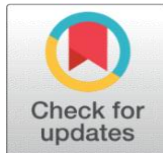
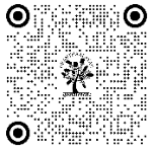


EXPLORING AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN *THE LUNCHBOX*: A DIALOGUE WITH SUSAN SONTAG'S *AGAINST INTERPRETATION*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relevance of Susan Sontag's 1961 essay *Against Interpretation* through a detailed analysis of the Bollywood film *The Lunchbox*. Sontag's argument for prioritizing aesthetic experience over interpretive analysis resonates strongly with the film's poetic depiction of everyday life. While the film's ambiguous ending has led to various interpretations, this study deliberately refrains from exploring its thematic or political aspects. Instead, it celebrates the film's visual and emotional appeal—its capacity to captivate audiences through beauty and subtlety. Sontag challenges us to consider whether art exists solely for interpretation or should be experienced in its purest form. In this context, *The Lunchbox* transcends mere narrative; it becomes a work of art that goes beyond its utilitarian purpose. This paper contends that the film exemplifies Sontag's assertion that art should evoke feelings and enchant viewers rather than serve as a vehicle for didactic or political messages. By employing a formalist approach and focusing on the film's visual and emotional artistry, this study emphasizes the importance of valuing the aesthetic over the interpretive.

Keywords: Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, *The Lunchbox*, Aesthetic Experience, Film Studies

INTRODUCTION

Cinema has always been a subject of diverse opinions among academicians, critics, filmmakers, and audiences, particularly regarding its artistic dimensions. As a form of art—whether high, mass, or popular—it occupies a unique space in cultural discourse. This paper explores the relevance of Susan Sontag's 1961 essay *Against Interpretation* by applying its central ideas to the Bollywood film *The Lunchbox* (2013). The film's captivating beauty and emotional depth offer an ideal case study to engage with Sontag's call to prioritise aesthetic experience over interpretation. Sontag critiques the tendency to dissect art into symbolic or political meanings, emphasizing instead the importance of experiencing art in its immediacy. Similarly, the Bollywood film under purview, *The Lunchbox*, exemplifies cinema's ability to evoke sensory and emotional responses without succumbing to interpretative reductionism. Thus, the paper aims not to critique or praise the film but to celebrate the visual and emotional richness it presents. Sontag's reflections on the role of cinema as a form of art resonate deeply with *The Lunchbox*, a film that evokes rather than explains, enchants rather than instructs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employs qualitative research to explore *The Lunchbox* through an interpretive and observational lens. Formalism serves as the theoretical framework, emphasizing the film's narrative structure, visual style, and use of symbolism to evoke aesthetic experiences. Observation forms the core of this methodology, focusing on the nuanced interplay of character actions, settings, and cinematic techniques. The study captures the film's layered storytelling and emotional depth by analysing scenes, dialogues, and non-verbal cues. The approach aligns with Susan Sontag's philosophy by refraining from over-interpretation and instead embracing the immediacy of the aesthetic experience. The research highlights the significance of the film's visual and emotional appeal through detailed textual analysis, offering insights into its broader cultural and artistic relevance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Susan Sontag was a renowned American writer, cultural critic, and intellectual whose works spanned literature, philosophy, and art criticism. Celebrated for her incisive commentary on contemporary culture, Sontag explored the intersections of art, politics, and society with unparalleled depth. She extensively wrote and spoke about literature, photography and media, culture, illness, war, human rights, and left-wing politics. She has been called "one of the most influential critics of her generation" by The New York Review of Books (nybooks.com). Sontag was a critic who opposed content and favoured formalist interpretation of art. Her 1966 essay collection, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, remains one of her most influential works, challenging the traditional frameworks of art criticism. Her other well-known works include *On Photography*, *Illness as Metaphor*, and *The Volcano Lover*.

