

The Transition of Art Exhibition in the Age of Immersive Media

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ABSTRACT

The third media age gives birth to immersive media. The development of immersive media technology promotes the multi-level transition of art exhibitions. Immersive media provides new ways of displaying traditional artworks. The changes of display ways bring about changes in the form of information communication, furthermore, allows people to obtain a new kind of aesthetic experience. Based on the current development of art exhibitions, this article will explore the various transitions of art exhibitions in the age of immersive media from three aspects: displaying ways, information communication forms, and aesthetic experience.

Keywords: *immersive media, art exhibition, aesthetic experience*

1. INTRODUCTION

In The Second Media Age, American scholar Mark Poster claims that the one-way media age dominated by elites and intellectuals is the “first media age”. The age of two-way decentralized communication, represented by the Internet, is the “second media age” [1]. Poster puts forward the concept of the media age, which defines the media in terms of the media age. This is consistent with the view of Innis and McLuhan because both Innis and McLuhan mentioned that each age has its mainstream media, representing a certain level of technology, which is in line with the social development at that time [2-4]. In the *Communication* (2007), Clement Y. K. So and Alice Y. L. Lee, the authors of the second chapter Media Theory, adopt the concept of the media age, introduce the mainstream media in the “first media age” and “second media age” respectively [5]. Furthermore, Clement and Alice claim that the Internet has changed the relationship between the media and the audience, making people rethink the media theory in contemporary society [5]. With the development of technology and society, digital technology is becoming the new rising media after the second media age, as well as being applied widely in various fields. According to the Poster's media age theory and the context of the current age, Chinese scholar Li Qin proposes "the third media age" concept. The third media age is an age of pan-media communication characterized by immersive communication, thus, is called “the age of the

immersive media [6]. The mainstream media of this age is immersive media, which is the general term for all media forms that have the characteristics of immersive communication as well as provide people with an immersive experience. Virtual reality is a typical immersive media technology, a product of the integration of computer technology and information technology to create an immersive experience.

The revolution driven mainly by media technologies is profoundly affecting people's lives and bringing about changes in various fields, one of which is the transition of art exhibitions. From the beginning of 2020, affected by the epidemic, the cultural industry in China had a hit. During the epidemic, the art museum/exhibition needs to innovate the original displaying mode. The State Administration of Cultural Heritage in China has successively launched 300 online display projects, including online virtual exhibitions, digital panoramic exhibitions. Traditional art museum applies digital technologies(VR) to integrate people's visual, auditory, tactile and emotional experiences, breaking the boundary between virtual and reality, allowing the subject and object of information to enter the perceptual atmosphere of the integration of virtual and reality. In short, traditional art exhibitions could apply digital technologies to create an immersive experience, develop a new model of art exhibition, that is, immersive art exhibition. The current immersive art exhibitions can be divided roughly into two types: one is traditional exhibitions that apply contemporary digital

technologies and new media technologies to display vividly traditional artwork, in an attempt to create an immersive atmosphere. For example, in 2018, the Forbidden City launched the high-tech art immersive exhibition “Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival 3.0”. The second type is the immersive art installation created by artists. When these installations are on display, they can be seen as immersive art exhibitions. For example, in 2015, the interactive art installation Rainroom created by Random International was exhibited at the Yuz Museum in Shanghai. In addition, the teamLab, an art group from Japan, is also committed to combining art and technology to create interactive and immersive art installations and the interactive art space. Considering that the question studied in this article is the transition of art exhibitions, the second type not only can be regarded as art exhibitions but also as artwork. For the accuracy of the article, the research object of this article is only limited to the first type, that is, an immersive exhibition based on traditional artworks.

This article will examine the transitions of an art exhibition in the immersive media age. This question is not only in line with the current context but also reflects the relationship between art communication and media. This article will examine this question from three aspects: the form of display, the communication form of the information, and the aesthetic experience of the audience. In this series of changes, the question of whether the audience's subjectivity has improved is worthy of attention.

