Hume's Aesthetic Thoughts and Modern Art

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Abstract. Modern art emerges when a new paradigm was used in art and understanding the flow of aesthetics can give an interpretation of the basic reason for this phenomenon. Through analyzing the characteristic of modern art we can discover that it conforms to the epistemology of empiricism for prioritizing sensation and etc. Hume as the epitome of empiricism in his philosophy we can summarize two ways to explain the essence of beauty, the utility theory and the empathy theory, the latter one especially works when it comes to explaining modern art. Therefore, if Cézanne is understood as an example in Hume's way, the reason why modern art is beautiful can better eliminate its obscurity.

1 Modern Art and Empiricism

The birth of modern art is marked by the phenomenon of universal conceptual innovation in artworks. Starting from the Western art world, Cézanne's still life paintings, Picasso's "Guernica" and Duchamp's "Fountain" and etc. have been created one after another. For instance, that is, in practice, it shows that the paradigm of art has been greatly challenged achieved, and achieved revolutionary innovations, meanwhile, this has also driven new thoughts in aesthetics surge. To answer the question of what makes modern art beautiful requires us to probe into the essence of beauty.

Philosophy, before Kant, started with the debate between Plato's philosophy of idea and Aristotle's philosophy of practice, and these two major traditions of epistemology developed in a mutually incompatible way, gradually forming two factions. The faction represented by Descartes is rationalism and the other one represented by Locke, Hobbes, and Hume is empiricism. Although aesthetics gained an independent status as a branch of the philosophy of aesthetics only after the approval of Baumgarten, aesthetics has been widely discussed since the birth of Western philosophy, and "the essence of beauty" has always been an old philosophical topic.

Early Greece regarded beauty as a part of natural philosophy, emphasizing its objective reality basis. Socrates brought aesthetics into the social field, making people no longer understand beauty as a simple imitation of nature, but link it with human society and pay attention to its utility for society. This gives Plato and Aristotle ample space to discuss aesthetics.

In *Symposium*[1], Plato sees the duality of love from the nature of chords and rhythms, and his Diotima defends his assertion that Eros is ugly as follows: "Does Eros only love beautiful things and doesn't love ugly things?… Will you call something you want but not pretty as beautiful?"[2], which helped us break away from the dualistic thinking pattern of beauty and ugliness, and also laid the initial foundation for the paradigm shift of art itself. In Plato, the world of ideas is primary, and the highest form of beauty is also the beauty that conforms to the world of ideas, which is conceptual rather than concrete, or even physical. The imitation that Plato demonstrates is the plagiarism of the appearance of perceptual things, but the real world itself is perceptual and secondary. From one side the highest level of the beauty of art is the beauty of ration. But from the other side, art as an imitation of the perceptual world can only become third. This fully reflects the contradiction of Plato's aesthetic thoughts about the essence of beauty. For him, rather than saying that the highest state of artistic beauty is the beauty of the idea, it is better to say that idea and truth itself are the highest beauty. But since the art world is "the copy of a copy" and is seen as the third nature, how can the emergence and development of modern art be faster than people's rational cognition of the world?[3] Plato also believes that art can reflect the irrational characteristics of itself in another aspect, that is, art comes from human inspiration. Plato's aesthetic thought is so mysterious and isolated from society that how does it affect the latter development of aesthetic thoughts and makes it adjust to the modern world, with the political, economic, and social upheavals and changes of human beings?

Aristotle critically inherited Plato's aesthetic thoughts, and he was "the first person to clarify the concept of aesthetics in an independent system" in the history of Western aesthetics. He brought the concept of the organic whole, the concept of psychological origin, and history into the consideration of the nature of beauty, and enriched the philosophy of the nature of beauty. Aristotle believes that the idea itself is embodied in concrete things, the world we live in is the real world itself, not the world of ideas. Then art imitates real objects, and beauty also has the function of expressing and cognition. Although Aristotle's thoughts are more realistic, his thoughts on the essence of beauty are not separated from the influence of his "teleology". For example, *Poetics* cited the examples

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of Sophocles and Euripides, indicating that poetry as art should "describe things as they should be", and its subjective and idealized characteristics also isolate art from social and historical scenes.[4] Homer's "art of lying" explained in *Poetics* that "conforms to the law of certainty or necessity" has become the origin of the "theory of artistic illusion".[5]

