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► **To cite this version:**

Déborah Prudhon. Punchdrunk's Immersive Theatre: from the End to the Edge. *Sillages Critiques*, 2018, 24, 10.4000/sillagescritiques.6341 . hal-03932527

**HAL Id: hal-03932527**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03932527>**

Submitted on 10 Jan 2023

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**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/6341>

DOI: [10.4000/sillagescritiques.6341](https://doi.org/10.4000/sillagescritiques.6341)

ISSN: 1969-6302

**Publisher**

Centre de recherche VALE

Brought to you by Aix-Marseille Université (AMU)



**Electronic reference**

Deborah Prudhon, "Punchdrunk's Immersive Theatre: From the End to the Edge", *Sillages critiques* [Online], 24 | 2018, Online since 15 July 2018, connection on 10 January 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/6341> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/sillagescritiques.6341>

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# Punchdrunk's Immersive Theatre: From the End to the Edge

Deborah Prudhon

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- 1 Immersive theatre appears to be a flourishing trend on the contemporary British scene. The events which are labelled as such all share the intention of “[placing] the audience at the heart of the work” (Machon, 2013: 22) and abolish the distinction between stage and auditorium to merge them into one single space. Punchdrunk, a British company founded in 2000 by Felix Barrett, can be considered the “pioneer” and the producer of the most emblematic shows within the field. On their website (Punchdrunk's Website: <<http://punchdrunk.com/>> (accessed 24.05.16), they give the following description of their own work which is worth quoting *in extenso*:

Since 2000, the company has pioneered a game changing form of theatre in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds. Blending classic texts, physical performance, award-winning design installation and unexpected sites, the company's infectious format rejects the passive obedience usually expected of audiences.

Punchdrunk has developed a phenomenal reputation for transformative productions that focus as much on the audience and the performance space as on the performers and narrative. Inspired designers occupy deserted buildings and apply a cinematic level of detail to immerse the audience in the world of the show.

This is a unique theatrical experience where the lines between space, performer and spectator are constantly shifting. Audiences are invited to rediscover the childlike excitement and anticipation of exploring the unknown and experience a real sense of adventure. Free to encounter the installed environment in an individual imaginative journey, the choice of what to watch and where to go is theirs alone. (Punchdrunk's website)

- 2 Punchdrunk's venture could thus be read as a reaction against traditional forms of theatre where a clear line is drawn between the fictional story presented on stage and the spectators who are “passively” — in the sense that they remain physically static despite a possibly intense cerebral activity — seated in the darkened auditorium. Located at the crossroads between theatre, performance, dance and art installation<sup>1</sup>, Punchdrunk deconstructs the conventional format to create a “theatrical world” which

the spectator can physically enter, literally stepping into the world of fiction, hence the playfulness and “excitement” surrounding the experience.

- 3 At the beginning of their shows, the spectators are given a mask and a few instructions before being set free in the performance space, where they have complete freedom to choose what to do: they can decide to follow a specific character in the play or go and explore the fictional world on their own, going wherever they want, opening drawers, reading letters that they might find there, etc. With such an experimental and experiential type of theatre, the spectator is no longer placed in front of a narrative which would unfold in a linear way with a beginning, a middle and an end, as in a traditional play. Being invited to roam free through the performance space, they take individual journeys and discover the different scenes as they go along and happen to come across them. Such a radical change of perspective invites us to reconsider the very notion of ending and to think of it not so much in temporal terms, as the last stage in a teleological progression, but to look at it from a spatial angle as the physical exploration of the space all the way to its edges.
- 4 This article explores the ways in which Punchdrunk's shows cause temporal and spatial boundaries to become porous, to the extent that it becomes difficult to think of time and space separately; rather we have to consider them as being tightly related.
- 5 The paper focuses on three productions by Punchdrunk: *Sleep No More* (2003), *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007-2008) and *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* (2013-2014). Following the original London production of the first show, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with a tinge of Hitchcock, it was transferred to Boston in 2009 and to New York in 2011, where it is still playing today, and a new production of the show opened in Shanghai in November 2016. *The Masque*, based on Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, was staged in London at Battersea Arts Centre while *The Drowned Man*, a creation inspired by *Woyzeck*, the unfinished play by Büchner, was staged in a disused Royal Mail sorting office near Paddington station, the performance space spreading over four floors.
- 6 Working on such an unconventional type of theatre raises theoretical issues. Indeed, one cannot analyse it in the same way as they would text-based theatre. Josephine Machon underlines this difficulty in her seminal book on immersive theatre, *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance*. She shows that the critical tools used for the analysis of a theatre characterized by an "intellectual and literary style" cannot be applied to immersive performances. The critic needs to resort to a new analytical approach that would take into account the specificity of this radical type of theatre she calls "(syn)aesthetic work", which "shifts between the sensual and the intellectual, the somatic, ('affecting the body' or 'absorbed through the body') and the semantic (the 'mental reading' of signs)" (Machon 2009: 4). This article therefore undertakes an analysis of Punchdrunk's work based on a description of its sensual and somatic aspect. It also draws on a personal account as well as those of other people's experiences of the shows.

