

## Review Article

# In the Archive of Longing: Susan Sontag's Critical Modernism

Mena Mitrano, *In the Archive of Longing: Susan Sontag's Critical Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 214 Pages, £70.00, ISBN 978-1-4744-1434-0.

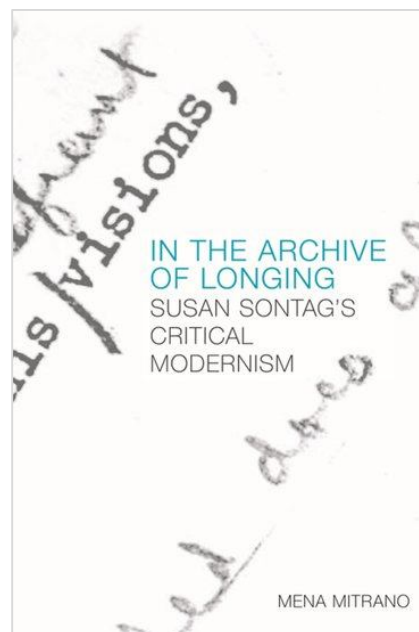
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Mena Mitrano's *In the Archive of Longing: Susan Sontag's Critical Modernism* is an illuminating archival scrutiny of Sontag's conflicting cravings for 'knowledge and experience'. The book lays open the rich and diverse intellectual experiences of a young and aspiring writer who wished to transform literary criticism into a privileged space of reflection. Mitrano affirms that Sontag's cry for 'new' brought her accolades (but only in the later part of her career) as well as condemnation. René Wellek paired her with Roland Barthes and rejected her for her appeal for a 'new' beginning by tagging her as a destroyer of criticism.

As Mitrano shows, Sontag's archive "remains largely understudied" (2) the project presents 'the Sontag' who chose to be anti-philosopher or rather 'non-traditional philosopher'. The archive of Sontag is examined under seven headings: 'Thoughts about Thinking: Approaching Sontag', 'Aesthetic Experience and Critical Theory', 'The Public Intellectual', 'Modernism and Theory', 'Iconologies', 'Aura, Dread and the Amateur', and 'Interlocution'. Apart from these seven chapters, the book offers to its readers an 'Introduction' to understand the disparate linking in Sontag's archive and also provides 'Coda' to its 'gentle readers'.

Certainly, Mitrano's close readings of Sontag's papers bring to the fore the longings of an artist in performance for 'self-fashioning' and 'self-creation'. Sontag's intellectual musings on the prominent theorists of her time reveal that modernism and theory seemed to happen at the same time. Mitrano observes that "Sontag was aware of theory, read it, but did not join in- at least not overtly." (3) She speculates that Sontag's distancing from theory's genealogies stemmed from her urge to create a new, never complete discourse which would focus on the gaps, the missing links of meaning, and which would hold a possibility 'to see more', 'to hear more', 'to feel more'- a site which would invite the reader to the field of 'unlimited semiosis'. Like Victor Shlovsky, Sontag shared the perception that modernism is a set of aesthetic practices without any fixed boundaries and like Peter Szondi, she looked toward Barthes and Derrida, who ushered a new theory of



literature. Sontag's archive is a testimony of her silent moving towards a new hermeneutics, which would foster 'real thinking' and elude the constrictions of the finished concept.

Mitrano examines the varied influences that shaped Sontag's thoughts and works. Sontag was greatly influenced by the Frankfurt School. Moreover, she was in dialogue with contemporary theorists like Fredric Jameson, Michael Foucault, etc. Foucault's notion of power impacted her 'inquiry into fascist aesthetics' whereas in Gilles Deleuze's 'schizoanalysis' she found her project- 'flight from interpretation'. While exploring Sontag's associations with the critical theory of the earlier Frankfurt School, Mitrano specifically focuses on the Adorno-Sontag relationship. She bases her discussion on a close reading of Sontag's *Styles of Radical Will* (1969) and Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1951) in order to show how Sontag inherited Adorno's key idea-the relation of philosophy to writing. Moreover, the rigorous underlining of certain sections of *Minima Moralia*, which Mitrano talks about, indicates Sontag's anxiety to understand Adorno, as she wrote: "A volume of Adorno is equivalent to a whole shelf of books on literature." Further, there are strokes of linkages between Sontag and Derrida as both believed in a productive dialogue between philosophy and literature. Indeed Sontag's connection to Derrida is intriguing. Mitrano discusses their affinities and how they were both working against interpretation, but Derrida preferred calling it 'grammatology'. Despite this philosophical kinship, in Sontag there is a departure from philosophy.

