# AN INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN SONTAG

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*Since the mid-sixties, Susan Sontag has been a highly visible figure on the New York intellectual scene. Her first book was a novel,* The Benefactor *(1963), and since then she has published two other works of fiction, a second novel,* Death Kit *(1967), and a collection of short stories,* I, etcetera *(1978). However, Sontag's reputation is based primarily on her essays which have done a great deal to propagate her enthusiasms for European writers, thinkers, directors: Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Resnais, Godard, Benjamin, Canetti, to name a few. Sontag is persuasive not only because she is a good writer, but also because she conveys an impassioned involvement with her subject. To a variety of cultural concerns, Sontag brings the same rigorous scrutiny. Her trenchant analysis often takes the form of regroupings of familiar points of reference. New lists, new contexts for quotations are themselves creators of novel ideas, as Foucault says of Borges, "breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things."*

*Nonetheless, there are a number of paradoxes in Sontag's position as essayist which quickly become apparent. Sontag is fascinated by "the modern" in art and thought, but deeply suspicious of many aspects of modern life, as is especially clear in her best book of social criticism,* On Photography. *Sontag prefers artists and thinkers who are resistant to easy assimilation by their audiences, but a good part of her writing career has been*

*spent "explaining" difficult, recalcitrant writers, like Artaud. She is known as an interpreter of European, particularly French, writing in North America, but she denounces interpretation in an early essay, the title essay of her first collection,* On Interpretation *(1966). In "life" as in "art" she repudiates the interpretive stance.* Illness as Metaphor *(1978) is an extended diatribe against those who would "interpret" tuberculosis or, especially, cancer as physical manifestations of psychic conflicts. In her essays Sontag avoids the first person singular, though her writing is very personal; in her fiction, however, she enjoys playing with narrative voice and persona, as is clear from just the title of her story collection.*

*These paradoxes do not diminish Sontag's work; instead they contribute to the creative tension between aestheticism and social criticism, sensuality and intellectual rigour. This tension is especially evident in* On Photography *where she diagnoses the "image-ridden" nature of our society and the fundamentally aestheticizing nature of still-images (as opposed to narrative, which can explain reality).*

*In the last two decades, Sontag has published her essays primarily in* Partisan Review *and* The New York Review of Books, *and they have been collected in three volumes:* Against Interpretation *(1966),* Styles of Radical Will *(1969), and* Under the Sign of Saturn *(1980). In 1982 her publisher, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux brought out* A Susan Sontag Reader, *an unusual consecration for a writer in mid career.*

*We first interviewed Susan Sontag when she was in Montreal for a reading in October. We spoke to her again at her home in New York in early December.*

*Eileen Manion*
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**CJPST:**

In your essay on Barthes you write that he "repeatedly disavows the vulgar roles of system-builder, authority, mentor, expert, in order to reserve for himself the privileges and freedoms of delectation". Would you say that this description applies equally to your own intellectual stance?

**Sontag:**

Well . . . yes. There's a lot of self-vindication in some of the last essays I've written. They are very personal estimates of people whose work has been important to me, though not necessarily important influences. I had not read Barthes when I wrote *The Benefactor* or the first essays in *Against Interpretation.* When I discovered Barthes he was above all for me a model of density and passionateness. There is no waste in Barthes' writing. I don't know another writer

who is so exciting to read, always. The essay I wrote on Barthes took me six full months to write and I think it's one of the best essays I've ever written. His work mattered to me a lot and I feel very haunted by him. He is the one French writer to have emerged in the post-war period who I am sure will remain a permanent part of our literature, as a writer — not as a semiotician of literary theorist.

**CJPST:**

In many of your essays you avoid the use of the first-person. One has the impression that you speak rather for a community. Is this the result of a conscious decision?