In the titular essay *Against Interpretation*, Sontag argues against the over-intellectualization of art through interpretive analysis. She critiques the tendency to dissect and decode art, reducing it to its symbolic or political meanings while neglecting its sensory and emotional impact. Sontag advocates for a shift in focus from "what art means" to "how it makes us feel," emphasising the importance of aesthetic experience (7). Art, she asserts, should be appreciated in its immediacy and sensual presence, free from the burden of excessive interpretation (14). Mena Mitran, in the *Archive of Longing: Susan Sontag's Critical Modernism* complements her "urge to create a new, never complete discourse which would focus on the gaps, the missing links of meaning, and which would hold a possibility 'to see more', 'to hear more', 'to feel more'" (Singh). Her ideas remain pivotal in modern art and film criticism, encouraging audiences to experience art in its purest form.

ANALYSIS

The Lunchbox, released in 2013, is a critically acclaimed Bollywood film that delicately weaves an unconventional tale of human connection, longing, and unspoken emotions. Set against the bustling backdrop of Mumbai, the film masterfully uses the city's iconic 'dabbawala' lunch delivery system as the narrative thread. This simple yet ingenious logistical network is the unlikely catalyst for a heartfelt story transcending its seemingly mundane premise. Susan Sontag's conceptualization of cinema as a 'synthetic medium' is particularly illuminating, as it encapsulates the essence of film as a confluence of diverse artistic expressions—narration, performance, music, photography, and audio-visual techniques. These elements converge to create a multi-dimensional art form, transcending traditional artistic boundaries. In her essay, *A Century of Cinema*, Sontag eloquently observes:

"It was born of the conviction that cinema was an art unlike any other: quintessentially modern; distinctively accessible; poetic and mysterious and erotic and moral—all at the same time. Cinema had apostles. (It was like a religion.) Cinema was a crusade. For cinephiles, the movies encapsulated everything. Cinema was both the book of art and the book of life." (123)

This perspective underscores cinema's capacity to emotionally, intellectually, and aesthetically engage audiences, offering a unique opportunity to synthesize mediums into a cohesive artistic narrative. Unlike static art forms, film dynamically fuses these elements, elevating them beyond mechanical reproduction or casual documentation. In light of this, *The Lunchbox* is a testament to the artistic possibilities of cinema envisioned by Sontag. Through its layered storytelling, evocative performances, and nuanced use of audio-visual elements, the film exemplifies cinema's potential to resonate as both "the book of art and the book of life," affirming its status as a genuinely synthetic and transformative medium. (123)

The plot of *The Lunchbox* unfolds when Ila (Nimrat Kaur), a young homemaker seeking to revive her stagnant marriage, prepares a special lunch for her indifferent husband. However, due to a rare mix-up in the otherwise flawless dabbawala system, the lunchbox ends up on the desk of Saajan Fernandes (Irrfan Khan), a lonely, middle-aged widower nearing retirement. Saajan, initially confused by the unexpected culinary delight, is drawn to the notes Ila begins to include in the lunchbox to understand her husband better. Their correspondence, conducted through handwritten letters exchanged via the lunchbox, blossoms into a unique bond.

The narrative explores the lives of two strangers who never meet but find solace in each other's words. Ila dreams of escaping her unfulfilled life while Saajan grapples with his solitude. Their poignant, introspective exchanges create a profound connection rooted in mutual empathy and unspoken desires. The film's ambiguous ending leaves viewers contemplating the nature of relationships and the paths not taken, making *The Lunchbox* a poetic meditation on love, chance, and human connection.

