

Original Paper

Reexamine Interpretation, Awaken Sense-perception—From Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation*

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Abstract

“Content theory” occupies the meaning of artistic works like one hand covers the sky, occupying the stage of the emergence of sensibility, resulting in the absence of sensibility in the appreciation of artistic works. However, the work of art itself is an aesthetic structure with a sense of summoning power. Art is born by “touch” and exists by “feeling”. It arises from very different sense organ, and also calls upon the connoisseur to respond with sensory experiences. To feel the charm of art works in “elsewhere” apart from content, we can have options such as “appreciating the form” and “hearing the sound”. Only by discarding the ideological shackles of the supremacy of content can we get a different taste of aesthetic experience.

Keywords

Against interpretation, touching, sensibility

Susan Sontag's pioneering attitude in *Against interpretation* shows her criticism of the interpretation view that only pays attention to content of literary works but does not care about form, which has enlightening theoretical significance. Starting from the absence of sensibility caused by “interpretation” mentioned by Sontag, this paper discusses the theme of reexamining interpretation and awakening perception along the narrative path of the non-feeling of criticism, the feeling of art itself and the feeling of art “elsewhere”.

1. No Sense: the Restriction of “Content Theory” on Art

Insensibility refers to the absence of sensibility when appreciating a work of art. “Content theory” occupies the meaning of artistic works like one hand covers the sky, occupying the stage where

sensibility appears.

1.1 The Generation of “Content Theory”

“Content theory” holds that the work of art is its content, and the value of the work of art comes from the explanation and interpretation of its content. In her book *Against interpretation*, Susan Sontag argues that the generation of “content theory” is related to the uniqueness of artistic value. In *The Republic*, Plato regards art as “imitation of imitation” and considers art as useless and of no unique value. For the defense of art itself, advocates separate content from art and try to give art meaning and establish artistic value by explaining content, thus proving that art has its own reason for existence. In order to better explain the content, exponents are also keen to create a variety of theoretical tools, such as Freud’s psychoanalysis, in order to uncover “the underlying text as the real text” (Sontag, 2003). They enjoy digging deep into the content of artistic works, and they are often proud of it, often with a sense of superiority over others.

1.2 Criticism of “Content Theory”

Susan Sontag is strongly critical of “content theory”. Content, she argues, “is now seen primarily as a hindrance, a burden, a refined or not so refined doctrine” (Sontag, 2003). Her so-called “opposition to interpretation” is, in essence, opposition to the sole authority of the content of the work of art, opposition to “the intentional psychological behavior of clarifying some codes or some rules” (Sontag, 2003), that is, against over-interpretation of the content of the work of art that is not directly revealed. She emphasized that interpretation is “the rejection of the independent existence of the work of art” (Sontag, 2003), the attempt to tame the work of art “by reducing it to the content of the work and then interpreting the content” (Sontag, 2003) is a mediocre act. This action not only does not highlight the value of artistic works, but even damages the value of artistic works. It is “reactionary, absurd, cowardly and rigid” (Sontag, 2003). There is no doubt that Sontag has a very trenchant eye. After all, the component of art is not only “content”, but also “form”. Excessive paranoia about the content divides the integrity of the work of art and the unity of the inside and outside. This paranoia, at the expense of the “self” of art, regards it as a vassal of interpretation, makes it unrecognizable and overshadowed. Therefore, Sontag advocates the liberation of art from the shackles of content interpretation, just as she advocates the rescue of disease from the shackles of metaphor and the restoration of the true state of art.