## Beginning With The End: An Unsettling Collective Finale

- 7 Most of Punchdrunk's theatrical performances have a conventional ending consisting in a grand finale. At the end of the night, the audience, then scattered across the building in the pursuit of their own journey, is guided to the space where the closing scene is to be performed and they all gather, along with the performers. The finale marks the end of the show and of the narrative. *Sleep No More*, for instance, culminates with a rather orgiastic banquet in a ballroom. If the scene is repeated throughout the night, marking the end of each loop<sup>2</sup>, the last one closes on the hanging of Macbeth. Similarly, in *The Masque of the Red Death*, the final scene corresponds to the arrival of the figure of Death, as in Poe's short story. Daniel Schulze, an "immersant"<sup>3</sup> of the show, gives the following description of the scene:

I am back in the basement, suddenly there is smoke everywhere and loud noise, stewards and actors are ushering us around, shouting. We are being forced into the great hall, which had been closed so far. They force us to go. An orgiastic dance by the entire ensemble begins. I am surprised how big the room is — a ballroom. The actors are in a frantic dance while we stand around them on all sides of the hall. Suddenly they all collapse and from the end of the ballroom a towering figure, larger than life in a hooded cloak enters the room. This is the Red Death, the prince at the other end is scared, but he cannot and will not escape as Death slowly but unstoppably makes his way towards him. When he gets him the prince collapses. Then somebody pulls the cloak away from the Red Death and there is no one underneath — the actor has vanished. [...] In this very moment, the lights on a stage at the end of the hall come up and we discover a band that we had not seen previously, they start playing. Suddenly, the ballroom transforms, the actors get up again, behind us bars are being manned and opened. This is a party now. (Schulze: 174)

- 8 This account of a personal experience highlights how the individual adventure ultimately turns into a collective celebration and it underlines the conventionality of the final scene in which the theatricality of the event is laid bare<sup>4</sup>.
- 9 Such a finale, clearly codified as an *ending*, would be expected at the end of a narrative unfolding in a linear way, and for this reason it appears at odds with the rest of the Punchdrunk experience. Indeed, the plot of their shows is built through the immersant's personal and random wanderings throughout the space. In this respect, they differ from promenade theatre where the "spectators" follow a preconceived path that takes them through ordered stages before reaching the end (somewhat similar to the experience of walking through an Ikea store).
- 10 In a Punchdrunk show, the narrative grows organically, taking the shape of an arborescence. The different storylines – one for each character – follow their own directions, overlapping from time to time. The plot thus unfolds both horizontally – the characters' pathways – and vertically – the superimposition and crossing of all these journeys.
- 11 The experience of the immersant is therefore not one of linearity, but of fragmentation. Even if they decide to follow the same character through his or her entire loop, they will still miss a major part of the show and the journey itself may be interrupted. In my own experience of *Sleep No More* in New York, I remember following one of the characters until he opened a door, stepped through to the other side and,

with a sarcastic smile, slammed it in my face. As I had no idea when and where he would reappear in the building, I could not follow the rest of his loop. Furthermore, it is physically impossible for a member of the audience to follow each one of the twenty or so characters in one night, rendering the experience necessarily partial and personal.

