

Was Susan Sontag a feminist?

Susan Sontag is considered a pioneer of queer theory. But aesthetically she always took her measure from the works of famous men. She also wrote against feminist slogans. Why?

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Susan Sontag is known as an intellectual figure of the sixties, an avant-garde pioneer of art criticism and a heroine of photography studies. She is celebrated for her sophisticated ideas and captivating style. While she was a glamorous thinker, she is not known as a feminist.

Or was she? This question arises in light of the new collection of a hitherto largely undiscovered part of Sontag's oeuvre, edited by her son David Rieff and recently published in America: *On Women* brings together seven of her texts on the subject of "women", which were originally published in the early seventies in *Vogue*, the *New York Review of Books* and other New York magazines.²

The jewel in the collection is "Fascinating Fascism", a dazzling demonstration of how Sontag's feminism can be understood: through art or works that want to be art.³ This essay is an excellent example of her virtuosity, a historically nuanced and aesthetically brilliant critique of the conspicuous fascism in the photographic and cinematic work of the director Leni Riefenstahl who was closely associated with Adolf Hitler and the German Nazi Party. In 1975, it posthumously provoked an angry response from Adrienne Rich (also included in the new collection), a New York poet and leading figure in the feminist scene of the time, who accused Sontag of being "male-identified."⁴ Rich criticized Sontag for being obsessed with success by enrolling herself in a patriarchal discourse, and treating things as an intellectual exercise rather than giving written expression to her own position as a bisexual woman.

¹ First published in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 13 August 2023.

² Susan Sontag, *On Women* (Picador, 2023).

³ Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 108-136; Susan Sontag, *On Women* (Picador, 2023), 105-141.

⁴ Sontag, *On Women*, 146.

Hannah Arendt is never mentioned explicitly

While Sontag was sceptical of the feminist movement, her intellectual stance is authentic. This is evidenced in particular by her diaries which document her strong desire to become famous as a writer. Since childhood and throughout her life, Sontag's image of the writer was male. Thomas Mann, for example, was at the very top of the list.

Sontag was neither talented at nor particularly interested in specifically celebrating women's intellectual achievements. *Under the Sign of Saturn*, her superb collection of literary portraits from 1980, demonstrates this.⁵ Besides the Riefenstahl essay, the volume contains "Exercises in Admiration", as Sontag's son David Rieff calls them, all of which pay tribute exclusively to men: Paul Goodman, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin.⁶

The only truly historico-critical essay in this collection is on Leni Riefenstahl – it is precisely in the case of work by a woman that Sontag calls for historically accurate contextualization and the examination of the political significance of the aesthetic object. Since the captivating beauty of Riefenstahl's photography can make us forget her propaganda, the aesthete herself demands a historically sober view. As if men had no need of history.

Against this background, it is remarkable that Sontag also remained silent about her female role models.⁷ The philosopher Hannah Arendt, for example, whom she read extensively, is never credited explicitly. And it is not without a certain irony that Sontag referred to Arendt as "male-identified", although Arendt's work and Arendt as a person are of singular feminist significance to her. Sontag had planned an essay on Hannah Arendt that dealt with the topic of "beauty."⁸ Unfortunately, it never came to pass – perhaps it would have shed light on Susan Sontag's twisted feminism.

Feminism is viewed aesthetically

Sontag's archive contains a copy of Hannah Arendt's biography of the Romantic writer Rahel Varnhagen. It could serve as a key text in understanding Sontag. Her edition contains numerous annotations, especially where Arendt problematizes Varnhagen's aesthetic transfiguring of her Jewish outsider role. Here the focus on aesthetics stands in the way of a confident, Jewish, early feminist revolt against conformity to an anti-Semitic environment.

5 Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980).

6 Susan Sontag and David Rieff, *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Diaries 1963-1981* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), 14.

7 Scholarship has recently increasingly turned to Arendt's relevance for Sontag. Cf. Kai Sina, „Worin unsere Stärke besteht“ in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of Mittwoch, December 1, 2021, Nr. 280, Page N. 3; cf. also Anna-Lisa Dieter, *Susan Sontag. 100 Seiten*: (Reclam 100 Seiten) (Reclam Verlag, 2022).

8 Note of International Women's Year 1975, Susan Sontag papers (Collection 612). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Did Susan Sontag's preoccupation with the male-dominated Western canon, then, grow from a denial of her own painful experience of discrimination as a woman? This must remain speculation unless we understand how Sontag, as a postmodern woman, engaged with the patriarchal intellectual discourse of modernity. Everything in Sontag's work, including feminism, is subject to aesthetic scrutiny. It is precisely this obsession that was to be her feminist undoing. The Riefenstahl essay is paradigmatic of what ultimately the other, smaller works in the collection also attempted: to analyse, problematize and diversify beauty. Beauty is the model in which Sontag saw the leading currency for the oppression of women.

