Constructing the Sensorium: Neoliberalism and Aesthetic Practice in Immersive Theatre

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Abstract:

Associated with a broad range of theatrical events and experiences, the term immersive has become synonymous with an experiential, spectacle-laden brand of contemporary theatre. From large-scale productions such as Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (2008, 2011) to small-scale and customizable experiences (Third Rail Projects, Shunt, and dreamthinkspeak), marketing campaigns and critical reviews cite immersion as both a descriptive and prescriptive term. Examining technologies and conventions drawn from a range of so-called immersive events, this project asks how these productions refract and replicate the technological and ideological constructs of the digital age. Traversing disciplines such as posthumanism, contemporary art, and gaming studies, immersion represents an extension of a cultural landscape obsessed with simulated realities and self-surveillance. As an aesthetic, immersive events rely on sensual experiences, narrative agency, and media installations to convey the presence and atmosphere of otherworldly spaces. By turns haunting, visceral, and seductive spheres of interaction, these theatres also engage in a neoliberal project: one that pretends to greater freedoms than traditional theater while delimiting freedom and concealing the boundaries of particular events and experiences. Moving between various components of performance in each chapter (text, space, object), the dissertation illuminates the relationships between multimedia installations, intertextuality, and object/participant interactions that make up these environments.

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Introduction: Immersive Theatre

Given the scope of immersive theatrical events in the past decade, it may seem counterintuitive to write a dissertation about immersive theatre. After all, almost every performance is immersive now. The extent to which the term is essentially meaningless is evidenced by its prevalence. One journalist even posed the open question "Is theatre becoming too immersive?"[1] Even dinner-theatre style arrangements have taken on the term, presuming that performances in any configuration other than auditorium-style seating warrant the branding currency that immersion provides.[2] Yet, even with all of the "immersives" that have arrived while I have worked on this project, the problem of defining and interpreting what is meant by immersion still requires an adequate critical response. Josephine Machon, Bill Worthen, Andrew Sofer, Gareth White, and Claire Bishop have all, to some extent, responded to the immersive theatre with their own interpretations of what is happening in these events and what it means to be immersive. However few scholars have made the immersive theatre an exclusive study, and fewer still have concentrated on the sociopolitical ramifications of immersion, its manipulation of participant agency, and its internal structure.

These, therefore, are the aims of this project. I examine and call into question the notion of immersion, especially as conjured up by the performances and theatrical companies that have popularized the term and its use across New

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[1] Jones, Alice, "Is Theatre Becoming Too Immersive?" *The Independent,* 5 March 2013. http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/is-theatre-becoming-too-immersive-8521511.html.

[2] Gushue, Jen, "Can *Natasha, Pierre, and The Great Comet of 1812* Bring the Immersive Theatre to Broadway?" *American Theatre* 14 December 2015. http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/12/14/can-natasha-pierre-and-the-great-comet-of-1812-bring-immersive-theatre-to-broadway/.

York City. These events may best be characterized first and foremost by what

they are not. These are not site-specific productions, or at least, not only, and they

are not environmental a la Richard Schechner's Performance Group. They are

also not "happenings" of the sort popularized in the 1960s. Instead, these

productions, while being indebted to all of these performance tropes, manifestly

attempt to create complete and virtual environments that, at their core, are haptic

sensory experiences invested with the structures and limitations of technological

narrative tools such as videogames, virtual reality, hypertextual narratives, and

even the Internet itself.[3] As Chiel Kattenbelt and Sarah Bay-Cheng suggest in

Mapping Intermediality in Performance:

> Kattenbelt proposes that intermediality in performance is very much about
> *staging* media and, in consequence, changes the interrelations between
> their materiality (or ontology), mediality (or functionality) and modes of
> perception (with respect to medium-specific conventions). These changes
> are characterized in terms of a refunctioning of the media involved and a
> resensibilisation of perception. The "staging" process is contextualized
> within the performative turn in our culture and society, which might in
> part be constructed as a response of the arts to an all-embracing
> theatricalisiation, particularly insofar as the performative turn is
> understood also as a process of increasing mediatisation.[4]

The "performative turn" is one that I characterize as embodying a neo-baroque

cultural landscape, following scholars such as Angela Ndalianis and William

Egginton, who both describe a contemporary culture obsessed with notions of

truth and spectacle, illusion and intimacy. Entering into the immersive space, I

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[3] In using the term "haptic" I refer especially to Chris Salter's conceptualization of it as the sensation of touch. See: *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (2010) and his experimental work with *Haptic Fields*: http://www.centreforsensorystudies.org/related-interest/haptic-fields/.

[4] Bay-Cheng, Sarah and Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender, and Robin Nelson eds. *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 27.

suggest, involves just the sort of "all-embracing theatricalisiation" described above—turning open-world environments into structures specifically preceded by Baroque characteristics. Like Baroque drama, art, and literature, the illusory aspects of space described by the immersive theatre are all a metatheatrical ploy, which calls to attention to its own theatricality while simultaneously suggesting an internal truth, a core of substance. However as the ensuing chapters argue, participants who believe the hype of being able to go anywhere or do anything in an immersive event will find themselves disappointed or even kicked out of productions. The lack of transitional space between theatre/non-theatre in the fully mediatized and hypertextual world means that the limitations that are more obvious in the traditional theatre remain but are rendered invisible.

Which brings me to the posthuman and neoliberal aspects of the immersive theatre. While the ensuing chapters delve into the characteristics of neoliberalism in more detail, suffice it to say that the neobaroque paradigm of immersive events, while inspiring audiences to search for greater intimacy, more narrative clues, and heightened sensory experiences, delimits and manipulates the ability of audiences to actually perform such actions. As in open-world videogames, there are boundaries it is impossible to traverse because the game will not allow you to do so. In creating those boundaries, theatre artists can manipulate the potential narratives available to participants: where they can walk, what they can pick up, what is seen and unseen. Whereas on the one hand the immersive experience suggests a landscape of boundless participation, the event structures itself around the responsibility of the participants to create their own

narratives. What you get from a performance is ultimately up to the individual. In Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, it is possible to walk for long periods of time encountering no one but the space, while in Third Rail Project's *Then She Fell*, one has no choice but to follow a singular performance track. Not knowing the boundaries or mores for a particular event, the participant is ultimately on his or her own—a model that hinges on aspects of neoliberalism. Whereas a more complete discussion of neoliberalism occurs in Chapter 1, I use it here to mean a reliance on the individual to construct their own performance narrative, the limitation of participation and interactions based on unspoken rules, and an emphasis on the limitlessness and intimacy of the performance event itself.

Where surveillance, voyeurism, and anonymization come into play, either through masking, separation, or intimate interaction, the posthuman becomes an inseparable part of the neoliberal paradigm. As previously mentioned, the immersive theatre covers a bewildering array of aesthetic choices, but throughout the case studies described here, there is always a lingering question of subjectivity and identity in space. Brian Massumi, Katherine Hayles, Chris Salter, and many others, have described the posthuman as primarily a decentering of the body in space—the body as a node among nodes. The immersive theatre proves to be fertile ground for this paradigm, detailing interactions between participants and objects, performers, and sites as flexible, ultimately indeterminate displacements of subjectivity, agency, and identity. If neoliberalism displaces the creation of narrative and meaning onto participants, then posthumanism interrogates the agency of sites, objects, and bodies in immersive events through the altered status

they attain in the contexts of the immersive landscape. In *Sleep No More*, the participants all wear masks. As a roving sea of white masks populating the enormous performance site, what is to differentiate them from objects or voyeurs? If they are no more than objects in the space, then what is their ultimate purpose in the performance context? Are they ultimately just consumers? These are all questions that theories of posthuman theorize well, especially in the construct of technologically inspired performances.

It is easy to be a critic of immersive performance, by focusing specifically on the neoliberal sociopolitics that have accompanied the rise of the phenomena in New York City, but I also suggest alternatives that may escape a neoliberal theatrical framework, explored by other companies in different times and places. Woodshed Collective, for example, creates large-scale immersive pieces in and around New York that are free to participants, opting out of the multi-tiered pricing schemes of other companies. Mike Pearson has never called his early work with Welsh Company Brith Gof in the 1990s immersive, yet it presents a principled and socially engaged method of producing work that parallels immersive aesthetics. What Pearson calls site-specific in this instance responds to many of the criterion espoused by writers such as Josephine Machon for discussing what is, and is not, an immersive experience. Most importantly, if immersive theatre is here to stay and audiences come to expect increasingly open, participatory landscapes, it is important to have as many snapshots as possible of what is, in actuality, going on when "immersive" theatre is brought up in scholarly and artistic conversations. Ideally, the neoliberal aspects of immersion

described here that might ultimately be discarded in favor of new, more constructive aesthetic choices that thoughtfully engage with site, text, objects, and participants.

Importantly, Brith Gof is not the only precursor to what is now termed immersive. While this project is limited to a body of work created in Anglophone societies (e.g. New York City, Wales, London) the participatory and aesthetic circumstances of the productions described here also have a long history of utilization in other cultures. Argentinean theatre, for example, is a fertile ground for immersive-style events. In *Maids* (2010-11), Argentine artist Lola Arias created an immersive event that travelled to hotels in multiple cities:

> "Maids" is an installation composed of biographies. Each visitor adopts the role of a chambermaid responsible for five rooms per hour. But instead of cleaning, the audience spends the hour walking through the five rooms, where they discover portraits of the cleaning staff: films, original voice recordings and photographs that bring to light something of the invisible spirits who clean up after others.[5]

Through the use of multimedia, Arias highlights the lives of people typically invisible to travellers in a hotel. In so doing, she uses immersive aesthetics to create social commentary—a different use than the majority of the productions explored in this project. Mariano Pensotti, on the other hand, uses *Interiores* (2007) as a way for audiences to view vignettes in the lives of people in a working class apartment complex:

> Inside a real building in the center of the city. Corridors with doors that give access to six different apartments. The spectators may open the doors and enter the apartments. Inside each apartment there are actors playing different situations. Some are everyday situations, others are more unusual. There are no dialogues. The spectators have audio players with headphones over which they hear things about the situations they see in

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[5] Arias, Lola. http://lolaarias.com/proyectos/mucamas/?lang=en.

the apartments. Stories about the characters, their thoughts, etc. As if they were invisible, the spectators may explore those different spaces, peek inside the lives of the people they see, observe their activities, while receiving information over the headphones. Every spectator may chose [sic] his or her own route through the corridors of the building and decide the order in which they enter the apartments.[6]

The invisibility of the participants resonates with productions such as *Sleep No More*, which features masked participants mostly ignored by the performers who move throughout the environment. However, whereas several of the events in New York City make a claim to site-sensitivity, both of these Argentinian productions have been transferred to various play festivals and cities, focusing instead on the content and narratives of the productions rather than site. Nonetheless, they present important iterations of the aesthetics that have currently been coopted and branded by theatre companies in New York City and beyond.

Written long before these productions, Griselda Gambaro's *Information For Foreigners* (originally published in 1984) serves as a harrowing critique of Argentina's Dirty War. Diana Taylor describes the piece:

> Set explicitly in Argentina in 1971, Gambaro's *Information* not only thematizes but re-creates the climate of terror. The action takes place in a house. The audience is split up into groups upon arrival, each led through the house by a Guide introducing the different scenes with short excerpts about abductions and murders taken from actual contemporary newspapers, "information" for foreigners. This information is verifiable, accessible both to the audience in the house and to the reading public in and outside Argentina. There are thus two audiences, the groups walking through the house and the reading audience outside Argentina, the "foreigners" of the title, that is, *us*. The audience follows the Guide down long, dark passageways cluttered with corpses and prisoners, up and down steep, dangerous staircases, in and out of small rooms in which isolated acts of torture or theatrical rehearsals are forever being played out.[7]

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[6] Pensotti, Mariano. http://marianopensotti.com/interioreseng.html.
[7] Taylor, Diana. "Theater and Terrorism: Griselda Gambaro's *Information For Foreigners*" *Theatre Journal* (Vol. 42, No. 2, May 1990), 165-182, 169-70.

Information has a direct connection to what this project describes as immersion: i.e. it involves a large installed space with a promenade audience and non-linear narrative arc. However, as with the two more recent pieces described above, the production directly confronts a social and political reality using this aesthetic. Alternatively, *Sleep No More, Then She Fell*, and other pieces in New York City choose a more fanciful domain—one less problematized by sociopolitics and more akin to virtual gaming. The sensitivity of these Argentine productions to social activity, their installations of site, and their creation of participatory audience relationships, all introduce a problem with relation to rebranding similar work in New York, London, and etc. While the appropriation of immersive structures from other cultures represents a real and present difficulty with the term "immersive" and its implementation in contemporary theatre, this is not the critique presented by this project. Nonetheless, it is important to be wary of immersive theatre's claim to novelty and avant-garde structure, a claim that has, partly, inspired this work's neoliberal critique of productions in NYC.

As a final note, there is no chapter in this project on bodies. This is a purposeful omission. On the one hand, it highlights the posthuman aspects of immersive sites—the focus of the case studies described here each use site, text, and object as the primary foundations of the immersive event. On the other hand, it is virtually impossible to talk about the bodies in immersive sites beyond the haptic responses of a single body: my own. To do so would mean making vast generalizations about the effect of sensual stimuli on other individuals whose journeys through the productions would certainly have been quite different than

my own. This is one of the challenges of discussing immersive theatre. Rather than providing one chapter on the body, I use the subjective experience of my participating body as an entrance point to each chapter. As a participant in these spaces, it is also important to note that I am a white, cis, straight, male, and that this subjectivity colors my perspective of the events as they unfolded around me.

Methodology

The discourse on immersive theatre has been forming for some time now, but it is not plentiful enough yet to be a reliable source of criticism. Even so, most articles have focused predominantly on *Sleep No More* alone as an example of immersion's potential. My research therefore took a three-pronged approach:

1) Given the experiential qualities of immersive productions, I decided that it would be virtually impossible, not to mention disingenuous, to write primarily about productions that I had not seen for myself. I therefore attended a number of productions, some of which are not mentioned here due either to space constraints or because they were not, in my experience, immersive. I saw the productions I discuss in no particular order: *Sleep No More* (2009, 2010); *The Donkey Show* (2009); *Speakeasy Dollhouse* (2013); *Then She Fell* (2012, 2013); *Play/Date* (2014); *Queen of the Night* (2013); *Natasha, Pierre, and The Great Comet of 1812* (2014); and *Here Lies Love* (2014), along with other events that touted themselves as immersive or participatory. Whenever possible, I took field notes of

my experiences so as to make as a reliable a representation of my responses and the structure of the performances as possible.

2) I used a number of critical and conceptual texts to describe what I was experiencing. These ranged from scholarly articles Gareth White's "Odd Anonymized Needs: Punchdrunk's Masked Spectator" and Bill Worthen's"'The Written Troubles of the Brain'": *Sleep No More* and the Space of Character" to theoretical works by Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Chris Salter, William Egginton, Susan Bennett, Josephine Machon, Brian Massumi, Alison Landsberg, Sarah Bay-Cheng, and Daniel Miller. Heavily featured were texts on posthumanism, Baroque and neobaroque aesthetics, semiotics, phenomenology, anthropology, contemporary art, and immersive theatre. I attempt to synthesize these discourses in the body of the work partly because immersive theatre's theatricalisiation of time and space casts a broad net that includes, not just the event itself, but a range of material experiences available before, during, and after each event.

3) Finally, my research relies heavily on journalists, critics, bloggers, and super-fans to create a better picture of what, precisely, is happening in any one immersive experience. As described above, immersive theatre is intimately connected to technology in both structure and form—and has acquired a significant presence in cyberspace in the past decade. These informal sources provide, not just a fragmented series of audience impressions about a

performance, but also a bigger picture that documents trends, aesthetic choices, economic footprints, and movements toward a new avant-garde of immersive performance. Without the availability of these sources, the dissertation would have been written in a vacuum of my own experiences.

<center>Chapter Structure</center>

Chapter 1, entitled "Punchdrunk, *Sleep No More*, and The Immersive Aesthetic: Experience, Site, and the Neoliberal" functions as an introduction of sorts to the immersive theatrescape. Using Punchdrunk's now long-running (2010-2016) production *Sleep No More*, I examine the use of site, text, object, and participation in the construct of a large-scale immersive event. Outlining the underlying ideologies of neoliberalism and the neobaroque, the chapter negotiates key concepts for discussion in ensuing chapters and outlines an ongoing critique concerning contemporary immersive events. Following the aforementioned "performative turn," I suggest that the construct of immersive theatre involves a move towards participatory, sensually engaged sites, the application of technological paradigms (e.g. virtual reality, roleplaying, videogames) to theatrical production, and the interpolation of neoliberal values into the act of performance. Together, these impulses suggest a critique of immersion as a conceptual aesthetic. First, I argue that productions such as *Sleep No More* present a disingenuous account of themselves as free and participatory where neither are the case. Further, the turn towards virtuality, experience, and gamification, deemphasizes the potential for theatre to respond to a community, site, or

individual in the real world. While later productions discussed in this project suggest the possibility of marrying immersive theatre to community and site-responsive endeavors, Punchdrunk Theatre Company, and other companies in the New York theatre scene, model immersive theatres as experiential escape zones—conglomerations of sensual stimuli for participants to parse as well as they can. Analyzing this trend as it occurs will, hopefully, provide a basis for reimagining the use and scope of immersive experiences going forward.

Chapter 2, entitled "Textual Implosion: Topography, Ontology, and the Sensorium" examines immersive theatre's use of, and relationship to, texts, both canonical and otherwise. Foundationally, most immersive events base themselves off of a text, which is then freely adapted into visual space. Questions of text—how an immersive experience authors a text, manipulates narratives, subverts or reifies the authority of the canon—plague such productions. As a corollary to the experiential nature of immersive events, texts and textuality represent both an engagement with the future (in its dissemination throughout spaces) and a hearkening to the past (in its authorial, written, form). As such, it continually negotiates the line between neoliberal ideologies, where authorship is an act of individual responsibility, and the cultural ur-text, or what has accreted around a text in the minds of participants to influence their imagining of that text. For instance, Lewis Carroll's 1865 novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (commonly referred to as *Alice in Wonderland*) maintains a space in popular culture through films, plays, and other imaginings, all of which are borne into the space of Third Rail Project's still-running *Then She Fell* (2012). Yet, the

conglomerated imaginings of participants are then faced with the reinterpretation of their cultural memory evoked in visual, aesthetic, and experiential terms. They are there forced to integrate that narrative into another form—producing the push/pull of neoliberalism vs. the agency of free association. With this struggle in mind, this chapter compares and contrasts the functionality of text in immersive environments against what I term traditional theatrical circumstances. Further, I continue an exploration of how the gamification of space, the neobaroque paradigm, and the posthuman influence the embodiment of text in immersion and its systems of relationships, i.e. between participant and production, participant and performer, and participant and space.

Chapter 3, entitled "Site and Seduction: Space, Sensuality, and Use-Value," examines the integration of site into immersive production, as well as the creation and recreation of narratives surrounding culturally and community-relevant sites. Immersive aesthetics, with their emphasis on the sensate experiences of the body, transform the relationship of site to ideologies and sociocultural histories. Since immersion, broadly, removes participants to an alternate, all-encompassing reality, it divorces audiences from public, political, engagements that remain embedded in traditional theatrical forms. Whereas in the darkened auditorium audiences remain acutely aware of the performance as an event, immersive formats attempt to sever, or at least blur, the relationship between reality and performance, virtual time and real time. As such, aspects of immersion transform space into sensory, multidimensional worlds, exhibiting a tendency to ignore the specificity of social contexts involved in the choosing,

inhabiting, or reviving of particular spaces. Using *Queen of the Night*, *Sleep No More*, and *Then She Fell* as examples of site-use in New York City, the chapter turns finally to Mike Pearson's *Goddodin* (1988) for an example that engages a historical and community-aware narrative of space—as opposed to its fabrication or economic viability.

Chapter 4, entitled "Things, Agency, and Neoliberalism in the Immersive Theatre" describes the place of objects/things in the immersive landscape, exposing how the placement and experiential nature of objects in sites open up, and delimit, the boundaries of imagination and interpretation. Texts, canonical and otherwise, provide justification, expectation, and name recognition, creating powerful forms of aesthetic and economic branding for a crowded cultural landscape. Sites provide the physical mold of the production and sometimes a marketable history—one that takes part in the overall conceit of the design. The responsiveness of immersive events to site varies widely, either taking on the mantle of a geographic place or entirely reimagining its use and use-value. However, while texts and spaces dissimulate by glossing the production with expectations, narrative exposition, or anticipation, *things* by-and-large make up the corporeal experience of immersive performance.[8] Bodies in these spaces often become things as well—an interchangeable part of the production's environs, no less present and embodied than the objects themselves.

Manipulating desires and narrative impulses throughout *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell*, objects weave labyrinthine interrelationships that transform

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[8] The chapter will theorize objects as things with relation to work by Bill Brown and Daniel Miller.

space, time, and sensate experiences into a cogent, pre-determined, sensual fabric. Synthesizing discourses of the early modern theatre, anthropology, archaeology, and performance, I observe how these theatrical objects become complex presences that both parallel and expand current theatrical and virtual technologies. Participants, far from being lost in these worlds, become established parts of them. As such, the role of individuals in immersion continues a neoliberal project: one endeavoring to entice audiences variously into the role of voyeur, actor, object, and narrator. In immersive theatre, actor-participants are precariously poised between the human and inhuman, the material and the visceral. Finally, I endeavor to present a prospective model for breaking free from the neoliberalist framework presented throughout the productions hitherto described. Like Brith Gof's *Goddodin* in Chapter 3, Woodshed Collective's *Empire Travel Agency* (2015), their newest production, devises an alternative that attends both to aesthetics and socioeconomics in its re-conception of immersion.

Chapter 1

Punchdrunk, *Sleep No More*, and The Immersive Aesthetic: Experience, Site, and the Neoliberal

First, if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g. by a place which one can move) and interdictions (e.g. by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of those possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform, or abandon spatial elements. Thus Charlie Chaplin multiplies the possibilities of his cane: he does other things with the same thing and he goes beyond the limits that the determination of the object set on its utilization. In the same way, the walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else.[9]

I am standing in a schoolyard in Brookline, Massachusetts, waiting expectantly to enter a mysterious production that I know little about. I have heard rumors of course, rumblings of *Macbeth* and Alfred Hitchcock from the press—but these were only vague suggestions, bits and pieces released to titillate and beckon adventurous audiences. I was invited by a friend to attend this preview performance of *Sleep No More*, a production masterminded by England's Punchdrunk Theatre Company, and brought across the Atlantic by the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge. Punchdrunk has now become a household name in American theatrical circles, with its third iteration of *Sleep No More* in Chelsea, NYC (2011), forays into popular culture (*Gossip Girl*, special interviews, bespoke advertising creations for Sony and Stella Artois, and another London production known as *The Drowned Man* in 2013), but this was their first time in America—a test run on American audiences whose most participatory experiences in performance might involve the ubiquitous arrangement of dinner-theatre, *Blue*

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[9] De Certeau, Michal. *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 98.

Man Group, or *Fuerza Bruta*. Without maligning these long-running productions, their sheer popularity has done away with their mystery, and their entry-level of audience inclusion has become *de rigueur* for a night out in New York City—no more threatening than having "Happy Birthday" sung to your table at a restaurant.

This was not the case on that night in Brookline. As patrons continued to gather behind my friend and me, speculation shot through the crowd: "how did you hear about it?" "I heard it was like a haunted house, really scary…" "I know a guy who worked on the show" "So, this is something to do with Shakespeare?" Finally, the line lurched forward, and a man clothed in theatre-blacks checked our tickets and beckoned us inside. Inside, it was pitch-black. As my eyes adjusted, tiny shaded lamps barely lit the way through circuitous walls of stage curtain. Half blind, we soldiered on. Three or four turns later I am totally disoriented ("will the entire production be like this?") until finally a warm glow appears in front of us. We are jettisoned into a bar, circa 1930, handed a playing card, and asked to relax and have a drink by a fetching young woman in a glittering dress. Gratefully, we do so, and are free to look around. Red velvet curtains, lounge tables, and a long wooden bar make up the space. There is live music, a singer accompanied by a bass, drums, a trumpet—she is signing old standards to what is, at the moment, a mostly empty room—I am reminded of a scene from David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*.

Inevitably, the bar fills up, patrons stumbling comically out from the darkness and into the warmth of the bar. Finally, the music stops, and we are told to look at our playing cards. I have the deuce of spades. As each card is called,

those with that card are told to gather at a point in the bar. My friend and I have the same card, but we are not all so lucky. Couples are split up, and groups of friends. Our card-group is about ten-twelve strong, and we are guided towards an elevator. This is where the mask makes its first appearance. It is an odd mask: white and beaked, it evokes the dottore of commedia. We are given rules now. Our bellhop (for he is so clothed) tells us that we may not take the mask off except in the bar from which we came, we may not speak, we will likely be separated, and we should feel free to explore everything. We enter the elevator. An unmarked button is pushed and we move upwards. A pause and the doors open. We move to disembark and our guide lets a person out—only to push a button for another floor. Our friend is left in the dark to an uncertain fate. Another floor, and four more of us are let out. I am in this group. I remember a musty smell. My eyes adjusted, and I find myself in a hallway. I see my companion only once after disembarking from the elevator. Both curious, we separate to discover this new, foreign piece of theatre.

I find a lobby; appointed fully with desk, mail slots, a guest book (written in!), a telephone booth, books and tea sets. It looks as if it should be bustling with people, and yet there are none. I am the only person here. I pick up items and touch them, ponder them, and return them carefully, as if I had walked into an archaeological dig. Pushing forward, I find evidence of Shakespeare's titular character in a witch's apothecary, with its distinctly herbal aroma, a doctor's office with files on various patients from the Macbeth household, and a giant auditorium filled with real pine trees (the forest of Dunsinane). In each space I

can touch and manipulate the environment, go where I please (almost), and follow

performers at will. The performances are themselves highly physical. Actors,

dressed to fit the 1930s décor, follow tracks through the space, illuminating parts

of the narrative through dances, by themselves and with others. These are often

violent, the struggles of characters embodied through the tonality of movement.

There is little or no speaking, of Shakespeare's text or at all. Instead, *Sleep No*

More envelops audiences in a sensory fabric of violence, shame, guilt, voyeurism,

retribution, and psychological horror. Where the production succeeds is in its

power of suggestion and provocative call to personal narrative. At first blush, I

found it nothing short of magical—a world away from Shakespeare, but still

redolent of his authorship, imagery, and intensity.

In the ensuing months, I would attend *Sleep No More* several more times.

After Brookline, the production moved to a much larger space in Chelsea, New

York City, in 2011. Watching the transformation of the production from preview

to widespread popularity has presented a unique perspective on the evolution of

immersion as a concept, an experience, and a cultural moment. That moment, I

assert, involves a turn towards participatory, sensually engaged sites, the

application of technological paradigms (e.g. virtual reality, roleplaying,

videogames) to theatrical production, and the interpolation of neoliberal values

into the act of performance. Together, these impulses suggest a critique of

immersion as a conceptual aesthetic. First, I argue that productions such as *Sleep*

No More present a disingenuous account of themselves as free and participatory

where neither are the case. Further, the turn towards virtuality, experience, and

gamification, deemphasizes the potential for theatre to respond to a community, site, or individual in the real world. While later productions discussed in this project suggest the possibility of marrying immersive theatre to community and site-responsive endeavors, Punchdrunk Theatre Company, and other companies in the New York theatre scene, model immersive theatres as experiential escape zones—conglomerations of sensual stimuli for participants to parse as well as they can.

Neoliberalism, where it concerns this dissertation, references an ideological framework of free-market capitalism—one with a special emphasis on individual responsibility, fiscal austerity, and the dismantling of the welfare state.[10] This may be misleading terminology for present-day American meanings of the term "liberal" in popular culture. In fact, *neoliberalism* engages with socially and politically conservative practices. Activists Elizabeth Martinez and Arnoldo Garcia offer a highly critical five-point definition of neoliberal characteristics:

> 1. THE RULE OF THE MARKET. Liberating "free" enterprise or private enterprise from any bonds imposed by the government (the state) no matter how much social damage this causes. Greater openness to international trade and investment, as in NAFTA. Reduce wages by de-unionizing workers and eliminating workers' rights that had been won over many years of struggle. No more price controls. All in all, total freedom of movement for capital, goods and services. To convince us this is good for us, they say "an unregulated market is the best way to increase economic growth, which will ultimately benefit everyone." It's like Reagan's "supply-side" and "trickle-down" economics -- but somehow the wealth didn't trickle down very much.
>
> 2. CUTTING PUBLIC EXPENDITURE FOR SOCIAL SERVICES like education and health care. REDUCING THE SAFETY-NET FOR THE

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[10] A similar definition can be found in the OED under "neoliberalism" *adj.* Pursuant to discussion about Thatcherism a la Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* in a later chapter.

POOR, and even maintenance of roads, bridges, water supply -- again in the name of reducing government's role. Of course, they don't oppose government subsidies and tax benefits for business.

3. DEREGULATION. Reduce government regulation of everything that could diminish profits, including protecting the environment and safety on the job.

4. PRIVATIZATION. Sell state-owned enterprises, goods and services to private investors. This includes banks, key industries, railroads, toll highways, electricity, schools, hospitals and even fresh water. Although usually done in the name of greater efficiency, which is often needed, privatization has mainly had the effect of concentrating wealth even more in a few hands and making the public pay even more for its needs.

5. ELIMINATING THE CONCEPT OF "THE PUBLIC GOOD" or "COMMUNITY" and replacing it with "individual responsibility." Pressuring the poorest people in a society to find solutions to their lack of health care, education and social security all by themselves -- then blaming them, if they fail, as lazy."[11]

Granted, these characteristics also represent critiques of neoliberal thought. In so listing them, I wish to foreground that, like Martinez and Garcia, I argue that neoliberalism is a sociopolitical ill. Jen Harvie, in her work *Fair Play*: *Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (2013), asserts a similar claim when she asserts:

Neoliberalism is the revived form of liberalism which thrived first in Britain in the seventeenth century and which recognizes and prioritizes the individual's right to seek self-fulfillment and to do so in conditions unrestricted by state-instituted regulations, such as the requirements to pay appropriate taxes, to heed trade restrictions or to observe employment laws pertaining to hiring, firing, and paying workers. In neoliberal capitalism, these principles of diminished state intervention and enhanced individual liberty to seek self-reward work in the service of maximizing private profit. Simultaneously, the welfare state is diminished as taxation shrinks and government 'intervention' – which in some contexts might instead be seen as support, for example of workers' rights – is rolled back.[12]

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[11] Martinez, Elizabeth and Arnoldo Garcia. "What is Neoliberalism?".
http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=376. All capitalizations original.
[12] Harvie, Jen. *Fair Play: Art, Performance, and Neoliberalism* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2013), 12.

Similar tactics can be seen in the disruption of basic social services in the United

States, from the disruption and defunding of welfare and Medicaid to the mass

privatization of the prison system. This political context, in which individuals

have the ultimate responsibility to conduct themselves toward their own

prosperity, has infiltrated society at all levels, and not least of these is the theatre.

This becomes apparent, I suggest, not only through the general effects of

neoliberalism on broader society, but also through its effect on modes of theatrical

performance, i.e. immersion. Neoliberalism, as an underlying ideology, both

frames and disrupts the alleged intentions of immersive theatricality to create

radically participatory experiences for audiences. In doing so, it coopts the

language of virtual reality, art installation, and open-world videogames to describe

systems of inclusion, participation, and sensuality, all while simultaneously

denying these to participants.[13] Neoliberalism integrates itself into immersive

performance through both commercial and aesthetic processes, insinuating itself

into sites, aspects of participation, embodied performance, ticket prices, and class

disparities latent throughout many of the works. Deconstructing the claims and

experiences provided in these environments requires a foreknowledge of

immersive production, in this case exemplified by *Sleep No More*. As a result of

its popularity, size, and long-livedness (it continues playing in New York City as I

write this), Punchdrunk's work highlights the aesthetic and ideological formats

possible in immersion, and its transformation from one site to another better

illustrates the morphological and ontological processes that reoccur in other

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[13] *The Guardian's* Game's Blog has an interesting take on immersive gaming here:
http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2010/aug/10/games-science-of-immersion.

performances discussed throughout this project.

In addition to the sociopolitical apparatus of neoliberalism, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's writings inform this critical discussion through the conceptual frame known as the *rhizome*. The rhizome creates an organic and dynamic structure for parsing the relationship between site, space, text, and ideology in the immersive theatre. In *Sleep No More*, this paradigm of recursive networks models the emergent meanings created in and through immersive spaces, and further, what it is to be phenomenologically involved in the event. Rhizomes, as a biological metaphor, are structures without a clear beginning or end. In an explication of Deleuze's theoretical term, Adrian Parr writes:

> The rhizome conceives how everything and everybody - all aspects of concrete, abstract and virtual entities or activities - can be seen as multiple in their interrelational movements with other things and bodies. The nature of the rhizome is that of a moving matrix, composed of organic and non-organic parts forming symbiotic and aparallel connections, according to transitory and as yet undetermined roots.[14]

Rather than a hierarchical model – or something with a beginning, middle, or end, the rhizome is a system of relationships. In effect, the rhizome aids in describing the complex interaction between site, text, object, participant, and performer in an immersive piece, accounting for the many and varied interrelationships produced by these circumstances. In the instance that I am alone with an object in *Sleep No More*, for example, the rhizome integrates both my possible agency and the object's function, what I am able to physically *do* with a file, a medical instrument, or a photograph, and what actions it desires me to perform. The rhizome also functions to excavate ideology. As mentioned above, neoliberalism

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[14] Parr, Adrian. *The Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 231.

positions responsibility in the hands of the individual. Where *Sleep No More* and other immersive performances profess a commitment to participation, freedom, and visceral engagement, the articulation of the rhizome realizes the real-world limits of that rhetoric—observing the rigidity of meaning systems and internal structures designated precisely to contain agency, to limit sensuality, and ultimately to frame the potentials of narrative in a given space and time.

Whereas both neoliberalism and rhizomatic thinking focus predominantly on the mechanical functions of immersive performance—the nuts and bolts of experiencing and building an immersive space in the contemporary theatre— aspects of these productions also borrow heavily from historical paradigms. Especially with regard to performance and sociopolitics, illusion and the spectacular, the immersive theatre reimagines the postmodern as neo-Baroque: a metatheatrical reflection on the theatre as world and world as theatre. In terms of integrating the spectator with theatrical space and framing social power, immersion externalizes the verbal architecture of the theatre, creating in concrete space what spectators in the early modern theatre merely imagined or were led to believe. Larry Norman writes on the characteristics of the historical Baroque, asserting:

> The ancient formula *theatrum mundi*, the world is a stage, became the motto for the age. Acting and sets, scripts and plot construction were metaphors applicable to every domain of human action: the science of politics, the metaphysics of the universe, the morality of private life--and even the art of painting and sculpting.
>
> Baroque art endows the objects it represents with a sense of often-extraordinary weight and mass. It conveys a palpable illusion of physical presence. Viewers often notice, for example, the fleshiness of Peter Paul Rubens's nudes or the massiveness of Bernini's famous colonnade at St.

Peter's basilica in Rome.

> Contrast is the primary tool through which baroque art prompts a sensation of the infinite in the mind of the beholder. The infinite cannot of course be shown. It must be suggested or implied. What baroque art conveys is an impression, an illusion of infinite space, of movement into boundless depths, by suggesting the existence of what finally remains unseen. Contrast of light and dark, or chiaroscuro, gives space particular qualities. It accentuates the illusion of depth, giving the objects depicted a greater sense of mass and weight while simultaneously heightening their three-dimensionality, making them appear to jump out of the picture frame, or in the case of sculpture or decoration, out of the immediate space that "contains" them. It gives the image dramatic possibilities that steady, even illumination precludes. Like the lighting in films, chiaroscuro in painting works directly upon the spectators' emotions.[15]

Baroque theatre suggests that beyond each figure, backdrop, and narrative, there is a boundless depth—a world within a world. Immersive theatre maintains the fleshy, substantive, and dramatic model of the Baroque, through theatrical sites that feel similarly boundless and overwhelming. In essence, the neo-Baroque is the Baroque followed to a logical conclusion, the making-present of what would otherwise be expressed through illusion. The promise of infinite space, the boundlessness of the imagination, the spectacular doubling of theatre/world and world/theatre, the promise of motion and intimacy, all conjoin to elicit visceral, experiential responses. *Sleep No More* uses each of these devices to its advantage, producing multiple layers of intimacy, metatheatre, and spectacle. Entering a bedroom and pawing through bedclothes, recreating the forest of Dunsinane with real pine trees on casters, and wandering through half-darkness punctuated with flashes of blinding light, all point to a nouveau reimagining of

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[15] Norman, Larry F. "The Theatrical Baroque: European Plays, Painting and Poetry, 1575-1725". http://fathom.lib.uchicago.edu/2/10701023/.

Baroque principles, an evocation of paradigms represented in the European theatres of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Pierre Corneille's *The Illusion* (1636) exemplifies the Baroque use of theatre to confound the truth with fiction. In it, a father searches for his long lost son with the help of a wizard. The wizard presents episodes of his son's supposed life to the father (and the audience). We witness his life, his love, and supposedly, his death. All the time, there is no reason to believe that the wizard has been other than truthful, and the father believes his son to have been killed by a rival lover. But then, the wizard discloses that these have all been scenes from a play, and that his son, far from dead, is a successful actor in Paris! The play blurs the line between truth and fiction, between belief and theatrical craft—a metatheatrical tour de force that destabilizes notions of "capital T" Truth in favor of a multivalent interpretation of theatre, life, and space/time. William Egginton asserts this model as key to the Baroque's seductive power: "This strategy, which I call the major strategy of the baroque, assumes the existence of a veil of appearances and then suggests the possibility of a space opening just beyond those appearances where truth resides."[16] Following a parallel strategy with early modern text, *Sleep No More* creates a metatheatrical environment that conflates the real and the imagined—one that resurrects the conventions of early modern performance in a posthuman context.

That posthuman context, broadly, contains and expands on the discourses described and defined above, namely neoliberalism, the rhizome, and the

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[16] Egginton, William. "The Baroque as a Problem of Thought," *PMLA*, (Volume 124, Number 1, January 2009), 144.

Baroque. Loaded with theoretical descriptions, posthumanism has become a totalizing and interdisciplinary term that spans a massive field of discourses: artificial intelligence, sociology, human/animal relations, disability studies, etc. However, at its most essential, posthumanism references a theoretical perspective that questions and deconstructs humanist thought. Instead of viewing the human and the human body as the center of intellectual and biological discussions, post-humanism sees the corporeal body as a node in a network, not unlike the rhizomatic structure posited by Deleuze. Similarly, posthumanism views discourse as a root structure rather than a tree. Deleuze and Guattari reflect that the tree-model represents "the most classical and well reflected, oldest, and weariest kind of thought. Nature doesn't work that way." Instead, the rhizome gives us, "taproots with a more multiple, lateral, and circular system of ramifications, rather than a dichotomous one. Thought lags behind nature."[17] The posthuman sees all ideological and material concerns as interconnected and interdependent, the separation of thoughts into discrete arenas as artificial and even destructive. In posthumanism, thought cannot be teleological.

The consequences of decentering the body and establishing it within discourse creates a secondary issue in that the body, like all other elements within Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, remains in constant flux. This flux, or what these philosophers call becoming, maintains time and being as a state of constant impermanence, and identity as permanently deferred and immanent. The posthuman, in this case, parallels discourses extended and augmented by authors

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[17] Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. Brian Massumi 3rd ed. (London: Athlone, 1996), 5.

such as Katherine Hayles, Brian Massumi, and Jeffrey Cohen. As Slavoj Zizek

puts it, posthumanism emphasizes selfhood as an interweaving of the biological,

theoretical, and physical:

> What we get here is not the relationship of a *metaphor* (the old boring
> topic of machines replacing humans) but that of *metamorphosis*, of the
> "'becoming-machine'" of man. It is here that the "'reductionist'" project
> goes wrong: the problem is not how to reduce mind to neuronal material
> processes but, rather to grasp how the mind can emerge only by being
> embedded in the network of social relations and material supplements.[18]

Instead of the singular, posthumanism denotes a pluralism of relationships

between ideologies, objects, subjects, and texts. Reimagining the body as a node

or avatar, entering an environment framed as theatre and populated with both

social relations and material supplements, Deleuze's rhizomatic structure exposes

how immersive performance maps identity onto participants. In manipulating the

site, text, and materiality of the theatre-as-event, the posthuman describes the

submerged consciousness of participants contained therein. *Sleep No More*, for

example, demotes the body and bodily interactions in exchange for relationships

with objects and site, anonymizing audiences behind masks, and embedding them

in a space without knowing precisely who, or what, they are in relation to it.

In reference to the early modern theatre, the immersive model

Punchdrunk provides exhibits aspects of the both the posthuman and the Baroque.

Just as *Macbeth* materializes a mythology surrounding the real court of James I,

Sleep No More's reinterpretation of that world in concert with Alfred Hitchcock's

Rebecca envisions a living version of a roleplaying game—a game complete with

avatars, levels, and secret treasures. In essence, the performance environment

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[18] Zizek, Slavoj. *Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 16.

exhibits the symptoms of two different historical moments whose foundational

ideologies have come under attack: in one instance shifting from the ideological

and cultural hierarchies of medievalism towards humanism (*Macbeth*), and in the

other the dissolution of that humanism in exchange for subjects as sites of

potential and flux (posthumanism, neo-Baroque). As Jeffrey Cohen writes in

Medieval Identity Machines (2003):

> When considered a finite object, the body tends to be analyzed only to
> discover a pregiven essence, a stability of being: how do its pieces fit
> together into a coherent whole? What are its secrets, its genetic destiny, its
> unchanging ontology? When bodies become sites of possibility, however,
> they are necessarily dispersed into something larger, something mutable
> and dynamic, a structure of alliance and becoming.[19]

Cohen goes on to discuss the medieval and early modern body, its attachment to

the material and modeling of the world. The dispersal of the body into something

else, something larger, may remind us of virtual worlds, social media, or even the

Internet as a whole. In this case, immersive theatre call upon individuals to forgo

their preferred modes of being in exchange for an act of becoming or a liminal

state dictated by a foreign environment. In *Movement, Affect, Sensation: Parables*

of the Virtual (2002), Brian Massumi extends these possibilities:

> The charge of indeterminacy carried by a body is inseparable from it. It
> strictly coincides with it, to the extent that the body is in passage or in
> process (to the extent that it is dynamic and alive). But the charge is not
> itself corporeal. Far from regaining a concreteness, to think the body in
> movement thus means accepting the paradox that there is an incorporeal
> dimension *of the body*. Of it, but not it. Real, material, but incorporeal.
> Inseparable, coincident, but disjunct . . . The body's potential to vary
> belongs to the same reality as the body as variety (positioned thing) but
> partakes of it in a different mode. Integrating movement slips us directly
> into what Michel Foucault called *incorporeal materialism*. This
> movement-slip gives new urgency to questions of ontology, of ontological

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[19] Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xiii.

difference, inextricably linked to concepts of potential and process and, by extension, event-in a way that bumps "being" straight into becoming. Paraphrasing Deleuze again, the problem with the dominant models in cultural and literary theory is not that they are too abstract to grasp the concreteness of the real. The real problem is that they are not *abstract enough* to grasp the real incorporeality of the concrete. [20]

This material incorporeality brings issues of spectatorship, interaction, and illusion within the immersive theatrical space into the foreground, establishing the subjects constructed there as in process or becoming. Cohen and Massumi, in conceiving of the body proper as multidisciplinary, nodal, and expansive, suggests a way in which the body immersed in an experience can be both limited and limitless, tied to both physicality and abstraction. This is not to say that the body cannot be contained by immersion, rebuilt as through a series of phenomenological experiences, but only that it can be, and is, manipulated aesthetically and ideologically by processes outside of its control.

