

Contemporary Regimes of Visuality: The Avatar Mountains

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In recent decades, academic conceptions of landscape have been progressively shifting away from a representational definition, according to which landscapes are reduced to scopic fictions aligned with the sensitivities of beholders, towards a substantive understanding that highlights their aesthetic, ecological, and socio-political dimensions. This ongoing turn has promoted more holistic and more-than-representational approaches that emphasise the interconnections between the perceptual and the environmental layers of landscape experience. At the same time, mobility practices (especially tourism) driven by the prior circulation of digital images foster a new reduction of places to the 'horizons of expectation' shaped by such imagery. Without adopting a technophobic stance, this article examines the risks implicit in modes of landscape consumption that disregard their inherent complexity. Focusing on Zhangjiajie Forest Park in China, it analyses how cinema and digital media have transformed this natural landscape, highlighting both the merits of this remediation – in terms of enhanced visibility and economic development – and its drawbacks, notably the encouragement of unsustainable practices such as overtourism and the aestheticisation of natural beauty. | *Keywords: Immersivity, Landscape, Media, Visuality, Zhangjiajie Forest Park*

1. Landscape aesthetics and new media

The first task we set ourselves is to justify our diagnosis regarding the aestheticisation of landscape in the contemporary world. Taking into account a substantial portion of the most recent interdisciplinary and extra-academic literature, one can easily detect a tendency to consider landscape in a 'substantive' sense (Olwig 1996), that is, as the aesthetic-phenomenological manifestation of ecological or socio-political dynamics and equilibria operating at the local level. Article 1, section (a) of the European Landscape Convention, approved by the Council of Europe in 2000, offers the following definition: "Landscape means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" (Siani, 2024, p. 76). In this definition, the 'character' of landscape emerges from the organic interaction of diverse factors and, as such,

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is made available to the perception of populations. This amounts to a genuinely realist turn in the conception of landscape, standing in contrast to the dissolution of landscape's meanings into the representational projections of experiential subjects and, even more sharply, to the reduction of landscape to a mere view designed to elicit the aesthetic appreciation of observers. As Alberto Siani notes:

The starting definition reflects a concrete and anti-dualistic conception, which is not weakened but rather reinforced by its intentional vagueness, aimed at avoiding exclusion and at providing a sufficiently broad basis on which to design and implement specific policies [...] There are no limitations grounded in dualisms such as nature/culture, habitable/uninhabitable, exceptional/ordinary, beautiful/ugly, insider/outsider. (Siani, 2024, p. 77)¹

The institutional debate has had significant effects on policies for the planning, conservation, and regulation of European landscapes, as highlighted by the numerous interdisciplinary studies that have followed the evolution of the European Landscape Convention over the years.² Yet, the awareness generated by this new anti-dualistic and substantive paradigm has had to contend with quite different socio-cultural trends, ultimately grounded in the very same modern dualisms that the ELC's definition sought to overcome.

What is at stake here is not the persistence of theoretical frameworks, still dominant in certain disciplines, that continue to presuppose a logical-metaphysical distinction between nature and culture.³ Rather, we are referring to the global promotion of a media ecology of an audiovisual kind, thought as 'immersive' so as to meet the practical and even theoretical demands of a philosophy (broadly understood) that seeks to present itself as anti-Cartesian and anti-Kantian – in other words, anti-modern – through the rehabilitation of the body, experience, and feeling.

The discourse on immersivity, in fact, calls into question embodied, situated, and interactive subjectivities, according to a conception of aesthetic experience redefined in terms of engagement, as opposed to a more traditionally contemplative and detached approach. In a theorist such as Arnold Berleant (1991), this shift from the contemplation of the artwork to engagement with any object or context endowed with aesthetic-

¹ For the fulltext of the *Convention* see Premio Nazionale del Paesaggio (no date).

² We should at least mention the proceedings of the conference *Beyond the Convention*, held on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Convention's initial approval, which was ratified by Italy in 2005 (see Castiglioni et al., 2021).

