

The Writer and Popular Culture, or Notes on Pop:

The subject of my talk is the writer and popular culture, what's pop, what's not and why, and it's dedicated to Susan Sontag who died Dec 28 2004. Her celebrated essay on camp inspired me to write a meditation on popular culture, and I've expanded my essay here to include a discussion of the role of the writer.

The popular culture of our time—cell phones, Google, iPods, Twitter, YouTube, Oprah, Reality TV, Craigslist, Apple computers, Bluetooth, and Hollywood blockbusters—has been defined by social critics like Norman Cantor and Michael Werthman as what the majority of people do or consume in their spare time while high culture like ballet, opera, the symphony and certain kinds of literature has its roots in aristocratic patronage of the arts.

When Susan Sontag published “Notes on Camp in 1964”, the division between high and low culture still existed. Her essay, dedicated to Oscar Wilde, was one of the first to treat pop culture seriously, as seriously as art in the realm of high culture. Sontag said camp grew out of the gay community, and was a way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon, not in terms of beauty but in terms of the degree of artifice, or style. According to Sontag, the camp sensibility preferred art with grandiose aspirations. Something was good not because of its tasteful aesthetic merits but because it tried so hard it was aesthetically bad. This aspiration was both touching and funny. A piece of camp could be a Tiffany Lamp, old Flash Gordon comics or Swan Lake.

Before I give you my notes on pop, inspired by Sontag's essay, I'd like to talk about Sontag herself, who was one of the first modern writers to bridge the division between popular culture and high art. Sontag defined a writer as someone who is interested in everything and she once complained that she was always looking for other writers who were interested in high art and popular culture but she couldn't find them.

“There was nobody I ever met who was interested in both and I always was.”

Sontag was born Susan Rosenblatt in New York in 1933, but soon after the birth her mother returned to China, where Sontag's father was a fur trader. Susan and her younger sister Judith were left in the care of their grandparents until the death of their

father when Susan was five. Her mother remarried when Susan was twelve and Sontag adopted the surname of her stepfather Nathan Sontag. Sontag dismissed her childhood as a waste of time because she was aware of herself as “a genius-schmuck” by the time she was three or four. By genius schmuck she meant someone with brains who had trouble living up to conventional expectations, and certainly Sontag never did. She was a conventional American only in her determination to leave behind the provinces and make her name as a brilliant author. She grew up in Tucson, Arizona and later in Los Angeles where she graduated from North Hollywood High School at the age of 15. She began her undergraduate studies at Berkeley but transferred to the University of Chicago where she studied philosophy, romanticism and literature and graduated with a B.A. She married one of her professors, Phillip Rief after a ten-day courtship when she was only 17. They were married for eight years before divorcing in 1958 and Sontag became a practicing lesbian. She had one son, David Rief, who later became his mother’s editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux as well as a writer in his own right. Sontag’s six books of fiction, three plays and numerous essays published in five collections of non-fiction have made her one of the Western world’s most famous cultural commentators and critics. In addition, she published monographs written in her characteristic aphoristic style, the ideas grouped like a gang of keys on a ring. Her 1977 book *On Photography* cemented her fame. Sontag who didn’t have much personal experience with a camera, said writing about photography didn’t require expertise because she was writing about modernity. And photography was the easiest way to understand it.

Her other monographs, all well known, include: *Illness as Metaphor*, *AIDS and its Metaphors* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Sontag also made four films and contributed phrases to Fischerspooner’s album *Odyssey* as well as liner notes for the Patti Smith album *Land*. But after her death, we discovered a whole new Sontag when her son David Rief published her journals and notebooks, *Reborn, Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1964* in 2008. This book, which describes in detail her struggles with her lesbianism and her ambition, is the most personal of all Sontag’s writings. David Rief said that Sontag’s narrative of self-creation trumped any concern for privacy although Sontag stayed away from self-revelation when she was alive. She admitted once that maybe she should have written more about her lesbianism because that would have given

comfort to some readers. But she said she preferred her writing to challenge conventional wisdom and superstition and it's obvious that the unguarded, impressionistic entries in her journal are written for her eye alone. *Reborn* is a devastating portrait of an arrogant and difficult personality, a first class neurotic who disliked bathing, eschewed kindness and drove herself to be intellectually superior while at the same time railing against intellectualism in American art.