…

Since their first production of *The Cherry Orchard* in 2000, Punchdrunk Theatre Company has created a series of performance events based on site-specificity, art installation, and audience participation. In their own words:

> Since 2000, we have pioneered a game-changing form of immersive theatre in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds. Blending classic texts, physical performance, award winning design installation, and unexpected sites, our infectious format rejects the passive obedience usually expected of audiences.[21]

This simple definition of Punchdrunk's theatre belies the sophisticated structure of their performances and the exploratory spirit the company fosters in audiences.

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[20] Massumi, Brian. *Movement, Affect Sensation: Parables of the Virtual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 5.
[21] Punchdrunk Theatre Company. Punchdrunk.org.uk (25 September 2012).

In creating each of their productions Punchdrunk presents a unique and rigorously designed theatrical world: each complete with sights, sounds, smells, textures, and symbolic languages. Punchdrunk's interest in canonical texts translates predominantly into a focus on early modern England, including plays by Shakespeare, John Webster, and Christopher Marlowe. However, while the company integrates these plays fully into the fabric of their productions, they are nearly always transformed from their original format. Deconstructed and scattered throughout the theatrical space and performances, the texts become a labyrinth through which an audience must, literally, find their way.

Familiarizing readers with the most common precepts of immersion, Punchdrunk's work in *Sleep No More* has provided a model for other companies eager to create immersive works. Throughout the rest of this chapter, both Boston and New York mountings of *Sleep No More* stand-in as models of popular immersive production in the United States, and especially New York City. Where future chapters focus particularly on the use of text, space, and objects in immersive productions, the current discussion engages generally with *Sleep No More*, its structure, model of participation, association with text, and organization of objects. Engendering a basic understanding of immersive environments through this influential production, some of the major critical issues of the format are brought to light for further discussion in later chapters.

As an underlying but ever-present foundation of immersive performances, the use of text provides a clear example of *Sleep No More's* ideological and participatory structure. If a neoliberal goal is to foist responsibility onto

individuals, then the fragmentation of narrative throughout the production forces

participants to reconstruct meaning for themselves. For *Sleep No More*, *Macbeth*

is the foundation for the sensual environment, interspersed with the aesthetic

elegance of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*. But, whereas Punchdrunk's work with

early modern texts has proved particularly successful, they are far from the only

ones to use canonical narratives as an authoritative means of generating

immersive material. Besides Punchdrunk, companies such as New York's

Woodshed Collective and Third Rail Projects, as well as England's

dreamthinkspeak and Zecora Ura, among others, have taken cues from such texts

as *The Tenant*, *Alice in Wonderland*, the book of Revelation, and Euripides'

Medea. Prioritizing these texts in immersive circumstances creates a dialogue

between contemporary cultural aesthetics and the historical context of their

sources, especially in relation to the meanings consumed and created by

audiences. W.B. Worthen, in "'The Written Troubles of the Brain'": *Sleep No

More* and the Space of Character" (2012), develops a theoretical relationship

between Shakespeare's text and the fabricated spaces of Punchdrunk's

productions:

> Spatializing *Macbeth*'s discourse of character, *Sleep No More* evokes a
> sense of Shakespeare as theatrical *auteur*, intentionally building "a
> gestural, kinesthetic, and vocal dimension into how he writes his
> characters"; we reciprocally "learn about our own complex human nature
> by thinking about and coming to respect Shakespeare's characters" in
> much the way we do people…In this paradigm, dramatic performance
> delivers a literary character, fused in the blend with the material actor: we
> seize this blend objectively, not "immersively," ignoring the structuring
> conventions of the theatre. Inscribing literary character in performance
> space and invoking and resisting the voyeuristic conventions of modern
> fourth-wall performance, *Sleep No More* both charts the pervasive power
> of longstanding, largely "literary" conceptions of theatricality to the

making of "new" performance, and—in its dynamic foregrounding of text, character, space, and audience—opens a series of questions about the apparent emancipation of the spectator, and about the character of cognition, offered by theatrical immersion.[22]

Worthen's impulse to see the blending of literary characters and material actors provides a convenient starting point for tracing the ontologically tricky web created by theatrical immersion. From the dynamic foregrounding of text arises, as Worthen suggests, a complex situation concerning the relationship between theatricality, text, and the subjectivity of spectators. Expanding this discussion, the fusing of an audience's sociocultural experience with immersive theatre provides a landscape for discussing virtuality and metatheatricality on the postmodern stage. The reconstruction of such texts in immersive spaces conjures up a fluidity of meanings and identities, as deeply rooted in the early modern play, as they are in current incarnations of the hyper- and meta- textual.[23] By augmenting the conventional theatricality of the proscenium theatre with a complex sensory and aesthetic engagement, *Sleep No More* underscores a changing social and technological environment not unlike the early modern trend towards humanism, especially in the way that it necessitates a reimagining of what it means to be human in a largely inhuman environment.

While reviewers, critics, and scholars have described and analyzed the New York performance of *Sleep No More*, it is instructive to compare and contrast

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[22] Worthen, W.B. "'The Written Troubles of the Brain": *Sleep No More* and The Space of Character" *Theatre Journal* (Volume 64, Number 1, March 2012), 84.

[23] *Sleep No More* has spawned a wide variety of hypertexts, or interactive texts, as well as meta-texts, or reflexive texts, both in and outside of the performance itself. In the latter instance, the Internet's ongoing conversations and debates concerning the performances (also known as "superfan" sites) have expanded significantly in the wake of the New York City opening in 2008. In the former case, the production creates a concrete material world of texts and objects that participants are encouraged to interact with. This may also be likened to the interactivity of an Internet page, inspiring exploration through a "web" of linked materials.

the Boston and New York productions.[24] These discrete productions provide a

glimpse, not just at the type of environment created in *Sleep,* but also at the

economic and performance imperatives engaged within different cityscapes,

performance spaces, and marketing/branding plans. Additionally, Punchdrunk's

popular success with *Sleep No More* has led to an expanding market for

immersive environments in the American theatrical landscape. Adam Green,

writing for Theatre Communications Group, discusses the trend:

> Breaking out of pre-ordained narratives is one of the large, overarching
> themes of immersive theater, the trend popularized in England and rising
> in America. "Choose Your Own Adventure," "video games," and
> "roleplaying games," are a couple of the shorthand comparisons this wave
> of the experiential trend has evoked. And it's easy to understand why:
> while an exact definition is still in flux, immersive theatre productions
> tend to operate in dynamically fluid settings, allowing the audience a more
> active, voyeuristic, and central role, while also individualizing their
> experiences…Punchdrunk's import of *Sleep No More* — first "staged" in
> England in 2003, then resurrected in Boston (2009) and New York (2011)
> — wasn't the first of its kind, but was and has been the most successful
> popularly and financially. The show continues not only to sell out despite
> the high price tag, but also attract repeat visitors.[25]

The cross-cultural trending of interaction and agency in performance, literature,

videogames, and other media provides a compelling reason why *Sleep No More*

has excelled as a large-scale production, and why other companies have followed

suit with their own experiential theatres.[26] Discussing *Sleep* then, is also to discuss

a phenomenon that has become increasingly ill defined even as it has become

increasingly socially potent. Marking the production as a touchstone for a focused

and critical view of immersion necessitates a condensed description of the two

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[24] Strictly speaking, the production occurred in the city of Brookline, part of the Boston Metro
area.
[25] Adam Green outlines some of the "post-Punchdrunk" immersive theatres currently being
produced in New York. http://www.tcgcircle.org/2013/04/immersive-theatre/ (24 April, 2013).
[26] Green cites Porges, Seth. "Theater for the Video Game Generation" *Forbes.*
http://www.forbes.com/sites/sethporges/2012/10/29/theater-for-the-video-game-generation/.

productions (Boston/New York) as they have existed in both cities.

At the outset, Punchdrunk's performances express the potential for immersive theatres to overwhelm and confound synchronous narratives and aesthetics. Due to the fragmented nature of individual experiences in these spaces, many immersive productions elude complete description. Instead, I draw upon personal observations of these performances to compare and contrast the Boston/New York experiences of *Sleep No More*. In both productions, audiences were released into the theatre space over the course of several hours. The acted performances were tracked to run for approximately three hours total (longer on weekends), repeating one track three times during the course of the evening. As a result, audiences often entered the space in the middle of the acted performances, forcing them to find their bearings within the installations without the aid of a clear narrative to guide them. In some cases, it is possible to wander utterly alone for long stretches of time—seeing neither audience members nor performers.

Both productions also utilized neutral white masks, given to audience members before being led into the space. Uninhibited by self-consciousness, the masked audience could theoretically feel more independent and curious within the performance. These masks serve a dual purpose that deeply affects the relationship of the performance to the spectator. First, the masks isolate spectators, forcing them to deal with the installations on their own. However, the mask also marks the audience as a group, a group whose uncertain subject position in the drama leads to important aesthetic and social implications. Gareth White, in his article "Odd Anonymized Needs: Punchdrunk's Masked Spectator"

(2009) provides some perspective on Punchdrunk's practice, noting, "The mask maintains distance, while allowing proximity of a controlled kind. Performer and spectator-participant can occupy the same physical and fictive space, without the latter having to reveal themselves, without them having to be present as a recognizable social subject."[27] White also quotes Nicholas Ridout, whose experiences with the awkwardness of unmasked interactions with performers sheds light on how the convention may be further complicated: "In the theatre of capitalism, the reverse gaze must always acknowledge, however tacitly, an intimate economic relation: I paid to have this man look at me, and he is paid to look. Our intimacy is always already alienated. It is a difficult intimacy."[28] In the former instance, White addresses a spectators' internal response to the mask. In the latter instance, Ridout outlines how the frame of capitalism limits the possibilities for truly intimate performance. Each renders an aspect of the relationship between performer and spectator as one that simultaneously frees and inhibits the individualized experience of the spectator in the immersive theatre space. In other words, the anonymity of an audience granted by the mask may free them en masse from habitus, their normative manner of being in space, but in that very anonymity they lose their presence as a social subject with the option to have (or not) the awkward interaction described by Ridout (albeit mediated by the boundaries of capitalism, as paying customers).[29] Therefore, in both versions of the production, the audience experiences similar treatment with regard to their

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[27] White, Gareth. "Odd Anonymized Needs: Punchdrunk's Masked Spectator" in *Modes of Spectating*, edited by Alison Oddey and Christine White (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 228.

[28] White, Gareth, 227.

[29] I am using "habitus" after Bourdieu, whose interplay between agency and structure best suits the rhizomatic, Deleuzian content of the discussion.

disorientation, encouragement to explore the space independently, and their

ability to make certain choices about where to go and what to do, but always

within certain literal and figurative limits.

At this point, the characteristics of the two productions begin to diverge.

In the Boston production, the performance took place in a smaller venue than in

New York, with a commensurate reduction in the number of audience members.[30]

Taking place in the abandoned Old Lincoln School in Brookline, MA, the

magnitude of the installed space surprised some individuals, and overwhelmed

others. Being fortunate enough to attend the preview of the Boston performance, I

felt both stunned and elated by the breadth and space of the production. Four

floors of the school were devoted to the performance, and true to the mission

statement, the production's design was painstakingly detailed. One audience

member observed:

> It is impossible to describe the scale to which the space was installed. It
> was mesmerizing, walking through the perfectly installed rooms, each and
> every one different from the rest, it's [sic] own perfect, detailed little
> world. How many rooms were there? It was impossible to know — the
> installation was so overwhelming that even now I can't recall if it was 3 or
> 4 floors.[31]

This blogger's experience mirrored my own initial appraisal. Each environment

contained discrete, often thematic, design elements. In one large room, huge pine

trees set upon wheeled casters moved eerily, powered by nearly invisible actors.

The basement, set as a billiard room with poker table and minibar, included a

floor covered with pine-mulch. In a passageway between rooms, gruesome

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[30] The numbers of audience for each production are unavailable. However, it is known that the
square feet, and therefore the audience capacity per performance, are significantly different.
[31] Theater Junkie. 20 April 2013. http://theaterjunkie.wordpress.com/?s=Punchdrunk+Boston.

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pictures of crime scenes hung on wires, like the darkroom of a private

investigator. Other rooms were set to look like bedrooms, housing four-poster

beds, damask curtains, and antique furniture. The feeling of such spaces was that

of lived-in chaos: letters, scraps of notes, family photographs, and tea sets. Far

from any direct translation of Shakespeare's text, the space exploded the narrative

of Macbeth's crime, dispersing fragments into the details of these rooms for

audience members to piece together.

Many of these spaces—especially the billiard room, pine-tree room, and

several others, included elements that invaded the scene from the natural world:

pine mulch in the billiard room, a banquet table in the pine tree room, an eel in the

bathtub room. In each of these instances, the natural world encroached upon the

elegantly arranged material world provided by Hitchcock's aesthetic. This

invasion, analogous to the prophesied motion of Birnam wood towards

Dunsinane, created a collision between two primary forces: the natural, primal,

and mystical world depicted in Shakespeare's original text, and the veneer of

elegant sophistication derived from a post-Prohibition era aesthetic. [32] While the

surface elegance provides an entry point for audiences, it also allows another,

darker, world to exist for them to discover on their own—the underlying world of

Macbeth's crimes.

The anachronism of the Hitchcock narratives and aesthetics created a

tension between *Macbeth's* ancient, primal, conditions and those of conventional

living spaces. In my case, this dissonance between textual markers and modern

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[32] Freeman, Neil, ed. *Macbeth* in *The Applause First Folio of Shakespeare in Modern Type* (Vancouver: Folio Scripts, 2001), 99-103.

aesthetics provoked a sense of intimacy and voyeuristic pleasure. The "discovery" of symbols from the early modern world, bits of narrative outlining Macbeth's downfall, and the weirdness of natural elements strewn throughout the otherwise well-appointed spaces, all conspired to elude linear narrative and inspire imaginative responses to the space. Facilitated by the interpenetration of *Macbeth* (1609) and *Rebecca* (1940) within the installations, the combined aesthetics elicited similarly uneasy feelings.

Renovating several abandoned warehouses to create the current performance space in New York, the production has added many installations and interactive experiences. Audiences in the New York performance are strongly encouraged to take candy from a candy shop, imbibe drinks offered by performers, and manipulate the massive number of planted files, folders, journals, and booklets in newly added rooms. The new performance affords the space for a witch's pantry, a labyrinthine cemetery, a taxidermy room, and a hospital ward. The installations, as in the Boston production, have been managed to the last detail. Bill Worthen engages with the objects of the installations, noting their critical position in the play's narrative force:

> *Sleep No More* reifies Macbeth's interior world as "immersive"
> performance space, materializing elements of the play's verbal texture as
> objects in a thematically resonant environment. Like the verbal structure
> Brooks once drew from *Macbeth* (reassembling intermittent verbal
> imagery of the text in a new rhetoric of organic interpretation), the objects
> in *Sleep No More* resonate as much more than "excrescences, mere
> extravagances of detail"; they function metaphorically in our performance
> as spectators, reassembled in an interpretive logic taken as homologous to
> a deep structure in the play itself…Unlike actors or directors bound, in
> Berger's view, to the temporal order of performance, readers are "free to
> explore the 'umbrella' potentiality of words by uncoupling them,
> abstracting them, and holding them over the play or transferring them to

another speaker," or indeed to another material object. These "Strange images of death" (1.3.95) betoken a world, and a mind, in which "Nature seems dead" (2.1.50)—a nature we enter as the McKittrick Hotel.[33]

Objects, as homologous specters of *Macbeth*'s deeper structure, refer to words, phrases, even monologues in Shakespeare's text. However, thinking of *Sleep No More* as *only* a visual metaphor of its source, an adaptation of sorts, the aspects of Shakespeare's play carried into the space by audiences must necessarily differ widely. While Worthen suggests further that, "Despite the 'immersive' adventure it provides, despite the absence of Shakespeare's words, *Sleep No More* spatializes a familiar and fully literary sense of character," the installations and performances of the play also provide an environment that fully integrates an audiences' experiences into the act of narration. Instead of translating Shakespearean performance into visual metaphor, the production synthesizes multiple texts to provide the space for audiences to map their own narratives onto the play-world.

Nowhere is this more evident than in *Sleep*'s one-on-one performances. One-on-one performances have become their own medium in the New York theatrical landscape and represent their own discrete phenomenon.[34] In the context of *Sleep*, these experiences with performers heighten the simulation of intimacy and voyeurism, supporting a notion that getting as close as possible to the performers might uncover something secret about the performance itself, some tantalizing detail that might provide a secret advantage. However, my experience indicates that the one-on-ones represent the most aporetic engagement

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[33] Worthen, 86.

[34] See Lee, Felicia R. "Theater for Audiences of One." *The New York Times.* 27 July 2010. http://theater.nytimes.com/2010/07/28/theater/28one.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1368290732-uoFG5yrEt80k/fWv03NPJA.

in the play *because* they occur with another performer. Following the posthuman conception of the dynamic indeterminacy of the body, the actors in these intimate performances disrupt attempts to include them in larger narratives. While providing a multitude of information fragments unavailable to most spectators, actors provide a moving fabric of signifiers on which to hang interpretations.

My own one-on-one experience occurred at the beginning of the production. Dropped off of an elevator into a dark hallway, an actor in nurse's uniform took my hand firmly and led me to a wheelchair. She motioned me to sit, and I was then wheeled into pitch darkness for several moments. The wheelchair stopped, turned, and was adjusted back so that I could see the ceiling. She then kept me pressed back in the wheelchair as a recording of the signature monologue from Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) began to play. While the recording went on, a scale replica of the Manderley estate gradually revealed itself on the ceiling. When the model was fully revealed and Joan Fontaine's monologue over, I was wheeled back to the elevator from which I came. A few hastily whispered words from the nurse ended the one-on-one before I was put back inside the elevator. The whole experience presented a disconcertingly personal interaction in a performance where I largely went unnoticed by both audience and performers. Returning to the masking of the audience in the one-on-one context, Gareth White intimates that the structure of *Sleep No More* does not prepare an audience for such direct interactions:

> Again, it is telling that when performers try to take off the participants' masks, as they often do in the isolated, one-on-one interactions, they produce the strongest reactions. They report that they are often resisted, and when they do succeed in removing it they might be met with tears,

confessions, and sometimes anger. In these moments they have achieved an intimacy, which is sometimes disturbing, to both parties, and which brings into question that this work is as purely escapist as they believe it is. The company have learnt to handle these encounters with care, and to provide a staged exit from the event, with spaces that allow participants to part-in and part-out of the environment and to cool off before leaving the building.[35]

Those cool-down spaces now include two separate bars in the New York production, each designed to maintain the world of the play while providing all of the modern comforts and cocktails patrons have come to expect. It is telling that these places can be difficult to find from within the performance space, increasing the effect of being lost within the installations. Spectators have often complained about the difficulty in finding such spaces, even with the help of black-masked ushers.

The one-on-one experiences have been highly commoditized by audience members in the New York production, who seek to be in the right place at the right time to experience them. This has paved the way for a blogosphere that attempts to track the production, and the experiences within it, from beginning to end.[36] In essence Punchdrunk has achieved outside the production what it endeavors to do within it: force audiences to decipher the installations and performances for themselves. Yet at the same time, the vastly increased number of audience members, press releases, and attempts to map the space, has had an adverse effect on the performance itself. In one instance, my companion was shoved aside by an audience member trying to get a one-on-one. In other instances, I have seen audiences defy the conventions of the space by taking off

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[35] White, 228.
[36] Adam Green's article lists several of these blogs, but many more exist. An Internet search for the production yields innumerable super-fan sites and associated commentary.

their masks, speaking to each other, and getting too close to the highly physical

performances for their own safety.

While the commoditization of the one-on-one experiences may prove

frustrating to participants, they also point towards notions familiar to both

posthuman and Baroque performance. First, metatheatre proves inescapable in

Punchdrunk's space. Simply entering *Sleep No More* through the dark and

winding hallway leading from lobby to bar evokes the separation of one world

from another, and the profound theatricality of moving from the real to an

artificially produced dreamscape. Spectators populate a world highly cognizant of

its role as theatre, and the notion of the one-on-one performance conjures the

ultimate signification and self-consciousness in that world. Individuals scrambling

to receive these performances understand their status as *performance* even as they

simultaneously seek to be rewarded by finding them (remember the massive

blogosphere that attempts to track each available performance). William Egginton

describes this phenomenon in Baroque terms:

> The fact that the space beyond the frame is itself partitioned into relative
> subdivisions of reality and illusion, themselves only determined by the
> positionality of spectators, makes of the entire ensemble, including reality
> ground zero (but who could be sure where that is?), a spectator-dependent
> system. In other words, the experience of space as being structured by a
> series of frames distinguishing the real from the imaginary, actors from
> characters, and spectators from those being watched invokes the
> ineradicable suspicion that one's own reality might, at any time, be the
> object of, and therefore exist for, the gazes of others. It conjures the
> disorienting sensation that one's own-most self might perhaps be no more
> than a character manufactured for the benefit of others.[37]

The donning of the mask, as described by both White and Ridout, mirrors this

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[37] Egginton, William. *How the World Became a Stage* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 80-81.

second-order metatheatre. Spectators, while holding on tightly to their anonymity, also implicate themselves in the theatricality of Punchdrunk's world through their motivation to explore and narrate their personal experience of the space. Yet, in taking on the mask and the understood boundaries of the production's environment, they allow for their frames of reality, their subjectivity, and their body proper to be inscribed as a member of a spectator-dependent system in which they themselves have taken on a distinct, if indeterminate, role. That commercialism provides an even broader frame for this experience, and especially the one-on-ones, becomes evident through another order of metatheatre that might be loosely defined as getting your money's worth. Capitalism acknowledges the theatrical experience only as use-value, as a virtuality to be consumed, and as an expectation of pleasure. The unsettling, sometimes frightening aspect of these relationships occurs when the actors attempt to include individuals in their manifestly strange world. This disturbs the latter frame, forcing responsibility onto audiences to play their part in the evening's work, and breaking the protective veil of the customer. In this way, the emerging relationships described by Egginton address the Baroque and neo-Baroque aspects of *Sleep No More* through the similarity of the impulses present in early modernism, as well as the textual fabric of *Macbeth*.

Outside these coveted one-on-one experiences, the corporeal performances provided in the space might best be described as abstract dance. Highly athletic in nature, they range from narrative moments of *Macbeth*—such as Lady Macbeth washing her hands in a bathtub-to an impressive but ambiguous dance with a

loose wooden door in a hallway. Rarely, if ever, do performers utter a word to audiences. Instead, they rely almost exclusively on physical cues to set the boundaries for their sometimes-dangerous movements. Ambiguous performances detailing physical and emotional struggle intermix with narrative moments detailing Macbeth's crimes and their aftermath. Effectively, this means that audiences rarely, if ever, get to see all of the narrative performances. Some may see the orgiastic ritual between Macbeth and the witches, some the smothering of Duncan with a pillow, but few will see both. Through these performances, *Macbeth* is transformed from a singular narrative concerning the death of a monarch and the titular character's descent into madness. Instead, the audience descends into a labyrinthine environment that creates the distinct *feeling* of Macbeth's madness and chaos. As mentioned before, the feeling of being trapped in a maze is literal, since attempting to leave the performance space and go back to the bar for a respite can be frustratingly difficult.

The experience of *Sleep No More,* in both productions, therefore depends upon audiences to make choices and create meaning on their own. Or, at least, this is the idea espoused by the company. Narrative, in the forms available to spectators, penetrates the space and performance in conjunction with the plurality of their cultural memories and frames an audience brings into the theatre. In this regard, Punchdrunk renders a posthuman experience of theatergoing that effectively turns individual consciousness into an extension of play-space. The subjective confusions of the posthuman landscape often conjoin the problematic of the Baroque, especially in the conflations and reimagining of theatre, world,

text, and performance.

Alison Oddey and Christine White outline similar phenomena in their book *Modes of Spectating* (2009). Describing the intricacies of twenty-first century spectatorship, they note that performances increasingly require, "looking and observation, action and integration, and interactivity. The new definition of spectatorship is interactivity."[38] In this case, interactivity involves mapping meaning on disparate sensual stimuli without the aid or guidance of an overarching, or at least synchronous, narrative. The activation of the audience in this way is not new. Oddey and White suggest that Brecht's theatre represents a similar response "provoked by the sleep walk into National Socialism in Germany." Brecht's reaction was profoundly different in its impulse towards defamiliarization versus Punchdrunk's hyper-theatrical immersion of audiences, but Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* comes closer: "Mark Rosenthal, with reference to installation art, suggests the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where, 'the artist has total command of a space and might use any artistic means, including architecture, music, dance and theatre, along with the visual arts, to create a synesthetic environment, has become an everyday occurrence.'"[39] However, as evidenced by the production described above, the key differences in *Sleep* involve the interaction of the subject with the material landscape of the performance, or, as Oddey and White continue:

> Therefore, artworks have redirected themselves, reconfiguring in expanded borders, new areas of content, changing modes of cognition and experience. The interdisciplinary nature of installation artworks means

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[38] Oddey, Alison and Christine White. *Modes of Spectating* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), 12-13.
[39] Oddey, 8. The quote comes from Rosenthal, Mark. *Understanding Installation Art* (Prestel, 2003), 25.

that the spectator is no longer content simply to view the work. More is required. The spectator wants to engage in a more active way, to play a significant part or role in the reception of the work…When the spectator participates in the work, they become "fused with it."[40]

This expansion of disciplinary boundaries and the fusion of audiences with the artistic work also suggest the alteration and expansion of subjects and identities. As *Modes of Spectating* continually suggests, the spectatorial relationship of installed spaces, certain live performances, and cinema, all revolve around an active role in the work delimited only by the confluence of both the spectator and performance circumstances. In other words, the material world of the installations in *Sleep No More* becomes embedded in the cultural luggage of the audience member's experiences, and vice versa. The result of this fusion synthesizes meaning as a posthuman extension of the body proper. The material space, interaction, and sensorium congeal to create a dynamic, rhizomatic, structure of performance whose meanings constantly open and close.

Memory therefore, and especially cultural memory, plays a large part in the process of experiencing *Sleep No More*. How these memories are experienced on an individual basis may differ, but several critics theorize models for rendering the specter of the cultural past in contemporary performance practice and artistic installation. Alison Landsberg's writes in *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (2004):

> This book argues that modernity makes possible and necessary a new form of public cultural memory. This new form of memory, which I call *prosthetic memory*, emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum. In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which a person sutures himself or herself into a larger history…In

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[40] Oddey, 9.

the process that I am describing, the person does not simply apprehend a
historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a
past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic
memory has the ability to shape that person's subjectivity and politics.[41]

In a theatrical context, and especially one that touches upon a playwright with the

cultural cache of Shakespeare, the creation of the prosthesis can also refer to a

process occurring between contemporary audiences and theatrical productions.

Marvin Carlson, in *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (2003)

describes a paradigm called *ghosting*, which negotiates the memory of previous

performances and their effect upon audience reception:

> Ghosting presents the identical thing they (an audience) have encountered
> before, although now in a somewhat different context. Thus, a recognition
> not of similarity, as in genre, but of identity becomes a part of the
> reception process, with results that can complicate this process
> considerably.[42]

Such complications can be encountered, Carlson continues, in most aspects of

performance processes, and the recognition of remembered elements in theatre

become especially relevant to the re-creation of historical events and figures. This

phenomenon occurs in Worthen's construction of literary character from the

textures of the installed space of *Sleep*:

> *Sleep No More* materializes the object world of *Macbeth* through
> repetition, multiplicity, analogy, transformation. Ross reports to Macduff
> after his family has been murdered by Macbeth's henchmen: 'Your castle
> is surprised, your wife, and babes / Savagely slaughtered. To relate the
> manner / Were on the quarry of these murdered deer / To add the death of
> you' (4.3.205-8). The deer, then, also embody a principal fantasy of adult
> horror in *Macbeth*—infanticide. Brooks noted a 'great many references to
> babes in this play,' and children are evoked everywhere in *Sleep No More*,
> too: the headless-doll mobile, the 'bloody child' (4.1.92) concealed in a
> font in the dead ballroom and birthed by one of the witches in the delirious

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[41] Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University, 2004), 2.
[42] Carlson, Marvin. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre As Memory Machine* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 7.

> prophecy scene (intense, thumping score, strobe, naked Macbeth, Satan, blood everywhere), the pictures of children and the children's bedrooms in the Macduff suite, the egg sculptures there and elsewhere—'What, you egg! / Young fry of treachery,' the murderer gloats, gutting Macduff's son (4.2.83-84).' I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.' (1.7.55-56). [43]

Interpreting the space as a Shakespearean scholar, Worthen illustrates Carlson's point about theatrical haunting through the lens of texts, performances, and interpretations he has seen, but also through the visceral perspectives produced by the space itself.

Marvin Carlson confirms this interpretation when he quotes Freddie Rokem, who asserts that, "On the metatheatrical level…the repressed ghostly figures and events from that ('real') historical past can (re) appear on the stage in theatrical performances. The actors performing such historical figures are in fact the "things" who are appearing again tonight in the performance"[44] The multivalent meanings of the term things aside (in the above quote by Worthen, the literal "things" feel just as active as the performers), the historical pasts rendered by *Sleep No More* exist as layers of narrative openness designed to be filled. Memory and performance infuse each other, creating alternate subjectivities and histories that haunt the moment of performance. According to Rokem, the repetition of the actor creates a unique phenomenon of disembodiment; an echo effect that flattens history into the performing body. In *Sleep No More*, *Macbeth* calls upon a union of material and sensual circumstances to conjure up a vision of brutal crimes, deceptions, and rituals. The flattening of history and articulation of

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[43] Worthen, 85-86.
[44] Carlson, 7.

cultural memory in *Sleep No More* shifts the embodiment of cultural memories and prostheses into a synthetic, and ontologically rootless, subject.

Landsberg and Carlson relate a paradigm that attempts to account for the interaction of audience, performance, memory, and repetition. In the first instance, Landsberg creates a prosthetic other to describe the interaction of audience with mass media, and in the second Carlson treats the performers and performance environment as the ghosts of performances and cultural histories. Both models also include a tacit acknowledgement that the environment of performance shifts subjectivity away from the body, or at least extends it into unfamiliar spaces and times. Landsberg's model specifically distinguishes itself from the corpus of either the body proper or a body of personal experience, telling us that "First, they (prosthetic memories) are not natural, not the product of lived experience—or 'organic' in the hereditary nineteenth-century sense—but are derived from engagement with a mediated representation." Her second reason for describing these memories as prosthetic goes further, describing the sensual memories of the mediated experience as being "worn on the body" like the prosthesis to which the title refers.[45] Carlson, in his turn, leans on the performative end of the spectrum; he highlights theatre as a "cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition" often dependent upon an audience's recognition of "restored" or "recycled" material.[46] Infused with the former experiences of audiences, that material might be viewed as a prosthetic

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[45] Landsberg, 20.
[46] Carlson, 11, 13.

subjectivity into which the performers' and audience's bodies are interpolated but not corporeal, and multiple rather than singular.

Sleep No More, with its emphasis on utilizing recycled texts adapted into a hybridized performance environment, creates a space to apply both prosthetic memory and ghosting to performance. Yet, thinking in terms of Landsberg's prostheses, the individual members of the audience experience the theatrical space as masked, anonymous, specters enclosed within the installed space. Together, the prosthetic memory and ghosting of the performance involves, not just the echo of a Shakespearean narrative, but also the mediated deconstruction of that narrative and its replacement with signs synchronized by individual audience members, as opposed to being dictated by the performance itself.

However, while the terms described by Landsberg and Carlson hint at the disembodied relationship between audience, text, memory, and cultural consciousness in its prosthetic state, they do not adequately examine their potential impact in an immersive environment. Extending the concepts of the prosthetic and ghosting to expand the limits of the humanist body, I suggest that *Sleep No More* has the effect of rendering the sensate subject, and the body proper, into what Jacques Rancière has termed an "emancipated spectator," or a subjectivity that constitutes a neoliberal structure of meaning-production:

> Faced with the hyper-theatre that wants to transform representation into presence and passivity into activity, it proposes instead to revoke the privilege of vitality and communitarian power accorded the theatrical stage, so as to restore it to an equal footing with the telling of a story, the reading of a book, or the gaze focused on an image...It requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation

in order to appropriate the "story" and make it their own story. An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators.[47]

This is true especially in the experience marketed to the public: an experiential work that "rejects the passive obedience usually expected of audiences."[48] The ability to touch props, explore supposedly secret spaces, and follow any performer, all hearkens to the establishment of alternate histories and texts with each viewing of the piece. Of course, that experiential frame comes, as we have seen, with a hefty price tag. The subject that Rancière constructs reimagines spectatorship as the revocation of communitarian power, not the experience in or with a community of participants, but the dissolution of communalism in favor of boundaries.

Those boundaries are inherent in *Sleep No More*, from textual foundation, to site, to objects. Landsberg continues, "It is incumbent on cultural critics to recognize that the capitalist world we inhabit brings with it new modalities of subjectivity, new structures of feeling."[49] Problematically, such structures within *Sleep No More* are built upon traditionally canonical literature to construct a pliable, but ever-present, sense of narrative linearity. Not to mention that the capitalist structures that support the massive New York production of *Sleep* expose, more so than in the relatively marginal Boston production, the complex subjectivities to which Landsberg refers. Within both arguments resides a dynamic modeling of theatrical space and performance, and combining them suggests that the narrative of an immersive performance constantly shifts with

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[47] Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), 22.
[48] Punchdrunk Theatre Company. Punchdrunk.org.uk. 25 September 2012.
[49] Landsberg, 18.

relation to a prosthetic, posthuman, sensibility that reads memory as a collective,

cumulative, and diffuse force conglomerated in and around, but not within,

spectators. However Rancière, while useful in describing an ideal of

spectating/performance as an act of making something prosthetic (and perhaps

more egalitarian) from performance, also provides a caution that echoes

Landsberg's notion of capitalist subjectivities:

> We have heard so many orators passing off their words as more than
> words, as formulas for embarking on a new existence; we have seen so
> many theatrical representations claiming to be not spectacles but
> community ceremonies; and even today, despite all the "postmodern"
> skepticism about the desire to change existence, we see so many
> installations and spectacles transformed into religious mysteries that it is
> not necessarily scandalous to hear it said that words are merely words.[50]

Sleep No More, which frames itself as something not unlike a religious mystery,

requires an examination of what it calls upon audiences to do both inside and

outside the walls of the immersive environment. The individuation of the

spectator, their anonymity, and their seeming purposelessness, all inspire that self-

same skepticism described by Rancière. *Sleep No More*, it would seem, models a

neoliberal performance ethic that erases the agency of the subject in favor of

material embodiment. Like its precursor in the Baroque, the production

establishes a self-contained interior world that realizes the illusion of intimacy,

depth, and infinite space.

  While the posthuman aspects of the production may best be described as a

mediated body of cultural memory (of Shakespeare, Macbeth, Hitchcock, the

1930s) intermingled with the sensual experience provided by the space and

physical performances, the role of the Baroque and neo-Baroque interpolate

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[50] Rancière, 22-23.

themselves closely with its stated aims. In Punchdrunk's pure excess of design, symbolism, and illusion, the Baroque makes a transversal, and epic, appearance. The expansion of *Sleep No More* into an increasingly large fictive space, the production's conflation of audience/performer, along with the tightly referential and allegorical installations, all collude to produce a theatre that emphasizes the performance of identity through the denaturing of identity itself. Similarly, the Baroque endeavored to produce, through a consciousness of social performance, a glimpse into its theatrical construction.

For instance, while the subjectivity of Punchdrunk's audiences appears to shift the negotiation of meaning into an abstract and virtually bodiless space somewhere between memory and discovery, examining the performance itself reveals the boundaries of this apparent freedom. These boundaries begin with the choice of *Macbeth* itself. For even though *Sleep No More* only obliquely references Shakespeare or Hitchcock in the spaces or performances the audience encounters, it still relies heavily on the (re)production of texts to package and define itself. Landsberg continues, "Whereas the experiential has been a component of many earlier forms of memory, the experiential has achieved a new virtuosity—and new-found popularity—as a result of new mass cultural technologies."[51] So, while technological and creative innovation has made the immersive theatre possible, it also provides a context in which subject, text, performance, and space require the authority and authentication of a stable textual document to give it the permission to exceed conventional boundaries for performance.

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[51] Landsberg 20.

In addition to promoting the experiential through the textual (the title itself conjures up all the literary power of Shakespeare's play) *Sleep No More* promotes a spectatorial relationship that troubles aspects of the discoveries Punchdrunk intends for audiences. In the company's rendering of *Macbeth* into sequences of visual metaphors, the politics of that spectatorship has been continually challenged even as the company's work has become increasingly successful. The boundaries of immersive spaces allow for the exploration of installations and confusion in terms of the subject/object relationship an audience might experience, but it also limits the agency of an audience to actively produce change. This is where immersion as a concept appears to stop short in favor of mass appeal. A *Boston Globe* reviewer observed this point of view in *Sleep*, noting, "this up-close-and-personal arrangement not only blurs the line between audience and actor, but also raises provocative questions about our role in the evening's bloody business. As we look on from behind our masks, are we simply witnesses? Accusers? Accomplices?"[52] Confusion, in this case, seems to relate intrinsically to the boundaries Punchdrunk has arranged around the convention of immersion as a cultural product. Left in the role of voyeur, an audience might play with the positions the review describes, but has no agency to affect the activity of the performance. Expanding on this idea, a recent article entitled "Punchdrunk and The Politics of Spectatorship" (2012) criticizes the limitations upon which *Sleep No More* relies:

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[52] Aucoin, Don. "Make your own 'Macbeth.'" *The Boston Globe*. 16 October 2009. http://www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2009/10/16/in_eerie_sleep_no_more_the_audience _wanders_through_the_bards_bloody_business/?page=2.

There is a scene in *Sleep No More* when the mad Lady Macbeth takes a bath to try and wash Duncan's blood from her hands. After the bath she stands up in the tub and raises her arms towards the audience gathered around her, inviting them to pass her a robe. One evening a few weeks ago, an audience member didn't understand the cue. When Lady M rose from the bath naked, wet and shivering, and stretched out her arms, the audience member, confused, returned the gesture and moved to embrace her. The performer playing Lady M broke character, screamed, and a group of black-masked crew materialized to escort the spectator from the show…For the majority of the performance, even though the traditional spatial relationship is broken down and spectators surround the performers, the performers seem to carry with them an imaginary "fourth wall," rarely acknowledging the audience's existence. When they do appear to see me, as a member of the audience, I feel very much a part of their fiction, like a ghost they have caught sight of, frightening and distant.[53]

This illuminates a problem with the conceptual frame of discovery that Punchdrunk advertises. Appearing to invite the initiation of direct action in the drama, the production simultaneously discourages this spontaneity. In a near-perfect modeling of the aesthetic impulses behind *tromp l'oeil* Baroque murals such as those by Pietro da Cortona or Giovanni Battista Gaulli, the imagined depth and artifice of the performance exceeds the boundaries of the frame. Like the ghosts of Silvestre's article, spectators negotiate a purgatorial subject position bounded by the consumption of narrative and visuality as well as of literal and material consumption. In the latter instance, Punchdrunk seems to be no foreigner to commercial strategy or market placement:

The New York *Sleep No More* is now in the hands of commercial producers, who ultimately control the production. But Punchdrunk's willingness to tie their work to commercial interests extends to recent UK productions, too. Lyn Gardner, writing in the UK paper the *Guardian,* in an article titled "Is this a sell out I see before me?", describes recent Punchdrunk projects developed as marketing strategies for companies:

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[53] Silvestre, Agnés. "Punchdrunk and the Politics of Spectatorship". http://www.culturebot.net/2012/11/14997/punchdrunk-and-the-politics-of-spectatorship/ (14 November 2012).

> Creating a live experience of a zombie videogame for Sony, or events to promote Stella Artois…It's true that the show has built commerce into its structure…The producers' innovation is to extend the theme of the show into a kind of *Sleep No More* brand.[54]

In essence, Punchdrunk is selling entry to a three-dimensional version of virtual technology, a sensory phenomenon that replaces the liveness of theatre with the structure of a videogame. Silvestre concludes:

> The way the piece is designed limits my desire to act or intervene–and if I don't respond to suggestion, it will remove me from the show. It's safe and smooth, but hypocritical. There is the illusion of choice and agency, but the offer is rigidly circumscribed, and the only real role allowed to me is that of passive voyeur, consuming the actions, images and sounds of the piece. I can open this drawer or that drawer, follow this actor or another. I have a choice, but it changes nothing. I'm a passive ghost moving through this illusion. And the only agency granted to me is the capacity to consume.[55]

Silvestre suggests that *Sleep No More* maintains a paradigm that undercuts Punchdrunk's advertised goals and concentrates more on economy than artistry. Landsberg and Rancière both suggest that the capitalistic environment may affect the integrity and mission of the performance, setting boundaries on the creation of prosthetic cultural histories.

