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An Aesthetic Examination of Immersive Art in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Objective: To establish what aesthetic category 'immersion' actually belongs to, and to explain how digitally immersive art generates and modifies aesthetic experience. **Methods:** A conceptual and historical analysis. The two senses of the Chinese word for immersion are separated, and 'immersion' is distinguished from 'flow experience' by the traditions each term comes from. The aesthetic mechanisms of digitally immersive art are then examined under three heads — perception, space and interaction — and read through the classical Chinese aesthetic categories of *yijing*, aesthetic distance, and empathy. **Results:** Immersion is not a late product of media technology but a very old aesthetic problem: the *jingjie* sought in classical Chinese art, the Dionysian frenzy of Greek culture and the purification (katharsis) of tragedy are alike marked by immersion. What digital technology changes is not the fact of immersion but its sensory range, its spatial reach and its interactivity, and with them the sensory hierarchy that Western aesthetics inherited from Plato. Digitally immersive art does not abolish aesthetic distance; it manufactures distance by other means, chiefly through the interplay of *xiejing* (writing the scene) and *zaojing* (fashioning the scene). **Conclusions:** The artistic merit of an immersive work does not rise with its verisimilitude or the strength of its interaction. Empathy is the most easily triggered state in an immersive setting, but it is neither the aesthetic experience itself nor a necessary condition of it, so sensory stimulation pursued for its own sake cannot be counted an aesthetic experience.

Keywords: digital immersive art, yijing, aesthetic experience, aesthetic distance, empathy

1 The Concept of Immersion

In recent years immersion has been discussed to differing degrees in computer graphics and simulation, education, psychology, management, communication studies, journalism, advertising and art studies. But what exactly is immersion? Different fields stress different aspects of the question and understand it differently.

The word 'immersive' comes from the West, where its original sense was the effect of a computational technique. In the course of translating and drawing on foreign scholarship, Chinese scholars rendered both *immersion* and *flow experience* as the single word *chenjin*, but *immersion* as a term originates in research on virtual-reality technology whereas *flow experience* originates in psychology [1]. As statements of a technical effect and of a mental state respectively, the first attends more to the sensory experience of 'being there' that VR technology delivers, the second more to the cognitive condition of being wholly absorbed.

In Chinese, *chenjin* carries two layers of meaning. The first is its literal sense, the state of a physical object sunk into a physical space — 'to soak', 'to fill with'. The second is figurative: a state and experience of the conscious subject within a space of thought, the entry into some realm or train of reflection. Given these two layers, work in the digital-art field has so far emphasised the first, that is, attention has gone chiefly to the perceptual immersion produced by the virtual space that new media technology creates, and this immersion is commonly divided into two levels, sensory immersion and cerebral immersion [2].

Sensory immersion uses new technical means — augmented-reality contact lenses, haptic gloves, scent-emitting devices added to televisions, an 'exoskin' shirt fitted with micro-motors, haptic chairs — in a new media environment created by joining digital information technology to artificial intelligence, and by mobilising the visual, auditory, tactile and olfactory organs it lets the senses of the body experience the world together. With the development of virtual-reality instruments, this level of immersion has now been realised in a preliminary form.

Cerebral immersion is the highest stage. Immersion at this stage may require neural transmission (a brain–computer interface) and still belongs to the frontier research that has only just begun. Brain–computer interface technology has already been trialled experimentally in games and in film. In 2018 the British director Richard Ramchurn released the short film *The Moment*; viewers wore an EEG headset, and the film's content — scenes, images and music — changed according

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to their emotion as they watched, so that each viewing was specially made for the emotion of that moment. This stage is one of deep fusion between person and medium.

The flow theory put forward by the Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi corresponds to the second layer of the Chinese word, and describes the flow experience cognitively as 'the state in which we are so involved in an activity or a goal for its own sake that nothing else seems to matter, we invest ourselves entirely and enjoy it, and thereby experience a certain state of mind' [3]. The immersion that flow describes began as a study of the cognitive state in artistic creation — the absorption and forgetfulness of eating and sleeping of a painter at work, the total commitment and self-forgetfulness of a musician playing — a state that can override physiological discomfort such as fatigue and hunger. Flow theory emphasises and attends chiefly to the effect of the immersive experience.