In her famous essay, "Against Interpretation," published in 1966, Sontag argued that intellectual interpretations get in the way of us experiencing art in a sensory or numinous way. And the posthumous diaries reveal her early reverence for high culture and the transformative power of art which likely came out of her own need for transcendent change. In the foreword to *Reborn*, her son notes sadly that Sontag was as uncomfortable with her body as she was serene about her mind. He describes an experience in southern Greece when Sontag heard members of the audience yelling during the performance of *Medea*, "No, don't do it, *Medea*." Sontag was profoundly moved by the audience's belief that the play was real, not a distanced work of high culture.

The posthumous journals also reveal her unshakeable confidence in her own judgments and the extraordinary task she set herself—to hear every piece of music, see every art work, be conversant with all the great works of literature. The journals show her listing the books she wants to read and ticking them off as she reads them. Here are some examples of Sontag's determination to record and react to everything she encounters: "Pretending to take a shower after gym period...(in) Florida, dreaming that the Lone Ranger would come and carry me away on his horse, I, wearing sandals... wanting to grow up...weeping when Roosevelt died...the Sunday mother came up to camp and I wouldn't swim for her. Grandma Lena feeding me mashed potatoes. One for mommy, one for Judy...listening to the world premier of Shostakovich's Seventh... giving blood for Israel, the ache in my arm...copying the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins...having my own room, choosing the colours...Elaine said that the pretty gym teacher was a lesbian."

In her journals, Sontag reminds me of the heroine in her last novel, *In America*, a character that Sontag described as "a saturnine personality, one of those fiercely serious

souls...possessed of a self-conscious and unforgiving relation to the self.” Sontag could have been talking about herself and not her novel’s heroine, the Polish actress, Maryna Zalewsky. In her better received novel, *The Volcano Lover*, Sontag allowed her characters to speak directly to the reader in an intimate, friendly voice, erudite and knowing, a voice that one critic said threw off ideas and intellectual sparks like a Roman candle or a Catherine wheel blazing in the night.

This then was the author of “Notes on Camp,” a sometimes charming but autocratic personality, grave and sensual with a critic’s eye for paradox, who dared to admire popular culture when most critics of her period dismissed it as mindless entertainment. It’s tempting to wonder what Sontag would have said about pop if she hadn’t died in 2004 because the divisions between popular culture and high culture have melted away since the 1964 publication of her essay on camp. There are few boundaries between high art and mass taste now. Look at the media that poured forth after the death of the King of Pop, Michael Jackson. Stardom now equals pop stardom.

Like it or not pop rules. Its power is reinforced by the Internet and a digital, electronic media, which creates a media-scape as influential as the natural landscapes of forests, grasslands and mountains were to our pioneer ancestors. But many of us remain skeptical of pop culture. If you are like me, attracted by pop’s energy, you may feel schizophrenic because you enjoy a good mindless Hollywood action movie while still feeling let down by its banality and lack of substance. Although I am a fan of pop, I am also one of its sternest critics because as a novelist, my tradition is literature with its ties to Gutenberg and the world of print. But as Susan Sontag points out in “Notes on Camp” there is no better person to talk about a cultural phenomenon than somebody with “a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.” So I offer the following Notes on Pop as an homage to Susan Sontag who once famously said that camp converts the serious into the frivolous.

Notes on Pop

1. Pop is a vision of the world based on the potential for mass appeal.
2. Pop is not a vision of the world in terms of style but a sensibility that is concerned with effect. Ultimately, it’s not the way things are done that counts but the way things go over that matters.

