he is the retiring Marxist Doctor Magiot Previously tolerated by the government as an ideological gesture toward potential friends in the East, he is gunned down by the Tontons Macoute when the American ambassador returns to Haiti. Nowhere is the meaning of the novel's action more clearly implied than in a letter written just before he dies which Brown receives after the murder. His radical commitment to a new Haiti, Magiot writes, has not been composed only of materialist theory but also of a *mystique*, a humanist faith. He is not afraid to act because. "I would rather have blood on my hands than water like Pilate." The richness of the novel's denouement, of the entire narrative, really, is the result of such political variations on Greene's old theme

Ex-capitalist Brown toys with the idea that the "comedians" are the only truly committed, to

> *. . the whole world of evil and of good, to the wise and to the foolish, to the indifferent and to the mistaken. We have chosen nothing except to go on living. . . .*

But he dismisses this version of the truth. His act of daring on behalf of the insurgents has given him the perspective to see beyond false philosophies After crossing the border into the Dominican Republic, he applies for a job as caterer-manager to an American mining company He badly fails the interview The American, he later tells the sympathetic Smith:

> *. . assumed I was a communist. . . Because the Tontons were after me. Papa Doc* [Duvalier], *you remember, is a bulwark against communism And insurgents, of course, is a dirty word I wonder how President Johnson would deal with something like the French Resistance. . . .*

(Greene points out clearly how America's militant anti-communism, like a medieval *auto-da-fe*, sullies almost beyond redemption her admirable ideals)

The author's continuing pessimism has led to the farcical atmosphere and despairing comic tone Surely Brown speaks for Greene when early in the novel he declares:

> *. . . it was only my sense of humour that enabled me to believe in Him . . .*

The radical politics, paradoxically joined with that pessimistic view, rather than alleviating the suffering merely intensifies the pain. Beyond innocence, after dissembling and fakery are dispensed with, having fled from the dark inferno of Haiti's (read "Hades") public life, Brown has merely raised his torment to a higher level. His vision of poolside voluptuousness has been replaced by a view of the world "as a great plain," and he is "walking and walking on the interminable flats." Purgatory! The cosmic joke remains: only "Death is a proof of sincerity."

And God is revealed by the conclusion to be "an authoritative practical joker." Haunted by a dream of "Major" Jones playing his revolutionary role in the style of an English music-hall comedian, Brown finds work as a funeral director's assistant in Santo Domingo.

This *Commedia* is more satanic than Divine. Brown's stand on the side of social justice has not saved him from an end that reeks with the irony of our time. It has, rather, led him there. *Pacem*, Aristotle This is closer to tragedy than anything Graham Greene has written.

Contra Sontag

AGAINST INTERPRETATION. And Other Essays. By Susan Sontag. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 304 pp $4 95.

Charles Thomas Samuels

Susan Sontag is a writer of rare energy and provocative newness, sustained by an intimidating if arcane erudition Even when her methods are questionable she gives fresh drama to a cast of players that fills the quarterlies with predictable performances of moderate acuity and suavely lucid prose.

But how does she perform? And in behalf of what conception of the critic's role?

Miss Sontag's ideas about art and criticism are most fully developed in the title essay of her collection and in a piece "On Style". (1) Art is formal and meaningful only through its form (2) Modern critics are fixated on content even though they proclaim their belief that content and form are inseparable. (3) This fixation with content leads to the technique of interpretation that ignores what she calls art's "voluptuousness." And (4), as a result, we need "in place of a hermeneutics . . . an erotics of art."

Thus armed, Miss Sontag sets forth to do battle against interpretation, but there is something oddly superfluous about her attack

Where has she been since the advent of I A Richards, Panofsky or B H Haggin, to mention some originative or practical critics of several arts? Who can she be talking about when she asserts that "most people assume . interpretation is . . an absolute value, a gesture of mind situated in some timeless realm of capabilities"? Does she confine her critical reading to Bosley Crowther and Charles Poore? If not, why does she trouble to confute "the prevalence of genteel-moralistic judgments in a contemporary literary (and film) criticism"?

