

**Productive Participants:**

**Aesthetics and Politics in Immersive Theatre**

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## Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own.

Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:..........

Date:.....26/06/2013.....

## **Abstract**

This thesis looks at an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre. It asks what it means to be affected by immersive theatre as an audience member and what it means to perceive risk as a participating audience. Moreover, it considers how affect production and risk perception among participating audiences might be approached as aesthetic characteristics that are, at the same time, profoundly political. Inspired by, but departing from, the writing of political philosopher Jacques Rancière, the argument considers whether a politics of audience participation in immersive theatre might be derived from an aesthetic core, a core that emerges from affect production and risk perception and that fundamentally impacts on how participation takes place and how participants are to take their place.

Immersive theatre is initially identified as a theatre style that surrounds participating audiences in a coherent aesthetic world. I ask, on the one hand, what might constitute a productive participant and how such a productive participant might contribute to the coherence of an aesthetic world. On the other hand, I ask how these productive participants might also be implicated in its rupture. Drawing especially on the broad disciplinary spectrum of affect studies and risk perception research, new terminology is introduced to frame productive participation based on narcissism and entrepreneurialism. Significantly, points of aesthetic and political alignment are charted between immersive theatre, the value system heralded under neoliberalism and the profitable production of experiences within a growing 'experience economy'. Through analyses of work by Ray Lee, Lundahl & Seidl, Punchdrunk, Shunt, Theatre Delicatessen and Half Cut, this thesis suggests that immersive theatre's most valuable political work might be derived from an aesthetics of audience participation that frustrates such points of alignment, unearthing into an affective zone the political consequences and compromises of productive participation.

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### **PART THREE**

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## Introduction

8 February 2013. Winter Storm Nemo was in full swing over New York City and my coat had turned from grey to white under the weight of a thick blanket of falling snow. I knew where I needed to be – 530 West 27<sup>th</sup> Street, between 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenues – but the blizzard made it difficult to see much beyond a couple of meters. The refuge of Ovest Pizzoteca & Bar provided warm and welcome respite.

On the wall by the bar were three white, beaked masks with large, hollowed out eyes. I had seen these before and the sign was encouraging. These were the trademark masks given to audiences in *Sleep No More* (2011-), the first international commercial venture of the British theatre company, Punchdrunk, reviving a 2003 London premiere and a revisited 2009-10 run in Boston. The performance, at the time of writing, is still running in New York thanks to co-production with the United States production company, Emursive. With runs extending every few months, the show demonstrates that most valuable of theatre ambitions: persistence.

Punchdrunk have become synonymous with a kind of theatre that has come to be referred to, especially in the United Kingdom and the US, as immersive theatre. This is a theatre style in which participating audiences enter the world of a coherent aesthetic space that surrounds them fully, usually sharing the space with at least one actor. In Punchdrunk's particular breed of large-scale immersive theatre, audiences are mostly free to move around typically vast spaces and tend to be masked with something like the masks that were hanging on the wall in front of me at Ovest Pizzoteca.

Pointing to the masks, I asked the barman if the venue was nearby. It was only meters away, so I took the liberty of delaying exposure to Nemo and asked him if he had been to *Sleep No More*. He called over his colleague, who had been twice. ‘I’m outgoing’, said the colleague. ‘It suits me. Others get a bit freaked out by it. It asks too much of them’.

When I mentioned that I had flown from London on a research visit to see the show he seemed surprised, at first. But, after a pause, he asked if I had heard of the repeat attenders. These ‘superfans’ of the performance incessantly attend tens of times, sometimes twice a night thanks to an additional late night slot on Friday and Saturday evenings. At the time I was in email correspondence with one of them. His name is Evan Cobb, a.k.a Scorched the Snake and author of the blog, *They Have Scorched the Snake... but not killed it, bitches*. As of 29 November 2012, Cobb had attended the performance forty one times... and counting: a performance, incidentally, that costs between \$75 and \$105.

I was already familiar with Punchdrunk’s work and had formed ideas as to what it might be that encourages audiences to attend performances like *Sleep No More* many times over. I also agreed with the barman that this kind of work asks plenty of audiences and specifying what this might be, exactly, is one task of the pages that follow. Escape, thrill, perceived risk and the rewards that might come with exercising ingenuity and opportunism offer audiences a hedonistic and opiate-like chance to be satiated by exploratory activity that embraces and celebrates excess: an enormous set of spaces that eludes being fully mastered, but encourages mastery in spite of that elusion; intensely personal interactions existing within the performance that, for the most part, are only available to the few and thrive on that lack of availability; tasks and hidden challenges that befuddle even the most committed

superfan, but nonetheless spur persistence; and an overwhelming, meticulous, awe-inspiring and addictively mesmerizing level of scenographic detail. This is what I had come to expect of Punchdrunk's large-scale performances and what I supposed might kindle the commitment of their superfans.

So it was a short walk from the pizzeria to the place where these expectations and suppositions might be challenged or supported: a vast former warehouse block and nightclub that, since the Punchdrunk-Emersive occupation, has come to be known as The McKittrick Hotel. The McKittrick has five floors, though some bloggers lay claim to having accessed an elusive sixth floor – a floor that, for me, remained blocked by a masked usher when I attended *Sleep No More*. Inside The McKittrick, masked audiences might stumble across a taxidermist's, bloodied bathtubs, a cemetery, a maze and a number of other atmospheric and immensely detailed environments that make either overt or tangential reference to the ambience and character psyches of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: a play that forms a point of departure for this primarily silent performance and from which Cobb derives the title of *Scorched the Snake*, 'bitches' aside.<sup>1</sup> Performers danced or meandered their way through the vast set of spaces, performing energetic choreographed sequences, or selecting single audience members for intimate one-on-one performances that primarily took place behind locked doors. Jazz ballads and Bernard Herrmann scores hovered amid dry ice and ambient lighting. The music seemed in keeping with the Manderley bar, both in a duplicated, desolate form inside the main performance space and as a place of partial entry into and exit out of this world: a liminal space where masks could be removed, drinks purchased and feet tapped to a three piece

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<sup>1</sup> 'We have scotcht the snake, not kill'd it' (Shakespeare III.ii: 870). In *Sleep No More*, the line is delivered by Banquo, not Macbeth, in a one-on-one performance within the performance (Cobb, email interview).

band and vocalist, betwixt and between the blizzard on West 27<sup>th</sup> Street and the escapist anonymity of The McKittrick Hotel.

*Sleep No More* typifies an aesthetics and politics of audience participation that is premised on maximising the best possible experience. Audiences must discover the various spaces of The McKittrick and take advantage of the opportunities presented to those savvy enough to discover them, such as the one-on-one performer-audience interactions that take place within the performance. It is very difficult to secure these opportunities, which are perhaps their main allure, but that process is helped by knowing the participatory ropes: not following crowds of participants, finding lonesome actors and sticking close to them as they weave their way through looped performance cycles. Such acts of discovery and opportunism ultimately determine a surplus of aesthetic experience available to some audience members, but not others. In other words, the one-on-one performances within a performance operate as a *potential* aesthetic surplus to the The McKittrick and the choreographed sequences that take place within it. This environment – or, rather, an agglomeration of synergised installations in a number of rooms that, taken together, make up The McKittrick – are certainly engaging in their own right, as are the larger scale group performances that take place at carefully timed and choreographed points in a looped performance cycle, such as a banquet scene on the bottom floor where Macbeth despairs at the arrival of Banquo's bloodied apparition. But the more risk-laden, intimate interactions with performers that are craftily unearthed by audience members with a more entrepreneurial disposition are by far and away the more experientially intense. It is these experiences that provide an aesthetic surplus for those able to secure them.

To clarify, briefly and as a prelude to a fuller engagement with aesthetics in chapter one: the kind of aesthetics that this thesis engages with refers specifically to aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience will be understood along lines broadly compatible with John Dewey's *Art as Experience*: '[t]he sensory satisfaction of eye and ear, when [a]esthetic, is so because it does not stand by itself but is linked to the activity of which it is the consequence' (50). While drawing on a wider range of sensory experiences than sight and sound in what follows, I share Dewey's interest in treating aesthetic experience as being thoroughly bound up with a given environment, particularly an immersive theatre environment. Moreover, for Dewey, the producer of an artwork embodies the attitude of a perceiver while making the work (50), where a special kind of perception, aesthetic perception, regulates artistic creativity (51). As such, producers and receivers of artworks share a common aesthetic link in a perceptive mode and it is this mode, a mode that I refer to as 'creative perception', which promotes aesthetic experience. In other words, by drawing on Dewey, I am advocating a view of aesthetic experience that factors into definition both that which is produced and that which is perceived, leaving space to underscore the audience's perception of an immersive theatre space as being itself productive, at least for the audience member. While, in what follows, I digress from Dewey's insistence on the immediacy of aesthetic experience, as that which must elude the entrance of a recalled past into an experienced present (127), I nonetheless find it useful to think about aesthetic experience in relational terms, where the audience's attention is fixed 'upon the way things bear upon one another, their clashes and unitings, the way they fulfil and frustrate, promote and retard, excite and inhibit one another' (139). An examination of aesthetic experience can therefore be seen as an examination of interactivity, not just between elements within a formal

artistic composition, but also the interactivity between one who perceives and what is perceived. The challenge, then, is to enquire into the possible peculiarity of an immersive theatre participant's productivity, asking on what terms they might be identified as a productive participant.

In a performance like *Sleep No More*, the inherent productivity and creativity of the receiving subject is necessarily tied into their participatory dispositions and capacities. In other words, an aesthetics of audience participation in this performance seems to be tied into its politics, where the participatory dispositions of audience members affect their participatory capacities. Some will be more disposed than others towards maximising the best possible experience in the immersive theatre event. To recall the Ovest Pizzoteca barman, some participants may 'get a bit freaked out' by *Sleep No More* as 'it asks too much of them'. Of course, such an exclusionary barrier to equitable participation is likely to plague almost any artwork, particularly theatre events. But testing the peculiar terms of such exclusion as it manifests in the political, through a participatory aesthetic, seems a worthwhile investigation. Why might audiences get freaked out by immersive theatre? In what ways might it ask too much of them? Are there ever instances where such exclusionary characteristics might be subverted?

To begin introducing an approach to these questions, it is worth probing a little deeper into one of the sparks behind my research visit to New York: the superfan. It seems likely that Cobb has acquired a degree of participatory expertise relevant to the performance by virtue of his repeat attendance. If such participatory expertise can indeed be established, through satisfactory theorisation, then audience participation can be seen to become something that can be practised, rehearsed and even mastered. This would raise the prospect of being able to participate better,



implying that Cobb and participants like him are not just paying to watch theatre events like *Sleep No More*; rather, it suggests a possible demand for a spectator willing to invest time, energy and money into a theatre event that is not simply presented, but rather encourages the cultivation of participatory skills. In other words, it suggests that participatory capacities might be nurtured by attending to participatory dispositions.

It is not unusual for a fan to celebrate the merits of a given performance online, nor is it unusual for audiences to participate in performance; what is unusual, though, is for a forum to emerge that offers strategies for audience participation in the theatre. On his blog, Cobb shares his participatory expertise by responding to questions asked by visitors to the site, although he usually avoids offering specific instructions on securing the much sought-after one-on-one performances within the production. The blog is used to exchange trivia about the performance and this exchange is accompanied by personal reflections on what it was like to participate on a given evening. But Cobb goes one step further: he offers cryptic advice on *how* to participate. This advice includes mappings of the performance space to help with accessing parts of the performance that might otherwise be difficult to find, as well as tips on discovering notable prop items, such as an Ouija board or Hecate's engagement ring (apparently a Holy Grail for superfans of the production).<sup>2</sup> The offering of participatory tips underlies an assumption that there are right and wrong ways to set about participating in *Sleep No More*, or at least that there are better or more effective modes of participation to be exploited. This suggests that audience participation can be meritocratic if premised on privileging particular ideals, such as

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<sup>2</sup> For more on superfans of *Sleep No More*, see Silvestre, 'Punchdrunk and the Politics of Spectatorship'. Cobb also specifies the search for Hecate's ring as a particularly fanatical pursuit of superfans (email interview).

the cultivation of participatory skills and/or the valorisation of participatory dispositions premised on opportunism and entrepreneurialism.

I find this notion of bettering participation fascinating in its own right, particularly with regard to a politics of participation in immersive theatre. But *Scorched the Snake* encourages reflection on another set of implications pertinent to Cobb's repeat attendance. In an email interview, Cobb openly and frankly articulates an 'infatuation' with *Sleep No More*. He talks about getting 'hooked' and discusses a persistent attempt to recapture the 'lost magic' experienced on first encountering their work (email interview). These turns of phrase attribute narcotic-like qualities to the performance. As with narcotic consumption, there seems to result a comparable perception of warped reality and escape, thrill and disorientation. His reflections on compulsive attendance suggest a yearning to retrieve the intensity of a first hit: an intensity that seems unlikely to be fully reiterated, but might nonetheless be approximated through strategically mastering the best way to participate. He writes about feeling 'a sense of genuine danger' when first experiencing intimate interaction in *Sleep No More*, even though this sense diminished with repeat attendance and familiarity. The will to retrieve the feeling of that 'first hit', though, reveals a fetishisation of risk that perseveres despite this familiarity. Securing these risky, affectively charged and addictive hits seems to become a goal of participation. Taken together, the various posts on Cobb's blog suggest that *Sleep No More* asks something of its audiences: to collude in the establishment of self-made participatory opportunity, whether they like it or not. It seems to suggest an addictive quality to the work characterised by the alluring presence of perceived risk, the seductive pleasures of thrill and disorientation and attempts to ensure that these are not only experienced, but maximised. Audiences, then, are immersed in the aesthetic world of

*Sleep No More*, but an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre seems to involve much more than this. It seems to involve a very close relationship between a politically charged privileging of participatory modes and the securing of surplus aesthetic experiences that add to those inscribed in the immersive installations. In short, the aesthetics and politics of audience participation at stake in *Sleep No More* seem to be mutually constitutive.

The primary task of this thesis is to deal with what this might mean for immersive theatre as a theatre style. Does something comparable take place in other immersive theatre performances? If so, what implications emerge for an understanding of the aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre?

The exchange of strategies of participation documented on superfan blogs like *Scorched the Snake* also raise a number of other questions about the kind of audience participation promoted in this kind of work. What does it mean for a participant to participate better in immersive theatre and how else might this bettering be established? Listings on *Scorched the Snake* suggest that participation is something to be learned and rehearsed and that such entrepreneurial endeavour procures rewards. With this in mind, just how freeing is it to make audiences a participatory offer? If participation is revealed to privilege a particular kind of participant, then who gets left behind?

Cobb's discussion of *Sleep No More*, both on his blog and through the email interview recounted here, alongside my introductory observations about the performance, provides a point of departure to start thinking about audience participation in immersive theatre. If this commentary is read at face value, then

immersive theatre productions like *Sleep No More* can be seen to privilege a participant predisposed toward entrepreneurialism, risk-taking and enjoying the affective thrills of participation. In such a framework, participatory experience, as a skill, is rewarded with aesthetic experience, as a source of pleasure, intrigue, or challenge. But in what ways might this observation be applied to and evaluated against immersive theatre productions more generally? I am interested in how affect production and risk perception, in particular, might usefully be treated as deeply political mechanisms of power, as well as central aesthetic characteristics of audience participation in immersive theatre. Treated as such, immersive theatre might be revealed as demanding a participant that is either predisposed towards risk-laden participatory opportunities and their affective rewards, or willing to strive to be that kind of participant. But is it right to think about immersive theatre in these terms? How might affect production and risk perception function as mechanisms of power? What is a mechanism of power in immersive theatre and why is this relevant for a politics of participation? In what ways might affect and risk allure and engage audiences? Which audiences? And is immersive theatre alone in promoting such forms of engagement?

### **What is Immersive Theatre?**

Immersive theatre, as a term referring to a distinct theatre style, emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century following the emergence of Punchdrunk in 2000. It was not addressed in theatre studies scholarship until 2008, to the best of my knowledge, following the publication of Sophie Nield's short article, 'The Rise of

the Character Named Spectator’.<sup>3</sup> Immersive theatre refers to a style of theatre that surrounds audiences within a coherent theatre aesthetic, usually sharing that space with at least one actor. Nicola Shaughnessy suggests that immersive theatre ‘refers to theatre and performance events that are all-encompassing, that submerge the spectator in an experiential environment where conventional boundaries between fiction and reality, performer and spectator are destabilized’ (188). Such experiential environments, I suggest, might make use of *mise en scène*, lighting, sound and music (occasionally through headphones), smell, tactility, the deprivation of sight, or the integration of consumable substances, such as food and alcoholic drinks. As such, immersive theatre tends to be multi-sensory. Audiences are frequently, but not always free to move or interact within an immersive environment and tend to be framed either as a character within the performance, or, by virtue of their freedom to move or interact in aesthetic space, as a heightened form of themselves. Demands might also be made of them during the performance by performers, or by other audience members. These demands might include dialogue, the performance of tasks or challenges, or intimate interaction.

In immersive theatre, audiences usually end up as both receivers and producers and it seems to me that this rendering is an important and defining feature of its aesthetics of participation, as well as its politics. By this, I mean that participating audiences observe and experience the performance, as well as contribute to the creation of it – an important basis for the term ‘productive participants’ that forms the title of this thesis – although the degree of

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<sup>3</sup> Baz Kershaw offers an early application of immersion to performance in *The Radical in Performance*, looking in particular at the Living Theatre (195-99). However, his concern is not so much with identifying an immersive theatre aesthetic, as defined in this thesis, as it is in studying audience participation’s immersive qualities. Furthermore, conceptual distinctions from Virtual Reality performance, occasionally referred to in terms of audience immersion, will be offered below.

efficaciousness arising from that creation may be fairly minor. This is meant not just in the sense of an artwork being ‘open’ (Eco, *The Open Work*), or through announcing the death of an authorial subject behind the artwork (Barthes, ‘Death of the Author’), but in the sense of audiences co-producing whatever it is that ends up being received. It is not *just* about treating acts of reception as being creative or productive, so much as regarding productive acts – such as interaction, or free roaming – as potentially generating material to be received by both individual participants and the performers and broader audience present.

Another important feature of immersive theatre is its tendency to aestheticise experience. The audience experience, particularly affective and risky experience, will be treated in this thesis as being integral to the immersive theatre event, to the point of defining a major part of what it is that ends up being received by participating audiences. There is something both introspective and projective about audience participation in immersive theatre: introspective, because aesthetic attention is turned inwards towards affective experience and projective, because attention is also turned outwards towards an immersive environment and the fruits of one’s own participatory labour within it. I like to think of this double-edged feature as being fundamentally narcissistic, as in both its introspective and projective forms the participating audience is receiving something that exists within or emerges from them. This will develop into a key idea of this thesis, manifesting in a neologism of my own: narcissistic participation. This model of participation will be detailed and examined in chapter one, but explored throughout.

It should be noted here that the aestheticisation of experience, as an experience drawn out of productive subjects and tied into aesthetic objects, has already been touched upon by Michael Fried, albeit in different terms and from

another context. Immersive theatre shares the same ‘theatrical literalness’ that Fried notoriously affiliates with minimalist sculpture, or what he calls ‘literalist art’: ‘[l]iteralist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work. [...] [Following the minimalist artist Robert Morris], the experience of literalist art is of an object *in a situation* – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*’ (125, original emphasis). Likewise, in immersive theatre you have no choice but to participate once you enter the performance space; even walking out establishes its own participatory act of rejection. But the crux defining this determined participation is, I believe, experience.

Fried defines the encounter with literalist sculpture in terms of extortion (127). Immersive theatre can also be seen to extort participation, for the participant is drawn into the theatre event and this drawing in, as I hope to demonstrate, is achieved through the production of experience within an environment far more akin to literalist sculpture than theatre auditoria, maximising the degree of productive participation. I will be arguing that the pursuit of experiences among participating audiences, which might be hedonic, challenging, erotic or otherwise affectively engaging, might reveal something about immersive theatre’s aesthetics of participation. If particular experiences can be produced, then in what ways might audiences be seen to submit to participation and forfeit at least a degree of personal autonomy? What political implications emerge from considering participation as something submitted to? And is the participating subject really just an aesthetic medium, or is there something more individual, more personal, about this aesthetics?

Key terms such as ‘submission’ and ‘autonomy’ call to mind an important issue in contemporary theatre studies and fine art discourse, as well as political

philosophy. The fact that audiences tend to be free to move or interact in some way is an important one, for it brings into play themes such as choice, responsibility and activity, all of which might contribute to a politics of some kind. But it would be a mistake to equate freedom of movement to empowerment, just as it would be a mistake to equate diminished movement with disempowerment. Participatory agency, particularly in relation to so-called ‘active’ (moving and interacting) and ‘passive’ (seated) audiences – troublesome terms indeed – has emerged in political philosophy and fine art and theatre discourse as a point of dispute, especially in the light of claims proposed by Jacques Rancière, Claire Bishop, Grant Kester, Shannon Jackson, Helen Freshwater, Baz Kershaw and others. As Rancière influentially asserts in ‘The Emancipated Spectator’, the opposition between viewing and acting fails to hold ‘once we understand that viewing is also an action’, for the spectator ‘participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way’ (13). In short, it has become unfashionable to align sedentary spectatorship with passivity, just as it is regularly rehearsed that spectatorship is an implicitly participatory activity (Bennett, S. 206; Freshwater 17; Fischer-Lichte 50; Bayly 42). But it seems to me that there is more to say about audience participation in immersive theatre, especially with regard to the particular breeds of participation that are asked of audiences.

With the concession acknowledged that watching theatre is implicitly participatory, it is perhaps worth remembering also that different kinds of participation are likely to procure different aesthetics and politics of participation. This thesis looks at audience participation in immersive theatre. Acts of participation will not be assumed to be emancipatory: quite the contrary. Rather, by examining particular immersive theatre performances, the invitation to participate will be considered as being potentially exclusionary. This can be seen to echo a concern of



Bishop's, who suggests that '[i]t is no longer enough to say that activating the viewer *tout court*' is subversive in and of itself, or that it enables co-authorship in an inherently positive way ('Antagonism' 78). However, I intend to approach this concern from a different perspective, by challenging the participatory demand on grounds of exclusion and inequality. This is not to reduce or equate politics with ethics – a reduction or equation that both Bishop and Rancière are especially wary of – but it is to emphasise how capacities, dispositions and privileging, as potential sources of unequal participatory opportunity, might affect an identification, analysis and evaluation of politics. It is worth calibrating agency: how is power distributed, not just between performers and audiences in immersive theatre, but also among audience members? And what are the political implications of experience production being nested at the centre of an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre?

The definition of immersive theatre offered in this section, alongside these introductory thoughts on participating within it, will be explored by analysing and evaluating several immersive theatre performances and events performed or curated in the UK by British, or UK-based artists and companies primarily, but not exclusively, over the three year course of my PhD research: Ray Lee's *Cold Storage* (2011) (chapter one); Lundahl & Seidl's *Rotating in a Room of Images* (2011) (chapter two); Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007-08) and *The Black Diamond* (2011) (chapter three); the performances and curation of Shunt (chapter four); and Theatre Delicatessen's curation of immersive theatre performances at Theatre Souk (2010) and the Bush Bazaar (2012) (chapter five). This selection is the consequence of my own exposure to these performances and events and is a response to the key role that British institutions and theatre companies seem to be playing in

the promotion and development of immersive theatre. The British focus includes Lundahl & Seidl, who are Swedish born, but based in London.

An aesthetics and politics of audience participation will be addressed in each chapter, but the thesis is split into three parts. This enables an examination of audience participation from three different, but related perspectives, each with different emphases and depths of engagement, cumulatively working towards an uttering of aesthetics and politics in the same breath. Part one will look at an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre, establishing why both affect (chapter one) and risk (chapter two) might be of relevance when analysing audience participation in immersive theatre and how both might exert influence over an audience's capacity to act, in relation to their being acted upon. Both these chapters will engage with how aesthetic experience ends up being produced in immersive theatre, elaborating the definition just offered and introducing some political implications surrounding experience production in performance. Part two looks much more explicitly at a politics of audience participation in immersive theatre. Part two shifts critical focus away from the isolated theatre event and towards political contexts that either directly impact on, or inform, how such an event might be critically addressed. In part two, I consider first of all how the participatory values emerging from audience participation in Punchdrunk's work align with those of the neoliberal ethos (chapter three). I then look at how an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre might align with the 'experience economy', where experience production is identified as a contemporary genre of economic output (chapter four). In both cases, the observations made in part one are re-evaluated in directly political terms. Part three considers aesthetics and politics together, drawing on, but departing from, the philosophy of Rancière. Part

three identifies how the production of experience among participating audiences, particularly affective experience, might reveal otherwise inchoate structures of manipulation and control, particularly as they relate to an audience's participatory expectations or anticipations (chapter five and the conclusion). Part three synergises the preceding two parts and puts forward the primary argument of this thesis: that a politics of audience participation in immersive theatre is fundamentally tied into its aesthetics.

Before concluding this section of the introduction, it may be useful to offer one final comment on the choice of case studies. *Cold Storage*, *Rotating in a Room of Images* and many of the performances on offer at Theatre Souk and the Bush Bazaar were one-on-one theatre performances, otherwise referred to as one to one performance, one to one encounter, 1:1s, individual performance, or performance for an audience of one. My preference for the term 'one-on-one' arises from an element of confrontation between performer(s) and audience that I see as an implicit, if latent element of the participatory encounter. As my account of *Sleep No More* suggests, immersive theatre may integrate one-on-one theatre performances – henceforth one-on-one performance – within a theatre event involving many audience members. However, even outside the context of immersive theatre performances for larger audiences, one-on-one performance fits under the immersive theatre umbrella: audiences tend to be surrounded by an aesthetic, even if the coherence of that aesthetic is punctured by an uncontrolled environment, such as an outside space; they are often free to move within, or interact with the work; experience is frequently multi-sensory; audiences are often cast as something other than an audience, even if that something other is an idealised form of self; and, significantly, one-on-one performance tends to be premised on the production of experiences, especially

intimate experiences. As noted in my remarks above, this aligns with how I define immersive theatre. As such, it seems justifiable to consider one-on-one performances that ally with this definition as constituting immersive theatre. What is more, one-on-one performance pares down the theatre encounter to a simple configuration. While there may well be more than one performer, the onus tends to be on the relationships that take place between one performer and one audience member at a time. In the case of *Cold Storage*, the audience, for the most part, is completely alone. This simplification of the theatrical scenario affords an opportunity to establish more clearly some important qualities of experiencing immersive theatre practise. I will be considering how these qualities are affected by the presence of other performers and audience members in chapter three, especially. However, even there the notion of an audience-as-community will not pull focus, so much as a profoundly individualistic mode of experiencing theatre, despite a shared space.

The remainder of this introduction is split into four sections. The next section addresses how my definition of immersive theatre and participation within it intervenes in the context of relevant theatre and performance studies discourse. The section after that defines the key terms of the thesis and outlines how those terms will be theorised and applied. This is followed by a brief section on methodology, concluding with a more detailed map of the thesis.

### **Positioning Participation**

The trouble with a neologism like ‘immersive theatre’ is conceptual slipperiness. Neologisms invite qualification regarding their need. Is immersive theatre really all that different from site-specific/-sympathetic/-generic performance? Does it stand

apart from promenade theatre? Perhaps not: immersive theatre may or may not be promenade and it may or may not relate to site in any number of different ways. The definition of immersive theatre offered above is broad in both respects. But as far as audience participation within aesthetic space goes, it will help to pin down why the term ‘immersive theatre’ – and the definition just offered – might be useful, or appropriate. If the term is to be granted credence, the first thing to establish is what it is, exactly, that audiences are immersed within.

### *Drowning Audiences*

A ball floats in a swimming pool on a windy day. Water surrounds the ball and as gusts of wind ripple the surface of the pool, the ball becomes intermittently submerged, bobbing beneath and on top of the water’s surface. The ball is mobile. It is not of the pool, but it is in the pool and it affects, however minutely, the sloshing about of the water. Gareth White thinks about audience immersion in immersive theatre in just this sort of way, where the metaphorical nature of the term ‘immersive’ retains a likeness to something like the ball I have just described; it implies that ‘we move within the artwork, intimately close to it, but still distinct from it. To be immersed is to be surrounded, enveloped and potentially annihilated, but it also is to be separate from that which immerses’ (228). The ball, like the audience, is not reducible to the immersive world in which it finds itself. This is where the immersive metaphor falls apart, for White, as it implies a subject-object divide (228). The audience, unlike the ball, holds a vital clue for him as to where immersion takes place; it takes place *within* the audience. As he remarks: ‘the spectator is not inside the work [...], but the work is inside the spectator’ (228).

It is this observation that prompts White to describe the immersive metaphor as a ‘faulty term to describe the phenomena it currently designates’, as it does not create ‘either fictional or imaginative interiors in a way that is different in kind than in more conventionally structured audience arrangements’ (233). W. B. Worthen also articulates points of comparison and similarity between an immersive epistemology and a more conventional view of dramatic performance (83), noting especially immersive theatre’s capacity for replicating fourth-wall realism (94-95). But if the term is faulty, as these authors suggest, then how else might we describe this style of theatre that fully surrounds audiences within aesthetic space?

Where ‘experiential theatre’ has been used by UK scholars as an alternative to ‘immersive theatre’ (Adams), the ‘theatre of experience’ has emerged in the Flanders context as a means of describing experience-driven theatre styles that might otherwise be dubbed immersive theatre (Groot Nibbelink 416). Both terms certainly allude much more directly to the experience-centred aesthetics of participation in immersive theatre, but they also beg a question: what theatre is not a theatre of experience? What is more, music festivals, raves, the circus and countless other cultural forms might be considered, on this basis, as being immersive theatres of experience: spaces of cultural performance that provide coherent spaces that surround audiences and participants that are aesthetically set apart from the everyday. Indeed, Nicholas McNerny considers the giddy participatory celebrations of the Burning Man Festival in Nevada as a ‘template’ for considering immersive theatre and the demands it makes of audiences (246). What needs to be established, if the need for a neologism is to be accepted, is what makes immersive theatre qualitatively different from its cultural counterparts.

I agree with White, to a certain extent. Audiences do not drown in immersive environments, breathing in an elusive immersive substance so that they end up fully subsumed. Nonetheless, I would add an important qualification; humans affect their environments in ways that a ball does not. The details of this claim will be reserved for the following chapter; suffice to say that audiences are able to both creatively perceive an immersive environment, as well as project out into it, subsequently perceiving the fruits of their own participatory labour. Books can be moved, cheeks kissed, dances danced and routes explored. Audiences have the capacity to affect an immersive environment and people within it, albeit a capacity that may be limited and reliant on disposition. Perhaps the notion of theatre's inherent eventfulness makes something like this assertion applicable to all theatre, as, indeed, others have argued.<sup>4</sup> But the aesthetic onus on experience production in immersive theatre seems to at least be amplified in a way that it is not in many other theatre forms and this amplification, I believe, impacts on the potential relevance of a clearly defined notion of immersion. This is where narcissism, as a model of audience participation and a critical concept, will be deployed most fruitfully in this thesis; on the knife edge between introspection and projection, an environment can be said to immerse audiences insofar as they become productive participants who mediate an environment, via perception, that they are also able to alter, however minutely. This does not detract from White's observation that a subject-object divide persists in the 'immersive' term, but it does qualify that observation with a defence of 'immersive theatre' as appropriate terminology. The term describes highly active acts of productivity, projecting participatory endeavour out into a space, as well as creative perception, practised by participating audiences *who immerse themselves* within an

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<sup>4</sup> See especially Erika Fischer-Lichte's theorisations of autopoiesis and feedback loops between audiences and performers in *The Transformative Power of Performance* (38, 50, 165).

aesthetic environment *that surrounds them completely*. This does not tend to happen in theatre auditoria, where the two emphasised parts of this claim fail to integrate.

### *Playing Audiences*

What does it mean to practise highly active acts of productive participation? This notion of practising being an audience member may call to mind Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, particularly with regards to the presentation of oneself in a coherent cultural habitat. Roles might be played in immersive theatre, just as they might be outside of an immersive theatre environment. So might aspects of oneself be selected for presentation over and above others. However, in immersive theatre, an awareness of being offered either a clear or ambiguous role, even if that role is the role of a performing audience, seems considerably stronger. When a discrepancy occurs between interpellation and identification in immersive theatre, the results can be confusing and chaotic. In 'The Rise of the Character Named Spectator', Nield reflects on her personal dissuasion from attending immersive theatre given the embarrassment it tends to provoke once a participatory offer is made. Re-formulated in the terms of this thesis, she is describing the centrality of affect. Not only that but, drawing on Nicholas Ridout, she describes this centrality as generating 'an uncomfortable sense of our own inappropriate presence' (533; cf Ridout 72-73). In defining immersive theatre, I was clear to point out how it often casts audiences, even if that casting is an idealised form of self. Using audience accounts of Punchdrunk's *Faust* (2006) and *The Masque of the Red Death*, Nield looks at how audiences tend to be cast as a generically defined Spectator: an ambiguous presence, masked and cloaked, that is at



once an audience and a role played within an immersive world. It is this ambiguity that produces, for Nield, drawing on Ridout, an audience's sense of their own inappropriate presence. Those masks hanging on the wall at Ovest Pizzoteca were immediately identifiable as Punchdrunk masks. They were traces of the performance happening further along West 27<sup>th</sup> Street and testament to a temporarily inhabited character, defined both anonymously and generically. These masks partly unify an audience by replacing distinguishing facial features with uniform indices of *Sleep No More*. This does not eradicate the individuality of each spectator, but it does present audiences with a generically defined identity as it appears, visually, to others.

The architectural presence of the hanging masks at the pizzeria are also suggestive of how this visual apparatus might be aesthetically characterised. For Josephine Machon, who is fast becoming an authority on immersive theatre, spectators of Punchdrunk performances choreograph themselves 'into beautiful carnivalesque sculptures. These masked, still bodies looking on, literally become part of the architecture' ('Space and the Senses' n.p.). Immersive theatre aspires to mark boundaries between the world of the theatre event and the world outside of it. However, by virtue of the audience's being there, these boundaries are rarely fully formed (cf Mervant-Roux, 'The Great Resonator'). As with Nield, Machon recognises how audience members are not just audience members, but are at least partially inscribed as a part of the world of the performance. Of course, short of drowning the audience, the important word in this claim is 'partially'. However, from this, it is possible to propose that audiences of immersive theatre are something at once akin to participant, individual, individual-as-spectator, individual-as-(part of)-audience and Machon's 'architecture'. But these observing co-creators are more like an active architecture: a thinking, feeling, moving architecture. In light of this,

Nield's concern about the ambiguous positioning of immersive theatre audiences seems justified; the roles of the audience tend to be both numerous and complex.

When performers directly ask from their audience a contribution of some kind, participants are confronted by the challenge of recognising who it is that they are meant to be: an audience, a character, or an audience playing a character. As Nield writes, 'we appear on the outside, facing the theatre, as a theatrical character, the character named Spectator, coherently in and of the theatrical world. But we do not necessarily appear so to ourselves' (535). Facing theatre as a character imposed by a performance, a character that may be only loosely defined, can produce embarrassment, exposure and vulnerability, particularly when handled in such a way that the offer to participate is unclear. At the same time, participating in immersive theatre can also be challenging, empowering and rewarding. These ideas will repeatedly emerge in the chapters that follow. The point to be taken for the time being is this: immersive theatre may never be able to fully sever its spaces from the outside world; most of the time, however, it aspires to do so. In this aspiration, a space is shared between actors and audiences who are cast within and are frequently treated as being part of a theatrical world either by live performers, or by a designer that anticipates the audience's being there. This casting may be a role, but it might just as well be a kind of hyper-self, an individual performing his or her own identity. And this casting might render the audience vulnerable, particularly once we ask who else might have a vested interest in the parts to be played. What happens, for instance, when immersive theatre is utilised to market a product? Who does the audience then become? In responding to these questions, it is worth asking how a participatory aesthetics might be co-opted and what political implications this co-optation might have for participating audiences.

### *Entrepreneurial Audiences*

Audiences do not drown in immersive theatre, but they do immerse themselves. Audiences may also play a role in immersive theatre, but they might just as well play a heightened form of themselves. Both these claims rely on a more fundamental hypothesis that immersive theatre audiences are productive audiences, producing in excess of creative perception. Establishing the basis of this hypothesis will provide one corner stone from which a study of an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre might stem.

The incessant return of Cobb and his fellow superfans to *Sleep No More* betrays an addiction, or at least an absorbing fascination with the performance. I wonder whether this might have something to do with the potential capacity to be master of one's own actions within a coherent world that at the same time stands paradoxically astride an escapist sacrifice of autonomy: a mastery based on practising risk, but potentially rewarded with stimulating experiences. Analogies might well be drawn here with pipes, pills and powders, where risky acts of consumption might be reciprocated with a pleasurable or challenging shunting of the perceptive faculties away from daily experiences and towards the aesthetically distinct.

Within the aesthetic spaces of immersive theatre events like *Sleep No More*, a participatory aesthetics emerges that draws on both affect production and risk perception: two elements of an experience-driven aesthetic form. I propose that one of the reasons why the production of affect can be so strong in immersive theatre is because of the audience's rendering as a potential producing receiver, or productive participant. Being confronted by the possibility of creation, particularly in the

presence of others, can be either intensely exciting or crushing: what if I do something wrong? When am I meant to participate and how? What if I come across to others as too reserved, or too keen? The notion of and desire for ‘bettering’ participation makes sense in the light of these concerns. For David Jubb, artistic director of the Battersea Arts Centre (BAC: a leading London immersive theatre venue), these kinds of concern are of paramount significance. For Jubb, the higher the perceived risk for audiences, the more brilliant artists need to be in navigating the relationship between chaos and order, care and trust; it is up to the artists to be clear on participatory protocols (personal interview). But, I believe, audiences are also encouraged to take risks, to be outgoing, to accept participatory offers and to take it upon themselves to be the kind of participant they are asked to be.

I suggest that where these inputs are present in immersive theatre, audiences are encouraged to be entrepreneurial. This is what leads me to introduce a second model of participation that will be explored in most detail in chapter three: entrepreneurial participation. An aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre might involve not just narcissism, but entrepreneurialism as well. Approached in tandem, this aesthetics is then revealed to be profoundly political. Provided the entrepreneurial capacity is exercised, audiences might enjoy a more fulsome aesthetic experience – but this provision is contingent either on disposition or aspiration and that, consequently, involves exclusivity.

Entrepreneurialism is clearly not for everyone. The sense of the audience’s own inappropriate presence results, for Nield, in ‘awaking to the actor’s nightmare of being on the stage, and not knowing the play’ (535). This sense of one’s own inappropriate presence might also transfer to entrepreneurial participation. And entrepreneurial participation might also feed into how affect is produced among

participating audiences in immersive theatre. This production, then, is partly about protocol: of knowing how to participate and of being rehearsed enough so that the actor's nightmare remains at a distance, allowing for the generation of affects arising from self-made opportunity; or of aiming to bring it closer, as an edgy and affective thrill. But it is also about being attentive to an event unfolding in the presence of others, as both observer and the observed.<sup>5</sup>

### *Exclusions*

To sum up: this thesis intends on positioning audience participation in immersive theatre by focusing on experience production among audiences as a fundamental aspect of its aesthetics, particularly as it manifests in affect production and risk perception. This fundamental aspect will also be approached as tying into a politics of participation in immersive theatre, insofar as a participatory mode might be privileged, at an aesthetic level, which partly determines how aesthetic experiences are to be engaged with and secured. In positioning participation, it now remains to clarify what will not fall within the remit of this thesis.

Applied theatre, community theatre and forum theatre are relevant for study of audience participation, but less relevant to the specific study of immersive theatre. These practises have a different kind of aesthetics, politics and ethics at their heart that must be alert to the demands of place and context and the sensitivities of participants. Content tends to be explicitly political and elicitation of audience involvement, at least in its idealised form, fundamentally concerned with ethical

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<sup>5</sup> Kershaw describes something comparable to this proposition as the 'paradox of performance': 'one is, often simultaneously, subject and object, active and passive, performer and spectator' (191). I perhaps digress from Kershaw in believing that such simultaneities are as likely to occur within theatre buildings as outside of them.

engagement. In contrast, as I hope to demonstrate most explicitly in part two, immersive theatre is susceptible to corporate and commercial ventures. It is a highly marketable style of theatre. The same degree of marketability is considerably less likely for applied, community or forum theatre settings. Secondly, while the demands of place and context and the sensitivities of participants may well be the concern of immersive theatre makers, immersive theatre performances tend to be oriented much more towards aesthetic coherence and the production of experience and away from ethical interaction and education, at least in such an explicit fashion. Bishop persuasively argues that the ‘*social task*’ of socially engaged art often takes precedence over ‘equally important *artistic gestures*’, thus constructing an opposition between ethical working practises and aesthetic concerns in constructing an artwork (*Artificial Hells* 13, original emphasis). Applying this observation to the current discussion, we might also assert that for applied, community and forum theatre, broadly speaking, the social task of theatre tends to take precedence over aesthetic considerations, with the possible exception in recent discourse advocating an ‘end of effect’ in applied practises (Thompson 5-6, 34). For immersive theatre, however, the artistic gesture tends to come first, epitomised in the production of hedonic or challenging aesthetic experiences. Finally, content is rarely political in quite the same way for immersive theatre as it is with these other practises, which is not to say that the work itself is not political. Although making work politically may not be a stated aim of most of the immersive theatre makers considered in this thesis, there remains scope to recognise and theorise participation as being acutely political in the work they produce as a consequence of whatever aesthetic order is put into play. The aesthetics and politics of participation explored may well have some relevance for

applied, community and forum theatre settings, but is only considered here as a possible area for future research.

With this in mind, it also proves useful to distinguish socially engaged art and relational art from immersive theatre. Nicolas Bourriaud uses the term ‘relational’ not to link artists by ‘style, theme, or iconography’, but instead to refer to a shared ‘practical and theoretical horizon: the sphere of inter-human relations’ (43). This broad definition might suffice for socially engaged art as well, provided we understand that the latter tends to place greater onus on provoking ‘reflection on the contingent systems that support the management of life’ (Jackson 28). Interactivity tends to be central to both and both tend to aspire towards political idealism. However, the frequent prioritisation of the ethical over the aesthetic in socially engaged art again marks it out as being distinct from immersive theatre, for the idealisation of transparent social relations frequently bars the capacity for immersion to arise. This is an interesting point, as immersive theatre is certainly capable of working with this kind of idealisation. In fact, in chapter five, I make the point that both Theatre Souk and the Bush Bazaar do precisely this – but only at the expense of troubling immersion. So socially engaged art has the potential to be a close ally of immersive theatre, but nonetheless seems aesthetically distinct from it. There are also points of crossover between immersive theatre and relational art, but interactivity tends to remain enshrined in the latter as a political goal in and of itself in a way that it is not, at least so explicitly, or commonly, in most immersive theatre performances. Nonetheless, my interest is in how immersive theatre might still render political relations apparent, despite immersion, or through affect production. This rendering is therefore much less explicit in immersive theatre, or at least much harder to pin down. It should be noted that the experience of a participatory aesthetic

in immersive theatre tends to take precedence over any overt ethical or political intervention, as a clear intention, even if such an intervention might be critically examined as emerging from an aesthetics of participation in immersive theatre.

It is worth clarifying this point, as it will grow into an important argument in part three. To watch and participate within theatre is to be sensitive to registering ‘something of what determines relations of power’ (Kelleher 43). Whether this be through theatrical representation breaking down through some kind of failure (Ridout 168), or through the ‘cogs of the machinery’ of theatre continuing to spin (Kelleher 43), it is through the very doing of theatre that politics has the potential to emerge most clearly within and through an aesthetic order.

One final range of practises that might be inappropriately confused with the immersive theatre practises explored in this thesis are those loosely identified as digital performance, or performances set within, or using virtual reality (VR). There are justifiable claims for thinking about VR performance in terms of immersion (McKenzie 86; Smith et al.; Slater and Usoh; Coomans and Timmermans). However, there are starkly contrasting aesthetic considerations between VR performance and immersive theatre, as I have defined it, not to mention demands made of participating audiences. While comparable notions of escape into other worlds certainly exist, they are of a different nature. For VR performance, these worlds provide interactive landscapes defined under the rubric of a computer programme; for immersive theatre, these worlds are tangible and not subject to the same mediation between a human user and digital interface. While immersive theatre performances may include some form of digital mediation, such as the audience’s wearing of headphones, there are different aesthetics at stake in wholly digital environments – different means of generating immersion – and these different means



should mark VR performance and immersive theatre as distinct. As such, while the performances explored in part one of this thesis both involve participating audiences wearing headphones, the environments that they move, or are contained within, are not digital. The relations between a participating audience and these non-digital worlds will pull focus in part one, especially with regard to how experiences might be aroused through those relations and how audiences can be seen to creatively receive non-digital environments, as productive participants.

In concluding this section, it is important to briefly acknowledge the field of audience research. In studying an aesthetics and politics of audience participation, my subject of study is, in one, important respect, the audience. Especially since the 1980s, audience research has grown into a vast discursive field in theatre and performance studies, following a number of trends from semiotics, to phenomenology, cognitive science and studies of the theatre event. Methodologies range from qualitative and quantitative empirical studies, to engagements with the material conditions of receiving theatre and social constructionism. I have already noted that affect production and risk perception among participating audiences are central to experience production in immersive theatre; both inputs, of course, relate to the audience's encounter with performance and might consequently be seen to constitute a theoretical branch of audience research. But, I contend, it is the social sciences that prove most fruitful in providing appropriate theoretical resources, along with a number of theatre and performance scholars who, it seems, would tend to agree.

## **Theorising Participation**

Now that an approach to audience participation in immersive theatre has been positioned, it remains to map the critical terrain and theoretical horizons of the thesis. Near the outset of my PhD research, I set up a series of Google Alerts: automated keyword searches that scan the web on a daily basis before dropping notifications in your email inbox. Audience participation, affect and immersive theatre occasionally bear fruit, but by far and away the big hitters have been risk and immersive experience. Risk usually throws up medicinal trials and findings and tends not to relate so much to risk perception. Immersive experience, on the other hand, frequently betrays a potentially shared aesthetics between immersive theatre, other components of the cultural industries and the creative industries: computer games consoles that project immersive gaming environments into your room at home; home cinema systems; live zombie combat experiences in a dilapidated shopping centre or mansion; corporate cocktail parties hosted by 1920s flappers; and, if I'm lucky, the odd theatre event. Immersing people: whether it occurs in railway arches, warehouses, flagship stores or zombie mansions, immersive experiences seem to have entered a growing number of industrial sectors and their persistent renewal suggests impact at the levels of both demand and supply.

Even as an aesthetic attribute, audience immersion is not peculiar to immersive theatre. Immersive theatre shares its participatory aesthetics with other industries and this sharing must surely impact on how it is approached, examined and evaluated, not least if immersive theatre's politics of participation is to be addressed adequately. In this section, I introduce the importance of establishing conceptual and critical shifts across the three parts of this thesis, shifts that might be encapsulated in three correlated questions: how might an aesthetics and politics of

audience participation in immersive theatre be theorised? What happens to that theorisation when we take on board uses of immersion and participation outside of the theatre? And where do we go from there? In what follows, the key terms and themes of the thesis will be specified and their relevance for an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre will be introduced.

### *Aesthetics and Politics*

In defining immersive theatre, I was clear to point out that it tends to aspire towards the formation of coherent aesthetic worlds that fully surround audiences. However, this thesis will also come to look for points of aesthetic slippage, rupture and frustration in immersive theatre that would seem to place this definition in jeopardy. Immersive theatre is a term that remains in infancy. That means it is especially malleable. As with any theatre style, there emerge performances that encourage us to question the stability of conceptual terrain and canons and immersive theatre is no exception. This does not necessarily debunk the right usage of a term like immersive theatre, but it does keep those who use the term on their toes.

Earlier in this introduction, I specified that the kind of aesthetics that this thesis engages with refers specifically to aesthetic experience, particularly as it arises between a creatively perceiving perceiver and his or her environment: i.e. an immersive theatre environment. It remains to define the second key term that appears in the subtitle of this thesis: namely, politics. Stefan Collini defines politics as ‘the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space’ (qtd. in Kelleher 3). As Joe Kelleher elucidates, ‘[b]y the phrase “relations of power” we might understand that power – or powerlessness – is nothing

in itself and only ever meaningful in terms of the distribution of power across social relations, among different groups or classes or interests that make up, however momentarily, a social body. It goes without saying that this distribution of power is often unequal' (3). We might tie into this definition how value is attributed to some things and qualities and not others within a given social space and how that attribution affects who is able to exercise power. What kind of person is valued and how does that valuing impact on their capacities, or play to their dispositions, in a given space? Politics, then, might be defined as the distribution of power among people, or anything that has a stake in those relations of power.

This thesis culminates in a synergised consideration of aesthetics and politics. This decision is significantly influenced by the philosophy of Rancière, who forcefully argues that there is an aesthetic core to politics, as well as a politics of aesthetics. In Rancière's approach to aesthetics and politics, the availability, or lack of availability, of something to perception and understanding also impacts on one's political capacities. Part three will be looking at Rancière's writing in detail, before moving away from strict adherence to his thought in favour of a more affect-oriented conception of the politics of aesthetics. This may seem an odd point in the thesis to introduce and explore the work of a thinker who provides an important point of departure for thinking about aesthetics and politics together. However, I regard it as a necessary delay. It makes sense to define and critique what an aesthetics and politics of participation in immersive theatre might look like before their synergies are addressed, for without a clear appreciation of what makes them distinct it seems likely that an understanding of those synergies will be somewhat cloudy; indeed, it makes sense to think about the elements that comprise a synergy before approaching how they might complement, or grow out of one another.

In the subsections that follow, approaches to both aesthetics and politics will be considered as they relate to the key themes of the thesis. These subsections mirror the order in which they will appear in the chapters that follow. The intention is to signal at this stage how these themes build on one another, gradually mapping a means of approaching audience participation in immersive theatre that attends to the details as a gateway into a fuller, more comprehensive appreciation of aesthetics and politics in immersive theatre.

### *Affect*

Affect moves audiences and it is intensely political. Theorising affect production in immersive theatre means thinking through an audience's capacity to control, in relation to their being controlled; it means thinking about the capacities of audiences, as well as their dispositions; and it means constructing critical space to help theorise autonomy. First and foremost, however, it means thinking about how aesthetic space triggers, or plays into affect production.

Chapter one deals with defining affect in detail, where important distinctions will be made between affect and emotion, alongside crucial discursive positioning among a wide range of scholarly approaches to affect. For now, though, it need only be suggested that affect arises from a number of inputs, including, but not limited to, biological, cultural, psychological and sociological inputs, as well as memory. Affect refers to responses and movements toward, or away from something, or someone. Those responses and movements, which are relational – i.e. they imply some kind of link between at least one subject and one object, or another subject – involve an orchestration of cognitive and bodily responses. Borrowing from Sara Ahmed, affect

will be viewed in this thesis as a kind of testimony to the interrelationship of the social and the personal, relating as much to being acted upon as being driven to act. Brief reflections on bodily and cognitive approaches to affect will prove useful, but an address of affect's social inputs will take critical precedence. I will be focusing especially on affect as it relates to risk perception in immersive theatre and the key questions underlying my enquiry into affect production ask: how might affect impact, politically, on a participant's thought, behaviour and feeling? How does affect relate to aesthetics? And how might affect reveal something about the relationships between aesthetics and politics in immersive theatre?

Machon introduces '(syn)aesthetics' as a term indicating both a performance style and a critical approach to performance, with particular regard to the audience experience.<sup>6</sup> She uses the term as a means of approaching the ineffable as it manifests for audiences in performance. Usefully, for present purposes, she includes what might now be called immersive theatre within the remit of her study. For Machon, experience production frequently and paradoxically involves an inarticulable but meaningful bodily experience that simultaneously eludes and demands a cognitive appraisal. She describes (syn)aesthetic performance as a visceral performance style loosely premised on 'the recreation of visceral experience' aroused in audiences, an arousal that 'places emphasis on the human body as a primary force of signification' (*(Syn)Aesthetics* 1). As Rachel Fensham rightly suggests, watching theatre *per se* is an embodied activity and this embodiment implies a visceral engagement with theatre (*To Watch Theatre* 11). But

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<sup>6</sup> There is some productive cross-over between Machon's notion of (syn)aesthetics, as it applies to a mode of encounter, and film theorist Vivian Sobchack's notion of the 'cinesthetic subject': 'the cinesthetic subject both touches and is touched by the screen, able to commute seeing to touching and back again *without a thought* and through sensual and cross-modal activity able to experience the movie as both here and there rather than clearly locating the site of that cinematic experience as "on-screen" or "off-screen"' (qtd. in Wik 38, original emphasis).

to say that all theatre is *premised* on the ‘recreation of visceral experience’ is not the same as saying that all theatre might *induce* it. What is more, there may well be contrasting means of inducing such experience, depending on the theatre style, as well as contrasting forms of experience.

What Machon encourages is an acknowledgment of visceral experience – read corporeal, or bodily experience – as a valid aesthetic zone. And this encouragement arises from an acknowledgment of how bodies, especially what takes place within them, engage with, or are engaged by, performance. In this respect, Machon’s approach to aesthetics draws near to what Hans-Thies Lehmann has influentially called ‘postdramatic theatre’: ‘a theatre that feels bound to operate beyond drama’, without dismissing dramatic heritage (27). In Punchdrunk’s work, for instance, backs are not turned on the dramatic text; rather, to take *Sleep No More* as an example, the narrative text is eliminated in primarily speechless performance, but Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* still provides a point of departure for the creation of an aesthetic world that is to be entered into by audiences. Perhaps, as Worthen maintains, that world remains cohesive and ultimately dramatic (94-95). But then again, as Fensham argues, immersive theatre companies like Punchdrunk invite ‘a new kind of spectator, one who participates in the process and meaning of the event, or situation’ (‘Postdramatic Spectatorship’ n.p.). The question then is what this might mean for an understanding of cohesive dramatic worlds, thus challenging the unifying functioning of drama. And an important part of that challenge, I suggest, might come from an appreciation of affect production as a contributing party to immersive theatre’s aesthetics of audience participation. I support Machon’s view that ‘sense (semantic “meaning making”)’ and ‘*sense* (feeling, both sensation and emotion)’ might usefully function as ‘a double edged rendering of making-

sense/sense-making' in performance ((*Syn)aesthetics* 14, original emphasis). In part three, adapting work by Rancière, I will be advocating an argument that regards making-sense, as understanding, and sense-making, as creative perception, as aesthetic characteristics of affect production in immersive theatre, but in a way that is fundamentally tied into politics. In other words, I will be working towards an argument that sees the experience of affect in immersive theatre as a vitally significant political factor that impacts on and, in certain cases, uncomfortably reveals how participatory capacities and dispositions are unevenly distributed, marking a significant change of emphasis away from Machon's study of audience reception and performance style and towards an examination of a politics of participation. This will involve considering how affect operates outside of theatre spaces, exploring how affect production in immersive theatre ties into increasingly established economic frameworks of experience production.

### *Risk*

Audience numbers soon grew at staggered intervals after first entering The McKittrick Hotel, so I headed to a largely deserted bottom floor. I found a lonesome Duncan in a small passageway and followed him into a bedroom where a ticking sound was emanating from inside a trunk. He opened the trunk and pulled out a metronome. The ticking stopped. He took me into a much larger space: what can only be described as a ghostly ballroom, complete with stage and balconies housing a grand piano. Duncan stared at me, moved closer, and whispered into my ear something I only vaguely remember about the body being a holy temple, perhaps a reference to Macduff's description of Duncan in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* on



discovering his death: ‘Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord’s anointed temple, and stole thence / The life o’th’building’ (II.iii). This moment was incredibly intimate and felt rewarding not so much because I had been selected, for there was no one else there, but because I had discovered him. But in order for this to happen, an initial risk had to be taken not to follow the crowd and to venture forth, alone, in the hope of finding something special. Although I knew that the likelihood of physical harm was slim to none while we were together, our being alone in the deeper recesses of The McKittrick nonetheless felt risky.

