

# "Postdramatic Theatre" Era: Immersion, Resonance, and Communication of Emotions — Taking the Shekou Theatre Festival as an Example

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**Abstract:** Taking Shekou Theatre Festival as an example, this paper discusses the immersion, resonance and spread of emotion in the "Postdramatic Theatre" Era. The author believes that in contemporary society, drama is no longer a stage performance in the traditional sense, but has changed into a more open and pluralistic cultural phenomenon. By breaking the boundaries of traditional theatres, Shekou Theatre Festival integrates drama with social, exhibition, public space and other elements, so that the audience can more deeply participate in the drama and feel the emotion and meaning. At the same time, the Theatre Festival also strengthens the communication effect of emotion by means of multimedia technology and cross-cultural elements, so that the audience can better understand and experience the emotions conveyed by drama. Finally, the article points out that the immersion, resonance and dissemination of emotion in the era of "post-drama theater" is of great significance to the cultural development of contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Immersive; Resonance Axis; Performing Space

## 1. Introduction

The so-called "postdramatic theatre" is a classification proposed by German drama scholar Lehmann in his "Postdramatisches Theatre", dividing the history of drama into three stages: the predramatic theatre period, including ancient Greek drama and other "primitive" forms of drama from various cultures; the dramatic theatre period, which is drama centered on scripts; and the postdramatic theatre period, the flourishing development of drama since the 1970s. In recent years, the performing arts industry has frequently introduced a new performance format, where creators create and perform in unconventional theatrical environments, blurring the boundaries between performers and audiences. The audience's role is no longer that of a bystander but becomes a part of the performance, even influencing the presentation direction of the work through interaction with the creators. In such theatrical spaces, the performer's body deviates from meaning, only displaying physical postures, creating an emptiness that can accommodate all meanings. Moreover, more open public spaces encourage operators and creators to innovate and experiment together, giving rise to a series of successful works and IP [1].

## 2. Cultural Connotations of Immersive Performing Arts Spaces

Looking at China, the concept of "immersive experience" has permeated almost all emerging consumer domains, becoming the "next trend" in cultural tourism. The concept of "immersion" originates from psychology, where Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, used immersive experience to describe the psychological state during peak experiences — a state of "complete immersion in the flow of consciousness". It defines a unique sensory experience where users are introduced into a fixed cognitive framework. Part of their consciousness and perception is shielded, retaining only reactions that match this cognitive framework. Users build a connection between their bodies and the environment, extending their visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory senses. "Immersion" as a psychological state of perception has always run through the process of artistic creation and appreciation. From ancient times to the present, the pursuit of immersive experiences has been a constant goal for both artistic creators and their audiences. Immersion is divided into physiological immersion and psychological immersion. Physiological immersion involves experiences related to sensory perceptions such as sight and hearing. Various forms of 4D experiential performances,

combined with technologies like AR, VR, and MR, along with diverse and distinctive theatrical works, generate multidimensional immersive experiences for the audience. This means that even in a fictional environment, the audience experiences a psychological illusion of being present at the scene.