Whether or not this is the case (it is impossible to remove the theatre from the material circumstances of its creation), it presents another aspect of the post-human at work in the production. As Cary Wolfe illustrates in *What is Posthumanism?* (2010), "In the form of meaning then, we find that systems increase their contacts with their environments paradoxically by *virtualizing* them"[56] Thinking of performance as a system, the contact with the social

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[54] Silvestre.
[55] Silvestre.
[56] Wolfe, Cary. *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010),18.

environment suggests a model of mirroring between performance and outside environment. In this case, Silvestre puts it best by pointing out the hypocrisy of Punchdrunk's branding within the notion of participation, art, and agency as if these concerns might be separated from the socioeconomic landscape of, say, London (where Punchdrunk is based) or New York City (where *Sleep No More* occurs). The virtualization occurs in the possibility of meaning making within the environment of the performance and the material context surrounding it. Egginton suggests that in the baroque aesthetic a veil of appearances conceals a supposed truth from an audience, who eventually find the only truth to be in the act of performance itself. Punchdrunk takes advantage of this technique, not just in their construction of performance, but also in the branding of their performances as an enclosed and participatory environment. Silvestre appears to criticize Punchdrunk for a lack of artistic integrity with regard to their mission, but in reality his criticisms outline the natural extension of Punchdrunk's performative state as one of virtuality, of creating the illusion of truth hidden behind social and theatrical performances. This conflation of Baroque and neo-baroque aesthetics with the posthuman has surprising consequences that shape further discussions of the immersive theatre.

Silvestre's interest in Punchdrunk's selling out also calls attention to the company's expertise at cashing-in on a cultural moment. Oddey and White, in an analysis of the game "Second Life," inadvertently describe the conventions of *Sleep No More*:

> If someone asked me to create a show right now I would create a large scale "grand game." The game is large in scale because within its system it

> consists of a number of games, similar to some forms of long form improvisational theatre…In Second Life, the theatre is a system with different parameters and inputs yet it still has its boundaries. It is a closed system. The space, and objects within, shapes the narrative and the game or collection of games within creates this system. The space leaves space for added content by players and also leaves room for solo or multiple play but guides this play in both concrete and content terms. [57]

In much the same way, *Sleep No More* is a closed system with rules and boundaries. Some of the games involve the theatrical space itself as a closed system, as in an individual's choice to investigate a room or to follow a performer down a darkened hallway. However, the allusions Silvestre and other bloggers make to the structure of the space itself, its performances, and its boundaries, express meta-systems that have shifted with the increased exposure and popularity of the production. Problematically, the metatheatrical network that tracks Punchdrunk's every move breaks the game by parsing its mysteries for other gamers. Silvestre, Landsberg, and Rancière have heretofore pointed out how easily this happens in a capital-based environment. To put it another way, it is as if the viewer of a baroque mural, play, or sculpture believed in the artifice of the unbounded frame, dynamic movement, or theatrical performance, as a representation of truth rather than the illusion that truth exists. The productions' aims have been reconstituted as a search for virtual meaning.

The virtualities that *Sleep No More* creates in regard to audiences express themselves further in relation to the structure of the performance itself and its relationship with spectators. While freedom allegedly lies at the heart of Punchdrunk's environments, criticisms like those above have become more frequent. An audience in these spaces, as in more traditional theatrical work, finds

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[57] Oddey and White, 81.

themselves forced into a discourse with a narrative within which they cannot effect real change. Instead they are ghosts whose interactions neither influence the course of events nor are allowed to facilitate unstructured interactions with the space or performers.

The material and theoretical consequences of Punchdrunk's work also necessitate an analysis of the aesthetic culture that produces immersive theatre. While this project has adopted the term to describe Punchdrunk's work as an extension of site-specific and promenade theatre, the term also provokes other questions relating to the structure and format of the audience/performance relationship the term engenders. Gareth White, in his "On Immersive Theatre" (2012) describes and troubles the term by noting that "Immersion implies access to the inside of the performance in some way, but what kinds of inside might the term refer to?"[58] White goes on to describe the interiority of works by both Punchdrunk and Shunt, another theatrical company specializing in immersive events. He continues:

> In *Faust* and *Sleep No More* the audience had access to the characters' bedrooms, while in *Masque of the Red Death* there was a theatre dressing room, hung with costumes and a row of mirrors. Being allowed to follow characters into these intimate spaces constitutes another facet of the company's [Punchdrunk's] preoccupation with interiority in these immersive environments: it allows for a feeling of being behind the scenes, and of being able to see what is otherwise hidden. But it is also a manner of adding *apparent* layers of depth to the drama itself, as well as to the presentation of a fictional space: layers that seem to be accessible to audience members, should they pursue them vigorously enough. [italics original][59]

Focusing on the interiority of the space compels a recognition that "immersion"

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[58] White, 221.
[59] White, 230

still "maintains a subject—object divide" in that the spectator experiences the artistic event as it unfolds, just as in conventional drama.[60] However, in the circumstances of a Punchdrunk production, the spectator also becomes an actor in the literal sense that they make choices about where to go and whom to follow. Such choices force the audience to collude with Punchdrunk's theatrical aims in the making of a performance. Whatever literal boundaries there might be to the interior space, and even the intimate spaces that White describes, the spectator becomes an accomplice, another character, or a participating member of the company.

Responding to Punchdrunk's work through the gaze of Deleuze's rhizome, subjectivities populate *Sleep No More's* spaces in bewildering variety and number. To the extent that the posthuman and neo-Baroque enter into this space, the nature of theatrical immersion may be redrawn, not just as an excess of site-specific and promenade theatre, but as a model of constant indeterminacy with regard to subjectivity and sensory stimuli. Drawn into this proverbial rabbit-hole, various writers and critics have suggested that *Sleep No More* descends precipitously into voyeurism, illusory intimacy, and the eventual madness of the titular character. Yet another blogger wrote of the Boston production that, "Punchdrunk…transformed forty-four rooms into a living hallucination, a kaleidoscope of dark hallways and whispers interrupted by sudden eruptions of brutal violence."[61] The action reaches a fever pitch at the end of a performance track, with Macbeth hung dramatically hung from the ceiling of the largest room-

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[60] White, 228.
[61] Switzky, Laurence. "Sleep No More." *Curtain Up*.
http://www.curtainup.com/sleepnomoreboston.html.

the center of the medieval labyrinth. This action occurred in both the Boston and
New York productions, bringing the entirety of the masked audience together to
witness Macbeth's gruesome end. The centrality of this climax in the space marks
the only portion of the production seen by all attendees. This is the ultimate act of
voyeurism, familiar to both medieval and early modern periods: the public
execution. That execution comes after audiences have wandered through the
living hallucination of dead ends, fragmentary evidence, and ambiguous
performances. Macbeth's fall seems to stand as a final metatheatrical vision that
describes the extra-theatrical activity of life as performance. After the struggle of
navigating the play-world, our end is not totally unlike Macbeth's. By the end of
the play, *Sleep No More* seems to embrace death as the ultimate end of
incorporeal materialism-the transformation of the body into something
indeterminate and other.

This conclusion takes clear account of the undeniably sinister aspects of
Sleep No More's inspirational texts. The physical and mental disorientation of the
space, the familiar message of mortality, and the excess of the space's sensory
power, all point to the fusion of the labyrinthine with the existential confusion of
posthuman existence. This is consistent with the rhizomatic model this chapter
has used hitherto to describe the complex of subjectivities in the immersive world.
Umberto Eco and Gilles Deleuze discover common ground between the labyrinth
and the rhizome:

> Then there is the mannerist maze: if you unravel it, you find in your hands
> a kind of tree, a structure with roots, with many blind alleys. There is only
> one exit, but you can get it wrong. You need an Ariadne's thread to keep
> from getting lost. This labyrinth is a model of the trial-and-error process.

> And finally there is the net, or, rather, what Deleuze and and Guattari call "rhizome." The rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite...that is, it can be structured but is never structured definitively.[62]

Comparing these visions of the maze with the relationship between the production and its spectators, the material world of the drama can be potentially infinite because no one person can ever view the entirety of the performance. In essence, the production introduces the rhizome into its structure, but does not fully embrace it. Instead, Eco aptly describes the synthesis of the rhizomatic framework with the mannerist maze, a maze with a definite center point and exit. The liminality of *Sleep No More's* labyrinth only increases the complexity of its final action by introducing Macbeth's death. While Punchdrunk may have created the equivalent of a mannerist maze, it also introduces the conceptual power of the rhizome, and the becoming of the rhizome, through death. Symbolically speaking, the only exit to the labyrinth is the final transformation, that of death. While we adjourn to the pleasant comfort of the production's bar, complete with live music, Macbeth's death literally hangs over our heads as a final nod to the dark metatheatre of Shakespeare's original text.

In as much as that text plays a role in Punchdrunk's productions, it resonates with the transformative vision of early modern drama. Punchdrunk has often used early modern texts as the backbone of their productions. As company artistic director Felix Barrett says of these plays "…installations are described in the text it's just a matter of unpicking. It's almost like a logic puzzle in itself. You dissect it and then think, this little couplet here will look beautiful in a

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[62] Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 57-58.

cupboard…"[63] In other words, the text lends itself to translation; not in the conventional manner of page to stage but from text to image.

That environment has been termed "immersive," though many questions still exist as to what that theatrical state might imply. Certainly site-specific and environmental theatres have now had a long history. While the company's performance depends upon site, immersive implies a furthering of site-specific and promenade theatres. However, the location of that theatre in contemporary culture highlights the continued intersection of immersion with a posthuman, neobaroque zeitgeist. Consequently, deploying installations in performance spaces with the intent of enveloping participants has certain, specific outcomes with regard to the importance of place. To imagine these outcomes requires defining site-specific theatre. Patrice Pavis highlights characteristics integral to the form:

> This term refers to a staging and performance conceived on the basis of a place in the real world (ergo, outside the established theatre. A large part of the work has to do with researching a place, often an unusual one that is imbued with history or permeated with atmosphere: an airplane hangar, unused factory, city neighborhood, house or apartment. The insertion of a classical or modern text in this "found space" throws new light on it, gives it an unsuspected power, and places the audience at an entirely different relationship to the text, the place and the purpose of being there. This new context provides a new situation or enunciation…and gives the performance an unusual setting of great charm and power.[64]

In Punchdrunk's case, "the space is all-important and the way we build the work is about our instinctual response to it."[65] In most instances, that space precisely follows Pavis's definition. As mentioned above, the company's first incarnation of

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[63] This, and several other quotations, comes from an interview with Punchdrunk's Artistic Director Felix Barrett, and Choreographer Maxine Doyle in Machon, Josephine. *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[64] Pavis, Patrice qtd. in Pearson, Mike. *Site-Specific Performance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 7.

[65] Machon, 92. The quote is from Punchdrunk's Artistic Director Felix Barrett.

Sleep No More (2009) used an abandoned school, and in New York City (2011-)

the production has transformed and expanded to fit several abandoned

warehouses. In other productions, they have used a defunct pharmaceutical

company, the tunnels under London's Waterloo station, and a Victorian town hall.

In each instance, the company claims to have responded to the space organically,

adjusting and refining based on the specificity of the space.

Where Punchdrunk expands on site-specific theatre relates both to

intention, or how the company relates to the space, and outcome, or how an

audience encounters that space. Both relationships imply an augmentation to site,

in this case deemphasizing its particular spatial configuration in favor of sensual,

haptic, experiences. In this, it resembles the neobaroque in its scope, and

posthumanism in its reprioritization of bodies in space. Josephine Machon, in her

important work *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* (2009)

emphasizes the viscerality of Punchdrunk's productions and their effect upon the

senses as a key component of analyzing immersion as a convention. Gareth White

quotes Machon:

> One of the key propositions of her '(syn)aesthetics' is that the 'fusing of
> sense (semantic 'meaning making') with sense (feeling, both sensation and
> emotion) establishes a double edged rendering of making sense/sense-
> making'; thus she places the site of response throughout the body rather
> than in a mediation by the bodily machinery of the sensed on behalf of the
> mind or brain.[66]

The immediacy of the sensual experience Machon describes highlights the

involvement of the audience in Punchdrunk's work, and indeed, intimates the

extent to which the spectator becomes a reactive, sensate part of the drama itself.

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[66] White, Gareth. "On Immersive Theatre" in *Theatre Research International* (Volume 37, Number 3, October 2012) 221-235, 228. He quotes Machon, 14.

Felix Barrett supports her thesis:

> So it's true, you don't have time to think about it, you let your body dictate to you what the show's going to be. The most crucial part of the process in terms of building the show is the first time the team walk around it, because its then, when you're wary of a certain corridor and you're tempted by a certain staircase, you know that's your body talking rather than your mind. That's immediate, that's what your senses pick up on…[67]

Speaking here about the relationship of the production space to the bodies involved, it becomes clearer the extent to which spectating, in Barret's view, can be conflated with inclusion in the performance. Spectating itself becomes part of the immersion, a syncretic part of the event. Barrett describes it as such: "If you save it [the conclusion of a production] until the final point…allowing the audience movement and manipulation through that crescendo of the building so that the audience motion through the space and narrative come to the same point…"[68] The audience, through the potential of the space and their unmediated response to its design, become a key part of the "crescendo" of the performance and, in essence, are led into complicity with an expansive metatheatre fully contained within the site of the event.

The relationship to space expressed by Barrett deemphasizes the historical context of a chosen site but highlights the potential sensory impact of that space for an audience. The theatrical site in this case, while still key to Punchdrunk's work, has less to do with a localized awareness of the space's proximal location within a community, and more on the potentials of a space in itself. Barrett's inclusion of the audience through intuition and instinct also emphasizes the

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[67] Machon, 92.
[68] Machon, 94.

participatory nature of these productions and the functional aspect of a site over

its historical qualities. For Punchdrunk, space becomes a tool for the creation of

an overall effect that spills out of the bounded implications of "site specific" and

into what has often been called "immersion." Machon quotes Maxine Doyle and

Felix Barrett:

> MD: There's a sense of the homogenous with Punchdrunk shows. It might be interdisciplinary with lots of different elements but there's a sense of it all working together.
>
> FB: It's because it's all about being able to *feel* it. Not just seeing it or hearing it, it's about what the audience feel, because it is about the visceral…it's about the most efficient way to cut straight to an audience member so there's no hierarchy of discipline. Each one needs to be as strong as the other; otherwise it becomes the weak link.[69]

This synthesis of a specific space with installations, objects, lighting, texts, and

other tools, also mirrors a trending expansion of the site-specific in contemporary

art and theatre practice. Miwon Kwon's prescient book *One Place After Another:*

Site Specific Art and Locational Identity (2002) quotes James Meyer:

> [the functional site] is a process, an operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and discursive filiations and the bodies that move between them (the artist's above all). It is an informational site, a locus of overlap of text, photographs, and video recordings, physical places and things…it is a temporary thing; a movement; a chain of meanings devoid of a particular focus.[70]

Meyer's summary of this trend provides a connection between post-humanism,

contemporary site specificity, and Punchdrunk's theatrical model. Kwon expands:

> The site is now structured (inter) textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions *through spaces*, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist. Corresponding to the model of

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[69] Machon, 95.

[70] Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 29.

movement in electronic spaces of the internet and cyberspace, which are likewise structured as transitive experiences, one thing after another, and not in synchronic simultaneity, this transformation of the site textualizes space and spatializes discourses. A provisional conclusion might be that in advanced art practices of the past thirty years the operative definition of the site has been transformed from a physical location—grounded, fixed, actual—to a discursive vector—ungrounded, fluid, virtual.[71]

In Meyer and Kwon's view, site becomes discursive, intertextual, and cross-disciplinary. Deleuze and Guattari might refer to this conceptualization of site as rhizomatic, in process, or becoming.[72] However, it is not "the passage of the artist" that marks out the "nomadic narrative" of a Punchdrunk performance, but the individual audience member who wanders through the site, experiencing the multidimensional sensory experience for themselves and locating their own narrative syncretically.

To this point, comparing Punchdrunk to site-specific work has taken an account of their performances as *more than* site-specific. The call to an audience's visceral response to the design and performance of their work, their sensory affect, calls upon a means of describing their excessive characteristics. Those characteristics bear a distinct resemblance to the strategies inherent in a neobaroque/posthuman aesthetic. As such, the company renders performances into rhizomatic worlds that have turned formerly stable categories, such as text and audience, into eminently fluid and unstable forces. At once subject and object, the spectator and performers range across a space whose boundaries assure containment, agency, meaning, and pleasure in measures relative to the prosthetics formed by cultural memory, symbols, and chance.

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[71] Kwon, 29-30.
[72] Parr, Adrian, 231.

Chapter 2

Textual Implosion: Topography, Ontology, and the Sensorium

In those dreams I spoke that language too, the first language, and I had dominion over the nature of all that was real. In my dream, it was the tongue of what is, and anything spoken in it becomes real, because nothing said in that language can be a lie. It is the most basic building brick of everything. In my dreams I have used that language to heal the sick and to fly; once I dreamed I kept a perfect little bed-and-breakfast by the seaside, and to everyone who came to stay with me I would say, in that tongue, 'Be whole,' and they would become whole, not be broken people, not any longer, because I had spoken the language of shaping.[73]

'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'
'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.
'I don't much care where—'said Alice
'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.[74]

From its first moments, entering *Then She Fell* feels markedly different than *Sleep No More*. Waiting on a stoop in Brooklyn in the cold of a January evening, the only indication that one is in the right place is the numbered address above the old, somewhat battered, door. As other participants find their way to this unassuming site in the middle of a residential neighborhood, small talk proves that many of them have also seen Punchdrunk's production. Having caught the immersive bug, they went out in search of more immersive experiences. I enthuse with them as we wait, rubbing my gloved hands together to keep myself warm on the concrete steps.[75]

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[73] Gaiman, Neil. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 43.
[74] Carroll, Lewis, Martin Gardner ed. *The Annotated Alice* (London: W.W. Norton, 2000), 65.
[75] I will also be discussing the production *Speakeasy Dollhouse* (2014), a production I also attended. However, I am using *Then She Fell* here because of its strong relationship to literary texts.

Then *She Fell* (2012, 2013) is the work of Third Rail Projects, a company based in Brooklyn, and involves a fusion of *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), and the life of Lewis Carrol (a.k.a Charles Lutwidge Dodgson). Here, there are only fifteen participants—Third Rail eschews the roving crowds of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*—and there is no pitch-dark transitional space. Instead, the company has turned an abandoned parochial school house in Brooklyn into the fictitious Kingsland Ward asylum, a far more compact site than the multi-warehouse Punchdrunk production. As it turns out, this is an intimate space for describing the trials and travails of an intimate relationship— that between Alice Liddell and Carroll himself.

Audiences begin in a waiting room where multiple texts are present and available to pick up and read. *The Annotated Alice*, edited by Martin Gardner, makes an appearance here alongside a biography of Lewis Carroll.[76] These appear on a desk attended by a nurse, who pours us a bitter, mulled wine from a pitcher. We are allowed to explore this office until the beginning of the production, and are given keys that open several of the locked boxes on the periphery of the room. Various texts appear in the boxes, including admittance papers for various characters from the Alice tales (notably the Mad Hatter, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson himself, and others). These papers provide atmosphere, but more importantly they destabilize the subject position of audience members. Are we also being admitted to the ward? Are we a sort of auxiliary staff? Are we visitors only? The possible roles we might play in the performance immediately "have such different regimes of organization and lines of causality, and pertain to such

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[76] See Gardner, Martin, ed. *The Annotated Alice* (New York: WW Norton, 2000).

different levels of reality...if we try to pinpoint the encounter, it slips from our

grasp."[77] Similarly, the search for a stable role in the space is fractured and

reimagined continuously as the performance continues.

After several minutes, we have drunk our glasses of bitter wine (we will

eat and drink several small items during the performance, conjuring up the "eat

me" and "drink me" items of the Alice tales), and are asked to sit in chairs as a

doctor comes to give us instructions. These instructions include a detailed

definition of the word "liminality," with an emphasis on *Then She Fell* as a state

of transition between imagined worlds. This echoes the Oxford English

Dictionary, which describes the term as "a transitional or indeterminate state

between culturally defined stages of a person's life; *spec.* such a state occupied

during a ritual or rite of passage, characterized by a sense of solidarity between

participants."[78] Liminality, as it is described by the doctor, occupies this

performance as a ritual or a rite—a suspended moment of animation and

transformation in which the audience colludes in the creation of the event. This

collusion provides yet another impetus for active participation in the performance,

providing the "solidarity" mentioned in the OED, as well as an acknowledgment

of the performative act about to take place. As Egginton continues in his analysis

of the neo-baroque, "There is a blurring...that suggests to the participant that the

borders distinguishing base reality from a given representation are fungible, only

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[77] Massumi, Brian, 15.
[78] Oxford English Dictionary.
http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/view/Entry/248158?rskey=uNBUXT&result=5&is
Advanced=true#eid12021030.

insofar as the base reality is taken as sacrosanct."[79] In essence, the doctor asks at the beginning of the performance for audiences to distinguish between the consumption of the immersive world and integration with its structure. This definition also occurs in the same breath as the ground rules for the space. This liminal adventure includes a series of prohibitions. We are not to open closed doors, or to speak unless spoken to. We are also to relock anything we open with our keys. As the doctor speaks, we are led away by twos, threes, or individually, by a succession of nurses. We will not sit together as an audience until the play's end.

At first blush, the prohibitions of *Then She Fell* call up the rules for a videogame. Even in open-concept video game worlds, there are boundaries. If you go too far, if you find the edge of the world, the illusion of the game is broken. In essence, the prohibitions voiced by the doctor enhance the metatheatricality of the immersive experience. Not only does the conflation of texts, the creation of the asylum, and the manufacturing of the space as spectacle fragment and open up potential identities—the rules that govern the space also transform individual audience members into avatars of the performance. Our role in the space is as a character of sorts. Just like other characters, or performers, our selfhood is relegated to the rules of the illusion for the time allotted. We are to avoid looking for the boundaries of the virtual world.

Audience members from this point on are led firmly along various paths, and to various scenes, many of which use the text of Carroll's work. Conflating the biographical details of Carroll and his relationship with the real Alice, Alice

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[79] Egginton, William, 82.

Liddell, with the work of his imagination, the production places audiences in

voyeuristic positions that challenge our ability to interpret the texts and

relationships before us. As Ben Brantley writes in *The New York Times*:

> This show occupies a dreamscape where the judgments and classifications of the waking mind are inoperative, and where the single self keeps splitting and blurring...Nothing is explained as it's happening...What you will experience is the feeling that children sometimes have of being swept up into busy, self-important social rituals that make no sense. And of spying on adult activities that don't make much sense either and are equally creepy and thrilling [sic].
>
> Among the set pieces: a truly mad tea party that noisily redefines and explodes table etiquette; several visions of two Alices discovering each other on opposite sides of a mirror in subliminally sensual reveries; your being made to paint a white rose red by the White Rabbit; and a forlorn session, in a flooded room, on a derelict dock with a bereft, barefoot man.[80]

In each of these scenes, *Then She Fell* provides an allusive, labyrinthine world

that audiences navigate, less through their own mobility, and more through a

prolonged examination of their own identity and position in space. *Then She Fell*,

more so than Punchdrunk's popular productions, creates a personal journey

through which audiences synthesize impressions about embodiment, identity, and

sensuality. This is true despite Punchdrunk's ostensibly less-structured

experiences, partly due to the intimacy enabled by Third Rail, and partly because

the rules and prohibitions of *Then She Fell* exist in plain view of audience

members. These experiences become individualized topographies that exceed the

boundaries of Carroll's texts, while also ruminating on their potential meanings.

In this sense, immersive performance serves, not just as an experiential version of

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[80] Brantley, Ben, "Lewis Carroll is in a Hospital," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2012.

a video game, but also as a palimpsest that reconstructs the bodies of texts in

unexpected, distinctly personal, ways.

Deleuze and Guattari, at the outset of their work *A Thousand Plateaus:*

Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1987) describe further how interventions of

various types penetrate texts and their potentials:

> As an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other
> assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs. We will never
> ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for
> anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in
> connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities,
> in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and
> with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge.[81]

The concept of the "body without organs" provides a key point of departure for

the posthuman—one that models the complicated junctions of text and subject

negotiated in the immersive theatre. Replacing "book" with "performance" in the

quotation, the production becomes less an auteur's vision, and more a machine for

the creation of lived experiences. However, while the body without organs may

have the potential for subversion, and therefore "seeks a mode of articulation that

is free from the binding tropes of subjectification and signification" it also "must

play a delicate game of maintaining some reference to these systems of

stratification…In other words, such subversion is a never-completed process…it

must exist—more or less—within the system it aims to subvert."[82] In immersive

theatres that base their experiences off of a text or texts, the body without organs

plays an important role. The authoritative, stable identity of an author or authors,

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[81] Deleuze, Gilles and Feliz Guattari, Brian Massumi trans. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 4.
[82] Parr, Adrian. *Deleuze Dictionary* (New York: Columbia, 2005), 33.

text or texts, provides the cultural cache necessary for audiences to feel safe, comfortable, and on known territory.

As individuals enter into the immersive environment, the structure of the narrative becomes unstable, fragmented, confusing, and perhaps even terrifying. Interjecting personal experiences into the space, reconfiguring the possibilities of texts that seemed clear, foreclosed, or otherwise concretized, individuals are forced to create new texts. Most importantly, this state of narrative becoming does not mean each immersive experience yields one of hundreds or even thousands of adaptations of, say, *Alice in Wonderland*. The agency of the audience exceeds the possibilities delimited by the concept of adaptation. Instead, audiences become members of their own narrative, part of the body without organs. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, the process of such a body "is continuous and oriented only towards its process or movement rather than any teleological point of completion."[83] At the end of the immersive event, it becomes unclear who authored the journey, where it started and ended.

Questions of text—how an immersive experience authors a text, manipulates narratives, subverts or reifies the authority of the canon—plague such productions. As a corollary to the experiential nature of immersive events, texts and textuality represent both an engagement with the future (in its dissemination throughout spaces) and a hearkening to the past (in its authorial, written, form). As such, the production continually negotiates the line between a neoliberal framework, where authorship is an act of individual responsibility, and the cultural ur-text, or what has accreted around a text in the minds of participants to

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[83] Parr, 33.

influence their imagining of that text. For instance, *Alice in Wonderland*

maintains a space in popular culture through films, plays, and other imaginings,

all of which are borne into the space of *Then She Fell*. Yet, the conglomerated

imaginings of participants are then faced with the reinterpretation of their cultural

memory evoked in visual, aesthetic, and experiential terms. They are there forced

to integrate that narrative into another form. With this in mind, this chapter

compares and contrasts the functionality of text in immersive environments

against what I term traditional theatrical circumstances. Further, I continue an

exploration of how the gamification of space, the neobaroque paradigm, and the

posthuman influence the embodiment of text in immersion and its systems of

relationships, i.e. between participant and production, participant and performer,

and participant and space.

In *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary*

Performance (2013), Josephine Machon introduces her topic:

> I started this venture with a fairly clear idea, albeit fuzzy at the edges, of
> what I believed immersive performance to be, and what I knew it was not.
> I am now certain that "immersive theatre" is impossible to define as a
> genre, with fixed and determinate codes and conventions, because *it is not*
> *one* [emphasis original].[84]

Qualifying this statement further, she states that "immersivity in performance

does expose qualities, features and forms that enable us to know what 'it' is when

we are experiencing it." [85] Implying that immersive theatre involves ineffable

qualities that defy generic conventions, Machon expresses the term as "shorthand,

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[84] Machon, Josephine. *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy Contemporary Performance*
(New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), xvi.
[85] Machon, xvi.

not jargon."[86] Used to define performances that synthesize space, text, physical performance, media, and participatory acts, immersive theatre proves too broad for a single, defining narrative. By privileging material conventions over others, emphasizing sensual engagements, and creating various formats for participation, theatre practitioners achieve results that, while varying considerably, all render immersive experiences for audiences.

In Chapter 1, Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (2010, 2012--) provides a representative example of what it means to engage with an immersive production in scholarly and experiential terms. However, it is only through a broad range of immersive environments that the key components of the form take on recognizable shapes and conventions. Using the term *immersive* as Machon does—shorthand for a swath of contemporary cultural and paratheatrical activities—the latter portion of this project examines other representative examples of theatrical immersion, focusing on text, space, objects, and participation in these spaces to build critical frames for describing the ineffability of immersive theatrical experience. Chris Salter contextualizes this framing in *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (2010):

> Technologies are not simply inert or neutral artifacts that are, as Heidegger termed it, *ready to hand*: waiting for human presence to activate them and thus extend human action into the world, revealing and framing it in a particular manner. Instead, technologies are similar to Guattari's machine, constructing and ordering social-cultural-political relations and constructing new ones between humans, tools, processes, and the environment in which we are all deeply entangled [emphasis original].[87]

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[86] Machon, xvii.

[87] Salter, Chris. *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), xxxv.

As both Salter and Machon underscore in their writings, the landscape of contemporary culture highlights immersive theatres' use of interdisciplinary and technological media. Revealing the competing priorities of immersive events, their entanglement constructs relationships that reframe the potentials of performance. As a result, each element of performance becomes critical to describing how these productions construct and implement immersive virtual worlds.

Texts, while playing a key role in the creation of immersive experiences, cease to inhabit the central placement expected in traditional theatrical circumstances. In speaking of *tradition* in theatrical terms, I specifically mean the text-centric conventions of the literary theatre:

> To be clear, "traditional" or "conventional" in this particular context (and accepting that these are contestable terms themselves) is a theatre experience, whether in a large Victorian theatre with a proscenium arch, the open plan theatres of the [Royal] National Theatre, or in smaller studio spaces, where audiences enter an auditorium, sit in their assigned seat in a given row, obediently hush as soon as the house lights dim and stage lights come up, perhaps, even still, a red, velvet curtain is raised.[88]

In the duration of the performance, actors perform a text. The experience has a beginning, middle, and an end, creating a linear temporal structure that positions audiences outside the processes occurring on stage. By contrast, immersion positions audiences *inside* the activity of the performance, and the variety of texts and conventions throw them "into a totally new environment and context from the everyday world from which it has come."[89] In these theatrical circumstances the

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88 Machon, 26.
89 Machon, 27.

temporal, verbal, experience of text has been transformed into a synthesis of media, performances, events, and constructed realities.

Given the differing priorities of the immersive theatre, dramatic literature becomes something other in these events, especially when compared to traditional theatres. Texts in immersive circumstances produce tensions between performance, literature, cultural memory, and audience interaction. For example, Third Rail Project's current production *Then She Fell* in Brooklyn, NY (2012, 2013--), and Cynthia von Buhler's *Speakeasy Dollhouse* (2013--), in Manhattan's Lower East Side, both create immersive circumstances that utilize texts significantly, but also transform them into experiential, interactive sites. In contrast to *Then She Fell*, *Speakeasy Dollhouse* uses the author's personal history as a precursor to entry into the event. Through a series of e-mails, participants are given to understand that Cynthia's grandfather owned a speakeasy, was murdered (perhaps by a rival gang member), and that the case subsequently remained a mystery—one that might be revealed by replaying the action with "dolls"—us.

As such, these performances, and others, attempt to establish what Nicolas Bourriaud calls "*relational* art" in the theatre—what he defines as "art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and *private* symbolic space [emphasis original]."[90] That private symbolic space may be likened to traditional, text-centered theatre, in which audiences and theatrical productions inhabit clearly defined and isolated social roles. As Machon relates in her definition of

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[90] Bishop, Claire, ed. *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 160.

traditional theatre, such theatre events isolate individuals in the dark of the

auditorium, creating spaces/roles antithetical to Bourriaud's goal of supporting

public interactivity and discourse in art. The audience of the literary theatre

inhabits a space that treats it as passive receptors without the freedom of

discourse. Machon continues in her description of the literary theatre:

> These rules and conventions can be understood to be in place in any spectatorial, theatre production where the audience/actor (us/them) relationship is defined by the delineation of space (auditorium/stage) and role (static/passive [sic] observer/active-moving performer) where the audience is viewing the action ahead of them. This is a theatre experience which, on analysis, suggests it does not matter if you are there or not; the audience could get up and walk out and it would carry on.[91]

By contrast, theatrical immersion creates spaces that allow discourses to take

place in the context of the performance environment, and often during the

performances themselves. Freeing audiences from their seats, allowing them the

ability to explore spaces, control aspects of the performance, and split their

attention between multiple stimuli, these experiences require the audience's

presence (of mind and body) for them to exist as whole. *Then She Fell* and

Speakeasy Dollhouse each produce an experience only possible through the

complicity and energy of audience members—making of them not just consumers

of text, but creators.

Bourriaud's "sphere of human interactions and its social context," similar

to the term *immersive,* refers to a broad range of discrete artistic activities.

Increasing the precision of this discussion and its relevance to theatre, posthuman

and neobaroque discourses supplement relational aesthetics in their ability to

account for the techno-cultural context of texts in immersive theatres. To that end,

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[91] Machon, 27.

Angela Ndalianis, William Egginton, and other scholars have suggested that our

current social context parallels tropes of the historical baroque, creating what

constitutes a resurrection of baroque ideologies and structures in the form of

postmodern technologies and entertainment. As Ndalianis writes in *Neo-Baroque*

Aesthetics, "Entertainment forms have increasingly displayed a concern for

engulfing and engaging the spectator actively in sensorial and formal games that

are concerned with their own media-specific sensory and playful experiences."[92]

Immersive theatres, in this sense, have become the natural extension of a social

context that produces increasingly complex virtual and mediatized experiences.

Extending and augmenting the structure of neo-baroque aesthetics, the

textual and narrative conventions of theatrical immersion also reflect the

influences of posthumanism upon cultural media, especially in circumstances that

emphasize these experiences as a means of communitas.[93] Jacques Rancière, in

his *Emancipated Spectator* (2011), emphasizes this communal function of the

theatrical, noting that "Everywhere there are starting points, intersections and

junctions that enable us to learn something new if we refuse, firstly, radical

distance, secondly the distribution of roles, and thirdly the boundaries between

territories."[94] While Rancière engages skeptically with performances attempting

to artificially create communities, he asserts that the emancipation of the spectator

involves "blurring...the boundary between those who act and those who look,

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[92] Ndalianis, Angela. *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), 27.
[93] Communitas is defined in the OED as "A strong sense of solidarity and bonding that develops among people experiencing a ritual, rite of passage, or other transitional state together."
[94] Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator* (New York: Verso, 2011), 17.

between individuals, and those of a collective body."[95] Similarly, posthumanism

redefines social and aesthetic boundaries as multiple, permeable, and dynamic

relationships. Starting with Deleuze's concept of the rhizome—a modeling of the

world as a system of lateral, interconnected flows of meaning—posthumanism

disrupts linear narratives and discrete subjects. As Brian Massumi writes in *A

User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and

Guattari* (1992), "Content is not the sign, and it is not the referent or signified. It

is what the sign envelops, a whole world of forces."[96] *Speakeasy Dollhouse's*

textual content gives way to participatory acts as soon as the

spectators/participants enter the space, whereas in *Then She Fell* concrete,

physical signs reconstruct two separate but distinct realities— one represented by

Lewis Carroll's authorial life and the other by his fictional works. In both

instances, signs envelop the participants of the drama and propel them into

hermeneutic acts.

The body without organs, along with its closely related cycle of

territorialization, also intersects with contemporary cultural tropes and narrative

technologies. The extravagant illusions of the immersive theatre, its veiled

allusions, and its disregard for spatial boundaries, all call up a neobaroque

aesthetic rooted in the historical Baroque. At once as dynamic, hyperbolic, and

labyrinthine as its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century counterparts, the

neobaroque presents itself in contemporary culture through new media,

interactivity, and sensual experiences. Viewing contemporary cultural works

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[95] Rancière, 19.

[96] Massumi, Brian. *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Boston: MIT Press, 1992), 12.

through their intertextual and rhizomatic qualities, Ndalianis suggests a

neobaroque reading of popular culture:

> As in the monadic structure proposed by the baroque philosopher
> Gottfried Liebniz and the baroque "folds" described by Gilles Deleuze,
> each unit (whether in the form of a serial, a specific allusion, or a distinct
> media format) relies on other monads: one serial folds into another, and
> into yet another still; one allusion leads to an alternate path outside the
> "text," then finds its way back to affect interpretation; or one medium
> connects fluidly to another, relying on the complex interconnectedness of
> the whole. The series of monads make up a unity, the series of folds
> construct a convoluted labyrinth that the audience is temptingly invited to
> explore.[97]

The Internet provides the most helpful example of this process. Web pages

generally include an intertext embedded in their functions. For example, one may

read a text that in turn links to another text, an image, a video clip, or audio file,

that in turn may lead to another text. The interactivity that lies at the base of this

experience allows narratives to emerge more or less organically, as a series of

junctions across time, space, media, and subject matter. However, and similarly to

the neo-and historical-Baroque, the structure of this process leads insistently away

from the originating point of entry, down into a labyrinth of subversions, tangents,

and manipulations. The neobaroque, like the Baroque before it, delights in

obfuscation, the power to overwhelm, and illusions of meaning and motion. To

continue with the analogy of the Internet, the presumed agency of "surfing the

web" comes with concomitant webs of conditions and preconditions having to do

with use, access, content, and risk. Immersive theatre involves similar rules and

pitfalls, as the neobaroque conventions of its aesthetic issue certain preconditions

to the lived agency of performance. These conditions or rules discreetly dismantle

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[97] Ndalianis, 27.

the audience's ability to effect change or delimit meaning. Likening this phenomena to the body without organs, it proves impossible for immersive environments to escape modes of "subjectification and stratification" in most circumstances.

Thinking in terms of the "body without organs" (hitherto the BwO), the use of linear scripts shifts, in the immersive theatre, to mimic the simultaneity of online experiences. For instance, the interactions audiences have with texts in these spaces depend upon choices spectators make during the course of performances. Often, multiple options are presented to participants, and they make a choice about the content they choose to view. These choices make up the participant's experiential journey in the duration of the event, and text becomes secondary to that journey. For, while texts remain included in immersive performances such as *Then She Fell* and *Speakeasy Dollhouse,* those texts are not the same as the sensorial engagements a participant chooses to experience. As Bourriaud observes, "Once the performance is over, all that remains is documentation that should not be confused with the work itself."[98] In Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More,* that documentation includes the marketing of the production as an extension of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*—a literary and canonical reference point. *Then She Fell*, similarly, uses Lewis Carroll's fiction as a focal point. *Speakeasy Dollhouse* uses archived historical documents to construct a narrative. In each case, as Bourriaud suggests, these texts do not represent the sum of experiences to be found in immersive events. This contrasts with traditional theatres, where the use of a given text might give prospective audiences an inkling

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[98] Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: presses du reel, 2002), 29.

of what to expect in the performance. Instead, texts in the immersive theatre

provide a skeletal structure for events upon which media, installation, and

physical performances may be overlaid. Like web pages, where coding is

concealed by the interface of the browser, texts provide the interface of the

immersive theatre—the recognizable fabric upon which participants map

expectations and cultural experiences.

The integration of literary works into these environments often occurs in

bewilderingly diverse ways—through artistic installations, props, imagery and

new media. Often, such spaces include little or no text in any concrete form (e.g.

as spoken dialogue or written text)—a fact that further complicates tracing textual

structures and meaning in immersive environments. Texts, in a fundamental

sense, become hypertexts in the immersive theatre. A hypertext, according to the

Oxford English Dictionary may be defined as:

> Text which does not form a single sequence and which may be read in
> various orders; *spec.*text and graphics (usu. in machine-readable form)
> which are interconnected in such a way that a reader of the material (as
> displayed at a computer terminal, etc.) can discontinue reading one
> document at certain points in order to consult other related matter. [99]

Supplementing this definition, hypertexts also represent the unseen encoding of

everyday technologies. Websites, for example, run on codes (the most notable of

which is HTML) that remain hidden from view, but provide us with the

interactive viewing experiences we have become familiar with in the digital age.

In their capacity to present fragmented narratives, interactions, and simulations,

hypertexts also reinterpret what William Egginton calls the "major strategy of the

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[99] Oxford English Dictionary.
http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/view/Entry/243461?redirectedFrom=hypertext#eid.

baroque," a strategy that "assumes the existence of a veil of appearances, and then suggests the possibility of a space opening just beyond those appearances where truth resides."[100] Like the subject clicking through web pages, the participant in immersive theatre negotiates an individualized narrative characterized by the illusion of choice—a narrative for which texts appear only to augment the experiential frame of the theatre space. The subject-participant creates a narrative about the performance from his or her experiences, but one based on textual markers that have been disguised and manipulated, and where the role of the audience-subject remains dynamic and unstable.

In Third Rail Project's *Then She Fell* in Brooklyn, NY, the sensual qualities of the production become apparent only after audiences have been stabilized by expectations associated with the production's canonical, textual frames. Using *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* as the foundational texts of *Then She Fell* (2012, 2013), the company depends upon cultural expectations of these texts as entry points, allowing for the transformation and subversion of these expectations within the performance event. Co-artistic director Tom Pearson describes this process:

> We decided to work with the two *Alice* stories and the life of Lewis
> Carroll for all its rich psychological terrain as well as its amazing
> structural components — but also because there is already a cultural
> cachet [sic] to these works which provides a really palpable entry point for
> audiences. Most folks are familiar with the stories to some extent, whether
> it's certain images or story lines that they remember from the books, film
> versions, or general cultural saturation. It gives us an opportunity to really
> take these images and themes into more abstract territory. This is a very
> good thing for immersive storytelling, where the narrative is inherently
> fragmented. Giving audiences something familiar allows them to enter the

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[100] Egginton, William. *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of (Neo) Baroque Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 3.

world with some sort of grounding, and then also allows us to quickly subvert those expectations...much like the *Alice* stories themselves.[101]

For Pearson, the structural elements and expectations of the Alice narrative provide a framing mechanism for the spatial signifiers and performances of *Then She Fell*. Carefully balancing cultural cache and familiarity with the potential for deviation, Third Rail integrates audiences within the intimate space speedily (as noted above, there are only fifteen audience members per show). However, while the text of *Alice in Wonderland* provides a nominal structure for audiences, it also allows the company to subvert the narrative expectations of the familiar Alice mythos. Dispersed into a multitude of spaces and performances, the production dislocates Carroll's texts from their narrative body by introducing aspects of the author's biography. This, in turn, allows for a blurring of the lines between real and imaginary subjects, spaces, and performances. The blurring of narratives in a single performance space has proved typical of immersive environments. London's Punchdrunk Theatre Company, for example, blends Hitchcock's *Rebecca* and *Macbeth* in its now famous *Sleep No More* (2009, 2012) and Büchner's *Woyzeck* with an imaginary Hollywood studio in *The Drowned Man* (2013). New York's Woodshed Collective integrated original work by new playwrights into an adapted vision of Roland Topor's *The Tenant* (2012), while London company dreamthinkspeak created *In The Beginning Was The End* (2013), a production inspired by "Leonardo Da Vinci, The Book of Revelation and the world of Mechatronics."[102] Hybridizing texts in the immersive environment allows for a more flexible aesthetic structure, as companies may

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[101] Rose, Frank.
[102] [Online] Available: http://www.dreamthinkspeak.com/in-the-beginning-was-the-end.htm.

combine disparate allusive elements within the performance space. However, the practice also provides for the inclusion of lesser-known texts than, say, *Alice in Wonderland.* For, while audiences may be familiar with Carroll's work, as it has appeared in countless cultural mediums, his mysterious and historically distant biography may elicit a less conditioned response than his texts. Intertextuality as it exists in the immersive theatre provides both an entry-point and, paradoxically, a diversion meant to catch audiences unaware. Rather than floating through an interactive vision of *Alice* in *Then She Fell*, individuals face the challenge of discerning their role in the space and position in time, of tracing the (imagined) aesthetic and moral disjunction between Carroll's heart and mind, and of facing the possibility of personal complicity, through voyeurism, in Carroll's ultimate collapse.

