

# Modern Art In Animation: Bringing Van Gogh's 'The Starry Night' Alive

Aliah Hana binti Ruzaidi  
Universiti Kuala Lumpur  
Malaysian Institute of Information Technology (MIIT)  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
aliah.ruzaidi@s.unikl.edu.my

**Abstract**— The *Starry Night*, painted by Vincent Van Gogh in an asylum in Saint-Rémy, is one of the most famous paintings of human history. Van Gogh is commonly dubbed as the 'tortured artist' who cuts off his own ear due to a declining mental state. When a Chinese company named Motion Magic decides to turn three of his masterpieces (*The Starry Night*, *The Yellow House and Bedroom in Arles*) into one 2-minutes long 3-Dimensional Virtual Reality animation, they did not just give birth to a mere video – they provide an experience for the viewers to live inside the eccentric world of Van Gogh, and indulging in his life from inside out. The viewers could feel the last bits of loneliness that Van Gogh suffers from when he decided to end his life – the artist with only one out of 860 oil paintings in his life sold. The art from the 1800s combined with the advancement of technology in the 2010s is surely something impressive to behold, something that could not be imagined in the olden times.

**Keywords**—Vincent van Gogh; *The Starry Night*; Virtual Reality; Modern Art; animation

## I. INTRODUCTION

Modern Art is a category for artistic creations born during the period of the 1860s to the 1970s. In term of paintings, it could be defined as an art which is not drawn as it used to be in the past, such as hyperrealism in paintings, or drawings that only consisted of the sacred people that were mentioned in the Bible – but rather a new type of individualism that involves a lot of either basic, experimental, abstract, or even unfathomable works.

When discussing the influence of Modern Art in animation, there are a lot of factors to consider. While Modern Art movements (such as Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, etcetera) themselves are influenced by the sociopolitical background, technology advancements among many other factors – art is no longer an imitation of the real scenery as it is – but rather on how the artist views the scenery; due to the invention of the camera which cuts off the purpose of painting realistically. Because of this, art is no longer for the service of the rich patrons and the nation but rather become a form of self-expression – where art is not about the art itself, but the state of mind and emotions the painter carries as they lay their brush on the empty canvas waiting to be filled with infinite possibilities.

Due to this, how is the peculiarity of Modern Art could place an influence on the animation industry? To answer this, in my opinion, I would like to think that behind the eccentric or uniqueness of the Modern Art paintings, it was the emotions that each painting carries that could place an impact on the art scrutinizer. Not only that, the techniques that are used in Modern Art such as the thick brushstrokes, a vivid, wide range of colors – could also be transferred to animation form; like the animation I am going to introduce today, *The starry night Stereo VR experience (2016)* [5] from the Shanghai Motion Magic Digital Entertainment Inc.

## II. YOUTUBE VIRTUAL REALITY (VR)

*The starry night Stereo VR experience (2016)* is a type of spherical video that could be watched from VR MotionMagic's YouTube channel [5], with the option to view the 360° video using a VR headset, a cardboard viewer or simply watching the video straight from your phone, tablet, or laptop device without an additional 3<sup>rd</sup> gear. Basically, there are two types of interactive videos that are possible using YouTube; that is 360-degree video (360) and Virtual Reality (VR) videos.

360-degree videos are also known as immersive videos or spherical videos. It was not until March of 2015 that YouTube launched the support to publish and viewing 360 videos using its platform – thus opening the door to even more technological advancements and opportunities for creative industries to bloom.

Although generally speaking, 360 videos could no longer be considered as a VR on their own due to the limitation comparing to other VR technology that requires additional gears to provide real-time tracking of the viewer's movements; for the ability to interact with the media's surroundings – opposite of a 360 video where the viewer's locations are fixed and their point of views are limited to whichever angles that are caught by the camera (or in this case, the animation created).

