

The Inspiration of Wild Romanticism in New Media Art to Contemporary Wilderness

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Abstract: The concept of wilderness originates in Romanticism and first appeared in the literature and landscapes of the Romantic period, emphasising its external spaces and internal states. With the development of digital technologies, the sensory experience brought by immersion and interactivity in the new audiovisual medium blurs the boundaries between the exterior and interior of wilderness aesthetics, allowing our material and spiritual have a deeper connection with nature. This paper explores the application of *Wild Romanticism* in the interactive installation, *The Ephemeral Lake*, and broadens the definition of wilderness aesthetics in the context of new media. It aims to dissolve the dualistic trend of contemporary wilderness, build bridges in environmental humanities and media studies, and provide new ideas for solving the climate crisis.

Keywords: Wilderness; Romanticism; New Media Art; External Spaces; Internal States.

1. Introduction

“The lakebed had no trees, no brush, no weeds to catch fire, just the bald bottom of an ancient inland sea.” [3] New media artist Jakob Kudsk Steensen’s interactive installation, *The Ephemeral Lake*, is inspired by the works of 19th-century Romantic landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich. Jakob uses real-time simulation, generative sound, and interactive glass sculptures to create an immersive space. It transports audiences into the aquatic myths of California’s Mojave Desert and experiences the fusion of the sublime landscape with the inner world. This aligns with the description of wilderness by Romantic-period authors, the combination of “external manifestations” (wild spaces) and “internal states (wild imagination)”, [1] constructing *Wild Romanticism* in the context of new media art.

The concept of wilderness originates in Romanticism. It first appeared in literary works such as *Frankenstein* [4], *Northanger Abbey* [5], *Kubla Khan* [6], and *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* [7]. Celebrating the wilderness was a universal way for Romantic-period authors to think about nature, resisting the modernisation and anthropocentrism of the Industrial Revolution. Together with “proto-conservationists” and “landscape artists and photographers”, [8] they promoted an anti-urban, anti-industrial notion of wilderness, participated in debates about the sublime and picturesque aesthetic categories, and together defined wilderness in terms of external spaces (geographical environment) and internal states (psychological perception).

In the 20th century, however, the concept of wilderness shifted. The US Wilderness Act of 1964 defined wilderness as an “area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” [9] The concept of “undisturbed by significant human activity” [10] weakens the internal relationship between nature and humans, and emphasises the separation of external spaces between the two. It loses the human-nature interconnectedness in *Wild Romanticism* and gradually falls into the dualism of culture and nature, human and non-human.

With the development of digital technologies, the artworks of wilderness aesthetics have presented more diverse forms:

immersive/interactive installations, virtual reality/augmented reality, 360° films, and video games. These artworks break through the traditional media framework, broaden the boundaries of our senses, allow us to better perceive and reflect on the method we connect with nature, and increase the depth and sensitivity of ecological issues we construct. Studying wilderness aesthetics in the context of new media can not only dissolve the dualistic trend of modern wilderness concept, but also broaden the definition of *Wild Romanticism*, build the bridge in culture, art, and media studies, and provide new clues for addressing the environmental crisis.

This paper combines environmental humanities and media studies to explore the application of *Wild Romanticism* in new audiovisual media and provides new ideas for expanding the definition of wilderness aesthetics in new media. First, I will trace the connection between wilderness and Romanticism in history and the application of external spaces and internal states in literature and art. Secondly, I will combine these two characteristics to analyse *Wild Romanticism* in the interactive installation *The Ephemeral Lake*, and propose a new trend in wilderness aesthetics in the context of new media, further reflecting on our material and spiritual connection with nature.

2. Wilderness and Romanticism

Wilderness and Romanticism are closely connected both historically and as a perceptual phenomenon. First, Romanticism is the origin of the wilderness, which has led to policy protection for wild spaces such as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. At the same time, the wilderness perpetuates “a certain form of Romantic subjectivity.” [1] In Morton’s definition of wilderness, wilderness can only be recognised when someone is outside it. [11] Similarly, the Romantic subject often portrays himself/herself as observing the self within a perceptual field and at the edge of that perceptual field. [1] For example, the famous landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich used *Rückenfigur* [12] in *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* [13]. It is a compositional technique in painting, graphic art, photography and film, in which the subject appears in the foreground of the image from behind, admiring the view in front of them. [12] It allows the audience to have better inner spiritual communication with nature. This adds to the perceived connection between

wilderness and Romanticism.

Among the modern definitions of wilderness, the most acceptable by the public is the definition in the U.S. *Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964*: wilderness is an area “in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, (...) where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” [9] Since then, undisturbed by human activity has become the main argument of the concept of wilderness, weakening the intrinsic connection between wilderness and humans, and gradually introducing the definition of wilderness into the binary opposition between humans and nature. We can also get a glimpse of modern photography, whether it is Ansel Adams’s [14] spiritually powerful and emotionally strong black-and-white wilderness, or Stephen Shore’s [15] and Joel Sternfeld’s [16] infinite wilderness with its perfect tones, harmonious compositions and dramatic skies, they are no signs of human existence. They all directly or indirectly illustrate the higher value of natural wilderness than human culture, which undoubtedly reinforces the binary opposition between the two.

