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2014 Tribeca Film Festival Filmmaker Profile: Nancy Kates (Director – ‘Regarding Susan Sontag’)

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‘**Regarding Susan Sontag**’ is an intimate study of one of the most influential and provocative thinkers of the 20th century. Endlessly curious and gracefully outspoken throughout her career, Susan Sontag became one of the most important literary, political, and feminist icons of her generation. **Nancy Kates**’ in-depth documentary tracks Sontag’s seminal, life-changing moments through archival materials, accounts from friends, family, colleagues, and lovers, as well as her own words, as read by **Patricia Clarkson**. From her early infatuation with books to her first experience in a gay bar; from her first marriage to her last lover, ‘*Regarding Susan Sontag*’ is a nuanced investigation into the life of a towering cultural critic and writer whose works on photography, war, and terrorism still resonate today.

Anticipating ‘*Regarding Susan Sontag*’ Screening at the **2014 Tribeca Film Festival** we profile the film’s Director *Nancy Kates*. The film screens as part of the *World*

Documentary Competition on **Saturday, April 19**, **Sunday, April 20**, **Monday, April 21** and **Friday, April 25, 2014** in New York City.

Find More Information & Tickets to 'Regarding Susan Sontag' at the 2014 Tribeca Film Festival – [HERE](#)

How were you first introduced to the life & work of Susan Sontag?

I think my friends in college must have talked about her—it is hard to remember. She was never assigned to me for classroom reading, but I was very interested in her ideas by the age of 19 or 20, as were thousands of young women in the 1970s and 80s. “The Susan Sontag Reader” came out in 1982, and it was something I had to buy, right away. I still have my paperback copy, though the spine fell apart during the making of the film, so I now have two halves, instead of a whole volume. I suppose I should buy a new one, but the 1982 edition is precious to me.

When did you first feel this was a story you wanted to tell at the feature length level?

I got the idea a few months after her death, in March 2005. I didn't have a specific length in mind at the very beginning, though it seemed like it would have to be feature-length, given the depth and complexity of her life. I had been interested in her for decades, at that point, and when I went home from the office after having this idea, I discovered I owned seven of Sontag's books—she wrote 16 in her lifetime. That seemed to indicate that I should do this, though, at first, I was a bit intimidated by the subject.

As a Documentary filmmaker, describe how you saw the narrative play out in the film's development? How did this narrative change (if it did) over the course of development?

Documentary stories are created in the editing room, or at least that is the way I work—I don't cut based on a script, but try to discover the story in and through the material. We also knew from the beginning that we had to find visual metaphors for the work of thinking and writing, and imagery to support revealing personal comments from her journals and notebooks. For a long time, the film was edited in a thematic, associative, non-chronological style. Given that it also has a lot of evocative and abstract imagery, jumping around chronologically proved difficult for those who reviewed the rough cut, including our board of advisors. So the film became more chronological during the editing process. We also drew heavily on treatments and other materials submitted to

fundings such as the NEA and the NEH, which were full of quotes from Sontag's works, many of which wound up in the film.

Speaking specifically to the medium of Documentary, what do you feel is its role is within the contemporary social dialogue?

This is a difficult question, particularly in the current media environment, with enormous competition for attention and eyeballs. I do think documentaries are unique tools for raising awareness about contemporary issues, though I have not made any "social issue" films, per se. If we define your question more narrowly, and focus on my biographical films (the Sontag film and *Brother Outsider: the Life of Bayard Rustin*, made with filmmaker Bennett Singer), I think they shed new light on figures that are known by some but not all, helping viewers engage with both the personalities and the eras in which they lived. Hopefully they allow audience members to think about their own lives and how they might do more, as activists, thinkers, writers, etc. A lot of people will see the Sontag film without having read her work, which means we will introduce her to new generations, and in a sense help percolate her ideas in the culture.

Personally (and drawing from your research), how is Susan Sontag a distinctly New York City figure?

In an archival interview, she actually says that she would not live in the United States if she did not live in New York City. She rejected her American-ness, though it defined her, but embraced her New Yorker-ness, while hiding her origins in Arizona and California. Sontag also spent significant chunks of time living in Europe, mostly in Paris, but with extended stays in Berlin and Sarajevo. American intellectuals of her day looked to Europe in a way that they might look to Asia or perhaps Africa today—it was certainly possible to live in New York in a somewhat European way in the 1960s, hanging out in cafes and eating steak for breakfast, which she loved to do. Sontag was famous for endless New York evenings that included the opera, a midnight movie, Chinese food at 2 a.m., etc., to the point that she wore out her friends through the pace of her activities. She was a 24/7 kind of New Yorker, and she just loved that culture, beauty, and food was available to her at any time of day or night.

Why is the Tribeca Film Festival the right destination for premiering 'Regarding Susan Sontag' to audiences?

New York is the perfect place to show the film, and Tribeca as a young, vibrant and

important venue for new films does seem ideal for this film, which will be broadcast later this year on HBO.



HBO's REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG director Nancy Kates. Photo credit: Anna Kuperberg.

Courtesy of HBO Documentary Films.

About Nancy Kates

Based in Berkeley, California, Nancy D. Kates produced and directed the highly-acclaimed feature documentary, *Brother Outsider: the Life of Bayard Rustin*, with Bennett Singer. The film premiered in competition at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival and as a special of the PBS series, *POV*. It went on to win more than 25 awards worldwide, including the 2004 GLAAD Media Award.

sontagfilm.org

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