Seen thus, any mental activity that absorbs a person wholly can give rise to an immersive experience, and such experience occurs whenever anyone is intently and single-mindedly devoted to something; it is not peculiar to the digital age. The 'immersive experience' manufactured by virtual-reality technology is achieved by blurring the boundary between media space and physical space (real space). Because media technology has developed, the intense immersion aroused by the sensory appeal and stimulation of digital VR exceeds what earlier media could produce. But media technology only makes the immersive experience easier and more convenient to obtain; it is not a precondition either for producing that experience or for reaching its cognitive effect.

As set out above, *flow* and *immersion* both carry the sense of immersion, but the former attends more to the mental state the immersion achieves, the latter more to what the environment or medium does to a person and to the environmental conditions that produce immersion. The two overlap and intersect in research on the human–computer relationship, each holding that immersion in virtual reality comes from the visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile systems [4]. Since immersion is the core concept of digital art, immersive art must stress both the environmental conditions that VR technology creates and the effect that aesthetic experience achieves at the psychological level. The concept of immersion examined in this study therefore covers both the psychological effect that flow theory emphasises and the media environment that technology constructs.

2 From the Hegemony of Audiovisual Aesthetics to a Multisensory Aesthetics

The coming of the digital age has revolutionised the way people perceive and come to know the world. As a driving force that alters social structure and cultural form, media profoundly affect the shape of the aesthetic and the drift of aesthetic style. With mobile internet, big data, artificial intelligence and VR/AR/MR/XR, new modes of aesthetic activity and new kinds of aesthetic experience keep emerging; the traditional theory of aesthetics and its system are under strain, and new aesthetic questions break past the coordinates of the classical and the sublime, inclining instead to the multisensory perceptual modes and the instantaneous aesthetic experience that new media technology creates.

Starting from the celebrated proposition that 'all media are extensions of man', Marshall McLuhan argued that different media act on different senses, that every new medium redesigns the 'sense ratios' of the human being, and so alters the structure of perception. In the digital age the electronic medium, as an extension of the central nervous system, no longer inclines people to sight and hearing but mobilises every sense in grasping and knowing the world. This has strained the aesthetic tradition of the primacy of ear and eye established since Kant, and the development of immersive media, VR above all, has begun to force a reconsideration of the traditional aesthetics and aesthetic system built on a hierarchy of the senses.

It is well known that in the traditional aesthetic system aesthetic activity is accomplished mainly through contemplating the form of an object; the pleasure or agreeableness obtained through the object's 'matter' is regarded as a utilitarian sensory experience and cannot rise to aesthetic experience. Ever since the hierarchy of the senses established by Plato and Aristotle made sight and hearing the distance senses and so the emblems of reason, touch, taste and smell have been accounted 'shallow' or 'low', and have even been cast as obstacles to knowledge and reason because they entangle one in the pleasures of the body. Every sense but sight and hearing was therefore excluded from the traditional aesthetic system. But with the digital age and the iteration of VR technology, the aesthetic senses are no longer confined to sight and hearing but extend to the whole body, and an 'organ-based' aesthetic experience begins to appear as an aesthetic phenomenon. With the rise of mass culture and the growth of the culture industry, moreover, the aestheticisation of daily life and the everyday life of the aesthetic have become basic aesthetic phenomena of society [5], and aesthetic style and its values have grown more plural.

The primary aesthetic characteristic of art founded on digital technology is immersion, and the immersion that digitally immersive art creates rests chiefly on the *yijing* it constructs; both bring to the fore the part played by the 'body' as medium in the aesthetic process and the aesthetic experience. In classical Chinese aesthetics the creation of *yijing* is bound up with the poet's body, that is, aesthetic activity cannot be separated from the body as medium. Wang Changling's aesthetic proposition that 'the body is within the meaning' (shen zai yi zhong) already implies that the *yijing* of a poem must include the poet's body. This 'body' is not merely the flesh separated from 'mind or spirit'; it is precisely the subject that is in no way

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sundered from mind [6].

