

Journey and Immersion.
About a Poetics of Sensory in Contemporary Theatre

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Abstract: In the contemporary theatrical practice we find very frequently different formulas where the role of the audience is explored and its relation with the performer is renegotiated. This paper investigates some of the practices that aim to abolish the traditional boundary between the stage and the audience, counting on its affective participation, on the interaction with the performer or the acting space. In many situations the productions are labeled as immersive, although the term remains ambiguous and generic, the diversity of the spectacular formulas not allowing the establishment of a consensus. Such productions seek a higher degree of the participation of the audience, so that it becomes an active part of the performance, more than a spectator, having the freedom to move in space, to explore freely or guided, to make choices, even to influence in a certain degree the course of the story. The inner world of the characters materializes rather in corporeal expressiveness, in objects, scenographic or sound elements, so that the textual poetry, with its content of meanings and verbal images, is transposed into a sensorial poetics, being favored the gestural, vocal, kinesthetic dimensions. Often the dramatic construction is episodic, fragmented and generates networks of meanings, which are detached from the narrative and the logic of the original textual support, in order to be later individually assembled by each participant.

Keywords: contemporary theatre, immersive theatre, spectator, space, Punchdrunk, mask.

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Traditionally, theatre is considered a place of immersion due to its ability to create a detailed and convincing representation of a fictional reality, which causes a "suspension" of the audience's doubt, so that spectators "forget" about the immediate physical location and enter into another through an active imaginary process. The spectator is emotionally driven into the represented drama and immersion manifests as a cognitive experience, or as Packer and Jordan say "the audience loses itself in the veracity of the drama, creating an immersive experience"². According to the two authors, immersion involves a process of depersonification, through which the audience projects itself in an alternative world, but this approach tends to be limiting, especially in contemporary theatre, which has increasingly turned to a sensory, physical experimentation. Different formulas, often circumscribed to notions as postdramatic theatre or multimedia performance, reject the portrayal of a fictional universe and create physical environments that have the ability to engage the participant both cognitively and viscerally, through an experience that combines information with materiality, image and sound, creating new models of reception, personification and contemplation. There is no longer built an imaginary world where spectators can project themselves, but an approach that focuses on their immediate reality and their physical presence in space. In the theatre based on representation, the audience is often separated, "left outside" of the fictional world of the action, which is framed by the stage and away from the viewer, while the postdramatic theatre and performance place the audience inside, "here and now", stimulating the entire sensory system. Theatre is a "hypermedium", one that can be ideal when, as George Landow and Paul Delaney say, "engaging all five senses"³. In postdramatic theatre, which does not offer an alternative reality clearly bounded, there is potential for the audience to experience a high degree of immersion in relation to the space and surrounding stimuli.

2. Randall Packer and Ken Jordan, eds., *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), xxxi.

3. George Landow and Paul Delaney, "Hypertext, Hypermedia and Literary Studies: The State of the Art," in *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, ed. Randall Packer and Ken Jordan (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 212.

The term "immersion" was first used in computer games and in multimedia art, and it has recently entered the theatre vocabulary, gaining popularity in the mid-2000s. In the field of video games, it refers to the capacity of a computer system to generate three-dimensional images that absorb the user, and also, the experience that comes and coexists in this alternative environment. The user is caught in this world of the game through an avatar, which allows him to go beyond the standard of involvement offered by literature, cinema or other kinds of media. While identifying with a character in a book or movie does not change the course of events, in the virtual world this changes some parameters, sometimes in relation to the other players. The word has been borrowed in the performative arts to characterize a level of involvement and experience at a comparable intensity.

Also, the term has begun to be used in multimedia installations, for those works that aim to capture the visitor in a sensory universe. *CAVE*, a direct reference to Platon's cave, made in 1991 by media artist Daniel Sandin, projects a virtual setting on the walls, the floor and the ceiling of a room. The space is simultaneously real and virtual and "the CAVE immersant does not experience dislocation and disembodiment, but rather is viscerally aware of his or her physical presence «on stage» amid the animated imagery and orchestrated sound."⁴ Another example is *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001), made by Bill Viola, who uses the sound and the image to explore topics as birth, death, memory and subconscious. Five ethereal bodies are projected on the black surface of the space in a permanent slow-motion, allusion to the purification process associated with the immersion in water. An ambiental music accompanies this dynamic, and suddenly one of the bodies get out of the water, leaving behind a trail of bubbles that marks the end of a cycle. The images, the lack of gravity of the figures, the textures and the colours of the water, the sound and the rhythm drive the viewer to another time frame and invites him to undergo, in his turn, a kind of transformation.

