

Domestic Research Literature Review on Sontag (2005-2023)—Based on the Analysis of CNKI Literature Metrology

Yuanyuan Jing*, Huixia Ning

School of Foreign Languages, Henan University of Technology, Zhengzhou, Henan, 450001, China

**Corresponding author*

Keywords: Sontag; CNKI China Knowledge Network; Review of domestic literature; Bibliometric analysis

Abstract: Susan Sontag was a great literary critic, philosopher and novelist. The research on herself and her works continues to grow at home and abroad. Based on the quantitative statistics and analysis of Sontag's research papers published on CNKI from 2005 to 2023 in China, this study summarized and sorted out the current research status of Sontag in China from three aspects: research distribution of her works, criticism methods and research hotspots. On this basis, the research direction and perspective of Sontag and her works were predicted and prospected.

1. Introduction

Susan Sontag, an American writer, became famous in the 1960s because of her book *Against Interpretation*. In essence, *Against interpretation* is Sontag's resolute resistance to the moralistic concept interpretation and the traditional criticism mode of dualism. The United States Time magazine also gave Sontag the high honor of "the conscience of the American public" for her heroic courage and strong and persistent sense of social responsibility. She writes in a wide range of fields, including art, literature, photography, etc. Sontag is best known for her critical work, but has often felt that she was more of a novelist. Her works have provided the world scholars with abundant and inexhaustible research corpus. Domestic research on Sontag began in 1993, when scholar Zhong published an article entitled *Historical Novels published by Susan Sontag* in *World Literature*. After the death of Sontag at the end of 2004, the domestic research on Sontag erupted, and the research on Sontag began to increase in 2005. In recent years, the popularity of domestic Sontag research has been increasing, and the exploration dimension has been expanding. Especially in the past 18 years (2005-2023), with the application of new literary research methods such as literary geography, cross-cultural research, and the resurgence of cross-text analysis, domestic Sontag research has constantly presented new hotspots. In order to show the latest trend of Sontag's research in China more directly, this paper adopts the bibliometrics method to make statistics and analysis on the data of CNKI journal articles from 2005 to 2023, so as to predict and prospect the research direction of Sontag's works in the future for reference[1].

2. Quantitative analysis of Susan Sontag's research papers in CNKI journals over the past 18 years

The quantitative statistics and analysis of Susan Sontag's related literature is conducive to the transformation of Sontag's directional research into quantitative research, which has important methodological significance [2].

With the help of electronic media such as CNKI and the keyword "Susan Sontag" in full-text search, some statistics are showed as follows (table 1). CNKI has collected 1048 papers related to Sontag's research in journals (including source journals, anthologies and extended editions) from 2005 to 2023. Among them, Foreign Literature Review, Foreign Literature Research, Foreign Literature, and Contemporary Foreign Literature have collected 32 articles in five major foreign literature journals, and 1,016 articles in other CNKI journals. Among them, there are 79 studies on Sontag's aesthetics, accounting for 7.5%. There are 140 papers on Camp theory, accounting for 13.4%. There are 21 theoretical studies of photography, mainly about *On Photography*, accounting for 2%. There are 75 studies on *Benefactor*, accounting for 7.2%. About her only collection of short stories, *I, etcetera*, there are 53 studies, accounting for 5%. There are 303 studies on *Against Interpretation*, accounting for 28.9%. There are 27 studies on the *Death Kit*, accounting for 2.6%. There are 8 studies on the treatise *Styles of Radical Will*, and there is no independent analysis of this treatise, all of which are included in the literary theory on the study of her literary thought. There are 88 studies on *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, accounting for 8.4%. There are 89 studies on the *Volcano Lover*, accounting for 8.5%; There are 3 studies on *Alice in Bed*, accounting for 0.3%; There are 95 studies on *In America*, accounting for 9%; 76 articles about *Where the Stress Falls*, accounting for 7.2%.