Yet under the influence of classical Western philosophy the cognitive model of a 'mind–body dichotomy' has deeply shaped the trajectory of aesthetics. From Plato's opposition of soul and body in *On the Soul* and the asceticism he held towards the senses of the body, to Descartes's proposition 'I think, therefore I am', the spirituality of the subject is asserted. Descartes construed the subject as pure thought (pure consciousness), construed the body as extension (that is, existence) divorced from spirit or mind, and held subject and body to be independent of one another. Under this habit of thought the body's perceptual and practical senses were obscured, and it sank to a purely physiological flesh set apart from the soul. This state of affairs lasted until the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, overturned the Cartesian dualism through his account of the relation between body and consciousness; bodily perceptual experience then entered the domain of aesthetic activity, and perception became a field of particular concern in aesthetics. Thereafter, with the development of media technology and the mass media, 'the aestheticisation of daily life' has increasingly become a contemporary cultural reality, and in this context Shusterman advanced the proposition of 'somaesthetics', so that the body's function as aesthetic medium has become ever more prominent.

As the poetics cited above indicates, in classical Chinese aesthetic theory the body is regarded as the medium of aesthetic experience and aesthetic activity. But in modern times, under the influence of Western philosophy and the progress of technical civilisation — above all because the electronic media let the audiovisual senses overcome the limits of space and time — audiovisual hegemony established itself quickly in China too. Yet with the development of the internet, digital technology and VR, and as McLuhan predicted, new media have changed the form, the mode of existence and the means of transmission of traditional art and have also reshaped people's sense ratios; the aesthetic senses have been comprehensively extended and integrated in the age of digital media, the multiple senses of the body have merged synaesthetically, and the body has returned as the medium of the aesthetic.

3 The Aesthetic Mechanism of Immersive Art in the Digital Age

As argued above, in artistic creation and in aesthetic experience the crux of immersion is total absorption. But does absorption come first and produce immersion, or does immersion first bring about the 'forgetting of both self and object' and so reach absorption? Or is it that, faced with something that interests them, people actively shut out external influence and so achieve absorption and finally immersion? If the last, then does immersive technology, besides counterfeiting reality, also help people to remove external interference so that they receive a single stimulus as far as possible and so achieve immersion? The cinema is perhaps an example: watching a film there, one must have the lights off, sound must surround one, and all outside noise must be shut out. In fact, long before simulation technology was developed, human beings had already learned to control their information environment and to use artistic devices to achieve as much immersion as possible. The Chinese garden, the cave at Lascaux in France, the Pompeian Villa of the Mysteries in Italy, Disneyland, Grimoin-Sanson's Cineorama, Douglas Trumbull's Showscan — all are 'artistic devices' that use a virtual environment to make the audience commit themselves wholly to the work [7]. Immersive art, then, existed as a very old artistic device long before the digital age. What, then, distinguishes the aesthetic character and mechanism of immersive art in the digital age from what preceded it?

In my view the differences between traditional and digitally immersive art, in both aesthetic character and mechanism, lie chiefly at three levels: perception, space and interaction. First, at the level of perception, traditional immersive art achieved its aesthetic effect mainly through sight and hearing; the other aesthetic senses — touch, smell, taste — were not comprehensively integrated or extended. In the digital age, by contrast, immersive art, drawing on digital simulation and artificial intelligence to build an environment of light, colour and three-dimensional motion, allows the user to integrate every sense in the aesthetic process and so creates a multisensory mode of aesthetic perception. This shakes the theoretical foundation of audiovisual hegemony in traditional Western aesthetics, breaks the tradition in which the aesthetic is merely the contemplation of an object's form rather than its 'matter', and brings aesthetic experience back from transcendence of the body to the body itself.