³ I am thinking, for example, of Anglo-American environmental aesthetics, but also of certain proposals in continental eco-phenomenology, in which the nature/culture dualism continues to operate (see Furia, 2024). Since, in practice, especially in our present age, the vast majority of terrestrial environments we can experience are partly natural and partly shaped by human activity, these approaches are then forced to develop hybrid categories, such as that of modified environments (Brady et al., 2018), conceived as formations arising from the encounter between two otherwise separate principles: nature and culture. The reference to the interrelations between natural and human factors in the definition of the ELC carries a very different meaning. It is the interrelations, in fact, which determine the character of the landscape, and it is this character, produced by the dynamic interplay of these factors, that populations perceive. These factors, whether natural or human, acquire their perceptual (and not only perceptual) meaning within the totality of the interrelations to which they belong. Even the attribution of a 'natural' or 'cultural' sense is, of course, useful, but it takes place within a semantic framework that is far more contextual than metaphysical.

phenomenological potential also led – well before the aforementioned institutional shifts – to a rethinking of the problem of landscape in terms of processuality and metamorphosis, grounded on interaction between the experiential subject and perceived reality rather than detached contemplation. In doing so, it provided genuine grounds for overcoming a purely visual, panoramic, and ultimately dualistic conception of landscape. One could say that, in an author like Berleant, it is the landscape itself that is immersive, not its virtual simulation – if only because, when Berleant placed his wager on this transition from contemplation to engagement in aesthetics, the media ecology that we now consider a defining feature of the contemporary situation had not yet developed.

At first, the media revolution brought about by the spread of digital technologies was seen as a continuation, even a strengthening, of an interactive and holistic conception of perception, opposed to the mere contemplative approach based on the subject/object dualism. According to Giuliana Bruno, the haptic visuality of screens opens up the possibility of a more widespread and capillary communication of the materialities that constitute the world. This possibility leads to a general recomposition of materiality itself: its very surfaces, captured by interconnected screens across every distance, transform our ways of inhabiting the world. As Bruno writes, “virtual movements are taking place on an environment of screen surfaces” (Bruno, 2014, p. 7). Such a radical transformation of the lifeworld is possible on the assumption that every material entity in the world possesses its own surface, and that the modifications affecting surfaces are, in every respect, material phenomena projected onto technologically developed supports – namely, screens. In this regard, Yves Citton draws on the demanding materialism of Karen Barad to describe the contemporary relationship between the current medial regime and individual subjects:

This radical intermediality means that we live among images, among media, as intermediaries who ensure their circulation. From this perspective, agency can exist only within this medial circulation of images: strictly speaking, one cannot speak of agency except to designate the intra-action that the system of image circulation emits and receives, permeating our bodies and our societies. Neither [...] I, the author of this text, nor you, the readers, can claim to act (to feel, to understand, to think) in any way that is truly external to the space-time-matter relations which, through the filters of medial attention, simultaneously constitute our subjectivities, our cultures, our socio-economic systems, and our Anthropocenic environment. (Citton, 2016)

From this perspective, the point is therefore not to deny human agency, but to rethink it within the context of a lifeworld inevitably shaped by the available media. In Citton’s discussion, drawing on Barad, this means not giving up the possibility of a creative use of the digital media in which we are immersed: for instance, by fostering a democratic restructuring of participatory practices or by restoring visibility to objects, places, and cultures left at the margins by traditional systems of communication. Intra-action (to recall Karen Barad’s well-known term) also implies the possibility of conflict: being immersed in screen-saturated environments does not necessarily mean being

subjugated by them, since digital media, for their very survival, require an active and dynamic attitude on the part of the consumer–user – an attitude sometimes encapsulated in the expression ‘produser’ (Bruns, 2008).

