From "Ways of Seeing" to "Ways of Experiencing": Paradigm Shift in Aesthetic Appreciation in the Digital Age

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Abstract

John Berger's 1972 formulation of "Ways of Seeing" established a visual-centric analytical framework that dominated the theory of aesthetic appreciation throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. The emergence of digital technology clusters — encompassing the internet, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), AI-generated art (AIGA), and non-fungible tokens (NFTs) — is now systematically restructuring the perceptual media, modes of bodily engagement, social contexts, and value-assessment mechanisms of aesthetic appreciation, propelling a shift from "seeing" through a single visual channel to a multi-sensory, interactive, and decentralized mode of "experiencing." Drawing on Kuhn's theory of paradigm shift as an analytical scaffold, this paper examines six dimensions of transformation in aesthetic appreciation in the digital age: (1) multimodal expansion of perceptual media; (2) inversion of bodily participation from passive to active; (3) dissolution of spatiotemporal constraints and reallocation of attention; (4) democratization of social appreciation from professional elite to distributed publics; (5) migration of value authentication from institutional authorization to algorithms and blockchain; and (6) the challenge posed by human-machine co-creation to artistic subjectivity. Through analysis of paradigmatic cases — teamLab, Google Arts and Culture, and immersive Van Gogh exhibitions — this paper proposes the "experiential turn" as a conceptual tool and conducts a bilateral assessment of both its emancipatory aesthetic potential and its critical risks. The study demonstrates that digital-age aesthetic appreciation neither simply continues nor wholly overturns the traditional appreciative paradigm; rather, it retains core elements of classical aesthetics while producing, through technological mediation, novel appreciative forms with distinctive aesthetic qualities, thereby posing theoretical challenges that urgently demand engagement in contemporary arts education and critical practice.

Keywords: *climate crisis, ecological art , installation art , visual translation, affective engagement, environmental aesthetics*

1 Introduction: Has the Era of "Seeing" Come to an End?

In 1972, the British art critic John Berger, in his BBC documentary series and the eponymous work *Ways of Seeing*, proclaimed: *"Seeing comes before words. . . . We explain the world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it." [1]*

Grounded in Marxist ideological critique and feminist gaze theory, this proposition reframed visual experience as a product of power relations and profoundly shaped five decades of art criticism and art history.

Yet when we find ourselves in 2025, standing inside an immersive digital art gallery — our bodies enveloped by a luminous Van Gogh starry sky, our hands reaching in a VR headset toward sculptural surfaces that do not physically exist, our smartphones pushing algorithmically curated commentary matched to our present gaze — has the mode of "seeing" that Berger conceived as a tool of power-scrutiny already yielded to an entirely different perceptual modality? Is a new era of appreciation, in which "experiencing" displaces "seeing" as the central category, taking shape?

The central argument of this paper is that the rise of the digital technology cluster is propelling aesthetic appreciation from a seeing paradigm — organized around visual perception and contemplative stillness — toward an experiencing paradigm characterized by multi-sensory immersion, bodily interaction, and social participation. Drawing on Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigm shift [2], this paper defines this structural migration as the "experiential turn" in the field of aesthetic appreciation, systematically analyzes its six core dimensions, and maintains a dual-directional scrutiny of the emancipatory potential and critical tensions it contains.

The paper is organized as follows: Section II traces the theoretical lineage of Ways of Seeing and its historical limitations; Section III analyzes the systematic restructuring of appreciative media by digital technology clusters; Section IV proposes and argues for the six dimensions of the "experiential turn"; Section V tests the analytical framework through representative case studies; Section VI offers a bilateral evaluation of the experiential turn; and Section VII concludes with directions for future research.

2 The Theoretical Lineage and Historical Limitations of Ways of Seeing

2.1 The Theoretical Tradition of Ocularcentrism

The privileging of vision in Western aesthetic tradition has deep metaphysical roots. Plato described the beauty of the "Idea" as an eternal form perceptible to the "mind's eye," while Aristotle ranked sight as the most noble of the five senses. From the Renaissance onward, the invention of linear perspective established rationalized visual cognition as the foundational technical norm of artistic expression, such that the notion of a "well-made image" was tantamount to the precise embodiment of a rationalized, disembodied visual logic.