- 12 Therefore, concluding a highly individual and fragmentary experience on a striking collective scene which clearly conveys the feeling of an ending is puzzling. Rose Biggin, in her recently published monography on Punchdrunk, shares this idea when she comments on the ending of *The Duchess of Malfi* (2010):

In the narrative of the show's spectacle, and design/musical score, it was certainly a grand finale and a satisfying one. The audience were together for the first time; the orchestra was fully assembled; in a true final reveal of spectacle, with a huge musical flourish the curtain was pulled on a warehouse-sized space full of hanging cadavers. In this sense, it was easy to know what was happening – the spectacular finale. But in a narrative sense there could easily be less immediate understanding: what had just happened between those characters? (Who are they? Am I supposed to know?) If I had encountered the Duchess before and perhaps learned something about her character, this finale might have meant more to me. It occurred to me then that I might have done the show “wrong”. (Biggin: 151)

- 13 The finale of the show therefore gave Biggin the jarring impression that there was such thing as a whole story that the immersants were supposed to piece together during their experience. The selling of a “guidebook” at the end of *Sleep No More* also plays into this idea. Cultivating the frustration of the audience and the “mystery” surrounding the story behind the show can be considered a way for the company to “trap” the immersant and encourage them to come back in order to try and solve the narrative “puzzle”.
- 14 In an interview with Josephine Machon, Felix Barrett gives another motivation for the decision to do so and explains that reaffirming the end as such was a deliberate choice on the part of the company which derived both from practical reasons and from what he calls a need of “a sense of conclusion” for the audience:

We realised at the end of *Firebird's Ball* [2005] that it wasn't finite enough; it needed a sense of conclusion for the audience to feel satisfied. In the early days the shows would run ad infinitum until the last member of the audience left, so it was a real world, totally controlled by the audience. Obviously, practically that doesn't work because the poor cast become tired. So the one thing we're getting closer to solving as a result of *Faust* [2006-2007] is *the need for a finite ending* so that the audience can feel that they've got it. The most interesting thing for us with *Faust* was pulling everyone down to the basement for *Faust's* downfall, which was the most conventional space, it's like being in a studio in a way, and then you're next door to the bar, that's it, show over. (Barrett quoted in Machon 2007, my italics)

- 15 These considerations underline the artificiality and manipulation of the audience — who are given the illusory feeling “that they've got it” or, in the case of Rose Biggin, the feeling that they should have got it — but they also point to the fact that the end is relocated in space. Indeed, the final scene is associated with a specific place (the basement) and the downward movement of the audience echoes the narrative. Going back to Daniel Schulze's experience of *The Masque of the Red Death*, the surprise that he felt at the size of the room revealed at the very end of the show is exactly what the company intended when creating it:

We knew the space as The Battersea Arts Centre which made it difficult to remove the sense of "BAC" but in terms of exploring it as an empty building, 65 rooms, you've got this giant ballroom tucked out back that a large part of the BAC audience

didn't even know about. We knew that this giant space [...] was, visually and architecturally, the most interesting [...]; it is the *crescendo of the building*. We could have used it completely differently, created glorious solos. It can be amazing to have a giant space and just one spot with one performer. However in listening to the building, allowing the building to inform our decisions, it was kind of obvious from the beginning that the audience had to have that revealed; they almost think it's over, it's like a series of doors that get bigger and bigger and if we'd have played our hand too early by opening up the ballroom the building would have felt too open. If you save it until the final point, funnelling the audience together, 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 within the building*. (Barrett quoted in Machon 2009: 94, my italics)

- 16 The artistic director's comments reveal how influential space is to the work of the company which has been described as "site-sympathetic" (Machon 2007). This idea is sustained by the artful rhetoric of Punchdrunk. By declaring that they "[allow] the building to inform [their] decisions", Felix Barrett conveys the sense of things unravelling "as if by themselves" in the process of creation, which perfectly fits with the "organic" and instinctive experience that the company strives to foster.
- 17 These comments on the use of the ballroom also make it clear that the ending of the show cannot be thought of independently of *space*. The end of the "narrative" is the discovery of this ultimate room and the "crescendo" which underlies the structure is first and foremost a spatial one: "the *crescendo of the building*".
- 18 While the ending of a Punchdrunk show may convey a deceptive feeling of teleological completeness, it also reflects the substantial link between time and space which is established and experienced in these theatrical events.

