

On the Relationship between British Contemporary Art and Mass Media from the Perspective of Turner Prize

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Abstract: *The intervention of British mass media in contemporary art turns contemporary art into a news event in Britain. Some artists and collectors with marketing strategies also use media public opinion to build personal brands, transforming cultural capital into economic capital. Turner Award is the highest award in the field of contemporary visual art in Britain, and as attractive as Oscar Award in the art world. From being unknown to today's highly authoritative art festival, the Turner Prize benefits from the extensive involvement of the media apart from the innovation of the evaluation standard. The resulting upsurge of visits and public discussions has changed the cultural impact of contemporary art on the public, promoted the prosperity of the art market, and made British contemporary art occupy a pivotal position in the world. This article attempts to take the Turner Prize as an example to analyse the relationship between mass media and contemporary art, and the positive and negative influences of mass media on British contemporary art; and to discuss how art would not fall into the trap of media and stick to its self-discipline in today's highly developed mass media.*

Keywords: Contemporary Art; Mass Media; Turner Prize; Art Market

1. The Relationship Between Turner Prize and Media

1) The media involvement in the Turner Prize

The Turner Prize made a complete shift from an embarrassing situation that no one cares about to becoming the most influential cultural event. In addition to its unique criteria for the selection, the Turner Prize achieved its success due to its interactive relationship with the media.

Since the resumption of the ceremony in 1991, the promoters of the Turner Prize began to focus on the promotion and commercialization of the award. The award ceremony cooperated with the Channel 4 to introduce the mechanism of public judging. This initiative sparked much enthusiasm among viewers, and although each nominated candidate was subjected to abuse, it also drew a lot of attention. TV stations broadcast live, and the promoters invite many celebrities to attend the ceremony every year. For example, in 2001, pop diva Madonna Ciccone presented the award to winner Martin Creed while Grayson Perry, the 2003 Turner Prize winner, attended the ceremony in a bow-tie, puffy dress. The eye-catching stars and events made the Turner Prize the talk of the town. In addition, the interviews with the nominated candidates by the BBC and other media have made contemporary art a news event. Due to the success of the Turner Prize in terms of media publicity, it has become a stage for a

group of young artists to show and promote themselves. For example, most of the Turner Prize winners in the 1990s came from the YBA, which promoted young artists such as Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and Douglas Gordon who broke with tradition.

2) Turner Prize expands the influence of media organizations

The media use technology as capital and they are turning into a cultural industry that uses content as capital. The joining of art makes the cultural industry, which does not have the ability to create culture, achieve economic success by using commercial means, and provide a feasible new path for the development of the market (Song Meng, 2006). Therefore, the coverage on hot topics in art has become an indispensable part of the media culture.

Whipping up public opinion and capturing hot topics that resonate among viewers and readers are important ways for media organizations to gain an advantageous position in the industry. Therefore, it is important to select hot topics for arts coverage. For the media, the Turner Prize is a natural selling point, with its innovative judging criteria and eye-catching topics. Major media outlets have been competing to report the Turner Prize, which is undoubtedly a channel for them to increase their own influence. The essence of media influence lies in the occupation of social capital through interaction with public opinion, and the essence of media economy is to realize the transformation between social capital and economic capital (Li Qinglin, 2008). In other words, the richer the occupied social resources, the stronger the voice in social activities, and thus, the more commercial benefits that can be obtained. For example, the live broadcast of the award ceremony by Channel 4 and the interview of the nominated candidates by BBC both achieve the discourse power and the control of public opinion through the occupation of social resources, increasing the mass influence of media.

Therefore, the coverage of the Turner Prize brings not only economic benefits to the media, but also the occupation and control of social capital, which is the media scam that is to be elaborated later in this paper.

2. The Mass Media Develops British Contemporary Art

1) Dialogue between contemporary art and the public

First of all, the mass media have made contemporary art more directly and conveniently accessible to the public, allowing them to have a dialogue with art. This has changed the relationship between art and the public in the traditional sense since contemporary art is no longer a luxury belonging to the aristocracy, but has begun to go public.

People no longer learn about art only by reading books and newspapers or by visiting museums, galleries, and other cultural venues. Film, television, radio, and a host of other communication media can present art directly to the audience and provide more information about art to the audience. The public can even communicate directly with artists through the media. Art is no longer an activity in which the artist uses his or her personal skills to present his or her own unique ideas, but also to meet the desires, needs and pursuits of the public as much as possible.

