Aesthetics & Interdisciplinary Studies: On New Humanities Disciplines & Modern Aesthetics Study

Wang Jie①
(Shanghai Jiao Tong University)

Abstract: Based on the thoughts of Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, this paper intends to rethink two questions of the Duality to human beings and the Modernity. Marx’s idea of ‘the laws of beauty’ demonstrated that the capitalist production model would be replaced by a new one, which is more considered and more humane. Marx also realized the inherent link between the technology progress and society progress and the possibility of the future society. With the development of contemporary natural and social sciences, it is important to combine the study methods of humanities and the related fields, because it may find several possibilities to resolve the crises of aesthetics, ethics and beliefs that occurring in the process of social transformation.

A New Pondering upon Modernity

Since the subprime crisis arose in the United States in 2008, once again, the problem caused by Capitalist Mode of Production, or as we call it Modernity, has aroused the alert of world public opinions and suspicion from academic circles as well. So far, the efforts of Obama Administration to resolve the crisis have met with little success. This situation, in a way, proves the magnitude of the crisis. Against this background, the relation between humanistic foundation and basic humanistic requirements has become the focal point. And also the estrangement of human nature and how can we deal with the estrangement becomes to be the central problems in humanities.

In China, moral crisis and value crisis are of the similar depth. Take my story as an example. On one weekend night last year, I was on a bus back home. I noticed that

① Wang Jie (1957- ), the Distinguished Professor of School of Humanities at Shanghai Jiaotong University, specialized in the study of Marxist aesthetics and Aesthetic anthropology.
there are 6 or 7 young students (I guessed they were gradates) talking about a young office lady died from overwork. When the girls were asked what their ideal careers were, they almost automatically cried out “to be a kept woman” regardless that it was a public place. This reflects the seriousness of value crisis in China. Today, people tend to identify success with money, and attribute the sorrow and misfortune of the weak to little hard work. As a result, the values based upon modernity are overturned and become totally one-sided.

Modernity is a global crisis. It seems to be 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

Athletics, of course, is not the way out in dealing with modernity. However as a cultural phenomenon, Aesthetic experience and aesthetic activity act as weapons to fight against Utilitarianism and one-sided view of human nature. As perceptional 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). The freedom we experienced in aesthetic experience and aesthetic activity are the ground on which we can withstand estrangement. The problem is in which way we should understand and explain “sense of freedom” in such activity and experience. In seems to me that the combination of aesthetic anthropological approaches and Psychoanalysis may be a possible or even effective way to promote contemporary aesthetics research. In the Paris Manuscript, Marx connected the natures of human beings with “the laws of beauty”. In previous studies, we tend to prove the nature of human beings is “freedom”, but never once have we taken the inner link between aesthetic experience and aesthetic activity 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 harmony and unity. These are the major concerns of modern humanities.

On laws of beauty, Marx said in Karl Marx’s 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 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.⁠①

The implement of the laws of beauty into thinking on modernity is of unique importance to both “estrangement” research and rethinking of the duality of human beings and modern social life. Compared with Feuerbach, Marx’s progress shown in Karl Marx’s Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 is that he took social relation and human history into consideration when he came to human nature or the essence of human beings. In this sense, Marx believes that the alienation of labor transforms human beings’ strengths against animals into disadvantages. In capitalist mode of production, people will never carry on their production and social activities according to the laws of beauty. The basis of the laws of beauty is human ethnical principles which formed in the long evolutionary process of human beings. In

aesthetic activities, people use “a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short, senses capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of man” ① 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 when they show their express human natures.

What merits special attention is the difference between Marx and a Kantian romanticism aesthetician: Marx never turns the direction of the value of social development towards “the past”, and he did not simply endow “the past” with utopian characteristics. In Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosphic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx always regards the great progress brought by capitalist mode of production as the prime and essential condition for a better and more reasonable society. “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.”② said Marx in this book. Without such condition, this comment will be impossible as well. In given historical context, human being necessarily duplicates himself. The particularity of capitalism is that it maximizes the duality of human beings, and forces human and its production activity turn to their opposite. If the laws of beauty agree with human natures and the essence of human beings, communist society will be reasonable and realizable.

