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Monday June 9 2014 | thetimes.co.uk | No 71218



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arts

Shining a light on a near extinct breed

At the Sheffield Doc/Fest, cinema is falling in love with the literary documentary, reports Kate Muir

Martin Scorsese's new film had its world premiere in Sheffield this weekend, and there was nary a whiff of *The Wolf of Wall Street's* vulgarity about proceedings. Scorsese has turned to loftier Manhattan matters: the high-minded life of writers on *The New York Review of Books* in his documentary *The 50 Year Argument*.

It's not a surprise to find Scorsese headlining along with the Pulp concert film at this week's vast Sheffield Doc/Fest — after all he has made music documentaries recently on George Harrison and Bob Dylan. Here, however, Scorsese and David Tedeschi, his co-director, concern themselves with that near-extinct breed: the rock-star intellectual, from Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal to Susan Sontag and James Baldwin.

Scorsese's nose for mafia-style feuds works well in this study of the literati who inhabit the *Review's* august and book-tsunamied offices in New York's Village. There's dramatic footage of Mailer shouting "harridans!" at an audience including Sontag, while Germaine Greer holds her head in her

hands. Joan Didion discusses taking the accused rapists' side of the story in the Central Park "wilding" attack on a woman, while Yasmine El Rashidi gives a counter-intuitive interpretation of events in Tahrir Square in Cairo.

The intellectual circus is still presided over by editor Robert Silvers, who founded *TNYRB* with the late Barbara Epstein in 1963. In a smart suit and yellow silk tie, 84-year-old Silvers pads around like an ancient patrician turtle — armed with a scalpel. This is a lost world of measured thought and long-form essays, in an age when opinions are 140 characters long and wars are Instagrammed. Indeed, the director himself made a digital appearance at a Q&A after *The 50 Year Argument* premiere in Sheffield, and I found myself in the bizarre position of asking a question to a cinema screen featuring Scorsese's 20ft wide head and giant black glasses on Skype.

"The challenge of making a literary documentary compared to a rock film is that with those you let the music tell the story — not the lyrics, but the tone of it," said Scorsese. "Here we don't have that but we have the language of ideas like music, and we're making a visual supplement to the ideas." The documentary also uses photographer Brigitte Lacombe's black-and-white portraits of recent contributors, including Colm Tóibín and Zoë Heller.

Scorsese said the film was not just aimed at *TNYRB* subscribers, but as an introduction for those who would now be curious to read the *Review*: "The concept is to keep the ideas flowing, no matter how uncomfortable." He also confessed that in his own home, "I do still have stacks of 'em around. I just can't always get to it".