Two other essays published in *Vogue* in 1975 were entitled "Woman's Beauty: Put-Down or Power Source?" and "Beauty: How will it Change Next?"⁹ Susan Sontag consciously devotes herself to a concept that both seduces and dazzles. For this reason, she demands that we look closely. She critiques militant (not just feminist) battle slogans for levelling historical differences and thwarting concrete discussions on lived oppression with ideals of beauty. Sontag's work is dedicated to aesthetic contemplation in all its facets – and not primarily to politics. Her hesitant attitude towards feminism is therefore not surprising, but part of her ambivalent position, one that tends towards aestheticism, between highbrow and lowbrow culture, between elitist obsession with the canon and pop. Her work was guided by the motto: "If I had to choose between the Doors and Dostoevsky, then – of course – I'd choose Dostoevsky. But do I have to choose?"¹⁰

Between avant-garde and conservative

Because she understands politics only through aesthetics, Sontag negotiates political issues, such as the position of women, within this frame. The most impressive example is her production of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in the embattled city of Sarajevo in 1993.¹¹ Without much preparation and with little knowledge of the language, Sontag travelled to the war-torn city and brought Beckett's play to the stage despite the devastating circumstances. The aesthetic approach to politico-sociological issues also informed her essays on "Illness as Metaphor" and "AIDS and Its Metaphors", in which she considers the charge of tuberculosis and cancer through literary-historical analysis. Paradoxically, Sontag argues for a separation of disciplines by taking literature at its word – as if rebelling against her own aesthetic perspective.¹²

For Sontag, literary metaphors have the power to transcend literature. What Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* tells us about tuberculosis takes on real historical significance. Literature not only reflects, it presents and creates reality. The fact that both of Sontag's essays drew on the reality of her own life – her severe cancer and the loss of many New

9 Sontag, *On Women*, 89-105.

10 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 310.

11 Susan Sontag, *Where the Stress Falls: Essays* (Macmillan, 2002).

12 Susan Sontag and Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor; and, AIDS and Its Metaphors*, First Anchor Books edition (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

York friends to AIDS – is not mentioned. Just as it is not clear from her writings on the social status of women that she loved women. As with feminism, the procedure here is the same: Sontag negotiates things aesthetically.

Yet, paradoxically, Sontag was a conservative avant-gardist. In her response to Adrienne Rich's criticism, she admits that she is critical of the notion of an authority-free society, that it is "a childish, sentimental fantasy about the nature of man."¹³ It is her belief that people need rules and standards and her work testifies to her desire to contribute to redefining standards in the field of aesthetics (for individual media such as film or literature, but also for sensory perception in general). Her essays on art theory and her narrative work (novels and stories), her diaries, and especially her literary portraits all show that Susan Sontag's literary career can be interpreted as the outcome of an unflinching study of aesthetic qualities.

"The lie that tells the truth"

As in the case of Hannah Arendt, Susan Sontag saw a close connection between aesthetic and moral judgement. Beauty and goodness are not the same thing, but the path to knowledge is similar in both cases, a path that leads to judgement by way of distinctions. Which is why Sontag tackles phenomena in all their diversity in order to discover and free herself of prejudice. The value profile of the male-dominated literary canon is therefore of central importance if we are to understand aesthetic quality in its full scope, an approach that informs Susan Sontag's writings on beauty and feminism. Because she wanted to get to the bottom of ideology itself through an aesthetic approach, feminism could never have become her guiding ideology.

Susan Sontag tried to leave the world a new vocabulary for a variety of aesthetic valuations. This is clearly seen in her concept of beauty, which could be a key to understanding her feminist stance. Since her legendary 1964 essay on the aesthetics of "camp," and on 'the lie that tells the truth' as her famous formula goes, Sontag worked for a pluralization of beauty, opposing the classic concepts of beauty with what we would today call a queer understanding.¹⁴ That is why she is considered an early representative of queer theory. She had an extraordinary sense of the political power attached to ideals of beauty and a far-reaching insight into the social significance of style and form.

Sontag's attitude toward feminism can be dismissed from today's perspective as outdated, caught up in chauvinistic thought patterns. But turning away from Susan Sontag because of this apparent deficiency would mean missing a great deal. The newly published essays on women show with captivating foresight and clarity how Sontag encourages us to find better, more precise words for the diversity of styles, forms and histories in the world.

¹³ Sontag, *On Women*, 149.

¹⁴ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 275-293.

For Susan Sontag, literature is successful when it inspires its audience to think, ideally even to write. Her work bears witness to this production of challenging reading. What she admired in the work of others inspired her own writing. And that is not only a tribute to modernity, but always a provocation to her current and future readers.