### ***2.1. Breaking Boundaries: Cross-Disciplinary Integration in the Dramatic Cultural Industry***

Currently, there is a plethora of immersive artistic tourism projects covering various domains, such as immersive museums, exhibitions, light shows, escape rooms, theme parks, and immersive performances, fully embodying the charm of the combination of culture and technology. For instance, "Night on the Yellow Crane Tower" uses the Yellow Crane Tower as a carrier, combining it with a light show to create a new landmark for "Nighttime Wuhan". The China Grand Canal Museum reconstructs large immersive ancient scenes, Xi'an Cultural Tourism's Datang Everbright City theme, along with the large-scale immersive theme park linked to the TV series "Chang'an Twelve Hours" — all these fields are engaging in cross-disciplinary integration with cultural production. In 2022, the Shekou Theatre Festival adopted a new dramatic form, employing a "site-specific script + immersive experience" model. This not only allows the audience to participate in the interpretation and deduction of the plot but also enables them to experience a stronger sense of immersion and identification in scenes directly related to the plot. As a result, they obtain a multi-faceted experience of "leisure and entertainment + theatrical performance". This new form of interactive narrative performance differs slightly from traditional interactive narratives. The audience's subjective initiative is stronger; they are no longer set in a "performer" state by the creators. The direction of each stage actually begins to deviate from the creator's arrangement. Excessive interaction may become a restraint or interference to the narrative, thus changing the spectator-performer relationship. For instance, in the play "The Catfish Effect" at the theatre festival, the performance takes place in real settings like art galleries, allowing the audience to choose parts to appreciate and engage with. In "Picnic", a large-scale scene with a ship serves as part of the performance, letting the audience create their own perspectives. In "Beside the Plum Tree, Beside the Willow Tree", even though the performance is within the Windofa Grand Theatre, there are no boundaries to the settings [2]. The female protagonist performs traditional Chinese opera in the audience area, combining ancient and modern elements, connecting with traditional culture while delivering a contemporary message. It is evident that the fixed stage perspective has disappeared. In the entire spatial domain, the audience can decide where to direct their gaze. Merging into the atmosphere and state presented by the performers, the sense of immersion is self-evident.

### ***2.2. Participation: Localization and Globalization of Dramatic Culture***

Faced with the trend of cultural "homogenization", there is a need for the recreation of local culture and active involvement in the process of globalization. The proposition of "homogenization" suggests that global culture is undergoing a standardization process based on the models of major Western countries. However, globalization does not equate to homogenization. While homogenization phenomena exist within it, it does not mean that we already have or will soon possess a unified, homogeneous "global culture". After all, the deep structures of many cultural entities are difficult to shake. On the contrary, globalization provides "incremental space" for different cultures, and on this basis, local cultures can burst forth with new vitality. The historical significance of Shekou can be traced back to its experimental status in the early stages of reform and opening up, making it one of the first cities to open up to the outside world. Combining this historical background with theatrical creation, the performance "On the Road at Sea" added the local mythological figure Nüwa, who is not only a local myth in Shekou but also one of the oldest figures in Chinese mythology, deeply influencing our national sentiments. "Someday We'll Walk Together" tells the old history of New China in a new form, resonating not only with local residents but also immersing foreign audiences in the feelings of that era. "Walking on Flower Street" uses a massive local cultural background with international elements, utilizing a large space to mobilize the audience's atmosphere and emotions. It conveys emotions and energy, creating a sense of immersion where the audience feels integrated. The localization participating in globalization roughly aligns with what Peter Berger said: seeking a middle ground between "willing acceptance" and "vigorous resistance" to the globalization dominated by Western culture [3].

## **3. Site Resonance Through the "Deceleration Strategy"**

With the advent of modern society, people fear standing still in the accelerating pace of life. The

fear of standing still in this fast-paced society can lead to cultural maladies such as apathy, depression, world-weariness, and neurasthenia, as mentioned by Rosa in "The Birth of Alienation". In the context of an accelerating society, the logic of social competition dictates that more and more resources must be invested to maintain competitiveness, as if "we must run as fast as possible just to stay in the same place". In such an environment, regardless of age, everyone is racing against the world, resulting in various forms of alienation. This has led to a sense of "deterritorialization" for most people in contemporary society, where entertainment time is brief and fragmented, memories are short-lived, and individuals feel emotionally detached, even in a crowd. The best solution to all these issues is to establish a resonance axis, with art being included within the vertical axis of resonance.

### ***3.1. Localization Resonance through Fuzzy Boundaries***

Most participants in the theatre festival are "empty-nest youth". With the process of urbanization, they wander between dreams and reality, becoming a concentrated reflection of social phenomena and problems to some extent. The work "Someday We'll Walk Together" resonates with the local elements it contains, evoking a sense of nostalgia with pictures of drawing books and exercise books from childhood. Combined with the form of "white noise", it creates an immersive experience. "The Barber Shop Next Door" has a simpler form, maintaining the daily environment while integrating auditory and on-site experiences, revealing the diverse and vibrant lives that exist naturally. "Dream Eater" uses ironic language, bizarre costumes, and performance style to vividly illustrate the anxiety, emptiness, and numbness experienced in today's society, giving the audience a sense of self-reflection. Outside the theatre festival, the director of "Only Dream of the Red Chamber • Theatrical Fantasy City" mentioned, "We designed many human scenes inside, as well as some illusions. We hope that drama can still exist without actors." The blurred boundaries of the stage enhance immersion and bring about multiple sensory experiences, including visual, auditory, tactile, and even the olfactory sense of "not being present", creating a soulful resonance between individuals and the works.