2. THE TRANSITION OF EXHIBITION FORM

If people think a little about the form of the traditional art exhibition, it is not difficult to find that there are two apparent characteristics about it. Firstly, traditional art exhibition tends to display artworks in static display spaces. The work is fixedly hung on the wall or placed in the showcase for appreciation. There is a clear boundary between halls and halls, exhibits and exhibits. Secondly, in terms of displaying methods, traditional art exhibitions use the single visual display methods to provide the information. If people have been to a traditional art exhibition, they will not be unfamiliar with barriers in front of artworks or the warning signs of “No Touch” next to them. These details indicate that these works displayed in the traditional art exhibition can only be “viewed”, that is to say, on the sensory level, people’s perception of artworks can only be done solely through visual means. Today, the intervention of digital technologies has changed the form of art exhibitions.

In 2018, the Forbidden City launched the high-tech art immersive exhibition “Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival 3.0”. Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival is a masterpiece painted by the Song dynasty artist Zhang Zeduan (1085-1145). It captures the daily life of people

and the landscape of the capital, Bianjing, from the Northern Song period. The work is in the form of a long scroll, using the scatter perspective composition method to incorporate the complex scenery into a unified and varied picture scroll. Successive scenes reveal the lifestyle of all levels of the society from rich to poor as well as different economic activities in rural areas and the city, offer glimpses of period clothing and architecture. The painting is considered to be the most renowned work among all Chinese paintings. This exhibition is composed of a huge multimedia scroll of Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival, an immersive theatre that tries to show the famous scene in the painting (Sun Yang Store), a dome theatre, and an experience space about the humanities of the Northern Song Dynasty. The whole exhibition maximizes the immersion and interaction of the audience’s viewing, allowing the audience to appreciate this masterpiece in multiple dimensions. In these parts of the exhibition, the most notable and amazing part is the dome theatre, which integrates a variety of high-tech interactive arts such as VR, 8K ultra-high-definition digital interactive technology, 4D dynamic images to create an immersive experience of the audience in the middle of the painting. The reproduction of the lifelike scenes makes the audience seem to travel back to the peaceful and prosperous times of the Northern Song Dynasty.

The immersive medium uses digital technology, focuses on the people, integrates people’s visual, auditory, tactile, and emotional experiences, breaking the boundary between virtual and reality, as well as allowing the subject and object of information to enter the perceptual atmosphere of the integration of virtual and reality to create immersion. The application of immersive media in the art exhibition allows the audience to become a component of the exhibition. In the age of immersive media, art exhibitions have undergone corresponding changes in both the display space and the display ways at the sensory level.

On the one hand, in terms of display space, the immersive exhibition would display works by creating dynamic or virtual spaces. The short film of the dome in the Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival 3.0, could bring the audience to a dynamic and virtual space via digital technologies. The audience’s sight was taken into the painting as if your body had a time travel to the painting, the characters in the painting seem to be “lived”. Audiences could see merchant ships passing by on the river, the characters on the shore waving to the people. The virtual environment created by the dynamic display space could make it easier for audiences to integrate into the work from an inner perspective. On the other hand, in terms of display methods, the immersive exhibition uses multi-sensory or even full-sensory display methods rather than a single visual display method. The immersive art exhibition “entices” the viewer to be immersed in the space created by the