Even so, in the terms of YouTube videos – the difference between the two types would be that a VR video *could* be a 360 video, but it is not necessarily the case for the opposite situation. A VR video needs a VR headset (or cardboard viewer) in order to be watched as VR requires the user to cover their field of vision for a fully immersive experience. The stereoscopic depth that could be seen is produced by covering the eyes with an

external device like Google Cardboard or a head-mounted display. On the contrary, a 360 video could be enjoyed as it is, also equipped with the ability to explore the world by turning our portable device around or using a mouse to interact with the media.

Shanghai Motion Magic Digital Entertainment Inc., the creator of this VR is a multimedia production base affiliated with Shanghai Media & Entertainment Group (SMG). This company provides services such as Digital Entertainment, Virtual Reality, Commercial Advertisement and Film, and Television Production. Motion Magic is also among the pioneers to explore Virtual Reality (VR) technology in China.

The computer graphic experts of Motion Magic made the VR version of Vincent van Gogh's magnum opus *The Starry Night* (1889) two centuries later in 2016 to enable art enthusiasts to indulge in the world of Van Gogh. *The Starry Night* is the first artistic work to be remade using VR technology by Motion Magic.

### III. VAN GOGH AND THE STARRY NIGHT

*The Starry Night* is a painting by Vincent Willem van Gogh, (born March 30, 1853, and died on July 29, 1890) in the year 1889. He is a Dutch painter that is now known as one of the greatest Post-Impressionist artists in human history. Up to this day, even among regular peasants who had no interest in art, they may have come across one of the most famous drawings of all time – Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*. Vincent van Gogh which is infamously dubbed as the 'tortured artist' is famous for his tragic depressive life with only one painting among 860 oil paintings he created in his lifetime sold. He was a misunderstood genius that is described as 'le fou roux' (the redheaded madman) by his townspeople, this suits the famous saying, "There's a fine line between genius and insanity." This is acknowledged by Van Gogh himself in a letter dedicated to his brother Theo:

What am I in the eyes of most people – a nonentity, an eccentric, or an unpleasant person – somebody who has no position in society and will never have; in short, the lowest of the low. All right, then – even if that were absolutely true, then I should one day like to show by my work what such an eccentric, such a nobody, has in his heart. That is my ambition, based less on resentment than on love in spite of everything, based more on a feeling of serenity than on passion. Though I am often in the depths of misery, there is still calmness, pure harmony and music inside me. I see paintings or drawings in the poorest cottages, in the dirtiest corners. And my mind is driven towards these things with an irresistible momentum.

And surely, it was this self-proclaimed eccentric mind of his that contribute masterpieces to the Post-Impressionist art movement during his time. Albeit being unappreciated during his lifetime, he sure leaves a big impact on the history of Modern Art. By the words of art critic Albert Aurier following Van Gogh's death, "He leaves behind a body of work which is a part of himself and which, one day, will make his name live again and for eternity."

The main subject of *The starry night Stereo VR experience* (2016) is one of the most famous paintings of Western culture, *The Starry Night* (1889) which is painted in an asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence.



Fig. 1. Vincent Van Gogh, *The Starry Night* (1889).

For someone who did not know any better, they said that Van Gogh may have a problem with his eyesight, hence the blurry, large halo that surrounds the stars in his drawing, one that resembles a bokeh of light from blurred eyesight. Or a much sadder but plausible theory as the peasants said, he may be crying during the painting's creation, which makes the world all blurry by the tears. But that is what people had to think about the behind story of the drawing.

When in fact, Van Gogh could not paint in his bedroom at the asylum and only paint in the ground-floor studio, although it would be inaccurate to say that it is entirely drawn by memory either as he was able to make sketches on ink or charcoal on paper beforehand. Even if the drawing may be mostly drawn by memory and observation; it is mainly shaped by the feelings he felt at the time of creation. According to Van Gogh, "I experience a period of frightening clarity in those moments when nature is so beautiful. I am no longer sure of myself, and the paintings appear as in a dream."

