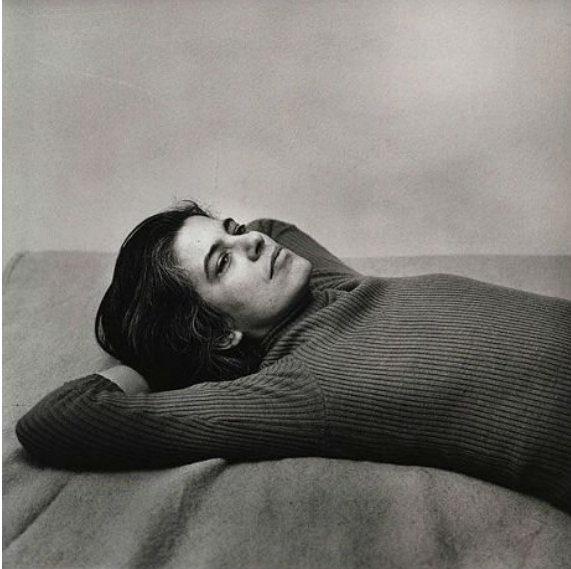


'REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG': AMERICA'S LAST GREAT INTELLECTUAL ROCK STAR

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From Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964):

56. Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of "character." ... Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as "a camp," they're enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling.

I won't beat around the bush about Nancy Kates' new documentary *Regarding Susan Sontag* because I loved every minute of it. For one, I've always been fascinated by Sontag herself, but beyond that, this is a very fine film, made with great flair, economy, and emotion. There's not a single wasted frame. It's the Susan Sontag movie *that needed to be made*.

Susan Sontag was a "social critic," filmmaker, novelist, and political activist, although she is mostly referred to as an "intellectual," a sort of rock star writer who emerged in the early '60s pontificating on a dizzying variety of

subjects that no one had ever really thought of taking seriously before her. Sontag offered the readers of her essays opinions on "camp," the hidden cultural meanings behind low-budget sci-fi films, photography as an unlikely impediment to understanding history, Pop art, warfare, the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard and much, much more. There was seemingly nothing that didn't fascinate her, and this unceasing, insatiable search for novelty and new experiences is what fueled Sontag's life on practically every level, including her personal relationships, which often didn't run very smoothly.

What other 20th century intellectual giant was photographed as much as Susan Sontag was?

Although she often came across in her interviews as brash, even imperious, Sontag was someone who privately felt that she was a bit of an underachiever, always writing *about* artists and culture, but not taken as seriously as an artist herself for her own films and novels. Gore Vidal famously trashed her talent at writing fiction, which apparently wounded Sontag deeply.

Obviously it was Sontag's right to have held this rather morose opinion of her life's work, but it seems so cosmically unfair considering the literary gifts she left behind her. "Susan Sontag's brilliance"—in a nice turn of phrase I'm pulling straight out of the press release—"gave form to the intangible." No minor achievement, it is for this that she will be best remembered.



Filmmaker Nancy Kates is best known for her film *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*, about the gay African-American civil rights leader. If you ever get the chance to see this film, *do take it*. Kates will be screening *Regarding Susan Sontag* at the Sheffield Doc Fest on June 10 with a Q&A session afterwards. HBO will be airing the film in the fall of 2014.

Posted by Richard Metzger