Berger's Ways of Seeing enacted an ideological turn within this tradition: borrowing Walter Benjamin's account of mechanical reproduction dissolving the "aura" of artworks [3], he re-theorized art-viewing in the context of modern mass media as a field of ideological reproduction. For Berger, seeing is not a neutral perceptual activity but a social practice saturated with the power of the gaze — the way men look at women, the way colonizers look at the art of the colonized, each inscribing an unequal map of power within the act of vision.

2.2 Structural Limitations of the Seeing Paradigm

While Berger's critical framework retains enduring revelatory power, Ways of Seeing as a paradigm for appreciation theory exhibits at least three structural limitations when confronted with twenty-first-century digital culture:

First, the single-sense bias. "Seeing" centers on vision and struggles to account for aesthetic experiences that integrate multiple senses. When an immersive installation work simultaneously mobilizes sight, hearing, touch, and even smell, critical discourse organized around the "gaze" proves inadequate.

Second, the assumption of the static body. Classical "seeing" presupposes a body that stands still, at a moderate distance, maintaining a spatial interval from the work. The white cube design of the museum is precisely the material expression of this bodily posture. The rise of interactive art, virtual reality experience, and performance art fundamentally challenges this presupposition of the static spectator.

Third, the binary structure of elite producer and mass consumer. The seeing paradigm implies a clear production-consumption binary: the artist produces, the viewer consumes. Digital technology has made audience participation in artistic production — from fan-made derivative works to AI-assisted creation — a large-scale reality, yet this participatory dimension lacks effective conceptual tools within the theoretical framework of "seeing."

3 The Systematic Restructuring of Appreciative Media by Digital Technology Clusters

3.1 Defining the Digital Technology Cluster

This paper employs the term "digital technology cluster" rather than a single-technology concept in order to emphasize that the context of contemporary digital aesthetic appreciation is an ecosystem constituted by multiple mutually reinforcing technological systems, not the product of a single technological breakthrough. This cluster comprises at least six strata: (1) the internet and mobile terminals, as the infrastructure for distributing art content; (2) high-resolution digital imaging and 3D scanning, providing ultra-precise digital twins of artworks; (3) virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), reconstructing the spatiotemporal coordinates of perception; (4) artificial intelligence and machine learning, intervening in art recommendation, stylistic analysis, and generative creation; (5) blockchain and NFTs, reshaping the ownership and value authentication of digital artworks; and (6) social media platforms, embedding individual acts of appreciation within networks of social visibility.

These six strata do not operate independently; they are mutually nested and mutually reinforcing, together constituting a technological ecology that reshapes aesthetic appreciation. It is precisely the systemic nature of this technological ecology that elevates the current transformation in appreciative modes beyond a mere media update, conferring upon it the structural characteristics of a "paradigm shift" in the Kuhnian sense [2].

3.2 From Reproduction to Immersion: Historical Coordinates of Media Evolution

The mechanical reproduction technologies Benjamin described in the 1930s — photographs, film, printed matter — had already accomplished the first democratic leap of art objects from unique originals to mass circulation [3]. Digital technology has advanced a second and even a third qualitative leap upon this foundation: from reproduction to immersion, from passive viewing to active interaction, from a single node to a network, from static images to dynamically generated forms. Table 1 presents the evolution of media from the traditional museum context to the digital immersion context.

Table 1. Historical evolution of aesthetic appreciation media: from original works to digital immersion

Historical Period	Primary Medium	Sensory Channels	Bodily Posture	Appreciating Subject	Typical Venue
Pre-modern (–1800)	Original objects	Primarily visual	Stationary, distanced	Nobility, clergy	Court, church
Modern Museum Era (1800–1960)	Original + printed reproductions	Primarily visual	Stationary, disciplined	General public	Public museums
Mass Media Era (1960–2000)	Photographs, television, print	Visual + auditory	Passive reception	Television audiences	Home / cinema
Internet Era (2000–2015)	Digital images, websites	Primarily visual	Click-based interaction	Internet users	Screen / online
Digital Immersion Era (2015–present)	VR/AR, AI-generated, NFT	Multi-sensory integration	Active, embodied participation	Co-creative participants	Immersive venues / metaverse

Note: The historical periodization above is an analytical generalization; the stages overlap and interpenetrate and do not represent sharply demarcated linear succession.