**Sontag:**

Where is that voice coming from? I don't think it's the voice of a community, at least not the sort of community I could take a census of. In fact the essays are extremely personal and yet operate on a strategy by which the first person is renounced. Eventually this formula becomes impossible and I'm finding now that I can't write them anymore. I've been asked to write an essay on Sartre for the *New York Review of Books* and at first I refused because I thought the project was too easy (and I'm glutton for punishment). In fact six months later I'm still working on the essay. Even a relatively easy topic like Sartre is becoming too difficult, because there's a first person who wants to be born in those essays and can't be. The essays are imploding in a way that makes them extremely difficult to engender. That's what's driving me back to fiction, not reluctantly. I have to come out of the closet of the third person and speak in a more direct way. On the other hand the last essays have become more personal. They are portraits which are in some sense self-portraits: the essays on Canetti, Benjamin, Barthes. And the Sartre essay is a kind of anti-self-portrait.

**CJPST:**

Do you think this problem has something to do with the fragmentation of the left in the States, that there is less of a community for you to represent?

**Sontag:**

I think that there is generally less of a community and that the fragmentation of the left is a symptom. I think that it is less and less possible to take for granted certain cultural references. That's what a community is: taking for granted certain assumptions, not having to start from zero every time. This is no longer true. The decline of education in North America and I suppose in Western Europe makes it harder to have a common body of references. You know that you can't make references to the Classics any longer and less and less to the English classics even.

**CJPST:**

You were one of the first to begin the process of importing contemporary French thought to America. What do you think the balance-sheet looks like now?

**Sontag:**

I didn't think of myself as importing. I thought it was more interesting to write about things people didn't know about than what they did. When I became aware that I was in fact "importing", I stopped doing it. The first French writer I knew well was Gide whom I read in my early teens. I in fact taught myself French by reading with a dictionary when I was about fourteen. I went to Paris for the first time when I was 18 and then, starting in my late 20s, I began to go a lot so that by my mid-30s I was mainly living there. So during that period (the 60s and early 70s) it seemed natural to write about things I was excited about. This included Godard, Lévi-Strauss. Now the new things happening in France don't interest me.

**CJPST:**

You're not interested in Post-structuralist French writers, then?

**Sontag:**

Their writing is not so interesting to me, but I'm not sure I have the basis to make the proper judgement. I know that I don't feel the need for this kind of theorizing. I feel that I've had enough theoretical speculation to last me a lifetime and I rather prefer the sources of that thought. For instance I'm extremely interested in the Russian formalists and have been for many years. I'm more drawn to their writing, which is expressive and literary, than to writing which is extremely academic or jargon-ridden. What I like about Barthes is that he is first of all a writer. When I read someone like Kristeva I feel that the academic cast of it is a barrier to me. On the other hand it does give you a big machine, a language, with which people can approach texts. I had the experience of teaching a seminar on first-person writing recently at Brown University. The students who had been trained in French critical theory wrote incredibly assertive, self-confident papers, full of ideas about how to use these texts. the students who had not been exposed to this approach simply paraphrased them. They are not even given training in the old-fashioned type of philological scholarship (like that of Auerbach, for instance, who is still a model to me). In other words I think part of the success which Structuralist or post-Structuralist thought in critical theory has had in literary studies in American universities is due to a theoretical vacuum.

**CJPST:**

At a 1982 Town Hall meeting to support Solidarity in Poland, you distanced yourself from allies on the left by criticizing American intellectuals' tolerance of repression in Communist countries. Have you been led to re-evaluate your own work in light of the ideas you expressed in this speech?

**Sontag:**

In fact the reaction to the speech was a media blow-up. I was not expressing new ideas but rather feelings I'd had since the mid-70s when I started to meet a lot of people, like Joseph Brodsky, who were in exile from Communist countries. I had to believe what they said about how terrible conditions were in these countries. The 60s (when I visited many of these countries) had been a great time of hope even for those in the Eastern bloc. All this ended in 1968 with the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

I had a very discouraging experience with an essay in which I was to discuss the relationship between intellectuals and the idea of revolution or revolutionary power. I abandoned it. It's quicksand! This was the first time in my life that I was bothered by the question of audience. The experience at Town hall made me realize that you can't limit your audience. When I gave that speech it was directed at a particular audience and I fully expected to be booed. When the speech appeared in the media it took on a different meaning. And so I began to think that if I'm writing about the romance of Communism, about intellectuals, who am I writing for? I'm not interested in giving aid and comfort to the neo-Conservatives. It's a crucifying dilemma. I was finally defeated by it. I spent a year and a half writing hundreds of pages and gave up. Since Town hall it's been a disaster and I'm still digging my way out of the rubble.

