

# ***American Consumer Culture as Reflected in Andy Warhol's "Marilyn Monroe" and "Green Coca-Cola Bottle"***

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**Abstract:** Andy Warhol was in an extremely prosperous post-World War II United States when Pop Art was flourishing in America, when art was becoming civilianized and began to focus on the daily lives of the public. Andy Warhol was keenly aware of the effects that consumer society brought to the mass culture and he brought the commodities and elements used by the masses into Pop Art, such as “Green Coca-Cola Bottle” and “Marilyn Monroe” which concentrated and distinctly embodied the cultural characteristics of the consumerist. This paper applied *The Consumer Society* written by Jean Baudrillard to argue the consumer culture reflected in two of Andy Warhol's classic paintings, namely “Green Coca-Cola Bottle” and “Marilyn Monroe”. The former reflected the state of consumption-controlled production in America, while the latter reflected the emergence of the consumer protagonist as the new concern of popular culture, the rise of mass media and the frenzied pursuit of consumer symbols. Lastly the inspiration he brought to us that is to provide an in-depth and well-reasoned understanding for the consumer culture reflected in Warhol's paintings and the implications for modern consumer society and contemporary art.

**Keywords:** Andy Warhol, “Green Coca-Cola Bottle”, “Marilyn Monroe”, consumer culture, Jean Baudrillard.

## **1. Introduction**

Andy Warhol was in an era of consumerism when the American economy was extremely prosperous, when Pop Art was flourishing in America, when art was becoming civilianized and began to focus on the daily lives of the public. Andy Warhol was keenly aware of the effects that consumer society brought to the mass culture and he brought the commodities and elements used by the masses into Pop Art, such as “Green Coca-Cola Bottle” and “Marilyn Monroe” which concentrated and distinctly embodied the cultural characteristics of the consumerist. Jean Baudrillard deeply analyzed the consumer culture of 20th century in America and Western society in *The Consumer Society* by depicting the transformation of the identity of commodity, the rise of the consumer symbol, the changing relationship between production and consumption, people's consciousness of consumption, the mass media and so on. Baudrillard's enlightening language is useful for understanding the consumer era and Andy Warhol's work.

Much of the literature on Andy Warhol focused on his artistic characteristics, depicting his great influence on Pop Art and his various artistic achievements. But fewer articles were written to analyze the consumer culture reflected in his paintings. For example, “Andy Warhol and Pop Art” written

by Jin Baoliang that only talked about Warhol's pop art. And not many articles chose to use Baudrillard's theory of consumer society. Like "A Mirror of American Reality : Trying to discuss Andy Warhol's Art" written by Yan Zhen discussed the critique of American consumer society embodied in Warhol's paintings but did not use anyone's theory to explain it. In this context, this paper applied the consumer society written by Jean Baudrillard to argue the consumer culture reflected in Andy Warhol's two paintings, and the inspiration he brought to us.

This paper will be divided into two parts. The first part will analyze one of Andy Warhol's classic paintings, namely "Green Coca-Cola Bottle". And references will be made to post-World War II American society when consumerism permeated all aspects of people's lives and had a great influence on Andy Warhol's art. Then applying Baudrillard's theory of consumption controlling production to help fully understand the context and inspiration for his work. The second part will discuss "Marilyn Monroe" painted by Andy Warhol in the 1970s. Then Baudrillard's theory of the transformation of the protagonist of mass culture, the mass media, and the symbol of consumption will be applied to further analyze the consumer culture reflected in this painting.

## **2. Analysis of Pop Art's Background and Consumption-Controlled Production Reflects in "Green Coca-Cola Bottle"**

The word "pop" comes from the abbreviation of "Popular", which means popular and public art. With the help of mass media, the art form uses popular cultural symbols in art, using mechanical reproduction or rendering to ironize its clichéd elements. Andy Warhol was a leading figure in the American visual arts movement and Pop Art, and is considered the original representative and most revolutionary artist of Pop Art [1]. Pop Art is well integrated with American consumer society, and understanding Pop Art is also a major focus of understanding Andy Warhol's work.e.

