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My Harmonious Aesthetics and Philosophy

Since the 1960s, starting from the simplest proposition that beauty is harmony, I have inquired into the history of aesthetic categories, and surveyed the historical process in the germination, development, fission and transmutation of every concrete pattern of beauty (and art), from the study of the highest potentially complete and rich perceptual objects of logical analysis of abstract dialectical reason, and from the unfolding of the giant abstract thinking route to the concrete logic of the transformation of history; here I have summarized this route.

The direct perception tells us that in the colourful boundless universe everything is in everlasting motion; nothing is absolutely static, everything is moving. There exists neither static eternal beauty, nor eternal art, nor eternal aesthetics, but only motional beauty, motional art and motional aesthetics. There exists neither abstract general beauty, nor general art, nor general aesthetics; there are only historically particular beauty, particular art and particular aesthetics. Abstract general beauty, general art and general aesthetics exist only in abstract thinking; but grasping them in knowledge, the thinking abstraction should further raise to thinking particularity. Therefore, I think, in ancient times there existed ancient beauty, ancient art and ancient aesthetics; in modern times there is modern beauty, modern art and modern aesthetics; in contemporary times there is contemporary beauty, contemporary art and contemporary aesthetics. The eras have changed, therefore beauty is different, as is art and aesthetics.

I disagree with the viewpoints which regard beauty and art as two separate entities, for I think they only differ in matter and consciousness, but are identical in their contradictory nature and structural principle. For this reason the essence of beauty and the aesthetic essence of art, as well as the historical formation of beauty and the historical formation of art are identical; the analysis of beauty virtually contains the analysis of art, for beauty and the intrinsic quality of art merge into an organic whole. The analysis of ancient harmonious art resembles my analysis of ancient harmonious beauty: in essence they are in perfect correspondence. The analysis of modern sublimity and sublime realism and romanticism, of ugliness and modernist art, the analysis of absurdity and of post-modernism, and the analysis of dialectical

harmonious beauty and socialist art are all like this, without exception. For the same reason that aesthetics is the logical summary of beauty and art, ancient aesthetics is an aesthetics of simple and unadorned beauty; modern aesthetics is aesthetics of the sublime, and contemporary aesthetics is aesthetics of dialectical harmony. The objects and contents of the study of aesthetics have developed along with the development of history, being different in each era. Aesthetics in the general sense, will be a condensed mastery of the long process of history.

Ancient beauty (and art) is a simple and unadorned harmonious beauty; it is its contradictory quality and structural characteristics that make all the elements of beauty (and art) constitute an organic whole in a sequential, stable, balanced and harmonious way. But the long river of history, sometimes fortells rapids and dangerous shoals, sometimes emphasizes the weakened wind and subsided waves; analogously the harmonious whole also presents the continuous development from the majestic via the graceful to the sublime. Majesty, grace and sublimity in the embryonic stage are the three forms of development of ancient harmonious beauty. But in ancient times, the sublime exists only in the stage of germination, in an immature form; strictly speaking, it was not until the modern day that it differentiated into an independent category. For this reason the essential forms of ancient harmony are majesty and grace. »Zhuangmei« (majesty) emphasizes the contradictory opposition, while »youmei« (grace) emphasizes the mutual complementation and permeation of contradiction. But both of them have not broken through the ancient harmonious circle; the powerful and the free of Su Shi (1037-1101) and Xin Qiji (1140-1207), and the subtle and concise of Yan Jidao (c.1030-c.1106) and Liu Yong (c.1004-c.1054), although they are »Yanggang« (masculine) and »Yinrou« (feminine), are the beautiful. In this sense, all the ancient arts are beautiful arts; the whole of ancient culture is aesthetic culture. It is suited to the ancient agricultural society of undivided subject-object, »zhonghe« (medium) cultural tradition, the simple and the unadorned thinking mode of dialectics, and the psychological structure of the ancient people. There was no complete separation between the ancient subject and object, for they both still existed in simple and unadorned harmonious relations. The ancient culture stresses the wholeness of the subject-object interdependence, and mutual complementation and transformation; man and nature are friends, and individuals merge in the community. These are the ancient characteristics, as well as the ancient merits and limitations. Speaking from the aspect of the subject, it depends on the object, is restricted by it, and is based upon it – and therefore cannot attain an independent development. Perception and reason present a

primitive balance and perfection in the subject, which is the reason why this kind of individual subject is often simplistic, and uncomplicated, abstract and not concrete, impoverished and superficial, and not rich or profound. It is characterised also by the lack of a subjective conscious awareness and the lack of an independent individual awareness. Viewed from the aspect of the object, in the eye of a primitive subject what is presented is not the purely essential truth of the objective world, but the typicality which not only lacks the concrete individual and perceptual characteristics, but is also deficient in its rationality and in complicated and rich connotations. In art and in the appreciation of the beautiful, it is often modelled and idealized, lacking contingency, individuality and ugliness. All these have not come into being until the emergence of modern society.

