

SUSAN SONTAG ON MOVIES: FOR INTERPRETATION

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1.

When I read the recently published second volume of Susan Sontag's diaries, which are filled with references to movies, I was reminded of an old (albeit virtual) quarrel I had with her.

Coming up in the seventies as a movie-lover through Jean-Luc Godard's films, I found Susan Sontag's famous essays on his work (a 1964 article on "Vivre Sa Vie" and a 1968 essay on his films to date) unsatisfying. Sontag wrote about "Vivre Sa Vie"—his 1962 melodrama about Nana (played by Godard's then-wife, Anna Karina), a shop girl and aspiring actress who leaves her husband and, unable to make ends meet, turns to prostitution—as if it were a closed system. She treated Godard like a formalist master, like the son of Robert Bresson and the cousin of Michelangelo Antonioni and Alain Resnais, and criticized him for wedging into the film a conspicuously personal reference (a lengthy quotation from Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Oval Portrait," which links Nana's story to the real-life relationship of Godard and Karina). Sontag described Godard as a onetime practicing critic but didn't bother to talk about his critical ideas, the movies he loved, or the way that his films were inspired by those movies—in large measure, Hollywood movies.

Sontag ghettoized much of classic Hollywood under the rubric of "camp" (famously, in her "Notes on 'Camp'"), just as, around the same time, Pauline Kael ghettoized the same movies by calling them "kitsch." In fabricating a Godard who satisfied her conception of a high European modernist, Sontag elided his critical perspective, the

politique des auteurs (or “auteur theory”), which recognized the artistry of some commercial filmmakers working in relative anonymity in the studios and considered them the peers of any artists, in any art form. She willfully ignored the New Wave’s passion for movies by Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks, Nicholas Ray and Otto Preminger, Samuel Fuller and Stanley Donen, as well as the young French filmmakers’ admiration for these Hollywood artists’ outsized personae.

But I revisited Sontag’s early essays on Godard with renewed curiosity after reading this latest installment of Sontag’s journals, which cover the years 1964 to 1980. It turns out that this new volume provides a surprising roadmap to the development of Sontag’s thinking. What she writes there gives us the background to her strangely, anachronistically narrow views on the cinema—and also shows how central to her identity as a critic, and even as a person, those views were.

In her journals, Sontag keeps voluminous lists of movies she watched, and she had an impressive habit (though not one that would be unusual for cinephiles of my acquaintance). She saw lots of movies of all sorts—for instance, she lists twenty-nine that she saw between September 17 and November 12, 1965, including such new ones as Godard’s “Le Petit Soldat,” Preminger’s “Bunny Lake Is Missing,” and Richard Lester’s “Help!”, and, in revival, Josef von Sternberg’s “The Last Command,” Fritz Lang’s “Beyond a Reasonable Doubt,” and Jean Renoir’s “The Lower Depths.” In the week of December 3, 1965, she saw either eight or eleven movies (depending on the import of a break in the list). But she had hardly anything of note to say about the work of classic American filmmakers, and I suspect that the reason is to be found in another list she provides—“Movies I saw as a child, when they came out.” It’s a list of fifty, including “Citizen Kane,” “The Great Dictator,” “Shadow of a Doubt,” “Notorious,” “The Best Years of Our Lives,” “Casablanca,” “The Strawberry Blonde,” and “The Wizard of Oz.” Her critical approach to Hollywood movies—that is, essentially ignoring them—shows that she couldn’t rank commercially produced and vulgarly marketed weekend amusements of her youth alongside Picasso’s Cubist masterworks and Beethoven’s quartets. This explains another jolting and indirectly self-revealing journal entry about movies, from the same year:

“0 Degree” films e.g. B-films—no formal elaboration; instead, the violence of the subject Medium is transparent

Godard and the others of the French New Wave didn’t worry about the studios’ internal classification of movies as A-movies or B-movies; the only reason why a critic such as Sontag would even bother watching B-movies in 1965 was that those filmmakers, and a generation of their successors, had identified great directors and great works of art to be lurking in those despised provinces, and found them to be anything but formless and transparent. Sontag knew there was something important about such movies, but they belonged to her less sophisticated younger self, so she relegated them to the category of “camp” and treated them like a realm apart—and ignored their contribution to what she considered the true cinematic art of the day, Godard’s films.

