

# The Aesthetics of Creation

GAO XINGJIAN

**M**y topic today is “the aesthetics of creation.” This is a term I have suggested as an inverse proposition to the aesthetics propounded by philosophers, and is a theoretical elaboration based on my own creative experiences.

As we all know, aesthetics has always been a topic for discussion among philosophers. In their attempts to explain the world, philosophers have naturally included works of art and artistic creation; they have also attempted to offer particular kinds of value systems for making aesthetic judgements, for example by laying down norms for artistic activities such as aesthetic appreciation, and thereby arriving at definitions of beauty. This is something that is inseparable from their explanations of the world: aesthetics has always been a component of philosophy.

But I cannot tackle such a huge topic today. From Greek philosophy to modern philosophers like Kant and Hegel to “modern aesthetics,” and, most recently, the “aesthetics of reception,” aesthetics is a vast scholarly system. I will not here touch upon aesthetics as practised by philosophers, but rather will just put forward an inverse proposition: aesthetics, regardless of which philosophical tradition it comes from, always seeks an explanation of the world, including works of art and artistic creativity, but if artists tried to create in line with the explanations of philosophers, they would probably not get much done at all.

Actually, those of us engaged in artistic creation know that if we set out from one single idea, or one single definition, it is impossible for us to create anything. Artists have to find other methods, and that is what I want to talk about today: the aesthetics of creation. In other words, what matters for artists is: how is art produced? How does a work of art take shape? That is why I’m going to keep well away from definitions and concepts and theories of any sort. It is essentially impossible to regulate artistic creation – if it were regulated, creation simply would not happen. Existing theories are simply theories, and can only be used as points of reference.

If artists are unable to put forward their own perspectives and come up with new achievements, they will only be replicating what others have done before them, and what they create will be of little significance. Artistic creation in itself means that the artist must break through existing norms, including theoretical ones. In other words, the aesthetics of the artist must be linked to his artistic creation, and above all

must be the individual perspective of the artist, and stem from his own reception and understanding of aesthetic appreciation. It must be the embodiment in artistic form of his concept of art and his methods, and all of this must be intimately connected with the practice of artistic creation. That is why artists find defining beauty both meaningless and impossible. Philosophers, however, are precisely the opposite: for them, deliberation and cognition are primarily a matter of setting boundaries, of establishing categories and concepts. For artists, aesthetics must be open and unrestricted; no artist can have the last word on it, and there is no need for anything to become a theoretical norm.

This “aesthetics of the artist” must first and foremost be based on the artist’s own experiences, so it is fair to say that here I’ll be talking about my experiences, and will then tie these in with my own approach to creation and try to come up with a theoretical expression of this.

Every artist seeks a free and unique mode of expression in his creative sphere, but every form of art has its basic limitations, and so from the outset this freedom is not infinite. Literary creation, for example, is inseparable from language. Divorced from language, no literary expression is possible. Whether it be poetry or fiction, in the final analysis both are language arts.

Furthermore, with regard to the art of fiction, I would add that it is not merely a language art. There may of course be many definitions of what makes fiction fiction, but the important thing for writers of fiction is not defining it but knowing where the fundamental limitations of this form of art are to be found. I feel that the fundamental limitation of fiction is narrative, for if fiction moves away from narrative and is written like a poem, or an essay, or a thesis, of course it can become a text, but it is no longer fiction. In this sense, when it comes down to it, before a writer of fiction seeks creative freedom in this language art, he must first understand where the limitations of the art lie.

Every form of art has its fundamental limitations, and where the language art of fiction is concerned, writers of fiction must accept the premise of narration in order to seek narrative methods of their own; hence, this kind of freedom has limits. Yet the pursuit of the art of fiction is also *unlimited* – generation after generation of writers have been unable to perfect or conclude it, and have always been able to find new narrative devices and techniques.



Gao Xingjian while shooting his film *Silhouette/Shadow* in 2003.

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In the century that just ended, politics pervaded everything and can be said to have interfered with and affected literature and art more than in any other age. An ideology closely bound up with politics was also all-pervasive, and what we call “modernity” [*xiandaixing*] was an epoch-making trend of thought derived from that ideology in the sphere of literary and artistic creation. This modernity was premised on the questioning and negation of tradition. The background to its emergence was an ideological one, a particular view of the world as a whole, and so of course it impinges on yet more political and philosophical issues.