A formal examination of *The Lunchbox* reveals its distinct genre, which diverges from the conventions of clichéd romance. The film occupies a unique space as an 'epistolary romance', wherein the exchange of handwritten letters serves as the conduit for emotional intimacy between the protagonists. This unconventional narrative device underscores the individuality of Ila and Saajan, who live in a personal and vibrantly alive Mumbai. Through precise attention to detail, the film captures the authenticity of urban life, engaging the audience with a tactile and sensory immersion. By doing so, it reacquaints the viewer with the "here and now," echoing Susan Sontag's critique of over-interpretation, which she posits as a barrier to experiencing the immediacy of art. (12)

The protagonist, Ila's world, primarily confined to her modest apartment, is depicted with striking realism. Her home feels tangible and lived-in, reflecting the minutiae of her life as a middle-class Marathi woman navigating domesticity and marital discord. In contrast, Saajan Fernandes inhabits a more nostalgic realm, defined by the melancholic undertones of his solitary existence and a palpable attachment to the past. The old Hindi songs and vintage audio cassettes that populate his world become poignant symbols of a bygone era. The absence of traditional lyrical compositions in the film further accentuates its formal brilliance. Instead of relying on song sequences to propel the narrative or impose meanings, the director employs a subtle background score to preserve the story's emotional purity and understated elegance. This artistic restraint aligns seamlessly with Sontag's admonition against reductive interpretation.

The *dabbawalas*, central to the film's narrative framework, embody this resistance to over-interpretation. Their folk songs left untranslated in the movie, resist external impositions of meaning. By choosing not to subtitle these songs, the director allows them to remain an authentic cultural artefact, underscoring the importance of preserving the integrity of artistic expression (Batra 78). This creative choice mirrors Sontag's insistence that interpretation diminishes art by converting it into an intellectual commodity, stripping it of its raw, experiential power (11).

The richness of *The Lunchbox* lies in its characters, who are profoundly layered and evocative. Mrs. Deshpande, though unseen, emerges as a dynamic presence through her disembodied voice, which provides Ila with advice and companionship. Her voice becomes an integral narrative device, functioning as a bridge between Ila's emotional turmoil and her quest for agency. Saajan's apprentice, Sheikh, is another multifaceted character who resists simplistic analysis. His unassuming demeanour and distinctive habits, such as his frequent banana-eating, may invite symbolic interpretations linked to class struggle or economic disparity. Yet a formalist perspective reveals him as a man

embodying resilience and hope amidst life's adversities. This juxtaposition between the symbolic and the literal reflects the film's broader thematic preoccupation with resisting reductive interpretations, encouraging viewers to engage with the characters' humanity.

The handwritten letters between Ila and Saajan form the film's emotional nucleus. As Catherine Field describes, these letters represent "slow communication," a stark contrast to the immediacy of digital interactions (Field 56). Each letter, penned with vulnerability and creativity, becomes a window into the protagonists' inner lives, enabling them to forge an intimate connection that transcends physical proximity. These letters are more than mere narrative tools; they symbolize the timeless human need for connection and understanding, evoking nostalgia for a form of communication that fosters reflection and emotional depth.

The film's open-ended conclusion is emblematic of its artistic philosophy. Rather than offering a resolution, it invites the viewer into a contemplative space, encouraging them to grapple with ambiguity. For instance, Ila's act of removing her jewellery may be read as a symbolic rejection of her oppressive marital life. However, as Sontag and Bordwell caution, over-interpretation risks stripping the film of its sensuality and emotional resonance. By refusing to tie up loose ends, *The Lunchbox* underscores the complexity of human relationships and the inherent unpredictability of life, allowing viewers to derive their meanings.

CONCLUSION

The Lunchbox is a cinematic masterpiece that blends artistry, storytelling, and emotional nuance to explore the complexities of human connection. Through its meticulous attention to detail, refusal to succumb to interpretative reductionism, and embrace of ambiguity, the film challenges conventional narrative frameworks and compels viewers to engage directly with its form and content. Its characters, enriched by their layered humanity and use of handwritten letters as a narrative device, underscore its thematic focus on intimacy, nostalgia, and self-discovery. In resisting the closure of meaning, *The Lunchbox* honours the immediacy of human experiences and invites its audience to embrace the beauty of uncertainty, reinforcing its place as a profound and enduring work of art. Thus, By eschewing interpretation in favour of direct experience, the film exemplifies Sontag's call to "see more, hear more, feel more". (16)

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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None

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