What matters most to us in relation to the problem of the substantive landscape is that, from a perspective which asserts the material – and therefore real – character of screens, to act on the screen means to act on reality, and thus on space: “The surface, like the screen, is an architecture of relations. It is a mobile place of dwelling, a transitional space that activates cultural transit” (Bruno, 2014, p. 8). Today, however, warnings come from semiotics and media studies about the risk of conflating what we might call ‘original’ immersivity (in the sense that we are always already immersed in the places of our existence, and this immersion has an onto-phenomenological significance far deeper than it appears at first glance)⁴ with the immersivity realised by contemporary media ecology. Jonathan Crary, on the basis of a meticulous reconstruction of optical and simulatory devices and their socio-economic use in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity, leaves no room for doubt: “the isolation associated with the use of digital media is continuous with the social fragmentation produced by economic and social forces throughout the twentieth century” (Crary, 2022, p. 7). This is not only because the neoliberal economic regime in which contemporary media ecology operates represents merely the latest evolution of capitalism, but also because the construction of experience favoured by capitalism, in its various stages, is strikingly similar: the narcissistic seduction of the experiential subject, who must be kept under the illusion of autonomously governing their own tastes and choices in matters of consumption, while a certain technical manipulation of their gaze generates and perpetuates a standardization of taste of which they are largely unaware.

Indeed, while it is undeniable that medial processes act back upon the world, continually transforming it – and that any attempt to return to a supposed condition of ‘real’ immersive authenticity in place is therefore unfounded and naïve – it is nonetheless necessary, when speaking of landscapes, to ask what they are images of, or, to retain Bruno’s vocabulary, what surface they present. And although it is certainly true that every surface is a material projection of matter itself, it is necessary to consider whether the transformations produced by the medial ecosystem upon surfaces are the only ones that matter when we speak of landscape; whether, rather, there exist layers in the structuring of landscape that refer to a non-semiotic and non-representational order of the real: one that does not exclude the projection and feedback of the medial, yet cannot be entirely reorganized according to the meanings established within modal intra-action. In other words, every landscape understood in substantive terms embodies a dialectical interplay between what it is and how it appears. Within the spatial phenomenon are embedded meanings that are not primarily dependent on the medial regime –

⁴ This clarification has been attempted by authors such as Tim Ingold (2000), Ed Casey (2002), and Jeff Malpas (2022), drawing on the phenomenological tradition, particularly Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

for instance, ecological fluxes and communitarian interactions grounded in historical and cultural associations and attributions of meaning. When speaking of landscapes, a dialectic between visibility and invisibility is always at work (Wylie 2006). Yet an excessive emphasis on the material constitution of the screen, and on the continuity between the reality of the Earth and its medial conditions of apprehension and perception, may obscure this dialectic, reducing materiality to aesthetics rather than returning aesthetics to materiality, as we will see in the next section.

2. Places images and the paradoxes of embodiment

The emphasis on embodied experience, which in aesthetics has served the purpose of overcoming the subject/object dualism implied in the paradigm of contemplation, therefore falls into the following short circuit: the centrality of feeling, at the expense of any critical distancing from the matter of that feeling, is in fact bound up with strategic forms of manipulation of experience and its places, based precisely on the same subject/object dualism that the appeal to embodiment was meant to overcome. The drama of aesthetic experience – torn between the need for redemption in its everyday, practical, and habitual dimension, and the relentless colonisation by processes of aestheticisation designed to steer production and consumption choices – is aptly described by Bruno Surace with regard to the question of immersivity in contemporary technologies:

We are once again, and quite uncritically, in the midst of the experiential turn, which mediates every form of cognitive systematization of the world through the corporeal. And thus it effectively imposes experience as the best possible form of mediation, while also subjecting it to a kind of mechanism of accumulation: the more things I can see and feel, the richer my experience will be, where this richness is measured by the storage of experience – just as we do when we dutifully post our vacations on social media or scratch off those inexpensive maps that allow us to ‘flag’ the countries we have visited, in a great race toward what, in the video game world, is known as “completionism”. (Surace, 2023, p. 292)

The examples taken from this passage by Surace bring us back to the problem of the aestheticisation of landscape in the contemporary media ecosystem. Decades of deconstructing modernity and its foundational assumptions have not been sufficient – a deconstruction that, among other things, has led to the recognition of the ideological character of the Western notion of landscape, trapped in a scopic reduction of aesthetic experience linked to a politics of visibility reflecting the tastes and interests of dominant classes (Williams, 1975). Nor has it sufficed to acknowledge the inherently strategic nature of representations of place, whether in the form of artistic images (Cosgrove, 1985) or maps (Farinelli, 2009). We continue to think of landscape as a visual datum resulting from the application of certain socio-cultural and technical frameworks to spatial reality, rather than as a spatial phenomenon possessing its own autonomy and capacity to bind to itself the embodied – and not merely visual – perception of the subject of experience. It is difficult to imagine that this is unrelated to the contemporary medial ecology, characterized by “an incessant iconographic flow, repeatedly described through metaphorical

