Interdisciplinary Approach of Aesthetics: On New Humanities Discipline and Modern Aesthetics Study*

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In the era of cultural economy or aesthetic capitalism, the relationship between humanities and science has undergone great changes that include four aspects: (1) the humanities are compatible with and dependent on science rather than antagonism and conflict; (2) the content and form of humanities have so greatly changed that the new humanities discipline has appeared; (3) in contemporary scientific and cultural development pattern, new humanities have gradually become the principal discipline; (4) aesthetics and art gradually highlight its importance. Based on the thoughts of Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, this paper intends to discuss the essence and significances of the modernity problem in contemporary society. And then, it analyzes "how to think about the future" in the era of aesthetic capitalism or cultural economy. In the last part of the paper, several characteristics of the new humanities are studied from the perspective of contemporary aesthetics.

Keywords: new humanities, aesthetic anthropology, aesthetic illusion as an emotional structure

In 2009, invited by the President Zhang Jie of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, I said goodbye to the magnificent Nanjing University, and came to Shanghai Jiao Tong University, to shoulder the important task to construct and develop the School of Humanities. This is a very special university, directly linked to China's social modernization process. I personally think that in a sense, the development of the Shanghai Jiao Tong University can be regarded as a microcosm of China's social modernization. In the early history of the development process of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, two figures had an important influence of Chinese social ideology and culture: one is the famous aesthetician and anthropologist, president Tsai Yuen-pei, and another is a famous aesthetician, art educator and Buddhist Li Shutong, also known as Master Hongyi. In the early stage of the modernization of the Chinese society and Chinese university system, Tsai Yuen-pei had proposed cultural ideas of "aesthetic education on behalf of religion"; his student Li Shutong had pioneered modern drama and modern art education in China. Until now, their thoughts play an important role in Chinese aesthetics and cultural construction.

In the process of China's social modernization, as one of the main forms of modernity, the relationship between aesthetics and science represents the major characterization of conflict and dialogue between science

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and humanities. The repeated arguments of this confusion contain goal, essence and means about modernization to solve the contradiction, revolution, and complicated theoretical and practical problems between native and Western, technological and aesthetic experience, the human nature of good and evil. Generally speaking, from 1896 when Shanghai Jiao Tong University was established, to present stage of complex and cultural diversity, as the basic idea of social modernization within university's core values from the early stage of China's modernization, science had world-shocking achievement, but the burden and anomie of perception and value dimension also brought sufferings for contemporary China and Chinese society. Therefore, almost one hundred years later, Tsai Yuen-pei's proposition "aesthetic education instead of religion" was again revival, while the center position of aesthetics returns to the humanities.

In 2010, School of Humanities in Shanghai Jiao Tong University established Aesthetic Research Institute; in 2014, Shanghai Jiao Tong University cooperated with Chinese National Academy of Arts to establish Aesthetics and Art Critical Theory Research Center, taking researches on contemporary aesthetics for the basic concepts and methodology of new humanities. In April 2016, the statue of Tsai Yuen-pei was unveiled at the Minhang campus of Shanghai Jiao Tong University. The forgotten history was revisited; buried memories are activated by the grim reality. Today, from the perspective of aesthetics to review and reflect the relationship between contemporary social science and humanities is essential not only for an old university but also for the Chinese society whether which get out of value loss dilemma.

A New Pondering Upon Modernity

Since the subprime crisis arose in the United States in 2008, once again, the validity of capitalist production mode, or Modernity as scholarship calls, has aroused both the alert of public opinions worldwide and suspicions from the academic circle as well. So far, the efforts of Obama Administration to resolve the crisis have little success. This situation, in a way, proves the magnitude of the crisis. Social system, rather than financial system, is the major problem of this crisis to reveal depth questioning of human nature and call for reflection of the entire events from economic system to social crisis. Against this background, the relation among humanistic foundation, basic humanistic requirements and modernity has become the focal point. And also the alienation of human nature and the way how can we deal with the alienation become to be the central in humanities.