On the other hand, the description of wilderness in the Romantic period: “an actively renewing force that is associated with distance”, [1] “internal states (wild imagination) and external manifestations (wild eyes). Plants, people, animals, and landforms can all be wild.” [1] We can see that wilderness, while related to geography and space, is not unrelated to humans. On the contrary, the relevance of wilderness and human beings is both physical and conceptual.

For Romantic writers, the physicality of the wild is in external spaces, while the conceptual is in internal states. We can see the common names of external spaces from the titles of travel literature, poems, novels, and aesthetic treatises of that period: location, scene, prospect, land, island, landscape, terrain, region, county, country, and world. [1] The subsequent study of physical geography gradually introduced distant places and ignored smaller or more local wild spaces. It is in contrast to the approach of Romantic writers, who studied not only distant or uninhabited spaces, but also more domesticated spaces, and even in cities (what Gavin Van Horn called “the relative wild” [17]). It is a non-discriminatory treatment that is “centred on acquiring knowledge about the situation of places in terms of their longitude and latitude.” [18] The fusion of fact and fiction is particularly noteworthy in external spaces of *Wild Romanticism*, which is not entirely based on actual geographical location but is largely reconstructed by fantasy or complete fiction. It allows us to study not only the “empty spaces” [19] of the Romantic geographical imagination but also the nature of its “known world” [20] and how the known world makes room for the wilderness, providing a rich narrative thread for works of art. I will discuss this feature in *The Ephemeral Lake* by Jakob Kudsk Steensen below.

In internal states of *Wild Romanticism*, Michael Paul Nelson and John Andrew Vucetich’s “experiential wilderness” [21] illustrates this characteristic well: “a psychological experience associated with perceiving the nonhuman elements in one’s environment.” [21] This includes physical stimuli, perception of stimuli (positive or negative), and response to perception (i.e., the impact of perception on the more general relationship between humans and nature). The focus is on the perceptual response, through which the world is filtered, organised, and then integrated into existing affective and cognitive patterns, most commonly “the

mapping of the sublime.” [1] John Baillie explores the human psyche through sublime emotional experiences: “every Person upon seeing a grand Object is affected with something which as it were extends his own Being, and expands it to a kind of immensity. Thus, in viewing the Heavens, how is the Soul elevated; and stretching itself to larger Scenes and more extended Prospects, in a noble Enthusiasm of Grandeur quits the narrow Earth, darts from Planet to Planet, and takes in worlds at one View!” [22] Burke’s sublime, on the other hand, is more concerned with the expansion of senses: “The eye is not the only organ of sensation by which a sublime passion may be produced. Sounds have a great power in these as in most other passions.” [23] Although these two sublime are not the same in emotional expression, either way, it is to feel sublime aesthetic experiences by admiring the vast and magnificent scenery, to enter a noble state, lifting the soul. This feature is well reflected in 19th-century landscape paintings, such as Caspar David Friedrich’s *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* [13]. This painting depicts a vast landscape in the Garden of Eden through the imagination of no man’s land in a wilderness environment (collaged from different locations). It gives an infinite sublime experience, and finally, the audience becomes one with the landscape being admired, reaching “the stunning moment at which this otherness is perceived as intrinsic to the self.” [11]

In contemporary new media art, whether it is the video installation of *Marshmallow Laser Feast* [24], the VR video game produced by *Wevr* [25], or the interactive website of *YAKUSHIMA TREASURE ANOTHER* [26], they all apply digital technologies to construct a virtual immersive world, allowing the audience’s body and mind to have a deeper connection with nature. This enhancement of sensory experiences can help us to expand the definition of external spaces and internal states of *Wild Romanticism*, and help to dissolve the dualistic notion of modern wilderness. Meanwhile, it also echoes Robert S. Emmett’s science and technology alone cannot solve environmental problems, [27] trying to find solutions to the environmental crisis from interdisciplinary frameworks such as cultural and media studies.

3. The New Wilderness: Wild Romanticism in The Ephemeral Lake

The Ephemeral Lake is an interactive installation by renowned digital artist Jakob Kudsk Steensen for Caspar David Friedrich’s anniversary celebrations. Through the ecological fieldwork of California’s Mojave Desert, it explores aquatic ecosystems that only exist under unique climatic conditions and reveals a wilderness ghost created based on rare landscapes. This immersive installation consists of three parts: a video game digitally constructed using original fieldwork research (recordings, scans, photographs, etc.), generative sound by experimental sound artist Okkyung Lee and composer Lugh O’Neil, and a series of 3D-printed interactive glass light sculptures. These three parts interact to create “a semi-sentient environment of sound, screens and glass objects”, [2] allowing the audience to experience the wilderness from multiple sensory dimensions such as vision, hearing and touch. It elevates sublime aesthetic experiences from the sense to the mind and empathises with the non-human elements of the perceived environment.