In terms of periodical distribution, the number of papers published in the five major foreign literature journals is about 3.15% of other CNKI journals, accounting for about 3.05% of the total. In terms of the research perspective and content, the thesis mainly focuses on Sontag's literary theories, including silent aesthetics, Camp literature, anti-dualistic interpretive literature, other studies such as metaphorical meaning interpretation, interdisciplinary and cross-cultural comparative studies, and cultural criticism studies. In terms of the distribution of works, her essays are the focus of research, accounting for more than half, while her novels are relatively less, accounting for about 20%.

Table 1: Quantitative analysis of Susan Sontag's research papers in CNKI journals over the past 18 years

| Time | Key words | | Number |
|-----------|---|--|--------|
| 2005—2008 | Miss Susan Sontag | <i>Illness as Metaphor</i> | 139 |
| 2009—2012 | <i>Against Interpretation</i> , new sensibility, <i>The Benefactor</i> | Gender, feminism, photography | 243 |
| 2013—2023 | aesthetic ideology, short stories | <i>I, etcetera</i> , <i>In America</i> , <i>On Photography</i> | 666 |

3. Analysis of the status quo and characteristics of Sontag's research papers in CNKI journals in the past 18 years

In general, in the past 18 years, the world literature journal papers on Sontag in CNKI journals show the following characteristics: first, theory and text research are connect closely; second, research methods are deeply cultivated; third, research content is constantly expanded[3].

3.1 Theory and text study go hand in hand

Literary theory and essays are the focus of Sontag's research, and the number of related research papers continues to grow. In the past 18 years, there have been new developments in both depth and breadth of related research. Literary theory mainly focuses on silent aesthetics and opposition to interpretation, and its collection of essays *Against Interpretation* is the most representative, with a research coverage rate of 100 percent. The book is a collection of 26 articles published by Sontag between 1961 and 1965 in the *Partisan Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Evergreen Review* and other important publications. In this work, the edge of criticism is all over the European and American avant-garde literature, drama, and film, which reflects new intellectuals, against interpretation and new sensibility, and reevaluates the revolutionary attitude and performance of the entire literature and art.[4]

In the 1960s, Susan Sontag replaced old interpretations with new criticism in the form of opposition, a typical modernist approach. One of the characteristics of modernism is that it constantly replaces the old with the new. In that era of rapid ideological change, various ideas and theories were intertwined, and people often only noticed the most visible side of an idea, and enlarged it into a stereotypical cultural label, "anti-interpretation" is one of them. People were highly susceptible to literalism and interpreted "opposition to interpretation" as an absolute resistance to meaning. If so, Sontag would be far from the essence of art. Sontag's "opposition to interpretation" redefines art and criticism, makes up for the shortcomings of traditional critical thought, and is the correction of chaos in the new era. The reason why the aesthetics of silence moves towards silence is that it wants to move towards the extreme and beyond. Sontag's silent aesthetics includes the transcendental character and artistic characteristics of avant-garde art [5]. A correct understanding of this kind of thought is of great benefit to understanding the avant-garde art that emerged in our country in the 1990s.

Susan Sontag has been a prominent figure in American cultural thought since the 1960s. She wears multiple professional identities, belongs to the elite cultural camp and is not afraid to play the role of rebel provocateur, both American confidence enthusiasm and European serious purview. "The Aesthetics of Silence" is included in her second collection of essays, *Styles of the Radical Will*, which more specifically presents the unexhausted aspirations of the older work: that the artist can break out of the vicious circle of self-criticism, that art is no longer confined to a specific category of art, that art is free from the norms of history, that the spirit is free from the bondage of matter, and that the mind is no longer subject to intellectual and intellectual repression[6]. In *Death and Redemption: The Aesthetics of Silence in the Carl Brothers*, scholar Ke Ying, starting from the lack of language and the difficulty of communication, intends to show that the sudden silence of serious artists in the peak state is a profound reflection on art[7].

