

Representation·Space·Behavior: On the Dimension of the Consumptive Alienation of Affect in Death in Venice

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Abstract. The tragic connotation of Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (1912) has traditionally been examined from three traditional perspectives: the tension between reason and desire, the aesthetics of disease and death, and mythological archetype metaphors. However, the implicit logic of the early consumer society within the text has been largely overlooked. This study uses Baudrillard's symbolic consumption theory as the core framework, and combines Benjamin's "aura" theory and Freud's "libido" theory to construct an analytical framework of symbolic representation, spatial commodification, and behavioral consumerist transformation. Through this framework, the study reveals the mechanisms and characteristics of affective alienation in the novel. Although Europe had not yet developed a mature consumer society around 1912, emerging consumption prototypes—such as accelerated urbanization and the rise of tourism—provided the socio-historical context for consumptive alienation of affect. Tadzio's representation was dismantled into appropriable signs such as classical and morbid beauty; Venice was degraded to a standardized tourist commodity space; and Aschenbach's commodified gaze and self-commodification signify the shift of affect from spiritual resonance to monetarized consumption behavior. Rather than denying the value of desire and physical beauty, this study exposes how consumer logic distorts affective relations, offering both a renewed modern interpretation of the classic texts and a literary reference for understanding contemporary affective reification.

Keywords: Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, symbolic consumption, consumptive alienation of affect

1. Introduction

Death in Venice, written by Thomas Mann in 1912, has become a classic text of modernist literature, centered on the narrative of the writer Aschenbach becoming infatuated with the beautiful boy Tadzio in Venice and eventually dying of cholera [1]. Academic interpretation of the tragedy generally fall into three mainstream dimensions: first, the emphasis on the inner struggle between reason and desire brought about by the artist's identity, though often staying at the abstract philosophical level and ignoring the impact of specific social environments on individual behavior; second, analyses based on the aesthetics of disease, which treat imagery such as cholera as metaphors of spiritual corruption and the crisis of the times, yet rarely touch upon the material basis

of consumption behind these phenomena; third, the exploration of mythological archetype patterns, which provides close readings of Greek mythological elements in the narrative structure but remains somewhat disconnected from the social reality embedded in the work. While these approaches offer rich explanations, they generally ignore the realistic background of the emerging European consumer society around 1912 and its literary representation in the text, thus failing to deeply reveal the role of consumption logic in Aschenbach's the consumptive alienation of affect [2].

In view of this, this study focuses on the following questions: (1) How do Tadzio's representation, the space of Venice, and Aschenbach's behavior reflect the semiotic logic of consumer society? (2) How does the consumption logic promote the alienation of affective relationships from spiritual resonance to sign possession? (3) What implications does this pattern of affective alienation hold for understanding contemporary phenomena of affective reification? Methodologically, Baudrillard's discussion of sign value and symbolic consumption serves as the core framework, combined with Benjamin's "aura" theory to analyze the erosion of authenticity in space and representation and Freud's "libido" theory to explain the psychological mechanism of desire being distorted by consumption logic [3-5]. By dismantling text details chapter by chapter, an analysis system for the consumptive alienation of affect is constructed.

The significance of this study lies in its theoretical introduction of consumption theory into the interpretation of a classic text, thereby compensating for the insufficient attention to social reality in existing research. In practical terms, phenomena such as affective symbolization and relationship transaction presented in the text echo prevalent issues of affective reification in contemporary society, offering literary insight for reflecting on the nature of contemporary affective relationships.

2. The evolution of the presentation of beauty: the semiotization of Tadzio as a consumable object

Tadzio's beauty in the novel has distinct semiotic characteristics, which coincide with the logical traces of early consumer society, and gradually becomes an object for Aschenbach's one-way consumption.

2.1. The instrumentalization of Tadzio through artwork and god metaphors

Aschenbach always regards Tadzio as a sign carrying beauty rather than a complete individual, which is the primary manifestation of the consumptive alienation of affect. He repeatedly compared Tadzio to a Greek sculpture, describing his skin as smooth as a statue and his veins as clearly visible. He also equated him with the embodiment of spiritual beauty and even confused him with the prototype of the mythical representations Hyacinthus and Narcissus [1]. According to Baudrillard, the core of consumption is to possess sign value rather than use value [3]. Aschenbach was obsessed with the classical beauty sign carried by Tadzio. Benjamin's "aura" theory states that the charm of an artwork stems from its unique sense of distance that cannot be replicated [4]. Aschenbach's act of deification is precisely by abstracting Tadzio into a sign of classical beauty, transforming it from a concrete real individual into an aesthetic representation that can be repeatedly appropriated. As a result, Tadzio lost his unique personality, and his authenticity was dissolved. In the later period, Aschenbach even planned to use Tadzio as a creative model, and the boy is degraded to a tool of artistic inspiration [1]. As Freud's "libido" theory reveals, this behavior is a distorted expression of primitive psychological energy, and its essence is to use art to disguise desire, which reflects the egocentricity of its affective core [5]. This instrumentalizing perspective paved the way for Aschenbach's subsequent dismantling of Tadzio into a partial sign.