4 Six Dimensions of the Experiential Turn

4.1 Dimension 1: Multimodal Expansion of Perceptual Media

Classical aesthetic appreciation relied primarily on vision as the perceptual channel, music appreciation being a notable exception. The foremost transformation brought about by digital technology is the incorporation of multi-sensory experience into the structure of visual art appreciation. In immersive exhibitions, for example, visitors simultaneously receive visual projections, surround-sound fields, and — in some exhibitions — scent or airflow, forming a holistic aesthetic experience in which multi-sensory signals mutually reinforce one another.

Neuroscientific research has demonstrated that multisensory integration can significantly enhance emotional activation intensity and memory retention [4]. From the perspective of neuroaesthetics, the coordinated activation of the amygdala, insular cortex, and orbitofrontal cortex by multimodal stimuli may produce peak aesthetic experiences at a frequency and intensity exceeding those elicited by visual stimulation alone, offering preliminary evidence at the level of physiological mechanism that "experiencing" may surpass mere "seeing" in aesthetic depth.

4.2 Dimension 2: Inversion of Bodily Participation from Passive to Active

The exhibition regime of the traditional museum — rope barriers, no-touching rules, unidirectional circulation routes — constitutes a systematic disciplining of the stationary spectator's body. Behind this disciplinary apparatus lies an aesthetics of "untouchability": the sanctity of the artwork is maintained through spatial distance and the unidirectionality of perception between viewer and work.

Digital interactive art fundamentally overturns this logic. In teamLab's installation works, the bodily movements of participants directly trigger the visual responses of the work — fish scatter when visitors crouch, flowers bloom when hands are extended [5]. This interactivity transforms the viewer from a subject of appreciation into a co-producer of the work; the body is no longer a fixed fulcrum bearing the gaze but a dynamic medium generating artistic meaning. Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodied cognition [6] here receives unprecedented validation through artistic practice: aesthetic perception is not disembodied seeing but a dynamic co-constitution between body and world.

4.3 Dimension 3: Dissolution of Spatiotemporal Constraints and Reallocation of Attention

Traditional museum appreciation is constrained by strict spatiotemporal limits: opening hours, geographic location, circulation routes, and visitor density collectively shape the boundaries of experiential accessibility. Google Arts & Culture employs ultra-high-definition digitization to bring the collections of more than 2,000 museums worldwide into any time and any place [7], reducing the physical spatiotemporal constraints of museum appreciation to the condition of network connectivity. This liberation simultaneously produces a structural change in attention: the linear circulation route of the physical museum is replaced by algorithmically driven personalized browsing paths, and "serendipitous encounter" becomes a more common trigger for appreciation than "planned contemplation."

However, the dissolution of spatiotemporal constraints is not pure liberation: attentional fragmentation in screen-based appreciation environments, notification interruptions, and the inertia of scrolling constitute systematic challenges to deep aesthetic immersion [8]. Research by Nicholas Carr and others reveals that habitual web browsing is structurally eroding human capacity for deep reading and sustained contemplation, posing a fundamental challenge to traditional modes of aesthetic experience that presuppose a state of undivided attention.

4.4 Dimension 4: The Democratization of Social Appreciation and the Paradox of Neo-elitism

Digital technology has dismantled the geographic and class barriers of aesthetic appreciation, enabling any individual with a smart device to access art resources previously restricted to particular geographic locations and social strata. The inequality of "cultural capital" described by Bourdieu [9] has nominally loosened in part thanks to increased digital accessibility. The "check-in culture" on social media platforms, the explosive growth of user-generated content (UGC) art commentary, and the proliferation of popular arts education content constitute surface evidence of the democratization of appreciation.