In fact, as noted above, the categories of classical Chinese aesthetics had long since taken in what the West called the 'lower senses'. Consider the olfactory aesthetic in 'a hidden fragrance floats in the yellow dusk', the taste and touch in 'three cups of thin wine, how should they withstand the late wind's urgency', the scent and flavour in 'the fragrance of tea lingers on the tongue after the guest has gone', the tactile in 'ice-cold flesh and jade bones, cool of itself and free of sweat'. In the West it was not until the modern Marxist aesthetic system that all five human senses were formally admitted as aesthetic senses; Marx moreover named the head, shoulders, hands and legs as organs of movement, insisting that the work of art should speak to the human being as a whole. And 'to suit this rich unity of the human being, artistic activity (including imagistic thinking) must mobilise and develop the whole force of consciousness, will and feeling of the artist himself and of his audience'. In the rapid development of audiovisual media the other aesthetic senses were weakened in audiovisual aesthetic experience because of the character of the medium. Digitally immersive art re-integrates the ratio of the aesthetic

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senses in aesthetic experience and creates better conditions for mobilising 'the whole force of consciousness, will and feeling' in maker and beholder alike.

Second, at the level of space, traditional immersive art required one to be physically present — the garden, the cave, the cinema, as noted above. Digitally immersive art, by contrast, can use simulation to expand the virtual without limit and build a three-dimensional space, manufacturing a 'hyperspace' indistinguishable from the real world. This overcomes the barrier between the spatial and the temporal arts, so that those who are 'telepresent' can equally have the experience of 'arriving' on the spot.

The scene-based, experience-based immersion created by VR/AR/MR/XR and by digital simulation blurs the boundary between the real and the virtual, creating virtual scenes exactly like the real world — indeed a 'hyperreal' environment that looks more real than reality, manufacturing things that do not exist in fact or in logic, and giving people the immersion of 'being there'. But the acquisition of aesthetic experience needs not only 'being there' but the mental state of 'self and object made one'. The *Great Learning* in the *Book of Rites* says that 'when the mind is not present, one looks and does not see, listens and does not hear, eats and does not know the taste', stressing that once the 'mind' as spirit is absent, no stimulation of the external senses can achieve its effect. Media technology has therefore only changed the way the immersive experience is obtained: by blurring the boundary between real and virtual it creates an environment or atmosphere in which immersion is easier to obtain, or prolongs the time spent in it, but none of this is a precondition for producing the experience. Immersion results from the joint action of the external situation and the cognitive structure of the subject; that is to say, technical factors can supply the objective conditions for concentration, but without the active participation of a person immersion cannot be reached. A virtual-reality environment therefore achieves 'self and object made one' only if it accords with the viewer's individual cognitive structure and brings them into a state of aesthetic experience.

Finally, at the level of interaction, the appreciation of traditional immersive art was chiefly contemplative; the beholder's intervention in and interaction with the work came mainly after the artistic form was complete, so that the interaction between viewer and work was delayed. The beholder in the digital age, by contrast, is in a state of immediate interaction with and participation in the creation of immersive art, and this has brought about a reconstruction of the aesthetic relation.

Digitally immersive works are open-ended and require the viewer to fill in the blanks and enrich their meaning: 'art and audience are in two-way communication; the interactive process is cognitively based, and its result is the exchange of information and the resonance of feeling among artist, work and audience'. The interactive space establishes a connection between viewer and artwork and lays stress on mobilising the viewer's sight, hearing, touch and smell to take part in the work. Supported by digital and artificial-intelligence technology, the interaction is characterised by immediate feedback: by analysing the viewer's brainwaves, gaze, facial expression and bodily movement through virtual-environment devices, their emotions and behaviour are projected into the virtual space, and the work produces a wholly different pictorial effect as those emotions and movements change. This stimulates, mobilises and shapes the perceptual experience of the artwork through every kind of sense at the cognitive level, so that the viewer more easily resonates with the work [8].

4 Immersive Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Distance

The German psychologist Hugo Münsterberg held that aesthetic experience is a state of extreme concentration. 'With the will undivided, it congeals into spirit' — in other words, aesthetic experience is the state of congealed attention. In that state we forget not only the world outside the object of contemplation but our own existence as well. In pure intuition there is no self-awareness, for self-awareness arises from the distinction between object and self, and only by forgetting that distinction can one reach a state of tranquillity. The mark of aesthetic experience, then, is 'the forgetting of both self and object'. Schopenhauer, in the third volume of *The World as Will and Idea*, says the following on that forgetting, with great penetration.