## Stepping Into The Space Of Fiction

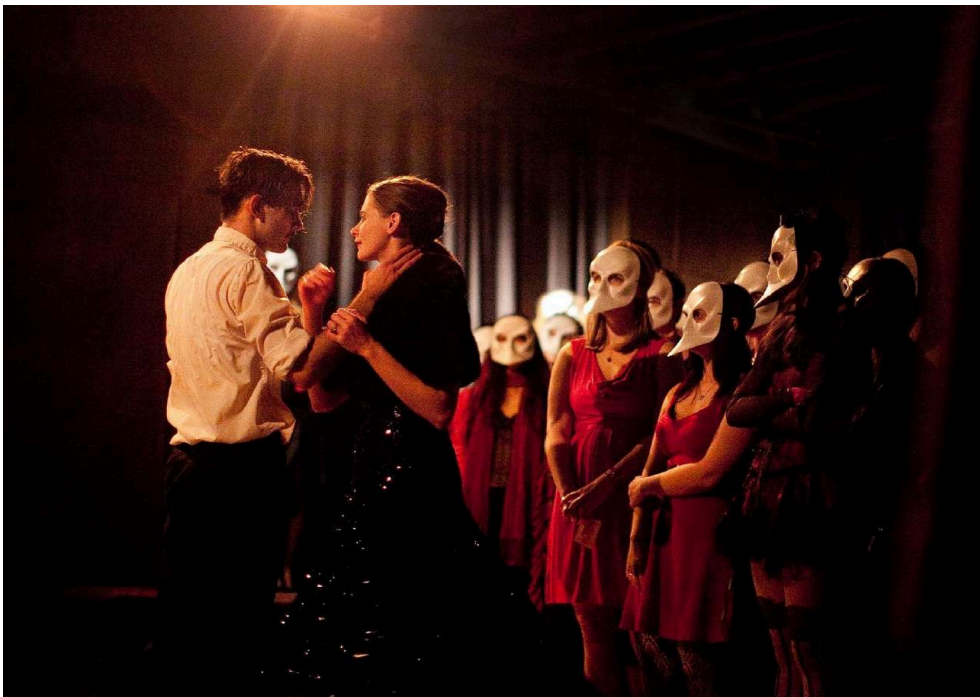
- 19 Not only does space play a central role in the work of Punchdrunk, it also *is* what is offered to the audience. Their shows are indeed conceived as expansive environments in which space becomes, to borrow Antonin Artaud's words, "a tangible, physical place"<sup>5</sup> and the narrative as a cartography one wanders through and explores.
- 20 A key element to this exploration is the mask that the immersants are handed out before entering the performance space and that they have to wear – in an intriguing theatrical reversal – at all times. The use of the mask marks a physical distinction between performers on the one hand and spectators on the other, thus re-establishing a boundary between them<sup>6</sup>. Felix Barrett elaborates on this idea:
- Handing out the masks is like assigning seats in an auditorium. It establishes each individual as part of an audience, and creates a boundary between them and the action. The masks create a sense of anonymity; they make the rest of the audience dissolve into generic, ghostly presences, so that each person can explore the space alone. They allow people to be more selfish and more voyeuristic than they might normally be. Hidden behind a fictional layer, they lose some of their inhibitions. It's an important part of the dreamlike world we are trying to create. (Souvenir Program: 24)
- 21 Paradoxically however, the mask also allows the immersants to merge organically with and "dissolve" in the space that surrounds them. This "fictional layer" acts as an interface between the real world – the person behind the mask – and the fictional world. When wearing it, the spectator adopts a fictional identity, literally becoming a



persona. Beak-like and white, it evokes the *commedia del'Arte* plague mask and, by extension, the Venitian carnival. Studying the adaptation of Poe's stories in *The Masque of the Red Death*, Frances Babbage reflects on the "themes of carnival and infection" that the mask embodies:

