

Cultural Consumption in Contemporary Society and Popular Aesthetics: The Interplay between Commodification and Abstract Thinking

Jiaying Zhu *

School of journalism and communication, Hunan Normal University. Hunan, China

* Corresponding author Email: 18419787920@163.com

Abstract: The material manifestation of literary and artistic endeavors inherently assumes the character of commodities. In the contemporary landscape of cultural creation, a gradual shift is discernible towards the production of cultural commodities. Inasmuch as culture, when commodified, necessitates its entry into the marketplace, it becomes inexorably entwined with the stages of production, circulation, consumption, and distribution within that market milieu. To render cultural commodities consumable, it is imperative that their production caters to the predilections of the masses. However, if contemporary aesthetic cultural consumption remains unilaterally fixated on technicality, formalism, and emotional stimulation, it not only risks supplanting spiritual gratification with emotional catharsis but also, over the course of time, threatens to atrophy abstract reasoning faculties, thereby propelling human pursuits further towards irrationality.

Keywords: Consumption Pleasure; Aesthetic Culture; Cultural Production.

1. Introduction

The material embodiment of literary and artistic endeavors has inherently borne the characteristics of commodities. In the contemporary milieu, the landscape of cultural creation is undergoing a discernible transformation into the production of cultural commodities (Bertelsen, 1996). Given that culture, as a commodity, must permeate the marketplace, it invariably becomes embroiled in the phases of market dynamics: production, circulation, consumption, and distribution (Siwek, 2016). To ensure the consumability of cultural commodities, production must cater to the predilections of the broad swathes of consumers, particularly the most prevalent among them in China. The creators of culture are acutely aware of how to appeal to these consumers. Their chief strategy involves allowing consumers to experience a unique pleasure in cultural consumption. Consequently, cultural production sets sail with fervor and determination, boldly advancing into the territory teeming with coins, where the "pleasure of consumption" abounds. Today, amidst the cornucopia of the burgeoning cultural industry, "artistic creation" appears to undergo a metamorphosis. It adorns itself with vibrant cosmetics, dons robes riddled with parasites, and, in the guise of temptation and declarations of newfound freedom, transforms into a new type of courtesan, ensconced in an ivory tower, sipping on red wine. With the ever-increasing publicization of personal desires within the realm of consumption rituals, artistic aesthetics and reading gradually morph into a form of fashion, social engagement, and catharsis. This evolution has given rise to a litany of contemporary cultural maladies, proliferating at breakneck speed. The current study dare not claim that the "nails" and "wedges" of these cultural maladies can be genuinely extracted or removed. Addressing these maladies in contemporary Chinese society seems akin to a nurse with limited skills, even if she has identified the crux of the maladies, she remains hamstrung and powerless. Nonetheless, to grasp the maladies with precision, it is imperative to

understand the nature of the afflictions culture suffers from, such as narrative asthma, addiction to reading, and voyeuristic tendencies (Soper, 2000).

2. Desire as Commodity: The Multifaceted Dynamics of Cultural and Fashion Consumption

"Desire" constitutes a pivotal element within the realm of "pleasure," wielding a boundless, often enigmatic influence over the thoughts and behaviors of the masses. Human desires encompass a diverse spectrum, encompassing ideals, violence, and sexual passion, among others. When we speak of the sale of "ideals," notable examples abound, whether it be Zhang Guangtian's utilization of cultural icons to craft dramatic narratives or the youthful pursuit of freedom, individuality, and rebellion within the "rock culture." However, the quintessential exemplar of this phenomenon resides in Hollywood (Chase, 1991). As the paragon of contemporary aesthetic imagery and desire economics, Hollywood incessantly wholesales ideals. These ideals revolve around themes of success ("Forrest Gump," "The Godfather," "The Prestige"), warmth ("The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," "WALL-E," "Once Upon a Time in America"), or fame and fortune (the celebrity system manufacturing idolatry; Doss, 1991).