In China, moral and value crisis are also intensive and serious. Let's take my story as an example. On one weekend night last year, I was on the bus No.4 back home. I noticed that there were six or seven young students (I guessed they were graduates) talking about a young office lady died from overwork. When the girls were asked what their ideal careers were, they almost automatically cried out "looking for a sugar daddy", regardless the public place. This reflects the seriousness of value crisis in China. Today, people tend to identify success to money, and attribute the sorrow and suffering to effortlessness. As a result, contemporary values based upon modernity are overturned and become totally one-sided.

Modernity crisis is a global phenomenon. It seems to be not unseasonable to review Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (also referred to as *The Paris Manuscripts*) in the present context. Marx said in his *Paris Manuscript*:

Money as the external, universal medium and faculty (not springing from man as man or from human society as society) for turning an image into reality and reality into a mere image, transforms the real essential powers of man and

nature into what are merely abstract notions and therefore imperfections and tormenting chimeras, just as it transforms real imperfections and chimeras—essential powers which are really impotent, which exist only in the imagination of the individual—into real powers and faculties. In the light of this characteristic alone, money is thus the general distorting of individualities which turns them into their opposite and confers contradictory attributes upon their attributes.

Money, then, appears as this distorting power both against the individual and against the bonds of society, etc., which claim to be entities in themselves. It transforms fidelity into infidelity, love into hate, hate into love, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, servant into master, master into servant, idiocy into intelligence, and intelligence into idiocy.

Since money, as the existing and active concept of value, confounds and confuses all things, it is the general confounding and confusing of all things—the world upside-down—the confounding and confusing of all natural and human qualities.¹

Aesthetics, of course, cannot resolve the problem of modernity. However as a cultural phenomenon, aesthetic experience and aesthetic activities act as weapons to fight against Utilitarianism and one-sided view of human nature. As perceptual activities, on one side, they have a close connection with the integrity of individual's experience; on the other side, they share the feature of irrationality (exceeding the reality) because of other essence and its effects which are different from human nature and animal instinct. The freedom we have ambiguously experienced in aesthetic experience and aesthetic activity is the ground on which aesthetic activities fight against alienation and the evidence of relationship amid aesthetic activities, experience and human nature. The problem of modern society is the way in which we should understand and explain "sense of freedom" in such activities and experience. It seems to me that the combination of aesthetic anthropological approaches and psychoanalysis might be a possible or even effective way to promote contemporary aesthetics research. In *The Paris Manuscripts*, Marx connected the natures of human beings with "the laws of beauty". In previous studies, we tend to prove that the nature of human beings is "freedom", but never once have we taken the inner link among freedom, aesthetic experience and aesthetic activities into consideration. How does this link work? What contributes to the division or even opposition between internal dimension and external dimension in modern society? Under what circumstances these two dimensions can reach a harmonious unity. These are the major concerns of modern humanities.

On the "laws of beauty", Marx said in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*:

In creating a world of objects by his personal activity, in his work upon inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species-being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as his own essential being, or that treats itself as a species-being. Admittedly animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom there from. An animal produces only itself, whilst man reproduces the whole of nature. An animal's product belongs immediately to its physical body, whilst man freely confronts his product. An animal forms only in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty.

It is just in his work upon the objective world, therefore, that man really proves himself to be a species-being. This production is his active species-life. Through this production, nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of

¹ See Marx, "the Power of Money", *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/power.htm>.

labor is, therefore, the objectification of man's species-life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created. In tearing away from man the object of his production, therefore, estranged labor tears from him his species-life, his real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him.²

