



NEW ZEALAND INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL / [REVIEWS](#)

Regarding Susan Sontag

BY [HUGH LILLY](#) · JULY 24, 2014



RECOMMENDED

Nancy D. Kates' film about the American essayist, critic, novelist, filmmaker, outspoken feminist, and public intellectual Susan Sontag is an extensive, accessible, and profoundly intimate survey of her life and work. It is both as serious and as self-reflexive as was Sontag herself, who died, a decade ago, at age 71, after a third bout of cancer. Narrated by the inimitable Patricia Clarkson, the film opens with a quote from Sontag about the act of writing being not about "expression," but about "taking part in a 'noble' activity." The film then explores what was one of Sontag's most divisive acts: her comments on 9/11. She was one of the only prominent figures who immediately pointed the finger at American foreign policy, criticising the talking-heads and politicians who circled around the same rhetoric for days and weeks afterward. "Where is the acknowledgment," she wrote in the [New Yorker](#), "that this was not a 'cowardly' attack on 'civilization' or 'liberty' or 'humanity' or 'the free world' but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?"

Sontag was as concerned with writing itself as with the act of being a writer—the performance of intellect—even though in her mind, and especially in retrospect, she was often not proficient, thorough, or prolific enough to earn the titles and adulation that came seemingly all at once, and

so easily. Her “Notes on Camp,” which appeared in the *Paris Review* in 1964, when she was 31, catapulted her to fame, and opened doors everywhere—not just avenues for her writing, but pathways to the eyes and ears of the rich, famous, and, more importantly to her, the famously intellectual. Kates quotes liberally from Sontag’s posthumously published journals and notebooks; the first volume, *Reborn*, is especially revealing of the writer’s insatiable appetite for literary culture and her unwavering desire to be at the centre of the thinking universe. These journals also memorably cover Sontag’s sexual awakening, which becomes a through-line in the documentary. Kates took this cue to combine the life and the work, most probably, from Sontag’s ideals: the final note in *Reborn*, which covers the period from 1947–1963, says, simply, “Intellectual ‘wanting’ like sexual wanting.” Kates leaves little out when looking at Sontag’s private life: everything from her first gay experiences and her first, unhappy marriage, to almost every woman she was involved with, to her final years fading from public view, are put under the spotlight.

Stylistically, the film sits slightly outside its genre. While many documentary-biographers would be content to pan-and-scan, blandly, across old photographs and combine this with interview footage, Kates has chosen to display carefully selected images with striking force: photos appear projected on slips of paper, refracted through glass and shone on opened books, and segmented on blank white walls. Some hang on tarnished strips of negative, distressed. This all culminates in an aesthetic intensity unusual for a documentary not explicitly about photography itself—although of course Sontag’s seminal 1977 work *On Photography* is duly examined. Her novels and critical essays, and their impact on politics and literary society are given considerable screen-time, and her two major forays into filmmaking, *Duet for Cannibals* and *Promised Lands*, are also scrutinized. A segment near the end of Kates’ film demonstrates how pervasive Sontag’s influence on the culture had become by the late 1980s: her mention in the scripts of two Hollywood movies, at once derisive and supportive, is unexpected but not surprising.

The film’s numerous interviewees are entertaining and insightful in equal measure. Kates focusses on former lovers of Sontag’s as well as her son David Reiff, who edited her journals and notebooks; he helpfully expands upon many excerpts heard in narration with stories from his often uneasy experience. The writers Wayne Kostenbaum, Fran Lebowitz, Alice Kaplan as well as the late Nadine Gordimer and the academic Deborah Nelson, provide the most insightful comments. Both Lebowitz and Kostenbaum are giddy with excitement when talking about Sontag’s life and times, while Nelson and especially Kaplan—whose wonderful book *Dreaming in French* looks at the formative years Sontag (and Jacqueline Onassis and Angela Davis) spent

in Paris in the years after World War Two—provide robust context to events under discussion. Reiff's ex-girlfriend Sigrid Nunez is also interviewed, but her incessant commentary here makes her out to be just as much of a gadfly as did her own slender book about Sontag, *Sempre Susan*. The photographer Annie Leibovitz, who was Sontag's lover for the last fourteen years of her life, is interviewed briefly but her remarks here are not particularly revealing. More was said about their time together in *Life Thru a Lens*, PBS' American Masters film profile of Leibovitz a few years ago.

In her [1988 profile of Sontag in the Chicago Tribune](#), Helen Benedict wrote "People are awed by Sontag because she is one of the few humans in American who are famous for their intellects." One of the problems Kates surely wrestled with throughout her documentary's long production was how to look at a writer such as Sontag—so well-known and yet almost academically inaccessible to many—with depth of thought as well as depth of feeling. By showing both sides—that is, Sontag the writer and thinker, and Sontag the complicated, troubled human being—the film triumphs and entertains, often at the same time.

Tags: [Nancy D. Kates](#)[Susan Sontag](#)

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