



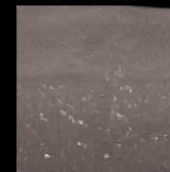
Content is the glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It's very tiny—very tiny, content.

WILLIAM DE KOONING, in an interview



It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.

OSCAR WILDE, in a letter



Against Interpretation
Susan Sontag

The earliest experience of art must have been that it was incantatory, magical; art was an instrument of ritual. (Cf. the paintings in the caves at Lascaux, Altamira, Niaux, La Pasiega, etc.) The earliest theory of art, that of the Greek philosophers, proposed that art was mimesis, imitation of reality.

It is at this point that the peculiar question of the value of art arose. For the mimetic theory, by its very terms, challenges art to justify itself.

Plato, who proposed the theory, seems to have done so in order to rule that the value of art is dubious. Since he considered

exhibitions of natural things, as well as themselves mimetic objects, as imitations of nonexistent forms,

or structures, even the best painting of a bed would be only an "imitation of an imitation." For Plato, art was not particularly useful (the painting of a bed is no good to sleep on nor, in the strict sense, true. And Aristotle's arguments in defense of art do not really challenge Plato's view that all art is an elaborate trompe l'oeil, and therefore a lie. But he does dispute Plato's idea that art is useless

has a certain Aristotle says

Art is useful, after all, Aristotle counters, medicinally useful in that it arouses and purges dangerous emotions.

In Plato and Aristotle, the mimetic theory of art goes hand in hand with the assumption

The earliest experience of art must have been that it was incapable of being taken as an imitation of any particular thing, but as an imitation of painting itself. Altan, *Le Peintre*. The earliest experience of the Greeks was that art was not a representation of reality.

peculiar value of art and by its ability to justify itself

theory of art is due to the fact that ordinary material things as themselves mimetic objects, imitations of transcendent forms

the value of theory

or structures, even the best painting of a bed would be only a bed.

But he does not mean to say that art is a lie. He means to say that art is a lie or no, art

has a certain value according to Aristotle because it is a form of therapy

the mimetic theory of art goes hand in hand with the assumption

that art is always figurative. But advocates of the mimetic theory need not close their eyes to decorative and abstract art. The fallacy that art is necessarily a “realism” can be modified or scrapped without ever moving outside the problems delimited by the mimetic theory.

The fact is, the Western conception of art as reflection upon its own nature within the limits set by the first theory of art as imitation or representation. It is through this theory that art as such—above and beyond given works of art—becomes problematic, in need of defense. And it is the defense of art which gives birth to the odd vision by which something we have learned to call “form” is

separated off from something we have learned to call “content,” and to the well-intentioned move which makes

Even in modern times, when most artists and critics have discarded the theory of art as 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 conceive of the work of art on the model of a picture (art as a picture of reality) or on the model of a statement (art as the statement of the artist), content still comes first. The content may have changed. It may now be less figurative, less lucidly realistic. But

that art is always figurative. But advocates of the mimetic theory have argued that it is not to describe the world as it is. The theory has been replaced by a “realist” theory that has scrapped the idea of art as a window outside the world and into the mind of the artist.

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.

theory of art as mimesis and by the idea of art as a window into the mind of the artist, become a central part of the defense of art. The theory of art as a window into the mind of the artist is a vision by which something we have learned to call “form” is

separated off from something we have learned to call “content,”

content essential and form accessory

When we look at a work of art

we are looking at a window into the mind of the artist.

It is a window into the mind of the artist.

It is a window into the mind of the artist.

It is a window into the mind of the artist.

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It is a window into the mind of the artist.

It is a window into the mind of the artist.

Or, as it's usually put today, that a work of art by definition says something. ("What X is saying is...", "What X is trying to say is...", "What X said is..." etc., etc.)

2

when one did not ask of a work of art what it said because one knew (or thought one knew) what it did. From now to the end of consciousness, we are stuck with the task of defending art. 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.