Modernity can be explained in many ways, but the generally accepted starting-point is that it stemmed from the early twentieth-century critical attitude towards what capitalism termed the “old world,” and that this is also where modern Western literature and art originated. The underlying philosophical foundation of this thinking was the dialectics of Hegel. The philosophical basis of Marxism also derives from Hegel; it reformulated Hegel’s speculative dialectics with the negation of negation, using constant criticism to change and even replace cognition. Not only were this epistemology and methodology used to criticise and transform

the old world, they also left a deep imprint on twentieth-century literature and art.

Modernity, right through to the “post-modernity” [*houxiandai*] that negated it, continued to take this approach, to the point that in the twentieth century, there appeared an unprecedented phenomenon, manifested widely in many fields of literary and artistic creation, that was resolutely anti-art, anti-drama, anti-painting, and even anti-fiction to the point of so-called “metafiction.”

There are two things I want to talk about today. First, the aesthetics of creation is not premised on redefining beauty, or continuing to use modern or post-modern methods to re-categorise art or artistic creation, or establish new standards – instead, it leads directly to artistic creation; it is open, diverse, and associated with the views of the individual artist. It is not an attempt to set up a system, or establish particular values, although artists naturally have their own judgments on the appreciation of beauty.

Second, methodologically speaking, I want to raise a question here for general discussion: is the afore-mentioned approach, which influenced the twentieth century so profoundly (i.e. constant negation or, to use a post-modern

term, the use of subversion as a mechanism for innovation), the only approach possible now, in the twenty-first century? Or can that, too, be called into question?

My term “the aesthetics of creation” applies above all to the individual, and is connected to the individual artist’s experience of creation. It is not an attempt to offer a general principle, nor is it the sole criterion for judging value; it refers simply to the choices made by an artist as an individual. What I choose above all is the maximum freedom of artistic creation, which means that from the perspective of the mechanisms of artistic creation my ideas are not premised on negation or criticism. Artistic creation is a kind of cognition, and this cognition is in turn based on the understanding of earlier generations, because no understanding can start from scratch, but always builds on the understanding of those who preceded us. The understanding that our predecessors had is a reference point for all of us, regardless of whether or not we agree with it, or only partly agree with it, or are striking off in a different direction altogether.

However, in the West and East alike, twentieth-century artistic creation was virtually dominated by criticism of cultural tradition. Tradition was sited in opposition to innovation, and innovation meant revolution, the negation of tradition, and the toppling of earlier generations – this seemed to become the universal law of artistic creation, and historicism of this kind has also permeated recently-produced histories of literature and art. Art lies in creation, not negation. Yet movements such as “Painting is dead,” “Anti-art,” “Counter drama,” and “Zero art” have all been popular at one time or another, and have spread throughout modern art.

Might there be other forms of understanding, and other methods, aside from this mainstream trend of thought? Is it possible to have creation and innovation that are *not* premised on social and cultural criticism? If we don’t have to negate traditional culture, is it still possible to achieve a new understanding and find fresh perspectives? This kind of understanding does not negate earlier generations, and in any case there is no need to overthrow them, since they are already dead. When they set out to take a fresh look at the internal mechanisms of art, our predecessors were not able to exhaust these mechanisms either, and they viewed them from new perspectives and so found new directions in artistic creation.

Is it still possible to offer fresh perspectives and be creative in a particular form of art without premising one’s ideas on the subversion of earlier generations? I think it is, although to do this of course one has to change one’s way of thinking, and find some other method to replace the dialectics of the

negation of negation. This method might well be cognition and re-cognition [*renshi zai renshi*].

Actually, every artist is involved in a re-cognition of the art he works in, as well as of his social environment, and it is impossible for him to overthrow previous generations, eradicate them, and start from scratch. The idea is absurd, it is utter nonsense – and yet this nonsense pervaded the twentieth century. At the beginning it seemed genuinely provocative, but as time went on it became just for show, and in fact, since it was no more than the replication of a concept, it could not create anything new at all.

Contemporary art has turned into the replication of this concept, or perhaps something deduced from it, and conceptual art of this sort is currently fashionable and popular everywhere, so that artistic creation has become a technical process. This being the case, design, fashion, and advertising have become contemporary arts in their own right, and the dialectics of the “negation of negation” has brought about a situation where art and anti-art are nothing but names, and people are no longer surprised by the unusual. Actually, “cognition and re-cognition” is a fundamental law of human understanding, and by no means a new approach. Due to the interference of ideology, however, in the twentieth century people became confused for a while and thought negation and subversion were the laws according to which things developed. Under the influence of this ideology and of dialectics, it was believed that a new society, a new age, and a new people had to break with the past: revolution was seen as the locomotive that would push history forward, and the negation of negation became a universal rule for development and for the progression of the age.

