

The Formative Dimension of Environmental Aesthetics in Marxist Theory Context

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Abstract

Environmental aesthetics research mainly focusses on the aesthetic appeal of human existence environment and the social effect of environmental aesthetic feeling. It is a profound re-thinking of artistic philosophy and it has gone far beyond the theoretical dimension of the artistic aesthetics, which excluded natural beauty form aesthetics since Friedrich Hegel' aesthetic theory. The "environmental aesthetics" discussed in this paper refers to natural environment aesthetics and social environment aesthetics according to the Marxist Theory. It is superior to Eco aesthetics because of the wider research fields and multidimensional research paradigms. The booming development of modern science and technology in the Era of industrial civilization are considered as a booming expansion of human essential power, which on the one hand improves our environmental conditions, while on the other hand upsets the delicate equilibrium of the ecosystem and leads to environmental degradation. Basically, the main reason is the relative independence of social ideology, such as hysteretic environmental philosophy and ecological aesthetics ideology. Based on the construction of ecological civilization, the paper try hard to clearly draw the formative dimension of environmental aesthetics from the huge system of the Marxist Theory. This essay consists of four parts. The first part is a brief comparison of environmental aesthetics studies in Chinese and Western. Then it refers to the debates and embryo of Marxist environmental aesthetics. The third part is the basis for theoretical growth of Marxist environmental aesthetics. While the last part

is evolvement logic and its ultimate appeal of Marxist environmental aesthetics. With this cardinal line, we hope to provide a new clue or perspective for environmental aesthetics research.

Key words: Social ideology; Environmental aesthetics; Marxist theory; Eco-civilization

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INTRODUCTION

The representative results in environment aesthetics are mainly achieved by western scholars, such as the Finland esthetician, Yrjo Sepanmaa, who wrote the book called *The Beauty of Environment: A General Model for Environmental Aesthetics* (published in 1986), in which he based on analytical philosophy and made a systematic outline of environmental aesthetics. Later, Arnold Berleant, an American environmental aesthetician made his books published. Including *Art and Engagement* (published in 1991), *The Aesthetics of Environment* (published in 1992), *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (published in 1997), etc.. And another famous aesthetic scholars from Canada are Allen Carlson, who wrote *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* (published in 2004), *from Nature to Humanities* (published in 2007) and so on (Chen, 2014). They have deeply discussed the relationship between human and nature, aesthetic and ethical issues, natural aesthetics and artistic aesthetics. Meanwhile, they put forward some distinctive natural appreciation mode, which is an important way to cultivate environmental ethics. The western environmental aesthetics has made great progress in the contemporary era. The first achievement is

the focus turning from “natural environment” to “Human Settlements Environment” as the some specialized works concerned with the human settlements environment, especially the urban living environment, city architecture art and artificial landscapes. The second progress is the alliance of environmental aesthetics and environmental ethics, which call for crossed cooperation within two areas, hoping to promote the common prosperity of two subjects. For example, the famous environmental ethicists such as Ralston paid attention to the environmental aesthetic problems, while the estheticians also discussed the environmental protection theory (Cheng, 2015).

Compared with the western environmental aesthetics, china academic achievements in this area relatively have some characteristics as the traditional ecological philosophy of ancient china and the implementation of socialism theory, which takes Marxist theory as its guiding principle. Specifically, main representative works are *Ecological Aesthetics* (published in 2000) by Hengchun Xu, *An Introduction to Ecological Aesthetics* (published in 2010) by Fanren Zheng, *Ecological Aesthetics and Ecological Assessment and planning* (published in 2013) collaborated by Xiangzhan Cheng, Arnold Berleant and Paul H. Gobster, etc.. As a result, environmental aesthetics research has contributed to a new conception of the environment, which shows an effort to overcome the dualism of man-environment and advocates the harmonious co-existence. There are three turns implied in environmental aesthetics: ecological turn, soma turn and spatial turn (Cheng, 2015), which gradually develops the “ecological aesthetics”, “life aesthetics”, “space aesthetics” in the context of Marxist theory. It is necessary to probe into the formative dimension of Marxist environmental aesthetics. This paper spreads along the main line of the debates and embryo, the theory basis for growth and the development logics of Marxist environmental aesthetics.