3. Pop is also a quality, the way volume or temperature are properties of space and heat.
4. If something is popular, it satisfies the needs of the pop audience whose desires aren't created by the media so much as catered to through doses of powerful sensation in the form of fashion, food, adventure, sex, violence, potency and the thrill of horror.
5. Things are always going in and out of being pop as the media circulates or recycles celebrities and fashion but pop's essential dictum remains the same: pop must never surprise us but it must also never be boring.
6. Pop's second most important dictum: pop must be blatant, basic and comfortable. Despite its constant trafficking in new sensations and images, the nature of pop is conservative.
7. Botticelli's Venus was not pop when it was painted in the 13th century because it challenged the traditional religious paintings of the period. His Venus was the first image since Roman times of a nude goddess in a pose that evoked the beauty and strength of the ancient pagan gods. Goaded by the monk Savonarola, Botticelli later went on to burn some of his "pagan" paintings but thankfully not his Venus whose gentle face and coyly posed frontal nudity looks soothing to our contemporary eyes.
8. Pop provides an illusion of stability in North American society. In a constantly changing world we may not have the stamina to do much except cling to our old perspectives.
9. Andy Warhol discovered his pop appeal during the late 1960's when Hollywood began to tackle the themes of his underground films. Until then, his work challenged our perceptions by treating pop culture as a subject for art. "People do tend to avoid new realities", Warhol said. "They'd rather just add details to old ones."
10. Pop art is no longer pop but its quality of inertness and its fascination with depersonalized imagery make it the soul of pop. Its love of

repetition, evident in Andy Warhol's silk screens and its representations of ads, billboards, comic strips, soup cans and cleaning utensils, (all objects despised by high culture), reflect pop's democratic theme.

11. "A coke is a coke," Warhol once wrote. "And no amount of money can get you a better coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking."
12. Canadians, with our earnest CBC television dramas, our Governor General and British parliamentary traditions, don't make good pop although not every Canadian attempt at pop fails. The film *Good Cop Bon Cop* is a Canadian pop success. The Quebec film industry is a pop success and so are Canadian singers Shania Twain, Celine Dion, Bryan Adams, Diana Krall, Neil Young and others like them.
13. Canadians appear to be more interested in an inventive way of enduring—a theme unlikely to become pop unless the world survives ecological disaster and goes on to enshrine sustainability as an ideal more important than freedom.
14. A cultural activity is only pop when it helps the ordinary person celebrate their right to be free. And no nation carries this celebration of freedom farther than the nation to the south of us, which may be why Americans are better at producing pop than anyone else.
15. The comic strip, Asterix le Gaulois, and his adventures against the Romans is pop, like mother's day e-cards advertised on the Asterix website.
16. Pop converts the dangerous into the comfortable so we can consume it. The process of converting the dangerous into the comfortable has to be done in a funny way. There is nothing funny about the story of St. George killing a dragon. But if St. George pinches the dragon in a comic strip and the dragon blows up, that's funny.
17. Pop makes art innocuous by killing its content. That's why popular success is ambiguous for the artist. If something is popular, its content

will be rendered harmless because it will be consumed on a visceral level rather than understood in its entirety.

18. To make a distinction between popular culture and commercial properties as some Marxists do is wishful thinking. Commercial properties cannot make money unless they satisfy the needs of the majority, an audience that cuts across class lines.
19. A more reliable distinction exists between found pop and deliberate pop such as TV sit coms and Harlequin Romances. Deliberate pop is purposefully created for mass audiences and relies on formulas and market surveys. Found pop happens by accident. It occurs when people use bits and pieces of art and culture for their own enjoyment, the way children will eat the Smarties off a cake.
20. Prairie grain elevators, which began as capitalist bins for the global wheat market, are found pop. Since the mid-Sixties, they've become sentimental tombstones for the rural past although grain elevators have a double meaning because they are also signs of conquest to First Nations people.
21. Another example of found pop: the Pope who's a nostalgic link to a feudal past when our religious world-view hadn't been shattered by scientific advances. Part of the Pope's glamour is his ability to maintain spiritual convictions in a post-religious age. It's not the Pope's message but the Pope himself who is fascinating.
22. Queen Elizabeth is found pop. Her international appearances answer a need for ceremony largely ignored in twenty-first century life. However, her ceremonial traditions are deliberate pop because they were invented after 1870 to impress a mass audience.
23. The Highland Kilt, invented in 1780 by an Englishman, is deliberate pop and so are the clan tartans, which contrary to popular opinion, were invented just over a hundred years ago.