Exposure, vulnerability, accountability, responsibility, investment, trust and affect might all pose risks for participating audiences, provided that distinctions are made between the likelihood of physical harm and perceived risk, particularly as it relates to affect. The theoretical approaches to risk perception discussed in this thesis draw largely on social and cultural studies of risk-taking, as practises, looking especially at how such practises end up being idealised or fetishised. But it is important to underscore here the subjectivity of risk perception. The psychometric paradigm is a psychological branch of risk perception research that ‘encompasses a theoretical framework that assumes risk is subjectively defined by individuals who may be influenced by a wide array of psychological, social, institutional and cultural factors’ (Slovic xxiii). When reading the social and cultural approaches to risk that are drawn on in what follows, it is important to keep in mind a theoretical framework that makes this important assumption of subjective definition. What this assumption opens up is an opportunity to discuss experiences of uncertainty in audience participation and how those experiences might affect audiences in deeply political ways. Via affect, risk perception can impact on *how* audiences participate. It can be intimidating, just as it can be exhilarating.

Distinguishing between risk perception and a more ‘objective’ understanding of risk is particularly important in the theatre. It is possible to assert that immersive theatre, if it invokes risk at all, invokes the simulacra of risk; after all, more often than not, it takes place in a risk-assessed theatre space. Simulacra, following Jean Baudrillard, is understood as a wholesale substitution of the signs of the real for the real (*Simulacra 2*). From this perspective, risk is not something produced, or even reproduced in aesthetic space, but is something where the signs which render risk identifiable, the signs which constitute risk as something meaningful, are wholly replaced by an imitation that no longer relates to its origin. There is nothing at risk for audiences, according to this point of view, in immersive theatre. However, risk is a phenomenon sometimes related to, but distinct from harm (Jaeger et al 171). As Gerda Reith notes, risk ‘is defined by and through temporality: the notion of “risk” expresses not something that *has* happened or *is* happening, but something that *might* happen’ (59, original emphasis). There is a tendency in theatre and performance discourse to limit application of risk research to the primarily self-imposed risks of artists (Welchman, *Aesthetics of Risk*; MacDonald, ‘On Risk’). But on the understanding of risk just introduced, one must ask: what about the audience?

In concluding *Postdramatic Theatre*, Lehmann makes the following suggestion:

it falls to the theatre to deal with extremes of affect by means of an *aesthetics of risk*, extremes which always also contain the possibility of offending by breaking taboos. This is given when the spectators are confronted with the problem of having to react to what is happening in their presence, that is as soon as the safe distance is no longer given, which the aesthetic distance

between stage and auditorium seemed to safeguard. (186-87, original emphasis)

In immersive theatre, taboos may very rarely be broken and audiences very rarely offended: but they might be bored, frustrated, annoyed and embarrassed, just as they might feel elated, joyous, or exhilarated. The collapse of an aesthetic distance between stage and auditorium takes place in a very literal way in immersive theatre and something like the ‘aesthetics of risk’ that Lehmann touches on can be seen to take place once risk perception, as a subjectively defined phenomenon, is identified. What is more, if the relationships between affect production and risk perception can be properly established, *as aesthetic phenomena*, then they might also be regarded as politically charged. While perhaps not to the same degree as Lehmann hopes for in his conclusion, an aesthetics of risk in immersive theatre, as it relates to affect production, might still hold the potential to provide an aesthetic rupture that either re-orders points of entry into an aesthetic framework, or at least renders a lack of perceptual accessibility or cognisance as a potentially politically praiseworthy point of frustration.

### *Neoliberalism*

It was my thinking around risk that helped to foster an interest in the kinds of value that many immersive theatre performances seem to herald. Where else might these values be seen to operate? In *Sleep No More*, for instance, risk, entrepreneurialism, individualism, personal participatory responsibility and privacy, with audiences shielded behind masks, all seem to be valorised. These same attributes also closely align with the neoliberal ethos. In brief, neoliberalism is a political theory and

economic order that emerged most prominently in the UK and US in the 1980s and continues to persist through government policy and in the economy. Neoliberalism defends the free market and advocates a shift of responsibility from the shoulders of government onto risk-taking and risk-bearing individuals (Harvey, *Neoliberalism 2*; see also Hacker 6; Abbott et al 244; Baker and Simon 3-4). For Louise Owen, in her doctoral study of the relationships between theatre making and neoliberalism, ‘the objective of neoliberalisation is to institutionalise the global free market economy and a form of enterprising, risk-taking and risk-bearing subjectivity as a general principle for action’ (323). This objective is typified in the writing of Anthony Giddens – a key architect of New Labour ideology – who regards risk as an ‘energising principle of a society’ (*Third Way* 63), which ‘is often beneficial both to the individual and to the wider society’ (116). An example here would be the entrepreneurial banker who supposedly draws money into the country from abroad through risky ingenuity on the stock market, as well as the labourer forgoing benefits in favour of employment (116). As far as risk is concerned, there will always be winners and losers.

This thesis culminates in an agreement with Lehmann that an aesthetics of risk might prove a valuable point of exploration for contemporary (immersive) theatre makers. However, in order to make that argument on political grounds, I will be reflecting on how risk and other elements of the neoliberal ethos have been put to work over the past three decades and at what political costs. In considering how an aesthetics of risk, via affect production, might tie into a politics of participation, I will be mapping a critical journey in part two that takes us outside of the theatre, into the terrain of marketing and political economy, before heading back into the theatre again. This return will culminate in an evaluation of how an aesthetics of audience

participation might be re-assessed on political terms that are responsive to the neoliberal ethos.

### *Experience Economy*

But what of the live zombie combat experiences and corporate cocktail parties? I opened this section with a brief comment on the rising prominence of immersive experiences across different industries that potentially challenge the aesthetic purity of immersive theatre. Nield rightly suggests that immersive theatre follows in the footsteps of experimental museum curators through the 1980s and 1990s who ‘increasingly positioned the visitor inside an “experience” rather than at an exhibition – within a tricked-out space, with props as well as artefacts, perhaps infused with smells, sounds, and even containing heritage actors playing Vikings, servants or famous people’ (531). This is a useful observation to make, for the immersion of audiences within aesthetic space has received insightful attention in curation studies (Griffiths, *Shivers*; Lorentz, ‘Immersive Experience’). I will be picking up on this in chapter four when I engage a comparative analysis of the London Dungeon, as an immersive pseudo-museum, and the work of Shunt. For now, though, it is necessary only to signal where the aesthetic centrality of affect production and risk perception in immersive theatre might find their counterparts; it seems to me that those counterparts extend throughout the experience economy. Immersive theatre’s aesthetics of audience participation is neither pure, nor singular. As such, an examination of that aesthetics – especially if the imbrication of aesthetics and politics is ultimately to be taken into consideration – ought to pay attention to these counterparts, thinking through how the operation of experience

production in the experience economy might usefully inform theorisation of experience production in immersive theatre.

It is important to flag existing acknowledgment of how corporate business initiatives have become increasingly adept at co-opting theatre and performance techniques to help market goods (Wickstrom, *Performing Consumers*). What this alludes to is an awareness that experience sells, an awareness that helped to foster recognition of an emerging experience economy in the closing years of the twentieth century. The experience economy names a paradigm shift, identified in B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore's book, the *Experience Economy*, away from the production of goods and services in contemporary economic production and toward the production of experiences. This shift has in part been instigated by the global rise of neoliberalism. But if it is fair to say that the experience economy is becoming adept at utilising theatre and performance, the question then should be: how does this impact on theatre and performance? In chapter four, I will be addressing how immersive theatre might fit into the experience economy and what implications this fitting might have for an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre. In other words, I will be questioning the implications of a shared aesthetics between immersive theatre and the experience economy, a questioning that, ultimately, will lead to a search for points of aesthetic slippage, rupture and frustration.

### **A Methodological Aside**

As far as audience participation in immersive theatre goes, the 'I' of the researcher is not a dirty word, but a point of departure. As a researching audience member, this 'I'

becomes immersed within a world of experience production and if the performance is to be adequately analysed, from the inside out, then the limitations of individuality must be recognised as limitations, but ultimately used to one's own advantage. As Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink writes of one-on-one theatre: 'there is only a personal insiders' perspective to depart from and no opportunity to fall back on a shared point of reference such as a clear plot or narrative' (413). This will undoubtedly be applicable to my own analyses of one-on-one theatre, but it also seems relevant to an address of immersive theatre events with larger audiences. Given its reliance on experience production among participating audiences and given the inevitable contingency of those experiences, it seems to me that the personal perspective of the insider provides the clearest point of reference for the researcher. With this in mind, I hope to echo Groot Nibbelink's suggestion, drawing on Mieke Bal, that a 'critical intimacy' might be implemented that approaches performance 'from a position of engagement' (413).<sup>7</sup>

Specific case studies will be drawn on in each chapter: performances that I have attended as a participating audience. Helen Freshwater proposes that discussion of performance drawn from one's own engagement ought to be nuanced by qualitative and quantitative audience research (5-6). But perhaps a political theory of participation that directly engages the individual might provide space to theorise that politics as malleable. This is about establishing a methodology suited to the peculiar demands of a research project. In this case, subscribing to qualitative and quantitative audience research might do more to hinder the construction of a theoretical approach to performance analysis than aid it. After all, this thesis is not about audience response; it is about establishing how participating audiences are

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<sup>7</sup> See also Heddon, Iball and Zerihan, who coined the acronym SPaR to signal 'Spectator-Participation-as-Research' (122).

figured in the production of aesthetic experiences in immersive theatre and how that figuring relates to a politics of participation. This will involve looking at how immersive theatre makers invite participation and how participatory modes might end up being privileged through that invitation. The focus, then, prioritises an examination of participatory protocol and experience production over and above the manifold responses which might be elicited from audiences.

However, this does not bar the potentially insightful mining of personal experience as a point of reference for analysing experience production. It seems justifiable to make use of anecdote as a means of documenting and illustrating case studies, particularly as it can be seen to work with or against the ambitions of the artists and producers behind each of the performances addressed in this thesis, expressed either in email interviews or personal interviews. While the means of experience production might be regarded as being subjectively identified by the researcher, the fact remains that these means are open to be identified as such and consequently theorised as a contributing party to the establishment of a mutually constitutive aesthetics and politics of audience participation. One of the strengths of utilising anecdote is the opportunity to ground theory in the materiality of a performance event. Anecdote, if used appropriately, has the potential to deter abstraction. Departing from a position of engagement and framing discussion by documenting that position seems to me a fair and frank means of approaching audience participation in immersive theatre, especially when it will be argued that individuality is inscribed at the very heart of the audience experience in such work. To this end, first-hand descriptions of case studies are considered as a vital part of constructing a theoretical approach to performance analysis, especially if the



production of experience plays such an important role in an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre.

Special emphasis, then, will be placed on the production of experience among participating audiences. This will not entail an explicitly phenomenological study of the experience itself, but I will be making reference to my own experience of the case studies considered to illustrate how experience might be produced in immersive theatre. I will be looking specifically at the means of experience production and especially at the dynamics between participating audiences and these means. In addressing such dynamics, studies of affect production and risk perception will be granted special attention, particularly with theoretical regard to how audiences contribute to the production of experiences. The integration of affect studies and risk perception research, as part of a theoretical methodology, opens up space to analyse and evaluate the means of aesthetic experience production which, in this thesis, are understood to include relations between subjects. In other words, a primary means of producing experience in immersive theatre will be framed as being social, even if that sociality relates to imagined states of affairs or to an objectified self. It then becomes necessary to ask how this theoretical methodology might be nuanced by a shift in critical attention away from the theatre to the contexts that might inform it, such as neoliberalism and the experience economy. To this end, theories of political economy and marketing provide a valuable touchstone to help consider how an aesthetics of audience participation might be re-evaluated in political terms. What then remains to be accounted for is a more thorough theorisation of how aesthetics and politics might interrelate and inform one another: this account is the purview of part three, where an address of Rancière's

philosophical approach to aesthetics and politics encourages a final turn back to the theatre, concluding the thesis in a more hopeful mode of enquiry.

### **Thesis Map**

The three part structure of this thesis provides different orientations toward immersive theatre and each orientation attempts to shed new light on how the aesthetics and politics of audience participation might operate: the first part looks at an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre and treats it primarily (although not absolutely) in isolation from a political or economic context outside of coherent immersive worlds; the second part re-assesses and re-evaluates the observations and conclusions arising from the first, but in the light of the neoliberal ethos and the experience economy; and the third part looks at how an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre can be seen to grow out of one another, offering a more optimistic evaluation of these claims and some concluding reflections on what they might mean for productive participants.

Part one is comprised of two chapters, both of which discuss important theoretical material pertinent to an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre, as well as some brief reflections on the political positioning of audiences. Chapter one looks at Ray Lee's *Cold Storage* and establishes reasons why affect production is so central to an aesthetics of audience participation. Affect will be theorised and distinguished from emotion. In this theorisation, a number of approaches will be touched on to aid conceptual and terminological clarity, broadly split between body-, mind- and social-centred approaches to affect. The notion of narcissistic participation will be explored most fully here and the individualistic

possibilities of participation in immersive theatre will be introduced. Although *Cold Storage* is for an audience of one, the claims established in this chapter will be revisited in the remaining chapters as pertaining to performances with larger audiences. One reason for this is because of the political functioning of affect: its capacity to both spur and deter action, as well as the appeal of its hedonic or challenging qualities.

Chapter two looks at an aesthetics of risk perception in Lundahl & Seidl's *Rotating in a Room of Images*. Drawing on risk research in the social sciences, risk will be defined in detail and risk perception will be identified as an inherently subjective and contingent phenomenon. Aesthetic relationships between affect and risk will be explored by looking at the operation of complete darkness as an immersive trope. The participatory acts of imagining and anticipating risk will be framed as being potentially productive of affect and affect will be addressed as a potential risk for audiences given its politically charged potential to promote 'towardness', or 'awayness' from something, or someone, especially as they are imagined. An examination of trust, individualism, isolation and privacy in this performance will be used as a concluding means of bridging part one and part two.

Part two looks at immersive theatre in the context of neoliberalism and the experience economy. Chapter three – the first chapter in part two – looks at the work of Punchdrunk, paying special attention to *The Masque of the Red Death* and their corporate performance for Stella Artois Black, *The Black Diamond*. The chapter begins with a definition of neoliberalism and an account of its emergence and growing hegemony. I then identify a neoliberal value set, or what I refer to as the neoliberal ethos, and address how this same value set can be seen to operate in the kinds of participation expected of audiences in *The Masque*. This is where I

introduce and explore the notion of entrepreneurial participation. I then turn to *The Black Diamond* and consider the political implications of participating audiences being co-opted as unpaid marketers of a product placed in performance. A fresh consideration of how affect and risk operate in immersive theatre is also offered, with a politics of participation in immersive theatre framed as being deeply connected to a political and economic context outside of an immersive world that aspires to be separated from it.

Chapter four looks at the work of Shunt, in particular *Money* (2009-10) and *The Architects* (2012-13), as well as their curatorial project, the Shunt Lounge (2006-10). The chapter offers a definition of the experience economy as a genre of economic output and explores how affect, in particular, although risk is also touched on, has become instrumentally integrated within the experience economy. Immersive theatre is framed as correlating with exponents of an experience industry and the kinds of audience engagement expected of participating audiences as aligning with experiential marketing strategies. The Shunt Lounge, *Money* and *The Architects* are then each explored in turn as a means of illuminating this context, comparatively analysing the first two, especially, in relation to the London Dungeon. But this is with an eye towards appreciating how immersive theatre might also productively treat affect production as a problematic, frustrating aspect of audience engagement. I will be working towards an understanding of experience production in this chapter that is less skeptical towards a politics of participation in immersive theatre and more appreciative of the potentially subversive potential of affect production against the context of an experience economy that increasingly seems able and willing to co-opt it.

Part three begins with chapter five, continuing in this more optimistic vein by considering two curatorial events by Theatre Delicatessen: Theatre Souk and the Bush Bazaar. Drawing on, but departing from, the philosophy of Rancière, this chapter considers how aesthetics and politics might informatively be addressed as being bound up with one another. Affect production, in relation to risk perception, will be considered as a potential vehicle for revealing to audiences power dynamics that might be in operation between participating subjects within an immersive environment. A politics of audience participation will consequently be seen to emerge from an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre, especially as they relate to political and economic contexts outside of the performance space. The thesis concludes with an assessment of the implications arising from the observations and theorisations put forward in the foregoing chapters: in particular, the implications of immersive theatre's aesthetics and politics of participation aligning with those of the experience economy and neoliberalism. But it also builds on chapter five, offering some concluding reflections on how immersive theatre might playfully engage with this alignment. Frustration, boredom, annoyance and embarrassment, residing on the cusp between affect and risk, might just provide a political battleground that immersive theatre can use to its own advantage.

# Part One

## Aesthetics: Affect and Risk

## Chapter One: The Production of Affect in Ray Lee's

### *Cold Storage*

*A nurse greets me and opens up a body-sized box against the back wall of a small room, somewhere inside the Battersea Arts Centre. Her faux smile is nonetheless inviting and overcomes an instinctual resistance against entering the box. I climb inside the white padded chamber and put on a pair of headphones. The lid is closed and I relax and savour the isolated peacefulness. The only thing visible is my reflection from the shoulders up in a half-transparent mirror, lit from inside the box, set against what appear to be stars. A voice recording says that I am to be frozen for thousands of years. Cold air is pumped inside. At first it feels pretty good, but then I begin to tremble and then to shake. I watch myself quivering in the mirror with increasing violence and this watching seems to magnify how cold I feel. Heartbeat quickens. The box's sides seem to press against my body. Several thoughts spring to mind: 'is it meant to be this cold? What if there's a fire? What if nobody lets me out? Why the hell am I doing this?'*

The above documents my experience of Ray Lee's *Cold Storage*, a one-on-one performance first performed at the Battersea Arts Centre's One-on-One Festival in 2011. Ray Lee is an award-winning sound artist and composer. He is best known for his bizarre installations of 'kinetic sound machines' that respond to the movements of audiences, or the movements of Lee himself. *Cold Storage* took a different tack, far more explicitly immersing audiences in a world enclosed by headphones, retaining the essential sound element in his work, but also in a very small, very cold

box. The isolation produced in this work resonated as deeply comforting once the outside world and any pressures and anxieties consciously associated with it became temporarily distracted with the closing of the box's lid. But the performance nonetheless featured voluntary incarceration, solitary confinement and unnerving bodily convulsions prompted by an uncannily cold and claustrophobic chamber. The shivering prompted by the steady inflow of cold air undoubtedly places substantial restrictions on the ability to exercise autonomous movement, but is this all there is to say about the audience's role as a creative and productive participant? How might the elicitation of particular kinds of experience impact on a participant's thought and action and what role does the audience have in this elicitation? As a piece of immersive theatre, there are clearly significant restrictions on the audience's capacity to interact or roam freely in *Cold Storage*. But might these restrictions help to reveal something about an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre?

This chapter proposes and examines two primary hypotheses about *Cold Storage* that may help to elucidate a more general engagement with immersive theatre in later chapters: firstly, that one fundamental aspect of this performance's aesthetics is the production and experience of affect; secondly, that this element of the performance is significant for articulating a politics of participation. How does affect get produced and what implications are there in this production for a participating audience? Is affect production really all that important in immersive theatre and if so, why?

Affect might refer to a noun (a biological and psychological state), a verb (to affect something) or an adjective (describing how something or someone is influenced, or affected, by something or someone else). This chapter engages with all three of these understandings of affect by asking what affects are produced in



*Cold Storage*, who or what affects and who or what is affected. The first half of this chapter is primarily theoretical and is designed to offer a definition of affect, traversing its noun, verb and adjective forms, as a basis for an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre. This will take time, for there are innumerable definitions of affect arising from a wide range of disciplines and fields, each with ramifications for the present study. The next section places affect in philosophical context, charting two broad, but influential philosophical traditions that continue to impact on how affect is understood across such an incongruous definitional field: the Spinozist and dualist, or rational actor traditions. Affect will be established as a heterogeneous term and a means of thinking about affect will be introduced, drawing on Sara Ahmed, which might potentially traverse these two traditions by shifting emphasis away from the body-mind relationship and towards relationality. The section after that distinguishes affect from emotion for conceptual specificity. This section provides an opportunity to nuance the preceding discussion while minimising the potential for confusion to arise in my deployment of key terms. The third section engages with Ahmed's work in more detail and establishes theoretical horizons for an understanding of affect to be deployed in this thesis: one that acknowledges evolved, dispositional components of both affect and emotion, but underscores how such components are significantly impacted on by autobiography. The section titled 'Affect, Atmospheres and Aesthetics' looks at how affect production might be seen to function in aesthetic space, accounting for reasons why affect might rightly be viewed as an aesthetic characteristic of immersive theatre.

The chapter then turns to *Cold Storage*, where the important definitional positioning and approach to affect gradually unpacked in the chapter's first half will be applied to an immersive theatre performance, focusing especially on the

production of affect in the live theatre event. This section is split into three subsections: the first introduces how immersive theatre can be thought of as narcissistic, providing a means to think about affect production as being central to *Cold Storage*'s aesthetics of participation; the second looks at affect in terms of both possession and kinesthesia, offering the necessary details to make this claim; and the third looks at what makes affect function aesthetically in the performance.

The penultimate section, titled 'Affect and Authenticity', reflects on the notion of affect as an aesthetic 'site' for an audience's attention. This section is important if the riskiness of affect is to be established later in the thesis, for what I will be approaching as the necessary 'authenticity' of experiencing affect, even if stimulated by representational means, retains a comparable effect that might also be produced outside of aesthetic space. The final, concluding section figures the authenticity of affect as an 'irruption of the real' in theatre, to borrow from Hans-Thies Lehmann. This will bring discussion much closer towards an understanding of a politics of audience participation that emerges from an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre.

### **Affect in Philosophical Context: Descartes, Kant and Spinoza**

Affect studies has incorporated a host of different disciplines including philosophy, political theory, anthropology, behaviourism, psychoanalysis, psychology, physiology, biology, cognitive science (including neuroscience), cultural geography, pedagogy and sociology, not to mention the various disciplinary strands that lead into and/or out of these. Despite the number of different approaches to affect, the western philosophical tradition profoundly influenced how those approaches have

been and, in many instances, still are practised. There are two primary streams in this tradition that tend to be drawn upon, to varying extents: the first of these finds its clearest roots in Benedict de Spinoza's *Ethics* and the second with René Descartes's *Discourse on Method* and Immanuel Kant's *Critique* corpus.

Descartes famously argued that philosophy's point of departure must stem from distinguishing between mind and body, asserting mind as the sole harbinger of truth: in particular, the act of thinking itself. This distinction between mind and body is most commonly referred to as dualism and privileges the activity of mind and reason over and above corporeal or body-centred knowledge.

This privileging, although not strictly Cartesian dualism, found an influential interlocutor in Kant. Gemma Corradi Fiumara highlights the importance of Kant's transcendental idealism for the emerging theoretical concern with affect towards the end of the nineteenth century. Fiumara looks towards a passage in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which he describes the rational mind as an island 'surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the true home of illusion, where many a fog bank and ice that soon melts away tempt us to believe in new lands' (Kant qtd. in Fiumara 4; cf Kant 251). She is interested in the formation of a post-Kantian episteme in the West, whereby the 'higher' sphere of the mind's rational pursuit of knowledge is prioritised over materialistic and earthly interaction with the world around us (see also Redding).

The tradition spawned by this episteme has been dubbed the Rational Actor Paradigm (RAP). Proponents of RAP argue that immediate bodily sensations and perceptions, such as the experience of affect, can only be examined and understood by means of rational consideration. This paradigm, typified in Kant's *Critiques*,

pitches rationality as the guiding principal of individual actors; though rooted in Renaissance Italy, it ‘remains a central legacy of Western thought. It pervades our culture at all levels’, from worldviews to theories (Jaeger et al 22-23).

Dualism and RAP are relevant for affect studies, particularly regarding the ethics and politics of affect, because of their coupling of a reasoning mind with subjectivity. An agentic subject is posited as being capable of autonomously affecting something or someone as the product of a choice, especially reasonable choice. RAP, more explicitly than dualism, inputs morality into affect: accountability, responsibility and culpability all arise as being applicable to subjects as thinking, reasoning beings. So in affecting others, the rational subject directly engages with both politics, by entering into a negotiation of power, and ethics, as a consequence of having a responsibility, moral or otherwise, for the affected subject’s welfare.

The other influential stream on contemporary approaches to affect finds its most important roots in Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Instead of a reasoning mind being heralded under RAP and dualism, ideally presiding over the distracting demands of the human body, Spinoza suggested that mind and body are best configured in more holistic terms (71). He put forward an understanding of affect as a constant interplay of motions between people and things, disagreeing with the idea that affect must arise from thinking (71). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Spinoza’s *Ethics*, along with the writing of Gilles Deleuze, had a profound impact on philosophical, sociological, geographical and political approaches to affect (Massumi, *Parables* 15; Thrift 13; Clough and Halley; Gregg and Seigworth, *Affect Theory*). Jane Bennett, for instance, considers affect as being unspecific to human bodies. She regards affect as something impersonal and ‘intrinsic to forms that

cannot be imagined (even ideally) as persons' (Bennett, Ja. xii). Adapting Spinoza's discussion of affecting and affected bodies, this is part of an anti-humanist project that seeks to attribute agency to things (see also Massumi, *Parables* 15). According to Bennett, all things have the capacity to demonstrate vitality, manifested in their openness to being changed and potentially changing other things within a context of heterogeneous subjects mutually impacting on one another (Bennett, Ja. 23).

I draw on these two philosophical traditions to underscore the fact that affect is itself a heterogeneous term. In its Spinozist articulation, '[a]ffect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon' (Gregg and Seigworth, 'Inventory' 1, original emphasis). It is important to note that this understanding of affect might be applied to both humans and non-humans, because affect is figured as a flow of movements and influences. Particularly in Jane Bennett's Spinozism, agency is not strictly attributable to any one subject, but instead belongs to a network of things and people, all affecting and being affected. By contrast, according to dualism, or RAP, affect must be treated as impacting, or tending to impact, on a typically human mind and body. It may even be framed as arising from the activity of a human mind, examples being, as I go on to demonstrate, cognitive appraisal and evaluation.

It would seem fair to assume that these two philosophical traditions are incompatible. There have been important and increasingly influential shifts, particularly in the cognitive sciences since the 1980s, towards the notion of an 'embodied mind' that can be seen to trouble both Spinozist and RAP approaches to affect.<sup>8</sup> However, in the following sections I will be working towards an account of

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<sup>8</sup> For neurologist Antonio Damasio, in *Descartes' Error*, the brain and body are thought of as indissociable, 'integrated by means of mutually interactive biochemical and neural regulatory circuits

affect that leaves behind, to a certain extent, debates as to the relationships between mind and body in the production of affect. What interests me more is how affect might function both aesthetically and politically. That being said, given the nature of this conflicted field of study, it nonetheless proves necessary to take a position on the mind-body debate, albeit a position that refrains from sitting in either the Spinozist or RAP camp.

Sara Ahmed distinguishes between a sociological and psychological account of emotion that sheds light on this task, but, in making this reference, important distinctions between affect and emotion must be temporarily suspended. Broadly speaking, for the psychologist (as, indeed, for the cognitive scientist), emotions occur within the individual and are later manifested and externalised through emotional expression. Ahmed calls this the ‘inside out’ model of emotions (*Cultural Politics* 8-9), although we might also describe it as a RAP perspective. In contrast, the sociologist, not unlike the Spinozist, tends to view emotion as first and foremost a social form that becomes internalised, thus constituting an ‘outside in’ model of emotions (9). However, in the model of emotion explored in Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*:

emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish between an inside and an outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made:

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(including endocrine, immune, and autonomic neural components)’ (xxvii). This perspective participates in recent theoretical shifts toward the notion of an ‘embodied mind’ (see Lakoff and Johnson 37-38; Johnson, *Body in the Mind* xiii; Johnson, *Meaning of the Body* 1). This argument does not reduce mind to brain, but, rather, attempts to argue that mind is the product of a brain which is in a symbiotic relationship with a body.

the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others. (10)

This understanding of emotion, then, allows one to maintain that an emotion may well happen inside of us, but in a way that is in constant relation to an outside, prompting 'towardness', or 'awayness', from something, or someone. It is in this sense that Ahmed describes her approach to emotion as 'relational' (8). This perspective provides scope to think of emotion as something that may be projected out into the world by an individual, potentially affecting that world and impacting on how emotion might be felt by others. But it also allows for a consideration of such projections as impacting on how emotions are felt as emotions in the first place. Within this model of emotion, it is possible to examine and evaluate the psychological (or cognitive) components of emotion *and* its social presence. The same, I believe, though perhaps controversially, can be said of affect. But in order to make this assertion, it proves necessary to mark clear distinctions between both affect and emotion before testing the assertion's validity.

### **Affect and Emotion**

Affect and emotion, not to mention feeling, passion, mood and sentiment, are frequently, but not always used to indicate the same thing, although this collapse of different terms into one another can be misleading. Throughout *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, for instance, psychologist Silvan Tomkins approaches disgust, fear and anger as affects. Paul Ekman, a psychologist mentored by Tomkins, consistently uses these same terms to label emotions in his book *Emotions Revealed*. If affect is going to be explored as an aesthetic and political theme, not just in this chapter, but

throughout the thesis, then clear conceptual positioning is necessary that attends, especially, to affect and emotion.

### *Affect and Emotion: Distinctions*

The role of cognition and mind in the production and experience of affect has proved a bone of contention in studies of affect, particularly in psychology.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, reminiscent of the Spinozist tradition, are those like Robert Zajonc, who argue against the influence of cognition over the initial production and experience of affective states (Zajonc; see also James 120); on the other, fitting within the RAP tradition, are those like Richard Lazarus, who embrace the role of cognition as being primary in relation to bodily response (Lazarus). The questions at the forefront of debate surrounding affect throughout the twentieth century can be put quite simply: is it a phenomenon of the mind, the body, or both? Or might affect relate to something non-human, without mind, or even physiological body?

I find it useful to think of visceral processes as potential affective elements that might be involved in affective experience, without fully encapsulating affect. Viscera, writes Damasio, refers to ‘blood vessels, organs in the head, chest and abdomen, the skin’, as well as endocrine secretions (such as glandular activity) (*Descartes*’ 86). Visceral activity might include a quickening heartbeat and faster blood-flow, sweating and piloerection (a wonderfully esoteric term for goose bumps). For Tomkins, for these individual visceral effects to become a given affect, they must act in a particular synergy (151). However, as will become clear, given the

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<sup>9</sup> As Chris Brewin defines the term, cognition denotes ‘the representation within an organism of information about itself or its environment or, alternatively, the processes whereby incoming information is categorised, stored, integrated with knowledge that is already present, and subsequently retrieved and used’ (380).



important role played by cognition in producing these affective attributes, affect is not, in my eyes, reducible to visceral processes. As far as humans are concerned, to be affected is to be acted upon in such a way that both brain and body are engaged.

For a human being to be affected, then, is to be influenced by someone or something: to be made to move, think, feel or act in a way that may not be fully at the subject's command. But why is it that a given stimulus affects some, but not others, or affects us in one time and place, but not another (see Lehmann, A. 37)? The predominant commonality of visceral processes among humans would seem to imply a universality to affect that does not equate, exactly, with personal experience and observation, especially where the frequently diverse affective responses of theatre audiences are concerned. An attempt to assert universality of all affective responses is incongruent with the observation of affects in oneself and others in relation to a potentially shared source, such as a theatre performance. Whilst universality may well be applicable with regard to something like startle, for instance, affects associated with an emotional state like jealousy appear varied depending on autobiography. What this suggests is that the personal and the social are inscribed both in what is perceived as an affective stimulus and in how affect is felt to be (Damasio, *Descartes*' 124; Blair 20; Shaughnessy 32-33).

This crucial acknowledgment is supported by Magda B. Arnold's cognitive research into 'affective memory', research that will prove a valuable touchstone in this chapter. Arnold asks her readers to consider a rider once thrown by their horse. Should they see the horse again, the act of perception may cause 'immediate apprehension in the unlucky rider. These reactions can only be based on the remembered joy or pain' (Arnold 174; see also Brewin 381). This notion of affective memory testifies to the potential for affect to be both persistent and lasting,

underscoring the ways in which affect is at least partly defined by previous experience. It stands in subtle distinction from what Machon calls ‘corporeal memory’, or an intuitive form of knowledge arising from the body’s production and appreciation of its own language (*(Syn)aesthetics* 5-6). In Arnold’s account of affective memory, there is a much greater emphasis on cognitive acts of remembrance (not entirely absent in Machon’s commentary on corporeal memory): as something relating to embodiment, of course, but in a way that gives greater credence to mindfulness, as opposed to the Deleuzian idea of affect being ‘immediately conveyed in the flesh through the nervous wave or vital emotion’ (Deleuze 33; cf Shaughnessy 234).<sup>10</sup>

Arnold’s research into affective memory opens up space to think relationally about affect. In some respects, it encourages thinking about affect in its Spinozist form, as a state of in-between-ness linking both human and non-human bodies, even over time, but it also encourages thinking about affect in terms of RAP, as something impacting on a human’s capacity to think, feel and act. This means of thinking about affect is especially useful for the present study, for it encourages reflection on the imbrication of particular participants within an immersive theatre setting. One problem that I see with purely Spinozist or Deleuzian approaches to affect is a tendency to couple the production, transmission and reception of affect with cause and effect. Indeed, in Jane Bennett’s work this acknowledgment arises as a cause for concern and defensive framing (33). Bennett thinks of objects and things acting on one another as an ‘assemblage’: that is, a collection of objects and things that

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<sup>10</sup> See also Damasio’s notion of the somatic-marker hypothesis. For Damasio, emotion relates to embodied learning stretching as much into the past as the present. It also relates to processes of cognition and evaluation that are marked by it (Damasio, *Descartes*’ 173; see also 185, 196). This latter is what Damasio dubs the ‘somatic-marker hypothesis’: a technical term that, I contend, might usefully add to Arnold’s notion of affective memory. Damasio’s somatic-marker hypothesis looks at how a feeling body affects cognition (173). Damasio’s research, then, suggests that emotion impacts on what we think, how we think and consequently how we think of ourselves as a discrete self.

mutually influence the meanings and even statuses of each other across relationship networks (23-24; cf Deleuze and Guattari 4). But I am wary of collapsing these kinds of cause-effect relationships into the definition of affect being eked out here. There may well be a large number of inputs pertaining to any given affect or set of affects. However, to remove outright the potential to observe and attribute agency to any one subject who might, despite this, play a key role in affect production, is to run the risk of sacrificing political and ethical accountability wrought through the absolution of attributing agency to a thinking, feeling and potentially acting subject. This removal just does not seem to chime with observation and personal experience, particularly the kinds of observation and experience on which the analyst of participatory performance relies. My interest is with a politically engaged consideration of audience participation in immersive theatre: one that does not *entirely* do away with the ethical considerations of responsibility and accountability.

For audience participants in immersive theatre, then, the production of affect can be seen to involve some element of being moved to think, act or feel by someone or something. In that sense it is political, as it establishes relations of power. But this condition of being moved is likely to involve both visceral and cognitive activity, providing plenty of scope for the personal to become integrated within affect production. As such and with Ahmed in mind: rather than subscribing to either an ‘inside out’ or ‘outside in’ model of affect, it may prove useful to consider how it traverses both, how both the personal and the social impact on an individual’s perception of affective sources and how affect is subsequently produced.

However, in drawing on Ahmed to make this claim, it is important to specify what might be left out, or lost in translation, when applying her theorisation of emotion to a theorisation of affect. Emotions, such as fear, joy, shame and disgust,

might be understood as that which enters into the broad schema of mental activity after the more ‘primary’ phenomenon of affect, as a cognitive ‘high road’ to affect’s ‘low road’ (Plantinga 57). Perhaps this entrance marks the terrain of feeling, but feeling might instead be thought of in terms of a metaphorical spotlight of consciousness focusing in on this entrance (Blair 68; Damasio, *Descartes*’ 159).

For Arnold and J. A. Gasson, emotion ‘can be considered *as the felt tendency toward an object judged suitable, or away from an object judged unsuitable, reinforced by specific bodily changes according to the type of emotion*’ (203, original emphasis; cf Damasio, *Descartes*’ 139). Significantly, for these authors, emotion is caused by judging a given object as suitable or unsuitable and this judgment is cognitive. What is more, the subject is positioning her or himself in relation to that object, appraising its significance for self, an appraisal which impacts on the judgment and consequently on the inducing of a given emotion and its accompanying affects. As such, all emotions have an affective component, but not all affects have an emotional component. It is possible to have thought or action affectively influenced by someone without becoming emotional. But this is not to say that the personal is somehow eradicated from affect. Affect still involves cognition and is impacted on by autobiography, especially in the light of the affective memory thesis. As such, while there is a cognitive distinction between affect and emotion, with the latter narrowing affect’s conceptual horizons, I believe it is feasible to consider how Ahmed’s critique of emotion might apply to affect. What this invites is a consideration of how the personal and the social might be bound up with one another in affect production, a binding that I will be framing in terms of the autobiographical.

### *Affect, Emotion and Autobiography*

So far, I have been underlining the place of the personal, or autobiography, in the production and experience of both affect and emotion. However, Damasio, as with many other cognitive scientists, especially neuroscientists, stresses that this does not tell the whole story (*Feeling* 51). In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Charles Darwin became interested in what it was that makes animals and humans express emotion. He regarded emotional expression as ‘innate or inherited; and such cannot be said to depend on the will of the individual’ (323). For Darwin, while autonomous expressions of will must at first have proved significant for such expressions to develop, these might soon, by means of habit and inheritance over a period of many generations, become innate. The volitional self no longer needs to intervene where the body acts of its own accord, even if acting no longer serves its original purpose of aiding the survival of a species by means of natural selection. The point is that there is a strong and prosperous tradition of considering both affect (Tomkins) and emotion (Ekman) as inherited dispositions, which would seem to be at odds with the onus on autobiographical influence that I have been representing in this chapter so far. I am not looking to dispel the convincing assertion that there exist affects, such as startle, or primary emotions, that are largely the product of disposition (Damasio, *Descartes*’ 177), but I am suggesting that autobiographical, or learned inputs significantly contribute to what might be apprehended as an affective, or emotional stimulus and how those affects or emotions end up being felt (Damasio, *Feeling* 51; Saville 895-96).

There is an important point of clarification to be made at this point. Autobiography and the autobiographical are terms that will appear frequently in this thesis. Deirdre Heddon acknowledges that a central concern of contemporary

feminist theorists is ‘the inevitability of the “self” that lies in all acts of production, both creative and theoretical [...]. Creative practices are always informed by who we are, as subjects embodied in time and space, with our own cultures and histories’ (7). In one manifestation, this has been famously abbreviated in the dictum ‘the personal is political’. I have something similar in mind when speaking of a participant’s autobiographical contribution to an immersive theatre performance: the inevitability of the self that lies in an audience member’s participatory acts of production in the theatre, whether this refers to the production of affect, as is currently being discussed, or the perception of risk, as will be encountered in the next chapter.

Valorising the autobiographical in spectatorship has been popularised in theatre and performance studies by Rancière in ‘The Emancipated Spectator’ (13). What I want to do, in both this chapter and the next, is study how such valorisation takes place when participating in immersive theatre by focusing on affect production and risk perception. A point that will be frequently argued in this thesis is that audience participants bring with them to acts of participation a unique life-story and this life-story – or autobiography – impacts not only on what is identified as a locus of attention in an immersive theatre environment, but also on how that locus affects both thought and behaviour.

Much of the foregoing discussion has been oriented toward definitional clarity. I have also underscored how individuality is of profound significance to the production of both affect and emotion. Now that affect and emotion have been defined and distinguished, I want to turn to Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, looking to justify why the research arising from that book has relevance for an approach to affect production adopted in this thesis. It is this resource, informed

by those already touched upon, that seems to speak most clearly to the production of affect in immersive theatre.

### **Finding Affect in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion***

In *Cultural Politics*, Ahmed theorises the relationship between affecting and affected subjects and the environments in which they find themselves. For Ahmed, emotions are constitutive of both personal and collective identities. They are something that we all ought to have a vested interest in, for our capacities to both affect and be affected have consequences for how identities come to be.

The relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ in Ahmed’s formulation of emotion is important. When considering the sensational, or affective qualities of emotions like pain, joy, or shame, for instance, there is a demand for more than an account of a bleeding finger, smile or hung head. As Ahmed explains:

how the feelings feel in the first place may be tied to a past history of readings, in the sense that the process of *recognition* (of this feeling, or that feeling) is bound up with what we *already know*. [...] It is not just that we interpret our pain as a sign of something, but that how pain feels in the first place is an effect of past impressions, which are often hidden from view. The very words we then use to tell the story of our pain also works to reshape our bodies, creating new impressions. (*Cultural Politics* 25, original emphasis)

In the previous section’s discussion of affective memory, affect was also framed as involving associative histories peculiar to each individual. As Arnold writes: ‘[w]e *remember* what has happened to us in the past, how this thing has affected us and

what we did about it. Then we *imagine* how it will affect us this time and *estimate* whether it will be harmful. This estimate or evaluation may be reflective but need not be. In emotional reactions, it rarely is' (174, original emphasis). For scholars such as Ahmed and Arnold, despite their different disciplines, recognising an affective or emotional stimulus is at least partly bound up with what we already know. Recognition has a personal history that is impacted on by socially inscribed ideals. Recognising a stimulus as affective entails imagination and what amounts to projection onto that object, inscribing on that object a part of oneself.

It seems appropriate to illustrate what this might mean with reference to John Hurt's portrayal of John Merrick (based on the true story of Joseph Merrick) in David Lynch's film, *The Elephant Man* (1980). The surgeon Frederick Treves (played by Anthony Hopkins) saves the badly deformed Merrick from a Victorian freak show. As a consequence of how others have treated him, with insults and physical attacks (one imagines as a consequence of his 'otherness'), Merrick appears in a constant state of shame and humiliation in the early stages of the film. He is wary of all social interaction. At the slightest movement, he flinches in fear. With the support and tutorage of Treves, Merrick is gradually raised to a state of dignity, even winning the affections of Queen Victoria who sponsors his accommodation in Treves's hospital.<sup>11</sup> However, at the hands of a vile night porter, Merrick finds himself once again subjected to the most obscene practises of voyeurism even within what was meant to be the safe haven of the hospital. He is eventually kidnapped by his old freak-show master and again subjected to ill-treatment, with his old affects returning. Nonetheless, he manages to escape and returns to London, where again he falls victim to the taunts, glares and insults of others – this time in Liverpool Street

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<sup>11</sup> Words like 'dignity' and being 'raised' to it must be approached with caution. This is a dignity constructed in the specific logic of the film.



Station. This victimisation operates as the film's climax, at which point he screams 'I am not an animal! I am a human being!'

Merrick's behaviour, expressed through a shame and fear partially manifested in those flinches from contact that are so unbearable to watch, is indicative of an almost constant state of affectation when in the presence of others. Each flinch and hanging of the head refers to a history of the grossest ill-treatment, or what we now might call affective memory. While the flinch appears immediate within any given situation, it is social in origin – an origin preceding that situation, but to which that situation will contribute in its memorised form. Each act of abuse functions as a constitutive part of his behaviour and identity, neither of which is fixed in the film. Treves manages to stimulate in Merrick joy, excitement and love. These positive emotions, upon accumulation, end up having a profound impact on who Merrick is, both as he sees himself and as others see him. When regarded as a shameful human being, he is treated as one and becomes shameful. When regarded as one capable of expressing joy and love, others come to treat him with both, even if with trepidation at first. This is not to outlaw the return of shameful treatment, as prejudice carries an affective value which is significant and more than capable of overriding this joyful contagion. What the depiction of Merrick in *The Elephant Man* shows is how affect, and the emotions that it may or may not promote, has a social and relational history. And this history is nothing if not autobiographical, where autobiography is revealed as dynamically relating to other people and things that are bound up in the memory of past experiences. To reiterate Ahmed: 'how pain feels in the first place is an effect of past impressions'.

In the light of this, when Ahmed refers to her approach to emotion as relational, she refers to a given individual's relationships with other people, objects,

situations and environments in one time and place and within different times and places and how these relationships help to constitute or mediate emotional responses. It is such relationality that I believe might usefully inform an approach to analysing affect production in immersive theatre. Affect has a social as well as a natural history. It might traverse both time and place. Our affects might influence others, just as those of others might influence ourselves through the production of affect. But it is still a socially situated individual that plays a vital role in the production of both affect and emotion.

To sum up: in what follows, when I speak of emotion I will place particular emphasis on the affective component of emotion. I will also be looking at affect as something that does not just take place within an individual, but nonetheless depends on individuals. Affect then emerges as that which might reveal the boundaries between a discrete self and the social influences that impact upon it. Given the capacity for affect to exert power and influence over the person or thing affected, it seems worthwhile and important to consider who or what might be responsible. With this vital approach to affect production illuminated, it is now possible to turn to the meat of the matter: an aesthetics of affect production in immersive theatre.

### **Affect, Atmospheres and Aesthetics**

Anne Sheppard rightly notes that the notion of ‘disinterest’ has been at the heart of traditional aesthetics, especially since the eighteenth century and most notably through the writing of Kant. Broadly speaking, disinterest refers to the ‘pure’ contemplation of aesthetic objects, appreciated for their own sake as ends in themselves and detached from the preoccupations, or ‘interests’, of the individual(s)

apprehending them (Sheppard 68; cf Hegel 64). At the heart of this notion is the idea of a distance existing between the perceiver and her or his interests in the perceived that allows for critical contemplation and reflection, especially with regard to the formal components of an aesthetic object. However, if experience can itself be aestheticised, then this distance would appear to collapse. In this section, I ask: to what extent can one's own experience be aestheticised, particularly in the moment of its happening? An aesthetic attitude towards an experience that is itself aestheticised is a difficult thing to grasp, not least because of its schizophrenic nature, implying as it does a split between a self that is simultaneously experiencing and aesthetically attending to that experience. However, the fact that one is experiencing something does not exclude the possibility of reflecting on that experience and what might have contributed towards its production, especially if this more reflective process is interspersed among periods of absorption within an experience.

Gernot Böhme is right to suggest that aesthetics has canonically been associated with judgment: 'that is, it is concerned not so much with experience, especially sensuous experience – as the expression "aesthetics" in its derivation from the Greek [*aisthesis*] would suggest – as with judgments, discussion, conversation' (114). He suggests that this 'central place of judgment in aesthetics', particularly as it relates to the social function of aesthetic theory and the articulation of positive or negative responses to artworks, has 'led to a dominance of language and to the present dominance of semiotics in aesthetic theory' (115). For Böhme, the fact that this dominance exists does not render the word or the sign as an essential part of an artwork. He suggests that aesthetic judgment has clouded critical and theoretical approaches towards the perception of artworks that exist, first and foremost, as objects of perception that are independent of the kinds of meaning that aesthetic

criticism seeks to apprehend. This is what leads him to call for ‘a new aesthetics’ that concerns itself with the production and reception of atmospheres, where atmospheres are defined as spaces that are “‘tinctured” through the presence of things, of persons or environmental constellations’ (121): both ‘thinglike’, ‘belonging to the thing in that things articulate their presence through their qualities’ *and* ‘subjectlike’, ‘belong[ing] to subjects in that they are sensed in bodily presence by human beings’ (122). This sensing, he contends, includes ‘the affective impact of the observed’, hence the notion of ‘affective atmospheres’ (125). Interestingly, then, in what might be framed either as paradox or synthesis, or even as a reorientation of Dewey’s relational approach to aesthetic experience, Böhme regards atmospheres as transcending, or traversing, objective and subjective status and fixity. Aesthetic production and reception are consequently pitched as interrelating in the moment of an artwork’s being encountered; in particular, the encountering of an artwork’s atmosphere. In Böhme’s terms: ‘[a]tmosphere is the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived’ (122).

By focusing on sensuous experience over and above judgment in aesthetic interest, the new aesthetics, or, rather, a new aesthetics, invites critical reflection on how that experience sits in relation to whatever it is that is being represented to a perceiver. What if sensuous experience, or affective experience, becomes incorporated within an art work, such as an immersive theatre event? Friedrich Schiller, in an influential series of letters on aesthetics, argues that ‘no real connoisseur will be likely to deny that [art]works [...] are all the more perfect according as they respect the freedom of the spirit even in the greatest storm of emotions’ (106). This respect towards the freedom of the spirit presupposes an interrelationship between aesthetic object and aesthetic reception. Incidentally, the

latter, for Schiller, is split into free play, or 'reciprocal action' (73), between sensuousness and reason (64-66). This free play is itself productive and underscores the creativity of aesthetic reception. But where a departure might take place from this traditional approach to the philosophy of art is with a much more direct embrace of the 'storm of emotions' within which 'the freedom of the spirit' might operate, at least as this storm relates to the production of affect.

Immersive theatre's participatory aesthetics seems to thrive on play as it exists in the space between aesthetic environment (object) and audience participant (subject), for it is the participant that engages not just creative perception, but aesthetic production within an immersive environment. Sensuous experience, as a notion implied in the term 'aesthetic experience', is apt to be heightened for participating audiences confronted by the potentially pleasurable, thrilling or challenging fact of uncertainty that accompanies participatory activity. But sensuous experience might itself take receptive precedence over whatever stimulates it. Feeling thrilled or feeling affected in some other way might become a participatory goal and an incentive to attend immersive theatre performances, just as it might with any theatre performance. But where a play text or scenography, for instance, might, through judgment, provide an aesthetic source for thrill – and an aesthetic end in itself – that end seems ripe for reorientation in immersive theatre. This is not to say that scenography or a play text cannot be marvellous, or otherwise profoundly engaging; rather, it is to suggest that sensuous experience, or an encounter with an affective atmosphere, might just as well gear these means towards a less judgmental and more sensuous end.

At first glance, this view might be associated with theorists of the aesthetic such as Roger Fry and Clive Bell, writing over a century ago. This is typified in

Bell's suggestion that '[t]he starting point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art [...]. This emotion is called the aesthetic emotion' (107). But what I am considering is not necessarily, or just, an aesthetic emotion, understood as an emotion provoked by a work of art; what I am considering is an *aestheticised experience*. The audience experience in immersive theatre, I contend, is itself aestheticised within environments that seem to invite this aestheticisation. Aroused experience, then, ends up forming its own aesthetic site to be engaged with in immersive theatre. Indeed, the honing of aesthetic attention on aroused experience is one of immersive theatre's most 'immersive' characteristics.

### **The Production of Affect in Ray Lee's *Cold Storage***

With the necessary critical framework constructed, I now turn to the production of affect in *Cold Storage*. This section is split into three subsections. The first introduces why affect is so central to an aesthetics of audience participation in *Cold Storage* by elaborating on the theoretical considerations of affect production explored in the previous sections. In the light of Ahmed's work, in particular, a model of 'narcissistic participation' is put forward that seeks to elucidate the imbrication of particular individuals in identifying affective stimuli and producing affect. As such, neither the Spinozist nor RAP approaches to affect will be fully adhered to: rather, affect will be treated as something emerging at the intersection of an imaginative and creative participant and the immersive world entered into. The second subsection clarifies the nature of affect production in immersive theatre against two relevant critical approaches to embodiment among audiences: a

possessive approach to affect and kinesthetic approaches to embodiment. This is important if the centrality of affect to the immersive theatre aesthetic in *Cold Storage* is to be properly accounted for in the detail it demands. The final subsection specifically addresses how affect might be experienced as an aesthetic phenomenon.

### *Narcissistic Participation*

*Cold Storage* promises a special experience for one audience member at a time. Participants climb into a body-sized box, the lid is closed and cold air is pumped inside. This produces a sensory experience that forces audiences to respond to the cold. While some responsiveness, especially shivering, is inescapably imposed on audiences, the specific experiential terms of that responsiveness are nonetheless contingent on the particular audience member. Akin to Böhme's new aesthetics, this sensory responsiveness to a very cold aesthetic environment, which can be seen to impact on thought, action and feeling, might just as well be called affect. In fact, the production of affect seems central to an aesthetics of audience participation in *Cold Storage*. But what are these specific experiential terms and what relevance do they have for aesthetics?

Participants are positioned in such a way that they must invest something of themselves in the performance. I mean this in two ways: first of all, audiences aesthetically attend to their own experience; secondly, they create for themselves something to be perceived. In other words, audiences aesthetically render their experience of affect in an environment that invites that rendering and they also project into a participatory environment, through bodily expressiveness, for instance. This ought to be distinguished from the narcissism involved in what Nicholas

Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst identify as a self-conscious presentation of oneself to an audience, either real or imagined (95-96). I coin the term ‘narcissistic participation’ to describe a double-edged quality of attending to experience and projecting out into a participatory environment something that might subsequently be aesthetically received. Whether locked in a box or roaming freely in a warehouse, the possibility for narcissistic participation to contribute to an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre is ever-present, as later chapters suggest. But, for the time being, what can *Cold Storage* tell us about this participatory model?

In Ovid’s account of the myth of Narcissus and Echo, Echo, a nymph, falls in love with a proud male youth called Narcissus. Along with many others, Narcissus rudely rejects Echo’s advances, claiming that he would rather die than yield to her. Narcissus is damned for his pride and brashness by the goddess of retribution, Nemesis: ‘[s]o may *he* love – and never win his love!’ (Ovid 63). Narcissus ends up falling in love with his own reflection in the shimmering surface of an isolated pool – a love so strong that his self-image holds him fatally enrapt. Narcissus dies by the pool, overcome by the grief of an impossible union.

Psycho-analytic theorisations of narcissism draw on this myth to describe character disorders derived from self-absorption (Lowen; Morrison), particularly in sexual development (Freud). A sense of self, bound up with either self-aggrandisement or vulnerability, tends to be framed in this discourse as conflating with the world, in opposition to inter-subjectivity and community (Houlcroft, Bore and Munro 274).<sup>12</sup> Esteem, entitlement and a sense of power are commonly attributed to this character disorder as narcissistic motives affecting an engagement with the world and with others (Gebauer et al.). While I make no claim to an

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<sup>12</sup> For recent contestations of this formulation, see Gebauer et al.



authentic reading of the myth, appropriating it to my own satisfaction, it nonetheless seems worthwhile flagging such clinical approaches to narcissism, as a disorder, if only to set distance between these clinical appropriations of the myth of Narcissus and a very specific understanding of narcissism as it uniquely appears in this thesis – an understanding that warrants autonomous definition in distinction from this literature.

While drawing on clinical understandings of narcissism, Richard Sennett's persuasive study of an ever-increasing fetishisation of intimacy and displays of the personal in *The Fall of Public Man* provides scope to begin thinking about narcissism outside the confines of a character disorder. Sennett describes narcissism in terms with much wider applicability, as an incessant desire to feel more: '[t]he most common form in which narcissism makes itself known to the person is by a process of inversion: If only I could feel more, or if only I could really feel, then I could relate to others or have "real" relations with them. But at each moment of encounter, I never seem to feel enough' (9). Sennett then adds to this the suggestion that narcissistic feelings 'often focus themselves on obsessive questions of whether I am good enough, whether I am adequate, and the like' (11). A desire to feel more, to maximise feelings toward or even away from something, as Ahmed understands emotion and I understand affect, seems to be attended to by the supply of immersive experiences. Performances like *Cold Storage* contribute to an immersive theatre landscape of experience providers. And these experience providers seem to promote reflections on participatory rightness. To borrow from Sennett, the obsessive questions of narcissistic participants might be 'whether I participate well enough, whether I participate adequately, and the like'. The feeling 'I' can be seen to predominate in a participatory aesthetics once the pursuit of experience takes

precedence over the reading of signs, or aesthetic judgment of an environment. And that precedence ties into Böhme's notion of a 'new aesthetics'.

The 'danger' of narcissism, for Sennett, is not so much 'the evils of self-love' as 'the danger of projection, of a reaction to the world as though reality could be comprehended through images of self' (324). Dangers and evils aside, an aesthetics of audience participation in *Cold Storage* seems to invite just such a reaction to an immersive world premised on comprehension through a sense of self, but that comprehension seems to derive not just from images of the self, but from affective experience as well. This clarifies why narcissistic participation is not just about a self-conscious presentation of oneself. Affect becomes something to be at once latched onto, as an aesthetic site, and something which colours perception of and can even physically alter an immersive environment: that is, as a projection into it.

