

A New Dialectic of Art Therapy and Social Discipline from the Perspective of Functionalism

Qiumin Chen¹

¹ Academy for Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies, Nankai University, China

Correspondence: Qiumin Chen, Academy for Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies, Nankai University, Tianjin, China. E-mail: garfield@nankai.edu.cn

Received: July 29, 2025; Accepted: August 13, 2025; Published: August 14, 2025

Abstract

Law, ethics, religion, politics, philosophy, and art constitute advanced forms of social consciousness that regulate human behavior. Art uniquely shapes mental states and spiritual outlooks through its aesthetic appeal rather than mechanical application. This study employs the traditional Chinese philosophical framework of "The Distinction between Ritual and Music" as a theoretical foundation, using music therapy as a representative case to analyze the dialectical relationship between artistic healing and social discipline within the functionalist perspective.

Keywords: aesthetics, function, Confucian Ritualism, social discipline, art therapy

1. Introduction

Law, ethics, religion, politics, philosophy, and art all represent advanced forms of social consciousness. Each guides and regulates human behavior from distinct perspectives. However, their operational principles differ: Law and ethics are relatively objective, primarily designed to establish social order; whereas philosophy and art, being more ambiguous in nature, subtly influence human minds through personalized experiences. Ancient Chinese philosophy famously addressed the "The Distinction between Ritual and Music (礼乐之辨)", exploring the fundamental relationship between order and freedom — a perennial social theme that remains endlessly debated. In today's world, technological advancements have transformed human relationships and fundamentally reshaped individual consciousness. This raises a crucial question: Does the rigid framework of rules create synergistic effects with the flexible aesthetic sensibilities of art?

2. The Dialectic between the Theory of Aesthetic Disinterestedness and the Theory of Artistic Functionalism

The concept of "art appreciation" might initially seem like a description of leisurely, relaxing activities. However, this is not the case. Art fundamentally serves as a form of social consciousness, often rooted in aesthetic sensibility as its foundational principle. This explains why Kants notion of "aesthetic disinterestedness" frequently applies to art appreciation. Yet different art forms rely on diverse media for creation and dissemination. The more complex and tangible the medium, the less likely the art becomes truly disinterested. Therefore, the only art form meeting purely disinterested criteria could be pure music — or perhaps none at all.

In the treatise *Poetics*, Aristotle explored the *Katastasis* function (which means purification) of classical tragedy.[1] This concept suggests that through the protagonists dramatic experiences in ancient Greek tragedies, audiences evoke their own tragic existential consciousness. The process of "empathy" triggers a state of "objectification" — where the subjects will momentarily splits into two roles: the "viewer" and the "observed." Through the characters' tragic journeys, the "ego" being observed by "me" gains recognition. This aesthetic mechanism bears subtle parallels to the narrative framework of the "Crucifixion of Jesus", embodying the principle of "imputation of guilt". While this paper avoids delving into tragic psychology, it uses the concept of *Katastasis* to trace Western classical traditions contributions to the functional theory of art.

Similarly influential is the "evocation, observation, community, criticism (兴观群怨)" theory from ancient Chinese Confucianism. Confucius stated: "Poetry can evoke feelings, observe society, communicate with others and criticize problems (《论语·阳货》)".[2] This theory essentially encapsulates how artistic appreciation affects both individual psychology and interpersonal relationships. In fact, the combination of vocation, observation and criticism — almost perfectly mirrors the *Katastasis* concept in Western tragedy theory.

As demonstrated, Kants "interesseloses Wohlgefallen (Aesthetic Disinterestedness)" doctrine in the *Critique of Judgment* only captures a limited aspect of aesthetic experience. In reality, what predominates is the

"Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck (Purposiveness without Purpose)", where the influence of "purposiveness" operates in a more subtle yet crucial manner. The "purposiveness" of aesthetics typically refers not to practical utility, but rather to an indescribable sense of "the pleasure of the Will of life". Consequently, this "purposiveness" proves difficult to quantify through logical frameworks.