Yet one could accept her book as an exercise in theory (discounting the polemical tone as high spirits) were her theoretical statements clearer and more intimately related to her practice To begin with, what does she mean by "interpretation"? She offers a definition ("a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain 'rules' "), but she never tells us what the code is or why its rules are objectionable Moreover, since she defines "style" as "the set of rules" by which "the will plays with itself" (whatever that means), it is a little difficult to see why she should be so formalistic when talking of art, and so free-spirited when attacking the formalistic nature of criticism Nor by citing Marx and Freud as examples of the interpretive spirit which stifles the modern age does she identify the movement she disdains.

Insofar as she is clear, she is against an unarguably naive tendency toward reading things allegorically, and she violates her crotchets when she engages a work of art She damns "the modern style of interpretation [which] . digs 'behind' the text, to find a subtext which is the true one," and then analyzes *Blues for Mr. Charlie* to show

"a rather complex displacement of the play's true subject." She has nothing but scorn for critics who apply the test of imitation, yet she finds that Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* is "painfully, insultingly inadequate to the reality it purports to represent."

Her method of argument combines loosely asserted connections and the sort of historical survey with which tired professors are likely to regale their undergraduates. In the title essay there is a passage illustrating both traits:

> *At least since Diderot, the main tradition of criticism in all the arts, appealing to such apparently dissimilar criteria as verisimilitude and moral correctness, in effect treats the work of art* as a statement being made in the form of a work of art.
>
> *To treat works of art in this fashion is not wholly irrelevant. But it is, obviously, putting art to use—for such purposes as inquiring into the history of ideas, diagnosing contemporary culture, or creating social solidarity.*

At least since Diderot. Miss Sontag likes this method of introducing a topic. "In the modern tradition (roughly, Rousseau forward) ", "The culture-heroes of our liberal bourgeois civilization are anti-liberal and anti-bourgeois ", (this last in a 1½ page piece on Simone Weil). There is something so pleasantly organized about it, particularly when one can authorize the generalization with an exemplary culture symbol.

apparently dissimilar criteria as verisimilitude and moral correctness. Why "apparently"? Do we talk of *Dubliners* and *Germinal* in the same way, though one depicts a social actuality and one moralizes it? And don't the dissimilar styles and intentions of these books demand different critical responses?

To treat works of art in this fashion is not wholly irrelevant. But it is, obviously, putting art to use. If not wholly irrelevant, shouldn't some notion of its relevancy be set forth, and shouldn't that relevancy qualify the impassioned attack against interpretation which is Miss Sontag's *raison d'être*? "Obviously" is made to do the work of argument, but it is nothing more than innuendo. And don't artists themselves put art to use for the purposes, among others, which Miss Sontag lists?

The "new critics" argued all this decades ago, and they did it with more philosophical sophistication and more careful consideration of texts than Miss Sontag does with her lists of approved modern fringe thinkers (Artaud, McLuhan, et al.) and obscure works of art (Franju's *Le Sang des Bêtes*, Noel Burch's *Noviciat*, etc.).

Her affirmations are no more persuasive than her attacks. To revise the putative fashion for overvaluing *content*, Miss Sontag proposes a simple reversal, as if we could improve critical discourse by simply turning an error on its head. "In art," she tells us, "'content' is, as it were, the pretext, the goal, the lure which engages consciousness in essentially *formal* processes of transformation." When she writes "the sense in which a work of art has no content is no different from the sense in which the world has no content. Both are. Both need no justification," there rings the rusty clangor of MacLeish.

No wonder Miss Sontag rejects evaluation along with interpretation. Her god is love. Though she toughly asserts "I don't, ultimately, care about handing out grades to works of art," she is liberal with As. In an intellectual milieu marked by exquisite acts of differentiation and a powerful tendency to exclude, Miss Sontag has won fame by equating art with existence and proclaiming herself the liberator of the sensibility to new sources of pleasure.