24. Pop says no to the old aristocratic division of the arts—base comedic form for the masses, sublime tragedy for the Kings and queens and the nobles.
25. A short list of what's pop: President Obama; Skype; folding bicycles; Ricky Bobby, the Nascar race car driver played by Will Ferrell who sells chewing gum on the Internet; Alberta; Osama Bin Laden; speed dating; *Pride and Prejudice with Zombies* by Jane Austen and Seth Graeme-Smith; Thai food; the websites, TMZ (which broke the story of Michael Jackson's death); Ted.com; GoFugyourself and LavaLife; Wikipedia; Gil, the crab from Honda Element Commercials; Gertrude Stein; Corner Gas; baseball, plastic glasses; American Chick Lit; Hugh Jackman and Brangelina; Eckhart Tolle; blogs; Blackberries; CSI Miami; The Sopranos; Mad Men; gangsta rappers; Avril Lavigne; Hockey Night in Canada, modern hipsters and flat shoes.
26. What's not pop: Ontario; Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; the war in Iraq; orthodox Jewish cooking; sharia law; mail order brides; novels by Gertrude Stein; Hijabs, burkas, paintings by Sir Edwin Landseer; the Taliban; plus fours; medieval sagas of Iceland and gentlemen's spats.
26. The theme of pop culture dates back to Christ, one of the first religious leaders to recognize the dignity of all individuals.
27. I tear up when Beyonce Knowles belts out in *Dreamgirls*, "Nobody can keep me down! I'm a somebody!"
28. The more something purports to defy authority, the better are its chances of becoming pop. Early British rockers like The Clash, or American grunge bands like Nirvana celebrated a revolt against authority and an unmasking of authority's qualifications to issue orders. Canadian efforts at pop are less successful because our stories often defer or fail to defy authority while American pop always reflects the idea that nobody—no matter how qualified—has any more right than anyone else to assert an opinion. On the other hand, the

racial mix in Canadian cities is poppier than the inner cities of American metropolises with their segregated neighbourhoods.

29. Some random examples of art that have become generic pop:
Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa (which is also the subject of a pop song); Van Gogh's sunflowers, Auguste Rodin's statue, *The Thinker* as in: "She has a body by Rubens and a smile like Mona Lisa".
30. Pop genres such as TV soaps smooth over the sharp edges of art, which work against the conventions of culture.
31. An open-ended genre like performance art is too unpredictable to be pop. In Canada, literary fiction was temporarily pop after the success of *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, and to a lesser extent, *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels.
32. A pop genre must give us what we expect even if what we expect is the unexpected. We count on Madonna to change her image as regularly as some of us once bought a new car. In North America, we depend on our rock stars to give us the illusion of renewal and progress. The search for meaning can be too time-consuming and frightening.
33. The rock music of the sixties emerged out of the folk music and rhythm and blues traditions. Its material came from the lives of the artists and their relationship with an audience of peers. Its evolution into a profit-driven industry has affected its role as an expression of solidarity and dissatisfaction. Traditional rock—with its projected image of caged potency, the unsmiling tousled-headed men and women whose faces change but whose stance does not—protects us from the possibility of real rebellion. Although the rock industry has atomized into different trends, traditional rock still preaches revolution without asking us to be revolutionaries.
34. Bands like The Police and Green Day are deliberate pop, proud to be populist, and so is the Canadian rock band Nickelback.

35. Early punk music is found pop but The Sex Pistols were deliberate pop because their manager Malcolm McLaren self-consciously marketed cynicism and encouraged the Pistols to spit at their audience instead of evoking the old communal feeling of rock and roll. In North America, the young adopted the punk style without sharing the lower class anger and nihilism of British rockers. North American teenagers wore the punk style of spiked haircuts and zippered clothing to express their rebellion the way white suburban boys now adopt the baggy pants and big hats and rolling walk of young American blacks.
36. Pop singer Elvis Costello remains an Indie figure although he sells a lot of records and even hosts a TV talk show. He is both critically acclaimed and famous.
37. Pop fame may never happen to us personally but we live with the possibility the way our pioneer ancestors lived with their fantasies of heaven.
38. The moment one becomes pop, one's image is projected like an electronic angel into our homes and movie-houses by the Internet and the mass media. The rest of us stay on the ground, suspended in the pre-pop moment.
39. Reality TV series are Ur pop. They promote our shared aspirations. Each of us is an undiscovered star waiting in the wings, living in the moment preceding the fifteen minutes of fame that the late Andy Warhol once promised us.
40. Susan Boyle, the frumpy, middle-aged British singer, soared to fame on YouTube because she embodied the pop idea that even the most ordinary of us can make it. If she had been younger and prettier, she would have just been another contestant.
41. If deliberate pop breaks its conventions and gives us the unexpected, it will no longer be pop. For instance, if a TV series like CSI: Miami moved its setting from Miami to Mars, it would lose its audience

although it's possible that such a series would gain a new audience, one that appreciates pop satire.

