

The Non-interpretability and Visual Meaning of Painting

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Abstract

Goethe once said that everyone could see materials, but connotation was only found by those who dealt with it, and form was a secret to the majority of people. This article is aim to discuss the currently situation of contemporary easel painting and its De-interpretation, from the development of easel painting, i present the irreplaceable visual sense, and therefore ,to offer a referent direction about the easel painting's future.

Keywords

De-interpretation; Contradictoriness; Visual Sense.

1. Introduction

This article is a reflection and interpretation of easel painting. The modern art market and the fact that easel painting is two dimensional make us have an illusion: painting itself is no longer important, what matters is the "packaging" of the critics, so gradually, painting is drawn into the market. And painting, which is limited in dimension, is taken as "dead". Whether painting can be free from the limit of interpretation and return to its original form will be the focus of this piece of writing.

First, interpretation is everywhere: from textbooks in primary schools to international behavior of politicians. We dislike interpretation because it is neither the intention of the creator nor reflects the aesthetics of the audience. Just as when I see the giant stone pillars in South America and am about to marvel at them, you tell me that this is the reproductive worship of a certain primitive tribe.

The contradiction of interpretation is that it is unavoidably subjective. When such subjectivity deviates from the author's intention, then interpretation becomes distortion and sophistry. Chinese born in the 1980s must have become bored with Lu Xun, because they don't know that each word in "I will feel the supreme tragedy of this society" can be analyzed. Lu Xun's works are still good, but educators force their own understanding and interpretation of his work on students. This is the biggest mistake of interpreters and interpretation.

Nevertheless, our society has been accustomed to interpretation. For example, when we watch news programs, we unavoidably will think of something, and such thoughts are heavily influenced by our own ways of thinking. When we watch Topics in Focus, or Phoenix Evening Express, we will receive information, but the information we received is no longer the information of the program, and the program does not necessarily reflect the reality. We don't feel anything strange about this, because interpretation is part of thinking. We hate interpretation but we cannot get rid of interpretation. Therefore, Susan, the author of Against Interpretation, failed to take a firm stand in her book, and replaced "reasonable interpretation" with "interpretation". In this way, the difference is made clear. Susan thinks like us - she is against unreasonable interpretation, she is against randomly assumed interpretation, and she is against interpretation that is forced with one's own understanding.

The reason I am against interpretation of painting is because, due to interpretation, the meaning of art takes the place of the works of art, and audience neglect the true intention of the artist. And, another important factor must be considered: interpreters are important figures, or

persons in authority, so their interpretation has significant influence on the public; their interpretation is not a true reflection of the artwork, but a "second creation", which is unfair to both art and the artist. Meanwhile, interpreters force their own understanding on the audience, this is not reasonable interpretation, but a reflection of the power of authority.

Interpretation is a process. The interpretation of ordinary audience is just an individual thinking process, so it won't be forced on any other individuals. But the interpretation by authority forced on ordinary audience is a vivid example of "force others to do as you wish".

To change the current trend - interpret artworks- is still a slogan rather than a habit of thinking. Each of us interpret, there is nothing wrong with it. But such interpretation must be fair and open. We don't need interpretation from the authority, because the value of artworks belongs neither to the artist nor the interpreter. The value of artworks lies in the fact that it is multi-dimensional, any single dimensional interpretation may bring an end to its multi-dimensional value, which, is of course against the true intention of the artist.

From the perspective of visibility, Craig Clunas once said that all material culture contained visual elements, and any type of visual culture was reliant on materiality. He thought that materials and visual culture were interdependent. The research on visual culture, which is just unfolding, takes every object related to "observation" as the subject of research, including the object being observed, the subject that is observing, and the discourse related to vision. The theme of vision becomes "speech to oneself". But in fact, vision also includes talks with the history, talks with fields, and talks with the audience.

As cultural history comes to a new age, social art history (or the left wing school) and visual art research has come into being. Vision (that deals with art/visual objects) abandons its awkward past - to work behind closed doors. While combining the results and theories of interdisciplinary research, vision is no longer confined to form analysis (lines, colors and composition) while processing the objects of art; attention is paid to the special perspectives (that are influenced by single facet or multi-facet social forces) presented by these "texts", and how to create facts that are universally accepted by the society, the shaping of ideology and effect of human heart assimilation behind such discourse are focused on. On this basis, research on visual art becomes popular in the UK. However, while talking about "visibility", we become trapped in a contradiction: on one hand, we are madly exploring the visual interestingness of a painting, on the other hand, we are easily influenced by relevant standard forms.

