

Invisible Style: Translating Sontag's "On Style" (1996) through Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

Based on Susan Sontag's *On Style* (1966), this piece reinterprets her ideas through the poetic structure of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Adopting Calvino's fragmented form, it reconfigures Sontag's arguments to explore the relations between style, content, art, form, history and morality.

12.NOV.2025

Style v.s. Content

The relationship between style and content is not a binary opposition. They are inseparable, and style has never been subordinate to content. Traditionally, style is thought to lie on the surface while content resides within, as if the outer layer could be peeled away to reveal the true substance of the work. Yet, in fact, style is closer to the core: it is not the shell that covers the soul, but the soul itself, while "content" is merely the surface shaped by form.

Style v.s. Morality
When discussing the morality of art, Sontag does not focus on the messages or positions that a work conveys, but instead turns toward style itself. She argues that the moral dimension of art lies in the attention, discipline, and sensitivity that the work embodies. Style is not merely a formal choice, but an ethical stance: it reflects how the artist perceives the world, restrains the self, and engages with what cannot be expressed. Rather than calling a work "moral" because its style is honest, lucid, and disciplined. Thus, style is not only an aesthetic matter, but also the moral way in which art exists in the world.

Style v.s. Form

Style and form are not separate from each other. Form is the structure and order of a work of art, while style is the way the artist chooses and realises that structure. As Sontag writes, "Style is the principle of decision in a work of art, the signature of the artist's will." Form gives the work its framework, but style gives that framework direction and life. Style makes form more than a neutral structure—it becomes the visible trace of how the artist relates to the world.

Style v.s. Art

The author believes that style is not decoration or something secondary, but the very way art exists. She writes, "Style is the principle of decision in a work of art, the signature of the artist's will." In other words, the essence of art lies in the constant act of making formal choices, and the traces of these choices become what we call style. Style is not only a matter of form, but also a way to deal with what cannot be said. It allows art to move between expression and silence, turning a work from an explanation of ideas into a practice of awareness.

Style v.s. History

A style can be recognised as such precisely because it is historical. Every style arises within a specific space and time, and it is through our historical consciousness that we perceive its difference from others. A style may follow or challenge the conventions of art, oppose the contents and forms of its predecessors, or attempt certain experiments that produce new results. Through these processes, it becomes something distinct from what came before.