expressions such as ‘bombardment’, ‘cascade’, or ‘proliferation’ of images” (Pinotti and Somaini, 2016, p. 18) a situation in which the primacy of the visual finds renewed force and novel modes of affirmation in every field and, it goes without saying, especially in those traditionally associated with the visual dimension, as has long been the case with landscape in much of European and North American cultural tradition from the late eighteenth century through part of the twentieth. This occurs at the level of mental and aesthetic habits on a planetary scale, despite the multiple advances toward recovering the originally embodied, synesthetic, and situated dimension of experience.

It is precisely the materialist approach to new media developed by authors such as Giuliana Bruno and Yves Citton that allows us to grasp the phenomenological and ontological impact of such a simplification. The former concerns the formation of the ‘horizon of expectation’ within which a certain ‘space of experience’ takes shape, while the latter concerns the transformations of the ‘space of experience’ in relation to a certain construction of the ‘horizon of expectation’.⁵ In the pre-digital medial situation, it was easier than it is today to sustain, as the historian Reinhart Koselleck did, that the horizon of expectation which orients the actions of an individual or collective historical subject in a certain direction depends on a cumulative, spatially embedded experience – and to grasp the incremental character of such experience it was legitimate to employ a spatial metaphor: “It makes sense to say that the experience transmitted from the past is spatial, since it gathers into a totality in which many layers of earlier times are present together” (Koselleck, 2008, p. 306). This is more than a metaphor, indeed: this totality that accumulates layers of meaning from various temporal orders is precisely the place, or the network of places, in which the personal and collective existence of subjectivities unfolds, and which perceptually communicates itself as ‘landscape’. This is, for instance, the position of Rosario Assunto, articulated in a rare book devoted to landscape within the aesthetics of the late twentieth century: landscape, he argues, consists in a certain “crystallization of time” (Assunto, 1973, p. 52) in a place and constitutes, in the present, a living image of its lived past, one that binds to it the horizons of expectation of those who inhabit or encounter it. Assunto already identifies, in the mechanical logics of modernity, an initial inversion of the temporal relation between a past that becomes present and transmits itself into the future through landscape, and a future planned in an abstract image destined to reshape the space of experience according to its own design: the time of technology and industry is, for the philosopher, “not only without return, but also without memory; a succession in which nothing is repeated and nothing is renewed” (Assunto, 1973, p. 64).

The contemporary medial situation reveals how the inversion of meaning between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation occurs through the performative mediation of abstract images of spaces of

⁵ The dialectic between space of experience and horizon of expectation was analysed and discussed by the historian Reinhart Koselleck in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (2007).

experience, rather than through their actual practice. In other words, horizons of expectation regarding places are constituted within socio-cultural imaginaries grounded in the pursuit of the interest, curiosity, and aesthetic satisfaction of tourists and consumers.⁶ Already in the 1970s, sociologists inspired by Erving Goffman argued that tourism inevitably divides regions into 'front' and 'back': "the front is the meeting place between hosts and guests or between customers and service staff, while the back is the area where the members of the host team withdraw between performances to relax and prepare" (MacCannell, 1974, p. 590). According to this theatrical conception of social life, tourism duplicates this structure, splitting places into zones staged specifically to meet visitors' expectations while leaving others to the everyday practices of the inhabitants.

The boundaries between these zones, in line with Goffman's view, are inherently porous, if only because tourists who choose such destinations are gratified by the perception of authenticity in their travel experience.⁷ The mechanism of image-based competition, however, divides areas more or less suited to aesthetic staging in a far less porous way. Not only do all areas – especially those dedicated to tourism – present a 'face' (the front, resulting from the emphasis on aspects meant to be communicated to outsiders in order to promote a successful imaginary) while concealing another (the back, where inhabitants live their lifeworld free from performative pressures), but within a given macro-region, some areas specialize in aesthetic communication, becoming front regions par excellence, while others remain deliberately in the shadows. In the next section, we will see how the contemporary media ecosystem operates and somehow remediates this dialectic between front and back region by focusing on a case study.