2.

I am *for* interpretation. The very title of Sontag's famous essay "Against Interpretation," which also became the title of her first collection of essays, is inimical to a useful way of watching movies, whether Hitchcock's or Godard's.

Sontag asserts that "*Transparence* is the highest, most liberating value in art—and in criticism—today," and cites, as examples, Bresson and Ozu and Renoir's "The Rules of the Game." She can't find any Hollywood movies to list, because, in fact, the best Hollywood directors neither seek nor achieve transparence, but create elaborate symbolic systems by means of extraordinary artifice. When Hitchcock shows a tight whorl of hair on the back of Kim Novak's head in "Vertigo," he isn't displaying the craft of hairdressing but creating an erotic web, a genital substitute, to ensnare James Stewart's idle officer. (And, later in the film, he *does* display the craft of hairdressing—to dramatize the cinema's, and his own, fetishistic obsession with artifice.)

When she does deign to mention Hollywood directors, she misunderstands them, lumping them in with the studio system at large and pressing them into the confines of her critical preconception:

In good films, there is always a directness that entirely frees us from the itch to interpret. Many old Hollywood films, like those of Cukor, Walsh, Hawks, and countless other directors, have this liberating anti-symbolic quality no less than the best work of the new European directors, like Truffaut's "Shoot the Piano Player" and "Jules and Jim," Godard's "Breathless" and "Vivre Sa Vie," Antonioni's "L'Avventura," and Olmi's "The Fiancés."

It almost seems as if, in praising "directness," Sontag were putting the immediate pleasures of pop movies beyond serious discussion and then assimilating ostensible art films to the same norms. But, of course, Sontag does take films, and, in particular, Godard's films, as objects worthy of in-depth discussion—though she ignores the extraordinarily complex symbolic dimension that he condenses into his films (and that he has discussed openly, in interviews, starting even before "Breathless" was released). She completely overlooks the symbolic element that ignited imaginations of the great Hollywood directors—especially that of Howard Hawks, who was one of the greatest of modern symbolists in any art form. (Has anyone ever thought of a dinosaur bone the same way since seeing "Bringing Up Baby"?) Instead, unable to shake her first-order childhood viewings, she wanted to believe what she saw.

Godard's films of the sixties are made to be interpreted; they're produced as collections of fragments meant to be picked apart and reassembled, filled with extravagant ranges of references, and in desperate need of extrapolation and intuition. They're open-ended symbolic collections of the first degree, and his vast range of public appearances and interviews furnished viewers with something of a special Godard lens—the artistic equivalent of 3-D glasses—for the interpretation of his films. For instance, the Poe recitation is only one of a panoply of symbolic elements

in “Vivre Sa Vie,” starting with the hairdo that Godard gives Karina’s aspiring actress: the dark bob that Louise Brooks made famous.

Sontag’s critical credo, from “Against Interpretation”—“the function of criticism should be to *show how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*”—reveals why she missed out on the essence of the art of the great American directors—and of their greatest acolytes, those of the New Wave, and, in particular, Godard. By contrast, the criticism that Godard wrote in the fifties, like that of his friends and comrades at *Cahiers du Cinéma*, was uninhibited by the strictures of aesthetic prejudice; it was open, ecstatic, enthusiastic, vituperative, anarchic, and personal. In discovering the inner worlds of such directors as Hawks and Hitchcock, Nicholas Ray and Anthony Mann and Douglas Sirk, his writing foreshadowed in tone and substance, in insolence and depth, in rapture and creative fury—and in interpretive freedom—the movies he would make. It brought the full range of his knowledge, experience, and passion to bear on movies; and it didn’t leave out the character and the personae of the auteurs themselves. To interpret is to write freely.

Sontag’s resistance to active criticism is of a piece with her formalist advocacy (as she wrote in the 1965 essay “On Style”) of “the “autonomy of the work of art” (what about the autonomy of the artist, the viewer, the critic?); of art as “stylized, dehumanized representation”; and, as she wrote in the journals, against “the bourgeois myth of the artist.”