Particularly, one of these installations has had considerable influence among theatre practitioners. It is *H.G.*, a labyrinthine scenography in fusion with sound and light, realized in 1995 by Robert Wilson and Hans Peter

4. Landow and Delaney, 287.

Kuhn in a network of underground spaces in London. Many scenes (a Victorian dinner wherefrom the guests have gone, a hospital room, luxuriant gardens, ruins), make a fascinating and strange world, that the viewer can complete with his own characters and stories.

Immersion is a subjective experience which can be measured only by the participant according to the degree to which it reflects the intensity of his cognitive, emotional and sensory connection, by reference to the content and the form of a work of art. The spectator of the immersive theatre is often invited to get involved with his own body, senses and imagination in the artistic act, to analyze his presence and his participation, that is what Adam Alston calls "narcissistic participation"⁵. This asks from the audience not only reception, but also a direct role, sometimes decisive in the artistic work. When the spectator has the possibility to be involved more than commonly - he observes, feels, thinks - the experience generated by the possibility tends to be followed by a self-absorption. The narcissistic spectator focuses his attention on his own role, psychically and physically, in the space of the immersive event, which may involve relationships with other actors and/or objects. He may influence this space to a greater or lesser extent, he may alter it or he may improve it. Alston also sees this involvement from the perspective of bio-politics, as a negotiation of power relationship, of the link between the dominant and the subordinate, especially when participation is based on a model to which the public is invited to conform to.⁶ In immersive theatre, there are often specific rules - following a route, wearing a mask, wearing video glasses or other electronic devices - but first of all it involves a tacit "contract", a mutual trust between the spectator and the performer.

There are many, extremely diverse productions that are labeled as immersive, often just because they take place outside traditional spaces and/or include interaction with the audience. A definition that includes fixed and determined codes is difficult to be found and may be incomplete or rigid. However, we will say, that immersive theatre designates those productions that involve commitment and intense, visceral experience of the audience, although

5. Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 34.

6. Alston, 36.

the statement remains a relative one. There are specific elements, common to several productions, that can characterize this phenomenon as a whole. First of all, whether it is about large-scale shows or the most intimate ones, they all put the spectator in the centre. He is given the opportunity to interact with the performer or to the space, to directly influence and to create a theatrical experience that will be unique and personalized. The show awakens his spirit of adventure, stimulates his imagination, curiosity and responsibility, it allows him to discover and study highly detailed theatrical images, objects or secret rooms. He becomes an active element in which the observer and the protagonist merge. Immersive theatre "rejects the passive obedience usually expected of audiences."⁷

In productions that intend the immersion of the audience, the connections with the actuality, with the social or other issues remain usually subliminal, the individual experience being in the centre. Most of the time, it is tried to distance the self from the outside world and explicit reformulations or polemics about it are not usually sought in this regard. This refusal of engaging in social becomes the most important argument for some commentators when they consider that immersive theatre is more entertainment than art. However, we mention the show *Container* (2007), an examination of human traffic made by the company Nimble Fish, which places spectators in a limiting space and involves them on a journey with five clandestine migrants.

The fact that immersive theatre offers individual experiences largely explains the success it has, managing to attract other audiences besides those who attend traditional productions. Adam Alston suggest that these shows fulfill "hedonistic and narcissistic desire: hedonistic because the experiences are often pleasurable, with pleasure often sought as an end in itself, as a site of self-indulgence or even eroticism; narcissistic, because the experience is all about you, the participant."⁸ This happens much more in those productions where a performer acts for or together with a single spectator/participant (*one-to-one performance* or *one-on-one performance*).

7. Felix Barrett apud Stephen Purcell, *Shakespeare and Audience in Practice* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 134.

8. Adam Alston apud George Rodosthenous, ed., *Theatre as Voyeurism: The Pleasures of Watching* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 66.

