

An Exploration of Aesthetic Thoughts in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844

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Abstract: Although the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 is not a complete discussion of beauty and aesthetics as a whole, Marx's work focuses on the practice of human production and explains the emergence of beauty in human labor, the rule of beauty that satisfies the "two dimensions", the disappearance of beauty due to the alienation of labor under the capitalist system of private ownership, and the realization of beauty in the communist society.

Keywords: Beauty; Alienation; Labor; Freedom

1. The emergence of beauty

Marx identified labor as the logical starting point for the birth of aesthetics from the perspective of materialism—"labor produces beauty".^[1] Beauty, which is the unity of subjectivity and objectivity, goes beyond the needs of human existence. And it is the attitude of human to freely treat the object of labor and the object of cognition. Human's aesthetic ability and aesthetic objects are generated and changed in historical practice. Firstly, labor creates man's aesthetic ability. The aesthetic ability is expressed in the aesthetic organs, which are manifested in the "ear with a sense of music" and the "eye that can feel the beauty of form". While the aesthetic ability of organs is generated and developed historically in labor practice, "the formation of the five senses is the product of all history so far." This history is also the history of labor. And "the human senses, the human nature of the senses, are produced by the existence of its objects, by humanized nature."^[2] So human feeling is gradually formed and developed in the practice of "humanized nature". Secondly, labor creates objects of beauty. The world of objects created by human's practice is both the object of human practice and the object of human cognitive and aesthetic object. Whether it is a natural object or a social object, it is in the long-term practice that gradually recognized and then becomes the aesthetic object of man. Natural objects that have been transformed by human labor practices, such as roads, ditches, parks and so on, are beautiful. While the natural objects that have not been transformed by human labor, such as the sunset, the sea, the mountains and so on, as the objects of human cognition, they are familiar to people in their long-term practice, can gradually become the aesthetic objects of people. Therefore, natural beauty is not decided by purely natural attribute, but closely related to human's practical life. Therefore, labor is fundamentally related to the creation of beauty, that is, beauty can be produced by human labor.

2. The rules of beauty

Marx put forward the "rule of beauty". To understand this concept, we should fully grasp "two dimensions". "Animals are constructed only according to the dimension and needs of the species to which they belong, but man knows how to produce according to the dimension of any species, and knows how to apply the inherent dimension to the object everywhere; therefore, man also constructs according to the rule of beauty."^[3] The "inherent dimension" should be understood in relation to Marx's statement in Capital about the essential difference between human's labor and animal's activity. "The activity of the spider resembles that of

the weaver, and the skill of the bee in building hives puts to shame many architects on earth. But what makes the craftiest architect superior to the deftest bee from the beginning is that he has built the hive in his own mind before he builds it with beeswax.” Before the architect builds the hive, he “has already built it in his own mind,”^[4] that is, the “inherent dimension”, the series of designed activities that the subject carries out in response to need. In this process of construction, man creates both according to his own needs and the “dimension of the species”, that is the inner regularity of the object. “One knows how to produce according to any dimension” emphasizes man’s discovery of rules. “Knowing how to apply the inherent dimension to the object everywhere”^[3] emphasizes man’s application of the rules. While the activity of animal, which is stimulated by the immediate needs of the flesh and produces according to the species, is an unconscious activity of life. In brief, the practice of man’s house-building is the unity of purposefulness and regularity, the unity of the dimension of the species and inherence, which is an ideal state of human activity. However, the perception of man’s inherent dimension is not man’s arbitrary need, but refers to man’s natural need. “This relation also shows to what extent the needs of man can be accordance with nature.”^[5] Only the needs that are in accordance with human’s nature can be correctly dealt with the relationship between man and nature. Then man can freely and aesthetically treat the objects of his labor.