... if he can thus disregard the 'where', 'when', 'why' and 'whence' of things, and attend only to the 'what' itself; if he does not let abstract thought and the concepts of the intellect occupy his consciousness, but devotes the whole force of his spirit to the object perceived, sinking himself into it, so that his whole consciousness is nothing but the tranquil contemplation of the present thing — a landscape, a wood, a mountain, a building — and he 'loses' himself in it, forgetting his own individuality and will, living the life of a 'pure subject', becoming the mirror of the thing, as though only it were there and no one were perceiving it, as though he did not separate the perceiver from the perceived but the two became one, the whole of consciousness coinciding exactly with one concrete picture (that is, with the image — my note); if the thing is thus insulated from every relation outside itself, and the self at the same time insulated from its own will — then what is perceived is not this or that thing but the 'idea' or the eternal form ... and the man sunk in the thing perceived is no longer this or that man (for he has 'lost' himself in it) but a pure subject of knowledge, without will, without pain, without time.

The hyperreal media environment that immersive art creates makes the viewer feel on the one hand that they have entered a 'real space', and on the other that they have 'compressed the presentation of real space to zero, so that the retina no longer receives information from real scenes of life'. VR technology, through the head-mounted display and other peripherals,

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extends the senses of a person to a very high degree and screens out the real world entirely, so that one feels in every direction that one really is inside this new virtual world. Such 'physiological immersion' can shut out the 'interference' of the outside world, immerse the viewer in an environment that the real world could never provide, and so achieve the effect of capturing attention, creating the conditions by which the viewer may reach the state of congealed attention [9].

'Distance' is an important factor in the realisation of aesthetic experience and a classical proposition in aesthetics. That distance produces beauty is a truth everyone is presumed to know; but why does it produce beauty, and what is its measure? To answer, one must first be clear what aesthetic experience is. So-called 'aesthetic experience' is 'the intuition of image'. This definition is in fact implicit in the word *aesthetic*: 'beauty' in Chinese denotes a property of things, whereas *aesthetic* in Western languages denotes the simplest and most primitive activity by which mind knows things. So although *aesthetic* is translated as 'the study of beauty', 'the study of intuition' would be more apt. Hence 'in aesthetic experience what the mind grasps of a thing is intuition only, not perception or concept; and what the thing presents to the mind is its image itself, not the matters connected with it — substance, cause, utility, value and the like'.

As noted above, beauty arises from the intuition of image and carries no practical purpose. But 'carrying no practical purpose' here means only that a distance separates it from the practical world; it does not mean a complete detachment from experience. Just as 'art, though separated by a distance from the practical world, has never produced a truly great work that is not a reflection of life', so 'in aesthetic experience we must on the one hand leap out of practical life and on the other cannot wholly escape it; on the one hand forget ourselves and on the other bring our own experience to bear in confirming the work'. This contradiction the British psychologist Edward Bullough called 'the antinomy of distance'. Whether art succeeds depends on whether the measure of that distance is well judged and the antinomy well arranged: if the distance is too great the art cannot be understood, if too small the practical motive will overwhelm the aesthetic, and 'neither too close nor too far' (bu ji bu li) is the most desirable state of art. This is exactly what the painter Qi Baishi meant in saying that 'a painting should lie between likeness and unlikeness; too like is vulgar, unlike is deceitful'. The old praise of a poet as 'free of the dust of the world', 'standing beyond the things of sense', 'purged of the smoke and fire of the human realm', means that he could place things at a certain distance and look at them from outside; conversely, to be 'enslaved by forms', 'stuck fast in things', 'bound by the halter of fame and the lock of profit' means that one has taken the interests of things too personally and cannot leave a distance between oneself and them.

The manufacture of aesthetic distance is an artistic device for the use of distance. Digital technology, while strengthening the immersive experience and making interaction possible, is held to have to some extent hindered the manufacture of aesthetic distance and dissolved it. Does the 'lifelike' reproduction of the real world by digital technology then affect the occurrence of aesthetic experience, and how is the proper 'distance' in digital art to be manufactured? Zhu Guangqian held that different arts are born with distances near or far. Among them, 'the nearest is drama, because it presents the ways of the world before our eyes in the most concrete manner. This most easily takes a person out of the aesthetic world and back into the practical one, so dramatists devise many methods to push the distance further'. Such 'distancing' devices include 'artistic technique and convention', 'remoteness in space and time', 'stagecraft and the effect of the set', and 'the non-actual character of character, situation and plot'. Taking the manufacture of distance in drama as a reference, we may analyse the question of 'distancing' in digitally immersive art.