Furthermore, the power of the media has extended the possibilities of public acceptance of art and changed the public's attitude to contemporary art. The media's interpretive coverage of art has guided the viewers' ways of thinking, and the British public in general has shifted from an initial difficulty in understanding, distrust, or even aversion to contemporary art to active participation in it. For example, Channel 4's voting activity for the Turner Prize has increased

the public's enthusiasm to participate in art activities, and predicting the winner has become an anecdote in the UK, improving the cultural impact of contemporary art on public life.

2) Promoting the Development of Art Market

(a) Artists and collectors use the media to whip up public opinion

According to sociology, the publication of an artwork does not mean its own completion; it can only be considered completed after it is accepted (Wang Desheng, 2004). In today's society, mass media have made it possible for artworks to be more accepted. Some artists, collectors, patrons, and others with business sensibilities are also aware of this.

Tracy Emin is a master of marketing, and she excels at arousing public controversy and generating media hype about her work. After angrily walking away from the 1997 award ceremony of Turner Prize, she has regularly appeared at gallery openings and on the award ceremonies in the UK. What really made her famous was her work, *My Bed*, which let her become a Turner Prize nominee. The work's display of her post-sexual bed caused a media frenzy and sparked a civil war of sort. One housewife living in Wales, England, even came all the way to London when she found out about it, bringing out the detergent and rags to clean up the bed. Two performance artists, Cai Yuan and Xi Jianjun, jumped onto the bed topless, hoping to make the work more complete in this way. Nearly every major newspaper commented on the work, with the Guardian (UK) devoting an entire second page to the work, prominently headlining, "How this bed transformed from artwork to contemporary symbol in less than two weeks", and congratulating the work, "The work's notoriety at the Tate has taken Tracy Emin from minor celebrity to infamy." With the cooperation of the public and media coverage, Emin became the biggest winner of the 1999 Turner Prize even though she was not the winner that year.

In addition to artists, Charles Saatchi, a collector, is famous in the world of collecting, and his exhibition (Sensation) at the Royal Academy of Arts in London and the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York in 1997 and 1999, respectively, caused a sensation. The first was Marcus Harvey's Myra Hindley (1995), which used children's handprints to turn the heads of murderers into a giant portrait of a star. At the exhibition, some people threw eggs and painted the work to express their anger, and the exhibition had to be suspended for two weeks. For Saatchi, however, this was exactly the result he wanted after a careful planning.

Since communication can introduce the public to artistic activities and give new life to works, today's artists and artistic activities can master and apply the characteristics of mass communication to enrich the connotation of art, thus successfully achieving balance between art and commerce.

(b) Art galleries benefit from it

Along with the rise of young British artists, London became the next world-class art centre after New York. Contemporary art was no longer confined to the so-called upper classes, but it also became a widely discussed topic in the mass media and among the public. A lot of galleries and art museums used the media to try to gain a more favourable position in the art world.

The Tate, as one of the most popular art museums in the UK, according to the data shown by DCMS in 2012-2013, had 796,673 visitors per month and nearly 8 million visitors for the year (including Tate Liverpool, Tate St. Ives, Tate Britain and Tate Modern). This is closely related to the Tate's reliance on mass media to promote the Turner Prize ceremony.

The Tate relies on its official website to successfully promote itself, receiving 50 million visits per year. It includes introductory information about the four branches, collection information, exhibition news, discussions between artists and short films, which basically present the Tate's art ideas to the viewers. When asked by a Chinese journalist on the impact of the Tate website on the museum, Stephen Deuchar (2007) who was the director of the Tate replied: "It has a positive impact, the growth in visits to the website is directly proportional to the growth in the number of visitors to the museum. It may be that people visit the website for information before they come to the museum, for example to book a seat; For the Tate, the link between increased visits to the website and increasing numbers of visitors is not a coincidence".

(c) Drive regional economic and cultural development

In the 21st century, British contemporary art is recognized both the British and the world. The opening of the Tate Modern in 2000 and the Frieze art fair in London in 2003 was testaments to the booming development of the British contemporary art. The governments across the UK have also realized the role of culture and art in revitalizing the economy. In addition to London, a number of emerging contemporary art districts have made great progress, such as Liverpool, Glasgow, Newcastle and other cities. They have also started to hold large-scale international art exhibitions. For example, in 2007, for the first time, the Turner Prize was chosen to be held in Liverpool, with the support of Arts Council England, Liverpool Cultural Corporation, the Western Regional Development Agency, Milligan, and members of the Tate. To promote Turner Prize ceremony, Tate Liverpool collaborated with Liverpool cab drivers. The cab drivers were asked to discuss the Turner Prize with passengers in their cabs, thus drawing the attention of the audience to express their feelings and opinions about the Prize, and these interactions were recorded on video. In this way, the public and the museums can have a real and natural exchange.