Based on the "laws of beauty", thinking on modernity is of unique importance to the criticism of "estrangement" (alienation) and rethinking of the duality of human beings and modern social life. Developed from Feuerbach, Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* took human nature or the essence of human beings back to its specific social relation and human history. In this sense, Marx believes that the alienation of labor transforms human beings' strengths rather than animals into disadvantages. In capitalist production mode, human labor and objection activities presented two opposite states, one is alienated labor; another is configuration based on the "laws of beauty". The division of these two kinds of labor is the division that is made in the sense of philosophical anthropology, representing labor, or the two extremes of human being's practice. Following the laws of beauty to work or to create, it is possible to achieve the highest ideality. From the perspective of contemporary social problems, the alienation of human labor is caused by social structural system; on the other hand, it is also a very important aspect, which is caused by human nature. Evidences from contemporary history of science demonstrate that, scientific research can be used for evil purposes. In this kind of phenomenon, to understand the complexity of human nature becomes a very important issue in the contemporary humanities; research on violence aesthetics is involved in a certain extent and answer the part. I think that Marx's thought about "the laws of beauty" has great significance for us to study and understand human nature. From Marx's point, people carry on their production and social activities according to the laws of beauty. The basis of the laws of beauty is human ethnical principle or ability which formed in the long evolutionary process of human beings. In aesthetic activities, people use "a musical ear, an eye for beauty of forms—in short, senses of capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of man"³ to experience and feel aesthetic forms. In other words, even in the alienated social life, the laws of beauty are still the standard for people refer to express human nature in aesthetic activities. On the aesthetics, I tend to use "integrity of aesthetic experience" to summarize this phenomenon, which is the feeling of beauty and enjoyment of the realization of the beauty of human nature is a kind of very important theoretical provisions. In real life, it was true human that have human nature, rather than animals.

What is more significant is the difference between Marx and a Kantian romanticism aesthetician: Marx never turned the direction of the value of social development towards "the past", and he did not simply endow "the past" with utopian characteristics. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and other writings, Marx always regarded the great progress brought by capitalist production mode as the prime and essential condition for a better and more reasonable society. Without this basis, the special ability which "knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent

² See Marx, "Estranged Labour", *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>.

³ See Marx, "Private Property and Communism", *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm>.

standard to the object”⁴ is impossible to develop sufficiently. In given historical context, human beings necessarily duplicate themselves. The particularity of capitalism is that it maximizes the duality of human beings, and forces human and its production activity turn to their opposite. From the anthropological perspective, the “laws of beauty” prove the irrationality of capitalist production mode or alienated labors. If the “laws of beauty” agree with human nature and the essence of human beings, communist society will be reasonable and realizable.

Therefore, in my own perspective, in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx uses his laws of beauty for philosophical anthropology to criticize the irrationality of capitalism and capitalist production mode, and prove that both of them will be replaced by a more reasonable mode of production. In a reasonable society, the relation between man and nature should be built in accordance to the “laws of beauty”. As a result, beauty is not merely an ideal but the realization of the future in advance.

How Should We Think About the Future?

How should we think about the future? Maybe we can describe the question in this way: against the background of globalization, financial crisis and terrorism, are aesthetics able to suggest our future? If the answer is yes, then how? This year is the 500 anniversary of the British humanist scholar Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* published, but also the 50 anniversary of China’s Cultural Revolution. Thinking of the future was gathered in the proposition of utopia. Is aesthetic a kind of Utopia? What kind of Utopia it is? Or is it the aesthetic experience that should be excluded out of the utopia?

Walter Benjamin once delved into the way in which aesthetics or arts can suggest the future of socialism, that is, constellation. By turning to the past and pre-industrial societies (i.e. the lifestyle and cultures), constellation decries the reality and aims to rebuilding a connection between the past, the present and the future. Charles Baudelaire’s poems and Franz Kafka’s novels are the two common examples of the constellation. In our time, especially in contemporary China, the result of turning to the past will not necessarily produce the same effects of constellation. It will cause a kind of resonance, named nationalism, which will deny the possibility of stretching into the future. In large amounts of films and television programs, we can easily see a simplified Confucian culture and a form of degeneration in vigor and aesthetic ability. In the cultural landscape of cultural economy, simply turning to the past, including the myth and folk, in fact, still cannot penetrate the illusion of ideology and that is not a real aesthetic object. For example, shot *Yellow Earth*, *Farewell My Concubine*, *The Walk While Sing*, the outstanding director Chen Kaige, suffers heavy defeat on *Sacrifice*. Although he had tried to use modern tragedy concepts to reinterpret the historical theme of “Zhao orphan”, it is a great pity because it did not reach the effect of constellation, rather, just a farce.