virtual environment by mobilizing the audience's multi-sensory experience. The short film in *The Surfing the River on Qingming Festival 3.0* applies the auditory display method to make the audience better and easier entry into the immersion state. The audience can not only see the scene, people, ships, shops, houses, etc. from the inside perspective but also could hear the sound of water, the chatting or laughing from the people on the shore.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the display space and sensory presentation methods of art exhibitions in the immersive media age have undergone more diverse changes with the help of digital technologies. The dynamic virtual display space and the multi-sensory presentation method correspond to the two features of virtual reality technology in the construction of scenes, as Tan Xuefang mentioned. One is that it could simulate reality by "domesticating time and space". Another is that it could simulate the experience by "embedding the body" [7]. Virtual reality technology could help people to travel in time and space. This is not about going back to the past or traveling to the parallel world, but immersing the audience in the virtual environment created by digital technology, helping people achieve a sense of immersion. Virtual reality enhances the user experience through "embedding the body", transforming the previously viewable image into an accessible image scene, in this way, making up for the shortcomings of the static image medium. Body embedding would generate the feeling of body presence. The viewer is immersed in the work in a first-person perspective, has a multi-dimensional experience that travels through time and space.

3. THE TRANSITIONS OF COMMUNICATION WAY

Domesticating the time and space as well as embedding the body, the two features of virtual technology applied in the art exhibition, have brought about a series of transforms in the way of information dissemination in exhibitions. Firstly, the static arrangement of displaying in traditional exhibitions means that the exhibition space has a clear space-time boundary. The dissemination of information is a one-way linear communication mode centered on the work and sent to the audience. Art exhibitions in the age of immersive media create a dynamic virtual display space, which breaks the boundary between time and space. The communication of information is ubiquitous. Secondly, compared to traditional art exhibitions, the channel of conveying information is mainly through the visual system, art exhibitions in the age of immersive media apply virtual reality technology to act on the audience's multiple senses. Multi-sensory experience shapes the perception of the body. The body, not a single visual

system, becomes the carrier of communicating information.

On the one hand, the application of virtual reality technology in art exhibitions is, to a certain extent, a "disenchantment" of the display space of traditional art exhibitions. In a dynamic virtual environment, the boundaries of time and space are dispelled, the interaction between the senses and the media will remain continuous. The disappearance of space-time boundaries allows people to wander freely in the real and virtual worlds. The construction of the scene blurs the boundary between virtual and real space. People who are in the shaped virtual space forget the time, as if they are in a specific historical background. The medium is embedded in the surrounding environment and is everywhere. The medium is the environment; the environment is the medium. People are surrounded by various information and receive information unconsciously, which potentially affects people's cognition. At the same time, the communication system that the medium as the environment is an open system, people are no longer bound by boundaries. Each communication node not only absorbs all kinds of information but also continuously disseminates it outwards. In such an information network, there is no center or edge. Everyone is the receiver and creator of information. The audience in an immersive exhibition becomes a part of the exhibition and a medium of communication. People are not only the main body of communication but also the content of the communication. This "people-oriented" communication mode displaces the "information-centric" communication mode. The audience and the media, the audience and the environment, are integrated.

On the other hand, vision is no longer the only sense for receiving information. The body has replaced a single visual system becomes an important interactive interface for communicating with the work. Through the perception and processing of the body, the sense of visiting experience is integrated and generated. According to McLuhan's theory, the medium is an extension of the body. Immersive media acting on people's multiple senses is no longer a simple extension of the people's sense, but also symbiosis with the multiple senses. The immersive media technology enables the extension of the senses to realize the reverse extension from the outside to the inside, continuously blending with the body, the application of immersing technology is continuously integrated into people's sensory experiences. The multi-sensory display method brings a multi-sensory way of receiving information. The use of virtual technology triggers the sensory world of the audience, stimulates the audience's imagination through the combined effects of vision, touch, hearing, and other senses. The manifestation of multiple senses shapes the perception of the body. On this basis, the audience expands their imagination. In these ways,

people would get a “presence” communication experience. In the interaction between perception and thinking, the audience establishes a way of receiving information in the virtual display space.

These two changes make the information communication ways of immersive art exhibitions based on two “flows” [8]. One is information flow, the other is the psychological flow. The former is the ubiquitous information formed by the ubiquitous connection established through the network. The latter is to obtain satisfaction and experience psychologically [8]. Two flows promote each other, the ubiquity of information flow deepens the audience's psychological immersion experience, the interaction between people and space, the immersion of psychological flow affects people's understanding and judgment of information, realizing a dialogue across time and space.