2.2. The decomposition of appearance into local sign

The text unconsciously presents a narrative that semiotizes parts of its body, which is in line with the logic of the consumer society of disassembling objects and consuming signs. There is no dialogue or inner description of Tadzio in the whole text. Aschenbach only pays attention to his hair, skin, eyes, and other local features: his hair is like a sacred halo, his skin is as pale as ivory, and his eyes are hazy and unique [1]. These elements are endowed with semiotic meanings of innocence and nobility. Baudrillard believes that consumer society decomposes and reorganizes individuals through sign systems [3]. These partial signs that strip away personality become the core of Aschenbach's consumption. His familiarity with Tadzio is not familiarity with inter-subject interaction but familiarity in the sense of aesthetic coding, which is the consumer's grasp of the attributes of the product [6]. This kind of cognition shows that the affective relationship degenerates into the possession and taste of "beauty" as a sign, and the spiritual core is largely ignored.

2.3. The scarcity of Tadzio's morbid beauty

Tadzio's morbid beauty is a reflection of consumer society's pursuit of scarcity and becomes the key to attracting Aschenbach's continued pursuit. The novel repeatedly emphasizes Tadzio's unhealthy state: his skin color is like lifeless ivory, and his teeth are bluish-white, like symptoms of anemia. Aschenbach directly points out that he is sick and ill, as if he cannot live long [1]. The consumer society promotes continuous consumption by creating differences [3]. Healthy bodies are more common, while delicate, fragile, and fleeting beauty is scarce and is more attractive, like limited edition goods. Aschenbach is not worried about the fact that Tadzio may have a short life; instead, he feels at ease, indicating that the affective relationships have been eroded by the logic of consumption [1]. What he cares about is not Tadzio's well-being, but the consumption value of this morbid beauty.

What needs to be made clear is that this criticism does not deny physical beauty or aesthetic desire but opposes stripping people of their subjective attributes and only using them as a sign for possessive consumption.

3. Venice as a tourist mecca: the commodification of space and crisis of privatization

Aschenbach's consumption of Tadzio's beauty as a sign is embedded within and enabled by the specific consumer environment of Venice. The commodification of space and crisis privatization together constitute the external conditions of symbolic consumption.

3.1. The replacement of urban authenticity by fabricated resort spaces

In the novel, Venice has been transformed into a standardized consumer product by the tourism industry, and its original historical aura has been replaced by display landscapes and commercial packaging, becoming an alienated external environment for affective consumption [7]. When Aschenbach boarded the ship, the conductor used exaggerated words to peddle Venice, treating it as a commodity eager to be sold; the buildings seen after landing were also display landscapes built to cater to tourists; tourists could only enjoy private beaches by checking into luxury hotels, and the beach and sea became high-end commodities only for fee-paying tourists [1].

Benjamin pointed out that "aura" stems from the sense of distance and uniqueness in art [4]. The tourism development of Venice has almost destroyed this trait: the city's charm is prepackaged into standardized experiences, the sense of aesthetic distance disappears, and history and culture are degraded to signs of famous tourist attractions. What Aschenbach and other tourists consume is not

the soul of Venice but its commodified label, making travel no longer a spiritual dialogue between people and the city but the pursuit of an established sign system, and Venice has become an instrumental space for the consumption of beauty as a sign.

3.2. The privatization of the cholera crisis as a special commodity

The cholera crisis in the novel did not make Aschenbach want to escape but was privatized in his psychological structure as a special resource to consolidate the possession of beauty as a sign, further distorting the nature of affective relationship.

The clues to the plague are hinted at the beginning of the novel. The smell of potion in the air contrasts with the beauty of the city. Authorities and citizens frequently cover up the spread of cholera. After Aschenbach ascertained the truth about cholera, instead of panicking, he was excited because the secrets of Venice blended with his own secrets and decided to keep it a secret to prolong his gaze on Tadzio [1]. This reaction shows that he transformed public crises into private consumption resources, and the threat of death made Venice become a purer consumption environment, allowing him to monopolize the beauty as a sign. His consumerist exploitation of the cholera crisis highlights the erosion of humanity by this very logic. Aschenbach's affective relationships have largely deviated from the essence of caring and become an extremely selfish act of sign possession.

4. Changes in Aschenbach's behavioral patterns: monetized expression of affect and self-commodification

Aschenbach's behavior has always centered on consumption, from The Commodified Gaze to Self-Commodification, marking that his affective relationships have essentially become the product of consumerist logic.

