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ORIENTATION AND REFLECTION: A RESEARCH ON SUSAN SONTAG'S NEW SENSIBILITY

Xingjun Chen¹

Abstract: This paper uses the research method of historical context to place Sontag's "New Sensibility" in the historical context in which "the demise of art" was prevalent, and puts forward that Sontag's "New Sensibility" is the sensibility in line with the needs of that time by denying "the demise of art" and affirming the dominant position of visual art. Its definition can be summarized as an ability of aesthetic perception of arts. It appeals to pure sensibility to appreciate visual arts, and devotes to changing modern people's consciousness and sensibility. At the same time, by comparing "New Sensibility" with "Camp Sensibility", proposed by Sontag, and "new sensibility", proposed by Marcuse, this paper points out that the main connotation of "New Sensibility" is to emphasize form, neglect content and suspend morality. However, "New Sensibility", which overemphasizes perceptual experience and ignores moral dimension, has its inherent defects, which cannot be ignored. Therefore, this paper finally takes Sontag's critical practice of Riefenstahl as an example to specifically explain the defects of "New Sensibility" and reflect on it. More than half a century after Sontag's "New Criticism", the orientation and reflection of it is conducive to re-facing the significance and value of it under the background of further development of science and technology and more diversified artistic styles at contemporary era.

Keywords: Susan Sontag. New sensibility. The demise of art. Camp; the visual arts.

INTRODUCTION

"New Sensibility" is an aesthetic concept first proposed by Susan Sontag (1933-2004) in 1965. As soon as this concept was put forward, it has attracted extensive attention and continuous discussions from western scholars. As early as in 1966, Robert Boyers recognized the significance of Sontag's "New

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Sensibility”, and tried to defend it. He said “Perhaps Miss Sontag’s primary importance is as the most articulate spokesman for a sensibility which, for lack of anything, may label post-modern, or anti-art.” (BOYERS, 1966, p. 31). According to him, “New Sensibility” emphasizes “sensual response” (Robert’s words), instead of art’s “meaning” or “content”, just as Sontag herself did: “What Miss Sontag wants to experience in the work of art is ‘[...] the pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy’.” (BOYERS, 1966, p. 30). At the same year, Paul Velde also praised Sontag, declaring her as a “liaison critic” who moves between “[...] the new art world and the intellectual community at large” on behalf of a “new sensibility.” (VELDE, 1966, p. 390-392). Elizabeth McCaffrey, in her Ph. D. dissertation, also agreed with Sontag’s “New Sensibility” (1981). For them, “New Sensibility” is such a kind of capacity, which can enable human being’s appreciation of arts, especially those popular arts. While, some critics hold different ideas. David Holbrook criticized Sontag, saying “[...] what Susan Sontag offers is a false way of feeling strength of identity through cultural symbolism of hate.” (HOLBROOK, 1968, p. 153-163). Daniel Bell (1971, p. 63-73) denied that the “New Sensibility” (alone, in fact) has “fused” politics and art. Then, almost ten years later, in the 1980s, some critics found some changes in Sontag’s idea. Hilton Kramer argued that even though Sontag still defended “New Sensibility” after the collapse of high modernism, she no longer adhered to pure aestheticism (KRAMER, 1982, p. 88-92). Actually, those critics had realized such changes in Sontag’s “New Sensibility” aesthetic thought. They merely did no effort to find the reasons. Then, entering into the 21st century, compared to her other aesthetic thoughts or critical opinions, “New Sensibility” was relatively ignored, and there appeared many studies about “camp”, “disease as metaphor”, etc. The significance of “New Sensibility” needs to be re-recognized. Different from the situation at West, in China, especially during these two decades, many researches were done on “New Sensibility”. Many of those researchers are Ph. D. candidates or postgraduates. They studied Sontag’s “New Sensibility” in their thesis or doctoral dissertations, including Zhao Yuteng’s *A Study on Susan Sontag’s New Sensibility Aesthetic* (2020), Jiang Sijie’s *On New Sensibility of Susan Sontag: The Function and Responsibility of Art Reconsidered* (2019), Tang Shujing’s *A Road to Aesthetic Liberation: A Study on Susan Sontag’s Aesthetics of New Sensibility* (2012), Zhang Zhengping’s *On Susan Sontag’s “A New Sensibility”* (2010) and Liu Danling’s doctoral paper *A Study on Susan Sontag’s Aesthetic of New Sensibility* (2007), etc. Among them, Liu’s opinion is very typical. She “[...] regarded Sontag’s thoughts as a whole system and

