

Against Interpretation

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This is a collection of essays written in the early sixties. They are dated, and that constitute in fact much of their charms. They can be divided into those that discuss Art in rather abstract and general terms, like the title essay, and those that actually ponders concrete instances, often in the form of actual reviews. Not surprisingly the latter tend to be superior to the former. There is nothing like a concrete example to get across a general and abstract idea.

Against interpretation is a rather weak, not to say banale effort, essentially expounding on the folly of trying to translate a work of art into something else. What if a work of art means exactly that, why not say it in the first place, rather than going through this elaborate round-about way, as in a 'rebus'? Those are the natural questions that puzzles most people, and Sontag really does not have very much more to say about them, apart from some rather superficial reflections of contents versus form. Her subsequent essay on style is a bit of an improvement though. Style is necessary in all kinds of work, and the art which professes to be styleless, actually employs that very lack of style as its style. Sontag becomes more interesting (as well as more dated, i.e. firmly placed in time) when she discusses 'Happenings'. Those were the vogue in the early sixties, and although practised all over the world, in Stockholm as well as in Tokyo, the lofts of Manhattan probably supplied the most natural settings, as well as a certain avant-gardepublic, the most appreciative audiences. 'Happenings' have gone out of fashion, but in their time they certainly were as radical as one could be. Superficially 'Happenings' are theatrical performances, taking place on a stage, with a specific audience, and of limited duration, but typically unpredictable such. But this is misleading, 'Happenings' may appear as natural extremes of theatre, but they evolved out of painting. As the canvases of paintings became larger and larger, and the materials going into them more and more unorthodox and catholic, the actual painting itself became a performance, and the performance took precedence over the finished product. In fact in a 'Happening' the audience is in the center, in fact it is privileged. But privilege is not always the same as comfort and adoration, on the contrary, the point of a 'Happening' was to abuse the audience. Not only to make it hard for it to see what was actually going on, often it was placed peripherally, any kind of obstacle thrown in its way to complicate its role. Typically, as noted above, it had no idea how long they would have to endure, and it was not unusual that it was openly humiliated, and at the end booed out and physically abused. Why did it repeat coming? To be shocked, to be titillated, to be surprised? Of course, any or all of those things. What is the most violent shock an audience can be subjected to? Being sexually aroused, or being paralysed with fear? Obviously the latter. When this piece was written, 'Happenings' were at their zenith, then they fell out of fashion, and this might not be too surprising, because would could they really get evolved into, blurring the line that separates Art from Reality as they constantly were close to doing. Some parts of 'Happenings' have survived in fossilized

forms, I am thinking of so called installations, when the actual 'gestalt' of a piece of art counts less than the intention. In one sense the natural development of the 'Happening' would be the terrorist attack. The terrorist attack has a definite purpose, namely that of installing fear into an audience. It also takes place on a stage, and it uses real props; but the props are not voluntary, nor is the audience. In that sense one of the most spectacular 'Happenings' in the 21st century is the Toppling of the Twin Towers. The event comes with most of the trappings of a mega-event, a medial extravaganza. Surely few events of recent decades have been more indelibly engraved in the visual collective memory than the images of Jumbo Jets crashing into skyscrapers. The two most potent symbols of mans desire to defy gravity annihilating each other, as a Bulgarian friend of mine remarked.

From 'Happenings' to Camp. In this penultimate essay Sontag shows her strength as an essayist. What is Camp? She quotes repeatedly Oscar Wilde, and presents about sixty different kinds of features that Camp more or less is expected to display. Camp is related to sensibility, and sensibility is basically a species of taste. Sensibility cannot be encoded, its features can only be suggested. Camp is about relaxing from high culture. There is the notion of good bad art, and Camp fills out that niche. This reminds me of Orwell, who classified Sherlock Holmes as an example of good bad books. Camp is needed for relaxation, to enlarge the world of pleasure. Camp is about the serious effort not quite succeeding, because of extra-vagance. Sometimes there is extra-vagance but the effort succeeds nevertheless, as in the movies by Eisenstein Sontag reminds us, then it is not Camp. And there are so many things that are Camp, and the author cannot refrain from making a list. Mostly it is about decorations, furniture, clothes. Art Nouveau is Camp, excellent Camp, with its emphasis on extra-vagant form. Pre-Raphaelite paintings are Camp too. Obviously. And the list can go on.

