Art versus amusement: What do photos allow people to do?

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When discussing the aesthetic reaction, Vygotsky used a formula as an explanation: in a work of art, the form is always in conflict with the content, and the artist always overcomes content with form. Vygotsky unfolded the formula mostly in literature, however, he claimed that the formula can be applied to all other art forms. In this article, Vygotsky's formula is employed to photography. Through analyzing the dialectic contradiction between form and content in roll film snapshots and digital photos, we have reached the conclusion that photos could be a medium of art, where the contrasting feelings of ephemerality and permanence, nostalgia and modernity, proximal experiences and distal experiences meet each other. When less emotion and imagination are involved, photos could also be reduced to a medium of amusement. And the available medium to a culture has a significant influence on cultural and social preoccupations.

In his book *The Psychology of Art*, Lev Vygotsky addressed a fundamental aesthetic problem of art: How are raw materials transformed into a work of art? Vygotsky (1971: 61) believed that the essence of art was "the dialectic contradiction between content and form". In other words, the true psychological meaning of aesthetic reaction is not from the harmony of content of form, but from the inner incongruity between them. Vygotsky analyzed this formula through some classic forms of literature – the fable, the novel, and Shakespeare's tragedies. He also demonstrated briefly that the formula can be applied to all other art forms, such as theater, drawing, sculpture and architecture.

Vygotsky didn't mention the art of photography in his book. In this article, we will apply Vygotsky's formula of art to photography. From the Kodak snapshots to digital photos, both the content and the form of photography have changed a lot. We will firstly analyze Vygotsky's ideas on the formula of art, and then turn to the different aesthetic reactions when we are facing roll film snapshots and digital photos.

1.   Vygotsky's formula of art

In *The Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky employed a new method called "objective-analytic method". He believed that the basis for aesthetic analysis should be "the work of art, rather than its creator or its audience", because for psychologists, "any work of art is a system of stimuli, consciously and intentionally organized in such a way as to excite an aesthetic reaction" (Vygotsky 1971: 23). Since photography involves more than one process

concerning the photographer, the one being photographed and the audience, Vygotsky's ideas provide us with a new perspective on studying photography: focusing on the photographs themselves. In this article, we will study the aesthetic or non-aesthetic reaction brought by the photos, and what people choose to do to themselves and to the audience with photos.

According to Vyacheslav Ivanov's scholarly comments on *The Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky (1971: 278) used the words "form" and "content" in a different way from their contemporary interpretation: "Content is identical here with material, that is, those elements of the work of art which existed prior to its complete realization", and "form is identical with the processing, the formation, of this material". In this article, we will use the two concepts, "content" and "form", in this sense. To avoid misunderstanding, we will use "material/content" instead of Vygotsky's "content".

With the examples of fable, tragedy, and short story, Vygotsky (1971: 160) discovered that "a work of art always contains a certain amount of contradiction, a certain inner incongruity between the material and the form". For example, in the fable "The Crow and the Fox", the material/content is that the fox despises the crow and tries to get his piece of cheese. The form is that the fox flattered the crow with the adulation. Finally the crow sings and loses his cheese, to which point both the adulation and the mockery reach the apex.

To create a work of art, the artist always "overcomes" the materials/content with the form (Vygotsky 1971: 214). This is the formula from *The Psychology of Art*. For instance, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the material/content is that Hamlet revenged his father's death on his uncle. It should be the direction toward which the story moves, and the audience is expecting the joy of the revenge. However, the form of this tragedy is that Hamlet hesitates many times. In the last scene, Hamlet is even slashed by the poison blade. The audience is more and more strained and miserable. At the end, the tragedy ends with the death of the hero and his sublime triumph simultaneously. The emotions generated by the material/content and the form develop in opposite directions but reach annihilation at the point of termination. Through the complex transformation of emotions, the affective contradiction finds its solution, and the form of the tragedy has successfully dominated the material/content.