2. The Current Status of Painting

The society is developing rapidly. Today, as art becomes increasingly complicated, traditional forms of art are no longer the core, as they once were. Painting, as a cultural symbol with historic meaning, begins to be disdained by the "contemporary age", which is of great temporal and developmental value. "Outdated" is a mark imprinted on painting. How to get rid of this mark is a problem painting artists urgently need to tackle. However, under the governance of time, people explore things, but they can not get rid of the definition of the things they explore, the definition endowed by the essence of the past and the possibility of the future. So, when we pay attention to painting, we must first trace the "marks", which are firstly, consciously left by people on the material media.

2.1. The Inheritance of Tradition

To leave their marks is what every animal on earth does. In the ecological cycle, "production", which is done from the inside to the outside, and "consumption", which is done from the outside to the inside, are the inevitable fate of each individual life. A "mark" is the product of "production", but in terms of the circulatory construction of "consumption", it does not have the general meaning. It seems to be a defective product in the ecological system, and it enables

individuality in the singly directed operation (production-consumption-production) to see the shadow of ego, and thus become the subject. That's how the concept of "mark" came into being. However, fortunately, and unfortunately, the fire of wisdom is passed to the hands of man. It lights up the world, but the world still looks deserted; it makes man's thoughts become deposited, but man remains at a loss as regards what to do. So man began to actively act on the external world with their behavior, while the "mark", which originally functioned to passively arouse the subject, evolved and functioned to actively recognize the object. And when it finally was combined with the visual experience of the human race, the traditional concept of "painting" came into being. But with the progression of time, the "mark", which is an image feedback of the independent object, under the effect of visual similarity, finally becomes the general experience of the concept of independent object, namely "text".

2.2. The Development of Tradition

In 6B.C., people's experiential concept of the world had become general and systematic. The "ultimate source" becomes the common secret of every existing thing, while painting is one of the means to provide feedback to these things. For thousands of years, painting has been used to visually replicate experiential concept, and during certain periods of time, its function - visual replication - was highly efficient in conveying experience and concepts. From the cliff painting in Lascaux, to wall painting in Sistine Chapel, vivid image is always more intuitionistic and concrete than texts. During the 17th and 18th century, the Enlightenment Campaign in France enabled rationality to reach the peak, and experience, concepts had become more logical and abstract. Cognition became a kind of thinking habit. In early 19th century, Hegel said that art would eventually become a form of philosophy. In 1839, photography was invented, and painting was confronted with unprecedented challenges, because it is low in production efficiency and indirect in expression of content. From the end of the 19th century to mid 20th century, the Modernism Campaign liberated painting from the tradition. Painting, which formerly was the object for recognizing the target and interpreting the gist, became the subject of creation, a tool for conveying the emotional or the rational, so, its function transforms from "providing feedback" to "expressing ideas". However, with the development of science and technology, material production is now the reality, and the abundance that comes with material production stimulated the market of cultural products, the needs for art are diversified, and painting, because of its monotonous expression, gradually becomes marginalized. In 1984, Arthur C. Danto published *The End of Art*, in which, through an analysis of phenomena, he drew the conclusion that as traditional art's form of media collapses and as traditional art participates in philosophy, it finally enters the field of experiential concept.

2.3. Tradition in the Contemporary Age

Today, when appreciating a work of art, people often ask themselves: "what's it about?" Audience are accustomed to applying their own experiential concept to the logic system of artworks. They endeavor to find the truth behind the artwork, as if the artwork presented in front of them is not enough, as if it must be further interpreted, if its being is to be proven reasonable. In the book *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* by Susan Sontag, the indirectness and separability of interpretation are explained in detail. Interpretation will not make the audience closer to art, on the contrary, to move the content of art will only make art become concealed by experiential concept. The essence it digs is not the answer to art, but the disdain of art. But to go against interpretation does not mean that art can not be described, rather, to go against interpretation aims at looking for the most suitable interpretation, namely, the question - "what form of criticism do we need to serve works of art rather than take their place?" As regards this question, Susan Sontag gave us an answer: "transparency", to experience the clarity of the object. That is to say, interpretation should show that "the function of criticism is to show how it becomes like this, or even to show that this is what it is, rather than to show

what it means", critics must master the minor differences between reasonable interpretation and over interpretation.