In other words, rather than drawing a painting that one could only see, he wants to create a painting one could 'feel', as mentioned by himself, "I want to touch people with my art. I want them to say, 'he feels deeply, he feels tenderly'." These deep emotions he tried to convey in his art and the process of thoughts he had before the creation of this painting could be proved in, yet another quote said by Van Gogh in his letter to his brother Theo:

At present, I absolutely want to paint a starry sky. It often seems to me that night is still more richly colored than the day; having hues of the most intense violets, blues and greens. If only you pay attention to it, you will see that certain stars are lemon-yellow, others pink or a green, blue and forget-me-not brilliance. And without my expatiating on this theme, it is obvious that putting little white dots on the blue-black is not enough to paint a starry sky.

To better recognize one of Van Gogh's most celebrated works *The Starry Night* (1889), it is an oil-on-canvas landscape painting with the center of the art being an intensively expressive night sky with whirling clouds, sparkling stars along a bright crescent moon. On the left side of the painting lies a couple of cypress trees with their fire-like dark branches curling following the movement of the sky – giving an effect of moving, animating scenery. On the contr

ary, a seemingly quiet, structured village that did not actually exist decorates the lower half of the canvas, with a slender steeple of a church, or a bell tower, coming into view to complete the masterpiece.

To give a little bit of context on what influences Van Gogh's unique way of style in painting *The Starry Night*, it was not until 1888 that Van Gogh's color palette changed drastically from what used to be a darker monochrome painting (such as *The Potato Eaters (1885)*) to what he is known for today – the extensive use of bright colors, mainly yellow and other warm hues. There are three major theories on why this happened: some say that he may suffer from xanthopsia, also known as the 'yellow vision'. On the other hand, another widely accepted theory would be his move to Paris in 1886, where he is inspired by the French Impressionists who assimilates intense colors in their painting. In 2018, there is a recent group of people who theorizes that his color palette brightens along with his move to places with a warmer climate and sunnier places like Arles and Saint Remy.

Not only the color palette, his way of drawing lines – from regular straight lines to wavy and curly, the paint becomes even thicker – sometimes squeezed straight from the tube onto the plain canvas – thus giving bold impasto that further intensifies his vivid, vibrant painting. His paintings afterward appear more other-worldly as if it is a scene straight from a dream. This change of style and whimsical way of painting is admitted by Van Gogh himself in a letter to his sister Wil:

The bizarre lines, purposely selected and multiplied, meandering all through the picture, may fail to give the garden a vulgar resemblance, but may present it to our minds as seen in a dream, depicting its character, and at the same time stranger than it is in reality.

#### IV. THE STARRY NIGHT VR

Regarding *The starry night Stereo VR experience* animation, *The Starry Night* is not the only painting to be recreated using VR in this animation, there are also other notable artworks included such as *The Yellow House (1888)* and *Bedroom in Arles (1888)* – all combined in a single animation to delude as if the paintings all belong to the same world that we could explore. This VR video remains a fascinating experience to feel as we turn our device or VR headset 360° around the 3D video.



Fig. 2. Vincent Van Gogh, *The Yellow House (1888)*.



Fig. 3. Vincent Van Gogh, *Bedroom in Arles (1888)*.

As we virtually walk our way through the 2:32 minutes long simulation, at first, we are entering the painting through a frame, as the camera slowly pans in between rows of abandoned-looking houses, until we could see *The Yellow House* in a distance. Upon entering the said yellow house, we will be entering another painting, which is *Bedroom in Arles* before exiting the room through its green windows, as we look back to see the scene slowly disappearing.

The first time I saw this video, I was simply amazed, blown away. The art and beauty from the 1800s combined with advancements in the technology of the 2010s is simply something mind-blowing to behold. The video took form in a dream-like setting, where nothing is definite, nor the purpose is clear. You just knew that you are dreaming by the ambiguity of it – it does not have to be a reason, a clear plotline in a dream, you just happen to be in a surreal scene, away from your regular cycle of life of trying to balance the stress and pressure level. Reality is like that, you are walking on a tightrope in trying to balance the long pole of 'stress and pressure level' without falling into the deep, dark endless pit. I would imagine, it was this sense of dreamy atmosphere is what Van Gogh tries to convey in his own words:

Looking at the stars always makes me dream, as simply as I dream over the black dots representing towns and villages on a map. Why, I ask myself, shouldn't the shining dots of the sky be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France? Just as we take a train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star. We cannot get to a star while we are alive any more than we can take the train when we are dead. So to me, it seems possible that cholera, tuberculosis and cancer are the celestial means of locomotion. Just as steamboats, buses and railways are the terrestrial means. To die quietly of old age would be to go there on foot.