Modern beauty is exemplified by sublimity (beauty in a broad sense). Its contradictory nature and structural principle combine all the elements of beauty (and art) into a whole in an opposing, disorderly, turbulent and inharmonious way. The most fundamental distinction between modern sublimity and ancient harmony is that in the former the ancient harmonious circular motion of the latter was completely annihilated by the modern opposing principles. It is synchronous with the historical development in which capitalism replaced feudalism, metaphysics replaced plain and simple dialectics, and the modern people replaced the ancient people. The development of these contradictions has different stages, with modern beauty historically presenting the evolution from sublimity to absurdity via ugliness. The sublime, the ugly and the absurd are the three forms of the development of modern beauty (and art). Sublimity (in a narrow sense), realism and romanticism appear as the unfolding of the subject-object opposition on the subjective basis. In the sublime in its narrow sense imbalance is transformed into balance, opposite struggle into harmony, and constraint into freedom and liberation, which is why its opposition is of a limited nature. Ugliness (and modernist art) carry further the fission and the separation and push the limited oppositon to the extreme form of mutual repellency. The extremity of opposition, the anti-harmony, becomes the fundamental characteristic of ugliness (and art). The absurd carries forth the extreme opposition of the ugly, and it places every factor and aspect of the oppositon in a paradoxical position. In ugliness there is anti-harmony between two opposite sides, while in absurdity every aspect, each side and its elements themselves are further found in an anti-harmonious paradox. This is a kind of a more profound and more one-sided ugliness, thereby presenting absurdity and confusion, running counter to the normal, and deviating from logic.

Modern sublimity unfolds three concrete forms of the sublime, the ugly and the absurd. Here I should explain that the category of »sublimity« has two meanings: the first is the broad one, which contains three concrete forms, i.e. sublimity, ugliness and absurdity. The overall features of sublimity are the subject-object opposition which is unfolded on the basis of the subject. No matter what differences the sublime (in a narrow sense), the ugly and the absurd themselves have, all of them are in opposition on the basis of the relation between the subject and the object. But sublimity in the narrow sense differs from ugliness and absurdity, for its features are the combination of opposition and harmony, arriving at harmony from opposition, unlike the opposite extreme of ugliness and absurdity. Its correspondent forms are only romantic and realist art, not modernist or post-modern art. The evolution from sublimity to absurdity is suited to the flow of free industrial society, monopoly industrial society and post-industrial society, and suited to the gradual extreme opposition and mutual negation of the subject and the object, the rise of perceptual subject and the decline and fall of rational subject, and to the development of metaphysics, negative dialectics and paradoxical thinking.

Between the modern subject and object there is a deep opposition and pronounced and complicated relations of conflict unfold on the basis of the subject. The first is the rise of the subjective individual consciousness and of human liberation. Human beings as rational subjects confront the objective reality of feudal theology; this is the era of the emergence of sublimity and the successive replacement of romanticism with realism. The rational subject is transformed into a perceptual subject; the objective world is thoroughly negated, and the perceptual subject is broadened, for it attains the position of creating the world and dominating exclusively the earth beneath heaven. »God is dead«, »human beings still live« is that extreme opposition; the other is the opposition and change of symbolism and expressionism into naturalism. Once the perceptual subject parts from the object, or the individuality breaks away from society, its extreme expansion, at the same time, is diminishing too. The deep contradictory opposition and paradox presented in the subject itself and between the subject and the object changes into absurdity through the extreme fission of the ugly; in art the creation of the theatre of the absurd, black humour and the New Novel appear. Along with the continuous changes and development of the contradictory structures between the subject and the object in modern society, the subject and the object themselves reveal different characteristics. Viewed from the aspect of the subject, modern aesthetics and art have covered a road which began by extolling the rational subject, changed to eulogize perceptual sub-

ject and eventually led to the contradiction, paradox and the expiration of the perceptual subject itself. Compared with the ancient subject the rational subject of sublimity is complex and multi-faceted (polyhedral) and not simplistic; it is concrete, not abstract; it is abundant, not poor; especially, it is conscious, having a strong individual and independent consciousness, and does not attach itself to the object or the masses. But in the sensible subject of ugliness, human beings have changed into anti-rational beings and separated sensible life from reason; thinking and reason have changed into sensual desire; apparent consciousness and conscious awareness have turned into the subconscious, »sexual instinct« and »collective unconsciousness«. The subject of absurdity – what is left to a human being is only the »internality«, as Ihab Hassan (1925-) has said, from the masters of the world falling low to self-denying wandering ghosts; human beings wander about with no home to go to. Now not only »God is dead«, but also »human beings are also dead«.

Viewed from the position of the object, the object in sublimity, especially the object in realism is essential and inevitable, not experiential or typological; it is complicated, accidental, unique, and full of perceptual individual characteristics, not idealized or modelled. In the object of ugliness, particularly in naturalistic art, it develops mainly in the direction of the individual, the perceptual, the accidental, the detailed and the purely objective. To the object of absurdity, the unity and the essentiality of objective noumenon are completely negated; all has become centreless, depthless, essenceless or meaningless. The process went from contradiction and paradox to dispelling all oppositions and differences, among these also the hazy expectation of a new harmony and tranquility.

Contemporary dialectical harmonious beauty and art, are the newest stage of the development of human beauty and art; this concept thoroughly negates the absolute opposition of modern metaphysics and returns to the unity of ancient harmony.

In brief, ancient harmonious aesthetics is integrated with ancient simple and unadorned dialectical philosophy and modern sublime aesthetics is related to modern metaphysical philosophy. In it the development from sublimity via ugliness to absurdity is integrated with existential philosophy, negative dialectics and paradoxical thinking. In the future dialectical harmonious aesthetics will be integrated with conscious and scientific dialectical thinking. Scientific and dialectical thinking are the philosophical basis of the system of my harmonious aesthetics and the development of the harmonious aesthetics from the ancient and the modern to the present.