took the aesthetics of New Sensibility as the ‘General Question’.” (LIU, 2007, p. 8). By comparing Sontag’s “against interpretation”, “camp aesthetics”, “aesthetics of silence” with “New Sensibility”, Liu believed that all of them are the implications or connotations of the latter one, and that’s the reason why she can take it as the “General Question” for study. Generally speaking, there was a common view which took “New Sensibility” as running through Sontag entire critical career without big modifications, and critics in China tended to use it to analyze her other sensibility concepts or ideas. So, this paper holds that this previous research route has some defects, which leads to the deviation of the accurate understanding of Sontag’s “New Sensibility”. It is not a constant concept, nor can it contain Sontag’s other aesthetic thoughts together. It is only one of her major aesthetic views at the early years, and has overlapped with “Camp” while having some differences.

Based on the explanation of its times context, this paper firstly focuses on the argument that Sontag’s “New Sensibility” is grounded on her accurate grasp on the era of visual culture. At the same time, through the comparison between “New Sensibility” and “Camp”, between “New Sensibility” and “Old Sensibility”, especially Herbert Marcuse’s “new sensibility”, this paper will discuss the main connotations and basic characteristics of Sontag’s “New Sensibility” in detail. Finally, combined with the films and photographic works made by Leni Riefenstahl (1902-2003), which Sontag criticized a lot, this paper tries to reflect on the thoughts of Sontag’s “New Sensibility”, so as to accurately understand the theoretical defects of it.

1 NEW SENSIBILITY: THE TYPICAL SENSIBILITY IN THE ERA OF VISUAL CULTURE

Sontag’s concept of “new sensibility” is closely related to the times context in which visual art has become the model of art. It is Sontag’s accurate grasp of the times that makes “New Sensibility” become an influential concept and widely accepted by critics. Sontag’s accurate grasp of the times context is mainly realized on the premise of denying the so-believed “the demise of art”. Specifically, Sontag figured out the new changes in the contemporary arts, then strongly denied the idea “the demise of art”. On this basis, she proposed that “[...] the model arts of our time are those with much less content, and in a much cooler mode of moral judgment like music, films, dance, architecture, painting, and sculpture.” (SONTAG, 1965b, p. 298-289).

Since the first half of the 20th century, views about the demise of art have been proposed and spread out. It is not only because of the development of art itself, such as the decline of traditional elite art and the rise of popular art, but also due to the threat imposed by the rapid development of other cultures, such as scientific culture. There is no doubt that the prosperity of scientific culture is inevitable because of the rapid development of industrialized society. With its further development, it will inevitably become the main cultural stream to dominate modern people's life and shape their personalities. However, for many intellectuals, this prosperous scientific culture poses a serious threat to the development of literary-artistic culture. On one aspect, it makes the function of literature-art "degraded" and "weakened". On the other aspect, it makes the art itself "transformed" and "deformed" by science and technology. For this reason, the idea is put forward that literary-artistic culture will die and be replaced by scientific culture finally.

Sontag disagrees with this viewpoint. First of all, she believes the premise that art is static and science is changing is not valid. As a matter of fact, just like science, art is also in the process of constant progress and change. With science becoming more and more professional, art also becomes more and more professional. In contemporary world, in the fields of some visual arts, there appeared some new forms or styles of them which needed people to have special training or special sensibilities to understand. Influenced by new technologies and new ways of expression, contemporary art is more difficult to be understood than traditional one. Taking painting as an example, the traditional painting art takes "imitation" and "representation" as its highest pursuit and goal. This imitative art is easy for people to understand because most of the works come from our life or the real world. While since the late 19th century, the Impressionism created a completely new painting style. Coupled with a more severe challenge of photography for the function of imitation, painting has gradually become an abstract art. Many new arts emerged such as Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Dada and Surrealism, Pop art and other new painting styles. Because the update and increasing maturity and perfection of the painting techniques, contemporary painting is becoming more and more difficult to understand.