In the animation, it was breath-taking; how no matter how much you turn the video around, you could not escape the vast magnificent night sky in comparison to our tiny self; gliding through the uninhabited houses – someone who could not even come close to the stars but viewing it in admiration. How the pools of twinkles that Van Gogh painted could be seen in motion – how we could literally drown in and view the painting from the inside out – is truly a mind-boggling fact. Technology advancements have come so far, yet it still has a long way to go, a bright future ahead.

If I were to explain the feeling of living inside this simulation, it was like waking up one day to find yourself deserted in a city full of vacant houses – the essence of solitude the video trying to portray. It was like implying, even if you have

the whole world, what is the joy in it if there are no beloved ones with you – what is it, but a heart filled with blackhole? You could have anything and everything in the world, but ultimately humans are social creatures that are created to interact, one could never live on their own no matter how they are despising connection. By the time, it will take a toll, even if it is all fun and games in the beginning, to not have any responsibilities or expectations on you in this world.

The moment you walk the streets, it is void spaces, with only the echoes from your footsteps to accompany every breath as the frustrated screams turn back to you in a boomerang motion. The silence of nothingness, but yourself, the wind, your shushed voices bounce in between empty doors and walls. As you turn around your head again and again for any signs of human's existence but yourself, only to come to disappointment in finding no one – only you; existing in that whimsical world inside Van Gogh's paintings.

It was this loneliness that the creator of this animation trying to depict. I would guess it is the same heartache that Van Gogh faced when he decided to mutilate his left ear after a fight with the artist that he wants to keep close contact with, also his only roommate, Paul Gauguin. His brother Theo is worried about Van Gogh's declining mental state along with his weakening body after been caught sipping on turpentine and eating paint – as the poor artist would rather buy paints than foods – thus offering a sum of money to Gauguin in order to keep the pitiful Van Gogh company.

Van Gogh is highly thrilled about the visit of Paul Gauguin at first, even bought two beds and decorate the place with sunflowers to brighten the atmosphere to welcome his long-awaited artist friend. The friendship ended horribly when Paul Gauguin accounts his messy last day with Van Gogh, reporting that Van Gogh followed when he left the house for a walk, and in his words mentioned that Van Gogh “rushed towards me, an open razor in his hand.” Van Gogh suffered from auditory hallucinations the moment he decided to sever his left ear, as afterward, he had no memory of the said event. This is also the same pitiful Van Gogh who fell in love with a prostitute Clasina Maria Hoornik (Also known as Sein) that took advantage of his kindness we are talking about – all because he ‘enjoyed feeling like he was needed’, as mentioned in a letter to Theo.

Vincent Van Gogh, a lone misunderstood genius or a tortured artist as people dubbed him, has always had a big heart in which he suffers the consequences in return. Even so, it is wrong for people to assume he could create masterpieces because of his mental illness – on the contrary, it was in spite of his mental illness. To prove this, *The Starry Night* was born when he self-admitted to an asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, not during his psychotic episodes. Van Gogh – unappreciated during his lifetime, yet keep on living as one of the geniuses in Modern Art. To borrow Van Gogh's words, “I can't change the fact that my paintings don't sell. But the time will come when people will recognize that they are worth more than the value of the paints used in the picture.”

## V. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, when the uniqueness and peculiarity that only exists in Modern Art in general and Post-Impressionism specifically – with the advancement of technology in animation, multimedia and Virtual Reality mechanism meets, it is like the form of art that exists in each era assimilates, thus forming a new type of interactive art; one you could indulge in. This is surely something unthinkable in the olden times, to be living in art itself – appreciating the art from the inside out using not only our eyes, but also with the companion of the mystical music along with it. We still could not walk on our own feet in this simulation yet – but I believe in the future; it is highly possible that the method to feel paintings through all our 5 senses – could be invented!