- 22 The beak-like masks Punchdrunk handed out to audience members, which have today come to be associated with Venitian carnival, were originally worn in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by medics who believed these would protect them from putrid air: the themes of carnival and infection both tie into the title story, and the fraught mix of gaiety, permissiveness and trepidation fairly describes the experience shaped for spectator-participants. (Babbage: 134)
- 23 The mask conveys the impression that the immersants are themselves part of the installation, of the setting. Josephine Machon notes that "through the masks, they become "ethereal beings" that haunt the event, part of the scenographic design" (Machon 2013: 73).

Performers Nicholas Bruder and Sophie Bortolussi with masked immersants in *Sleep No More* (NYC)



@Photo credit: Robin Roemer

- 24 In a similar way, the texts on which the shows are based — *Macbeth*, Poe's short stories, Büchner's play — are materially transposed and integrated to the space, thus *becoming* space:
- The reason why we've used Shakespeare so much is because those descriptions, there's so much in there, so many moments, installations are described within 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 cupboard, this passage here is obviously core narrative, this bit here is describing atmosphere so that's in the lighting. (Felix Barrett, quoted in Machon 2009: 96)
- 25 This dissection and scattering of the text in space is an integral part of the aesthetics of Punchdrunk's shows which are remarkably textual. Not only are they based on classic



texts but literary references proliferate, such as in *The Masque of the Red Death* where a shadow puppet show based on *The Fall of the House of Usher*, another of Poe's short stories, was performed in a shadow puppet theatre. The act of writing and reading is also found at the level of the performance: performers write letters which the audience can then read, they give them notes, etc. The immersants are thus envisioned as readers, a paradoxical practice that William Worthen underlines in his article "The written troubles of the brain': Sleep No More and the Space of Character". As members of the audience, he explains, "we write our individualized plotlines in our own movements, but are constructed within the spectacle as realist voyeurs, watchers, and readers, not agents." (Worthen: 96). Worthen interprets this in the light of Harry Berger's dichotomy of reading versus seeing plays: "[u]nlike 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" (86). Punchdrunk's shows could therefore be considered a literalisation of the act of reading – in Berger's sense – underlining the predominance of "networked spatiality" over "linear teleology" (McGinley: 12).

## A World Of Its Own: From The End To The Edge

- 26 Theatre both is and inhabits a place that stands apart from the real world – what Foucault calls *heterotopia*. In a conference he gave in 1967 entitled "Of Other Spaces", he defined heterotopias in relation to utopias. While the latter refer to sites that do not exist in reality<sup>7</sup>, the former are anchored in a real place<sup>8</sup>. Heterotopias can be conceived as counter-sites, alternative spaces – such as psychiatric hospitals, prisons, cemeteries, gardens, libraries, museums, fairgrounds, vacation villages, cinemas and theatres – that are to be distinguished from ordinary sites in that they establish and frame a world of their own in which the rules and relations of the normal order are suspended, "neutralised" or "inverted" (Foucault: 24).
- 27 Punchdrunk goes further than traditional theatrical heterotopias by creating, through the attention to detail in particular, the illusion of an alternative reality which occupies the whole performance space, thus setting up what feels like an entire fictional world that the immersant can inhabit for the duration of the show<sup>9</sup>. This relates to what Josephine Machon calls the "in-its-own world" quality (Machon 2013: 93), one of the specific elements which are, according to her, identifiable within any immersive experience<sup>10</sup>.
- 28 In her book *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan, studying immersion in literary fictional worlds – which differ from dramatic immersion in that the world of literature is purely imaginary whereas the world of immersive theatre is tangible – reflects on the question "What makes a world?". She refers to and quotes Michael Heim, a theorist of virtual reality:
- A world is not a collection of fragments, nor even an amalgam of pieces. It is a felt totality or whole." It is "not a collection of things but an active usage that relates things together, that links them. [...] World makes a web-like totality. [...] World is a total environment or surround space. (Michael Heim quoted in Ryan: 90-91)
- 29 These considerations shed light on the aesthetics of Punchdrunk which precisely aim at creating a "total environment". Beside the proliferation of minute details "relat[ing]

things together”, the performance space they use is so vast that it gives the immersant the impression that it is never ending and that they cannot reach its edges:

