

# REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG SCREENING GUIDE

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**PREMIERES December 8th 2014 at 9p/8c  
on HBO | HBOGO | HBO ON-DEMAND**

**For more information, go to [HBO.com](http://HBO.com)**

**SUGGESTION:** Invite your colleagues and friends to watch the film together, and then have a post screening discussion.



### WHAT'S THE FILM ABOUT?

REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG is an intimate and nuanced investigation into the life of one of the most influential and provocative thinkers of the 20th century. Passionate and gracefully outspoken throughout her career, Susan Sontag became one of the most important literary, political and feminist icons of her generation. From her early infatuation with books to her first experience in a gay bar; from her early marriage to her last lover, REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG is a fascinating look at a towering cultural critic and writer whose works on photography, war, illness, and terrorism continue to resonate today.

Susan Sontag was a controversial, larger-than-life figure: brilliant, beautiful, compassionate, maddening, insightful, frequently arrogant, and utterly dedicated to her work. She was an enormously influential writer who sold millions of copies of her books, and yet the public knows very little about her. For decades, Sontag wrote with tremendous insight about the cultural and political forces shaping the United States. By being serious about subjects and art forms that had not been given their intellectual due, her writings were sometimes a shock to the American system. Even while she was dying of leukemia, Sontag continued to provide a moral compass through which to understand the issues of the day. "I'm interested in various kinds of passionate engagement," she said. "All my work says 'be serious, be passionate, wake up!'"

## Sontag's New York and Postwar America

Susan Sontag came of age during the late 1940s and early 1950s, as the United States was exploding into a new era of prosperity, artistic and cultural transformation, urban development and suburban growth, political upheaval, and the beginnings of the modern civil rights movement. After emerging victorious from World War II, the U.S. had become a major superpower, as well as the world's policeman. It quickly moved into the Cold War with the Soviet Union: an arms race and fierce ideological battle. It was a period of hope and transformation, but also of bullying and deception: at home, McCarthyites spread fear through communist- and gay-baiting "witch hunts." The 1950s were the height of what Henry Luce of *TIME* deemed "The American Century."

Then the '60s arrived. The jazz was cool, the world felt young again, and New York was the place to be. At 31, Susan Sontag entered the New York literary and intellectual world and changed all the rules, becoming an instant star. Her image graced the covers of magazines. She posed in Ray Bans for Andy Warhol. Like Bob Dylan, she defined her times, ushering in a new vogue. In the electrifying years between 1960 and 1966, she defined intellectual chic and transformed what could be taken seriously in the world of arts and ideas.

### Notes on Sontag

Susan Sontag was born in New York City in 1933, and raised in Arizona and Los Angeles. A precocious, bookish child, she graduated high school at 15, attending Berkeley, briefly, and then the University of Chicago. Sontag was 17 when she met sociologist Philip Rieff and quickly married him; their son, David, was born two years later. She received a master's degree in philosophy from Harvard, and continued her studies at Oxford and the Sorbonne. But after teaching briefly at Columbia University, Sontag left academia to wow the New York literary scene with an ambitious first novel, *The Benefactor*, and a series of essays for *Partisan Review*. She wrote radically about low culture from a position within high culture, in an effort to expand what could be taken seriously in the arts. Later, she made waves with *On Photography*, presciently outlining the artform's central role in modern consumer culture, and calling for an "ecology" of images. After surviving a terminal breast cancer diagnosis and a mastectomy at the age of 40, Sontag turned to the subject of illness, becoming a role model to all who struggle with disease.





Sontag did not shrink from political controversy, confounding her literary colleagues with political stands that changed radically over time. Yet even her detractors—who called her inconsistent and elitist—acknowledged her bravery. She was vehemently opposed to the Vietnam War, and famously visited Hanoi in 1968, in the midst of heavy American bombing, notoriously proclaiming “the white race is the cancer of human history.” Sontag continued bearing witness to war and violence throughout her life. Decades later, her brief comments in *The New Yorker* in the aftermath of 9/11, about the underlying causes of the tragedy, unleashed a firestorm of anger. For her willingness to criticize American foreign policy, she was labeled a traitor. Her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, examines our responses to images of war and torture.