### ***3.2. The Novel Resonance of Experimental Stage***

We live in an era rich in experiences but lacking in profound encounters. Time seems to pass swiftly, leaving no trace in memory after each experience. Emotions that come with these experiences tend to fade rapidly, replaced by various fleeting, fragmented, and entertaining pieces of information. However, the theatre festival, through many experimental spatial works, provides the audience with emotionally refreshing experiences. As Peter Brook wrote in "The Empty Space", "We can take any space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged." This approach allows for creativity and performance in any environment, shortening the cultural value chain, enabling creative performances to connect with the audience in the shortest time. In "Nezha's Crazy Cosmic Circle", we witness actors performing puppetry in an amusement park, even a play. In this unique setting, without distinct lighting and various stage arrangements, the events in this space alter the audience's memory of the original space. This experimental performance in a realistic setting gives the audience the sensation of watching a show in their own residential playground, creating feelings of novelty, wonder, and engagement that take root in the audience's minds. Similarly, in "The Catfish Effect", a mermaid swims on the floor, creating a blend of the present and the absent, offering a fresh performance style and a humorous way of resonating emotionally, conveying a message of "don't be afraid to be different in the crowd" [4].

### ***3.3. The Future-Oriented Modern Resonance of Scenarios***

Future imagery is a medium of communication built upon technological means such as VR, AR, MR, and holographic projection, providing immersive, present, and interactive experiences. Taking VR (Virtual Reality) as an example, this technology uses devices such as headsets and controllers to simulate or create a virtual biomimetic system closely resembling the real world. This creates a lifelike immersive experience for users. In recent years, future imaging technology has expanded its applications not only in industrial manufacturing, healthcare, and aerospace but also increasingly in cultural activities closely related to everyday life, such as games, film and television, and stage drama. The work "Sea • Infinity" allows the audience to navigate through space with a "black mirror" in hand, engaging in drama through immersive environments and interactive participation. This breaks the traditional unidirectional relationship between "artist—artwork—audience" and achieves a holographic integration of perception involving images, text, sound, and vision. Leading internal subjectivity through diverse external senses, this approach bridges the gap from virtual digital space to real-world

physical domains, reflecting the creative imagination of the virtual with the agency of the tangible, thereby achieving an aesthetic reshaping of bodily sensations and subjective experiences.

#### **4. From Aesthetic Experience to Emotional Communication**

Viewed from the life spirit of Chinese aesthetics, modern drama needs to seek change within the unchanging, innovation within the ever-changing, enabling the audience to transition from "observing" with the eyes of reality to "perceiving" with the eyes of the soul. Rational communication and emotional communication represent a new form and method of communication relative to traditional classification (distinguishing between "presence" and "absence"). They are a set of opposites that are united in their opposition. Rational communication refers to communication activities where the thematic thinking adopts rational reasoning, constructing communication activities and processes based on rational cognition and patterns. In contrast to rational understanding, emotional communication involves thinking that utilizes emotional logic and direction. It influences the audience through emotional activities and processes, forming interaction and sharing, taking emotions as a premise and bridge, and using emotions as the path and communication pattern to achieve communication goals and effects.

