

- **Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (1966)**
- “Content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It’s very tiny – very tiny, content.” – Willem de Kooning
- “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.” Oscar Wilde
- Section 1
- The earliest *experience* of art must have been that it was incantatory, magical; art was an instrument of ritual
- The earliest *theory* of art, that of the Greek philosophers, proposed that art was mimesis, an imitation of reality
- It was at this point, the crossroads of experience and theory, that the peculiar question of the value of art arose
 - For mimetic theory, by its very terms, challenges art to justify itself
 - Plato, who proposed mimetic theory, seems to have done so in order to rule that the value of art is dubious
 - Since he considered ordinary material things as mimetic objects themselves (imitations of transcendent forms or structures), even the best painting of a bed would still only be an imitation of an imitation
 - For Plato, art is neither particularly useful (the painting of a bed is no good to sleep on), nor, in the strict sense, true
 - To Plato, all art is an elaborate deception of the eye and therefore a lie
 - Aristotle, however, does dispute Plato’s idea that art is useless
 - Whether a lie or not, art has a certain value for Aristotle because it is a form of therapy
 - For Aristotle, art is useful because it arouses and purges dangerous emotions
- But Aristotle and Plato could only conceive of art as figurative, always a realism
- Nevertheless, says Sontag, all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation
 - It is through this theory that art is viewed as something problematic, something that must defend itself
 - And in this defense that art makes of itself, and odd dichotomy is created between form and content
 - Suddenly in this defense, content becomes essential and form accessory
- Even in modern times, when most artists and critics have discarded the theory of art as a representation of an outer reality in favor of the theory of art as subjective expression, the main feature of the mimetic theory persists
 - Whether we perceive the work of art as a picture of reality, or a statement of the artist, content still comes first
 - It is always assumed that a work of art is content, that a work of art says something
- Section 2
- None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory when art knew no need to justify itself – when one did not ask of a work of art what it said

- When all one needed to know was what a work of art did (subjectively, to them)
- But from now to the end of consciousness we are stuck with the task of defending art
 - And we can only quarrel with one or another means of defense
 - Indeed we have an obligation to overthrow any means of defending and justifying art which becomes particularly obtuse or onerous or insensitive to contemporary needs and practice – something Sontag is criticizing
 - This is the case today with the very idea of content itself – today the idea of content is a philistinism, a complete misunderstanding of content
 - Currently we believe that a work of art is primarily its content
 - It is the habit of approaching works of art in order to interpret them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art
- Section 3
- Directed to art, interpretation means plucking a set of elements from the whole work
 - The task of interpretation is virtually one of translation in this method
- Interpretation first appears in late classical antiquity, when the power and credibility of myth had been broken by the “realistic” view of the world introduced by scientific enlightenment
 - Once ancient texts became no longer acceptable as pristine accounts of the world, work was under way to reconcile the ancient texts to modern demands
 - Thus, the Stoics, to accord with their view that the gods had to be moral, allegorized away the rude features of them
 - For example, what Homer really designated by the adultery of Zeus with Leto, the Stoics explained, was the union between power and wisdom
 - In the same vein, Philo of Alexandria interpreted the literal historical narration of the Old Testament in spiritual paradigms and said the account of the Exodus from Egypt, the wandering in the desert for 40 years, and the entry into the promised land was really an allegory of the individual soul’s emancipation, tribulations, and final deliverance
 - Interpretation thus presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers
 - The situation is that for some reason a text has become unacceptable, yet it cannot be discarded because it is thought too precious to repudiate – interpretation then becomes a radical strategy for conserving the old text
 - Thus the interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text is nonetheless altering it
 - The interpreter will never admit to doing this but claims to be only making it intelligible by disclosing its true meaning
 - And however radically an interpreter alters a text in this way, she must claim to be reading off a sense that is already in the text
- In modern times interpretation is no longer prompted by a piety towards the troublesome text but by an open aggressiveness
 - The old style of interpretation was insistent but respectful – it erected another meaning on top of the literal one

- The modern style of interpretation excavates and destroys the literal meaning – it digs “behind” the text to find a subtext which is the true one
 - The most celebrated and influential modern doctrines, those of Marx and Freud, actually amount to elaborate systems of hermeneutics
 - As Freud put it, all observable phenomena have a manifest content that must be probed and then pushed aside to find the true meaning – the latent content
 - It is as if events, texts, etc, have no meaning without interpretation
 - So now to understand *is* to interpret
- In some cultural contexts interpretation can be a liberating act (it can revise, transvalue, escape a dead past) but in others it can be reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling
- Section 4
- Today is such a time when interpretation is largely reactionary, stifling
- Today the effusion of interpretations of art poison our sensibilities
 - Interpretation has become the revenge of the intellect on art
- To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of “meanings” – it is to turn *the* world into *this* world
- Section 5
- In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone
- Real art has the capacity to make us nervous
 - By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art
 - Thusly interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable
 - This philistinism of interpretation is more rife in literature than in any other art
 - For decades now, literary critics have understood it to be their task to translate the elements of the poem or play or novel or story into something else
 - For example, the work of Kafka is now subject to a mass ravishment by no less than three armies of interpreters
 - 1) Those who read Kafka as social allegory see case studies of the frustration and insanity of modern bureaucracy and its ultimate issuance in the totalitarian state
 - 2) Those who read Kafka as a psychoanalytic allegory see desperate revelations of Kafka’s fear of his father, his castration anxieties, his sense of his impotence, his thrall to his dreams
 - 3) Those who read Kafka as a religious allegory explain that K. in *The Castle* is trying to gain access to heaven, that Joseph K. in *The Trial* is being judged by the inexorable and mysterious justice of god
 - Prouse, Joyce, Faulkner, Rilke, Lawrence, Gide have all suffered similar fates
 - In the notes that Elia Kazan published on his production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it becomes clear that, in order to direct the play, Kazan had to discover that Stanley Kowalski represented the sensual and vengeful barbarism that was