4.1. The one-way erotic gaze

Unlike Werther's spiritual love, Aschenbach's affective expression is always based on monetary transactions, and The Commodified Gaze is its core representation of alienation. He stayed at a luxury hotel and paid a high fee for the best viewing position to gaze at Tadzio; when passive viewing was not enough, he hired a gondola to follow Tadzio's family with a high tip and even stood in front of Tadzio's room for a long time. He even stood in front of Tadzio's room for a long time [1].

According to Baudrillard's theory, consumer society shapes desire through sign systems, and Aschenbach's desire is to possess Tadzio's beauty [3]. By continuing to pay for the opportunity to gaze, he simplifies the affective relationship that might have a spiritual connection into a one-way act of possession that can be traded with money, eroding the purity of the affective relationship. This kind of gaze realized through consumption significantly undermines the spiritual resonance attribute of affective relationship.

Therefore, this kind of erotic relationship maintained by money is not only one-way but also significantly weakens the spiritual trait of affective relationship, making affective relationship degenerate into a consumption activity that can be purchased, prolonged, and reproduced [8].

4.2. The self-commodification of youthful appearance

Aschenbach's self-transformation in order to cater to the symbolic consumption of beauty is essentially an act of self-commodification that alienates him into a consumer object. This writer,

who was once proud of his spiritual achievements, felt ashamed of his own aging when compared to Tadzio, the most beautiful consumer product, and finally turned to a barber for a comprehensive transformation, pretending to be youthful through consumer acts such as hair dyeing and makeup [1].

Ironically, on the ship to Venice, he once despised the old man who put on makeup to counterfeit his youth, but in the end he became the person he once hated. The purpose of this transformation, as the barber puts it, is to love as much as you want, essentially an investment in the self for affective consumption [1].

According to Baudrillard's analysis, the body has become capital that needs to be polished and displayed in the consumer society [3]. Aschenbach attempted to make himself worthy of consuming Tadzio by purchasing signs of youth. This act ended the spirituality of affective relationship, and it descended to a false relationship between consumers and consumer goods [8].

5. Aesthetic morality and affective relationship: contemporary inspiration from death in Venice

The novel's depiction of the consumptive alienation of affect in *Death in Venice* reflects to a certain extent the potential erosion of affective relationship by consumption logic and provides an important literary reference for understanding modern affective reification.

Aschenbach's tragedy can be viewed from the theoretical perspective of what Zygmunt Bauman later described as "liquid modernization" [9]. He described this state as the weakening and dissolution of traditional social norms, and Venice demonstrated a trait similar to "liquefaction" that allowed Aschenbach to put aside social identity and responsibilities and use desire as a guide to action. Consumerism's pursuit of beauty as a sign further weakens its moral constraints, turning the moral bottom line into an obstacle to the possession of a sign. Aschenbach's acts, such as stalking, gazing, and concealing cholera, all prove that he puts personal desires above the subjectivity of others under the dominance of consumption logic. This dilemma of weakening morals is not only Aschenbach's personal tragedy but also a universal metaphor for modern people facing desire and consumption. Therefore, the fundamental difference between authentic affective relationships centered on spiritual resonance and alienated affective relationships centered on symbolic consumption lies in whether the independence of the subject is respected. Authentic affective relationship does not reject desire and physical beauty but refuses to degenerate them into signs for consumption. The dilemma here is the modern dilemma of affective expression alienated into sign possession under the logic of early consumption, rather than the fault of desire itself.

6. Conclusion

Through the three-dimensional analysis of representation-space-behavior, this study clearly sorts out the complete trajectory of the consumptive alienation of affect in *Death in Venice*: Tadzio is dismantled into appropriable signs such as classical beauty and morbid beauty, Venice is degraded to a standardized tourist commodity space, and Aschenbach's *The Commodified Gaze* and self-commodification mark the affective relationship as essentially alienated from spiritual resonance to consumption behavior full of money transactions.

It needs to be reiterated that this study introduces consumption theory not as the only dimension to interpret the tragedy, but as a complement to traditional perspectives. Consumption logic is the key factor that accelerates and deepens alienation, but it does not deny the classical connotations such as the temptation of beauty and the dilemma of human nature; at the same time, research has

never denied the value of desire and physical beauty, both of which are natural components of human affective relationships. What really leads to tragedy is the distortion of affective relationships by consumption logic.

Death in Venice provides a prescient critique of what later theorists would call the symbolic consumption of desire. Aschenbach's downfall prefigures how affective relationships in contemporary times are mediated and evaluated through semiotic exchange, such as the commodification of bodies on social media or the performance of love through expensive gifts-giving. Aschenbach's demise, therefore, stands as a powerful literary foreshadowing of the self's disintegration under the total mediation of desire by the logic of symbolic consumption.

Future research can be advanced in two aspects: first, combine Thomas Mann's creative background information to further verify the consciousness of consumption logic writing; second, make a horizontal comparison of Death in Venice with other contemporary texts involving affective relationships and consumption to explore the differences in literary responses of different writers to early consumer society.

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