But the *politique des auteurs* is perhaps the ultimate enshrinement of that “myth” as well as the biggest story in the modern cinema—a story that the New Wave told as critics and then enacted as filmmakers. They achieved the definitive personalization of the cinema; they experienced it with an extraordinary intimacy and they evoked that intimacy by discussing their connection with directors. In 1964, Sontag wrote, in her journals, “This is the first generation of directors who are aware of film history; cinema now entering era of self-consciousness”—but didn’t concern herself with the content of that consciousness. Why did she resist that experience?

3.

Godard, as a young filmmaker, was movie-mad in another way. He didn’t solely admire or imitate certain formal aspects of Hollywood movies he loved, but also their gestural, verbal, even sartorial styles—and, strangely, Sontag doesn’t bother with this, either. For instance, Sontag refers, in the 1968 essay, to “the formal impenetrability of the plots of Hawks’s ‘The Big Sleep’ and Aldrich’s ‘Kiss Me Deadly’” without noting that Humphrey Bogart’s air of cool insolence is the propulsive center of “Breathless” or that Godard was fascinated by the rudely lowbrow, even apocalyptic, yet stylish violence of “Kiss Me Deadly”—and also learned from that movie about the grafting of literary and musical quotations into a roughneck context (Aldrich’s adaptation of Mickey Spillane features Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony and poetry by Christina Rossetti).

Yet, as the journals touchingly show, Sontag was movie-mad too, as she wrote there in 1967:

Those hundreds of movie stills on my walls. That's populating the empty universe, too. They're my "friends," I say to myself. But all I mean by that is that I love *them* (Garbo, Dietrich, Bogart, Kafka, Vera Chytilová): I admire them; they make me happy because when I think of them I know that there aren't just ugly leaden people in the world but beautiful people; they're a playful version of that sublime company to which I aspire.... For me, they're reinforcements! They're on my team; or rather, I am (hope to be) on theirs. They're my models. They guard me from despair, from feeling there's nothing better in the world than what I see, nothing better than me! ...

Sontag found her own models of cool remoteness and control in the movies. And, strangely, her critical project was as radically personalizing as was Godard's—but in lieu of actual intimacy and self-revelation, in lieu of speaking in the first person, she conjured a persona. Her colorless, flavorless, odorless, quasi-academic prose was a sleekly alluring mask that, in turn, reflected a brilliant young woman's striking, worldly, knowing, infinitely remote, infinitely alluring persona. (That may be why she *mistakes* Godard's cinematic intimacy for formal distance.) She was the *auteur* among critics; her writing was the synecdoche for her very self.

Her opposition to interpretation locked criticism into a self-abnegating passivity, abstemiousness, and austerity (as if borrowed from a work by one of her heroes and models, Kafka's "The Hunger Artist": "I always wanted you to admire my fasting"). The "erotics of art" that she endorsed in the last line of "Against Interpretation" wasn't a lust for the work of art itself but, rather, signified the critic's own erotic aura. Instead of "interpreting" a work, it would suffice for her to anoint it with her approval, and thereby elevate it to her canon of contemporary cynosures. She turned criticism into a performative gesture, a stylization of desire akin to that of Garbo or Dietrich.

Just as neither Garbo nor Dietrich could love the boy next door, so Sontag couldn't embrace the popular art at hand—pop movies, pop music—without fatally dispelling her exotic aura. She loved, but couldn't unite her intellect with her love. She couldn't speak of her pleasures; in her journal, in late 1965, she wrote that her "biggest pleasure the last two years has come from pop music (The Beatles, Dionne Warwick, The Supremes) + the music of Al Carmines"; yet there's no trace of this demotic passion in her essays. She couldn't write about rock stars because she was, in effect, becoming one. She couldn't personalize movie directors because she was becoming a movie star.

Imagine the truly radical impact Sontag might have had on her cultural circles, on her times, if she had considered and praised actual rock stars, or Jerry Lewis and John Wayne and Joan Crawford, or Samuel Fuller and Vincente Minnelli.