The whole performance space, with all its objects, rooms, nooks and crannies is so vast that it is impossible to explore everything in one night. Audiences can realise this very quickly. It is almost sublime to notice that this performance seemingly never ends. It mirrors the real world in that it goes on and on and on, it has no discernible beginning or end. (Schulze: 170)

- 30 The geographical limits of the performance space remain indeterminate for the spectator. The *end* of the game, therefore, is not to passively wait for the narrative to unfold to its end, but to actively explore this *terra incognita*, to map the fictional world and push the frontier to its edges<sup>11</sup>.
- 31 Thus, space is not only the core of the show, but it is also crucially its driving force. It is the desire to reach the boundaries of this physical space coupled with the drive to see what happens elsewhere at the same moment that impels the immersants to move from place to place: “the feeling that there is more to see in the next room,” notes Gareth White, “and that there is always a danger of missing something, propels this movement. The moment-to-moment ‘what happens next?’ of conventional narratives is replaced by the ‘where is he going?’ and ‘what’s in the next room?’” (White: 224).

## A Spatial Conception Of Time

- 32 The performance space conveys the impression of a world existing on its own that seems to escape temporal considerations: there is seemingly no beginning or end, neither physical nor temporal. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the action loops. The first cycle starts fifteen minutes before the audience gets in and, during the night, scenes are performed whether there are people to witness them or not, inducing a feeling of a world existing on its own, unlike conventional theatre where the actors wait for the audience to be seated before starting and would not perform in front of an empty auditorium. The spectators thus get the impression that the fictional world exists independently of their being there, and this feeling lingers even when the show is over: "You never feel that the curtain's come down, you always feel that it's still going on, it's existing without you" (Barrett quoted in Machon 2007).<sup>12</sup>
- 33 This enclosed temporality which is proper to the fictional world recalls another aspect of Foucault's definition of *heterotopias*. Indeed, not only are they in rupture with ordinary spaces, they also break away from ordinary time:
- Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time. (Foucault: 26)
- 34 In Punchdrunk's shows, heterotopia and heterochrony go hand in hand since time is perceived in relation to space. This association of the two concepts reflects the cognitive conception of time.
- 35 In their book *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson develop the theory of the "embodied mind" stating that our thoughts and concepts are shaped by primary metaphors based on everyday bodily experience<sup>13</sup>. Among other notions, time is apprehended through spatial analogies: "Most of our understanding of time is a metaphorical version of our

understanding of motion in space" (Lakoff and Johnson: 139). Similarly, the perception of the structure of narratives composed of a beginning, a middle, and an end derives from the "Source-Path-Goal Schema" (32) which in turn comes from the experience of moving from a starting point to an end point.

- 36 Punchdrunk's performances could thus be considered a literalisation of the primary metaphor of time-as-space. An illustration of this is to be found in the beginning and ending of the shows which can be thought of not only as specific moments in time but also as physical spaces. Once again, Punchdrunk appears as a prime example of Foucault's *heterotopias*: "Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable." (Foucault: 26). These liminal spaces can be considered "decompression chambers" taking immersants from the real world to the world of fiction and vice-versa: "[W]e always establish an entrance point to the world we create which is like entering a decompression chamber, to acclimatize to the world before being set free in it" (Barrett quoted in Machon 2009: 91). The "entrance point" to the world of *Sleep No More*, for instance, is a 1940s hotel bar that the immersants reach after groping their way through a labyrinth plunged in darkness and where they get to spend some time before being given masks, taken into an elevator and being randomly allowed to exit at different levels of the performance space. This room establishes a link between the everyday world — people chat and have drinks with their friends as they would in the foyer of a theatre before the start of a show — and the world of fiction — some of the people there are actually actors and the bar itself is the replica of a run-down bar to be found in the performance space. The immersants find themselves in limbo; it is unclear to them whether the show has actually started or not. The space allows them to gradually adjust to the atmosphere of the world of fiction before they step into it.
- 37 Similarly, at the end of the show, when the grand finale is over, people are led back to the bar where a band is playing; they take their masks off, sit at the bar and have a drink before returning to the real world. Daniel Schulze underlines the need — shared by other immersants — that he felt for such a space: "The bar and dancing in the end was very necessary as a "decompression chamber". It helped you to slowly ease back into the real world" (Schulze: 175-176).