This is the case, today, with the very idea of content itself. Whatever it may have been in the past, the idea of content is today mainly a hindrance, a nuisance, a subtle or not so subtle philistinism.

Though the actual aesthetic developments in many fields may seem to be leading us away from the idea that a work of art is primarily a content, that idea will nevertheless exist in a hegemony. I want to suggest that this is because the idea is now perpetuated in the guise of a certain way of encountering works of art thoroughly ingrained among most people who take

Or, as it's usually put today, that a work of art by definition says something about the world (is... is... is... etc.)

None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory when art knew no need to justify itself, when it was just a work of art, when one knew it was art, when it did not know itself, when conscience was not the task of art, when only the work itself meant anything, when we have no means of defending and justifying art which becomes

particularly obtuse or onerous or insensitive to contemporary needs

with the idea that a work of art is primarily its content, the idea still exerts an extraordinary subtle

Though the actual developments in many arts may seem to be leading us away from the idea that a work of art is primarily its content, the idea still exerts an extraordinary hegemony.

of works of art thoroughly ingrained among most people who take

any of the arts seriously. What the overemphasis on the idea of content entails is the perennial, never consummated project of interpretation. And, conversely,

there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art.

3

Of course, I don't mean interpretation in the broadest sense, the sense in which Nietzsche (rightly) says, "There are no facts, only interpretations."

Interpretation is a certain code, certain "rules" of interpretation.

Directed to art, interpretation

means plucking a set of elements (the X, the Y, the Z, and so forth) from the whole work. The task of interpretation is virtually one of translation. The interpreter says, Look, don't you see that X is really—or, really means—A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?

What situation could prompt this curious project for translating a text? History provides the materials for an answer. Interpretation first appears in the culture of 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 the question that haunts post-mythic consciousness—that of the seamliness of religious

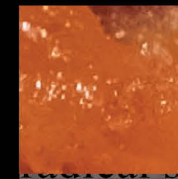
symbols—had been asked, the ancient texts were, in their pristine form, no longer acceptable. Then interpretation was summoned, to reconcile the ancient texts to “modern” demands. Thus, the Stoics, to accord with their view that the gods had to be moral, allegorized away the rude features of Zeus and his boisterous clan in Homer’s epics. What Hera really designated by the acronym of Zeus with Leto, they explained, was the union between power and wisdom. In the same vein, Philo of Alexandria interpreted the literal historical narratives of the Hebrew Bible as spiritual paradigms. The story of the exodus from Egypt, the wandering in the desert for forty years, and the entry into the promised

land, said Philo, 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. It seeks to resolve that discrepancy. The situation is that for some reason a text has become unreadable; yet it cannot be read. The interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, is altering it. But he can’t admit to doing this. He claims to be only making it intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning. However far

symbols—had been asked, the ancient texts were, in their pristine form, not open to interpretation. To read them was to read them as they were. To read them as they were was to read them as they were. “modern” interpretations of the Stoic texts were seen as a distortion of the original text. That the allegorical interpretation of Zealotry in Homer really was a distortion of Zealotry was the point. And what Philo of Alexandria did in the life of the Jews of the time of the paradigmatic exodus was to explain the exodus in the desert for forty years, and the entry into the promised



Zealotry in Homer
Zealotry
Zealotry explained



Zealotry. Interpretation is a
Zealotry strategy for conserving
Zealotry an old text, which is thought
Zealotry too precious to repudiate, by
Zealotry revamping it.

Zealotry is altering it.

the interpreters alter the text (another notorious example is the Rabbinic and Christian “spiritual” interpretations of the clearly erotic Song of Songs), they must claim to be reading off a sense that is already there.

Interpretation in our own time, however, is even more complex. For the contemporary zeal for the project of interpretation is often prompted not by piety toward the troublesome text (which may conceal an aggression), but by an open aggressiveness, an overt contempt for appearances.