Different art forms exhibit distinct "purposiveness" operational procedures based on their media characteristics. Architecture demonstrates a higher degree of serviceability, while music shows less. But this does not lead to the conclusion that architectural art requires "purposiveness" more than musical art. When musical compositions incorporate semantic elements beyond pure sound, they develop a sense of discipline. Language serves as the medium of "logos," hence power combats are often called as "discourse of power." Thus, society is termed a "discursive society" — Its contours outlined by logically structured elements on the principle of logos. Humans exist within social frameworks governed by hegemonic discourses. While such dominance may not inherently harm reality, when free-flowing music merges with value-laden discourse to form an artwork, how do these two mediums achieve mutual coordination and collaborative operation? In reality, when they become inseparable, The Value-centeredism approach of language symbols has taken the dominant position — essentially stripping away the sensory energy of acoustic media. Pure music's inherent "beauty" gets forcibly restructured into subordinate components, achieving a master-slave relationship akin to domestication. As the scene of the film *American Beauty* reveals a fundamental conflict: A family of three constantly argues over the choice of music for their dining table, which escalates into a deeper dispute — the male protagonist's emotional infidelity. What they are debating isn't merely "which kind of music is more beautiful", but rather which melody can reflect their mental state. Through this musical selection, they seek to effectively dominate the entire family.

In reality, music not only interacts with discursive power but also frequently collides with social norms. While the original purpose of artistic appreciation might be a pure spiritual experience — a form of inner cultivation, but artistic acts inherently become "social events" once they occur (unless the artist retreats to seclusion or avoids social interaction entirely, which is impractical). Since people live within social collectives, every word and action may potentially offend others. Therefore, any multi-stakeholder coexistence inevitably forms a set of public order and good customs, requiring all individuals in the community to abide by these conventions.

Sometimes intense clashes of will emerge between individuals. Not every inclination aligns with truth, goodness, and beauty, which necessitates institutional mediation — as exemplified by "ritual" and "law". Yet when constraints arise, suppression inevitably follows. Or rather, even without conscious awareness, the human psyche harbors latent dark impulses. This is where art therapy power truly shines. When we mention of "aesthetic experience", it must be harmless. Regardless of the subject's aesthetic object or its form, this principle holds true — as Laozi (老子) observed in his concept of "On the Virtue of the Crippled and Deformed (兀者、支离者之美)". Pure aesthetic engagement should cleanse and heal the mind.

The principle of "Aesthetic Disinterestedness" does not equate to nihilism, but rather suggests that aesthetic appreciation serves not tangible utilitarian goals, but rather evokes profound emotions through ambiguous yet fluidic elements. Since the driving force of aesthetics is clearly the Will of life, its guiding principle aligns with the purpose of purposiveness — creating evolutionary goals, rather than practical utilitarian objectives. This elevates our research perspective to the level of cosmic evolution theory. When we encounter suppression in the realm of "certainty", our will directs us toward the domain of "ambiguous sensations" for resolution, where artistic aesthetic activities act as subtle mediators. Therefore, "Aesthetic Disinterestedness" and "Artistic Functionalism" are not contradictory concepts — they operate at different levels of meaning.

3. A Reinterpretation of "The Distinction between Ritual and Music"

In Chinese philosophy, how does the concept of "ritual" specifically manifest alongside the notion of "music"? Wang Guowei's essay *On Ritual Propriety* posits: "The term 'ritual' originally referred to vessels holding jades and stones for divine offerings, later evolved into wine vessels for sacrificial rites, and ultimately developed into a comprehensive term encompassing all ritual activities." [3] This interpretation has gained widespread academic recognition in China. Archaeological evidences reveal that many burial objects were not considered practical items but rather ritual vessels, thus commanding exalted status. This demonstrates that early Chinese civilizations "ritual" functioned within primitive spiritual worship systems, forming a socialized protocol to express devotion. Essentially, "ritual" represents a series of procedural actions, with each step following the previous one, which reflecting collective beliefs. Tracing historical development, during the Zhou Dynasty, The Duke of Zhou (周公姬旦) "established the ritual and musical systems (制礼制乐)" [4], transforming sacred sacrificial practices into multifaceted ethical institutional frameworks. Crucially, ancient people believed ritual vessels, sacrifices, and deities all have tangible functional significance. In contrast, contemporary China, influenced by Marxist materialist

conception of history, often treats ceremonial celebrations as primarily symbolic routine activities. It is even comparable to the "Taobao Shopping Festival".