⁶ The strategic manipulation of lived space through abstract images is clearly understood by two key authors of the so-called spatial turn in the humanities and late twentieth-century philosophy: Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau. In Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974), "representations of space" are produced by technocrats and stakeholders and imposed upon real space, generating forms of life consistent with the model. Similarly, in de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), strategic representations of space are imposed from above, encountering the discreet and often unconscious resistance of practices – or tactics – developed by inhabitants, through which even strategically manipulated spaces are invested with meanings derived from lived experience, memories, and habits. The main difference between the models of Lefebvre and de Certeau, on the one hand, and the dynamics of today's media environment, on the other, lies in the fact that the abstract images through which spaces of experience are now manipulated are not the outcome of deliberate political strategies or, as in the case of picturesque landscape, the result of an aesthetic ideal defined within the sphere of art. Instead, they emerge from a quantitative competition regulated by social media algorithms. The additional peculiarity of these abstract images is their capacity to colonise people's horizon of expectation before their space of experience. As a result, the arrangement of space conforms to the taste of the viewer: aestheticisation leads to a colonisation of practices and tactics – using de Certeau's terminology – that renders obsolete any model based solely on the opposition between "top-down" strategies and "bottom-up" tactics.

⁷ Already, according to Dean MacCannell, writing in the 1970s, "visitors are motivated by the desire to see life as it is really lived and to get in touch with the natives" (MacCannell, 1973, p. 592). This correlation between tourism and the search for authenticity appears to be empirically confirmed with regard to contemporary trends. According to a recent study by Kim and Lee (2020), for young travellers, it is more important to spend an entire week in Paris, wandering through its neighbourhoods and savouring their multiple atmospheres, than to spend a single day there with an organised group just to take a picture of the Eiffel Tower and Notre-Dame. The preference of Generation Z for intangible cultural heritage can likewise be interpreted as an expression of a new quest for authenticity in travel (Jiang et al., 2024).

3. The Immersive Spectacle: Zhangjiajie and the Remediation of the 'Front Region' in China's Media Ecology

In this section, we will use Zhangjiajie National Forest Park as an example to show how the ideas in the previous section work with respect to a natural landscape. This is a place where natural beauty, cultural meaning, and intense media representations all come together. In particular, Zhangjiajie exemplifies how a 'space of experience' is proactively influenced by a digitally constructed 'horizon of expectation'. In this context, we will refer to a landscape rightly perceived (and consequently institutionalised) as a 'natural landscape', in order to show how technological remediation operates upon places according to a recognizable pattern, regardless of whether they are predominantly natural or cultural.

Zhangjiajie's aesthetic appeal is fundamentally rooted in its distinctive quartz sandstone peak forest landscape, rich biodiversity, and high-quality landscape ecology. As a World Natural Heritage site, its exceptional air quality and ecological environment attract tourists. However, the character of this landscape emerges from the interplay of natural and human factors. The park in fact includes several historical attractions dating back to the Ming dynasty, such as Guānyīn Dòng (观音洞), a spectacular Taoist temple carved into the rock. Human presence in the area now occupied by the park has been continuous over time, though not always traceable through architectural remains. Using a UNESCO neologism, one could say that Zhangjiajie National Park is a kind of 'associative cultural landscape':⁸ the park's imposing mountain has been regarded as sacred, particularly within Taoist spirituality, and therefore respected and revered in its integrity, so that the direct physical impact of human intervention on the area is not especially visible at the landscape level. Furthermore, the region is also home to a rich cultural mix, mostly made up of the Tujia and Miao peoples, who make up 85.5% of the local population. This ethnic diversity, alongside other smaller ethnic groups, contributes to the rich cultural character that can be seen in the landscape itself. The natural environment is, therefore, not merely a geological feature but is infused with cultural meaning. This is made evident through the symbolic interpretation of its geography. Certain dramatic formations, such as Golden Whip Rock,⁹ are named after local myths, legends, and spiritual beliefs, often resembling human figures or mythical creatures. These local narratives and the ongoing practice of cultural performances and beliefs show how the natural features have deep cultural meaning, making the landscape a place where people hold collective memory and identify themselves.