Based on the above situation, Sontag even proposed the idea of "specialist sensibility". She argued that "[...] in our time, art is becoming increasingly the terrain of specialists. The most interesting and creative art of our time is not open to the generally educated; it demands special effort;

it speaks a specialized language.” (SONTAG, 1965b, p. 295). She even put forward several artists’ works, such as Milton Babbitt’s music, Mark Rothko’s painting, Merce Cunningham’s dance, those visual arts as examples to prove the requirements of a special sensibility to appreciate them. This view is Clement Greenberg’s reminiscent, who lived from 1909 to 1994. In his essay “The Avant Garde and Kitsch” (1939), he had already put forward similar ideas, such as “artists’ artists” and “cultivated spectator”. In the context of the emergence of avant-garde art at the first half of 20th century, which aimed at breaking established perceptions about arts, Greenberg in his paper pointed out that “[...] the avant-garde’s specialization of itself, the fact that its best artists are artists’ artists and its best poets poets’ poets, has estranged a great many of those who were formerly capable of enjoying and appreciating ambitious art and literature, but who are not willing or unable to acquire an initiation in to their craft secrets.” (GREENBERG, 1939, p. 56) Same as Sontag, Greenberg has expressed his concern about the audience’s sensibility in terms of artists, the creation of arts, as well as their increasing professionalism. He proposed that both the artist himself and the audience need to have an unique specialist’s sensibility to appreciate the works of art. Otherwise, they can’t create the best art, not even appreciate them.

The second supporting idea for denying the demise of art is that the relationship between art and science is not completely exclusive but complementary. Each rapid advance of art in history is inseparable from the invention and innovation of scientific and technological means. It can be said that art has been “encouraged” by science and technology to go further. Henry Focillon (1881-1943), a French art historian in the 20th century, firmly put forward the slogan of “technology first” (CHEN, 2011, p. 9) in the art field as early as the early 20th century.

For the above two reasons, Sontag argued that art was not dead and that the conflict between art and science was just an illusion. However, it is undeniable that the function of art has transformed compared with that in the past. It is no longer to console the human soul by playing the role of religion in the early period, nor is it to enlighten and guide human life by describing and commenting on the reality in the later secularized period. According to Sontag, “Art today is a new kind of instrument, an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility.” (SONTAG, 1965b, p. 296). Because of the profound changes in human experiences in modern society, the traditional pastoral and stable way of life has been substituted by

fast, fluid, and perishable modern lifestyle. And art must be rooted in these experiences to update and cultivate the humans' sensibility and the ability nowadays. Art can help them to experience, to listen, to see, and to feel.

Meanwhile, Sontag points out that the representative art of this era expresses new experiences with new technological media in new forms. It is conducive to the restoration of human sensations and feelings. Therefore, the traditional dominant position of content-oriented literature is inevitably replaced by new artistic styles, especially those visual arts represented by film, photography, dance, painting etc. The conclusion is mainly based on the following premises: First of all, because contemporary art aims to "modify and educate sensibility and consciousness", artists have become aestheticians, and art constantly needs to seek materials from non-artistic fields. Compared with literature, which one has only language or letters as its material, visual arts represented by painting, architecture, film, and dance, can use much more diverse and richer materials.

Secondly, as stated earlier, along with the further development of scientific culture, there are more and more advanced and various scientific and technological achievements. Visual arts, especially film and photography, need to make the utmost of those results. Thus, compared with literature, visual arts can benefit and make use of those outcomes more largely and reasonably. Even if there may be a strong mark of technology, it still will not embarrass the audience.

Finally, as the development of visual art itself, its achievements in the second half of the 20th century enable it to surpass literature and become the most important culture in modern times.

So far, it is easy to understand why Sontag takes visual art as the model of contemporary art and chooses visual arts, especially films, photography, painting, and dance, as her targets to criticize on. Finally, it can be said that Sontag's raise of "New Sensibility" is just based on her accurate understanding of the contemporary art models. It meets the demand of the historical background.

2 DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW SENSIBILITY

Since one of the important functions of art in modern society is to modify consciousness and organize new modes of sensibility, modern humans

need this new sensibility to appreciate contemporary art. Then, what exactly is “New Sensibility”? What is its definition? What are the similarities and differences with Marcuse’s “New Sensibility” and Sontag’s “Camp”?

Sontag does not provide a clear definition of “New Sensibility”. Readers can only identify its main connotations by comparing it with “Old Sensibility”. This contrast is mainly reflected in the following three aspects, namely, the object, the concept of art, and the experiencing mode.

Firstly, the objects. According to Sontag, all ages have the kind of sensibility corresponding to or needed by the objects. “This new sensibility is rooted, as it must be, in our experiences which are new in the history of humanity.” (SONTAG, 1965b, p. 296). The traditional way of life, despite the industrial revolution that began in the mid-18th century, was generally more stable than it is today, and there was no widespread social and physical mobility. Now, along with the science and technology revolution further, there appears a new experience in human history with characteristics of strong liquidity, fragmentation, and mechanics. The fast circulation of population and objects in modern society is unbelievable compared with that in the previous centuries. Along with this fluidity comes a fragmented experience of time and space. And this new experience inevitably requires and cultivates a new sensibility.