What I want to do is simply to clear away this fog – we should say goodbye to this kind of thinking and get to know our world afresh, without premising everything on criticism. It is not necessary for artists to premise their ideas on criticism, but even so it has deeply affected many of them. We should calm down and accept the world as it is, for the artist can never play the role of the Creator and can never change the world, but in the sphere of artistic creation he has total freedom, and his understanding of the world is inexhaustible.

But let us return to literary and artistic creation, where it is better to look for a different orientation, one that is not premised on the criticism and negation of tradition, but which fully acknowledges the artistic achievements of our predecessors, and on that basis seeks a fresh understanding and new impulses and mechanisms for artistic creation. I am much more interested in that.

For example, if the writing of fiction is premised on not moving away from narrative, is it still possible to find new ways of expression? Or what about painting? Is it possible for there to be innovation in painting without getting rid of two-dimensionality and images? And with drama too: a basic condition of drama is that it requires actors to perform it. You cannot get rid of them, no matter how hard you rebel. Drama also requires an audience, and if there is no audience in the theatre, only actors, then there is no drama. Drama demands actors and an audience; the relationship between the two, and what the actors present to the audience and how they present it, is what the art of dramatic performance is all about. If the art of drama were to be reformed, acting would have to be looked at afresh, and new mechanisms would have to be found within this ancient art, but there would be no need to negate the history of drama.

We must acknowledge that the basic limitations of each of the arts have been shaped by the history of that art over a long period of time — they are not regulations dreamed up by a particular person. These norms are not the sort of thing that any of us could establish (unless a new form of art were created, when of course this would be possible), but literature, drama, and painting, the major traditional categories of art, do have fundamental limitations.

What the artist does is to seek creative freedom while acknowledging the basic limitations of the various arts. What the philosopher does is to explain art history and works of art that have already been produced, or make predictions about art; but none of that can replace artistic creation, and it is the artist who has to find the inherent impulses that propel this creation. It is the job of the artist to see what mechanism he can find, within the constraints of the basic limitations on art forms, and become a new dynamic force to drive creation forward.

For example, we might acknowledge that fiction cannot be divorced from narration, that in the past all fiction told a story, and that the art of fiction lies in telling such stories in an interesting and vivid way. To make it interesting and vivid, fiction requires a number of characters, and it is the relationships between those characters that make up the story and shape the plot. Traditionally, fiction has had to have characters, a story, and a plot.

But modern fiction has broken out of that framework, and James Joyce, for example, extended the narrative capacity of fiction. Previously, the narrator in fiction had been either the storyteller or the author, and was omniscient and omnipotent. He or she described in detail the relationships and even the psychology of the various characters. Joyce, how-

ever, immersed himself in the minds of his characters, narrating through their eyes and their feelings, and using the third person “he/she”; this kind of subjective narration provided fiction with a fresh, new style of writing. The term “stream of consciousness” means immersion in the psychological activity and feelings of the characters, which naturally clarifies the plot of the story; it is therefore possible for a novel to have several different narrators and narrative angles. This contribution to the art of fiction brought to light a new narrative method, but without negating the narrative function of the novel.

I, too, have tried to find my own method. Who is the subject of the fictional narrative? Who is doing the narrating? Further enquiries reveal that in fiction the narration must have a subject, and this subject must be embodied in the grammatical category of person. No narrative can do without the three persons “I,” “you,” and “he/she.” These three persons are three different co-ordinates through which a person’s consciousness is realised. If there is only “I,” this consciousness remains somewhat vague, so in order to realise it there has to be recourse to interaction with others: “you” is thus the object of “I.” Only when there is an object can a person interact and engage in observation and thought. The third layer is the third person, “he/she.” If the narrator can remove himself and dispassionately observe the same subject “I,” that subject can become “he/she” in the narrative language. Fiction must have at least one character, but that character can have three grammatical persons, and hence three different narrative angles. *Soul Mountain (Lingshan)* was written like that, using a structure with “I,” “you,” and “he/she” instead of the normal plot of a story, but this was neither a rebellion nor a subversion of fiction; it was another step towards achieving an understanding of the narrative art of fiction.