The same goes for painting. Although, because of the identifiability of painting works, it tends to make people interpret them, painting in the field of cognition has become a mark of the past. It no longer meets the expectation of the modern culture, because freedom and equality are the common objectives of today, therefore, in art appreciation, the audience and the authors are absolutely equal, so, interpretation - a type of activity conducted from one party to the other, a type of activity with strong intentionality, becomes a factor of violence. It not only influences the relationship between the author and the audience, but also influences the conflict between the audience as an individual and audience as a group, because of the involvement in the right to speech that contains political elements. Of course, we are unable to give a negative definition to interpretation, but in aesthetic activity, interpretation must be handled with meticulousity.

3. The Interpretation of Painting

Whether for painting or art, interpretation means a distrust toward the form of the artwork. This is a kind of universal doubt. This is not only true for the audience, but also true for the artists. Excessive interpretation makes them but a tool for replicating experiential concept.

In the classical period, painting was regarded as a means for reflecting objects. In the early stage of modernism, artists have been exploring the possible independence and freedom of painting. From the post impressionist school, the dimension of "observation" was expanded. Painting regressed to its essence. Its objects were no longer the views in front of you, but the painting canvas. It was no longer attached to natural science, rather, it found rationality by communicating with the painting canvas. However, as it develops further, painting returned to the old path of experientialism. In *White on White*, a work of suprematism by Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, visual concept is completely conceptualized, the conflict of white and white is not reflected by temperature of colors, the conflict of square and square is not aimed at stressing the edges and corners of shape. The general shape makes them fall into the mire of nihilism. What the audience can see is concept not painting. Painting, after reaching the peak of self deconstruction, arrived at desolation. After that, in the "View on Space" work series by Lucio Fontana, painting became vaguer, although its carrier is flat, marks are left, and the results are visual, the point Fontana stressed transforms from two dimensional (flat surface) to three dimensional (space). Flat surface becomes a foil. After being dismantled by force, it becomes a three dimensional work, space is the true intention of the work. The marks of cut are not used to correspond to our vision, but to deceive our vision and lead the audience to the black hollow beneath the marks. Standing in front of the work, the audience cannot obtain all the information, because, after all, a painting canvas with a cut is not something strange. However, when it is made into a work of art, people will judge, because, here, irrationality against experience and common sense appear. Some say it's a rag, some say it's art. In both terms, phenomenon and essence become apart, and are grafted in the "View on Space" work series. For this work series, the final "painting" is not where its art lies, everything in its creating environment is, in particular, its author, is what makes the work a piece of art. Painting is no longer the object of man, but the means of man.

4. The Visual Meaning of Painting

When painting was used as people's way of expressing, in expressionism, it once had its glory. However, with the diversification of forms of art, people's increasingly rich desire for expression engulfed the activity of painting, making it a single form of language that is easily replaced by modern technology. In Joseph Kosuth's conceptual work *One and Three Chairs*, the material chair, the image chair and the textual chair share a common concept, but their forms

of language are completely different. We cannot prove that the three chairs are one chair, because they are indeed different, but we also cannot deny that the three chairs are not the same chair, because their "facts" are so obvious. In this work, the unity of opposite relationship of "signans" and "designatum" are revealed. The domain of the whole "language" is floating and uncertain. It lies in the diversity of media, and the difference of subject and object. Because of this, it is meant to be unilateral, temporary, and even ineffective. Image, as a type of language, is fragile today, because of its single dimension, it has no ability to reveal the whole context, however, painting, although factitious infusion will bring it certain language background, its weight can be neglected in the flood of language.

In Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, the epistemes of three historic stages are illustrated: the Renaissance episteme (the unity of the "words" and "things" connected by "similarity"), the classic episteme ("things" represented by words, thoughts represented by language), and the modern episteme. In modern episteme, the capitalized "history" of the "basic means of existence of experience" creates an order for things, "man" appeared for the first time in the experience and recognition of labor, life, and language, and human studies come into existence. However, it is gradually deconstructed by psychoanalysis and ethnogeny, the "unconscious" is discovered as a formal structure, human science is losing its efficiency because of multidisciplinary disintegration. Meanwhile, as an empirico-transcendental doublet, man created ego in knowledge, thoughts of "man", as experience, has been modifying themselves in a prior fashion, the decision of "cogito (my thought)" will eventually give way to the judgment of "not my thought". Therefore, Foucault predicted that: "man will be eliminated, just like a face on the beach by the sea", man will no longer exist as the center of discourse. Therefore, coming back to the expression of art, human's importance as the subject will be weakened. This has already been proven in modern art. Individual expression is no longer common. Most of the modern artists attempt to establish a context rather than to yield results, to put forward a question rather than to look for an answer. Although, in the sense of expression, it still exists, artists are no longer the focus of art expression, right is placed on the art works and audience. Of course, as the creator of the art work, the subjective judgment of artists is still very important. It is put in the form of the work and becomes an information symbol, waiting for interpretation as well as misunderstanding.

Therefore, under the pressure: the vacillation of interpretation, the low efficiency of art-conveyance tools, the transfer of the nature of the art subject, painting has found it more and more difficult to express. Hence, after omitting the indirect contents, what is the weight of external form? Here, we must go back to "man" again. How does man exist in this world? Jean-Paul Sartre said: "existence exists because of man". Martin Heidegger said: "man are the window of everything". Therefore, man's function is to build, to build the connection between everything, but Foucault said that man are no longer the center of the world, so man retreat to the border and become separate individuals, but man's building function still exists, in an era of globalization, diverting and reconstruction take the place of origination, man evolved from information creator to information inheritor. The world man constructs is also constructing man. Painting will treat man as an object, information will become something that integrates itself and form. I call it visual meaning.

4.1. The Perspective of Visual Meaning

The status of human to painting, before the construction of all concepts and experience, is a visual activity starting from a white painting canvas. Regardless of the content, for the creator and the audience, the flat surface is the basic form of painting. Once, the study of "perspective" enables space to win flat surface, then, the appearance of movies makes time the new challenge in visual arts. Although Paul Cézanne et al tried to capture time via painting, the fact that it is flat is like a shadow that goes unnoticed. You can change its form, but you can't change its

essence. People live in a temporal concept. Their world is spatial. But the flat painting have to subordinate to human and reflect his world. This is a tour of conquer that transcends dimension. However, like fate, for painting, flat surface is its insurmountable barrier. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, time is the insurmountable barrier of Sisyphus. It has absolute power over Sisyphus. The judgment of time makes Sisyphus a tragedy, however, the repeated behavior makes him a hero. When deciding the result, time also provides the solution. The sun and moon rise and fall, Sisyphus fills in the void with repeated behavior, and the eternity of time is dissolved by the repeated behavior. Its dominating status is dissolved by man's initiative. Meanwhile, we realize that only by regressing and paying attention to ourselves, can we achieve true freedom. The same goes for painting. Flat is an inevitable barrier, but it is also a kind of absolute independence. The gap between different dimensions will only be filled by exploring the flat surface positively, in this way, painting will regenerate while being domineered.

4.2. The Visualization of Visual Meaning

On the basis of a flat surface, painting started from man's marks, which become visualized concepts through a visual sense of identity. But with the development of man, with the accumulation of experience and knowledge, through a visual similarity with the outside world, images can be differentiated and become cultural. And, through symbolic meaning, it becomes an interpretation of the object image referred above. It is not pulling man and painting closer, it is drifting them apart, through a kind of directionality, and by accepting relevant concepts and experience, it makes up for the lack of perceptibility. However, for painting, the form of image is another common identification under historic accumulation. Even in the works of abstract art, the inherent differentiation meaning of the image is removed, but the arrangement of its elements makes image infiltrated in the painting. In *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* by Piet Mondrian, image was refined into parallel squares and absolute colors. It no longer pursues after the simplicity of meaning, the symbol of painting. The cultural content reflected by image grows like branches. This is a kind of branching and non-directed accumulation. In this process, the single signified is no longer certain, because overall, history is moving forward, but the form of signifier can not be replaced hastily, so image must be isolated, and build a bridge between the absolute signifier and the rheologic signified. To isolate image, first, the simulation of image in three dimension space must be pressed, and restored to its basic form. This has been fully practiced by abstract painting. However, due to the exclusion of image's historic nature, painting is developing toward pure empirical concept. But the preservation of image's historic nature will bring with it the interpretation of knowledge and experience. To solve this, it's necessary to cut the integrity of image, break the fixed pattern of interpretation by exchange of position. Save image and painting from the mire of cognition with visual contradiction.