Secondly, the concept of art or culture has also changed significantly. Traditional cultural concepts insist on the pursuit of truth and eternity. For example, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), in *The Origin of The Work of Art* (1935), believes that Art is the self-insertion and manifestation of the truth of existence (HEIDEGGER, 1996, p. 255). Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) argues that art is a criticism of life. It is understood as proposing thoughts on moral, social and political aspects (commented by Sontag, 1965b, p. 300). These artistic or cultural concepts always consider literature as a model. According to the concepts, literature with language as the carrier can reveal the truth and human thinking more effectively. As stated earlier, with the advent of this visual cultural age, the model status of literature has been represented by painting, film, photography and other visual arts. To express truth value is no longer the primary purpose of art, and art is no longer the criticism but the expansion of life. It is committed to modifying and cultivating human sensibility. Sontag bluntly states that the first characteristic of “New Sensibility” is that its model product is not the literary works.

Third, the fundamental difference between “New Sensibility” and “Old Sensibility” lies in their different ways of aesthetic experiencing modes. On the basis of the first two, rooted in the relatively stable and complete life experience of human beings, it expresses truth and eternal value, especially in literature as a model of art. The effective way of aesthetic experience is to appeal to rational cognition, and dig their potential significance. In Sontag’s words, it is to replace A (art) with B (interpretation), “[...] to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings’. It is to turn the world into this world.” (SONTAG, 1964a, p. 7), which is the main content of the “Old Sensibility”. But for new experiences rooted in flow and fragmentation reality, art aims at expanding life, while “New Sensibility” appeals to sensory experience, or pure sensibility, requiring people to cutting back content so that we can see the thing at all.

Through the above comparison, we can give Sontag’s “New Sensibility” a more acceptable definition, that is, “New Sensibility” is a kind of aesthetic perception ability rooted in the experience of today’s new era, aiming at visual art, appealing to pure sensibility and cultivating people’s sensory experience.

In other words, the essential characteristic of “New Sensibility” is to appeal to pure sensations or sensibility. Here, Sontag did not leave any room for reason or rationality. On the contrary, she objected to the traditional way of experience, that was to excavate content and meaning of art. Instead, Sontag required people to make full use of all kinds of sensory perceptions, to see, to listen, to touch in person, for the overall form of art or “Style”. Therefore, it is not difficult to find that when it comes to new sensibility, the difference in rational treatment between Sontag and Marcuse is the main difference. Marcuse proposed that the “New Sensibility” wanted to correct what he called the “new totalitarian society”, in order to relieve modern people’s suffering from alienation and being controlled by scientific and technological products in the industrial society, so as to reshape the new modern people with a complete personality. He said that the new sensibility has become a political factor: a new principle of reality is born, and under which a new sensibility combines the same anti-sublimated scientific understanding with a “scale of beauty” (MARCUSE, 1989, p. 106-107). In Marcuse, reason was not completely abandoned, but combined with sensibility under the framework of “imagination”² (MARCUSE, 1979, p. 110-112), so as to guide the reconstruction of reality.

² Marcuse put forward the concept of “imagination” in *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Inspired by Kant, Marcuse believed that the “productive” and creative senses provided the empirical materials for the imagination, while the reason provided the logical guidance for the imagination. In the conception of the imagination, the sensibility and reason wanted to be combined, thus creating the free kingdom of

If appealing to pure sensibility is the essence of “New Sensibility”, Sontag’s “Camp Sensibility” also has such connotation, then, what are the differences between “New Sensibility” and “Camp Sensibility”? Can they be understood as the same?

“Camp Sensibility” is a concept that Sontag often uses in his aesthetic practice. In describing camp³, she only used two words “wholly aesthetic” (SONTAG, 1964b, p. 287). In other words, “Camp Sensibility” is actually a kind of pure aesthetic sensibility. Through analyzing Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” and other critical essays, and by comparing “Camp Sensibility” and “New Sensibility”, it is not difficult to find that they overlap each other in many aspects. For example, content is impaired in both sensibilities. Sontag said: “Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way... is in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization [...]” (SONTAG, 1964b, p. 277) and “Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content.” (SONTAG, 1964b, p. 278). Therefore, artifice or stylization are emphasized, and content is slighted. Besides, both sensibilities emphasize the cultivation of human sensibilities so as to restore their senses. They are all elaborated by Sontag in order to affirm the great changes that have taken place in contemporary art, and so on. It is not difficult to understand why many critics discuss camp directly under the title of “New Sensibility”. However, in addition to the similarities between the two, there are some other major aesthetic features of “Camp Sensibility” that are different from “New Sensibility” and are easily overlooked.