The Moonslave, one of the first productions of Punchdrunk, aims to create such an experience, where the participant is simultaneously voyeur and protagonist. Blurring the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, the space and the journey included in the story, sequential structure made of scenes with strong visual impact, the sound and the light design, define this immersive world designed complex and rigorously, which is reconstructed by one of the participants as follows:

It began pretending to be a conventional performance. Alone, you enter a village hall with a classic proscenium-arch stage, programmes on every seat, an old telephone on a rickety table centre stage. Phone rings, no one answers; it must be for you. The caller instructs you to go outside and get in the car. The masked and gloved chauffeur, head to toe in white, provides an alarm that you can hit if you want the performance to stop. He places you on the back seat, and silently drives you into the countryside. A sound-score begins via the car stereo system; Igor Stravinsky's Firebird Suite overlaid with narration telling of a castle and a princess who was forbidden to dance. During this prologue the car turns onto a dirt track and pulls up at a ruined mansion, one lit window at the very top. Your chauffeur disembarks, opens the door, puts the headset on you, gets back in the car and speeds off. You are alone. The soundtrack continues; one night, Viola breaks free from the palace, follows the path into the forest. There is a burning torch lighting your path; all you can do is follow this, like a moth drawn to the flame. As Viola, in the story, reaches a gate, so do you, and gradually you realize you are becoming the protagonist. The next full moon, Viola returns, missing her engagement party; as you turn a corner, suddenly you see a banqueting table laid out for 20 people, coffee still steaming, cigarettes still smouldering. On you go, through one environmental installation after another, evocations of the narrative. The night before her wedding, dusk falls and Viola bursts out of the palace, in her haste forgetting her shoes, cutting her feet as she runs to the clearing. She calls to the moon and her music plays more powerfully than ever before. But it is the night of the lunar eclipse. As she dances the eclipse occurs and '*suddenly she was no longer dancing alone*'. You have been alone for 30 minutes, firelight ensuring you cannot see beyond your immediate vicinity; 'at the point of that italicised sentence the music swells', a marine flare shoots into the sky

turning everything for 15 miles bright red and revealing 200 scarecrows, to suggest those that have danced with the devil before. A second flare, you are blinded by floodlights from 50 metres away which reveal a figure moving towards you, through the scarecrows: your chauffeur. He takes you by the hand, leads you through the scarecrows, removes your headset and returns you to the car. Here the epilogue plays; her fiancé finds the blood trail from her feet leading to the clearing, her footprints in the sand alongside another set of footprints, these with a cloven hoof.⁹

Also, there are productions for only one participant, that involve more performers, as those made by the company Il Pixel Rosso. The participant wears video glasses, in which a 3D film is shown, in the mean time the performers around him complete this virtual reality so that all the senses are involved. Another example may be the show made in 2004 by Kate Bond and Morgan Lloyd, *You Me Bum Bum Train*, where a single participant is involved for almost an hour in an adventure in which he has the main role, passing through several episodic scenes, in different situations and spaces, together with more than two hundred volunteer actors.

An immersive experience designed for a single participant which does not involve performers is *Cold Storage* (2011), made by Ray Lee, artist known mainly for kinetic sound installations that react to the movements of the audience. "A calm, white clothed technician assists as you climb into the cryogenic tank. The lid is closed on you. Inside it is cold, noticeably cold, freezing. Your hands and face feel the cold. There is not much room inside. You are lying down on your back. The casket is lit from the inside and you see your reflected image on a mirror above you. You cannot see outside the tank. It is a bit like being in a coffin, or in a medical procedure, or... There is an uncomfortable sense of nothing happening except that you are beginning to feel the cold penetrate the outer layers of clothing that you wear. You wonder how long this will go on or if you will get too cold for comfort. Wearing headphones you listen to a calm, authoritative voice explaining what will happen to you. You will be deep frozen and put to sleep for a thousand years. The voice continues to gently talk to you and you are invited

9. Liz Tomlin, ed., *British Theatre Companies 1995-2014* (London: Methuen, 2015), 270–71.

to consider the finite nature of our life span and as you do so the light dims inside the tank until you become aware that you can see through the glass window above you. As you see through the glass and your mirror image fades you can see that above you are an endless sea of stars. You are now in complete darkness, in the cold of the cryogenic tank, looking out into space, as if set adrift, lost in an ocean of nothingness.”¹⁰

In *Cold Storage* the participant is the performer as well, and also his own spectator; he is the one who through the body and mind triggers the experience and he is also the one who observes it, voluntarily accepting imprisonment in a restrictive space. It is an experience both cognitive and sensory, in which the participant looks at himself and inside himself, he is “the centre of his own singular journey”¹¹.