### **2.1. The Background of the Era in which American Pop Art Emerged**

In the 1940s, Pollock's abstract expressionism was very popular and became the new favorite art of the elite, but the abstract paintings were meant to express the artist's strong emotions, and sometimes even the artists themselves were not sure why they wanted to do the paintings, not to mention whether the general public could understand them. Undoubtedly, this led to a huge disconnection between the public and art. While the 1950s saw the rapid development of the American economy, After the Second World War, America had a great development. Its economic power grew dramatically; the foreign trade was strengthened and military power, as well as science and technology advanced by leaps and bounds, making America the most powerful country in the world at that time. People's life has been improved and become more colorful. With the growing openness of social concepts and the development of the civil rights movement, the mainstream culture in America began to show the characteristics of harmony and toleration. American culture of traditional values changed and modern consumption concepts were formed. Before the formation of the consumer society, American believed in Puritanism which emphasized hard work for prosperity, frugality, and rationality. While economic growth and the stimulation of consumption motivated Americans to turn to hedonism and the promotion of consumerism. The new consumerism considered that individual success must be reflected by the amount of money. And purchasing power is an important index of social position [2]. Relaxing social environment allowed artists to free their personalities to whatever extend they wished. As a result, the mass, accessible and innovative Pop Art gradually became popular with the public and flourished in the United States. Pop art explored the correlation between popular culture and art, endowing the most common things in daily life with artistic value and reflecting the cultural concept,

consumerism and anti-traditional aesthetic ideology of the young generation in Europe and America at that time.

## 2.2. Consumption-controlled Production Reflects in “Green Coca-Cola Bottle”

By the 1960s, Andy Warhol made a significant change in style by moving from commercial illustration to pure art. He made great contributions to the development of American pop art, of which he is the most influential and representative artist. His works concealed the artist's personality and skills. He fused daily life with art creation to show more symbolism and commercialism. These works coincided with the prevailing consumerism of the society at that time and formed his distinctive "Warhol Style". Warhol once stated, "I think my goal is to search for the epic in daily objects" [3]. He abandoned the narrative of the picture and the formality of the spread. Instead, he recorded the life he saw around him through the most simple way. For example, in his work "Green Coca-Cola Bottles," an oil on canvas created in 1962, Warhol chose the standard Coca-Cola packaging bottles that were readily available at the time. He painstakingly duplicated identical green bottles in rows on a 208.9 cm x 144.7 cm canvas, making viewers feel like being overwhelmed by a wall of bottles that gave them a strong artistic shock. Though the viewers felt a strong visual impact, that was all. Next, the viewers would feel that the painting had no meaning and felt no emotion.

Mechanically reproduced bottles are like the mass-produced industrial products in people's life. The development of mechanization and automation has disturbed the original order of human life and natural environment. Everything natural is destroyed artificially. From the production and dissemination of designed commodities to human life defined by them, people could not avoid and could not choose. As Baudrillard claimed: "The initiative is supposed to lie with the consumer and to impact back through the market, on the manufacturers. In this new case, by contrast the manufacturers control market behaviour and guide and model social attitudes and needs. This is, at least tendentially the total dictatorship of the order of production" [4]. It meant that production enterprises would increase the exposure of their products through mass industrial production, then make them come into prominence through extensive advertising and merchandising. People thought they chose what to consume, but actually, all decisions were manipulated by the enterprises, star advertisements and marketing strategies. Duplication effectively reduced the cost of art and shortened the cycle of Warhol's creation, enabling his works to enter the art market quickly. The method was well suited to the fast-paced lifestyle of consumerism.

He once stated, "I paint the way I do because I want to be a machine, and I feel that I do the work as a machine does. That's exactly what I need." On one hand, he called his studio a "Factory" and made himself look like a sick man to show the numbness of workers who works continuously like a machine [5]; on the other hand, he operated the machine in a unique way and he gathered all kinds of artistic talents to create art together to achieve his Pop Art purpose, which aimed to replace the traditional, profound, elite and unique with a new generation of artistic values into the mechanical, realistic, repetitive and popular. Samuel Adoms Green once declared, "His pictorial language consists of stereotypes. Not until our time has a culture known so many commodities which are absolutely impersonal, machine-made, and untouched by human hands. Warhol's art uses the visual strength and vitality which are the time-tested skills of the world of advertising that cares more for the container than the thing contained" [6]. That is to say, Warhol's art conformed to consumer society and subverted the traditional artistic creation and aesthetics. He replaced unintelligible abstract expressions with explicit figurative ones, ending the domination of Western art by the very pioneering abstract art of the time, and eliminating the sacred glow of art, together with shortening the estrangement between the public and art.