First of all, in terms of the way of experience, if “New Sensibility” mainly relies on sensory intuition, to experience the form or overall style of

imagination. Thus, Marcuse believed in the power of imagination to reconstruct reality. See Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, preceding quote, p. 110-112.

³ Apparently, in the Western English-speaking world, the word “camp” was popularized by Sontag. However, there are several different versions of its origin. Bruce Rogers argues that camp was a 16th century variant of the French word “campagne”, meaning the village where passing pantomime troupes went to perform. Thomas A. King believes camp is from Middle English “cammock” or “Cambok”, meaning a crooked branch. This understanding may have something to do with the Welsh word “cambren”, which is a portmanteau of “CAM”, meaning “curved” and “pre” meaning “branch”. It has also been linked to the “Akimbo”, a posture of poise of the aristocrats in 18th century, as well as gay subcultures such as mollies. The more modern understanding is that the word is derived from the abbreviation “KAMP” for “Known as male prostitute.” Other popular explanations suggest that the word comes from the French slang “se camper”, meaning “to present oneself in an exaggerated manner” or “to boldly present oneself,” which is the most accepted interpretation of camp today. All these information can be referred to the book *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, edited by Moe Meyer.

the work, then “Camp Sensibility” plays its role through the “camp taste”. At the end of 1964, *Time* magazine re-published “Notes on ‘Camp’” in the form of sketches. In *Time*, Sontag’s original text was shortened into five paragraphs with two columns, and the most striking word is “taste”⁴. The word is in bold, followed by “camp” in quotation marks. Through Sontag’s description of camp, taste is always the core part of camp, and the two are often used together: camp is a kind of taste; this kind of taste is defined as “camp”. Traditionally, this special aesthetic taste usually refers to the elite taste embodied by the declined aristocrat class at the 19th century. Disgusted by the mediocrity and vulgarity of the bourgeoisie, they expected to realize their “delicate spiritual confrontation” against the bourgeois mediocrity through the improvement of aesthetic ability. Inspired by it and the situation of contemporary art in Sontag’s time, she said “Camp is the modern dandyism.” (SONTAG, 1964b, p. 288). In a word, “Camp Sensibility” relies on aesthetic taste or ability. It can be said that “taste” both contains sensibility and transcends sensibility. Therefore, Camp taste is mainly a kind of aristocratic taste. It is the style of modern dandyism.

Secondly, “New Sensibility” unifies the traditional binary opposition of form and content by “style”, while the main feature of “Camp Sensibility” is “Stylization”. In the article “On Style”, Sontag defined “stylization” as “[...] what is present in a work of art precisely when an artist does make the by no means inevitable between matter and manner, theme and form.” (SONTAG, 1965a, p. 18). It is not difficult to see that “stylization” in Sontag’s concept reflects the distinction or even opposition between subject matter and mode, or content and form. When subject matter is used in a certain style, “stylization” appears. Obviously, the style mentioned here refers more to the style in the narrow sense of tradition, that is, a style genre that has been established and formed, including its usual creation techniques and skills. At the same time, compared with “style” proposed by Sontag, which is internalized in works of art as the unification of form and content, “stylization” again separates content and form, and refers more to form and its manifestation of content. Therefore, “stylization” embodies decorative, artificial or technical, dramatic and other characteristics. While, according to Sontag, “[...] the essence of camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.” (SONTAG,

⁴ Sontag uses “taste” instead of “gusto”, which means “hobby”. It can be seen that the concept of taste which Sontag wants to express is not divorced from sensory intuitive experience, which can also indicate that Camp sensibility is also based on sensual experience, which overlapped with New Sensibility.

1964b, p. 275). In other words, “Camp Sensibility” is the aesthetic experience of the skills and the degree of stylization in one work, rather than the aesthetic experience of the overall form or style of the work based on the sensory intuition emphasized by “New Sensibility”.

