

Nikhil Chinchalkar

Professor Sophie Pinkham

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### Susan Sontag: Assessing the Validity of Criticism

For Susan Sontag, art is a visceral experience, relating to the heart as much, if not more, than the mind. She asserts that artworks have two interacting parts, ‘form’ and ‘content’, and that while modern criticism focuses on the former of the two sections, in order for the purity of the criticized piece to remain, there needs to be “more attention to form in art” (8). Her argument against interpreting the ‘content’ of a work of art stems from the idea that art has the ability to incite unique emotion out of someone, and that using a formulaic “Y is really B” or “Z is really C” diminishes the rawness of the piece, making it “comfortable” for the audience rather than generating “nervousness” or discomfort (3, 5). With sensations in mind, she illustrates exactly how to approach critiquing artwork: by using a lexicon with which to “[describe], rather than [prescribe]” form and ‘dissolving’ content into this vernacular (8). This notion of how analysis is meant to be created is an idea that is certainly well-grounded, and applicable to various forms of media. Essentially, valid criticism is done by using specific vocabulary to describe the form of artwork, taking into account its content through this described form.

This form of criticism is most applicable to film, and Sontag herself describes film as having the perfect characteristics for vocabulary use, as the visual aspects of this mode of art allow for specific analysis. Take, for instance, *12 Angry Men*, a film about the fluidity of personal convictions. Following Sontag’s guidelines, a critic should focus on the form of the

film, for instance, its claustrophobic ‘feel’. Rather than describe what the film might or might not mean, which dilutes the functionality of the media as a driver of emotion, one might explain the significance of a certain directorial technique in telling the story (using a defined vocabulary), like a shallow depth of field close-up, as a means of describing “how [the film] is what it is” (10). By analyzing a work of art in this manner, the critic works with the media, appreciating (or not, depending on the nature of the critic) the art, rather than simply interrogating the film for a quasi-existent meaning. It is worth noting that when performing such analysis, the content of the work is bound to be touched upon. However, this style of analysis differs from convention by passing interpretations of content *through* its form and its ‘feel’.

While this type of critique might seem to most align itself with film, where there is an obvious separation between form and content, it can also apply to written works. Take Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, for example, a play about the tragedy of filial relations. Here, the form might take up the auditory sensation that the reader feels when going through the play. An instance of this are the repeated uses of plosive alliteration (again, defined vocabulary), a stylistic device in which the reading of a group of words is purposefully meant to generate abrasive sounds (thus, the form). This is something a critic might mention in explaining, once again, “how [the play] is what it is”. Essentially, rather than structuring a critique as “the play means that tragedy is inevitable”, one should follow form, to say that “the play is tragic because of its coarseness in dialogue”.

Though applicable to all forms of media, I do believe that searching for meaning in certain scenarios is a valid method of analysis. In poetry, especially of the modern kind, form

that elicits an emotional response certainly exists in the poem, but meaning can also be discovered that elevates the sensation of the work. For instance, a modern poet like Ocean Vuong places a variety of hints as to the greater meaning of his poetry. In “Trojan”, a poem about Vuong’s sexual identity, he brilliantly uses red, white, and blue imagery to silently communicate to the viewer that he is describing his assimilation into American culture. Here, by prowling around the words of the art, the reader unlocks new content - by finding what each of the delicately-selected words means, while not going overboard in interpreting, the poem takes up a new form. Thus, though Sontag argues and is justified in her statement that valid dialogue about a piece should center around form rather than content, that is not to say that all content-approached criticism is futile.