An essential element of the immersive performance is the space, and the relationship with it is built in numerous hybrid formulas, some of them being often surprising. In contrast to traditional productions, the immersive theatre focuses on the journey, on the movement in space as a form of active involvement, based on the model of the museum and the visitor. In some productions, the immersion of an existing space is emphasized by the incorporation of scenographic elements, objects, complex sound and light design, so that inside it, the own world of the show is built, a world that is distinct from the one of the building, or of the place where it is placed. In some cases, the accent is on the potential of the natural landscape or on the architecture, the dimensions and the design of the construction. This personal world is also generated when the space where the action takes place cannot be differentiated from the space of daily life, being a condition for the viewer to “disconnect” from the surrounding reality. It may include an emphasis on geographic location, community, culture and local history. According to Fiona Wilkie, the relationship between the show and the space includes three typologies, although the distinction is not always easy to make: site-specific, when the production is specifically generated from/for one selected site; site-

10. “Cold Storage [2011],” *Invisible Forces*, 2011, https://www.invisible-forces.com/projects/cold_storage/.

11. Keren Zaiontz, “Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance,” *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 3 (2014): 405–25.

generic, if the production is generated for a series of like sites; site-sympathetic, when a performance-text is physicalized in a selected site which defines, influences and shapes the work that is produced¹².

The company dreamthinkspeak, managed by the director Tristan Sharps, exploits architectural details, acoustics, the mystery and the history of some spaces, in combination with text, sound and film, to create meditative essays about absence, loneliness or missing worlds. The productions are usually based on classic texts transposed into mainly visual scenarios, static images or images animated by actors, which the spectator discovers by following more or less predetermined routes. *Don't Look Back* (2003) is an exploration of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, *Underground* (2005) was a piece inspired by Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and takes place in an abandoned slaughter house, while *One Step Forward, One Step Back* (2008) leads the audience through the hidden rooms of a gothic cathedral, having as a guide fragments and images provided by *The Divine Comedy*. Being inspired by *The Cherry Orchard*, the show *Before I Sleep* (2010) proposes a journey through the labyrinthine interiors of a former shop, where the spectator meets Chekhov's world recomposed by several recurring characters and themes. Firs, Lyubov Andreievna and Gayev are beings incarnated by actors or objects, small-scale figures, abandoned in different situations: on a field covered with snow, in a children's room, in a partially melted candle forest, submerged in an aquarium, in a toy carousel or on a small piece of land surrounded by water. The appearances of the old servant and his attempts to serve the former masters with tea, while they are dancing or they are deepened in reveries, become the leit-motif of the show. At the end of this journey, the audience enter the "reality" of an ultramodern shop, recreated in detail and populated by employees who speak different languages, where fragments from the world of the orchard (objects, costumes, furniture) are exposed for sale. Firs, a ghostly appearance, seems once again lost between the past and the present; in search of a refuge he sits on a bed, but the sellers force him to leave. When exiting this space, the spectators cross a huge warehouse and find the orchard in the form of trunks of cut trees.

12. Fiona Wilkie, "Mapping the Terrain: A Survey of Site-Specific Performance in Britain," *New Theatre Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (2002): 150.

When the nature itself is the venue for the event, geographical data and atmospheric phenomena will be key elements that stimulate the audience, as it is the case of some productions made by Louise Ann Wilson. *Fissure* (2011) is an itinerant show that lasts for three days, where Christian and Greek myths, poetry, music and choreography, in resonance with rocks, caverns and underground rivers, speak about the degradation and erosion produced by time and disease, about life and death as part of natural cycles.

Immersive theatre is always an interdisciplinary one, incorporating very varied elements from other fields: architecture, video art, installation, film, dance, animation, circus, video games. The sound – musical compositions, sound effects, recorded voices or ambiental product - is a vital component in many cases, having the role of an interface, of intermediation between the real and the fictional universe. *The Borough* (2013), a project of the company Punchdrunk, is a sound escape where a single participant travels on a certain route in a small town by the North Sea, listening in the headphones the music of Benjamin Britten, poetry, sound effects and the shocking history of that small community.