The most celebrated and influential modern doctrines, those of Marx and Freud, actually amount to elaborate systems of hermeneutics, aggressive and impious theories of interpretation. All observable phenomena are bracketed, in Freud’s phrase, as **manifest content**. This manifest content must be probed and pushed aside to find the true meaning—the **latent content** beneath. For Marx, social events like revolutions and wars; for Freud, the events of individual lives (like neurotic symptoms and slips of the tongue) as well as texts (like a dream or a work of art)—all are treated as

the interpreters alter the text
(another notorious example is the
Rabbi's interpretation of the
Song of Songs, which is
to be read as a love poem
already in the original text)

own interpretation, and
more often than not, the
content of the text is
projected onto the text
prompted by the interpreter
the text is interpreted
may be interpreted
by an interpreter
overtly



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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 as it excavates, destroys; it
digs "behind" the text, to find
a sub-text which is the true
one

of the text, and usually
of the text, and usually
of the text, and usually
of the text, and usually

an obscure
bracketed
manifest content.
content is

the latent content

texts (like a dream or a work of
art)—all are treated as occasions

for interpretation. According to Marx and Freud, these events only seem

they have no meaning without interpretation. To understand is to interpret.

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cultural contexts, it is reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling.

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In a
culture whose already classical
dilemma is the hypertrophy of
the intellect at the expense of
energy and sensual capability,
interpretation is the revenge of the
intellect upon art.

enge
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. (“This world”! As if there were any other.)

The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have.

5

In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to philistine refusal to leave work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous.

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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. Sometimes a writer will be so uneasy before the naked power of his art that he will install within the work itself—albeit with a little shyness, a touch of the good taste of irony—the clear and explicit interpretation of it. Thomas Mann is an example of such an overcooperative author. In the case of more stubborn authors, the critic is only too happy to perform the job.

The work of Kafka, for example, has been subjected to a mass ravishment by no less than three armies of interpreters. Those who read Kafka as a social allegory see case studies

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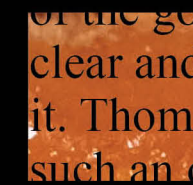


By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable.

interpretation is more rife in literature than in any other art.

For decades now, literary critics have understood it to be their task

to reduce the work of art to its content and then to interpret that. This is a clear and simple procedure. It is the task of the literary critic to make the work of art manageable, conformable. In the hands of the literary critic, the work of art becomes a social allegory. In the hands of the literary critic, the work of art becomes a social allegory. In the hands of the literary critic, the work of art becomes a social allegory.



Those who read Kafka as a social allegory see case studies

of the frustrations and insanity of modern bureaucracy and its ultimate issuance in the totalitarian state. 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 own impotence, his thralldom to his dreams. 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.... Another oeuvre that has attracted interpreters like leeches is that of Samuel Beckett. Beckett's delicate dramas of the withdrawn consciousness—pared down to essentials, cut off,

often represented as physically immobilized—are read as a statement about modern man's alienation from meaning or from God, or as an allegory of psychopathology.

Proust, Joyce, Faulkner, Rilke, Lawrence, Gide...one could go on citing author after author: the list is endless of those around whom thick encrustations of interpretation have taken hold. But it should be noted that interpretation is not simply the compliment that mediocrity pays to genius. It is, indeed, the modern way of understanding something, and is applied to works of every quality. Thus, 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 Blanche Du Bois was Western civilization, poetry, delicate apparel, dim lighting, refined feelings and all, though a little the worse for wear to be sure. Tennessee Williams' 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.

Tennessee Williams thinks Streetcar is about what Kazan thinks it to be about. It may be that Cocteau in *The Blood of a Poet* and in *Orpheus* wanted the elaborate readings which have been given these films, in terms of Freudian symbolism and social critique. But the merit of these works, commonly disregarded, is that they retain their meanings." Indeed, it is precisely to the extent that Williams' plays and Cocteau's films do suggest these portentous meanings that they are defective, false, contrived, lacking in conviction.