When we think the future, from the laws of beauty perspective, there are two things imperative: one is the progress of technology; another is a representative of the future in human nature. However, the most important is the combination of these two aspects, its possibility and its expression mechanism.

Among all modern thinkers, Marx holds the most dialectical attitude towards modernity and scientific technology. On the ground of duality of man’s objection institution and historical dialectics, to criticize capitalist

⁴ Marx, “Estranged Labour”, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>

production mode and irrationality of technological centrism, Marx sees the inner link among scientific technology, social development and the future society. Nowadays, with the quick development of new media and scientific technology, a new mode of constellation and a new way of thinking and understanding of the future, will be possible. We are happy to see such new aesthetic effects and new aesthetic experience in movies like *Avatar*, *Inception* and *Source Code*.

Take the movie, *Source Code*, as an example. This science fiction film narrates the multiple possible worlds in which contemporary mankind exists. At the ending part, miracle happens because of love and the power of human nature, that is, the protagonist gets a new life and happy love. In this movie, the protagonist was a pilot of the US Air Force and died at Afghanistan. His brainwaves were used by American government to defend the terrorist attack to the United States. After many times to back and forth through reality space and the future space, he finally defended successfully a terrorist attack and recreates his new life and a happy relationship. The story is nonsense in common sense. But in the movie, it is possible based on the development of natural science and technology. The development of science and technology opens another window for us. In this sense, man and science are no longer opposite to each other; science becomes the material foundation to realize man's nature. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx indicates the duality of science in modernization, and its meaning for human's freedom and liberation:

But natural science has invaded and transformed human life all the more practically through the medium of industry; and has prepared human emancipation, although its immediate effect had to be the furthering of the dehumanization of man. Industry is the actual, historical relationship of nature, and therefore of natural science, to man. If, therefore, industry is conceived as the exoteric revelation of man's essential powers, we also gain an understanding of the human essence of nature or the natural essence of man. In consequence, natural science will lose its abstractly material—or rather, its idealistic—tendency, and will become the basis of human science, as it has already become—albeit in an estranged form—the basis of actual human life, and to assume one basis for life and a different basis for science is as a matter of course a lie.⁵

Rather than experience of the past and aesthetical objects on knowledge, in fact, aesthetic objects based on science are specific ways beyond the irrationality of modernity. The two key facts are: (1) the science's constant discovery of real life, including exploration of new possibilities; (2) the goodness of human nature, merits altruism, and beliefs on great powers.

Recently, I read a Chinese writer Chen Jiming's novel, *Beijing Monk* (2011). It is a thoughtful novel. This novel portrays the contemporary Chinese society: in China, even temples are commercialized. The landscape of secular Buddhism has multiple interactions of religion, theocracy and social powers in this novel. Therefore, in such a society, a monk named *Ke Cheng* has an emotional love story with a girl *Hong Fang*. The story tells us that even in a devastating real circumstance, the real goodness of human nature, and care for others and connection among people still exist in some beautiful ways. Even in the mostly secularized situation, to lead a life according to the laws of beauty is feasible and possible as well. For me, *Ke Cheng*'s thoughts and feelings have proved the goodness of human nature and altruism. Director Jia Zhangke's movie, *Still Life*, also elaborates this subject. These two works represent the bottom life in contemporary China and show glory of human nature from deep

⁵ See Marx, "Private Property and Communism", *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm>.

inside in the difficulties and secular biases. *Ke Cheng* and *Han Sanming* are not heroes of our era; they do not have achievements as winners, but their feelings and human nature show brilliant merits to us.

Philosophers adopt different approaches to prove the existence of aesthetic sensibility and the goodness of human nature in aesthetic activity and aesthetic experience. In fact, it is of more importance to prove them in a scientific way. At least three aspects of contemporary social science can prove the differences between human and animals, the goodness of human nature and altruism. These disciplines are:

1. Psychology, brain and cognitive science;
2. The theory of evolution, especially the new evolutionism to identify mankind and define what human nature is;
3. Anthropology (including literary anthropology and aesthetic anthropology), but I prefer philosophical anthropology and aesthetical anthropology to focus on material foundation of ethics and aesthetics.