3.2 Deep cultivation of research methods

The first is the importance and application of the research method of interpretive theory. In *Susan Sontag on Interpretation*, scholar Cui Weisong discusses Sontag's metaphorical theory, silent aesthetics, and opposition to interpretation. Secondly, the in-depth development of "Camp literature". In *Camp and Aestheticism: Camp On the Benefactor*, Ke Ying discusses Susan Sontag's first novel *Benefactor*, indicating that the novel embodied the Camp aesthetics in her landmark essay *Notes on Camp*, in which the two characteristics of advanced Camp and aestheticism are highlighted by the characters' words and deeds[8].

The second is the in-depth discussion of feminist theory. In *The Traditional Innovative Theoretical Model of Jasmine's Female Writer Criticism -- Based on Susan Sontag Under the Sign of Saturn*, scholar Zhang Yi proposed that intellectuals should feel the spirit of the earth and experience the public feelings rooted in a place in the specific living environment and cultural inheritance, and

innovatively put forward theoretical models. Centered on the study of the ethics of reading in Susan Sontag's self-portrait *Under the Sign of Saturn*, the author discusses the dialogue and communication between the writer and the deceased writer in reading activities, as well as the influence of this kind of ghost reading behavior on our own literary criticism. In *From Double Standards to Double Destinies -- Susan Sontag's Feminist Review and Literary Creation*, scholar Zhu Hongmei considers Sontag's double standards for both sexes in a male-dominated society from a female perspective. The depression and frustration encountered by talented women in the real society make them form a dual fate: one is the fate of talented people, and the other is the fate of women as male vassals. The interweaving and collision of these two fates became the source of inspiration for Sontag's literary criticism and literary creation[9].

Next is the deep study of narrative mode. In the *Traumatic Narrative of Susan Sontag's short Stories*, LiJing scholar tries to explore the author's brilliant narrative skills from the aspects of ineffable but necessary family trauma, trauma performance of key characters, trauma metaphor of illness, etc., and then explore her touching humanistic care.

The last part is an in-depth exploration of Sontag's works in the field of ethics. Opposition to interpretation also reflects Sontag's construction of literary ideal criticism model and her expectation of human ideal life. In the 1960s, Sontag's opposition to traditional moral criticism seemed extreme, but it was the expression of her ethical concern in pursuing critical truth. After the 1960s, Sontag resisted the mainstream culture to expose the truth of The Times, and tried to restore the unique perception and judgment ability of human beings in the complicated world [7]. In her later years, Sontag, contrary to the long-held image of an "aesthete" who only defends aesthetics, stated bluntly that art should bear its moral responsibility, arguing that "it is sensibility that nourishes our ability to make moral choices" (*Against Interpretation* 29). In *A Study of Sontag's Thought on the Relationship between Literature and Morality*, scholar Lin Yilan tries to analyze the relationship between literature and morality reflected in Sontag's works from the perspective of the social background of the United States at that time. In Sontag's literary and artistic works, we can clearly see her criticism of traditional literary and artistic morality and her efforts to liberate people from traditional aesthetic concepts. Sontag opposed the over-interpretation and excavation of the content of works by traditional literary and artistic concepts, and opposed to treating works of art as carriers of moral preaching. It opposes the binary opposition between reason and sensibility, content and form, and advocates that people should pay more attention to the form in art works, try to recover and mobilize people's sensibility to experience art works wholeheartedly, rather than giving art works too much moral meaning. Sontag's criticism of traditional literary ethics overturns the moral understanding that has long occupied the mainstream culture in the west. Perhaps some of her ideas are too extreme, but the critical wisdom in them is beyond doubt. Therefore, the research on the relationship between literature and morality of Sontag is of great reference significance for the development of our current cultural industry [10].