3. The disappearance of beauty

In the capitalist system, beauty is the state of extinction. It manifests itself in practice as capitalism destroys beauty in the form of a fourfold alienation. First, capital destroys the beauty of the products of labor. The capitalists occupy the products of the worker’s labor, and the worker even has to buy the products of his own labor. And the more the worker creates, the more alien forces he produces to enslave himself. Theoretically, the subject can directly concern himself with his own essential power in the process of his labor to create a change in the world, and thus to achieve self-enjoyment. In reality, the products of labor don’t form an objective relationship with the laborer. And people are pushed to the opposite side of beauty - “deformed” and “stupid”. Secondly, capital destroys the beauty of the labor process. In capitalist society, labor is forced, external and negated. The capitalists take ownership of the material goods, which makes the worker forced to labor in order to survive. And workers don’t feel happy and free in their labor. They are in a state of physical and psychological suffering, not positive self-affirmation but negative self-denial. All that the worker can perceive in alienated labor is alienated, and he cannot feel the beauty of free labor. Thirdly, capital destroys the beauty of man’s generic nature. “workers’ own essence becomes a mere means of sustaining himself.” The sole purpose of the worker’s labor is to maintain the activity of life, which is obviously similar with that of an animal. The essence that belongs to man disappears. While Marx pointed out that “free conscious activity is precisely the generic identity of man.”^[3] Labor is the key to become human being, that is, his generic nature. This generic essence expressed as free conscious labor is not presented in a capitalist society. Fourth, capital destroys the beauty of man’s generic existence. In capitalist society, the relation of man to man is alienated relationship. On the one hand, it is expressed in the alienation of the laborer and the capitalist. The alienated labor of the worker produces “a relation to this labor by one who is alienated from it and stands outside of it.”^[7] The capitalist becomes the alienating force controlling the worker, who enslaves the worker’s labor. On the other hand, it is manifested in the alienation of the capitalists themselves. Under the coercion of desire, they take possession of the whole world of objects, while they themselves spend lavishly, without carrying out labor. The capitalist deviates from the real needs and becomes a slave of material wealth, detached from the man’s generic essence, so the capitalist is also in a state of alienation. In short, capitalist society is far from the beauty of human freedom and liberation in the form of fourfold alienation. Under capitalist private ownership, man is alienated from the world of his objects. And capitalist private ownership is the institutional root of the destruction of beauty.

4. The realization of beauty

The natural way to realize beauty is to redeem it from the yoke of capitalism. According to Marx, the redemption of beauty requires the elimination of capitalist private ownership and the positive renunciation of private property, thus the

restitution of man's essence can be achieved. This restitution is manifested in two ways. On the one hand, it is manifested in the "real resolution of the contradictions between man and nature, and between man and man."^[6] Only in a communist society can man truly eliminate his inorganic body, that is, nature, and thus achieve reconciliation between man and nature. Man conformed to his nature, and nature ceases to be opposed to man under alienated labor. It's "a true resurrection of nature."^[9] On the other hand, it is manifested as "the true resolution of the struggle between being and essence, objectification and self-confirmation, freedom and necessity, individual and class."^[6] The realization of beauty is the process of realizing the reversion of man's nature. And this reversion isn't a regression of history, but rather a liberation of man from his animal nature, to regain the richness of his senses and to become a complete human. Man corroborates his essential power, intuitively himself from it, affirms himself, enjoys and realizes beauty. The communist appropriation of man's essence "should not be understood as mere possession, ownership. Man appropriates his full essence in a comprehensive way, that is to say, as a complete man."^[8] So, the communist appropriation of man's essence is not one-sided but comprehensive. One-sided appropriation of man's essence will only plunge him into the whirlpool of deformed development, whereas comprehensive appropriation of man's essence can truly realize the full development of man's free personality. In fact, it is the possession of things by human's practice, which is consistent with the true needs of human nature and is capable of embodying the essence of human, realizing their self-pursuit, and promoting the free and comprehensive development. Ultimately, human can realize the beauty of true freedom and liberation.

5. Conclusion

Marx centered on the practice of human production, comprehensively explained the emergence of beauty, the rule of beauty, the disappearance of beauty, and the realization of beauty. From the view of the understanding of beauty and the development of aesthetics, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 is the foundation of the theoretical framework of Marxist theory on aesthetics, and also the cornerstone in the process of the construction and development of the theoretical system of aesthetics. At present, the continuous development of social practice, the people's aesthetic interests have also changed, which provides a realistic basis for the reconstruction of Marx's aesthetics. Therefore, the re-interpretation of the aesthetics in the manuscript has certain practical significance in constructing Marxist aesthetics with Chinese characteristics in contemporary times.

References:

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- [4] Marx, Capital, vol. 1, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2004, 208.
- [5] Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2014, 77.
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- [8] Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2014, 81.
- [9] Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2014, 79.