Ancient texts contain abundant discussions on the distinction between "ritual and music", as exemplified in The Book of Rites: The Record of Music (《礼记·乐记》): "Music seeks unity, while ritual pursues differentiation. Unity fosters intimacy, differentiation cultivates respect. When music prevails, harmony flows; when ritual reigns, estrangement follows." [5] Clearly, both ritual and music serve as fundamental tools for social governance, representing early manifestations of social consciousness. Music integrates all spiritual aspirations, compelling people to engage in collective focus through aesthetic experiences where the mind flows freely. Ritual, however, operates through compartmentalized principles that divide society into distinct "order zones," guiding individuals into corresponding domains under different circumstances. Ritual focuses on creating a socially optimized system with rigid, or say semi-coercive, constraints that ensure individual compliance within permissible limits — maintaining "order". While music remains flexible. Through musical appreciation, people perceive the dynamic flow of mental energy rather than direct practical benefits. The Book of Rites: The Record of Music further clarifies this: "Music stirs inner impulses, while ritual regulates external conduct. Thus, ritual governs restraint, while music fosters abundance." [6] Consequently, politicians often employed music as a complementary tool to ritual, allowing their synergistic operation. This is also the reason why Confucianism regards the ritual and music culture as a means of governing the country.

Western society also prioritizes issues of order, with ethics being the primary branch of Western philosophy dedicated to this domain. Ethics examines concepts like good and evil, freedom, contracts, and power, hence its alternative name "moral metaphysics." This discipline can be seen as the precursor to modern law. The ethical and artistic aesthetic studies in Western philosophy often intertwine, attempting to synergize social constraints and spiritual enlightenment through dual approaches. When ritual teachings function as semi-coercive means, people tend to accept them willingly. However, artworks with excessive political didacticism become repulsive — take the 2015 Chinese film *Wolf Warrior* for instance, which drew widespread criticism. This situation stems from a misinterpretation of the profound meaning behind "artistic functionalism", where creators oversimplify concepts and reduce works to rigid dogma. Consequently, many audiences have revived the slogan of European aestheticism: "Art for art's sake."

With the advancement of modern society, legal frameworks have become increasingly sophisticated. Many matters that previously relied on flexible moral codes (known as "ritual") can now be precisely resolved through detailed legal provisions, leading to the diminished strategic significance of music. As legal systems evolve and industrial technology advances explosively, contemporary music activities have grown increasingly commercialized and entertainment-oriented. Confucius ancient warning from *Analects of Confucius*: Wei Ling Gong: "Zheng's music is licentious and corrupting (郑声淫、放郑声)" [7] which once considered prophetic—now appears largely obsolete when applied to modern contexts. This ancient doctrine emphasized how artistic styles profoundly influence human consciousness, potentially distorting social norms and even causing societal collapse, thus positioning art as a crucial auxiliary tool for governance. In today's society, while people frequently debate the merits of visual and conceptual art, few critically examine the quality of acoustic factors. The current music industry development mirrors Laozi's warning: "The five notes deafen the ear (五音令人耳聋)". Numerous idols who claim to be musicians but are actually engaged in the business of selling their bodies are flaunting their charms on stage, yet the fans are quite receptive to this. The fanatical effect within the "fan economy" has largely deprived "beauty essences" of art itself. Against this backdrop, music art can no longer be simply labeled as a tool of governance.

The trend of music evolving in this direction is not unique. China's contemporary film and television industry has also encountered similar issues. The reason why it has been exploited time and again lies precisely in the ambiguity of music itself. People have never been able to clearly define it, leading to its shifting identities across different historical periods. While history progresses relentlessly, aesthetic standards may not necessarily improve. Whether fundamentally attributed to industrialized production systems or other factors remains debatable, but current creative processes indeed lack high-quality artistic works, while audience tastes have become increasingly vulgar. Over the past three decades, there is no new musical giants have emerged in Chinese mainland, and even Western countries exhibit similar decline. This echoes Confucius lament from thousands of years ago: "The collapse of rituals and the decay of music."

In today's rapidly evolving society, innovations like artificial intelligence and big data skill are driving continuous upgrades in intellectual productivity, while individual consciousness becomes increasingly fragmented. In this era, art should strengthen its self-discipline to bridge these divides through beauty and truth. With continuous technological advancements, communication barriers between people have nearly disappeared, material

boundaries are also dissolved, and personal privacy has been reduced to minimal levels. As bizarre new media emerge, digital transformation permeates every aspect of life, enabling rapid interactions through digital simulacra. This means that although interpersonal interactions in the digital age have intensified dramatically, individuals grow more atomized and isolated. People can now fulfill all daily needs without leaving their homes, just living behind digital masks. These characteristics of our era make complete personality increasingly fragmented, yet this impasse remains unsolvable by traditional rites and legal frameworks.