Zhangjiajie as a distinctive natural marvel, propelled by its remarkable geological structures, initiated a preliminary phase of institutional 'staging'.

⁸ See Operational Guidelines 2008, Annex 3 at the website Centre (no date).

⁹ The Golden Whip Rock (Chinese: 金鞭岩, pinyin: Jīnbiān Yán), a prominent geological formation within the Golden Whip Stream area of Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, stands at a height of 378 meters. Its striking morphology resembles an upright whip soaring skyward, evoking a sense of awe among observers. Local folklore attributes its origin to the legendary whip of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, which was said to have been petrified after being switched with a fake created by the Dragon King's daughter.

The formal process started in 1982 when the area was made a national forest park and then in 2004 when it was added to the list of UNESCO Global Geoparks. Most importantly, this early stage of institutions aimed to bring together natural and cultural heritage. This was accomplished by interpreting the physical landscape in a symbolic way and intentionally including and promoting local cultural elements in tourism planning. The goal was to make the tourist experience feel more real by putting the region's cultural identity front and centre through controlled storytelling and traditional performances.

This established 'space of experience', however, is now undergoing a radical change driven by a forward-thinking application of aesthetic and digital principles. Zhangjiajie is being strategically changed from a place to see natural beauty into a multi-faceted centre for composite tourism, which includes leisure, wellness, and vacation activities (Liu, 2025, p. 51). This upgrade relies on its rich cultural resources, but the process is drastically accelerated by digital technology. Integration with the internet sector – which encompasses digital technologies and platforms like social media – is a key driver for personalising tourism experiences, improving marketing, and enhancing operational efficiency (Lu, 2024). Zhangjiajie move beyond its traditional reliance on natural sightseeing and develop deeper, participatory experiences that engage all the senses and create memorable, shareable moments for tourists. The design of these experiences, such as cultural immersion activities, interactive forest adventures, and festive participation, aims to "generate positive emotions and unique personal stories" (Su, Tian and Xu, 2009, p. 267). This transformation involves the use of creative aesthetics and cutting-edge technologies – including Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), and Artificial Intelligence-Generated Content (AIGC) – to produce cinematic content and immersive virtual spaces. Such a digital effort showcases both natural and cultural heritage in innovative ways that foster customisation and interactive behaviours. At the same time, it is necessary to highlight the risk that, alongside the potential for personalising experience, new technologies may also lead to a certain simplification and trivialisation of aesthetic experience. This occurs through the reduction of the ecological and socio-cultural complexity of places to spectacular images easily consumed on the web. It is to this risk that we refer when we speak of an inversion of priorities between the space of experience and the horizon of expectations.

The inversion of priority between space of experience and horizon of expectation is explicitly demonstrated by the role of the Hollywood blockbuster Avatar (2009). The park was strategically rebranded as the Avatar Hallelujah Mountains, substituting a pre-existing cultural 'space of experience' with a global sci-fi media imaginary (Yao and Yin, 2011). This constitutes a profound cinematic remediation. The medial rebranding of Zhangjiajie as the Avatar Hallelujah Mountains epitomises the integration of a local space of experience into a global media imaginary, where emphasis shifts from the traditional meanings historically associated with the natural landscape to an aesthetic mode of fruition accessible to everyone in cyberspace.

The impact of this process has undeniably been substantive: the resulting tourism revenue has become a major driver of regional development, while the global platform has amplified the visibility of Tujia and Miao cultures, allowing their traditions to be performed and recognised on an international stage. The digital horizon of expectation thus operates as a powerful generator of both economic and cultural capital. Therefore, the critical task, as anticipated in the first paragraph, is not to wish away this digital layer, but to question the conditions under which its economic benefits are distributed and its cultural representations can acquire greater depth and local agency, moving beyond a logic of pure spectacle and thereby avoiding the unreflective reproduction of practices that may prove harmful at the societal, cultural and especially ecological levels, such as overtourism.