The spoken text loses its importance, may even be missing or may appear as audio recordings, on video screens or integrated into the scenography of the show (in *Sleep no More*, by Punchdrunk, fragments from *Macbeth* appear on the walls of the rooms, at a typewriter or in various documents abandoned in space).

The members of Shunt Collective have gained notoriety through the collage formula practiced, but especially through the nonconformist, even anarchic, spirit of the productions in which they are involved. Many diverse ways of expression are used, including cabaret, circus, dance, masks, video art, installation art, live music, alongside fragmented scenarios, parody, absurd, cliché images taken from urban culture. Every project means "the invitation to an audience can be part of the work, part of the dramaturgy, part of the scenography"¹³, but unlike companies that encourage free and often

13. Mischa Twitchin, "On the History of Shunt and Their New Show Money," Andrew Eglinton. Writing about contemporary theatre and performance in Japan and beyond., n.d.; quoted in Dan Rebellato, ed., *Modern British Playwriting: 2000 – 2009. Voices. Documents. New Interpretations* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 55.

individual exploration, Shunt practices a guided group movement: "It's not an individual journey, they might have an individual perspective and of course they will necessarily have an individual interpretation, but all of the audience are on the same journey". If there is too much freedom, says David Rosenberg, one of the founders,

an audience can choose not to encounter 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. It's a very difficult balance because also you don't want the audience to feel manipulated. You don't want to pretend to give them a choice and then actually there isn't one or we're forcing them to feel complicit, we're forcing them to make decisions that they wouldn't necessarily make.¹⁴

The productions made by Shunt challenge the spectator, demands his attention and senses through *coups de théâtre*, long moments of darkness, noise, sudden changes of register, rhythm or place of the action. In *Money*, the audience is placed in a closed space where the ceiling and the floor are transparent, and the action takes place both indoors and above or below. In *Dance Bear Dance*, a show about global conspiracies, spectators, along with actors, are involved in an international pseudo-conference and participate in making of a terrorist attack against an unspecified enemy. In the end, this "terrifying, hallucinatory experience"¹⁵ comes to its climax, when a gigantic metal door opens, revealing a room where another group performs identical actions.

Punchdrunk's productions are first of all about journey, discovery and interaction, because the audience have the freedom to explore, to build their own show, having "a visceral experience for both the mind and the body."¹⁶ Thus, the audience are placed in another relation with the performer and the space, spectators become an active factor, removed from the apathy and

14. David Rosenberg apud Josephine Machon, (*Syn*)*Aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 106.

15. Rebellato, *Modern British Playwriting: 2000 – 2009. Voices. Documents. New Interpretations*, 55.

16. Felix Barrett apud Mark Fortier, *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 124.

inertia that are usually present in the theatre. "The physical freedom to explore the sensory and imaginative world of a Punchdrunk show without compulsion or explicit direction sets it apart from the standard practice of viewing theatre in unconventional locations."¹⁷ For Felix Barrett, the founder of the company, immersive theatre "it's the empowerment of the audience in the sense that they're put at the centre of the action; they're the pivot from which everything else spins. It's the creation of parallel theatrical universes within which audiences forget that they're an audience."¹⁸

One of the first performances made by Barrett, *Woyzeck* by Georg Büchner, already outlines its own aesthetics that will remain a constant basis in later developments. Inspired by the fragmentary structure of the text, Barrett deconstructed the original, compressing it into a montage of scenes, each about twenty minutes, played at the same time and "in the loop" for three hours. He placed *Woyzeck's* world in an old military base, he added small scenographic details to the space (including taxidermy, smells, real human hair) and invited spectators to wear a mask to get in touch with what it was "as much art gallery inspired by the text as it was theatre show"¹⁹. The mask, in particular, was an important revelation for Barrett, a solution through which the spectators could be integrated into the theatrical space. The mask that the audience wear has an essential role, it changes their statute and the relationship with the show or the performer, but it is also a tool for negotiating a certain game of distances. The mask makes the spectator anonymous, hides his facial expression and his response to the show, eliminates inhibitions, stimulates active participation, although there is also the risk that he will remain a silent witness in the shade. "The impact of the mask differs for each audience member – for some, wearing the mask gives them a sense of character, enabling them to come out of their shell and adapt their behaviour accordingly. This is empowering because it means they have the freedom to act differently from who they are in day-to-day life."²⁰ Christine

17. Apud Tomlin, *British Theatre Companies 1995-2014*, 262.

18. Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres. Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 159.