It is the same with painting. Is it possible to find a new pictorial language, or come up with fresh images, without rebelling against painting and its two-dimensionality, and getting rid of the frame and the canvas? Actually, some fresh pictorial language and images did appear in the twentieth century, for example abstract painting, and I feel they deserve to be affirmed. These were images that had never appeared in traditional painting, but they did not negate painting or the images of two-dimensional painting — even very formalistic abstract painting still uses images, and is based on two-dimensionality.

Kandinsky is someone else who had his own aesthetics of creation, and his book *Point and Line to Plane* is an example of what I mean when I talk about the aesthetics of the

artist. Points, planes, and lines were originally concepts from geometry, but through him these geometrical concepts became an artistic language, and a form of artistic expression. I often ask myself whether or not we can come up with any other new forms of expression, besides abstract painting. There have been brilliant achievements in figurative painting, and it has a very rich history; abstract art, too, is by now more than a hundred years old. Is it possible to find any new and interesting forms of artistic expression, outside these two? That is up to the artist, whose creative freedom is still infinite.

I have, for example, noticed that there is an area between the figurative and the abstract that has often been ignored. Can images still be found somewhere between the figurative and the abstract? Neither completely figurative nor totally abstract, what role can such images play? They do not depict shapes or delineate reality, and the concept behind them is neither the reproduction of reality nor pure abstract expression and the venting of subjective feelings. In abstract expressionism, a particularly notable example of abstract painting, the emphasis is on freedom and spontaneity in painting as well as on the painter's feelings, and his reactions to colour and light, yet it is still figurative. Might it be possible to discover other forms of expression between the figurative and the abstract? I believe that it might be.

That is also the direction in which my own painting is going – I have been searching for images like this, somewhere between the figurative and the abstract. The intention behind such artistic images is neither a faithful representation of reality nor the self-expression of the artist and his feelings; it is more a suggestion [*tishi*], vague but not completely abstract, creating images that the spectator can enrich with his or her own experiences and associations. Because these images are still two-dimensional, there is colour, light, shade, and shadows, and they still make use of points, planes, and lines, technique and artistic style. This is the direction I have found for my painting. Are there other directions, besides this? Of course there are. Every painter with any creativity is searching for his own direction, his own pictorial language. Moving on now to drama – if we accept the limitation that the relationship between performers and audience cannot be done away with, is there any possibility of renewing this ancient art? Many dramatists are exploring this question, and looking for a new mode of performance. But any mode will still have to acknowledge that there is one fundamental relationship in performance art, and that is the relationship between the actor and his role, which we normally refer to as the duality of acting. It is the various ways in which the re-

lationship between the actor and the object of the acting (i.e. the role) is handled that will produce different artistic schools, different dramaturgical methods, and hence different plays.

Let me quote a couple of extreme examples: one is the Russian Stanislavsky, the brilliant embodiment of dramatic realism, whose “Method acting” involved getting the actor to inhabit his role and play it in a life-like way in front of an audience. An actor's ability to identify completely with his role was considered the height of performance art, and this led to psychological realism in playwriting. Chekhov's plays are typical of this kind of drama.

My second example, and the opposite of the first, is expressionist drama, the plays of Brecht and his “alienation effect.” In these plays, the actor does not conceal his identity as an actor, he just plays his role in public, and in so doing presents the audience with a critique of it, and of society. That these plays tend to be political is of course obvious.

A great deal of thought has also been given to methods of acting and direction in some modern and contemporary avant-garde drama, and the Polish theatre directors Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor, for example, have both developed the expressive power of this performance art. In my own plays, too, I have naturally wanted to offer some new perspectives. I believe that within the dual relationship of actor and role there is another layer that is all too easily neglected, and that actually performance art has to address a tripartite relationship. A rather extreme example from Peking opera might be useful here. Mei Lanfang continued playing the role of the young girl Qiu Hong even in old age. How was he able to inhabit the role? If he had played it in the Brechtian manner, it would no doubt have been very comical. How did he manage to play this young girl on stage so winningly? That is the mystery: it is not yet sufficiently understood that the method of acting in Peking opera and Kunqu, and other types of traditional Eastern drama such as the Noh and Kabuki of Japan, in fact involves a tripartite relationship.