##### ***4.1. Pleasing to the Senses: Experience-driven Performing Arts Empowered by Technology***

Based in urban environments and integrating urban development with the drama culture industry, a great dynamic space is created for theatrical production. Planning within this vast area allows creators to be more detailed and closer to life than traditional theatre settings, creating a sense of presence. The integration of various technological products in the city with drama produces a more impactful and refreshing emotional experience for the audience. Interactive performances like "One Day We Walk Together", which strongly involves the audience in crossing domains and forms of performance, and "Sea • Infinity", which directly uses technology to empower drama and engage the audience in the creative environment, provide viewers with a direct and immersive experience of the artistic charm. The incorporation of performances into real environments, as seen in the structure and aesthetics of "Nanhai Yiku Area", allows the audience to intuitively feel the allure of art. In technologically empowered drama, artistic expression unfolds at the levels of language, structure, and form, allowing the audience to visually perceive the art through the lens of reality.

##### ***4.2. Pleasing the Heart and Mind: Avoiding Emotional Deficiency in the Face of Technological Alienation***

Various technologies that we take for granted, if excessively relied upon, may lead to overlooking their flaws and the loss of the subjective status of individuals. This can result in a phenomenon of "losing meaning". The solution is simple — go beyond "presence" to seek the meaning of "absence", making the work profound and vibrant. The humanization of technology is reflected in its combination with art, which gives the audience a pleasant emotional experience. It is necessary to fill the gap caused by the rapid urbanization process, addressing the "locality" deficiency in the psychology of modern individuals, compensating for the emotional void in alienated individuals, achieving a revival and appeal for the simple emotions between people and slowing down the process of acceleration and resisting the alienated society.

##### ***4.3. Pleasing the Spirit and Aspiration: The Humanistic Return of "All Things Are Connected"***

The deepest spiritual pursuit of a nation must undergo genetic sequencing in its inherited national spirit. With this understanding, we can undoubtedly find the ideological and spiritual genes of holistic thinking needed for art in the traditional culture behind China. The philosophy of "all things are connected" means that all things in the world, including humans, are diverse and unique yet intimately connected, merging into one. Each person and thing has this "oneness" as its origin, and different things are connected, influenced, and interact with each other (in Nietzsche's words, "mutual connection, mutual influence, mutual interaction"). In the philosophy of "all things are connected", the aesthetic state is where humans and the world, humans and humans, and humans and objects are completely integrated, reaching an advanced state of "harmony between man and nature", transcending moral consciousness and possessing aesthetic consciousness. Here, the pursuit of beauty, morality, and utility forms a unity, namely, aesthetic consciousness is a unity of transcendence and reality. Therefore,

everything beyond the subject-object relationship, under the influence of aesthetic consciousness, becomes audible and visible. In the festival, the perceived aesthetic taste can achieve a combination of "life" and "business", giving rise to a sense of "life interest", a kind of "forgetting the appropriate", which is the ultimate pleasure of forgetting pleasure. This peak stage of experience also enables individuals within the festival to form different yet connected aesthetic experiences between individuals and between individuals and the environment [5].

## 5. Conclusion

Firstly, various forms of theatrical performances and ever-changing innovative performance spaces are gradually emerging around us. It is not just about the form but also about innovative content. Post-modern theatrical performances are no longer just theoretical discussions on paper or isolated creative endeavors. These theatrical festivals have created a new platform for the Chinese theatrical market, offering audiences a more contemporary and diverse aesthetic experience. However, being experimental in nature, there are bound to be imperfections. As one director put it, "There is no perfect work of art in the world, but the process of pursuing perfection is fascinating, with organic errors, obstacles, and deviations being the most attractive things." We should give modern theatre ample room for experimentation, as it is through trial and error that we can come close to achieving perfection. Furthermore, regarding the innovative development and creative transformation of performance spaces, director Wang Chaoge poses a crucial question: "What more can be done?" This question is a continuous inquiry into innovation. In the face of new forms, how can we innovate? How can we attract more people, not just for the self-satisfaction within the performing arts community? How can we create works that are loved by the general public and resonate with tradition? Can the creations truly capture the hearts of the audience? These questions follow one after another, but they are precisely the questions that every aspiring individual should ask. Observing forms, posing questions, overcoming challenges, and rediscovering new issues are the fundamental principles of progress in any industry. Finally, it is hoped that the theatre industry can uphold the spirit of "What more can be done", not forgetting its original intentions.

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