Compared with Aristotle, Plato has a greater influence on Western aesthetic thought. Plato's aesthetic thoughts were combined with theology in the Middle Ages, which greatly influenced the philosophers of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Moreover, after Plato's aesthetic thoughts greatly influenced classicists such as Horace, Descartes, as a rationalist, also became a neoclassicist in aesthetics. At the same time, Descartes' aesthetic thoughts were influenced by the dualism of the coexistence of material and spiritual worlds, so he once said: "Since people's judgments are very different from each other, we cannot say that beauty and pleasure can have a definite scale. "[6]

Therefore, when we analyze the reasons for the birth of modern art, we might as well look for interpretation methods from the empirical aesthetic tradition which is more influenced by Aristotle. Hume is the epitome of British empiricism, and his aesthetic thought, like his epistemology, emphasizes the characteristic that knowledge comes from sensation, which to some extent endows the creation and appreciation of artworks with deeper philosophical and even psychological significance. [7]For example, Cézanne, the painter who transformed 19th-century artistic concepts into 20th-century styles, is famous for his still-life paintings that cannot be regarded as the copy of nature itself. He once said: "Sensation forms the basis of my career." [8] Therefore, when we use Hume's thought to analyze the input and output process of art creation and appreciation, we can see the essence of modern art more clearly than the deduction of rationalists.

2 Hume's aesthetic thoughts

2.1 Overall epistemology

Hume's empiricism aesthetic theory is in the same strain as his empiricism philosophy theory. First, as an empiricist, he believes that the science of human or philosophy of mind must be based on experience and observation. Therefore, his research on beauty and ugliness is also based on experience and observation, using a lot of psychoanalysis methods to explore the basic issues of aesthetics that he concerns, such as the essence of beauty. This also brings the precision of philosophy to aesthetics.

As a skeptic, the characteristic of Hume's empiricism is that he believes that experience is nothing but the various relationships between our own impressions and ideas. All human ideas come from impressions. The substances in the world of our perceptual experience are nothing but a collection of simple ideas of different natures. Therefore, human knowledge is acquired from experience. So, how to get it, is it through causality? Hume denied the objectivity of causality. He believes that people can only regard the limited things they have experienced as inevitable, but these are actually probable reasonings that people have summarized through their own imagination, habits (survival instinct, natural tendency, etc.), or beliefs. Through perceptual intuition, we call the so-called causal relationship the similarity, nearness, continuation, constant combination, and other elements between things. This idea is the systematization of the theory of idea association proposed by Hobbes and explained by Locke.[9] Therefore, he believes that human knowledge is obtained through the natural psychological process of idea association. According to Hume's explanation, idea association is a mental activity conducted from one idea to another on the basis of imagination. The nescessity of cause and effect needs to be explained by people's beliefs about the existence of objects and minds.

Hume did not completely deny causality but believed that human cognitive ability could not grasp the reason within, but only knew the approximate range. Therefore, it can be seen that Hume's agnostic thought, which not only doubts the existence of external things but also questions the self and self-perception, is based on the analysis of idea associations. Therefore, the agnostic position of Hume's philosophical thought and his idea association theory made him think that beauty cannot be defined, but can only be recognized by people's sensations.

In addition, because beauty and ugliness in Hume's eyes are based on human beings' experiences, his investigation of beauty and ugliness is closely related to human emotions and moral issues. On the issue of morality and ethics, similar to his position on the law of causality, he also denies that morality is derived from free will, and human reason cannot be the motivation of morality, but can only judge whether it is true or false. And Hume examines human emotions from the point of view of sensation theory, and human beings are just slaves of passion. Hume believed that humans and animals are essentially animals of passion, but humans have instrumental rationality and their passions are more complex. The nature of emotion is about feelings of pleasure and pain. Direct passion is pleasure and pain, while indirect passion involves the connection between the subject and the object.

From the above two paragraphs, it can be seen that(in conclusion) Hume believes that beauty is not a character of an object, but an effect brought to the human heart. Just as in "On Skepticism", he used the circle praised by many formalists in the past as an example, writing: "Beauty is not a property of the circle. Beauty is not in any part of the circumference line... Beauty is only the circle in the heart The effect produced, the special structure of the mind makes it capable of feeling this emotion". [10]

So, from an empirical point of view, what are the exact effects of beauty? In Hume's philosophical system, this is equivalent to asking what the essence of beauty is. Through the directness and indirectness of the feeling and effect of beauty, it can be seen that Hume put forward two conclusions that are similar but somewhat different from the perspective of human aesthetic experience.

