

FEATURE

Susan Sontag, Essayist and So Much Else

By [Emily St. John Mandel](#) | HUMANITIES, September/October 2014 | Volume 35, Number 5



Susan Sontag captured by photographer Peter Huiar in 1975.



1.

How to capture a life? A problem of biographical projects, especially those involving subjects who left behind multiple books and interviews and hours of film footage, is that ten edits of the same story will yield ten different lives. This raises a further question with which every biographer must contend, even for lives much less complex and ecstatic and varied than Susan Sontag's: How much space should be given over to the messy details

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of the private life—the love affairs, the children, the fraught relationships with family—how much to the public life, and beyond that, how much to the environment and the era by which that life was shaped?

Nancy Kates’s new documentary film, *Regarding Susan Sontag*—a fascinating, moving, and often gorgeous entry into the canon of works produced about Sontag since her death—doesn’t neglect the time and the social forces that shaped Sontag’s life, but, for the most part, the narrative that emerges is deeply personal. It’s a close portrait of a woman who was, in the words of her son, “interested in everything”: Wittgenstein, but also sci-fi B movies; John Cage, but also Fred Astaire.

“She wanted to have everything at least three ways,” Christopher Hitchens wrote in his memoir, *Hitch-22*,

. . . and she wanted it voraciously: an evening of theater or cinema followed by a lengthy dinner at an intriguing new restaurant, with visitors from at least one new country, to be succeeded by very late-night conversation precisely so that an early start could be made in the morning.

Sontag was born in New York City in 1933, raised in various suburbs—on Long Island, near Tucson, the San Fernando Valley—and when she enrolled at Berkeley as a teenager, she felt she’d found home, standing in line and hearing Proust’s name pronounced correctly for the first time. When she recounts this on video decades later, you can still see the ecstasy of that moment in her face.

She transferred to the University of Chicago, where she married a professor whom she’d only known for ten days. She had a child, went to Oxford on a philosophy fellowship, divorced; fell in and out of love with women and men in Paris and New York; wrote novels, stage plays, and essays on subjects ranging from photography to illness to horror movies. She was brilliant, beautiful, and forceful. She established herself as a cultural critic and a public intellectual, and became excessively famous. By the time of her death—of cancer, in 2004—she had left an indelible and sometimes controversial mark on American culture.

2.

In the edition of the *New Yorker* that appeared a week after 9/11, the Talk of the Town section was given over to a number of short essays by prominent writers, Sontag among them, reflecting on the atrocity. The other writers offered subdued, anguished reflections on the horror of watching the attack unfold, on its aftermath. They wrote of human connections, of grief, of their shock and disorientation as they tried to find bearings in

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this baffling new world in which we'd all suddenly landed. Sontag, on the other hand, came out with knives drawn. "Where is the acknowledgement," she wrote, 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 super-power, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?

At a moment when the prevailing sentiment was grief, she'd already moved on to critiquing the language, and she came across as insensitive at best. An early clip in *Regarding* finds her defending her position on ABC, a representative of the Heritage Foundation interrupting and talking over her to explain that Sontag is "an offensive writer," part of the "'blame America first' crowd," whose "version of patriotism is 'blame America, blame America.'"

When she eventually succeeds in getting a word in edgewise, she explains that her point in the *New Yorker* wasn't that America was to blame, her point was that "this sort of build-up of moralistic words to describe this horrendous atrocity was not helping us to understand and reach an intelligent response, political and military, which I'm absolutely in favor of. I'm not a pacifist."

It was an argument, in other words, for precision and intelligence in our use of language. In the cacophony of interruptions that follows, Kates cuts to an editorial that Sontag wrote as a teenager, in the North Hollywood High School newspaper:

The battle for peace will never be won by calling anyone whom we don't like a Communist. If we do this, we shall some day realize that in the effort to preserve our Democratic way of life, we have thrown away its noblest feature: the right of every person to express his own opinion.

This is one of the great pleasures of *Regarding*, these glimpses of the early life, Kates's grace in connecting these glimpses to the life and the career that followed. Peter Haidu, a scholar in medieval studies, remembers the teenaged Sontag well. "She sat me down on her bed," he recalls, "and ran through the argument of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. She must have been fifteen."

3.

