

The Interpretation of Aesthetic Capitalism in the Age of New Media

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Abstract: Aesthetic capitalism, which stems from the Frankfurt School's theory of the cultural industry, is profoundly revealing. Through social media, fashion trends, weight loss and slimming have become popular topics across age and culture, especially among women. People are setting more minute and demanding aesthetic standards for clothing, lifestyle products, and even their own bodies. As the public receives new aesthetic culture, new aesthetic demands are created, which in turn allows the industry to create a new wave of aesthetic consumption. This article aims to analyze how aesthetic capitalism runs through consumers' daily life in general, and the trend it shows when integrated with social media or new media. In order to examine changes throughout Aesthetic capitalism of the consumer market, this paper entails multiple essays on aesthetic capitalism and cultural industry, written by professors from China and other countries, which provides the article a bigger picture. The analysis indicates a general characteristics of aesthetic capitalism under the development of new media such as globalization, industrialized production and sensory pleasure. The paper also discusses phenomenon arising from such characteristics. However, the findings need a further quantified data to examine.

Keywords: aesthetic capitalism, influencer, cultural industry, new media

1. Introduction

From the very beginning, the development of Western modernity, or the development of the capitalist mode of production, has been closely related to aesthetic tastes and desires. Western philosophers and economists tried to analyze the complex relationship between aesthetics and the capitalist mode of production, and to find a way to liberate modernity from aesthetic freedom. From Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments to Rousseau's On Science and Art, Marx, Benjamin, and Daniel Bell, they all offered their own interpretations of the relationship between aesthetics, aesthetics and production from their different fields of expertise. Olivier Assouly, the author of Aesthetic Capitalism, is a renowned scholar of branding and consumer culture. In this book, he focuses on the characteristics of aesthetic capitalism in the advanced stage of capitalist society. At a time when aesthetic consumption has become a common social phenomenon, the author discusses the connection between aesthetic taste and capital production. He illustrates the transformation of the aesthetic element into a driving force of production and economic development by tracing the history of capitalism. At the same time, Olivier brings his professional expertise to analyze how major companies invest in

transmitting and disseminating emotions and pleasures to stimulate or sustain consumption through aesthetic marketing.

In China, research on the specificity of aesthetics actually predates the West. However, very few philosophers or economists in China discuss the relationship between aesthetics, taste, and social production and consumption. Famous aesthetic researchers such as Wang Guowei and Cai Yuanpei often adopted a negative, even resistant attitude to the concepts of fashion and consumption, which can be defective in the present time when aesthetic consumption production has entered people's lives in all aspects. Aesthetic capitalism is a fact that exists not only in Western societies but also in China. Only after rationally confronting and discussing aesthetic capitalism can it be properly criticized and find a way to liberate aesthetic freedom and productivity.

In addition, the advent of new media makes it easy to consume. For example, when seeing a blogger's Tweet on social media, customers click on it, if they like, then click on the link below to make a purchase. This has led to a deeper and more comprehensive infiltration of other people's opinions and visual aesthetic elements, as well as a new context for discussing the theory of aesthetic capitalism. However, there are few works on aesthetic capitalism in the new media era, and the theory has some reference value in the current consumer society, so the author decides to make his own analysis of the phenomenon of aesthetic capitalism entering the new media era. Based on Olivier Assouly's *Aesthetic Capitalism*, this article will refer to previous academic papers on the theory of aesthetic capitalism, consumer society, and the society of spectacles for analysis, as well as the current new media landscape for comparison, and summarize the phenomenon of aesthetic capitalism in the present.

2. The Characteristics of Aesthetic Capitalism under the Development of New Media

2.1. Trend of Globalization under Media Development

Aesthetic capitalism as an academic concept under the industrial theory of culture is mostly discussed in pre-industrial and industrial societies, that is, in the period when the Dialectic of Enlightenment was written. At that time, the industrial society in which the Frankfurt School proposed the industrial theory of culture was dominated by machine technology, and the medium of communication was limited to the press, radio and television. In today's society, however, thanks to the Internet, the speed and scale of information collection and dissemination have reached unprecedented levels, and Global information exchange and interaction have been realized [1]. As a result, cultural communication also presents the phenomenon of information explosion: the amount of information in this era is constantly increasing, growing at a geometric level, and the amount of information is growing much faster than human comprehension, pouring into human life in all directions. Therefore, social production has entered the post-industrial society, which is based on and characterized by the information economy and immateriality. This means that cultural issues have become a central issue [2]. The new media trends presented by today's digital development have changed the previous mode of cultural communication in industrial society, and information such as cultural content is no longer delivered to the audience in one direction by traditional media. Audiences can actively make their voices heard and access information through media platforms. Therefore, information interaction in the new media era is a two-way or even complex interaction mode. This confirms Benjamin's view that "new technology is the force of social innovation, a force that primarily provides the masses with greater opportunities for participation [3]." Popular culture has been able to achieve partial liberation and democracy.