4.3. The Contradiction of Visual Meaning

Visual contradiction makes painting able to develop in two dimensional space. Just like drama, it makes people trace the source, asks the results and build the overall concept of time. But the limit of two dimension deprives this contradiction of its usual direction of development, people are forced to stay at the divergence point of vision, so painting obtained external eternity in its internal moment. In Picasso's *Woman with a Chignon*, visual contradiction makes a boring scene become a picture with infinite charm. The figure is vertically in the middle of the picture, the background environment is horizontally cut into three. The round table on the left lower corner and the square painting on the right upper corner correspond. The cheeks of the figure are not symmetrical, the shoulders, which are square and round, the right hand, which faces the inside, the left hand, which faces the side, all demonstrate contradiction, under the hint of symmetry. The normal becomes a potential falseness, visual contradiction makes uneasiness and mystery come into being, a kind of habitual thirst is suppressed on the quiet image, the source and result

are compressed into a flat surface, the audience cannot obtain an answer to the image. They seek the answer but they cannot obtain the answer. Confusion makes the audience stop and pay attention to the image. The visual contradiction is like a door. The audience walks in, behind it is mirror-like void, reflecting all the experiential concept of people.

4.4. The Materiality of Visual Meaning

Flatness, image and visual contradiction determine the content of painting, but the content is general, it does not contain the absolute quality of painting. In art forms like graphic design, photography, films, etc, it can be observed easily as well. So what determines the fact that painting appeared before the audience rather than other flat visual art work? Materiality, an innate feature, determines the independence of objects. In Joseph Beuys' *Fat Chair*, heavy fat is piled over the chair, its materiality is stressed, the concept of "fat" becomes a symbol of calling, even if we temporarily forget the colorful and eerie life of Beuys, the audience still can read thoughts on life and nature, which are the result of refining the behavior of repeatedly piling "fat". In this work, ordinary visual object - image - is replaced by heavy fat. Although the conceptual recognition of fat is certain, because of its great stress intensity, materiality is taken out of the cognition scope that can be reflected by its surface image, and becomes a new visual object. Fat is still fat, but is not the ordinary fat, but a kind of moment, independent fat with discourse background. Vision assumes the primary responsibility here, it uses feeling to measure everything it has. Back to painting, materiality is reflected as the materials for painting. Painting canvas, pigments, brushes are its contents. Such materiality is deposited in the painting. It is a prior existing, but is often neglected, so what we really need to do is to stress it, and help it become a specific content and appear on the painting.

The visual meaning of painting is the integration of flatness, visualization, visual contradiction, and materiality. It is not a man-made framework, but an existing visual information. Meaning is man-led blending, is an active construction, which is not partial. During the process of construction, it has accumulated extensive contents through human behavior. Interpretation is not effective for it, because form and content are not parallel contradiction, but the integration of the center and the margin. It established a stable relationship in the "art conveyance - art acceptance" process, namely form becomes the fixed and only source of content, while the distance between human and work provides infinite space for the extension of contents. In Mark Rothko's abstract colour painting works, visual meaning makes heavy blocks and solemn colors become a mysterious symbol with strong directionality, but there is no existing experience that functions as the guide. The implied and introverted margin and blank, ethereal smearing become the visual points of the contradiction, bringing people into the piled flat color gamut. Cognition has no road to walk here, but feel can always find its place.

5. Conclusion

"The greatest artist obtained a high level of neutrality." (Susan Sontag). In an era when the Internet is highly developed, people are living in a sea of information and interpretability becomes a habit. On the basis of experiential concept, interpretability becomes a shortcut. People no longer need to honestly and bravely confront their objects. The transfer platform Internet makes the shadow of everything replace themselves and become a common and cheap data. It makes form empty talks, while the contents left is barren and boring. As a fictitious media, the Internet is destroying the "truth". Where is truth? It does not lie in our brain in the form of experience, it is not the vague concept in our cognition. It is what we see, hear, eat, and feel. The reason why "truth" is true is because it is not invented, but something real that can be felt!

"The pearl rolls in the plate in a flexible way, and the spirit still remains within the plate". In the world of the "plate", to make criticism and interpretation play its "spirits" role will be the best answer.

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