Lewis Carroll (1832-98) or Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (his real name) wrote the original Alice stories for Alice Liddell, whose father was the dean of Christ Church College in Oxford. His deep fondness for Alice eventually created a rift between the Lidells and Dodgson—a rift that, it seems, became permanent. Martin Gardner explains in *The Annotated Alice*:

> There has been much argumentation about whether Carroll was in love with Alice Liddell. If this is taken to mean that he wanted to marry her or make love to her, there is not the slightest evidence for it. On the other hand, his attitude toward her was the attitude of a man in love. We do know that Mrs. Liddell sensed something unusual, took steps to discourage Carroll's attention, and later burned all of his early letters to Alice.[103]

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[103] Gardner, Martin ed. and Lewis Carroll. *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition* (New York: WW Norton, 2000), xix.

What actually occurred between Alice, her mother, and Carroll, has never been definitively explained. *Then She Fell* uses this mystery to its advantage by pursuing the relationship of the real Alice and Carroll throughout the performance, forcing audiences into a constantly shifting position between the fictional and biographical.

To set the stage for these darker veins of biographical and imaginative work, however, companies such as Third Rail first have an economic imperative to sell their production. The impulse to ground audiences in classic texts follows throughout the marketing of Third Rail's production, channeling literary references into active, relational, terms. Lewis Carroll's texts orient an audience's expectations for the performance, but the production also transforms them into terms that call for participatory acts. As with the hypertextual encoding of a webpage, the static literary influences of the production are transformed into the language of interactive and virtualized media. The description of the production on the company's website provides a glimpse of what to expect in the performance:

> Inspired by the life and writings of Lewis Carroll, [*Then She Fell*] offers an Alice-like experience for audience members as they explore the rooms, often by themselves, in order to discover hidden scenes; encounter performers one-on-one; unearth clues that illuminate a shrouded history; use skeleton keys to gain access to guarded secrets; and imbibe elixirs custom designed by one of NYC's foremost mixologists.[104]

While this description sets the tone for the theatrical environment and provides narrative reference points to pieces of canonical literature, the company's description of the production also drips with verbs—one can explore, discover,

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[104] Third Rail Projects. "Then She Fell". http://thenshefell.com/info/.

encounter, unearth, and illuminate. From the outset, the production promises

agency, intimacy, and a sensory experience that includes secret keys, drinks, a

mystery, and clues. Following a neo-baroque aesthetic, the promise is that of a

spectacle-laden experience, complete with intimate secrets and one-on-one

performances. To reiterate Egginton's argument, *Then She Fell* "depends on the

play of appearances in relation to a corporeal substance...baroque space produces

an effect of depth on surfaces."[105] The prospective intimacy of *Then She Fell*

creates an audience-driven narrative that assumes there is something crucial to

discover in the context of the performance, and that this knowledge may be

available to any audience member.

In this regard, *Then She Fell* follows the marketing impulse of many other

immersive events. Punchdrunk Theatre Company, for instance, promises that in

their production *Sleep No More* (2009, 2010), "Audiences move freely through

the epic world of the story at their own pace, choosing where to go and what to

see, ensuring that everyone's journey is different and unique."[106] Importantly,

Then She Fell concentrates less on the ability of audiences to move on their own,

instead focusing on the intimacy of the performances and interactions audiences

may experience. These two factors mark a major difference between

Punchdrunk's overwhelmingly large spaces and Third Rail Project's attempt to

capitalize on the trending impulse for increased interaction between performers

and audiences. Felicia Lee, writing in *The New York Times* about the explosion of

one-on-one theatrical events taking place across New York, London, and other

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[105] Egginton, William. *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of Neo-Baroque Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 15.
[106] Punchdrunk Theatre Company. http://punchdrunk.com/current-shows/column/3.

locations, writes that, "With the exponential increase in gaming culture, people

are used to being at the center of attention, of controlling their avatar, of getting

immediate feedback."[107] The audience-focused marketing of *Then She Fell* tells a

similar tale through the use of descriptive verbs about what audiences will be

allowed to *do*.

The emphasis on the personal in *Then She Fell* also highlights two distinct

but equally important uses of text in the immersive theatre. First and most

obviously, the inspiring texts of the immersive event haunt all of the

proceedings—either through the marketing materials described above or through

aspects of the space itself. Less obviously, audience members have the

opportunity to create individual narratives driven partially by the textual referents

of the production, but also relative to the installations in the rooms and the

performances they encounter. In *The Stage Life of Props*, Andrew Sofer describes

a similar model as it applies to objects in performance:

> On the one hand, props are *unidirectional*: they are propelled through
> stage space and real time before historically specific audiences at a given
> performance event. At the same time, props are *retrospective*: In Marvin
> Carlson's apt expression, they are "ghosted" by their previous stage
> incarnations, and hence by a theatrical past they both embody and
> critique.[108]

The spaces of the immersive theatre project a performative vision in real time, and

in conjunction with the cultural and editorial accretions of their advertised texts.

However, this model requires expansion to encompass the relational aesthetic

described by Bourriaud and the rhizome conceptualized by Deleuze. For example,

whereas in primarily text-based performance events the props, texts, and

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[107] Lee, Felicia "Theatre for Audiences of One" *The New York Times*, July 27, 2010.
[108] Sofer, Andrew. *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2003), viii.

performances exist in chronological order, immersion defies time by transposing

or subverting linear order. For instance, in *Then She Fell* and *Sleep No More*

(2009, 2012), as well as a number of other immersive events, I may experience

events, spaces, and objects simultaneously, in separate or recurring orders, or not

at all. Consequently, props *or* texts in the immersive theatre might be described as

transversal as opposed to unidirectional. Transversals allow for the textual fabric

of *Then She Fell* and its material components to meet each other in oblique, non-

linear, junctions—as in Deleuze's rhizome. Subsequently, Carlson's notion of

ghosting occurs when audiences place cultural notions of texts, performances, or

props into context with prior performances. Directing this impulse further into

popular culture allows for the entrée of interactive media into the proceedings of

the performance event. Gaming, websites, 3D movies, and a variety of other

emergent technologies make up the cultural context for immersive environments

more than any individual performances or objects by themselves. Chris Salter

addresses this critical context, addressing several questions to the reader:

> If one of the hallmarks of performance is its material embodiment in the
> world, whether that body is defined by human form, a sound that rattles
> the chest, or a machine trying to decode the nuance of a choreographed
> gesture, then why should we make a cut between ourselves and the
> technologies we design to create sheer artifice and, at the same time, a
> world that is not represented but lived? What would it mean to examine a
> history of artistic performance practices using technologies as *machinic*
> performances in the spirit that Guattari used the term: as an immanent,
> collective entanglement of material enunciations that operate on, shape,
> and transform the world in real time? [emphasis original][109]

Such questions illuminate immersive events as enunciations similar to those

described by Guattari. Culturally, as the remove of the technological from the

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[109] Salter, xxiii.

human becomes less apparent through the creation of avatars, constant connectivity to social media, and virtualized marketing personalities, the notion of being embedded, or immersed, in theatrical works becomes more and more normalized. Further, immersive theatres are themselves immersed in the technological entanglements of postmodern culture, creating interdisciplinary machines for the creation of real time experiences. Text, in this case, retains no separate identity from the act of performance.

As BwOs, literary narratives interject themselves into immersive experiences but, unlike the formulae of traditional theatres, those narratives become entangled in sensual experiences. Carrying on the biological terminology beloved of Deleuze and Guattari, literary narratives, immersive theatres, and their participants, all represent vectors that recombine in the context of the performance event. In the OED a vector is defined as: "a bacteriophage which transfers genetic material from one bacterium to another; also, a phage or plasmid used to transfer extraneous DNA into a cell." In essence, a vector is a carrier for foreign DNA. After foreign elements have been introduced, the DNA is *recombinant*. Locating this concept in Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, immersive theatres and their component parts represent *recombinant* structures. Rhizomatically, the texts, participants, installations, and performances of productions such as *Then She Fell*, *Sleep No More*, and *Speakeasy Dollhouse*, maintain connections and interactions that feature conventions of each other element. For example, literary text introduces the performance to a participant, who then creates the living narrative of the event. Conversely, installations and performances present and (re)present

versions of narrative texts to participants, reifying the organizing regimes of the events themselves. Each element of production renders the immersive event as simultaneously imminent, fluid, and regimented—a rhizomatic space constantly in the process of rewriting the DNA of immersion. Taking up a spatial metaphor: while the immersive theatre still relies on texts to make up the substrate for the construction of their performances, each individual who enters the construction site may potentially interact with, and therefore reconstruct, the frame of the performance.

However, as with the BwO, the subject cannot exist outside of systems that it aims to subvert. Noting the similarity of hypertextual interactions to the immersive theatre, hypertexts force individuals to choose a path among *those provided*. Websites, games, and other technologies deploy various limitations upon users. Just as the doctor at the beginning of *Then She Fell* described a series of prohibitions to the audience, the motive force of many immersive experiences involves the manipulation of audiences in the interest of specific outcomes. As a result, the images, objects, and performances of *Then She Fell* also function as the delimitation of available actions rather than the creation of agency. Socio-politically, the verb-heavy language of immersive marketing demands a Marxist critique of immersion. That critique returns to the characteristics of neoliberalism described in Chapter 1. Claire Bishop, writing in *Artificial Hells* about participation and social justice in artistic circumstances, argues:

> The social inclusion agenda is therefore less about repairing the social bond than a mission to enable all members of society to be self-administering, fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state and who can cope with a deregulated, privatized world. As such, the

neoliberal idea of community doesn't seek to build social relations, but rather to erode them.[110]

Immersion, in this case, develops as the antithesis of Bourriaud's relational ideal, instead creating environments similar to the model of consumption engendered by retail establishments. Consuming performances, objects, and spaces like products allows for the existence of conditional choice under the auspices of an authoritative regime. That regime, embedded in a model of social inclusion, projects a neoliberal agenda into theatrical space. *Then She Fell* provides a potent example of this cultural projection in two ways. First, the production provides participants with the opportunity to define the performance narrative. Allowing participants to unlock doors and boxes with their key, examine papers, and interact with performers, the space privileges self-administration over narrative or inclusion. Second, the space situates these activities as a lack. In other words, spectator/participants are required to fill the narrative lack in the performance with a desire to see that narrative complete. Deleuze, in his theorizing about desire, describes *lack* in the context of psychoanalysis as a negative attribute, a void to be filled. Psychoanalysis, in turn, represents the regulation of desire:

> Deleuze is particularly critical of the alliance between desire-pleasure-lack in which desire is misunderstood as either an insatiable internal lack, or as a process whose goal is dissolution in pleasure...Against this alliance Deleuze describes desire as the construction of a plane of immanence in which desire is continuous. Instead of a regulation of desire by pleasure or lack in which desire is extracted from its plane of immanence, desire is a process in which anything is permissible.[111]

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[110] Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 14.
[111] Ross, Alison. "Desire" in Parr, 64.

Creating lack through the presentation of potential narratives in immersive space,

productions such as *Then She Fell* regulate the plane of immanence. Instead of

being "assembled or machined" with positive, productive attachments, desires in

the immersive space are regulated, limited, and manipulated with the illusion of

agency.[112] Through the supposed deregulation of agency in the immersive theatre,

the possibility of community erodes through an emphasis on individual, isolated

experiences. Immersive theatres, therefore, manufacture the desire for freedom,

exploration, and intimacy at their inception, none of which can be sated over the

course of performance. Similar to other forms of advertisement, productions such

as *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell* function through the creation of need or lack.

In this, immersive theatres mirror the psychoanalytic discourses that Deleuze and

Guattari explicitly opposed.

While need, lack, and the manipulation of desire prove endemic to

immersive theatres, the transparency/opacity of organizing regimes in such

productions also alters the possible agency of audiences. In *Then She Fell*,

regulations come from the Doctor, up-front, before the production properly

begins. Audiences, in this case, step into the environment knowing the boundaries

of the virtual world. However, other productions allow their verb-heavy

marketing to govern the agency of their spaces. *Sleep No More*, for example, asks

audiences to "explore, and be daring" upon entering the performance space.[113]

However, this often proves problematic for audiences to interpret. Spectators

attempting to push the envelope of possible interactions come up against a wall

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[112] Parr, 64.

[113] These were instructions given to audience members from an usher during a performance of *Sleep No More*.

(sometimes literally), are asked to leave by ushers, have doors shut in their faces, or may be injured by performers.[114] When asked to create their own texts using the materials present in immersive environments, audiences seek to expand the frame of the play-world in the hope that the promises of agency, intimacy, and creative potential actually exist. What they often find instead is that, much like the illusive frames of baroque paintings, the spatial and sensual elements of the performance have been imagined into existence by a third party, a party whose organizational regimes only allow a specific range of textual and narrative meanings to exist at any one time. Paradoxically, the veil of agency constructed in theatrical immersion prohibits narrative freedom most in cases where the environment appears seamless. Similar to the effect produced by the open-world virtual environments in video games, the borders of these theatre-worlds only appear when participants imagine themselves as free agents—something more than consumers, props, or solitary wanderers.

Keeping the social, spatial, and economic limitations of the immersive theatre in mind, the development of individual texts through sensual interaction still presents a myriad of options—enough to satisfy the appetite of a public used to the immediacy of participatory technologies. Despite being highly codified and structured, it remains the case that immersive theatres generate individualized texts in ways that are distinct from the traditional theatre, similar to the aforementioned hypertext. That hypertextual model simultaneously creates new narratives, sequences, and actions, all while providing a running commentary on the performance's canonical source material. These narratives not only relate to

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[114] See Silvestre, in Chapter 1, 29.

exploring the space itself, but to one-on-one interactions with performers. In *Then She Fell*, I came face-to-face with an Alice (there are two different incarnations in the performance). She took my hand and led me into a tiny dressing room filled with clothes, dolls, a mirror, and two chairs. Asking me to sit, I was told to brush her hair while answering a series of deeply personal questions. I was asked such things as "Do you remember your first love?" "Are you (in a relationship) with someone right now?" and "Do you love them?" When asked these questions, I reflected on the limitations of Carroll's notions of love, the strangeness and intimacy of the setting, and the awkward roleplaying of the performer/audience relationship. The heightened intimacy of this interaction created the potential for reflection on the synthesis of Carroll's imagination with the troubles of his reality. Alice made me feel vulnerable through these disarming personal questions, which in turn emphasized my discomfort with talking about such topics (especially to a total stranger). That vulnerability and awkwardness, I imagined, might have been similar to the experiences of Carroll himself. While my experience with the site and installations of the space speak to the structure of the event, interactions of the sort I had with Alice create a multivalent narrative frame. Tom Pearson observes of *Then She Fell* that "Because it's so intimate, everything is always new (both a blessing and a curse). Every audience member has the potential to respond in a new way, and each scene can be a real collaboration to some extent."[115] Tellingly, the single uncontrollable variable in these performances is the

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[115] Rose, Frank. "Way-Way-Off-Broadway: How the immersive theater of 'Then She Fell' resonates with the digital world". *Deep Media.* 10 June 2013..
http://www.deepmediaonline.com/deepmedia/2013/06/the-immersive-theater-of-then-she-fell.html.

audience's response to intimate, interactive scenes. The reactive nature of the immersive experience, highly controlled though it may be, nonetheless produces an agency that defies the structure of text and authority.

Time and again, the whimsy and interactivity of *Then She Fell* saves it from becoming either just dance-theatre or just installation. The participatory spirit of the production, the voyeurism of watching strange rituals through mirrors, and of being addressed directly and unpretentiously by characters, makes for a hazy dreamscape of blurred worlds and soft edges. Unlike *Sleep No More*, whose landscape seems like the stuff of nightmares punctuated by hard-edged fits of violence, frustration, and anxious energy, *Then She Fell* aims for reflection more than spontaneity and puzzle solving.

Puzzle solving, however, describes the primary gesture of *Speakeasy Dollhouse*, whose aesthetic distance from *Then She Fell* or *Sleep No More* proves Josephine Machon's point regarding the breadth of experiences possible under the aegis of immersive theatre. Textually, *Speakeasy Dollhouse* differs from the latter two productions in important ways. As opposed to the canonical texts introduced into the play-spaces of other immersive events mentioned above, the text of *Speakeasy Dollhouse* comes from public archives.[116] Additionally, whereas audiences of *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell* begin experiencing the event before entering the space, they do so indirectly. Exhortations to wear comfortable shoes, promises of intimacy, and a prevalent sense of mystery, all obfuscate the role of audiences in the event itself. *Speakeasy Dollhouse* dispenses with vagaries by directly addressing the production's goals and the participants' role in those goals.

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[116] See appendix.

Approximately a week before coming to the event, the ticket-holders receive three

e-mails outlining the purpose of the production—to solve the murder of the

director's grandfather.

Cynthia von Buhler, the creator and director of the play, sends out three e-

mails, each of which includes pieces of archived material related to the death of

her grandfather, Frank Spano. She writes in e-mail #1:

> Hi Doll,
>
> I'm Cynthia, Frank Spano's granddaughter.
>
> My grandparents used to own two speakeasies during prohibition -- one
> was a club and the other was a bakery. The bakery was a storefront and the
> club was upstairs behind their apartment.
>
> My grandmother died in the 1980s and I never knew my grandfather. He
> was mysteriously killed in 1935. He died on the very same day my mother
> was born. She told us that he was shot and nobody knew why. It was a
> secret. They boarded up the club and bakery after that.
>
> I started researching my grandfather's murder years ago. I even built a
> speakeasy dollhouse to see if that might help me understand what
> happened. My cousin now lives in my grandparents' old apartment. She
> took it over from them years ago. She's letting me stay here
> while I continue my research.[117]

The audience in this production has a clear role. We are *dolls* being used to

reconstruct the crime scene of von Buhler's grandfather's murder. The

comparative clarity of our role in this production contrasts with the vague

potentials described by the marketing materials of *Then She Fell* or *Sleep No*

More. More than explorers free to do, say, wander, or participate; the audience is

called to perform a single, specific, task. In fact, an attentive audience can glean

much about the production from this single passage. We know, for instance, to

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[117] E-mail communication from *Speakeasy Dollhouse* (21 January 2014), 1 of 3.

expect a speakeasy (the title gives this away as well) and a bakery. We know that there is a secret to uncover, and research to be done. Research, as an activity, is not a verb used in the materials of *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell*. Instead of "exploring," "unearthing," or "illuminating," we are *researching*. In *Speakeasy Dollhouse* participants revive the events of archival material by becoming a living archive.

The textual structure of *Speakeasy Dollhouse*, different though it may be from those productions using canonical texts, provides perspective on the use-value of such authors as Shakespeare or Lewis Carroll. Through the synthesis of experiential and textual elements in productions that rely on canonical work, two distinct constructs emerge. First, the integration of known (or partially known) texts with immersive environments reinforces the narrative and spatial parameters of a given performance. *Speakeasy Dollhouse* can perform this function only through the archival material it presents pre-production, and as a result has limited narrative aims. Second, audiences begin imaginatively framing performances based on traditionally canonical texts long before entering the immersive space. Artists in these cases can rely on the possibility of subverting a participant's perspective on a piece of literature. Hearkening back to Tom Pearson's statements about the Alice mythos, such subversion is, I argue, more likely when cultural cache plays a role in the foundations of an immersive performance. When audiences begin using the narrative technologies of the environment, they begin their (re)constructions based partially on preconceptions of the texts being used.

Speakeasy Dollhouse cannot rely on an audience's exposure to its textual materials. However, while canonical texts have the advantage of pre-fabricating expectations, *Speakeasy Dollhouse* gains certain freedoms from relating a personal, intimate narrative. The use of texts, both canonical or otherwise, frames the narrative impulses of the immersive production without appearing (in their textual form) in the event itself. Susan Bennett, in *Theatre Audiences* (1997), negotiates this dual structure of theatrical experience:

> The outer frame comprises the social/cultural/economic context of the event itself and this would include all the pre-production elements as well as culturally influenced expectations of the audience. The inner frame holds the particular dramatic performance. It is within this inner frame that the audience engages in one of the main functions of spectating; that is, interpreting or decoding the production.[118]

Importantly, the two frames intersect at various points. Technology infuses our participation in immersive theatre, structuring the social/cultural matrix in which immersive theatres arise. Similarly, decoding and interpreting the pre-production signals of immersive performances proves critical to the event itself. While text may be embedded deeply in a production's DNA, as in *Then She Fell* or *Sleep No More*, it often brings memorized cultural images to life. For productions such as *Speakeasy Dollhouse*, the decoding and interpreting of texts necessitates the building of images from nothingness, facilitating audiences to create the play's world on their own.

While the language of the e-mail attempts to circumscribe the play's world, it also attempts to forge connections through a different kind of textual vector than the imaginative, canonical texts of the other two productions

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[118] Ndalianis, 121.

described here. The *recombinant* aspects of *Speakeasy Dollhouse* have to be

specified because cultural memories, accretions, or associations participants might

have with canonical literature are absent. While participants may have remote

ideas of what a speakeasy is, or might look like, personal connections have to be

established with participants long before they enter the space precisely because

gangland murders of the early twentieth century exist more as cultural relics than

cultural memes or realities. The foreignness of the event, and its associated texts,

requires a bridge to bring audiences close enough to invest in participation. Alison

Landsberg reflects on this process in *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of

American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (2004):

> As I have begun to describe, prosthetic memories are those not strictly
> derived from a person's lived experience. Prosthetic memories circulate
> publicly, and although they are not organically based, they are
> nevertheless experienced with a person's body as a result of engagement
> with a wide range of cultural technologies. Prosthetic memories thus
> become part of one's personal archive of experience, informing one's
> subjectivity as well as one's relationship to the present and future tenses.
> Made possible by advanced capitalism and an emergent commodified
> mass culture capable of widely disseminating images and narratives about
> the past, these memories are not "natural" or "authentic" and yet they
> organize and energize the bodies and subjectivities that take them on.[119]

Unpacking Cynthia von Buhler's texts reflects the advantage of commodified

mass culture as part of theatrical enterprise. In disseminating images of the past,

she attempts to construct prosthetic memories that will inform the subjectivities of

audiences at the performance. In their state as *prosthetics*, the memories von

Buhler endeavors to produce also represent posthuman aspects of the past,

present, and future. As *dolls*, participants negotiate a position inside and outside

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[119] Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 25-6.

of history. Asked at the outset to investigate a past event, reenact that event in the present, and facilitate access to closure in the future, participants experience history as fluid and immanent. This state of immanence, in Landsberg's words, informs the subjectivity of audiences, asking them to participate in the non-linear construction of narrative before entering the space—before productions such as *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell* subvert the linearity of their foundational narratives. As per von Buhler's e-mail, the narrative of *Speakeasy Dollhouse* is embodied, not discovered, by participants.

This strategy gestures towards inclusion in the narrative construction of the immersive event, addressing some of the criticisms leveled at the social-inclusion agenda by Claire Bishop. Landsberg describes further how the technological merges with memory to create sympathetic, and inclusive, ethical structures:

> While memory has been called to serve the agenda of identity politics, prosthetic memory's power derives in part from its challenge to the idea that a particular set of memories belongs exclusively to a particular group. With the aid of mass cultural technologies, it becomes possible for a person to acquire memories that are not his or her "natural" or biological inheritance and thus to feel a sense of kinship with people who might otherwise seem very different...This form of memory thus challenges, or works against, the naturalizing, essentialist tendencies of identity politics.[120]

Using e-mail as a pre-production narrative allows, logistically, for fast communication with large numbers of people. However e-mail, like letter writing before it, allows for variations in tone, formality, and structure that establish

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[120] Landsberg, 22. Landsberg also includes a footnote: Lipsitz makes a similar point, suggesting that "electronic mass media" enable people from different backgrounds to share a sense of ancestry with people they have never seen and to take on memories to which they have no natural link. George Lipsitz. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 5.

social norms in interpersonal interactions. For instance, the address of "Hi Doll"

begins impersonally, but the method of address becomes successively more

personal with each communication. For example, "E-mail #2" reads:

> The mail just came. I received a large packet. The autopsy reports arrived. It's crazy -- check it out. I have to go to the library and look something up. - XXCyn[121]

The informality of this communication aligns with Landsberg's thesis. Von

Buhler uses mass technology to produce the experience of personal contact, while

simultaneously introducing the documents associated with her grandfather's

murder. Whether or not this produces prosthetic memories, the production has

clear strategic aims for the creation of the performance experience, and the

audience's participation. Cynthia e-mails participants as a friend, updating us on

her progress, informing us about her research as would a close confidante "E-mail

#3" occupies a similar social space:

> Did you notice the name "Hulon Capshaw, Magistrate" on the court documents? He dismissed the case against John Guerrieri. I decided to look him up at the library. Look at what I found!

> Cheers, Cynthia[122]

Highlighting an important name on the documents, Cynthia tells the reader about

her trip to the library. The written research about her grandfather stops here,

leaving participants *in media res*. Again, the focus of the production leans on

research as a primary objective for the participants. In this pseudo-scientific

experiment, the documents only tell half the story. In testing hypotheses about her

grandfather's death, we, the dolls for the evening, will produce another version of

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[121] E-mail communication from *Speakeasy Dollhouse* (23 January 2014), 2 of 3.
[122] E-mail communication from *Speakeasy Dollhouse* (24 January 2014), 3 of 3.

the events these documents describe. By this time, the subjectivity of participants has been fully inscribed as both researchers *and* dolls. Occupying both places in time, the event becomes rhizomatic, a time/place existent between history/memory, but intimately connected to both. To borrow the doctor's line from *Then She Fell*, the event becomes liminal—a crossing of the threshold between the past speakeasy and present performance.

Crossing thresholds, or even making them invisible to participants, follows the impulse of the neobaroque to expand into a supposedly infinite space. Revisiting Ndalianis's "media-specific sensory and playful experiences," the neobaroque engages participants through von Buhler's e-mail research/journey, never letting on what parts of the narrative are historically true or fictional, what the role of a doll might be in this event, or how to engage with the historical data we have been e-mailed.[123] Similar to Landsberg's prosthetic memories, which compel an audience to connect sympathetically to the root-narrative of *Speakeasy Dollhouse*, the neobaroque technologically immerses prospective participants through hypertextual strategies. Rendering the narrative of the play-world through a combination of personal tone and archived documents, the e-mails also populate the performance environment with parameters, characters, and expectations. Whereas in *Then She Fell* or *Sleep No More* textual clues have been embedded in the space to be found by audience members, *Speakeasy Dollhouse* eliminates this search by prioritizing direct interaction with performers within the environment itself. Having made choices, pre-production, regarding the relative guilt or innocence of the characters (controlled by the type and kind of archived

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[123] See Appendix of Images

documents we receive), spectator-participants become immersed in a pre-established hierarchy of choices.

Primed with von Buhler's e-mails, I arrive in the cold of a January afternoon to the theatre in the Lower East Side that serves as the production's erstwhile speakeasy. Two police officers in period garb stand outside in the slushy snow, taking the passwords e-mailed to us and ushering us into a line. Unlike in *Then She Fell*, where the space subdues audiences, or *Sleep No More*, where participants have come to expect anonymity and the possibility of separation from their group, the audience here feels energetic and talkative. Many people in the line have dressed in clothing from the 1920s and '30s, and I see everything on display from thrift-store finds to tailored suits. Actors are in the line as well, of course—in a choreographed scene we see the two police officers throw an unwanted speakeasy patron to the ground as we wait for the house to open.

Entry into the performance space cum speakeasy takes place, suitably, down some stairs and through a back alley. Nell Alk, in the *The Wall Street Journal*, observed that the performance occurs at what amounts to a speakeasy-themed bar in real-life, known appropriately as The Back Room.[124] Knowledge of the bar's existence is limited—Veronica Cooper of *New York Magazine* reports that it works hard to preserve the idea of exclusivity: "Don't even think about getting access to the hidden back room of gorgeous copper ceilings and Art Nouveau knick-knacks unless you're friends with the owners. Instead, simply

[124] Alk, Nell. "Mobsters and Murders on the Lower East Side." *The Wall Street Journal* (3 February 2013) Accessed: 4 July 2013. http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324445904578282181856625350?mg=reno64wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2FSB10001424127887324445904578282181856625350.html.

enjoy the main room, a speakeasy of sorts with the faux façade of a toy store."[125]

Descending down the alley, it becomes easier to imagine the dark, dingy

surroundings as a route that only those of the lucky in-the-know crowd might

take. Progress through the tunnel slows as we are checked in to the performance

and told to climb through a small hole (literally) in the wall to get into the bakery

portion of the environment, a kind of holding area before the production begins.

We are served coffee laced with anisette and cannoli.

An already existing speakeasy concept has been providing New Yorkers

with entertainment for some time now, and bears mentioning as an economic

model for the sustenance of productions such as *Speakeasy Dollhouse*. An artist's

collective in Chelsea, for example, created a highly exclusive project called The

Night Heron in an abandoned water tower:

> The Night Heron was as exclusive as it was lawless. The only way to get
> in was to be handed a pocket watch by a prior guest (who had been
> instructed to offer minimal explanation), report to a street corner at a
> certain time, and call a number pasted inside the watch. Mysterious
> helpers led guests through one decrepit building into another and up 12
> flights of stairs to the roof. The watches were taken at the door, but guests
> were given the chance to buy watches at the end of the night if they
> wanted to continue the chain of invitation.[126]

Arguably, the exclusivity of these sites defies the neoliberal agenda described by

Claire Bishop in *Artificial Hells*. Neither the artists who created The Night Heron,

nor Cynthia von Buhler, pretend that everyone has access to the space. Indeed,

even *Speakeasy Dollhouse* advertises that its sold-out shows are a result of an

[125] Cooper, Veronica. "The Back Room." *New York Magazine.* Accessed: 3 March 2014.
http://nymag.com/listings/bar/The-Back-Room/.

[126] Vadukul, Alex. "Water Tower in Chelsea Manifests a Secret Life." *The New York Times*. 22
May, 2013. Accessed: 3 March, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/23/nyregion/illicit-
nightclub-in-a-chelsea-water-tower.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&utm_source=feedly&_r=2&.

"underground" campaign, created "entirely" by "word-of-mouth and social networking"[127] Boxcar Theatre, a company in San Francisco, has also created the similarly titled production *The Speakeasy* (2014). Using parallel tactics (semi-secret location, slimmed-down narrative, speakeasy setup), the company has created what they have termed an immersive event:

> The show portrays a San Francisco speakeasy in three acts and decades: in World War I, the Roaring 20s, and World War II, respectively. In true speakeasy form, the play is staged in an undisclosed S.F. location. On the day of the performance, audience members will receive instructions on where to meet. Once at the speakeasy, audience members will go in through one of a number of secret entrances — some might walk in through the shop that serves as the speakeasy's false front; others might enter into a full-fledged cabaret show. At any given time, 35 cast members could be performing seven to 10 scenes in various places. The whole show, director Nick Olivero estimates, involves 80 or 90 artists, including six writers, two directors, and two costume designers. "There's like two of everything," says Olivero — a gigantic undertaking for a small theater company.[128]

This production, although on a larger scale than *Speakeasy Dollhouse*, also creates intimacy through exclusivity, in a gesture toward the metatheatrical aspects of the neobaroque rather than the economic or hierarchical aspects of its systems. Exclusivity, in New York, breeds higher ticket sales, to make no mention of the cost of drinks. As with the e-mails that describe to audiences of *Speakeasy Dollhouse* directly what they will be doing in the performance, and how they will be doing it, the frame of the production makes no pretense to inclusivity or illusion. Instead of the elaborate, neobaroque trappings of *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell*, that promise secrecy, intimacy, and inclusion in a mysterious world, the

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[127] Alk, Nell.
[128] Janiak, Lily. "Password, Please: Speakeasies Become Sets, the Audience Gets Involved." *San Francisco Weekly*. 8 January 2014. Accessed: 3 March, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/23/nyregion/illicit-nightclub-in-a-chelsea-water-tower.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&utm_source=feedly&_r=2&.

social/economic agenda of the speakeasy pares down expectations. If you know,

you're in. If not, you're not. The simplicity of these statements belies their

importance. Creating intimacy through exclusion, even feigned exclusion, not

only creates a scarce product—it creates a product that promotes access as the

primary façade of the production.[129] Access, in turn, creates solidarity among

participants, paradoxically creating a system of inclusion, of being in the in-

crowd, without the mysterious one-on-one performances, pretended secrecy, or

unintended consequences of finding the boundaries of the production.

Once past the bakery, we go up a flight of stairs and through another door

that leads to the speakeasy itself. Inside, the space provides a feeling of faded

glamour. One reviewer describes the scene:

> Guests moved on from the bakery, walking through an alleyway and
> getting the "approval" of Frank and Mary Spano before being allowed in
> to the speakeasy nightclub, located close by. As you enter the club, you
> are immediately transported to the prohibition era by the decor, costumes
> and music, and you begin to piece together who's who. Part of the fun is
> trying to figure out who is an actor and who is a guest, since the guests are
> also encouraged to dress in period attire. (We needed little encouragement
> on that front. This writer happily left a trail of sequins and feathers
> throughout the streets of the Lower East Side on the way home).[130]

As we enter the bar, we are given a small slip of paper as well. On one side, we

are admonished to "be nosy, talk to strangers" and on the other we are given a

role to play, and a mission to perform. I am told that I am an "upright citizen" and

I need to ask one of the detectives to look into the dealings of the corrupt

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[129] It is important to note that, while I intimate that *Speakeasy Dollhouse* is more open about its
boundaries, pretended and otherwise, it still has an engagement with the market—in this case, I
argue, it uses access as a defining characteristic of that engagement. It is still a product to be
consumed.

[130] Greenberg, Lori. "Recap: The 'Speakeasy Dollhouse' on the Lower East Side." *Bowery
Boogie*. 11 June 2012. Accessed: 3 March 2014. http://www.boweryboogie.com/2012/06/recap-
the-speakeasy-dollhouse-on-the-lower-east-side/.

magistrate, Hulon Capshaw.[131] As the last text I receive before experiencing the performance, the role and mission I receive influences the choices I make during the course of the evening, who I speak to, and where I go. Maintaining the specificity of our respective identities during the performance, the mission we are given provides added structure to what might otherwise be characterized as a costume party with a few interjected performances.

From the first e-mail participants receive from von Buhler addressing us as dolls to the last slip of paper we receive upon our entry—it is clear that individuals are participants in this performance. Issuing roles and missions suggests that we are, in fact, performers in the drama as well. Not only are participants rewarded by being in-the-know enough to find out about the performance, they are also included specifically in the structuring of the evening's events. *Then She Fell* or *Sleep No More* suggest that subjectivity remains fluid, installing audiences as properties of the drama without constructing their roles. Positioned more as voyeurs than participants (especially in *Sleep No More*) our role in the evening's business remains indeterminate, relying structurally on the textual skeleton of *Macbeth* or *Alice in Wonderland* to facilitate the creation of narrative. *Speakeasy Dollhouse*, though light on narrative, establishes the performance as an egalitarian plane—one where performers and customers are, at least nearly, equal forces in the space. Shunning the neobaroque hierarchies established by other immersive performances, the speakeasy produces interconnectivity between the artistic work and the participant, creating a space

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[131] See Appendix of images.

more akin to Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics" than either of the other immersive performances discussed here.

With a mission now in hand, I proceed in to the packed bar. This area encourages mingling with other participants and performers indiscriminately. Characters that populated the documents we received in our e-mails wander the floor, interacting directly with the audience. It is difficult to guess, amongst the costumed participants, which ones are performers. The narrative set up by Cynthia von Buhler's archival research provides actors with structure as they ad-lib their way through the crowd. Like *Then She Fell*, the point at which the performance meets text becomes the point at which text transforms into interactive phenomena. A live band plays hits from the 1920s and '30s while scantily clad dancers take to the floor. A card game begins in a corner. Performers begin staging the scenes that will eventually result in the murder of Frank Spano in the alleyway. *Speakeasy Dollhouse* has come to life.

Wandering through the bar, the limitations of the environment become apparent. The bar represents the largest share of the performance space. The downstairs area, where we entered, houses the bar itself, while a staircase leads to a lounge area. Laden with curtains, cushions, and communal seating, the upstairs portion of the space houses the live band, which changes nightly. Towards the back of this lounge area, a revolving bookcase opens into a sparse bedroom/living room that represents the Spanos' home. This room houses the dollhouse as well: a scale replica of the original speakeasy populated by actual dolls and created by von Buhler. The metatheatricality of the literal dollhouse, with all of its carefully

constructed details, presented participants with a clear visual analogue of their own position in the larger dollhouse von Buhler has created with their living bodies. Each part of the performance space conjures an eclectic period narrative, complete with everything from the speakeasy's teacups to antique photographs of family members.

Throughout the space, the feeling is that of a large, but select, party—again mirroring the borders of the crime narrative, the construction situates itself as just another night in the speakeasy—a day on which Frank Spano's murder happened to take place. While all of the accouterments of the immersive environment created the feeling of immersion in another world, time, and place, the acting dilutes the gravity of the crime-narrative, verging often into the self-referential and ridiculous. Reflecting again on the structural aspects of the murder narrative, the failings of the performance to reflect believable action may stem from the narrow, unknown story and complicated archival documents. In the case of *Speakeasy Dollhouse,* the possibility of an egalitarian immersive performance structure, one that goes out of its way to provide inclusivity and participatory experiences, runs up against the neobaroque cultural boundaries of text, canon, technology, and basic self-interest. In the sense that von Buhler creates a performance in which all the parameters are known, no desire exists to propel audiences towards the interpretation or decoding of the narrative. In addition, whereas the cultural force of Shakespeare or Lewis Carroll creates interior and exterior points within the borders of the performance space, the history forgot Frank Spano's murder. The relative cultural force of the immersive production

relates intimately with the force of its source materials—at least for now, the cultural moment dictates that textual sources have become key components of the immersive event.

Textual sources as described here in their use, and use-value, in immersive events, inhabit a perilous space in the cultural environment. On one hand reproducing an intertextual conversation that reproduces frames, borders, hierarchies, and excess, texts and para-texts exert cultural force on the possibility of agency in a hyper-technological world. At the same time, posthumanism reimagines texts, and their aspects in performance, as immanent movement and meaning. Imagining immersive events as hypertextual experiences, in which aspects of choice are sorted by regimes that govern agency, the neobaroque and posthuman dissect the encoding of the ineffable immersive event to describe and categorize such regimes. Cultural cache, in the case of *Speakeasy Dollhouse* and *Then She Fell*, still recognizes and creates vectors to penetrate the most avant-garde of immersive environments, ever tying their circumstances to the sociopolitical fabric of culture.

Chapter 3

Site and Seduction: Space, Sensuality, and Use-Value

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have
long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too
heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the
discussion began long before any of them got there, so that no one present is
qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a
while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you
put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your
defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or
gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your ally's assistance.
However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart.
And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.[132]

At a nondescript doorway on 46th street, an unusual queue forms. Men

sport three piece suits, bowties, and dinner jackets. Ladies, not to be outdone,

glitter in an array of designer dresses, jewelry, and sequins. Passersby stare at us:

are we an undercover movie premiere? An odd bit of performance art? Just

eccentric New Yorkers? Not quite. We have been instructed to dress "to please

the queen" for a spectacle known as *The Queen of the Night* (2013).[133] Produced

in part by Randy Weiner, a New York City theatre veteran known for *The Donkey*

Show (New York City, 1999, Boston, 2008--), *Sleep No More* (New York City,

2014), and vaudeville-supper club The Box (New York City, 2008), I have been

prepared to expect over-the-top extravagance. The space's moniker is

promising—Queen of the Night runs in a space known as The Diamond

Horseshoe. The former site of a nightclub opened by theatre impresario Billy

Rose in 1938, it currently lies underneath Midtown's Paramount Hotel. After a

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[132] Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 110-111.
[133] E-mail communication from *The Queen of The Night* (5 May 2014).

multimillion dollar renovation, the long-dormant club has now been reopened for what promises to be a spectacular affair.

The blank door finally opens, and we file down an unremarkable white hallway. Leaving the street behind, eager patrons shuffle in out of the cold to check purses and overcoats. Another white hallway follows. So far, the surroundings are bare—contrasting starkly with the high drama and pitch dark entry of Sleep No More's (2008, 2010) or Then She Fell's (2012, 2013) prop-heavy medical waiting room.

Suddenly, we find ourselves at the top of a stunning art-deco stairwell, gleaming white and softly curved. Participants seem to float down the well-worn treads, deep into the bowels of a city many thought they already knew. Stacks of champagne glasses are stacked haphazardly in the first landing, alluding perhaps to the raucous celebrations of Billy Rose's heyday. Here as well attendants in halter-top tuxedos and short black breeches (designed by couturier Thom Browne) greet us with silver trays full of cocktails.[134] Mine tastes of gin and smoke, rosemary and bitters. Our descent continues another flight. We finally reach the bottom of the staircase. Here we wait expectantly, sipping our drinks as other patrons file in behind us.

Gilt frames and marble floors sparkle in the half-light of a lobby or antechamber. To my left, red velvet curtains conceal openings in the wall. Directly across from the stairs, a glass partition exposes a bare-breasted woman on a revolving platform. The audience murmurs, wondering aloud whether or not the delicately spangled, still figure is a mannequin. She begins to move slowly,

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[134] Thom Browne is an American fashion designer.

sinuously. She bears a crown on her head—could this be the titular Queen? In a few moments, more black-and-white attired company members stream out from the velvet clad opening and begin grabbing audience members indiscriminately, leading the way across the small lobby and through the curtains.