Susan Sontag embodied an ideal, a zenith that none could equal but many aspired to: the possibility of a committed life, an intellectual life, and a life of thinking and writing outside of the academy. She was the foremost female intellectual of her day, and refused to be reduced to her gender, but was also perfectly willing to use her beauty and sensuality to advance her career. Publicly, she was the fierce “dragon lady” of American letters; in private, she was as confused and vulnerable as the next person. Since girlhood, Sontag had been pushing socially acceptable boundaries to make room for herself as a brilliant woman in a circle of men, yet she was unwilling to reveal her vulnerabilities, for fear of being dismissed as weak. She kept her sexuality



private, assuming it would be used against her. Before her death, she hesitatingly admitted to being bisexual, though her diaries are much more explicit. “My desire to write is connected to my homosexuality,” she confided in a 1959 journal entry. “I need the identity as a weapon to match the weapon that society has against me. I am just becoming aware of how guilty I feel being queer.”

Susan Sontag died on December 28, 2004 of acute myelogenous leukemia, after an intense struggle with the disease, her third form of cancer. While her eloquent voice has been silenced, she lives on in her books, essays, letters, and in the dramatic interviews and footage she left behind.

## HOW DO YOU HOST A SCREENING?

Invite your colleagues and friends to a gathering spot to watch the film together. Here are some tips for hosting a great screening:

**1. Gather your friends and colleagues.** Use a site like Paperless Post or Punchbowl to send out invitations and collect RSVPs. Here's a sample of what your invitation can say:

<HOST NAME> cordially invites you and a guest to a screening and discussion of REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG

REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG is an intimate and nuanced investigation into the life of one of the most influential and provocative thinkers of the 20th century. Passionate and gracefully outspoken throughout her career, Susan Sontag became one of the most important literary, political and feminist icons of her generation. From her early infatuation with books to her first experience in a gay bar; from her early marriage to her last lover, REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG is a fascinating look at a towering cultural critic and writer whose works on photography, war, illness, and terrorism still resonate today.

<TIME> WELCOME

<TIME> SCREENING (length 1h 39m)

Please RSVP to <EMAIL address> by <DATE>.

Create a Facebook event as well. Then, promote your screening to potential guests. Tag your tweets with @Sontagfilm, #RegardingSusanSontag and #HBO. Share the poster (see the end of this guide). Send the link to the trailer, too:  
<http://sontagfilm.org/trailer>



**2. Introduce the film.** Ask everyone, "What does Susan Sontag mean to you? What do you already know about Susan Sontag?" Give everyone a chance to write down or at least consider his/her responses before the film.

While watching, ask viewers to think about whether the Sontag portrayed in the film is different from the one they know. How is the period in which she lived portrayed?



### Consider the following themes:

- **War and peace**

Sontag demonstrated her beliefs through action, bearing witness to war in Vietnam, Israel and Sarajevo. Her provocative political activism and writing often unleashed firestorms of anger.



- **Feminism / Being a woman**

Sontag was the foremost female intellectual of her day, and refused to be reduced to her gender, but was also perfectly willing to use her beauty and sensuality to advance her career.

- **The search for love**

Sontag kept her sexuality private, assuming it would be used against her, even in later years when admirers demanded she come out.

- **Illness**

Sontag survived a terminal breast cancer diagnosis and radical mastectomy at the age of 40, and wrote about the stigma of diseases in *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. She died of acute myelogenous leukemia, her third form of cancer.

- **Photography**

In *On Photography*, Sontag called for an “ecology” of images. In many ways, we live in a Sontagian world of complete visual overload, a media environment dominated by the image culture of television, advertising, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and the Internet, with instant access to global information.

- **Fame**

More than any other thinker of her day, Sontag was watched, viewed, photographed and stared at. She was gazed at, and she gazed back.

### 3. Watch the film.

**4. Talk about what you saw in the film.** Go over your responses, and talk about what surprised people the most. What have they learned? Have their perceptions changed?

Before beginning your discussion, agree upon a simple set of guidelines to establish respectful listening. Keep in mind that the film may raise sensitive issues, and that everyone will bring different personal backgrounds and experiences to their responses.

**Post-Screening Discussion Questions:**

- Did you like Susan Sontag, based on the portrayal in the film? Why or why not?
- How did Sontag reflect the times in which she lived? When was she ahead of her time?
- Did seeing Sontag's story on screen make you think about your own life? What aspects of it?
- What do you think about the fact that Sontag remained closeted during her lifetime? Did it bother you? How did you respond to those who defended her closet?
- Why did she feel compelled to travel to war zones? Is that something you would ever consider doing?
- If you could meet Susan Sontag today, what question would you ask her, or what might you say to her?
- How do Sontag's ideas about photography resonate today, with the Internet and the proliferation of images available to us?
- How did the visual style of the film support the storytelling? Did you like it? What images stand out in your mind? Do you have questions about the visual style of the film?
- Did anything in the film upset you? Did it make you want to have a discussion or dialogue with Sontag, or with others?
- What would you ask the filmmakers if you had the opportunity to talk with them?
- How will Susan Sontag be remembered in the future?



