

The Horizon of Expectations of Paintings' Audiences in Picture-Reading Era

JIAO Wei^{[a],*}

^[a]Academy of Fine Arts, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China.
*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Horizon of expectations has never been so complicated: The public aesthetic taste gets diversified; image information explodes; the overloading of image information leads to aesthetic fatigue. The most fundamental feature of art in the copying era is the disappearance of charm, audiences' horizon of expectations in the admiration of a painting is denied, which essentially is an aesthetic shock. Add the distance between artworks and the public's horizon of expectations can make the Paintings find ways to survive in the society where the public cannot concentrate because of aesthetic fatigue.

Key words: Horizon of expectation's public aesthetic; Diversified era of reading pictures; Aesthetic fatigue; Aesthetic shocks

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INTRODUCTION

When a man is standing in front of a painting covered, he has a "pre-understanding" for the "painting" concept; that is the "horizon of expectations" in the "rightful prejudice" context for the painting. When the painting finally gets uncovered, either the positive "disappointment" that falls short of his "expectations" or the negative "disappointment" that matches his "expectations" will be integrated into his "pre-understanding", which then can

form a judging basis for the future. When such activities continue, more aesthetic objects enter into view, become prospects, get integrated and fade into the background. Being integrated means more "expectations" for the future, which could live up to, deviate from or negate reality. If expectations get denied, it means the birth of new points of view, which could bring out "aesthetic shocks".

1. HORIZON OF EXPECTATIONS HAS NEVER BEEN SO COMPLICATED.

Chinese horizon of expectations for paintings can be roughly divided into two: the "vivid charm" of traditional Chinese paintings and realistic paintings. For some historical reasons, like Xu Beihong's proposal "realistic transformation of Chinese paintings" and Cultural Revolution, most Chinese painting audiences have the pre-understanding that realistic paintings are the mainstream.

The western realistic paintings were introduced to China in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, developed slowly in the period from the late Qing Dynasty to the Liberation War and finally established itself as the mainstream. After the War of Liberation, the realistic painting was the most popular style and had its heyday. Xu Beihong became the leader of the new Chinese Art World. The realistic painting style represented and proposal advocated by Xu Beihong gets established and become the guideline of art education and creation. After Opening and Reform, Chinese artists' horizons were broadened suddenly and they have the opportunity to study the entire more than 500-year western realistic painting history after the Renaissance. Thus emerged the new realism representative of Chen Danqing, Yang Yunfei, Wang Yidong and Chen Yifei, and postmodern realism represented by Liu Xiaodong and Xin Dongwang.

Chinese realistic painting has experienced many important turning points up to now, and the number of

realistic painters has been increasing. Now because of the rapid development of network and digital technology as well as the influence of postmodern thoughts, the public aesthetic taste becomes diverser.

1.1 The Public Aesthetic Taste Gets Diversified

Due to the rapid development of network and digital technology as well as the enhanced effects of postmodern thoughts and commercial society, public aesthetic taste becomes diversified. Public culture is the one with popularization, and it can directly show itself through intuitive and figurative media. Compared with the traditional aesthetics, which requires the audience to get the “charm”, public culture is quite intuitive; thus aesthetics is no longer exclusive to the elite. On one hand, public aesthetics aims at the pursuit of temporary sensual pleasure instead of the deeper joy of spirit and purification of soul. On the other hand, public aesthetics is more direct and flat; therefore, the aesthetic object is more related to the daily articles of consumption, such as clothing and decorations. And its range is also expanding, from the traditional art kinds to the imaginary world displayed in the TV, network and advertising.

1.2 Image Information Explodes

In the 20th century, human being gets information mainly through the words; but in the 21st century, image is likely to replace the words for its intuitive characteristic and becomes the main medium for cultural diffusion.

Traditional words are replaced by beautiful pictures; literary classics and bestsellers are adapted into films and TV series one by one; kaleidoscopic displaying forms brought by the computer technology create countless virtual worlds. It is undeniable that image which is an important feature of this era has greatly enriched people’s visual experience and satisfied people’s visual desire. At the same time, in the technology and commerce highly-developed society, too much image information floods into people’s mind through a variety of media and make people’s brains overload. People can see pictures of the promotional goods on the doorknob almost every day, dazzling and rapidly-cut advertisement as well as the 24-hour news and so on, which is the society that we are facing. Image has become the main information carrier because of its intuitive stimulation of eyes. Media are everywhere: billboards of the Internet, TV, mobile phone and bus stations, newspaper and all the other traditional and modern media. Wherever people go (like in the train, plane, car, ship, hotel, or on the pavement, mountain road, bike), the media always disseminate image information to them. It seems that every step we take will be followed by image information. Every time we turn on the computer and connect to the Internet, countless image information pours out of each web page. Computers are more like pumps than filters.

These image information is fragmented without logic links between them, which is exactly the same as those in the TV.

As a global electronic library, Internet gives everyone an equal opportunity to access image information; the emerging of Internet broadens the global cultural landscape and the world has become “flat”. Every Internet surfer can almost share the same image information which is no longer exclusive to a certain person or one certain society class.

1.3 The Overloading of Image Information Leads to Aesthetic Fatigue

The structure of human brains hasn’t changed much for 5000 years, but the amount of image information that human brains need to face the society has increased by thousands of times. Therefore, our talent to deal with image information cannot adapt to the rapid changes, choices and challenges of modern society. Countless image information makes human brain overload.