**CJPST:**

How important is feminism now to your work?

**Sontag:**

I certainly identify myself as a feminist. I have been told that I am a "natural" feminist, someone who was born a feminist. In fact I was quite blind to what the problem was: I couldn't understand why anyone would hesitate to do what they wanted to do just because they were told that women didn't do such things. The feminist movement has been important to me because it's made me feel less odd and also because it has made me understand some of the pressures on women which I was lucky enough to have escaped, perhaps because of my eccentricity or the oddness of my upbringing.

**CJPST:**

In the final paragraph of *On Photography* you say: "If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well." Do you have any thoughts about how we could develop such an ecology?

**Sontag:**

The last sentence of a book is, of course, where you have to stop. And the

answer to this question really involves a new argument which is also a political argument. The question of the social uses of photography opens out into the very largest issues of the self, of the relationship to community, to reality. Jean Baudrillard is a writer who addresses this question of the ultimate implications of the consumer society.

**CJPST:**

What do you think of Jean Baudrillard's work?

**Sontag:**

I'm very interested in his themes and particularly like his essay on the Centre Pompidou and the function of the museum in modern society. I'm very interested in Baudrillard's perspective, extremely rhetorical descriptions. I like his eye. I can't say that I come away with any sense of alternatives, because the way he describes always carries with it an imputation of inexorability. That tendency of social thought to generalize, to describe a leading tendency in a society in such a way that it seems that everything falls within its iron laws, is very common. Of course our own experience tells us that life is not as monochrome as these thinkers depict it. On the other hand they are very valuable because they alert us to transformations we are likely to take for granted. I belong rather to a more classical tradition of social analysis. Max Weber was a very important influence for me. I can't say I know how to change the society, but I share the feeling that this society is full of technology which depersonalizes people, which seems to drain a sense of reality from our lives. It's full of a lot of other things too. What interests me is to understand the nature of the modern. Ultimately that's what the essays in *On Photography* are about: another way of talking about the modern.

**CJPST:**

In *I, etcetera* one character says "My skull is crammed with quotations" and another says "We are ruled by quotations". Do you have a particular strategy for using quotations in your work?

**Sontag:**

What seems distinctively modern as a unit of thought, of art, of discourse is the fragment; and the quotation is one kind of fragment. I became aware, after the fact, that I was fascinated by quotations and lists. And then I noticed that other people were fascinated by quotations and lists: people as different as Borges and Walter Benjamin, Novalis and Godard. Using quotations was at first quite spontaneous for me, but then this use became strengthened through reflection. But originally this practice came out of temperament. I agree with Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde that ultimately ideas come out of a temperament or a sensibility, that they are a crystallization or a precipitation of temperament. It's not that you make up your ideas to justify your temperament but that it's the

temperament first. In the late essays collected in *Under the Sign of Saturn* I ended up writing portraits which seemed like assessments of the body of a work but are in fact portraits of temperaments that express themselves in art. I'm interested in the possibility of fiction which straddles narrative and essay. A novel is a "baggy monster", as Henry James said. You can include essay elements in fiction; this is a very nineteenth century practice. Balzac will stop to describe the sociology of a place or profession; Tolstoy will talk about ideas of history. That notion of including essay elements is very familiar, but there are more seductive modern examples: Central European novelists, like Broch.

**CJPST:**

Are you working on that kind of fiction now?

**Sontag:**

In fact after finishing the Sartre essay I'll be going to Cambridge, Mass. to direct a play by Kundera at the American Repertory Theatre.

**CJPST:**

In Kundera's last novel, *The unbearable lightness of being*, he suggests that Western intellectuals are in some way "condemned" to a kind of necessary but futile theatrical activity when they question political power. What do you perceive as the role of intellectuals to influence political events?