1. THE DEBATE AND EMBRYO OF MARXIST ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

In industrial civilization era, we mindlessly pursued the development of productivity forces, which lead to global environmental degradation and natural resources scarcity. Consequently, neutral science and technology had to endure the charge of ecology killer. Meanwhile, theory systems of philosophers and thinkers who paid attention to human subjectivity were blamed for causing serious ecological crisis and other environmental problems. Some scholars denied the environmental philosophy and environmental aesthetics clues in Marx’s theory system. Moreover, they even attributed natural destruction and flowering anthropocentrism to Marx and his philosophic thought, which were based on magnifying the human

subjectivity and initiative. They also thought this would primarily cover the beauty and the intrinsic value of nature, and it would destroy the objectivity, integrity, and organic principles of nature, which would finally upset the balance of human and nature. As Pasmore says, for ecology, there is no more harmful thought than traditional theory of Hegel and Marx (Sun, 2008).

Based on the above discussion, it is necessary to analyze the beauty of environment under Marxist theory context. Actually, Marx’s theory system contains a mixture of ecological philosophy and environmental aesthetics, seeking for a harmony and unity of human and nature. According to Marx’s original texts, there are less two vital clues which can be regarded as supporting evidences. Firstly, he suggested to explain the essence of beauty form the perspective of objectified human and humanized nature, which was presented by Marx in Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844. He made the point it was the labor that created beauty itself. This proposition brought about a paradigm shift of aesthetic research. In a word, Marxist theory on alienation, estrangement and objectification own its significance for environmental aesthetics. Secondly, Marx put forward that human beings still can construct under the principle of beauty. As the essence of human being is equal to free, the freedom of humanity and the necessity of perceptive objects would be a unity, in which lays the essence of all kind of beauty. This unity is a specific principle of creating beauty (Liu, 1980).

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In summary, environmental aesthetics in the perspective of Marx’s theory has something in common with western environmental aesthetics, but simultaneously own unique construction model and formative dimension, which would be worthy of our intensive study. Marx did not engage in systematic and independent aesthetic

studies, but his aesthetic ideas should not be overlooked or denied. Just as his philosophy though, those shining points are scattered in his plutonium studies, historical materialism philosophy and scientific socialism researche

2. GROWTH BASIS OF MARXIST ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

According to Marx's theory, the development of humanity has three historical forms. The first phase is the dominant dependency of human, in which people are attached to a kind of social community and heavily rely on nature for food and other subsistence. The second phase is humanity's comparative independence based on dependence of objects, in which people are controlled by alienated labor and alienated social relationship. The third phase is everyone's liberal personality based on people's comprehensive and free development, in which the free development of everyone would be a precondition for the free development for all other man because of the highly developed productive forces and vast material wealth. It is not difficult to find that contemporary human cannot access to the essence of beauty and free as we are placed in an alienated nature or alienated social relationship at the second stage. In the process of discussing the human liberation, which is the final purpose of all Marx theories, he concerned the formal beauty of preexistent nature, the practical beauty of humanization of nature and the harmonious beauty of humanity and nature. Obviously, two theoretical footstones of Marxist environmental aesthetics are the environmental philosophy based on the nature and the social ecological civilization based on human beings.

2.1 Marxist Environmental Philosophy

Although Marx and Engels did not discuss ecological environment and beauty from a new perspective of "theory of the question" (Ren, 2008), they proposed the theory of harmony between man and nature, the cheerful assumptions of shared liberation between man and nature, the ideal of human beings "ascending" from nature and so on, which were basic principles and reasonable cores of contemporary environmental philosophy. The wisdom of Marx's ecological philosophy is reflected in two aspects.

Firstly, duality of the subject and the object have been canceled in his theory. There are no absolute subject and no absolute object as well. Both human and nature are initiators and recipients in ecological system because the relationship of human and nature has to object properties. Human beings and nature share the equal ontology status although the magnitude and the inherence speciality of their acting force in the life community are very different. Meanwhile, humanity has the unique intrinsic value undoubtedly, so it is with nature. Specifically, value is special property of human, while nature has its own unique property as well. However, approving the intrinsic value of nature does not mean there would be a need to

admit the essential equality of human and nature. These views have significance for environmental philosophy and aesthetics researches, which may bring about our paradigm transformation and inspire us to change our standpoints of thinking. For instance, contemporary renowned ethicists Ralston says, the slogan of a wilderness park was changed from "Please leave flowers for people to enjoy" to "Please let the flowers blossom", which represents a paradigm transformation of thinking. The former showed the purpose of human, while the later one showed the respecting for nature.

