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Re-reading Susan Sontag

Susan Sontag died in late December 2004, and with her we lost a woman able to write in a most vivid, compassionate and intelligent way about difficult subjects: war, art, poverty, freedom, the meaning of history, and human suffering. The actual topics of her essays concerned photography, literary criticism, diseases, radicalism; her two romances were set in the past, a love story in Naples circa 1770, and the epic of a Polish actress making it to America a century later. Underneath across the whole range of publications and political activism, it was easy to recognize her defiant look, self-assured reasoning, well-argued moral stand, and her courage to be an isolated voice; less evident was her deep emotional involvement with people far away from the comforts of intellectual New York both in space and time: victims of American wars, friends turned frail because of illness, sharecroppers in Depression America, persecuted writers, the poor everywhere. Yet, it was this compassion her ultimate strength, and the capacity to let compassion nurture the analysis her major achievement.

Her famous comment on the 9/11/01 attack against New York and Washington, published shortly after in the New Yorker, infuriated most Americans - although it may appear less radical to Europeans – but was vindicated by later developments:

“Where is the acknowledgment 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 superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?”

I first read her essay on “Illness as metaphor”, and the later one on Aids, in the late ‘80s while working at the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, and as much as it surprises me today, at the time I dismissed them both as being narrowly concerned with the USA, too literary about tuberculosis, and oblivious of the class divide that makes a same disease so vastly different among the rich and the poor. Notable was also her under-appreciation of the economics of global public health, where the funds available for research and prevention largely determine both the agenda of action, and the myths about what is the priority of the day. This is quite crucial given that, as she argues, the fantastic metaphors attached to illnesses are bound to disappear as soon as an effective cure is found.

I had not read her other books yet, and if my approach was then too technical to fully appreciate the essays, I did nonetheless admire the clarity of her writing and the talent in bringing together different areas of inquiry, along with her clear stand on the human rights of those affected by HIV or AIDS. Now, of those essays I admire the clairvoyance, the seamless texture of feelings and politics, and the revealing stand: having been diagnosed with cancer earlier on, she did not write a memoir or a book on her personal dealing with the illness; rather, she embarked on a thorough analysis of the myths and public images that, apparently, any given age constructs around a different disease, as if an enemy were needed as the ultimate Other to fight.
Re-reading “Illness as metaphor” today, one cannot escape from the realization that terrorism is the certified illness of our times. But also one sadly realizes that the very same military metaphors of “fighting” the disease, “defeating” it or “conquer” it, that she so convincingly unpacked and denounced as offensive to the person living with cancer, were used in many obituaries written about her own death.

It was her book “On photography” that made me a fan of Susan Sontag. The fact that her views on photography now seem uncontroversial is the “sure sign of the authentic pioneer” (Hitchens). But for me, not acquainted with the camera, they opened up a whole world of understanding, as they must have to many others, if John Berger welcomed the book as “The most original and important work on the subject”. The relation and mutual influences of photography and painting, the correlations of modern still photography with poetry, the very personal review of the great American photographers of the two last centuries, the diligent treatment of surrealism, the new habits of seeing brought about by photography that we don’t even suspect, these and a dozen other major themes are narrated with calm and zeal, along with the two that dominate this as other books of hers: the relationship between the photographic image and language, and the way we look at human tragedy through the lenses of photographers.

Complex notions on interpretation and history are presented, but Sontag manages to write a clear, linear prose, a sure sign of competence:

“...photography is not, to begin with, an art form at all. Like language, it is a medium in which works of art (among other things) are made. Out of language, one can make scientific discourse, bureaucratic memoranda, love letters, grocery lists, and Balzac’s Paris.”

It is interesting how she links the origin and success of photography in the second part of the XIX century, the growing centrality of objects for mass consumption as required by the economy - the golden age of American capitalism from then and up to the 1930s -, the corresponding cultural developments from realism onwards, and two apparently distant phenomena as sex and poverty:

“In the past, a discontent with reality expressed itself as a longing for another world. In modern society, a discontent with reality expresses itself forcefully and most hauntingly by the longing to reproduce this one. As if only by looking at reality in the form of an object – through the fix of the photograph – is it really real, that is, surreal.”