2.2 The Utility Theory

Hume found that when the object of beauty and ugliness is ourselves, beauty can bring pride to ourselves, while ugliness can bring humility. Because the idea of beauty can bring pleasure to people, on the contrary, the idea of ugliness brings pain to people, so in ourselves, the happiness and unhappiness will be transformed into the emotional impression of pride or humility, so beauty and ugliness become the two objects of emotion. That is to say, he completely denied any objectivity of the beauty of things or objectivity of the aesthetic value of things, just as his empiricist philosophy doubted the existence of objective things, and only recognized the "substantiality" of perceptual impressions, this characteristic also was brought into his aesthetic thoughts such as admitting the “substantiality” of feelings of happiness or unhappiness in aesthetics. It should be noted that Hume did not completely equate pleasure with beauty but regarded it as a way for the human mind to judge objects as beautiful.

As for what can generate the emotion of beauty, Hume pointed out: "If we consider, that a great part of the beauty, which we admire either in animals or in other objects, is derived from the idea of convenience and utility, we shall make no scruple to assent to this opinion." The tradition of the utility theory of the essence of beauty began with Socrates, that is, things or concepts that can produce "goodness" and thus bring happiness are defined as beauty. As for the characteristics of concepts that can bring convenience and utility, Hume mentioned the order, structure, form, proportion, relationship, position, etc. of objects many times, which are the properties and conditions of objects on which the production of beauty depends. For example, if a palace with a simple shape and appearance is more convenient, then this appearance is beautiful; for a certain animal, a certain body shape can make it produce more physical strength, then this shape is beautiful; According to a rule in architecture If the entablature is thinner than the plinth, the architecture is safer, then this rule and design of pillar are beautiful. This point of view also breaks Hume's aesthetic view from the purely subjective and idealistic level. At this time, although beauty belongs to feeling and sensation, and although the feeling and sensation of beauty determine the essence of beauty, this kind of feeling of beauty is not entirely caused by the imagination of the human mind but comes from the direct feeling of human senses, and only involves the form of the object.[11]

2.3 The Sympathy Theory

The above is Hume’s discussion about the utility theory of the essence of beauty. The theory of utility can well explain how beauty is produced through happiness and unhappiness from the aspect of taking the self as the subject. Then why can beauty still give us emotional experiences that bring us pleasure or pain when it is not directly acting on the subject but on other external objects? Because beauty is transmitted through human emotions. And how is this possible? This involves Hume's another thesis on the essence of beauty, the theory of sympathy.

In *A Treatise of Human Nature* he writes, "Beauty is such an order and construction of parts, as either by the primary constitution of our nature, by custom, or by caprice, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul." [11] Also, that is to say, beauty comes from "the special structure of the human heart". Human nature has a complex structure, and people also have various complex needs and physiological functions. If the structure and order of the object can be coordinated with the "special structure of the human heart", then it can produce joyful and pleasant emotions of beauty in the human heart. The structure of the human heart is common and shared. According to Hume's definition, sympathy is a natural tendency and instinct based on the common human nature or psychological structure between people, also on the basis of common sensory experience and common utilitarian pursuit. [12]Beauty, as a peculiarly pleasurable emotion, follows the same pattern as sympathy. The process of sympathy is the process of refracting the emotions of others into our hearts and cognition or arousing the emotions of others in our hearts, that is, the process of transforming ideas into impressions.

It is worth noting that we should distinguish Hume's sympathy from the moral sympathy that Hume called pity we often talk about. Pity or sympathy in a moral sense is humanistic caring based on emotion, and it is a kind of emotional empathy that can inspire people to pay attention to and help others in trouble. [13] For example, if an old man over seventy years old falls down on the street, people will have the emotion of wanting to help him up. This emotion is sympathy in the moral sense. According to Hume's definition in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, this kind of moral sympathy is more like the emotion of pity, that is, a concern for the suffering of others. The emotion of pity is included in Hume's definition of sympathy, which means that the scope of sympathy is wider than pity. Pity is largely dependent on contiguous and adjacent relations, and "the transmitted emotion of sympathy is sometimes produced by the weak and living force of its original emotion, or even by the passage of an emotion that did not exist." This is why the theory of sympathy can explain people's feelings of beauty towards rather distant objects.