The first characteristic of digitally immersive art is that it takes tangible installation and intangible technology as its artistic language and creates an immersive virtual scene. Read against classical Chinese aesthetics, the creation of that virtual scene is one phase of 'creating *yijing*'. *Yijing* is a category of classical Chinese aesthetics. Wang Guowei, in *Renjian Cihua*, divided the making of *yijing* into *zaojing* and *xiejing*, and held the two hard to distinguish: 'for the scene a great poet fashions must accord with nature, and the scene he writes must border on the ideal'. *Xiejing* inclines to realism and stresses the reality that is represented, that is, it reflects the truth of the objective world; *zaojing* inclines to expressiveness, presenting an ideal reality through imagination and fiction. In a digitally immersive work the creator can, while using VR, computer graphics and sensors for a truthful *xiejing*, join computer technology to the author's imagination and to the audience's live response in a *zaojing* that ranges at large. *Xiejing* draws the distance to lived experience nearer, while *zaojing* goes beyond lived experience and so again opens the distance from reality.

Rain Room, for instance, first shown at the Barbican Centre in London in 2012, does to some degree 'restore' the viewer's everyday experience; yet because sensors are used, the viewer, though standing in 'rain' and able to see it fall, smell its damp and hear its sound, is not wetted so long as they walk slowly. The principle is that the overhead apparatus emits an effect like rain while sensors in places one cannot see capture one's movement; one may be understood as becoming a set of data once one stands still and is captured, and the falling water then avoids that data. Walk too fast, or wear black, and one cannot be captured and converted smoothly, and one really does get wet. Walking in the rain without being wetted achieves the state of 'entering within it and emerging beyond it' (ru hu qi nei, chu hu qi wai). This is precisely to step outside the 'interests' of being wetted by real rain, and to regard the romance and beauty of a walk in the rain through a 'technical distance'.

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Interactivity, moreover, as a typical characteristic of digitally immersive art, is also regarded as an important factor in dissolving aesthetic distance. In my view, however, because the immersive aesthetic experience of digitally immersive art — its 'immersiveness' — is sensory, timely and instantaneous, that immersion is 'passive'. Compared therefore with the activity of the aesthetic experience of traditional art, the interactivity of immersive art may be called a means of mobilising the viewer's active investment of feeling. Zhu Guangqian observed that 'art cannot be separated from feeling. Feeling is personal; in aesthetic experience feeling is concentrated on the image of the thing, so that I forget myself. 'Distance' means the isolation of myself and the thing from the practical point of view; from the aesthetic point of view I and the thing almost coincide, and the distance could not be nearer'. The interactivity of immersive art therefore removes the 'physical distance' between viewer and work, and in aesthetic experience comes closer to the state Zhu Guangqian called 'I and the thing almost coincide'.

As a new artistic form, then, immersive art is also born with distances near and far; but it does not follow that immersion and interactivity wholly dissolve aesthetic distance. It is enough, in designing an immersive scene, to manufacture distance by adjusting the degree and emphasis with which sense and intuition are mobilised in the course of 'writing the scene' and 'fashioning the scene', and so to obtain the immersive aesthetic experience.

5 Empathy in Immersive Art

As argued above, the design of the virtual scene in immersive art is the creation of *yijing*, and '*yijing* is the crystallised product of feeling and scene (image)', that is, the fusion of feeling and scene. Wang Guowei noted in *Renjian Cihua* that 'scene does not mean scenery alone; joy, anger, sorrow and delight are each a realm within the human heart. So one who can write true scenery and true feeling has a realm; otherwise he has none'. Scene and feeling are the two basic elements of *yijing*, and true scene with deep feeling is what makes a realm. In my view the 'true scene and deep feeling' Wang Guowei advocated may be called an important criterion of the artistic level of every kind of art, the design of digitally immersive scenes included.