Narcissism tends to imply negativity. My model of narcissistic participation, however, is not intended to prescribe a positive or negative value; rather, it is merely intended to describe a mode of aesthetic engagement. Nonetheless, there may well be instances where negativity is applicable to narcissistic participation. An important point of Sennett's is that narcissism denotes 'the search for gratification of the self which at the same time prevents that gratification from occurring' (220). It involves an incessant search for gratifying a desire that cannot be satiated. 'The narcissist is not hungry for experiences', writes Sennett, 'he [sic] is hungry for Experience' (325). And the result: 'one drowns in the self – it is an entropic state' (325). But even here, I wonder whether the value of a negative or positive judgment might be temporarily evacuated from Sennett's observation, instead pursuing it as a line of enquiry: what does it mean to drown in the self? In the introduction, conceptual limits were placed on the descriptors 'immersion' and 'immersive', alongside the

inappropriateness of describing audiences as drowning within, or being permeated by, immersive environments. This juncture in the thesis presents an opportunity to consider this in more detail. While audiences cannot be said to drown in immersive theatre, they might nonetheless be said to drown in themselves, through a narcissistic participatory encounter.

### *Possession and Kinesthesia*

Responding to this hypothesis involves unpacking how affect might work on, from, with or through audience participants. For instance, is it right to speak of being possessed by affect? In this subsection, I will be critiquing one understanding of affect as ‘possessing’ individuals. Building on the theory explored in this chapter so far and introducing the concepts of kinesthetic sympathy and kinesthetic empathy, this subsection further justifies the significance of recognising affect’s autobiographical components. It addresses how these autobiographical components function in the production of affect in *Cold Storage*. Furthermore, it theorises what it means to imaginatively project onto something in immersive theatre. This should help in describing the creative process of how a participating audience contributes to the production of affect in as specific a way as possible in the context of a theatre event.

The notion of being possessed by affect has been explored in relation to participatory arts practise by Christopher Braddock. He suggests that ‘objects *perform* the person; that is, they [the person] become contaminated to the point that they *become* the thing’ (100, original emphasis). However, I have been describing, after Ahmed, how the affective components of an emotion like fear only temporarily

reside in a perceived object, as the product of imaginative projection. In my experience of *Cold Storage*, I was affectively possessed by the reflected image of my own, objectified and reflected shivering, only to the extent that this was perceived to be strange, uncanny and even fearful. The shiver response itself was an autonomic response to the cold and is different from the affectively distressing, but curious act of watching myself shiver so violently. The shiver itself did not possess me with fear; rather, the objectified and uncanny reflection of that shivering in the mirror was subsequently perceived to be affectively engaging. This is an important distinction, for it dissolves the potentially problematic rendering of a given object, or even another subject, as already possessing an intrinsically fearful attribute.

This critique of treating affect in terms of possession is granted critical weight when read alongside approaches to the embodied experience of watching theatre: in particular, by presenting a comparative analysis of kinesthetic sympathy and kinesthetic empathy. Hanna Järvinen describes kinesthesia as being ‘independent of sight, hearing and touch’, while exceeding the sense of balance alone; it is ‘delimited by sensations that are of relevance to the body position and the movement of the body in space, as opposed to false feelings about the body and its movement such as vertigo’ (74). Kinesthesia, then, is about feeling movement through the body. For Järvinen, kinesthetic sympathy describes how, ‘in the absence of words written or spoken’, meaning might be transmitted to spectators of theatrical dance (76). Her claim is that ‘movements made on stage *kindle* certain sensory experiences in the bodies of spectators because the spectators unconsciously sympathize with the bodies they witness’ (76, original emphasis). If sympathy is understood to mean fellow-feeling, or feeling for another premised on judging that other in relation to

self-perception, then Järvinen's model of kinesthetic sympathy seems to position sensory experience as the crux on which such feeling and judgment is based.

There is clearly a strong connection here between sympathy and my discussion of possession, as distinct from Braddock's, for there appears to be the same onus on projection into the artwork; this is not the same thing as the experiencing subject somehow becoming the art object, as Braddock would have it, but more a question of *existing with* the artwork and opening up to a state of kinesthetic possession, where that possession is itself the product of imaginatively projecting oneself onto the perceived artwork. This latter qualification is, for some, the very thing which characterises empathy, not sympathy. For Bruce McConachie, mental simulation, which runs close to what I have been calling imaginative projection, is precisely this defining quality of empathy (66). I will return to this below. For now, it is necessary only to acknowledge that this kind of projection, or mental simulation, far from rendering the subject possessed by a foreign object, is an insular, autopoietic kind of possession. Autopoiesis refers to how the elements of a given system, such as the relationship between subject and imagined object currently being discussed, 'are produced within the network of the system's elements, that is, through recursions' (Luhmann *Art as a Social System* 49; cf Carlson 7). The experiencing subject is not possessed by an object; the experiencing subject is possessed by their imagining of that object, hence, the subject is possessed by their own creative and productive act of perception (see Fischer-Lichte 150; Shaughnessy 36). It is this self-possession that is autopoietic.<sup>13</sup> In *Cold Storage*, it is as if this

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<sup>13</sup> A similar observation has been noted by Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. Sartre figures emotion in terms of belief, specifying a comparable act of creative projection of consciousness upon the world, transfiguring that world in the eyes of the beholder: 'consciousness is caught in its own snare. Precisely because it is living in the new aspect of the world by *believing in*

tendency is directly confronted by Lee's decision to place a mirror in the box. It is as though he is confronting narcissistic participation. By having the mirror so close to the audience's face, the participant – short of shutting their eyes throughout the piece – has no choice but to engage with their own reflection and acknowledge their own status as one who watches and one who is watched, albeit as someone watching him or herself. The participant consequently has their status as both producer and receiver explicitly revealed as such.

This model of kinesthetic sympathy is perhaps best read alongside the more commonly articulated notion of 'kinesthetic empathy', first put forward by Deidre Sklar, but more recently explored in Susan Leigh Foster's *Choreographing Empathy*. According to Foster, for the German aestheticians who invented the term in the 1880s, *einfihlung*, or empathy, described 'a kind of physical connection between viewer and art in which the viewer's own body would move into and inhabit the various features of the artwork' (10). Foster also defines sympathy as fellow-feeling (154), but distinguishes this from empathy, where empathy is

the distinctly human ability to move into and feel anything in the observable world [...], to enter into their dynamic state and experience its uniqueness. [...] Rather than receiving a picture of the other and replicating it in one's own mind, the observer now grasped the other through a simultaneous *moving into* and *melding with* the substance of the other. (154, my emphasis)

I have reservations about this notion of moving into an other, melding with it/him/her. This is what Brecht might have called 'crude empathy': 'a feeling for another based on assimilation of the other's experience to the self' (Bennett, Ji. 10). I

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it, the consciousness is captured by its own belief, exactly as it is in dreams and hysteria' (80, original emphasis).

also feel that Järvinen's understanding of kinesthesia allows more space to figure the personal in a relational approach to affect and how the personal might taint perception of an object of aesthetic appreciation. Not only that, but I find the notion of moving into and inhabiting something or someone strangely akin and prone to the problematics of possession, at least in Braddock's account of it. This is not the same as suggesting that empathy is not possible; rather, it is a case of challenging the model of empathy just accounted for.

If empathy is to be employed as a term, I find it useful to think of it as a 'wish feeling', to borrow from Ahmed, 'in which subjects "feel" something other than what another feels in the very moment of imagining they could feel what another feels' (*Cultural Politics* 30). Or, as Jill Bennett writes, empathy is characterised by 'a distinctive combination of affective and intellectual operations, but also by a dynamic oscillation, "a constant tension of going to and fro," as Nikos Papastergiadis has put it, "of going closer to be able to see, but also never forgetting where you are coming from"' (10).

Strangely enough, Sklar, who coined the term 'kinesthetic empathy', would seem to agree. Sklar considers kinesthetic empathy as a 'capacity to participate with another's movement or another's sensory experience of movement. [...] It is a matter of re-cognizing kinesthetically what is perceived visually, aurally, or tactilely. [...] [I]t is a translation capacity' (15). According to Sklar's model, then, kinesthetic empathy is precisely not a question of entering into another, but of translating the perception of another's movement on the basis of personal discrimination (hence translation), which is itself the product of 'education, cultural preferences, and practice' (16).

The place of the personal and the significance of the personal in the production of affective experience is lost in the state of complete possession which seems to be hit on by both Foster and Braddock. In contrast, considering narcissism as a kind of mirroring which preserves the personal through the encounter with an aesthetic object, by means of imagination and self-projection, leaves plenty of space to account for the personal in the production of affective experience in aesthetic appreciation. It is this sympathetic sense (or even empathetic, in Sklar's account) that leaves more room to factor in the place of the personal in the production of affect.

The sympathetic model of kinesthesia preserves the experiencing subject as something distinct from the object perceived, but in such a way that the threat of being possessed by that object might still be confused with what is actually happening: i.e. autopoietic possession. In my experience of *Cold Storage*, it was the otherness of my reflected shivering body that set an unsettling distance between a discrete sense of self and what I was watching in the mirror. The perceived threat to self implied in this objectification, which shall remain a threat short of psychological collapse, might then be realised as a productive source of affect.

From the foregoing, it is clear to see that an aesthetics of immersive theatre participation in *Cold Storage* refers not just to the placing of an audience within a performance environment, but also to the experiential qualities of perceiving objects within that environment. To feel theatre is to feel objects of aesthetic perception as they are channelled through the personal. Immersive theatre does not possess the body; what is taken to be possessive in immersive theatre turns out to be the result of a complex interplay between imaginative engagement, self-projection, narcissism and affect, all intertwined and mutually enforcing. In my analysis of *Cold Storage*, it



was demonstrated how this kind of imagining can itself be affectively charged, rendering affect a crucial element of the immersive theatre experience.

Narcissistic participation – the turning inwards of attention towards experience and projecting outwards into an immersive theatre world – need not be limited to *Cold Storage*, nor even immersive theatre more generally. However, the example of *Cold Storage* illustrates how aesthetic attention might be shifted from the stage to experience itself in immersive theatre. The stimuli of a given experience seem to matter much less than the encounter with those stimuli in an affective field of production: hence, immersive theatre's promotion of the narcissistic participant.

This may seem reminiscent of G. W. F. Hegel's *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, but his focus there, or at least part of his focus, is firmly on the reasons why an artist might want to express something: '[t]he universal need for expression in art lies, therefore, in man's [sic] rational impulse to exalt the inner and outer world into a spiritual consciousness for himself, as an object in which he recognizes his own self' (36). What I am suggesting here, however, is that a comparable consciousness of oneself is at work in an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre, alongside an opportunity to recognise the self. The subject who potentially experiences this consciousness and realisation is not an isolated artist, but a participating audience. On the one hand, then, I am echoing a point that has provided an important cornerstone in the history of aesthetic theory. However, on the other, I am calling for an embrace of sensuousness and an address of the audience experience as an aesthetic site: both in its introspective and projective forms. As such, if this onus on the production of affective experience holds, an aesthetics of audience participation in performances like *Cold Storage* are revealed as having a peculiarly narcissistic quality.

In sum, I depart from theorisations of audience engagement and affect production conceptually premised on possession, as the source of affect is likely to come from an individual projecting onto what only seems to be an originating source of affect. That is not to deny that an object, environment or person might influence perception of each as being potentially affective. Immersive theatre environments present potential affective stimuli, but they are only actualised as such if perceived to be affective and that act of perception depends on the participant. So the production of affect in an immersive theatre work like *Cold Storage*, as with Ahmed's model of emotion, can be seen to come from both within the participant and an immersive world which is perceived by the participant.

#### *Affect and ESTHETIC DELECTATION*

So far I have been addressing the production of affect in *Cold Storage*, in particular how the experience of being locked inside the box drew more attention than the box itself. An experience of affect became central to an aesthetics of audience participation in *Cold Storage*, both as an introspective turning inwards of attention and as an expressive projection outwards into the confined interior of the box: i.e. narcissistic participation. What I wish to do now is explore why this drawing of attention onto affect is best described in terms of aesthetics. What is it about *Cold Storage*, exactly, that makes affect function aesthetically?

Without the participation of a spectator, *Cold Storage* would be in a constant state of incompleteness, for an integral aesthetic locus would not yet have entered the scene. The piece exists for an audience, because the piece *is* the audience. I mean this in a number of ways: firstly, as addressed in the two previous subsections, the

way in which the piece is apprehended is creative and constitutive; secondly, immersive theatre environments, whilst they might have outstanding aesthetic merit, seem to function more as a vehicle, or technology, for the production of experience, particularly affective experience, which becomes the primary focus of the theatre event. In *Cold Storage*, the box and the cold air constitute the technologies which help to produce this, but eventfulness does not become so until the spectator begins some kind of interaction with the box. The box and cold air function as ‘feeling technologies’, to borrow from Erin Hurley: ‘mechanisms that do something with feeling’ (28). And these technologies, in many respects, serve the aesthetic experience of participating audiences.

Within the world of immersive theatre performances like *Cold Storage*, a world entered into with an eye predisposed towards aesthetic engagement, affect becomes aestheticised in a way that it perhaps would not be outside of aesthetic space. Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, though perhaps not initially intended as objects for ‘ESTHETIC DELECTATION’ (Duchamp 141, original emphasis), demonstrate how our encounters with a given object morph once placed in an environment geared towards aesthetic appreciation. A urinal placed in an art gallery is subjected to an aesthetic surplus, even if that surplus is unintended. It gains a special kind of resonance and demands a special kind of attention. As the Russian Formalists would have it, it is made strange and granted a kind of autonomy and individuality not usually afforded outside of aesthetic space or fictional narrative. Comparably, discussing the work of Società Raffaello Sanzio, Bryoni Trezise uses the word ‘sensationship’ to describe how audiences might focus on *feeling* feeling (208). I contend that the same is true for the experience of affect in immersive theatre; it becomes aestheticised as a consequence of the environment in which it is

experienced. And by virtue of that aestheticisation, it is possible to attend to affect. This does not detract from the ‘reality’ of affective experience; rather, affect is granted a special kind of attention afforded by its entry into aesthetic space.

If a urinal is placed in an art gallery, in some respects it ceases to be just a urinal; it becomes an art object. It may never again capture urine, transforming its operative qualities into a receptacle for an indefinite number of meanings and purposes which might be read into it. Once aestheticised, does affect function similarly? Does it become qualitatively different from affect as it might irrupt outside of aesthetic space? What might an experience of affect be said to represent in immersive theatre? The next section looks at the difference between feigning affect by mimicking affective expression and affect itself. Previous research within theatre studies has focused on this in relation to acting emotion, most notably in the work of Peta Tait. Taking Tait’s work into consideration, I will focus instead on the impossibility of audiences experiencing unauthentic affect in the theatre. Although representational strategies might be employed to contribute towards the production of affect, it will be argued that the experience of affect – as distinct from its display – is not mimetic. One reason for engaging with this notion of an ‘unauthentic affect’ is to prepare theoretical ground for approaching the perception of risk in immersive theatre in the next chapter, for if affect has a hand in the perception of risk, then the perception of risk becomes more than just a perception; it becomes something experientially knowable, or at least feelable, producing a threat for audiences defined at the level of affect. What is more, establishing the authenticity of affective experience means re-thinking how politics might function in an aesthetic space otherwise connoting idealism, fiction, possibility and even utopia; it is to establish an affective politics of participation founded in an aesthetic encounter.

## **Affect and Authenticity**

In the foregoing, I accounted for how *Cold Storage* at least partly shifts an aesthetic 'site' of performance from an immersive environment to the participant's affective experience of the work. This experience relates to a perceived immersive world, as well as a unique history brought into that world by a participant. What this encourages is reflection on the representational status of immersive theatre's aesthetics of participation. Are the affects produced in *Cold Storage* and work like it representational?

It seems to me that this particular aesthetic element of immersive theatre is not about doubleness, or mimesis. That affect has become an object of aesthetic appreciation is not the same as suggesting that it is mimetic; it might be granted a special kind of attention, or made strange, but that does not equate to mimesis. The affect produced is not *not* an affect; it is an affect which is experienced as such, despite its aestheticisation. As Shaughnessy suggests, the here-and-nowness of immersive theatre 'equates to a form of authenticity which is unreproducible – even if we experience it again' (189). The hub of this here-and-nowness is experience, or, it seems to me, the experience specifically of affect.<sup>14</sup> Whilst the environment which has a hand in triggering affective experience may well look to represent something, to provide an immersive landscape situating its audience in a given world, the affect itself does not represent anything other than affect, even though it might draw attention to why a particular affective state might have been produced. As Trezise has suggested, drawing on Hans-Thies Lehmann, affective spectatorial experience is ripe to occur despite the fact that it is triggered in a world of representation (213). As

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<sup>14</sup> My focus on affect marks a move away from Shaughnessy's observation. She prefers to look instead at Walter Benjamin's notion of 'aura' as a means of elucidating the authenticity of this here-and-nowness (189-90).

such, there is a literalness to the experience of immersive theatre. Like Fried's literalist art object, the experience of affect in immersive theatre does not 'signify, or allude to anything' (Fried 143). Consequently, I propose that there is no such thing as an unauthentic affect. It seems to me that the audience's experience of affect in the theatre, particularly in immersive theatre, is beyond representation and cannot be mimetic.<sup>15</sup> The realm of the real is not something that performance can claim as its own and mark off from theatre; an aesthetics of audience participation derived from affect production opens up access to this realm, albeit within cohesive aesthetic worlds that are distinctly other.

In *Cold Storage*, an experience of fear or isolated peacefulness is not representational of fear or peacefulness; it *is* fear or peacefulness. It makes no difference to the authenticity of affect if it is perceived to be trivial in relation to more intense experiences, nor does it matter that the stimulus which helped to produce that response was looking to mimetically represent something. In fact, that seems to have been Lee's intention in *Cold Storage* (Lee, email interview). The intention seemed to be to place the audience in a position where they might experience, by means of imagination and representation, a state of suspended animation for many, many years, waking up at some point in the distant future. In my experience, this was not the important part of the performance at all, despite the apparent intentions of the artist; rather, this performance was about relocating where an important aesthetic site of theatre can be seen to sit. And that reorientation impacts on how theatre can be said to function representationally.

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<sup>15</sup> As an aside and to clarify: I am distinguishing between what affects audiences and the affect itself. As such, my claim is not to be confused with the subject of Colin Radford's bewilderment in his article, 'How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina'. For Radford, being moved to tears by the fate of a fictional character is nothing other than incoherent (Radford and Weston 78). My focus, in contrast, is not on what might move an audience, but the movement itself: i.e. the state of being affected in the theatre, as a state that becomes aestheticised.

‘Certainly, performance of emotions are theatrically constructed’, writes Peta Tait, ‘which suggests also that a display of emotions can be manipulated within a social context’ (3). Tait *appears* to be separating emotion from its performance, thus implicating the idea, after Judith Butler, that the social component of emotion, at least, conforms to a stylised repetition of acts, rehearsed and repeated. The onus on the display of emotion which is so important within a social context, wherein we might also situate the theatre, is consequently constitutive of emotion ‘norms’, according to this model, which are typically gendered and bound to specific cultures and periods.<sup>16</sup> Demonstrating her commitment to Butler, this point is illustrated by Tait as follows: ‘[i]f participation in miming or enactment reproduces the feminine in social languages, it follows that miming emotions as feminine brings them into existence through and as gendered states’ (158). The appearance of separation between emotion and its display in Tait’s writing, then, is only an appearance, for the separation of ‘inner and outer bodily spaces’ which this implies does not necessarily take place (8). Tait is effectively giving experiential and visceral weight to Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender by taking a comparable theoretical model and applying it to the rehearsal and repetition of emotions as stylised acts. This challenges the supposed naturalness of the emotions by looking to underline their status as structured phenomena without an authentic original.

Ahmed’s relational model of emotion and, it might be argued by extension, of affect which has been put forward in this chapter, defends how even dispositional, evolved and inherited affective states might be nuanced and adapted by a stylised

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<sup>16</sup> For an alternative historicisation of the emotions, see Roach’s *The Player’s Passion* (see especially 218). For an ethnographic account of the cultural construction of emotion as mediated by emotional display, see Benedicte Grima’s *The Performance of Emotion Among Paktun Women*. For an opposing discussion of emotion as an imposition undermining a more general performance of self, after Erving Goffman, see Harré and Parrott’s ‘Embarrassment and the Threat to Character’, particularly their discussion of a dramaturgical account of embarrassment (45-46).

repetition of acts famously discussed by Butler and applied specifically to the emotions by Tait. The point, as I see it, and which consequently diverges from Tait, is not that these inherited affective dispositions are somehow unauthentic; they are authentic insofar as they are adapted, or even produced by autobiography. Acknowledging plurality need not bar conceiving of affect and emotion as being authentic for the experiencing subject, even if both are regarded as cumulatively structured on the grounds of personal experience over the course of a lifetime. The bone of contention, then, is not with Tait's theoretical engagement with emotion as a socially structured phenomenon; rather, the bone of contention is with labelling that structured phenomenon as being void of authenticity. Whilst normativity might be rehearsed and reproduced along the lines outlined by Butler and Tait, the peculiarities of one's autobiography render what is perceived to be an affective or emotional experience as being contingent on the personal. Thus, it is important to recognise the means by which affect might be rehearsed and reproduced, particularly in cultural representations on the stage, while also acknowledging that the inner experiences of affect and emotion are potentially inscribed with social meaning (Tait 145). However, it might also be noted that the relationality of affect that Ahmed draws attention to is something impacted on by a number of inputs which are dependent on individuality and this renders the total hegemonic potential of affect and emotion as limited, for the very reason that the number of these inputs is so vast.

In sum, Tait suggests that '[e]motions are recognisable because they are performable conditions. [...] It is in their performance, either as imagined and/or displayed, that emotions assume social meanings' (170). In this formulation, the display of emotion performed by an actor becomes constitutive of emotion through its rehearsal and repetition. However, I think it is important to distinguish between



how such an act can become constitutive of emotion through its contribution to a cultural milieu, as an act of cultural expression performed in front of an audience or audiences and consequently rehearsed and repeated over time and what that actor is experiencing in the moment of expression. Despite the observation of Ekman and others that emotional display is critical not just to the recognition of emotion in others, but also to the socially managed experience of emotion, or ‘display rules’ (Ekman 4; cf Goleman 113-14) and despite the interesting applications of Ekman’s work to actor training made by those within neuroscience and the theatre studies discipline,<sup>17</sup> it seems pertinent to acknowledge that one can give a convincing performance of emotion or affect without being affected. This is the point famously defended in Denis Diderot’s *The Paradox of Acting* (see in particular 16-17, 74, 108). Not only this, but the performance of emotion without affectation can produce its own kind of contagion, presenting an audience with stimuli that may well produce a given affect or emotion (again, a point made by Diderot).

This is best exemplified in a famous exchange between Dustin Hoffman and Laurence Olivier on the set of *Marathon Man* (1976). The method-trained Hoffman stayed awake all night to portray a sleep-deprived character. Olivier, noticing his dishevelled appearance on set the next day, responded with the quip: ‘Why don’t you try acting?’ (Esch 46). For Hoffman and other method actors, contra Diderot and Olivier, convincing display of emotion or affect in the theatre can be produced by trying to evoke stimuli which will reliably induce an affective or emotional state in the actor, thus coupling the display of affect with affect itself. Behavioural

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<sup>17</sup> There are some within the theatre studies discipline, as well as neuroscientists like Susana Bloch, that defend how mimicking emotional expression can produce emotion in the actor. ‘ALBA emoting’ takes Ekman’s findings at face value and applies them to actor training in an effort to develop an acting technique which allows for controllable emotion (see Bloch, ‘ALBA EMOTING; Rix, ‘ALBA EMOTING’).

psychologists would no doubt sympathise with this.<sup>18</sup> However, for Diderot and Olivier, all that is necessary to arouse sympathy in the audience is to convincingly adopt the display of affect by means of mimesis.<sup>19</sup> In neither case is an unauthentic affect produced in the actor. In the first instance, an affect is or is not produced which results or does not result in affective display; in the second, affect is not produced at all, only its mimicked display.

I suggest that this same logic should apply to audiences. The display of affect, particularly as subject to the display rules of Ekman, is perhaps not as pertinent for audiences watching theatre in a darkened space, despite the corporeality of feeling: for instance, changes in facial expression as a source of personal pleasure or displeasure. In immersive theatre, on the other hand, audiences are rendered performing subjects who frequently perform in the presence of other subjects who also both perform and spectate. In *Cold Storage*, the audience is the only performing subject, a subject forced to stare at their own reflection in the backlit mirror of the cold box. The display of affect, of one's own affective state, is aesthetically rendered; should one so wish, it would be possible to heighten or even mimic affective expression. Whilst this might potentially serve as an amplifier for affective experience, it is not reducible to that experience. Either one is affected by the performance and all that is brought into that performance at a subjective level, or one is not. In sum, whilst it is possible for affective display to be performed without

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<sup>18</sup> Rhonda Blair usefully charts the influence of the behaviourist school on Stanislavski and those he influenced, including founders of the Method school of acting in the US, in *The Actor, Image, and Action*.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Roach records a wonderful anecdote which helps illustrate the discrepancy between display and affect in the theatre: '[t]he name of one Perkins, hair-dresser and wig-maker, enters into the history of the eighteenth-century stage on the strength of a technical contribution to David Garrick's Hamlet. The actor employed his services to enliven the Prince's first encounter with his father's ghost [...]. When other spectators marvelled that Hamlet's hair actually seemed to stand on end as the ghost appeared, they testified to a fact. The ingenious Perkins had engineered a mechanical wig to simulate the precise physiognomy of mortal dread. On the line "Look, my lord, it comes", the hairs of this remarkable appliance rose up obligingly at the actor's command' (58).

being affected, it is not possible for affect to be unauthentic, even if it is recognised that affect and emotion are at least partially subjected to social structuring.

### **Conclusion: The Irruption of the Real**

The observation that affect cannot but be authentic ought to at least acknowledge that authenticity might still be subject to degrees. For McConachie, the mind is not taken in so easily by figurative or representational stimuli. For him, the thing invested in as an affective stimulus, whilst it may be productive of affect, is of a lesser order than a comparable stimulus outside the world of make-believe:

Within theatrical play, humans can almost always distinguish between a stimulus of fear or panic emanating from the stage and a stimulus that directly threatens their lives. Spectators may vicariously experience Blanche Dubois' panic within the make-believe of [A] *Streetcar [Named Desire]*, but if the scenery catches on fire and people are rushing for the exits, the perceived threat to life and limb will put an abrupt end to play time. (51)

What this perspective presupposes is that the real cannot irrupt within the aesthetic, but may only do so as an imposition from outside of it. However, to borrow from Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*, the 'closed fictional cosmos' (99) assumed in this perspective has for quite some time been intentionally opened up by numerous directors and theatre companies, such as Società Raffaello Sanzio and Forced Entertainment, as well as having remained an often unintended risk inscribed in theatrical representation itself. Such unintended risks have also been explored by Ridout, where realness is revealed as an implicit part of the machine of theatrical

representation once that machine begins to break down: through actors ‘drying’, for instance, or ‘corpsing’ (168).<sup>20</sup>

The intentional deployment of an irrupting real is also exemplified in the work of Extant, in particular *Sheer* (2012), where a company of blind actors perform for an audience in pitch black. Their blindness is not representational, for they are blind, and neither is the darkness enveloping the audience, for the darkness which envelops them and the sight which it consequently deprives them of does precisely that; it does not represent the deprivation of sight. The representational frame, as a totalising, enclosing frame, is consequently ruptured by that which is not just representing blindness, but presenting blindness as a presence partly shared between blind actors and a temporarily blinded audience in the pitch black.

I want to consider the irruption of the real – a term borrowed from Lehmann’s *Postdramatic Theatre* (99-104) – as something that is produced among participating audiences, not as a consequence of theatre failing, but as a consequence of how affect gets produced in the theatre, especially in immersive theatre.<sup>21</sup> Catherine Bouko is right to suggest that ‘postdramatic performance rejects the convention of illusion and reinforces the manifestation of a concrete experience, here and now’ (30). For me, though, an important root of this here-and-nowness can occur in spaces of illusion, or even *in spite* of illusion. The irruption of the real is an

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<sup>20</sup> An example of a different ilk to the instances of corpsing, drying and the like studied by Ridout is Finbar Lynch’s playing of the Cardinal in a production of John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* at London’s Old Vic (2012). The actor broke his arm in a motor cycle accident towards the end of the rehearsal period, evidenced by his wearing of a black sling in performance. For one critic, this unintended irruption of the real made a welcome entrance to the aesthetic of the play (Lawson).

<sup>21</sup> Ridout comes close to voicing a comparable opinion in his account of Samuel West catching his eye in a production of *Richard II*, whereby embarrassment accompanies acknowledgment of the actor’s labour conditions (70-81). Ridout’s focus, however, is drawn more to the material conditions of theatrical production and the dissolution of theatrical representation. It should also be noted that I depart, slightly, from Lehmann’s specific instance on the self-reflexive use of the real in postdramatic theatre (103). Affect production, as an irruption of the real in immersive theatre, may, or may not be self-reflexively intended by immersive theatre makers – it may just as well be coincidental.

implicit part of affect production among theatre audiences. The panic that an audience might empathetically share with Blanche Dubois is not *not* panic. Even though the stimulus might reside in the world of make-believe, the affect does not. Whilst the scenery catching fire might produce a more intense affective experience, the engagement with character just described is not somehow rendered unauthentic. The spectator is, as Marie-Madeleine Mervant-Roux maintains, borrowing from Elie Konigson, a ‘guardian of reality’ (231). For Mervant-Roux, the spectator is ‘firmly anchored in social reality’ whilst investing in ‘the poetry of the stage’ (232). This reality, whilst it is social, also has an affective element and it is this element which serves as an irruption of the real, perhaps even reminding the audience of their anchoring within reality.

Figuring the spectator as a guardian of the real serves to underline the theme of responsibility which has been steadily introduced in this chapter, but from an inverse perspective. Mervant-Roux seems to suggest that this responsibility anchors and roots the poetry of theatre in the context of a material social reality. It is in this sense that the spectator, as a guardian of the real, functions as an intermediary. So, in *Cold Storage*, where affect functions as an aesthetic site for the theatre event, the participating spectator becomes a vessel through which theatre passes and is realised. This vessel is not solely of the theatrical world, for the audience functions as a guardian of the real and retains coherence as a distinct personality, nor does the theatrical world absorb or take over the audience-as-vessel; rather, as medium, the affected participating subject, through projection and imagination, personalises that theatrical world. And this ultimately designates an aesthetics of audience participation, as well as the profound productivity of participating audiences in immersive theatre.

This chapter has argued that affect plays a central role in an aesthetics of audience participation in *Cold Storage*. The next chapter sees how this might apply to Lundahl and Seidl's *Rotating in a Room of Images*, where a second cornerstone of this aesthetics will be introduced: risk perception. In what follows, affect production and risk perception will be approached as elements of an aesthetics of audience participation that are thoroughly bound up with one another.

## **Chapter Two: The Perception of Risk in Lundahl &**

### **Seitl's *Rotating in a Room of Images***

*A woman in blue stands to my left and gestures for me to sit down. She approaches and covers my ears with headphones and hangs a sling containing an MP3 player across my shoulder. The lights fade to black. A young female voice asks me to stand up and in doing so I make the first of many stumbles. The lights fade back up and the orientation of the room has shifted 90 degrees to form a long, white corridor: a trick made possible by the use of fabric drapes to mark the space's boundaries. The lights fade back to black. The voice asks me to reach out my hand before another hand gently touches mine. Despite its gentleness, the touch comes as a shock. The hand guides me through the darkness. Somehow this person can see. This is the hand that will appear from above, below, in front of and behind for me to find as the stumbling and fumbling continues. The lights fade up. The dimensions of the room have changed again. Like a game of hide-and-seek, this goes on. I soon find myself facing myself; a camera protrudes from a fabric wall in front of me and I am writ-large around it. I look behind. Nothing. I look back at the projection, but this time a man and a woman appear in shot, walking towards me: a couple seemingly plucked from a Baroque painting. After more searching through the dark, I find the couple and the woman in blue performing a ritual of some kind behind a set of open doors. The voice in my headphones asks me to approach. When I draw near, a performer stands in my path. We look into each other's eyes. The door is closed.*

This describes my experience of *Rotating in a Room of Images* by Christer Lundahl and Martina Seidl: a performance programmed the same year as *Cold Storage* at the BAC's One-on-One Festival. *Rotating* revisited and revised *Recreational Test Site* (2007), also performed at the BAC, which itself shared some stylistic and technological techniques with an even earlier manifestation, *My Voice Shall Now Come from the Other Side of the Room* (2006). These three performances chart an important part of Lundahl & Seidl's on-going aesthetic interest in sensory deprivation and limitation. All three performances limit vision, or deprive audiences of sight altogether, either through white-out goggles, or by fading the lights to black at intermittent intervals. Much like *Cold Storage*, headphones are also placed over the ears of participants to provide narrative and blot out any unwanted audio spill, promoting a highly controllable sense of aesthetic cohesion. In other words, sensory deprivation or limitation is used to turn aesthetic attention inwards, towards an experiencing self that searches, feelingly, in a coherently perceived immersive world. Coherence need not necessarily refer to an ease of understanding; it might just as well refer to synergised aesthetic qualities that may or may not appear fully cognisable. In these performances, techniques of sensory deprivation and limitation end up deployed as an immersive medium and I want to address what that medium can tell us about an aesthetics of audience participation.

Audiences have experienced darkened theatre auditoria at least since André Antoine's 1888 production of *La mort du Duc d'Enghien*, after the advent of highly controllable electric lamps in 1879. However, Ridout argues for 'much earlier attempts to achieve a dark auditorium in the case of the theatre of San Giovanni Crisostomo (1677) in Venice' (48-49). Watching theatre from within a darkened space has become an assumed fact of experiencing many theatre events, albeit one



that, some claim, only started to gain widespread traction following suit from cinema in the early twentieth century (Welton, 'Possibility of Darkness' 9). Perhaps also in debt to Richard Wagner's pursuit of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, or total artwork, blackening the immediate space outside of a theatre stage focuses audience attention on a world of representation on the stage. This can be seen to promote immersion by engrossment, despite the separation existing between the world on stage and the sedentary space of the auditorium inhabited by an audience. But the origins of darkened auditoria and their overwhelming dominance in contemporary theatre contexts is perhaps less relevant to a study of darkness in *Rotating* than a consideration of how the pitch-black, specifically in immersive theatre, affects audience participation. There is an important difference between watching theatre in the dark while seated in an auditorium and participating in the dark while moving through a space. That difference, I believe, relates to the perception of risk. What the veil of pitch-black bestows on a performance, from an audience's point of view, is uncertainty. This chapter addresses why this is so, why this might be important for an address of participatory aesthetics and how that aesthetics might relate to a politics of audience participation.

### **Pitch-Black Theatre**

Pitch-black theatre and installation art events have been performed with increasing frequency over the past ten years. Most famous, perhaps, is Miroslaw Balka's installation *How It Is* (2009) at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall: a simple, but effective container in which individuals could be immersed and move in total blackness. ThisNowThis's *Anemone* (2011) at Camden People's Theatre involved audiences

being prodded and poked from all angles amid occasional shards of light beaming from hand-held torches. As touched on in the previous chapter, Extant's *Sheer* (2012) at Stratford Circus was performed by a company of blind actors in pitch-black. Sound&Fury's *Going Dark* (2012), performed at London's Young Vic, made audiences share in the deprivation of sight endured by the performance's protagonist as he slowly went blind. Though seated, audiences were encouraged to look all around them, especially upwards, straining to see whatever light sources punctuated the darkness. Another Sound&Fury work, *Kursk* (2010), also made use of pitch-black at the Young Vic to great effect and their earlier performance, *The Watery Part of the World* (2003), performed at Battersea Arts Centre, has received critical acclaim for its employment of total darkness. With a brief prologue aside, the entirety of David Rosenberg and Glen Neath's *Ring* (2012-13) took place in the pitch black and used binaural sound recordings played through headphones to deceive audiences into thinking that characters were really whispering into their ears, in addition to the recorded sound. This three dimensional sound recording technology has reached a zenith in recent years and despite having experienced many such performances in the past, I was still tricked into collapsing the virtual into the actual in a pitch-black performance space where such distinctions could not be visually verified and where uncertainties prevailed.

Depriving audiences of sight has also been approached by theatre makers in a number of other guises aside from blacking out theatre spaces and these other guises introduce a highly charged eroticism to the live participatory encounter. This is especially true of Ontroerend Goed's *The Smile Off Your Face* (2007) at C SoCo in Edinburgh, where audiences were blindfolded, with their wrists bound, forced to submit to the control of the performers. Bad Physics's adaptation of Louis de

Bernières's *Sunday Morning at the Centre of the World* (2011) at the Southwark Playhouse used blindfolds toward less erotic ends, treating the blindfold as a device to focus the audience's attention on senses other than sight. It is also worth mentioning the use of hoods covering the entire head in recent theatre events, particularly those purporting to 'kidnap' or hold audience members hostage, such as Lucien Boujeily's *66 Minutes in Damascus* (2012) at Shoreditch Town Hall and the second part of Punchdrunk's corporate performance for Stella Artois Black, *The Black Diamond* (2011).

Depriving audiences of sight, then, has been frequently deployed by theatre and performance makers over the past few years. It seems worth asking what is so special about immersing audiences in the pitch-black to warrant such prominence. This chapter engages with *Rotating* as a specific iteration of a more sweeping contemporary aesthetic interest in darkness, approaching the deprivation of sight as an instrument of immersion. Total darkness surrounds audiences within a constant and indefinite pool of blackness. But what might the use of pitch-black in immersive theatre, as an instrument of immersion, tell us about the production of affect for a participating audience member? And how might this instrument of immersion impact on theorising an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre?

In this chapter, I will be focusing on those moments in *Rotating* that take place in complete darkness. Taking my own experience of the dark in this performance as a point of departure, this chapter addresses, first and foremost, the perception of risk. Why did the gentle touch of an unseen hand seem shocking, at least initially? The hypothesis explored in this chapter proposes that the perception of risk has a fundamental role to play in affecting an audience's attitude, thought and behaviour in immersive theatre, taking my own experience of darkness in *Rotating*

as a case in point, emblematised in my reaction to the touch of an unseen other. As such, I will be enquiring into the relationships between affect production and risk perception, particularly as both might relate to an aesthetics of audience participation. As the chapters that follow look to demonstrate, this hypothesis asserts that risk perception is not just derived from an experience of darkness; rather, it asserts that the experience of darkness, as an affectively resonant instrument of immersion, renders abundantly clear an aesthetic facet of audience participation in immersive theatre that is partly derived from the audience's perception of risk.

The suggestion is, then, that the presence of affects and sensations as contributing inputs to and possible results of the perception of risk are not novel to, but nonetheless are especially clear in the pitch-black and even clearer when audiences are invited to move in the pitch-black. In the midst of this dyad, between affect production and risk perception, is a subject who thinks, feels and imagines: that is, an authorial subject. Affected audiences desire, fantasise and worry, projecting out into a space a number of possibilities of what could be lurking somewhere in the unseen (Bleeker 18). But how might an experience of and movement within the dark amplify this intrinsic facet of spectatorship, in excess of Rancière's urge to regard viewing as an authorial action ('The Emancipated Spectator' 13)? Watching theatre attests to more than the act of looking and thinking; it is a creative, imaginative and embodied act that is distinct from receiving some rigidly defined entity with a sovereign and stable meaning. But how might moving and watching, especially in darkness, send such acts into overdrive? What then happens to the political figuring of a participating audience?

The scope for audiences to be rendered creative subjects in pitch-black theatre, the scope for audiences to participate by means of imaginative projection, is

wide. Maaïke Bleeker acknowledges that ‘we always see more or less than what is there’ and that seeing is imbued ‘with ideals, values, presuppositions, fears, and desires’ (18). This perspective shares a great deal with Ahmed’s writing on emotion, for there is a comparable onus on pitching the individual subject as the harbinger of something productive, be it productive of emotion, or productive of what is seen. In both cases the subject’s productivity does not occur in isolation, but in dynamic relation with an outside: the emphasis is on co-production. Another goal of this chapter is to unpack what might be meant by this dynamism. It seems to me that this particular reading of the audience’s creative status is granted a degree of credence when read in terms of risk perception. The participant’s status as a creative co-producer can be both observed and examined and this has implications for that participant’s political status.

The remainder of this chapter is split into three sections: the first places risk in theoretical context, exploring important distinctions between risk as a measurable uncertainty and subjectively defined risk perception, assessing the significance of these distinctions through an analysis of *Rotating*; the second, ‘Affect and Risk in the Dark’, looks at the various ways in which affect production and risk perception interrelate in *Rotating*; a final, concluding section sums up the claims arising in the chapter, before looking at how risk perception relates to trust, isolation and privacy. This concluding shift of attention towards trust introduces the significance of a critical shift deployed in the next part of the thesis, where the arguments arising in part one will be re-assessed in the light of immersive theatre’s political context, especially as that context relates to economics.

## **Risky Thinking, Risky Practise**

In a forthcoming chapter in *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science: Body, Brain and Being*, '(Syn)aesthetics and Immersive Theatre', Machon recalls her own experience of *Rotating*. For Machon, this was a gentle, trusting performance. Risk is not mentioned in her chapter, implying that, for Machon, it was either not perceived, or did not warrant reflection. In contrast, my recollection of *Rotating* recounted above illustrates a very different response: one permeated by a sense of anxiety, as well as thrill, manifested in the shock accompanying the first gentle touch of an unseen hand in the dark. Far from being antagonistic, these divergent responses to the work are testament to the rootedness of experience in particular individuals. But, despite this rootedness, I believe it is still possible to suggest that risk is an implicit part of experiencing much immersive theatre – an implicit part of its aesthetics of audience participation – and that this implicit part is rendered most clear in pitch-black theatre.

Responses to the integration of risk within the immersive theatre style are likely to be divergent; for instance, as the above illustrates, an engagement with risk might just as well result in the positive experience of gentility as it might in the challenging experience of trepidation. But the plurality of possible affective responses to risk perception does not alter the possibility that risk is there to be identified in immersive theatre, provided that clear definitions of risk and the operation of risk perception are offered. It is to this task that the chapter now turns.

## *Defining Risk*

In the introduction, I suggested that risk is a phenomenon sometimes related to, but distinct from harm (Jaeger et al 171). I drew on Reith to help elucidate how risk ‘is defined by and through temporality: the notion of “risk” expresses not something that *has* happened or *is* happening, but something that *might* happen’ (59, original emphasis). In other words, risk necessitates an engagement with something that is unknown. An influential voice in risk research, the twentieth century economist Frank Knight, was at pains to distinguish uncertainty from risk. For Knight, where uncertainty signals something which cannot be measured, risk can be measured. What this perspective defends is that risk can be objectively identified from any subject position. For Knight, the distinction between risk and uncertainty provides the basis upon which profits might be made in the broader context of a market of actors (19-20). But once risk is extended outside of a purely economic context, without forgetting that context, the place of uncertainty in risk seems integral and becomes, I believe, its defining attribute (see Luhmann, *Risk* 28; Jaeger et al 17). As Owen rightly points out regarding an approach to risk analogous to that of Knight, uncertainty is not something that can be evacuated from the notion of risk without fundamentally altering what it stands for; risk’s remainder in the face of measurement – that is, uncertainty – ‘introduces dynamism, the possibility for disruption and the potential for gain or loss’ (39). Risk might then be broadly defined as an engagement with an uncertain future in the present, treating uncertainty as its most important attribute, no matter how honed the techniques to quantify and measure risk. Engagement with risk necessitates processes of imagination, anticipation or expectation, not to mention possible experiences of affect and emotion, as to what could possibly happen at some future point. To engage with risk,

then, is to engage with possibility. This section will be working towards an understanding of risk that is at odds with Knight's definition, culminating in the subsection on risk perception. In that subsection, risk will be explored as something subjectively identified and defined, in relation to a broad range of influences.

Charting the history of risk's emergence, as a concept and practise, has achieved a degree of consensus in sociology, although varying etymological roots have been foregrounded. Reith looks toward the seventeenth century Anglo-French *risqué* to underscore the ways in which time and uncertainty can be seen to complement one another (64). In the contemporary British context, the meaning of the word *risqué* has accumulated semiotic baggage and tends to be used to describe something or someone as edgy, controversial, erotic, potentially dangerous or morally questionable, but nonetheless hedonistically inviting. Peter Bernstein prefers to approach risk as deriving primarily 'from the early Italian *risicare*, which means "to dare"' (8). These etymological inputs might both be treated as informing a contemporary understanding of risk today.

Sociological consensus tends to couple the emergence of risk with the devolving power and influence of religion in the European Enlightenment: a devolution partly inherited from the Calvinist valorisation of worldly endeavour in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Bernstein 1; Luhmann, *Risk* 13; Lyng, 'Sociology of the Edge' 21; Reith 59). This emergence might also be figured within the concurrent rise of RAP explored in the previous chapter, especially with regard to Knight's understanding of risk as a measurable uncertainty. My dismissal of this perspective contributes to the ways in which multiple understandings of risk, as a concept and a practise, have evolved and are likely to continue doing so, even across different contemporaneous contexts.



A growing number of sociologists are subscribing to the view, most famously promulgated by Ulrich Beck, that risk has been playing an increasingly significant role in the lives of citizens in countries all around the world. Comparable, but not reducible to RAP, this view frames risk as something that paradigmatically pervades culture at all levels (Jaeger et al 22-23). But unlike typical RAP perspectives, this pervasion can be rooted as much in feeling, particularly affective and emotional feeling, as it can in reasoning. Speaking primarily about Europe and the US, Frank Furedi labelled the 1990s as promoting a ‘culture of fear’, in a book of the same name. This labelling hit upon the affective and emotional side of risk as something permeating even our innermost selves, troubling Knight’s understanding of risk as a measurable uncertainty.

So how did this pervasion of risk come about? In his seminal 1986 publication on risk, *Risk Society*, Beck argues that advances in knowledge and power ‘from techno-economic “progress” is being increasingly overshadowed by the production of risks’ (13; cf Luhmann, *Risk* 28). The creation or development of fertilisers, power sources (especially nuclear power), fuels and the like, have the capacity to produce both calculable ‘risks’ (in Knight’s sense of the word) and wholly unanticipated consequences, often as the product of technological advances (see Taleb). This is what led Beck to earmark the late twentieth century as a ‘risk society’: or, in Scott Lash’s terms, a more disordered ‘risk culture’ or set of ‘risk cultures’ (47). Although Beck’s concern was mainly ecological, his thesis can be extended to account for a much broader range of risks, as many other commentators have set out to do (see especially Gardner, D.; Furedi).<sup>22</sup> Public transport bombings

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<sup>22</sup> In doing so, the extent to which the ‘risk society’ might be called a ‘world risk society’ is diminished. For more on this, see Beck’s ‘World Risk Society as Cosmopolitan Society?’

and a host of other terrorist threats (see Merolla and Zechmeister), malnutrition, obesity, AIDS, any number of animal flus, recessions, funding cuts... Scaremongering is something easily exploited by the mass media to the extent that risks of various kinds seem commonplace. It is the commonplaceness of risk that the risk society thesis alludes to.

If risk is going to be pitched as having fundamental relevance to an audience's encounter with immersive theatre, then this discursive context should be borne in mind. As this section goes on to demonstrate, risk perception does not occur in isolation, but depends on what a subject brings to it and it seems likely that this 'bringing with' will spring from a subject's personal experience of a very particular historical moment. Significantly, the apparent omnipresence of risk has the power to hold sway over thought and action: it has political power. As such, to take risks is to act politically, while to have risks imposed is to be politically acted upon. It seems unlikely that either pole of this binary might be comfortably inhabited, but negotiating the pull between risk-taking and risk-bearing is not only possible, but profound in our contemporary context. As discussed in the introduction, this is precisely what Owen seems to find so compelling about risk. This distribution begs some important questions: politically speaking, what does it mean to engage with risk today, particularly in the context of immersive theatre? How is risk distributed and who ends up better off?

A useful means of approaching these questions is provided if audience participation is conceived as a practise. In a comparable way to theatre makers practising the craft of theatre, so might audience participants practise participation in immersive theatre. This idea will be explored most fully in part two of this thesis and provides a foundation for my notion of entrepreneurial participation. But what the

idea of practising participation offers present purposes is a means of thinking about engagement with risk in immersive theatre in the light of Owen's risk-taking and risk-bearing subjectivities touched on in the introduction. What does it mean to practise risk in immersive theatre, either as a risk-taking, or risk-bearing audience participant?

### *Practising Risk*

Stephen Lyng uses the term 'edgework', borrowing from Hunter S. Thompson, to refer to the many ways in which risk might be practised and his commentary on edgework offers two frameworks to help with thinking through audience participation as a risky practise. The first regards edgework practises as a 'means of freeing oneself from social conditions that deaden or deform the human spirit through overwhelming social regulation and control' ('Risk-Taking Experience' 10; see also Simon, 'Taking Risks'). Practising risk-taking in the light of this framework can be seen as a response to sanitisation, bureaucracy, or a host of other governmental processes, particularly, that are perceived to restrict free expression and activity. The notion of social regulation and control might also be elucidated if risk itself is acknowledged as being structurally embedded in, for example, a government's approach to the welfare state. Although speaking primarily about New Labour, Bishop acknowledges the relevance to current coalition government policy in the UK of structurally embedded risk, especially through the rhetoric of volunteerism: 'social participation is viewed positively because it creates submissive citizens who respect authority and accept the "risk" and responsibility of looking after themselves in the face of diminished public services' (*Artificial Hells* 14).

Likewise, drawing on Pat O'Malley, Owen takes interest in the largely governmental institutionalisation of risk as a valorised practise bearing an especially close relationship to responsible citizenship (258-60). This is what Jacob Hacker has dubbed 'the great risk shift', describing the US context (although much the same can be said of the UK over the past thirty years): a shift in which citizens undergo 'a massive transfer of economic risk from broad structures of insurance, including those sponsored by the corporate sector as well as by government, onto the fragile balance sheets of American families' (6). I will be addressing the political and economic context framing risk more thoroughly in the next chapter, but it is necessary at this point to introduce what Lyng means when he describes risk-laden social conditions in terms of social regulation and control – a point that, once plucked from the clarity of its original context, might otherwise end up prone to the vagaries of abstraction.

Lyng's first framework addressing edgework practises regards practises of risk-taking as subversive responses to a regulatory framework, be it bureaucratic, governmental, or work related, among a number of other possible regulatory frameworks. Applied to immersive theatre, audience participation might also, potentially, be regarded in these terms: as a subversive response to a regulatory framework. Viewed as an edgework practise, audience participation in immersive theatre might be approached as an attempt to reclaim control of how risk influences and operates on thought and behaviour, on however small, or trivial a scale. However, as will become clear below, this proposition is certainly contentious.

Lyng's second edgework framework refers back, even more explicitly, to the risk society in which risk-taking 'is itself a key structural principle extending throughout the social system in institutional patterns of economic, political, cultural and leisure activity' ('Risk-Taking Experience' 8). This framework takes a more

sceptical view of the socio-economic context just touched upon, expressing pessimism toward the possibilities for edgework practises to operate as resistant or subversive. This framework regards edgework practises as potentially prompting the desire for risky practises in the first place, regarding that desire not as a radical intervention against a regulatory system but as an exponent of it. It also regards outlets for edgework practises as being, at least potentially, imbricated within a much wider and more pervasive network of risk-taking, more often than not allied with a sanitisation of risk, or a capitalisation on the desire for risk-taking. An example here would be the rise of adventure companies that promise an experience of risk in the wild, such as white water rafting, where the most risky part of such an experience among expert professionals would be the car journey there (Holyfield, Jonas and Zajicek 177). In such a context, risk ends up being both sanitised and potentially subject to capitalisation, despite, or because of the potential for thrill to be derived from the experience.

Either of these two frameworks – of aiming to free oneself from the risk society’s social conditions, on the one hand, and regarding risk as a structural principle affecting risk-taking’s subversive potential, on the other – might usefully aid an address of a politics of participation in immersive theatre. Where the first might be seen as a political act of resistance against the risk society, the second – and this will be addressed in part two – makes space for third parties to exploit that potentially political act, deriving profit from the desire which lies at its heart.

According to the definition of risk explored so far, risk perception among immersive theatre audiences might result in feeling just about anything. If the risk turns out well, it might promote excitement, thrill, joy or a rewarding sense of trusting and being trusted. Drawing on Lyng’s first edgework framework, practising

risk in immersive theatre may even have the potential to be subversive in the context of the risk society, which may end up promoting a sense of fulfilment, satisfaction, or pride – bearing in mind that these consequences may just as well be co-opted towards profitable ends by third parties. But a number of challenging alternatives might also emerge. An audience might end up feeling exposed, vulnerable, accountable, or responsible for something or someone in a way that may be at odds with what they want, desire or value. This, too, may be subversive of the risk society by virtue of how such feelings might resist profitable co-optation.

This being said, applying risk as a tool for analysing immersive theatre is not as simple as dividing into a binary good and bad responses to a risk scenario. I define a risk scenario as any occurrence involving risk perception among one or more subjects, either inside, or outside of a theatre space. To illustrate why such a binary division is misleading, I refer to some possible encounters with responsibility in *Rotating*. Conceived as a risk that might be practised, responsibility has both positive and negative possibilities implied within it. This is what renders responsibility as risky; the outcome arising from being responsible for something, such as participating in *Rotating* in a way that does not disturb the artistic integrity of the performance, as the artists might be seen to have imagined it, might turn out either well, or badly. Responsibility is not fixed as being either good or bad, restrictive or freeing. It might even have attributes of both, depending on the particular individual caught within the risk scenario. To be responsible for *Rotating* as a participant – or, to be more precise, to be partially responsible, sharing what may be only the tiniest part of a network of responsibilities with the theatre makers and the institutions housing and funding the event – might result in a sense of empowerment, or a pleasing feeling that one is being trusted and respected. But what if a transfer of

responsibility is not wanted, no matter how minimal the efficacious implications of that transfer? What if even the gesture of a transfer of responsibility onto the shoulders of audiences leaves them nervous or anxious in the absence of a clear indication of what that transfer entails? Where is the line to be placed between participating as a submissive figure and a committed maverick? What if audiences end up feeling exposed, vulnerable or accountable for something that they did not want to be held accountable for? To complicate the uncertainty of responding to a risk like responsibility even further, what if the potential for anxiety to be produced in relation to responsibility might in fact be experienced positively, as a thrilling challenge?

In the previous chapter I examined the production of affect in *Cold Storage* and by applying Ahmed's relational approach to emotion to that examination I demonstrated how an individual participant's autobiography is drawn into the performance by means of projection and imaginative engagement. It seems to me that if risk is defined as it has been in this chapter so far, then something similar is at stake. Participation in immersive theatre involves practising risk, whether or not a risk scenario is identified as such and especially if a particular performance is being experienced by an audience for the first time. This does not mean that audiences are put at threat of physical harm in immersive theatre; rather, it means that audiences are being asked to participate in something in which the end points of the performance, or means of achieving those end points, are likely to lack certainty for the participating audience member. In other words, the aesthetic terms of audience participation in immersive theatre, given their relation to uncertainty, relate to an encounter with risk. Risk is integrated within the participatory aesthetic, no matter what the threat of physical harm might be. Theatre companies and audiences can

minimise the scope for this uncertainty to emerge, but that is not to say that risk will be rendered null and void for participating audiences. One reason why this is so is made apparent once risk, as an objectively and empirically validated quantity, is distinguished from risk perception.

### *Aesthetics of Risk*

When Lehmann calls for ‘an aesthetics of risk’ in his conclusion to *Postdramatic Theatre*, he calls for an engagement with taboo as it resides at the interface between theatre making and audience reception. My reading of ‘an aesthetics of risk’ places less onus on breaking with taboo and more on how risk gets perceived, as a politically charged phenomenon. I agree with Lehmann that ‘[t]he politics of theatre is a *politics of perception*’ (185, original emphasis), but I am especially interested in exploring such a politics through the audience’s perception of risk and risk-taking, alongside affect production. For me, the terms of perception’s political charging relate to how aesthetics and politics can be seen to intertwine – but I reserve an explicit account of their mutuality for part three. For now, it is necessary to lay out what is meant by risk perception and how it ties into an aesthetics of risk.