“As an aesthetics that yearns to be a politics, Surrealism opts for the underdog, for the rights of a disestablished or unofficial reality. But the scandals flattered by Surrealist aesthetics generally turned out to be just those homely mysteries obscured by the bourgeois social order: sex and poverty. Eros, which the early surrealists placed at the summit of the tabooed reality they sought to rehabilitate, was itself part of the mystery of social station. While it seemed to flourish luxuriantly at extreme ends of the scale, both the lower classes and the nobility being regarded as naturally libertine, middle-class people had to toil to make their sexual liberation.”

Her studies in France and fluency in foreign languages make more piercing Sontag’s profound love for America, her detached criticism of American culture, and her passionate opposition to American governments, here quietly hinted at in a powerful synthesis:

“[In late XIX century, European ] photographs tended to praise or to aim at neutrality. Americans, less convinced of the permanence of any basic social arrangements … have more often made photography partisan. Pictures got taken not only to show what should be admired but also to reveal the needs to be confronted, deplored – and fixed up. American photography implies a more
summary, less stable connection with history; and a relation to geographic and social reality both more forceful and more predatory.”

It is in her romance “In America” that all her narrative strands come together, unified by the complex relation with her country. America is the powerful magnet that attracts immigrants, who, after having worked hard to solve their own problems— including survival—cannot help but fixing up those of the entire world. America that has its own America within, California, thus forcing a second voyage on the fugitive Europeans. Maryna Zalezowska, the heroine of the story, is a Polish actress who pursues her own liberation as a woman through the voyage to New York and California: she leads others to set up a rural community and then, when most give up after failure, she goes on to become a diva.

“America means: one can fight against her own destiny.”

Maryna looks at her adoring men and thinks that she wants to be in love, because a desperate passion sparks off the best part of ourselves, but when marriage ends it all, it’s liberation. It is her conviction that love makes men strong, and women frail. But Maryna stays on in the mind of the reader as a very strong woman whose humanity is enhanced by those very frailties that make her quest for independence so difficult.

This book, her first full-length novel, was written when the author was 60. It makes us understand American history from a European perspective, and is an ideal first introduction to the work of Susan Sontag.

She is hailed as a feminist but she was not particularly concerned with gender issues, nor made specific points about women’s specificity, nor published in the feminist press. Because of this, and because she resolutely refused to comment on her private life (she had a long relationship with Annie Libowitz, a most celebrated New York photographer), was criticized by many. Yet, she has become an icon for many women, with her elegant figure, her “signature black-on-white swoosh in her hair” (Hitchens) and her assiduity to arts events in-between trips to Sarajevo.

Perhaps she appeals most to women who have appropriated the feminist critique as cultural geology of the territory they move on, and feel ready to confront men in their terrain, with a defiant eye, calling them to measure up with the ever dramatic turns of history. She would bring her own strength, and demand that in the examination of social reality, people be treated as a whole, passions and vulnerabilities included.

This is why her last book, "Regarding the pain of others", is so powerful. In it, she goes back to photography, this time focussing on the images of war, poverty, and catastrophes: we see them every day, and they always trigger uneasy reactions. Images, created by a person and a camera, are all we know of tragedies, from the Spanish Civil War, to Nazi camps, to famines, colonialist wars, genocides, natural and man-made disasters, torture, and current imperial wars. For every one of them, we fix the eyes of a woman desperate for her family, of a man afraid of death, of children lost in the mayhem: people in pain we are asked to watch. It seems that for Sontag, this is the true otherness of our times, the thoroughly Different Other. So heavy to bear, we sometimes turn away from it. But such images have a context, and are carefully chosen by the media organizations for release. Let’s try to understand what they may mean for an American audience:

“What is called ‘collective memory’ is not a remembering, but a stipulating: that this is important … with the pictures that lock the story in our minds.
… photographs of the victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus.

… The national consensus on American history as a history of progress is a new setting for distressing photographs – one that focuses our attention on wrongs, both here and elsewhere, for which America sees itself as the solution or cure”.