In his 'theory of realms' (that is, his theory of *yijing*), Wang Guowei divided *yijing*, in terms of the relation between aesthetic subject and object, into 'the realm with a self' and 'the realm without a self'. 'There is the realm with a self and the realm without a self … In the realm with a self I observe things, so all things bear the colour of my self. In the realm without a self things observe things, so that one does not know what is self and what is thing.' That state of self and object made one, in which 'all things bear the colour of my self' and 'one does not know what is self and what is thing', is what aesthetics calls 'empathy'.

Empathy may be regarded as a species of projection, and projection is the casting of my perception or feeling onto things so that they become properties of the thing. Poets and artists, looking at the world, habitually project what is in them onto what is in the thing, so that lifeless things are given life and feelingless things feeling. On empathy, Lotze in his *Microcosmus* writes as follows.

Whatever form the eye sees, however slight, imagination can transport us into it to share its life. This putting oneself in another's place to share feeling is not limited to creatures like ourselves: we can dance with the magpie, leap with the antelope, or creep into the mussel's shell to share the flavour of its monotonous life as it opens and closes; we can imagine ourselves a tree, enjoying the green of the shoot or the joy of the pliant branch in the wind; and even things wholly alien to us we can project feeling onto, so that they take on a life of their own. A building, for instance, is a heap of dead matter; we lend it feeling and it becomes an organism, and its pillars and walls become living limbs, putting forth a presence, and we then carry that presence back into our own hearts.

This empathy is seen most clearly in classical Chinese poetry and prose: the 'proud' (ao) of 'though the cold of heaven, still there is the bough that braves the frost', the 'playing' (nong) of 'the cloud breaks, the moon comes, the flower plays with its shadow', the 'looking at' and 'never tiring' of 'we look at each other and are never tired, only the Jingting Mountain'. The wonder of empathy is that 'in concentrated contemplation my feeling-interest and that of the thing flow back and forth into one another'. Sometimes the feeling of the thing follows mine — at parting the candle may weep, in high spirits the green hill seems to nod; sometimes mine follows the thing's — glad at the leaping fish and flying kite, solemn before the high peak and the great sea.

Empathy has a great influence in both creation and appreciation. In creation, the artist must not only enter minutely into natural scenery ('all things bear the colour of my self') but do the same with the characters and situations he makes — 'live the life of whatever character you create' (self and object made one). In appreciation, as argued above, only in the process of concentrated attention can my feeling-interest and the thing's flow back and forth into one another and produce aesthetic experience. True aesthetic experience always reaches the state of self and object made one, and in that state empathy most readily occurs.

Since empathy has so great an influence in creation and appreciation, how does it affect the creation and appreciation of digitally immersive art? In other words, what does empathy suggest for the design of the virtual scene, and how does

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digitally immersive art affect empathy and aesthetic experience? As argued above, the state of self and object made one most readily triggers empathy; how, then, is that state to be realised in immersive art? This must be examined from the characteristics that distinguish digitally immersive art from traditional art; from the analysis above, verisimilitude and interactivity are its principal characteristics, and approaching from these two directions makes it easier to grasp empathy and the construction of the state of self and object made one in immersive creation and appreciation.

First, at the level of verisimilitude, VR/AR/MR/XR can approach the 'written scene' of reality without limit and create a 'hyperreal media environment', but the verisimilitude of *xiejing* is not the same as copying reality entire, because the truth of an artistic image is the fusion and unity of *xiejing* and *zaojing*, as Wang Guowei observed in saying 'the two are hard to distinguish'. In immersive creation especially, if one copies scenes of life and builds a lifelike environment without any cutting and elevation of the real, one not only fails to create beauty for the beholder and to promote empathy but actually destroys it. Take the 'Forest of Flowers' series that the Japanese collective teamLab launched in 2017 and showed in Beijing and Shenzhen (the official title usually changes with the touring venue). There the viewer can wander in a forest full of flowers in a gentle breeze just as in real life; the flowers are arranged in different zones by season, and the dreamlike virtual sea of flowers responds to the viewer in real time — a hand 'touching' a flower makes its petals fall, and flowers bloom wherever people gather, one's every movement affecting the whole life-course of the flowers. Were that exhibition to present the scene without any selection and restore reality faithfully, showing alongside the flowers the flies and wasps that occasionally appear around them in life and spoil the real pleasure of flower-viewing, then the viewer's concentrated contemplation of the flowers and the arising of empathy would be hindered, the state of entering minutely into things and even of self and object made one would be hard to reach, and the artistic effect of the exhibition much reduced.

