

# How Art Semiotics Affects Our Behaviour and Judgement

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## Abstract:

Symbols are tools used by humans to understand the world and interpret art works. During this process, art and the signs in the artworks affect the viewer's way of thinking and judgment. This is an interesting phenomenon and a significant way for viewers to interpret works of art. The author divides this article into three parts, starting from the fact that "art is unnatural" but a product of human consciousness, to how the "inclination of art" affects our judgment and values, and finally to raise actual cases to talk about "pan-aestheticisation" and its impact on society.

**Keywords:** art, symbol, intention, society, culture, artistic, aestheticisation

## 1. Introduction

Since the birth of human civilisation, art has been accompanied by the development of human society. From the nature worship in the Neolithic Age to the religious worship in the Middle Ages; from the classical and harmonious form in the Renaissance, transforming to the appreciation of "ugliness" and "absurdity" in modern art. Art reflects human civilisation along the way, and we can see different social phenomena through art. However, art is difficult to be defined: no matter Duchamp's porcelain urinal or Joseph Beuys's quote "everyone is an artist", it seems the definition of art is getting more and more ambiguous, but the influence that art brings to people is increasing and we are unable to ignore this problem in the twenty first century. As an exploration of the law of thinking, semiotics aims to help people to understand how human-beings express and recognise things. With the use of art semiotics, we become a part of our understanding of the world. If there was no map, latitude and longitude, no definition of various colours, no understanding of square, circular and triangles, we would not have any knowledge of the world. In this essay, in order to understand more about the relationship between art and the society, I will discuss the concepts "art is not natural", "the inclination of art" and "pan-aestheticisation" through art semiotics to show how art affects human behaviour and judgement.

## 2. Art Is Not Natural

Art is not a natural thing, but a purely artificial symbol. In English language, the "art" has an artificial nature, the definition of the words "art" is: "human skill or workmanship as opposed to nature". In fact, there is also true in traditional Chinese, the "art" word in Chinese is "藝術", the top part of "藝" (𡗗) stands for wood and plant, and the below part indicates hand operation, and "術" means "methods and approach"<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, China and the West have the same meaning for the word, and they both mean "hand operation". However, this argument faces the challenge: natural objects are often seen as art, such as waterfalls, seaside reefs, and natural events have artistic meaning as well, such as thunder and light, expressing the wrath of the gods. People call beautiful mountains and clouds, elegant human body art, they take the view that the sightseeing is created by nature. However, the world we live is a humanised world<sup>2</sup>. Our human-beings definite everything we can understand, giving their signs, then what we see comes from the signs that we understand, and we cannot think without

<sup>1</sup> Xushen. (100BC). *Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters*. (Shuowen Jiezi).

<sup>2</sup> Human gives definitions to everything in the world to understand them. "Humanised world" is the things in the world that is understood by human perspective.

signs<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, pure natural things are not art, and there is only one way to turn natural objects into works of art, that is to be displayed: from the nature of objectivity, a stone is not art, but it could become a man-making artwork if the artist adds intentions to it; the natural mountain is not art, but it becomes an art if we feel and imagine it in our awareness of presentation and our intention of appreciation.

According to the news, the paintings painted by an elephant was auctioned for 6,0000 RMB in an art auction in China. The public was astonished by this event, and the news clarified that a large number of people refused to admit they are artworks although the pieces were sold out under the name of art. The so-called paintings made by the animal, perhaps the texture and patterns are same as paintings made by artists, but the current research outcome of zoology indicates that animals do not have the intention to create art.<sup>2</sup> Once the work is exhibited, the intention of creating and the creative process cannot allow people to appreciate and criticise the art from the original meaning. Arthur Danto takes the view that intention is important because he refers it is important to judge if it is a success based on whether the expected meaning to be expressed<sup>3</sup>.

According to the above, we can see as a man-made symbol, art should carry certain intentions. Nevertheless, it is controversial to definite if a thing is art based on whether it has intentions. For example, low-level urban sculptures, offensive performance art and sketches that under the examination-oriented education. Therefore, the inclination of art is meaningful to be discussed.

### 3. The Inclination of Art

In the context of the times changes during the 20th century, Western art has undergone dramatic changes of “anti-tradition”. Under the shadow of the world war, the classical and harmonious aesthetic ideals have been changed. The art has come out of the classical and harmonious form, transforming to the appreciation of “ugliness” and “absurdity”. Therefore, we can classify aesthetics into two groups to a certain degree: positive and negative.