If appealing to pure sensibility is the essence of “New Sensibility”, Sontag’s “New Sensibility” also embodies the following three main characteristics:

The first is a preference for form over content. Starting from the form of works of art, Sontag’s “New Sensibility” requires appreciating works of art as a whole. Here, form is no longer the antithesis of content in the traditional sense, but the overall Form or Style presented by the work. Although Sontag put forward the concept of “Style” in “On Style” to unify content and form in artistic works, throughout the whole essay, “form” and “style” are often used instead. Therefore, in terms of the overall presentation effect of artistic works, style and form have the same connotation: style is form, and form is style. Besides, Sontag’s concept of form is in line with the concept of form put forward by the Russian formalists, Focillon, Marcuse and others: in a narrow sense, they are all convinced that form gives art works that kind of uniqueness. Content is only “special” with the help of form, and becomes the only content of this unique work of art; in a broad sense, they all affirm the independent existence of art as an object. Once completed, the work of art becomes an object, not just the artist’s some view or projection. Finally, they all affirm the aesthetic experience that art brings to people. This aesthetic experience is no longer the acquisition of some kind of knowledge or moral judgment, but the aesthetic pleasure based on the perceptual experience of the form or style of artistic works. Therefore, for “New Sensibility”, form is undoubtedly the first, and content is weakened and even directly included in the category of form, becoming a part of form.

The suspension of morality is the second major feature of the “New Sensibility”. The moral enlightenment of the content of artistic works advocated by people through “old” sensibility or traditional sensibility is suspended in the “New Sensibility”. In “On Style”, Sontag even replaces the traditional meaning of “morality”, which does not refer to the ethical standards for judging people’s behaviors and emotions, but to the moral pleasure brought by art, that is, “[...] the enlivening of our sensibility and consciousness.” (SONTAG, 1965a, p. 25).

This kind of moral pleasure and aesthetic pleasure therefore have similar contents, or in Sontag's case, morality and aesthetics are no longer two opposing concepts, but mutually integrated. Sontag believed that

Art performs this "moral" task because the qualities inherent in aesthetic experience (disinterestedness, contemplativeness, attentiveness, the awakening of the feelings) and aesthetic objects (grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness) are also fundamental constituents of a moral response to life. (SONTAG, 1965a, p. 25).

It is in this sense that Sontag defined whether art is "moral" or not.

Finally, for the emphasis on form and the negation of traditional moral judgements, "New Sensibility" inevitably shows the characteristic of pluralism, which is the third main feature of "New Sensibility". For contemporary art, the pluralism of "New Sensibility" proves that there is no difference between good and bad, moral and immoral, so long as it can give people usual aesthetic pleasure, educate and cultivate people's awareness and sensibility. So even as contemporary art becomes more serious and incomprehensible, "New Sensibility" remains equally receptive.

Sontag's "New Sensibility", therefore, is essentially an experiential method or ability to appeals to pure sensuality, which is characterized by its emphasis on form, its weakening of content, and its pluralism. Its aim is to restore people's sensations or feelings. It is important to note that this is just Sontag's understanding of Modern Sensibility in the 1960s, and her emphasis on form still arouse some controversies among the readers, especially as her opinions about the Nazi movies published in the 1960s, which will be discussed in this article. More details below.

3 AESTHETIC PRACTICE OF AND REFLECTION ON NEW SENSIBILITY

The emphasis of "New Sensibility" on the form can help modern people accept and understand artistic works, which were generated in the latter half of the 20th century and showed bold innovative forms and styles. However, influenced by the emphasis of the new sensibility on the form, Sontag's understanding of some works can be described as being "deviated". She overstressed the form and ignored the immoral connotations of content, putting too much emphasis on aesthetics instead of morality. That point can

mainly be embodied in how she criticized Leni Riefenstahl's movies in the early period. Nevertheless, Sontag reflected on this obvious "deviation" and corrected it in her later critical essays.

Riefenstahl is known as Nazi filmmaker⁵. Her films show extremely perfect aesthetic forms, fully matching Sontag's "New Sensibility". Therefore, in the early period, Sontag hold the "maintenance" attitude towards Riefenstahl. Riefenstahl claimed herself to be an artist dedicated to discovering beauty and only focusing on beautiful things. In fact, for art or beauty alone, they were worthy of being called masterpieces. Up to this day, Riefenstahl's techniques and epic recording in both documentaries have been admired by others, and even Steven Spielberg (1946-), one of today's most celebrated directors, openly admired her.