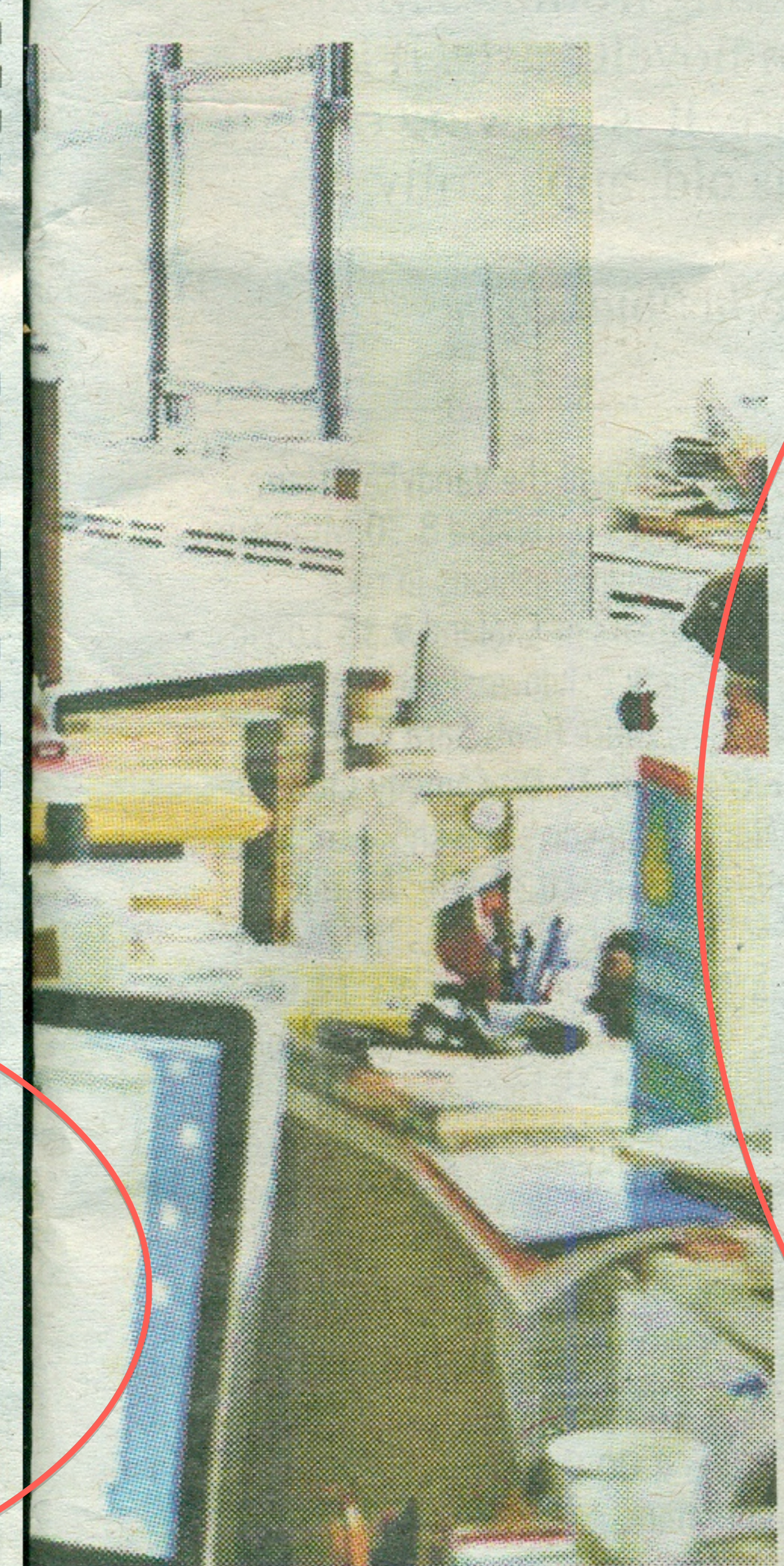
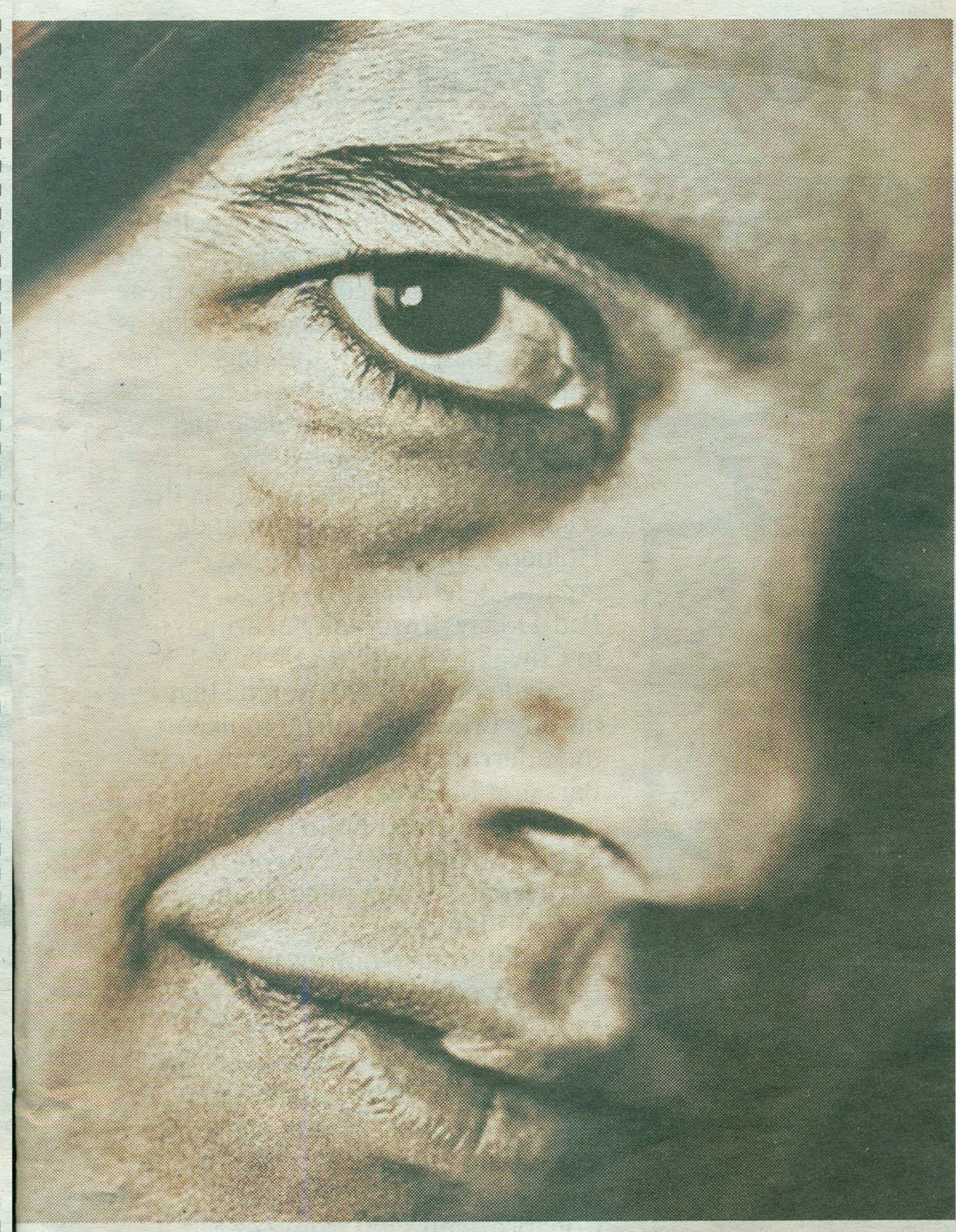
The 50 Year Argument is one of a slew of literary documentaries