From interviews, it appears that Resnais and Robbe-Grillet

order to direct the play, Kazan had to discover that Stanley Kowalski was not a brute and violent man, as he was often depicted. Blanche was a civilized woman, apparently, with a delicate feeling for the world. Tennessee Williams became a psychoanalyst, and now he writes about some of the Westerners who were a hard-headed man. Kowalski's name is not a

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It doesn't matter whether artists intend, or don't intend, for their works to be interpreted. Perhaps

been given of Freud's social critique. But the merit of these works certainly lies elsewhere than in their "meanings."

From interviews, it appears that Resnais and Robbe-Grillet

consciously designed Last Year
at Marienbad to accommodate
a multiplicity of
plausible

the temptation to interpret
Marienbad should be resisted.
What matters in Marienbad is the
pure, untranslatable, sensuous
immediacy of some of its images,
and its rigorous if narrow
solutions to certain problems of
cinematic form

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immediate sensory equivalent for
the mysterious abrupt armored

happenings going on inside the
hotel, that sequence with the tank

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It is always the case that
interpretation of this type
indicates a dissatisfaction
(conscious or unconscious) with
the work, a wish 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.

Interpretation does not, of course, always prevail. In fact, a great deal of today's art may be understood as motivated by a flight from interpretation

The flight from interpretation seems particularly a feature of modern painting. 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, starting from the great experiments of French poetry (including the movement that is misleadingly called Symbolism) to put silence into poems and to reinstate the magic of the word, has escaped from the rough grip of interpretation.

The most recent revolution in contemporary taste in poetry—the revolution that has deposed Eliot and elevated Pound—represents a turning away from content in poetry in the old sense, an impatience with what made modern poetry prey to the zeal of interpreters.

I am speaking mainly of the situation in America, of course. Interpretation runs rampant here in those arts with a feeble and

Interpretation does not, of

course,

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art. To

avoid interpretation, art may

become parody. Or it may become

abstract. Or it may become

(“merely”) decorative. Or it may

become non-art.

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so blatant, so “what it is,” it, too,

ends by being uninterpretable.

A great deal of modern
poetry as well, starting from

the late 19th century, which
was a reaction to the dominant

idea of art as a reflection of
the world, and a means to

communicate a message or
emotion. In the

early 20th century, there was
a shift towards a more

subjective and personal
approach to art. This was

the result of a revolution in
art, led by figures like

the Impressionists and
the Symbolists. In this sense,

modern art is a reaction to
the traditional idea of art as

a reflection of the world. It
is a more subjective and

personal approach to art.
Interpretation runs rampant here
in those arts with a feeble and

negligible avant-garde: fiction and the drama. Most American novelists and playwrights are really either journalists or gentlemen sociologists and psychologists. They are writing the literary equivalent of program music. And so rudimentary, uninspired, and stagnant has been the sense of what might be done with form in fiction and drama that even when the content isn't simply information, news, it is still peculiarly visible, handier, more exposed. To the extent that novels and plays (in America), unlike poetry and painting and music, don't reflect any interesting concern with changes in their form, these arts remain prone to assault by interpretation.

At least, I hope not. For this would be to commit art to being perpetually on the run. (It also distinction between form and content which is ultimately an illusion.) 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. Is this possible now? It does happen in films, I believe. This is why cinema is the most alive, the most exciting, the

negligible avant-garde: fiction and the drama. Most American novels are really, in the end, gentle, psychologically minded, the literary equivalent of music unincorporated into the score. The same is true with the drama, that of course is simply still possible, more so in the novel. Unlike the novel and the drama, the interest in the theater is prone to assault by interpretation.