Along with the circulation of globalized industrial trade, the cultural industry has become globalized and is called the global cultural industry [4]. The public is a category of impersonal communication with a certain frequency and regularity, resulting in a kind of solidarity and unity.

Under the influence of the global culture industry, the public can receive the same aesthetic propaganda, and aesthetic capitalism can be spread worldwide.

2.2. Aesthetically Generated Pleasure to Industrialized Production to Mass Daily Consumption

Aesthetics and taste were originally tools the aristocracy used to manifest their social status in feudal society. With the liberation of the productive forces, the space for aesthetic freedom was opened up and the masses were included in the scope of the subject of appreciating aesthetics. They were able to enjoy themselves and derive pleasure from appreciating it. The traditional capitalist market usually expands the material demand for commodities to the point of cyclical and regular exhaustion. Art is exactly the opposite of regularity, projecting art onto objects, thus acquiring aesthetic uniqueness. For the consumer, the artifact has functional characteristics and the ability to satisfy aesthetic desires. This, therefore, breaks the boundaries of traditional industry.

Any kind of product that can evoke a sense of pleasure can be considered a luxury [5]. The pleasure that matter brings to people focuses on desires while satisfying needs, creating a new demand for industrial production motivated by aesthetics and taste. The taste needs to be recognized by the general public. The transformation of aesthetic pleasure into a form of daily consumption relies on the existing aesthetic standards recognized and accepted by the general public. The recent intense and rapid development of mediated societies and the technological iterations of cultural vehicles have led to a series of academic and standardized scenarios of aesthetics on a global scale through opinion leaders who hold the power of discourse. As Adorno notes in his theory of the cultural industry, standardized production is achieved through technological innovation [4]. Industry satisfies the everyday aesthetic imagination of the masses by creating a product that conforms to people's aesthetics, standardized style for mass, and uniform production.

2.3. Sensory Pleasure Accelerates the Iteration of Aesthetic Taste

Adorno used film as an example to explain the phenomenon of ideological manipulation in the cultural industry. When people watch movies, they unconsciously treat the movie world as a continuation of the real world and then judge the real world by the movies. This rapid visual reaction automatically shapes the consumer's aesthetic experience without much thought. Aesthetics are transmitted to the audience through the senses, resulting in mental pleasure. The market of the cultural industry uses this logic to create cultural products that are functionally subordinated to form, that is, many seemingly different but identical goods simply for the audience's pleasure. For such products not to be boring but sought after by the public, a precondition is required: the stimulation of the creation of an aesthetic taste that recognizes that it has no permanence in itself [5]. Key opinion leaders break old aesthetics and lead to the creation of new ones, which can spread widely and quickly with the help of cultural vehicles, especially in the case of everyday consumer goods such as clothing, whose low value and high consumption characteristics accelerate the renewal of aesthetic tastes. Today, the involvement of social media platforms has expanded the influence of clothing fashion from a niche group to a whole society and even globally. Each trend change will trigger a new wave of consumption in the apparel industry. For example, fast fashion brands such as H&M and ZARA have risen to the top of the apparel market by offering consumers frequent novelties in the form of low-cost, trendy products. Fast fashion clothing is often produced at an accelerated pace to respond to trends. The lack of time for production often makes fast-fashion clothing fragile and difficult to achieve sustainability. The emergence of fast fashion has increased the total amount of clothing consumed by the public. On a per capita basis, fiber production was 7.6 kg/person in 1995, while this figure rose to 13.8 kg/person in 2018, an increase of 82% (47% increase from 2000 to 2018) [6].

3. Aesthetic Consumption Phenomenon in the New Media Era

3.1. Pan-aestheticization of Daily Life

Before the arrival of new media, Jean Baudrillard has already linked aestheticization and editorialization. He considered it would be the main promoter of the aestheticization of everyday life [7]. Digital media combine sound, image, and text, and the proposed trio of forms triggers more stimulation, experience, and enjoyment of the audience's senses. In the process, a large number of images proliferate, and all kinds of symbols and images turbulently flood and thus penetrate into the organization of daily life, where they finally realize the aestheticization of reality. The boundary between reality and fiction is constantly blurred to the extent that everyday life enters the image and thus loses its actual existence [7]. The overly saturated Internet (accumulation of knowledge, information, and power) and highly saturated media have led to a "spectacle phenomenon" society: a consumer-oriented society in which aesthetics and other means stimulate human desires and are trapped in a cycle of material and spiritual consumption.