A profusion of stories meticulously shaped and celebrities immaculately packaged stirs the enthusiasm of Hollywood aficionados. Subconsciously, their ideals are commodified and transmuted into profit in the hands of Hollywood producers. Naturally, Hollywood doesn't limit itself to ideals alone; it indulges in visual violence ("The Fast and the Furious" series), psychological horror ("Hannibal"), and sexual desire and pleasure ("American Beauty"). It caters to every conceivable facet of human desire, effectively becoming a reservoir and factory for Hollywood to extract from and manufacture desires as raw materials, a wellspring that never runs dry. Hollywood is not the sole entity that

recognizes the potential of this factory. Zhang Yimou, for instance, discerns this and becomes a catalyst for desire and violence in his films like "Red Sorghum" and a symbol of authority and identity in "Curse of the Golden Flower." These resonate deeply with the essential fabric of Chinese rural society, rekindling the long-dormant passions of a people who have borne the weight of millennia of asceticism. With a deft touch, Zhang Yimou rekindles the flames of desire in Chinese rural society, illustrating that the human thirst for desire is universal (Ruitenbergh, 2014).

Numerous Chinese novelists have also explored this avenue, albeit more subtly. Works like "White Deer Plain," rich in symbols of bloodline violence, and "The Abandoned Capital," steeped in exchange of desires, are notable instances. "The Abandoned Capital" is a narrative masterpiece comprised of two key elements: the conscious thwarting of desire and the unconscious venting of desire. This narrative mechanism, characterized by its "organization of desires," adeptly shackles the audience to the author's intentions, unleashing the "Shaanxi Army" to march mightily through the literary terrain, straddling the realms of agricultural and commercial civilization, and delineating a unique literary landscape exclusive to Chinese society. The commodification of human desires does not halt at the sphere of literature and art but has extended its reach into the realm of fashion. In this domain, people's "voyeuristic desires" have found a market. The rise of lace fashion and "SM" attire provides a lens into the psyche of individuals who yearn for both the infliction and experience of pain. Modern fashion increasingly incorporates elements such as latex, corsets, arm cuffs, and whips, resonating with this evolving facet of human desire (Venkateswaran et al., 2019).

3. Illusions in Contemporary Culture: Concealed Pleasures and Deceptive Realities

"Illusions" have the capacity to induce pleasure, be it in the form of momentary indulgence or the satiation of one's yearning for transcendence. Undeniably, these affirming illusions have dwindled significantly within contemporary society. However, as humans, the thirst for illusions remains an intrinsic necessity (Miller, 2007). Consequently, such illusions shroud themselves beneath a discreet veil, transforming into an inconspicuous force, lurking within literature, cinema, and gaming, metamorphosing into the new-age opiates and hybrid enchantments, cloaked in the garb of culture. It is worth noting that the demographic most susceptible to these illusions comprises women (Stavrakakis, 2006). Li Shaohong astutely discerned this phenomenon and brought forth "The Red Oranges" to the silver screen. The series thrived in the marketplace with its robust, pragmatic idealism. Throughout the narrative, the scarlet oranges never seem to wither, the opulent furniture in the rooms perpetually resists aging, and youth and emotions appear eternally unfading, painting a utopian facade (Binkley & Littler, 2008).

However, reality dictates that rain-soaked oranges will inevitably rot, furniture and clothing will lose their luster within a couple of years, and relationships often take divergent trajectories. Hence, instead of labeling it as "aesthetic art," it is more apt to classify it as the "ecstasy of culture." Represented by "The Red Oranges," such soap operas erupted in popularity, manipulated by capital, harnessing the unique emotional bonds women have with

their families, and concealing the essence of "pleasure consumption" beneath the veneer of beauty and idealism, thereby consuming the viewers' time and emotions. Director Li Shaohong, in the minutiae of her film, has disseminated falsehoods. Indeed, within the marketplace, the act of disseminating falsehoods through illusions is an all too common occurrence. In the realm of literature, the embodiment of deception is exemplified by Wei Hui. Her writing is replete with fetishism and sexual allure. Take, for instance, "Shanghai Baby," where both the experiential veracity and the narrative style belie artifice, obscuring the grit of Chinese society, obliterating various real-life nuances, and showcasing an intoxicating world, detached from the practicalities of daily existence. Her novels undoubtedly serve as materialistic museums, readily inducing unrealistic materialistic illusions in the audience. The proliferation of symptoms related to cultural illusions, manifesting in diverse forms, such as using pseudo-details to obliterate authentic life details in prose, or virtual experiences devoid of physicality in games, seems to be an ongoing theatrical production that shows no signs of abating.