But programmatic avant-

gardism—which has meant, mostly, experiments with form at the expense of content—is not the only defense against the infestation of art by interpretations.

to perpetuates the very distinction between form and content which is, ultimately, an illusion.

why cinema is the most alive, the most exciting, the

most important of all art forms

right now

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 intentions

of their director. In *Winter Light*

and *The Silence*, the beauty and

visual sophistication of the images

subvert before our eyes the callow

pseudointellectuality of the story

and some of the dialogue. (The

most remarkable instance of this

sort of discrepancy is the work

of D. W. Griffith.



Many old Hollywood

films, like those of Cukor, Walsh,

Hawks, and countless other

directors, have this liberating

antisymbolic quality, no less

than the best work of the new

European directors, like Truffaut's

Shoot the Piano Player and Jules

and Jim Godard's *Breathless*

and *Vivre Sa Vie*, Antonioni's

L'Avventura, and Olmi's *The*

Fiancés.

The fact that

films have more

is in

part due simply to the newness

of cinema as an art. It also owes

to the happy accident that films

for such a long time were just

movies; in other words, that

they were

mass, as opposed to high, culture,

most important of all art forms
right now. Perhaps the way
one tells how alive a particular
art form is, is by the latitude
it gives for making mistakes
in it, and still being good. For

example, the American
Bergman, who has been
with us for a long time,
models a certain kind of
interpretation, one that
overlooks the technical
of the film, and focuses
and the visual, and the
subtext, and the
pseudohumanism, and the
and so on. (This is the
most common sort of
of D. W. Griffith.) In good films,

there is always a directness that



entirely frees us from the itch to
interpret. Many old Hollywood
films, like those of Walsh,

and the films of Renoir's
and the films of Renoir's



but films have not
been overrun by interpreters

is in
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they
were understood to be part of
mass, as opposed to high, culture,

and were left alone by most people with minds. Then, too, there was a sense that the novel held a more secure position than the cinema.

analysis of the cinema, unlike the novel, possesses a vocabulary of form and devices that came to be used in the cinema, and that goes beyond the novel and film.



What is the criticism of the cinema? I am 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

One of the problems is that our idea of form is spatial (the Greek metaphors for form are all derived from notions of space). This is why we have a more ready vocabulary of forms for the spatial than for the temporal arts. The exception among the temporal arts, of course, is the drama; perhaps this is because the drama is a narrative (i.e., temporal) form that extends itself visually and pictorially, upon a stage.... What we don't have yet is a poetics of the novel, any clear notion of the forms of narration. Perhaps film criticism will be the occasion of a breakthrough here, since films are primarily a visual form, yet they are also a subdivision of literature.

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

of form would silence. What is needed is a vocabulary—a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary—for forms.*

and
win
es,”
Northrop Frye's essay "A Conspectus of Dramatic Genres,"

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 principle 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. What we decidedly do not need now is further to assimilate Art into Thought, or (worse yet) Art into Culture.

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

All

the conditions of modern life—material plenitude, its sheer senselessness-conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. And it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critic must be assessed.

What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.

Our task is not to find the

for Dante), it must have been a revolutionary and creative move to design a work of art that might be understood on a level that is not far from the present, that is, the present life.

when we are faced with a work of art, we must not be satisfied with an ordinary interpretation, and our task is to work out what the work is doing for us. We do not know what the work is for until we have done our task. Though we are not sure of the cultural context, we can still



Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there. This cannot be taken for granted, now. Think of the

sheer multiplication of works of art available to every one of us. The result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience.

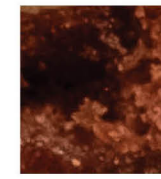
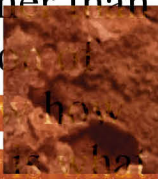


Our task is not to find the meaning of the work, but to learn to feel more. Our task is not to find the

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

The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art-and, by analogy, our own experience-more, rather than less, real to us. The function



10

In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.

[1964]

maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more

is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.

on art, and that is to show how a work of art is what it is, rather than less, or more, or something else. 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.

we need

[1964]