Both ritual and music aim to serve the existential nature of being. Life and death are two sides of the same coin in the Will of life, while artistic spirit charges toward mortality with the vigorous Will of life. Ritual, however, serves a different purpose — maintaining the efficient operation of existing organizational components through instrumental rationality. Music confronts the infinite nature of time, whereas it functions as a binding mechanism within specific temporal contexts. Music achieves harmony through its reflection on itself via the Will to death. This means that confronting death with a robust and romantic will is essential. In this chaotic and bewildering era, we must seek ways to transcend weak will. Therefore, in the digital age, we should more urgently call for "returning to beauty itself."

4. The Integrative Efficacy of Art Therapy — Take Music Therapy as an Example

How can art positively influence the real world? Take music as an example. As previously discussed, it can stimulate either overt or latent mental states, thereby shifting individuals' spiritual conditions away from their original lethargic state. In this sense, music can be considered a form of spiritual practice akin to shamanism. While music primarily affects the mind, mental activities also trigger physiological responses such as increased blood flow and hormone secretion. Minor physical symptoms caused by accumulated mental stress may seem insignificant in daily life, but severe cases could lead to organic disorders like bipolar disorder. Music therapy has emerged as a technique specifically designed to address these issues.

Music therapy originated in the United States. This technique is rooted in clinical medicine, psychotherapy, neuroscience, and cognitive science, primarily classified as applied psychology. It was first developed around 1950, initially targeting post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) rehabilitation for war veterans. "Gouk noted that after the publication of *Music and Medicine* in 1948, music therapy became a widely recognized profession in the U.S." [8] While this approach can complement clinical treatments, it should not be used as the primary method for treating mental disorders.

How exactly does this work? The technique involves therapists organizing one-on-one or group sessions where patients interact through musical playing or singing. This process activates the patients' emotions, thereby enhancing perception, improving memory retention, and alleviating anxiety. These principles align with Confucian "music education (乐教)", Christian hymns, and celebratory rituals. Therapists and medical staff can closely monitor patients' responses throughout the session.

As early as in the ancient Chinese classic *Lü Buwei's Annals* (《吕氏春秋》), there are records of using music activities to alleviate physical ailments: "In the early days of Emperor Yao's (陶唐氏) reign, damp and cold air accumulated stagnantly and waterways became blocked, preventing natural circulation. Which caused the people's blood and Qi were blocked and could not circulate smoothly, causing their muscles stiffen and bones inflexible. Therefore, Emperor Yao created dances for the people to perform in order to promote circulation." [9] Through observing real-life situations and scientific experiments, we could find that psychological states indeed affect physical health, with severe mental disorders sometimes even being fatal. Symptoms like depression, mania, cognitive distortions, and hysteria all indicate mental dysfunctions. In modern society, more and more people are becoming aware of these abnormal mental phenomena. Music therapy or other art therapies can effectively intervene in distorted psychological states through non-invasive methods, potentially eliminating negative emotions completely over time.

In the context of general artistic appreciation, music and dance activities can effectively lift people out of negative or stagnant moods. When observing students in art training institutions or university art departments, we often see them with lively eyes and cheerful laughter. In contrast, students from regular liberal majors — especially those in natural sciences—typically appear more reserved. The fundamental reason lies in this: during musical experiences, participants fully engage without defenses, achieving complete immersion. This contrasts sharply with purpose-driven social interactions where people smile but maintain guarded attitudes. It's hard to imagine needing to put up a defensive barrier when experiencing art activities.

This embodies the essence of "Music is Joy (乐者乐也)" as articulated in *The Book of Rites*: "Music, being joy itself, is an inevitable outpouring of human feeling. It arises through sound and manifests in movement and stillness, which reflecting humanity's fundamental nature." [10] The reason why people willingly spend substantial sums on

records, audio equipment, or concert tickets lies precisely in this truth. The therapeutic power of music's "trans-temporal" experience proves irresistibly alluring. Who wouldn't yearn to escape their mundane routines and retreat into a realm where the mind can be defenseless? During music therapy sessions, patients participate in performances and interact with therapists. When treatment concludes, cheerful energy permeates the ward. Patients develop heightened empathy and mental agility. This is their experience of the "During (Bergson's concept)" of Musical Will, that is, the experience of artistic conception.