It's a given that Sontag was possessed of an extraordinary mind; a strength of *Regarding* is its depiction of an equally extraordinary will. She was who she was—Susan Sontag the icon, as opposed to, say, Susan Sontag the very-well-read-but-unpublished housewife—because she willed herself out of one life and into another. Then another, and another.

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In one of the film's most compelling interviews, shot in Sontag's later years, a reporter pries gently into the early chronology: college at fifteen, marriage at seventeen, a child at nineteen. "These numbers suggest what?" she asks. Sontag replies:

Eagerness to grow up. I hated being a child. I couldn't do what I wanted to do. I wanted to stay up all night. . . . I wanted to talk to people. I wanted to meet people who were interested in what I was interested in.

I couldn't do what I wanted to do. In *Regarding*, this problem seems as relevant to Sontag's marriage as it was to her childhood. "Marriage," she wrote in her journal, "is based on the principle of inertia." An unfortunate conception of marriage for anyone, but particularly disastrous for a person whose internal equilibrium seemed to require constant motion. In 1957, Sontag left her husband and son in the United States—she made arrangements for five-year-old David to be cared for by her husband's parents—and crossed the Atlantic to study philosophy at Oxford. "I think," her sister Judith says of this decision, "she just wanted to do what she wanted to do. That's really all there is to it." "She was constantly discovering things and becoming a new person," the French scholar Alice Kaplan notes in the film, "and that was her essential avant-gardism. You can either suspect it or really, really admire it."

Or both. It's possible to admire it on one level and, on another, suspect a certain lack of attention to the effect of those reinventions on the people around her. "She was never able to know what goes on in another person," her former girlfriend Eva Kollisch said. "I mean the sensitivity that we exercise in everyday life all the time, you know, like 'what are you thinking, what are you feeling, where are you in this?' Susan was not sensitive. She was not a sensitive person."

But Kates's depiction of Sontag's decision to leave is nuanced. Sontag may have wanted to do what she wanted to do, but, as Alice Kaplan points out, American parenting in the mid fifties was very different from American parenting today. Some things that seem unfathomable now were less so back then, and vice versa. Moreover, the model of passing off one's children to other people was a familiar arrangement: Susan and Judith had been raised by relatives until Susan was six and Judith was three, their parents being occupied by the fur-trading business in China.

Consider for a moment this passage from Jenny Offill's exquisite recent novel, *Dept. of Speculation*, in which a married female writer considers the path not taken:

My plan was to never get married. I was going to be an art monster instead.
Women almost never become art monsters because art monsters only concern

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themselves with art, never mundane things. Nabokov didn't even fold his own umbrella. Véra licked his stamps for him.

It is absolutely possible to be an artist and to be married. It's difficult to be both an art monster, in Offill's splendid phrasing, and a responsible spouse. And it seems a fairly safe assumption that being both an art monster and a wife would have been virtually impossible in the mid fifties.

Reflecting on the collapse of his marriage with Sontag, in a story that appeared in the *New York Observer* a year after her death, Philip Rieff said, "I think what I wanted was a large family and what she wanted was a large library."

4.

It's at this point in the film, when Sontag's desire for freedom takes her to Oxford and then Paris and then New York, when the contours of her adult life become apparent, that the problem of biographers to which I alluded at the beginning comes into focus. How to edit a fathomless sea of archival material? Or, to put it differently, Which story to tell? Sontag once wrote, "What makes me feel strong: being in love, and work." *Regarding* follows these two polestars through the course of Sontag's life. Kates alights upon the important love affairs—she has found extraordinarily compelling interviewees in Harriet Sohmers Zwerling and Eva Kollisch—and the important works: "Notes on Camp," *On Photography*, *The Imagination of Disaster*, a few of the others. Is it a failing of the film that we hear about Susan cheating on Harriet with Irene Fornés but hear nothing of, say, her impassioned defense of Salman Rushdie in the fraught period following his death sentence? Or that while David Rieff is spoken of frequently by the women who were close to his mother, we hear from David himself only fleetingly, in extremely brief interview snippets, mostly having to do with his mother's illnesses? Or that some of the more explosive moments in Sontag's public life—her infamous 1967 essay in *Partisan Review*, for example, where she proclaimed that "the white race" is "the cancer of human history"—are given only the most cursory mention?