Sontag's defense for Riefenstahl was mainly based on the two aesthetic points of her "New Sensibility". One is the emphasis on the form, and the other is on the objectiveness of artistic works. Sontag said: "Riefenstahl is a genius filmmaker, through whose 'content', we come to – even assume and defeat her intentions – play a purely formal role." (SONTAG, 1966, p. 35). Clearly, Sontag at that time weakened the Nazi "contents" of these two documentaries and blended them into forms of pure beauty. At that time, Sontag defended Riefenstahl by noting that she was just a moviegoing person, yet did not care about the geniality or talent shown in Riefenstahl's films, and she did gain enough aesthetic pleasure from those with the fullest expression of artfulness. The objectiveness of artistic works proposed by "New Sensibility" also provided an excuse for Riefenstahl to shed or downplay her connections with the Nazi content of the film. Sontag always believed that truly great artists could achieve a "high degree of neutrality." (SONTAG, 1966, p. 40). That could immunize the artist against any criticism he or she may face. Therefore, in terms of aesthetic experience itself, Sontag did not

⁵ As for the identity as a Nazi filmmaker, Riefenstahl has been on the defensive that she was only employed by Hitler to work for him for just seven months, and she usually took her female director's status as a "pretext". She pointed out that male intellectuals used to work for Nazi or pro-Nazi, such as Heidegger, Salvador Dalí (1904-1989, Spanish painter), Herbert von Karajan (1908-1989, Austrian conductor), Roberto Rossellini (1906-1977, Italian director) and others, and they were not affected by this experience at all and even gained their fame in respective fields. In contrast, she was blamed simply because she was a woman, and "women are not allowed to make mistakes." However, that is not the case, as critics have proved that her aesthetic propositions or pursuit of film qualities highly matched Hitler's political philosophy through detailed argumentations. Therefore, she could not claim that she was innocent. And the fact that she refused to admit the pains her films really brought to the people worldwide made people cannot forgive her Nazi filmmaker identity.

deny the enjoyment or satisfaction brought by artistic works, even the content of which may be immoral. She thought that “[...] as long as we regarded these works as artistic works could we obtain the sense of gratification from them.” (SONTAG, 2006, p. 86)

After nearly 10 years, Riefenstahl’s publication of the album *The Last of the Nuba* (German original title: *Die Nuba Nuba*, 1973) gave Sontag a novel chance to review her ideology of “New Sensibility” during that time to rethink the relationship between form and content, and to reflect on her “New Sensibility”.

The Last of the Nuba is an extraordinary collection of 126 colored photographs of the Nuba and records the wrestling and funeral rites of over 8,000 primitive Africans living in the mountains of southern Sudan. Notably, Riefenstahl’s shots focus on well-built, muscular adult Nuba men, with few images of the elderly, the sick or women, which Riefenstahl explains is the result of her desire for beauty. The collection caused an immediate sensation. It has been credited with revealing the mysteries of primitive African tribes and has even been equated with the anthropologists’ sacred mission to excavate and preserve vanishing races. However, Sontag just found that it was only the continuation of Riefenstahl’s fascist aesthetic thought, and it was the third of her “[...] fascist propaganda film trilogy.” (SONTAG, 2015, p. 28). In “Fascinating Fascism” (1974), Sontag exposed and interpreted Riefenstahl’s fascist aesthetics to debunk her “lies”.

Then, why did Sontag change her opinions? What are those changes? Is “New Sensibility” out of date? Sontag’s interview in 1975 provided some answers to these questions. “My understanding of the moral service performed by artwork is less abstract than it was in 1965.” (SONTAG, 2015a, p. 28). At that point, she began to think about “[...] the content implicit in the concept of some forms.” (SONTAG, 2015, p. 27). Tracing her personal life and critic career, we can find this change was closely related to the international environment, social environment and personal life experience at that time. Sontag published “Against Interpretation” and “One Culture and The New Sensibility” in 1964 and 1965 respectively, but in 1968, an event called “May Storm” spread from France to Europe and United States. Influenced by that, Western intellectuals’ enthusiasm of taking part in the social and political events decreased, instead, they used theoretical discourses to intervene politics. After 1968, Sontag saw the severe international situation and was also influenced by cultural studies and ideological criticism. She could not

ignore the content of literary and artistic works. Especially after 1965, she went to Vietnam and was touched by it. In the 1970s, Sontag suffered from cancer, and during her treatment, she endured the pain of her disease as well as the moral condemnation of the metaphor of the disease, which caused her to have a big change of thought. She began to think that disease was not just a medical problem to be treated, but a metaphor, evolving into a moral judgment, a political judgment, and a cultural judgment, which clearly moved beyond her “against interpretation” domain and began to be interpreted in terms of cultural studies. It was this deep thinking that made her give up her previous position of emphasizing the aesthetics of “New Sensibility”. So, when Riefenstahl published her album *The Last of The Nuba* in 1973, Sontag changed her previous attitude toward this controversial artist, no longer highly-praised her anymore, and reinterpreted Riefenstahl’s Nazi films by exposing the fascist aesthetic shown in *The Last of the Nuba*.