Every actor develops certain habits of speech and movement over the years, so what happens when he is required to play a role that is very different from himself, and can't play himself? He needs to have a process that purges him of himself, and that is where the actor's essential training and performance skills come in. How the actor clears away the “I” of his everyday life and uses the neutral actor's “you” as an intermediary, prepares him physically and mentally for taking on the role of “he” and presenting it to the audience. I won't go into detail here about the psychology of acting or the physi-

cal mechanisms of the human body; I simply want to highlight these three layers. If we acknowledge that on stage an actor also has the identity of a “neutral actor,” his performance will become more layered, and this will bring about great changes in dramaturgical techniques.

Some of my plays have no plot, nor even characters with a clear-cut identity. *Between Life and Death* (*Sheng si jie*) is a woman’s monologue, where the female actor only uses the third person “she” on stage when acting her role and when narrating. This play has been staged in several countries, in different languages, and many times over, which shows that it is acceptable to actors and popular with audiences. In another of my plays, *The Man Who Questions Death* (*Kouwen siwang*) the two actors use the second person “you” in their interaction, but the words of both express the feelings and thoughts of a single person. In *Weekend Quartet* (*Zhoumo sichongzou*) there are four characters, each of whom may use the three different persons, “I,” “you,” and “he/she,” when they speak, and this gives the performance a more complex contrapuntal relationship. All of these plays have been performed, which proves that it is possible for this kind of acting to be staged, that the plays are not just empty words or purely theoretical utterances, and that this is a method advanced by the performance experience.

I have very wide interests, and one could say that I wanted to try my hand at all the arts, including cinema. *Silhouette/Shadow* (*Ceying huo yingzi*), a film I made recently, could be seen as a synthesis of all the arts, as it contains elements of painting, opera, drama, literature, and poetry. I wrote a poem especially for it, called “Xiaoyao ru niao” (L’errance de l’oiseau/Way of the wandering bird). Of course, it is a film, and I had been wanting to make a film for a very long time – but I didn’t want to make a film with a story, or an art documentary, both of which have fixed forms.

But how was I to find a new form? Of course, these days film can incorporate devices from all the arts - painting, drama, opera, even poetry. But in cinematic art itself, what is there left for us to do? Cinema is a new art, and one sign that it had become an art was the book written by the Russian film director Eisenstein, which falls into the category of what I have called the aesthetics of the artist, or aesthetics of creation. His theory about montage, or cinematic editing, was not a philosophical treatise, nor was it about art in general – what he proposed was an artistic method of linking together two different scenes after editing in such a way as to give them a new significance. When film-making first became an art form, the art lay not in the recording of real-

ity, but in the editing. And of course, film-making methods went on to become more and more richly inventive.

What else could the art of cinema do? First, I wanted to go beyond the norms of modern films. *Silhouette/Shadow* is not a film with a story, nor is it a documentary or a biography. Second, I wanted to change the narrative mode of modern films. I have just said that fiction and narrative are inseparable, but what about films? Does a film have to narrate anything? The popular films of today make use of narrative: documentaries make a narrative record of an event using the camera lens and then critique it; story films narrate using a lens, and it is impossible to divorce them from narrative. But is narrative so vital in films? I feel that we can get rid of narrative, and films will still be films.

People usually think of films as being made up of two essential components, sound and images: the images predominate in the relationship between them, while the sound is there to complement or contrast with the images and add explanation. Of course it is possible, in particular circumstances, to have them set in counterpoint to one another, so that sound and images are both relatively independent. But basically, in most of today’s films, sound and language are still subsidiary, and images are still the most important element.

Are there other methods to be found? I have proposed what I call “tripartite film,” and if people are interested, they can look at the essay on *Silhouette/Shadow* in my new book *On Creation* (*Lun chuanguo*), where I have explored whether there could be other ways of making films, and whether there might be other concepts of cinema.

It is the job of the artist to open up another way of thinking, without premising his ideas on criticism of the old world and negation of tradition, or adopting a strategy of subversion. While respecting cultural tradition, and acknowledging that each form of art has its fundamental limitations, he must attempt a new understanding of this art based on the understanding of previous generations, and be able to find within it mechanisms of innovation to advance artistic creation and thereby initiate artistic phenomena that have not yet been defined by philosophers. •

This text was adapted by Gao Xingjian from a lecture given at the Chinese University of Hong Kong on 23 May 2008.

• Translated by Caroline Mason