4. THE TRANSITION OF THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Regarding the influence of media technology on the audience's state of participation, Walter Benjamin has an amazing discussion. Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* is one of the most influential essays on modernity and art in the twentieth century. In *The Work of Art*, Benjamin discussed the decay of traditional art (auratic art) as well as the emergence of modern art (reproducible art). Benjamin claimed that technical reproduction “causes the most profound change in their impact upon the public” [9]. One of the “profound changes” is about the shift of the audience's aesthetic experience. Mechanical reproduction technology not only made the ‘aura’ of the artwork disappear but also produced a ‘shock’ aesthetic experience. Correspondingly, the state of participation of the spectator has changed from “concentration” to “distraction”. Benjamin's discussion of these two states of participation is as follows:

“This is at the bottom the same ancient lament that the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator. That is commonplace. The question remains whether it provided a platform for the analysis of the film. A closer look is needed here. Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbed the work of art [9].”

In this quotation, Benjamin puts forward the two states of participation of the spectator, namely “concentration” and “distraction”. Before the age of mechanical reproduction, the value of the artwork is “cult value”. The cult value comes from the “here and

now”, “unique existence at the place”, that is, the “originality” of the work [9]. When viewing traditional artworks, the spectator is absorbed, then experiences the “aura” of the work. In Benjamin's view, the concept of aura refers to the incomparable aesthetic experience triggered by a specific space and time: it represents to be unrecoverable in the temporal dimension, it is only associated with a specific place in the spatial dimension. Zeller claims that aura comprises a holistic model of aesthetic experience and associates the concept of aura with “profane illumination”, a state of intoxication that connects an ecstatic self with the uniqueness of an artwork, as Benjamin describes in his essay *Surrealism* (1929) [10]. In short, “aura” is an aesthetic experience. It is an aesthetic experience that the audience is absorbed into the work by concentration, in turn, which produces “a state of intoxication”. It is worth noting that in the process of experiencing “aura”, the significance of the spectator is not in a dominant position. The “here and now” “originality” of the artwork is essential. That is the reason why Benjamin claims that mechanical reproduction technology makes the decay of the “aura” of artworks, in this way, the “exhibition value” of artworks displace the “cult value”.

In the age of mechanical reproduction, technology frantically began to conquer space and time, “The presence of the original” is facing a crisis of deconstruction. The technique of reproduction leads to the collapse of auratic art, replaced by reproducible works, like 2D movies. Reproducible artworks demand a specific kind of approach, “free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them” [9]. The spectator cannot be absorbed into the work, or abandon himself to his associations. The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change, as a result, the spectator could get a “shock” aesthetic experience. In Benjamin's view, concentration is not a positive state of participation, it could evoke people's association and make people intoxicated in aesthetic illusions, lose themselves generally. Thus, the contemplation of traditional art weakens the critical function of art on reality. While reproducible art represented by movie, utilize incoherent pictures to constitute “shock effect”. After the “shock effect”, the audience would analyze and think about it, thus modern art would have the function to neglect and criticize reality. In conclusion, two states of participation, “concentration” and “distraction”, correspond to two different aesthetic experiences, namely “aura” and “shock”. In the traditional paradigm of aesthetic experience, works have “cult value”, as Benjamin claims. The aesthetic experience of “aura” is derived from the originality of the work itself. On the contrary, under the modern aesthetic experience paradigm, the shock effect produced by the reproducible art could arouse the consciousness and subjectiveness of the

spectator. In the communication between the spectator and the work, the participation of the audience's awareness plays a significant role.

Compared with modern mechanical reproduction, reproductive technology in the age of immersive media, has made a breakthrough. The digital technology transmitted at the speed of light is convenient for storage and reproduces the artwork effortlessly without compromising its quality. It has a devastating impact on the relationship between the original work and copied work. "Original-copy", the modern and once trusted dualistic model is no longer reliable and replaced by a new dual hierarchy between reality and illusion generated in the field of digital media. Based on this, the transformation of the aesthetic experience paradigm is that the binary opposition between "concentration" and "shock" aesthetic paradigm is gradually replaced by "immersion" aesthetic experience.