Besides literature, Vygotsky believed that his formula could also be applied to other domains of art. As in sculpture, when the artist uses marble or metal to represent a human or animal body, the artistic form (marble or metal sculpture) keeps distance with the content (a living figure), and overcomes it.

In the last chapter of his book, Vygotsky (1971: 213) discussed the social significance of art. He considered art as catharsis, a "short-circuiting" of the conflicting emotions. Only when the act of overcoming the original feeling, resolving it, conquering it, can we reach the birth of art.

2.   The art of roll film photos

For a century, photography had struggled to be identified as a form of art. Susan Sontag (2005: 116) claimed that photography is not an art form, but a medium in which works of art (among other things) are made. When facing certain photos, not necessarily professional art photos in galleries, we experience rich imaginations and conflicting feelings. The medium of photos has potential for bringing aesthetic experience, no matter whether they are taken by artists or ordinary people.

Many photographers and critics have held the point that the artistic charm of photography comes from its relation with time. Henri Cartier-Bresson (1952: 76), founder of the theory of "the decisive moment", said that "of all the means of expression, photography is the only one that fixes a precise moment in time". Susan Sontag (2005: 127) considered that "the force of a photograph is that it keeps open to scrutiny instants which the normal flow of time immediately replaces".

In the era of roll film photos, cameras were not so easily accessible to everybody and films were expensive. Normally, before taking a photo, the photographer would carefully find the view and evaluate secretly if it was worth taking. And he might hold the camera for a while, to adjust the aperture and the shutter speed, and to wait for "the decisive moment". Thus the material/content of photos is some memorable thing floating in the time-flow, such as a special place or object, a milestone of life or family, a remarkable event... The photographer seizes one moment and freezes it into the film. Finally the form of a photo is a small piece of paper with that static moment inside.

We will explain the contradiction between the material/content and the form with a photo taken by a Chinese photographer in 1998. It is chosen from a famous series of photographs called "My Father and My Mother". The material/content is the continuous daily life of the old couple in a Chinese village. The form is a piece of photo with the moment and the view chosen by the photographer: Kneeling on the bed, the old couple were re-organizing the family photos (Fig.1).

Figure 1: Series Photos: My father and My Mother, No.19 "When new year is coming, my parents are re-organizing the photos of the children in the frame. It is also a way of family reunion" (1998).[1]

In this photo, the contradiction exits in at least three aspects. Firstly, in the chronological time-flow, an opportune moment is seized by means of the photo. This moment gets rid of the irreversible time-flow, making itself an independent, timeless image. Time is still relentlessly melting and the old parents passed away, but the photo is always there, conferring on the beloved persons a kind of immortality (and importance) they would never otherwise have enjoyed (Sontag 2005: 8). In this aspect, the emotions generated by the material/content are the fears and pities of the ephemerality of life in the passing time. And the form has overcome it with a long-lasting image out of the time-flow.

Secondly, the affective contradiction is between nostalgia and the feeling of reality. A piece of photo could help us keep the relation with the past. In this photo, we can see a corner of a Chinese village house with an earthen bed, a wall calendar with a pin up lady, a telephone, a thermos bottle, a photo frame, which is a typical view of home for many Chinese people who have spent their childhood in the village and left for big cities. The hometown has been totally changed and the good old days will never come back. The break with the past is traumatic. The memory is fading out but the photo with all the details is still at

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[1]   The picture is downloaded from http://www.cpanet.org.cn/zhuanti/11jinxiangjiang/detail
          _image_105693.html

hand, which certificates "the lacerating emphasis of the noeme (that-has-been)" (Barthes 1981: 96). The form of photos has successfully picked something from the messing past and brought it to the present.

Thirdly, photos have given us a chance to go beyond the horizon of here and now. As thin slices of space and time, photos could be arranged and combined arbitrarily. The photo of the old couple organizing their photo frame could be seen together with other photos, such as the photos of their wedding, the photos of another Swiss couple.... Actually, if we look at this photo carefully, we can see that the old Chinese couple was also arranging pictures in a photo frame. The pictures might be photos of themselves, their children and grand-children, taken in different places and times. However, they were all put together as resources for imagination. In this aspect, the material/content of a photo is always the one scene just before the eyes. However, the form of the photos could overcome the here-and-now limitation, establishing connections across different time-space dimensions.