5. Think about what you or your group can do to get involved. Invite guests to go to [Sontagfilm.org](http://Sontagfilm.org) and [HBO.com](http://HBO.com) to learn more about the film. Urge participants to tell their friends and those in their networks about the film and the issues it raises.

6. Thank your guests. Send a thank you email the next day, and include some follow up comments on the discussion. You can include links to the groups below.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

PEN American Center

[www.pen.org](http://www.pen.org)

The Susan Sontag Archive

[unitproj.library.ucla.edu/special/sontag/sontag.htm](http://unitproj.library.ucla.edu/special/sontag/sontag.htm)

Ms. Foundation for Women

[www.forwomen.org](http://www.forwomen.org)

Lambda Literary

[www.lambdaliterary.org](http://www.lambdaliterary.org)

Jewish Women International

[www.jwi.org](http://www.jwi.org)

American Cancer Society

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)



## Susan Sontag | Books & Essays

### Nonfiction

*Against Interpretation* (1966)  
*Styles of Radical Will* (1969)  
*On Photography* (1977)  
*Illness as Metaphor* (1978)  
*Under the Sign of Saturn* (1980)  
*A Susan Sontag Reader* (1982)  
*AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988)  
*Where the Stress Falls* (2001)  
*Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003)  
*At the Same Time* (2007)

### Fiction

*The Benefactor* (1963)  
*Death Kit* (1967)  
*I, etcetera* (1977)  
*The Way We Live Now* (1991)  
*The Volcano Lover* (1992)  
*In America* (1999)

### Journals

*Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1963* (2008)  
*As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980* (2012)

### Select Essays

"Notes on 'Camp'" (*Partisan Review*, Fall 1964)  
[faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html](http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html)

"The Talk of the Town: Tuesday, And After" (*The New Yorker*, Sept. 24, 2001)  
[www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/24/1256341](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/24/1256341)

"Of Courage and Resistance" (Rothko Chapel, March 30, 2003)  
[www.thenation.com/article/courage-and-resistance](http://www.thenation.com/article/courage-and-resistance)





Official Selection  
idfa 2014



Official Selection  
2014  
San Francisco  
Jewish Film Festival



**TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL, SPECIAL JURY MENTION**  
**FRAMELINE: SAN FRANCISCO INT'L LGBT FILM FESTIVAL, HONORABLE MENTION**  
**MIX COPENHAGEN, JURY SPECIAL MENTION**

"REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG... stood out for the complexity of its portrayal of a difficult character.... striking for its nuance, its communication of overlapping meanings" —Pat Aufderheide, *International Documentary Association*

"The most compelling of several biographies [at Tribeca] is Nancy Kates's perceptive film REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG, about that cultural critic and writer, who died in 2004 and belonged to a vanishing breed of literary celebrity. The film is forthright in revealing the personal life of this haughty, glamorous art star" —Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*

"Susan Sontag was one of the most influential literary, feminist and political icons of her time... Nancy Kates' documentary, REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG, gives a vast look at the life of the cultural critic, from her personal love life to her bold, brilliant writings on art and politics." —Erin Whitney, *Huffington Post*

"Poignant, intimate, surprisingly entertaining documentary."  
—Christopher Frizzelle, *The Stranger*

"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, it's a close portrait of a woman who was, in the words of her son, 'interested in everything.'"

—Emily St. John Mandel, *Humanities*, the magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities



"Kates has chosen to display carefully selected images with striking force... One of the problems Kates surely wrestled with throughout her documentary's long production was how to look at a writer such as Sontag—so well-known and yet almost academically inaccessible to many—with depth of thought as well as depth of feeling. By showing both sides—that is, Sontag the writer and thinker, and Sontag the complicated, troubled, human being—the film triumphs and entertains, often at the same time."

—Hugh Lilly, 4:3



"I won't beat around the bush about Nancy Kates's 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."

—Richard Metzger, *Dangerous Minds*



#### DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I was inspired to make a film about Susan Sontag because of my sadness at her passing. When she died in late 2004, I felt that an important voice had been silenced. Sontag fascinates in part because of her internal contradictions, as well as the way in which she mirrors divides and conflicts in the culture. She stood publicly against the Vietnam War, but not against the actions of the state of Israel, at least in the 1970s. She was politically brave, but fearful about exposing her personal life; ahead of her time in many ways, and yet closeted.