When we enter the upper space of the exhibition, we can

see a large screen. It showcases two worlds constructed by the video game: a fleeting crystalline world above ground, composed of water reflections, crackling salt fields, and arid weather conditions. The other is a labyrinth of humid limestone caves and endless reservoirs underground. In its deeper realm, there is a simulated pulsating energy *The Novascene Heart*, the core drive of the entire desert. The above-ground world symbolises external spaces of *Wild Romanticism*, while the underworld symbolises internal states, where “we exist within and among”, [1] is invisible but plays a pivotal role. The boundary between these two worlds is blurred with the pulsating energy (emotion) of *The Novascene Heart*: “Emotion is the matrix through which the world is brought to our sensoria; it registers our response to this world; it worlds our world and thus makes sense of sense.” [28]

These two spaces are both fictional and real. They are wilderness landscapes conceived by recording the sounds and digitising natural formations, rocks, plants, and insects in different locations of the Mojave Desert, with Caspar David Friedrich collage techniques. This is what is emphasised in external spaces of *Wild Romanticism* to believe not only in the construction of wilderness but also in the actuality of wilderness. [29] The actual geographical location (fact) and the imaginary space (fiction) are equally important. Both are integral to the narrative of *Wild Romanticism* and gradually merge into a semi-factual and semi-fictional narrative.

The second part is generative sound influenced by real-time simulation. Using the concept of polyphony, the artist recorded the sounds of various life forms to create soundscapes beyond our human comprehension: the intense vibrations with desert energy created by Bucha Mei on the cello, the strange music that O’Neill added when working with ambient sounds, water flowing through rocks, little algae, and insects. Notably, the echoes in the virtual environment are mapped to the physical architecture. It is a method of interacting the virtual world with the physical architecture through sound. The sound that the audience hears at any given time is not repeated. It also expands the definition of external spaces and internal states of the wilderness in the dimension of sound: “The wild goes in and out of houses, riding along in hair and glances, and yet resists any form of domestication.” [1]

In the space below, seven physical light sculptures emit different light patterns in response to generative sound, as well as multiple screens with sculptural elements. Each screen offers a different perspective of the world and acts as a portal into this “living” desert wilderness. [2] The physical form of light sculptures is based on magnified scans of the rock needles formed by the tufa from the Mojave, which corresponds to the virtual sculpture on the screen. It realises the real-time dialogue between virtual and physical sculptures, symbolising the integration of external spaces and internal states. An interesting phenomenon worth paying attention to is the upper and lower spaces of the exhibition. The physical space corresponds to the two opposing imaginary worlds conceived by the artist: the overground and the underground, the arid and the humid, the fleeting and the inexhaustible dynamics, which alludes to the dynamic relationship between external spaces and internal states in *Wild Romanticism*.

A brief analysis of the above shows that this immersive installation, consisting of real-time simulation, generative sound, and interactive glass sculptures, allows the audience to better experience the wilderness. It also allows the audience to empathise with nature and other non-living elements

through sensory expansions such as vision, hearing, and touch. Whether it is the fact and fiction of external spaces in video games, the interaction of generative sound in the virtual and physical worlds, and the real-time interaction between physical and virtual sculptures, all of them are the fusion of external spaces and internal states of *Wild Romanticism*. In this worldview, water, as the main force and legend, guides the viewer to blur the boundaries of his/her body and mind, gradually merging with environmental energies and other species. It reaches a dynamic balance of fact and imagination, sense and mind, physical spaces and mental perceptions.

4. Conclusion

The concept of wilderness originates in Romanticism, and the relationship between the two is both historical and conceptual. This concept first appeared in literary works and landscape paintings, emphasising its external spaces (geographical environment) and internal states (psychological perception). However, modern wilderness emphasises the separation of human and natural space, gradually introducing the concept of wilderness into the binary opposition between culture and nature, human and non-human. The artworks developed in its context also reinforce this opposition. With the development of digital technologies, new audiovisual media such as immersive/interactive installations, virtual reality/augmented reality, 360° cinema, and video games enhance the senses to better interpret the external and internal states of wilderness aesthetics. The external spaces and interior states of *Wild Romanticism* in *The Ephemeral Lake*, a new media artwork, are embodied in four aspects: fact and fiction in real-time simulation, virtual and physical worlds in generative sound, physical light sculptures and virtual sculptures on screens, and physical spaces in the exhibition and virtual spaces by creation. The entire immersive environment is resonated with the audience’s emotional world by the created virtual world.

In addition to the interpretation of external spaces and internal states in *Wild Romanticism*, the tendency to merge the boundaries of the two is also worth noting. The immersion and interactivity of new media art enhance our embodied experiences. We can experience wilderness aesthetics from external spaces and internal states, building a bridge between body and mind, and becoming a part of nature. It may provide a new perspective for breaking down human-nature dualism and have far-reaching implications for solving the environmental crisis. Looking back to the complex emotional matrix of *Wild Romanticism*, whether external or internal, wilderness or cultivation, sublime or ordinary, real or fictional, we should not rely on the real metaphysical distinction between humans and nature. We should be confronted with the wild otherness of nature and maintain a more open and humbler mind, to awe, wonder, and respect.

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