One of the many attractive performers grabs the end of my tie, leading me, not too softly, toward what seems to be a backstage area. There, in a dimly lit space filled with stage ropes and cables, another company member meets us. He has pulled another participant away from the crowded entry hall. We take shots of an unknown liquid, poured from a tap hidden by more damask curtains. We make a toast. My attractive guide grabs my tie again, loosening it and unfastening the top button of my shirt. Nodding approvingly at her handiwork, she tells me to "be good" tonight, but not "too good." Abruptly, I am ejected from the backstage area through a curtain. I find myself standing on a stage.

The ballroom is an oval with burnished tile on the walls, elegant archways framing openings on each side, and banquettes lining the two long sides in soft curves. Lights glitter off of polished surfaces and from behind curtains. Soft ovals appear everywhere in the design, from the gilt and stucco detail to the wrought-iron handrails. It is an overwhelming first impression. I walk down from the stage on a wide, steep set of stairs— this is a small proscenium on a short end of the oval. It is full of chairs, stacked crazily, as if another party had just left in a hurry. At the other end a long bar, shining and curved, dominates the space. In between, bare tables and iron barricades are arranged to keep audience from crossing the floor. Instead we are allowed to move towards the bar through side passages

extending the length of the rectangle. As people continue to enter, several areas are lit to reveal acrobats performing a variety of sensuous, highly athletic, dances on tables and platforms. The scene feels familiar, yet strange—a ballroom lost in time, rediscovered and relit with the extravagant glitz of Broadway.

Repurposing non-traditional or disused spaces for performance events, immersive theatres make use of a prototypical theatrical practice. From the renovation of an auto garage by Richard Schechner and his Performance Group in the 1960s to site-specific performances created by Mike Pearson and Brith Gof in the 1980s, non-traditional sites and spaces have been critical to performance for decades. In *immersive* theatre, however, emphasis on the real-time sensual engagement of participants alters the relationship of spaces to theatrical events. Spaces in these scenarios become vessels for sights, sounds, smells, and tastes that imbue abstract, sometimes surreal surroundings with concrete and powerful immediacy. These transformations reimagine the relationship of the theatrical site, or ground, to other material and bodily aspects of the theatre.

As the vocabulary of theatrical technology has expanded over the past two decades, immersive theatre has accumulated spatial and aesthetic formats designed to bridge the gap between presence and mediation, space and time. Appropriating the jargon of digital media, the term promises spatial and sensual experiences beyond any encountered in new media alone. For these performance events, the live, visceral quality of theatre makes the sensual impact of immersion possible. And because immersion, as a label, has become indicative of both a type of experience and a trending brand, it reveals itself through a broad range of

aesthetic and branded impulses. In these circumstances, site becomes a powerful asset. Abandoned schools, parking lots, and apartment blocks have become highly popular grounds for immersive events.

Foregrounding use-value, agency, and sociopolitical contexts through the lens of a participant, I define a continuum of immersive projects in this chapter. First, there are self-styled immersions, concentrated on a narrowly defined spectrum of participatory and sensual experiences. On the other lie those events that, by dint of aesthetic and sensual languages, manifest all the markers of immersion without the branding impulses—immersive events that prove inclusive of social and political engagement with relation to site and site-use. In reviewing the gamut of corporal sites in immersive theatre, I also review the expansion of site via the advent of digital spaces, participation, and activities that stimulate, provoke, and control the act of performance.

A wide range of events has been labeled immersive, so-called either by the companies themselves or by the media that covers them. As such, *Queen of the Night* represents the most narrowly defined of the four productions discussed in this dissertation, a self-proclaimed immersive spectacle that concentrates on the solicitation and containment of individual sensuality and sexuality. Third Rail Project's *Then She Fell* (see Chapter 2) negotiates a middle ground approach between authority and agency, pure voyeurism and self-reflection. In the production's Kingsland Ward, participants have intimate interactions with actors (as noted above, there are only fifteen audience members per production), as well as appreciable time to negotiate the impact of physical site without mediation.

Speakeasy Dollhouse (2011), an event that takes place in the context of a former speakeasy, also utilizes a combination of spatial agency and control, urging participants to play an investigative role in the drama. Finally, Mike Pearson's work with Brith Gof never utilizes the language of immersion, but maintains sensitivity to social, sensual, and political contexts through such pieces as *Goddodin* (1988). *Goddodin*, along with Mike Pearson's important contributions to dramaturgical theory and practice recognizes and excavates a methodology for socially engaged site-use—one that produces a fusion of both *virtual* and reconstructed histories that could be used in contemporary performance events. Through this range of immersions, complex patterns with regard to space emerge, problematizing current configurations of site, use, and participation in the current theatrical environment of New York City.

I argue in this chapter that immersive sites are, more often than not, removed from their communal and sociopolitical histories in the interest of creating immersive performances. Instead, as with productions such as *Queen of the Night* and *Then She Fell*, alternate, virtual histories are fabricated for immersive performances that suit the terms devised by the production. Furthermore, the creation and marketing of these virtual histories transform an audiences expectations of performance, manufacturing and bounding desires that, more often than not, will remain unsatisfied in the moment of performance. Lastly, I assert that the former three activities—isolating site from history, manufacturing and marketing desires, and fabricating virtual histories, all

provocatively connect to models of technological space, e.g. hypertexts, interconnectivity, the boundaries and negotiation of virtual environments.

Immersive aesthetics, with their emphasis on the sensate experiences of the body, transform the relationship of site to ideologies and sociocultural histories. Since *immersion*, broadly, removes participants to an alternate, all-encompassing reality, it divorces audiences from public, political, engagements that remain incumbent upon traditional theatrical forms. Whereas in the darkened auditorium audiences remain acutely aware of the performance as separated from their daily lives, immersive formats attempt to sever, or at least blur, the relationship between reality and performance, virtual time and real time. As such, aspects of *immersion* transform space into sensory, multidimensional worlds, exhibiting a tendency to ignore the specificity of social contexts involved in the choosing, inhabiting, or reviving of particular spaces. Lyn Gardner, writing for *The Guardian*, writes about Punchdrunk Theatre Company and its use of site:

> Katie Spain at Grassroots was "moved [by Punchdrunk's *Faust*] in such a way that my insides were squirming, my brain twisting in fear and delight". The use of space is inspired, the experience heightened by its unfamiliarity, and Hazel at Londonist has noticed a trend: "Site-specific art and performances are all the rage at the moment," she writes. Hazel was talking about London, but I wonder whether this is a nationwide phenomenon.
>
> Hazel also wonders whether development for the Olympics in 2012 might lead to a dearth of such derelict spaces. "Artists have responded by grabbing hold of what we've got now... before it all goes away." I suspect London, like most cities, will always have abandoned spaces; and one can't really argue against the development of affordable housing so that we can still enjoy these as they are. But it is great that people are exploiting them - and not, in the interests of balance, just for raves. Punchdrunk are dedicated to site-specific theatre and have already made

use of a former distillery in Deptford for an interpretation of The Tempest
and a former Geological Survey building in Exeter for The Cherry
Orchard. I will certainly go to whatever they create next.[135]

Exploiting site, these London productions expose complex social problems
relating to space. This is especially true of the struggle for affordable housing in
the midst a trending "rage" for site-specific and immersive theatrical experiences.
In this case, the negotiation between site and social context relates to aspects of
economics, gentrification, and the fate of fragile historical sites in urban space.
Stripped of their former identity and laden with expectation, immersion elides
these problems to create what I call *constructed history*. By *constructed history*, I
mean an imagined history created solely by, and for, a given performance.

Constructed history, as a method of structuring space and spatial
interactions, engages the audience in a legacy, a historical frame establishing
heightened stakes in the corporal performance event. For *Queen of the Night*, this
means translating the sensual impact of pre-war Broadway into the context of pre-
recession American wealth. For *Sleep No More*, the derelict warehouses of
Chelsea become the McKittrick Hotel, and for *Then She Fell*, a former parochial
school becomes Kingsland Ward, a nineteenth-century asylum. In each of these
instantiations, the ground of performance becomes resituated in a constructed
history—a history that appears to extend both backwards and forwards in time,
becoming so enmeshed in the theatrical ground that no other narrative maintains
coherence. By extension, the *constructed history* created for immersive
performances disconnects sites from their concrete historicity, alienating

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[135] Gardner, Lyn. "The Play's Location's The Thing", *The Guardian*, 9 March 2007.
http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2007/mar/09/theplayslocationsthething.

participants from the social context of the event's geography. Constructing an alternate historical narrative in lieu of the event-proper requires, as discussed further below, the maintenance and curation of a world that appears and feels *immersive*—a vibrant, unified, and viscerally present landscape.

Films, and especially the horror genre, have taken advantage of this methodology for some time. Two examples illustrate the sorts of *virtual histories* appropriated by the immersive theatre particularly well: 1999's *Blair Witch Project* and 2002's *The Ring*. *The Blair Witch Project* took advantage of the then-emerging technology of the Internet to publicize a fictional found-film "documentary." Three students hike into the Maryland wilderness to find out what became of the notorious Blair Witch, only to go missing like her other victims. Their film is supposedly found in the wilderness—the only sign of the students that authorities are able to uncover. The film's use of the Internet for publicity purposes became an early example of viral advertisement, and the historical backstory created for the film proved highly credible to audiences. *Entertainment Weekly* wrote that "When *The Blair Witch Project* came out in 1999, some people thought the film was true: "They thought these three kids really went into the woods and disappeared forever, leaving only their video cameras full of spooky footage behind."[136] Partly, this virtual historiography succeeded because of the detail involved in the film's "timeline" of events stretching from 1785-1995 (1995 is the year the film was supposedly found).[137] Additionally, few publicity messages relayed explicitly that the film was fictional, introducing further

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[136] Bacle, Ariana. "'Blair Witch Project' actors talk going hungry on set," *Entertainment Weekly*, 6 October 2014. http://www.ew.com/article/2014/10/06/blair-witch-project-found-footage.
[137] http://www.blairwitch.com/mythology.html.

ambivalence into the viewing experience. Whether or not audiences believed or disbelieved, the wholly fabricated history left an indelible mark on the subgenre of found-film horror.

Similarly, the immersive production *Speakeasy Dollhouse* (2011) also claims to be based on real events. Documents related to a mob hit in the Lower East Side of Manhattan appear on the production's website. These also appear in e-mails sent to audiences before attendance at the performance. A Blogger site full of photographs, letters, and other ephemera related to the crime are left for participants to pore through like private investigators.[138] Upon entering the speakeasy bar (also located in the Lower East Side), participants receive investigative roles to play throughout the evening. The virtual, archival world bleeds into the space of the viscerally present, crowded bar. As with *The Blair Witch Project*, where the veracity of historical events leads into a perceptual reorganization of the film's viewing, *Speakeasy Dollhouse's* flirtation with the archive prepares audiences to participate fully, establishing a priori principles for negotiating the space of performance.

2002's *The Ring* presents another such example. *The Blair Witch Project* aspired to deepen and expand the experience of the film through its media campaign, but *The Ring* aspired to viral status through the dissemination of a fictional, viral film seen within *The Ring*—a film within a film. These metatheatrics played into the films' broader plot, namely one concerning the viewing of a supernatural VHS tape that inevitably causes the viewer's death seven days later. The film, as cultural critique, mirrors anxieties concerning new

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[138] Speakeasy Dollhouse. http://speakeasydollhouseevidence.blogspot.com/.

and emergent technologies (i.e. widely available viral films), using a format

(VHS) that was already disappearing when the film was made. Beyond this "film-

within-a-film" device, the website devised a further mythology for the

supernatural characters, mostly involving the usual suspects associated with the

horror genre: a creepy old house, an abandoned farm, an insane asylum, and a

demonic child.[139]

Then She Fell also provides an asylum to house its part-biographical, part-

fictional approach to Lewis Carrol and his works. Filling in historical gaps left

about the nature of Carrol's relationship with his muse, Alice Liddell, the

performance interweaves the whimsical literature of the Alice tales with the dark,

sometimes brooding sadness of Carrol's life. Like *The Ring*, where the

mythological history of the film's antagonists provides an extension and

completion of the plot, *Then She Fell* manufactures an asylum in order to color

and enliven the historical and imaginative framework of Carrol's life. The choice

of an asylum also offers up a familiar trope to participants. The asylum is a place

for strangeness and the throwing-off of imaginative constraints. *Then She Fell's*

title alludes directly to the asylum-space. Signifying Alice's rabbit-hole (what she

fell in to in *Alice in Wonderland*), as well as her real-life separation from Carrol,

the asylum becomes simultaneously a place of control and wildness, inhibition

and imagination. Such dualities occur in many of the aesthetic assemblages of the

immersive theatre. The wholesale creation of such histories reinterprets the

space-time of the performance event, augmenting and extending its presence

beyond the walled environs of sites themselves.

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[139]The Ring. http://thering.asmik-ace.co.jp/.

In the sense that these *virtual histories* often become indistinguishable from real circumstances, the sites of immersive performance observed here also engage, willingly or not, in the sociopolitical ideology of neoliberalism. Participatory and visceral, yet highly stratified and artificial, immersive theatres maintain a focus on the experiential nature of space as well as the creation of alternative, fictional histories. Invariably, relegating the social, public, context of sites to *virtual* narratives and sensual experiences reinforces ideological structures mirrored in the technologies and sociopolitical culture of the free market. Something here about how the above implicates many immersive theatres -- in that they support the view promoted by neoliberalism – that the individual could maintain agency within growing disparities in wealth, access to social resources, and labor.[140]

Immersive theatres, with their promise of autonomy and agency in imaginary realities, often put the onus on individuals to create their own narrative of a production. Yet, as observed in prior discussions, pushing the boundaries of these performances often results in confrontations with constraints and structures that delimit both the activity of participants and the potential narratives available in each performance event.[141] Agency and autonomy, along with site and context, branding and reality, are blurred by the imagery and power of spatial and temporal forces in the *immersive* theatre. This blurring, coupled by the creation of

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[140] See Chapter 2 for more discussions of neoliberalism in the immersive theatre, esp. via Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (Verso, 2012). Her work, which focuses on participation, notes that "In this logic [of neoliberalism] 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).

[141] Chapter 2 especially relates several run-ins with the boundaries of immersive events.

aesthetic and pseudohistorical homogeneity both pre-and-post-production, parallels the neoliberal elision of inclusive social narratives.

Critical to the *neoliberal* structures latent in *immersion*, theatre companies also layer the physical act of performance with a potent mix of technology and new media. Observable in both film and theatre, these often support a hierarchical, authoritative approach to historical narratives, creating what heretofore has been defined as *constructed history*, be that of a site, body or text. With its cultural cache and overwhelming prevalence, social technologies allow performances to take place in partially, or entirely, mediated environments. In the case of the performances discussed here, pre-performance communications prepare participants to engage in specific activities during the real-time event, establish spatial/performance boundaries, and control the narrative meanings available to participants. Expanding the concepts of site and performance beyond the typical, real-time boundaries of events, immersion realizes a bewildering variety of virtual spaces running parallel to the event-proper. These spaces radiate beyond tangible, corporal forms and into a variety of mediated and participatory experiences that can occur before, during, and after the performance. Taking the form of e-mails, mobile applications, websites, archival material, blogs, texts, photographs, and many others, these augmentations become an important part of the spatial arrangements of immersion.[142]

Not to be confused with theatrical ephemera such as playbills, posters, photographs, or even set dressings, websites and other virtual media often enhance and expand performance events, playing a role in the provocation of

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[142] Each of the productions discussed in this dissertation engage in one or more of these practices.

desire, curiosity, and expectations integral to the structure of the immersive world. Websites, in our digital world, never die. Even stored sites from the birth of the Internet are still available for the nostalgic to peruse. This is true of Third Rail Project's *Then She Fell* (2012, 2013), a performance where the texts of Lewis Carroll prepare participants for the topsy-turvy world of the asylum in which the event takes place. The production's associated website describes a range of participatory/sensory experiences that mirror structural aspects of the event (See Chapter 2). Similarly, *Speakeasy Dollhouse* (2011) begins with e-mailed documentation of an unsolved mob-hit in Manhattan's Lower East Side. These e-mails ask participants to become investigators of a sort, engaging them in the context of the space's reality long before entry into the speakeasy. In both these instances, the space-time of performance expands to include parallel activities in virtual spaces—spaces that articulate and bound the potential for participation, agency, and sensuality in a given event.

Queen of the Night's corporal and virtual spaces revolve around the now-legendary Billy Rose. Rose, whose penchant for the spectacular lives on in the Diamond Horseshoe's reimagined space, was no foreigner to creating theatrical spectacles. Through a series of business ventures in theatres, nightclubs, and music halls through the early 1950s, he left a legacy that still impacts the New York City theatre scene.[143] *Vanity Fair,* whose fifth anniversary celebration took

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[143] Cambridge Guide to Theatre "Rose, Billy": "his ventures ranged from nightclubs and theatre-restaurants (Back Stage Club, Casino de Paree, the Billy Rose Music Hall in New York during the 1920s and 30s; Casa Mañana in Fort Worth in the 1930s; New York's Diamond Horseshoe, 1939-52) to epic spectacles such as Jumbo (1945) and the aquacades at the 1939-40 New York World's Fair and the San Francisco Golden Gate Exposition (1940), as well as 11 legitimate Broadway productions, including Carmen Jones (1943) and The Immoralist (1954). In the 1950s and 60s he owned two New York theatres. Among Rose's five marriages was one

place in the original Horseshoe in 1988, heralded the public reopening of the

ballroom in 2014 with an article highlighting Rose's outsized personality:

> Billy Rose opened the Diamond Horseshoe for the first time on Christmas,
> in 1938. Rose had already masterminded Jumbo, an elaborate circus-
> themed musical, and nightspots like the Billy Rose Music Hall, whose
> hallmarks were a hearty dose of nostalgia, spiced with Rose's own
> outlandish bravura. At the Diamond Horseshoe, he conjured a Gay
> Nineties-themed saloon: the walls of the main room were painted deep red
> and white with period fixtures, while the staircase was plastered with
> posters of bygone vaudeville stars.[144]

For the America of 1938—a nation on the brink of war and still in the grip of the

Great Depression—the Horseshoe's escapist theme proved successful. *Queen of*

the Night follows a similarly troubled era of American history: post-war and post-

recession, the ballroom's lavish decorations gaze wistfully back to the heady days

before the 2006 financial crisis. Following Billy Rose's strategy of nostalgic

escapism, the production uses the Diamond Horseshoe to generate and authorize,

through a reimagining of Billy Rose's aesthetic, a variation of immersive theatre

that offers sex, excess, and indulgence—for a price. And, while *Queen of the*

Night creates a similar environment as other so-called immersive events – with its

art-installed space, freedom to wander, and chance encounters with actors – the

production curtails the agency these events often provide to participants.

Synthesizing the sit-down format of Rose's club with the promise of spectacle

(acrobatics, nudity, and the possibility of intimate contact), the physical and

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to Fanny Brice (1929). The Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library was
funded by his foundation (organized in 1958)."

[144] Monahan, Patrick, "The Diamond Horseshoe, the World War II-Era Nightclub Resurrected by
Randy Weiner and Simon Hammerstein", *Vanity Fair*. January 24, 2014. Accessed August 2,
2014, http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2014/01/diamond-horseshoe-nightclub-simon-
hammerstein.

virtual spaces of the performance enforce restrictive mores. These mores strip away the necessity of narrative in exchange for desires that remain, for the most part, unfulfilled.

Queen of the Night's move towards non-narrative theatrical immersion proves atypical in the New York City theatre scene. In Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (2009, 2012) or Third Rail Project's *Then She Fell*, (2013, 2014) patrons negotiate the nuances of spaces and bodies to craft meanings enhanced or augmented by props and performers. *Queen of the Night*, by contrast, deemphasizes narrative construction in favor of sensuality alone. While this dinner-theatre/floor show/bacchanal replicates, interpretively, an image of the Diamond Horseshoe's original goings-on under Rose's ownership, the commercial interests of the performance lie more in providing a constant and overwhelming flow of sensory stimuli than a historical reconstruction. Effectively removing participants' agency to construct narratives for themselves— consumption, conspicuous and otherwise, becomes the primary mode of participation. Harnessing the Horseshoe's history, exclusivity and social hierarchy emerge, as with the original Diamond Horseshoe, from nostalgia for the recent past.

Nostalgia, history, and memory, in turn, all play a role in the creation of

Queen of the Night's theatre-space; a landscape created in both concrete and

virtual spheres. While the Diamond Horseshoe's renovation capitalizes on Billy

Rose's aesthetic strategies, the virtual spaces created by the production's branding

on its website, e-mails, external blogs, and press, enhances the Horseshoe's

stylish, jet-setting image, setting expectations for the evening that outstrip the

performance's potential experiences. As with other *immersive* events, the

managing and manipulation of the event pre-performance primes participants for

entry into the site. However, *Queen of the Night* takes this agenda one step

further, creating a sense of exclusivity through costly, value-added experiences.

Sleep No More pioneered this concept in the New York City theatre scene through

an increasingly diverse set of spaces that includes two bars (Mandalay and The

Gallows Green) and now a restaurant (The Heath). Access to these venues is not

contingent on attendance at the performance. In *Queen of the Night*, the add-on

experiences become part of the production: you need a ticket to experience them.

Additionally, such experiences relate to the potential stimulation participants

might be privy to—sexual or otherwise. As examples, Figures 1 and 2 provide

typical e-mail communications about *Queen of the Night's* extra-curricular events.

Figure 1 advertises access to the *Queen's Club*, a free-membership club that keeps

the party going long after the performance has officially ended. The image of a

slender woman in a chastity belt alludes to the type of naughty, sexy play that

might transpire "after the show" when "the party continues" into the small hours.

The advertisement also comes straight to the point, putting legs and crotch front-

and-center in the frame. Bare midriff and all, the image leaves little to be

imagined, but much to be desired—a desire that proves critical to *Queen of the*

Night's branding. However, whereas the image in Figure 1 focuses the

composition of the e-mail on legs and crotch, the text of Figure 2 provokes a

similarly titillating, transparent, message of seduction.

The message of Figure 2, "Lose Inhibitions, Make Resolutions," contrasts

with my own experience of the production, where at least one patron was ejected

for losing more of his inhibitions than was deemed appropriate.[145] No surprise

then that this image appears to tell two different stories. First, the text at the top

catches the eye, inspiring a reaction not

unlike Figure 1's legs. However, the

restrained elegance of the image, the

statuesque font, and the floral motif bring

the eyes down to "Black-Tie Masquerade

Gala." "Black-tie" implies elegance,

exclusivity, a sense of decorum, and

perhaps even restraint. The Queen herself

appears offset, regal and demure—far from

the bare-breasted and spectacularly

decorated Queen greeting participants in the Horseshoe's lobby.

Both Figures 1 and 2 have similarities to advertisements, which is in fact

what they are, but this direct branding through sexually explicit language and

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[145] At my experience of the production, a man got drunk and tried to reach for the titular Queen's bare legs.

imagery proves significantly different than the tactics employed by either *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell*. In these latter productions, the emphasis on curiosity, intimacy, and discovery in the context of the physical site characterizes the performance as a mystery, a labyrinth for individuals to traverse. In *Queen of the Night*, the language and imagery has been stripped down to the desire for both access and sexual release. In neither case does the production afford individual participants the former without proper real-world credentials: i.e. cash.

Explicitly setting out rules and expectations for interaction in the physical space of the Diamond Horseshoe, these images also tender implicit, subtly manipulated messaging. The sexual tone obscures the subtext involved, while also playing a role in defining the immersive space. Returning to the concept of *constructed history*, these types of images prove critical to crafting the Diamond Horseshoe's narrative as revived theatre-site, as well as establishing aesthetic continuity with what participants will see upon entering the ballroom's glittering oval. However, the messages sent by these e-mails also suggest dissonant impulses. On the one hand, Figure 1 appears to promise sexual revelry, but does so in the guise of a woman in a chastity belt, and on the other, Figure 2 provides a restrained image coupled with enticing language. This play of image and language leaves prospective participants with semiotic confusion—a confusion that appreciably increases the production's flirtatious attitude with its guests. In addition, both figures establish the site's permanence over time. Through a neo-Rococo aesthetic, the e-mails invite entry into an elegant and luxurious club atmosphere, suggesting both intimacy and exclusivity. By appropriating a

historical, decorative approach, the pieces also suggest a sense of history and lineage that authorizes the promised excesses of the "Queen's Club" and "Masquerade Gala." The *constructed history* of the Horseshoe, overall, intimates a site in which excess and glamour are tempered with rules and decorous elegance.

These e-mails, along with other communications about the production, prioritize desire and sensation above narrative or participation. If a narrative existed, it might be best expressed by the words uttered to me upon entering the Horseshoe—"be good" but not "too good." With this interaction in mind, *Queen of the Night* again contrasts with several other *immersive* productions. *Sleep No More; Then She Fell*; and *Speakeasy Dollhouse* all utilize textual narrative as a major component of their experiences. For this reason, *Queen of the Night* models *immersion* as a term of cultural production, and exhibits the strongest evidence that aesthetic or sensual *immersion* exists in distinction from commercial or branded *immersion*. *Queen of the Night*, through its construction of excess and trompe l'oeil spectacle, illuminates the entanglements between these two formats. As such, the Diamond Horseshoe's renewed popularity highlights and problematizes aspects of immersion latent in other site-engaged experiences. The necessity of the individual actor-participant to be self-sustaining, to translate the (often dissonant) impulses of the productions' virtual and physical spaces on his or her own, and to adjust to the rules deployed pro- or retro-actively into the performance landscape, deemphasizes linear space-time in favor of a one-size-fits

all performance philosophy—one that simultaneously expects participants to produce their own narratives in space while limiting their ability to do so.

Whereas virtual spaces, new media, and found spaces all play a role in the construction of immersive sites, so too do macro practices that structure the experiences inside immersive events. The specific uses of performance sites also raise questions concerning the social and political ramifications of such spaces and how they absorb or interpolate aesthetic and commercial technologies. *Queen of the Night's* e-mails provide a clear example of how this branding works in the virtual world; aesthetics and commercialism intertwine to create an immersive brand as much as sensory experiences in concrete spaces. While use varies based on the context of each production, the emphasis on site as an atmospheric, sensual, and image-laden interactive experience holds true in many immersive events.

Immersive theatre's use of site attempts to liberate it from the textuality of modern drama, using site to construct ephemeral landscapes that take the place of text. In the sense that immersion represents a broader social attention to images, sites, and interactivity, it appears corollary to a broader techno-cultural shift. Indeed, the aspects of immersion that parallels video/virtual reality games as whole-cloth constructions, taking place more and more immersively, challenges any one definition of the theatrical practice(s) purportedly being discussed here. Hans-Thies Lehmann's influential work *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006) expresses some of the problems produced by the classification of *immersion* succinctly:

> In the face of the pressure created by the united forces of speed and
> surface, theatrical discourse emancipates itself from literary discourse but

at the same time draws nearer to it in terms of its general function within culture. For both theatre and literature are textures which are especially dependent on the release of active energies of imagination, energies that are becoming weaker in a civilization of the primarily passive consumption of images and data... **Theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing and spectating take place**...Its profoundly changed mode of theatrical sign usage suggests that it makes sense to describe a significant sector of the new theatre as "postdramatic." [Emphasis added][146]

Lehmann's analysis of the cultural moment refines the boundaries of site in immersion. "Speed and surface" have shifted the aims of theatre and literature, with the "passive consumption of images" taking their place. Synthesizing images, sites, and new media forms to establish the structure and bounds of immersive environments, productions maintain order through the organization of time and space rather than bodies or texts. *Queen of the Night*, for example, depends on the Diamond Horseshoe's past grandeur to enable its aesthetic and commercial excesses. *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell* in turn utilize painstakingly detailed installations to fragment and refract canonical texts. In these productions, imagistic and spatial aesthetics take precedence over the live presence of bodies, spoken words, or spontaneous imaginings.

Then She Fell, whose Kingsland Ward asylum removes participants to an unknown point in Lewis Carroll's nineteenth century, reproduces the signal manipulation of space and time described in part by Lehmann. Starting in a waiting room filled to the brim with books, medical files, and a giant desk, participants go on to experience a sequence of rooms and interactions particular to

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[146] Lehmann, Hans-Thies, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby. *Postdramatic Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 16.

each individual. No two journeys are the same, and as a result, no two people will have the same interactions, be spoken to the same way, or even be led along hallways by the same nurses and doctors. Subsequently, no one narrative of the space can ever be complete. No single characterization, not even Carroll's, is psychologically deep—the participant can only ever map his or her own navigations through space and time onto the characters' psyches. Add to this the alterations of space to include the fanciful imagery and characters of Carroll's fictions, and time and site themselves become malleable, interpretive, and reflexive. However, where Lehmann suggests that this type of theatre, the theatre of speed and surface, describes a passive set of impulses that waylays the imagination, I suggest that they call participants to do *more* within the bounds of site. Literature provides beginnings, middles, and ends, with textual signifiers that have broad, abstract, signifieds. Delimiting texts in spaces, however expansive, restricts the abstractions of language. Stripping away linearity and the ability to narrate the self in space further inhibits external opportunities for things to mean in concert with each other. In such circumstances individuals are forced to map individual meanings onto objects, persons, and the site itself. Rather than producing a narrative *read* by participants, *Then She Fell* forces them into a crisis in which participants have to interpret the speed and surface of the world they have been dropped into. As such, *immersive theatre* is postdramatic theatre, destabilizing the primacy of drama, and of literature. Lehmann continues:

> In postdramatic forms of *theatre*, staged text (*if* text is staged) is merely a
> component in a gestic, musical, visual, etc., total composition. The rift

between the discourse of the text and that of the theatre can open up all the way to an openly exhibited discrepancy or even unrelatedness.[147]

Theatrical practice in the immersive theatre opens up such a discrepancy. However, productions such as *Then She Fell* call upon participants to cede control of interpretation in exchange for sensual, visceral, and manipulatable impulses. Seductive though they may be, these performances engage auditors as actors in strictly circumscribed sites and events masquerading as unique, individual, and intimate one-time experiences. The sites of the immersive theatre therefore become exemplars of the postdramatic—post-textual events that develop through a synthesis of communications, hypertexts, and experiences occurring inside and outside of theatrical space/time.

Housed in sites, images and signs provoke the participatory interchange that, in Lehmann's definition, becomes the "collective" foundation of theatre-as-event. In *Sleep No More*, participants become homogenous specters through the use of masks—until touched or spoken to by a performer. In *Then She Fell*, participants bond through acts of voyeurism and intimate tête-à-têtes with actors. *Queen of the Night* pushes strangers to break bread together while flirty company members touch and manipulate the crowd. These interactions, occurring as they do in physical or *real* theatre-space, secret away the complex of expectations, boundaries, and media informing the mores and behaviors of participants before they ever cross the site's threshold. In the immersive theatre, the experience of site exceeds the boundaries of collective experience. While this may also be true of other theatrical forms, in immersive formats the emphasis on pre-performance

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[147] Lehmann, Hans-Thies, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby. *Postdramatic Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 46.

preparation occurs in the interest of controlling participant responses—media and imagery reinforce the boundaries of the kinetic, imaginary, worlds engaged by site.

Interwoven into both habitable and virtual spaces, immersive theatre therefore uses site for both aesthetic and commercial effect. The shifting nature of theatrical signs, in Lehmann's view, justifies the creation of the term *postdramatic*. Similarly, immersive theatres' utilization of signs in imagery and site responds to postdramatic impulses in technology and culture. As a critical example, *Queen of the Night* declines textual referents to focus on sensuality. Deemphasizing collectivity and narrative, the production prefers the "speed and surface" of spectacle. Effectively, I argue, this format conforms to the commercial, branded aspects of immersive forms—individuating participant experiences based on a neoliberal model of subjectivity and self-reliance.

Whereas the physical conditions of sites change radically between immersive productions (warehouses, schools, clubs, and etc.), the internal ideologies deployed in these spaces retain similar points of reference. Sites in the immersive theatre serve as conduits—either through the materials provided before entrée into the site-proper, or the physical site itself—into the otherworldly experience of the immersion. Josephine Machon, in her work *Immersive Theatres* (2013) underscores the fact that immersive sites are places "Where the audience-participant is imaginatively and scenographically reoriented in another place, an otherworldly-world that requires navigation according to its own rules of logic."

[148] In these terms, site's importance to immersive theatre lies significantly in its atmospheric qualities, but, Machon continues, "Whereas in games practice this occurs in a conceptual space, in immersive theatre a central feature of the experience is that this otherworldly-world is *both* a conceptual, imaginative space *and* an inhabited physical space." The conceptual and imaginary site of performance increasingly includes guidelines, controlling the imaginations and expectations of audiences.

As the "other-worldly world" in *Queen of the Night*, The Diamond Horseshoe provides a provenance associated with vintage luxury, facilitating the creation of imaginative and virtual expectations of the production for prospective participants. Lehmann's definition exposes the shift towards image and sense-experience, allowing for an expansion of the theatrical ground. If Lehmann helps situate what immersion *is* then Patrice Pavis's definition of site-specific performance illuminates what it is *not*:

> This term [site-specific performance] refers to a staging and performance conceived on the basis of a place in the real world (ergo, outside of established theatre). A large part of the work has to do with researching a place, often an unusual one, that is imbued with history or permeated with atmosphere: an airplane hangar, unused factory, city neighborhood, house or apartment. The insertion of a classical or modern text in this 'found space' throws new light on it, give it an unsuspected power, and places the audience at an entirely different relationship to the text, the place and the purpose for being there.[149]

In Pavis's definition, the site of performance in the site-specific aesthetic provides a significant influence on the performance event. The historical apparatus latent in

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[148] Machon, Josephine. *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 63.

[149] Pavis, Patrice. "Site-Specific Performance" in *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1998), 337-338.

a place proves important to the methods and structures in site-specific work, provoking an artistic response that engages with the histories, sociopolitics, and publics served by the site now and in the past. This level of social responsibility is rarely, if ever, true of immersive performances. Disused spaces, historically relevant spaces, or atmospheric spaces are utilized specifically to serve the marketplace.

Given *Queen of the Night's* ultimately narrow window of provocative impulses (sexual liberation or straight-laced inhibition), the production provides a surprisingly large spatial arrangement that traverses virtual, historical, and physical landscapes. For example, the Diamond Horsehoe's history as Billy Rose's nostalgia-driven nightclub provides a rare instance in which the production's impulse towards sensual consumption and atmospherics mirrors the original use of the site. Placing Pavis's definition beside Lehmann's, site-specific theatre implies a level of social engagement, whereas immersive theatre represents the "speed and surface" referenced by Lehmann. To borrow a phrase from a *Forbes* article on *Then She Fell*, this is theatre for "the videogame generation"—a specific mix of game theory, sensory overload, and mysterious occurrences designed to exploit site to suit the exigencies of consumers familiar with open-world videogames, interactive entertainments, and non-linear narratives.[150]

Videogames, virtual reality, and other technological forms, have begun popping into the consumer landscape with regularity. Smartphones, smart

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[150] Porges, Seth. "Theater for the Videogame Generation", *Forbes*, October 29, 2012 [Online] Available: http://www.forbes.com/sites/sethporges/2012/10/29/theater-for-the-video-game-generation/.

watches, and a vast range of other wearable tech have created what is now

referred to as "The Internet of Things." Jacob Morgan defines this term in an

article for Forbes:

> Simply put this is the concept of basically connecting any device with an
> on and off switch to the Internet (and/or to each other). This includes
> everything from cell phones, coffee makers, washing machines,
> headphones, lamps, wearable devices and almost anything else you can
> think of. This also applies to components of machines, for example a jet
> engine of an airplane or the drill of an oil rig. As I mentioned, if it has an
> on and off switch then chances are it can be a part of the IoT. The analyst
> firm Gartner says that by 2020 there will be over 26 billion connected
> devices…that's a lot of connections (some even estimate this number to be
> much higher, over 100 billion). The IoT is a giant network of connected
> "things" (which also includes people). The relationship will be between
> people-people, people-things, and things-things.[151]

Similar to the expansion of the virtual events produced for the pre-performance

landscapes of immersive theatre, the IoT removes the boundaries of real time and

space from the practice of communication—even automating parts of that

communication according to pre-determined, but increasingly flexible, scripts. As

self-contained sites, sites that depend on participant interaction to fulfill their own

scripts, immersive spaces have become a metaphorical plane upon which this

future is already occurring. Far beyond a website or e-mailed communication,

entry into the immersive theatre means, not just inhabiting Machon's

"otherworldly world," but navigating, interacting with, and defining that world on

an individual basis. The vision of such spaces seems, as with the IoT itself, to be

novel and expansive. With the interconnectedness of all things and people, all

things and people come closer together—a utopic vision of space-time.

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[151] Morgan, Jacob. "A Simple Explanation Of 'The Internet Of Things". *Forbes*, May 5, 2014.
http://www.forbes.com/sites/jacobmorgan/2014/05/13/simple-explanation-internet-things-that-
anyone-can-understand/.

Henri Lefebvre, in his arguably prophetic book *The Production of Space*

(1991), delivers an analysis of space eerily similar to contemporary technologies

of site and creation long before any real discussion of an "Internet of Things"

existed:

> It [space] embodies at best a technological utopia, a computer simulation
> of the future, or of the possible, within the framework of the real – the
> framework of the existing mode of production. The starting-point here is a
> knowledge which is at once integrated into, and integrative with respect
> to, the mode of production. The technological utopia in question is a
> common feature not just of many science fiction novels, but also of all
> kinds of projects concerned with space, be they those of architecture,
> urbanism, or social planning.[152]

The technological utopia, "a common feature of many science fiction novels,"

describes modes of production as integrated with knowledge, and vice versa. This

sounds much like Morgan's description of the IoT. Similar again to the immersive

theatre, Lefebvre's analysis of spaces as "simulations of the possible within

frameworks of the real" invokes any of the *immersive* production formats

discussed so far. As self-contained and virtual worlds, immersive theatrical

landscapes produce expansive spaces that realize closely monitored simulations of

the possible. When combined with the sociopolitical ideology of the *neoliberal*

consumer environment of the IoT, however, Lefebvre's vision quickly turns

dystopic, less *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and more *1984*.

This is not to say that *The Production of Space* is not critical of the ability

to read space, in many ways anticipating the creation of the Internet of Things.

Throughout the rest of his book, Lefebvre systematically reviews space and the

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[152] Lefebvre, Henri., trans. David Nicholson-Smith. *The Production of Space* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991 orig. 1974), 9.

relationships that compose and mold it. Interconnected, inclusive, and flexible, spaces are regarded as fluid, *readable*, containers.[153] Making a call for the considered analysis of spatial use, he also relates the difficulties endemic to doing so:

> It is no longer a matter of the space of this or the space of that: rather, it is in its totality or global aspect that needs not only to be subjected to analytic scrutiny (a procedure which is liable to furnish merely an infinite series of fragments and cross-sections subordinate to the analytic project), but also to be *engendered* by and within theoretical understanding [emphasis original].[154]

This process of spatial analysis can only be realized, according to Lefebvre, through time *and* space. Or as he describes, "The historical and its consequences, the 'diachronic,' the 'etymology' of locations in the sense of what happened at a particular spot or place and thereby changed it – all of this becomes inscribed in space."[155] With regard to, say, *Queen of the Night*, the legibility of space breaks down upon closer analysis. While the production presents a façade of unified space/time realized through the insistent messaging of renovation, installation, marketing, and bodies, examining the cultural history produced in that space fragments and dismantles its innuendoes. Space, therefore, represents a layering of effects and significations that respond to both internal contexts (those that relate to an individual's experience) and external ones (those that relate to the events taking, or that have taken, place in X space—real or imagined). Following Alison Landsberg's *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (2004), these two contexts become

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[153] Lefebvre, 15.
[154] Lefebvre, 37.
[155] Lefebvre, 37.

fluid—readily shifting and reacting to places both virtual and material, to construct (or reconstruct) frames of history, memory, experience, and presence. As Landsberg writes, "*Prosthetic Memory* asks scholars and intellectuals to take seriously the popularity of new cultural surfaces, such as experiential museums, and demands their recognition of the power of these new media to affect people and shape their politics."[156] Simultaneously enmeshed in, and descriptive of, The Internet of Things, neoliberalism, and constructed history, the immersive theatre rehearses what happens when virtuality gains priority over the corporality of real-time performance events and their spatial circumstances. Taking Lefebvre and Landsberg's viewpoints together, mediatized and material experiences no longer represent discernably different experiences of space.

Queen of the Night pays unusual attention to sensual interactions, over and above narrative impulses. Indeed, the preeminence of bodily experience in these spaces may represent the logical extension of current cultural trends, especially with relation to virtuality and technological evolution. Robin Nelson, in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (2010) expands on this tectonic movement:

> Contemporary theatre practice may well be less concerned with offering meanings than pleasures and experiences, the frisson of momentary dislocation of normative bearings and the opening up of new perceptual modes extending the range of human experience; and perhaps even projecting us into the posthuman.[157]

The "momentary dislocation of normative bearings" sums up, not just the use of space in the immersive theatre, but a benchmark for defining *immersion* as a

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[156] Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University, 2004), 21.

[157] Nelson, Robin, Sarah Bay-Cheng, Chiel Kattenbelt, and Andy Lavender eds. *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 20.

conceptual tool—a tool used for something other than marketing. Dislocation, however, comes in a multitude of forms. In *Queen of the Night*, this takes the form of a burlesque nightclub, while in *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell*; the scenic efforts replicate places that seem familiar: an asylum, a bar, a candy shop, or a bedroom. In these latter instances, the familiarity of constructed sites determine a protocol for their exploration, as well as a frame in which they can become *other* through telltale signs. For example, In *Sleep No More* a bathtub holds an eel, and in *Then She Fell* the floor of the asylum falls away to reveal a pond—each signaling that the seeming familiarity of spaces is at odds with their corporal reality. *Queen of the Night* forecloses the strangeness elicited in these latter productions in exchange for a framing of site delimited by homogeneity— what you see is what you get. For while Billy Rose's haunted ballroom informs the excess and spectacle of *Queen of the Night*, the new Horseshoe flattens the site's historical context into an undifferentiated, capital-driven experience; one that replaces the altered realities of other events with a monolithic focus on sensuality and nostalgia.