Beneath this democratic picture, however, a new elitist logic lurks. Algorithmic recommendation systems simultaneously broaden audience coverage and, through the filter bubble mechanism, reinforce existing aesthetic preference circuits, systematically reducing the probability of traversing one's aesthetic comfort zone. The digital divide [10] — not only at the level of access but also at the level of technological competence — perpetuates structural inequalities among appreciating subjects in digital literacy, device conditions, and cultural capital in new forms.

4.5 Dimension 5: Migration of Value Authentication Mechanisms

In the traditional paradigm of appreciation, the authentication of an artwork's value depends on an institutional chain: curators, critics, auction houses, and museums together constitute a system of institutional authority that confers cultural legitimacy on artworks. The digital age has seen two parallel migrations of authenticating authority: first, the substitute penetration of critical discourse by algorithmic visibility metrics such as traffic and like counts; and second, blockchain-backed NFT ownership certificates, which reconstruct through decentralized technological means the proof of scarcity and authenticity of digitally native artworks.

The rise of NFTs deserves particular attention. At the theoretical level, NFTs use cryptographic means to re-address Benjamin's observation that digital reproductions lack "aura" — by endowing infinitely reproducible digital files with unique certificates of ownership, NFTs artificially reconstruct at the technical level the logic of scarcity inherent in original works [3]. Critics, however, point out that this merely imports the logic of speculative capital into the art domain, replacing aesthetic judgment with financial instruments and degrading value authentication from "a good eye" to "good timing."

4.6 Dimension 6: The Challenge of Human-Machine Co-creation to Artistic Subjectivity

The rise of AIGA (AI-generated art) is not only a technological innovation but a fundamental disturbance to the ontological question of "who is the object of aesthetic appreciation." When generative AI systems such as Midjourney and Stable Diffusion can produce visually stunning images within seconds, the authorial attribution of the object of appreciative acts — the artwork — becomes ambiguous: is it the expression of the human prompt engineer's intention, the statistical projection of the AI model, or the joint product of human-machine negotiation?

This ambiguity poses a grave challenge to the traditional "intentionalist" and "authorialist" frameworks of appreciation. If part of the pleasure of appreciation lies in perceiving traces of the creator's intention and craft, then in AIGA works, who is the object of that pleasure? The sixth dimension of the experiential turn is therefore not merely a change in the mode of appreciation but a fundamental opening of the ontological status of the object of appreciation.

5 Case Studies: Three Exemplary Texts of the Experiential Turn

5.1 teamLab: Embodied Participation and Aesthetic Co-creation

teamLab is a Japanese interdisciplinary art collective founded in 2001; its works use ultra-large-scale digital projection and real-time interactive technology as core media to create immersive spatial installations that incorporate the human body into visual ecosystems [5]. The representative Borderless series offers an illustration: visitors move through a boundless dark space while butterflies, flowers, and stellar rivers — triggered by bodily position and movement — continuously emerge on walls and floors; each visitor is simultaneously an appreciator, a disruptor, and a generator.

Analyzing the teamLab case through the six-dimensional framework proposed in Figure 1: at the level of perceptual media, the deep integration of visual projection and spatial sound achieves multimodal experience; at the level of bodily participation, embodied interaction replaces distanced seeing; at the level of space and time, each visit generates a unique and unrepeatable experience; at the social level, the interactive triggers among strangers become a constituent part of the work's meaning; at the level of value, the scarcity of the experience (the presence of a specific body at a specific time) replaces the scarcity of the original; and at the level of subjectivity, the final form of the work is determined by the real-time data of collective participation. The teamLab case fully embodies all six dimensions of the experiential turn and stands as one of the most representative examples for understanding the new appreciative paradigm.

5.2 Google Arts and Culture: Spatiotemporal Liberation and the Attention Paradox

Since its launch in 2011, Google Arts & Culture (hereafter GAC) has digitized the collections of more than 2,000

museums worldwide — over seven million works — and made them freely accessible to the public. Its Street View feature allows users to virtually walk through the world's foremost art institutions such as the Louvre and the British Museum, andthe positioning of the platform as a "pocket museum"symbolizes the ultimate liberation from the spatiotemporal constraints of appreciation. Platform data for 2022 shows that monthly active users exceeded 50 million, with an average of 7.3 artworks browsed per session and a median dwell time per artwork of 23 seconds [7].