## After The End

- 38 However, the temporal ending of the theatrical event does not mark the end of the Punchdrunk adventure. Indeed, some immersants feel that they can only achieve true closure once they have explored the fictional world in its entirety — yet again linking space and time. As the size of the performance space makes it impossible to see it all in one night, this frustration encourages the audience to come back and experience the same show several times, underlining its addictive aspect — some people can go back over fifty times. Furthermore, audience members extend the world created by Punchdrunk through their sharing of their different individual experiences — what Josephine Machon calls their "embodied memory" — in an attempt to try and reconstruct the narrative puzzle. These discussions extend to the virtual sphere where numerous fan pages and Wikipedia pages are created in order to establish a collective inventory of the different scenes and maps of the performance space.

- 39 Through the creation of expansive environments that immersants are free to explore as they wish, Punchdrunk thus invites us to reconsider the very notion of *ending*. Onto the temporal end of the show is superimposed a spatial one, and the experience can only truly be brought to an end once the spectator has attained the far reaches of the fictional territory, looked into every nook and cranny of the set and attended the various scenes that happen simultaneously in different parts of the building. In other words, the experience of a Punchdrunk show can never really come to an end.

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## NOTES

1. As such, the company includes a choreographer, Maxine Doyle, who is also associate director, and design associates Livi Vaughan and Bea Minns.
2. The show is composed of a loop – or cycle – which lasts for about an hour and is repeated three times over during the performance
3. The first use of the word is attributed to Char Davies, a Canadian artist who coined the term to refer to people who experienced her digital installations (see McRobert).
4. For an illustration of Punchdrunk's closing scenes, see the excerpt of *The Drowned Man's* finale available on Youtube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P90RHykUpyg>> (accessed 19.05.16).
5. "I maintain the stage is a tangible, physical place that needs to be filled and it ought to be allowed to speak its own concrete language." (Artaud: 25)
6. However, the performers themselves may sometimes don a mask to navigate anonymously among the spectators and there is a temptation as an immersant to take it off and see if you will be mistaken for an actor and start being followed by other immersants.
7. "They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces." (Foucault : 24)
8. "There are also [...] places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality." (Foucault: 24)
9. In this respect, it is interesting to note that immersants frequently steal small objects from the set in order to bring pieces of this heterotopia back to the real world with them, thus pushing the metalepsis even further. Likewise, people are often given a piece of memorabilia, such as a ring, at the end of a one-on-one.
10. Along with the "in-its-own world" quality, she identifies space, scenography, sound, duration, interdisciplinary practice, bodies, audience, and a contract for participation.
11. However, each spectator, and therefore their experience of the show, is different: some may not seek to discover everything, but simply enjoy the musing quality of the space. It is frequent as an immersant to stumble on other members of the audience sat at a desk or in a comfortable sofa while reading letters or simply wandering through the maze of rooms. This echoes the pleasure of the labyrinth – walking around and getting lost in it can be as pleasant as trying to solve the spatial riddle, which inevitably marks the end of the experience.

