

I'M NOT TRYING TO "SAY" ANYTHING IN MY WORK

There is a pernicious shadow haunting every single one of us trying to make our way in the world of pleasing an audience; it is that our work must contain some *message* or have some point to make about the world; it's not so much that we are forced to make our work that way but those who consume it are so deluded by the overbearing need for *usefulness* that they assume any artistic output that isn't blasting CGI all over a wide screen--the artsy fartsy stuff--must contain some edifying quality. And so they project their own paranoia and suspicion of the author's point of view (which they, in fact, can never know even if the author wanted them to) onto the work; this is egregious. And I know it happens because right now I am more audience member than artist and I commit this sin all the time. So this isn't just another angry rant, it is also a confession.

There is a wonderful essay by Susan Sontag; I'm sure you've heard of it; it's called *Against Interpretation*. I still have to read it many times again before I can say for sure that I understand it, but my point is you should all read it.

Our efforts to *interpret* things have ruined our ability to just surrender to our senses. It's ruined everything from scripture, to greek tragedy, to shakespeare, up until our contemporary age.

I'm not saying artists (or audiences) should never hold a point of view--political or otherwise--but if they wanted to tell it to us they have other avenues. I was introduced to Sontag (who was a fiction writer and filmmaker in her own right) because of her apparently incendiary essay in the *New Yorker* the Tuesday after 9/11 (which I stumbled upon years after its publication since I was seven at the time of the events); she was the only one in that *New Yorker* feature who wrote something that refused to play into the punditry of American victimhood after the terrorist attacks. You should all read that too. An incendiary essay in the *New Yorker* is a good way to tell the world what you think and get in trouble for it. Sontag was incredibly political, but she didn't let it cloud the way she read a book or watched a movie or witnessed any other creation.

Here's the truth: I am an amateur. Right now this is a very scary and very stupid foray into the world of writing for me. Writing blog posts; writing short fiction; writing things for myself to perform (my feverishly made and thoughtless podcast). There are things that I plug into my writing because I read them somewhere and I find them curious or fascinating and like any good amateur I am still unable to resist the temptation to show how smart I am. But those references don't really mean anything.

Because I don't want to be *useful*, I want to be *entertaining*. The question I want asked (if there is anyone out there who has listened to my podcast) is not "hmmm, what does this say about society?" or worse, "what does this say about the author?" The question I want asked is "What's going to happen?" or "Wasn't that funny?!" or "Oh my god did *you* see that coming?"

That's it.

Well, what about stories like, say, *The Constant Gardner*? Doesn't something like that have a very obvious political message? Interesting point. But I'd venture to say that a) the circumstances in *The Constant Gardner* really are just how the world works, and so there is nothing "political" about them, and b) those circumstances make for a good story, and c) if John Le Carre thought his twenty two novels were an effective way of relaying polemics against corporate imperialism he wouldn't have spent so much time writing speeches and giving talks and interviews in which it was very clear he was issuing such polemics.

I love essay books. Because I love reading an author's point of view. James Baldwin wrote incredible essays that were very political. Mary Oliver wrote incredible essays that were mostly non-political but also expressed her environmental ideals. And it isn't as if any author could ever completely filter out their opinions in their poems or novels or films--that would just deaden them--and it would be dishonest because the point of writing is to be true to yourself. But if these authors truly cared about their opinions they would just write them out directly (which they do) instead of couching them in the improper form.

Sure, a novel like *Go Tell It On The Mountain* could be seen as a protest novel, in part (among a multitude of wonderful things). But I love it only because when I read it, I couldn't get a line like "*I don't care how many times you change your ways, what's in you is in you and it's got to come out*" out of my head; I don't even remember which character said that line.

As an audience member it's best if I just unburden myself from the assumptions I fling onto the author.

Of course, as an author, my constricted imagination can only go so far... obviously what I build will inevitably reflect *some* perspective on the world that I happen to hold at the time. But that's not the point.

My fiction, if anyone cares, is not about expressing my opinion. I just want to make that clear at the outset, so that there are no misunderstandings when I've actually written a considerable amount of fiction.

I have this blog so that I can tell people what my opinion is. But even then, I don't think I have the amount of craft necessary to let you know the full complexity of what I think when I choose to open my mouth and express an opinion.

Again, I'm an amateur; my opinion isn't really worth anything (yet) but I might as well practice.

Then again maybe I should stop writing and acting all together. Seems much more trouble than it's worth.

Nah.

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