A median dwell time of 23 seconds is a datum worth pondering. In physical museums it is not uncommon to devote 5 to 10 minutes or longer to a significant work; on the GAC platform, more than 70 percent of single-artwork browsing times fall below 30 seconds, a striking contrast to the mode of deep contemplation characteristic of traditional museum appreciation. The dissolution of spatiotemporal constraints comes at the cost of attentional fragmentation, exemplifying the internal tension of the experiential turn.

Six-Dimensional Analytical Framework of the Experiential Turn

Dimension	teamLab	Google A&C	Immersive Van Gogh Exhibit
D1 Multimodal Expansion of Perceptual Media	★★★★★	★★☆☆☆	★★★★☆
D2 Bodily Participation: Passive to Active	★★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆
D3 Dissolution of Spatiotemporal Constraints	★★☆☆☆	★★★★★	★★★☆☆
D4 Democratization of Social Appreciation	★★★☆☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆
D5 Migration of Value Authentication	★★★☆☆	★★☆☆☆	★★☆☆☆
D6 Human-Machine Co-creation and Subjectivity	★★★★☆	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆

Figure 1. The six-dimensional analytical framework of the experiential turn and case mapping

Note: ★ indicates the degree to which each dimension is manifested (five stars = highest). Ratings are based on the case-analysis judgments of this paper and represent qualitative assessments rather than precise quantitative measures.

5.3 mmersive Van Gogh: Re-encoding the Classical and the Commodification of Experience

The globally touring Immersive Van Gogh Exhibit has been staged in dozens of cities worldwide since 2019, using large-scale dynamic projection to deconstruct and reassemble Van Gogh's works into flowing audiovisual landscapes. This phenomenon attracts analytical attention at two levels simultaneously — aesthetic experience and cultural industry: from the former perspective, it achieves a multimodal re-activation of classical artistic heritage, generating strong emotional resonance in new audiences who have never engaged in deep contemplation of Van Gogh's originals in a museum; from the latter perspective, it represents the deep penetration of the logic of the experience economy [11] into the art domain — art images that were previously viewable free of charge as part of the public domain have been re-commodified as immersive experience products requiring paid admission.

This tension reveals a deep paradox of the experiential turn (like Table 2.): the democratization of aesthetics and the commodification of aesthetics tend to occur simultaneously and to condition each other. Immersive technology lowers the knowledge threshold of appreciation (emotional resonance requires no art-historical background) while raising its economic threshold (high ticket prices and commercial operating models); it allows art to reach a broader affective audience while simultaneously converting the art experience into a consumption event, placing the non-instrumental value of art at risk of erosion by commercial logic.

Table 2. Emancipatory potential and critical risks of the experiential turn: a bilateral assessment framework

Dimension	Emancipatory Potential	Critical Risks
Perceptual	Multimodal integration enhances emotional activation and peak aesthetic experience frequency	Sensory overload may obscure the depth of detail and conceptual dimension of works
Bodily	Embodied participation activates perceptual understanding in the Merleau-Pontian sense	Entertainmentized bodily participation may mask critical cognitive distance

Dimension	Emancipatory Potential	Critical Risks
Spatiotemporal	Breaks geographic and class barriers, maximizing the accessibility of art	Attentional fragmentation undermines the structural conditions for deep contemplation
Social	Distributed publics participate in appreciative discourse, democratizing the critical ecology	Algorithmic filter bubbles reinforce aesthetic homogenization; risk of neo-elitism
Value	Blockchain technology provides an authenticity framework for digitally native artworks	Financial speculation logic penetrates the art domain, monetizing value judgment
Subjectivity	Human-machine collaboration opens plural possibilities for artistic subjectivity	Ethical issues such as labor exploitation and copyright infringement in AI-generated art

Note: Emancipatory potential and critical risks are not mutually exclusive; they coexist as bidirectional tensions on each dimension, and their relative weight varies according to specific technological applications and social contexts.