*The starry night Stereo VR experience* proves how Modern Art could play a major impact and influence on the animation industry, due to its unique nature in which art is not just about the art, it is a form of self-expression, a way to communicate one's heart and mind through plain canvases, convey one's feelings from long ago, undead until this day. Through Modern Art, animation could be developed in such a manner, no longer rigid, structured form of animation that had to convey a certain story, plot, or purpose. *The starry night Stereo VR experience* did just that, it gave us an experience rather than a clear plotline. Just like how Modern Art gives the spectator not a crystal clear, direct message of the art, rather as something that could be interpreted in its own ways. When scrutinizing a Modern Art piece, it is always without a resolute set of rules to determine one's perception that differentiates a beautiful painting from what is not. After all, beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder and Modern Art proves that – it shows how art does not necessarily have to be functional or useful for it to be considered beautiful. For what Van Gogh used to say, “Normality is a paved road: It's comfortable to walk, but no flowers grow on it.”

Due to this fact, I believe it is important to appreciate the history of Modern Art – as an animator specifically – so that we could cherish the hard work and the story that lies underneath each painting, deeper than what meets the eye. After all, according to Van Gogh, “It is good to love many things, for therein lies the true strength, and whosoever loves much performs much, and can accomplish much, and what is done in love is done well.”

## REFERENCES

- [1] H. Arnason and E. Mansfield, *History of Modern Art* (7th ed.). Pearson, 2012.
- [2] Modern art. (n.d.). Wikipedia. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern\\_art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_art)
- [3] Modern Art - Development and Ideas. (n.d.). The Art Story. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from <https://www.theartstory.org/definition/modern-art/history-and-concepts/>
- [4] 3D-VR version of Von Gogh's Starry Night. (n.d.). Motion Magic. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from <http://www.shmds.com/en/view.php?aid=102>
- [5] VR MotionMagic. (2016, November 28). The starry night Stereo VR experience [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/G7Dt9ziemYA>
- [6] Burch, A. (2016, July 22). Infographic - Virtual Reality vs 360 Videos. Touchstone Research. <https://touchstoneresearch.com/infographic-virtual-reality-vs-360-videos/>

- [7] Introduction to 360-degree video and virtual reality. (n.d.). YouTube. Retrieved May 23, 2021, from <https://creatoracademy.youtube.com/page/lesson/spherical-video>
- [8] YouTube Creators. (2016, August 4). Explore 360 and VR - A Whole New Immersive Experience [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/10YBJx18BPI>
- [9] Vincent van Gogh. (n.d.). Wikipedia. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent\\_van\\_Gogh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_van_Gogh)
- [10] Vincent van Gogh. (2020, March 4). Biography. <https://www.biography.com/artist/vincent-van-gogh>
- [11] Vincent van Gogh Quotes. (n.d.). Goodreads. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/34583.Vincent\\_van\\_Gogh](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/34583.Vincent_van_Gogh)
- [12] Biographics. (2020, January 10). Vincent Van Gogh: The Humble Genius [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/wI2i5ca1RT4>
- [13] Van Gogh's Illness. (n.d.). Van Gogh Museum. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/art-and-stories/stories/van-goghs-illness>
- [14] BuzzFeed Unsolved Network. (2019, May 10). The Curious Death Of Vincent Van Gogh [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Hrsdntds9kM>
- [15] The Art Assignment. (2018, January 18). Better Know: The Starry Night | The Art Assignment | PBS Digital Studios [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/oz908BHg55Y>
- [16] Zelazko, A. (n.d.). The Starry Night | History, Description, & Facts. Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved May 23, 2021, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Starry-Night>
- [17] P. Trachtman, (2009, January 1). *Van Gogh's Night Visions*. Smithsonian Magazine. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/van-goghs-night-visions-131900002/>
- [18] J. Bailey, (2018, December 25). *New Data Shows Why Van Gogh Changed His Color Palette*. Artnome. <https://www.artnome.com/news/2018/11/26/new-data-shows-why-van-gogh-changed-his-color-palette-to-bright-yellow>