19. Apud Tomlin, *British Theatre Companies 1995-2014*, 259.

20. Machon, *Immersive Theatres. Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, 160.

White has analyzed shows where version of the involvement of the audience appear and considers that when there is no mask "the experience seems to have been less immersive and more self-conscious"²¹. Although the performer and the spectator often occupy the same physical and fictional space, the intimacy and interaction are achieved in a controlled way. The spectator remains "invisible" most of the time, being treated as if he is part of the scenography, and the interactions, whether planned or not, are always initiated by the performer. There may be dancing moments or "one to one" monologues, when the performer "unmasks" and invites a spectator into an intimate room. White has found out that the spectator often refuses to put off the mask, and when this happens, he produces "the strongest reactions [...] tears, confessions, and sometimes anger."²² When using the mask, she says, Punchdrunk "produce disjuncture between the individual spectator and the crowd-like audience, and do so quite deliberately [...] They produce experiences in which we appear to forget ourselves as social subjects."²³

In large scale shows, as *Sleep No More* or *Faust*, each element that contributes to their realization is equally important and the multitude of creative voices in the company can be found in the final result. The process is extremely complex and laborious, participatory, everybody is involved in creation, production, technical and administrative tasks. It is based primarily on the cohesion of the creators, because "it's like designing and directing a 200 scene play"²⁴. Despite being in a full digital age, Punchdrunk shows distinguish themselves by appealing to tools that are largely from the traditional theatre: scenography, sound and light, corporality, physical interaction.

The classical text provides the characters, actions, secondary themes and details, even minor ones, which lead to contiguous developments of the main narrative, respectively to a non-linear, kaleidoscopic scenario, constructed in the form of a narrative loop, with the role of coagulant element for the story of each character, from which the spectator will build his own story. The sequential structure contrasted to the long speeches, allows a fluidity of

21. Alison Oddey and Christine White, *Modes of Spectating* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2009), 225.

22. Oddey and White, 228.

23. Oddey and White, 228.

24. Apud Tomlin, *British Theatre Companies 1995-2014*, 268.

expression during the performance and encourages the individual journey because sometimes it is not necessary for a scene to be fully followed to reach its essence. The sound makes the atmosphere in each room, and also for the whole performance, defining the world and the mood of the show. The sound mediates the connection between scenes, brings weirdness and contrast, sometimes it is barely noticeable or reverberates from other areas, guiding the spectator, stimulating his imagination and curiosity.

The most intense phase involves improvisations in the chosen location, first without audience, then with its participation. "The audience involvement produces a whole new layer of improvisation"²⁵, time intervals change, there may occur interactions, responses and unpredictable dynamics, and performers must develop the ability to respond instinctively to these presences, "becoming really skilled in changing the movement language in response to other bodies and other bodies in space"²⁶. Subsequently, the entire "material" is edited, from the detail to the ensemble, each scene is customized and the performers' routes are fixed.

The venues where the big projects take place are generally former administrative or industrial buildings, without personality, neutral, but which allow the creation of labyrinthine universes, composed of a network of corridors that interconnect many rooms. Each room is designed separately and they impress by plasticity, sometimes by the abundance of details, sometimes by cold and strange minimalism, they are hyper-realistic or abstract, suggest that they are inhabited or, on the contrary, seem abandoned long time ago. The space tells stories and offers emotional possibilities to the audience and the performer, triggers new ideas and solutions on the theme, narrative and form, facilitates clarification of the whole concept. "With each project we go into, I know how much of a player the building is; it becomes a battle to try and match it. That's what marks Punchdrunk out among other companies that do site work; so often the site or building dominates and the show doesn't do anything in it."²⁷