3.3 The research content continues to expand

From 2005 to 2008, research about her focused on Sontag's personal mourning, and works focused on *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. *Illness as Metaphor* is one of Sontag's classic works of cultural criticism. It is the embodiment of Sontag's theory of opposition to interpretation. With the purpose of disclosure, criticism, scrutiny and exhaustion, Sontag examines the interpretation of diseases such as tuberculosis, AIDS and cancer, as well as the process of interpreting the world by means of diseases, that is, from a mere disease of the body to a metaphorical process of moral criticism, psychological judgment and political oppression, revealing the absurdity and oppression of meaning interpretation. As a kind of natural phenomenon, the original meaning of the disease is distorted and distorted after the meaning is imposed by the cultural class with various purposes, and the original

meaning is lost[11-12]. Sontag's efforts on the metaphor of illness were actually to challenge the stubborn ideology of the time, to criticize the oppressive discourse in society at that time, and to restore the true face of "disease".

From 2008 to 2012, the research content has been deepened, and has studied all aspects of her, including interpretive literature, new sensibility, female consciousness, photography, etc. Researches about Her works focus on the *Benefactor*. Susan Sontag has always been famous for her theoretical research in the literary world, and we can only get a glimpse of her identity as a novelist from her papers. Yilin Press has published a series of novels written by Sontag. *The Benefactor* is the first book in the series, and the first book Sontag self-published. In *On the Unreliable Narration in Sontag*, Zeng Yangping and Du Zhiqing, based on the rhetorical narrative theory, found that the narrators in the works are not very reliable, and there are two types of unreliability in the text. Among them, contractual unreliability supports aesthetic interpretation, so readers are easy to fall into the trap of interpretation. The estranged unreliability constitutes the irony of the narrator and reveals the true face of the "benefactor". The analysis of the unreliable narrative helps readers to appreciate the complex and rich thematic meaning of the work: the work not only expresses the pursuit of formal aesthetics, but also insinuates and negates the behavior of falling into the extreme form and viewing aesthetic as the only way out of self-salvation [3].

From 2013 to 2023, in addition to the above content, the research on all kinds of novels, especially the short stories *I, etcetera* and the novel *In America*, increased significantly. *I, etcetera* is Sontag's only collection of short stories, published in 1978. From the artistic point of view, *In America* has a strong color of postmodernism. Sontag boldly innovates in expression techniques, narrative angles and aesthetic paradigm, integrating the narrator's inner monologues, personal memories, diaries, letters, advertisements, news reports, and the protagonist's inner consciousness into the narrative structure, giving people a fragmented, interspersed, hazy but very real feeling[13]. The novel goes beyond the shaping significance of politics and economy to human beings, and rises to the metaphysical level to explore the meaning of life and the true meaning of human beings. Sontag, while describing the protagonist in detail, has deliberately reserved some space for the reader's imagination. Sontag argues in her essay *Against Interpretation* that "all great art causes contemplation, a dynamic contemplation." No matter to what extent the reader, listener, or spectator is excited by the temporary equivalence of what is in the work of art with what is in real life, her final reaction - so long as it is to the work of art - must be calm, serene, contemplative, relaxed, and above indignation and approval "(*Against Interpretation* 49). However, the emotional power of the work should be implicit, and the author should maintain a certain sense of distance from the work, so as to make the characters more lifelike and full of life. *In America* is one such thought-provoking novel. The novel's open-ended ending indicates that Marlina's artistic pursuits, like her touring shows in the United States, will never stop; Similarly, Malina's spiral of self-improvement never ends. From *From the Concept of Freedom to Criticism of the USA: On Susan Sontag's "American Spirits"*, Yao Junwei takes Susan Sontag's short story collection *I, etcetera* as a reference and focuses on the *American Spirit*, which has received little attention from the academic community, analyzing the heroine's quest for freedom and the role played by the souls of great Americans in her quest [14-16].

4. Conclusion

Based on the above quantitative data and characteristic analysis, the future domestic Sontag research needs to make further breakthroughs in the interpretation of late works, the introduction of new cutting-edge critical methods and perspectives, and the strengthening of international docking and relevance to the present. From the perspective of the distribution of work interpretation, the domestic long-term focus on Sontag's proceedings, such as *Against Interpretation*, *Illness as*

Metaphor, and not enough attention to the fiction. Sontag considers herself as a novelist, whose novels reflect her literary thoughts. In-depth interpretation of this type of works is not only conducive to deepening the understanding of Sontag's works in other creative periods, but also conducive to understanding the complexity of Sontag's overall creative thoughts and the completeness of her artistic style.