Nostalgia and commercialism often cohabit in the theatre. However, unlike conventional theatrical events that take place, say, framed by a proscenium arch, so-called immersive events such as *The Queen of the Night* create problems of definition and genera. Site-specific theatre, interactive theatre, participatory theatre, promenade theatre, environmental theatre—all appear to fall somewhere under the aegis of *immersion*, with most identifying the specificity of site as a core convention of the theatrical event. Yet *immersion* implies more than these

terms suggest. Especially with regard to space, the expectation of the participant

being surrounded, engulfed, or otherwise overwhelmed, infuses the concept of

immersion— transforming site into an interactive actor-participant with its own

agenda and agency. As Josephine Machon describes in *Immersive Theatres*,

"Immersive theatre actively demonstrates how space is the palpable medium

where the historical memory of simultaneous activity is a constant *praesance*."[158]

In this, space serves a paradoxical role. On one hand *praesance,* or being in-the-

moment, dictates experience as the crowning achievement of immersion. Yet

space constructs the experience of the participant—it is palpable and navigable,

containing memory and activity. Space becomes the means of conveyance into

another world, as well as the world itself. With regard to many exemplars of

immersion, the in-betweenness of such theatrical spaces often expands the

potential for audience engagement, calling seductively for participants to imbue

objects and sites with new and varied meanings in the interest of narrating their

own experience.

Ascribing agency to the sites of immersive theatre proves crucial to

discerning the difference, or nuance, provided by the term *immersive* itself.

Concretely, site-as-actor often serves as the primary contact point between

production and participant in immersive environments. Finding themselves freed

from the typical restraints incumbent upon audiences, participants wander through

transformed sites installed with artistic flourishes, sometimes totally alone. Spaces

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[158] Emphasis original. Machon defines *praesence* via Deleuze on pg. 109, expanding on the concept in later discussions: "This is an 'absolute' experience of being 'in the moment,' a constant *praesance*, ascribes the full force of the experience to the moment of being in the event itself..." Machon, Josephine. *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 143.

become an enigmatic forest of signs and signifiers, with participants distributing

and mapping meanings across as much of the site as can be explored. These

experiences have proved seductive, inciting large online communities to map both

immersive spaces and prospective experiences to be had with performers.[159]

Overall, the immersive phenomenon takes on many aspects of a game or puzzle,

especially of the kind created by current technologies—interactive worlds

engaged in the first-person and constructed to appear real. As the ability to create

virtual worlds becomes increasingly attainable through such technologies as VR

goggles, smart-phone applications, or Google Glass, immersive theatre also

focuses similarly on an experience of virtuality—creating an inclusive interface

for participants known as *intermedial* performance. In *Mapping Intermediality in*

Performance, Robin Nelson and Chiel Kattenbelt describe this term's special

significance to theatre, asserting that

> Theatre is distinctive, among the arts and media, in its capacity to stage
> other media in a process of theatricalisation, which incorporates them
> under the conditions of their established media specificity without
> transforming them (as in transmediality), and without abandoning its own
> specificity of liveness in the here and now.[160]

While Robin Nelson goes on to suggest that this view of liveness may be troubled

by such things as virtual performances, they nonetheless establishe performance

as a process-based phenomenon where space maintains interrelationships with

other media, but remains a fixed point of reference. Paradigmatically, this

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[159] A partial list of such sites and communities may be found in my bibliography. However, it must be noted that such communities appear and disappear as certain events come and go.
[160] Nelson, Robin and Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender, and Sarah-Bay Cheng, eds. *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 19.

terminology allows *immersion* and *immersive* space to exist without muddying the waters searching for a single, elusive definition.

In its attention to individual, sensual experience, *Queen of The Night* places a high priority on being in-the-moment. However, it remakes the Diamond Horseshoe into a commercial medium where receiving personalized performances depends on individual luck and ingenuity as opposed to choice. Entering the space comes at a high price (higher than good seats at most Broadway productions), and with a tiered pricing system that includes varying levels of interaction, food, and drink. The production's website and ticketing provide a glimpse at the wide, and highly unequal, range of experiences available:

> **QUEEN OF THE NIGHT is a decadent fusion of theater, cuisine, circus, and nightlife that welcomes guests into a wholly interactive entertainment experience.**
>
> **All of The Queen's guests will receive a welcome cocktail, passed canapés, and full sit-down dinner complete with decanters of wine.** Dress to please the Queen. Cocktail or gala attire required. The Queen will deny access to guests who are not appropriately dressed.
>
> **ULTIMATE RESERVATION**
> The Ultimate Reservation promises esteemed guests our highest level of service and access. In addition to everything included in the Premium Reservation, you're invited behind the scenes to indulge in a selection of delicacies personally chosen by our Executive Chef, and assisted with your choice of a premium wine to accompany your dinner. You will then be escorted to your VIP reserved seats for personalized table service throughout the rest of your evening.
>
> **PREMIUM RESERVATION**
> The Premium Reservation grants you admission to the Diamond Horseshoe and all of the Queen's festivities including cocktails, passed canapés, and full sit-down dinner complete with decanters of wine. Premium guests will be welcomed with VIP reserved preferred seats and private cocktail service at the table. You will also receive a gift from the Queen which entitles you to free-flowing drinks from our Mad Distillery Bar.

GALA RESERVATION
The Gala Reservation grants you admission to the Diamond Horseshoe and all of the Queen's planned festivities. You will receive a welcome cocktail from our Mad Distillery Bar, passed canapés and a sit-down dinner complete with decanters of wine. Cash bar is available for additional beverage purchases.

PLEASE NOTE: Gala Reservations are general admission seating; there are no assigned seats.

QUEEN'S CHOICE
Queen's Choice is a highly customized, exclusive QUEEN OF THE NIGHT experience that is personally tailored to each guest by our VIP concierge team. Reservations can be made at concierge@queenofthenightnyc.com.[161]

The cost for these tiers comes to $140 (Gala), $190 (Premium) and $390 (Ultimate). The "Queen's Choice" package includes no prices, but it might be assumed to include an even higher cost (above and beyond the "Ultimate" experience). The installation of this hierarchy, from the moment participants purchase tickets, immediately recalls attention to the neoliberal aspects of immersive production in this, and other performances. In my own experiences with immersive theatre in New York City, I have never encountered such a clearly defined pricing scale associated with the potential intimacy and services of the production. *Sleep No More* relies mostly on luck to attain the most intimate "one-on-one" experiences, and *Then She Fell* leads participants on pre-determined performance tracks that are not correlated with ticket pricing. *Queen of the Night* establishes the class-hierarchy of the event and our role inside the space, from the very moment of purchase.

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[161] Queen of The Night: http://queenofthenightnyc.com/.

Reviewing the production for *The New York Times*, Charles Isherwood describes some of his experiences with the space and its denizens:

> Although there is a sprig of drama involved — characters modeled on the principals in Mozart's "Magic Flute" have central roles in the floor show — the foursquare aim of this meticulously produced spectacle is to satiate appetites other than traditionally dramatic ones. Just how sated you will be depends on chance, to a degree. As with 'Sleep No More,' every individual's experience will be different. You might drink, dine and watch the performance, most of which takes place on a raised platform in the middle of the ballroom-size dining room, without being accosted by any of the "butlers," as the wranglers who spirit customers away for private encounters are called. Or you could be lassoed (literally) almost the moment you descend the marble staircase leading to the festivities, as my companion was, and led off into a private chamber for some intimate talk about intimate matters. ("Have you ever been in love?") Or you could find yourself, as I did, shoeless and sitting in a fur- and mirror-lined boudoir with a pert young woman making goo-goo eyes at you as she strokes your face with a feather.[162]

The ballroom, boudoir, chamber, and staircase provide the venues for intimate, flirtatious encounters with the butlers, but these often occur by "chance." Titillation, and the fantasy of encounters with the scantily clad actors, reproduces a version of desires encouraged by floor shows starring Billy Rose's 6'2" chorus girls in the 194's. Taken abruptly through the wrought-iron boundary of the ballroom's center, a female butler danced seductively on a platform in front of me (I peeked). She stroked and touched my face and back. However, unlike Isherwood's private one-on-one, this was done in full-view of other participants. At once voyeuristic and intimate, encounters with the performers present themselves comparably to those promoted by Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, but

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[162] Isherwood, Charles. "A Circus of Intimate Sensation: Twisting, Touching and Teasing in 'Queen of the Night,'" *The New York Times*, February 2, 2014.

without the narrative pretension extending from either Shakespeare or Alfred Hitchcock. The sexuality on display in *Queen of the Night*, while still of the PG variety, maintains itself with the discipline of the strip-club: look but don't touch, indulge, but not too much. However, notwithstanding the difficulty of attaining these semi-accessible encounters, the site itself structures the hierarchical relationship of participants to spaces and bodies through a resurrection of its original use. Spatial logic, in *The Queen of the Night*, offers our imaginations the fleeting feeling of being desired and desiring, of being pampered and important— but with a constant reminder of the one-night-only ephemerality of it all, and all in the spirit of capitalistic competition that made Rose a lasting businessman.

Reading the Diamond Horseshoe's situation underscores that ephemerality, joining the faded aesthetic of the original structure with the outlandish conceptions of Randy Weiner, and his co-producer Simon Hammerstein. To achieve these effects, the Horseshoe's renovation required homages to the chorus-girl spectacles of the late 1930s and '40s art-deco design, and the preservation of historic details. To bring the spectacle up-to-date, the production also uses elements of post-modern burlesque and variety performance, with architectural renovations to match the cabaret-like costuming of the butlers. Maintaining portions of Rose's original design proves critical to this strategy, encouraging participants to view the ballroom as a historical conduit—a world in which normative inhibitions seem passé.

Using Machon's terms, *Queen of The Night* takes Billy Rose's historical context as its conceptual space, but remodels the inhabited physical space with the

gaudy trappings of 2006's pre-crash excesses. *Vanity Fair* affirms that, "Beneath

the neon, the space is configured just as it was in Rose's day. An extensive

renovation left the staircase paint peeling."[163] That staircase conveys both a literal

and figurative descent. The peeling paint, unkempt stacks of champagne flutes,

and elegant deco curves of the stairwell, all suggest our tardiness to the party: one

that began long before our entry, and may continue long after we leave. As the

Horseshoe's literal threshold, the three flights spark tension, anticipation, and

curiosity. Like Disney princesses and princes, we make our way down to a

climactic and sumptuous party—a celebrity ball where our celebrity is a fiction.

In this case, resurrecting the Diamond Horseshoe reflects, not a

reengagement with Broadway's golden age, but a post-capitalist paean for the

golden age of millennial profiteering. *W* magazine, producing a similar article as

Vanity Fair about the $20 million dollar renovation of the Diamond Horseshoe,

describes the triumphant excess of the space's makeover:

> "The space is like a cross between a church, an opera house, and a
> bordello," added Giovanna Battaglia, the creative director of the project
> and a *W* contributing fashion editor. In conjunction with Douglas Little,
> who has designed window displays for Bergdorf Goodman, Battaglia
> transformed the dilapidated location into a gilded lily of surrealism, with
> hammered-gold floors, green velvet stage curtains held back by four-foot-
> long hands, and a bejeweled ceiling inspired by Catholic monstrances. She
> enlisted the designer Thom Browne to dream up fetishistic costumes like
> butler suits accessorized with phalluses.[164]

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[163] Monahan, Patrick, "The Diamond Horseshoe, the World War II-Era Nightclub Resurrected by Randy Weiner and Simon Hammerstein," *Vanity Fair*. January 24, 2014. Accessed August 2, 2014, http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2014/01/diamond-horseshoe-nightclub-simon-hammerstein.

[164] Lawrence, Vanessa. "The Diamond Horseshoe,",*W Magazine*, January 17, 2014. http://www.wmagazine.com/culture/2014/01/diamond-horseshoe-nyc-nightclub/photos/.

This church/opera house/bordello, full of fetishistic costumes, constructs a fantasy of exclusivity, of being desired guests at an event most have paid a great deal to attend.

Queen of the Night, with its weird, cognitive dissonance of sex and restraint, to some degree fits the bill of site-specific theatre as described by Pavis. After all, where else but the Diamond Horseshoe could such *constructed history* be interpolated so effortlessly with the reality of spatial use? However, to conflate *Queen of the Night's* use of space with site-specific theatre is to elide the specificity of site in social, political, contexts. Beyond the apparently neoliberal aspects of the performance, the celebratory conjuring up of pre-recession wealth, and the hierarchical arrangement of audiences, the space merely cites itself as a reason for the gathering without critically commenting on the undercurrent of classist, capitalistic, dogma pinned to its former use. In terms of site-specific performance this production illustrates, conversely, how the conjoining of prosthetic memory with spatial analysis creates socially engaged site-use. It is difficult, for example, not to read Mike Pearson's description of his project in *Site-Specific Performance* (2010) without reflecting on parallels with Lefebvre:

> I suggest that the conventions and techniques of the auditorium may be inappropriate or inadequate to addressing "site." And that site-specific performance is other than a transposition and modification of stage practices. If the stage is essentially *synecdochic* – in the which limited resources stand in for a complete picture, as when a table and chairs suggests a domestic scene – site is frequently a site of plenitude, its inherent characteristics, manifold effects, and unruly elements always liable to leak, spill and diffuse into performance: "site-specific work has to deal with, embrace, and cohabit with existing factors of scale, architecture, chance, accident, incident."[165]

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[165] Pearson, Mike. *Site-Specific Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.

Allowing the book's project to remain unencumbered by theoretically

pigeonholing site-specific performance, Pearson sets out instead to create a work

for practical application. Through an informal series of guideposts, he aims to

"encourage further initiatives in performance."[166] Like Lefebvre and Landsberg,

who aim to create a theoretical structure for space, time, and cultural memory,

Pearson's opening lines evoke the fluidity of performance with relation to space,

time, place, and individual experience. For immersive theatrical events, that

fluidity accompanies overwhelming sensual data available during a given

performance, rendering a complex realignment of space and time with regard to

asynchronous, decentered experiences.

Mike Pearson, whose work has more often been characterized as site-

specific, began using immersive tropes before the term formally existed as a

description for theatre. As such, Pearson's work with Welsh company Brith Gof

provides data concerning the use of immersive tactics and aesthetics, but ones that

consciously avoid neoliberal models and the label 'immersive'. *Goddodin* (1998),

based on an ancient Welsh epic, took place in a site that engulfed participants in

the intensity of battle. The company's use of space illustrates aesthetic

immersion—a retroactive defining of the performance that alludes to similar

methods of sensual engagement as, say *Queen of the Night* or *Sleep No More*, but

that retain the integrity of social and historical contexts in its use of space—a

historical engagement that proves less *virtual* in its engagement than parallel to

present political struggles. In the company's words:

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[166] Pearson, 2.

> The impetus to create the performance came with the darkest days of
> "Thatcherism," a time when Margaret Thatcher herself proclaimed society
> dead. Of course, the metaphorical implications of the poem were self-
> evident. But in deciding to create a large-scale work, at the limits of our
> ability to achieve it both technically and physically, we aimed to echo the
> folly of the Gododdin, the small struggling with the impossibly greater.
> We wanted to constitute political theatre as sophistication and complexity,
> elaborating dramatic material and detail in all available media
> simultaneously, to work with the friction between the sensibilities and
> procedures of theatre and rock music and with anachronism.
>
> Gododdin was conceived, constructed and initially presented - for three
> nights late in December 1998 - in the engine-shop of the enormous,
> disused Rover car factory in Cardiff, itself a potent symbol of economic
> decline and industrial decay.[167]

Goddodin not only reached backwards to revive a key document of Welsh culture,

but reached forward in time and space to critically engage with "Thatcherism"

and the destruction of livelihoods through the dismantling of Welsh industry.

And, in the midst of this highly physical performance, participants found

themselves in the midst of a struggle—between the old battle and the new social

struggle, between Welsh and English languages, and "the small struggling with

the impossibly greater." As described in *The Independent's* review, participants

had to pay close attention to their surroundings, or risk being a casualty of the

battle themselves:

> The performance begins almost imperceptibly, as Lis Hughes Jones recites
> from a central position on the balcony. Then, to guttural blasts from the
> taped soundtrack, the doors open. As the traffic speeds by in the street
> outside, Test Department enters on a fantastical cart made of wood and
> scrap metal, torchlit. In the male players' costumes of maroon kilts, black
> cloaks, and Dr. Martens, they circle the hall and climb to the percussion
> instruments wailing on the gantry. Then come the players; four men and
> two women. After ritual grooming and heroic postures, their haughty
> demeanour turns to aggressive sham. Oil drums collide in mid air and the

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[167] "Brith Gof: Goddodin" [Online] Accessed: 7 February 2015,.
http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/brithgof/19.

audience realises that quick reflexes are needed to avoid the tyres whirled on ropes. The cars take a fearful beating.[168]

This description highlights the futility and frustration of the epic's violence. The David and Goliath story of industry/colonialism vs. livelihoods/nationalism ends with the defeat of the Welsh people—a defeat to which participants bear witness, and are indeed a part of whether they like it or not. *The Scotsman* concurred:

> Promenade Theatre is too wan a description for this spectacle, since the audience is dragged willy-nilly into the action, and will have to keep attentive to avoid the performers, who leap in their midst, swing massive rubber tyres in their direction or hurl steel barrels either into pools of water or at the pillars behind which the prescient spectator will cower.[169]

The reviews never mention the term *immersive*, yet the installation of a massive space with scenery and props, the participation of audiences, the reconstitution of site, and the sensual force of the performance, all point towards contemporary immersive aesthetics. Even so, the inescapable difference between *Goddodin* and *The Queen of the Night*, or any of the range of New York performances that self-describe as immersive, are highlighted by the description and reviews of *Goddodin*. Drawing again from the notion of *constructed history* and pre-performance expectations, the viscerality of *Goddodin* is real: avoiding the flailing warriors, with their tires and car-hood shields, becomes a necessity. *Queen of the Night* evokes viscerality through lustful depictions, through flirtation, and through the appropriation of site, but these all prove illusory in the real-time context of the production. In terms of sociopolitical context, *Goddodin* features a concise and powerful critical awareness, whereas *Queen of the Night*

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[168] "Brith Gof: Goddodin" [Online] Accessed: 7 February 2015. http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/brithgof/19.
[169] "Brith Gof: Goddodin" [Online] Accessed: 7 February 2015. http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/brithgof/19.

revels in, and reproduces, the excesses of pre-recession America without critical

attention to, or acknowledgement of, present social, historical, or political forces.

Mike Pearson defines the artistic and dramaturgical activities that create

productions like *Goddodin* in *Site-Specific Performance*, providing clues as to the

usefulness of the company's practices near to the birth of immersive theatre as a

term of art. If *Goddodin* might be redefined as *immersive* (in addition to site-

specific), then the collection of site-practices engaged by Brith Gof may represent

an approachable, flexible means of defining socially engaged *immersive* practices.

The potential to fuse aesthetic and experiential notions with branding practices

could shift the potential use-value of sites in New York City and beyond. Mike

Pearson writes,

> But in addressing the very particularities of its engagement with a
> location, any choreographic account of site-specific performance as a
> thing will necessitate detailed description, paying equal attention to that
> which is of the site and that which is brought to the site, the inextricable
> binding of place and artwork, to demonstrate its uniqueness.
>
> This might resemble what Michael Shanks and I called a *deep map*
> (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, pp. 64-6): an attempt to record and represent
> the substance, grain, and patina of a particular place, through
> juxtapositions and interweavings of the historical and the contemporary,
> the political and the poetic, the factual and the fictional, the academic and
> the aesthetic...depth not as profundity but as topographic and cultural
> density. In this it is perhaps akin to anthropologist Clifford Geertz's *thick
> description*: the detailed and contextual description of cultural phenomena,
> to discern the complexities behind the action, and from which the observer
> is not removed (Geertz, 1973) It may further reference his *blurred genre*:
> as Shanks and I appropriated it, "a mixture of narration and scientific
> practices, an integrated, interdisciplinary, intertextual and creative
> approach to recording, writing, and illustrating the material past" (Pearson
> and Shanks, 2001, p. 131).[170]

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[170] Pearson, Mike. *Site-Specific Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 32.

The *deep map*, if applied to so-called *immersive* forms, defines the holistic

confluence of a site with aesthetics, history, and virtuality. The stakes of applying

this set of practices becomes most evident near the end of the quotation, where

Pearson describes "writing, and illustrating the material past." In other words, the

structuration of the past in space represents an affective act of recording and

imagining history. Thus, in *Queen of the Night*, when the record concludes that

the past begins and ends in the virtual, in expectation, and in unsatisfied desires, it

elides the dramaturgy of space and time in favor of sensuality and image—

returning to Lehmann, *Queen of the Night* represents the "speed and surface" of

performance without the *deep map* or the *thick description* that socially enlivens

performance events like *Goddodin*.

If the holistic site, in Pearson's view, interweaves the spatial and aesthetic

with the past, present, and even future, then the constructed history of sites like

The Diamond Horseshoe, the asylum of *Then She Fell* or the McKittrick Hotel of

Sleep No More all depend on an implicit text. Even if that text is fully devised,

narrative still pervades and authorizes immersive theatre-spaces. For *Queen of the*

Night, the floor show includes a love story of sorts; *Sleep No More* depends on

Macbeth; and *Then She Fell* on both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the*

Looking Glass. In the spirit of expanding the theatrical ground—one that includes

virtual spaces and messages as well as real, sensual experiences—texts become

embedded in immersive theatrical sites. As such, the supposed lack of texts in

immersive experiences often, ironically, indicates their expansive presence. The

space of immersive performance absorbs texts and diffuses them across carefully

composed images, experiences, and performances. Andrew Sofer, in his book

Dark Matter (2013) expresses such a model in reference to Punchdrunk Theatre

Company's *Sleep No More*. Sofer's description of this space is worth quoting at

length:

> Aside from invisible props like Macbeth's dagger and offstage figures like
> Godot, spectral reading illuminates the impact of phantom presences
> whose substance is not, in the first instance, rhetorical...Thus *Sleep No
> More*, Punchdrunk Theatre's site-specific, phantasmagorical remix of
> *Macbeth* as filtered through Hitchcock and *The Shining*, is both
> nonmimetic and nonverbal. Far from synecdochically representing an
> elsewhere, the cavernous performance space is the total space of action.
> The "Manderley" bar remains a working bar with the audience can order a
> drink (even if it is cunningly ghosted by a double or doubles embedded
> elsewhere—a Platonic joke).[171]

Spectral reading as Sofer defines it "is a deliberate pun. Not only are we looking

for ghosts we can see right through, invisible presences that cast no light

themselves. We are expanding our investigative spectrum beyond material bodies

and objects in order to discern hidden wavelengths beyond the reach of the naked

(critical) eye."[172] In the case of Punchdrunk's work, as well as other immersive

performances, text effectively becomes spatial. The process by which space

exceeds synecdoche and morphs into place, enacting "nonmimetic" and

"nonverbal" gestures that nonetheless conjure narrative forces, presents a critical

flashpoint for the framing of contemporary performance. This is not to say that

immersive work represents a novel expression of theatrical conventions, but

rather that its spaces become places—imbued with memory, emotion, and

sensuality—in ways that simultaneously refine, reflect, and reject cultural

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[171] Sofer, Andrew. *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, and Performance* (Ann Arbor: university of Michigan Press, 2013), 9.
[172] Sofer, 5.

technologies ("surfaces"). In line with the interdisciplinary aspects described by

Lefebvre, Landsberg, and Pearson, the novelty of immersive spaces lies in their

coalescence—the refractions and interactions of forces inhuman and human,

concrete and abstract, straightforward and labyrinthine. As evidenced in both

Queen of the Night and *Goddodin,* the valences these texts produce differ broadly

in practice. However, the textual/spatial/virtual all play a critical role in the

structure and deployment of immersive sites.

  Constructed history, as I have termed it here, is in many ways akin to

spectral history. Behind, or beyond, the "total space of action" in the immersive

theatre lays a void unfilled by cultural production. Mapped onto sites, these

histories resonate with the technological revolution of the "Internet of Things," of

videogames and virtual avatars, and of the curation of undefinable spatial

identities. Given the way these theatres map onto space, linking virtual histories

and personas onto concrete objects and events, I suggest that the commercial

iterations of immersive theatre engage in a parasitic role with relation to site. The

implications of the term *parasitic* generally provoke a negative response, but in

this case its use relates only to the role site plays in relation to a performance

event. The OED provides a primary usage of the term "parasite" as "an organism

that lives on, in, or with an organism of another species, obtaining food, shelter,

or other benefit; (now) *spec.* one that obtains nutrients at the expense of the host

organism, which it may directly or indirectly harm." As opposed to *symbiosis,*

where site and bodily performances might function cumulatively to create

productions (e.g. *Goddodin),* immersive sites present an opportunity for other

theatrical aesthetics to exist through its intrinsic and extrinsic use-value. Whether through economic or aesthetic necessity, this parasitism proves reductive, distilling the depth of social and public space into surface forms and images ("speed and surface" again). *Sleep No More* was first transplanted from London to a disused school in Brookline, MA (2009), and then to a warehouse in Chelsea, (2012). *Then She Fell* (2013, 2014) takes place in a former parochial school in Brooklyn. *Queen of the Night*, of course, takes place in the Diamond Horseshoe— ironically the only site of the three to make reference to the site's original cultural or public use. Where the production shuns textuality in favor of spectacle, that spectacle requires Billy Rose's ghost for its aesthetic and commercial foundation.

Beginning this discussion, I noted the definitional and generic confusion of labeling *immersive* theatre in relation to other associated theatrical forms. In doing so, I quoted Josephine Machon, and her criterion for such events in relation to the "otherworldly world" of the immersive theatre. In a subheading entitled "Total Immersion*,"* Machon writes that, "Where total immersion occurs, there is always the experience of formalistic transformation in that the audience-participant is able to fashion her own 'narrative' and journey." This statement has born considerable scrutiny in the duration of this chapter, with site and site-use coming under fire for formalistic transformations that eliminate, or simply neglect, the social, political, and public in exchange for the sensual and experiential. Troublingly, the novelty of such experiences often trumps the critical examination of their inception and direction. With immersive, space itself appears to tumble into a rabbit-hole that disengages from the transformation of the social

environment of New York City, but has the potential to explore the anxious

interplay of technology and site, time and space, real and virtual.

Chapter 4

Things, Agency, and Neoliberalism

Yet with this new move to a grounded understanding of things we must
simultaneously consider immateriality, the need to objectify, to abstract, and our
embodied practices of magic and making. Fabrication is all about making the
world while making ourselves, our quintessential subject making. All our
endeavors in the world are about copying, whether in the domains of language or
material cultures, both are processes of replication, an objectification of the
thought world.[173]

I remember the taxidermy room as being distinctly uncomfortable. Having

wandered through *Sleep No More* at length—through the candy shop, the chilly

graveyard, and the Macduff's family bedroom (I knew it from the blood on the

small beds)—I wandered into a room filled with taxidermied specimens. At the

best of times, I dislike taxidermy. And worse, there was a smell that permeated

the space. I remember the browns of fur, the dead eyes of the deer, but that smell

was something different. Somewhere between mothballs, death, and mold. The

witch's apothecary had been filled with hanging bunches of herbs, unknown

things in jars, and small wooden boxes. The smell there was something more like

rosemary, earth, grass, and musty books; far more comforting. The taxidermy

room haunts me still when I think of *Sleep No More*—the smell to me was the

smell of existential dread, a *memento mori* reminding me what, precisely, runs the

machinery of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

In *Then She Fell*, the tea party produced another memorable reaction.

Specifically, I recall the taste of stewed, bitter tea. My mother being English, I

have a deep memory of teas taken over the course of my life. In the mad tea party,

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[173] Meskell, Lynn, ed. *Archaeologies of Materiality* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 3.

a scene where the White Rabbit, the Red Queen, the White Queen, and the Mad Hatter all congregate with four participants, we witnessed a frenetic choreography that culminated in our being offered a seat at a long table with a white tablecloth. We are each poured tea. I believe it was Earl Gray. We drink. I remember thinking that it had sat too long in the pot, that it was a hastily made tea. Inasmuch as any tea could be mad, this was what I would consider a mad tea.

If texts undergird these performances, and sites ultimately frame their physical embodiment, then objects may be said to create the experience, the immersiveness of immersion. However, determining the nature of objects in immersive performance proves slippery. When left to their own devices, they engage with semiotic and phenomenological processes that defy and expand analyses from the traditional theater. In my above recollections from *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell*, for example, smell and taste provoked the strongest responses. In the traditional theater as I have defined it in this project, smell and taste rarely enter the equation. But it is not only the engagement with alternative sensual stimuli that necessitates a re-envisioning of theatre semiotics and phenomenology. Immersive theatre confounds theatre and world, dissolving analogy and synecdoche in favor of corporeal materialism. It also presents a paradigm that engages with technological structures in new, potent ways.

Manipulating desires and narrative impulses throughout *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell*, objects weave labyrinthine interrelationships that transform space, time, and sensate experiences into a cogent, pre-determined, sensual fabric. Synthesizing discourses of the early modern theatre, anthropology, archaeology,

and performance, I observe how these theatrical objects become complex

presences that both parallel and augment current theatrical and virtual

technologies. Participants, far from being lost in these worlds, become established

parts of them. As such, the role of individuals in immersion continues a neoliberal

project: one endeavoring to entice audiences variously into the role of voyeur,

actor, object, and narrator. In immersive theatre, actor-participants are

precariously poised between the human and inhuman, the material and the

visceral. The examples presented in this chapter model this neoliberal project, but

in my conclusion I counter with productions that serve as possible alternatives.

While the semiotics of traditional theatrical production have established

discourses, the immersive theatre differs in key points from such approaches. Keir

Elam, in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, writes:

> The process of semiotization [in the theater] is clearest, perhaps, in the
> case of the elements of the set. A table employed in dramatic
> representation will not usually differ in any material or structural fashion
> from the item of furniture that the members of the audience eat at, and yet
> it is in some sense transformed: it acquires, as it were, a set of quotation
> marks…the material stage object becomes, rather, a semiotic unit standing
> not directly for another (imaginary) table but for the intermediary signified
> "table," i.e. for the *class of objects* of which it is a member.[174]

This is untrue of the immersive environment, in which objects are not stand-ins

for a class of thing, and do not acquire quotation marks. Instead, tables, chairs,

glasses, jars, and taxidermied animals function as interconnected components of a

single sign: the production itself. In other words, I argue that the design of

immersive space is an enclosed sign system in which objects refer most often to

themselves, or each other, rather than to anything outside the production proper.

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[174] Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 7.

This view coincides with Erika Fischer-Lichte's, where in *The Semiotics of Theater* (1992) she argues that:

> Thus, in a certain sense, theater involves the 'doubling-up' of the culture in which that theater is played: the signs engendered by theater respectively denote those signs produced by the corresponding cultural systems. Theatrical signs are therefore always signs of signs which are characterized by the fact that they may have the same material constitution as the primary signs which they signify.[175]

Rather than a class of signs, the objects in the immersive theatre are culturally doubled through an invocation of canonical text, atmosphere, and placement. As such, signs of signs, e.g. chair, bedspread, crucifix, or jar, in the immersive theatre intimates a methodically structured reaction to cultural texts that audiences may or may not have access to. That access is critical, I argue, to reading the performance. Not having read, or having knowledge of, *Macbeth* represents a real deficit in *Sleep No More*. Immersive theatres, and especially those described here, depend upon a culturally, socially, and class-specific integration of sign and narrative integration.

Circumstances get more complicated with the introduction of the actor/participant. As discussed in Chapter 2, participants inevitably carry their individual experiences and cultural memories with them into the immersive event, creating prosthetic memories and referring signs to meanings outside that event. Such a situation is reminiscent of Elam's introduction to theatre semiotics, in which he concludes that, "Connotation is a parasitic semantic function, therefore, whereby the sign-vehicle of one sign-relationship provides the basis for a second-order sign relationship (the sign vehicle of the stage sign 'crown' acquires the

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[175] Fisher-Lichte, Erika. *The Semiotics of Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 9.

secondary meanings 'majesty,' 'usurpation,' etc.)."[176] Just as *Sleep No More*

presents itself as an enclosed system of signs, it also takes advantage of a

participant's knowledge of *Macbeth*, of Alfred Hitchcock, and of the 1920s and

'30s. In this manner, it connotes a relationship with texts, both literal and

aesthetic, to promote the internal signage of the site. Take the taxidermy room as

an example. My visceral reaction to this room inevitably made me think of

Macbeth. Indeed, decay, ruin, death, and disorder all represent thematic elements

of that text. And yet, the signage of the room could conjure these visceral feelings

whether or not I knew the text of *Macbeth*—whether or not I knew the intimate

connection of the play to the natural world, to forests and wild things. *Sleep No*

More, while representing a viscerally present, distinctly concrete site, still

succeeds in conjuring up connotative meaning structures. It does so

phenomenologically, through the experiences of the participants. Connotations in

the immersive theatre are suspended until imagined by the participant wandering

through a site. These connotations are aesthetically open and uncontrolled.

  Whereas Elam presents a clear and eminently readable examination of

theatrical signs, the immersive theatre hews more towards Marvin Carlson's

Theatre Semiotics, in which he opens up the potential for cultural memory, for

ghosting, and for enclosed sign systems. Carlson draws on Roland Barthes to

describe the breadth of his approach:

> In response to a question from the journal *Tel Quel*, Barthes characterized
> the theatre as "a kind of cybernetic machine" which, as soon as the curtain
> rises, sends out a variety of simultaneous messages (from setting, costume,
> and lighting, as well as from the positions, words and gestures of the

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[176] Elam, 9.

actors), some of which remain constant for extended periods (such as the setting) while others continuously change (such as words and gestures).[177]

Carlson goes on to describe the importance of negotiating the entirety of theatrical experience, of which the "actual performance is only a part."[178] The event itself represents a singular structure in an experience that often begins from the moment of hearing about the performance, buying a ticket, receiving associated e-mails about the event and its conditions, and finally experiencing the event itself. So, when I say that immersive theatre represents an enclosed system of signs, I mean merely that things in these performances refer insistently to an alternate reality they create through their concrete presences. These objects are not synecdochic, and are not signs in themselves. Instead, they function as a unified system of presences from which connotative meanings can be extrapolated through their direct embodiment and the sensations they evoke. Phenomenological aspects of *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell* invariably get mixed-up in their semiotics, representing a similarly cybernetic machine to that referenced by Barthes, but more advanced and virtual in its machinery: a machine more akin to Deleuze's rhizome than to a traditional semiotic analysis.

For these reasons, the experiential also has a definitive place in immersion, and other scholars often begin with that experience, exploring it as the primary mode of immersive aesthetics. Concentrating their efforts on defining the phenomenological aspects of the performance enables participants to legitimate their experience of the production. Given the materialistic aspects of immersive spaces, I assert that the objects of immersive performance matter far more than

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[177] Carlson, Marvin. *Theatre Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), xii.
[178] Carlson, xiii.

individual experiences, as the preexisting regimes of immersion govern the potential narratives, desires, and impulses of a given production.

While largely eschewing phenomenology in favor of object-centered discourses, I take from phenomenology the notion of framing experiences from a multitude of perspectives, using this as an ontological frame for discussing their performative contexts; contexts through which objects manipulate experiences, memories, time, and space. The metatheatricality of these spaces and objects exist in multiple frames, or layers. In *Sleep No More*, I found myself inside a shrine, or chapel. In this chapel were various objects of devotion: crosses, candles, and other materials appeared out of the darkness. In one sense, the presence of these things is literary, a symbolic account of Macbeth's profanity embedded in the theatrical world. Yet, these also draw attention to contemporary acts of faith. I questioned how I ought to act and react to this room. Is it a sacred space? Is it a comforting space? I was unsure. This effect speaks to the phenomenological frames at work in the production itself.

Peeling these layers back reveals a multilinear, rhizomic network of theatrical impulses that mark immersion as a powerful dramatic tool. Josephine Machon, in her work on the immersive theatre, begins with bodily experience in her book *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* (2011), and continues that work in *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (2013). Phenomenologically, the framing of immersion focuses on the participant's half of these interactions: what is actually experienced in the

context of the event. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines

phenomenology as:

> the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions.[179]

Phenomenology fundamentally insists on the centrality of bodies in space,

experiencing phenomena. Experiences "of or about some object," as described in

previous anecdotes about immersive performance, centers agency on the first-

person perspective. In the chapel, no one told me how to react to the objects of

devotion therein. The context and position in space of the devotional symbols

with other objects combined to form an impression of meaning. In this case, I

took them to be symbols of purity in an otherwise impure, troubled, environment.

However, just like the objects these experiences describe, these sense-impressions

simultaneously mark the effect that objects have in real-time while veiling the

contextual frames of the objects themselves. In other words, the framing of

objects represents an aesthetic choice on the part of the creators of *Sleep No*

More. This is true of, say, incongruous encounters with the natural world in

indoor spaces, the placement of a graveyard on the same floor as a candy shop, or

the empty facsimile of the production's main bar in the basement. All served to

provide a phenomenological account of the production in space through the

proximal placement of other objects and spaces—a rhizomatic encounter with my

own desire to make meaning.

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[179] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Phenomenology."

If phenomenology functions especially well for describing first person encounters with objects in space, then Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" aligns those object-encounters with time. The parallel bar (a model of the Manderley bar where the productions starts) is an example. This second bar is deserted, though bearing all the accouterments that a bar might have: glasses, bottles, tables, and chairs are all here, and as a result, I felt I knew the space already. Yet, because it was deserted, it was as if the production had left it behind, out of time and place. The things here seemed limp in contrast to the full, noisy space I had come from. This type of experience in the immersive theatre has not been unusual in other productions as well, showing how Brown's approach to things proves useful in these circumstances. Things, for Brown are agents whose shifting relationship to time constantly reimagines their phenomenological effects. For example, reflecting on Claes Oldenburg's sculptures, he notes how

> "timeless" objects in the Oldenburg canon (fans and sinks) have gone limp…[the] object attains a new stature precisely because it has no life outside the boundary of art-no life, that is, within our everyday lives. Released from the bond of being equipment, sustained outside the irreversibility of technological history, the object becomes something else.[180]

Sleep No More and *Then She Fell* also contain multitudes of things framed in a theatrical context, concrete but without purpose. The bar is only one example. There are also typewriters and phone booths, rotary phones and Victorian dolls. Similarly, Claes Oldenburg's sculptures remove mundane details from everyday life and give them a new status as art, adjusting the potential for technological

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[180] Brown, Bill. "Things," *Critical Inquiry* (Vol. 28, No.1, Autumn 2001), 1-22, 15.

implements to act outside their intended use.[181] As Brown continues, "Benjamin recognized that the gap between the function of objects and the desires congealed there became clear only when those objects became outmoded."[182] This concept recalls Alison Landsberg and her concept of prosthetic memory. The participant's memory activates the potential meanings for objects. The formation of desires in or around certain things invariably opens up when they have lost their status in cultural memory. The result of this openness comes about when I encountered the antiquated gravestones in the misty graveyard, the typewriter in the doctor's office—complete with typewritten notes on Lady Macbeth's insanity—or a rotary phone mysteriously positioned on its own in a tiny room. Their meaning becomes urgent to the narrative as aesthetic and symbolic icons because they can no longer have the meanings ascribed by consumer culture.

What the participant engages in in the immersive space, then, is an act of rehabilitation. The objects of say, *Sleep No More* become the read text, the internal narrative, of the immersive theatre. Rehabilitation, in turn, negotiates the flexibility of object identities over the course of both time and space. Elizabeth Grosz provides a potent means of addressing this flexibility when she turns to Derrida—who also acknowledged time, texts, and subjects as reconstruction:

> The identity of any statement, text, or event, is never given in itself. Neither texts nor objects nor subjects have the kind of self-presence that gives them a stable or abiding identity; rather, what time is, and what matter, text, and life are, are becomings, openings to time, change,

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[181] For example, when I was younger, I bought a cassette tape. If I held that same cassette tape up to a class of undergraduate students and asked them to identify it, they may now have trouble doing so, but it might also spark curiosity unknown to those who bought them for their original purpose: listening to music.
[182] Brown, 13.

rewriting, recontextualization. The past is never exhausted in its virtualities...[183]

Virtuality, or the (re)construction of landscapes from things, implies an unstable, constantly mobile set of identities. The concreteness of objects in immersive productions gives the lie to this concept, constantly suggesting their stability and materialism. As a result, semiotics and phenomenology support my analytical approach, one that draws on a variety of disciplines in an effort to reconstruct the virtuality of immersive performance—its negotiation of neoliberalism, the neobaroque, and the profusion of meaning within its spaces. The mobility of the immersive theatre, its claim to creating total sensual environments, and its sheer range of aesthetic possibilities, all add challenges to the task of conceptualizing its structure.

While Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* has moved from London (2003) to Brookline, Massachusetts (2009), and then to New York City (2011), each of its sites reiterate the primacy of objects over bodily or textual presence. Wandering through various iterations of the event I have encountered crime photos and hanging bunches of herbs, candy and bathtubs, tea sets and bloodied sheets. I pick up these objects: feel the tattered edges of a patient's file or the rough texture of a statuette, turn them over in my hands, and move them at will. Touching these things in the context of a theatrical performance feels deviant, yet satisfying, as if the rules of the museum have been suspended and I could sit at my favorite

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183 Grosz, Elizabeth, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss ed. "Histories of the Present and Future," *Thinking the Limits of the Body.* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 17.

seventeenth-century desk, or take tea using the king's silver service. Third Rail Project's *Then She Fell* (2011, 2012) takes advantage of similar impulses when I am led, often alone, into rooms kitted out with their own bizarre collections: there are medical books and tree branches, hats and white roses scattered throughout the space; a space that was, once-upon-a-time, a parochial school in Brooklyn, now reimagined as Kingsland Ward asylum.

However, while texts and spaces dissimulate by glossing the production with expectations, narrative exposition, or anticipation, things by-and-large make up the corporeal experience of immersive performance. As in my description of *Sleep No More* above, the smell of taxidermied animals, the clink of jars, and the texture of hard covered books, all became as present for me as any of the production's human bodies. In fact, bodies in these spaces often become things as well—an interchangeable part of the production's environs, no less present and embodied than the objects themselves.

If things are flexible precursors to meaning especially when removed from their intended time and space, then participants in *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell* experience a similar trajectory through their movements in an immersive event. Removed from the linear aspects of time and narrative, I often found myself at odds with immersive sites. In *Sleep No More* my masked compatriots created seas of white, moving masks that could get annoyingly in the way of my view of actors and spaces. Stripped of their individuality, they seemed to be little more than props. In *Then She Fell*, I often found myself behind a mirror, watching

the action as little more than a voyeur. Without the negotiation between actor and audience, the ability to explore and participate seemed hollow.