25. Apud Tomlin, 265.

26. Apud Tomlin, 265.

27. Apud Tomlin, 262.

Faust (2006) is placed in a huge warehouse, with five floors and more than forty rooms, inspired by the aesthetics of Edward Hopper's paintings. The fusion of space, scenic movement and sound have transformed the classic myth into an epic, multi-faceted and multi-sensory journey. The spectator can join Faust, from the library on the last floor, with huge shelves full of old books, to the underground cell, cold and wet, where he finds his end, passing through cramped motel rooms, vast fields of corn and pine forests, he can enter the small chapel where Gretchen's child lies in the coffin or stop at the bar where Mephisto gives him the magic potion. *The Masque of Red Death* (2007) offers hallucinatory journeys, too, a gothic nightmare inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, played in the space of a former archive, *Tunnel 228* (2009), an experiment of visual theatre in the catacombs under the Waterloo Station, where the atmosphere from *Metropolis*, the film by Fritz Lang, connects with an art gallery with surrealist objects and a dark vision of the future, *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* (2013), which transforms a former post office building into a 1960s film studio, and the Woyzeck's story becomes a pretext for two "mirror" narratives. In *...And darkness descended* (2011) elements related to the form and aesthetics of computer games are incorporated, the virtual environment being transferred to a concrete one, using the vast network of underground galleries in London. Here is recreated a post-apocalyptic universe with industrial spaces, scientific laboratories, abandoned hospitals, where the spectator participates in the double quality of player and character.

The longest running show, *Sleep No More*, is a free adaptation of *Macbeth*, initially performed in London in 2003, than in Boston (2009) and New York (2011), the last one in a six floor and about one hundred rooms building. The show transposes Macbeth's tragedy in the 1940s, using the aesthetics of the film *noir* and more or less explicit references to Alfred Hitchcock's work (particularly *Rebecca* and *Vertigo*), both visually and through the sound universe. Apparently, the spectator enters the atmosphere of an old hotel, with reception, dance halls, restaurants, offices and rooms, all meticulously reproduced through furniture, decorations and lots of objects, but soon he discovers that behind the doors are hidden disturbing worlds that invites exploration or contemplation. In this enormous space, partly museum, partly haunted by specters, performers and spectators alike, the experience is inevitably fragmentary, difficult to be perceived as a whole. You can follow the main characters, attend the reception

offered in Duncan's honour, see the arrival of the witches, the murder scene, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth trying to wash the spots of blood, or watch the whole show as an installation that can be visited on any route. For those who are not familiar with the narrative of the play, the non-linear scenario is undoubtedly difficult to follow, even confusing, but the lack of lines favors the focus on movement and scenographic detail, on the interaction with "site-sympathetic"²⁸, as Barrett calls it. The rooms best translate the atmosphere of Shakespeare's play; the supernatural, the mystery and the marks of violent crimes are impregnated everywhere: the Duncan's bedroom, the room of Macduff's children that is full of toys, the infirmary, the upholstered cells, the laundry and the numerous baths, the cemetery, the taxidermy workshop, the abandoned cinema where the same scenes run continuously. The show always offers something new to explore, because from one representation to another the composition and the number of these spaces change.

Covered by mask, the spectator is almost forced to step out of passivity, he has to make choices and to set his own route. This intention becomes explicit in *Faust* and *Sleep No More*, where the audience are transported literally and figuratively in the world of the show, by an elevator that randomly drops them to one of the floors. Moreover, the groups are usually separated by successive stops at different floors, thus suggesting that the solitary adventure would be the premise of a much more intense experience. Spaces urge to sensory interaction through all five senses: entering Faust's laboratory, the spectator can observe the equations written on the walls, he can touch the experiments, he can have a look in the drawers, he can read documents; like a detective he can invade the characters' private space, he can get close to Lady Macbeth as she reads letters, or he can study the magic substances, plants, and books used by witches; in *The Masque of Red Death* he has access to the world behind the show, and can even enter the actors' cabins.

There is a permanent discussion on Punchdrunk's shows and, of course, many critical opinions. It is argued that the sequential structure, developed in several spaces and scenes, comes at the expense of drama, character and dramatic cohesion or that the use of the mask blocks the total participation in the event. On the contrary, Deborah Prudhon says that

28. Machon, *Immersive Theatres. Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, 288.

In a Punchdrunk show, the narrative grows organically, taking the shape of an arborescence. The different storylines – one for each character – follow their own directions, overlapping from time to time. The plot thus unfolds both horizontally – the characters' pathways – and vertically – the superimposition and crossing of all these journeys.²⁹

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29. Deborah Prudhon, "Punchdrunk's Immersive Theatre: From the End to the Edge," *Sillages Critiques*, no. 24 (2018): para. 10.

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