From the perspective of literary text study and realistic consideration, the connection between domestic Sontag study and current reality is not strong. It is an inevitable trend of humanities and social science research in the new century to give full play to the realistic value of academic research and provide suggestions and guidance for the development of mankind and the world.

Through quantitative statistics and analysis of Sontag related research papers collected in five major foreign literature journals and other CNKI journals in the past 18 years, it can be seen that although the domestic Sontag research has entered a new stage of rapid development, the number and direction of research still need to be strengthened. We should also face up to various difficulties in the current research, make efforts to make up for our shortcomings, narrow the gap, and promote the healthy development of Chinese Sontag research. This is not only an academic project to strive for and grasp the international academic discourse and improve the international academic status, but also a humanistic contribution to inject sustained vitality into Sontag as an important spiritual wealth of mankind and make it lasting.

References

- [1] Ke Ying. *Death and Redemption: The Aesthetics of Silence in The Brothers Carl*. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*. 2016, 37(01):29-35
- [2] Cui Weisong. *Susan Sontag's Reflections on Interpretation* [J]. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 2021, 42(02):121-127.
- [3] Ke Ying. *Higher Camp and Aestheticism: On Camp's aesthetics in Benefactor* [J]. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 2021, 42(04):13-19.
- [4] Zhang Yi. *The Traditional Innovative Theoretical Model of Jasmine's "Female writer Criticism" -- Taking Susan Sontag's Under the Sign of Saturn as the Research Center of Reading Ethics Criticism* [J]. *Research on Foreign language Teaching in Jiangsu*, 2016,(03):46-51.
- [5] Zhu Hongmei. *From "Double Standard" to "Double Destiny"—Susan Sontag's Critical and Literary Views on Feminism* [J]. *World literary review*, 2016,(02):45-49.
- [6] Li Jing. *The Traumatic Narrative of Susan Sontag's short story "Baby"*. *Yangtze River Series*. 2019(10).
- [7] Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. Cheng Wei. Shanghai Translation Publishing Press. 2011.
- [8] Lin Yiran. *A Study of Sontag's Thoughts on the Relationship between Literature and Morality* [D]. Heilongjiang University, 2019.
- [9] Zeng Yangping, Du Zhiqing. *On the Unreliable Narration in Sontag's The Benefactor* [J]. *Journal of Huaqiao University*, 2018, (03):137-145.
- [10] Yao Junwei. *From the Concept of Freedom to Criticism of the USA: On Susan Sontag's "American Spirits"*[J]. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2018, 40(04):127-135.
- [11] Zhang Shufang. *Against Interpretation: Returning to the Truth Behind Illness as Metaphor*[J]. *Journal of Changsha University*, 2008,(04):92-94.
- [12] Gu Mingsheng. *A Player's Artistic Mode and Critique of Everyday Life: A Re-Examination of Sontag's Fiction Writing* [J].*Foreign Literature Studies*, 2023, 45(03):132-144.
- [13] Wang Yanli. *The Hermeneutic Value of Susan Sontag's Against Interpretation*. *Chinese Journal of Social Sciences*. 2022(02).
- [14] Liu Xinyan, Yao Junwei. *From Getting Rid of the Other to Transcending the Self: An Interpretation of Susan Sontag's I, etcetera* [J]. *Fudan Forum on Foreign Languages and Literature*, 2021,(01):128-132.
- [15] Yao Junwei, Leland Poague. *Defining the Almost Undefinable Susan Sontag: An Interview with Leland Poague* [J]. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2021, 43(01):1-19.
- [16] Lei Denghui. *Ethical Concern and Discourse Practice in Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation"* [J]. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2018, 40(03):120-130.