12. However, the finale of the shows can be seen as undermining the impression of cyclical time. The following comments of Rose Biggin on the denouement of *The Duchess of Malfi* also apply to other Punchdrunk shows, and particularly *Sleep No More*:

A further way in which this ending lacked internal narrative coherence was in regard to the way the format of the show had been constructed and arranged before the finale took place. Looping individual characters' journeys during the show suggested, to me, that time itself in this world was fractured and cyclical [...] the idea of cyclical, ever-repeating time was negated by an ending event explicitly showing the death of a main character. (151-152)

13. Scholars before them had studied these conceptual metaphors, such as German linguists Jost Trier, Harald Weinrich and Franz Dornseiff, as well as German philosopher Hans Blumenberg ("Paradigms for a Metaphorology" 1960). (Geeraerts and Cuyckens : 596)

## ABSTRACTS

Immersive theatre appears to be a flourishing trend on the contemporary British scene. The events which are labelled as such all share the intention of "[placing] the audience at the heart of the work" (Josephine Machon) and abolish the distinction between stage and auditorium to merge them into one single space. This type of theatre questions not only the status of the spectator, redefining his/her place and role, but also the notion of *ending*. This article examines the work of the British company Punchdrunk which can be considered a "pioneer" in the field and which creates expansive environments that the "immersants" are free to explore as they wish. In these shows, the spectators are no longer placed in front of a narrative unfolding in a linear way with a beginning, a middle and an end. Invited to roam free through the performance space, they take individual journeys and discover the different scenes as they go along and happen to come across them. Such a radical change of perspective invites us to reconsider the very notion of ending and to think of it not so much in temporal terms, as the last stage in a teleological progression, but to look at it from a spatial angle. The driving force of the shows itself reveals a shift from the temporal to the spatial: "The moment-to-moment 'what happens next?' of conventional narratives is replaced by the 'where is he going?' and 'what's in the next room?'" (Gareth White). The *end* of the game, therefore, is not to passively wait for the narrative to unfold to its end, but to actively explore this *terra incognita* in an attempt to reach its edges. As the size of the performance space makes it impossible to see it all in one night, the temporal end of the show is inevitably frustrating for the immersants. They tend to gather — physically or online — after the performance in order to share their respective experiences, to try and piece together the narrative puzzle and map out the space. Punchdrunk's shows thus go beyond their temporal boundaries and one can wonder when — and if — the immersive adventure truly ends.

Le théâtre dit "immersif" apparaît comme une tendance florissante dans le paysage théâtral contemporain britannique. Les pièces/expériences de théâtre auxquelles ce terme s'applique placent le spectateur au cœur du dispositif en abolissant la distinction entre scène et salle pour les fondre en un espace unique. Ce type de théâtre interroge non seulement le statut du

spectateur, redéfinissant sa place et sa fonction, mais également la notion de fin. Cet article se fonde sur le travail de la compagnie britannique Punchdrunk, pionnière dans le théâtre immersif et dont les productions se présentent comme de vastes environnements à explorer librement. Au sein d'un tel dispositif, le spectateur n'est plus placé face à un récit qui se déroulerait de manière linéaire avec un début, un milieu et une fin. Invité à déambuler à sa guise, il trace un itinéraire personnel et découvre les différentes scènes au gré de ses pérégrinations. Un tel renversement des perspectives nous invite à penser la fin non plus tant en termes temporels, comme la dernière étape d'un cheminement téléologique, que d'un point de vue spatial. En effet, le moteur-même de la représentation opère un glissement du temporel au spatial: « The moment-to-moment 'what happens next?' of conventional narratives is replaced by the 'where is he going?' and 'what's in the next room?' » (Gareth White). Il s'agit dès lors pour le spectateur animé d'une volonté de ne rien manquer, de se lancer dans l'exploration de cette terra incognita dans une tentative d'atteindre les confins de cet espace. La fin temporelle de la représentation génère inévitablement une frustration pour le spectateur: celle de ne pas avoir eu le temps de faire le tour, au sens littéral comme au figuré, de la pièce. Le corps collectif théâtral, atomisé lors de la représentation, tend à se reconstituer dans l'après de la performance afin de mettre en commun les différentes expériences pour tenter de cartographier le « plateau-terrain » et de reconstruire le puzzle narratif. Le spectacle déborde ainsi de son cadre et la question se pose alors de savoir à quel moment l'aventure immersive prend véritablement fin.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Punchdrunk, immersive theatre, contemporary British theatre, end, space, heterotopia, labyrinth, mask, spectator

**Mots-clés:** Punchdrunk, théâtre immersif, théâtre britannique contemporain, fin, espace, hétérotopies, labyrinthe, masque, spectateur

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