Two factors found culture’s consuming principles: One is people regarding the artworks as entertainment, and the other is the highly-developed commercial society. Under such consuming principles, artists are no longer purely art creators; they are more like producers and bring art into the industrial system, which is just as Benjamin said “modern art producers must carry out production according to the market requirements”. Cultural keynote of our times has fallen into public culture context, or the postmodern context which denies generality and universality and emphasizes particularity and difference. Because of the fast-paced life and working condition, people are compelled to consume their physical strength to the extreme; so they need to relax. Under social depression, people must strictly obey all the values of specific life situation, which makes the moral constraints become obstacles; but human nature tends to break such obstacles and satisfy their relative impulses to the largest extent. Therefore, people need visual stimulation to meet such needs. However, too much visual stimulation will make people insensitive to image and feel spiritual emptiness.

Firstly, the aesthetic activity is a process from the sensory stimulation to the spiritual enrichment. When all modern print media send too much visual information, the public hardly has enough time to enrich their spirits because of the image information’s instant and real-time feature. Therefore, those who are accustomed to digest “underlying meaning” surely feel aesthetic fatigue and spiritual emptiness.

Secondly, mechanical reproduction of traditional paintings has squeezed out the “charm”, which leads to form and pattern similarities. Thus, the public will feel monotony and aesthetic fatigue. Thirdly, the public is submerged by too much image information of all kinds sent by the Internet and their sense is always in

excitement, but excessive visual stimulation will cause sensual disorder. The information that our brain can handle in a certain period is limited, so too much image information brings fatigue.

Aesthetic fatigue for the image information makes people “less excited about image, have no strong sense of beauty, or even sick of the old and similarities”. Image information is updating at an amazing speed, and all the new image information seduces the public to renew their brains. The aesthetic fatigue caused by image information overloading results in distraction, which means the public cannot concentrate or concentrate for a long time. In this case, only the information with novel contents can attract people’s eyes.

As we can see from the above, the diversification of aesthetic taste, the leap of image information amount and the aesthetic fatigue have entered into people’s horizon of expectations, get integrated and become part of the “pre-understanding”. So new ideas emerge, which transform and reform the old horizon of expectations, change the whole understanding for paintings and develop new horizon of expectations. If art creation is still based on the old horizon of expectations, the public must feel “disappointed” because their expectations get satisfied. For instance, when a viewer expects one painting using realistic technique and this painting happens to be a realistic one, thus he will feel “disappointed” because his expectation gets fulfilled and this painting cannot bring him new ideas. On the contrary, if this viewer sees a painting that denies his horizon, he will have some new perspectives and expectations. Horizons’ realization, miscarriage and transformation can increase the public’s interest in paintings.

2. THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CHARM IN ARTWORKS AND AESTHETIC SHOCKS

Benjamin thought the most fundamental feature of art in the copying era is the disappearance of charm. Firstly, mechanical reproduction eliminates the uniqueness of the artworks. Thus painting masterpieces can be easily copied without limit, and their copies are seen and can be bought everywhere. However, replicas are only copies of non-original works. The disappearance of uniqueness means the whole experience brought by the uniqueness has transformed into thousands of individual experience. Because the replica is easy and cheap to get, the sanctity, reverence and affection for the artworks have also vanished. The charm of artworks exists not only in the structure and content, but also in the way that they are displayed to the public.

In the modern society, digital technology and Internet make it easier to replicate and spread, thus there is nowhere to find artworks’ charm. Nowadays the aesthetic reception is only for pastime. Audiences’ horizon of

expectations in the admiration of a painting is denied, which essentially is an aesthetic shock.

3. ADD THE DISTANCE BETWEEN ARTWORKS AND THE PUBLIC’S HORIZON OF EXPECTATIONS

Nowdays the public disregard authority and judge paintings freely with their own standards, which reflects the diversification of aesthetic taste. People’s interests become diverse and paintings’ viewers no longer exist as a group but as individuals. On the whole, the audiences’ horizon of expectations is getting more and more varied and complicated. Therefore, “novelty” is the basic content of the horizon of expectations for the paintings. This “novelty” creates an aesthetic distance between the horizon of expectations and paintings. Every time the reception of paintings occurs, it means the denial of previous experience; new experience generates new receptive consciousness, which causes the “horizons’ changes”. Jauss pointed out that

at the historical moment when a literary work was born, the first reader’s expectation horizon got satisfied, surpassed, disappointed and rejected, which apparently provides a standard to determine the work’s art value. The distance between the horizon of expectations and works, and the distance between the familiar aesthetic experience and “horizons’ change” needed for the reception of new works’ decides literary works’ art speciality. ((Jin, 1988, p.123)

The aesthetic distance makes the first reader feel surprised and pleased because of alienation and novelty, but as for the second reader the originality is already self-evident and has entered into his future horizons of aesthetic experience to become a familiar expectation. So the aesthetic distance that determines features of artworks no longer exist for the second reader.

Painters’ creation originates from life; in the “flat” world, painters and their audiences share information. So the aesthetic distance between paintings based on shared information and the horizon of expectations is reduced. It is much harder for the public to find surprising and pleasant factors in paintings, so the horizon of expectations keeps the same. As a result, such paintings are likely to be swallowed by the information tide without attracting the public’s attention.

Aesthetic fatigue for image information makes people “less excited about image, have no strong sense of beauty, or even sick of the old and similarities” (Feng, 1999, p.7). So only those information with innovative factors can catch people’s eyes. The painting belongs to the visual art. It used to be the main way for people to appreciate images when there were no photos, printings and Internet, but now it is in an awkward position due to the information tide. In the modern world, the appreciation of paintings is not entirely about meeting aesthetic needs, which must

provide visual stimulation. Art is closely related to the commercial, and the latter's ultimate purpose is profits. So novel and eye-catching factors must be made to maximize the profits. Paintings have to find ways to survive in the society where the public cannot concentrate owing to aesthetic fatigue.

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