Secondly, Marx found practice is the probable path to protect the environment and appreciate beauty. According to Marxist theory, practice is a bridge from human to nature, and a bridge from theoretical analysis to real environmental problems as well. To find meeting point of environmental philosophical theory and social ecological civilization, it is essential to examine practice direction of environmental philosophy, which is a reflection of the relationship between humanity and nature at the level of value (Zhou et al., 2014). We have to change the unscientific and unreasonable practical paradigm, and find our way to ease the problems of environmental pollution, resource shortage, alienated social relationship and man's lopsided development. In a word, practice is the access to the harmonious society and the key to the essence of beauty.

Totally speaking, the wisdom of Marx's ecological Philosophy provides the logic clues for the formation of environmental aesthetics. As no duality of the subject and the object, aesthetic activities become a multi-subject involved process with interaction. It is possible for human to hold a dialogue with nature. At the same time, Practice theory of Marx and Engels breeds practical aesthetics, which is a shift of aesthetics with logic integrity and historical regularity. Lastly, the free development of humanity and the goal of reconciliation with nature provide the ultimate appeal for aesthetic studies: the harmonious beauty of everything.

2.2 Marxist Social Civilization

The second theoretical basis of Marxist environmental aesthetics is social civilization theory, including material civilization, political civilization, spiritual civilization and ecological civilization as well. Before come to the point, we have to point out that we are discussing the environmental aesthetics rather than ecological aesthetics, which is mainly focussed on the relevance of lives and the dynamic balance of humanity and nature in the ecosystem. While, the environment has dual dimension of the natural environment and social environment. From the perspective of ecological aesthetics, beauty lies in the ecological environment. While depending on environmental aesthetics, beauty lies in the unity of ecology and civilization. This is an important point on which the environmental aesthetics go beyond the ecological aesthetics. As the civilization is a key factor of

beauty, environmental aesthetics cannot ignore the beauty of social harmony and human civilization.

The theory of Marxist social civilization is based on the essential differences between human and nature. We just have to acknowledge intrinsic value of man, which has the non-bridging distinction with nature. According to Marxist Philosophy theory, human beings are the unique species that can manufacture and use tools, in the process of which, human consciousness and social relations occur. It is the social relations that determine the human nature. Therefore, the intrinsic value of man lies in its social attributes, while the intrinsic value of nature is objective and preexistent, or as some scholars hold, are subject to human value. Because of the inevitable difference, on one hand we call for humanistic concern in modern environmental ethic, attach importance to the beauty of social harmony and human civilization, and emphasize human value. On the other hand, it is necessary to adopt the interests of nature into account when pursuing self-development. Overall, environmental aesthetics studies cannot go any further without social civilization.

3. EVOLVEMENT LOGIC OF MARXIST ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

The evolvement logic of environment aesthetics, which based on environmental philosophy and social civilization, is a process of development from the primary form to advance form. In a rough way, it is a process of pursuing truth, pursuing goodness and pursuing real beauty. In essence, it includes the transformation of the aesthetic relationship between man and nature, which is to care for the nature, to be concerned with the enhancement of the human condition, and to achieve the harmony and beauty between man and nature.

3.1 Preexistent Nature and Its Formal Beauty

Although the beauty of objects cannot be independent of its contexts, at first, people always pay more attention to the pre-existence or objectivity of nature, which is the aesthetic characteristics presented by natural attributes (such as the color, the shape, the line, the sound, etc.) of the material and its combination rules (such as integrity and uniform, rhythm and cadence, etc.). Thus, the formal beauty is generally divided into two parts. The first part is objective and perceptual material that contribute to formal beauty. The second part is the combination rules of those perceptual material. People have been discussing the formal beauty since ancient Greece age. They summed up a lot about the laws of formal beauty, such as the balance, symmetry, proportion, contrast, rhythm, harmony, unity and diversity. The most important rule is a variety in unity, which in essence is the beauty of esteem and harmony. Based on the integrity organism of that era, the formal beauty of objects lies in the inappropriate unity of various form factors. They had a tendency to regard nature (mainly

means preexistent nature) as the interactive unity from the view of morphology, especially the expression and function of rhythm and cadence in aesthetic principle.