42. Pop satire, a third kind of pop, makes us laugh uncontrollably when it lampoons the rituals and pretensions of North Americans living the good life.
43. The following pop satirists are involved in a critique of North American culture: Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, South Park, The Simpsons, the late Lenny Bruce, Married with Family; Gilbert Shelton, the creator of Wonder Warthog, the hog of steel; early SCTV skits by comedians like John Candy; performance artists and film makers like Laurie Anderson and Michael Moore.
44. Pop satire embodies the complexities of pop; it wants us to have fun. At the same time it reminds us there is little meaning behind the pop image except a naïve faith in the power of fame, wealth and unlimited freedom.
45. A pop genre dies when the values it projected and the appetite it satisfied are transferred to something else. Arnold Schwarzenegger grimly executing whoever steps in his path is old pop, but Clive Owen protecting a pregnant mother in the futuristic world of *Children of Men* is new pop.
46. The ultimate non-pop statement comes from Susan Sontag: freedom of choice has been translated into freedom to consume and individuality has given way to egotism.
47. The Pop Age, with its worship of the Internet, blogs and Facebook, proclaims that one person's truth is as true as the next one's. Opinion is eclipsing fact and the pop audience has become the pop show.
48. Pop's democratizing power is its most vital quality and its emphasis on freedom has provided a model for disadvantaged nations and groups like gays, blacks and women. Without the pop tradition, we wouldn't have: hip hop singer Queen Latifah; American Idol star Adam Lambert; Barack Obama, George Washington; Michael Jackson;

Eminem, feminist novelists, and the Iranian martyr Neda whose death on the streets of Tehran was captured on cell phone and sent around the world.

49. The life and death of Michael Jackson, the king of pop, is a pop dilemma. Before his death, Jackson sold more pop albums than any other singer but his life after pop stardom, like the life of Elvis Presley before him, suggests that wealth and fame don't provide personal fulfillment. Why? It is in our nature to be dedicated to something but pop fails to generate a new ideal beyond freedom and wealth.

50. Pop doesn't address the problem of what to do with our time after we are lord and mistress in our own homes, and the lack of context that goes with pop success can lead to boredom and despair. It was one thing for our immigrant ancestors to escape a rigid class system in Europe; it is quite another thing for us, their descendants, to imagine a meaningful value besides getting ahead. After we get it all, what do we do next? Meanwhile, the potential for the destruction of our planet increases and the tragedy of poverty and genocide continue to haunt the human race.

51. Although the pop genres are meant to protect us from uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, pop's celebration of freedom in the face of catastrophe intensifies the anxiety and dread that are part of modern life. The more pop celebrates itself, the more hopeless we feel—and the more likely we are to bathe ourselves in pop in order to escape.

52. Pop is about the unspeakable fear that can never be addressed. (What if we don't fit in?)

53. Two old pop rituals: throwing marshmallows at the Stay Puft marshmallow man in *Ghostbusters* and yelling "slut" at the leads in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Three contemporary pop rituals: Google bombing, which links many sites to a certain web address to raise its ranking in Google's research results; building a stone Inukshuk (Inuksuk is preferred Inuit spelling) and posting a status update on FaceBook.

54. The ultimate pop statement belongs to Andy Warhol: “Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art.”
55. Pop avoids the emptiness of its tradition by concentrating on the famous, which includes those who are famous for being famous like Paris Hilton. What’s left of the elevation of pop is the reign of celebrity while the ultimate pop questions remain unanswered: Is there a value more important than personal freedom? And can we honour it without undermining freedom itself?

So now that I’ve described the characteristics of pop, where does that leave the writer? And what would Susan Sontag say about the writer’s role in contemporary pop culture? Since 1977, when Sontag published her book on photography, the Internet has made writing a mass art form in the same way the portable camera made everybody a photographer. As I speak new formats like Twitter and the Kindle keep appearing, giving each of us still another way to communicate with each other, whether we are writing cell phone novels with our thumbs like young Japanese girls or sending emails the way personal notes in Jane Austen’s time were delivered in a matter of hours by stage coaches. (Except of course, these nineteenth century notes didn’t glow from the inside the way an email or e-book does.)