The “positive aesthetics” brings people pleasure, and it is associated with the word, such as “truth” and “kindness”. Although different aestheticians have different definitions of “beauty”, they are all talking about positive experiences. In our daily experience, it appears to show it is easier and faster that people accept and recall “positive art”. When people are communicating and looking at problems, there is a bias towards to the positive side. For example, when we ask someone’s height, we would say “how tall are you?”. The positive word is normally used and we would not say “how short are you?” Also, people say “how fast can the car run?” and “how slow can it run?” shows an insolent attitude. Furthermore, almost nationalities believe that the capital accent (or the accent in nicest place) is the most beautiful accent. Chinese Beijing accent, British Oxford accent, French Paris accent. The contrast is the dialect that outside of capital: the Londoners tease the East London and Battersea accents, the Edinburghers make fun of the Aberdeen accent, and the New Yorkers make fun of the Alabama accent.

The “negative aesthetics” brings people singularity and contradiction. The “negative art” can be interpreted as unrest and resistance to the mainstream. In real life, we believe that kind, optimistic and friendly people are beautiful. However, in art, such as the Chinese classical masterwork “A Dream of the Red Chamber”, people believe that the sick and gloomy Lin Daiyu is beautiful. Also, the leading lady in the Korean film “My Sassy Girl” is very popular with the public. As for music, the “positive aesthetics” could be Mozart and Chopin, and the “negative aesthetics” could be modern experimental music.

It must be admitted that these two forms always exist with being mixed. Such as “The Flowers of Evil” by Charles Baudelaire, the book illustrates “negative”, but the means of expression is “positive”. There is another specific case to show it: in 2008, a portfolio of painting for Chinese high school students who are preparing The Art National College Entrance Examination was published. The art portfolio “China Academy of Art No. 1 demonstration”<sup>4</sup> is a good approach for Chinese high school students to learn and imitate Post-Impressionism style, and the examiners and tutors in China Academy of Art prefer the paintings with elegant grey. Therefore, a large number of students had bought the portfolio to cope with the exam<sup>5</sup>. From the perspective of art semiotics, the “positive aesthetics” can stimulate art, and the resulting art is “positive art”. The “positive aesthetics” provides a standard for “positive art”, so the beauty of art is consistent with the socially recognised beauty. From the perspective of art education, it is a fruit of the examination-oriented education, the style “elegant grey” has only become a tool to go to the art university, and this is a hindrance to the development of Chinese art education.

<sup>1</sup> Susanne K. Langer, (2002). *Philosophy in a New Key*. Beijing: Communication University of China Press. p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> S. Yuchang, (2014). *Animal Behaviour*. Beijing: Pecking University Press. p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Danto, A., (1997). *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> A sketchbook for art students to copy.

<sup>5</sup> C. Han., (2015). *Analysis of the present status in the Art College Entrance Examination*. Henan University School of Art. p. 33.

From the angle of the students, the majority of them have positive attitude with skills and aesthetics that they have learned from the portfolio, although they may lose their individuality.<sup>1</sup>

When talking about the relationship between the “positive” and the “negative”, most people in the society tend to be positive. This can lead to a stable and peaceful society, but it will also cause the culture to be ordinary and vulgar. However, art can increasingly subvert and challenge the mainstream value by playing these two roles. Pan Gongkai refers: the abnormality in life is difficult to be valued by us because we cannot identify with it in experience and convention, but it can make us confused and think.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, we can find the two most obvious features of modern art are “misconstruction” and “misordering”. Moreover, it is meaningful here to mention that the balance between the “positive” and the “negative” is important. Under the context of the contemporary society, overmuch persistent changes would make the “negative” more marginal and more extreme, and it can affect people’s understanding of the world. For example, too much violence in the films would make people accustomed to violence in real life.

#### 4. Pan-Aestheticisation

It seems only by existing in the context of the normal state of society can art express a special meaning that is different from other fields. If the case is opposite, the symbol of art would be hard to show meanings. To show what does it mean, the sculpture “Cloud Gate” at Millennium Park in Chicago, it sharply contrasts to the buildings and the other sculptures nearby as its enormous size and the smooth mirror-like material. But let us imagine that if every single building and sculpture at the park has the same size and material as the “Cloud Gate”, then this sculpture would be inconspicuous and pale. Thus, we can see the “pan-aestheticisation” refers to art is comprehensively open to and integrated with various fields of life. It mainly includes two aspects: on the one hand, the “pan-aestheticisation” breaks the concept of classical art and bridge the gap between art and life, thus greatly expanding the boundary and extension of art, enriching the meaning of art, and in this process, the interdisciplinary integration of art can be realised; On the other hand, during the process of “pan-aestheticisation”, the concept and symbol of art will be widely used in many areas in life, it can reduce the sublimity and spirituality of art itself, and even changing the meaning of art in a sense.<sup>3</sup>