Similar to music therapy is drama therapy. Primarily designed for adolescents, this approach involves therapists portraying classic characters while staging humorous plays in therapeutic settings. Patients engage through interactive participation to alleviate depressive moods. However, drama therapy has limitations: it demands high patient engagement, and complex plotlines may require active comprehension — exerting mental energy that could intensify psychological burdens, sometimes making patients feel "this is so silly and annoying". Therefore, the most effective treatment for mental disorders should adopt a passive acceptance approach. Human auditory perception holds priority in sensory processing. When interacting with sound media, individuals need no conscious effort to discern or analyze sounds, making music therapy particularly suitable for resistant patients.

While psychotherapy demonstrates broad efficacy, its therapeutic effects tend to be short-lived. Some patients may initially respond well to treatment, showing improved cheerfulness and gradually approaching normal physiological parameters after a period of therapy. However, symptoms often recur shortly after discharge. This reveals that aesthetic and emotional healing requires sustained maintenance — akin to how people repeatedly play records, attend theater performances, visit concert halls, or seek other sensory stimulation. The therapeutic impact derived from "beauty itself" diminishes over time, intensifies periodically, then weakens again — a cyclical process mirroring Nietzsche's "chess-playing" theory. Aesthetic and emotional healing permeates the entire life journey. Clearly, treating art consumption as a mental stimulant is risky, much like how American hippies in the 1950s vented frustrations through punk music and eccentric fashion, achieving only marginal results. The most fundamental approach to spiritual healing lies in returning life to the ontological level of the Will of life — That is, living poetically. Here, the term "poetic" encompasses both moral metaphysics and sensuous metaphysics.

Human nature inherently possesses the impulse of free will. When awakened by the call of music and art, we effortlessly recall our once-vibrant state of being, irresistibly yearning to reclaim our authentic life essence. This constitutes genuine healing. Music does not "infuse" virtues or vices into people; artistic appreciation is never about dogmatic indoctrination, but rather awakens our inherent will to return to the core of our "innate conscience and innate capacity." How does music achieve this healing? —By nourishing the soul with melodies, it rekindles hope for the afterlife.

5. Conclusions

When examining artistic phenomena, researchers should not only analyze their aesthetic qualities but also consider their functional value. This approach naturally leads to music therapy as a social intervention, which inherently connects with the functionalism of ethics. While music is generally considered a non-utilitarian art form, when it functions at the existential level, it achieves heights of social consciousness that other art forms cannot reach.

The ancient Chinese philosophical proposition of "The Distinction between Ritual and Music" demonstrated profound insight in analyzing the relationship between arts' functional roles and social ethical norms. However, as societal structures evolved, many elements and case studies within this philosophical framework still require further supplementation. By applying modern interpretations through therapeutic case studies in art therapy, this paper enhances the depth of research in art theory to some extent.

References

- [1] Li, X. (2005). *A Course in Western Aesthetic History* (p. 36). Peking University Press.
- [2] Peking University, Department of Philosophy. (1974). *Annotations on The Analects of Confucius* (p. 394). Zhonghua Book Company.
- [3] Wang, G. (1959). *A Collection of Essays by Guantang* (Vol. 6, p. 144). Zhonghua Book Company.
- [4] Chen, H. (Yuan), & Jin, X. (2016). *The Book of Rites* (p. 362). Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House.
- [5] Chen, H. (Yuan), & Jin, X. (2016). *The Book of Rites* (p. 429). Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House.
- [6] Chen, H. (Yuan), & Jin, X. (2016). *The Book of Rites* (p. 454). Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House.
- [7] Peking University, Department of Philosophy. (1974). *Annotations on The Analects of Confucius* (p. 340). Zhonghua Book Company.

- [8] Darnley-Smith, R., & Petty, H. M. (2016). *Music Therapy* (p. 13). Chongqing University Press.
- [9] Lü, B. (2011). *Lü Buwei's Annals* (Vol. 1, p. 148). (L. Jiu, Trans. & Annot.). Zhonghua Book Company.
- [10] Chen, H. (Yuan), & Jin, X. (2016). *The Book of Rites* (p. 455). Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).