### **3. Analysis of the Mass Media and the Symbol of Consumption Reflects in “Marilyn Monroe”**

“Marilyn Monroe” , one of Andy Warhol's most representative works, is also closely associated with consumer society. The painting is linked to all aspects of consumer culture from its creation to its exposure. Monroe was the most famous American pop star at the time, and Warhol used her to draw attention to his work by using celebrity art and repeatedly promoting it through the mass media, creating an artistic symbol of "Andy Warhol". The following paragraphs will use Baudrillard's theory of consumer society to deeply analyze the consumer culture reflects in “Marilyn Monroe” .

#### **3.1. The Transformation of the Protagonist of Mass Culture Reflects in “Marilyn Monroe”**

Duplication and repetition are the most distinctive features of Andy Warhol's Pop Art works. However, "repetition" is different from the "duplication" like he used in "The Green Coca-Cola Bottle", for repetition is not invariable, but omnipresent. The process of repetition is change, repetition is "change". A single thing do not change, nor do it develop and innovate [7]. Warhol created "Marilyn Monroe" by the art of repetition. In "Marilyn Monroe," Warhol used the technique of screen printing to repeat the portraits, varying the hue and composition to drown Monroe in a patchwork of color chips. He chose Monroe as his material simply because she was an influential American pop star at the time who was a representative of American pop culture, and the kind of figure that popular culture pursued as glamorous and luxurious life. Baudrillard once mentioned that in his book:

In the West, at least, the impassioned biographies of heroes of production are everywhere giving way today to biographies of heroes of consumption. The great exemplary lives of self-made men and founders, pioneers, explorers and colonizers, which succeeded those of saints and historical figures, have today given way to the lives of movie stars, sporting or gambling heroes, of a handful of gilded princes or globe-trotting barons-in a word, the lives of great wastrels (even if the imperative is often that they be shown, by contrast, in their daily ‘simplicity’ doing their shopping, etc.). With all these great dinosaurs who fill the magazines and TV programmes, it is always the excessiveness of their lives, the potential for outrageous expenditure that is exalted [4].

Traditional works of art aspired to use sophisticated and exquisite techniques to record significant historical events, and the subjects of portraits were often among the elite or the great men of history. While art nowadays no longer dwells on cumulative artistic skills, the objects of its concern have also become entertainment-related celebrities, who are the high-spenders living in luxury and called “the biographies of heroes of consumption” by Baudrillard. Also, "the lives of great wastrels" are of great interest to the public in consumer society and are wildly followed. Warhol specifically chose to work on these popular issues, whether they were celebrities or politicians and social events, as they were familiar to the general public and easily interested them. He believed that as long as the subject matter is well known to the public, it is the best subject matter for artistic creation [8].

#### **3.2. The Mass Media and the Symbol of Consumption Reflects in “Marilyn Monroe”**

But such a remarkable group of celebrities, such as Marilyn Monroe, was only an artistic symbol in Warhol's work. The portrait of Marilyn Monroe chosen by Warhol was a still from her film "Niagara Falls," which presented her as a sexy movie star rather than the real-life Marilyn Monroe. More importantly, her sexy and lovely on-screen personas were also created by the capitalists to cater to the public. Neither Warhol's art nor the Monroe in the movies was the real her. In the age of consumerism, we find new celebrities in mass media such as TV, the internet, magazines and newspapers every day. The reasons why they appear in the media have become so varied that the line

between artists, stars and entertainers has become increasingly blurred. People began to confuse the on-screen personas shaped by the stars with their real life. Marilyn Monroe was no longer only a real individual in reality. She has become an image, a commodity symbol, which was real when the image and symbol were blown up out of all proportion by the mass media, but objectively unreal. Because her image has been stripped of its true meaning and has become homogeneous with other objects, it can also be substituted for them. This was also reflected in "Marilyn Monroe" created by Warhol. Monroe has lost her own personality and become an artistic symbol that Warhol designed; a work of art and a consumer product that can be bought and sold. Warhol stated himself that the way he saw Monroe was no different from anyone else. So there is no essential difference between Coca-Cola bottles and Monroe, only the difference in the public's emotions. Baudrillard noted that the phenomenon of "repetition" in consumer products has become a magic spell that has a firm grip on consumers' minds, brainwashing their consciousness through constant repetition, and even after they realize it, they are powerless to resist it. This was exactly what the American consumer society looked like. The mass media repeated the same news over and over again every day. They appeared on top of all the major media at the same time, competing to occupy the dominant position. "The monotony and boredom of Andy Warhol's repetition precisely transmitted the feeling of indifference, emptiness and mechanical repetition in highly developed commercial civilization of our time[9]." It also exposed that people are being manipulated by recurring mass media, pursuing "trendy" stars, consuming "well-known" commodities and eventually losing their free will.