Anyone can blog and many people do while others make mash-ups out of video and audio clips and still more of us use Facebook. Just as photography blurred the division between the expert and the amateur, the online world makes everyone a writer, in theory and practice. Authors like myself and many of you in the audience have already experienced pressure to be more accessible, to produce more, to be less reflective and more inter-active because words keep speeding up. Everywhere words are moving, when you speak, when you watch, when you go on line.

The good news for writers is that words have not been replaced by image or sound with the advent of email, Facebook, websites and Blackberries (there are 25 million Blackberry users in North America alone); instead words have been retrieved by the Internet. Cell phone texting, the blog world and the e-book are bringing text back, if it

was ever truly lost. Despite its approach to spelling, cell phone users still use the term texting to describe sending messages.

And in just a few short years after Susan Sontag's death, we have become our own pop subjects whose reports are available immediately and simultaneously to anyone in the world. Because it's time consuming and expensive to research world events the way a traditional newspaper does, the trend has been for us to report on ourselves, and we expect our reports to reach an audience even though many of us may not know how to make our blogs and Facebooks more appealing to readers.

Nevertheless, as authorities on ourselves we are pop spielers whose words, like the words of a street corner speaker, fly out of our mouths onto the screen. A blogger is the ultimate in pop expression because the blogger is freer than ever before to tell the world what he or she thinks about it. Thanks to the Internet, we don't need any intermediaries; we can talk directly to our audience without an agent or an editor and publishing house. All we need is ourselves. Our unabashed self-reporting exemplifies pop's democratic theme.

But is the democratization of writing a good thing? Andrew Keen, in his book, *The Cult of the Amateur*, complains that the growing numbers of amateur writers have made it hard to distinguish good writing from bad, and therefore even harder for professional writers to make money from their writing. Keen says politicians and corporations often pose online as amateurs to disguise themselves and their motives. And he cites a cartoon of two dogs talking about going on line. "On the Internet," one of the hounds confides. "No one knows you're a dog." If newspapers fold, Keen says we will be forced to rely on unpaid amateurs like the contributors to Wikipedia, whose articles can be wrong, even downright fraudulent. Recently, a contributor to Wikipedia, who edited thousands of Wikipedia entries and was given the authority to arbitrate writers' disputes, turned out to be a 24-year old named Ryan Jordan, not the tenured professor he claimed to be.

McLuhan expert, Derrick de Kerckhove, who teaches at the University of Toronto, says professional writers are still necessary, and he also thinks the need for books will continue because readers CAN'T interact with the printed page. Books are restful and give the reader time to reflect and develop a perspective. "The relationship of

printed matter to electronic publishing...should be one that serves to support the authority of information, just as gold bullion serves to support the value of money," de Kerckhove says in his book *Connected Intelligence*.

But it seems like amateur writers are here to stay, and so are writers who make a living from writing (although how we do it online is still being decided). In her book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag once pointed out that some photographs taken by amateurs could be construed as art, but nevertheless highly paid photographers like Sontag's partner Annie Leibowitz are still in demand. And when one wants wedding pictures, one doesn't go to Uncle Charlie but to a professional. The same is true of writing. It's not just craft, but professional intent that makes the expert, and no matter how many changes there are in our digital world, some writers will be successful because they're talented, and because they've spent time honing their craft.

Occasionally, a Sunday blogger who writes, say about the war in Baghdad, may have their writing turned into a lucrative book deal but chances are this will not happen regularly. Recent studies show that 95 percent of bloggers give up because their blogs aren't read. Only a few amateurs will manage to reach an audience while professional writers will continue to blog, write books, or have their work published on e-books, whose glowing screens are a link to old illuminated manuscripts. And the work of these authors may, too, reach a mass audience.

In her last years, Sontag said that discourse about Western political options had been literally silenced. Her job, she pointed out, was to do something about that. A writer's duty, she also said, is to be in as much contact with reality as you can. I agree. Although the context continually changes, pop's theme remains the same, and so in certain ways, does the role of the writer.