If all human activities become art, all meanings that the signs express have art function, that would cause serious problem. Such as a beautiful modern washing machine cannot make clothes clean, a pretty seashell-like house cannot offer residents a convenient and comfortable environment. About half a century later, there was a “pan-aestheticisation” in contemporary culture. Welsch illustrated as follows: “the most obvious artistic movement appears in urban space. In the past few years, everything in urban space has been refurbished, shopping places have been decorated with gorgeousness, almost every single paving stone, all door handles and all public places have not escaped from this artistic movement. ‘Make your life better’ is the motto for yesterday, and today it has become ‘make a better life, better shopping, better communication, and better sleep’”<sup>4</sup>. The “pan-aestheticisation” makes art transcend cultural categories and penetrate into the economy and politics, making all ideologies become artistic symbols, which seems dangerous to the author.

Political campaigns often select politicians with strong ability and international perspective, and the vote reflects the extent of public support. Nowadays, it is the fact that the film stars and singers become the political leader. The reason why they get everyone’s voting support is not related to his or her performance on political stage, but through artistic effects and idol effects. In this case, the art is no longer artistic, the art is involved in politics, and artistic symbol has become the political symbol. What we are talking about here does not mean these stars are not competent, nor that they cannot represent the benefits of people. The thing we should know is art is different from politics and there is no doubt that their symbols are different as well. Similarly, if a world-class university lets professional film stars come to be professors, then this is a process of making science artistic. Science and philosophy should criticise the society, once the academic resource becomes art, the academic independence is difficult to be maintained. Another example, Chengdu government has built an artificial lake and some artificial Taihu stones in 2007 in order to attract more tourists to consume. So, from the point of view, the artistic nature of the artificial lakes is different from the artistic nature of natural lakes, because the art has become the commercial symbols. Conversely, if the discussion of trade cooperation between two nations becomes art, then the negotiate would be absurd and dramatic.

From the above examples, the “pan-aestheticisation” has caused art to suffer a serious symbolic impact. Once everything in the world becomes art, the art has to increase its particularity to prove its existence, so some artists today try to make so called “new art” which is confused, such as extreme performance art that wanders on the

<sup>1</sup> Yao, Y., (2013). *A Brief Talk on the gouache teaching in Art College Entrance Examination*. Art Fashion. p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Pan, G.K., (2005). *On the Boundary of Western Modern Art*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Publishing House. p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> Tianming, G., (2012). *Art Criticism: What is pan-aestheticisation?* p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> Welsch, W., (1997). *Undoing Aesthetics*, London: Sage Publication Ltd. p. 15.

edge of the law. Accordingly, as for this problem, we should think critically about whether we should make everything artistic, or only make art artistic to keep art original. As Zhao refers once human civilisation has only art left, art would get lost in this illogical world, and the development of human value judgement would cease.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, art is one of the most incredible symbols of human creation. The advancement of technology and material is obvious to all, however, the tremendous accumulation of artistic symbols (including art, design, music, film, language, etc.) has become a major feature of human culture. In the discussion of “art is not natural”, the author talked about art is a product of humanised world, it is also a manifestation of purpose. Under the influence of this concept, people began to critically look at everything around them, and people began to re-think the definition of art. The second discussion is “the inclination of art”, the author discussed the different inclinations of art through “positive” and “negative”, and then explores how they affect people and how people make biased choice in art. In the modern society, the inclination of art can affect people’s attitude towards things. In the third area “pan-aestheticisation”, the author started the discussion with the social issues and problems caused by “pan-aestheticisation”, and expressed worry and concern about the result and upcoming result of “pan-aestheticisation”. The emergence of “pan-aestheticisation” in our social life forces us to face to the problem of definition of art. It enables us to review the history, focus on the present and look forward to future, and think about the direction of art development in such a context. From these three aspects, the author has shown how art semiotics affects human behaviour and judgement. However, the relationship between art semiotics and people can be expressed via many aspects, and it needs to be analysed through more angles. Semiotics is not a panacea for solving all social problems, but the simple nature of semiotics may be able to sort out some complicated questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Zhao, Y.H., (2016). *Semiotics Principles and Problems*, p. 313. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press.