Sontag acknowledged that *Triumph des Willens* (1934) was a film intended to promote fascist aesthetics and revealed the hypocrisy of Riefenstahl’s insistence that her aesthetic creation was independent of political intent. But her previous enjoyment of the exquisite images and extreme forms of Riefenstahl films made her realize that she was “[...] paving the way for a very unintentional promotion of all kinds of disruptive emotions.” (SONTAG, 2015, p. 97). Apart from this, one can easily identify the main features of the Fascist aesthetic, such as the yearning for supreme power, the praise of blind obedience, and the glorification of death. These characteristics are reflected in Riefenstahl’s early films. Through the investigation of Riefenstahl’s later photographic works and other achievements, Sontag (2015, p. 109) even believed that Riefenstahl was the one who most insisted on the fascist aesthetics thoroughly compared with other fascist artists.⁶

CONCLUSION

This paper firstly analyzed the background situation of “New Sensibility”. Sontag’s “New Sensibility” was put forward in 1960s. At that

⁶ Through a detailed reading of Sontag’s discussion on fascist aesthetics, this paper argues that if only from the perspective of fascist aesthetics, Sontag does not completely deny it. She even thinks that as a special aesthetic style, it is sometimes reflected in modern and contemporary youth pop culture with relatively positive significance. It is just that Sontag elaborated on Riefenstahl’s fascist aesthetic works in the later period (at this time, she no longer only paid attention to the aesthetic level, but also began to examine from the moral level), and adopted a critical perspective to condemn her fascist opinions. For details, see Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, preceding quote, p. 90-91.

time, there were some typical changes and visual art became the dominant one instead of traditional elite art. Those visual art required a special aesthetic ability to appreciate, so, in such context, Sontag raised a new aesthetic idea: “New Sensibility”. Then, by comparing “New Sensibility” with camp, “Old Sensibility” and Marcuse’s “New Sensibility”, this paper defined “New Sensibility” as an aesthetic sensibility that appeals to pure sensory experience and aims to restore people’s sensory experience. Finally, based on Sontag’s specific critical practice of Riefenstahl’s artistic works, this paper reflected on Sontag’s aesthetic thought of “New Sensibility” and revealed its defects, which is its overemphasis on the form instead of content, and on aesthetic experience instead of moral dimension. Sontag corrected the limitation of “New Sensibility” in her later period. Therefore, it is not right to regard “New Sensibility” as the “general problem” unifying Sontag’s aesthetic thoughts, or merely to equate it with or define it as the artistic concept expressed by avant-garde art.

CHEN, X. Orientación y reflexión: una investigación sobre la nueva sensibilidad de Susan Sontag. *Trans/formação*, Marília, v. 46, n. 1, p. 251-268, Jan./Mar., 2023.

Resumen: Este artículo utiliza el método de investigación del contexto histórico para situar la Nueva Sensibilidad de Sontag en el contexto histórico en el que prevalecía “la desaparición del arte”, y plantea que la Nueva Sensibilidad de Sontag es la sensibilidad acorde con las necesidades de esa época al negar “la desaparición del arte” y afirmar la posición dominante del arte visual. Su definición puede resumirse como una capacidad de percepción estética de las artes. Apela a la sensibilidad pura para apreciar las artes visuales, y se dedica a cambiar la conciencia y la sensibilidad de la gente moderna. Al mismo tiempo, al comparar la Nueva Sensibilidad con la sensibilidad de Campamento propuesta por Sontag y la “nueva sensibilidad” propuesta por Marcuse, este artículo señala que la principal connotación de la Nueva Sensibilidad es hacer hincapié en la forma, descuidar el contenido y suspender la moralidad. Sin embargo, la Nueva Sensibilidad, que hace demasiado hincapié en la experiencia perceptiva e ignora la dimensión moral, tiene sus defectos inherentes, que no pueden ignorarse. Por ello, este artículo toma finalmente como ejemplo la práctica crítica de Sontag sobre Riefenstahl para explicar específicamente los defectos de la Nueva Sensibilidad y reflexionar sobre ella. Más de medio siglo después de la Nueva Crítica de Sontag, la orientación y la reflexión de la misma son propicias para replantear el significado y el valor de la misma bajo el trasfondo de un mayor desarrollo de la ciencia y la tecnología y de estilos artísticos más diversificados en la era contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Susan Sontag. Nueva sensibilidad. La desaparición del arte. Campamento. Las artes visuales.

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