**Sontag:**

What Kundera's has to say is so shaped by his own historical situation that he comes as a messenger of bad news. His own posture was frozen ten years ago and things have changed very rapidly since then. Kundera is addressing a situation which is already obsolete. There is an understandable vindictiveness in people who come from Communist countries. They want to keep telling us that we were fools to think that we could make radical changes in our society. Though I understand their dismay, respect their suffering and don't understand the gullibility of some people who don't take in how repressive these societies are, I still think it's important to keep people of all kinds as active in civic matters as possible. Currently intellectuals in Western Europe and North America are extremely demoralized and shaken by the rise of a virulent conservative tendency (which some have even joined.) The way in which a certain kind of political idealism has been discredited and scorned makes the danger not that intellectuals keep on making fools of themselves, formulating political opinions when they might not be as informed as they might be, but that they retreat and leave politics to the professionals.

**CJPST:**

Your writing is impassioned and risk-taking . . .

**Sontag:**

It doesn't feel like risk-taking but I know that it is. I've been at it long enough to know the trouble you get into. I write essays first because I have a passionate relationship to the subject and second because the subject is one that people are not talking about. The writers or artists I write about are not necessarily those I care most about (Shakespeare is still my favourite writer) but those whose work I feel has been neglected.

**CJPST:**

Has the reception of your work influenced the way you write?

**Sontag:**

I'm more cautious about what I write. When I wrote *Against Interpretation* I was very innocent about the way work is used. I wrote those essays for the most part very quickly and they reflected some current interests and discoveries. In my own mind I had a model of the transmission of literary work which, at the time when I was starting to publish, was becoming obsolete. I thought there were such things as "little magazines" with a small, passionate, educated readership. When I was in my mid-teens, going to high school in Los Angeles, my dream was to come to New York and write for *Partisan Review* and be read by 10,000 people. Well I did come to New York and write for *Partisan Review*. But it turns out that already in the 60s among the 10,000 people who read the Review were a lot of editors for perhaps *Time* magazine, or *Newsweek* or *Playboy* who would want to take the work, recycle and amplify it. When you see your 40-page essay turned into a "hot tip" in one paragraph in *Newsweek*, you get anxious about the way your writing has been used. I have not liked many of the transformations and adaptations of my work. The work is not allowed to remain itself: it is duplicated. It's almost as if this is the fundamental procedure in modern society: duplication and recycling. Therefore when you are writing, you are — from society's point of view — only producing the first version which will then be processed and recycled... We live in a world of copies and we're fascinated when we encounter the originals (in a museum, for instance). In a lot of writing or intellectual discourse we're starting to use that model: "Oh, this is where it comes from!" I would like to concentrate on work which is more resistant to that procedure, as I think fiction is.

One of the things I've been thinking about a lot this year is the word processor. Most writers I know have switched to word processors. I haven't but I'm very curious about why people like it so much. I think it has something to do with the fact that at last writing, which has been such an old-fashioned, artisanal activity, even on a typewriter, has now entered the central domain of modern experience which is that of making copies, being involved in the world of duplicates and machine-mediated activities.

**CJPST:**

In your Artaud essay, you seem to be attracted to his writing precisely because he resisted easy assimilation.

**Sontag:**

There I was treating a more old-fashioned version of the question of reception by talking about the domestication of something which was basically wild. Some of the exuberance of my essay-writing has gone because I'm worried about the uses they could serve. Shortly after I wrote the essay on Canetti he won the Nobel Prize and a number of people said: "Oh, you predicted he'd get the Prize". That sort of reception — where everything is assimilated to the world of celebrity — makes me dream of becoming a more recalcitrant, harder to assimilate writer.

**CJPST:**

Would that be a writer who couldn't be quoted?

**Sontag:**

No, you can always be quoted. Quotation is a method of appropriation which is invincible, I think. It's not a procedure which displeases me, contrary to recycling. The quote is always fascinating because it changes out of context, becomes different and sometimes more mysterious. It has a directness and assertiveness it may not have had in the original. I think the quality of inaccessibility, the mystery, is important — that whatever matters can't be taken in on just one reading or one seeing. This is certainly a quality of the little of art that lasts.

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Editors' Note: Susan Sontag read but did not edit the interview.