The Oregon Group, comprised of Paul Slovic, Baruch Fischhoff and Sarah Lichtenstein, are pioneers of what has come to be known in risk perception research as the ‘psychometric paradigm’. The psychometric paradigm ‘encompasses a theoretical framework that assumes risk is subjectively defined by individuals who may be influenced by a wide array of psychological, social, institutional and cultural factors’ (Slovic xxiii). Significantly, this paradigm recognises just how highly dependent risk perception is ‘upon intuitive and experiential thinking, guided by



emotional and affective processes' (xxxi). The psychometric paradigm is based on four intentions:

- to establish 'risk' as a subjective concept, not an objective entity,
- to include technical/physical and social/psychological aspects in risk criteria,
- to accept opinions of 'the public' (i.e. laypeople, not experts) as the matter of interest,
- to analyse the cognitive structure of risk judgments [...]. (Renn and Rohrman, 'Risk Perception Research' 17)

To be clear: my reference to the psychometric paradigm is not intended to flag a research method to be applied in this chapter, at least not directly. I refer to it only to indicate how risk might be conceived in terms of perception, as something explicitly distinct from Knight's understanding of risk. Two important implications arise from this distinction for an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre: firstly, it suggests how risk perception might occur in a risk-assessed theatre space; secondly, it provides scope for a range of possible responses to an uncertain future, thus reconciling the possibilities in *Rotating*, as a case in point, for divergent affective responses to emerge from perceiving a given stimulus, such as the touch of an unseen hand. In short, the psychometric paradigm ascribes to risk perception the importance of autobiography in an individual's aesthetic encounter with a live theatre event.

The psychometric paradigm constitutes a major shift from the macro level of the risk society to the particularities of how individuals encounter risk. What the psychometric paradigm does is ground risk in the mind and body of a thinking,

feeling and potentially acting subject. It marries risk to risk perception. Individuals, in relation to their social context, are the ones who create the risk society, contributing to that society through conversation, blogging and just about any other activity or practise that transmits or expresses an individual's understanding of, or engagement with, risk. Individuals remain the seat of risk's existence. This does not bar the possibility that social regulation might affect risk perception, as Lyng acknowledges; rather, it provides theoretical grounding for the assertion that such social regulation is still mediated through an individual and will consequently be thought about and acted upon differently across different subject positions.

This point is clarified once the multiple sources which might impact on risk perception are foregrounded and risk perception is treated as a multi-dimensional phenomenon (Renn and Rohrman, 'Risk Perception Research' 41). Treated as such, various social and cultural affiliations are likely to have a role to play in affecting risk perception, as opposed to some monolithic and singular source such as government, although such a source may still prove significant. These kinds of affiliations are likely to produce similar risk perceptions among those within particular social and cultural groups (Douglas and Wildavsky 6-9), but the sheer number of contemporary affiliations is likely to promote a fairly complex set of contributing inputs to an individual's risk perception.

As Ortwin Renn and Bernd Rohrman suggest, elements of this 'multi-dimensionality' include a number of 'heuristics that individuals and groups use when forming judgments about risks', 'cognitive and affective factors that influence the perception process', 'the social and political framework in which individuals and groups operate' and 'cultural factors that govern or co-determine' these other dimensions ('Cross-Cultural', 221-222; see also Tversky and Kahneman). Risk

perception, then, is not simply determined by the macro scale of a society, but is imbricated in a considerably more complex process of sociality and cultural production. The individual and society are not taken as isolated inputs, but interrelated contributors to the multi-dimensionality of the production of risk perception. This perspective regards individuals as potentially contributing to the framing of risk within a given social milieu: a milieu that will also contribute to how risk ends up being perceived, alongside innumerable other inputs such as government, the media and the family.

To sum up: the perception of risk, as something which is subjectively defined by an individual and contingent on prior exposure to a host of different inputs, is distinct from more objective accounts of risk, such as Knight's measurable uncertainties. Conceived as such, risk perception arises as an important part of an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre as a consequence of participation demanding an engagement with largely uncertain end points and means of achieving those end points. In other words, to participate in a context of uncertainty is to contribute to both the aesthetic production and experience of immersive theatre. To participate is to imagine, anticipate, expect, or feel what a possible future might hold. Possible futures might involve either good or bad experiences of performance, but identifying those experiences as being either good or bad will depend on the participant and may even involve elements of both.

Approaching risk in this way helps to elucidate why I found the gentle touch of an unseen hand so shocking in *Rotating* and why Machon seems to have derived such a different set of responses from the performance. I am not suggesting that an individual consciously contemplates the experience of darkness mid-performance as being risky (although they might, particularly as far as sensationism is concerned, to

recall Trezise) and I am not suggesting that an individual treats risk as a measurable uncertainty, as Knight would have it. Rather, whether they like it or not, audience participants are forced to encounter uncertainty in this work because they are less knowledgeable about the world in which they find themselves compared with the performers populating that world, especially if the performance is being experienced for the first time. It should also be noted that this does not prohibit the possibility of bettering participation in relation to other audience members. Previous exposure to immersive theatre and especially the work of Lundahl & Seidl is likely to counterbalance the extent of this uncertainty – indeed, this is going to be a key argument put forward in the next part of the thesis – but the fact remains that the audience is likely to be confronted by a situation in which they are asked to participate, but of which they might know very little. This openness to possibility is what is risky for participating audiences, particularly the *perception* of various possibilities that might arise through one's participation, despite the capacity for efficacious action that may in fact be handed over to audiences: a capacity that may be fairly inconsequential. Even if, in hindsight, it is revealed to an audience that they had very little control over a performance, there is still plenty of space in the live moment of performance to encounter risk as a participating audience. Repeat attendance either to the work, or comparable immersive theatre performances, may procure a sceptical attitude toward risk perception, but once the notion of risk is uncuffed from both physical harm and measurable uncertainty, it arises as a concept that might usefully impact on how we understand an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre.

It is worth returning at this point to a vital adjunct: the contingency of an aesthetics of risk on particular audiences. For Machon, the gentle touch of an unseen

hand in *Rotating* seemed beguiling, playful and dreamlike; for me, it was not that these characteristics were absent from the hand's tactile invitation to guide, but that they were experienced differently. An important stimulus producing experience for an audience in such a moment – the touch of a hand in darkness – remains much the same for all audiences who experience this work; what changes are the other inputs which impact on aesthetic experience, inputs that are contingent on the participating audience's state of mind, their disposition towards participatory work and many other contingencies too numerous to list, such as an attitude towards tactility. Is it any wonder, then, that the relationships between performers and audiences in immersive theatre performances like *Rotating* are imbued with uncertainty?

Addressed in the light of risk perception research, what emerges through this commentary is a hyperactively creative subject. To borrow from Bleeker, an experience of darkness makes apparent how 'we always see more or less than what is there' and that seeing is shot through 'with ideals, values, presuppositions, fears, and desires' (18). The perception of risk is contingent on the participant involved and it is consequently dependent on the multiple inputs or dimensions pertinent to risk perception. As a participant, my perception of risk is likely to be informed by the rules of thumb deployed in, for instance, anchoring a particular risk scenario in the light of previous and comparable experiences (see Tversky and Kahneman 1128). In order for risk perception to occur, then, there must also occur a colouring of something as risky. In the terms articulated in the previous chapter, this might even be identified as a creative act of projecting onto an object of perception the status of its being risky: even an imagined object, such as an unseen hand approaching the body of an audience member.

There is an assumption that has been underlying this subsection: that acts of anticipating or expecting, as acts of imaginative projection into an immersive theatre environment, play an important role in the perception of risk. But what justification is there that supports this idea of a subject projecting the status of 'risky' onto something or someone, beyond my account of the psychometric paradigm? Is it right to figure participants in this way, as hyperactively creative subjects?

Some useful justificatory material has indeed arisen from the social and cognitive sciences that would seem to support the claims I have been making. The promotion of prudence in relation to risk, for instance, where prudence equates to a value, testifies to the precautionary principle: a principle that Furedi argues has become engrained not just through social and political life (107), but has also become absorbed by individuals as the number of professed risks escalates and the notion of victimhood becomes all-pervasive (100-01). For Furedi, '[t]here exists a disposition towards the expectation of adverse outcomes' (53) and this disposition, what he also describes as a 'pervasive mood' and 'free-floating consciousness', tends to attach itself to 'a variety of concerns and experiences' (20). A comparable view has also been supported in cognitive science. Justin L. Barrett's research into the Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device (HADD) asserts that human beings are predisposed to seek out and attribute risk as an evolutionary principle, for it is better for survival to assume risk than forego that assumption and end up being harmed (189). Taken together, the research of both scholars suggests that projecting onto something the state of risky is a very real and identifiable process.

On a separate, but related note, the discrepancy between the threat to life caused by smoking and the potentially more intense, affectively present risk of harm through farming and consuming genetically modified foods, for instance, has been

commented on by Dan Gardner (12). This discrepancy derives from how degrees of risk are attributed to some things, but not others. Roger E. Kasperon et al have approached the notion of imaginative projection from the perspective of social amplification in the US, responding to data which suggests that '[d]espite the expenditure of billions of dollars and steady improvements in health, safety, and longevity of life, people view themselves as more rather than less vulnerable to the dangers posed by technology' (177). Elsewhere, Sarah Moore and Adam Burgess observe how 'a *sense of risk* can become attached to an experience or phenomenon through the vagaries of the law or the campaigning of individuals' (1, original emphasis). For this to happen, both the law and campaigning, or whatever it might be that attaches a sense of risk to an experience, must be experienced and processed, either consciously or unconsciously. Either way, risk perception still depends on the individual mediating between something like a law or campaign and whatever it is that is perceived as risky.

All of these perspectives leave space to position the individual as a mediator of risk perception. Although the seeds of a given risk perception might be socially constructed, it still takes the imaginative projection of an individual to render risk not just affectively present, as an anxiety, for instance, but present *tout court*.

Another useful means of thinking about how risk gets identified comes from Ahmed. Although she comments on how someone or something might be rendered the subject of an emotional attachment of some kind, it seems to me that there is space in her work to consider risk perception as well. Comparable to what I have been calling imaginative projection is Ahmed's notion of 'stickiness', described 'as an effect of surfacing, *as an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs*. [...] Stickiness depends on histories of contact that have already impressed

on histories of the object' (*Cultural Politics* 90, original emphasis). In order for an object to become sticky, however, it requires an interlocutor and this interlocutor is not some passive recipient of an object which is already sticky; rather, I would argue, in the context of risk, that for something to be observed or experienced as sticky it requires the observer to render it as such, provided that that rendering is understood as being profoundly influenced by the multi-dimensionality of risk perception. So, for instance, whilst there may be an instinctual drive to fear the dark in *Rotating*, the 'stickiness' of that darkness being perceived as risky is likely to relate to a whole host of experiences and associations: growing up as a child, watching films, reading ghost stories, etc. Such influences impact on why we might encounter the dark as risky. They stick to the darkness, as affective residue, but the sticking is done by an interlocutor that, in this case, might otherwise be called a participating audience. With this in mind, the perception of risk seems best approached in terms of its relationality: in terms of what the individual subject projects onto a thing, space or person. This is about aligning the personal with social space, testing the ways in which risk perception, as with Ahmed's understanding of emotion, helps us to acknowledge the fluidity of the personal, the social and an immediate environment (*Cultural Politics* 70).

Given its capacity to infuse an environment – a theatre environment, say – risk has an immersive quality. Unlike theatre spaces with sedentary auditoria, free-roaming in immersive theatre, especially, maximises the degree of uncertainty unfolding before an audience by amplifying acts of anticipation, expectation and imagination as participants walk within and around different spaces. This, in turn, maximises the potential for risk to be perceived, felt and acted upon. To speak of immersive theatre, then, is to extend an understanding of aesthetics beyond aspects



of theatre such as *mise en scène*, lighting and even use of multiple spaces; it seems that an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre can also refer to the imbuing of spaces as risky, via the audience's perception of risk, consequently immersing audiences in risk's ambience as a product of risk-laden imaginative projection.

What this onus on an imagined, anticipated, expected or felt future in *Rotating* encourages is a revisiting of the claims arising from the previous chapter, most notably the proposition that the production of affect plays a fundamental role in an aesthetics of audience participation in *Cold Storage*. I now want to add risk perception to that proposition, only this time discussing *Rotating*, looking at how both the production of affect and the perception of risk might interrelate as central and integral attributes of this aesthetics. The hypothesis now is that the production of affect and the perception of risk might form two components of an important bedrock behind an aesthetic experience of immersive theatre performances and that these two components might in fact interrelate.

### **Affect and Risk in the Dark**

Of all of the dimensions to risk perception, one will be granted special attention in this section: affect. Renn and Rohrmann are not alone in underlining the significance of affect in the promotion of risk perception (Zinn and Taylor-Gooby, 'New Risks' 66). As proposed in the previous chapter, affect is, simultaneously, an aestheticised site of the audience's attention in immersive theatre as well as an authentic experiential site, despite the representations that may have a hand in co-stimulating,

along with perception, the production of affect. But what relevance might this have for risk perception in performance?

This section reflects upon and examines my experience of *Rotating* with several goals in mind; the first subsection addresses reasons why affect production is so central to this piece; the second reassesses this centrality in relation to risk perception, identifying and analysing the ways in which affect production and risk perception might be intertwined in a participant's live encounter with an immersive theatre performance like *Rotating*; and the third addresses some implications arising from this intertwining on the basis that the authenticity of affect production might find its counterpart in the reality of risk perception.

#### *The Production of Affect in Rotating in a Room of Images*

There is something uncanny about staring into the pitch-black, eyes darting within their sockets up, down, left and right and yet seeing nothing – something derived, perhaps, from vision involving a whole perceptual system and not just an eyeball linked to a brain (Gibson 205). Perhaps this uncanniness, as Martin Welton suggests, is the product of this perceptual system being set apart from the glaring lights of a Debordian spectacle (*Feeling Theatre* 53). But Welton also suggests that '[i]n the absence of the touch of any *thing*, what is felt in or as darkness is the activity of feeling itself' (63, original emphasis). So what can this activity tell us about the production of affect in *Rotating*?

While the activity of feeling is apt to be recognised here as a locus of the participant's attention in immersive theatre – i.e. sensationism (Trezise) – so might

the embodied activity of trying to see be regarded as a potentially affective source. What is more, in the absence of touching any *thing*, as Welton puts it, or of seeing any clearly distinguishable things, the audience may project out into the blackness something that might disappear were the lights to be switched on. Such an imaginative act is all the more likely if, as is the case in *Rotating*, the participant has indeed been touched by an unseen hand in the dark before. Who is it that has this capacity to find me? What else are they able to do? So audiences, in seeing more than what is there, although perhaps basing that creative process on previous experience, make for themselves a number of other potentially affective sources.

Removing the spectator's capacity to see, to spectate, is to potentially narrow focus on the theatre experience. It encourages participants to think spatially about the body. I mean this in the sense not just of a spectating body in space, a space of potential obstacles to walk into, but also, and importantly, in the sense of configuring attention as being turned both inward and outward: that is, turning attention to space within the body in relation to space outside of the body (Sheets-Johnstone 365). This narcissistic interplay, between what takes place in the body and mind and how the body might take its place, is surely one of the fundamental qualities of experiencing theatre: attending to the corporeal fact of being a spectator. But I believe this interplay is granted focus when theatre, especially immersive theatre, downplays its focus on sight, or eliminates it altogether. Like a miner's head lamp turned toward inner-space, attention becomes focused much more sharply on goings on in the body and mind. As Baz Kershaw puts it, an experience of darkness works to displace 'the dominant visual economies of Western cultures [...]; the world as object of representation is replaced by the self as subject of investigation' (209). In terms arising from the previous chapter, this might consequently be seen as another

instance of narcissism pertaining to the spectator's experience in such a context: a turning inwards of attention towards experience, but a turning inwards accompanied by an incessant projection outwards into a pitch-black immersive world.

In my own experience of *Rotating*, the double-edged loci of this attention was placed on a feeling of vulnerability and trepidation, where feeling here refers to the conscious experience of an affective state produced via precisely this kind of dynamism between a feeling body and an environment subjected to creative projection. As a consequence of attending to both an unknown outside and an affected inside, I found myself taking the smallest of steps through the dark when asked to do so. With each step, I was convinced that I was inches from some barrier. Small movements were characterised by trepidation and a mild exhilaration. The state of unknowing brought about by the darkness was certainly enjoyable as a thrill. Although feeling mildly vulnerable, it felt good to be so. There was pleasure to be found in losing control, in being disoriented and in being dependent on unseen others. Darkness was what produced these affective responses, but darkness itself was not the enjoyable part of the performance; for me, the enjoyable part of the performance was an experience of affect in the dark.

Oftentimes, it is only when something is taken away that something else can be apprehended most vividly; this is particularly so when that something is, for many, commonplace, like sight. The supposed commonplaceness of sight has been fruitfully challenged and rendered strange by *Extant*, as touched on already when discussing theatre by blind performers. Nonetheless, while there remains the questionable threat of fetishising darkness as a site of potential pleasure, the point to be emphasised is that immersion in darkness renders strikingly apparent and *feelable* the interplay between a body's inside and outside. As the mind's eye runs wild

where the visual sense is hampered, an unknown outside, or an outside brushed up against, or bumped into, *or imagined to be such an obstructive outside*, becomes a particularly strong source of affect. Just what could be out there, lurking?

This question is a vitally important one. The question presupposes a subject that asks it, of course, but a subject concerned with this interplay between the inside of an affected body and an outside of potentially affective sources. The word ‘potentially’ is crucial here, for it brings into play uncertainty and risk. The last chapter spent time unpacking reasons why participating audiences have an important role to play in the production of affect, defending the view that autobiography has a hand not only in identifying affective sources, but also in characterising how affect might be felt in the first place. In other words, the concern in that chapter was primarily with what goes on in the body, albeit in relation to an environment outside the body that is projected into. The next subsection approaches this notion of projecting into something in the context of those moments in *Rotating* that take place in the dark; a focus on risk perception provides a means for doing so.

#### *The Mutuality of Affect Production and Risk Perception*

The imagined scenario of threatening things emerging from the pitch-black, or of walking into a wall, as risks which could result in some kind of embarrassment, or even injury, just as much as they could in pleasure (or even the pleasure of embarrassment), find their counterparts in the reality of affected behavioural states induced by such imagining: states which have the capacity to become productive in performance once action is prompted and acted upon. In addition, expecting, anticipating and imagining, as productive acts, seem likely to amplify the affects

produced in the moment of performance, either by maximising the pleasure felt when the risk turns out to be positive or maximising the degree of discomfort felt when nervousness, or a comparable affect, is felt to be a justifiable presence were embarrassment to ensue. An encounter with risk, as an encounter with an uncertain future, might well function not just as a productive source of affect, but as a productive source of performance. In this instance, at least, the participant's affected contribution is likely to impact on the performance's creative trajectory, at least as it is experienced by the participating subject.

All this points towards how risk perception might be productive of affect. The participant's perception of risk is also revealed as potentially impacting on the creative trajectory of a performance and in that sense might even be seen to align with Lyng's first edgework framework: as a resistant practise. As a consequence of how risk perception might produce affect, it emerges as something that potentially intervenes within a performance. But the fact that risk perception might produce affect opens up the possibility that uncomfortable or unwanted affective states may be produced. There is a risk to affect production; there is no guarantee that the production of affect arising from risk perception will be thrilling, exciting or pleasurable. It might just as well be deeply unsettling, or uncomfortable. Rather, affect itself is presented as a potential risk for audiences. Risk perception, then, emerges as being potentially productive of affect, just as affect can itself be regarded as a risk for audiences. What is more, as the psychometric paradigm asserts, affect also functions as one of a number of possible inputs contributing to the perception of risk in the first place. In short, affect and risk can be seen to be profoundly intertwined, especially so in an immersive theatre production like *Rotating*.

### *Risk and the Real*

Brian Massumi has usefully articulated how the anticipation of something which does not yet exist, or something that might never exist, but would exist if it could, can be productive of affect. What this brings into play is how something subjectively imagined can bring about verifiable change in the present. To borrow an example from Massumi: whilst an object of risk (for example, a suitcase which is suspected to be full of anthrax found at an airport) might turn out to be without risk as a danger of some kind (a suitcase leaking flour), the affective realities produced within individuals (fear, anxiety, terror, etc.) can bring into being their own material realities in a given environment (SWAT teams, news helicopters, road blocks, etc.) ('Future Birth' 57-58). Much the same can be said of risk perception in *Rotating*. Whilst an object of risk (the risk of someone leaping out from the dark, or of walking into a wall) might turn out to be without, or with minimal risk as a danger (a group of performers and/or stage hands who know where to lead you safely on a pre-determined path through the space), the affective realities produced within individuals (trepidation, vulnerability and nervousness, for instance) can bring into being their own material realities in the present (the manner in which the performer-audience relationship unfolds as well as the routes carved within mapped routes by the affected participant). In other words, risk perception and the cognitive, affective and imaginative processes that it entails has the potential to render something immaterial – a subjectively defined risk that may be known only to the participant in question – into something verifiable by sensation and/or perception in what may or may not be a shared environment. The participant's identification of affective or risky sources, even and especially as they are imagined, has the potential to alter the status of an immersive world and one's actions within it. As such, the authenticity of

affect production is bolstered by the potential for it to produce something outside of the bodies in which it might be experienced; not only that, but risk perception might also manifest in this world through its consequences, provided that risk perception is acted upon. There is a reality to risk perception, just as there is an authenticity to affect production, because both have the potential to promote creative production – and this not just in the interior world of a participant’s experience, but also in an immersive environment in which bodies are placed or move. While a perceived risk may only be imagined, the affects accompanying that perceived risk may have material results as a consequence of spurred participatory activity. This is what marks the potential reality of risk perception.

This notion of the ‘reality of risk perception’ leads me to introduce the idea of the performativity of risk. As far as I am aware, this is something which has gained extremely scant consideration, with only the odd exception. Such an exception comes from Oliver Kessler:

Risk is not a perception or a property of an objective reality [...]. Risk is a particular mode of reasoning that names the boundary between known and unknown [as Niklas Luhmann has observed]. [...] [O]bserving performativity of risk is always to engage in second-order observations: we observe how risk shapes the way in which others observe the economy, themselves or other actors. (114)

This suggests that observing risk, as an act of recognition, is what creates risk as something which can be labelled and systematised. Kessler’s focus is firmly on economics, or, more specifically, economic sociology. At the same time, he borrows from linguistics, particularly J. L. Austin’s famous notion of performativity (Kessler



113-14). Deploying an understanding of risk that I regard as being indebted to Knight, Kessler approaches risk as that which is engineered to deal with an unknown future. According to this view, risk brings something into being in much the same way as a performative utterance, such as the utterance ‘I do’ at a wedding brings about an institutionally recognised bond of marriage. It might also be asserted that the formation of a performative utterance, or gesture, is not to downplay its impact on a given reality; it is merely to recognise the role of a subject, or set of subjects, in bringing about a given state of affairs.

Even when risk is not understood as something deliberately employed to handle an uncertain economic future, Kessler’s argument, I think, remains persuasive. What I want to add to his brief engagement with the idea of the performativity of risk is not only to apply it to the different context of immersive theatre, but to factor in affect as an important element in that context. Risk is something which only needs to be perceived or affectively felt in order to imbue a space with risk as an ambient presence. This ambience can, through imaginative projection, make things, spaces and people become risky sources of affective stimulation once perceived. Risk does not in the first instance change the material reality of a given environment, but it can change the ways in which that environment is perceived and consequently interacted with *and altered*, however subtly.

In *Rotating*, audiences anticipate what could possibly (however unlikely) appear from the dark, particularly in relation to personal insecurities. Risk demands participation within it and infuses the environment in which a subject affectively feels it (ambience), but only as a consequence of imaginative projection. An object, space or person is only rendered risky once perceived as such, but in such a way that the thing perceived is really the projection of an anticipation, or expectation. In other

words, for risk to materialise, there must exist either one, or a number of subjects who bring risk into being by way of imaginative projection. The assertion ‘risk demands participation within it’ is really an autopoietic demand that comes from the participant – a participant exposed to risk’s ambience, even if that subject functions as a medium between risk as an ambient presence and the object, space or thing taken to be imbued with risk – which is then activated as a performative phenomenon.

I have already looked to demonstrate the significance of affect production for immersive theatre participants, but it is now possible to further characterise an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre with regard to risk perception. In the pitch-black of *Rotating*, risk is rendered present and diffuse in a space. In the dark, there is no visible object which might be encountered as a risk; rather, the audience finds themselves confronted by acts of anticipation and expectation, imagining walls to walk into (which may have their material counterparts behind the white drapes) and threats that might jump out from the blackness. In other words, audiences imagine an important part of the artworks they experience, making them especially productive participants as far as aesthetics goes. The ambience of risk, then, is an immersive quality which permeates the space, but only as a consequence of what the audience imaginatively and narcissistically projects into that space, complete with their own personal dispositions and prejudices. As such, it is possible to assert that alongside affect production, risk perception is central to an aesthetics of audience participation in *Rotating*.

## **Conclusion: Risk, Trust and Submission**

Affect production and risk perception were revealed in this chapter as being intertwined in a number of ways: risk perception was treated as being potentially productive of affect; affect was considered as feeding into the perception of risk, along with a number of other inputs identified in the psychometric paradigm; and affective experience was treated as a potential risk for audiences. It was shown that the perception of risk is inscribed as a fundamental part of experiencing *Rotating*, despite the fact that a highly personal reflection on the work provided a point of departure for the claim. Risk perception, like affect production, was framed as being extorted from audiences, but in a way that resonated with the model of narcissistic participation explored in the previous chapter: namely, that the participant, by virtue of their implicit creativity manifested in acts of imaginative projection, ends up drawing from themselves the identification of things and people – either real or imagined – as risky. Evidence was collected to bolster the assertion that imaginative projection pertains to the perception of risk and this particular aspect of audience participation, one also explored in the previous chapter, was granted the further attention it demands through more detailed theoretical argumentation as to what the process entails. An important part of this theorisation turned again to Ahmed as a means of elucidating how something, or someone, might be identified as risky as a consequence of how stickiness operates.

In this chapter, risk was not considered as an objective phenomenon, but as something subjectively defined on the basis of multiple sources, both within a theatre space and outside of it. This is not to belittle the affective significance of risk: to the contrary, there is a reality to risk perception arising not only through the production of authentic affect, but also from the activity of the participant perceiving risk. Risk

perception is performative insofar as the naming of something as risky, or even thinking of something as risky, even if that thinking occurs without being aware that one is encountering risk, has the potential to imbue an immersive space with ambient risk. Furthermore, audience participation in immersive theatre was considered as a practise, especially in the light of a kind of participation that thrives on risk perception. In this way, an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre can be identified as a kind of edgework practise, but the framework that that practise sits within, as either resisting or conforming to the social regulation of risk, is yet to be properly identified.

This chapter clearly opens up a number of new critical demands, most notably the need to think through how immersive theatre performances and their participatory practises relate to a given context – especially a political context. In concluding this chapter and as a bridge to the next part of the thesis, I want to consider three more aspects of experiencing *Rotating* that are relevant to this chapter's discussion of risk perception: the relationships between risk and trust, the potential for isolation to be perceived by a participating audience and the potential for privacy to be experienced in a theatre space populated by others, seen or unseen.

First of all, why is trust relevant to the current discussion? The performers in *Rotating* know the ropes; these are performers who can see in the dark with the benefit, I found out after the performance, of night vision goggles; these are performers that probably know more than the audience about what is going to happen, that are always one step ahead and on which the audience are likely to find themselves dependent if they are to successfully follow a path through the performance which has been tightly choreographed and effectively designed. Lundahl & Seidl have experienced dissident reactions from their audiences, most

notably in another work, *Observatory* (2008), where transgression of what the artists deemed ‘acceptable’ participatory responses took place. This performance was not for an audience of one, but was rather to be experienced in a group of six participants. On one occasion, Lundahl remembers an audience member who ‘said she had a bit of a flu, maybe fever’ and who moved through the space violently and even ‘pulled and grabbed other visitors in a non-pleasant way’ (email interview). This expressive act of anarchic autonomy demonstrates the potential for audiences to subvert an ordered performance, albeit at the expense of Lundahl & Seidl’s sanction. There is certainly space, then, to be a dissident audience member. However, audiences attending this kind of work enter into a frequently unspoken bond of trust with the performance in general and the performers in particular. This could be for any one of a number of reasons, including a respect for the artists involved and a desire to achieve the best possible experience.

The thing to take away from this anecdote, though, is its rarity. When questioned about audience dissidence in the same email interview, Lundahl emphasised the clear commitment to trust that the work demands of its audiences: ‘[t]rust is essential in our work, to trust oneself and others. And being able to let go of control and not to see that as a passive action but an active one. Letting go of the part of the self that takes action in order to give room for another part of the self that is experiencing the self and [its] surrounding[s]’ (email interview). What Lundahl appears to be underlining here is the potential for submission to an experience to procure rewards for audiences and that this submission, despite the autonomy it can be seen to sacrifice, is itself a freeing gesture. What it opens up is the need to discuss the relationships between the risk of such a sacrifice and the trust which taking that risk can be seen to involve.

Anthony Giddens paraphrases Niklas Luhmann's articulation of trust as follows:

an individual who does not consider alternatives is in a situation of confidence, whereas someone who does not recognise those alternatives and tries to counter the risks thus acknowledged, engages in trust. In a situation of confidence, a person reacts to disappointment by blaming others; in circumstances of trust she or he must partly shoulder the blame and may regret having placed trust in someone or something. (*Consequences* 31)

For Giddens, however, 'it is unhelpful to connect the notion of trust to the specific circumstances in which individuals consciously contemplate alternative courses of action. Trust is usually much more a continuous state than this implies. [...] [Trust is] a particular type of confidence rather than something distinct from it' (32). Dependency on a growing number of experts in a growing number of specialist practises – a key feature of Beck's risk society thesis – stimulates the development of cultures of trust. Trust, according to Giddens, at least, 'may be defined as confidence in the reliability of a person or system, regarding a given set of outcomes or events' (34). Over and above this, cultures of trust proliferate as society innovates, particularly as a heuristic tied into the most menial of tasks, from the water we drink to the transport we choose.

What I want to draw from this definition is the idea that performers are analogous to any given performance's experts, for they tend to have a pretty good idea of how the performance will unfold: as a run progresses; no matter the degree of participation expected of an audience; and despite the idealisation of unpredictability that artists may claim their work opens up for the performers (setting aside explicit

engagements with chance). As *Scorched the Snake* makes clear, audience participation, in certain circumstances, may well be something that can be rehearsed alongside the accumulation of expertise in participation and in knowledge about the performance; indeed, the next chapter explores this notion in detail. However, for the time being, it is clear that participating audiences more often than not commit themselves to the authority of expert theatre makers, if we understand an expert, in this instance, as one more knowledgeable and practised in whatever performance is on offer. From the outset, participating audiences are positioned as less knowing and less practised in the particular performance being performed and, as a consequence, as potentially vulnerable, though not necessarily as inferior or powerless. It is in this sense that participating audiences can be seen to enter into bonds of trust. This provides another instance of how audiences can be seen to engage with risk, particularly the risk of trusting in a performance or performer(s) so that an encounter with uncertainty might be managed.

The second point I wish to reflect on in this conclusion is how isolation might be experienced by a participating audience in *Rotating*. The immersive instrument of darkness in *Rotating*, as something which engulfs and could potentially hide a set of antagonistic forces, threatens trust by placing participants in what might be experienced as a state of vulnerability: one which may be characterised by isolation and loneliness in the context of a performance for an audience of one. It is as though audiences are being asked to trust in a kind of trust which, to pluck from a different context, ‘sets out to undo itself’ (Ridout 80). There is a sense of courting trust as something which is to be undone, but only if that undoing takes place in such a way that one is never really in any danger. In other words, the thing invested in *is* trust, masquerading as trust which undoes itself. This

is not to downplay the affective potential of courting this kind of trust, as something perceived to be risky. But what this encourages is a concluding discussion of what precisely this trust relationship entails.

Participants in *Rotating* are not alone. They watch and are watched by performers when the space is lit. Once plunged into darkness, participants are still not alone, for unseen hands reach out to lead them through the space. And yet, despite this, whenever these hands are absent the participant becomes isolated: a monad engulfed in apparently endless darkness. In such moments, the participant's status as an individual is made explicit. When some can find their way through the dark and others cannot, those who cannot do so – the audience – might find themselves in a bond of trust. This bond also extends to the theatre designer, who is likely to take into consideration the removal of sharp or protruding objects. It also extends to the performers and all those involved with choreographing the handling of audiences. Trust in immersive theatre, then, tends to draw together within a risk scenario a number of different parties, only some of whom will be present. While the participant may end up experiencing isolation, there may well be numerous other subjects, both present and absent, that contribute to that state being reached. So the experience of isolation in immersive theatre tends to rest on the contributions of a disparate community. Paradoxically, it takes a communal effort to experience isolation in immersive theatre.

I find the idea of experiencing isolation in immersive theatre utterly fascinating and it opens up space to consider one last point before concluding part one. It seems odd that isolation is something that can be experienced at all if we recognise that the perception of isolation may not correspond to the audience's being completely alone in a space. The dark provides confidentiality. Whilst the dark can



clearly be a site of insecurity and threat, it can also provide security given what it hides. It might hide the unknown and thus the potentially threatening, but it might also hide what one wishes to be kept unknown from others. The privacy opened up through depriving others of sight can be seen as profoundly individualising. Stemming from a consideration of isolation, then, comes a need to consider privacy as well.

Privacy relates to a kind of licence permitted by darkness. There is much less demand on downplaying affective facial expressions in the dark; it is possible to squirm without fearing the condemnation of being seen to squirm. Despite the performers wearing night vision goggles, discovered in hindsight, the blanket of darkness in the moment of performance felt hospitable to facial expressions and movements that, in environments more conducive to sight, would be far less so. There is clearly a balance to be addressed in considering the experience of engaging with theatre in the dark: firstly, to reiterate, there is this fostering of dependency via a bond of trust in both the performance itself and performers within the space; secondly, there is space to perceive isolation in what may well be a public space; thirdly, as a consequence of perceiving isolation, there emerges the potential to experience privacy – even in relation to night-vision-clad performers who, in another context, might be seen to jeopardise such privacy as Peeping Toms. It felt as though these performers were guardians of your own private experience, free from the prying eyes of other audience members. And as guardians of the private, attending to your own private experience, these performers enshrine privacy as a value.

These concluding remarks demand a critical shift from an address of immersive theatre as being largely set apart from a political context framing the event, to an address of immersive theatre as being tied into such a context. It is now

necessary to consider in more depth the kinds of value promoted in immersive theatre, as well as the experiential allure of such values. It is this shift of critical and theoretical focus onto value that steers discussion much more explicitly into the domain of the political. A central concern of this chapter and the last has been an establishment of immersive theatre's aesthetics of audience participation. A politics of participation has been touched on, but part two takes this as its main concern. In doing so, many of the claims arising in part one will be revisited and, more importantly, re-evaluated.

## Part Two

# Politics: Neoliberalism and the Experience Economy

## Chapter Three: Punchdrunk and the Neoliberal Ethos

As the opening remarks of this thesis suggested, *Scorched the Snake* is more than just a fan blog for Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*. Cobb goes beyond expressions of adoration. *Scorched the Snake* presents *Sleep No More* as a performance that can be mastered. Through his blog, Cobb is positioned as an expert participant – the go-to guy in the know. This chapter returns to some of the questions raised in those opening remarks: does immersive theatre privilege a particular kind of participant? What does it mean to develop participatory expertise? On the basis of an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre explored in part one – that is, a basis premised on the production of affect and the perception of risk among participating audiences – this chapter, the first of part two, approaches these questions with reference to another: what are immersive theatre's values with regard to audience participation? To focus on value is to focus on the political, especially when a value system is in play that synergises select values over and above alternatives.

In part one, some vital points were raised that are highly relevant for a politics of participation in immersive theatre, such as the necessarily central role played by the participant in generating affect production and risk perception, premised on unique autobiographical contributions. This should be balanced against an alternative set of contributions that might bolster this authorial positioning of the participant, on the one hand, while undermining those contributions, on the other. A politics of audience participation in immersive theatre is likely to rest somewhere in balance between these two sets of contributing inputs, the latter of which encourages

a detailed look at the political context which might inform a critical approach to immersive theatre.

Punchdrunk draw focus in this chapter. The company were formed in 2000 and claim to be game-changing pioneers of immersive theatre (*Punchdrunk.org.uk*). Their work tends to be site-sympathetic: that is, sensitive to the architectural and environmental givens of a particular building or location, without delving into the socio-historical specificity of that location. They tend not to perform in theatre buildings and have instead performed in a number of appropriated sites, including: an empty Victorian school for the first UK run of *Sleep No More* (2003); a defunct Sharwood's Pickle factory in London's Oval for *The Firebird Ball* (2005); London's Wapping Lane Tobacco Dock for *Faust* (2006-07); the BAC, a former town hall, played host to *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007-08), thus providing an exception to the non-theatre venue rule; railway arches behind Waterloo station for *Tunnel 228* (2009); the redundant Manchester offices of the National Probation Service for *It Felt Like a Kiss* (2009); London's Great Eastern Quay provided space for *The Duchess of Malfi* (2010); and a disused postal sorting office near Paddington station for *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* (2013). Punchdrunk consequently work within loaded spaces: converted municipal buildings and the outmoded vestiges of industrialism. As such, their work tends to operate in the cracks of an evolving urban landscape.

An engagement with architectural relics of social and industrial change is not the only way that Punchdrunk tie into a particular socio-economic context. Firstly, and in most detail, this chapter focuses on *The Masque of the Red Death*, establishing the various ways in which this performance prioritises a particular kind of participation: what I call 'entrepreneurial participation'. In doing so, I draw

comparisons with a neoliberal value set, with neoliberalism broadly defined as a theory of political economy that erodes the public sphere to the benefit of private enterprise, risk-taking, personal responsibility, individualism and entrepreneurship.

Secondly, as a bridge toward the next chapter, I will be looking at a second set of performance practises that work alongside, or, more accurately, beneath the more public face of Punchdrunk: namely, their corporate performances. Representatives of Punchdrunk have been creating work for corporate business for over a decade. In the early stages of this activity, the corporate face of Punchdrunk went by the name of Gideon Reeling: Punchdrunk's sibling company initially co-directed by Felix Barrett, Punchdrunk's artistic director, and Kate Hargreaves, a long standing performer-collaborator with Punchdrunk. Barrett no longer co-directs Gideon Reeling since they became an independent company. In early life, though, as Punchdrunk's corporate face, Gideon Reeling helped with sourcing funds for Punchdrunk performances, an example being *Faust*. In sourcing funds for *Faust*, Gideon Reeling provided the creative and productive impetus behind Southern Comfort's Fat Tuesday club nights and the funds raised through this corporate venture helped to make *Faust* a realisable project for Punchdrunk (Gardner, L., 'An Offer'). More recently, though, Punchdrunk have outsourced creativity to corporate businesses without recourse to Gideon Reeling, although these ventures are not always clearly identified as being attributed to Punchdrunk. It tends to be the corporate publicity that foregrounds the Punchdrunk brand, not that of the theatre company, although information does now appear on the corporate pages of Punchdrunk's website following redevelopment of the site (*Punchdrunk.org.uk*).

Punchdrunk were behind the highly lucrative opening of Louis Vuitton's Bond Street store in 2010 and later created a performance to help publicise the

release of Sony's computer game Resistance 3 with *And Darkness Descended...* (2011). *The Black Diamond* (2011), the second of two productions marketing Stella Artois Black created after *The Night Chauffeur* (2010), will pull focus in the second part of this chapter. These performances demonstrate how immersive theatre is especially susceptible to absorption within the business practises of entrepreneurial marketers. I will be arguing that while the compatibility between the neoliberal ethos and the kinds of participation favoured in Punchdrunk's work are likely to feed into this susceptibility, there is perhaps a more covert co-optation of audiences that is at stake premised on the lure of Punchdrunk's affectively resonant work and the resulting rendering of audiences as unpaid marketers of a product.

The aims of this chapter, then, are twofold: firstly, to identify a shared value set between neoliberalism and the kinds of audience participation at play in Punchdrunk's work; secondly, to study the ways in which Punchdrunk are particularly susceptible to absorption within, or co-optation by, neoliberal business enterprise. The purpose is to introduce a set of important political points about audience participation in immersive theatre that should impact on how an aesthetics of audience participation is evaluated. Consequently, I will be considering how affect production and risk perception operate under neoliberalism, paying close attention to the politics of that operation and how such consideration might usefully impact on developing an understanding of a politics of participation in immersive theatre.

The chapter begins with a section titled 'Neoliberalism and the Neoliberal Ethos'. This section defines neoliberalism and sketches some key junctures in its evolution and institutionalisation. I then go on to identify and examine neoliberalism's core values, before focusing on risk and the relationship of affect to

the neoliberal ethos. The section after that looks at how these values apply to audience participation in *The Masque*, opening up space to evaluate what this application might mean for a politics of participation. The following section then addresses *The Black Diamond* and considers how the figuring of audiences in Punchdrunk's theatre practise ends up as something prone to co-optation in their corporate partnerships. In conclusion, I differentiate between the artistic quality of Punchdrunk's work, which I still consider highly attractive and worthy of the company's international success, and the kinds of quality-as-value promoted through the modes of participation that they ask of audiences. I go on to evaluate a politics of participation in Punchdrunk's work as being implicitly exclusionary as a consequence of the participatory values attributed to these modes of participation.

### **Neoliberalism and the Neoliberal Ethos**

This section is split into four subsections: the first puts forward a definition of neoliberalism, an account of its origins and its subsequent institutionalisation and growing hegemony; the second identifies neoliberalism's ethos by exploring its core values; the third focuses on risk as one of neoliberalism's core values; and the fourth hones in on the appropriation of affect as an effect of the neoliberal ethos. This section, then, introduces and explores an economically minded political context to help situate an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre as it has been established in part one. It begins to construct the basis on which a comparative analysis might take place between the core values of neoliberalism and the core values that seem to be prioritised in Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death*.



### *What is Neoliberalism?*

As a political theory, neoliberalism has its roots in the late 1930s and, as David Harvey writes, it was ‘actively shaped during the 1940s by thinkers such as [Friedrich] von Hayek, Lud[w]ig von Mises, Milton Friedman, and, at least for a while, Karl Popper’ (*New Imperialism* 157): key figures who played a vital part in the inauguration of the Mont Pelerin Society, an early attempt to group together like-minded advocates of neoliberal principles. While the Mont Pelerin Society denied political affiliation to any political party or orthodoxy, its aims were unquestionably political. As Harvey explains, neoliberalism during this time came to stand in staunch opposition to ‘communism, socialism, and all forms of active government intervention beyond that required to secure private property arrangements, market institutions, and entrepreneurial activity’ (157). Such opposition remains influential in contemporary neoliberal guises and might be thought of as a defining characteristic of neoliberal ideology.

Following the belated recognition of publications by Mont Pelerin Society members in the 1970s, after being largely dismissed, coupled with the generation of a sense that profound change was required during what turned out to be an economically turbulent period, the ground was set for neoliberal theory to be put into practise through government policy. It was Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative party that would be the first to take up the governmental baton following a successful election in 1979 (157). But what characterised the 1970s as turbulent? What political climate helped to promote Thatcher’s successful election campaign? Responding to these questions will provide a touchstone to help with defining neoliberalism not just as an ideology, but as something practised and as something arising in its

institutional form from a very particular set of social, political and economic conditions.

There are a number of very clear and persuasive accounts of how neoliberalism is best defined and how it came to be. Among them is the *oeuvre* of David Harvey, but chapter four of David Hesmondhalgh's *The Cultural Industries* provides another useful touchstone. Hesmondhalgh is extremely cautious throughout the book about simplifying a complex interplay of economic and political processes that led to sweeping transformations in the cultural industries without also taking on board social, cultural and institutional processes which are sometimes misconceived as by-products of macro changes (96). He is also wary about overstating the case for radical change while continuity in the cultural industries has also been present from the post-war period to the present day, to some extent, not to mention the roles of contingency and chance in contributing to the evolution of the cultural industries (97, 257). Nonetheless, there remain key junctures in the evolution of neoliberalism's institutionalisation, in both its various national and international forms, that impacted on the acceleration of its influence and increasing hegemony over a range of industrial sectors. In the interests of being concise, it is to these key junctures that I turn.

In the early 1970s, after a long post-war boom, 'advanced capitalist economies hit the beginning of a Long Downturn which continued into the 1990s, marked by particularly severe recessions in 1974-[7]5, 1979-82 and 1991-[9]5. In the G-7 countries between 1970 and 1990 profits fell significantly across all sectors, but especially manufacturing' (Hesmondhalgh 85). This kind of claim ought to be approached with caution, as recessions are frequently counter-balanced by financial booms – and booms, or bubbles, there undoubtedly were, most notably the so-called

Lawson Boom in the late-1980s, stimulated by tax cuts and low interest rates. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello likewise remain cautious of capitalism's supposed crises post-1973: '[c]ertainly, growth has slowed on a long-term basis, but the returns to capital are increasing' (xxxvi). Nonetheless, Hesmondhalgh is looking to underscore a particular financial climate of growing financial insecurity and dematerialised working processes following the decline of manufacturing among G-7 nations, despite confidence bubbles like the Lawson Boom. One consequence of this – especially the unemployment which followed the closure of many traditional manufacturing institutions – was to undermine faith in capitalist enterprise as it stood in the post-war era, peaking in the 1970s: a time also of profound economic change on a global level following deep shocks to the Bretton Woods system. This system, formed in 1944, was most significantly characterised by the formulation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to help stabilise exchange rates between allied nations. But following President Richard Nixon's decision in 1971 to decouple the US dollar from the gold standard, part of what was dubbed the 'Nixon Shock', the IMF's capacity to function as a stabilising mechanism metamorphosed as a dematerialised money system became liberated from state control (see Harvey, *New Imperialism* 62). Indeed, to place this in the light of more recent turns of events, financiers and economists today have become acutely aware of the hurdles and risks of a de-stabilised international system of capital flows. This awareness arguably reached an apex in the spring of 2009 when the IMF estimated that \$50 trillion in asset values worldwide had been destroyed in the wake of the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis in the US, alongside the global financial crisis that swiftly followed suit (Harvey, *Enigma* 6).

This awareness has become coloured by a sense of worry and an acute sense of vulnerability, both at the level of individuals concerned about the safety of their assets in such a turbulent economic climate and of nations concerned about the stability of their political power in the milieu of volatile international capital flows. While the contexts of the 1970s and 2000s are of course very different, it is the generation of a pervasive sense of insecurity and volatility shared between the 1970s and more recent history that might help with relating to that period from a contemporary standpoint; it might help with empathetically accessing the climate that helped to inaugurate a set of radical and sweeping changes to government and the welfare state following democratic government elections. I believe that what citizenships wanted was the fulfilment of a promise captured in a word that has come to define and typify once again the rhetoric of governments following the elections of Barack Obama in the US and David Cameron in the UK – namely, change.

In the aftermath of the 1974-75 recession noted by Hesmondhalgh – a recession which plagued and arguably weakened the 1974-79 Labour party – the UK citizenship turned to the Conservatives in 1979, with a majority Conservative vote of 43.9 per cent, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher (House of Commons n.p.). In the US a year and a half later, the Republican candidate Ronald Reagan won the presidential election. Although numerous other national capitalist economies soon followed suit, such as New Zealand, Thatcher and Reagan came to typify the early implementation of institutionalised neoliberal policy. Despite the status of capitalism in the 1970s, what these governments stood for and what neoliberalism stood for was not a rejection of capitalism, but its metamorphosis.

Advanced capitalist states like the UK and the US responded to the Long Downturn not by seeking to do away with capitalism, but by radicalising how it was

to operate.<sup>23</sup> Labour movements were attacked, most notoriously reaching a culmination between 1984-85 when Thatcher took on and overcame dissent from the National Union of Mineworkers.<sup>24</sup> This was accompanied by the elevation, from emergency, to permanent measures, of: anti-inflation strategies, ‘cutbacks in public spending and the stripping away of regulation by democratically-elected governments’ (Hesmondhalgh 87), ‘dismantling or rolling back the commitments of the welfare state, the privatization of public enterprises (including social housing), reducing taxes, encouraging entrepreneurial initiative, and creating a favourable business climate to induce a strong inflow of foreign investment’ (Harvey, *Neoliberalism* 23). While the notion of consent in such a context has been characterised as dubious (Chomsky 43-62), Thatcher’s appeal nonetheless lay in the cultivation of an expanded middle class ‘that relished the joys of home ownership, private property, individualism and the liberation of entrepreneurial opportunities’ (Harvey, *Neoliberalism* 61). These ‘joys’, or values – ownership, privatisation, individualism and entrepreneurialism – remain a powerful force in contemporary politics. They are values that this chapter will return to frequently and will prove significant when exploring a shared value set between neoliberalism and audience participation in Punchdrunk’s particular breed of immersive theatre.

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<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that Hesmondhalgh challenges the reality, or at least the extent, of this radicalisation: ‘[t]he move towards neoliberalism was remarkable and the fact that neoliberalism was adopted in so many countries reflects the global interconnectedness of the late twentieth century. But I have argued that within the advanced industrial countries, ultimately this represents a shift of emphasis within a fairly stable policy system, whereby states regulate on the basis of tensions between the interests of citizens/voters and dominant business interests’ (257; cf Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity* 166-70, 196).

<sup>24</sup> As a contextual aside, it is worth quoting Keith Laybourn at length: ‘[i]n 1950 the white-collar workers represented about 30 per cent of the British workforce; by 1979 the proportion had risen to about 52 per cent. Over the same period the proportion of manual workers fell from 64.2 per cent to about 45 per cent. As a result, the traditional occupational bastions of Labour Party support have declined. In mining and quarrying, for instance, employment has fallen from 880,000 in 1948 to 629,000 in 1965 and, more recently, to 250,000 in 1984 and less than 30,000 by the end of the 1990s. The National Union of Mineworkers has, as a result, shrunk dramatically’ (109). While this was paralleled with a rise in white-collar trade union membership (109), Laybourn’s observation nonetheless illustrates the declining power and influence of the National Union of Mineworkers that influenced Thatcher’s stranglehold victory.

But what is so ‘neo’ about neoliberalism? What Thatcher’s social and fiscal policy decisions resulted in was, to a limited extent, a rejuvenation of nineteenth-century economic liberalism that, in short, advocated an unregulated free market.<sup>25</sup> While the accuracy of this rejuvenation has been staunchly contested as a consequence of decoupling financial risk-taking from responsibility and accountability under neoliberal practise (see Harvey, *Neoliberalism* 29, 69; Chomsky 19, 39-40), a version of its renewed idealism remains the force behind the coinage of *neoliberalism* (Hesmondhalgh 87), coupled with a shift of emphasis away from market exchange and towards market competition (Lazzarato 116-17; cf Foucault 118). It should also be noted that neoliberalism does not just refer to the policy decisions of governments: it also refers to an ideological business practise. However, this ideological business practise came to relate closely to government policy, not least because of the relative freedoms which neoliberal government policy allowed businesses to take advantage of. As Manuel Castells observes, ‘interaction between markets and governments’, operating in the wake of the Long Downturn, proved a driving force behind the emergence of a new, globally oriented economy, primarily fostered ‘by deliberate government policies’ (135). It is this kind of interaction that I want to flag as being integral to the emergence of neoliberalism as a *dominant* capitalist ideology, one that, while increasingly abstracted from nations, nonetheless relies on the promotion of national and international policies advocating the rights of individuals and businesses to trade in as autonomous a way as possible. In short,

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<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault suggests an earlier point of reference around the middle of the eighteenth century, arguing that from around that time the ‘reasoning’ of government shifted to focus ‘on how not to govern too much. The objection is no longer to the abuse of sovereignty but to excessive government’ (13). Note also that Foucault contests the suggestion that neoliberalism arose as a smooth rejuvenation of ‘old forms of liberal economics which were formulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’, arguing instead for a more fundamental shift in the relations between the state and the market, with the former increasingly functioning in subservience to the authority of the latter (117).

neoliberalism needs governments to the extent that governments can secure the minimisation of their own interference in neoliberal practises.

What is under discussion, then, is a significant structural – and political – shift in the way that economies function. Many contemporary immersive theatre makers (and researchers, including me) spent the early years of their life growing up while this shift was taking place in the UK. They were either born into, or lived through, a very particular and significant moment in the evolution of a social and economic landscape under the powerful influence of a charged political context. And at the heart of this moment, as I go on to elaborate below, is a valorisation of almost unbounded autonomy – an autonomy that, I believe, is likely to prove a valuable point of reference when examining immersive theatre practises that advocate particularly liberal forms of participation.

Before identifying some of the key values associated with neoliberalism, it is important to express, with Hesmondhalgh, clarification regarding my introduction of neoliberalism thus far: ‘[i]n all areas of commercial life governments intervene [...]. Even those national economic systems based most on private enterprise, such as the USA, are built on a huge foundation of laws concerning competition, tax, contracts, the obligations of companies and so on’ (107-08). While it seems counterintuitive, under neoliberalism governments do still intervene in the market, especially via three policy areas: legislation, regulation and subsidy (108). These policy areas directly impact on the freedoms of businesses to exercise autonomy within markets and therefore limit the freedoms available to enterprise within a free market. The point is not to deny that deregulation received increasing traction following the institutionalisation of neoliberal policy in the 1980s; rather, the point is to underscore that such measures were not total. It would be dangerous and misleading to over-

emphasise or hyperbolise deregulation, for instance, for this does an injustice to the powers still exercised by government, despite state devolution.<sup>26</sup> While the state did indeed foreground private over public interests, it was not a complete retraction of state intervention that occurred during the rise of neoliberal policy initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s, but, rather, a different ethos was instigated under the governments which deployed neoliberal policy strategies. It is in this sense that I will be describing a ‘neoliberal ethos’ in what follows.

### *Neoliberal Values*

‘Ethos’ refers to the characteristic spirit of something. When I refer to the neoliberal ethos, I will be making reference to the characteristic spirit of neoliberalism which is to be understood here as a system of values. These values include individualism, responsibility, opportunism, privacy, entrepreneurship and the taking of risks. Affect enters into the neoliberal ethos less as a value and more as an effect of how capitalism has come to function under neoliberalism: namely, by rendering affect as something co-opted toward profitable ends. This subsection will look at how individualism, responsibility and entrepreneurship, in particular, operate as values under neoliberalism, while the subsection after that will look specifically at risk. Opportunism and privacy arise more as concerns by implication. The concluding subsection establishes what it means for affect to be co-opted under neoliberalism by exploring two key concepts: emotional labour and affective labour.

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<sup>26</sup> As Hesmondhalgh suggests, ‘[s]ome advocates of public interest have argued, in response to this use of the term deregulation, that **re-regulation** is a more appropriate name for changes in media and communications policy in the 1980s and 1990s’ (109, original emphasis).



Taken together, these subsections outline not only what constitutes the neoliberal ethos, but also some of the effects of this ethos on social conduct and work practises. This step – from neoliberal value to neoliberal practise – is an important one for the present study, as it prepares ground for charting points of alignment between neoliberalism and audience participation in immersive theatre. My goal is to develop a vocabulary for re-examining my analysis of audience participation in immersive theatre in part one, reorienting that analysis towards an explicitly political context. It is from within this political context that an identification of a politics of participation in immersive theatre might grow, beginning with an address of Punchdrunk’s immersive theatre practise. It is not without consequence that a set of values and characteristics might be shared between neoliberalism and the kinds of audience participation frequently promoted in immersive theatre performances like *The Masque* and *Sleep No More* and these consequences should be factored into an evaluation of immersive theatre’s politics of participation. As such, it is worth spending time setting out the contextual field of what these values and characteristics are before addressing how they might find their counterparts in Punchdrunk’s immersive theatre practise.

What Thatcher helped to inaugurate through her policy measures, along with Reagan in the US, was a metamorphosed means of figuring society: something which Thatcher famously identified as being non-existent compared with the self-evident fact of individual citizens. For Thatcher, this ideological means of thinking about what a nation’s people are and how they may, or may not relate to one another, provided the foundation for a politics premised on individualism. As this section has looked to demonstrate, this politics was put into practise by reducing the size of the welfare state in an effort to let private interests gain influence. But such measures

were by no means limited to Conservative governments. In 1997, a new and long-awaited era of Labour governance came to power following the successful election of Tony Blair's Labour party. This was the dawn of New Labour.