Many people have been deeply touched by this series of "My Father and My Mother". When the audience is reading these photos again and again with rich imagination and big tears, it is undeniable that these photos have caused aesthetic reaction. From Vygotsky's (1971: 209) point of view, if psychologists attempt to explain art, they should proceed from "the irrefutable association that exists between emotion and imagination". In our case, the photo of the old couple has activated the audience's imagination of their own parents, their own family, and their impression of the villages in China and the Chinese people. And their complex emotions about time and life have exploded by means of short-circuiting contrasting feelings of ephemerality and permanence, nostalgia and modernity, proximal experiences and distal experiences (Zittoun & Gillespie 2016: 35).

3. The art of digital photos

From Daguerre's Daguerreotype to roll film photos, from digital cameras to smart phones with both front and rear cameras, people's preferences for different kinds of camera are changing gradually. In the last section, the roll film photos we were talking about are primarily personal photos taken in domestic life. In this section, we are going to reflect on ubiquitous digital photos taken by smart phones and portable digital cameras.

Among this kind of digital photos, the material/content includes all visible things. Because the camera is always at hand and the digital photos are nearly at zero cost, a trillion photos are produced per year. For Chinese young people, the most taken photos are selfies, tourist photos and photos of food.[2] With the development of the technology of photography, the form of a photo has also

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[2]   Research Report on APP Usage of Teenagers (2015), http://www.sohu.com/a/36077452 _132560.

changed a lot. It is no longer a touchable, long-lasting piece of paper, but an ethereal series of digital information.

There is almost no need to wait for "the decisive moment", because of the technology of burst shot, real-time imaging and Photoshop. In the digital era, people shoot every thing and produce so many photos that they even don't have time to look at them again. Thus, some scholar claimed that "photography appears everywhere and nowhere simultaneously" (Liser 2013: 5). If there is too much information at present, people might not have lots of time to look back to the past, as they often did in the era of roll film photos.

Nowadays, when people are facing a digital photo, it is not easy to fall into the complex feelings on time and emotions that Barthes (1981: 116) described: "In each of them, inescapably, I passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented, I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die...". It is not expected that the audience could experience aesthetic reaction with their emotions and imaginations when he glanced a photo in half a second. The unnatural performance and settings in front of the camera is also "a defense against the visualization of the actual feelings and emotions" (Barthes 1981: 50). Without the involvement of emotions, imagination and the contradictions about time, we could draw the conclusion that certain kinds of digital photo, that is the great majority, could not be considered as a medium of works of art. It is a medium in which pleasure is made, a medium of amusement.

Different from the traditional roll film photos, it is argued that the theory of photography must be drawn into a theory of computation and network, as they are the agents that are responsible for the dissolution of all physical media while ensuring their continuation (Liser 2013: 6). Social Networks have brought new rules and values for digital photography. A digital photo could be sent to any corner of the world in no time and it is expecting an immediate response. The huge number of photos would weaken the joys of sense and more stimulation is required. In order to attract attention, some people try to post photos of every aspect of their life. The domain of private and domestic life is more and more exposed to the public, joining in the great data flow.

According to Neil Postman (2005: 9), the medium of communication available to a culture is a dominant influence on the formation of the culture's intellectual and social preoccupation. Photographs could be used both as the medium of art and amusement. Vygotsky (1971: 248) claimed that the social significance of art is that it is "an indispensable discharge of nervous energy and a complex method of finding an equilibrium between our organism and the environment", while amusement could offer us "castles in the air", in which we try to live, without thinking about the real world (Postman 2005: 77). So the question is not "what do photos allow people to do", but "what people choose to do to themselves and to others with photos".

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