1.3 Torpor of Sensibility

The interpreter’s “paranoia” about the content, the application of theory, and the over-reliance on intelligence will inevitably lead to the torpor of his own sensibility. In his *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Ivor Armstrong Richards made a similar observation: “This intervention of the organ senses in the process of perception plays a role in all literature and art, and it may well be extremely important, but it is often overlooked” (Richards, 1997). The school of *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a typical group that neglects the function of the senses. They dig up the details of the text of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, just to find the corresponding relationship between the text content and social history, but turn a blind

eye to the loveliness of the characters' moods, the richness of the products, the harmonious beauty of the poetry and prose presented in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. In part, this means a decrease in sensory sensitivity for readers. Sontag said, "Our task is not to discover a great deal of content in a work of art, nor to extract more content from what is already clear. Our task is to weaken the content so that we can see the work itself" (Sontag, 2003). In other words, only by focusing on the art itself beyond the content can the senses that have been numb for a long time become sensitive be mobilized.

2. Feeling: The Art of "Touch"

Art is born by "touch" and exists by "feeling". It arises from very different sensory experiences, and also calls upon the readers to respond with sensory experiences.

2.1 Art: Born of "Touch"

The work of art itself is an aesthetic structure with a sense of summoning power. Works of art are often born of "touch", full of deep feeling and shocking power. Song Dynasty poet Yang Wanli believes that "touch" is an opportunity for creating poetry, and he discusses it in detail in "Answer Jiankang House Army library guard Xu Da Book": "At the beginning, I did not intend to write a poem but a thing. It is appropriate for things to touch me, my meaning is also appropriate to feel it is a thing, it is an event. It is touched first, the feeling follows, but the poem comes out" (Yang, 2007). According to this, Yang Wanli divides poetry into three kinds, among which, the works that arises from touching with the naturalness are called the best. Qing Dynasty poet Ye Xie also holds this view, he once wrote in the *Yuan Poem*: "In essence, events are the initial causes of poetry. Must first touch to rise up poets' interest, and then choose words, make sentences, and combine them into an article. When the poet is touched by events, then the creative inspiration will burst out suddenly from nothing, such as the artistic conception of the work, the choice of words, the creation of sentences. All these things exist in the poet's mind, and when they are written, they appear as feelings, scenes, events, which no one else has ever written, and which poets themselves began to write" (Ye, 2014).

In short, "touch" is the opportunity for art to produce, and it is the sensitive perception that calls for the essential power of human beings. Therefore, works of art, whether lyric, landscape or narrative, always carry a rich perceptual experience, which has the power to summon perception, and can make readers and authors feel the same feelings to achieve the resonance of the soul and the harmony of the heart.

Many theorists of literature and art have expressed deep recognition of the sensory summoning power of art, as Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy wrote in *What is Art*: "The work of art is based on the fact that a person who receives, auditory or visual, the feelings expressed by another person can experience the same feelings as the person who expresses his own feelings...Art begins when a man, in order to convey to others the feelings he has experienced, revives them in himself and expresses them by some outward sign" (Tolstoy, 1958). In other words, the author conveys his feelings through his works of art, and the reader can feel these feelings expressed by the author through the use of his own perception.

Works of art are the carriers of emotions and the media through which emotions flow and exchange. Benedetto Croce also directly regards the sense of summoning power as the essential attribute of poetry, arguing that: “The expert of poetry can directly touch the heart of poetry, can feel the beating of the heart of poetry in his own heart; wherever there is no such beating of the heart, it is certain that there is no poetry” (Croce, 1992). The power of feeling has become the absolute criterion for determining the essence of poetry, and only where the soul resonates can there be poetry and art.