Identity confusion and avatarism play a large role in immersive performances, from Punchdrunk's masked spectators to *Then She Fell's* liminal psychiatric home. Especially in relation to participants, these structures illustrate the effect of popular technologies on theatrical identities. In videogames for example, our level of engagement is reduced to a two-dimensional character confined within certain boundaries proscribed by the game-world. In such games as *Skyrim* (PlayStation 3 platform) the titular open-world is traversed in the first person. I can pick up objects, craft them, and make other useful products with them. I can also walk to the very edge of the world, only to be stopped by an invisible force. The world before me (my character, that is) appears exactly like what has come before: there are trees and grasses, animals and mountains. Yet I can go no farther. The analogy with immersive performance is clear, especially in the case of objects and space. In all the immersive performances I describe in this dissertation, I can pick up objects but not remove them from a room, I can participate in the performances of actors, but not too much, and I can unlock doors, but only those I am meant to unlock.

Difficulties arising from the interpolation of roles, expectations, and boundaries in *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell* reveal the influence of techno-cultural forms on the aesthetics and branding of immersive formats. Where new media and technologies play a role in immersive theatrical landscapes ("immersion" has, after all, been appropriated from the language of tech), they

parallel a shift towards interactive narratives—the choose-your-own-adventure world of role-playing games and virtual reality—via the explorations and desires prevalent in concrete things.[184] These expectations highlight a major difference between the technological borrowings of the immersive theatre and their artificial counterparts in virtual media: theatrical immersions perform as systems of live, tactile sensations. In doing so, they hide their internal forms and structures behind veils of secrecy that pretend to various, often contradictory, purposes. As with the articulation of baroque and neobaroque characteristics discussed in earlier chapters, objects in immersive theatre concentrate their power in creating a sense of verisimilitude, intimacy, and depth. The pawing through files and books and other people's long lost things produces the effect of inner knowledge of their affairs. A letter in *Sleep No More* told me about the love between Macduff and Lady Macduff and the toys in the Macduff's nursery told me about the children's likes and dislikes, and eventually, told me of their murder. This is how objects in productions such as *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell* inculcate their respective environments with an immediacy and self-awareness impossible to reproduce in virtual spaces, and which maintain a powerful, visceral hold upon participants.

In their theatrical context, the placement of these objects in immersive space strategically reimagines modes of viewing and understanding a production. In *Sleep No More,* purpose-built rooms such as bedrooms stand out against rooms equipped with crime photographs or ritual shrines. The incongruence inherent in such spaces confounds the borders typically distancing audiences from theatrical

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[184] O'Neil, Dan. "On The Art of the Immersive, Or is This Even Theater?" 3 February 2016. http://www.culturebot.org/2016/02/25441/on-the-art-of-the-immersive-or-is-this-even-theater/.

surrounds. On one hand the logical placement of ledgers, bottles, or books in a bar or lobby defines one type of spatial and sensory awareness. On the other, the introduction of pine trees, graveyards, or even rotary telephones introduces a tension into the materiality of the space—a dream world logic, but not a lucid one, not a dream that can be controlled (however much one may like). Immersive events create a new normal, a play-world based on the curation of things. Those things/objects, combined with the ability to enter and reenter *Sleep No More* at will, creates a vision of reality that can be all encompassing. Coming back to Manderley once or twice during the course of the three-hour run, I began to feel the play-world close in and become a self-sustaining illusion.

Wandering through rooms filled with installations, many of them familiar, participants collect sense-impressions of the environment through spatial choices and interactions with the production's collection of objects. Held in relation to each other, the systematic order of things in immersive space/time collapses reality and theatricality, blending them into an indistinguishable whole. On the one hand, there are recognizable (if foreign) objects, and on the other there are disjointed, surreal assortments of things. For instance, there is a hotel lobby and a witch's apothecary, or a bedroom that seems normal until it is covered in blood. The critical issue with this collapse emerges with the elision of the dream world and reality. As with any other theatrical entity, its status as theatrical suggests an illusion or artifice. However, from the moment of booking a ticket to *Sleep No More*, our invitation is not to a performance, but to the fictional McKittrick Hotel. In the creation of a seemingly real hotel, *Sleep No More* looms dangerously close

to reality, to conflating theatre and world to the point that the production threatens to reimagine, not *Macbeth*, but the world outside the warehouse.

By contrast, the darkened auditorium of traditional theatre divides the real and imagined more-or-less clearly through demarcations/organizations of space and light. Performers rarely, if ever, enter spaces reserved for audiences, and if they do, it is often to create a specific affect of perception. Objects (props) are strictly off-limits, clearly framing the theatrical world from the real one inhabited by spectators. While this framing appears, at face value, to mark immersion as more egalitarian, accessible, or intimate, it is important to observe that the realignment of theatre/world as a unified experience replicates, and more importantly, hides, cultural ideologies at work in the context of both aesthetic and branded immersive experiences. In Chapters 2 and 3 I have suggested that texts and spaces in branded versions of immersive productions reproduce a neoliberal sociopolitical experience/fantasy. Objects participate in this fantasy. However, as the rest of this chapter argues, the role of things in immersion becomes increasingly difficult to contain in the face of their own agency as objects—a point that opens immersion to increased transparency.

Things, for their part, become part of the illusion or not, simultaneously creating and bounding the theatrescape. Doors, journals, cupboards, dining sets, portraits, and religious icons compete for space in these settings, engaging playfully in the metatheatricality prominent throughout large-scale immersive productions. Arising from the destabilization of the theatre/world dichotomy, the metatheatricality of immersive experiences emerges from the contextual power of

objects. Again, the division of spaces into domestic locations (bedrooms, sitting rooms, operating theaters) points towards familiarity, a connection with real-world context clues and environment, while the unexplained introduction of unusual things into these spaces (pine mulch, grave sites, blood, typewriters) constantly refers back to the embodiment of the space itself as an aesthetic, theatrical representation. Whether or not these productions are legitimately attempting to replicate the textual markers of *Macbeth* or *Alice in Wonderland*, their self-referential qualities exceed the bounds of metaphor and enter a realm that confounds and confuses theatricality with reality—a problematic addressed throughout the course of this project in various forms.

The Baroque theatre also conflated the theatrical world with the real one—a trope that, in fact, made up a major argument in the era's anti-theatrical pamphlets. Such a study illuminates the spatial and corporeal qualities of the immersive theatre by way of early modern cultural and theatrical constructs. Chapter 1 briefly discusses how the propensity to metatheatre in *Macbeth* enhanced and structured portions of *Sleep No More*. Similarly , corollaries of the early modern to other immersive productions illumines tropes with regard to metatheatre, space, and objects in these circumstances. As such, *Sleep No More* serves as a useful case study for thinking about the theatrical space and objects of immersive productions, through the lens (or in comparison with) the early modern theatre. While the early modern theatre rarely provides material settings, the rhetorical and spatial aims of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage reflect moves made in immersive theatrical productions, and especially those discussed in the

course of this research. To start with, *Sleep No More* renders a material vision of

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* by way of postmodern pastiche. Through this pastiche,

the mostly bare stage of Jacobean tragedy gives way to a fully concrete landscape,

and the images and metaphors of the play text burst from the imagination and into

real space/time. *Sleep No More* therefore follows the inclination of many other

immersive events (*Then She Fell*, *Queen of the Night*, and *Speakeasy Dollhouse*)

to adapt texts/histories that translate easily into explicitly visual, dramatic, or

spectacular environments. For this reason *Macbeth*, and its repurposing, propels a

further comparative study of the immersive theatre with early modern and

baroque drama.

Rhetorically, plays like *Macbeth* insist on interiors and exteriors. Emma

Atwood, for instance, asserts "that early modern plays repeatedly oscillate

between space and place, between a sense of the fictional setting and the physical

stage. This oscillating dramaturgical tension acutely embodies the thematic

interest in domestic spatial control at stake in so many early modern

plays."[185]*Sleep No More* responds to this emphasis by creating vast interior spaces

defined by objects and, where necessary, bringing the outside inside: plants,

herbs, taxidermied animals, etc. This is not to say that the early modern stage

included (or needed) more physical spatial markers, but that the texts themselves

arranged space with more acute precision on the unlocalized stage. This tension,

present in the castles, gates, and forests of *Macbeth* receive earnest, if not entirely

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[185] Atwood, Emma. *Spatial Dramaturgy and Domestic Control in Early Modern Drama* (Doctoral Dissertation, Boston College, 2015).

explicit, treatment in *Sleep No More*, creating textually recognizable inner spaces from the husks of warehouses in Chelsea.

Metatheatricality in these immersive productions asserts itself, not just through the things present in the performance space, but through a constant realignment of participant and environment. Wandering from room to room, either at will or on an individual performance track means encountering objects in many different configurations. These configurations establish ever-changing perceptual relationships, compelling theorists such as Bill Brown, in his article *Thing Theory*, to remark that, "The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation."[186] *Sleep No More*, for instance, conjures up environments in which objects and participants exist, not just in the same space, but also in interchangeable roles. Masked and silent participants become spectral denizens of the production, interpolating themselves with the object-world of Punchdrunk's creation. In *Sleep No More*, human presence vanishes into materiality: one becomes a thing among things. Masked audiences cannot identify each other in the context of *Sleep No More*, creating a situation in which roving bands of silent participants become part of the scene in each room. In my own experience, I was no more an individual than the objects I picked up and interacted with. I was unrecognizable, shrouded in darkness, and watching acts of violence perpetrated without any recourse to participation. Whereas in traditional theatre, the subject watches the objects on stage along with any stage business with which they

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[186] Brown, Bill. "Things," *Critical Inquiry* (Vol. 28, No.1, Autumn 2001), 1-22, 4.

become associated, *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell* facilitate the blurring of subject and object—either as a result of participant interactions with material installations, or as a result of the narratives those installations evoke. Therefore, if the early modern theatre provides one way of thinking about immersive theatre, then another potential way of wrestling with the subjectivity of objects and the objectifying of subjects is through an idea of *becoming* as articulated through Deleuze and Guattari.

But these objects are not abstract; though their use and use-value can shift radically depend upon context and perspective. Reading the medical journal on a desk in *Then She Fell* changes the interpretive direction of the White Rabbit's dance with the Red Queen, as does a mad Tea Party taken after dictation from the Mad Hatter him/herself. The manipulation of participants, as both human and inhuman, as ethical interlocutor and voyeur, troubles these proceedings and defines them. As a result, the difficulty of defining what objects "do" in these spaces requires appropriate terminology. In its status as partly voyeuristic and partly interactive, by turns seemingly either emancipated or rigidly structured, the immersive theatre, and the things in it, exist in a constant state of what Deleuze and Guattari term "becoming." This term proves helpful in defining the nature of materiality in immersive theatres:

> Becoming points to a non-linear dynamic process of change where we are encouraged not just to reconfigure the apparent stability of the art object as "object" defined in contradistinction to a fully coherent "subject" by considering a given production away from the classical subject/object relation that prevailed by and large up until the 1960s.[187]

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[187] Parr, Adrian ed. "Becoming + Performance Art" in *The Deleuze Dictionary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 25.

Participants, upon entering an immersive space, are made to feel as if they maintain control over experiences, both sensual and otherwise, while within the production. This is evident from many of the marketing schemes outlined in Chapters 2 and 3. However, the fluidity of the material relationships in these environments, as we have seen, complicates such claims to agency and emancipation. Instead, the life of objects in the immersive theatre provides, less an egalitarian paradigm than a material one: a literal hegemony of things. *Becoming*, as defined above, prohibits the temptation to nail down what objects are doing at all times in an immersive space. Like the participants in an immersive production, *becoming* allows us to examine one facet of an object at a time, and in a specific context. The best way to illustrate *becoming* is through example— anecdote being the only possible way to relate the experiences of immersion without generalization.

  Then She Fell explicitly connects text and object in ways that realize these acts of *becoming*, maintaining a simultaneous sense of control and confusion over participant's roles. This was apparent in my experience of the event. Finding myself in a small room, I was greeted by an art-school mess of white roses and red paint. The textual reference comes directly from *Alice in Wonderland*, where in Chapter VIII Alice finds the Seven, Five, and Two of Spades frantically painting a white rose bush red. A bemused Alice watches them: "'Would you tell me, please' said Alice, a little timidly 'why are you painting those roses?'" [188] The stakes are high, as the gardeners will have their heads chopped off should the

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[188] Carrol, Lewis and Martin Gardner ed. *The Annotated Alice* (New York: WW Norton, 2000), 80.

Queen find out. I found myself painting the selfsame roses in this tiny room, under the watchful gaze of the White Rabbit. On one hand, painting the roses means momentarily inhabiting the role of the Queen's guard in the Alice story. On the other hand, the production explicitly aims to present the psychological confusion preoccupying Carroll's own roles—meaning that making white roses red, a metamorphosis of objects, stands in for Carroll's/Dodgson's identity crisis as well— conservative Oxford don or fanciful lover of children? In this instance then, was I Carroll as well? Dodgson? Plagued with confusion and harried by the Rabbit, I was led out of the room, never to enter it again. With no easily definable role in this scene, I was neither auditor nor participant; rather, I could be considered a placeholder for the internal concerns of the production. The act of painting the roses, literally transforming them from one thing into another, contrives to fragment consciousness, to tread a line between fantasy and reality anchored by the aesthetic power of things (the roses, myself) becoming *other*.

Deleuze and Guattari, by offering up the term *becoming*, point towards just this sort of transience and ephemerality, but not only on the level of scene or production. Their theories also apply on the macro level: participation and the market, the personal and the political, and the subject and the object, all present themselves as unstable markers—present and concrete, but constantly moving. In *Then She Fell*, the roses conflate participation and manipulation by referencing a particular cultural memory archive of the *Alice* text. The bloodied bed sheets and gravestones of *Sleep No More* refer back to *Macbeth* and forward to the moment of Macbeth's execution in the production's denouement. Far from the free-

wheeling attempts at agency enunciated by environmental theatre or "happenings"
in the 1960s, immersive theatre never intends on doing away with the boundaries,
structures, or relationships of traditional theatre: it simply cloaks them in the
fabric of things.

With the cloak of things in mind, assigning singular or objective roles to
things in *Sleep No More*, *Then She Fell*, or any of a range of other immersive
performances stops short of embracing their internal complexities. To avoid
pinning down the subject-object relationship by asserting what it is or is not, or
what role each play, I suggest adopting more fluid terminology for these
performance circumstances. For that reason, I use the terms "things," "objects,"
and "stuff" interchangeably. Following Arjun Appadurai, I suggest "even though
from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance,
from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their
human and social context."[189] Things-in-motion narrate an experience through
their proximal relationships, dependent on what, in the immersive theatre, is a
constantly shifting framework of experiences. This instability of signs in
immersion induces slippage. Participants might move from taking dictation with a
quill pen to being a masked prop, from viewing gruesome images to inhabiting a
tableau. In short, circumstances change quickly, exposing how stuff, objects, and
things carry varied and difficult inflections in the course of a single production. If
the trope of things-in-motion defines the activity of physical presences in *Sleep*

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[189] Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5.

No More or *Then She Fell*, it may be said to transform and invigorate objects, reigniting their relevance and reimagining their hold over our consciousness.

Given the constant motion of things in immersive aesthetics, participants enact dramas aligned more with the role of an archaeologist than that of a spectator or auditor. Transition: this is leading you to your discussion of "sensorium" – which is part of your project title! So it's important to say that an "archaeological focus" is what allows one to think of these productions in terms of a sensorium. Paradoxically, this archaeological role in immersion leads to metatheatre—layers of objects, retrieved and re-settled, placed in theatrical contexts, uncovered again by a curious wanderer who rediscovers them in performance. Mike Pearson, whose work has been instrumental in the growth of this project, writes:

> The archaeological involves an explicit focus on the materiality of society, with social experiences rooted in all the cognitive and emotional faculties and senses of the human body. Social experience is materially embodied – society felt and suffered as well as rationally thought and understood – perhaps fundamentally ineffable. The term **"sensorium,"** a culturally located array of the senses was coined to try to deal with this embodiment, under a proposition that a task of the humanities is to ground social reconstruction and understanding in sensoria...[190] [emphasis original]

The problem/fascination is that the archaeological operates in two distinct ways in the immersive theatre. First, focusing on the sensorium serves to elide the materiality of an event, and in this case, the duplicitous nature of that materiality.

Coming back to former point momentarily, the second of Pearson's assertions describes the loneliness and isolation of the sensory body. In attempting to realign the archeological with the fragmentary nature of performance, Pearson

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[190] Pearson, Mike. *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2001), 10.

highlights the disconnectedness of immersive theatrics from embodied cultural practices. Instead of an aesthetic operating on the assumption of communal agency, or self-discovery, immersion elects to contrive and control social/sensory experiences through materiality. Concentrating on what participants will experience, rather than what they will do, allows the theatre to manufacture spectacle that feels distinctly real, without having to make it so. Returning to the first point, while it is clear that Pearson intends on reclaiming the archaeological from the insistence on the rational, immersive theatre's claim to participants is that it simultaneously engages the material **and** irrational. Irrationality in this case, merely serves as a covert means of exploitation, of defining the materiality of an environment to look and seem fascinatingly opaque. Immersive theatre merely stages the crime scene, calling on participants to look, react, but ultimately, the production stymies the investigation.

These boundaries pit participants against the material aims of a given production from the moment they enter the performance site. The possibility for successfully navigating and parsing the environment proves elusive to participants, especially in *Sleep No More*, because at the same time that one "discovers" the space, the space confounds attempts to realize alternate versions of sensoria. The McKittrick Hotel does not permit going off-script. Metatheatre and neoliberalism meet in the shadowy halls of the production, endeavoring to rigidly maintain and manage a structure that looks and feels like unimagined freedom. Meaning in these theatre-sites emphasizes the placement of things as critical to both narrative meanings and aesthetics. In other words, chairs may act

as chairs but also be art objects. Or the same chairs may be a part of a larger assemblage or art-installation. In one instance, I sit in a chair in a bar expecting a drink, and in another, a chair is stacked against the wall with other furniture as if pushed aside by a giant hand. This is where *becoming* gives interpretation a leg-up, by acknowledging the transience of contexts in which "chair" registers in a theatrical environment, and its status as a theatrical tool in immersion. Given these complex interrelationships, between theatre and use, aesthetics and semiotics, "things," "stuff," or "objects" are registered as both concrete and conceptual, often at the same time. Actor-participants in such productions face the overwhelming task of narrating their own experiences, and doing so within a series of unseen boundaries and parameters unspecified by theatre artists— parameters maintained and directed, largely, by the stuff surrounding them. Emphasizing materiality and the liveness of sensation as a critical characteristic of the theatre-world, immersion emphasizes things as the conduits, the clues, which lead to intensely sensual experiences

However, not all immersive theatre engages in object/art installation as the main thrust of a production. As previously discussed, the term *immersive* suggests a broad range of performance practices, rather than a prescriptive set of rules or aesthetic principles. But, the term does suggest being submerged in an unfamiliar world, especially in the definition espoused in Josephine Machon's work *Immersive Theatres*.[191] Machon emphasizes, as do I, the notion of immersion as experiential phenomena in which the participant is sensually engaged. However I

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[191] Machon, Josephine. *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). The preceding chapters talk more broadly about Machon's working definition of immersive theatre.

would add that, in addition to being "anchored and involved in the creative world," immersion constructs narrative regimes through objects that act not unlike the virtual things in interactive videogames.[192] For instance, when I attempted to remove a book from a room in *Sleep No More*, a black masked usher stopped me, and when I attempted to read a letter in *Then She Fell*, an actor took it from me. Objects retain the fluidity of meaning in sites and games insofar as they maintain their status as theatrical—as an agent of the theatre or the game, situated as components that point simultaneously towards and away from their innate theatricality. The typewriter in *Sleep No More*, for example, is a mundane tool for writing, but situated amongst the papers of someone's desk, it gains a theatrical meaning through its place among things.

In other words, while immersion touts the agency of participants and their ability to construct and reconstruct narratives through the stuff of performance, the stealthy operation of these objects also manipulates and predetermines the outcomes of a given production. In *Sleep No More*, Macbeth's crimes lead participants inexorably deeper. In the Boston production, separate floors opened over time, revealing an increasingly bizarre array of spaces and objects. The downward motion led through candy shops, to chapel, to crime scene photographs, to an eventual gathering in the forest of Dunsinane. Machon interprets this momentum as normative to immersive circumstances, assuring us that, "Here audience-participant-performer interactions, although carefully shaped and in many ways predetermined, allow diverse decisions to be taken and thus

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[192] Machon, 61-62.

invite an exciting variety of interpretations to be made."[193] As in gaming, there are rules and boundaries; dialogues are pre-selected, routes pre-mapped. Things bound the spatial frame, providing the interiority, spectacle, and narratives that construct the notion of *immersion* in the terms described by Machon and elaborated here. Objects in the immersive theatre, in essence, feed on the desires of participants even as they shape and delimit those desires. There is no real information hidden in the files by the typewriter, nor is there a secret hidden in the bedroom bureau. All of this is titillation without reason or purpose. In other, more traditional forms of theatre, the boundaries typically come packaged with the performance—I am not expected to participate in a Broadway production of *Les Miserables*—if I did I would be promptly removed. These traditional limits are exposed and understood to limit space, action, and to a certain extent, the cultural mores incumbent upon spectators. The immersive theatre laminates the frame with an alternate reality that, like a baroque painting, provides the illusion of untold depths. Yet it goes further even than the baroque propensity to illusion, typified by a bursting forth from ceilings, arches, or altars, by eliminating the frame altogether. This is why in this chapter I refer to the microcosmic worlds of *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell* as profoundly metatheatrical: because they attempt to do away with boundaries by eliminating the imaginations of theatregoers. This is a stage of hard realities, corporeal presence, and delimited being—all provided through the hegemony of things.

For example, in *Sleep No More*, a production in which objects provide the focal point of haunting, atmospheric installations, the inadequacy of generic

[193] Machon, 62.

terminology (for things, or for performance) becomes especially apparent. Often

characterized by lush descriptions of both objects and the sensual experiences

they evoke, anecdotes about *Sleep No More* tend to emphasize the overwhelming

sensation of being surrounded by things. Troubled by the relationship of objects

to text and space (see Chapters 2 and 3), and disoriented by the absence of

performing bodies through much of the event (some have this experience more

than others, depending on time, choice, and luck), participants enter a world rife

with materiality. Sophie Richardson and Lauren Shohet present their own

experience [insert something to the effect of: which echoes some of the stuff that

I've just said]:

> The Punchdrunk *Sleep No More* unfolds as a continuous game of absence
> and presence. Theater-goers are invited to wander through a vast maze of
> rooms where the real is insistently present, every nook and cranny
> meticulously filled with period objects. Shelves are littered with kerosene
> lamps and candles, the dining room is furnished with antique chairs and
> china, and the doctor's waiting room displays a collection of old
> magazines fanned out on the table. Yet these rooms also emphasize at
> their edges gaps and absences: a corridor opens into a skeletal forest
> swirling with blue fog; a ballroom vanishes as trees roll in. The sets have
> no contiguity, so the spectator moves from indoor to outdoor, domestic to
> commercial, effecting transitions by displacing her own body through
> empty corridors or stairwells, unescorted by the narrative or theatrical
> machinery that sequences scenes in more conventional forms. Often the
> visitor finds herself alone, in a gap between staged spectacles, unnerved
> by the demand to choose her own next step. At other times, caught up with
> one of the bands of theater-goers that collect around actors rushing to
> execute different scenes in different rooms, quite the opposite ensues. The
> experience is at once isolating and communal, at once meta-theatrical and
> immersive.[194]

Displacements of body, both participant and actor, render a troublingly opaque,

yet overwhelmingly material and corporeal environment. The unnerving quality

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[194] Richardson, Sophia, and Lauren Shohet. "What's Missing In *Sleep No More*" *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* (Volume 7, Number 2, Fall 2012/Winter 2013).

described by Richardson and Shohet describes an existential quandary present in many immersive spaces. Made to question their subject-position in the production, and choosing how (and whether) to engage in a number of roles, participants encounter the neoliberal foundation of *Sleep No More's* theatrical model.[195] Objects, or things, that seem remarkably at home in the installations of *Sleep No More* seem to relegate human subjectivity to an absence, a loneliness even, that feels distinct from more conventional theatrical forms. That loneliness, and its associated lack of communal experiences, is partially emended, like a prosthetic, by a litany of objects. What those objects do to, and through, participants, realizes aspects of desire and desiring often foreclosed by traditional theatrical forms.

To the extent that these objects inform and transform the spaces they inhabit, they also create much of the sensual substance of experiences in immersive performances. More than bodies or texts, objects and things—what Daniel Miller calls "stuff"—integrate participants and performers into the experience of the production, comprising the literal feel and look, the aesthetic tone, of what one has entered. [196] Walking through *Sleep No More*, I knew the witch's apothecary by the smell of those bunched herbs, the tinkle of jars, and the feel of animal bones. Other spaces were more difficult to place, unfamiliar, but more redolent of places I have been before. Bathtubs in rows, half-full of water, lay in the farthest reaches of the space, calling up a slew of memories relating to cold, institutional, unfriendly places. Nostalgia exists here as well: the candy shop

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[195] Chapter 2 includes a more complete discussion of neoliberalism in the immersive theater.
[196] Miller, Daniel. *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

calls up a hundred grade-school field trips to places like Colonial Williamsburg

(itself a kind of immersive experience) or Old Salem (near Winston-Salem, NC).

Quaint candies wrapped in plastic live in canisters behind an old wooden bar, and

we are urged to take some. The question of what these objects mean seems to defy

explanation. Some have a direct correlation with *Macbeth*—a play that is at best

tangentially connected to *Sleep No More* as a whole—and many remain

indecipherable: a barely legible palimpsest through which texts, objects, spaces,

and experiences mingle.

...

In a recent presentation concerning this project, an audience member

asked in the Q&A how immersive theatre differed substantively from a

videogame. I paraphrase, but the thrust of the question and its implied critique

was something akin to "so what? There's no 'there' there." As I understood it, this

audience member meant that the presence of meaning in these spaces seemed

peculiarly absent; that the immersive effects of the space seemed less profound

than, say, a conventional performance in an auditorium. I responded that the

point of immersive theatre is that the narrative is something you find—it takes on

the meanings one maps onto it. With the benefit of hindsight and further research

into the structure of these events, I now view immersion somewhat differently.

Aesthetically, immersive theatre attempts to engulf audiences in another

world—a world of objects that, when placed in proximity to each other, describe a

variety of narrative impulses. These impulses lead inexorably forward, through

space and time, until they reach a pre-determined climax. Through such a climax,

immersive theatre treads familiar ground. Where it differs is in the modality of the experience—in the immersive theatre, things substantially replace text while refusing synonymy with text. As a brand, the immersive theatre projects agency through theatrical landscapes, the abandonment of normative rules, and the fulfillment of social, psychic, and sexual fantasies. These are fantasies of free will, something that a Marxist might view as a commodification and devaluation of that will. For, instead of the simple equation of receiving product (entertainment) for remuneration (cash), the paradoxical model of the immersive theatre imposes upon the individual the responsibility to be his or her own guide, picking his or her way through unfamiliar material surroundings. Objects in this world maintain special significance as the harbingers of narrative; signposts that point in multiple directions, yet lead inexorably to a foregone conclusion—in the case of *Sleep No More*, Macbeth's death by hanging.

Videogames and other virtual technologies produce narratives similarly, and I suggest it is not a cultural accident that the rise of immersive theatre has followed the rise and rise of virtual gaming. MMORPG'S (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), such as *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft*, have existed for many years now. The promise of virtual reality from technologies such as Oculus Rift and the Virtuix Omni puts participants in the physical, visceral world of a game more squarely than ever before. However, while aftermarket add-ons and downloadable content for videogames has become a burgeoning market, most of the creative work of the virtual world remains out of the hands of consumers. The boundaries of these new worlds, however present they might

seem, still prove stubbornly out of reach to most prospective creators. Like the immersive theatre, the art objects of the game world and their potential meanings remain tantalizingly out of reach.

This is why my response at the presentation missed the point. As in virtual gaming, where ready-made environments and set pieces challenge character-avatars to greater and greater leveling, the objects in immersive environments map their desires onto the participants of the performance, not the other way around. As mentioned above, the objects, artifacts, or stuff encountered in the immersive events described here follow similar patterns as the texts and spaces discussed in prior chapters: they limit the potential narratives available to actor-participants while seeming to do precisely the opposite. In this regard, these events are like the videogames my audience member described. However, unlike the virtualized game-world, the prevalence of objects in the immersive theatre transfers the burden of meaning from texts to visceral experiences and from the articulable to the inarticulate. Language in the immersive theatre becomes inchoate gesture: the touch of a hand or the color of a lamp, the feeling of being watched or the discovery of a secret door. Sensual, ephemeral, and material-centered experiences take precedence in these contexts. And, while the neoliberal aspects of immersive spaces presents a counter-narrative to the rhetorical aims of branded "Immersion" with a capital "I", criticisms of immersion tend to refute the vagaries of signs or invitations to interact with the space. When siding with things in the immersive environment narratives appear, not absent, but eerily in control. In the case of *Then She Fell*, we are given the keys to unlock things, but those

things are very specific, at least as specific as the tracks upon which each audience member is led. The potential narratives have been pre-determined and, to a certain extent, the meaning structures of objects.

Given this responsiveness to materiality and its critical place in immersive theatrical worlds, I suggest that the objects in immersive performance fundamentally *are* the performance or, at the very least, are *co-extensive* with performance. Alfred Gell, whose work *Art and Agency* asserts the potency of art objects in social space, asserts similarly that the negation of the individual in immersive theatres establishes that "art objects are the equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents." Gell, speaking from an anthropological perspective, describes such an equivalence: "Thus, from the point of view of the anthropology of art, an idol in a temple believed to be the body of the divinity, and a spirit-medium, who likewise provides the divinity with a temporary body, are treated as theoretically on a par, despite the fact that the former is an artefact and the latter is a human being."[197] Encountering the theatrical space in these circumstances enacts, not just the observance or sensing of objects we know to have been installed by someone else, of viewing, sensing, and touching those objects, but also a differential of power embedded, in turn, by the artist, cultural experiences, and sense-memory. The material objects in the immersive theatre possess a consciousness designed to direct and redirect desire.

In *Then She Fell*, for example, we were all given antique keys, designed to open certain boxes, drawers, or doors. Desiring to use my key, I opened a hutch in the first keyhole I could find. Inside, I found a few inkbottles, some bric-a-brac,

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[197] Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 7.

but no clues as to why a keyhole might appear in this particular place. Later in the

same room, I open a screened box with my key containing fictional letters to

Alice Liddell from Carroll. Here, I thought, was the point of the key! These were

all love letters. Such red herrings as the hutch permeate both *Then She Fell* and

Sleep No More, serving as reminders that the stuff in these worlds often prove as

tricky as Cheshire Cats, pressing participants up against the boundaries of the

immersive world and leading them away from what, in the world of role-playing,

are called side quests; quests whose purpose are not directly related to the major

narrative, that serve as minor, supporting roles.

While *Sleep No More* and other similar events have been criticized in

scholarship for withholding, subverting, or redacting meaningful theatrical

experiences from their productions, I suggest instead that their artificiality

articulates the act of performance through synthetic, yet concrete, metatheatrical

lenses. These lenses are created by objects both present and absent, familiar and

strange. The objects, in effect, *perform* a task regularly attributed to performing

bodies—bodies that in most examples of performance represent the foci of

meaningfulness in theatrical circumstances. Daniel Miller, whose work on

material culture informs my discussion, says it best in a discussion of clothing:

> "The Emperor's New Clothes" is a morality tale about pretentiousness and vanity. The Emperor is persuaded by his tailors that the clothes they have stitched him are fine to the point of invisibility, leaving him to strut naked around his court. The problem with semiotics is that it makes clothes into mere servants whose task is to represent the Emperor – the human subject...But what and where is this self that the clothes represent? In both philosophy and everyday life we imagine that there is a real or true self which lies deep within us. On the surface is found the clothing which may represent us and may reveal a truth about ourselves, but it may also be a lie. It is as though if we peeled off the outer layers we would finally get to

> the real self within...We are not Emperors represented by clothes, because if we remove the clothes there isn't an inner core. The clothes were not superficial; they actually were what made us what we think we are.[198]

In this example, the clothes/objects *are* both performance and identity. The meanings that immersions produce via objects become real in so far as they have been contextualized in a performance environment. The museum metaphor holds true in that the museum is built to house things, and without the things, it would be purpose-less. Things are the clothes of a given performance space, designed to replicate a core of cultural production that, unlike in the museum, ceases to exist as soon as the performance is over.

Spaces that include access to things like the disappointing hutch in *Then She Fell* illustrate the hollowness of the immersive aesthetic in these productions. Where the key, and the desire to use it, meets the brick wall behind the curtain, the participant runs up against the theatricality of the space he or she has entered. Even with a real drink in hand and an environment designed with the intricacy of a film set, the potential for participation presses uncomfortably against the outside world. Like the aforementioned clothes, the accouterment of the apothecary, the candy shop, the bedroom, or the graveyard, all maintain an aesthetic tone without becoming narrative elements in that they don't tell me anything about the story—some of the objects are red herrings designed to occupy participants while other things do the narrative work. Those things that construct narrative elements point down a rabbit-hole through which all participants must eventually pass. Ricky D'Ambrose reflects on this [insert verb or noun] in *The Nation*—in a piece suggestively titled "A Theater Without Qualities":

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[198] Miller, 13.

>Immersives also demand nothing less than succumbing to a fantasy of infinitude. Each room is a colossal cabinet of curiosities designed to be devoured in an exhaustless, fascinated stare. And, like the *Wunderkammer*, whatever rouses the stare is finally less important, and maybe less interesting, than the continual sense of indiscriminate intrigue that gives each event its tonicity. This is one reason why it is difficult to talk about immersive performances as works of art; insofar as curiosity can ever have a claim on our experience, it will always be a blunting, paltry response to any number of situations.[199]

D'Ambrose's opinion oversimplifies in its comparison of "immersives" to *wunderkammer*—not because the simile is incorrect, but because it underestimates the purpose and history of *wunderkammer* and the depth of the of their connection to immersive theatre. The OED defines the term *wunderkammer* as "a chamber or cabinet of wonders; *spec.* a place exhibiting the collection of a connoisseur of curiosities, such as became common from the late Renaissance onwards." This is a place where, as our working definition implies, a carefully curated collection of objects might be displayed.

Where D'Ambrose arguably fails in his critique of immersive productions is in his suggestion that the "things" displayed in these productions simply evoke tone for the sake of tone by way of aesthetic laziness. As indicated previously, the fact that some objects lead further into narratives and some to dead-ends speaks to the careful curation of these objects for the manipulation of the beholder. "The fantasy of infinitude" is the brand being sold, but the things involved conduct themselves with careful intention. When expectantly opening the hutch in *Then She Fell*, I engaged in the key's instruction: to find objects, open them, and explore them. The disappointment at finding nothing meaningful inspired further

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[199] D'Ambrose, Ricky. "A Theater Without Qualities" in *The Nation*, 30 September 2014. http://www.thenation.com/article/theater-without-qualities/.

exploration—leading me eventually to Carroll's letters to Alice. These letters

played a key role in the rest of the production, compelling me towards a narrative

that blended fantasy and biography, subconscious meanderings and concrete

interactions.

D'Ambrose's discussion of *wunderkammer* eventually returns to the idea

of the museum, where the accumulation and display of objects has become a

signal element of modernity in the Western World. Immersive theatres, especially

in the case of *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell* represent similarly curated

collections of objects, the significance of which are also aesthetic, totemic, and

often presented a coherent narrative. As such, the Baroque construct of

wunderkammers can elucidate the function of objects in contemporary immersive

spaces. The Tate, arguably one of the world's great museums, traces its own

genealogy back to the *wunderkammer*:

> Wunderkammer or curiosity cabinets were collections of rare, valuable,
> historically important or unusual objects, which generally were compiled
> by a single person, normally a scholar or nobleman, for study and/or
> entertainment. People believed that by detecting those visible and invisible
> signs and by recognizing the similarities between objects, they would be
> brought to an understanding of how the world functioned, and what
> humanity's place in it was.[200]

Immersive theatres, and productions such as *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell*,

read like giant *wunderkammer*—conglomerations of objects and experiences

granted (in some instances) totemic qualities, constructed in such a way as to

guide and delimit the perspectives of participants who are, nonetheless, forced to

navigate the length and breadth of theatrical space/time to find meaningful

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[200] The Tate. "Wunderkammer". http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/mark-dion-tate-thames-dig/wunderkammen.

connections between objects, situations, and experiences. From virtual media/videogames/new media to the practices of fifteenth-century collectors, immersive theatres provoke transhistorical discussions of materialism in the theatre.

If a key point of D'Ambrose's critique lies in the claim that the features of *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell* melt into a single aesthetic tone, then the semiotic impulses of these spaces ought to follow suit. Again, I assert that this is not the case. Further, the complexities of immersive performances arise precisely from the preponderance of things in their sites. Semiotically, it is specific objects in these productions that possess determinate force and lead the narration—calling participants to follow them, become them, watch, and interact with them. Working to read the fabric of human cultures through their material and cultural signs, semiotics presents a theoretical opportunity to read immersive theatres in a manner associated with Deleuze's concept of *becoming*. For, if *becoming* traces the shifting nature of object status in an immersive production (returning to the many contexts of the chair, previously discussed), then semiotics performs a corollary practice through which to read immersive landscapes as networks of specific things.

Umberto Eco provides a framework for picking out signs in just the sort of complex, experiential circumstances associated with immersive theatres. Responding to the analysis of literature and popular culture, Eco envisions an "open text" that can be viewed from "different perspectives."[201] For Eco, signs within a text represent directional pointers, not static signifiers. Quoting the

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201   Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). 10.

German Romantic Novalis, Eco notes that the open work "offers a multitude of intentions, a plurality of meaning, and above all a wide variety of different ways of being understood and appreciated..."[202] Eco's theory bases itself in the indeterminacy of signs, offering a range of significances to any one example. [Sentence about how this is useful for what you've been trying to communicate about the immersive theatre. And a segue into your next paragraph.]

In the far reaches of *Sleep No More*, on the third floor, lies an expansive room filled with bathtubs. Six white, claw-footed bathtubs existed in this space, sitting in two even rows. This room was installed in both the Brookline and New York City mountings of the production. No other objects can be found here. These bathtubs each contained a variable amount of water, but on average each was half-full. The only other bathtub occurring in the production (to my knowledge) may be found in the Macbeths' bedroom space. In this space, a scene occurs in which Lady Macbeth attempts to wash Macbeth's hands. Just before the denouement, Lady Macbeth attempts to wash her own hands in the bathtub. These tubs on the third floor are, however, silent. I experienced no performances in this room, though they may exist, and participants, while present, tended to keep to rooms where a greater variety of things had taken up residence.

These bathtubs present themselves as a metaphor for elements of *Macbeth*, but for me they also created an opportunity to realize the openness of the production's signs. While the majority of this discussion has argued that *Sleep No More* engages with a neoliberal system that bounds and inhibits meanings, that is not to say that the production can contain or delimit a multitude of interpretations.

202   Eco, 8.

In limiting the spaces one can wander into, providing clues as to the direction of the major narrative arc, and eventually leading participants into the final, climactic scene, *Sleep No More* may reveal its traditionalism, but it cannot fully contain its materiality. That said, the bathtubs call to mind a number of meaning-structures. First and foremost, baths are meant for cleansing and water is meant for purification. A number of bathtubs together, all containing water, intimate an overdetermination of cleansing and purifying, revealing it as a futile practice—especially in the context of *Macbeth*. For *Rebecca*, with whom Shakespeare's text has been interpolated aesthetically, water contains another meaning: death, destruction, and annihilation. Each instance reveals a haunting existential problem: the impossibility of redemption, the inevitability of death, and the loneliness of inner turmoil. This brief impression connects to other aesthetic languages in the production, but the particularity of this impression and the ability to interpret it freely speaks to its semiotic openness.

However, the tubs may also incline a viewer to think of institutional oppression, referring especially to nineteenth-century mental wards. The barrenness of the room seems to bear out this reference, as does *Macbeth* itself. After all, Lady Macbeth goes mad and kills herself, both acts suggesting to a modern audience that she is mentally ill. The tubs are half-full of water, implying that their occupants are on their way or have just left. The presence of water calls to mind the possibility of bodies within the tubs, silently asking for a participant to imagine their presence. Following Shohet and Richardson, this is another presence in the space predicated on absence and based on the state of things in

situ. In this interpretation, Lady Macbeth is both criminal and victim: a criminal for starting the cycle of death in the play, and the victim of both psychological trauma and cruel treatment. Critically, this hermeneutic shifts blame away from Lady Macbeth, marking her as a product of social circumstance and internal disruption.

Both interpretations are equally valid, and others are possible. How the tubs are decoded in the moment depends on the becoming of participants. Or in other words, the sequence of events leading up to the moment with the tubs, the objects one has seen, and the performances one has been privy to, are all contained in this encounter with the bare room. In this, one other sign appears: us. Not unlike Lady Macbeth, we find ourselves in an unfamiliar room with six bathtubs in rows; we are also subject to the whims of the spatial configuration, a configuration from which escape is often difficult. The question remains as to whether participants might liken themselves to Lady Macbeth's predicament, having been forcibly removed from the real world, anonymized by masks, and made to trudge up and down flights of stairs seeking answers. There is a distinct sense in which participants have been robbed of their selfhood in a way not totally unlike the institutional coldness of the mental hospital.

In the context of the interpretations and material imagery described above, any of the objects in any of the rooms may serve as semiotic points, points that, when read in sequence, construct a series of impressions like that above—all endeavoring to lead in a range of specific directions based on their position in the space/time of performance. These impressions are not relegated to objects only,

but also to literal texts, like the personal letters and journals left on desks

throughout the space. Audiences can choose to pick these props up and read them,

thumb through files or make out the details of a photograph, hoping to learn

something definite about the structure of the events happening around them.

However, these snippets are always incomplete, creating an experiential outline

for narrative impulses that leads inward, to the prospect of more and better

secrets. Like riddles, things only increase the sense of mystery and deepen the

potential complexity of the rhizome.

Amongst various examples Eco presents of the open text, his most

instructive discusses Kafka, whose work:

> remains almost inexhaustible insofar as it is "open," because in it an
> ordered world based on universally acknowledged laws is being replaced
> by a world based on ambiguity, both in the negative sense that directional
> centers are missing, and in a positive sense because values and dogma are
> constantly being placed in question.[203]

That ambiguity also protects *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell*, for in their play

worlds the desire to continue discovering the site's secret knowledge becomes co-

extensive with the ability for the production to continue its narration. Failing to

buy in to the responsibility granted participants at their entry into the event merely

guarantees their disappointment. The reader of the open text, in this instance, is

compelled towards an interpretive space without ever having been given a map to

guide him or her to it. These two landscapes imply the existence of directional

centers for participants, but constantly point towards a single, overarching

narrative goal—as in the drive towards the basement spaces of *Sleep No More* or

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[203]Eco, 9.

the constantly present materials of Carroll's authorship (letters, books, white roses).