Moreover, a to an Israeli Jew, a photograph of youngsters butchered by a kamikaze in a Tel Aviv pizza place is first of all that of a Jew killed by a Palestinian. To a Palestinian, a child in a refugee camp torn apart by a missile is first of all a Palestinian killed by the Israeli Army.

“All photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions.”

As Harding says, “These contradictions can never be fully resolved without the ‘horror’ of war becoming a question of what side you’re on” and yet, Sontag keeps telling that, all considered, these images are important because they question our regard over the others: we, with the power of watching; them, with only the suffering. This should eventually enable us to go beyond politics and reflect on what it means to be human in a world that can generate such atrocities:

“Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood … No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, of amnesia.”

Susan Sontag privileged in her analysis the still photograph rather than the moving image, although she was a cinema critic and even took part in films. One misses her thoughts on the video work by amateurs that increasingly defines events on television and sticks in our mental picture gallery.

I’d like to end with a comment by Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of The New Republic and an old friend of Sontag (quoted in Fox):

"The theme that runs through Susan's writing is this lifelong struggle to arrive at the proper balance between the moral and the aesthetic. There was something unusually vivid about her writing. That's why even if one disagrees with it - as I did frequently - it was unusually stimulating. She showed you things you hadn't seen before; she had a way of reopening questions."
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- 1969 Styles of radical will
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- 1970 Duet for cannibals
- 1972 Under the Sign of Saturn,
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- 1974 Brother Carl
- 1977 On photography
  - Sulla fotografia
1978 I, etcetera
  ➢ Io, eccetera
1978 Illness as metaphor
  ➢ Malattia come metafora
1979 The story of the eye
  ➢ 1980 Interpretazioni tendenziose. Dodici temi culturali
1982 A Susan Sontag reader
1987 Pilgrimage
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1988 Aids and its metaphors
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1988 Italy, one hundred years of photography [with Cesare Colombo]
1990 Cage-Cunningham-Johns: dancers on a plane
1991 The way we live now [with Howard Hodkin]
1992 The Volcano Lover
  ➢ L'amante del vulcano
1992 Violent legacies [with Richard Misrach]
1993 Alice in bed [teatro]
1995 Conversations with Susan Sontag [by Leland Poague]
1995 Homo poeticus
1999 In America
  ➢ In America
2000 Why are we in Kosovo?
2003 Regarding the Pain of Others
  ➢ Davanti al dolore degli altri.
Susan Sontag (/ˈsɒntæɡ/; January 16, 1933 – December 28, 2004) was an American writer, filmmaker, philosopher, teacher, and political activist. She mostly wrote essays, but also published novels; she published her first major work, the essay “Notes on ’Camp’", in 1964. Her best-known works include the critical works Against Interpretation (1966), Styles of Radical Will (1968), On Photography (1977), and Illness as Metaphor (1978), as well as the fictional works The Way We Live Now (1986), The Volcano On January 16, we’re celebrating the birthday of Susan Sontag (1933-2004), one of the most influential American essayists, and critics of the 20th century. Known for her sharp wit, her breadth of knowledge, and her acerbic voice, Sontag combined rebellious cool and academic rigor to craft brilliant essays on everything from radical politics to French New Wave to pornography. But if you haven’t read her yet, you’re missing out on one of the smartest voices in American letters. Here's where I recommend you start with the great Susan Sontag: Styles of Radical Will, 1969. This excellent collection of Sontag's essays from the late '60's is a great intro to her particular style, offering piercing observations and insights in politics, philosophy, and modern art. Related Reads. Susan Sontag on the Trouble with Treating Art and Cultural Material as “Content.” Susan Sontag on Literature and Freedom. How Susan Sontag Possessed New York and Subverted Sexual Stereotypes. I should have read it much more slowly and I must re-read it many times. Gide and I have attained such perfect intellectual communion that I experience the appropriate labor pains for every thought he gives birth to! Thus I do not think: “How marvelously lucid this is!” but: “Stop! I cannot think this fast!”