Which makes it all the more puzzling to see how careful she is to deny any vulgar delight in thrills when once she begins making a case for something she enjoys. Celebrating "Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*" [*The Nation*, April 13, 1964], she initially declares that it is difficult to advocate a film full of "close-ups of limp penises and bouncing breasts [with] shots of masturbation and oral sexuality. " But, given her theories about art, one is surprised to find her casting a veil over her responses. "Rather than being sentimental or lustful, Smith's images of sex are alternately childlike and witty." How ingeniously the arguments that the film is not pornographic jostle the ingenuous glee that it is: "In *Flaming Creatures*, amateurishness of technique is not frustrating, as it is in so many other recent 'underground' films. For Smith is visually very generous, at practically every moment there is simply a tremendous amount to see. " Only a critic as absolutely humorless as Miss Sontag could have perpetrated this howling example of misplaced pomp:

> *One great virtue of the pop-art movement is the way it blasts through the old imperative about taking a* position *toward one's subject matter . . . there are some elements of life — above all, sexual pleasure—about which it isn't necessary to have a position* (emphasis hers).

Her rare analyses of art works are invariably surprising in view of her theories. Perhaps the best such essay in the book is the review of Ionesco, at least here she provides valuable insights into her subject and designates serious critical issues concerning his ultimate worth. As she asserts, Ionesco's "plays are not 'about' meaninglessness. They are attempts to use meaninglessness theatrically." For that reason, Ionesco should be a prime example of the new art she seeks to promote. But the conclusion of her review judges that Ionesco is less great than Brecht, Genet and Beckett because he does not share their "full-bloodedness . . . grandeur and relevance."

What is one to make of a critic so intellectually armored, yet so vulnerable? Exactly what Miss Sontag avows in her prefatory note. "What I have been writing is not criticism at all, strictly speaking, but case studies for an aesthetic, a theory of my own sensibility." If we substitute "attitudes" for "case studies" and "reflection" for "theory" we can begin to estimate her positive contribution.

In her famous essay, "Notes on 'Camp,'" she anatomizes more than a fashion in contemporary taste. In notes which reveal a fundamental impatience with intellectual work (ingenuously defended on the ground that one cannot catch a "fugitive sensibility" in "a linear, consecutive argument"), she makes a claim, belied by her jottings, that she is describing rather than advocating. Yet her expostulation ex cathedra about sex ("the most refined form of sexual attractiveness [as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure] consists in going against the grain of one's sex") virtually duplicates the epicene flavor she acknowledges in "camp." More seriously, her analysis of "camp" culminates in an excuse for it on grounds which are morally presumptuous. "Camp" taste, she says, is a kind of love for human nature, "camp" feeling is "tender." Receptivity to "camp" is an antidote for those serious souls who are poisoned by "high culture and the high style of evaluating people."

Miss Sontag is less a critic or an aesthetician than she is a publicist with a subtlety and flair suitable for an epoch in which nothing but the

recherché and novel will serve. Reading her reminds me of coming from the metaphysical poets, Emily Dickinson or T. S. Eliot, onto the long lines and rhapsodic lists of Walt Whitman Indeed, it is not surprising that the shift in artistic purpose which is signaled in the post-Whitmanian poets, and which should have affected even the legitimate heir of the metaphysical-Eliot line (Lowell), should now make itself felt in criticism.

I don't think we need react to this phenomenon with Miss Sontag's "voracious enthusiasm," before which everything is an item of consumption ("I have the impression not so much of having, for myself, solved a certain number of alluring and troubling problems as of having used them up") and from whose vantage point, passing by in hectic "supercession," all kinds of work are equally to be cherished. At least, we ought to be clear what her sensibility threatens In its expression, discernment is abandoned in behalf of sensation, evidence yields to incantatory assertions, and critical elucidation disappears, leaving in its place porous generalizations about the agonized modern mind, and hasty concoctions to lighten its burdens with a tolerance for junk.