Therefore, in my own perspective, in an anthropological way, Marx uses his laws of beauty in his Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosphic Manuscripts of 1844* to criticize the irrationality of capitalism and capitalist mode of production, 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 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 our Future?**

Maybe we can describe the question in this way: against the background of globalization, financial crisis and terrorism, is aesthetics able to suggest our future? If the answer is yes, then how is it possible? Walter Benjamin once delved into the way in which aesthetics or arts can suggest the future of socialism — constellation. By turning to the past (i.e. the lifestyle and cultures in the pre-industrial societies), 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; this is actually a form of degeneration in aesthetic ability. Simply turning to the past will not produce a real aesthetic object. For instance, a historical play — Sacrifice, directed by one of the most successful director, Chen Kaige, turned out to be a total failure.

Among all of the modern thinkers, Marx holds the most dialectical attitude towards modernity and scientific technology. On the ground of duality of man and historical dialectics, Marx sees the inner link between scientific technology and social development and 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 the future will be possible. We are happy to see such aesthetic effects in movies like Avatar, Inception and Source Code.

Take the movie, Source Code, as an example. When the leading character, a modern, wakes up in the body of an unknown man, he discovers he's part of a mission to find the bomber of a Chicago commuter train. He becomes part of a government experiment called the Source Code, a program that enables him to cross over into another man's identity in the last 8 minutes of his life. With a second, much larger target threatening to kill millions in downtown Chicago, Colter re-lives the incident over and over again, gathering clues each time, until he can solve the mystery of who
is behind the bombs and prevent the next attack. Finally, the man showed his great nature. 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 open another window for us. In this sense man and science are no longer opposite to each other and science becomes the foundation to realize man’s nature.

In Karl Marx’s *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.①

Aesthetic objects based on science are in fact a modern way of exceeding the irrationality of modernity. The two key facts are: 1) the science’s constant discovery of real life; 2) the goodness of human nature and altruism.

Recently, I read Chen Jiming’s novel, *Beijing Monk*. This novel portrays the contemporary Chinese society: in China, even tempers are commercialized. In such a society, a monk named Ke Chen has an emotional love story with 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 between 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 Chen’s thoughts and feelings have proved the goodness of human nature and altruism. Jia Zhangke’s movie, Still Life, also elaborates this subject.

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 natural scientific way. At least in 3 aspects can we prove the difference between man and animals, the goodness of human nature and altruism:

1. Psychology
2. The theory of evolution
3. Anthropology (including literary anthropology and aesthetic anthropology)

Take aesthetic anthropology as an example. Aesthetic anthropology introduces modern anthropological approaches to aesthetics research. In my point of view, one of its functions is to prove the existence of “laws of beauty” with positive materials and cases. I have spent several years in this filed and hope to push forward the research in the School of Humanities of SJTU.

**Several Features of New Humanities Disciplines (Based on Contemporary Aesthetics Research)**

We call it the era of knowledge economy or the era of the internet. Cultural conflicts, ethonal crisis and ecological crisis are becoming deadly. In such situation, the prime concern of aesthetics studies is how to understand realistic relation and Lacan’s “the Real”. This is the difficult problem in the whole humanistic 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.¹

This kind of aesthetics and humanistic study directed to the future are my understanding of new humanities program. There are mainly four features of them:

1、The major research method should be interdisciplinary. Positive scientific and even natural scientific approaches should be introduced into the research, for instance, statistics and field work.

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. For me, how to keep “the real” in an aesthetical and critical way is one of the major concerns of modern humanities.

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, more positive study on human feelings and physiology 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 sciences, anthropological studies and the theory of evolution, theoretical research on human natures is becoming the major concern in humanities study. We should adjust our researching strategies and innovate our research methods so as to deal with

modernity.

We are living together in a special era. In this era, the man 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. Consequently, we have to realize it is the very time for us to carry out the new humanistic research!