I think there are no right answers here, only different films. If *Regarding Susan Sontag* has a weakness, it's in an occasional overindulgence in visual gimmickry and special effects. Sometimes the effects are lovely, other times lacking in subtlety: When Sontag is diagnosed with cancer, for instance, the gravitas isn't heightened by a shot of her photograph being gradually buried by pouring sand.

But Kates and her colleagues have assembled some remarkable footage, and in content and approach *Regarding* is sound. There's an occasional skimming-the-surface quality to

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it, but I don't know how a film that compresses a life into an hour forty minutes could possibly be otherwise. A few of the major works; a few of the major loves; there isn't time for much more than that.

5.

An interesting quirk of Sontag's career, well-explicated in *Regarding*, is that as famous as she became, she was never known for exactly what she wanted to be known for. The essays made her famous, but she thought of herself as a novelist, always. In the mid nineties, she told Charlie Rose that she wished she'd spent more time writing novels. It's not clear that this would have been a particularly good idea—Kates seldom passes up an opportunity to point out that the novels' critical receptions were, to put it politely, mixed—but it's a wistful note in the film.

Reading Sontag's essays, all these decades later, the content is often interesting, but equally notable is the supreme self-assurance on display, the calm explication of the way things are. She was more self-conscious in the privacy of her personal journals, but in public her confidence was remarkable. Much later in life, she noted of her 1960s essays that "they were very insolent, like a young person's work." Confidence is a privilege of the young—I don't know about you, but I was never more confident in my understanding of the way the world worked than when I was seventeen or eighteen years old—but she wrote those essays in her thirties, which is young but not *that* young.

One of the film's more entertaining interview segments, recorded in the same era, opens as Sontag has apparently just been asked if she's aware of the critical reception of her first film, *Duet for Cannibals*: "Yes," she says, a little irritated, "I know, I read the reviews." A clipped, vaguely British syntax. In those days she sometimes slipped into that wonderful and regrettably now-lost transatlantic accent.

"Have you any comments?"

"I think they're wrong."

The confidence wasn't a byproduct of youth; the confidence was something essential to Sontag, and it seems to me that it was inextricable from her will. There were moments when it curdled into arrogance. Her 1992 interview with Christopher Lydon, excerpted in *Regarding*, is painful to watch. She is imperious, dismissive, and needlessly insulting. She makes no effort to hide her contempt.

"She represents grandiosity, I think," the poet and critic Wayne Koestenbaum suggests a moment later, "and it is a little comic, and there is an aspect of camp. Susan

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Sontag *iscamp*. Her seriousness is a kind of camp, because it's a bit of a pose, it's mannered and stylized. But that's part of the fun of the package of Susan Sontag." But she doesn't seem to be in on the joke. And there's something a little horrifying, isn't there, in the thought of turning unknowingly into a camp version of oneself?

6.

Of that terrible moment when the Ayatollah Khomeini sentenced Salman Rushdie to death, Christopher Hitchens wrote:

Susan Sontag was absolutely superb. She stood up proudly where everyone could see her and denounced the hirelings of the Ayatollah. She nagged everybody on her mailing list and shamed them, if they needed to be shamed, into either signing or showing up. 'A bit of civic fortitude,' as she put it in that gravelly voice that she could summon so well, 'is what is required here.' Cowardice is horribly infectious, but in that abysmal week she showed that courage can be infectious, too. I loved her. This may sound sentimental, but when she got Rushdie on the phone—not an easy thing to do once he had vanished into the netherworld of ultraprotection—she chuckled: 'Salman! It's like being in love! I think of you night and day: all the time!' Against the riot of hatred and cruelty and rage that had been conjured into existence by a verminous religious fanatic, this very manner of expression seemed an antidote: a humanist love plainly expressed against those whose love was only for death.

I've quoted this long passage in its entirety not only because I admire Sontag's courage during the Rushdie affair and think it should be highlighted, but because Hitchens's final sentence brushes up against what seems to me to be the essence of Kates's film: *Regarding* is a portrait of an immensely passionate life. *What makes me feel strong: being in love, and work*. The two aren't always extricable, and this is what *Regarding* conveys so beautifully. This was a woman who was driven by humanist love, by a lifelong allegiance to the kingdom of books—"my household deities, my space ships"—and ideas. All she wanted was everything: to see every film, read every book, have every experience; to understand civilization, to understand war, and fall in love. To talk to everyone interesting, to stay up all night.