New Labourite politics is commonly referred to as the 'third way'. The UK iteration of the third way is largely indebted to a sociologist and its principal architect, Anthony Giddens, but third way politics has its roots in New Democrat initiatives in the US.<sup>27</sup> The New Democrats emerged as a Democrat faction disheartened by the success of Reagan's neoliberal republicanism in the 1980s. They were determined to rejuvenate the Democrat party by moving toward the political centre in an effort to win back what appeared to be a disillusioned electorate. The successful 1992 presidential election campaign in the US of the New Democrat Bill Clinton ushered in the first wave of third way politics at the level of government, later followed by New Labour in 1997 in the UK. For both parties, neoliberalism was a point of departure. It was taken as a hegemonic given responded to not by expanding the political spectrum in opposition to it, but by contracting that spectrum towards the political centre in an effort to work with, not against neoliberal ideology. Such were the changes to governance instituted through the international growth of neoliberalism that the seeming impossibility of working outside of it, coupled with significant blows to the political left during the period of this expansion, rendered the third way an appealing political battle ground. However, the consequences of this battle ground for approaches to welfare and society had profound implications for the continued development of a neoliberal value system on both sides of the Atlantic – but it is the UK that firmly pulls focus in what follows.

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<sup>27</sup> Giddens concedes that these roots are there to be identified and are indeed valid, but encourages a more balanced address of Continental democracy at around the same time (*Third Way* viii).

Giddens defines the third way (or, at least, defined the third way in the late 1990s) as ‘a framework of thinking and policy-making that seeks to adapt social democracy to a world which has changed fundamentally over the past two or three decades. It is a third way in the sense that it is an attempt to transcend both old-style social democracy and neoliberalism’ (*Third Way* 26). It is this transcendence – or, as I would have it, convergence – that characterises third way politics as centrist. Giddens accepts that the late-twentieth century witnessed the emergence of ‘a new individualism’, but dismisses the sole cause of this as arising from Thatcherite policy alone. For Giddens, drawing on Beck: ‘[t]he new individualism, in short, is associated with the retreat of tradition and custom from our lives, a phenomenon involved with the impact of globalization widely conceived rather than just the influence of markets’ (36). But as Andy Hewitt elaborates, ‘[i]n Third Way political theory, social justice is replaced by ideas of social inclusion. The concept of Third Way citizenship then becomes framed in terms of the “individual” in society and how effectively one participates in the economic system’ (21-22). In other words, it is a form of individualism which is not only accepted, but promoted by government.

The notion of a new individualism has been alternatively explored by Boltanski and Chiapello as a figuring of autonomy as something *demandé* under capitalism, helping to shed light on this retreat of tradition and custom noted by Beck and Giddens. While this demand might make welcome relief from slavish working weeks and autocratic bosses, Boltanski and Chiapello nonetheless caution against the formation of an individualistic worker status that is ‘frequently assessed according to their capacity for self-fulfilment, elevated to the status of an evaluative criterion’ (429). As such, the clamour of libertarian revolution that might be said to have characterised the May 1968 uprisings in Paris and further afield have in many ways

been absorbed into a ‘new spirit of capitalism’, as identified by Boltanski and Chiapello, resulting in a ‘decline in job security deriving from the new methods of utilizing labour (temping, fixed-term contracts) and unemployment’ (429-30). As such the oppositional demands for autonomy and responsibility affiliated with those uprisings have returned as a threat to individuals in the wake of a new individualism.

In looking to establish social cohesion in the wake of this new individualism, Giddens rejects the top-down authority of the welfare state. At the same time, he rejects a retreat to the conservative defence of tradition as well. He argues that ‘[w]e have to make our lives in a more active way than was true of previous generations, and we need more actively to accept responsibilities for the consequences of what we do and the lifestyle habits we adopt’ (*Third Way* 37). This assertion gets to the very heart of third way politics, as articulated by Giddens; third way politics accepts the new individualism as a given, but in trying to stoke social cohesion it responds not with backing traditional communal values, as might otherwise have been associated with the political left, as with attributing values – values that might, potentially, be shared – to the new individualism. As such, responsibility and accountability, exercised at the level of the personal, emerge as the tools to promote social cohesion in third way politics. The notion of ‘active citizenship’ typifies the heralding of the individual as a socially responsible figure. What might previously have been identified as the responsibility of the state for the welfare of its citizens is attributed under third way politics to individuals. In Giddens’s third way, social or welfare rights are coupled with social responsibility, an example being the coupling of unemployment benefit with the obligation to actively look for work (65).

However, these characteristics also get to the heart of Boltanski and Chiapello’s notion of a new spirit of capitalism, where firms are ‘re-engineered’

through networked systems of suppliers, sub-contractors and temporary personnel, all of which place significant pressure on the stability of employment (74) and where the nurture of teams and individuals that self-organise and control themselves within businesses ends up transferring responsibility for enterprise onto the shoulders of workers (80). As such, the 'active citizen' in politics might find its counterpart in the 'active worker' that seeks opportunistic and potentially lucrative employment at the expense of a long and stable career. Third way politics and the new spirit of capitalism are of a kind.

A key claim of Giddens's third way is that the competitive spirit of neoliberalism and the celebration of wealth generation attributed to it might be profitably merged with government investment 'in the human resources and infrastructure needed to develop an entrepreneurial culture' (*Third Way* 99). Arising through nineteenth century liberal doctrine, the entrepreneur was defined as a thrifty and sharp individual who capitalises on the profitable opportunities afforded by enterprise. However, as Owen suggests, neoliberal government recalibrated the definitional boundaries of entrepreneurialism as a practise 'in which all citizens should engage' (258), recruiting civil society, as Maurizio Lazzarato maintains, to serve the objectives of a neoliberal transformation of the social (111). While entrepreneurialism was implicitly championed under Thatcher as a consequence of idealising state devolution in the context of a metamorphosing government ethos, Giddens advocates what ultimately amounts to a more solid institutionalisation of neoliberalism. For Giddens, the role of the state is not necessarily to be devolved in an attempt to free the market, so much as to police and nurture free market enterprise as something extending across all social sectors, not just in business. But where the Thatcher government matched a comparable policing to the rendering of government

as an active force championing privatisation, the third way instead regarded the state itself in more explicit terms as a defender of free market enterprise. In the third way, the ‘public interest’ is supposedly synergised with the private sector, giving birth to what Giddens calls a ‘mixed economy’ (*Third Way* 99-100). With New Labour’s embrace of third way ideology, then, came the enshrinement of a very clear value set: a defence of individualism coupled with a public sector geared towards promoting it; personal responsibility coupled with personal accountability heralded through the rubric of active citizenship; and the institutionalised backing of entrepreneurial initiative and opportunism in the free market. Third way governments were evolving governments, instigating profound changes in politics which, inevitably, meant profound changes for the economy, culture and society. The third way government was no longer the harbinger of the welfare state; it was the harbinger of the social investment state (*Third Way* 117).

### *Neoliberalism and Risk*

There is another, vital neoliberal value that Giddens’s third way advocated: ‘[a]ctive risk taking is recognized as inherent in entrepreneurial activity, but the same applies to the labour force. Deciding to go to work and give up benefits, or taking a job in a particular industry, are risk-infused activities – but such risk taking is often beneficial both to the individual and to the wider society’ (*Third Way* 116). Giddens is effectively taking Thatcher’s idealised figure of the risk-taking entrepreneur and applying it to the wider society. Again, this signals an acceptance of neoliberal hegemony by treating it as a point of departure and extending neoliberal ideology across social sectors. This is yet another instance of how the neoliberal ethos ends up

being institutionalised. Risk becomes a value that ends up enshrined through policy decisions.

As my introduction looked to establish with reference to Owen, an effect of institutionalising risk in government policy is to interpolate subjects either as risk-taking, or risk-bearing subjectivities (Owen 323). On the one hand, risk-taking is valorised under neoliberalism through the promotion of opportunism and entrepreneurialism. On the other hand, risk-bearing subjects, particularly in the rhetoric of third way politics, are defined as an excluded or marginalised public that need to be redeemed through coupling the affordance of right with the execution of obligation, typified in New Labour's Welfare to Work programme and the journey towards social inclusion.<sup>28</sup> The promotion of both risk-taking and risk-bearing subjectivities typifies Hacker's Great Risk Shift once a transfer of responsibility from state to individual is understood as a process entailing great risk potential – either for gain or loss, defined in terms of capital accumulation and social prestige, or loss of welfare and security, respectively.

It is this context that, I believe, Lyng was partly commenting on when invoking risk-laden social conditions in the contemporary era. One contribution of this section so far has been to offer a more detailed account of the context informing the operation of Lyng's edgework practises encountered in the previous chapter, either as something rebelling against a stultifying and bureaucratic social system, as a reclamation of risk by assertively executing risk on the risk-taker's own terms (the

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<sup>28</sup> As Laybourn explains, '[t]he market-led nature of New Labour's approach [...] was of course blatantly obvious in [Gordon] Brown's 1997 Budget [as Chancellor of the Exchequer], particularly in the explicitly titled programme of "Welfare to Work". [...] The philosophy behind New Labour seems to have been to reduce social need through an alliance between the state and the private sector. This was outlined, in some detail, by Tony Blair on 18 March 1999. [...] Blair suggested that a modern welfare state should be "active, not passive, genuinely providing people with a hand-up, not a hand-out"' (160-61).

first framework), or as something that already embeds risk within a social structure to such an extent that edgework practises become expressions of a pervasive hegemony (the second framework). Risk-taking is not a practise that occurs in isolation. It is something that has been allowed to flourish under neoliberalism. I do not want to downplay the potential for risk to be rendered a subversive practise – through audience participation in immersive theatre, for instance – but I do want to echo Owen’s concern that risk has become a condition of everyday life in the UK. As such, ‘we should at the very least be wary’ of invoking risk as a positive value (Owen 329). What has been eroded through the steady risk-centric policies applied by successive governments since 1979 in the UK is security. If the neoliberal ethos could be distilled down to a single message, it would probably read: ‘[y]ou are on your own’ (Hacker xvi, original emphasis).

### *Neoliberalism and Affect*

In drawing this section to a close, I wish to draw on an effect of the growing hegemony of the neoliberal ethos: the co-optation of affect. Part one, especially chapter one, positioned the production of affect as a defining and significant aspect of immersive theatre’s aesthetics of audience participation. How might this be approached in the light of the context sketched in this chapter so far? In preparing responses to this question, I draw on two closely related notions: emotional labour and affective labour.

In their influential book *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri propose: ‘[i]n the postmodernization of the global economy, the creation of wealth tends ever more toward what we will call biopolitical production, the production of social life



itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest in one another' (xiii). What this proposition encourages is a re-evaluation of what affect production might mean today. If neoliberalism presides today, how might its various effects inform study of affect production, particularly as those effects relate to a politics of participation?

'Biopower', write Hardt and Negri, 'is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior' (33). 'The great industrial and financial powers thus produce not only commodities but also subjectivities [...]: they produce needs, social relations, bodies, and minds – which is to say, they produce producers' (32). In addressing one iteration of biopower, Hardt and Negri deploy the term 'affective labour' to describe in-person services or services relying on physical proximity between people and the accompanying creation and manipulation of affect to accommodate this proximity: it is labour in a bodily mode (292-93; cf Hardt 95-96). Affective labour is first and foremost an activity premised on being together. Indeed, this onus on togetherness has influenced contemporary understandings of affective labour, particularly in the field of art criticism. For instance, in a poetic essay titled 'You Make Me Feel Mighty Real', the art critic Jan Verwoert describes affective labour as follows: '[t]he field of affective labour [...] is always also a form of witnessing, in that it is a continuous endeavour of taking on board and bearing the weight of the emotions of others, be they pain- or joyful. The labour of affect is the sustained effort of keeping oneself exposed to feelings' (271-72). In its simplest figuration, affective labour refers to witnessing premised on some kind of affective exchange; but affective labour might also be tied into more complex, biopolitical systems of exchange. To understand how this is so, it proves fruitful to think genealogically about the concept of affective labour.

I have already noted some important differences between affect and emotion, but the notions of affective labour and emotional labour tend to be highly compatible in their various iterations. However, for present purposes and drawing on chapter one and the introduction: affective labour might be broadly defined as a labour process involving towardness or awayness from something or someone. Emotional labour also involves towardness or awayness from something, as its affective component, but emotional labour specifically engages emotion as a work site in this process. Emotional labour must involve affective labour, but not necessarily the other way around.

To the best of my knowledge, the sociologist Arlie Hochschild was the first to identify and define emotional labour in *The Managed Heart*. For Hochschild, emotional labour ‘requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others [...]. This kind of labour calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality’ (7). She gives an example of a flight steward/ess providing an air of welcome and warmth to airline customers. The forced smile does more than offer a service: ‘it estranges workers from their own smiles and convinces customers that on-the-job behaviour is calculated’ (5; cf Klingmann 23). This notion of estrangement from emotional signals is a vital part of Hochschild’s account of emotional labour. For Hochschild, the estrangement of the contemporary worker in the service industries finds its counterpart in the alienation of workers from their bodies in nineteenth-century industrialism (17). An implication of emotional labour is a conflation of privacy and public demeanour; not only is emotion effectively co-opted by business enterprise within increasingly competitive markets, where competition itself is the driving force

behind emotional co-optation when businesses look to stand apart from competitors, but the private also increasingly ends up as something to be displayed.

Bound into Hochschild's examination of emotional labour is an approach that owes as much to Erving Goffman as Constantin Stanislavski; social roles, such as that of bride, wife or mother, establish 'a base line for what feelings seem appropriate to a certain series of events' (74), whereas 'feeling rules' provide 'standards used in emotional conversation to determine what is rightly owed and owing in the currency of feeling' (18). In chapter one, I was insistent on underscoring that emotional disposition by no means stands alone, but is rather something that emerges in dynamic relation with autobiography and social experience. What Hochschild emphasises here are the socially responsive elements to emotion. She is constructing a language to address how emotional engagement and display are tied into a set of social mores. In the context of the book as a whole, this opens up space to consider how a number of institutions – including those of business – might affect how emotion functions. As such, the individual ends up as a permeable subject open to the biopolitical forces noted by Hardt and Negri. Whether pitched as an integral part of offering a service, or as something more lasting and affective, emotion is revealed through Hochschild's work on the subject as something prone to co-optation.

An effect of the theoretical approach to emotion – and affect, for that matter – that was detailed in chapter one, is to open up space for compressing the social and the personal. To recall Ahmed, emotion is what allows us to distinguish an inside from an outside in the first place – but this recognition still relies on permeability. Hochschild encourages another look at this permeability in the context of market relations. She rightly suggests that '[i]t does not take capitalism to turn feeling into a

commodity or to turn our capacity for managing feeling into an instrument. But capitalism has found a use for emotion management, and so it has organized it more efficiently and pushed it further' (186). This is also echoed in the writing of Eva Illouz who, in *Cold Intimacies*, puts forward her notion of 'emotional capitalism' to describe

a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing what I view as a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behaviour and in which emotional life – especially that of the middle-classes – follows the logic of economic relations and exchange. (5)

She traces this mutuality back to the emergence of psychiatry and what she calls the 'therapeutic emotional style' in the first half of the twentieth century, following Freud's influential promotion of psychoanalysis (6). What this helped to foster, she claims, was a preoccupation with emotional life and especially the possibility of managing emotions (6-7). Not only that, but '[b]y making personality and emotions into new forms of social classification, psychologists not only contributed to making emotional style a social currency – a capital – but also articulated a new language of selfhood to seize the capital' (65). Indeed, this recognition has even led to 'emotional intelligence' being thought of as an indicator of successful work competencies (see Goleman). Reminiscent of Sennett, Illouz suggests that a consequence of the decline of the Victorian era's strict division between public and private life, coupled with the increasing influence of the therapeutic emotional style, paved the way for a reshuffling of boundaries between the public and the private spheres, making the entrance of emotional life into the workplace a distinct possibility (16, 23-24). So with the possibility having emerged of rendering emotion a source of capital,

coupled with the conflation of, or confusion between, public and private spheres, emotional labour was free to rise as a site for integration within capitalist practise. To recall the example of the airline steward/ess, what ends up marketed to potential customers is not just air travel, but the emotional engagement of the airline's staff. What this marketability necessitates is the dissolution of strict boundaries between privacy and the public and the conflation of interiority and exteriority. The workplace in such a context is not just an airplane cabin, but the human body. Consequently, affect and emotion are rendered as biopolitical work sites.

Emotion, as something to be potentially co-opted, has demonstrably been taken on board by governments, an example being the government of Bhutan's measurement of its population's happiness through the Gross National Happiness (GNH) index since 1972. Closer to home, as Ahmed writes (who I also thank for drawing attention to the GNH), David Cameron 'talked about happiness as a value for government, leading to a debate in the media about New Labour and its happiness and "social well-being" agenda' (*Promise of Happiness* 3-4). Happiness, as with emotion more generally, is apt to be incorporated within a government's value system, in a comparable way to emotional warmth among staff being incorporated within the value system of an airline. But this remains an effect of the neoliberal ethos. As a value, affect has no intrinsic relation to the neoliberal ethos, but it nonetheless seems to be deployed as a political value compatible with that ethos, without being explicitly integrated into it, for businesses and even governments. Affect's relationship to the neoliberal ethos is incidental, which is not to undermine that relationship's significance.

For Ahmed, the promise of happiness is a directive that, ultimately, is normalising and hegemonic. What the promise or directive of happiness rubs over is

the subversive appeal of unhappiness, or political frustration, that contravenes an accepted definition of happiness. There is a sense of obligation to feel an emotion like happiness, just as there is of being disinclined towards unhappiness. These kinds of influence, I believe, are usefully approached as additional forms of emotional labour and what this kind of emotional labour helps to enforce is cultural hegemony. The consequence of this enforcement is political stultification as digression from the directive of emotional ideals is policed in daily interaction. As Ahmed suggests – and this will prove significant towards the end of the next chapter and in part three: ‘[w]e might need to attend to bad feelings not in order to overcome them but *to learn by how we are affected by what comes near*, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as an ethical resource’ (*Promise of Happiness* 216, original emphasis).

To draw this commentary on neoliberalism to a close and to sum up: what this concluding remark of Ahmed’s reveals, I suggest, is a potential for emotional labour to be counteracted by affective labour. Emotional labour might involve the co-optation of happiness as a value and a promise in the rhetoric of government, or it might refer to the biopolitical absorption of emotion and the personal as productive sources of capital in economic exchange, through the forced smiles of airline staff, for instance. Affective labour is broader than this, referring to processes of towardness or awayness from something, or someone. This is also understood as the affective component of emotion and might just as well be co-opted. But by focusing on how we are attracted to or repelled by something, or someone, we must engage in a kind of affective labour by objectifying that towardness or awayness as a subject of scrutiny. If this towardness or awayness is itself bound up in emotional labour, then attending to affective labour may help to reveal that emotional work *as work*.

Whatever the case, affective labour – despite the fact that it is prone to biopolitical co-optation – might also carry within it a political potential for resistance in the form of subverting otherwise inchoate relations between people and systems of governance and control.

This section has spent time introducing and defining neoliberalism, charting some important junctures in its evolution. Key neoliberal values were identified and explored, along with the co-optation of affect as a biopolitical effect of these values being practised. What remains to be seen is what relevance this has for immersive theatre. The next section compares the neoliberal ethos with audience participation in Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death*. My intention is to establish what politics of participation is at stake in this performance by identifying what participatory values are favoured and addressing how that favouring might impact on an audience's capacity to participate freely, particularly as that capacity can be seen to tie into disposition.

### ***The Masque of the Red Death and Neoliberal Value***

In *Artificial Hells*, in a chapter that updates an earlier, influential article called 'The Social Turn', Bishop notes how New Labour 'deployed a rhetoric almost identical to that of the practitioners of socially engaged art in order to justify public spending on the arts' (13). At the same time, she also touches on how the neoliberal ethos might tally with the artistic sphere through the deployment of governmental rhetoric. I have already described this rhetoric as emphasising active citizenship, responsibility, accountability and, by implication, participation. In attempting to subsume all social sectors within the neoliberal ethos as 'included' citizens, largely defined by and

through social mobility, in an effort to forge social competency in a privatised world, participation came to take centre stage. ‘In this logic’, writes Bishop, ‘participation in society is merely participation in the task of being individually responsible for what, in the past, was the collective concern of the state’ (14). She goes on to suggest that this is an ongoing issue not confined to New Labour, but persistent under the current coalition government, especially through David Cameron’s vision of the ‘big society’ (14). The big society takes personal responsibility and active citizenship to a new level through its advocacy of volunteerism and personal investment in the welfare of communities. The point to be underlined, though, is that participation is now a political battleground and, much with the more general institution of the neoliberal ethos before it, the participation of citizens in actively contributing to the welfare of communities and society – where previously this would have been a task of the state – has now become a point of departure for successive governments. The extent to which this might be questioned through the persistence of public services and the welfare state, through the universal benefit, for instance, ought not to be overlooked. Again, the tendency in discourses addressing change in its various guises is to hyperbolise. However, the fact remains that a political ideology promoting participation in society remains a persistent force in government rhetoric.

In the light of this, it seems important to consider how participation is being deployed in immersive theatre by: questioning how audiences are encouraged to take responsibility for their own participatory experience of immersive theatre; addressing how a participatory theatre environment might be framed as a site of intimacy and privacy; identifying how audiences of immersive theatre may parallel the new individualism associated with neoliberalism; thinking through how participants might be encouraged to adopt something of the spirit of



entrepreneurialism that typifies neoliberal ideology; and examining how they might be encouraged to take risks and at what potential costs. What is more, it is worth returning to an effect of the neoliberal ethos just recounted: namely, the co-optation of affect. How might practising participation in immersive theatre relate to this co-optation of affect and what impact might this have on how a politics of participation is to be formulated?

In response to these points and questions, I will be reflecting on my own experience of Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death*. This reflection will be nuanced and coloured by allusions to my more recent experience of the New York run of *Sleep No More* in February 2013 as a means of establishing a sense of consistency across Punchdrunk performances.

As with many Punchdrunk performances, *The Masque* was loosely based on a canonical literary text: in this case, the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. At the beginning of *The Masque*, the audience is asked to wear a beaked white mask and they are given an instruction to find a purveyor of cloaks within the performance world. Adorned with both cloak and mask, the audience is free to wander through the surprisingly vast number of rooms inside the Battersea Arts Centre, each one decadently detailed appropriate to the haunting worlds of Poe's short stories. At various intervals throughout the performance, the cast walk solemnly up the BAC's main stairway in the foyer in a communal, trance-like exodus which perhaps offers a cue to help synergise the various performances within this performance that take place on a looped basis. Audiences might witness an increasingly manic evening meal with characters apparently plucked from Poe's 'The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether'. 'The Black Cat' from another of Poe's tales prowls the space. Audiences might also find themselves in grim catacombs reminiscent of 'The Cask

of Amontillado’, or in a claustrophobic bedroom space for the disturbing murder of the old man from the ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’. These are all performances within the performance. Macabre murders are repeatable in the performance loops over the course of an evening, resurrecting not only murdered characters, but performance itself.

Audiences are encouraged to be forthright in seeking out performance in *The Masque*. If they are of an outgoing disposition, or perhaps spurred to be outgoing by wearing the mask and cloak, they might venture through a fireplace in an effort to find more of the performance in this labyrinthine world, a venturing that typifies how audiences are to engage with an environment that holds secrets. If audiences venture, they discover more of the performance. If they risk stepping into the unknown, then they are rewarded with more to experience. This is theatre for those who want to invest in a performance by taking risks, testing the limits of what can and cannot be entered, opened, touched, or eaten.

The performance as a whole, with the exception of one-on-one performances for participants singled out from the broader audience, largely took place without the actors acknowledging the presence of spectators. For the one-on-ones, which usually took place in locked rooms, audiences might be asked to remove their mask to engage in dialogue with a performer, or they might be asked to perform a task – such as eating the eyes (made from olives) from a figure of a cat made from a napkin.<sup>29</sup> With these one-on-ones aside, there are rare instances elsewhere in the performance where a performer might catch an audience member’s eye – in a mirror, for instance, rendered all the more haunting by a pianist in the same room playing Eric Satie’s

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<sup>29</sup> For this particular one-on-one, I make reference not to my own experience, but that of Chloe Veltman. See Veltman, ‘The Masque of the Red Death’.

*Trois Gnossiennes: Gnossienne No. 1* – but, for the most part, the audience remain voyeurs. For instance, while acknowledged in the mirror by the ghostly presence of another performer, I was ignored by the pianist when I joined her in playing the melody to this well-known Satie piece in the upper octaves of the piano (presuming that this was not the consequence of incompetent playing on my part, but perhaps the consequence of participating inappropriately). Discovering and exploring performance spaces, as an expected and in many ways demanded participatory mode, takes much greater precedence over more explicit kinds of audience-instigated performer-audience activity. Audiences are acknowledged by performers to the extent that they subscribe to these golden participatory rules of discovery and exploration, provided that exploration subscribes to the coherence of the world that is entered into.

The participatory element of *The Masque*, then, primarily comes through the audience's ability to move freely through the various spaces of the performance. Not once do they step outside of a coherent immersive landscape until the moment they leave the building. This sense of coherence was especially prominent at the Palais Royale, a cabaret bar hosted by Roderick Usher from Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher': a character that was more reminiscent of both the Kit-Kat Club host from the film *Cabaret* (1972) and the UK celebrity magician Derren Brown. In the Palais Royale, the audience could remove their mask and enjoy a drink while watching vaudeville acts. Audiences were also able to venture backstage as the vaudeville performers prepared for their next show. By opening up the backstage area of this performance space within a performance space, the rest of the immersive landscape was granted even more of a coherent reality. Even the productive processes of making a performance event were theatricalised, or at least absorbed within the

performance as a whole. The performance ends in an homage to the Poe tale from which the production takes its title, with Prince Prospero's ball taking place in a hall accommodating every audience member. An energetic dance begins which features a number of duets performed in unison. The red death, a mysterious cloaked figure, eventually appears before miraculously disappearing in a feat of magical trickery that still baffles me.

In the following subsections, I will be looking to identify what values are shared between audience participation in *The Masque* and the neoliberal ethos. In the two final subsections, on risk and affect respectively, this discussion reaches a pivotal point, for it is here, most explicitly, that an aesthetics of audience participation identified in part one is addressed in explicitly political terms.

### *Privacy*

It is worth dwelling on Punchdrunk's insistence that audiences wear a mask and cloak. As Machon writes, '[t]hese masks at once allow for anonymity and a sense of (role)play within the performance itself. As an audience member, the mask allows you to take risks, to step outside of yourself and enter into the adventure of the event' ('Space and the Senses' n.p.). For Felix Barrett, the mask is there to remove the audience's sense of trepidation: 'whatever baggage you're bringing in, it's neutralized by the mask. So you can be a timid person, but crazy in the show world' (qtd. in Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 90). What the mask helps to provide is confidence. Literally cloaked from view and rendered anonymous, audiences are freed from the glare of a potentially judgmental public. Participants are consequently encouraged to exercise free movement within the various spaces without being recognised, thus

severing potentially guilt-ridden social convention that may put off participants from engaging in voyeurism in particularly sexually charged moments, for instance, or in being seen to run through a space in public, or perform some kind of act that might otherwise be taken to be embarrassing outside of the secluded intimacy and privacy of the one-on-ones. The point I want to make is that even the more public experiences in this performance are rendered private. The cloak and mask closes off audiences from one another, with the exception of anonymous eyes glaring out from behind the mask. Participating audiences are rendered monads. Affective facial expressions are concealed within a private space behind the mask, known only to the audience member and those performers who temporarily remove the mask for one-on-one performances. Indeed, these one-on-ones are dependent on closing off fellow audience members from the performance space, locking them out from the intimacy bestowed on a selected audience member within a locked room. These one-on-ones epitomise the cultural cache associated with an experience of the performance and might even become a potential source of envy among those who were not fortunate enough to have experienced such privilege.

*Scorched the Snake* is filled with requests from visitors to the site as to how these one-on-ones might best be secured in *Sleep No More*, but Cobb remains reluctant to offer this particular kind of advice (although he does have a tendency to leave breadcrumbs). What this suggests is that the one-on-one is potentially, depending, of course, on the audience member, an enviable thing: the locus of participatory one-upmanship. Indeed, in my own experience of *Sleep No More*, I remember feeling distinctly dejected when another audience member was selected from a group of three to pass through a locked door for a one-on-one. The fact that there were only three of us there was itself the consequence of heading the other way

to a much larger group of participants once we clocked and followed a solitary female character wandering between rooms. Outside of a locked door, she stared at each of us in turn, finally selecting the person next to me. This moment was thrilling, knowing that selection was a possibility as the product of an opportunity, albeit a failed one, that was self-made. Like a limited edition collector's item, this kind of experience is apt to be rendered enviable for the have-nots and a source of pride for the haves. Consequently, it can be seen to thrive on privacy. As such, Punchdrunk's use of one-on-one performance can be seen to be exclusory and, indeed, their exclusory nature is surely part of an appeal that encourages the lucky audience member to feel special for being singled out (later in the performance I had the 'privilege' of feeling this sense of speciality). What must be recognised, though, is that the use of one-on-ones valorises privacy once rendered exclusionary and exclusive.

### *Individualism*

By promoting private experience, the cloak and mask also foster a profoundly individual experience. Fine art discourse on participation has a tendency to celebrate togetherness and community among fellow participants (Kester; Bourriaud), although there are notable exceptions, most explicitly articulated in Bishop's article 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics'. Theatre audiences have also been framed as a coherent entity coming together in a hopeful, transformative community (see especially Dolan; Fischer-Lichte). However, if togetherness can be said to exist at all in *The Masque* – with the possible exception of the Palais Royale, where cloak and mask are removed – it is a togetherness aroused through a necessary acceptance of

individualism. If an audience-as-community can be said to exist, it is an audience of individuals sharing in anonymity. Indeed, this is echoed in a response to a F.A.Q on Punchdrunk's website: '[w]hy do you describe your work as immersive? [...]' Although our work is necessarily structured from a practical and safety perspective, the non-linear narrative content coupled to the high degree of viewer freedom of choice make it a singularly intense and personal experience' (*Punchdrunk.org.uk*).

In Giddens's third way, the new individualism was taken as a point of departure for founding a new centrist politics. As noted above, rather than opposing the new individualism, the third way applied value to it that might potentially be shared. By rendering individualism as a value, premised on the rewards which individual enterprise might afford, it became possible to institute structural changes to the economy and the welfare state which helped to solidify individualism as an institutionalised value. I believe that something comparable is taking place in *The Masque*. If an audience can be said to exist as a coherent entity at all, it is an entity premised on exploiting individualism as a shared value premised on 'freedom of choice' and 'a singularly personal and intense experience'. The performance is premised on encouraging audiences to go it alone by wearing the cloak and mask, crafting their own individual journey through the performance. While experiences of the performance might be shared after the event, or even during the event in the Palais Royale, this sharing is premised and even thrives on treating individualism as a value. In *The Masque*, the immersive theatre audience, as a group, is a group that is primarily brought together through expressions of individualism and shared recollections of individual endeavour.

Alan Read, drawing on Rancière, suggests that it is 'in the audience's *decomposition* that the threat to hierarchies of organisation begins [...]. Here the

consensual fantasy of a phantasm called “audience” gives way to the interruptive *dissensus* of a multitude among whom individuals make themselves variously known’ (179, original emphasis). I want to flag the importance of recognising that individualism has a very potent political history. It is important to recognise, as indeed others have, what a defence of a decomposed or dissensual audience of individuals might lead to.<sup>30</sup> One of the primary claims arising from part one was that an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre, manifested in affect production and risk perception, derives from individual productivity. This individual productivity is now being revealed as manifesting in far more explicit ways through the practise of participation in its individualised form and not, or at least not so much, as a dialogic practise taking place between interacting participants. I agree with Read that there is space to formulate a potentially redemptive politics of individualism: this is something to be explored in part three. But, for the time being, it is worth highlighting that individualism has a darker side, at least as it appears in *The Masque*. By encouraging audiences to be opportunistic and, as I argue below, entrepreneurial, prompted by a clear valuing of individualism, inequality seems highly likely to emerge. By inequality, I refer to an unequal distribution of participatory opportunity premised on a number of factors, including: familiarity with immersive theatre participation and the anticipations that might procure (for instance, of mastering participatory protocol through experience of comparable performances); familiarity with the performance, especially through attending the performance several times (either by having the money to afford to do so, coupled with the savvy attitude of buying tickets far enough in advance of a sold out run, or by volunteering as an usher and receiving free tickets in return); being of an outgoing

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<sup>30</sup> For instance, Shannon Jackson has offered an insightful critique of Bishop’s notion of ‘relational antagonism’ (53-56).



disposition, or aspiring to be so once the cloak and mask is worn; and even, as Cobb's blog suggests in the case of *Sleep No More*, a rehearsed awareness of how to go about securing the best possible experience prior to entering the performance. In each case, it is the individual that must bear responsibility for maximising self-made opportunity.

### *Shifting Responsibility*

What all this amounts to is a clear shift of responsibility for maximising the best possible experience of *The Masque* from the theatre makers to the theatre receivers, now rendered as partial co-producers of the theatre event. This is not to downplay the painstaking work that must go into the creation of such incredible and vast performance spaces, not to mention the time and energy invested by the performers in maintaining vivacious physicality night after night. Rather, my point is to stress that forthrightness is a prerequisite of participation in *The Masque*. It is up to the audience to help foster self-made opportunity as an aesthetic surplus to an immersive environment.

It is worth recalling Giddens's insistence that '[w]e have to make our lives in a more active way than was true of previous generations, and we need more actively to accept responsibilities for the consequences of what we do and the lifestyle habits we adopt' (*Third Way* 37). The introduction to this thesis troubled the deeply problematic binary of 'active' and 'passive' spectatorship. Nonetheless, it was also pointed out that immersive theatre tends to amplify latent elements of more traditional theatre spectatorship, an example here being the extent of 'active' participation in *The Masque* associated with, for instance, venturing through

fireplaces and seeking out cabaret bars. Comparable to Giddens's championing of 'active citizenship' is the 'active participation' encouraged in this performance. The amplification of active participation has consequences, an example being the transfer of at least partial responsibility onto the shoulders of individuals. Borrowing from Giddens above, what this transfer entails is an acceptance of the consequences arising from what participants do. *The Masque* is democratic in the third way sense; once pitched as a group of individuals investing in the shared value of individualism, set against a seemingly accessible backdrop of looped performances in performance spaces that audiences are free to discover, a kind of democracy emerges that depends on realising this shared value. However, as with the third way, in defending this strange breed of democracy, a democracy that sheds a defence of equality in favour of marrying right with obligation, *The Masque* obliges audiences to seek out the 'right' to the experiences that they have paid for. Recalling Boltanski and Chiapello, autonomy is in many ways *demande*d of audiences in this performance. And that demand poses its own restrictions on participation for those without the disposition or capacity to participate opportunistically. In both the third way and *The Masque*, equality is pitched not as a right without obligation, but as something to be attained by exercising initiative. As such, the acceptance of personal responsibility, premised on exercising initiative, ends up enshrined as a value. Perhaps affective thrills are rendered all the more satisfying if initiative bears fruit; at the same time, the frustrations accompanying failure in this task are likely to be rendered equally amplified.

### *Entrepreneurial Participation*

In charting the evolution of neoliberalism from the Mont Pelerin Society to its institutionalisation under Thatcher, I commented on both entrepreneurial initiative and the liberation of entrepreneurial opportunities as being two of its defining characteristics. I then went on to identify entrepreneurialism as a key neoliberal value. The previous subsections have all been building towards a model of participation at work in *The Masque*: a kind of participation that I call ‘entrepreneurial participation’. This refers to audience participation that demands entrepreneurial initiative. The entrepreneur was identified above in a twofold sense: firstly, as ‘a thrifty and sharp individual who aptly capitalises on the profitable opportunities afforded by enterprise’; and, secondly, as an ideal that, particularly in the New Labour years, ended up extending to include all citizens. The entrepreneur was no longer restricted to the activity of business enterprise in these years, but became valorised as a state of being to which all should subscribe. Applied to audience participation, the entrepreneurial participant might function as a savvy individual who capitalises on profitable participatory opportunities. Entrepreneurial participation might also function as an ideal extending to all participants: as a state of being to which all should subscribe. Both cases, I contend, are in play in *The Masque*.

It is the entrepreneurial participant that is most likely to walk through a fire place, discover the most performances within the performance and secure the most one-on-ones. It is the entrepreneurial participant that is likely to rehearse participatory protocol, or familiarise themselves with the best tactics to deploy prior to entering the space – by brushing up on recent superfan blog posts, for instance. But entrepreneurial participation is also inscribed as something far more

fundamental, in the second sense noted above. Entrepreneurial participation is the participatory mode expected of audiences as well, for without exercising at least a degree of entrepreneurialism, especially by practising risk, the participant is likely to minimise the number of opportunities made available to them. For instance, it constitutes a risk for audiences to move in the opposite direction to crowds of spectators who may have communally followed a character on a loop. Taking this risk may increase the chances of securing a more intimate experience, as, indeed, so nearly happened in my own experience of *Sleep No More* outside that locked door. This opportunity, albeit a failed one, is far less likely to have arisen were the decision not made and the risk not taken to ignore the hurried pacing of the crowd on the tail of another performer. While the latter may well have led to an engaging encounter and was perhaps a more secure option that must at least have resulted in something to watch, the entrepreneurial decision to go my own way bettered the odds of securing a more intimate and ultimately more memorable experience. More so than anything else in this performance, it was this failed encounter that remained one of the most exciting, thrilled at the time by the prospect that it could have been me that she selected.

It should now be clear that the neoliberal ethos and audience participation in immersive theatre have much in common, but there still remains another element of that ethos, as well as an effect, that must still be noted: risk, as the element, and affect, as the effect. So far I have been looking at how participation is practised in *The Masque*. I now want to directly address these two themes in the remaining two subsections: themes that have been established as the bedrock of an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre in part one. In doing so, I explicitly look to evaluate that aesthetics in political terms.

## *Risk*

I commented on The Great Risk Shift in the introduction and in the previous chapter: a shift that has been firmly tied into the institutionalisation and evolution of neoliberalism. Indeed, it is this shift that can be seen to have prompted Lyng to reflect on risk-laden social conditions as a stimulus for both his first and second edgework frameworks. My examination of this framework led to an address of Giddens and his insistence that risk-taking is an inherent element of entrepreneurial activity. By idealising entrepreneurship and extending it as a value across an entire citizenship, the institution of this value in the policy decisions of New Labour also valorised risk. Something similar is at stake in *The Masque*. Through a comparable extension of entrepreneurial participation to all participants, as a value to be aspired to, risk-taking, by implication, ends up being valorised as well. As with the third way, the goal of this valorisation may well be to render entrepreneurship and risk-taking as inclusive values. Indeed, implementing the mandatory wearing of a cloak and mask, as has already been demonstrated, would seem to support this claim. It should be noted that Colin Nightingale, Punchdrunk's senior producer, claimed that it is far from an intention of Punchdrunk to promote exclusivity in their work (personal interview). Barrett's comments on the mask above would also seem to substantiate the idea that Punchdrunk seek the opposite: namely, inclusivity. However, in raising entrepreneurial participation and risk-taking to the status of values to be aspired to, as an implicit consequence of the kinds of participation favoured through their approach to space and the audience's free roaming within spaces, Punchdrunk end up producing exclusionary forms of participation as a consequence of the grounds on which inclusion is premised. To be specific: entrepreneurial participation and risk-taking are these exclusionary forms.

This kind of observation is what led Owen to express wariness of treating risk as a positive value (329), just as it leads me to approach the valorisation of risk-taking in immersive theatre participation with scepticism as to its political ramifications. While the rewards of acting upon risk as a participant may be high – maximising participatory experience and its experiential rewards – the costs are also high, in political terms, for these rewards come with the obligation of assuming risk-taking and entrepreneurship. Free roaming in an immersive theatre environment, then, might not be quite as free as the term implies. Rather, it is worth asking: who gets left behind?

It is important to note that the likelihood of encountering risk is something that may well decrease over the course of a live event, or with repeat attendance. Indeed, after a few hours of wandering around the various spaces of *Sleep No More*, I soon became familiarised, or at least better acquainted, with the map of the space and where the looped performances were likely to be taking place at particular times. The risk of missing out might consequently be seen to decrease, just as repeat attendance to different immersive theatre events and the consequent bettering of knowledge regarding participatory protocol might work in much the same way. Not only that, but a developing awareness of that participatory protocol, as well as a growing familiarity with the kind of performance being presented over the course of one performance and over the course of several years of experiencing Punchdrunk's work, also seemed to decrease my own experience of risk perception. Nonetheless, risky choices were still made: do I follow the crowd, or do I go it alone? Do I take the hand of this performer and risk humiliation under the gaze of others, or do I decline? Do I remain in one space and hope that the action comes to me, or do I

wander? While they may seem trivial, these are still risks to be negotiated in performance: not by choice, but by necessity.

### *Affect*

Punchdrunk use space to generate a particular atmosphere appropriate to whatever text(s) provide the point of departure for a performance. Barrett insists that the creative stimulus behind the creation of each show comes from an engagement with space: significantly, the architecture of the space that will house whatever immersive world is to be created. Barrett claims to log his own feelings when first encountering a given space and that the subsequent challenge is then to fix those feelings ‘and accentuate them so that we can guarantee for any audience member that they’ll feel that same impact’ (qtd. in Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 92). This implies that space functions first of all as an independent producer of feeling which is then harnessed and manipulated. Machon describes how Punchdrunk use space to allow ‘the text to be opened up on a multi-dimensional level. In this way, the text itself becomes entirely visceral’ (‘Space and the Senses’ n.p.). While the entirety of this viscosity should be approached with caution, both comments nonetheless allude to a tendency in Punchdrunk’s work to throw audiences into immersive worlds that attempt to provoke an authentic sense of atmosphere appropriate to the text being used, by manipulating affective stimuli as a means to that end.

In *The Masque*, audiences might find themselves nestled, for example, in an opium den adorned with Persian pillows, rugs and paraphernalia for various forms of consumption. In creating this kind of environment, Punchdrunk allude to the sense of disorientation and otherworldliness affiliated with the dream-like landscapes crafted

by Poe through his literature. It is in this sense that atmosphere is forged within Punchdrunk's world, largely manipulated through lighting, architecture, *mise en scène* and anything else that might guide the audience's senses in some way to help induce feeling. Central to Punchdrunk's work, then, is the production of affect, as something that can even be seen to provide an incentive for an audience's entrepreneurial participation.

In closing this comparative analysis of *The Masque* and the neoliberal ethos, I want to focus on this production of affect, specifically as it relates to neoliberal value. As specified above, I do not consider affect as a part of the neoliberal ethos; the neoliberal co-optation of affect arises as an effect of the neoliberal ethos. Affect is not a neoliberal value, but it has become a biopolitical site of negotiation for entrepreneurial business enterprise following the rise of the service economy, especially. Affective labour and emotional labour have become imbricated within neoliberalism as a consequence of the incessant need for businesses to expand not only their business interests in a highly competitive free market, but the means of securing those interests as well. What remains to be seen is how this imbrication of affect production and neoliberalism might contribute to the comparative analysis of the neoliberal ethos and *The Masque* being eked out so far. Politically speaking, what does it mean for affect production to be a central component of an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre?

In approaching this question, it proves fruitful to introduce two additional terms to the current discussion, both drawn from Hurley. Hurley's notion of 'feeling technologies' was introduced in chapter one: 'mechanisms that do something with feeling', which might include, in the current context, costuming the audience in a mask and cloak. Feeling technologies involve the direction of sentience and



consequently function as instruments that help to stimulate and manipulate feeling. Feeling technologies are thoroughly bound up with what Hurley calls ‘feeling-labour’, which refers to ‘theatre’s solicitation, management, and display of feelings’ (Hurley 4; see also 29). By using a term like ‘feeling-labour’, then, Hurley intends ‘to capture the work theatre does in making, managing, and moving feeling in all its types (affect, emotions, moods, sensations) in a publicly observable display that is sold to an audience for a wage’ (9). To manage and elicit feeling from an audience is to engage in feeling-labour, as an extractive form of production, just as the display of feeling on the part of the performer is to put feeling to work, as a service – not too dissimilar from the airline steward/ess performing warmth for a customer. But where experience, particularly affective experience, is something to be discovered and worked for, as is the case in *The Masque*, feeling-labour becomes explicitly accommodated by a participating audience. Whether formulated as affective labour, emotional labour or feeling-labour, this kind of activity is not simply purchased or received, but worked for: both as a consequence of the participant’s implicitly creative role in the production of affect, as explored in chapter one, and also as a consequence of their having to search for it.

As a participant engaging in a form of affective labour, audience members in *The Masque* are revealed even more clearly as co-producers, or especially productive participants. Audiences are affectively worked upon through feeling technologies, but they also exert affective labour through their inherent productivity and the more explicit productivity of entrepreneurial participation. As such, a crux emerges: on the one hand, audiences are manipulated by feeling technologies; on the other, they engage in affective labour. However, in evaluating the politics of this latter form of affective labour, it is important not to jump to the conclusion that entrepreneurial

activity leads to autonomy. Rather, this productivity remains premised on the potentially exclusory forms of entrepreneurial participation and risk-taking explored in the previous two subsections.

In discussing affective labour, I suggested, drawing on Hardt and Negri, that affect is rendered a biopolitical site for the negotiation of power. This may well have rang alarm bells given my suggestion in part one that affect is rendered a site of aesthetic attention for the immersive theatre participant in both *Cold Storage* and *Rotating*. In a comparable way, the wearing of cloaks and masks in *The Masque* work to heighten focus on the production of affect. In *The Masque*, the audience's mask and cloak works as a feeling technology by turning attention towards the audience's interior. Not only this, but by virtue of the privacy it affords, the mask and cloak both become mechanisms that help to generate affect and emotion, especially if the confidence that might come with anonymity prompts the audience to take risks. The mask and cloak helps to produce affect as well as draw attention to an experience of affect. This particular feeling technology, then, hints towards a potential for the participant's affective labour to be revealed as just that: labour. However, there is an equal risk of this labour remaining inchoate, or at least unrecognised, given the fetishisation of affective experience at play in rendering such experience the privileged reward of entrepreneurial participation. So long as something is thrilling, enjoyable or otherwise pleasurable, a potentially damaging question may emerge: who cares? What this question helps to erase, or keep hidden, is how audiences are worked upon by affect, or how audiences have no option but to subscribe to a particular value set that has already been identified as aligning with the neoliberal ethos.

In sum: affect production in *The Masque* relates to the neoliberal ethos, not as a part of that ethos, but as an effect. As a consequence of privacy, individualism, personal responsibility, entrepreneurial participation and risk-taking, affect manifests not only through the exertion of affective labour on the parts of participants, but also as a reward for such labour, exercised through practising neoliberal values. It is in this sense that affect production can be seen as an effect of the neoliberal ethos in *The Masque*: an effect that does not do away with the significant contribution of autobiography to the production of affect, but rather pushes the individualism associated with it to an extreme form. Consequently, a politics of participation in *The Masque* might best be understood through the identification of a value set shared with neoliberalism that does not exclude the possibility of togetherness, so long as the inclusion associated with that togetherness is itself recognised as exclusory, premised as it is on privileging the entrepreneurial participant.

### **Product Placement and the Unpaid Marketer in *The Black Diamond***

Over the course of this chapter I have been arguing that there is something integral about participating in Punchdrunk's work that correlates strongly with the neoliberal ethos. If there is a politics of participation in *The Masque*, it is a politics that is at least partly premised on neoliberal values. With this compatibility in mind, it is perhaps no surprise that Punchdrunk, by making performances with, or on behalf of corporate businesses, have come to demonstrate what might be framed either as a feeding off, or absorption within such emblems of capitalist culture as Sony, Louis Vuitton and Stella Artois Black. However, this relationship with business enterprise is not just the result of compatibility based on a shared value set between audience

participation and neoliberalism; it is also based on Punchdrunk's production strategies. In this section, I will be looking at how Punchdrunk's production strategies end up affecting audience participation in the first scene of their second corporate performance for Stella Artois Black, *The Black Diamond*. In particular, I will be addressing the positioning of audience participants in this performance as unpaid marketers of a product placed in performance and assessing the political implications of this positioning.

Colin Nightingale, Punchdrunk's senior producer, suggests that given the company's growing popularity they can be increasingly picky about which corporate businesses they want to work with while exercising greater authorial independence (personal interview). This is a view that resonates with Alvin Toffler's book, *The Culture Consumers*, published in 1964. Toffler suggests that collaboration between arts and business 'increases the manoeuvrability of the artist. It puts him [sic] in a better bargaining position' (107, original emphasis). Toffler and Nightingale are advocating greater independence on the part of artists to choose among funding streams. In particular, Nightingale is effectively advocating Toffler's suggestion that artists, or at least Punchdrunk, are free to manoeuvre within a funding field comprised of a range of different funding sources, achieving greater bargaining status through systems of exchange, with potentially mutual benefits, in a competitive market for both businesses and artists. It is this kind of manoeuvrable production strategy that can be read as being prized in post-2010 UK arts funding. Chapter five will address how the assumption of manoeuvrability, as an option, is simply not open to every artist and is therefore both selective and exclusive. For the time being, though, I hope to demonstrate that this strategy has consequences for audiences of Punchdrunk's work, especially those performances, like *The Black*

*Diamond*, that are strategic performances geared towards the generation of capital on the parts of both those making and funding the work.

Nightingale is clear about another motive behind Punchdrunk's work with corporate businesses. Not only does such work help to fund other productions that are expensive to mount, while also offering performances that are free to attend for audiences, but it helps to keep Punchdrunk's actors in paid work, especially in the potentially long interim periods between large-scale productions (personal interview). Decisions to work with corporate businesses do not occur in isolation from an economic context, but react to it. It is not as simple as suggesting that Punchdrunk are somehow selling out to corporate interests. Decisions to work with corporate businesses are informed by a number of valid ethical concerns regarding the welfare of their performers, as well as important political manoeuvring alongside the UK's primary public funding body for the arts, Arts Council England (ACE).

What this introduces is an additional set of considerations that demonstrate how Punchdrunk are imbricated within a very particular economic context that directly affects what work is produced and how work is produced. ACE's former chair, Alan Davey, was clear about supporting mixed economic funding in ACE's 2010 publication *Achieving Great Art for Everyone*: that is, funding initiatives that make public money stretch by integrating private funding streams (7). It is no accident that Punchdrunk's corporate funding drives were rewarded in April 2012 with national portfolio organisation (NPO) status, solidifying their regular ACE funding from 2009 with a public funding rise of 141 per cent in real terms, despite significant cuts in public funding to former regularly funded organisations (ACE, 'National Portfolio Organisations' n.p.). Punchdrunk were – and now, to an even

greater extent, are – working in a funding climate in the UK that explicitly supports mixed economic funding models.

In *Achieving Great Art for Everyone*, ACE advocates a mixed economy through their arts funding decisions, claiming, as Davey writes, to work hard ‘to try and deliver more from the private sector, by improving fundraising skills and the overall culture of giving to the arts’ (7). In other words, ACE is attempting to help artists to become entrepreneurial, approaching arts funding not so much as a public financial support mechanism, but as a tool for investing in the arts in ‘sustainable’ ways – where sustainability is premised here on the part-privatisation of arts funding. This is not just an echo, but an amplification of the spirit of privatisation championed under Thatcher and further institutionalised through New Labour and into the contemporary moment.

Nightingale suggests that Punchdrunk’s mixed funding model certainly helped with their successful bid for ACE funding, but that reliance on public funding is too risky (personal interview). A mixed funding model at least offers a degree of security to continue making work should one or other of the public or private funding strands prove compromised. He also suggests that Punchdrunk has needed to be entrepreneurial in sourcing funds for their large-scale work for some time, claiming that money is always an issue at the forefront of production, particularly a lack of it to meet the financial requirements of a given show (personal interview). So while Punchdrunk’s reward of a rise in public funding at a time of funding crisis came to emblemise ACE’s funding strategy, they had already been practising what was to become ACE mantra as articulated in *Achieving Great Art for Everyone*. Punchdrunk may well have become increasingly imbricated with a public funding ideology nudging ever closer toward privatisation, but their own funding initiatives

were already demonstrating entrepreneurialism – a prime example being their early reliance on Gideon Reeling.

A funding initiative worth mentioning before focusing in on *The Black Diamond* is Punchdrunk's Key Holder scheme. This scheme 'embodies exciting opportunities to support the company as it continues to innovate and push the boundaries of theatrical experiment. There are six levels at which you can support the company, each with a different key unlocking access to exclusive information and experiences' (*Punchdrunk.org.uk*). These six levels – recently reduced to four – begin with the £30 annual Valet Key membership, which '[u]nlocks limited access to the company's plans with priority booking for some Punchdrunk productions and an occasional letter' (*Punchdrunk.org.uk*). In the closing weeks of my PhD research, the fifth and sixth keys seem to have been dropped from the Key Holder scheme, at least from its public face on the website. The range of prices used to almost be topped with a £25,000 biennial Skeleton Key membership, which, in addition to priority booking and unveiling the secrecy which surrounds the company, as the £250 Bow Key bestows, unlocks 'a bespoke opportunity of the most exclusive and exhilarating nature, a once in a lifetime trip with Punchdrunk Travel Company' (*Punchdrunk.org.uk*). The sixth key was an access all areas Master Key for unspecified larger donations. The current most expensive option is a £5000 Abloy Key, allowing key holders access to a 'personalised service from the Punchdrunk team as they develop and nurture a close relationship with the company' (*Punchdrunk.org.uk*). The former upper echelons of this system, then, seem to have given the company cause for reflection, which I interpret as signalling unease about the exclusivity inherent in the Key Holder system. This may also be the consequence

of Punchdrunk Travel Company being moved onto the company's backburner (Balfour, personal interview).

In addition to regular ACE funding, Punchdrunk are funded by the independent Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the mass media corporation, Bloomberg. Punchdrunk also have a director of brand partnerships, Connie Harrison. The 'partnerships' pages on Punchdrunk's website states: '[o]ccasionally we are able to collaborate with like-minded, imaginative organisations to bring original and extraordinary ideas to life. We have many interests and ideas outside the company's core work and we'll always be pleased to hear from people who might help us realise some of our creative ambitions' (*Punchdrunk.org.uk*). This chimes with Nightingale's insistence on a compatibility of interests between Punchdrunk and the corporate businesses that they pick to work with, again echoing Toffler's suggestion that working with private funding streams may in fact better the bargaining position of artists that might otherwise be wary of sacrificing authorial control.

Nightingale suggests that one such realisation of creative ambitions – immersive theatre that steadily integrates with the real world (that is, the world outside of an artistically rendered performance space) – came with *The Black Diamond* (personal interview). Punchdrunk performers Hector Harkness and Raquel Meseguer directed the show, although Nightingale suggests that Barrett had a hand in the creative decisions as well (personal interview). While functioning as a marketing tool for Stella Artois Black, the partnership in this instance was with the advertising agency, Mother: the entrepreneurial and edgy marketing giants behind the Pot Noodle musical at the 2008 Edinburgh Festival and Acer's interactive dolphin aquariums pitched in shopping centres around Europe in 2012 (the interactive dolphins, thankfully, were not real, but convincing animations).



*The Black Diamond* was rapidly booked to capacity and played to an audience of 3000 non-paying audience members over the course of six weeks, 2200 more than this performance's forerunner, *The Night Chauffeur* ([Punchdrunk.org.uk](http://Punchdrunk.org.uk)). *The Black Diamond* was split into seven scenes, with scene one taking place on a different day to the remaining six. The first scene was where Stella's presence was most prominent. Audiences would enter a building playing host to an engagement party for two characters called Jacques and Cecile in East London's Blackall Street. This converted living space was furnished appropriate to the 1960s. The music of Juliette Greco floated through the cosy complex's various rooms, very much in keeping with Stella's brand aesthetic. Performers intermingled with audience members in an effort to integrate them as a part of the celebration, effectively interpolating them as characters sharing in festivity. On entering the space, audience members were handed beer tokens which could be exchanged for pints of Stella Artois Black in branded glasses in the bar upstairs – an exchange that, due to the volume of glasses that then trickled throughout the building, provided a branded backdrop to the frolicking of performers. The bulk of scene one of this performance involved, quite simply, being in such a cool, convivial space, although this scene culminated in the revelling audience and performers heading outside where Jacques brought out the black diamond from his pocket to formalise the engagement, only for a thief to explode from the crowd and steal the diamond. The performers dispersed, leaving the audience outside to reach the conclusion that scene one was over.

In the latter scenes of this performance, performed at a later date, there was much more of an onus on narrative development as considerably smaller groups of only a few audience members were led or driven through the streets of East London as the story of the black diamond and its whereabouts gradually unfolded. But in

what follows, it will be scene one that pulls focus, for it was this scene that most explicitly raises the issue of an audience's positioning as an unpaid marketer of Stella.