A half hour's aimless flipping through recent issues of our major literary quarterlies will suggest that Miss Sontag is not unusual, though highly publicized, as befits a publicist After the pioneer achievements of the last three decades, as Hayden Carruth has said, "readers are more interested in the non-literary forms of criticism, or in no criticism at all"

Yet we need to remind ourselves that the death of criticism is dangerous for art. Mr. Carruth, a poet, insists that he derived unaccountable benefits from the critical explosion through which he lived Miss Sontag calls into question not only the intellect which criticizes but the intellect which creates Her theory asserts the primacy of form in order to champion a new definition of art which one can see realized in the tiresomely self-referring nouvelle vague.

Between Miss Sontag's celebration of sensuous surface, and Norman Podhoretz's assertion that the novel has been supplanted by the essay as a bringer of news, there is a strong similarity. He has turned his back on art, she has lobotomized it.

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FILMS

Robert Hatch

There is no ghost or glimmer of new moral content in Joseph Losey's *King and Country* We had all of it as long ago as *Billy Budd* and we've had it countless times since A simple boy (Tom Courtenay) "walks away" from a war. Of course he is caught and brought back to stand court-martial. And this being the British army (World War I), the proceedings are conducted with the gentle implacability that British gentlemen traditionally display toward domestic animals and "other ranks." The young captain (Dirk Bogarde), appointed to defend the hapless creature, is moved by such candid helplessness to an eloquent plea of extenuating circumstances, loss of perspective by reason of battle fatigue and absence of premeditation. The tribunal is more than half convinced, but if the lad was sick, it is a catching sort of sickness and the larger view dictates the sentence of death before a firing squad. This is carried out so inexpertly that the captain himself must administer the *coup de grâce*, gazing deep into his protégé-victim's eyes and inserting the barrel of a revolver almost lovingly into his gaping mouth.

There was a time when people would solemnly debate the moral balance in this kind of charade, the assumption being that you could find ethical bedrock in war if only you dug deep enough. It's late in the day, I think, for that sort of agonized sophistry.

In a sense that's a pity, for there is good work in *King and Country* In the first place, there is the duet between Courtenay and Bogarde. It may be old hat—the inarticulate honesty of the one and the yearning compassion of the other, the vain reaching across class; and when Bogarde is caused to quote Lewis Carroll in a moment of despair you may wonder for a moment if the film is meant as some ghastly parody. But the two are fine actors and they are working with what is—or was—the British social condition

Much more interesting, though, is the chorus of the prisoner's fellow soldiers These are Elizabethan zanies, rollicking about in French mud so fluid that it will not accept the rotting fragments of their dead comrades This Falstaff's honor guard fights titanic sham battles with rats that outsmart them, on the eve of execution they lug jugs of home brew (trust them to cook it) into the death cell and fall into a maudlin homosexual roughhouse that culminates in a game of firing-squad blindman's buff. The fellows are quite mad from mud and cold, hunger and fear; and their officers, stepping about in spotless twill and polished leather, are quite mad not to notice it. There was a sort of hell's ballet going on in the background of the picture (and the extravagantly horrible set had the right staginess for it) I wish it had been made the whole picture, and the ethical cant thrown to the junk heap with *Journey's End* and Percival Christopher Wren.

De Santis' *Italiano Brava Gente* is about World War II, but it could as well have been 1916. Its manner is a weird cross between *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Alexander Nevsky*. It seems that among his other wicked buffooneries, Mussolini sent an army to the Russian front, and this is alleged to be the story of what happened to it With the exception of a contingent of black shirts who ape the Nazis and stay prudently in reserve, these brave but gentle Italians march deep into the great plains as the wheat ripens and the evenings turn chill. They fear the Germans, fraternize happily with any Russians they meet, and observe the first snowflakes with childlike gravity Cossacks kill them, Germans kill them, they kill one