In this part, we mainly discuss the preexistent nature and its formal beauty. The attention to pre-existence of nature and concern on formal beauty show the man's ontological pursuit of truth. In this context, beauty is only existing as an attribute of truth. The nature, which is real and exists independently of anyone thinking of them, has been free to show its beauty. The force of nature is objective, mysterious and marvelous, which can endow the material with the aesthetic feeling of the unity and changes, the comparison and adjustment, the rhythm and cadence, the symmetry and balance, the rates and sequence, etc.. Generally speaking, in the process of gaining the formal beauty, aesthetic subject tends to neglect the influencing factors of human and even eliminate acceptance differences of human. They believe that beauty is the mode of natural existence and has nothing to do with human cognition, just as motion is the mode of matter existence. Exactly this is the ecological beauty, which represents man's perception of the absoluteness and necessity of physical ecology. Therefore, it is not the absolute environmental aesthetics in the Marxist theory context, but the initial stage in the formative dimension of Marxist environmental aesthetics. In fact, Marx has raised three questions of formal beauty, which was the philosophical basis of formal beauty, formal analysis of beauty and psychological analysis of formal beauty. He also thought our sense of formal beauty could come from objectification of human essential power (Zhao, 2014). To sum up, the beauty of nature may be objective and inviolable as the inherent free and value of its own, but the realization of beauty cannot be independent of personal factors and social environment.

3.2 Humanized Nature and Its Practical Beauty

There are many similarities between contemporary environmental aesthetics and Marxist environmental aesthetics, which pays more attention to beauty of social practice. Contemporary environmental aesthetics focus on cities, which are the spoils by conquering nature by human. This kind of home is artificial and composed of various humanized nature. It absolutely cannot exist independently without natural materials, because social practice can only change the form of self-expression, but cannot create new any type of material which doesn't exist in the world. In Marx's work of "Theses on Feuerbach" in 1845, he said "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice". According to this opinion, the "environment" should refer to natural environment aesthetics and social environment aesthetics as well. Therefore, Marxist environment aesthetics have to contain the formal beauty of nature and the practical beauty of social.

Humanization of nature is a dynamic and cyclical process. There are two phases in every cycle. The first phase is objectification of human essential power. Human change the primitive structures, forms and function of materials by means of science and technology according to his own needs, hope and design plan. In this way, the essential power, the free will and the moral character of human could permeate through the nature. Then, the second phase is the transforming of nature. Nature constantly turns itself to human and adjust its forms to human needs, finally nature gain the personal properties and becomes a part of existence conditions and essential power of human. The humanized nature was also described as “the realistic nature of human”, “the nature of anthropology”. Thus, the subject and the object is mutual transforming and penetrating in the process of practice, which creates real world and the human beings constantly. Subject object—subject and object of the cycle, it is the nature of the whole process of practice and practice is the nature of beauty. The upward cycle process of any human objectification and nature humanization is the essence of practical beauty, which is a dialectical beauty surpassing the formal beauty.

As the practical beauty of humanized nature is the second as well as advanced form compared to formal beauty of preexistent nature, it is necessary to point out the especial role of human and its society. According to Allen Carlson, the nature without human practice has the aesthetically good. He even provides some appropriate categories for us to appreciate the beauty of nature to access those aesthetically good. For them, there is inherent beauty in the natural world (Liu, 2010). However, since we also refer to the social environment, we have to lay stress on the beauty of science, technology, morals, civilization and harmony between human and nature.

3.3 Harmonious Beauty of Human With Nature

Harmonious beauty of humanity with nature is the third stage and the ultimate goal of the aesthetic realm. It is also the third formative dimension of environmental aesthetics in Marxist theory context. There are lots of harmonious aesthetics found in Marxist economic and philosophic manuscripts in 1844. The most important perspective is “the free and comprehensive development of human beings”, which essentially implies the harmonious beauty of human development in the future. Besides, Marx has an assumption on the model for the final relationship between human and nature, which is the mutual liberation of humanity and nature. In a sense, the liberation of mankind and the liberation of nature are interaction in social practice. It is a truth that there would be no liberation of nature without the liberation of humanity, while there would be no liberation of man without the liberation of

nature. In ancient china, the theory, which called “the unity of man and nature”, is the basic preposition in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics, which show us the dialectic wisdom of harmonious beauty. This ideology appeal to maintain the natural ecological balance and bring people s initiative into full play at the mean time. As the harmony and civilization are the basic characteristics and inherent requirements, the ancients in China always regard the harmony of man with nature as the theme of life ideal and the ultimate state of aesthetic.

As the ultimate goal of aesthetic activities, harmonious beauty of humanity with nature is also the ultimate appeal of Marxist philosophy. The essence of beauty, the freedom of humanity and the mutual liberation of humanity with nature has internal relations among themselves. As for aesthetic appreciation of human beings, harmonious beauty of humanity and nature implies two standpoints. From the perspective of ontology, this means an ultimate concern of humanity as well as nature. While form the perspective of epistemology, this contains an eternal pursuit of the life-world’ significance. Regardless of the fact that it is a difficult task to approach those ultimate goals in modern environmental aesthetic activities, we can still find our way to push through environmental aesthetic research in every effort of scholars in this world.

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