In my definition of immersive theatre articulated in the introduction, I suggested that there tends to be an aspiration towards the formation of other worlds. For theatre companies with small budgets, the site beneath the immersive landscape is more likely to be visible or at least pose a nagging presence, especially if the space itself is too big for the resources available – for instance, pipes and chipped paint may be visible beneath or next to Persian fabrics and velvet curtains, puncturing the degree of immersion and escape that a given immersive environment aims to create. In *The Black Diamond*, permeation of an immersive world took place, but not as a consequence of a lack of resources; rather, the resources were themselves the problem, functioning as an uncomfortable surplus. The problem was product placement and posed a twofold set of effects which rendered the boundary between constructed immersive landscape and the world outside of it as a two-way membrane that seems antithetical to immersive theatre.

On the one hand, the Stella Artois Black brand, through the vehicle of the branded glasses dispersed throughout the space, was absorbed within the immersive aesthetic. Anna Klingmann uses the term 'brandscape' to describe the physical manifestations of a brand identity that demarcates 'culturally independent sites where corporate value systems materialize into physical territories' (83). Punchdrunk are helping to create such a brandscape for Stella and the sea of branded glasses within the performance space are part of the vehicle for doing so – albeit a vehicle reliant on a more complex aesthetic arena crafted by Punchdrunk. The immersive experience then functions as a contagious entity which, especially in the minds and

comments of those who experience it, is likely to end up being associated with the branded identity of Stella. Mother's marketing campaign consequently thrives on Punchdrunk's provision of a brand experience. Immersive theatre then emerges as a co-opted medium to aid the development of a brand identity while fostering brand awareness by affiliating Stella with an emerging theatre style supplied by immersive theatre pioneers, Punchdrunk.

On the other hand, the immersive world is itself coloured by the Stella brand. The permeation and contagion works both ways. Not only is Stella affiliated with a great immersive experience, but *The Black Diamond* and, by implication, Punchdrunk, are affiliated with corporate branding. Audiences are rendered not only as consumers of theatre, but much more literal consumers of a branded drink as well, along with the aesthetic that Stella hope to have affiliated with their brand. This is where the political implications for audiences of this kind of brand partnership come into play most prominently, for audiences end up, effectively, as unpaid marketers of Stella Artois Black. Perhaps their payment is the reward of experiencing this work for free, in which case the audience functions not unlike a volunteer, paid in kind. But my point is that a form of work – i.e. advertising – is disguised as leisure, adapting Deborah Rapuano's fear that this disguise 'obscures the private appropriation of profit' (618).<sup>31</sup>

Audiences, particularly if they enjoy the free performance that is offered to them, end up positioned, at least potentially, as what Max Lenderman calls 'brand evangelists': the bringer of glad tidings and 'progenitors to the new consumer' (167).

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<sup>31</sup> Rapuano offers an 'ethnographic case study of Irish traditional music pub sessions' (617). Many of the session musicians in her study were paid. None of the audience participants in *The Black Diamond*, to the best of my knowledge, were paid. As such, I believe that Rapuano's subject of study – a form of work disguised as leisure – is even more applicable to *The Black Diamond*, where the only remuneration for audience participants is the reward of experiencing a performance at no financial cost.

The brand evangelist, writes Lenderman, ‘love[s] the brand because it provides them with an experience no other brand can deliver. That experience will be translated by word-of-mouth to peers and family on their own terms’ (168). In the case of *The Black Diamond*, it is not just the experience of drinking Stella that is potentially evangelised. Brand evangelism is taken as a point of departure for Stella, via Mother, to capitalise on, via word-of-mouth hype surrounding the performance (tickets were in extremely high demand for this performance), alongside the positive contagion bestowed on Stella via integration within an immersive world provided by Punchdrunk. Whether they like it or not, audiences end up functioning as a kind of brand evangelist for Stella simply by attending the performance and especially once they discuss the work with friends, or on online blogs. They may not have to buy a ticket, but they certainly buy into this advertising campaign by simply attending and are even depended upon to make that campaign efficacious. So the permeation of an immersive world works both ways; the brand benefits from the positive contagion of being associated with an experience purveyed by Punchdrunk and the performance itself is significantly coloured by branding, positioning audiences as brand evangelists. This latter, especially, exerts political pressure on an audience by fairly covert means. By inviting audiences to participate in a marketing campaign with the attractive offer of free tickets, despite whatever compatibility might play into Punchdrunk’s interests at that period in time, audiences end up positioned as marketers of a product. The performance and the audience along with it end up being co-opted by corporate enterprise that has become ever more alert to the marketing potential of cultural cache and the buzz affiliated with a hot ticket.

And what is at the heart of this business venture? Marketable experiences. In part one I staked the claim that experience, particularly affective and risky

experience, is at the centre of immersive theatre's participatory aesthetics. It seems to me that advertising agencies such as Mother are wise to this and have consequently looked to co-opt this integral aspect of Punchdrunk's immersive theatre work. Indeed, 'experiential marketing' is a practise that has come into its own over the past ten years as businesses search for means of standing out within saturated markets. In many ways *The Black Diamond* can be seen as a moment of culmination for innovations towards capitalising on attractive experiences. This is why the next chapter will be directly addressing the increasing marketability of experiences, as, I believe, the ongoing evolution of neoliberal business practises should impact on how we approach an experience-centred style of theatre such as immersive theatre.

To draw this section to a close: *The Black Diamond* can be seen to bring risk into play in a very different sense to that explored so far in this thesis. The kind of risk in operation is covert. Audiences may not be aware – or care – that they are at risk of being used. It may be that this is a fairly trivial, perhaps inconsequential form of using. However, the fact remains that the lure of an immersive experience by Punchdrunk masks the peculiar breed of a risk-bearing audience's productivity: a form of affective labour which is fetishised and instrumentalised as a means for accumulating capital by those funding this affective labour.

### **Conclusion: Punchdrunk and Exclusivity**

This chapter has staked the claim that the participatory values enshrined in the kind of participation that Punchdrunk asks of its audiences in *The Masque* shares much with the neoliberal ethos, particularly with regard to privacy, responsibility, individualism, entrepreneurialism and risk-taking. It was also demonstrated that an

effect of how these values operate through neoliberal business practise has been the absorption of affect as a form of labour and as a productive source of capital production. This absorption ought to at least colour an evaluation of the centrality of affect in immersive theatre's aesthetics of participation, especially if immersive theatre is not treated as an isolated entity but, rather, approached as something that operates in close relation to social, economic and political contexts. The lure of affective thrill and the excitement that surrounds participation in Punchdrunk's work was revealed, through my examination of the partnership between Punchdrunk and Mother, as something that can be capitalised upon and even co-opted. The audience in this performance function as unpaid marketers of Stella, or at least as volunteers paid in kind in return for their brand evangelism, encouraging reflection on the uses to which productive participants might be put in such immersive theatre performances.

In conclusion, a politics of participation in *The Masque* has its counterparts in the kinds of civic participation that successive governments have been asking of the UK citizenship since at least the 1980s – a correlation that helps to illuminate a politics of participation in *The Masque*. The distribution of risk-taking and risk-bearing subjectivities, especially as a distribution that responds so sensitively to the production of affect, and even more so once affect is approached as a form of labour, might then be questioned by asking: who gets left behind? These are political concerns, for at their heart lies the production of a value system that necessarily favours some – particularly the entrepreneurial participant – over others less disposed towards entrepreneurialism. The fact that audiences are encouraged to be entrepreneurial participants by wearing a mask only serves to institute further this element of the neoliberal ethos, as both an encouragement and an expectation.

My point in this chapter has not been to criticise the artistic merit of Punchdrunk's work. Punchdrunk remain one of the most exciting and impressive immersive theatre companies working today and their work rarely ceases to affect me in profound and intensely stimulating ways. Rather, my point has been to critique the kind of qualities that are present in the participatory modes that are expected of their audiences. It is in addressing this nuance that I locate a politics of participation in Punchdrunk performances as an exclusive politics that is all the more thrilling because of exclusion. Exclusion provides a counterweight to the privileges of those that buy into Punchdrunk's Key Holder scheme, at its various levels, not to mention the corporate performances with restricted audience access. But it is also tied into the values that are prioritised in the kind of participation that is both asked and expected of audiences in their performances more generally. In evaluating the thrill and sense of amazement or excitement that might come with, for example, being selected for a one-on-one, or being one step ahead of the crowd in discovering something within a performance, it is also worth reflecting on the implications of valuing this implicitly exclusionary practise. What emerges is an isolated audience, responsible for the generation of self-made opportunity through practising spectatorship as an entrepreneurial participant.

## **Chapter Four: Shunt and the Experience Economy**

Throughout this thesis, I have staked and sought to substantiate the claim that affect production and risk perception significantly contribute to an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre. In the last chapter, I also suggested that the risk-laden affective labour of participating audiences contributing to the production of aesthetic experiences in Punchdrunk's work is framed as an expectation, on the one hand, and, on the other, is susceptible to co-optation. I then suggested that this expectation and susceptibility carries important political ramifications for the positioning of participating audiences. This chapter reorients this discussion by charting points of alignment between immersive theatre and the experience economy so as to define further how both an aesthetics and politics of participation in immersive theatre might be coloured by context.

The experience economy refers to a paradigm shift largely instigated by businesses recognising, especially over the past decade, that experience production among potential and existing customers might bolster sales, establish brand loyalty and contribute to the formation of a brand identity. I will be exploring how the proliferation of marketable experiences provides a context that might help to inform an evaluation of immersive theatre's aesthetics and especially its politics. If experience production is so central to immersive theatre's aesthetics of participation and if experience production is also proliferating as a marketing strategy deployed by contemporary businesses, then how should this impact on theorising audience participation in immersive theatre? What are the consequences of this participatory aesthetics for the political positioning of audiences within an event, be it a theatre, or marketing event?



This chapter focuses on the work of the London based theatre collective, Shunt. Shunt formed as a group of ten artists in 1998 and until 2004 were based in railway arches in Bethnal Green, where they performed *The Ballad of Bobby François* (2000) and *Dance Bear Dance* (2003). They then moved to the London Bridge Vaults: premises accessed through an unmarked door in London Bridge station. As well as the Shunt Lounge, which functioned as a curatorial project in this location between 2006 and 2010, the Shunt Vaults, as they came to be called, provided a venue for both *Tropicana* (2005-06) and *Amato Saltone* (2005-06). After a brief stint at a nearby former tobacco warehouse on Bermondsey Street for *Money* (2009-10), Shunt took over the Biscuit Factory for *The Architects* (2012-13) – a large former industrial space which dominates what is now the V22 artists' studios complex in Bermondsey (*Shunt.co.uk*).

In contrast to Punchdrunk's work, where audiences are largely free to move around a range of spaces of their own accord on individual journeys, audiences in Shunt's performances tend to have their movements guided and also tend to remain as a group, although there may still be moments of discovery for participating audiences. As one member of the Shunt collective, David Rosenberg, suggests: if there is too much responsibility handed over to an audience, 'then an audience can choose not to enter some of the difficulties of that performance; an audience can choose not to see the thing that is going to upset them or confuse them, or surprise them, or revolt them' (qtd. in Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 106). For Shunt, there is a show to be presented and a journey to be taken through and that onus on being taken through something, on being guided, is what most distinguishes their work from the entrepreneurial participation expected of an audience in, for instance, Punchdrunk's *The Masque*. Entrepreneurial participation is not at stake in Shunt's work; rather,

what is at stake is much more of a submission to an experience, be it thrilling, uncanny, upsetting, confusing or frustrating.

In Shunt's two most recent performances, *Money* and *The Architects*, performances that will pull focus in this chapter alongside the Shunt Lounge, audiences spend the most part seated within immersive environments, interspersed with brief moments of promenade to enable transition between several highly controlled aesthetic spaces. In *Money*, a performance based on Émile Zola's *L'Argent*, audiences enter into a huge machine reminiscent of some horrific remnant of a dystopian factory, complete with dripping liquids and the groans and sounds of pumping pistons that at once pinpoints outmoded Victorian industrialism and the smoggy progress of technology. Once inside the machine – a remarkable feat of immersive design – the audience enters a strange antechamber. They are plunged into darkness as the groans of the machine begin to overwhelm the space while wind machines blast air across the bodies of the audience. Taken together, this promotes a sense of being transported somewhere at rapid speed. The audience then find themselves inside a wooden panelled chamber where they take seats at either side of a traverse space. Performers sit in among the audience, one of whom plays an entrepreneur seeking investment. The audience follow his progress across the three floors of the machine, celebrating his rise to fortune with glasses of champagne and catching glimpses of covert exchanges through transparent panels fitted in the floors above and below the audience. A strange, spider-like human creature clammers all over the machine and can be watched through these transparent panels. Despite being seated, or at least fairly stationary for most of the performance, the audience is encouraged to crane their necks to look up, across and down within this immersive space which, as a consequence of these transparent panels, extends the immersive

environment beyond walled spaces. The effect can be disorienting, not least because of the oddness of experiencing such multidimensionality.

In *The Architects*, based on Jorge Luis Borges's *The House of Asterion*, audiences are free at the beginning of the performance to navigate their way through a maze. The maze also functions as a funnel that pumps arriving audiences into a cabaret-bar space. Inside this space, audience members are able to sit at small tables and take in their surroundings, or perhaps order a drink from the bar. A band begins to play as a prologue to very brief, episodic moments of performance that take place around the seated audience. 'This is your trip of a lifetime', we are told by one of four Scandinavian characters – characters that appear to be hosts on a cruise ship within which the audience is immersed. These characters also double as obscene doppelgängers, god-like in their elevated status as characters mediated via film projection on screens above the audience's heads at either end of the space. The resources and activities that our hosts claim are available to us in these brief, episodic scenes, interspersed by alienating periods of blackout, are gradually revealed as decaying. A passenger is found to have taken a shit by the BBQ and a human finger has been discovered without an owner to claim it. The audience – interpolated as passengers on a cruise ship – must sit, watch and listen as their disintegrating trip of a lifetime is only ever relayed through narrated text. The experience of the ship's star attraction, for instance – a machine that is entered into involving sex with a dolphin – is, of course, never engaged with through interactive participation. Such acts of potential participation, however ludicrous, are discussed by the cruise ship's hosts or, in the case of the dolphin, by the godlike figures on the projector screens: but they remain unfulfilled in participatory action, posed always as an anticipation that is never satisfied.

After what seems like an eternity of such fragmented episodes, the audience is asked to evacuate the space with men and women exiting through different doors. In the first of two remaining spaces, the male audience – and here I write as a part of the male audience – is asked to obey the commands of scrolling text that appears on a television screen, mostly encouraging audiences to shout out simple yes and no responses, or to make nonsensical noises such as the sound of monkeys screeching, as though mocking the participatory impulse itself. If told to squeal, the audience squeals. A final space, revealed after a curtain is pulled back, hosts a volatile acrobatics routine and the massacre of a surreal Minotaur figure on one end of a broken bridge. This provides a false ending after the Minotaur's slaughterers take a bow to audience applause. The performance concludes with the godlike characters from the video projections appearing on an elevated platform in various states of undress, hobbling about their enclosure as if enduring the last vestiges of a party that the audience were never a part of. Drawn by the sound of the band starting up back on board the cruise ship, the audience are finally encouraged to leave the performance by following a red thread, perhaps that of Ariadne, back through the labyrinth and into the outside world.<sup>32</sup>

In what follows, the bewildering content of these performances – posing something of a challenge to represent in summary – will not draw focus so much as the immersive feeling technologies used to produce experience among audiences. The machine that is entered into in *Money*, for instance, functions representationally as a menacing consequence of industrial modernity; at the same time, though, it functions critically, as an experience machine for an exponent of the cultural industries. It is a designed space that is entered for the purpose of encountering the

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<sup>32</sup> This element of the performance – the red thread – was not used in the preview performances, but was added during the run (the altering of material over the course of a run is common with *Shunt*).

Shunt experience: a confusing, complex and cool theatrical experience that thrives on the sensuous and absorbing fact of the live moment. In both *Money* and *The Architects*, there is a sense that the immersive environments on offer are intended as much as experience machines as they are as a vehicle for transmitting coherent meaning. In *The Architects*, this onus on the production of the experiential was perhaps subject to critique through the constant negation or trivialisation of participatory opportunities and anticipations. Nonetheless, even here the various spaces were clearly designed to produce an experience of some kind: whether that experience be the intended disorientation of the labyrinth, or the sensation of temporal distortion while on the cruise ship as repetitive episodes incessantly followed on from one another.

With this in mind, while both *Money* and *The Architects* took place in periods of financial turbulence – *Money* after the 2008 global financial crisis and *The Architects* in the midst of the coalition’s austerity measures – and clearly make reference to the perils of financial turbulence, it is the experiential qualities of encountering their work that seem to take centre stage. While the narrative content of these works ties the performances into very particular contemporary moments – into very particular economic and political contexts – it is the stylistic elements of performance, the performance as experience machine, that pulls focus in my analysis as binding each performance to such contexts. It is Shunt’s experimentation with theatrical style and design – style and design that, I believe, is best characterised as immersive – that will consequently take critical precedence in what follows.

The last chapter introduced the idea that the kinds of experiences produced for audiences in immersive theatre were ultimately marketable and prone to co-optation. In what follows, through an analysis of Shunt’s work, I will be considering

the ways in which an experience-centred style of producing theatre ties into experience-centred styles of producing capital in contemporary business. In the next section, I explore the experience economy as a genre of economic output that is enjoying increasing pervasiveness. In doing so, I provide a context to re-evaluate the centrality of experience production in immersive theatre's aesthetics of participation. The section after that, 'Shunt in the Experience Economy', is split into three subsections: the first conducts a comparative analysis of the Shunt Lounge and the London Dungeon as cultural forms that either correlate with, or subscribe to the marketable curation of immersive experiences; the second considers *Money's* immersive environment as a contemporary manifestation of the fairground funhouse, addressing both as components of the experience industry and the potential triviality that this may impose on the kinds of experience produced in each; and the third looks at *The Architects* as 'postdramatic theatre' and argues that the frustration of participation within an immersive environment that seems to invite it might in fact function as an effective critique of the participatory impulse in the experience economy.

In conclusion and in transition to part three of the thesis, I offer an evaluation of Shunt's work as being profoundly self-conscious of audience manipulation. I suggest that audiences are not patronised by the offering of vaguely customisable experiences, but are instead confronted by the annoyance of anticipated participation either being denied, or being without efficaciousness. Consequently, a critical support of negative affects is considered in relation to the fun environments that help to stimulate them as a potential battle ground for a subversive politics of participation in immersive theatre.

## What is the Experience Economy?

Hesmondhalgh usefully identifies three main ways in which capitalist industry was radicalised between the 1970s and 1990s: a shift towards service industries, internationalisation and organisational innovation (88). The first of these is most relevant to current concerns and merits clarification. In identifying a shift towards service industries, Hesmondhalgh refers to a transition between different stages of economic output. The first of these stages refers to the extraction of commodities, such as the mining and agricultural industries (the primary sector); the second refers to the industrial transformation of these commodities into manufactured goods, an example being the automobile industry (the secondary sector); the third refers to ‘the various industrial sectors which deal primarily with services: distributive, producer, social and personal services’ (the tertiary sector) (88).<sup>33</sup> Hardt describes the advent of these different sectors as paradigms; he suggests that the paradigm shift from extractive to industrial production constituted a period of modernisation and the paradigm shift from manufacturing to service provision, most notably from the 1970s, heralded postmodernisation (90-91).<sup>34</sup> This latter shift, to some extent, remains dependent on outsourcing a significant part of the manufacturing industries overseas (Castells 220). However, Hardt insists that manufacturing is not so much

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<sup>33</sup> This third stage might be usefully nuanced with a brief aside on ‘post-industrialism’. As Castells explains, while expressing scepticism about the appropriateness of the term (219), the notion of post-industrialism combines three statements and predictions: firstly, ‘[t]he source of productivity and growth lies in the generation of knowledge, extended to all realms of economic activity through information processing’; secondly, ‘[e]conomic activity would shift from goods production to services delivery’; and thirdly, ‘[t]he new economy would increase the importance of occupations with a high information and knowledge content in their activity’ (218-19). Whether defined as ‘post-Fordist’, ‘post-industrial’ or as a ‘service economy’, the point to be underlined is that in the second half of the twentieth century, in advanced capitalist societies including the UK, an increasing prominence seemed to be placed on service industries, alongside their organisational and managerial structures. Fully exploring these alternative terms and notions would be more applicable were my focus, at this point, placed less on a shift towards service industries and more on organisational innovation.

<sup>34</sup> See also David Harvey, who uses alternative terminology to describe, in more detail, this latter shift in terms of ‘flexible accumulation’ (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 147).

removed from service economies, as transformed, blurring the divisions between manufacturing and services: ‘[j]ust as through the process of modernization all production became industrialised, so too through the process of postmodernization all production tends toward the production of services, toward becoming informationalized’ (92). One consequence of the developing service economy has been the increasing prevalence of immaterial labour – ‘labour that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication’ (Hardt and Negri 290) – one aspect of which is affective labour.<sup>35</sup> As the last chapter suggested, there are biopolitical implications associated with this shift, not least because of the possible co-optation of human experience as a productive source of capital.

I now want to address a fourth stage of economic output: what B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore identify in their influential book, *The Experience Economy*, as ‘an existing but previously unarticulated *genre of economic output*’: namely, the production of experiences (ix, original emphasis):

[e]xperiences are a fourth economic offering [after commodities, goods and services], as distinct from services as services are from goods, but one that has until now gone largely unrecognised. [...] When a person buys a service, he [sic] purchases a set of intangible activities carried out on his behalf. But when he buys an experience, he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages – as in a theatrical play – to engage him in a personal way. (2)

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<sup>35</sup> It is worth nuancing this remark; such immaterial goods, as they are produced in the service economy, oftentimes are inextricably linked with some kind of material good, such as a computer chip, thus ‘making it impossible to distinguish the boundaries between “goods” and “services”’ (Castells 221). The extent of this ‘impossibility’, however, is contestable, as it remains useful to flag how labour practises have increasingly come to incorporate non-material qualities.



Pine and Gilmore trace the origins of the experience economy to Walt Disney, most notably through Disney's inauguration of the theme park (2). Disneyland, in California, opened in 1955 and revolutionised what an amusement park came to represent by synergising everything within it through a coherent theme which, in Disney's case, related to the characters and narratives from Disney animations. As Klingmann writes, Disneyland constitutes a prime example 'of a completely constructed environment, one that is based not on traditional principles of [architectural] composition but rather on the choreography of scripted sequences that are compounded with the identity of a brand' (69). For Klingmann, Disneyland's success partly resides in the integration of such sequences, making up 'a holistic environment' (75). What the theme park came to typify and what Disney helped to found through Disneyland was an escapist world: a coherent landscape, cut off from the environments outside of its boundaries, premised on the production of memorable and pleasurable experiences. The theme park synergises multiple spaces through attending to scenographic detail and executing a legible and consistent design. In other words, it relies on offering an other-worldliness that resonates strongly with immersive theatre environments. Not only is Disneyland populated with role playing performers that interact with audiences, but it also presents immersive landscapes that can be freely roamed within. As such, immersive theatre finds a historical correlate in a popular origin of the experience economy.

*The Experience Economy* looks at a number of different industry sectors that have come to embrace experience production within highly competitive markets. Pine and Gilmore consider the international successes of themed restaurants like Planet Hollywood and shops such as Niketown as noteworthy examples of experience-driven businesses that revolve not just around customers purchasing

goods or services, but also a more holistic experience that is at once entertaining and memorable (3). For instance, on a reluctant visit to Niketown's Oxford Street store in London, I learned that customers could 'steam fit' their Nike Flyknit trainers in-store to achieve a customised fit. Of course, this is not much different to a tailor customising a suit, but the experiential qualities of this personalising process go much further. In Niketown, customers are able to try out their steam fitted shoes on running machines to ensure a customer satisfaction that is as much premised on the quality of the good as it is on buying into an experience of customisation.

This example also demonstrates how experience, as a genre of economic output, extends to the goods themselves. While the framing of how goods are sold is an important element of the experience economy, as it is with the service economy, it is also the nature of the good that is changing. One need only think of the comparative success of the iPod and iPad over rival MP3 players and tablets to realise how important the experience of using a good has become for many consumers. Design features that foster interactive experiences while using a product are clearly doing well in the market. Experience has come to function as an ideology in contemporary business across a wide and diverse range of commercial sectors and this ideology is as much geared towards experientially minded design as it is toward a memorable and preferably interactive experience of liveness.

Recognising the importance of how a good or service feels – recognising the significance of its experiential qualities – has been a driving force behind the emergence of experiential marketing. Bernd Schmitt, in particular, has been influential in propagating this marketing technique in his book *Experiential Marketing*. Schmitt writes in much the same vein as Pine and Gilmore about the rising importance of the commodification of experiences, but from the more focused

perspective of utilising experience as a marketing strategy. He identifies four ‘Strategic Experiential Modules’ (SEM) that might be utilised in marketing something: SENSE marketing, to promote value via sensory appeal (111); FEEL marketing, which looks to attach affect to a company or brand (118); THINK marketing, which looks to engage the creative faculty of potential customers via intrigue or provocation (153); ACT marketing, which relies on promoting customer interaction and transformation in lifestyle preferences (154); and RELATE marketing, which looks to relate the discrete self of a customer to the wider socio-cultural context reflected in a brand (171). ‘Holistic experiences’ are referred to by Schmitt as a goal of these SEMs (193).

As Max Lenderman, another advocate of experiential marketing, suggests, the emergence of these kinds of marketing strategies is the result not just of marketers to ‘break through the ad clutter and counteract the growing ineffectiveness of mass marketing’, but also to respond to ‘the consumer desire to be connected to brands through memorable communication’ (10). ‘Consequently’, writes Lenderman, ‘experiential marketing is a marketing philosophy that views the typical consumer as everything but a set of eyeballs’ (51). The universality of ‘consumer desire’ in this instance should be questioned, as there are undoubtedly many who would consider this kind of desire wholly antithetical to their own values and beliefs and the attribution or assumption of such desire somewhat implausible, patronising and even offensive. Nonetheless, as these authors demonstrate, there are a growing number of observers who appear to be identifying and even celebrating not only the increased successes of experience-driven marketing techniques, but also an apparent demand that renders these techniques successful.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the literature on experiential marketing, particularly Schmitt's writing on SEMs, is the choice of terminology. It is remarkably applicable to immersive theatre, particularly with regard to the engagement of audiences. Relationality, arousal of feeling, sensory engagement that stimulates more than just the eyes... These terms are strongly reminiscent of those encountered in part one of this thesis, as well as the introduction. Pine and Gilmore go even further in *The Experience Economy* when they describe four different dimensions of experience that businesses should acknowledge when producing experiences for potential consumers. They provide two axes forming two different spectrums of experience that are relevant to the crafting of experiences in the experience economy. The first axis positions passive participation in opposition to active participation, while the second axis, which intersects the first, positions absorption in opposition to immersion (30). Passive participants are aligned with sedentary, or static spectators, while active participants are aligned with customers who 'personally affect the performance or event that yields the experience' (30). The other axis refers to

the kind of *connection*, or *environmental relationship*, that unites customers with the event or performance. At one end of this spectrum lies *absorption* – occupying a person's attention by bringing the experience into the mind – at the other end *immersion* – becoming physically (or virtually) a part of the experience itself. (31, original emphasis)

These two axes, particularly regarding their intersection, come to define what Pine and Gilmore define as four 'realms' of experience: entertainment, educational, aesthetic and escapist. These are defined as 'mutually compatible domains that often comingle to form uniquely personal encounters' (31). The personal element of this

encounter seems likely to be derived from the role played by autobiography in the production of experience, integrating narcissism within an encounter, striving to achieve the ideal of making the consumer feel special, wanted, important and necessary.

These axes and realms provide a taxonomy for identifying particular kinds of experience that are sold by experience-mongering businesses, but they might just as well provide a taxonomy for identifying particular kinds of experience in immersive theatre. Throughout this thesis so far I have referred to participation in both its active and passive forms, troubling how these two forms are polarised, and have called upon immersion as a means of defining the other-worldliness of immersive theatre. What is more, the four realms of experience hit upon by Pine and Gilmore, with the possible exception of education, at least in its explicit form, have provided at least a subtext for my analysis of immersive theatre in the preceding chapters. Immersive theatre's feeling technologies also resonate with the SEMs identified by Schmitt, for both experiential marketers and immersive theatre makers seem to be engaging with SENSE, FEEL, THINK, ACT and RELATE as strategies for engaging audiences. By virtue of a shared interest in the experiential qualities of audience engagement, particularly as those qualities relate to some form of participation, it seems that immersive theatre and the experience economy bear a strong resemblance to each other.

There is a further analogy that demands special attention, particularly as it pertains to a politics of participation: the efficaciousness of participation within a participatory framework. Pine and Gilmore provide another taxonomy to address customisation premised on degrees of participation. They observe four different models of customisation in looking to establish the potential formation of customer-

unique value: collaborative customisation, adaptive customisation, cosmetic customisation and transparent customisation. Collaborative customisation allows customers to ‘explore ways to obtain what they desire in one dimension of the product without having to sacrifice in another dimension’ (87; cf Klingmann 32). In adaptive customisation, ‘neither the product itself nor the representation of the product is changed for the individual customer; rather, the customer customises the good or service as desired using customizable functionality embedded into the offering’ (88-89). Cosmetic customisation ‘presents a standard good or service differently to different customers. The product is not customized (as with collaborative) or made customizable (as with adaptive); instead, a standard offering is *packaged* specially for each customer. [...] [E]ach customer obtains the ego-gratifying experience of seeing the item personalized “just for me”’ (90, original emphasis). Finally, transparent customisation provides ‘individual customers with a tailored offering *without* letting them know explicitly (through representational changes) that it is customized for them’ (92, original emphasis).

At the heart of this taxonomy is an attempt to locate dissatisfaction among contemporary consumers with standardised goods and commodities that might otherwise be associated with Fordism and early- to mid-twentieth century capitalist enterprise. A defining attribute of the experience economy and the emergence of experience as a fourth genre of economic output is a movement ‘from a one-size-fits-all economy to a customization-for-all economy’ (Klingmann 1). The experience economy is supposed to herald an end, or at least a challenge to the standardisation of goods and services under mass production and consumption. Pine and Gilmore’s taxonomy detailed above presupposes an increase in demand for personalised products, foregrounding desire and self-interest over functional need. The fact that

suppliers seem to be responding to this demand, or even creating the demand in an effort to beat competitors in competitive markets, suggests that the emerging experience economy is bringing with it changes in economic production and consumption. In short, the advent of the experience economy would seem to sit comfortably alongside the new individualism explored in the previous chapter.

The taxonomy provided by Pine and Gilmore is particularly apt as a tool to aid in the evaluation of immersive theatre work. To what extent might collaborative customisation be seen as an ideal in immersive theatre – particularly one-on-one theatre? And to what extent might this ideal be undercut by the actual presentation of cosmetic customisation, or adaptive customisation? It seems to me that, more often than not, collaborative participatory practise may well pose as offering some form of tailored experience, whereas the appearance of unique functionality in fact veils a fairly repeatable and fairly standardised theatrical offering. As Philip Auslander writes, interactive plays

commodify the very aspects of live performance that are said to resist commodification. Because they are designed to offer a different experience at each visit, they can be merchandised as events that must be purchased over and over again: the ostensible evanescence and nonrepeatability of the live experience ironically become selling points to promote a product that must be fundamentally the same in each of its instantiations. (47-48)

While Auslander is specifically discussing ‘franchise’ interactive play successes such as *Tamara* (1981) and *Tony ‘n’ Tina’s Wedding* (1985), his observation might just as well apply to much contemporary immersive theatre. This is especially so in the two one-on-one performances discussed in part one of this thesis. In both those

cases, the theatrical offering is itself fairly repeatable, but the narcissistic participation of audiences *invests* the work with a surplus which is unique to them, promoting the illusion of tailored functionality. This is not to undermine, as a consequence of how autobiography figures in the production of experience, that the experience itself is unique – this is not so much open to question as it is inevitable. But, I believe, it is questionable to extend the source of this uniqueness to the production.<sup>36</sup>

This leads back to the role of autobiography in the production of affective experience. Indeed, it prompts the need to look again at the theme of affect and authenticity that was introduced in chapter one. The experience economy seems to thrive on the production of affective experiences, particularly in relation to the marketing of products that are reputedly tailored, in a number of different ways, to the particular subject, despite the fact that this customisation may in fact hide a fairly standard offering. Experiential marketers, in particular, seem aware that there is a narcissistic impulse to be exploited among potential customers who might encounter an experiential marketing strategy and invest such a standard product as being authentic. Authenticity emerges not as something that is necessarily essential to a product, but as something that is perceived to be attributable to it. As Boltanski and Chiapello acknowledge, while the inauthenticity associated with mass production provided one important basis for anti-capitalist critique, responses to that basis have since become incorporated within capitalist enterprise (37, 449). Paradoxically, authenticity is something that can be manufactured as a consequence of how participation in customisable procedures works: that is, through the narcissistic

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<sup>36</sup> Opposing the influential thesis of Peggy Phelan that '[p]erformance's only life is in the present' (146), this point can be seen to tie into a strand of performance studies discourse that concerns itself with the reproducibility of theatre and performance as it appears in the repertoire (Taylor), or in re-enactment (Schneider). I will return to this in the conclusion.



participation of a customer and the attribution, via imaginative projection, of autobiographical relevance onto a standardised product that, despite mass production, nonetheless *seems* to be made just for the customer. Condensed to an oxymoron, what emerges is customisable standardisation.

If, for Pine and Gilmore, '*the customer is the product*' who cries 'change me' (*Experience Economy* 172, original emphasis), then the autobiographical emerges as something apt to be inscribed within marketing strategies. What is more, this shift of emphasis from the product to the customer's experience of the product, treating the experience itself as the thing sold, positions the participant's own creativity as the seat of an authentic experience (Pine and Gilmore, *Authenticity* 12-13). By turning towards experience, particularly affective experience, and acknowledging my earlier claim that there is no such thing as an unauthentic affect, the experience economy has found a means of perpetuating customisable standardisation. Pine and Gilmore, in their follow-up book to the experience economy, describe '*rendering authenticity*' as the 'primary new source of competitive advantage' (*Authenticity* 3, original emphasis). By integrating customer participation in the production of a good, service or experience, no matter how efficacious that customisation is, 'the output automatically qualifies as authentic for the consumer. It turns each individual into what Alvin Toffler calls a "prosumer," that is, a producing consumer' (12-13). What is more, it also plays into the authenticity of affect production and the reality of risk perception as aesthetic means to bring about competitive advantage. In other words, these two elements of an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre are apt to be instrumentalised as aesthetic means toward non-aesthetic ends: i.e. capital accumulation.

There is something of the prosumer mentality that is at play for participating audiences in immersive theatre, particularly in Punchdrunk's work. In preference to experiencing a performance from a theatre auditorium, participating audiences are maximising participatory opportunities by choosing to go to a theatre event where such opportunities, especially self-made opportunities, are likely to be available to those able to exploit them. At its most basic level, experience production in immersive theatre seems unlikely to involve an aesthetics of audience participation that is different in kind from the kinds of experience production that are operating elsewhere in the experience economy. And this lack of clear difference seems likely to tie into a potentially shared politics.

The terms and phrasing deployed in this account of the experience economy clearly chime with the rhetoric of this thesis. What remains to be seen is how the experience economy specifically ties into immersive theatre practise. In the next section I conduct a comparative analysis of the experience economy and the work of Shunt. The intention is to consider how experience production in Shunt's work ties into the experience economy more generally, while also reflecting on how experience production in immersive theatre might in fact prompt pause for thought on how personal experience is being absorbed within the marketing strategies of business. If experience has indeed emerged as a biopolitical site, then what hope is there for immersive theatre to promote a politics of participation that does something other than mimic the pervasive production of experiences in the experience economy?

## **Shunt in the Experience Economy**

This section is split into three subsections, each of which explores a different Shunt project in relation to other experience-centred exponents of the cultural industries, or in relation to discourse on the experience economy: the first compares the Shunt Lounge with the London Dungeon by exploring comparable immersive strategies; the second compares the production of experience in *Money* with the fairground funhouse; and the third approaches *The Architects* as postdramatic theatre. The third subsection addresses how the transmission of meaning via narrative means is positioned as being of secondary importance, as a communicative medium, compared with the affective experience of a theatrical world. This subsection looks again at the primary argument underlying part one – that the production of experience is central to an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre – this time exploring how immersive theatre might frustrate and trouble the biopolitical integration of experience within the experience economy.

### *The Shunt Lounge and the London Dungeon*

The Shunt Lounge was based in the Shunt Vaults: a vast complex of vaulted arches beneath London Bridge Station. It was founded in September 2006 and ran for four years, with a brief period of inactivity towards the end of 2009 before the closure of the Vaults in 2010 due to renovation of London Bridge Station. In addition to the 1500 artists and arts organisations that presented work there, the Lounge provided a platform for the ten members of the Shunt theatre collective and their associated artists to continue presenting work to a public (Shunt, 'Finance Manager' 1).

As a curatorial project, the Lounge presented a diverse set of performance practises ranging from cello sonatas and DJ sets, to circus acts, acrobatic displays, live art, monologues and physical theatre. The bar was open between and during performance events that would take place over the course of an evening and there were plenty of tables and chairs creating social bunkers to encourage chatting with friends and new acquaintances. These bunkers were not so much a refuge from the festival-like art programming, as they were an integral part of the social experience of the Shunt Lounge.

Since their inception, Shunt have been avoiding theatre buildings and have instead sought out potentially site-sympathetic, or what I would call Shunt-specific sites: locations that the theatre collective treat as their own residence and define on their own terms. The Vaults, for instance, as one might expect from subterranean vaulted arches, had a clandestine feel to them and provided a ready-made canvas to work with in producing atmospheric environments. Mischa Twitchin, one member of the Shunt collective, is clear about the company's relationship to the spaces that they take over, especially regarding a denial of site-specificity:

there's a relation to a space that has atmosphere, but which is, in a sense, neutral in theatrical terms – such as a railway arch. It can be more or less atmospheric, which already gives you something, but we're not making a show about railway arches. We've not made a show at the Vaults about the construction of the railway in London. We've made fictional worlds for an audience that nevertheless are, of course, informed by, and produced in relation to, the space that we are in. (n.p.)

The Shunt Lounge, in particular, seemed at home in the ready-made vaulted arches, without treating those arches as a thematic point of departure for making performance. The experience of attending a curated event that took place behind an unmarked door in London Bridge Station was a particular appeal of the Shunt Lounge: to be in on the secret that lay behind the door. The space itself was at the heart of this exclusive appeal and significantly coloured the work that was performed there. For instance, when Curious Directive took *Return to the Silence* to the Shunt Vaults in 2009, a company that I devise and perform with, we had to deal with the hustle and bustle of a bar that was situated within the same set of vaulted arches as our performance. And there was no escaping the dank and grimy fact of the vaults, together with the rats that could occasionally be seen scuttling across the space during brief rehearsal periods that were tightly scheduled in a busy venue. The space itself was wholly out of keeping with our show – a physical theatre performance exploring neurological disorders based on the writing of Oliver Sacks – and yet the Lounge provided an opportunity to perform to a diverse, but primarily young audience that might otherwise have never attended our work. There was something appealing and edgy about performing in the Shunt Vaults that is clearly reflected in the 3000 strong audience that walked through its unmarked door each week (Shunt, ‘Finance Manager’ 1).

In what follows, I will not be commenting on specific performances that were performed at the Shunt Lounge. I will be looking instead at the space itself as a curatorial site that provides a ready-made immersive theatre environment. The Vaults function as a pre-existing feeling technology that ‘already gives you something’, to recall Twitchin, in the way of affective potential. This ‘something’, an affective atmosphere, to borrow from Ben Anderson and to recall Böhme, emerges

from space but is activated by an experiencing subject (Anderson 78-79). The production of affect that emerges from this kind of activation is one lure of the experience economy. It is the thing that renders marketable experiences potentially lucrative. Thrill, excitement or any form of pleasurable or challenging affect, as something potentially stimulated by feeling technologies, is an integral part of participating in such experiences, just as the production of affect is an integral part of an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre.

In what follows, I will be comparing an aesthetics of participatory experience at the Shunt Lounge with a nearby counterpart: the London Dungeon. Formerly based in vaults beneath the London Bridge Station area, the London Dungeon specialises in providing memorable experiences for customers. The difference is that the experiences on offer at the Lounge are framed as art and those on offer in the Dungeon are framed as entertainment. Despite these distinctions, I hope to demonstrate that both the Dungeon and the Lounge chime with one another as emblems of an experience industry, defined by Wouter Hillaert as referring to ‘theme parks, amusement centres, strip-clubs, role-play adventures’ and even theatre (434). The experience industry can, in many respects – particularly where its archetype, Disneyland, is concerned – be considered as the experience economy’s most valuable touchstone, as alluded to above.

The London Dungeon is currently based, as of 1 March 2013, in London’s South Bank. However, in what follows, I will be referring to their former home next to the Shunt Vaults in London Bridge, up until its closure on 31 January 2013. The London Dungeon opened its doors to the public in 1975. It was the brain child of Annabel Geddes and the consequence of her frustration at the lack of information and insight offered by Madame Tussauds’ Chamber of Horrors and the absence of

atmosphere she felt at the Tower of London.<sup>37</sup> The Dungeon features themed installations depicting a number of episodes from the city's gory and disturbing history, both real and mythic: from the Great Plague to Sweeney Todd. These installations house actors, usually one actor for each installation, costumed appropriate to the period being represented and complete with enthusiastically rendered, but wavering cockney-inflected accents. The integration of actors within the Dungeon became critical following the installation of their Jack the Ripper feature in 1992. Now nearly every attraction within the Dungeon is actor-led. The London Dungeon favours visitors disposed towards courting the perception of risk – particularly the perception of threat – and has consequently prompted many (usually, but not always children) to flee either in floods of tears, or wide-eyed and anxious.

Within the Dungeon, promenading audiences are shifted through regimented pathways while adhering to tightly scheduled routines. With upwards of 700,000 visitors per year, the actors are required to keep the stragglers pumping through the installations, or else face a backlog of punters. There is something mechanistic about the routine each actor is expected to perform, in a cycle, throughout the day. Despite the limitations on free-roaming, audiences might still select observational strategies to absorb as much, or as little, of the environments which surround and immerse them as possible, although to fully remove oneself is only possible by leaving the Dungeon entirely through one of several escape doors.

In addition to walking through mapped routes in the London Dungeon, various actor- and technically-led experiences are offered at stations en-route. Audiences might have water, masquerading as the contents of a chamber pot,

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<sup>37</sup> I am grateful for the useful information offered by Mark Oakley via email interview. Oakley is, at the time of writing, PR representative for the London Dungeon.

chucked at them from the window of a London townhouse (I managed to receive a good dowsing on my last visit). They might experience the Long Drop, otherwise known as the Extremis Drop Ride: a ride within the Dungeon designed to simulate what it is like to be hanged by raising audiences on a roller coaster-like set of seats before letting them plummet back down again. There is also a 5-D cinema experience representing a séance at 50 Berkeley Square, reputed as being London's most haunted house. In addition to 3-D visuals, audiences have water vapour blown at them (4-D), spin on a revolving platform and shoot various ghouls and monsters with laser guns (5-D, apparently).

All of this typifies so much of what we might call immersive theatre, the differences being the nuances which work within that description. An aspect of the Dungeon's spaces worthy of particular note, though, are the smells, not just as a consequence of deliberate infusion within the spaces, but also arising from the damp and mouldy vaults. The vaults in both the Shunt Lounge and the Dungeon, while still resident in London Bridge, were separated by metres, not miles. A smell pervaded both which seemed to envelop audiences, functioning as its own ready-made immersive quality: an important contributor to be activated by audiences in generating an affective atmosphere. Both spaces also shared a complete absence of natural light, rendering the potential for crafting atmosphere particularly strong, either through use of pitch-black, or through guiding the audience's attention via stage lighting. It is no wonder that both Geddes and Shunt found these vaults so appealing – they reeked in such a way that audiences were pulled into their catacombs. Perhaps this is a reason why so many immersive theatre companies and venues have set up camp in vaulted spaces and arches, including Punchdrunk's



*Tunnel 228*, Debut Theatre's Coming Up Festival (2011) and Goat and Monkey's *Reverence: A Tale of Abelard and Heloise* (2007).

The points of convergence do not end there. There was a bar in one of the many alcoves in the Shunt Vaults where the screams from those in the Dungeon, most probably on the Extremis Drop Ride, could be heard through the walls. For those arriving early enough, those screams seemed uncannily appropriate, especially if the association with the Dungeon next door was not made. It was all part of 'the experience'. What comes to the fore is not only the sense of a shared space, a space shared by an immersive theatre company and a much more explicit component of the experience industry, but also of how these two bleed into one another and have the capacity to complement. Those screams did not seem out of place in the Shunt Vaults. They contributed to an aesthetic of the uncanny, the mysterious and even ghostly.

In discussing points of alignment between the London Dungeon and the Shunt Lounge, particularly as those points of alignment relate to feeling technologies, space and their effects on audience immersion, I have not been suggesting that these two distinct cultural forms are somehow collapsed into one another. As curatorial experiments, there are clearly different aesthetic intentions at stake. Nonetheless, the Shunt Lounge is not alone in its attempts to deploy feeling technologies and audience immersion as tools to aid in the production of experience. Indeed, as Alison Griffiths argues, this deployment might just as well be traced back to the solemnity of cathedrals, the magnitude of nineteenth century panoramas, awe-inspiring early- to mid-twentieth century planetaria, and the technologically impressive mid- to late-twentieth century IMAX cinemas (*Shivers*; cf Grau, *Virtual Art*; Lorentz, 'Immersive Experience'). Precursors of immersive theatre, as well as

contemporaneous counterparts, might be identified not just in theatre and art history, but in the experience economy more generally – especially in the experience industry (cf Nield, ‘Character Named Spectator’: 531). The Shunt Lounge is part of a pervasive experience paradigm, made especially telling through its deployment of audience immersion as a curatorial tool that is shared with comparable curatorial tools in, for instance, museums and pseudo-museums such as the London Dungeon. In both cases, the production of experiences is the goal, where experience production is itself privileged as an end in itself over and above the meaningfulness of an aesthetic stimulus that contributes to its production. This is not to discredit the aesthetic intentions of the various artists appearing in the Shunt Lounge. Rather, my point is to underscore the difference between a curatorial experiment that seems to subscribe to an aesthetic premised on experience production and the various performances that, over the course of a given evening, contribute towards a spectator experience that is greater than the sum of its parts. In the cases of both the London Dungeon and the Shunt Lounge, it is not so much an artefact, a sculpture, a piece of narrative or a convincing and moving display of acting or choreography that ends up being the centrally significant thing, as the holistic and synergised experience of each as a unified whole.

### *Money and the Funhouse*

The experience of fun is not something to be underestimated in Shunt’s work. Fun tends to be both enjoyed and undermined, just as efficacious interactive participation is seemingly offered but ultimately negated. Fun tends to be produced in Shunt’s work, but it is a very particular, two-fold sense of fun that incorporates risk. To have

fun is to enjoy or experience pleasure of some kind; this is the first sense. But fun, as the late Middle English *fon* suggests – ‘make a fool, be a fool’ – also denotes trickery and hoax (*OED* 700). To produce fun in this latter sense is to craft an experience in such a way that the experiencer may not be able to perceive the productive source of fun. They are made fun of, even if this ‘making fun’ is without malicious intent.

To have fun, then, is also potentially to be at risk of being made fun of, provided fun is approached as an affective state that must involve a relationship with an affective source, albeit one that retains the integrity of autobiographical affect production. There is a politics to fun as it relates to the positioning of subjects, especially with regard to the perception of risk-laden tricks and hoaxes and their affective potential. It is something that can be produced and that can exert strong affective influence over a subject. As such, fun relates to the distribution of power between those caught within a fun matrix: a system of power relations that may be either recognisable or unrecognisable, tending toward the latter for the experiencer of fun who, more than likely, may not care all that much about what stimulates fun, provided the experience is pleasurable.

In my description of Shunt’s *Money*, I described the immersive structure that audiences enter into as an experience machine. This experience machine houses the performance, but it also functions as a literal productive mechanism for generating experience among immersed audiences. The box in *Cold Storage* functions in much the same way. But the experience machine in *Money* is comparable with the fairground funhouse, especially as the funhouse relates to the twofold understanding of fun described above: both as a source of pleasure and enjoyment and as a space of trickery. In the funhouse, warped mirrors, revolving walls and doors and undulating

floors are all designed to trick audiences and in so doing produce fun. In both the funhouse and *Money*, immersed audiences experience disorientation in a space that misleads. In both cases, there is an onus on the structure's secrets only gradually unfolding and that gradual unfolding is ultimately premised on the fun experience of being tricked.

It seems to me that the funhouse is by no means an outmoded medium. It finds contemporary manifestations in the experience industry and the London Dungeon provides an especially clear example. For instance, one of the first installations encountered by visitors to the London Dungeon, at least when it still stood in London Bridge, was the 'Labyrinth of Lost Souls': a disorienting mirror maze which seemed to be directly pulled from the funhouse. Groot Nibbelink rightly suggests that 'labyrinthine staged environments' are a common characteristic of experientially driven theatre practises (416). Punchdrunk framed *It Felt Like a Kiss* as being like 'the disorienting whirl of a fairground ghost train' (*Punchdrunk.org.uk*); they seem to be explicitly referencing the spirit of the funhouse, of the fairground and the experience industry which, at least in part, stems from these kinds of recreational attraction. The London Dungeon, the funhouse and immersive theatre events like *It Felt Like a Kiss* and *Money* are all of a part. What they share in is the stimulation of experiences complete with all their affective potential – the promotion of thrill, exhilaration, fear, trepidation, nervousness, anxiety, joy and countless other affective goings on, all of which might impact on the capacity of participating audiences to think and act within prepped spaces, even and especially when that thinking and acting is anticipated by the experience makers. These cultural forms pander to the demand for experiences identified by Pine and

Gilmore: they satisfy a want. And this satisfaction is, ultimately, one that a fairly standardised offering can procure.

Shannon Jackson describes the Berlin-based theatre company Rimini Protokoll's *Call Cutta in a Box* (2008) and *Cargo Sofia* (2006) as being reminiscent of the funhouse: '[t]he funhouse has historically installed moving spectators within an interactive landscape, placing triggers and cuing surprises that altered the environment as receivers walked, sat, and touched elements around them' (177). It seems entirely appropriate to refigure this assertion in the context of immersive theatre, as one continuing on from Nield's correlation of immersive theatre with experiential museum curation and adding to my alignment of immersive theatre with the experience economy. The London Dungeon and immersive theatre can be seen to stem from the same spirit as the funhouse of which Jackson speaks, not least as she continues: '[t]he thrill of the funhouse comes in the precarity of the receivers' sense of control of the environment they activate, its ability to propel them between curiosity and fear, risk and safety as they explore its alternate reality and seek strategies of escape' (177; see also Griffiths 279).

I quoted Rosenberg earlier in the chapter expressing reservations about handing over too much responsibility to audiences. In Shunt's *Money*, the capacity for audiences to control the trickery is always at a distance and only ever a seeming control. Experiential stimuli are offered to audiences within functional and carefully constructed environments and the audience's pathway within these environments, as with the London Dungeon, tends to be carefully monitored. In both cases, there is the same sense of being propelled through an environment, fluctuating between curiosity and fear, perceived risk and safety.

What is so fascinating about Shunt's work is an almost paranoid self-consciousness about how audiences are to be manoeuvred through immersive environments that would seem to undercut the misleading triviality of fun experiences. While immersive theatre shares a great deal with its counterparts in the experience industry, there is, I believe, much greater potential to problematise affect production in immersive theatre. This is not to ignore the persistent threat of fun's political side being rubbed over or shrouded and controlled to the point where subversive potential is rendered void. For example, risk and the subversive potential of fun might be tamed, as indeed it frequently is in the experience industry, particularly through, for instance, adventure companies that 'provide excitement and other intense emotions while guaranteeing the safety of those who do not wish to actually risk their lives experiencing these sensations' (Holyfield, Jonas and Zajicek 174). This taming of risk might downplay the subversive potential of edgework practises, subsuming Lyng's first edgework framework within the second. Given the points of alignment between immersive theatre and the experience industry explored so far in this chapter, it follows that the subversive potential of practising risk or fun in immersive theatre will need to be wary of the ways in which risk perception might in fact stand against a highly controlled state of affairs that negates the political efficacy of such practise. Nonetheless, I will be working towards an argument that asserts a greater capacity in successful immersive theatre performances to make feeling technologies and the power they exert over audiences distinctly uncomfortable, *despite* the fun-as-pleasure that they might elicit. The real test, as far as a politics of participation is concerned, will be the extent to which fun itself ends up questioned, as both a pleasurable experience and as trickery. In addressing a

possible instance of this questioning, though, I turn to another of Shunt's experience machines: this time a cruise ship in *The Architects*.

### *The Architects as Postdramatic Theatre*

*The Architects* can be seen to engage with the experience economy in a number of direct and indirect ways. First of all, the bulk of the performance is spent inside an immersive set representing an entertainment area on a cruise ship. Audience members are hailed by Scandinavian hosts as pleasure seekers and are consequently introduced, via narrative description in brief episodic scenes, to hedonistic symbols of leisure activity that are reputedly available on board. A Jacuzzi, a pub quiz and the bedroom of the one male host are all introduced as symbols of experiential engagement. But as interpolated subjects, the audience are only ever told, via imagined recollection, of their own hailed characters' antics that are meant to have taken place in the past. So when informed that someone has taken a shit by the BBQ, the hailed audience is inferred as a potential culprit, the potential perpetrator of an act that has taken place in a past moment that is called into being within the dramatic logic of the performance. While of course this past moment has never taken place, as a consequence of a claim it is called into existence within the fictional cosmos generated in the live moment that is invested in by both the characters and an audience that chooses to temporarily believe in, or become absorbed within this fictional cosmos. This is what Maurya Wickstrom has described as 'the truth of the make-believe', where observers, or experiencers, 'bring invention into facticity, and vice versa' (19). Of course, such investment is by no means peculiar to this kind of theatre, but the interpolation of the audience as characters within an immersive event

does, as I hope to demonstrate, alter the functioning of this most fundamental quality of the theatre.

While much of Punchdrunk's work might be framed in strictly dramatic terms as involving coherence and the representation of a unified world, particularly with regard to character (see Worthen), Shunt's *The Architects* might be usefully approached as an example of postdramatic theatre.<sup>38</sup> It should be noted first of all that wholeness, illusion and world representation – key features of dramatic theatre identified by Hans-Thies Lehmann – are undoubtedly in play in immersive theatre and *The Architects*, at least at first, appears to be no exception (22). And yet, what emerges in this performance is a 'rift between the discourse of the text and that of theatre' (46). The Scandinavian characters are calling into existence through a linguistic text a past that is aroused through a performance text, or live theatrical situation.<sup>39</sup> This past is attributed to the audience's imposed fictional character of cruise ship pleasure seeker. The imposition of a role, in relation to the linguistic text that helps to impose it, sits uncomfortably within a space that seems to invite participation, while at the same time, for the most part, depriving audiences of opportunities to participate. What is more, these moments of narration are themselves fragmented, cut off by blackouts, sometimes mid-sentence. Narrative is something that is constantly disrupted. Significantly, what these moments of disruption allude to is a strange sense of indefinite time passing. Many of Borges's short stories engage with warped senses of time, or duration, particularly with regard to the author's apparent obsession with the infinite. It seems to me that these incessant episodes are meant to help produce just this sense of warped time among

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<sup>38</sup> Rachel Fensham has also made the link between immersive theatre and postdramatic theatre. See 'Postdramatic Spectatorship'.

<sup>39</sup> See Lehmann for more on the linguistic text and the performance text (Lehmann, H. 85).



audiences, as a performance text that is always in surplus of the linguistic text. The narrative content is of secondary importance to the promotion of this feeling. As such, narrative functions as a feeling technology, but not in the sense of attempting to solicit pathos, necessarily, or catharsis, or some other emotional purging; rather, this particular feeling technology seems intended to produce among audiences the experience of distorted time: time running on its own, constructed terms; more Bergsonian duration than clock time. As Lehmann writes:

[i]f time [in postdramatic theatre] becomes the object of ‘direct’ experience, logically it is especially the techniques of time distortion that come to prominence. For only an experience of time that deviates from habit provokes its explicit perception, permitting it to move from something taken for granted as a mere accompaniment to the rank of a theme. (Lehmann, H. 156)

This elevation of time to the rank of a theme is precisely what is at stake in *The Architects* and is very much in keeping with the durational atmospheres that Borges tends to craft in his short stories.