And taste? Intelligence is a kind of taste, a taste in ideas. Taste is unevenly developed in people, she remarks, unusual that a person would have a well developed in things visual, in people, and in ideas, simultaneously. This as a preliminary warm up for the discussion on Camp.

The enmity and split of the two cultures is up in her final essay. C.P.Snow is dismissed as a philistine, too ignorant of Art, in spite of his dual character as a scientist and a novelist. In fact Sontag claims that there is no problem, no division, the two cultures actually merging into one, but most people being too uneducated to notice it. Art will become less and less traditional, in a sense more and more scientific, drawing on a wide variety of experiences, materials, techniques. In the process the divisions between high and low culture will dissolve, as the traditional distinction between the unique artefact and the massproduced will disappear. It is all so vintage sixties, in its naive belief in a better, more egalitarian future and with its embracement of change and modernity.

Sontag is at her best when she discusses something concrete. As a systematic thinker she fails, as she is not willing to probe too deeply, content with half-hearted attempts, suggesting where to dig, but not wanting to dig herself. Maybe a symptome more of impatience and versatility than impotence.

Why read the journals of a writer? In a journal we are able to watch the writer at his most naked, which also means when he is suffering the most. There is intense pleasure in vocariously enjoy the sufferings of others. You get the exaltaton of pleasure, with its

concomitant intensity, without having to suffer the consequences. It is like participating in the grief caused by the death of a celebrity, without having to feel the personal loss and deprivation, a death close to you invariably entails.

Sontag is not above ranking people. Camus is very handsome and attractive, and such a moral writer, yet he does not measure up to Sartre. Or placing Hesse above Palsternak! That Brecht is very good, better than most modern 20th century playwrights, one can accept on the other hand.

Theatre is close to her concern. She trashes recent plays by Miller and O'Neill, and cuts Ionescu to size. She is particularly good on Ionescu. Meaninglessness was not the subject of his plays, but their style. But he repeated himself after his initial success, and after that there were no way to go. Some dramatists she raises to the skies, such as Peter Weiss. His play on Sade and Marat is a true masterpiece. At least from the horizon of New York City. You can feel the presence of New York in the 60's in whatever she writes, and as noted this placement not only in time but place, is what gives her writing charm. Charm more than instruction.

What may strike the reader with a jolt is how seriously she takes the cinema as an artform. It is unusual, at least to the present reader, to see wuch philosophical apparatus being applied on what by any crietirion must be considered rather slight works of art. She is particular enamoured by the French, and once again art-cinema houses in New York City appears before the mind of the reader. Godard and Bresson, both having their films scrutinized. How can you fall so completly for the philosophical features of a film of Godard? His films may be pleasant enough, but surely arethey not being too self-consciously made as pieces of art and philosophy. In fact are they not headed to be Camp, but at the time of her writing the reviews, that was not entirely obvious to her.

She gives a good survey of the genre of science-fiction movies. They all follow rather rigid schemes, but areenjoyable nevertheless. In fact they are close to being Horror-movies, but fail to be such, as the psychological component is not really there. Science-fiction movies is not about people, they are about disasters. Bigscale disasters, and Sontag prefers them in color, because it means bigger budgets and more sensual footage.

Finally, she has a rather good piece on 'religion'. When religious sensitivities are being phased out in a more and more secular world, there is a kind of fellow-travelling based on nostalgia. Now, when there is no longer any threat, the various religious sensibilities appear rather charming. Why kick a dead horse, why not admire it? But in blurring the distinctions between different religions, and making out a generic 'religion' you empty it of all meaning. There is no thing as religion in the generic, as little as there is 'language' to be spoken. If you speak, you speak a specific language, and in the same way if you really want to sample a religious sensibility, you better be serious and make a choice. Religion as 'religion' is nothing but an affront to the serious believer as well as the sincere atheist. Kaufmanns collection, the excuse for the essay, gets predictably trashed.