From this exhibition we can see that the hyperreal created by digital art does not copy reality entire either, just as Hegel held of traditional art: 'to extract what is essential and universal, to wash out what is accidental and irrelevant — only the result will bring every particular aspect of the work to the full expression of its fundamental purport, leaving nothing void or meaningless'. What Hegel calls 'extraction' and 'washing out' is precisely the elevation and cutting of real life, which in Eastern aesthetics corresponds to *zaojing* and *xiejing*. Only by achieving the fusion and unity of *xiejing* and *zaojing*, rather than pursuing 'verisimilitude' for its own sake, can the viewer more readily feel empathy in digital art and so reach deep immersion.

Second, at the level of interactivity: as an important characteristic of digitally immersive art, immersive scene design currently lays great weight on interactivity, which involves the viewer's sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. Although, as argued above, the Western aesthetic tradition has always taken only sight and hearing as aesthetic senses and regarded the rest as 'lower senses' that satisfy human desire, the aesthetic senses have been comprehensively extended and integrated in the age of digital media, and the body has returned as the medium of the aesthetic. What influence, then, does interactivity have on the arising of empathy?

In immersive design as it stands, interactivity may be divided, by the degree of the experiencer's participation in the work, into active and passive interaction. In actively interactive works the experiencer chiefly uses motion-capture equipment, position trackers, head-mounted displays and data-sensing garments to interact with the work by speech and movement and to take part in its creation, becoming part of the work. Typical examples are the 'Forest of Flowers' series and 'Forest of Resonating Lamps' mentioned above, and the immersive film *Secret Cinema: Casino Royale*. In an immersive exhibition the experiencer, as part of the work, can affect its content and form by their behaviour; in an immersive film the experiencer takes part as an 'actor' in the development of the plot. In passively interactive works the experiencer has less influence on the content and form of the work, which chiefly uses sound effects, taste and touch sensors, VR and glasses-free 3D visual devices, and a 360-degree deeply enveloping stage to stimulate the five senses and so make the experiencer take part passively. Examples are the intangible-cultural-heritage show *Five-Dimensional Memory* and the large-scale immersive situational drama *Tianshui: An Eternal Show*.

Whichever kind of interaction it is, it is an important means of arousing the viewer's feeling-interest and of mobilising their emotional investment, and that investment is the basis on which empathy occurs. As already noted, art cannot be separated from feeling; in traditional art, art is required to express and to stir feeling, and this needs indirect artistic means — the 'true scene and deep feeling', 'meaning and scene in concert', 'feeling and scene fused' that *zaojing* and *xiejing* pursue are all devices adopted so that the viewer feels empathy in appreciation. In digitally immersive art, by contrast, the design of an interactive scene can directly give the viewer the sense of 'being there' and of 'self and object made one' by involving them in the work and stimulating their five senses, and in that state empathy most readily occurs.

One point must be made, however: while empathy most easily occurs in an immersive scene, it does not follow that the more 'lifelike' a work or the stronger its interactivity, the higher its artistic level and aesthetic value. On the relation between empathy and aesthetic experience, Zhu Guangqian argued from two ways of acting. In the first, that of the 'sharer', the actor forgets that he is acting and seems to be the character himself; in the second, that of the 'onlooker', he knows throughout that he is acting, as in the 'rules of the house' of Chinese traditional opera, working out every word and gesture of the part

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through calm and attentive study. The first involves empathy and the second does not, yet both can create a role successfully. Hence 'though empathy and the making-one of self and object often accompany aesthetic experience, they are neither the aesthetic experience itself nor a necessary condition of it'. So in creating immersive art, if too much weight is placed on sensory stimulation, or the mode of interaction is too obscure or too tedious, then even if the viewer feels empathy in experiencing or appreciating the work, it cannot be called an aesthetic experience.

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