Andy Warhol's Pop Art has received a great deal of public attention due to his own enthusiasm for self-expression. He published his work or gave speeches in the social news program whenever major events occurred. Warhol became a public icon and a talented artist by publishing his autobiography and numerous works of his own to make him known to the public in order to enhance his influence. He had to create art and manage his huge art factory, film and television company, publishing company, orchestra, etc, but he was happy to do so. And he claimed, "Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art" [12]. He was adept at using the mass media to advertise himself, and he took advantage of well-known figures such as Marilyn Monroe and Mao Zedong to draw people's attention. That has brought him hundreds of portrait commissions from wealthy celebrities, musicians and movie stars. Even the middle class ordered from him, making the prices got higher and higher. Gradually, Andy Warhol became the most profitable artist in New York. The most essential features of the age of consumerism were revealed by him [10]. "You never consume the object in itself(in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status" [4]. In this sense, the consumption of goods is not necessarily the consumption of the goods themselves. The vitality of consumer capitalism lay to a large extent in the transformation of material consumption into some kind of aesthetic consumption. The latter enriched with spiritual connotations, or, in the words commonly used by Baudrillard, "into the consumption of meaning." Just as people consumed the artworks created by Warhol is not because the portraits have any practical function, but for their beautiful appearance and, more importantly, for the symbolic value behind them [11].

Warhol has succeeded in making his artworks a value label. Whoever owned a portrait created by Andy Warhol, the very popular artist of the moment, was able to demonstrated their open and inclusive spirits of the times, new fashionable aesthetics, and embodied tasteful artistic choices. So the elite was intended to pursue the most up-to-date art while the middle class scrambled to buy was to expect the symbolic value of "art belongs to the elite" behind it to enable them to join the ideal elite group.



Marcel Duchamp once declared, "The artist of the future, who doesn't have to be a painter, just puts his finger on it and says that's art, and that will be art. It doesn't matter how the work appears, whether it's on canvas or whatever." I think this quote could not be more appropriate for Andy Warhol. Meanwhile, it also points out the frenzied pursuit of symbolic value by people in consumer society. By now, in 2022, Andy Warhol has gone for decades. But he is still proving the dominance of commodity symbols in consumer society. The products and books relate to Andy Warhol are best sellers nowadays. Moreover, this year, on May 9, Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe portrait was sold at Christie's for \$195 million, which was the highest price an American artwork ever fetched for at auctions. It was only the name of Andy Warhol that made Marilyn Monroe portrait such a spectacular performer in the auction market. This is probably a naked critique of consumer society that Andy Warhol's "ghost" has made once again after his death.

#### 4. Conclusions

Warhol was also a keen observer, and his works were with striking time stamps, truly reflecting the cultural characteristics of the age of consumerism. Baudrillard's theory of consumer society was further analyzed his creation of the "Green Coca-Cola Bottle" with the art of reproduction, which reflects the fast-paced lifestyle of consumer society, the mechanized mass production method and the conversion of the relationship between consumption and production into one in which consumption controls production. He used repetitive art to create "Marilyn Monroe" to reflect the prosperity of mass media in the consumer era, the replacement of the productive protagonist by the consumer protagonist as the protagonist of mass culture, and the use of celebrity art to express people's mad pursuit of consumer symbols.

Over half a century has passed and Andy Warhol's art has become history. But his "art ghost" is still lingering today, and the impact it has brought to modern art in America and the world can still be perceived. Some scholars regard Warhol's art as a "Pandora's Box". Once this magic box was opened, all kinds of popular art, commercial culture, advertising, celebrity phenomena and so forth came one after another and kept emerging, impacting American society and influencing the world in waves, which made the traditional art face an existential crisis [10]. So he brought elements of commodities and popular culture used by the masses in their daily life into Pop Art, which concentrated and distinctly embodied the cultural characteristics of consumerism - fashion, vulgarity, reality, commercialization and technological duplicity.

Warhol's artistic values truly inspired a generation of conceptual art creation. He could have made a name for himself and stopped being a commercial artist. Yet he never became a member of the top of consumption chain that sets the rules of capitalist consumption society. In fact, even at the time when his works could fetch exorbitant prices, he still refused to accept any commercial offers to infiltrate his "Factory". His works stayed close to life; that's why he found favour with the underclass at the time and inspired a generation of people to criticize consumerism. The commercial and popular nature of Andy Warhol's art is an important element that modern art and design should have. Understanding Warhol's innovative aesthetic and the consumer culture has significant implications for the creation of modern art.

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