suddenly in the cinema zeitgeist. The late Sontag appears again at Sheffield in the biopic, *Regarding Susan Sontag*, while the Scottish author of *Lanark* talks about his painting, independence, hard work and hard drinking in *Alasdair Gray: A Life in Progress*, which has a world premiere on Thursday. The producer Harvey Weinstein made much of the recent JD Salinger documentary by Shane Salerno, yet to be released in the UK, which may also become a feature film.

The Alasdair Gray story is well known in Scotland, but less so in international circles, which may be surprised to see a Renaissance man at work, painting a vast mural on the ceiling of the Glasgow church that has now become the performance space Óran Mór. Directed by Kevin Cameron over 15 years, the film shows how Gray altered Scotland's literary consciousness from the 1980s onwards with his daring, iconoclastic novels.

The Sontag documentary, by Nancy Kates, is in some ways more satisfying than *The 50 Year Argument*, with its deep mining of Sontag's essays *Notes on 'Camp'*, *On Photography* and *Illness as Metaphor*, and a fascinating investigation of her bisexual relationships. She went to university at



Far left, Alasdair Gray, the Scottish author; above, *Regarding Susan Sontag*; left, *The 50 Year Argument*

15, married her professor aged 17, had her son David Rieff at 19, and left him with his grandparents to go to Oxford and Paris aged 24. "In marriage I have suffered a certain loss of personality," she said, but future relationships did not stop her writing 17 books, taking popular culture seriously and being viscerally engaged in public debate, from feminism to the wars in Sarajevo and Vietnam. Towards the end of her life she noted: "That 'high culture' I took for granted has the quality of an endangered species." The cinema is exploring our nostalgic yearning for serious debate and towering bookish geniuses. If only Sontag were here now to make sense of it for us ... sheffdocfest.com runs until June 12