Peter Boenisch describes something similar in a critical reflection on Shunt’s *Money*. For Boenisch, performances like *Money* no longer locate the ‘principle of meaning’ in the interpretation of a given text, such as Zola’s *L’Argent*. Instead, ‘[t]he dramatic text and its (dramatic and narrative) textures function as an indispensable dramaturgic mediator’ that energises what he calls the ‘relational components of dramaturgy’: that is, anything within the live theatrical event, which includes an audience and especially the actions of an audience, that impacts on the generation of meaning between what is produced and received (‘Acts of Spectating’ n.p.; cf Boenisch, ‘Towards a Theatre of Encounter’). ‘As a result’, he writes, ‘the focus

shifts from the representation of meaning to the “sense” generated’ (‘Acts of Spectating’ n.p.). Comparable ‘relational components of dramaturgy’ seem to be in play in *The Architects*, where there is, to borrow from Boenisch, a ‘fluid shifting between materiality and semioticity’ (n.p.), between the material fact of the live theatre event and the multiple meanings which are drawn from an immersive theatre environment and the actions that take place within it. But for *The Architects*, as well as *Money*, I contend that this fluidity is nonetheless goal oriented. It is experience which ultimately functions as a meaningful site which is potentially drawn into an aesthetic world via the audience’s creative acts of reception. In other words, narcissistic participation is raised to the status not just of a participatory mode, but a thematic point of interest.

This is of the upmost significance to the concerns of this chapter. In producing a rift between the discourse of the linguistic text and that of the theatre, apparent through the techniques deployed to distort the perception of time, Shunt are treating the experiential as a site for the transmission of meaning. It is the experience of warped time that takes precedence, as opposed to a description of it. Perhaps the narrative content of this production is of less significance than the treatment of experience, particularly affective experience, such as boredom, or frustration, as a meaningful site for engaging with performance. As Lehmann suggests, ‘*time as such*’ is turned into ‘an object of aesthetic experience’ (Lehmann, H. 156, original emphasis). I would add that this object of aesthetic experience in *The Architects* is an affective experience of time. It is the affective experience of time that is aestheticised, in much the same vein as I have been describing an aesthetics of affect production. As such, *The Architects* can be seen to share much with postdramatic theatre performances like Forced Entertainment’s *Exquisite Pain* (2005), where

incessantly repeated narrative episodes also arouse feelings of boredom, frustration and annoyance in the spectator. In both cases, narrative is used not so much as a semiotic vehicle, but as a feeling technology contributing to the performance text. The arousal of affective experience is consequently treated as an aesthetic site for communication and the transmission of meaning.

The point unfolding here is that the experience machine presented in *The Architects* even treats narrative as a feeling technology designed to elicit experiential engagement from audiences in this immersive event and that something similar is also at work elsewhere in postdramatic theatre. While Forced Entertainment, for instance, do not create immersive theatre, they nonetheless make use of a technique that might be identified as immersive – albeit edging towards the ‘absorption’ end of Pine and Gilmore’s second axis of experience. While theatre is virtually synonymous with arousing feeling, there still tends to be, in dramatic theatre, a fairly coherent stimulus that provides a meaningful source for the arousal of feeling, but feeling emerges as being secondary to that meaningful source. In Shunt’s postdramatic immersive theatre, as with other instances of postdramatic theatre, while there may still be identifiable meaningful stimuli, it is the immersive experience itself that is drawn into the performance text as a vehicle for the communication of something to an audience. In *The Architects*, this communicable something is a warped sense of time, immersing audiences within a disorienting experiential world appropriate to Borges.

This important postdramatic shift in immersive theatre practise might be usefully approached as being symptomatic of a pervasive tendency towards the elicitation of experience across the experience economy: not just in immersive theatre practise, or postdramatic theatre practise, or even the experience industries

more generally, but as a dominant paradigm within the experience economy.<sup>40</sup> As this section has looked to demonstrate, Shunt are by no means alone in looking to engage and captivate audiences through experience: just as meaningful experience can be crafted to adhere to a desired brand identity, so might theatre be designed to induce an experience deemed appropriate to the communication of something as abstract as time; just as experiential marketers might use SENSE, FEEL, THINK, ACT and RELATE marketing strategies, so might these same markers be utilised as means of engaging audiences in immersive theatre, as well as critically approaching that engagement; just as customisable experiences might be fetishised to the point that participatory efficacy is rendered virtually obsolete, so might invitations to participate in immersive theatre turn out to be fairly redundant, albeit in a potentially efficacious mode of revealing to an audience their participatory inadequacy. In purchasing a ticket for a performance such as *The Architects*, audiences are effectively purchasing an experience which is sold by a theatre company. While such an experience may be challenging or even productive in its capacity to frustrate – an important aspect of Shunt’s work that I explore in the conclusion to this chapter – the fact remains that this is not all that different from the purchasing of marketable experiences elsewhere in the experience economy.

### **Conclusion: Fun and Frustration**

Or is it? On 12 February 2013, I organised a small research event on *The Architects* involving Sophie Nield, Louise Owen, Gareth White and Daniel Oliver. Oliver, a postgraduate researcher and live art practitioner, suggested at this event that Shunt’s

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<sup>40</sup> See Adams, ‘Contemporary Theatre and the Experiential’.

work promotes a critical paranoia that is suspicious of participation: a paranoia that I would describe as a heightened self-awareness of not participating in an environment that seems to invite participation.<sup>41</sup> This is a useful means of describing the meta-theatrical critique of the performer-audience relationship that is often at stake in work like *Money* and *The Architects*. What appears to be addressed alongside the content of these two performances, especially, is participatory expectation, or anticipation. In *Money*, for instance, there is a moment when plastic balls are released to bounce over a large table around which the audience stands sipping glasses of champagne. This becomes the most explicitly participatory moment of the performance, when audience members take to chucking the balls at one another in pleasingly childish fits of glee and sanctioned naughtiness. And yet, what does the chucking of these balls accomplish? It is a trivial, patronising invitation to contribute as a participant to the performance. But that, as I see it, is the point. Audiences are not meant to be empowered at this, or any moment of the performance. They are meant to be controlled and an awareness of this control is rendered all the more apparent when such futile participatory endeavours are practised.

Part one of this thesis approached audience participation in immersive theatre primarily in isolation from the contexts in which it operates. This was a useful means of establishing some important aesthetic hallmarks of immersive theatre participation. However, immersive theatre does not occur in an isolated aesthetic bubble, but is rather framed and informed by the pervasive production of experiences in the experience economy. This pervasiveness ought to at least colour how an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre is to be

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<sup>41</sup> In proposing this notion of ‘critical paranoia’, I believe that Oliver was making reference to Douglas Kellner’s *Media Spectacle*.

theorised and evaluated. It would be a shame if the arrival of experience production in the experience economy emerged the first time as history and the second time as farce in immersive theatre, without critiquing where such points of comparison might be made and then challenged.

And yet, perhaps rendering experience production as something like a farce is, potentially, a useful means of jeopardising the pervasive production of experiences. The first application of the term ‘farce’ to theatre originally referred to comic interludes ‘stuffed’ into the otherwise coherent structure of religious plays (*OED* 626). The farce was an interruption of a metanarrative: a comic caesura that disrupts the coherence of a dramatic text. Whether intentionally so or not, farces deployed fun as a rupturing device. As such, the force of farce’s capacity to rupture rested on its affective potential to produce mirth. Immersive theatre might be said to produce farcical moments, where farce here refers to an affective rupture of an otherwise coherent immersive world. Affect has the capacity to function as an irruption of the real within a closed fictional cosmos, as Lehmann would have it (see chapter one). Such an irruption of the real has the capacity, at least, to deploy authentic affect as a critical device that works outside of the organising principles put to work in creating an immersive environment. Affect might consequently function as a critical tool to reveal to audiences how they are manipulated by a performance: a revelation that simultaneously depends on manipulation and at the same time promotes scepticism towards the participatory claims to efficaciousness arising elsewhere in the experience economy.

Rosenberg is clear to defend the centrality of the audience experience in Shunt’s work:

I think an important thing about the Shunt aesthetic is that there's often a functional approach taken to the design because there are experiences that we want to give the audience, or ways that we want to place the audience in relation to the action or ways that we want the audience to see the action or see each other. (qtd. in Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 102)

Shunt's immersive environments are strikingly functional, perhaps most explicitly in *Money*, where the vast machine that is entered into gradually reveals its mechanistic tricks, such as transparent floors revealing a multidimensionality to the space and the use of pitch black, soundscapes and wind machines to help synergise the immersiveness of the environment. This functionality, though, while appearing to invite interactivity, ends up frustrating that invitation. The kind of functionality at play is one that depends on the theatre makers' retention of their authorial capacity and responsibility for the presentation of an artwork. What audiences are presented with is an experience machine: a feeling technology, or, rather, a group of synergised feeling technologies, designed to produce the kinds of experiences that Rosenberg refers to above. While audiences might not be so free to participate by roaming a space, as in Punchdrunk's work, complete with the hidden limits of that supposed freedom, they nonetheless remain central to the design of immersive spaces. And while audiences may be watching theatre more than interacting with it in shows like *Money* and *The Architects*, scenography is nonetheless tailored towards the experiential. But this tailoring preserves the potential to engage experience production as a postdramatic communicative medium, treating affect as a potentially meaningful site for engaging with a performance that contradicts immersion by inspiring criticality towards it. It is in this sense that Shunt's immersive work can be seen to promote a form of participation that is self-conscious and farcical, in the

sense of providing a rupture between the presentation of an immersive world and its potential troubling through an affective irruption of the real.

There is a case to be made for *The Architects* being somewhat savvy towards the thirst for experience that the experience economy would appear to respond to, on the one hand, and help to construct, on the other. The experience machines provided by Shunt tend to make no qualms about the potential for audiences to collaborate. Neither *Money* nor *The Architects* are collaborative. In *The Architects*, especially, the participatory impulse is something that emerges as a subject of critique. Audiences are confronted with empty participatory offers, hollowed out in fairly meaningless episodic scenes, in their own right, on board a represented cruise ship. When the male and female audiences are segregated and explicitly invited to participate by reading out words from a television screen, it is participatory desire that is mocked and ridiculed. It is farcical and fun participation: a hoax and a joke. There is no collaborative efficacy to be had in screaming like monkeys at the command of an automated scrolling text. In Lyn Gardner's review of the show, she writes: 'it doesn't just feel as if it is the gods who are laughing at us, but the company, too' (Rev. of *The Architects* n.p.). I agree, but Shunt's mirth is a critical mirth. There is a sense of self-righteousness about such critical mirth that might rightly be read as arrogant, but at the same time audiences gleefully scream and wilfully submit to something so utterly pointless that such arrogance is perhaps justified, if only to prompt frustration.

To recall Rosenberg, an audience should be presented with the difficulties of a performance in a way that might upset, confuse, surprise, or revolt them. In the case of *The Architects*, perhaps frustration and annoyance might in fact generate a necessary criticality towards participatory impulses. Why is it that audiences seem so



willing to submit to participatory invitations? Just what is it that audiences participate in when they joyfully applaud the slaughter of the Minotaur? If the audience are interpolated as cruise ship leisure seekers on a trip of a life time, in what ways might the purchase of drinks in the ship's bar and participatory responses to scrolling text demonstrate a fairly passive acceptance of this role?

In *The Promise of Happiness*, as touched on in the previous chapter, Ahmed defends the right to be unhappy, annoyed, anxious and frustrated. These 'bad feelings' are not so much in the way of some better, more hopeful future, as they are productive obstacles. 'We might need to attend to bad feelings not in order to overcome them', she writes, 'but *to learn by how we are affected by what comes near*' (216, original emphasis). If frustration accompanies pitiful participatory invitations that sit alongside, or, at best, aid the presentation of theatre, then perhaps it is worth questioning the source of that frustration. Perhaps it is worth questioning the terms on which participatory invitations rest in relation to the motives that might underlie participatory desire – if desire is in play at all. In an experience economy that seems increasingly bent on the proliferation of marketable experiences, perhaps a performance that positions audiences on an archetypal consumerist trip of a life time, a cruise ship, might promote a critical, affective reflexivity that treats anxiety about participation in positive terms. It is in this sort of questioning – this critical reflexivity that is generated through the potentially risky affects accompanying audience participation in immersive theatre – that I locate a potentially subversive politics of participation in the final part of this thesis.

## Part Three

# Aesthetics and Politics

## Chapter Five: Transaction in the Theatre Marketplace

Punchdrunk have set a referential benchmark for identifying immersive theatre. Shunt, while not themselves identifying with the stylistic label, have nonetheless been associated with and can be seen to embrace elements of the immersive theatre aesthetic. Both these companies create primarily large scale work and have had time to hone their respective crafts. Both have received large amounts of ACE funding: Punchdrunk, as explored in chapter three, and Shunt, for instance, having received £150,000 to help fund *Money* (Cavendish n.p.). And both have benefited from association with the National Theatre, despite their respective performances taking place off-site, including Punchdrunk's latest work, *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* (2013) and Shunt's *The Architects*. Both, then, are positioned as representatives of British theatre culture. These companies, either directly or indirectly, have helped to craft how the immersive theatre style is defined and how that style participates in the development of a contemporary theatre landscape in the UK. As influential powerhouses, these companies can be seen to impact on the perception and understanding of immersive theatre: what it designates, how it looks and how it functions as a contemporary theatre style.

Theatre makers like Ray Lee and Lundahl & Seidl have been stretching the breadth of applicability of a term like immersive theatre over the past few years. Lundahl & Seidl, in particular, by stripping their audiences of sight, pose challenges to the time-consuming and expensive attention to scenographic detail and complex design that might otherwise seem characteristic of immersive theatre. The emergence of new companies and artists that do not subscribe to a newly developing immersive

theatre convention, a convention that is still trying to find its feet, provide important interventions that help to prevent this broad and malleable style from becoming dry, or predictable. There are important institutional bastions for these new companies, the BAC being one notable example. Another would be the Camden People's Theatre (CPT), most notably its annual Sprint Festival. Both venues are willing to give young and emerging companies the time, space and opportunity to develop work that, increasingly frequently, stems from a rapidly developing immersive theatre scene in the UK. What is more, many of these companies present work on shoestring budgets that defy the need to gobsmack audiences with eccentric and flamboyant displays of scenographic extravagance. This is not to belittle the value of inspiring awe, nor is it to degrade the admirable craft, particularly design, that is so praiseworthy in the work of both Punchdrunk and Shunt. However, it is to map out alternative, arguably more accessible, particularly financially accessible, routes into the creation of immersive theatre for an increasing number of artists and companies, especially young and emerging artists and companies.

In the institutional fostering of creative activity, a potential emerges to re-draw heuristic lines that might otherwise limit how immersive theatre comes to be defined. What ends up being instituted is a platform for artists and companies to partake in the early evolution of a theatre style. To be more precise, this partaking refers to how that style is made sense of through the neologism 'immersive theatre'. This partaking means levelling out, on however small a scale, a playing field of sense-making: a playing field that deals with sense-making in a two-fold sense of the term, to recall Machon, both as a making sense of immersive theatre and as producing sensual experiences among participating audiences. It involves offering a

part to those who might not otherwise have a part to play in the formation of a cultural form, as well as a chance to speak and be heard within an artistic framework.

This kind of platform, I suggest, finds its most notable foothold in a fairly young theatre company that have come to blur the boundaries between making, producing, curating and housing theatre. Theatre Delicatessen was formed as a theatre company in 2007 by directors Roland Smith, Jessica Brewster and Frances ‘Effie’ Loy. Their early work included performances of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (2008) and *The Winter’s Tale* (2009), but they achieved their first notable success with *Pedal Pusher* (2009). All three of these productions were performed at a disused Boosey & Hawkes office space at 295 Regent Street. In 2005, Boosey & Hawkes relocated to Aldwych House. A property developer in charge of the empty complex was happy for Theatre Deli to make use of the building as a rehearsal space and, ultimately, as a venue for these performances in the interim period between business occupations. This kind of temporary occupation, or pop-up theatre, has come to define the company’s approach to producing theatre; it is nomadic and dependent on a fluctuating commercial property market. Smith suggests that there are ‘many ideological choices that we’ve made and many that are simply pragmatic. As Lenny Bruce says, “I’m a hustler. If they’re giving, I’ll take”’ (Brewster and Smith, personal interview). As such, Theatre Deli functions at the interface between pragmatism, dependency, entrepreneurialism and uncertainty. The result is a working environment without the support of reliable infrastructure that at the same time provides an opportunity to create work that might not otherwise have the opportunity.

Despite numerous applications for ACE grants, Smith asserts that the company have only received around £8000 of ACE funding since its formation. I

will dwell on the company's funding structure in due course; suffice to say that they approach the creation of work from a difficult financial position. So far, the company have only applied for small 'Grants for the Arts' ACE funding, primarily to fund the wages of performers, and have not applied for long-term NPO funding.<sup>42</sup> This suggests that the company edge closer towards entrepreneurial funding initiatives than it does towards public funding.

By 2010, time was up at 295 Regent Street and Theatre Deli moved to the former home of the Uzbekistan Airways offices at 3-4 Picton Place in West London. After a production of Phillip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* (2010), the company would embark on their first curatorial experiment: Theatre Souk (2010). This was very much the brainchild of Brewster although, like most of Theatre Deli's projects, all three directors contributed to the development of the event. A modest cover charge to enter the building could be bought in advance of the event, but even this act was theatricalised as audiences entered the building via a make-shift box office. Once inside, the gesture of transacting became incessantly reiterated. Spread across five floors and a stair well, independent young and emerging theatre companies sold their performance wares to wandering audiences. Audiences were invited to negotiate payment with the artists for each short performance that they chose to experience – some lasting a few minutes, others around fifteen. Haggling was encouraged and a typical price would be around £3 per person. The handing over of money was at once a functional gesture of exchange, paying the artists in question, as well as an aestheticised gesture of exchange. The money collected directly by the performers

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<sup>42</sup> At the time of writing, the company are in the process of raising £10,000 to match an ACE funding bid for their forthcoming work, *The Great White Unknown*. They have consequently inaugurated the Theatre Delicatessen Friends Scheme, not so dissimilar from Punchdrunk's keyholder scheme – only with membership costs ranging from £25 to £1000. So Smith's claim that the company have only received £8000 of ACE funding should be read in the light of a possible boost to that funding for this forthcoming project.

was theirs to keep, while the money collected at the door was firstly Theatre Deli's and secondly incorporated as a part of a start-up budget for future theatre marketplaces and other Theatre Deli initiatives (Brewster and Smith, personal interview). I derive the term 'marketplace' from the Souk programme and the term 'theatre marketplace' seems apt in describing how the collected performances were curated. What the term underscores is the audience's act of paying for the labour of theatre making, curating and producing in a way that foregrounds payment: whether at the make-shift box office, or outside the doors of the individual performance spaces.

The performances were a mixed bag. Flabbergast Theatre's *Puppet Poker Pit* (2010) featured entertaining and witty puppet manipulation and some verbal audience interactivity, while Half Cut's *Half Cut* (2010) presented a simple, but effective encounter between a single participating audience and a performer. The performer in the latter wore nothing but a pair of Emporio Armani boxer shorts and the audience was invited to pay money to pluck, cut, shave, or wax hair from his body. The objectifying nature of Half Cut's invitation to audiences summed up much of the curatorial spirit behind Theatre Deli's curation of Souk: payment for labour, particularly how that payment can be seen to objectify the labourer. At the same time, the performers are forced to confront how their work is being financially valued by audiences, especially if that valuing takes place after the performance. A payment that might otherwise be forgotten about is drawn into the space of performance and, at least in the case of Half Cut's *Half Cut*, rendered uncomfortably present.

While these two performances had much to praise regarding the quality of humour (Flabbergast Theatre) or interaction (Half Cut), it seemed to me that others –

which shall remain nameless due to the fruitlessness of naming in this context – lacked the same degree of aesthetic merit or critical interest. This was also the case with Theatre Deli’s second such theatre marketplace: the Bush Bazaar (2012). This took place at the newly re-located Bush Theatre in the old Shepherd’s Bush Library on Uxbridge Road in West London. As with Souk, the Bush Bazaar took over an entire building, including a stairwell and toilets. Again, there was a reasonable cover charge to enter the building which was foregrounded by a temporary box office set up in the bar (although it should be noted that this temporary box office has become a more stable fixture at all Bush Theatre events I have been to since). Audiences were then free to haggle and negotiate the value of each chosen performance. Likewise, while some performances were both engaging and interesting, others were very much edging towards the ‘scratch’ end of the spectrum – although not intended as such – coming across as either incomplete or without that much critical depth. Indeed, Brewster and Smith have expressed dissatisfaction with both Souk and the Bazaar and are open about this, but they nonetheless argue that the theatre marketplace remains an interesting curatorial form that is worth pursuing and developing (Brewster and Smith, email interview).

The fact that both Souk and the Bazaar provide a platform for young companies to enter into public performance is admirable. Smith suggests that Theatre Deli embrace the opportunity to give young artists a home – albeit, primarily, a nomadic residence in temporary spaces. He suggests that these events enable young artists to take risks with the kind of work they produce that may not otherwise be produced (Brewster and Smith, personal interview). There is a danger here of an authorial Theatre Deli stamp covering over the individual identities of these young companies, as well as a danger of valorising risk. To some extent, the former



reservation seems a likely consequence of the curatorial space itself being rendered immersive, where a shared building housing diverse performances becomes a coherent immersive environment, or marketplace, for free roaming audiences. Nonetheless, an aesthetics of audience participation deployed in both events can be seen to function as a valuable political interruption. In what follows, I hope to unpack just what this interruption might mean for participating audiences. Interruption in relation to what? And political in relation to what?

What interests me is how aesthetics and politics are drawn together in both events, particularly with regard to a politics of aesthetics. Where part one focused on aesthetics and part two on politics, this third part of the thesis looks at how both might feed into and out of one another. The theatre marketplace, as a total event, brought the immersive element into play as something bearing down on the reception of each performance. Additionally, both Souk and the Bazaar offered a forum for young theatre makers who might not otherwise have had a meaningful or memorable part to play in the contemporary theatre landscape: to give voice and be heard; to provide attempts at aesthetic intervention and to challenge the kind of value judgments that I have just put into play; and perhaps to put politics to work within a theatricalised funding structure that foregrounds the labour of performers as a labour that is explicitly and directly paid for, complete with a potentially uncomfortable performer-audience dynamic that may or may not ensue from this payment. Souk and the Bazaar functioned neither as a platform for amateur theatre, nor as a space for polished performance; both rest in an uncategorisable zone between these two poles that encourages a questioning of who might contribute to an aesthetic landscape and who does not fit the grade of intelligibility and supposed aesthetic merit. This kind of consideration engages the politics of aesthetics and encourages a

closer look at how aesthetics and politics relate to, impact on and grow out of one another.

Both Souk and the Bazaar encouraged participating audiences to consider how they value experiences which are offered to them. At the same time, audiences are framed as being guardians of their own experience, which seems to acknowledge the vitally important role of audiences in the production of experience, as well as the responsibility of audiences for the partial generation of their own satisfactory experience. As such, the aesthetic spaces which are entered into in both Souk and the Bazaar – marketplaces which house and colour individual performances – can be seen to be tied into a political agenda: value, responsibility and agency are all summoned as themes to be negotiated between performers and audiences in a way which is inescapably framed by the curation of both events. The task of this chapter is to unpack what this might mean for an understanding of how an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre might align.

The rest of this chapter is split into four sections and a conclusion: the first looks to represent Rancière's thinking around aesthetics and politics, in particular how they can be seen to relate to one another; the section after that reconsiders and departs from this thinking by explicitly incorporating affect production within it; the third section sketches the economic context and ideological decisions informing Theatre Deli's production practises and, particularly, Souk and the Bazaar – this will end up being of special significance when approaching the theme of transaction in these events and its relevance to audience participation; the fourth section focuses in on Half Cut's *Half Cut*, arguing that its political potential resides in the performance's capacity to aesthetically disrupt; and the conclusion evaluates the

significance of approaching the political potential of Souk and the Bazaar through analysis of a participatory aesthetic.

## **Rancière**

As far as the structure of this thesis is concerned, it has proved necessary to leave a detailed account of Rancière's writing to this fairly late stage in the thesis. The previous two parts of the thesis were both geared towards different ends: examinations of aesthetics and politics, respectively. Although points of overlap were touched on, the specific terms of that overlap still need to be identified and thought through. This structural strategy has given me space to develop my own vocabulary to help examine both aesthetics and politics in immersive theatre, introducing narcissistic and entrepreneurial participation as participatory modes, for instance, and reflecting on productive participation as it specifically applies to immersive theatre. In this regard, exploring Rancière in any depth in parts one and two would have proved more of a hindrance than a help. As the introduction suggested, Rancière would resist segregating productive participation in immersive theatre from productive participation as a *de facto* requirement of spectatorship. There is significant slippage, then, between our respective means of thinking about audience participation. Nonetheless, in identifying and theorising how aesthetics and politics can be seen to feed into and out of one another, Rancière's work proves especially enlightening.

In turning to Rancière as a means of elucidating the consubstantiality of aesthetics and politics in immersive theatre, then, it should be clear that I will be appropriating his writing, as opposed to fully subscribing to it. Now that my own

vocabulary and modes of theorising audience participation have been introduced and developed, for the most part, it is possible and necessary to account for a significant claim of this thesis, a claim that, in many ways, the last two parts of the thesis have been building towards: that a politics of audience participation in immersive theatre is likely to be derived from its aesthetics. With this specific task in mind, it now proves useful to consider Rancière's philosophical work in the detail it not only merits, but demands. While this section introduces and reflects on Rancière's approach to aesthetics and politics, the following section departs from the specificity of his thinking, advancing towards a more autonomous articulation of their interrelationships.

Rancière uses very particular and original definitions of both aesthetics and politics in his work. However, the ways in which these definitions are approached in his various articles and books, particularly those emerging in the mid-1990s through to the mid-2000s, occasionally throw up subtle nuances. In what follows, I will be drawing most explicitly on: *Dis-agreement*, first published in French in 1995; *Dissensus*, a collection of articles, most significant of which is 'Ten Theses on Politics', written between 1994-96 and first published in French in 1998; *The Politics of Aesthetics*, a series of interviews first collated and published in French in 2000; and *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, first published in French in 2004. I will also be touching on a number of other works by Rancière, as well as a growing literature on his various publications. What I hope will emerge from this is a sense of a consistent theoretical approach to political philosophy that, nonetheless, has expanded to include a wider range of understandings implied in his deployment of terms like aesthetics and politics. It will be shown that this partly relates to the growing space given to aesthetics in Rancière's work. *Dis-agreement* marks an early

engagement with how aesthetics and politics might speak to one another in theorising what equality might mean. But a decade later, in *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, the influence of Rancière's thinking around aesthetics can be shown to impact, even more explicitly, on how he conceives of politics as well. This will prove significant when considering how Rancière's writing might inform examination of an aesthetics and politics of participation in immersive theatre.

In the following subsections, I will steadily introduce a number of terms used by Rancière. This section functions both as a lexicon and as a platform for theorising the relationships between aesthetics and politics. Some of the terms that follow will be familiar to those unacquainted with Rancière's writing, but nonetheless uniquely defined; others are of Rancière's own making. What I hope will emerge from this is a working vocabulary that might add to my own in thinking through the relationships between aesthetics and politics in immersive theatre.

### *Politics and the Police*

In approaching aesthetics and politics as they appear in Rancière's writing, it is useful to begin with politics. In *Dis-agreement*, he draws on Plato to make an impassioned call for acknowledging what democracy overlooks: a 'miscount, which is, after all, merely the fundamental miscount of politics' (10). In thinking about politics and democracy, Rancière challenges us to consider what it is that the notion of 'a people' rubs over, particularly as it manifests in an abstract concept through democratic processes such as voting, or going on demonstrations. As Todd May suggests, Rancière's deployment of the word 'politics' in this book refers to equality as it arises 'only when the traditional mechanisms of what are usually called politics

are put into question' (108; cf Hinderliter et al., 'Introduction' 7). This draws on Rancière's claim in *Dis-agreement* that 'the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone, or the paradoxical effectiveness of the sheer contingency of any order', ought to function as a foundational point of departure for politics to emerge (17; cf Rancière, *Shores* 51-52). Politics then appears not as something concerning equality of liberty, or equality of opportunity, but equality *per se* as something pre-existing, for instance, the distribution of liberty or opportunity. Fundamentally, in this book, politics is understood as existing only 'when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part for those who have no part' (11). As such, a narrow understanding of politics is put forward, where politics can only be said to exist once those excluded from supposedly democratic processes – processes which stand for the whole, as a consensual representation, to the detriment of some individuals – are able and recognised as being able to interrupt that exclusion. Understanding what this ability and recognition entails for Rancière is where aesthetics comes in, but there is more to be said, for the time being, about what Rancière means by the word 'equality'.

An important claim of Rancière's is that equality must function as a foundational presupposition for politics: a precondition of possibility that also functions as a point of departure for thinking about politics. The notion of liberty being distributed then emerges as being antithetical to equality. To clarify: '[w]here there is distribution there must be a distributor' that, more often than not, is likely to be government, or some form of governance (May 109). This is evident in immersive theatre, especially in those instances where audiences are assigned roles. What is more, this reference to immersive theatre is potentially enlightening, for Rancière seems to be suggesting that something like a role and its assignment to

subjects is at work whenever liberty is distributed. Bound into this assignment is a concept that is crucial to Rancière's whole philosophy: 'the police'.

Where equality is distributed – such as equality of liberty or opportunity – it is not politics which is at stake, as Rancière understands the term in *Dis-agreement*, but what he calls 'the police'. He distinguishes this from the 'petty police' on the beat, or the secret police, or the policing of parades and protests by guardians of the law. The petty police, for Rancière, 'is just a particular form of a more general order that arranges that tangible reality in which bodies are distributed in community' (*Dis-agreement* 28). This more general order is what Rancière calls the police and he aligns this order with a commonly, though, for Rancière, mistakenly understood notion of the political. In using the term 'the police' to refer to this more general order, the parameters of which are still to be identified, Rancière rejects an understanding of the political which is premised on 'the aggregation and consent of collectivities [...], the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution' (*Dis-agreement* 28). For Rancière, in *Dis-agreement*, politics opposes the police, but at the same time it comes into being as something dependent on it as a consequence of being opposed to it.

In short, this seminal book pitches the police as an antithesis to politics. Where the police is understood as an ordering process which figures subjects in particular roles and assigns – or distributes – to them certain capacities, politics interrupts this distribution. But to fully grasp what this distribution means, it is necessary to incorporate Rancière's second key theme into our thinking around politics: namely, aesthetics.

*Aesthetics and the Distribution of the Sensible*

Drawing on Kant, Rancière defines one sense of aesthetics as referring to ‘the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience’ (*Politics of Aesthetics* 13). This goes some way towards clarifying what he means by the police: i.e. a concept which is first and foremost aesthetic and concerned with aesthetic order. For Rancière, the police concerns what is sensible, or open to apprehension by the senses – hence the need to consider politics and the police in relation to aesthetics. Moreover, the police is concerned with how what is open to apprehension might be structured: i.e. aesthetically ordered. Crucially, though, this assertion must be read alongside Rancière’s elaboration of his definition of aesthetics, where he marks out original territory that asserts aesthetics to be at the core of politics:

aesthetics denotes neither art theory in general nor a theory that would consign art to its effects on sensibility. Aesthetics refers to a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships. (*Politics of Aesthetics* 10)

This should be understood in terms of what Rancière calls the ‘distribution of the sensible’. The distribution of the sensible ‘simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it’ (12). For instance, to have an occupation ‘determines the ability or inability to take charge of what is common to the community; it defines what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language, etc.’ (12-13). This ability or inability, then, relates to the stake which an individual can be said to have in governance, especially self-governance.



Idiosyncratically, Rancière turns towards the Ancient Greeks as a means of elucidating his point. Drawing on Aristotle, he suggests that a slave's ability to understand the language of rulers is not tantamount to 'possessing' that language (*Politics of Aesthetics* 12). This lack of possession begins to flesh out what the distribution of the sensible might mean. The ability to perceive something in common, such as language, does not necessarily correlate with an ability to change the terms on which that supposed commonality operates. The same might be said of law; the ability to understand the legal system, especially the modes of writing and speaking that exist within, for instance, court procedures, does not necessarily mean that any one individual has the capacity to alter the terms on which that system operates. In this instance, there are some occupations – such as politicians, lawyers and judges – who will have a much greater influence over the operation of that system in comparison to others, despite the 'commonality' of law. There are some that might be able to speak, but not be listened to and understood in quite the same way as others, just as there are some that might be able to listen, but not speak in a way which will have the same valence or efficaciousness as others. While some are presumed to be qualified to speak, others are presumed not to have qualities that hold equal validity and are therefore excluded.

Of course, there may well be exceptions to this rule. Rancière, for instance, describes the 1832 trial of the revolutionary Auguste Blanqui as being just such an example. In this trial, Blanqui referred to his profession as 'revolutionary', a profession initially unrecognised by the magistrate. But once informed that this was 'the profession of thirty million Frenchmen who live off their labor and who are deprived of political rights', the judge is forced to acquiesce (*Dis-agreement* 37). Blanqui takes possession of the term 'profession' by re-inscribing it as 'a profession

of faith, a declaration of membership of a collective [...] the class of the uncounted' (38). Rancière does, then, give an example as to how exclusions in the specific case of a law court might be countered and counted: that is, countered *because* the excluded is counted on terms that conflict with a prevailing order, an order of appearing and being understood that is, ultimately, aesthetic.

What is emerging here is a particular vocabulary that might help in establishing how aesthetics and politics relate to one another, not just in law courts, or in master-slave relationships, but in a variety of contexts. Audience participation in immersive theatre provides just such a context. In what follows, I will be honing in on how Rancière considers the inter-relationships between aesthetics and politics through terms like 'the police' and 'the distribution of the sensible', alongside his particular understandings of 'aesthetics' and 'politics'. This will open up space to return to the aesthetics of audience participation considered in this thesis as already containing within it a deeply political formula, at least as a potentiality. In one sense, this formula will mark a turn away from Rancière's particular focus on political disruption, or interruption, by focusing on the fairly ordered aesthetic frameworks that tend to occur in immersive theatre practise; however, in another sense, it may still be possible to adopt Rancière's critical vocabulary and appropriate some of his thinking as a means of critically approaching an aesthetics and politics of audience participation.

### *Aesthetics and Politics*

The idea that modes of perception are susceptible to exclusivity is at the heart of Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible – a notion that, at the same time,

arises from recognising that its operation is ultimately aesthetic. To appreciate what this aesthetic operation is for Rancière, it is worth returning to his writing on the police. ‘The police’, he writes, ‘is not a social function but a symbolic constitution of the social. The essence of the police lies neither in repression nor even in control over the living. Its essence lies in a certain way of dividing up the sensible’ (‘Ten Theses’ 36). Hence, for Rancière, there is an aesthetic core to politics, defined in *Dis-agreement* as ‘conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it’ (26-27). This stage refers to the playing space of privileged modes of appearance which obscures an underlying equality between subjects. In that sense, it is an aesthetic playing space. It is aesthetic because it is concerned with modes of appearing and being seen to appear, or heard. Politics then emerges as that which reconfigures the existence of this stage and its entry points, affecting how things and people appear to one another, or are heard and understood.

It has been argued that, in Rancière’s later writing, he puts forward a broader definition of politics, at least as it might relate to art, that is ‘first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience’ (Rancière qtd. in Rockhill 199). As such, it is claimed, while his earlier, more widely understood definition of politics – in *Dis-agreement*, especially – refers specifically to a break in the traditional mechanisms of politics, or the police, his later definition approaches the police as already containing within it a form of the political as a consequence of the heterogeneous relationship of politics to it. ‘In other words’, writes Gabriel Rockhill, ‘the epithet “political” would be better understood neither in terms of what Rancière earlier defined as politics qua subjectivization (*la politique*) or the police order (*la police*), but according to what he sometimes calls “the political” (*le*

*politique*), that is, the meeting ground between *la politique* and *la police*' (200). Rockhill finds this most evident in Rancière's *Aesthetics and its Discontents*: '[i]n emphasizing – at least implicitly – the police process in politics *and* the dissensual elements in the distribution of the sensible, Rancière breaks down the rigid opposition between stable structures and intermittent acts of reconfiguration' (202, my emphasis).

However, I would argue that there remains in *Aesthetics and its Discontents* a very strong emphasis on politics involving some kind of aesthetic redistribution, or a disruption to what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible, understood there as a 'distribution and redistribution of places and identities, this apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, and of noise and speech' (24-25). As such, while the onus on political subjectivisation is not so prominent in this book, as it was in *Dis-agreement*, his definition of politics is nonetheless consistent with aligning it alongside an aesthetic intervention of some kind, now defined as a direct engagement with and redistribution of the sensible. 'Politics', writes Rancière, 'consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals' (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 25). As such, while Rockhill is right to claim a change of emphasis in Rancière's writing, where the concept of the distribution of the sensible gains increasing traction and specificity, there is a maintenance of thought concerning an aesthetic core to politics – a core that is ripe for breaking – and a politics of aesthetics that emerges from seeing both aesthetics and politics as 'two forms of distribution of the sensible' (Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* 26).

On this basis, what is it, exactly, that immersive theatre can offer in terms of introducing new subjects and objects into an aesthetic situation? How can it render visible what had not previously been? Can it make participants heard and understood as speakers, or does it leave audiences behind while remaining deaf to their protestations? If Rancière's thinking is to be applied to immersive theatre, it is necessary to clarify two further points: firstly, the relationship between a participant and the thing participated in; secondly, whether or not a primarily non-political theatre – i.e. a style of theatre that tends to have no clear political message or goal – can promote an aesthetic interruption that is at the same time a political interruption. The remaining two subsections address each question in turn, before highlighting some important reservations about applying Rancière at his word to an examination of audience participation in immersive theatre.

### *Political Zones*

Rancière can be interpreted as identifying a potentially troubled political zone, a zone troubled by the very idea of something being common to sense (as perception) and sense (as understanding). This zone might usefully bear down on how we approach the production of experience in immersive theatre. I will return to this interpretation in the next section, as Rancière has voiced reservations about such readings of his writing ('Thinking of Dissensus' 1). For now, though, it is worth addressing work where Rancière has been explicit in opposing 'sense and sense': 'common sense does not mean a consensus but, on the contrary, a polemical place, a confrontation between opposite common senses or opposite ways of framing what is common' ('Afterword' 277). As such, common sense is being deployed here as a

philosophical idea that is at odds with an assumed, shared understanding of something. In fact, Rancière's reading of common sense refers to just the opposite of an obviously common understanding of something: that is, multiple understandings, or senses, that rub up against one another, common only to the degree that they hold equal, polemical claims. This is also the 'common' political equality to be presupposed. For immersive theatre audiences, the question then would be how an assumed commonality premised on a sensory order might be put into question, or upset. How can immersive theatre unearth and unsettle modes of sense-making? How can immersive theatre stage the gap between the police and the political?

The third of Rancière's 'Ten Theses on Politics' suggests that politics must involve a specific break with the logic of *arkhê*, meaning beginning or originating: as in an originating source of power and consequently leadership and sovereignty (30-31, 29; *Dis-agreement* 13-15). In this third thesis, Rancière contests the idea that there exist subjects with dispositions specific to such leadership roles that somehow qualifies their authority ('Ten Theses' 30). This is about challenging the submission of individuals to the sovereign authority of notions like 'community' or 'democracy', as abstract, unifying ideals. Rancière is therefore reiterating an invitation to his readers that is also present in *Dis-agreement*: to acknowledge, first of all, that politics exists 'simply because no social order is based on nature, no divine law regulates human society' (*Dis-agreement* 16). In the absence of any such natural authority, law, or *arkhê* to politics, competing political claims emerge as having equal valence. This observation is what grounds Rancière's defence of politics as necessarily including a part for those who have no part, for any political system that excludes even a minority from having a political stake, he suggests, has no legitimate authority to do so.

Thinking about this in the context of immersive theatre, Rancière might then be seen to contest the very idea of an authoritative participatory protocol expected of participating audiences, particularly one based on prioritising modes of sensory engagement (the police): or if not expected *of* them, then assumed *by* participating audiences disposed to formulating such an assumption. In this instance, it would not be the case that an audience can participate rightly or wrongly, for this would involve a value judgment premised on an originating source of authority that might come from any one of a number of inappropriate sources, such as those articulated by the theatre company in question, or those drawn from a particular audience's horizon of expectations. The expectations and assumptions involved in entrepreneurial participation undoubtedly tie into both. Indeed, these expectations and assumptions can be seen to put into play what Rancière might call 'archipolitics', where an ethos – in this case, the neoliberal ethos – constructs, in ideal form, a possible community premised on that ethos (*Dis-agreement* 65-70). This kind of politics is tantamount to what Rancière calls 'archipolicing', where ways of doing, thinking and feeling are submitted for ratification to an order. As such, an important reason why entrepreneurial participation excludes some audience members, along with the neoliberal ethos from which it emerges, can be seen to be because of the *arkhê*, or sovereign participatory law, inscribed at its heart: a law that fails to provide points of entry into a political engagement with the piece for some audience members.

What Rancière encourages is a challenge to an idea of politics that presupposes a subject already disposed to participating rightly, or in the 'best' possible way. For Rancière, we need to dig much deeper, beyond such an ethical line of enquiry and into a notion of the political. How are prioritisations established as

priorities and who gets left behind? While it might be argued that a “recalibration of the senses” is impossible in an ethically neutral space’ (Charnley 51), it might also prove useful to interpret Rancière’s rejection of ethical enquiry as a refusal to enslave political interrogation to a sovereign moral code. So it is not just a mode of enquiry which shifts (as in a political, or ethical mode), but a subject of enquiry. This is why Rancière speaks of equality as something to be presupposed and taken as a point of departure when thinking about political relations – i.e. positioning politics as that which much exist before ethics – a point of view largely inspired by the early nineteenth century pedagogue Joseph Jacotot and explored most fully in Rancière’s book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. The question which now arises is significant: what scope is there for the political to emerge through audience participation in immersive theatre, especially when the theatre style is so susceptible to its contradiction?

### *Dissensus*

Rancière’s notion of ‘dissensus’ provides one possible answer. Dissensus identifies an approach to democracy in support of those who, otherwise conceived, have no part in the political. It is important not to confuse dissensus with antagonism, or mere articulations and actions of oppositional dissent or disquietude. Dissensus refers to something much more specific to Rancière’s theoretical approach to politics: ‘[d]issensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible itself’ (38). In other words, dissensus is fundamentally an aesthetic intervention: a reordering of what can or cannot be said, done and/or understood by others. This reordering may well



necessitate a ‘confrontation between opposite common senses’, where the common element is not coherence or consensus, but a divergence of understandings and a lack of coherence: in other words, a degradation of sense’s incorrectly supposed commonality.

This aesthetic approach to conceiving of and examining politics, in particular an understanding of equality as a presupposition, has come under critical scrutiny, most notably in an insightful and lucid article for the *New Left Review* by Peter Hallward. A damaging concern raised by Hallward draws on Rancière’s disregard for and indifference to ‘questions of organisation and decision’, leaving ‘little place for direct engagement with the issues that pose the most obvious and direct challenge to his egalitarian stance – those bound up with the forms of knowledge, skill or mastery required for effective political action, as much as for artistic innovation or appreciation’ (126). On the one hand, Rancière dismisses the kinds of political and artistic organisation that come with consciously attempting to provide a political intervention; on the other, though, he supports a kind of improvisatory, anarchic, dissensual intervention. But Hallward asks: does this not also require skill or experience (126)?

This question is an apt one to ask in the context of this chapter, particularly with regard to the potential usefulness of turning to Rancière as a means of theorising how an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre might speak to one another. A point raised in part two of this thesis was that audience participation in immersive theatre is indeed something that arguably benefits from both skill and experience. Not only that, but the very kinds of disposition that are so central to Rancière’s notions of the police and the distribution of the sensible are fundamentally present in both narcissistic and entrepreneurial

participation: modes of participation that, first and foremost, are premised on the rewards and/or challenges of aesthetic engagement. Hallward is inviting his readers to consider how even the most potentially disruptive or dissensual acts of political intervention, to be truly efficacious, are surely premised on the nurture of skill and expertise. This is particularly the case if they are to be lasting and if they are to avoid the ephemerality of political sequences arguably advocated by Rancière; indeed, such ephemerality is another of Hallward's concerns about Rancière's political philosophy (123). However, while these are valid concerns, it seems to me that Rancière's writing on aesthetics and politics can, nonetheless, prove enlightening with regard to an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre. But for the extent of this applicability to reach its full potential, it proves useful to depart slightly from that writing.

With the possible exception of Shunt, the theatre makers commented on in this thesis so far are not making political theatre, or theatre that deliberately invites reflection on the political. But Rancière encourages us to reconsider the relationship between art and politics: '[i]f there exists a relationship between art and politics, it should be cast in terms of dissensus [...]: artworks can produce effects of dissensus precisely because they give neither lessons nor have any destination' (*Dissensus* 140).<sup>43</sup> Perhaps it is in the very lack of an overt political message that immersive theatre does its best political work, despite the potential lack of political influence that concerns Hallward. That is not to say, I would add, that a political intention cannot play into the reasons behind a theatre maker's decision to create a piece of

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<sup>43</sup> This perspective might be usefully read alongside Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, where Adorno criticises politically engaged art as art which integrates 'into the reality it opposes', diluting the potentially subversive otherness of art (119). Likewise, the social efficacy of art, for Adorno, is efficacious not because it heals social wounds, but because art stands in opposition to society: '[b]y crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as "socially useful," it [art] criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it' (308).

immersive theatre; rather, drawing on Rancière, it is to suggest that the political efficaciousness of that theatre event is likely to rest on an aesthetic intervention that cannot be calculated, as opposed to a political intention (*Dissensus* 143). Recalling Rancière's particular deployment of the term 'dissensus', the questions then would be: in what ways might immersive theatre disrupt an aesthetic order, or participation within immersive theatre disrupt its own aesthetic order? How might sense – or, for me, affective experience – be felt less as something expected or safe and more as something out of the ordinary, or uncomfortable? This latter throws risk into the mix, for risk is then introduced both as the inverse of security and as an entering into the infinite realm of the unknown. In responding to these questions, I depart from a strict Rancièrian approach to aesthetics and politics: a departure that nonetheless works with his vocabulary, while at the same time detracting from its specificity.

### **Rancière Revisited**

It is now possible to return to my interpretation of Rancière's thinking around the opposition between sense and sense as an opposition between perception and understanding. In his opening remarks in a 2003 conference paper titled 'The Thinking of Dissensus', Rancière suggests that this opposition 'is not an opposition between the sensible and the intelligible' (1). Rather, as the paper goes on, it signals oppositions between senses as they appear among a people or group, along the lines accounted for in my discussion of Rancière's critique of 'common sense'. But why might Rancière have felt the need for this explicit framing?

For Rancière, a 'dis-agreement of sense and thought' – particularly as it appears in Jean-François Lyotard's writing on the sublime – implies an

‘enslavement’ of reason and the mind ‘to the law of otherness’ (Rancière, ‘Thinking of Dissensus’ 10; cf *Aesthetics and its Discontents* 128; Lyotard). This reduces, for Rancière, the politics of an aesthetic experience to an ethical interpretation of it (‘Thinking of Dissensus’ 10). For Rancière, the evasiveness of the sublime experience binds an experiencing subject to a law that cannot be understood and that binding simultaneously marks enslavement: hence, his trouble with the notion of an opposition between sensory perception and understanding.

Departing from the specificity of Rancière’s thinking, I want to reclaim a potential dis-agreement between sense (perception) and sense (as understanding) as being politically charged. I do not necessarily mean this in the sense of nullifying the mind’s capacity to understand something arising from sense perception implied in the notion of the sublime, as Rancière fears might plague such a project; rather, I mean it in the sense of addressing how communicative pathways derived from sources other than sight and sound might impact on an engagement with something, or someone – pathways that are, fundamentally, both aesthetic and political. This means inputting corporeality into Rancière’s writing on aesthetics and politics.

Rancière’s writing on aesthetics and politics, particularly the politics of aesthetics, tends to focus on two senses: sight and sound. Bishop is right to point out the significance of Rancière’s reworking of the term ‘aesthetic’ so that it concerns ‘*aisthesis*, a mode of sensible perception proper to artistic products. Rather than considering the *work of art* to be autonomous, he draws attention to the autonomy of our *experience* in relation to art’ (*Artificial Hells* 27, original emphasis; cf Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* 29-30). She also neatly summarises his view that ‘this freedom suggests the possibility of politics (understood here as dissensus), because the undecidability of aesthetic experience implies a questioning of how the world is

organised, and therefore the possibility of changing or redistributing that same world' (*Artificial Hells* 27). This seems to me a very appropriate reading of what Rancière is getting at in his charting of the politics of aesthetics. However, what is missing is an acknowledgment of how *aisthesis* is conceptually limited in his writing to include only ways of seeing and hearing, visibility and audibility. This limitation is worth revisiting for present purposes.

In what ways might a definition of *aisthesis* be expanded to include what is *feelable*? Moreover, how might this expansion and inclusion affect a politics of aesthetics? In *Dissensus*, Rancière chooses not to subscribe to this expanded understanding of *aisthesis*. He chooses instead to focus on what exists in surplus to the idea of a *bios politicos*, or 'the essence of a mode of life' (92). This surplus, for Rancière, is 'a property that is biologically and anthropologically unlocatable, the equality of speaking beings' (92). On the basis of this position, it would be fair to assume that he is likely to be wary of seeing affect as forming any kind of basis for the political. His scepticism is directed towards viewing the body as an *object* of power, as it appears in Foucault's writing, for this perspective, according to Rancière, erases any possibility for the political to emerge (92-93; cf May 115). In many respects, affect production potentially rests on a similar objectification of the body as an object of power. However, given my account of affect production articulated in chapter one, the production of affect does not just emerge from top-down affective impositions upon bodies, so much as from the dynamic interrelations between a particular subject and such authorial impositions. Conceived as such, and noting the onus on aesthetics and sensibility in Rancière's writing, it seems to me worth asking how a more general approach to experience that takes into account the

affective and what is feelable might at least take us close to Rancière's understanding of the political, even if it does not align with it fully.

This desire to reformulate Rancière's approach to *aisthesis* stems from a note of surprise articulated by Groot Nibbelink: 'I think it is remarkable that Rancière's distribution of the *sensible* hardly pays attention to the possibility of *corporeal* intelligence: knowledge that is present in affects and sensations. [...] Rancière seems caught into a distribution of the sensible of his own, which borders on logocentrism' (418, original emphasis). I would rephrase this observation as knowledge that might be reached through affect as it is produced in relation to and through particular individuals. While the remarkability of this observation might be tamed on the basis of Rancière's concerns about the biopolitical just accounted for, it nonetheless seems right to question how these two central ideas of Rancière's – the distribution of the sensible and the politics of partaking (including the presupposition of equality) – might take on board how something like affect could be woven into the aesthetics reputedly at the core of his politics. If politics begins with a break in the logic of *arkhê*, then perhaps affect seems an odd place to start given the fact, to risk tautology, that it *affects* people and therefore arguably detracts from their capacity to exercise independent political expression. It poses a risk. However, if the experience economy is enjoying increasing influence across a range of sectors and practises, then perhaps affect, over and above what can be seen or heard, provides the very site in need of disruption, or perceptual shock. If immersive theatre is particularly susceptible to absorption within the experience economy and co-optation by neoliberal markets and even if its value system can be seen to align with the neoliberal ethos, then surely affect production is one of the most apt subjects of enquiry to begin thinking about a politics of its aesthetics? And if affect and, more

generally, the production of experience, is indeed central to an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre, particularly when addressed against such a context, then surely this part of its aesthetics is a good place to start questioning how the distribution of the sensible and the police function in this kind of work, asking what capacity there might be for dissensus to emerge?

The remainder of this chapter is split into two core sections. The first looks in more detail at Souk and the Bazaar. Both will be treated as events curated by Theatre Deli, where curation functions as an immersive strategy to aid the disruption of a sensible regime, particularly with regard to the foregrounding of transactions between artists and audiences. The second focuses on Half Cut's *Half Cut*, honing in on one particular example of such transaction, analysing and evaluating how affect production and risk perception – i.e. an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre – can be seen not just to impact upon, but *form* the core of a politics of participation.

### **Recession, Recession, Recession: Disrupting Austerity**

As Brewster explained in a personal interview, the initial idea for Souk came from a love of festival culture, especially Glastonbury Festival of Contemporary Performing Arts in the UK. She reminisced about the festival's 'magical' qualities: bleary eyed delirium; 'open conversations' between live bands and screaming audiences; and happenstance stumblings upon oddities, such as a 'hidden' ballroom, complete with brass band greeting red-eyed revellers at 10am in what was Glastonbury's Lost

Vagueness (Brewster and Smith, personal interview).<sup>44</sup> The constructed mayhem of Glastonbury and comparable festivals was perhaps dimly echoed in Theatre Deli's un-muddy and sober curation of Theatre Souk. However, there is something fundamentally different between these two iterations of festivity. The pricey cost of a festival ticket is something that might easily be forgotten in the hedonic excesses of a festival like Glastonbury. Consumable products aside, the ticket purchased well in advance of the festival remains largely set apart from the art and entertainment within it, excluding the obligatory, but largely forgettable wristband branding right of access. This is one reason why I find the music festival only dimly echoed at Souk and the Bazaar. Payment was an omnipresent theme in both theatre marketplaces in a way that is far less evident at music festivals; it became a source for experiential engagement and affect production.

The particular form of affect production aroused through this experiential source for engagement must be primarily contingent on the individual, but there was nonetheless a potential for an *embarrass* that may be present across a range of affective encounters. As Ridout explains: '[s]haring origins with the word embargo, an *embarrass* is "an obstacle", and "embarrasser" is "to block" [...]. So to *embarrass* might be to do something to someone by speech or action, to act or speak in such a way as to introduce obstacles or complications' (81). Understood in this way, an *embarrass* resonates with what Rancière might call dissensus, as a disruption of, or blockage to, a coherent sensory fabric. On the one hand, it should be noted, to be affected by embarrassment might emerge from an understanding of breaking with social convention, or whatever it might be that has been disrupted, therefore

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<sup>44</sup> Lost Vagueness is no longer a part of Glastonbury Festival following a dispute over commercialisation between Michael Eavis, Glastonbury's founder, and Roy Gurvitz, founder of Lost Vagueness.



functioning as a mechanism that sustains the operation of that convention given the Pavlovian corrective discomfort that may ensue while embarrassed; on the other hand, embarrassment might alter the way in which that convention is understood to be just that – a convention – as a consequence of being perceived as such. In other words, embarrassment might enable an unearthing of something that is otherwise not perceivable, or an unmasking of something that is perceivable, or knowable, but is then open to be perceived or known differently. It might interrupt aesthetic stability. What is more, an embarrass need not necessarily refer to embarrassment, but any such disruption of, or obstacle to, what can be sensed and made sense of. In the case of Souk and the Bazaar, the embarrassing source in question is transaction: specifically, a financial transaction. Both events encourage audiences to question who or what they are paying for, why they pay for it and the corresponding value between monetary value and aesthetic value.

A more resonant backdrop to the emergence of Souk and the Bazaar was the 2008 global financial crisis and the long economic recession which shortly afterwards ensued in the UK. Brewster was explicit in interview about the financial crisis providing a central theme for Souk (Brewster and Smith, personal interview). Recession, crisis and austerity: from the double-dip to funding cuts, the current coalition government has deployed an increasingly familiar vocabulary to try to make sense of financial instability, or else identify approaches aimed at its resolution. Since the coalition rose to power in the UK in 2010, a conceptual rubric has been implemented, typified in this kind of language, that has reordered the symbolic constitution of government authority. Volunteerism, Big Society, the welfare trap: these terms do not just describe, but help to define who in society has a right to partake in welfare and who is expected to benefit from self-governance.