6 Bilateral Assessment: Emancipatory Potential and Critical Risks

6.1 Emancipatory Aesthetic Potential of the Experiential Turn

The most significant positive value of the experiential turn lies in the systematic lowering of traditional aesthetic thresholds. The accumulation of "cultural capital" described by Bourdieu [9] requires a prolonged cultivation of class habitus, whereas the affective accessibility of digital experience allows, to some degree, bypassing this threshold — without art-historical knowledge, relying solely on embodied sensory presence, individuals can generate genuine emotional resonance in immersive experiences. This effect offers important implications for arts education: multi-sensory immersive experiences can serve as affective anchors and entry points for traditional art history education, rather than replacing the latter.

The experiential turn also provides unprecedented infrastructure for the cultural participation of marginalized groups. For people with mobility impairments, residents of remote areas, and low-income populations, the institutional barriers of exclusion have been substantially lowered in the context of the growing popularization of digital appreciation tools. Although the digital divide [10] persists, its character has shifted from a problem of physical accessibility to a problem of digital literacy and device conditions, the latter theoretically being more amenable to educational intervention.

6.2 Critical Tensions of the Experiential Turn

The most profound critical risk of the experiential turn lies in the commodification logic applied to aesthetic experience. The penetration into the art domain of the experience economy described by Pine and Gilmore [11] — which adds an "experience" dimension on top of goods and services to command a price premium — has driven the design logic of art experiences increasingly toward the sensory stimulation and emotional management of the entertainment industry, placing the disinterestedness value of art under systemic pressure to be replaced by consumption logic.

Furthermore, the immediacy and intensity of an experience are not equivalent to depth of aesthetic understanding. Leder et al.'s model of aesthetic information processing [12] demonstrates that genuine aesthetic appreciation requires the sequential processing of information through multiple stages — perception, memory integration, cognitive classification, and affective evaluation — and constitutes a process of considerable cognitive complexity. Immersive experience may optimize the emotional activation stage, but supporting the stages of cognitive mastery and critical understanding requires specifically designed educational intervention; it cannot be assumed that intense sensory experience automatically equals deep artistic understanding.

7 Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

Using the conceptual framework of the "experiential turn," this paper has described and analyzed the structural transformation in aesthetic appreciation in the digital age: the paradigmatic migration from Ways of Seeing — centered on visual contemplation — to Ways of Experiencing — characterized by multi-sensory immersion, embodied interaction, spatiotemporal liberation, and social participation. Through the six-dimensional analytical framework and three representative case studies, the following core conclusions are reached:

First, the experiential turn carries genuine paradigmatic significance. It is not merely a technological update but a systematic reorganization of the perceptual structure, social organization, and value-assessment mechanisms of appreciative behavior, meeting the core characteristics of paradigm shift as defined by Kuhn.

Second, the experiential turn contains fundamental tensions. Aesthetic emancipation and aesthetic commodification, sensory richness and cognitive depth, the democratization of appreciation and algorithmic elitism constitute the irreducible internal contradictions of this turn; neither unidimensional optimism nor pessimism is adequate to grasp its

complex character.

Third, the experiential turn is not the end of the traditional appreciative paradigm. The relationship between digital immersive experience and deep contemplation in the physical museum is not zero-sum but complementary: the former can serve as an affective anchor and entry point, while the latter remains an irreplaceable site for cultivating critical aesthetic understanding. The core task of arts education is to equip audiences with the capacity to move consciously back and forth between the two modes of appreciation.

Among directions for future research, the following topics merit priority: (1) longitudinal tracking studies of digital appreciation behavior to examine the actual effects of immersive experience on long-term aesthetic literacy development; (2) aesthetic-ontological research on the appreciation of AIGA to clarify the identity boundaries of the appreciated object in the context of human-machine co-creation; (3) cross-cultural comparative studies of digital appreciation to test the applicability of the analytical framework proposed here in different cultural contexts; and (4) research on institutional regulatory mechanisms for the tension between the experience economy and the public character of art.

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