In this kind of consumption in the Internet spectacles, aesthetics, a trigger for consumption, appear as a pan-aesthetic form without depth, whose main characteristics are style, appearance, form, decoration, and the dominance of feeling [8]. Taking clothing as an example, there is no doubt about the necessity of clothing as an everyday item. But nowadays, when resource sustainability is advocated, clothing is purchased and consumed much more frequently each year than the range of living needs of the masses. Moreover, many people will browse and receive fashion clothing styling and celebrities wearing styles on new media, then make clothing purchases. Due to the current Internet spectacles and aesthetic updates, even tiny differences in appearance can also contribute to the consumption behavior of the general public. This is precisely the result of the combination of pan-aestheticization and pleasure consumption: in a business system based on the awakening of consumer desire and the iteration of commodity renewal, destructible objects have a special value that can reignite consumption behavior and contribute to a faster pace of consumption [9].

3.2. Opinions Become the Aesthetic Authority

In Tald's theory of the public, he argues that the authority of society consists of three aspects: opinion, tradition, and judgment.[5] In the period of feudal society, tradition was the main influencing factor, meaning that the established secular regulated the behavior and thinking of the masses. In an industrial society, where productivity is liberated, the masses can make their own judgments and view public opinion with rational cognition acquired through education. While in the present time, traditional media, self-media, and even grassroots media are rapidly striving to occupy the high ground of public opinion, public opinion is transient and unstable. At the same time, as the desire for consumption expands and the means of communication increase, the weight of opinions is gradually increasing and even holds the scales of public authority.

On social media such as Instagram, people can clearly see the number of clicks and reads of a message posted by bloggers with millions of followers. These celebrities combine business with their own lives, consciously or unconsciously sharing their opinions or attitudes to promote the business. Many followers learn about the brand from their posts and even make purchases out of trust in the blogger. A new study published by Oberlo shows that about 49% of customers consider the advice and opinions of social media influencers when making a purchase decision [10]. At the same time, influencers with a high level of appeal are more likely to influence the purchase intentions of their followers [10].

3.3. Identity and Image Symbolic Value

Taste is built on the intervention of the eyes of others. Since a person's identity is validated through social interaction, the objects displayed to outsiders can be seen as an extension of the owner's "self," revealing the owner's identity. Fashion, for example, relies on a cultural mechanism that shapes self-identity. Only when the aesthetic culture can become a consumer good is the individual given the right to choose his or her own culture, that is, the right to choose fashion. In the past, fashion was associated with the upper class and privileged groups, representing noble social status. However, the cultural industry has turned culture into a commodity, and the masses have achieved cultural freedom through the autonomy of consumption, obtaining the power of self-improvement, development and identity in consumption. At the same time, taste intervenes in the choice of cultural commodities to satisfy the cultural interests of the public. And the choice of interests becomes the basis of social relations between individuals and others, through which people position themselves and are positioned by others [11]. For example, on social media platforms, various fashion trendsetters post pictures and videos to show their attitudes and the mainstream culture or subcultural groups they represent to netizens, and use them to find a social circle of like-minded people.

In addition, one's aesthetic consumption represents one's identity symbols to a certain extent. Popular culture has not been able to eliminate social differences or inequalities, and behind aesthetic consumption is a struggle for monetary power. Many people are willing to spend much money on luxury brands of expensive clothes, hoping that the clothes they wear will make others classify them in a higher social status. At this point, customers buy cultural products not only for their utility value or function but also (and especially) for the meaning attached to them, such as the brand value behind luxury goods. The symbols and meanings of products are ultimately constructed through semiotics, reflecting market culture's value [12]. In addition to money and status, people want to show their unique aesthetic style through consumption, emphasizing their one-of-a-kind. This allows them to open up new aesthetics and establish new rules. The symbolic value of such an image lies in the innovation opening the door to aesthetic freedom, thus attracting a large number of followers and gaining the right to speak in the cultural field itself, then again creating commercial value. This kind of logic is fully experienced by social media fashion bloggers.