Significantly, with time, this kind of language does not just label, but affects the political positioning of the labelled. At the same time, it would not be too big a leap to consider how such labelling might be matched with perceiving a world and one's part within it. As such, a means of making sense of the world can be seen to affect, at least potentially, sensing the world: i.e. thinking about political participation can be seen to align with perception. It is this kind of alignment that Rancière might describe as an aesthetic core to politics. It presupposes that politics refers to what can, or cannot be sensed and how that sensing relates to what can and cannot be made sense of. In other words, it suggests how aesthetics feeds into the stake a subject can be said to have in a political field.

Following a hung parliament without any one party winning the necessary 326 seat majority in the House of Commons, the coalition was formed in May 2010, comprised of both Conservative and Liberal Democrat members of parliament and with a Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, at the helm and a Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, in charge of the budget. Coalition rhetoric provided a linguistic field from which a biting series of cuts to public services and funding could be framed as justified, particularly with regard to the construction of perceived necessity. ACE was far from exempt from these cuts. 'In passing on overall government cuts of 15%', write Charlotte Higgins and Mark Brown in a report for *The Guardian*, '[m]ore than 200 arts organisations' lost their ACE funding 'on a day of wildly mixed fortunes for English Arts': '[o]f the 1,330 organisations that had applied for funding for 2012-15, 638 were disappointed. Of those, 206 had been regularly funded by ACE' (n.p.).

One sense in which Souk and the Bazaar can be said to have made political interventions is through an explicit drawing on and troubling of this unsettling

economic context. Without sufficient public funding, Theatre Deli have pursued alternative avenues in order to fund contemporary theatre. Against the context of cuts to arts funding and despite austerity, but arguably because of instability and insecurity in business and the empty office blocks left in its wake, Theatre Deli persevere. But before this perseverance is evaluated or mindlessly celebrated as some heroic triumph in the face of adversity, it is worth reflecting on an important and unnerving question: does Theatre Deli end up sustaining the dissolution of a stable funding system for immersive theatre? In what ways might a pop-up aesthetic debunk an attempt to theorise a disruptive politics? Might pop-up theatre merely sustain the heteronomy of immersive theatre as an art form dependent on private enterprise?

### *Pop-up Theatre*

Immersive theatre has, to some degree, become closely associated with non-theatre spaces. As chapter three identified, all of Punchdrunk's major work, with the exception of *The Masque*, has been performed in disused factories, or abandoned industrial or municipal off-casts. Likewise, Shunt also perform in spaces susceptible to limited duration, as the sacrifice of their home in the London Bridge Vaults made painfully apparent. Of course, there are theatre institutions which offer temporary residence to immersive theatre artists and companies, such as the BAC and CPT. But, despite this, immersive theatre makers do still tend to operate outside of theatre buildings and it is worth questioning what the implications of this operation might be.

Jen Harvie has persuasively argued for the validity of such questions with regard to socially engaged art in an article for *Performance Research*. In this article, she addresses Roger Hiorns's *Seizure* (2008-10): an Artangel commissioned installation in a council housing block, scheduled for demolition, near Elephant and Castle in the London Borough of Southwark. 'The Borough of Southwark', writes Harvie, 'is an area of comparative deprivation: in 2007, it was the twenty-sixth most deprived borough overall in England (of 354), the eighteenth most deprived on the income scale' (114). For *Seizure*, Hiorns and Artangel filled a three room flat in this housing block with copper sulphate solution. Three weeks later, the solution was drained to reveal a sparkling interior with every surface covered in vibrant blue crystals. Art savvy visitors were then free to experience the installation.

While acknowledging the potential social and aesthetic worth of interventions like *Seizure*, Harvie maintains a number of significant reservations. The most pertinent of these for the current context addresses the maintenance of heteronomy: 'one of the risks of a spatially responsive art practise such as *Seizure* is that its maker's volition is more than limited by what is available (or, what is available to the art market) and that the work is necessarily significantly determined by that dependence' (120). For Theatre Deli, something similar is at stake. Where *Seizure* intervened in former social housing – social housing that was, Harvie notes, to be destroyed 'to create space for a new, larger and much more densely-populated development of mixed social and part-private housing' (114-15) – Theatre Deli remains dependent on the interim periods between a business vacating a premises and another business taking over the premises. This interim period can sometimes last up to a year. What is more, it is an interim period that can be mutually beneficial

in a way that benefits, to some degree, both the company that currently owns the unused premises and Theatre Deli. As Smith explains:

[i]f you have a commercial property, the owner or tenant of the commercial property has to pay business rates, which is the commercial version of council tax. [...] Councils have to give charities an 80% mandatory relief on their business rates. And the council can give a discretionary reduction of 100%, so you're not paying any business rates. Theatre Delicatessen is a charity. (Brewster and Smith, personal interview)

Even if a commercial building is left empty, the owner of that building must still pay business rates. If a charity like Theatre Deli inhabits the building in an interim period between the purchase of the property and redevelopment by and for a given business, then the owner can receive a substantial discount in business rates. In the case of Theatre Deli's occupation of Marylebone Gardens at 35 Marylebone High Street between 2012-13, the former BBC London headquarters, this meant striking a deal with the new owners, Scottish Widows Investment Partnership (SWIP). By virtue of Theatre Deli's ratified occupation of the building, SWIP pays only a fraction of its business rates. In return, Theatre Deli have no need to pay anything other than power bills with regard to the building itself. They are also in a position to ask SWIP for a proportion of what they have saved to cover these bills and to fund artistic activity.

Smith and Brewster view this kind of relationship as pragmatic and a comparable approach has been utilised to enable all of their pop-up projects. After all, without public funding, it is difficult (but of course not impossible) to see how a young company like Theatre Deli could function or provide the kind of platform that they do for other young and emerging theatre companies without this kind of

initiative. However, on the other hand, Harvie encourages us to be wary of the alleged availability of such spaces, for that availability, at least in the case of Theatre Deli, relies on market volatility, the precarious interim between business inhabitations, and the private revenue of a business like SWIP that, ultimately, will be the force that sustains their nomadism.

Posing even more cause for concern, Harvie notes further dangers that pop-up theatre makers must ultimately confront:

[t]hough artists' responsiveness to such opportunities testifies to their abilities to be creative, innovative and resilient – as well as entrepreneurial – it may also naturalize what is otherwise lacking or underfunded: a stable, 'purpose-built' arts infrastructure that allows for long-term support and planning rather than simply opportunistic and usually short-term responsiveness. (121)

I would suggest that Harvie is only criticising the artists exploiting pop-up theatre opportunities to the extent that they help to sustain, indirectly, the lack of a sustainable arts infrastructure. As such, her concern is not so much levelled at the perseverance of the artists in question, so much as the context they find themselves in and the ensuing effects of their pop-up activities. Without public arts funding to support their work, Theatre Deli must either perform different work that is not so dependent on large spaces in buildings – and arguably forego the rehearsal and performance platform they offer to other young companies – or embrace explicitly private, commercial, corporate, or philanthropic funding initiatives, or squatting, all of which have their own compromises. It is in this context, I believe, that Brewster

and Smith consider their enterprise in terms of pragmatism, however compromised that pragmatism might be.

### *Pop-Up Theatre as Interstice*

Theatre Deli's production practises can be seen to naturalise the dissolution of a sustainable arts infrastructure for the work of young and emerging companies, particularly those creating immersive theatre. At the same time, in the midst of recession, austerity and cuts to public arts funding, they are able to curate small scale work within the larger scale curated events of Souk and the Bazaar, despite all of these obstacles. Theatre Deli are challenging the distribution of parts within a contemporary theatre landscape that, partly because of a reduced public arts funding pot, has become even more limited with regard to enabling artists to contribute to such a landscape. On the one hand, Theatre Deli are sustaining a working relationship with private enterprise that will also sustain their nomadism; on the other, their resilience, in many ways because of the seemingly compromised 'quality' of the work they produce, can be seen to disrupt the ordered distribution of parts within a creative arts structure, opening up opportunities for other theatre makers to participate in the creation of theatre. This means that audiences will be coming into contact with work that has not been ratified, at least to any great extent, by ACE, or been supported by permanent and respected institutions such as the BAC – the latter excluding the Bazaar, which took up residence in the Bush Theatre. The artists that work with Theatre Deli are, in an important sense, represented by them as well and the fact that the Bush Theatre ended up hosting the Bazaar marks an odd shift towards institutional representation. However, especially as far as Souk is

concerned, this work can still be seen to bubble up from within the infrastructural cracks of British theatre making and producing. In many ways, it stems from a company that takes as a point of departure the entrepreneurialism, opportunism, risk and responsibility that characterises the neoliberal ethos, asking ‘where do we go from here?’ As such, there is something uncannily third way about Theatre Deli, but only to the extent that pragmatic responses to the supposed facticity of neoliberalism are adopted, stopping far short of an embrace of neoliberal values.

There is little that is radical about Theatre Deli’s working practises. Harvie’s reservations and their applicability suggest as much, for they reveal how the root cause of the problems provided by the context they find themselves caught within remain largely unchanged. But perhaps those practises might still function as an interstice, albeit in counterintuitive form. Bourriaud describes the interstice as a term

used by Karl Marx to describe trading communities that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit: barter, merchandising, autarkic types of production, etc. The interstice is a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system. (16)

At Souk and the Bazaar, barter was clearly a defining attribute. What is more, the capitalist economic context is hardly eluded if we focus on the spaces used by Theatre Deli alone. These are spaces that benefit exponents of this context through reduced business rates and arguably the cultural capital that accrues with ‘helping’ a fairly young theatre company like Theatre Deli. The capitalist economic context, then, at least in this sense, is supported, not eluded. What is more, the transaction at



stake in the trading community presented to audiences was clearly defined financially. Audiences were asked to hand over real money in return for a performance that has been valued in monetary terms.

However, while this kind of transaction mirrors the capitalist economic context, the reflected image ends up warped. The kind of metaphorical mirror in play is tantamount to those of the funhouse. The capitalist economic context that the interstice seeks to elude is indeed eluded, so long as elusion is understood as a crafty undermining of compliance and is here distinguished from Theatre Deli's transactions with the owners of the buildings they inhabit. The kinds of transaction which take place between audiences and performers sit within a curated event that itself sits within an economic context governed by a mutually beneficial contractual relationship between a theatre company and a future corporate resident of the space inhabited. But these transactions between performers and audiences nonetheless trouble that stability: they make it *appear* awkward. They are embarrassing. Bartering may of course be fun and that fun may end up fetishising the relation between a paying audience and an earning labourer; but fun may also be seen to exist in the sense of hoaxing explored in the previous chapter. The audience is rendered prone to being made fun of if the payment ends up being rendered as a source of embarrassment. As I hope to demonstrate in the next section, this was especially clear in Half Cut's *Half Cut*. The point is that an obstacle – an embarrass – is uncomfortably presented to audiences in a way that blocks the masking of a potentially objectifying relation between purchaser and the purchased.

Souk and the Bazaar, then, function as interstices in a very particular sense: both operate in spaces functioning within an economic context that, if anything, works to *sustain* that context, while at the same time disrupting the smooth operation

of transaction *within* temporarily inhabited spaces. The efficacy of these two curated events does not lie in creating sustainable and ambitious alternatives to an existing economic order; rather, it can be seen to lie at the interface between a curator, Theatre Deli, performers assigned to young and emerging theatre companies and audiences that necessarily participate as soon as the transaction takes place. In other words, it can be seen to lie in ‘a space in human relations’ which is constructed at the centre point of such an interface.

This space is first and foremost an aesthetic space: a space of appearance. It is a space that is concerned with *aisthesis*. This does not just mean a space that is concerned with what is seeable or sayable, although it may involve what is seen and said while a performer and audience negotiate a transaction. Rather, in this context, *aisthesis* refers to all that is experientially understandable: knowledge that is derived from affects and sensations, or at least recognised as being so by a thinking, feeling subject. The transaction is incorporated within the aesthetic space of the performance, but it also plays on the centrality of affect production in an aesthetics of audience participation within an immersive theatre marketplace. At least potentially, the transaction might become a source of embarrassment. It might just as well become a source of shame, or mirth. Whatever the case, the transaction itself, along with the human relation caught within it, is raised into the realm of *aisthesis* and, hence, perception.

It is in this sense that an aesthetic disruption, or dissensus, can be said to take place, for something otherwise left largely condemned to what cannot be perceived is made sensible and therefore open to sense. As noted in the introduction, Machon has pointed out how immersive theatre draws together ‘sense (semantic “meaning making”) with *sense* (feeling, both sensation and emotion)’ and ‘establishes a

double-edged rendering of making-sense/*sense-making*' (*(Syn)aesthetics* 14, original emphasis). I want to re-direct this claim toward those of Rancière's and suggest that Souk and the Bazaar, as experiments in immersive theatre curation, jeopardise how the relationship between perceiving and making sense of something can be seen to function. What is made available to perception in the first place is an oddity – a human relationship – that might otherwise be fetishised in the financial transaction outside of these aesthetic spaces: i.e. the police. What is supposedly common to sense perception and therefore common sense is revealed as a commonality contingent on aesthetic framing. That is what has been re-ordered, or re-distributed. That is the embarrass to be negotiated. And, as Rancière might have it, that is where a politics of participation might be found: at its aesthetic core.

### **Aesthetics and Politics in Half Cut's *Half Cut***

Half Cut is a young theatre company with three artistic directors: Astor Agustsson, Dan Ball and Joe Iredale. *Half Cut* was their debut performance, performed at Souk. In this performance, perhaps more than any other at Souk, transaction was raised to the level of a theme. Audiences were enticed into a small annex where they met a shady barterer. Using an illustrated stick-figure attached to a wall, with arrows pointing to different parts of its anatomy, the barterer explained the varying prices associated with plucking, cutting, shaving or waxing hair from his model's body. The model, he assured, was waiting next door. In my case, £1 a pluck seemed a fair deal – although the barterer was keen to shunt the invasiveness and therefore the monetary value of my epilatory efforts up a couple of notches. I withdrew a solitary

pound coin from my pocket and handed it over before the door was opened to another room.

The model, standing to my left, greeted me with a smile, brandishing red marks from recent epilation. To my right was what looked like a surgeon's tray, complete with razors, tweezers, scissors and waxing strips. The transaction which had just taken place in the room next door seemed to weigh down on the scenario. It was an utterly ridiculous circumstance to be in, trivial and laughable, but the kind of laughter that follows a *faux pas*: part defensive, part guilty, part tactic to make light of a situation. At the same time, that transaction seemed to prompt a commitment to pluck. A performance contract had materialised the moment that pound coin was handed over. Of course, the contract could be broken. I was free to walk out. But then again, why else was I there? Grabbing the tweezers, I approached the model and located a hair that seemed particularly lonely on his left breast. Pluck. I thanked him, despite the feeling that I was not particularly thankful for the situation that had just ensued.

I would discover later that this scenario was filmed and live streamed to a television screen in the third floor bar designed by Half Cut. The bar was run by one of the three directors: whoever was running low on available hair at the time. Consequently, the three members of Half Cut rotated roles between barterer, model and bartender. The live streaming itself I found deeply compromised. This was not made an explicit part of the transaction and for many it would remain a hidden element of the 'sphere of interhuman relations' that Bourriaud suggests characterises the interstice. The camera finds its correlate in the instruments of epilation, only it is the audience that ends up exposed to its objectifying glare. A space which is set up as a private space for the objectification of an other is later revealed as a publicly

observable space: an other, it should be noted, that has chosen to create the work and perform in it, while incorporating that decision, for himself, implicitly, in the transaction that is set up before any act of epilation takes place. The lack of transparency for audiences that this shift entails is problematic, for it potentially scuppers the terms of the transaction between a paying audience and a paid for performance, albeit it a scuppering that nonetheless echoes the audience's potential objectification of another human being.

The camera certainly rests uneasily in my recollection of the event, but it had no bearing on the live experience as I was completely unaware of its presence at the time. Perhaps its presence should nonetheless pull ethical focus in what follows. There is certainly scope for this to take place, but I fear it would detract, as might Rancière, from this chapter's primary engagement with aesthetics and politics. Without condoning the camera, what I want to focus on is how the theme of transaction presents an aesthetic intervention, insofar as a transaction is perceptively re-ordered. What is more, the two primary streams of an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre identified in part one – affect production and risk perception – appear to be the battle ground on which this re-ordering occurs.

The transaction itself takes place in an annex adjacent to the epilation room. The contents of that room remain largely anticipated and imagined for potentially participating audiences prior to entering. In my case, I remember feeling struck by the reality of the model in the room next door, convinced as I was that the transaction would lead to a different kind of hoax. Maybe an empty room, or a room inhabited by a mannequin. In negotiating the transaction with the barterer, I was negotiating an uncertain performance contract, albeit a contract that was more uncertain for audiences than it was for the performers. It was only upon entering the

room that risk perception was finally fully mustered, despite the fact that risk, as an operative potential, was already set in motion while negotiating the monetary transaction. Risk, manifested in risk perception, became fully realised and fully realisable on entering the realm of *aisthesis*. It was through aesthetic experience that the risky nature of that transaction and the unpredictable set of affective responses that might ensue from it manifested, as an embarrass: i.e. as an obstacle to the otherwise smooth, fetishised and ultimately hidden operation of risk within a risk-laden transaction. In my case, risk was rendered feelable through awkwardness and embarrassment. It was also made apparent through an annoyance at having been made fun of, of being gulled by the misleading supposition that there could not possibly be a human model next door. The financial transaction, through the disruption of risk's aesthetic ordering, became an annoying, embarrassing, awkward presence in the room, hanging between audience and performer like a foul, but vaguely amusing stench. It made uncomfortably palpable a social relation that may otherwise remain masked (see Harvie, 'Witnessing' 72). It is in this sense that Half Cut can be seen to affect the distribution of the sensible: as an aesthetic rupture in the operation of interhuman risk relations. In Rancièrian terms, this is also why Half Cut can be seen to provide a political provocation, as a consequence of aesthetic disruption.

The triviality of this intervention may in fact be one of its strengths. The seemingly trivial encourages us to reconsider what it is that makes something appear trivial. It encourages us to reconsider who, or what, has the right and the capacity to partake in aesthetic re-distribution. And it has the capacity to take us by surprise as a disruptive potential.

However, this claiming of the political demands qualification, not least because of Rancière's vital presupposition: the presupposition of equality. *Half Cut* thrives on power and unsettling the distribution of power between participating parties. The performing model in *Half Cut* is first and foremost a labouring performer. The money that audiences hand over to the barterer will ultimately be owned by Half Cut – it is not Theatre Deli, but the theatre companies involved with Souk that pocket these monetary contributions. The thing paid for is the performance that ensues from the monetary transaction: i.e. the potential objectification of the model. The thing that is sold to audiences, in many respects, is the labour which is explicitly bound up in the model's objectification.

The explicit here does not necessarily refer to sexual gratification, but it does engage sexuality. What is purchased is the opportunity to use a male actor's body in a prescribed way, plucking, cutting, shaving or waxing hair from his body. This is a particularly charged potential source of affect production that must, of course, be contingent on the individual participant. Their gender and sexuality, but more importantly their culturally, socially, ethically, politically or religiously inflected views of both, may well bleed into the encounter between audience and performer and fundamentally contribute to the generation of affect in this risk-laden scenario. The performer is of course subject to objectification, but the audience, depending on the audience, is also prone to being objectified – and not just under the glare of the camera. This results from an aesthetic incorporation of their experience into the performance. At the same time, this incorporation is potentially troubled through a refraction of narcissistic participation: that is, as a potentially uncomfortable, objectified encounter with one's own experiencing being. Audiences may feel culpable for a situation that they are not wholly culpable for and responsible for a

relationship for which one is only partially responsible. In short, the performer-audience relationship, along with the power dynamic operating between them, is messy, unclear and elusive of complete intelligibility. It is a disruptive relationship that is perhaps rendered most resonant, paradoxically, through introspection.

There is a danger here of rubbing over a historically loaded human relationship between performer and audience. There are numerous and deeply troublesome historical links between the ocular availability of the (usually female) actors' body on the stage and their sexual availability off the stage. As Hurley suggests, commenting on the historical research of Kirsten Pullen: the prostitute, as an 'age-old metaphor for the actress', can be traced back at least to the Greek '*auletrides*, who entertained and then sexually gratified the hosts of the *symposia* as early as the fifth century BCE' (65). This correlation between the ocular objectification of the actor on the stage and an *assumed* sexual availability off the stage has consistently emerged in a number of guises for centuries, from the *commedia dell'arte*, to 'the early modern French theatre, the English Restoration stage, and pre-twentieth-century Chinese theatre' (65). A significant consequence of this correlation 'thus negatively marked actresses' gender exceptionalism as much as it slurred their affecting emotional and physical labour – in other words, their acting' (66). What this undermines is the possibility of presupposing equality between an objectified performer and an objectifying audience. What gets in the way of this presupposition, to begin with, is perception. What is made available to sense perception is co-opted as potential sensory pleasure (experience), as a consequence of how it is made sense of (understanding). What gets in the way, then, is an aesthetic order that is phallogentric and possessive.



It seems that *Half Cut* is explicitly engaging this history and this issue from a critical standpoint. First off, the model is male. The gender and sexuality of the audience, together with their views on both, will fundamentally impact on how the male model is both perceived and, subsequently, interacted with. This does not alter the framing of that model as being prone to objectification; rather, that vulnerable identity is limited by the contingency of particular audiences. Nonetheless, the male model's body remains something that is paid for prior to entering the epilation room and that financial relation fixes him as a labourer and the audience as one who pays for labour. The relations of power and objectification set up in this scenario are contradictory and elusive of universally explanatory conclusions, particularly those derived from an ethical order, not least because of the shared presence of various audiences and the performer in a repeatable context. But the presentation of a figure that is at least comparable to the prostitute, complete with the provocations this poses for the political, must nonetheless be confronted.

Commenting on Jules Styne, Stephen Sondheim and Arthur Laurents's Broadway show *Gypsy* (1959), a musical about the burlesque stripper Gypsy Rose Lee, Hurley notes scope for drama to lay bare 'a theatrical service economy in which female performers are the primary feeling-technology' (67-68). *Half Cut* seems to aspire to this 'laying bare' of a theatrical service economy, albeit through the presentation of a male performer that seems to invert the gendered structure of this economy. The male performer is placed in an explicitly objectified and objectifiable role: objectified through the monetary transaction and objectifiable through the realisation of the invitation to epilate. At the same time, the audience is positioned in a way that demands affective labour: a further and significant element of the theatrical service economy that is particularly applicable to participatory theatre

styles. For the audience, this affective labour is something paid for and may even be desired, as opposed to something engaged with to maintain subsistence and the development of craft and artistic exploration. Nonetheless, it remains an important consideration, for it emerges as an aesthetic vehicle through which the weight of a questionable transaction might be felt.

Both performer and audience in *Half Cut* are subject to affective labour, albeit very different forms of it, in a context that raises that labour to the level of *aisthesis*. Transaction, labour and objectification, in a typically postdramatic shift, become objects of direct experience; they deviate from habit to promote its explicit perception, ‘permitting it to move from something taken for granted as a mere accompaniment to the rank of a theme’ (Lehmann, H. 156). What is put into play here is an aesthetic rupture that simultaneously defines this work’s political status. The equality presupposed in the relationship between audience and performer stems from a *potentially* mutual vulnerability. In some respects, the ethically compromised imposition of the camera ensures at least a degree of this vulnerability on the parts of both performers and audience. Perhaps this potentially mutual vulnerability marks the limitations or nullification of politics in terms that are strictly applicable to Rancière. However, at the same time, the uncertainty of the situation, as a consequence of its contingency on the responses of different audience members, avoids consensus, particularly ethical consensus. While the participatory invitation is fixed – to epilate, or not to epilate – the aesthetic web operating between performer and audience is at least potentially volatile; it is to be negotiated through affect production in an affective framework that neither performer nor audience can fully anticipate or determine. And within this affective framework, a human relationship is

raised to the status of a stench, like a body odour that one hopes, but fails to keep masked: a potentially awkward, annoying, frustrating stench that *embarrasses*.

### **Conclusion: Aesthetic Disjuncture**

Rancière defines ‘critical art’ as ‘a type of art that sets out to build awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation’ (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 45). Is *Half Cut* an iteration of critical art? Is it trying to teach us something? Does it make assumptions as to the audience’s ignorance of political relations? I do not believe that it does, at least with regards to a politics of exchange. Systems of exchange are incorporated within the work and are even oriented toward the end of critiquing objectification. And yet, I do not believe that this is meant to turn the participant into a conscious agent of world transformation. There is nothing so grand at stake in *Half Cut*.

For Rancière, critical art kills ‘the strangeness of the resistant appearance that attests to the non-necessary or intolerable character of a world’ (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 45). In *Half Cut*, this killing is avoided because it is not political art, in the sense of it being critical art; it is political in the sense that it redistributes a sensory mode of participation. It resists appearance insofar as a mode of appearance – i.e. an intolerable affect – emerges as something strange in the encounter between model and participant, as well as the transaction on which that encounter is based. The intolerable element is an aesthetic element which is, at the same time, the crux on which a politics of participation in this work rests. Something is not so much made visible, as Rancière might characterise a political intervention in the distribution of the sensible, as it is made feelable, as an affective intervention that is,

at the same time, risky. It is risky because the affectivity of the situation unfolding between a performer and a participating audience that can only ever be anticipated in an abstract, generalised guise by the performer, is deeply uncertain. The format of the exchange itself might be fairly predictable and fairly repeatable, but the functioning of affect in that exchange, given its fundamental dependency on the subjects that participate in its production, cannot be so, at least to the same extent. The politics of participation in *Half Cut* that is being considered here, therefore, resides in a participating audience's affective and risky aesthetic experience of the work.

In the introduction to this chapter, I suggested that a potential to re-draw the heuristic lines that might otherwise limit how immersive theatre comes to be defined might arise through the institutional fostering of creative activity. Theatre Deli was then held up as being emblematic of this fostering. The work of young and emerging theatre companies was framed as posing challenges to the kinds of company and performance that have a right and capacity to partake in a cultural milieu. At the same time, through disparities in what is perceived to have aesthetic or critical merit, this work prompts reflection on what constitutes merit in the first place. This is especially important once merit, particularly of the aesthetic kind, is taken to be synonymous with the right or capacity to participate in artistic creativity in spaces accessible to the public: i.e. what Rancière would call the police.

In chapter three, I raised the issue of immersive theatre's exclusivity, where exclusivity among theatre audiences, particularly as it arises through entrepreneurial participation, was described in terms of prioritising some participatory dispositions to the exclusion of others. In this chapter, I have been looking at exclusivity as it applies to immersive theatre makers and curators and how they attempt to

circumnavigate barriers to inclusion within a contemporary theatre landscape posed by, for instance, public funding. But this is also of relevance to audience participation in immersive theatre. By carrying on regardless of public support, despite attempts to secure public financial backing, Theatre Deli present audiences with participatory opportunities that are not ratified by a public funding infrastructure. In fact, drawing on Harvie, they can even be seen to undermine it, both inadvertently and dangerously for a sustainable future for such an infrastructure. My aim has not been to support or even praise the production practises of Theatre Deli with regard to pop-up theatre. With Harvie, I am concerned about the implications this may have for public arts funding in the future. However – and this is consistent with how I interpret Harvie – it is the economic context and not *directly* the pop-up company in question which should provide the primary cause for concern, not least because of the highly limited windows of opportunity that are made available to the likes of Theatre Deli, short of making different work and potentially sacrificing the rehearsal and performance platform they offer to other young companies. In persisting, they make a contribution – however small – to the terms on which immersive theatre might be defined and, consequently, the terms on which audience participation in immersive theatre might be defined.

The theatre companies involved with Souk and the Bazaar suggest that immersive theatre can take place with limited resources, on a modest scale and can be created by artists at the very outset of their professional careers. They also challenge the notion that, in the introduction, I identified as being an idiosyncratic characteristic of immersive theatre: namely, that immersive theatre environments create stable and coherent ‘other worlds’. For the likes of Half Cut, as well as Souk and the Bazaar more generally, the various other worlds on offer are subsumed

within a curated immersive event – a theatre marketplace – where the reality of labour relations rupture both the stability and cohesion of immersion. What this presents is a contradiction; while an immersive environment is identifiable as such, that environment is nonetheless revealed to thrive on aesthetic disruption. Drawing on Rancière, it is possible to view this kind of aesthetic disruption as being deeply imbued with the political, provided that aesthetics is regarded as a core to politics.

I noted a concern of Hallward's regarding Rancière's disregard for and indifference to 'questions of organisation and decision'. Rancière may well dismiss the kinds of political and artistic organisation that come with Theatre Deli's transaction ethos, for instance, or their production processes more generally. Ultimately, the companies, many of which would later become associate companies of Theatre Deli, must subscribe by association to Theatre Deli's ideological approach to pop-up theatre and means of financing the making of immersive theatre. It is difficult to see in this context where the dissensual intervention so beloved of Rancière can emerge. As far as theatre production and curation is concerned, Theatre Deli thrives on consensus among the community of artists that are increasingly affiliated with them. However, that is not to say that the artwork produced through Theatre Deli must act in the same way. Over the course of this chapter, I have argued that Souk and the Bazaar can be seen to operate as interstices, raising labour relations, primarily, but also objectification, into the realm of *aisthesis*. In that raising, an aesthetic disruption can be seen to take place that reorders, or redistributes, what can be perceived and made sense of. It is in this sense, of approaching politics *through* aesthetics, that Theatre Deli and companies like Half Cut associated with them can be seen to make political interventions. This is the dissensus that takes place in their work. It is not antagonism between performers and

audience or between performers and curators – although it may just as well involve this – but an aesthetic disjuncture with the mistakenly supposed commonness of sense that might be characterised here as defining a politics of participation in immersive theatre. Sense, either as perception or understanding, has the potential to be common, but that commonality resides in upsetting a mistakenly supposed level playing field premised on an exclusive aesthetic order.

## Conclusion

22 March 2013. One minute past midday. A confirmation email lands in my inbox for a preview performance of Punchdrunk's latest show, *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable*. Tickets went on sale as the clock struck twelve and were bookable through the National Theatre via an online queuing system. The queue shot up to the thousands a minute or two after my successful purchase, signalled by a counter indicating your place in virtual line and an onslaught of desperate comments on social media websites. Despite its unlikelihood given a three month run, I was convinced that tickets for the production would sell out in hours. Either that, or the National Theatre website might have crashed, as it did for the English National Opera once tickets for *The Duchess of Malfi* were released. Neither worry materialised. But given the online queue of thousands, it would appear that this was not an isolated concern. We bought into the buzz.

A surge of publicity for the show and media coverage was released only the day before tickets went on sale, resulting in hype that was brief, but effective. Critics were invited to a dilapidated shop on Kingsland High Street in Dalston, just prior to the release date. Inside, having meandered through corridors and down stairs, they would meet Andrez, busy repairing film equipment, but wanting, nonetheless, to tell them a story. This turned out to be a ten minute 'live trailer' for the performance and certainly proved effective. The sense of excitement produced by the novelty of this publicity stunt bled into the media hype reported in, for instance, *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. The live trailer was made open to the public, but Punchdrunk asked critics to keep the precise whereabouts under wraps. This was a trailer to be discovered. As Daisy Bowie-Sell reports: '[t]he man you encounter in the tiny



section that's being played out over the next two weeks has advice for you and will appear himself in *The Drowned Man*, which opens in June. Pay attention to what he tells you, says [Felix] Barrett, as it may prove useful' (n.p.). In other words, for those willing to go the extra mile, to risk heading to Dalston and finding nothing, but to risk nonetheless, there is an opportunity to get a head start in the immersive world that awaits you. That is, so long as you pick the right door and make the appropriate leap of faith.

I took the risk. On a Thursday afternoon, a week after the tickets were released, I made the trip to Dalston Junction and headed up Kingsland High Street, past unmarked brown doors, grocers and shop fronts with missing sign lettering. I was unsure what I was hoping to find or where to find it, but I was confident, nonetheless, that if there was something to be found it would be recognisable. Sure enough, I noticed an unmistakably out of place shop front. In bright neon lettering, suspended in a window framed by red curtains, was the word '*Psychic*'. Unfortunately, in a glass door panel, there was also a sign which read 'closed'. A young woman was sat at a desk behind the door and I called through the pane of glass: 'when do you open?' Her response was inaudible, so I repeated and she replied by raising four fingers, mouthing that I should return in one hour. I returned after forty five minutes and a coffee in a nearby Turkish sweet shop, only this time there was a small queue of hipsters, students and one or two dapper looking couples. I counted along the line, knowing that the experience was to last around ten minutes for each individual audience member and calculating how long I was likely to have to wait – probably an hour and a half which, for a three hour round trip to make it to Dalston, seemed manageable.

I peered through the window and saw a crystal ball and some tarot cards. Passers-by wandered past and mocked the queue in utter disbelief that a ‘witch’, as one of them suggested, could attract so much attention. A pungent smell of incense accompanied the opening of the door and Katy Balfour, a Punchdrunk Associate Artist who I had interviewed three weeks previously, came out onto the pavement and called the name of someone in the queue one place behind me. A critic, I supposed. Then the first one or two members of the queue filed in. Five minutes after four o’clock, Katy came out again and regretfully informed us that they were too busy to allow anyone else to enter that afternoon – but come back tomorrow.

This was an annoying turn of events, to say the least. And annoying in a somewhat unfruitful sense of the word, lacking subversion of a participatory promise, as might be expected in, for instance, a Shunt performance, instead fetishising a participatory experience as something to yearn for. There was certainly a childish delight and sense of pride to be had in finding the location. Initiative was rewarded on that front. But that initiative, or entrepreneurialism, ended up being scuppered by a faux public façade. Was I not entrepreneurial or savvy enough? Or was I not meant to take the instruction of the inaudible woman at face value? Should I have ignored her suggestion and waited outside the door for the full hour? Whatever the case, for those critics invited to attend, there was an opportunity reciprocated in publicity; for the rest of us, or at least for most of us in the queue on that day, Andrez’s secrets remain a mystery. But a mystery that I, for one, wanted to discuss with others. The lack of eventfulness nonetheless allowed for an unlived experience to persevere as something more in my mutterings to friends afterwards, most of whom, pedants and misanthropists aside, marvelled at what could have been.

Punchdrunk's pop-up intervention could not quite escape the fact that it intervenes in private space. This was an intervention in the misleadingly public space of a London high street. Its status as an intervention – of posing some kind of aesthetic rupture to the coherence of the high street – was overridden by the presence of the queue. This was not a door to be stumbled upon; it was a door to be found by people in the know. Anyone stumbling across the door would have access barred either by a closed sign or a queue. In this respect, Punchdrunk are victims of their own popularity. What is more, an out of the ordinary appearance, potentially holding an out of the ordinary experience, was tamed by familiar indicators of cultural capital: the queue and the checklist. These exclusionary indicators, upon reflection, seemed at home in a space revealed to be private and, for those of us in the queue that day, inaccessible.

What was promised in the publicity for the live trailer was an experience: an experiential taster of *The Drowned Man*. But the mere promise of an experience proved enough to render it an effective marketing tool. Perhaps the company have learned from Mother and Stella Artois Black. Comparable to *The Black Diamond*, they have created a theatre event in a pop-up space as a means of marketing their theatre product, *The Drowned Man*. Both critics and audience end up marketing the performance on Punchdrunk's behalf, in return for a free mini performance for those lucky few who actually get to experience the live trailer. The first-hand experience of these few ends up traveling through numerous communicative pathways, promoting what I would call an experiential contagion: a viral marketing strategy premised on the production of experiences that thrives on hype and buzz, but does not depend on first-hand experience. Despite offering an experience to a potential public, this offer only depends on a small number of people experiencing the event for the desired

publicity to be maximised. An experiential product is consequently able to enter an experience economy where lived experience is no longer a necessary requirement for the experience economy to function effectively, at least with regards to experiential marketing. The materially encountered lived experience need only touch a few before its contagious capacity bursts through innumerable immaterial pathways. And the result is an online ticketing queue running up into the thousands in minutes.

Punchdrunk's live trailer, then, embraces much of what this thesis has been addressing: an immersive experience is offered to a lucky few that thrives on affective potential, particularly as that potential spills out through the experience economy. It challenges audiences to take the risk of coming to Dalston on the off-chance that they will not only discover the venue (entrepreneurial participation), but gain entry (individualistic privilege). As such, it can be seen to draw into play elements of the neoliberal ethos that characterises the kinds of participation that Punchdrunk tends to ask of audiences in a not-so-freely available free performance. Finally, the live trailer took place in a pop-up theatre venue, which can be seen to trouble the aesthetic coherence of the high street. However, whatever aesthetic disruption occurs through this potential troubling of aesthetic coherence ends up forming another kind of aesthetic coherence through familiar signals of the theatre and commercial entertainment, such as the queue and the checklist. The kind of politics at stake is not one of aesthetic re-distribution, then, but a recognisably hierarchical and exclusive distribution of parts among those who can and cannot participate in the 'freely' available live trailer. The performance is free of monetary charge, but that does not equate to freedom of access. Even among those who can participate having found the location, which poses its own, potentially intimidating, or off-putting obstacle, there remain many who are simply not allowed to participate,

despite their best efforts. The restrictive one-on-one format thrives on privilege. But married to popularity, that privilege also ensures exclusion.

In short, affect production, risk perception, the neoliberal ethos, the experience economy and the twinned notions of aesthetics and politics are all brought together here and that bringing together crystallises how an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre might be approached. By treating affect and risk perception as aesthetic inputs coded through experience production and by comparing the kinds of value and exchange at stake with those operating elsewhere in political ideology and the economy, it is possible to locate what a politics of audience participation might look like in a particular iteration of immersive theatre.

In 'Historicizing Untimeliness', Kristin Ross articulates an illuminating summary of Rancière's approach to politics as 'an event that cannot be predicted any more than its end can be apocalyptically announced. It is always circumstantial, local, and entirely contained in its singular manifestations' (29). While Ross is primarily commenting on politics – as disruption – as it emerges in history, she might just as well be describing politics as it emerges in an artistic practise such as immersive theatre. What this means is that a singular theory of the politics of participation in immersive theatre, as well as its aesthetics, fails to understand what politics is, at least for Rancière: that is, a circumstantially bound disruption of any such singularity. Nonetheless, while the foregoing theorisations of immersive theatre participation have all been firmly rooted in particular case studies, it seems that a number of conclusions can be drawn that might usefully carry over into a much wider and more general evaluation of an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre.

First of all, certain aspects of immersive theatre participation considered in this thesis have emerged from analyses of specific immersive theatre performances, or companies, but with limited applicability to work by other companies. For instance, the notion of entrepreneurial participation was introduced as an implicit participatory expectation in Punchdrunk's work of significant consequence for political evaluation. However, this notion is clearly not as relevant to participating in a Shunt performance, for instance, or in Ray Lee's *Cold Storage*, where much less emphasis is placed on seeking out performance within an immersive environment that is structured and controlled and where the audience's experience can be carefully manipulated. This is where Ross's insistence on the circumstantial and singular manifestations of politics is most fruitfully considered and where my rejection of the definite article in exploring *an* aesthetics and *a* politics of participation throughout this thesis reveals its hesitancy as a necessary hesitancy. That being said, it is possible to put forward some assertive conclusions regarding the peculiarity of immersive theatre's particular breed of productive participants that usefully bears down on how an aesthetics and politics of participation might be evaluated.

This thesis has identified and examined how audience participation tends to operate in immersive theatre, particularly with regard to the audience's creative or productive role in relation to immersive theatre environments. Narcissistic participation was coined and introduced as a potentially fruitful participatory model that might help with thinking through how participation operates in immersive theatre, especially as it relates to experience production as both a participatory incentive and an aesthetically central characteristic of immersive theatre performances. Narcissistic participation, both as it relates to affect production and

risk perception, seems to be at stake in all of the immersive theatre performances considered in this thesis, at least as narcissism was defined and approached in part one: as an introspective turning inwards of aesthetic attention towards one's own experience, coupled with a projective turning outwards of attention towards the fruits of one's own participatory activity in an immersive environment. This dyad, coupling introspection and projection, finds fertile grounding in what I have framed as the aesthetic characteristics of affect production and risk perception, narrowing aesthetic focus to aesthetic experience and how aesthetic experience is produced in immersive theatre. Individual participants fundamentally contribute to that production within the immersive environments surrounding them. Narcissistic participation engages risk through an affective encounter with an immersive environment that can only ever be partially known. In that partiality, together with demands that might be made of audiences within immersive theatre environments – either directly, as a demand from an actor, or indirectly, through, for instance, entrepreneurial participation – a kind of audience productivity arises that is not just imaginative, as might be expected of audiences more generally, but attentive to both interiority and exteriority, as well as experience and participatory activity that projects out into a space that surrounds audiences.

With this in mind, it is therefore the manifold nature of productivity that renders immersive theatre audiences as especially productive participants, magnifying and multiplying an audience's inherent productivity in spaces that are peculiarly conducive to productive participation. This may well prove a useful observation as a counterbalance to the more hesitant definitions of immersive theatre and, specifically, audience participation in immersive theatre, which interrogate and challenge the appropriateness of the immersive metaphor. What needed to take place

in scholarship dealing with immersive theatre was clarity regarding what the style shares with drama and theatre more generally – a sharing that, for instance, has been identified by Worthen – but that nonetheless demarcates immersive theatre as a distinct theatre style, thus opening up terrain for a critical examination of aesthetics and politics as both apply, specifically, to audience participation in immersive theatre. The definition of immersive theatre and an approach to audience participation identified and theorised in this thesis took up this task. Points of alignment between immersive theatre and drama were implicitly challenged by considering immersive theatre’s postdramatic features, without rubbing over the important and useful demarcations that maintain the stylistic integrity of immersive theatre as a distinctly identifiable theatre style with distinctly identifiable modes of audience participation.

This definition encourages reflection on the kind of politics that emerges from especially productive participation, as well as a questioning of how this supposed productivity might relate to dispositions, or capacities, for exercising participation productively. Moreover, it is worth considering where such productive participants might find their counterparts outside of the theatre. In this thesis, I have made the claim that there are strong compatibilities between audience participation in immersive theatre and participatory experiences offered or marketed in the experience economy. I have also suggested that the participatory values operating in many immersive theatre performances, but particularly in Punchdrunk’s work, are typically neoliberal. It therefore seems important to think politically about audience participation in immersive theatre, considering what consequences might arise from accepting alluring invitations to secure a given experience, while maximising the best possible experience. It is worth asking what the political cost of aesthetic



experience in immersive theatre might be. It is striking that this task has, until now, remained largely unaccounted for as far as immersive theatre, specifically, is concerned.

This is why I believe it is so important to consider an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in unison. The primary conclusion to be drawn from this thesis is that immersive theatre's aesthetics of audience participation is also, potentially, a possible site for its politics. Elsewhere, it has been argued that a politics of participation in contemporary theatre and performance is not reducible to the realm of aesthetics and that, if anything, political demands for participation are *transformed* into aesthetic responses in such circumstances (Bala 238). But in immersive theatre, particularly once approached using the vocabulary of Rancière, an aesthetics and politics of audience participation appear profoundly interrelated and mutually constitutive. Before elaborating this point, it bears fruit to revisit reasons why immersive theatre might also dispel the likelihood of political dissensus emerging.

First of all, immersive theatre is a prescriptive art form. This is particularly evident in a great deal of one-on-one theatre, where the sheer inflow of theatre consumers tends to reveal the theatre scenario as being at least fairly repeatable. The fact that this repeatability, or reproducibility, can be said to exist depends on coming to terms with the overriding tendency towards a performance structure of some kind being in play, be it a script, or a more general scripted framework that leaves open some space for improvisation: i.e. cosmetic, or adaptive customisation. Either way, there tends to be something coherent that can be shared between participating audiences after the event, in some cases more so than in others, that testifies to precisely this kind of structure. There may also be a participatory protocol, the rules

of which are either clear or ambiguous. This, too, can be said to identify immersive theatre as a prescriptive art form. The intentions of immersive theatre makers may deem a particular aim, goal or message to be at the forefront of their artistic concerns, which factors in attempts to guide audiences towards an understanding of these intentions. Theatre design might also work to help realise these intentions. What all this amounts to is an establishment of immersive theatre as a consensual art practise which, in Rancière's sense of the term, is to be understood as 'an agreement between sense and sense, in other words between a mode of sensory presentation and a regime of meaning' (*Dissensus* 144). Clearly, then, if Rancière is to be drawn upon, we need to look elsewhere for immersive theatre's capacity to disrupt such consensus. That elsewhere, I contend, is affect production.

As the last chapter suggested, in making this claim I am departing from Rancière's sceptical thoughts on bodily objectification at the expense of the political subject that, he believes, comes with focusing on the corporeal. But I have deployed in this thesis a very particular understanding of affect production that takes the subject and his or her role in the production of affect as a given, albeit in a way that operates in dynamic relation with an uncertain outside. Indeed, this very dynamism provides a possible line of enquiry to think through what a disruption, or rupture, in the distribution of the sensible might look like, especially when that disruption affects the otherwise smooth operation of neoliberal value or the fetishisation of experience and participation in the experience economy. While affect production can be guided, it can never be fully controlled given its contingency on the subjects who feel it and necessarily help to produce it. In that sense, it is unpredictable, or at least it cannot be predicted with absolute certainty. This is about inputting the corporeal into a regime of sensibility in Rancière's writing that, otherwise, is limited to

visibility and audibility, the capacity to see and speak and be seen and be heard. As such, what is being added to that formulation is the capacity to affect and be affected. It is such a capacity that, I believe, provides a potential locus for the political in immersive theatre, provided affect is experienced as something unsettling, frustrating, annoying, uncomfortable, out of place, or out of the ordinary: that is, especially as it might relate to risk. This is not to limit attention to negative affects, such as shame, although shame might just as well be considered as potentially political in the context of immersive theatre. Pleasure, even hedonic pleasure, might work in this sense as being politically disruptive if rendered as a dubious, challenging sensation: that is, as an *embarrass*. The point is that there are many guises that the political might inhabit in immersive theatre – guises that are, first and foremost, aesthetic.

Based on the definition of affect production offered in chapter one, it is affect that provides the clearest potential for dissensus to emerge through audience participation in immersive theatre. This is so for two reasons: firstly, affect draws on the participant's unique autobiography in a way that will always be in excess of the anticipations of theatre makers; secondly, while affect might be drawn on as a postdramatic medium for the transmission of something meaningful, it nonetheless depends on a host – a particular participant – that can only ever be partially anticipated as a generalised participant in advance of the event. The same can be said of risk perception given its fundamental dependence on the individual, as well as its close relationship with affect production. It may well be that affect production and risk perception, via affect, can be biopolitically worked upon and co-opted, but it is not something that can be owned, nor ever fully controlled. There must be space

within it to at least allow for the possibility of unpredictability, risk and therefore dissensus.

There are undoubtedly restrictions on this space. In *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and its Theatrical Seductions*, Wickstrom looks at the ways in which Nike, Disney and a range of other corporate businesses co-opt not only affect within the experience economy, but theatre and performance as well, particularly with regard to mimesis. ‘Mimesis’, she writes, ‘is a capacity that allows us to travel a spectrum along which we encounter, or live, the truth of the make-believe’ (19). Drawing on my argument that there is no such thing as an unauthentic affect, it is clear to see the attraction of co-opting bodies into marketing strategies, utilising the biological fact of the human subject as a means of injecting authenticity into theatrically constructed brands. In immersive theatre, affect might likewise be used to draw audiences into an immersive world that is partly of their own making. In both instances, individual productivity, via affect production, works upon audiences/customers as they are at once set apart from a theatre event/brand, while at the same time providing the basis for its grounding as a truthful form of make-believe that can be valued as such.

This co-opting of bodies ultimately correlates to the utility of *aisthesis*. I am not alone in underscoring the aesthetic centrality of experience production in immersive theatre. I have explored how Machon’s *(Syn)aesthetics* has put forward comparable observations through study of corporeal, or visceral audience engagement. What I have done in this thesis, though, is articulate the centrality of experience production in starkly different terms, looking at affect production and risk perception, in particular, before orienting that articulation toward starkly different ends: that is, endeavouring to establish a politics of audience participation in

immersive theatre. This is where the utility of *aisthesis* begins to resonate most strongly as an important subject of study.

In an immersive theatre performance like Shunt's *The Architects*, this utility equates to the centrality of the performance text, as opposed to the linguistic text, particularly as the performance text works through affective experience as a potential harbinger of a meaning that appears to be all of one's own. In the case of branding, particularly in Punchdrunk's corporate performances, or in experiential marketing, that utilisation works on a similar principle. But as my discussion of *The Architects* makes clear, this similarity might just as well be critiqued. The impulse of narcissistic participation, of turning attention inwards towards one's own experiencing self, as well as a projecting outwards towards the fruits of one's own participatory labour, might be rendered troublesome. Breaking, scuppering, frustrating, or embarrassing a participatory assumption or expectation, defined in terms of physical prowess or intervention within an aesthetic space, might reveal the dangers and susceptibilities of that impulse, or at least its status as an impulse. Likewise with Half Cut's *Half Cut*, as well as the curatorial projects of Theatre Souk and the Bush Bazaar, there is a potential for immersive theatre to play upon and frustrate the familiarity of aesthetic coherence – to inject an embarrass into whatever transactions might take place between audience and performer and to raise from its hidden status an uncomfortable human relation that may not be visible, or audible, but at least feelable through *aisthesis*. It is in these kinds of frustrations that immersive theatre's most valuable politics of participation can be seen to occur: in the apparently trivial, against the consensual or comfortable, and from within its aesthetic core.

A number of further research avenues are opened up by some of the claims put forward and explored in this thesis. One such claim taps into an on-going academic interest in the liveness of theatre and performance in theatre and performance studies, in particular the recent trend in challenging the supposed non-reproducibility of performance that Diana Taylor, Joseph Roach and Rebecca Schneider have, in their own ways and among others, been exploring over the past decade (Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*; Roach, *Cities of the Dead*; Schneider, *Performing Remains*). I have suggested that the immersive theatre event, especially one-on-one theatre, in many ways depends on being at least fairly reproducible. The non-reproducible element can be seen to come from the specificities of narcissistic participation, but the theatre event that is designed prior to the audience's arrival nonetheless presupposes a format or structure that might be presented to different audiences with a strong degree of consistency.

Secondly, my discussion of an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre certainly resonates with the later work of Bishop, in particular her discussion and application of Rancière's theoretical writing to participatory scenarios in *Artificial Hells*. I specify later work, as this book departs from her earlier notion of 'relational antagonism' explored in her article 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', instead focusing on the significance of an aesthetic return as an important alternative to the ethical turn in socially engaged art practises. What my thesis adds to this discussion is in a certain respect a rejuvenation of her concept of relational antagonism, but in a way which fundamentally departs from the sense of aggressive confrontation implied within it. Rather, in the third part of this thesis, I have been exploring Rancière's notion of dissensus in a way that prescribes neither antagonism nor conviviality, but, rather, refers to an aesthetic

reordering that is fundamentally political. This kind of reordering could take place in annoying, frustrating or embarrassing circumstances, just as it might in a pleasurable zone of apparent triviality, provided an aesthetic disruption of some kind takes place, even if that disruption is simply premised on who has a capacity to take part in artistic creation and participation. In this regard, there is space to apply the approach to audience participation put forward in this thesis to other styles of theatre, performance and the fine and visual arts, particularly participatory styles, as an aid to the identification and examination of aesthetics and politics.

Finally, there is a larger project opened up from the foregoing regarding the figuration of an audience-as-community. In part two, I charted a number of important political shifts that can be seen to have contributed to an atomisation of society. This ‘new individualism’ was approached through commentary on the increasing hegemony of the neoliberal ethos, particularly as it has been inscribed in the policy decisions and political strategies of UK government since 1979, especially. The kind of participant described in this thesis is one that Rancière, despite his resistance to such explicit forms of physical participation, may well have at least some sympathy with. Individual productivity and the individual narrative journey of audiences were themes reiterated time and again through discussion of affect production and risk perception. But – and this is perhaps where Rancière’s sympathies might cease – the counterparts of this individualism, particularly as it might be inscribed through experience, were found to be in operation in the experience economy and through elements of the neoliberal ethos. The immersive theatre audience, particularly as it appears among Punchdrunk’s masked and cloaked participants, or in one-on-one theatre, is profoundly individualistic. Once the notion of narcissistic participation is taken into account, this individualism can be seen to

extend, potentially, to many different participatory theatre styles, suggesting that contemporary theatre audiences may well be unsettling the notion of an audience-as-community. Given the compatibility of value and aesthetic systems operating between immersive theatre, the neoliberal ethos and the experience economy, it is perhaps worth asking what causative links, as opposed to parallels, might be proposed between the possible rise of individualism among theatre audiences and the economic and political shifts, or continuities, promoting the disintegration of the audience-as-community, at least as an ideal – a mythic ideal, perhaps, but a metamorphosing mythic ideal. This thesis has not been the place to tackle this specific line of enquiry, but it does seem a potentially pressing area for future research.

In drawing this thesis to a close, I want to return to the key notion of an aesthetically disruptive politics, particularly as it might arise not just from annoying, or frustrating audiences, but also from excitement, or pleasure. In chapter four, I commented on Ahmed's positive support of unhappy feelings, along with their political worth, in cultures that position happiness as an end to which all else must be subservient. I also noted her frustration at what this 'promise of happiness' can be seen to rub over, or leave behind, in its march towards hegemony. But an aesthetically disruptive politics might also embrace exhilaration, joy and celebration: characteristics that so often characterise the most memorable immersive theatre experiences. In *Performance Affects*, James Thompson makes an impassioned call for an 'end of effect' in applied drama (5-6). Drawing on the anarchist Emma Goldman, Thompson invites us to consider the value of experiencing '*beautiful radiant things*' as an affective end in itself (1, original emphasis). Alternatively, Jill Dolan introduces the notion of 'utopian performatives', in a critical mode



reminiscent of Herbert Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension*, to describe a possible marriage of affect and effect. Utopian performatives celebrate those 'small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense' (Dolan 5). Whether posed as an end of effect, or a marriage of affect and effect, these perspectives encourage us to re-consider the political value of enjoying beautiful radiant things in immersive theatre, or the ways in which immersive theatre might be able to generate utopian performatives. Too much of a focus on aesthetic disruption, as it arises from frustration, or annoyance, may be seen to quench celebratory moments. But an understanding of the political offered by Rancière in his later writing does, indeed, leave space to consider such celebratory moments as being politically relevant, provided some kind of aesthetic re-distribution takes place. As such, it has not been an intention to exclude such possibilities from an approach to an aesthetics and politics of audience participation in immersive theatre; rather, my intention has been to focus, in part three, on especially clear instances of aesthetic rupture that challenge participatory engagement with immersive theatre. This challenge may be annoying, just as it may be celebratory, or fun. But, I believe, the most valuable political contribution of such a challenge is likely to emerge from the aesthetic terms that are put into play in an immersive theatre performance, together with how those terms open up, or restrict modes of participatory engagement.

Over the three year course of this PhD research, the definitional stability of immersive theatre has been put into question time and again. What was raised as a defining characteristic in the introduction – the provision of coherent other worlds

that surround participating audiences within an aesthetic environment – has since emerged as a useful heuristic, but a heuristic that is open to question. Punchdrunk have recently been exploring boundaries between the street and the street as the stage in a fascinating collapse of aesthetic orders, an example being *The Borough* (2013). This was a site-responsive headphone performance based on Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* and George Crabbe's poem *The Borough*, performed on the streets, beach and marshes of Aldeburgh in Suffolk, UK – a site which resonated so very strongly with Britten's score and former place of residence, despite the entrance of uncontrollable quotidian factors, from passing cars to snoozing sunbathers. Shunt seem to embrace this definitional heuristic of immersive theatre without explicitly identifying with it, while, for the most part, keeping their audiences seated within environments that productively frustrate participatory expectations. Ray Lee and Lundahl & Seidl reveal how affective irruptions of the real within immersive theatre environments might unsettle, or at least divert attention away from their representational function. And Theatre Deli create pop-up theatre that depends on a system of finance and support that ensures their nomadism. Theatre Deli depends, in an explicit way, on a world that is far from otherworldly: on a business world that acts as both giver and evictor. But this is a world that can become critically incorporated within an immersive theatre interstice, existing within a far from perfect cultural and economic infrastructure, depending on it, even supporting it, but at the same time revealing its inadequacies.

The functioning of the political in the case studies explored in this thesis is far from radical. In many cases, exclusionary practises mar the potential for the political to be fulfilled in all of its disruptive potential. But there remains the possibility of intervening, of breaking with an aesthetic order while at the same time

existing within it, and engaging an aesthetics of audience participation in immersive theatre as its most effective political potential.

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