The inversion between the space of experience and horizon of expectation is thus accomplished through the worldwide promotion of an audiovisual media ecology that utilises digital technology to enhance aesthetic and cultural appeal. To make immersive virtual spaces and movie content, people use tools like virtual reality, AIGC, and digital media arts. For example, the Zhangjiajie World Geopark Museum uses AI-driven interactive guides and immersive creation in a smart way to make sure that visitors connect with the landscape through a digital lens, which sets the expectation before they even get there. Convergent media live broadcast *Live Human- Hearing International Zhang*, which includes live streams, short videos, and interactive content across domestic and international platforms, optimised Zhangjiajie's scenic image and boosted tourist attention (Li, 2005, p. 115). This kind of digital mediation makes a feedback loop between how tourists act online and how they act in person. Landscapes are meticulously curated: the most spectacular attractions, once materialised in situ, are then disseminated through social media platforms, fostering the emergence of visual tropes such as the 'glass bridge' and the 'mist-covered peaks'. In turn, the inherently visual emphasis on panoramic imagery in online circulation fuels the creation of further attractions, such as scenic viewpoints and similar installations conceived to replicate and amplify these aesthetic patterns. As previously mentioned, Surace calls this habit of 'checking in' and collecting geo-tagged photos 'completionism', which means that the experience is judged by how shareable it is instead of how deep it is. The horizon of expectation is globally synchronised, illustrating the capacity of abstract images to redefine the experiential space according to their intrinsic design. While this confirms the power of new, surface-oriented media to profoundly shape and transform our experience of landscape, it also exposes a widening gap between the ways we are led to experience a landscape and those dimensions – both of the spatial phenomenon itself and of our own experience – that are overshadowed by the dominant images in circulation, overlooked and excluded from the scope of our horizons of expectations.

In Zhangjiajie, tourism and contemporary media regimes intensify the Goffmanian model of social interaction, resulting in a unique spatial dynamic: the entire park is a 'front region' that is carefully managed

for aesthetic consumption. The tourist experience is carefully orchestrated through a theatrical infrastructure designed to enforce a specific mode of perception. Social media serves as the primary global amplifier of Zhangjiajie's tourism, driving both inbound flows and international visibility, and further magnifying attention when coupled with the area's economic or environmental appeal. Large-scale, innovative events – such as the Wingsuit Flying World Championships¹⁰ – act as powerful catalysts for extensive organic coverage across social media and news outlets, thereby forging a distinctive and compelling brand identity for the destination. This dynamic highlights the critical importance of a strong digital presence: marketing strategies increasingly prioritise mobile-friendly content and social media engagement to reach global audiences (Wu, Bidin and Johari, 2025, p. 14). Accordingly, the city of Zhangjiajie (located only a few miles from the National Park) has adopted a proactive digital strategy, maintaining official overseas accounts such as iZhangjiajie on platforms like TikTok and Facebook to showcase its unique natural beauty and cultural heritage, which consistently attract high levels of viewership and engagement. This effort is bolstered by inviting global Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) to experience attractions like the Tianmen Mountain and Glass Bridge, who then share their adventures in real-time, instantly reaching millions of international followers.¹¹ Structures such as designated photo spots, viewing platforms, cable cars, and the Zhangjiajie Grand Canyon Glass Bridge serve to physically enforce a panoramic, purely visual relationship with the landscape. In short, the space of experience adapts to the aesthetic expectations produced within the global space of the image economy.

Yet perceiving the height of the Glass Bridge through a screen is not the same as perceiving it in presence: immersion in the deeply artificial and artificalised context of the natural landscape still ensures an exposure to spatial otherness by one's own body, with all its senses. The real encounter with the landscape places us, from the very level of perception, to a condition of 'not-feeling-at-home' arising from the simple 'being-elsewhere', exposed to a spatial phenomenon whose surface, to recall Bruno's terms, can circulate in digital space only in a necessarily reduced and relatively atrophic form. At the perceptual level, which opens the way to all other levels of structuration of the spatial phenomenon, there is, for instance, a question of scale: the screen diminishes the difference in proportion between the towering mountain pinnacles, the spatial abysses over which the Glass Bridge is built, and our body. The reality of 'being-elsewhere' leads, on the aesthetic-phenomenological level, to the possibility that the spatial phenomenon may 'speak differently', communicating something that goes beyond, or even runs counter to, the expectations the perceiving subject has formed within

¹⁰ The Wingsuit Flying World Championships is an extreme sports event organized by the World Wingsuit League. Since 2012, it has been held annually at Tianmen Mountain in Zhangjiajie, Hunan Province, China. The launch point for the competition is located at the summit of YuHu Peak (elevation 1,458 meters), with a vertical drop of 990 meters and a straight-line flight distance of approximately 1.3 kilometers.

