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Q&A

Regarding Susan Sontag: A New Doc on Her Force of Personality and Brainpower

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Regarding Susan Sontag is a new documentary playing at the [Tribeca Film Festival](#) this weekend and will air on HBO this fall. The film is an intimate look at the influential American writer, filmmaker, political activist, and cultural critic. Sontag is widely considered to be one of the most important, outspoken, and provocative thinkers of the 20th century. Her writings include novels, short stories, and film scripts, but she was best known for her critical essays that examined all kinds of social and artistic issues. Sadly, Sontag died of leukemia in 2004 at 71 years old, but her work still resonates today. Style.com spoke to the film's director, Nancy Kates, about Sontag's creative process and wide-ranging influence, and what inspired her to make the film.

What made you decide to make this film about Susan? I imagine that you have followed her work for a long time.

I was saddened by Sontag's death in late 2004, which was also the year my father passed away. Sontag was a heroic figure to me in my youth. Like many smart young women in the 1980s, when I was 20 or so, I wanted to grow up to be like her—confidant, fearless, supersmart, and not willing to play second fiddle to men. I was always interested in what she had to say—I had the idea to make the film [when I was] at my office, and when I went home, I counted the Sontag books on my shelf. I had seven of the sixteen books she published in her lifetime, which seemed like a good sign, particularly because I read her purely out of interest and not because her work was assigned to me in a classroom setting. In some ways, this film is a look back from middle age at the person I was thirty years ago.

Susan's writing was incredibly powerful, articulate, and candid. She also had a wide range of interests. What do you think her greatest passion was?

Critic Wayne Koestenbaum, who is interviewed in the film and served as one of our advisers, refers to Sontag as a "cosmophage"—someone who eats the world or consumes the world. It is probably not fair to single out one of her passions—

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she had passions for words; ideas; books; photographs and the realm of photography; her lovers, most of whom were women; and for more ordinary pleasures, such as Chinese food. Her work was a deep expression of most of those passions, though she hid her sexuality, which, ironically, probably limited her ability to write fiction. Interviewed about her historical novel *The Volcano Lover*, in 1992, Sontag told a journalist, “I’m interested in various kinds of passionate engagement. All my work says be serious, be passionate, wake up.”

Which one of your interview subjects offered the most insight into Susan’s creative process?

I think it is unsporting to play favorites among the interviewees, but Don Levine, who spent a long time as a sort of unpaid editor and writing collaborator, was extremely helpful in describing the long stretches of work they did together on *Death Kit* and *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, which they edited together, though Sontag is the sole editor on the cover of the book. So many of our interviewees are also writers; they are speaking about Sontag through their own experiences writing on other subjects.

How do you think Susan was able to be both an influential critic and a sort of celebrity?

Sontag was unique in American letters, in that she had a mind that would not quit, and was also very beautiful, which was part of her appeal and partly why she became so famous, though I think she also sought fame in a way that had been unfashionable among the previous generation, i.e., the writers of the 1950s and early sixties. Like many people who become famous, she craved that sort of public attention, and needed it, in certain ways. I don’t know that she would have had the celebrity without the looks, even though it pains me to say so. She was also willing to be a bit outrageous in her public statements, such as the one she made during the Vietnam War: “The white race is the cancer of human history.” Through sheer force of personality—and considerable brainpower—Sontag made sure that she was not going to be dismissed or condescended to because of her gender, managing to avoid the sort of treatment that most women in the public eye experienced in the 1960s and seventies, and sometimes even today.

—*Chris Black*

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