2.2 Use “Touch” to Appreciate Art and Borrow “Touch” to Create Art

Chinese classical literary critics have long been aware of the sensory summoning power of art works. As art critics, they are very good at mobilizing their senses to “touch with the ear” “touch with the eye” “touch with the nose” “touch with the tongue” “touch with the body” and “touch with the mind” to appreciate the charm of art. It is worth mentioning that the ancient Chinese literary scholars emphasized the intercommunication between the senses, and Mr. Zhou Yukai specifically discussed this issue in his article “The Influence of the concept of ‘the Mutual use of Six Roots’ on the daily life and aesthetic activities of scholastic officials in Song Dynasty” (Zhou, 2011), and came up with two terms of “thought out of position” and “the mutual use of six roots” to explain this phenomenon. “Thought out of position” is a concept of German aesthetics, which refers to the aesthetics of one art transcending its own media boundaries into another art. The “mutual use of the six roots” is a way for Buddhist practitioners to reach the realm of harmony. The concept of “six roots” is transformed from the “five senses” and refers to the ears, eyes, tongue, nose, body and mind. Once a practitioner has reached the level of bodhi enlightenment, then there is no obstacle between his six roots and they are connected to each other, and any one of the six roots has the function of the other roots: the ear can see colors, the eye can hear sounds...Therefore, in Chinese ancient literary theory, some readers are inclined to “ear to see and eye to hear”, just as Su Shi commented on Wang Wei’s poems: “there are paintings in poems and poems in paintings”, Su Shi can not only hear poems from paintings with eyes, but also see paintings from poems with ears. Huang Tingjian often said “to smell is to understand Zen”, first introduced the term “nose view” into poetry. “Theory of nose view” had a deep influence on the poets at that time and later generations, for example, Qian Qianyi, an esthetician in Qing Dynasty, developed Huang Tingjian’s “theory of nose view” and advocated using nose to appreciate poetry; Pu Songling was influenced by Qian Qianyi and he also emphasized “to appreciate article by nose”. The ancient literary theory is also involved taste, Su Shi said that “outside dry but inside unctuous, seems dull but beautiful in real” in his article “comments on poetry of Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan”. Zhong Rong believes that good poetry should be “taste of the infinite, smell of the heart” in his essay *Poetry*. In terms of sense, since Liu Xie put forward the idea of “feeling in accordance with things” in *Wen Xin Diao Long*, the relevant theories have been continuously developed and extended to the present, forming an important branch of contemporary Chinese literary geography.

Western literary critics have also realized the sensory summoning power of artistic works, and the

typical representative is the Russian formalist theorists. Different from the Chinese literary scholars who create a theory of the senses from the perspective of readers, they prefer to increase the difficulty of feelings from the perspective of the author's creation in order to enhance the sensory summoning power of artistic works. According to Viktor Shklovsky, "What is called art exists precisely to reclaim man's sense of life, to make man feel things, to make stone more of a stone. The purpose of art is to make you feel things as you see them, not as you know them. The method of art is the method of 'defamiliarizing' things, of complicating forms, of increasing the difficulty and delay of feeling, since the process of understanding in things is for its own purposes, it should be prolonged. Art is the way of experiencing the creation of things, and the created things have no significance in art" (Shklovsky, 1989). He emphasized that defamiliarization of art forms can give art a stronger and more lasting sense of calling, so that art can maintain "artistic" and literature can maintain "literary".

3. Feeling Art "Elsewhere"

Art is the art of blending scene and feeling, including sound and color, and having the power of summoning and motivating. As Liu Xie, a literary critic of the Liang Dynasty in the Southern Dynasty, once mentioned in *Wen Xin Diao Long*: "The first is a formal essay that involves color, the second is a sound essay that involves tone, and the third is an emotional essay that involves temperament. Five colors mixed together, the form has aesthetic; five tones are mixed together, a beautiful music will be done; five emotions are mixed together, an article will be created" (Liu, 1955). Artistic works are not only the existence of content, they are three-dimensional, dynamic, rich in levels and long in meaning. Therefore, Susan Sontag firmly criticizes the "unhealthy trend" of over-interpreting the meaning of content, and proposes that in art "the value of a work must exist elsewhere, not in its' meaning" (Sontag, 2003), that "the abstract forms and styles of feeling, emotion, and sensibility all have value" (Sontag, 2003). "To replace art Hermeneutics, we need an art pornography" (Sontag, 2003). The "pornography" here is not pornography in the ordinary sense, but the sound beauty, painting beauty and architectural beauty of the above mentioned works of art directly acting on the sensory experience, which is a practical feeling obtained from the feeling of artistic works. "Art-pornography" emphasizes abandoning the stereotypical interpretation, returning to our senses, restoring our senses, seeing more, hearing more, and feeling more.