The results of these studies have provided an important basis for our understanding and touching of the future.

Take aesthetic anthropology as an example. Aesthetic anthropology introduces modern anthropological approach to aesthetics research. In my point of view, one of its functions is to prove the existence of the “laws of beauty” with positive materials and cases. I hope to promote actively the research and development of aesthetic anthropology and cultural anthropology, in order to explore the contemporary research space of Marx’s aesthetics.

In recent years, on the ground of local aesthetic experience researches, Chinese scholars work on aesthetic institution, forwards Raymond Williams’ concept “structure of feeling” through the methodology of anthropology. Structure of feelings is a kind of emotional ideology. It not only relates to production and social structure, but also relates to certain cultural traditions and cultural habits from continuous changes of subject. It is a psychological phenomenon, but in fact, it is a very complicated cultural phenomenon. Staying in the vision of traditional aesthetics, art criticism and literary criticism lack proper theoretical power due to the simplified and abstract methodology, and they are isolated from social and cultural relations of artworks, so lose a powerful force the literature criticism used to have.

Several Features of New Humanities Discipline

We call it the era of knowledge economy or the era of the Internet. Cultural conflicts, ethnical crisis and ecological crisis become seriously. In such situation, the prime concern of humanities is how to understand realistic relation and Lacan’s “Real”. This is a difficult task in the whole humanistic study and also in contemporary aesthetic study. Only when we get rid of the pattern of Kantian aesthetics, there is possibility for us to understand the realistic relation and therefore talk with the reality. Marx has an enlightening description of this kind of new mode of humanistic research in his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content. There the phrase went beyond the content—here the content goes beyond the phrase.⁶

⁶ See Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>.

Marx's "nineteenth Century revolution" means the socialist revolution. After more than one hundred years of development, socialism has already moved from fantasy to reality. Although socialism has suffered many major changes in the development of reality and has emerged many new phenomena and new factors, at the key point, rationality of socialist goal still exists. Therefore, Marx's description is still meaningful. Marx puts forward a new paradigm of social changes; in my view, it is the basic principle of new humanities paradigm. This kind of aesthetics and humanistic study directed to the future are my understanding of new humanities program. From the perspective of aesthetics, there are mainly four features:

1. The major research methodology should be interdisciplinary. Positive scientific and even natural scientific approaches should be introduced into the aesthetic research, such as, statistics and field work. Combined social science with scientific methods, problem-oriented researches of contemporary aesthetics will provide a science and social science foundation to answer some important cultural challenges in current society, such as aesthetics, ethics, beliefs, and so on.

2. Consciousness of questioning and consciousness of the times are of vital importance. Intensive study should be undertaken to analyze major social matters and cultural issues generated in social transformation and therefore to suggest the way out. In my opinion, how to keep "the real" in an aesthetic and critical way is one of the major concerns of modern humanities. For contemporary aesthetics and art criticism, illusion of aesthetics as the structure of feeling is a theoretical concept which needs to be taken seriously.

3. Great attention should be paid to new scientific development and scientific culture research. As a tradition, research in humanities tends to reject scientific approaches and results. It is because for a long period of time, natural science mainly took matter as its object of study while humanistic programs regard man as its fundamental object. With the development of natural science, especially the development of brain study and anthropology, more positive study on human existence, human feelings and psychology are available. This is a crucial basis for new humanistic programs and contemporary aesthetics.

4. Research and discussion on human nature should be restarted. Due to the difference in ideology and the limitations in research ability and level, human nature was once boiled down to improvable proposition. However, with the progress of life science, anthropological studies and the theory of evolution, theoretical research on human nature is becoming the major concern in humanities study. We should adjust our researching strategies and revise our research methods so as to deal with modernity.

We are living together in a special era. In this era, mankind has the power to destroy the earth; the unfair distribution of wealth has crossed the safety margin; the perspective of human society seems to become dismal. In accordance with the "laws of beauty" to shape humans' lives, or in accordance with the aesthetic experience of the enlightenment to explain and transform the world, is it impossible and unnecessary? If the answer is no, consequently, we have to realize it is the very time for us to carry out the new humanistic research!