4. Discussion

As a relative concept, new media refers to a new mode of communication in which digital technology is applied to communication media. Under the application of the binary text, a symbolic and image-based virtual space is constructed, and the boundary between virtual and reality is gradually dissolved. The visualization and symbolization of information production and transmission in virtual space reshape the production and dissemination of new ideologies. Cyberspace has become the territory of consumerist values and communication. In cyberspace, where information and digital images "implode," the media help reconstruct reality through models and generalize the aesthetics of everyday life. Take a recent example, under the influence of mass media visuals, fashion is not just an aesthetic concept, but the result of a chain of industrial, economic, cultural and aesthetic activities. Social media is full of "fashion inspirations" that satisfy the individuality, difference and variation of people's aesthetic desires, but at the same time, are an imitation and extension of established patterns. Nowadays "body" (especially the female body) gradually becomes part of fashion trends. Nearly all parts of the female body are disseminated in digital images, from clothing to makeup to structure, into the realm of fashion norms. A copy of images and concepts such as "A4 waist" (waist wide can be covered by an A4 paper) have been widely disseminated through the media. This later helps to establish aesthetic standards, thus making the female body a referential symbol in consumer society. The female body became both a consumer product and a subject of consumption. This was

accompanied by the creation of a uniformity and pattern in the aesthetics of the body, as well as a sense of anxiety when facing bodily differences.

Through the diffusion of aesthetic interest, which in turn has triggered the production and preparation of the aesthetic industry's imagination, advanced societies are increasingly entering a phase that seems to be dominated by aesthetics [12]. Aesthetic consumption, which is dominated by sensory and emotional pleasure, requires new media technologies that stimulate human sensory capacities to improve the market's abstraction and flexibility. This completely integrates aesthetics into the production process of general goods and involves the proliferation of aesthetics in everyday life for every person and every object.

From the perspective of the individual, every aspect of life and every object is subject to certain aesthetic tastes and standards. Aesthetic marketing based on the industrial production model gradually extends to one's life and culture. The development of new media technology has accelerated the frequency and scale of aesthetic renewal and iteration. At the same time, a great deal of aesthetic propaganda for the purpose of capitalist production has been transferred to the daily information reception of individuals through social media, such as opinion leaders collaborating with brands to promote, celebrities leading new fashion trends, and hired "netizens" use the same tone of voice to tout and hype. The radical culture industry has created "dummies" that are no different from natural people, whose authenticity and hidden ideology can no longer be discernible by the naked eye. Society is increasingly becoming a network of consciousness, and human initiative and individuality are gradually being buried [5]. Through the advantages of the new media, the opinions of those with a voice in society are highlighted and consensus is reached, while the few who hold opposing views are ignored. People begin to feel disoriented and even puzzled by dissenting opinions. For example, in the case of body aesthetics mentioned in the previous paragraph, if a person whose body does not meet or is far from meeting popular standards thinks he has a beautiful body and feels confident about it, he may make people around him feel puzzled and confused.

Theories of the cultural industry and the concept of aesthetic capitalism are often thought of as political theories with a strong critical consciousness. In fact, Adorno's elaboration simultaneously shows the hope of finding the answer to aesthetic freedom and freedom of expression in mass culture itself by relying on technological progress. The new media era has accelerated the spread of aesthetic capitalism while at the same time giving the general public a platform to speak out and an opportunity to lead a revolution in individuality and aesthetics. For example, social media has sparked a debate on the above-mentioned phenomenon of "body consumption" and "beauty service," and people are discussing whether the harshness of women's bodies and the culture of body consumption are justified. As a result, there is a trend of reversal of the phenomenon of alienated consumption.

5. Conclusion

Today, cultural industrial theory and even aesthetic capitalism are considered by many to be elite cultural theories. There is a tendency to think of cultural-industrial theory and aesthetic capitalism one-sidedly as political-ideological critical theory, ignoring the insights of Frankfurt School scholars such as Benjamin on mass culture in the production economy. The insights of Adorno and others on the production and consumption of cultural and aesthetic elements are all evident in today's consumer society. Therefore, by re-examining and confronting the theory of aesthetic capitalism, we can better understand the motives and behaviors of consumers towards fashion and popular culture. While synthesizing the phenomenon and rationality of aesthetic capitalism at the real level, this paper explores the characteristics embodied in the new media era, especially social media, and further explains its significance in the new context. Even though the theory of cultural industry has been regarded as a cutting-edge theory in the field of mass culture research with a certain prescience, the explosion of information growth and cultural renewal iterations fueled by new media urgently

requires the theory in this field to follow the development of the times. The future theory of aesthetic capitalism in the new social changes may be able to develop a new theoretical discourse and criticality on aesthetic consumption in the new media era under the development of theory.

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