To feel the charm of art works in "elsewhere", we can start from the aspects of "viewing the form" and "hearing the sound".

3.1 Viewing the Form

Form is the external form of art works, including language, structure, genre, style and other elements. The view of form is the appreciation of the external form of the work of art, and the full feeling of the visual beauty. The beauty of form is the common pursuit of artists from all over the world. A good art form can even transcend the content and survive through time. As Northrop Frye puts it in *Anatomy of*

Criticism: “It often happens that a originally descriptive text, like the histories of Fuller and Gibbon, survives because of its’ style or interesting linguistic arrangement after its value as a representation of fact has faded” (Frye, 1994)

In Chinese art works, the appearance of formal beauty is even more incisive. For example, Li Shangyin’s poems, especially the poems such as “The sad zither” and “To one unnamed”, are not filled with the profound sense of poetic content, but the misty sense of artistic conception, the rich impact sense of color and the delicate sense of the swaying of love, which is the artistic style of various kinds of beauty interweaving. This is similar to what Liang Zongdai called the “pure poetry” of symbolism: “Pure poetry”, he said, “is to abandon all objective scenes, narratives, reasoning, and even sentimental sentiments, and to produce, purely by the elements of its form, such as rhyme and color, a magical suggestiveness that evokes the sensations of our senses and imaginations, and transports our souls to a realm of light and blessedness on the surface of an art” (Liang, 1932). Not only literature, but also Chinese calligraphy and drawing, which is the vivid form, and the abundant colors call to human senses directly. Then, when reviewing art works, readers may as well throw away the bondage of content, indulge the interactive combination of senses and forms of art works, and seek a different taste of aesthetic experience.

3.2 *Hearing the Sound*

The works of art often contain a lot of auditory writing, which includes both the writing of sound and the writing of the “hearing” of the perceived sound. These writings carry the poets’ keen perception experience, hidden rich emotions and lively fun. Take one of the Yang Wanli’s poems “Renzi year, January 4, walking in the back garden” as an example:

The cuckoo came down from the tree by chance, and I wanted to see its gorgeous brown feathers. I hid behind the pillar from the bird, but the bird was frightened and flew away because I was hiding (Yang, 2007).

This verse is about the poet playing with a cuckoo. The beauty of the poem is that it makes no mention of sound, but if you listen carefully, you will find that sound is not only present, but also determines the course of events. From the narration of the first three sentences, the poet is so careful that it should be able to see the brown brown coat of the cuckoo. However, it was the noise the poet accidentally made while hiding that sent the cuckoo flying. This subtle sound can be described as the “finishing touch” of the poem, which makes the situation of the story a subversive turn. Although the outcome of the event itself is not satisfactory, the final situation is more real and interesting. Only by mobilizing the sense of hearing, and “re-listen” literary works on the basis of intensive reading of the text, can we know what is sound-color and interesting for art.

In a word, sensitive sensibility is very important in art appreciation, it is the basis of appropriate interpretation of art works, but also a feasible path to the value of art works.

Conclusion

“Our culture is a culture based on excess, based on overproduction; As a result, the sharpness of our sensory experience is gradually being lost. All the circumstances of modern life—its material abundance, its crowding-combine to blunt our sensory functions” (Sontag, 2003). In the last century, Susan Sontag was keenly aware of the decline of human sensory function in modern cultural industrial society. This kind of decline is reflected in the field of art hermeneutics, which is the overemphasis on the content of the work of art, the neglect of the part outside the content, the forgetting and abandonment of the sensibility, and the art criticism gradually moves towards the end of a suicidal forced interpretation. Therefore, it is urgent to re-awaken perception, re-examine art and its value, and re-examine interpretation methods. Art itself is born of “touch” and carries a rich sense of experience. Only by abandoning the paranoia of the content and starting from one’s own feelings can one feel the erotic beauty of the work of art, feel the sacred “aurora” that the work of art shines, that is, the “unique manifestation of something that is at a certain distance but feels so close” (Benjamin, 2006).

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