4. Class-Oriented Cultural Consumption: Theatrical Performance and the Social Performance of Status

In the contemporary urban cultural landscape, three distinct categories of cultural consumption emerge: public, class-based, and class-oriented consumption. Presently, "class-oriented consumption" enjoys particular popularity within certain intellectual and cultural circles. Forms such as dance drama ("Dreams in White"), café theater ("Visual Touch"), and political theater ("Che Guevara") have made their debut, with the names of Zhang Guangtian and Meng Jinghui gradually gaining recognition among the general populace. In this era, it appears that one's cultural standing is not complete without attending a theater performance or experiencing a musical production. Those who ardently pursue such dramas are deemed discerning individuals. There are also those who mobilize to prove their "cultural elite" status, acquiring high-priced tickets after a show becomes a sensation and feigning knowledge or appreciation as they attend these plays and musicals (Brown & Vergragt, 2016). They anesthetize themselves, deriving a euphoria akin to opiate consumption from the joy of being perceived as "cultured individuals." This concept of a "cultural hierarchy" finds its foremost urban representative in Shanghai. The consumption habits of Shanghai's denizens are intriguing (Throsby, 1994). Though frugality and resistance to excessive spending are inherent traits, they have ingeniously transformed "consumption" into a form of "performance" to accentuate their identity as "cultural elites." (Bartolovich, 1998)

In Shanghai, it seems as though everyone lives under the scrutiny of the "Citizens' Fine Reading Law." Following being judged by others, they, in turn, become the judges, seamlessly weaving the concepts of social hierarchy and status into every action and breath of daily life. The graduation project of Zou Yaqi from the China Central Academy of Fine Arts reveals the enigma of this societal structure. She adorned herself in exquisite makeup, carried a high-quality imitation Hermès bag, and frequented various upscale establishments for 21 consecutive days. Not only did she not spend a single penny, but the staff also continuously

treated her to food and drinks or offered small gifts from branded stores (Tratnik, 2021). Under the "Citizens' Fine Reading Law," Zou Yaqi was interpreted as a young socialite and cultured individual. This societal rule transforms cultural consumption into a subtle form of class oppression, gradually compelling those burdened by status anxiety to assume an identity that does not truly belong to them. Fashion, it appears, is a societal conspiracy. What individuals with status use becomes what's in vogue in society. Everyone seeks to elevate their social standing, thus "fashion" emerges. Fashion is revered akin to a religion, where individuals increasingly associate wealth and status with a divine order, and subscribing to fashion becomes an outward form of worshipping the new deity (Chatterjee, 1987).

5. Conclusion

As a commercialized form of aesthetic contemplation and appreciation, the act and manner of aesthetic cultural consumption are centered on the pursuit and enjoyment of pleasure. Contemporary consumers emphasize self-gratification, emotional self-selection, and the market dynamics of the commodity economy, which are driving a transformation in aesthetic cultural consumption (Whiteley, 1987). The pursuit of pleasure in aesthetic cultural consumption stems from human sensual desires for aesthetics and is intricately connected to aesthetics as a field of study. The practice of contemporary aesthetic cultural consumption indicates that the pursuit of pleasure in this domain fulfills certain gaps in the personality needs of consumers and propels them toward higher value demands beyond mere survival. In an era where culture is commodified, "culture" is no longer a purely cultural entity; it has become a slave to desire, a puppet of illusion, and a form of identity worship (Nava, 1991). If contemporary aesthetic cultural consumption were to solely chase technological advancements, formalism, and emotional stimulation, it not only risks substituting emotional catharsis for spiritual satisfaction but also runs the risk of atrophying abstract thinking and steering human pursuits towards irrationality. Therefore, the essential question for contemporary aesthetic cultural research lies in how to organically integrate technology and art and imbue the pleasure experience of aesthetic cultural consumption with more value and spiritual direction. This challenge represents a vital and ongoing endeavor in the realm of aesthetic cultural studies (Assadourian, 2010).

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