A few months after her death, I found myself having an argument with a colleague about whether Sontag had been a lesbian. Neither the *New York Times* nor the *Los Angeles Times* obituaries mentioned her same-sex relationships. For the national paper of record to make such an omission seemed, to many, to be homophobic, though it was likely done with the intention of protecting her privacy. As I walked back to my office after this conversation, the idea to make a documentary hit me like a brick. The task was daunting. Sontag was fascinating, complex and difficult.

For decades, I have been interested in Susan Sontag—as both thinker and icon. The film also comes out of my obsession with books and writing—it is, in part, a reader's tribute to a writer and the literary world. We tried to make the film in a manner that resonates with Sontag's work, i.e. produce a deep, associative engagement with a serious subject, one that raises more questions than it answers. We hope those familiar with Sontag's work will gain fresh insights into her life and legacy, and that the film will inspire new audiences, young people who may have never heard of her, and others with only a cursory knowledge of Sontag.

- Nancy Kates, Director

## FILMMAKERS

**NANCY D. KATES, Producer/Director**

Nancy D. Kates produced and directed *BROTHER OUTSIDER: THE LIFE OF BAYARD RUSTIN*, with colleague Bennett Singer. The film went on to win more than 25 awards worldwide, including the 2004 GLAAD Media Award. *BROTHER OUTSIDER* received significant attention in the national press: critics described it as “a potent piece of historical rediscovery” (*L.A. Times*); “beautifully crafted” (*Boston Globe*); “powerful and startling” (*The Advocate*); and “poignant” (*TIME*). Kates received her M.A. from Stanford’s documentary film program. Her master’s thesis, *THEIR OWN VIETNAM*, received the 1995 Student Academy Award in documentary, and was exhibited, among other festivals, at the 1996 Sundance Film Festival. Kates has worked on a number of other documentary projects as a writer, producer, story consultant, and editor. She writes occasionally for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and other publications.

**SOPHIE CONSTANTINO, Cinematographer**

Sophie Constantinou has earned international acclaim for tackling difficult subjects with artistry. Her directing credits include *DIVIDED LOYALTIES*, a personal exploration of the conflict in Cyprus, and *BETWEEN THE LINES*, a lyrical documentary about women who cut themselves. Her shooting credits include PBS’s award-winning *MAQUILAPOLIS*; HBO’s *UNCHAINED MEMORIES*, which tells the stories of former slaves; and the PBS film *PRESUMED GUILTY*, a portrait of a public defender’s office. She is working on *OPEN MINDS*, *OPEN MOUTHS*, a film about the movement for sustainable, organic lunches in public schools.

**JOHN HAPTAS, Editor**

John Haptas practiced law in Oakland, California before meeting his wife, Kristine Samuelson, and turning to film. He became a documentary editor after several decades of work as a location sound mixer. His editing credits include *SOUNDTRACK TO A RIOT* for *Frontline World* (Emmy nomination); *HUNTING THE HIDDEN DIMENSION*, a program on fractal geometry for PBS Nova; and *INSIDE GUANTANAMO BAY*, a two-hour National Geographic Explorer special (editor/co-writer; Emmy nominations for Best Documentary and for Writing). With Samuelson, he made the recent *TOKYO WAKA*, a meditation on the crows of Tokyo, and a number of earlier films.





IDEAS MOVE ME.

HBO DOCUMENTARY FILMS PRESENTS

# REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG

HBO DOCUMENTARY FILMS PRESENTS "REGARDING SUSAN SONTAG" PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY NANCY KATES EDITED BY JOHN HAPTAS CINEMATOGRAPHER SOPHIE CONSTANTINOU MOTION GRAPHICS DAVE TECSON  
MUSIC BY LAURA KARPMAN AND NORA KROLL-ROSENBAUM VOICE OF SUSAN SONTAG PATRICIA CLARKSON WRITTEN BY NANCY KATES AND JOHN HAPTAS EXECUTIVE PRODUCER TOM DOLBY CO-PRODUCER RACHEL ANTELL  
ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS SUSANNAH MORSE AND ARWEN CURRY STRIP COLLAGE LEWIS KLAHR POST-PRODUCTION COORDINATOR NINA GOODY FOR HBO: SUPERVISING PRODUCER LISA HELLER EXECUTIVE PRODUCER SHEILA NEVINS

**PREMIERES MONDAY DEC 8, 9PM HBO**

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