However, the engagement of theatrical and metatheatrical discourses in the immersive theatre provides complications, luring participants into a trap: the idea that beyond the surface of these objects resides ever deeper, more intimate sets of meanings. These fictitious, performative meanings are the product of concrete sets of objects positioned in space for the purpose of defining, limiting, and controlling the spatial and experiential parts of immersion. To the extent that *Sleep No More*, *Then She Fell*, or other immersive productions in New York successfully submerge participants in their elaborately detailed environments, the semiotic embodiments in those worlds present dissonant impulses. On the one hand, the assemblages of objects insist on a reality in the same way that a videogame might, urging participants to play within the confines of this new, strange world. On the other, things also point away from their theatrical impulses and towards the Emperor's naked body. The absence of clearly discernible narratives, the absence of bodies, the sporadic liveliness of the space, and the loneliness of the journey, all invite impulses to decode and narrate—but only to the point that the veil of the performance, the identity of the Emperor, remains intact. Removing objects from their defined spaces, attempting to go beyond the spatial limitations of, say, *Sleep No More*, or even attempting to participate in acted vignettes, all come up against the refusal of intimacy. Within the proscenium theatre, things remain on stage. Audiences remain aware of the theatrical space, and props stay in the hands of professionals. Whatever

ambiguities exist, exist within the critical world of the play, the world represented on stage. Socially activating stuff in the hands of lay participants ignites new rhizomes of relations, some of whose ethical implications have turned up in previous chapters.

Such things litter immersive sites, producing not just a tonal atmosphere, but also a careful collection of objects designed to reengage participants in the thingness of their surroundings and the specificity of their selection. Participants gather around the guest book in the hotel lobby of *Sleep No More* hoping to find a reference to *Macbeth* or *Rebecca*, a one-on-one performance takes place inside a phone booth, and the Macduff's chamber contains vintage dolls, wooden blocks, and a 1920s style push carriage. In *Then She Fell*, I used a quill pen to take dictation from the Mad Hatter in a room filed to the brim with old hats, used an antique key to open boxes, and flipped through sheaves of typewritten medical notes. Out of time and place, these objects furnished spaces to catch the eye and elicit the desire to know and understand them outside their context as purpose-built things. The lack of familiarization with these object-circumstances highlights their purposefulness and metatheatricality in immersive sites. For while they fit into the frame of a singular landscape, this stuff reimagines itself as symbolic, totemic, and containing the narrative body of the play-world.

Viewing objects from various perspectives, e.g. phenomenologically, semiotically, and temporally, creates praxis of discernment for understanding immersive things. Ultimately, this practice redefines object-hood in such landscapes to include, not only the theatrical frame, but also the context of the

event. In other words, the stuff in these spaces tells participants about the production, but also about their lack of directional center and neoliberal articulation. In their relationship to text, objects such as beds, blood stains, or bottled herbs present involved metaphors of text in space. Seen merely as signs, tonal implements, or unfamiliar worlds, the teacups and photographs, the music and pine trees, might all share a fate that occludes their innate desire to be interpreted, that might become *only* about canonical text. Bill Brown continues in his article by noting that, "although words and things have long been considered deadly rivals, as Peter Schwenger details**,** Dali had faith that they could be fused and that 'everyone' would 'be able to read from things.'"[204] In this [insert verb or noun], Dali misunderstood the problem. *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell* imagine the text for participants, creating what amounts to a metatext that then tells them they are experiencing something *about* text that they would otherwise miss.

However, investigating objects as a source of agency does not result in a total refusal of bodies or experiences. As mentioned by Josephine Machon and others, physical sensuality remains critical to these productions. Instead, the notion of things being in the driver's seat of the performance simply asks bodies to move aside. Chris Salter writes in *Entangled* about the difficulties invoked by such a line of questioning:

> Still, Latour's call for a symmetrical anthropology that gives things their due lands us in a dualistic framework between the human and the not. This may be forgiven when dealing with scientific practices that utilize nonhuman forces, but it is a much trickier territory when dealing with the all-too-human arena of performance, as such a split gives a convenient

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[204] Brown, 11.

locus to theorists for where or where not to locate agency. Instead, my appropriation of the term *entangled* from its anthropological connotations suggests that human and technical beings and processes are so intimately bound up in a conglomerate of relations that it makes it difficult, if not impossible to tease out separate essences for each. When cultural anthropologist David Howes writes that objects should be seen as bundles of sensory properties and interconnected experiences that activate the human senses in complex and culturally varied ways, he is also invoking a space that refuses to make a demarcation between inanimate technology and human interpreter.[205]

Salter lays the human/non-human dichotomy aside in favor of a fluid, agile perspective that fuses bodies with things, acting as a single, seamless entity. This entity, viewed microcosmically, does away with the dualism of the darkened auditorium or artificial separations of space and role. Macrocosmically, productions like *Sleep No More* emerge as theatrical bodies of their own—highly structured bodies productive of specific structures and aims. Objects in this body act more like cells than props, coded to constantly reinvent their signage based on the real-time narratives of participants.

The sprawling theatrescape of *Sleep No More* makes the spatial experience of the production wholly concrete. First, and most importantly, the transformation of the performance space reveals, in general, what objects have been anchored to, as well as what audiences come to expect upon entry. In the case of both *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell* participants enter into fully realized and often use-oriented spaces. In *Sleep No More* for example, a doctor's office comes complete with an examination table and medical implements. A hotel lobby includes a counter, guest book, pens, and lounge chairs. A canopied four-poster bed, wardrobe, and end tables create a bedroom. Yet, something in these spaces

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[205] Slater, Chris. *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), xxxii.

invariably seems odd, out of sorts, or to borrow language from Shakespeare,

"weird." Furniture in a bedroom is stacked haphazardly against a wall, piled from

floor to ceiling. The doctor's implements seem more suited to violence than

diagnosis, with vintage medical machinery and metal dissection tables. The

lobby's mailboxes are strangely devoid of mail—as if the guests had all deserted.

Indeed, the lobby includes such quaint touches as curtained phone booths, a tea

set, and a wall of keys to rooms unknown. Yet not all the pegs are filled, and

notes for guests are tacked up behind the front desk. Who are these for? Who are

the guests? The absence of bodies, in this case, proves disquieting. Alone in these

purpose-built installations, only the objects are there to arrange, to guide, to

motivate, and to activate my activities—activities that have definable limits,

despite the beckoning curiousness of the site's collections of stuff.

"Collection," as a term, conjures up the museum again, with its inherent

urge to categorize and illumine the meanings of objects. Systematically, artifacts

are arranged by order and genera, magnitude and canon. As such, things in the

immersive theatre often follow suit. *Sleep No More's* practically oriented spaces,

in all their oddity, call up what Keir Elam and Marvin Carlson call "iconic

identity" i.e. things in a theatrical setting that appear "in a form frequently

indistinguishable from how they appear in daily life."[206] Objects or things in these

immersive spaces require contextualization. Bill Brown responds again to the

complex relationships of subject/object by asserting that:

> You could imagine things, second, as what is excessive in objects, as what
> exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as

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[206] Carlson, Marvin. *Theatre Semiotics*: *Signs of Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), xiv.

> objects—their forces as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems. Temporalized as the   before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically reducible to objects). But this temporality obscures the all-at-onceness, the simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic and the fact that, all at once, *the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names some thing else*.[207]

The "excess" of objects in *Sleep No More* describes, not only the lush, highly detailed environment of the site, but the latency of meaning in objects—each signifier links by pointing at the next object to create its assemblage, and on a macro level, the production itself. Installations in this environment therefore engage in a similar simultaneity as that which Brown describes; a dialectic that positions things as being more than themselves, more woven into the fabric of theatrical space/time, rather than stand-alone "icons." As Deleuze and Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order."[208] Rhizomes, according to Deleuze and Guattari, have neither beginning nor end, circling endlessly back on themselves—a scene not unlike the closed landscapes of theatrical immersion. In creating bodily sensations and calling up sense-memories, these spaces conceal their interconnectivity with the bankable economics upon which they are built, and how individual participation, agency, and choice are, if anything, less realized in these circumstances than in the traditional theatre.

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[207] Brown, Bill. *Critical Inquiry* (Vol. 28, No.1, Autumn 2001), "Things," 1-22.
[208] Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, trans. Brian Massumi. *A Thousand Plateaus*: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7.

Conclusion: Where Do We Go From Here?

In the course of this project, several examples have described how the excess of space, text, or objects can be harnessed to neoliberal, humanistic, models of performance. *Sleep No More*, in all its glamorous monetization—two bars and a restaurant, at the time of writing—exploits the concept of immersion by branding its aesthetic and sensual experiences. Notably, this economic expansion has increased significantly since the Boston iteration of the production. In the Boston production, a single bar housed the bar/safe space of *Sleep No More*; a way of selling liquor certainly, but also a safety valve for audiences who became overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the space. The New York production, with its increased size, has reevaluated the concept of the safety valve, hoping instead to upsell the value of each ticket with numerous add-ons to the space.

These add-ons, I suggest, do not serve the same purpose as the production's lobby bar, the Manderley. Rather than providing a release from the world of the play, the impetus behind the "Gallows Green" and "The Heath" suggests an augmentation of that world. Participants enamored of the production can continue their experience through food or drink in spaces bearing the stamp of the production's overall aesthetic. Instead of escaping the things of the production, *Sleep No More* now relies on participants to want more of those things, more mysterious narratives, and more areas to explore. It therefore becomes apparent that *Sleep No More* actively seeks a consumer relationship with its participants that it attempts to conceal in its own theatricality

That consumerism, and the neoliberal ideology of which it is a part, seems

to occlude the idea of an immersive theatre that functions without either.

However, work has been produced recently that legitimately attempts to rethink

the project of immersive experience as other than the creation of virtual agency,

textual metaphor, or free market capitalism. Woodshed Collective, a company out

of New York City, produced *The Tenant* in 2011:

> Set in Paris and inspired by Roland Topor's book which was famously
> adapted into a film by Roman Polanski, *The Tenant* is a thrilling, haunting,
> and grotesquely hilarious investigation into the relationship between who
> we are and where we live. When Monsieur Trelkovsky rents a room
> recently vacated by a woman who fell from her window, he soon finds his
> world changing in bizarre ways. Haunted by images of the previous
> tenant's apparent suicide and terrorized by his new neighbors, Trelkovsky
> begins a slow decent into paranoia and delirium.[209]

Although this production paralleled *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell* in its large

scale reimagining of a text in space with performances and installed spaces, [they

didn't stick to this model.] However, their 2015 production of *Empire Travel*

Agency that the company has broken ground in New York City with an immersive

event that de-emphasizes a single space, intimacy, and the relationship of

consumption espoused by so many contemporary immersive companies and

events. The description of the production in "Hyperallergic," an arts-based blog,

helps to demonstrate how *Empire Travel Agency* represents an important

deviation from the model followed by *Sleep No More, Then She Fell, Queen of*

the Night, or Speakeasy Dollhouse:

> *Empire Travel Agency* starts with four strangers waiting for a call at a
> Lower Manhattan phone booth. What follows is a two-hour immersive
> theater experience that weaves through the streets, subway, and behind

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[209] Woodshed Collective. "The Tenant". http://www.woodshedcollective.com/productions/the-tenant/.

unexpected doors into sleek and disused spaces, all on the trail of a mysterious substance called ambrose that may alter the future of New York City.

Last year, the first edition of *Empire Travel Agency* invited audience members on adventures that included a subway ride to Coney Island, where actors entered and exited the train in a journey that culminated at the beach. The 2015 production, currently running through September 27, was written by Jason Gray Platt and directed by Teddy Bergman with a focus on the anxiety and adventure offered by the city.[210]

This article describes a production utilizing space, objects, and texts in fundamentally different ways than either *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell*. Because of this difference, I include it as a kind of epilogue: a possible way forward for immersive events in New York City and a contrasting perspective on the concrete and theoretical discussion of the experiences facilitated by the events hitherto described in this dissertation. First and foremost, this production is free to participants. Yet, because only four participants may attend at a time, it still maintains a sense of exclusivity. This reimagines participants, not as a customer base, but as a community exploring the event for the first time.

Also, much of the production takes place in public spaces. As a result, the artists can only control the objects, things, or stuff strewn throughout the event up to a certain point. In being unable to curate and enclose the entire production, *Empire Travel Agency* adds legitimate agency to the experiential frame of the production. The theatricality of being involved in the production, in moving from place to place and performance to performance, takes place phenomenologically in real, undetermined space, from which participants may derive reactions

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[210] Soloski, Alexis. "'Empire Travel Agency' Guides Adventurers on a New York Odyssey" September 10, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/11/theater/review-empire-travel-agency-guides-adventurers-on-a-new-york-odyssey.html.

unencumbered by the constant reification of control produced in *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell*. Finally, the text is not canonical, but devised. This point relaxes the imaginative potential of participants. Unbound by *Macbeth* or *Rebecca* or *Alice in Wonderland*, the participants can freely interpret and imagine textual metaphors, encoding meaning for themselves in the objects and language they experience in real time. Ultimately, I feel strongly that these are valid goals for the immersive theatre that might help create an ethical, articulate, structure for the integration of technology, participation, and visceral experience in the theatrical future.

As one of many current productions breaking free of tropes conceived by Punchdrunk, *Empire Travel Agency* is responding to a new, more experimental thematic in immersive events. Third Rail Projects has just opened a second production entitled *The Grand Paradise* (2016) that takes its cue from a tropical resort vacation in the 1970s—a theme devised without reference to any pre-written text. Andrew Hoepfner's Brooklyn-based *Houseworld* (2015) has also been devised, relying instead on specific rooms and roleplay to conduct proceedings that include only thirty audience members per evening. Each of these instances have occurred on the fringes of New York City theatre, populating the immersive aesthetic with a more diverse, economically accessible, and aesthetically unique class of experiences. As the concept of immersive theatre splits off from the big-name long-run productions of *Then She Fell*, *Sleep No More*, and *Queen of the Night*, the concept of immersion becomes simultaneously

more egalitarian and less centralized, making space for what may be a new avant-garde of experimental immersive performance.

But what, finally, is immersive theatre? Playwright Dan O'Neil takes a stab at a contemporary definition of its characteristics:

1. Audience agency (the audience is able to roam freely throughout the performance environment)

2. Proximity to performers (the audience can get very close, although in my example they could not touch)

3. Arranged in such a way that it can be experienced in any order without detracting from the overall experience (i.e., logically fragmented)

4. Housed within a larger, heavily designed environment or world that is not a theater, or at least not readily recognizable as such[211]

This definition is as good as any, but does not account for a range of other events that also consider themselves immersive. For example, a whole universe of one-on-one performances has taken root in New York City and London. There are productions such as *Here Lies Love*, David Byrne's 2014 creation at the Public Theatre that takes place in a recognizable theatre, but allows patrons to wander, involves participation, and includes close proximity to performers. There is *The Great Comet of 1812*, a musical iteration of *War and Peace* that keeps patrons in their seats but involves their participation and proximity. There are even productions such as *Slightly Askew*, a production that takes place in hospital beds in a room with others, but which is totally aural in nature.[212] None of these fit O'Neil's definition, yet are all immersive in some way. This not to mention the

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[211] O'Neil, Dan.
[212] Yee, Shannon. "Slightly Askew". https://shannonyee.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/final-rsa-a5-both.jpg.

paratheatrical experiences arising from immersion, such as the real-time puzzle rooms of Boda Borg or the room escape franchises that have popped up all over the country.[213]

With Josephine Machon, I agree that immersive theatre is not a genre, nor is it easily recognizable. As with any long-term project, my thinking about immersion has changed radically in the course of writing. I began with the thought that I would be able to define immersive theatre, to taxonomize its aesthetics and structures, and finally, predict its potential as a theatrical form. I did not wager on the multiplicity of immersion, its significant connection to technological forms, and its stubborn indeterminacy. More so than when I started, I cannot say what, precisely, immersive theatre *is*. However, if I had to attempt a definition, it might look something like this:

> Immersive theatre is an experiential aesthetic format relying on a combination of textual, visual, and spatial manipulations to create haptic responses in individuals. Such responses are then transposed onto site installations to create multilinear, rhizomic narratives.

While this definition may not cover everything that calls itself immersive, it remains open enough to account for most of the case studies I have written about in the course of the project.

The problem in the theatre now, however, is precisely the virtual technologies that it has sought to replicate in the tactile spaces of the immersive theatre. What immersive theatre, and all theatre, has had a monopoly on is liveness. I mean liveness in the sense of Lehmann's definition of theater: that

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[213] Boda Borg originated in Sweden, but has now come to the Boston metro area. See: http://www.bodaborg.com/north-america/. Many room escape franchises now exist. I attended this one in Boston: http://www.escapetheroomboston.com/.

breath and sensation communally experienced in the event itself. That monopoly, I suggest, is now over. As technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality blur the idea of liveness they introduce progressively more interactions in worlds not unlike those constructed by the immersive theatre. This calls into question what is meant by being in the same embodied space as another physical body. Like the immersive theatre, in which the experiential and sensual takes priority over narrative structures and cultural history, virtual technologies have set about the task of how to make virtual worlds feel as real as they possibly can.

Enter the Teslasuit. Literally a suit used to traverse virtual worlds, it creates haptic stimulation in the body, and works with a variety of standard console platforms. As the project's blog explains:

> Tesla Suit is a tactile suit for virtual reality, based on electro muscle stimulation technology, that performs a dual role as a motion capture system and tactile smart textile, incorporating thousands of nodes to stimulate sensations in the skin through tiny electric pulses. It is completely wireless and compatible with existing virtual reality headsets such as the Oculus, Google Glass and META Space Glasses, as well as game consoles (PSP, Xbox), PCs and smartphones.[214]

The suit, in essence, performs a similar function as an immersive event. Is this theatre? Certainly the question of whether immersive events qualify as theatre has come up over the course of this dissertation. However, most of these discussions have dealt primarily with the literary aspects of the event—be it *Macbeth* or *Alice in Wonderland* or historical biography—rather than the experiential, the sensual, or the haptic. Instinctually, writers and scholars (including myself) have believed these to be the province of the theatre, whether a clear narrative exists in the

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[214] "Teslasuit Transmits the First Virtual Hug in History Using Virtual Reality Tactile Technology" 30 October 2015. http://www.teslastudios.co.uk/tesla-suit-transmits-the-first-virtual-hug-in-history-using-virtual-reality-tactile-technology.

context of the performance or not. Whether or not the Teslasuit is a viable, commercial option for sensate feeling in virtual landscapes, the fact that it exists should give theatre practitioners and scholars pause. After all, what happens when virtual people gather in a virtual place to watch virtual actors perform in a traditional proscenium? Is this theatre? As such technologies gain traction, and are able to respond to the human body and emotional state with greater nuance, the phenomenological and existential questions espoused by these technical models of liveness multiply. If we are now postdramatic, then what happens in the next stage of virtuality? This is a question I would like to explore as the cutting edge of these technologies pushes beyond videogames and into the creation of experiential worlds.

While I believe such items as the Teslasuit require a new vocabulary for parsing the range of theatrical experiences now available to participants, it is also possible to lose the neoliberal critique in and amongst questions of liveness and identity in virtual formats. It could be argued that making such technologies available to a broad range of consumers better enables access to immersive aesthetics than theatrical productions can. In fact, with the advent of virtual meeting spaces, they need not experience these spaces alone, as it is possible to connect participants with a community of sorts with which to undertake virtualizations. This is a strategy followed already in most avatar-driven MMORPG's (massively multiplayer online roleplaying games) such as World of Warcraft, Second Life, or Everquest. However, this divergence from the real world carries a number of issues with it. Theatre is not just a communal

experience but, to borrow a term from Martin Puchner, it is a problem of ground.

As Mike Pearson suggests with his deep map the place of the theatrical event has

a depth and breadth of history and memory, and a connectivity to itself that

anchors its importance in the real. Again, for Pearson theatre is:

> An attempt to record and represent the substance, grain, and patina of a
> particular place, through juxtapositions and interweavings of the historical
> and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the factual and the
> fictional, the academic and the aesthetic...depth not as profundity but as
> topographic and cultural density.[215]

While virtual theatre may, for the moment, be able to compete with sensations,

the elements that theatre can provide beyond experience and sensation nearly all

involve the situatedness of performance in real space. Objects, things, smells,

touch, and even interactions will shortly have virtual equivalents if they do not

already, but the haunting specificity of site cannot be replicated. The grounding of

theatre in site calls upon practitioners and participants to engage in historical,

communal, often haunted, experiences of theatre in specific spaces. The

contextual framing of theatrical performance in site, as observed already, can also

be immersive—these are not exclusionary terms. However, a site-responsive art

form that embraces immersion can, I believe, reimagine participants as partners in

the theatrical event, and replace the isolating, consumptive tendencies of

neoliberal ideologies. I fear that if theatres do not assimilate technological

structures and repurpose them towards socially contextualized ends (as opposed to

merely experiential ones), then it will be difficult to compete with the endgame of

haptic, sensual experiences offered broadly to everyone.

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[215] Pearson, Mike. *Site-Specific Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 32.

While this dissertation has made no claim to being a comprehensive account, I would pursue several expansions to make it more so. First, I would seek to further contextualize immersive theatre in the economic framework of New York City, following the money from production companies, grants, sales, and advertising on down to ticket prices and drink sales. Such data might better inform, and provide evidence for, the neoliberal critique I find present in these productions. Immersive theatre is a culturally produced brand, one whose aesthetics are not new, but merely borrowed and remixed from a variety of sources in both past and contemporary theatre. Following the money, in this case, would serve to illustrate connections between cultural forces in New York City and the spectacles that they produce. Second, I would give a broader account of the race and gender identity of both performers and participants. Interviews, first-person accounts, and other data would situate to whom the production appeals, and whom it is marketed to. Demographic information and accounts (other than my own) further expands on the economic drivers of immersive theatre in NYC. Categorizing what types of immersive productions might be more or less well attended by various groups, and correlating these with the pricing schemes of each production, might also tell a story about how class-based these entertainments are. Immersive theatre, on the whole, is an expensive proposition in an increasingly expensive city. Analyzing the fiscal characteristics of these shows might expose other avenues for creating populist approaches that discard neoliberal ideologies and practices.

Finally, I will conclude by noting that immersive theatre, whatever it may be, is not a trend that will vanish in the next decade. I offer this up as both a prediction and a warning. It is positive to see, as I finish writing, that many theatre companies are choosing to modify and deconstruct the model provided by Punchdrunk's work, finding new and imaginative ways to devise narrative, use site and public space, and engage participation. As these events multiply and readjust to a changing social sphere and the desires of the market, artists are rewriting the book on the possible meanings of immersion. I hope they will do so for some time.

Figures (Chapter 2)
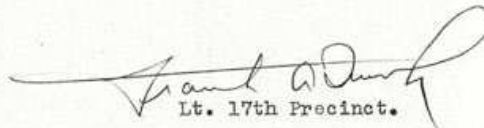
POLICE DEPARTMENT

CITY OF NEW YORK

17th Precinct.

April 12, 1935

From: Desk Officer, 17th Precinct.

To: Chief Medical Examiner.

Subject: RELATIVE TO YOUR CASE #1569, 1935.

1.   At 7.00 P.M. March 14, 1935, Frank Spano 41 years 4327 3rd Ave. while walking East in front of ▓▓▓▓ was shot in the left side of neck by J. Guerrieri of ▓▓▓▓ ▓▓▓▓, who afterward threw the gun away some where in the vicinity.

2.   Was attended by Dr. Werblow of Metropolitan Hospital and removed thereto. Ptl. Vincenot # 6227, 17th Precinct. Det. Crane 17th Squad assigned.

3.   Witnesses Dominick Spano, victims son and Nicholas Zecko of ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓, who were walking with him at the time.

4.   At 1.00 A.M. April 15, 1935 J. Guerrieri was arrested by Det. Crane and charged with assult, which was later changed to homicide. Dispositon pending.

Lt. 17th Precinct.

Kid Scrap Tragedy as Dads Take Sides With Gun, Knife

Dared to Come Out and Fight, Boy Brings Father Who Shoots Down Neighbor

The sins of the children were visited upon the fathers in a quarrel on the East Side today.

Thirteen-year-old Dominick Stano wanted to beat up fourteen-year-old Frank Guerriere.

But instead of going to fight alone, as a boy should, he went last night to the Guerriere home at _____ Street with his father, Frank Stano, who carried a knife.

He put a note under the door of the Guerriere apartment reading, "If you're not yellow, come down and fight." Then they waited in the street.

Instead of fighting his fight alone, as a boy should, the Guerriere child ran to his father, John, who carried a gun.

So the grownup Guerriere went down to the street in his son's place and fired five shots at the father of his son's foe, police say.

Frank Stano is near death in Metropolitan Hospital on Welfare Island, with two bullets in him. John Guerriere is locked up, charged with felonious assault.

The Stano home is at 02_ Street.

AUTOPSY

Case No.

Approximate Age   43 years   Approximate Weight   155 lbs. by scale
Height   5' - 6½"
Identified by   Residence
Stenographer   RFV   Residence

        I hereby certify that I Dr. T. A. Gonzales,   have performed an autopsy on
the body of FRANK SPANO,   at City Mortuary   on the
     17th   day of   March   1935, 10:30 A.M.   hours after the death,
and said autopsy revealed

AUTOPSY PERFORMED BY DR. T. A. GONZALES, DEPUTY CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER:

        The body is that of an adult white male, well-nourished and
well-developed; fairly well-muscled. Five feet and 6½" tall, weight by scale
155 lbs. Blonde hair on the head; wavy, few strands of gray on the sides. Blonde
eyelashes and eyebrows. Gray irides; pupils are small; unequal, the left being
larger than the right; the left pupil about 3/16"; the right about 1/8". Long
pointy angular nose. Rather narrow face. Smooth shaven face; three or four
days's growth of beard. Teeth; upper jaw, left, all teeth present except the
first and third molar and the first bicuspid - on the right all teeth present
except the two bicuspids and the third molar. Lower jaw; left all teeth present
except the third molar; the first molar shows a decayed root - upper right all
teeth present, except the first and second molar; teeth in good condition.
There is reddish hair on the forearms, pubes, axillae, thighs and legs. The
penis; foreskin is short. The skin of the penis is mottled with freckles; the
scrotum is natural. No scars on the penis. There is a scar in the left groin
below Poupart's ligament, running parallel with it from a point, inner end
1½" to the left of the midline, running outwards a distance of 2½"; this is
practically healed - this is covered with a black salve, probably ichthyol
salve. The left side of the face is also covered with salve.
HANDS - Are calloused - long and tapering - the fingernails are short. There
        is an abrasion on the index finger of the left hand, roughly circular,
3/8" by ¾", distal to the knucle on the dorsum of the finger; its center ¼"
to the thumb side of the midline of the finger.

TATTO MARKS - There is a tattoomark of a "cross", 1½" back of the web and between
        the thumb and index finger of this hand. There is a tatto mark
in blue on the dorsal surface, upper third of the right forearm, the name "Domeni-
co Spano" and below this "Panaccio Morti" and "Batello" below this "1919." On the
left arm are a number of undecipherable tattoo marks, symbols of some kind,
apparently Chinese characters, four in number. On the lower third, on the dorsal
surface of the left forearm, there are three other undecipherable tattoo marks
in blue, appears like a dagger. On the flexor surface of the right arm, there
is another faint tattoo mark - on the flexor surface of the left arm, also
a tattoo mark undecipherable, with initials "W.S."

There is distinct dimpling of the chin, in front. The face is somewhat freckled.
The shoulders, neck and arms are forearms are considerably freckled.

OPERATION WOUND - There is an operation wound on the left side of the neck,
        its upper end beginning 2½" below and 1¼" in front of the
left auditory meatus - it runs downwards, diagonally inwards a distance of 3½";
its lower end is 1" to the left of the midline; the upper end 3" to the left of
the midline. This is sutured with three sutures. Two inches below the upper
end of the wound and 1¼" to the left of the midline, the edge of the wound is
abraded - this is possibly the entrance of the bullet - the lower end of the
wound is opened to the extend of ¾" and gapes 3/8"; this is probably where the
drain has been. From the lower end of the wound which is 1" to the left of the
midline, there is another wound running towards the right across the midline,
a distance of 2½", making an "L" shaped wound, with the original vertical or
diagonal wound on the left side of the neck; this wound is sutured with three
black silk sutures.

On the left shoulder and left upper chest, there a large ecchymotic area extending from the midline to the base of the neck - 6" crosswise towards the left shoulder and 5" vertical. There is also an ecchymotic area on the top of the right shoulder, covering an area 2" roughly circular; the inner portion of this circular zone shows an abraded area 1" crosswive, from above downward ¾". There is another abraded area beneath the "bullet slap" on the left lateral chest measuring 1" horizontally, from above downward 5/8"; its front end situated 5½" below the axilla in the mid-axillary line. This and the previous abrasion on the right shoulder are probably bullet slaps.

On the right side of the back, trepezius fold, 2¼" to the right of the midline and about on horizontal level with the wound of entrance in the operation wound described on the left side of the neck.

The "Wound of Exit" measuring ¼" vertical. The bullet came out 4" to the right of the point of entrance.

ON OPENING INTO THE ABDOMEN - No free fluid. Panniculus measures ½" in thickness. Diaphragm; 4th rib righ ; 5th rib left. No free fluid in the abdominal cavity. LUNGS - Were free, except on the right apex, slight adhesions and the right lung shows slight puckering and scarring of the apex. On section, the right lung is natural; no blood in the bronchi. The vessels are normal. The left lung was entirely free from adhesions. On section alsonatural. The bronchiare free from blood; the vessels are normal. The lungs are very pale and blood.
HEART - Contains a small amount of fluid blood, in the right ventricle; in the left ventricle, there is also a very small amount of blood. The valves are natural. The coronaires natural. The fossa is closed.
LIVER - Normal in size and form. On section natural. Slightly paler than normal, and bloodless. The gall-bladder contains about one ounces of olive-green bile; the mucous-membrane is normal.
SPLEEN - Slightly enlaglarged; firm; on section shows no lesions. The capsule is wrinkled.
ADRENALS - Are natural.
KIDNEYS - Capsules strip easily, surface smooth; organs normal in size; on section show no lesions. Pelves and ureters are natural.
URINARY-BLADDER - Is distended with about 7 ounces of pale yellowish urine; the mucous-membrane is normal.
PROSTATE and RECTUM - Normal.
AORTA - Smooth, delicate and elastic.

In the anterior upper mediastinum in the fascial planes of the neck, especially on the left side, there is considerable hemorrhage, and there is hemorrhage in the periform fossa on the left side, and on the base of the tongue on the left side. There is a bullet hole thru the muscles on the left side.

ORGANS OF THE NECK - Namely, the oesophagus, trachea, larynx, tongue, thyroid gland and the muscles, aside from the facial planes of the neck are normal.

TRACT OF THE BULLET - Passes from its point of entrance on the left side of the neck, in a backward horizontal direction, passing towards the right, passes thru the muscles of the neck, where it passes thru the left common carotid, then to the left of the trachea and oesophagus, enters the spinal canal to the left side of the body of the 5th cervical ver- tebra, passes completely thru the cord then out to the spinal column on the right side posteriorly, passes thru the muscles of the upper inner shoulder and makes its exite at a point above described on the back, 4" to the right of the point of entrance. The length of the tract is approximately 7½".

NOTE - Just below and just underneath the operation wound above described in the muscles of the neck on the left side, there are several small pieces veins and arteries tied off. The jugular vein on the left side is un- injured. The holes in the carotid artery are "E and E" wounds. Below this, the vessel is tied offwith cat-gut ligatures. There is considerabe hemorrhage in the fascial planes just in front of the spine, cervical spine.
On opening the spine, there is hemorrhage between the dura spinalis

AUTOPSY   --- 3 ---   FRANK SPANO

ON REFLECTING THE SCALP - There is hemorrhage in the galea on both sides in
the parietal regions, and there is hemorrhage in
both temporal muscles, and there is also a contusion on the back of the head
just ½" to the right of the midline. There are fractures of the skull; one
beginning in the left parietal bone on its posterior internal angle, it
begins ¾" to the left of the midline, runs towards the right across the
midline and practically horizontally and then in the squamous portion of
the temporal bone, bends downward and forwards and ends in the squamous
portion of the temporal lobe, Just above the zygomatic process on the left
side there is another fracture beginning in the left parietal bone on its
posterior internal angle, 1¾" to the left of the midline, runs horizontally
forward in the squamous portion of the temporal bone where it ends in front
about the coronal suture. The length of this fracture is approximately 4"
The length of the fracture on the righ is about 6½" . See diagram.
In the right parietal occipital region, there is a small epidural hemorrhage
about 1½ ounces and measures 2½" in diameter, circular in shape, underneath
which there is a distinct depression in the right outer posterior aspect
of the right occipital lobe. There is also some subdural hemorrhage on
this side. There is contre-coup lacerations of the tip of the right temporal
lobe with subarachnoid hemorrhage about it and also contre-coup lacerations
and contusions of the undersurface of the right frontal region, lobe. On
section, the brain shows slight bloodstaining of the ventricles, otherwise
there are no lesions. There is slight subarachnoid hemorrhage over the cortex
of both sides. The base of the skull is normal. The skullcap is rather thin
and soft, being about ¼" in the occipital and 3/16" in the frontal and paper
thinness on the left being about 1/32", and the right about 1/8". The base of
the skull shows no lesions; there are fractures.

GASTRO-INTESTINAL-TRACT - The Oesophagus is natural. The stomach contains pieces
of white meat and some brownish fluid light in color.
The mucous-membrane is normal. The upper part of the small intestines contain
yellowish chyme; the lower part greenish chyme. The large intestines contain
pasty greenish-brown feces. The appendix and pancreas are normal.

                         ANATOMICAL DIAGNOSIS

          "Single Bullet Wound of the Left Neck" - Branches of the Jugular
          Vein and the Carotid Artery. "Bullet Wound of left Common Carotid Ar
          tery, Spinal Column, Spinal cord, Fifth Cervical Segment"

          "Exit" - On the right side of the back.

          HEMORRHAGE IN THE FASCIAL PLANES OF THE NECK AND ANTERIOR MEDIA-
          STINUM AND INFRONT OF THE SPINAL COLUMN:

          PLEURITIC ADHESIONS: RIGHT SIDE: WITH SLIGHT SCARRING OF THE APEX:
          HEMORRHAGE IN THE PERIFORM FOSSA AND THE BASE OF THE TONGUE FROM
          THE BULLET WOUND:
          FRACTURED SKULL: BOTH SIDES:
          EPIDURAL HEMORRHAGE: RIGHT SIDE: SUBDURAL HEMORRHAGE, RIGHT SIDE:
          CONTRE-COUP LACERATIONS OF THE RIGHT FRONTAL AND TEMPORAL REGIONS:
          SUBARACHNOID HEMORRHAGE WELLING UP FROM THE SPINE OVER THE PONS
          MEDULLA AND CEREBELLUM:
          HEMORRHAGE IN THE SPINAL MENINGES:
          ABRASION AND CONTUSION OF THE FRONT OF THE RIGHT SHOULDER AND OF
          THE LEFT LATERAL CHEST WALL:
          TATTOO MARKS OF ARMS AND FOREARMS AND LEFT HAND:
          SMALL ABRASION ON THE INDEX FINGER OF THE LEFT HAND:
          OPERATION WOUND OF LEFT SIDE OF THE NECK:
          SUTURES OF THE VARIOUS TORN VESSELS FROM THE BULLET WOUND:

CAUSE OF DEATH - BULLET WOUND OF THE LEFT NECK, LEFT COMMON CAROTID ARTERY,
          BRANCHES OF THE JUJULAR VEIN, SPINAL COLUMN, SPINAL CORD:
          FRACTURED SKULL: EPIDURAL AND SUBDURAL HEMORRHAGE:
          LACERATION OF THE BRAIN: HEMORRHAGE: H O M I C I D A L.

CLOTHES - Consist of a brown fedora hat, labeled "Preety-Roberts Co." size
          #7. Tan overcoat, large cattohewing no blood or it; no holes

AUTOPSY   -- 4 --   FRANK SPANO

(Clothes Con'd) - which was indicated that the abrasion on the left
                    lower chest might be from the bullet slap. The
hole in the vest labeled "X". Trousers of different material then the
coat, dark-gray, showing no blood and no holes, extensively torn and
cut - black leather belt with white metal buckle, with initials "F".
Blue shirt with collar-attached with label, "Lin-Dyes" stained with blood;
hole in the back on the right side corresponding to the Exit; this garment
is extensively cut. Gray balbrigan undershirt, with hole on the right side
of the back, corresponding in position to the exit; the hole in the back
corresponding to the exit, surrounded by stained blood. Pair of similar
gray extensively torn underdraws; no blood on them. Four socks, each dif-
ferent, one dark-gray, another one more lighter gray - two brown socks;
one dark-brown and another somewhat lighter-gray-brown; no blood on any
of them. Well-worn black low-laced shoes with rubber heels, labeled "Klein"
NOTE - On the overcoat and the coat, there is no holes in the shoulders
in front, nor in the left side of the garment, corresponding to the
bruising above described, on the body. There is a hole in the vest in the
back. There is a small hole in the blue shirt in the back on the left
side - both marked "X" - No holes in the underclothes, corresponding to
these two bruises - one on the front shoulder and one on the left lateral
chest - also with the clothing was a red and white figured four-in-hand
tie; small amount of blood on it.

          All clothing labeled "TAG - 3/17/35" except the blue knit sweater,
and the respective holes in the garments corresponding to the Exit, labeled
"Exit."

                         IDENTIFICATION

          Body identified to Dr. Gonzales, at the City Mortuary, at
12:30 P.M., March 16, 1935, by Patrolman Harry Cincenot, Shield #6227 -
17th Precinct, as the same body he first saw lying on the sidewalk, in
front of 309 East 48th Street, at about 7:00 P.M., - Deceased was shot
by a "barber" of 202 East 49th Street, who has been arrested.

          Body identified to Dr. Gonzales, at the City Mortuary, at
1:00 P.M., March 17, 1935 - by Frank Spano, Cousin, of 2037 Bellmont Avenue,
Bronx, N. Y.

          Police Officer also identified the clothes, at the City Mortuary,
10:00 A.M., March 18, 1935.

"Dixie" Davis, as Schultz's lawyer, became the man responsible for keeping "collectors" and other petty employes out of jail when his boss took over policy. On July 30, having pleaded guilty to his own indictment, he promised to tell in court how it was done.

"Jimmy" Hines, charges Prosecutor Dewey, was the political big-shot whom Schultz hired to protect the racket. Allegedly Hines, whose comings-&-goings once rated a police guard-of-honor (*above*), was able to stop most police raids on policy "banks."

"Judge" Hulon Capshaw, a Hines political protégé, is one of the city magistrates who, says Dewey, was fixed by Hines to free policy racketeers when they did get arrested. Magistrate Capshaw, a Social Registerite, is costumed here as an oldtime Tammany sachem.

"Judge" Francis Erwin, who died in 1935, was the other magistrate whom Hines is accused of fixing. Aug. 18 three witnesses told how they and 23 others were arrested when caught red-handed sorting policy slips, taken before Magistrate Erwin, promptly freed.

NEW YORK, Aug. 2.—District Attorney Thomas E. Dewey said in a Supreme Court today that the late Arthur (Dutch Schultz) Flegenheimer and his policy racketeers had "influenced" these officials:

William Copeland Dodge, former city magistrate and Dewey's predecessor as district attorney. Elected prosecutor in 1933, he served until last year, when Tammany neglected to renominate him. He now is in private practice as an attorney.

Magistrate Hulon Capshaw, appointed in 1929 by Mayor James J. Walker and re-appointed for a full 10-year term in 1933 by Major John P. O'Brien. He is a native of Cookeville, Tenn.

The late Francis J. Erwin, a magistrate from 1931 until 1935 when he died.

Capshaw Relieved of Duties

Magistrate Capshaw was relieved of his duties today by Chief Magistrate Jacob Gould Schurman, Jr., "until this charge is fully disposed of."

The names, regarded by sensation-seekers as a delectable appetizer for the trial of James J. Hines, veteran Tammany district leader accused of being the "front man" for the policy mob, were served up in a bill of particulars demanded by counsel for Hines.

Dewey indicated that others, "the names of whom are not presently known," would be brought out when Hines goes to trial August 15, charged with conspiracy to "contrive, propose and assist" in the operation of a lottery

Neither Dodge, Capshaw nor Erwin was charged with a crime, it being merely alleged that they were among those who had been "influenced," by intimidation or bribery, in the handling of policy cases.

He Names Names

Thomas E. Dewey

Says Racketeer 'Influenced' 3 N. Y. Officials

Former District Attorney Dodge, Two Magistrates Are Accused

MATTER DISBARRMENT HULON CAPSHAW
SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

[5] • IN THE MATTER OF THE DISBARRMENT OF HULON CAPSHAW.

[6] This Court, by order of Novembe[r]
Capshw, of New York City, New
should not be disbarred from furt[her]
said Hulon Capshaw having filed

[7] And this Court, by order of Febru[ary]
aforesaid, together with all papers
Spencer Gordon, of Washington,
committee of the bar of this Cour[t]
appropriate and thereupon to rep[ort]

[8] And the report of said committee
counsel for the said Hulon Capsh[aw]
report of the committee;

[9] Therefore, upon consideration of
exhibits, exceptions to the report,
argument upon the exceptions to

[10] It is further ordered that the said
practice of the law in this Court a[nd]
practice before the bar of this Co[urt]

"**Judge**" Hulon Capshaw, a Hines political
protégé, is one of the city magistrates who,
says Dewey, was fixed by Hines to free policy
racketeers when they did get arrested. **Mag-
istrate Capshaw**, a Social Registerite, is cos-
tumed here as an oldtime Tammany sachem.

204171

City Magistrates' Court Hom **District.**
FIRST DIVISION.

THE PEOPLE, &c.,
ON THE COMPLAINT OF

Thomas F. Crane

vs.

1 John Guerrieri   P

2

3

4

Dated   April 3   193J

Capshaw   City Magistrate.

Thomas Crane   Officer.

17 cg   Precinct.

Witnesses, Dominick Sfeano

No.   Street.

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