¹¹ See more at the website Zhangjiajie chu quan (no date).

the medial system. What is invisible in the landscape can, at least in part, be apprehended through the other senses: the extraordinary natural landscape that reveals itself to sight from the Glass Bridge and from many other panoramic viewpoints manifests itself at the same time as “circumambient and panperceptual,” inviting the visitor to a kind of “circumambulation by walking” (Casey, 2002, p. 8).

Processes of aestheticization extend beyond the physical environment to encompass local culture and everyday life, which are likewise staged as components of the tourist product. For example, the large-scale commercial folk performance, *Charming Xiangxi*, blends local ethnic cultures with contemporary tourism, presenting traditional Tujia dances, songs, and customs in artistic forms adapted “to the tourists’ tastes and gaze” (Deng, 2021, p. 224). Without an adequate aesthetic education aimed at fostering awareness of both the potential and the limits of such strategic medial reconfigurations, there is a risk that cultural symbols like the hand-waving dance or the weeping marriage ceremony¹² will be transformed into mass-market icons designed to resonate with a predetermined horizon of expectation. The resulting physical and cultural environment thus would turn into a meticulously managed system in which every interaction is orchestrated as a controlled performance, producing a totalizing aesthetic and digital milieu.

4. Conclusion

The case of the Zhangjiajie Forest Park efficiently exemplifies our article’s central short-circuit. It markets itself through the rhetoric of ‘immersivity’ in a natural wonder, which ostensibly engages embodied and interactive subjectivities. Yet, this ‘immersion’ is domesticated by the inversion between horizons of expectations shaped by the digital environment and the very spaces of experience – the landscapes – reconfigured according to images driven by a quantitative, algorithmic logic of social media. Consequently, there is a risk that the landscape’s character may be oversimplified and misunderstood, reduced to the horizons of expectation rather than to the local natural and human interrelations brought to the forefront by the substantive conception. Zhangjiajie is not an exception but a leading example of how landscapes under contemporary tourism and media regimes operate. It demonstrates the triumph of a scopic, aestheticized regime that successfully markets itself as immersive engagement. The critical task is not to mourn a lost ‘authenticity’ but to develop new analytical tools to understand and critique these totalizing aesthetico-economic systems that reshape our very perception of place. On a theoretical level, one possible path lies in returning to think not only about the phenomenological and ontological continuities between landscape

¹² Weeping Marriage, known as *Kujia* (哭嫁) in Chinese, is a unique marital custom among the Tujia ethnic group, characterised by the bride’s ritual of weeping and singing during the wedding ceremony. As the core element of this custom, the Weeping Marriage songs permeate the entire event, reflecting not only the romantic and marital practices of Tujia youth but also offering a comprehensive representation of the ethnic group’s political, economic, and cultural circumstances.

immersivity and digital immersivity, but also about their discontinuities, starting from the meaning of the experience of 'being-elsewhere'. Such experience can certainly be domesticated by the socio-economic tendency to stage spaces of experience in ways that increasingly resemble the horizons of expectation shaped by our aesthetic and medial habits and by digital imaginaries. However, precisely in the experience of being-there, in the presence of the mountain, it is possible, for example, to identify oneself with the experience of those who have looked and still look at that mountain as sacred, by virtue of its peculiar morphology aesthetically transmitted – through the contact between surfaces of different scales, between my body and the body of the mountain – thus discovering that at the root of the manifestation of the spatial phenomenon lie invisible processes of slow structuration and, ultimately, of profound ecological and humanistic meaning.



Quang Nguyen Vinh (no date) *Glass Bridge at Zhangjiajie, China*. Courtesy of Quang Nguyen Vinh.

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