The concept of "immersion" first appeared in the 1960s and 1970s. As a research object in the field of psychology, at that time, it corresponds to the "flow" concept, which was proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago. Later, after the development of communication studies, the concept of "immersion" appeared, which is consistent with the "flow". In 1990, Mihaly described "flow" as a state of complete concentration or being attracted in his famous paper *The concept of Flow: The Psychology of the Best Experience*. Its characteristic is maximum concentration and participation [11]. There are three levels of immersion state: informational immersion, sensory immersion, and psychological immersion. The application of digital technologies in art exhibitions, through the above discussion, could already enable people to achieve the state of information immersion and sensory immersion. Psychological immersion is the result of information immersion and sensory immersion. It is a process in which the audience "actively" chooses to enter the immersion state. When entering the virtual world of *The Surfing the River on Qingming Festival*, the ubiquity of information and the multi-sensory experience allow the audience to travel through the painting and return to ancient times. In the state of being immersed, audiences may stretch out their hands when the characters in the painting interact with them, even project themselves onto a role to feel his/her emotions.

Through the above description, the aesthetic experience of "immersion" would readily remind people of the traditional aesthetic experience paradigm: the audience is absorbed into the works and get the aesthetic experience of "aura". While, the difference between these two aesthetic experiences is that the acquisition of the "immersion" depends on the technologies, rather than the audience approaching the work employing "float-concentration". The psychological immersion

seems to be the result of the audience's initiation, but behind it, is the various interactive mechanisms and virtual environments created by digital technologies. The art exhibition/museum applies digital media technologies to design an environment of informational immersion and sensory immersion, the purpose of which is to make the audience psychologically immersed. In other words, the acquisition of immersive aesthetic experience requires the interaction between people and technology. The audience's "active participation" is triggered by media technology. In the process of participation, the self-consciousness of the audience is ignored.

It is undeniable that the emergence of new technologies and media will gradually cultivate new perceptions that are suitable for us. Due to the "interactive" characteristic of the emerging digital media, the aesthetic subject immersed in the fictional illusion has to some extent gotten rid of the role of passive consumers and has become an active participant in the illusion. Has technological advancement brought people a better aesthetic experience? The illusion of simulation forces a new turn of the aesthetic paradigm, the aesthetic subject immersed in the virtual world created by digital technologies. The aesthetic paradigm of "immersion" urges traditional art, even mechanical reproduction art, to strive to explore new narrative strategies. While is there no problem with this aesthetic paradigm? The composition of the meaning of artworks in the immersive media age requires the participation of the audience. Although this gives the audience a certain degree of subjectiveness and power, the audience is caught in the vortex formed by technology. Self-consciousness is overwhelmed. On the one hand, compared with the traditional aesthetic experience, the immersive aesthetic experience makes the audience lose the right to escape freely. On the other hand, compared with the modern aesthetic experience, the immersive aesthetic experience makes people less critical.

5. CONCLUSION

Art is related to the media. The development of media technology provides a new way of presenting works of art. In the context of the immersive media age, digital technology gives new possibilities for the display way of traditional artworks. The static single display space becomes a dynamic virtual display space. The visual presentation becomes a multi-sensory presentation. The transition in the display mode brings the corresponding changes in the form of information communication. In a dynamic virtual environment, the boundaries of time and space are dispelled. The "people-oriented" communication mode displaces the "information-centric" communication mode. The body, not the vision, becomes the carrier of information reception. The application of immersive media

technology brings about a change in the audience's aesthetic experience. Information immersion and sensory immersion contribute to the psychological immersion experience. Under the immersive experience state, behind the active participation is the presupposition induced by technology.

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