Sontag's distancing from philosophy brought her closer to art and this happened when she came in contact with Paul Thek, a New York based artist, in 1959. Thek imbued his work with a distinctive personal symbolism to present a reality which could stand parallel to external reality. Thek's *Technological Reliquaries* often referred to as 'Meat Pieces' comprised hyper-realistic slabs of meat sculpted in wax and paint. Mitrano speculates that Sontag must have been drawn toward Thek's allegorical incorporation of the past. Thus Sontag's first introduction to allegory happened through Thek. Moreover, Sontag's constant shuttling between body and mind and her quest for embodied thought might have had its source in Thek's art. While pondering over 'what is a body?' Sontag writes, "Knowing has to do with an embodied consciousness (not just a consciousness) this is the great neglected issue in phenomenology (from Descartes + Kant through Husserl + Heidegger)-Sartre+ Merleau-Ponty have begun to take it up." (100) With Thek, Sontag moved on to participate in the wider philosophical discourse on art. Some of the essays in *Against Interpretation*, especially, 'Against Interpretation', 'Happenings', 'The Anthropologist as Hero', and 'The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer' resonate with the intellectual-artistic exchange between the two. Mitrano is of the opinion that Thek's art "encouraged the visionary investment in a conceptual tabula rasa, a surface of pure forms to be experienced with the senses. This erotics of art certainly reclaimed the modernist autonomy of art...art's capacity to pose a parallel reading to the historical one." (108) Sontag's fidelity to the autonomy of art was further established with Jasper Johns who re-introduced her to the modernist avant-gardes. Her friendship with Johns brought her closer to Robert Rauschenberg's (American painter and graphic artist) 'cinematically organised fragmented surface' (111). Rauschenberg deployed non-traditional materials and objects to build innovative combinations. His experimentations with collage elements might have enchanted Sontag, who too dwelled on the idea of an incomplete and broken philosophical critical plane. His art must have charged her passion of *becoming*. All these interactions helped her to understand modernism as 'a living-thinking-writing continuum to the present'. Sontag was aware of the gradual decline of philosophy and therefore she turned to the modernist autonomy of art which would promise a 'thought beyond thought'. Her association with the New York School of artists stirred up her defence of the autonomy of art.

Susan Sontag emerged as a public intellectual in the 1960s, but the saga of her success is hidden in her archive. Sontag, the philosophy student, had studied the prominent linguistic philosophers like A. J. Ayer, Paul Grice and J. L. Austin by 1957. Her papers show that she had read extensively right from Plato, Aristotle, Platonius, Augustine, John Duns Scotus to Paul Tillich. Mitrano demonstrates Sontag's fascination with Plato. In 1955, at Harvard, Sontag had attended the lectures of Raphael Demos on Plato. Her graduate notes exhibit her inclination toward Plato's 'psyche'. She writes: "Psyche...is change, motion, activity, spontaneity, self-initiating source of change and activity in other things." (85) She associates it with 'freedom', with *being as becoming*. Sontag was interested in Plato's idea of *Chora* or *Khora* which suggests a receptacle, a space, a material substratum, or an interval. After pondering over Plato's metaphor of cave, Sontag expressed her desire to write philosophy: "I want to write an essay like/a fist. I want to write an essay/ where the date (year) it's written/ isn't important. Philosophical, not historical; not culture-criticism." (92) The anxiety to write propelled her to read more and more. In 1979 she read Erwin Panofsky's discussion of Dürer's *Melencolia I* in *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* to appreciate the fusion of two iconographic types: 'Melancholy' and 'Geometry', and to develop her aesthetics of melancholia, but her choice to side with Benjamin's 'theory of melancholia' is provocative. Melancholia dominates Sontag's writing. She sympathetically wrote on melancholia and the reasons for it could be her own state of depression. Mitrano says "In Sontag the melancholia is the melancholia of community – a community which constitutes thinkers and artists who comingle but are alone together." Mitrano also traces the evidence that show Sontag's affinities with Gilles Deleuze. She also conjectures that Piet Mondrian, the contributor to the *De Stijl* art movement, was not a random choice. Mondrian fashioned a non-representative form in art, which he termed neo-plasticism. Mitrano sees that in Sontag's assessment of modernism Plato's *Chora* and Mondrian's 'harmony' seem 'grafted together'.

Mitrano while talking about Sontag's connection to Benjamin discusses at length, the 'master/disciple', 'reader-writer' relationship. The discussion comes to a fascinating junction when she traces 'Sontag's theft of Benjamin's being': 'I was born under the sign of Saturn'. By repeatedly applying Benjamin's self-objectification to herself, Sontag was actually accentuating her yearning for thought. It was eventually through Benjamin that Sontag found herself. He freed her from the reductive view of critical art. Sontag's familiarity with Benjamin is visible in her entries between 1963 to March 1965, but her ties with Benjamin lasted for more than ten years. Her notes on Benjamin reveal her sheer focus on the artistic importance of photography which found expression in *On Photography*. If Adorno facilitated Sontag with his ideal of the critical theorist, Benjamin informed her with the critical gesture, kindling her ambition to write philosophically. It is at this juncture that she achieves success in realizing the relation of philosophy to writing.

In Sontag there is a preference for the unfinished form, for notes and fragments- 'thinking and writing', 'seeing and thinking' and this why in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag is the thinker as well as the 'vulnerable beholder'; whilst her *Against Interpretation* is a 'flight from interpretation'.

Sontag's fidelity to modernism was such that it placed her opposite to György Lukács and others who identified themselves with Hegelian and Marxist ideologies. Nevertheless her dialogue with the New York avant-garde artists took her devotion to modernism to a much higher level.

The book, through its seven chapters and Coda, investigates the intellectual journey of Sontag. The boxes of Sontag's archive unravel her affinities with the past as well as the present. Sontag's passionate examination of modernism and theory compelled her mentor, Kenneth Burke to call her a 'reporter of modernity'. Mitrano says that "in the archive Sontag gives the impression

of having departed from philosophy, but without turning her back on it; she appears to have taken it elsewhere.”(89-90) Indeed, Sontag’s archive is ‘cartography of modernity’ with its embedded yearnings for a ‘new lexicon’. Philosophy in Sontag springs from ‘broken discourses’, from ‘something unwritten’, and from the connection between modernism and theory.

Sontag’s archive tantalizes the readers much more now than it ever did before and the credit for it goes to Mena Mitrano’s book. Approached as a whole, the author weaves together the different pieces of Sontag’s archive in an absorbing story, forcing us to take a new look at Sontag. I believe, a renewed impetus to read and understand Sontag, comes with this book. *In the Archive of Longing: Susan Sontag’s Critical Modernism* is a wealth of documentation that will enable other scholars to build on Mitrano’s achievements.

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