The promotion of art museums to the public has brought amazing economic benefits to Liverpool. According to the Tate website, 71,800 people visited Tate Liverpool during the exhibition, and over 3.6 million people watched Channel 4's Turner Prize ceremony, bringing Liverpool an economic benefit of over £10 million. This success is in fact attributed to the use of mass media to transform social capital into cultural capital, and ultimately into economic capital.

3. Mass Media Makes Contemporary Art Face Difficulties

1) Media scam

It is undeniable that the mass media has enabled art to be accepted more quickly, promoted the development of the British contemporary art market, and created new art forms. But at the same time, the large-scale involvement of the media creates difficulties to contemporary art.

The media is materially and spiritually dependent on economic forces and market constraints because of their own interests, leading to some problems, such as the truthfulness and correctness of reporting. The media's coverage of an artwork actually acts as a guide for the art market. Through coverage, they guide the artists and the art circle, creating public opinion and hot spots, and thus, giving them a favourable position in the communication chain. With the development of mass media and driven by their own interests, they have now become the dominant force in art production and consumption (Luo Yiping, 2004).

For example, the BBC interviews the candidates nominated for the Turner Prize every year, and the artists present themselves and their works to the public through the media to receive

public praise or criticism. Therefore, the public opinion is controlled by the media. By using the vivid and imaginative symbolic information it has created, the mass communication participates in people's daily life. The masses repeatedly perceive the symbolic content of mass communication and the ideological characteristics in their daily life, and accept and imitate those reproducible images of mass communication. This is in fact a media scam, or communication illusion: readers and viewers observe and understand other activities within a designed perspective, resulting in cognitive compliance without questioning or disrupting the process.

The media has the right to express opinion and attract countless viewers to easily believe the recommendations and conclusions they make about a certain artist, a certain type of artwork or an art phenomenon, and they can influence readers and viewers in both positive and negative ways (Luo Yiping, 2004). This allows the public to approach art in a virtual environment, without overtly realizing their dialogue with art. Moreover, the media can to a certain extent, affect the ideas of some artists. Ultimately, artists will be controlled by the media, making contemporary art fall into the media's trap.

2) Loss of artistic self-discipline

Contemporary art has fallen prey to the media's deception and control, bringing about a loss of artistic self-discipline.

In his Critique of Judgment, Kant distinguishes beauty from pleasure and goodness, suggesting that "beauty is pleasure with disinterestedness... Connoisseurship is the ability to judge an object by means of pleasure or displeasure with disinterestedness. An object of such pleasure is called beauty." In other words, the appreciation of beauty is not caused by interestedness. In this way, art would become pure, and in this purity would find its own criteria and standards of independence.

As for today's art, under the influence of mass media, the art is becoming more and more popular, and creativity has been replaced by reproduction and production. For example, Hirst's recent works are largely made by hired assistants and not by him. Of the hundreds of works in the "Polka Dots" series, only five were painted by him. Half of Hirst's works were sold at auctions belonging to three nearly identical series: "Polka Dots," "Butterflies" and "Rotations." There was no difference between his works except for their size. Due to the lust for money, the originality of artworks has gradually disappeared and has been replaced by pop culture symbols, making the boundary between art and popular culture disappear.

In addition to originality, the capacity for independent thinking was also disappearing. Julian Stallabrass (2010) described a situation where "artists sneer at the media's pursuit of sensationalism, but at the same time pursue that sensational effect in their own works". The purity of art is replaced by other stimulations, bringing about a contradiction between the popularity and independence of art. Contemporary art is caught in a dilemma: how to protect the purity of art in the world led by modern media and ultimately to protect the artistic self-discipline?

4. Conclusion

Taking the Turner Prize as an example, this paper explored the relationship between the British contemporary art and the mass media. The author argued that the media's involvement in art has enabled media organizations to occupy more social resources and thus, to gain more opportunities to express their opinions. Through mass communication, art can dialogue with

the public, bringing about the prosperity of the British art market. At the same time, the media, in pursuit of profit, exercise control over the production and consumption of artworks as well as the audience, causing contemporary art to fall into the illusion of communication, and creating a contradiction between the purity of art and the popularization of art. For the general public, they should look critically at the media's coverage of art events and avoid the trap of media control.

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