engulfing our culture, while Blanch Du Bois was Western Civilization (poetry, delicate apparel, dim lighting, refined feelings and all, though a little worse for the wear)

- Tennessee Williams's forceful psychological melodrama now became intelligible: it was about something, about the decline of western civilization
- Apparently, were it to go on being a play about a handsome brute named Stanley Kowalski and a faded mangy belle named Blanche Du Bois, it would not be manageable
- Section 6
- It doesn't matter whether artists intend, or don't intend for their works to be interpreted
 - Perhaps Tennessee Williams thinks *Streetcar* is about what Kazan thinks it to be about
 - But the merit of the work certainly lies elsewhere than in its "meaning"
 - What matters in the work of art is its pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy
 - Interpretation always belies a type of dissatisfaction with the work, an attempt to replace it by something else
 - Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art
 - It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories
- Section 7
- Interpretation does not always prevail – in fact, a great deal of today's art may be understood as motivated by a flight from interpretation
 - To avoid interpretation art may become parody or it may become abstract (or it may become decorative, or non-art)
 - Abstract painting is the attempt to have, in the ordinary sense, no content – since there is no content there can be no interpretation
 - Pop-Art works by the opposite means to the same result – using a content so blatant, so "what it is," it, too ends by being uninterpretable
 - A great deal of modern poetry as well aims to put silence into the poem and to reinstate the magic of the word in order to escape interpretation
 - The most recent revolution in contemporary taste in poetry – the revolution that deposed Eliot and elevated Pound – represents a turning away from content in poetry in the old sense
 - In America, fiction and drama have a feeble avant-garde and so interpretation in these fields runs rampant
 - So rudimentary, uninspired, and stagnant has been the sense of what might be done with form in fiction
 - To the extent that novels and plays (in America) don't reflect any interesting concern with changes in their form, these arts remain prone to assault by interpretation

- But avant-gardism is not the only defense against interpretation, for if it were than art would be perpetually on the run
 - Ideally it is possible to elude the interpreters in another way – by making works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be...just what it is
 - In good art there is always a directness which frees us from the itch to interpret
- Perhaps one tells how alive a particular art form is by the latitude it gives for making mistakes in it and still being good
 - For example, a few of the films of Bergman – though crammed with lame messages about the modern spirit, thereby inviting interpretations – still triumph over the pretentious influence of their director
- Section 8
- What kind of criticism, of commentary on the arts, is desirable today
- Sontag is not saying that works of art are ineffable, that they cannot be described or paraphrased – they can be...the question is how
 - What would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place?
 - What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art
 - If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of form would silence
 - Thus what is need is a vocabulary – a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary – for forms
 - What we don't have yet is a poetics of the novel, any clear notion of the forms of narration
 - Sontag lists off valuable pieces of criticism
 - Erwin Panofsky's essay, "Style and Medium in Motion Pictures" – film
 - Northrop Frye's essay, "A Conspectus of Dramatic Genres" – drama
 - Pierre Francastel's essay, "The Destruction of a Plastic Space" – painting
 - Roland Barth's book, On Racine, and his two essays on Robbe-Gillet – literature
 - Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Story Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov" – literature
 - Equally valuable in terms of types of criticism would be acts of criticism which supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art
 - See Dorothy Van Ghent's essay "The Dickens World: A View From Todgers"
 - Randall Jarrell's essay on Walt Whitman
 - These two pieces reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it
- Section 9
- Transparence – experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself
 - Transparence is the highest, most liberating value in art (and art criticism)

- Once upon a time (say, for Dante) it must have been a revolutionary and creative move to design works of art so that they might be experienced on several levels – now it is not; it reinforces the principal of redundancy that is the principal affliction of modern life
- Once upon a time (a time when high art was scarce) it must have been a revolutionary and creative move to interpret works of art – now it is not
- Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there
 - However, this cannot be taken for granted now
 - Think of the sheer multiplication of works of art available to every one of us, superadded to the conflicting tastes and odors and sights of the urban environment that bombard our senses
 - Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction – the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience
 - All the conditions of modern life – its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness – conjoin to dull our sensory faculties
 - What is important now is to recover our sense – we must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more
- Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there
 - Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all
 - The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*
- Section 10
- Sontag finishes her essay with this section, which is comprised of only a single sentence: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art “