By using sympathy, we can bring into the results of the imagination and its associations with objects. Hume says: " And as this difference may be removed, in some measure, by a relation betwixt the impressions and ideas, it is no wonder an idea of a sentiment or passion, may by this means be enlivened as to become the very sentiment or passion. The lively idea of any object always approaches impression; and it is certain we may feel sickness and pain from the mere force of imagination, and make a malady real by often thinking of it. But this is most remarkable in the opinions and affections; and it is there principally that a lively idea is converted into an impression. Our affections depend more upon ourselves, and the internal operations of the mind, than any other impressions; for which reason they arise more naturally from the imagination, and from every lively idea we form of them. This is the nature and cause of sympathy; and it is after this manner we enter so deep into the opinions and affections of others, whenever we discover them."[14]

And as we know, under the definition here, ugliness is the opposite of the extension of beauty, and it is a special kind of pain. This also makes the production of beauty not only limited to people's intuitive feelings, but also through imagination and association towards it, that is, through sympathy, and this sympathy is different from the moral sense in our daily language. Sympathy, that is to say, is different from what Hume called pity. Precisely because it is different from pity, the pleasure and unhappiness produced by sympathy are different from the pleasure and unhappiness produced by pity or sympathy in the moral sense. For emotional experience, the pleasure produced by the former is the so-called beauty, which also makes sympathy aesthetic. This means aesthetics derive from sympathy and became an integral part of sympathy. This subtle sympathy of an aesthetic nature also makes both the person who possesses things and the person in the process of things feel happy, that is, it produces the emotion of beauty, and it can also convey such emotion and beauty to the bystanders. Sympathy also allows us not only to feel the beauty of ourselves, but also to experience the emotions of others regardless of the benefits or utility, and to generate pleasure and beauty by doing this.

Therefore, the interaction between human aesthetic nature and the formal structure of the object forms beauty and ugliness, which is the essential reason for the formation of the two. This is why some things do not affect us directly, and do not necessarily have a close or adjacent relationship with us, but still bring us direct happiness and pain, which is the reason for the feeling of beauty. Because we are "accustomed to evaluating some things by comparison rather than by the intrinsic value of things", this is also Hume's explanation of the essence of beauty besides the theory of utility, that is, the theory of sympathy. The idea of sympathy theory has had a profound impact on later generations. The "empathize" theory of Lipps' and the "internal imitation" theory of Gurus' are both variants of sympathy theory.

3 Back to Cézanne and the Modern Art he represents

We can use Hume's philosophy of the essence of beauty to analyze why Cézanne's artworks are beautiful as modern art. It can be seen from "Cezanne never talked about value.", compared with the utility theory, the sympathy theory can better explain modern art and help us understand modern art.

According to the philosopher Sorelles in "Ode to Infinity - On Art", when Sorelles appreciate Cézzane's work he felt "strong and transcendent emotions" and it is this that impels him to think about the subversive transformation of "motif" or paradigm in metaphysics that Cézanne's work has the effect on the art itself. That is to say, the new idea contained in Cézanne's work uses sympathy to make a strong impression on the special structure of the human mind. The book asks where was Cézanne's era, but actually asks how the concept of Cezanne's artworks making modern art transformed from an aesthetic point of view. Hume's empiricist aesthetics can explain the obscure phenomena of modern art clearly. For example, it is mentioned in the article, “The skull in Cézanne’s painting negates any form of naturalism. Yes, as Cézanne said, *this is paradoxical metaphysics*.” It can be seen that we can use the method of associations to deconstruct the objects in the painting. The pleasure produced by this process of associating produces aesthetic feelings. The so-called "paradoxical metaphysics" is because the ideas contained in the object are open-ended, and the relationship that can be produced between the ideas is also diverse, among them the one that can be explained in an aesthetic way becomes beauty. The two are also the reasons why Cézanne called on everyone not to be art critics but to be painters, and why philosophers should use philosophical thinking to interpret the phenomena of why art as culture occurs earlier. Because beauty comes from sensory experience and sympathy, the way of thinking that uses rational deduction, such as art criticism, is more passive than sensory experience such as beauty. Modern artists are driven by sensibility, and the innovation of concepts also resides in feeling and sensations. And the so-called "artistic sense" by Cézanne is precisely the feeling of beauty with the innovative significance of the times, which is narrated by people in the language of his art and perceived, by the appreciators using the structure of the human heart. If understood in this way, the reason why modern art is beautiful can better get rid of its obscurity.[15]

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