

BEATE NEUMEIER AND SARAH YOUSSEF

Immersive Shakespeare Productions

Immersive Theatre

The overwhelming appeal of audience participation promoted by artists since the 1990s is apparent in the rising number of companies specializing in immersive productions since the turn of the century engaged in theatrical ventures, drawing large audiences (e.g. Punchdrunk and Rift, dreamthinkspeak, shunt, Wildworks, Wilson+Wilson, You Me Bum Bum Train, Les Enfants Terribles etc). Recently Madame Tussauds in London teamed up with Les Enfants Terribles to create *The Sherlock Holmes Experience*, an immersive crime-solving one-hour event (2016). But even without utilizing the concept of immersion to its fullest, recent theatre productions have shown a greater interest in opening the auditorium to the performance. At the same time a notable number of new plays have been written thematising the effects of an obsessive desire for live immersion in virtual reality and a concomitant erosion of the boundary between the material and the virtual world (Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* 2013; Lindsey Ferrentino's *Ugly Lies the Bone* 2017). One of the most advanced current productions, which focuses on this cross-over on a thematic as well as formal level, is RSC's pioneering live-capture of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in collaboration with Intel and The Imaginarium, with characters that are part human, part digital (2017). The increasing interest in merging virtual media and live performance ventures foregrounds the shared interest of all of these productions in redefining the correlated notions of spectatorship and presence, and probing into notions of identity and reality and their inevitably politically charged repercussions. In the theatre the gradual terminological shift from site-specificity to participation to immersion marks the growing emphasis on the spectator's experience as an "emotional and embodied response" (Alston 2016a, 62). Academic analyses from Jacques Rancière (*The Emancipated Spectator* 2009) to Claire Bishop (*Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* 2012), and Josphine Machon (*Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* 2013), have either embraced or criticized this development. The trend towards immersive theatre has been read either as a consequence of, or as a counter movement to visual culture, as an expansion of the emphasis on spectacular theatrical sites and scenic images, or as a decisive shift away from representation to enactment and to the redefinition of the role of the spectator as co-creator of the event (Rancière 2009, 5-6). Moreover, immersive productions are either celebrated as an innovative step towards non-narrative theatre, or denounced as perfect examples of contemporary consumer culture.¹

¹ Adam Alston argues that similar to popular amusement parks immersive productions, such as the work by Punchdrunk, provide "audiences with choreographed sequences that are brought together in a thematically cohesive and holistic environment, much like Disneyland" (Alston 2016b, 150). The opening of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* in the vicinity of the Disney venture in Shanghai in 2016 seems to foreground this link, but still needs a closer analysis of the audiences drawn to the different forms of entertainment available in this particular space. For an excellent overview over notions of spectatorship cf. Eric Knowles' introductory essay to his edited issue on "Spectatorship" (Knowles, 2014).

These contradictory evaluations are linked to the persistence of a misleading opposition between spectatorial agency and passive immersion, which underplays the limits of the spectator's agency inscribed into the structure of the immersive performance, and at the same time, overstates the assumed degree of this immersion in the fictional world of the event. By contrast, the aim of many acclaimed immersive productions is precisely to probe into the experiential quality of being part of the event in terms of agency and immersion. This experiential quality is not opposed to spectacle but rather inevitably based upon it. It does not imply a total oblivion of the spectatorial self in the presence of the event, but is rather accompanied by a heightened sense of this self in the event. It thus rather encourages an engagement with and investigation into the relation between notions of affect, emotion, and reflection in the experience, and thus raises questions about embodied presence and liveness.²

Immersive theatre tends to foreground the implications of the process of making sense, forcing the spectator-agents to feel themselves in the process of an ultimately futile search for closure, rather than allowing them to forget themselves in the delusion of fully deciphering an overall narrative pattern and its message. Immersive theatre thus inevitably moves away from narrative plot and notions of representation to an exploration of the process of performing and being performed in an embodied experiential event. Immersion in this sense relies upon an investment in self-awareness rather than self-oblivion in the present moment.

Immersive Shakespeare Productions: *Macbeth*

Some of the most critically stimulating and economically profitable ventures have been immersive Shakespeare productions.³ Two of the most groundbreaking British immersive companies, Punchdrunk and Rift, have based spectacular productions on *Macbeth*, a play which has drawn remarkable current interest across different media ranging from theatre productions to movie adaptations to popular television and webseries.⁴ The bloody tragedy about the title character and his Lady driven by desires leading to madness, war and destruction, raises fundamental questions about human nature and the nature of reality, which seem to acquire particular topicality in the 21st century, which is as obsessed with visual culture and with notions of the human as the early modern period (cf. Clark 2007).

Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* opened in London in 2003, moved to Boston in 2009, has been running successfully in New York City since 2011, and opened a new site in Shanghai in 2016.⁵ Rift's overnight *Macbeth* had a two-months run, opening in June 2014 at the Balfour Tower in London. The site-specific choices are telling. Alt-

2 Significantly, immersive theatre has gained mainstream impact predominantly through British companies since the turn of the century, when the impact of in-her-face theatre as the most prominent British experiential theatre of the 1990s has faded.

3 According to the Trustee's Report 2016, *Sleep No More* contributed "£858,209 in royalty earnings and profit share to the charity (against £437,092 of expenditure)" (Bell et al., 4). Even smaller shows, such as *Totally Turbulent Time Machine*, which cost \$1500, took six months from conception to first performance, and had a gross revenue of approximately \$8,000 a week (Strauss 2013).

4 Cf. *Macbeth* in different media: in the theatre (Rupert Goold's 2010 production featuring Patrick Stewart; Ashford and Branagh's 2014 National Theater production, starring Branagh as the Scottish king; Simon Phillip's 2017 production for the MTC starring Jai Courtney (probably one of the youngest Macbeths of the past decades at 31, to name just a few); in the movies (most notable the 2015 film version featuring Michael Fassbender); in popular television series (for example *House of Cards* 2013-, *Sons of Anarchy* 2008-14, *Empire* 2015-); in webseries such as the Australian production *Shakespeare Republic*.

5 The following analysis is based on the NYC production.

though the website of *Sleep No More* in New York City describes the production site, the McKittrick Hotel, as a recently renovated actual former hotel, allegedly built but closed just before its opening in 1939 and vacant ever since, it is in fact an old warehouse, and former location of a number of mega clubs in Chelsea, in Lower Manhattan. The Balfron Tower in East London's Poplar area in the Borough of Tower Hamlets, on the contrary, is an example of architectural brutalism designed by Ernő Goldfinger in 1963 to provide affordable housing (cf. Drew 2014). Both buildings are used as highly sophisticated performance venues, engaging the spectator with the respective event in connected yet distinctive ways, highlighting the potential as well as the limits of immersive theatre productions.

Site-Specificity

Both venues invite the audience – the "guests" or "visitors" as the respective programs suggest – to check-in, either at the noir-inspired McKittrick Hotel (Punchdrunk), or at the rather dystopian Balfron Tower, situated in the fictional country of Borduria (Rift). Before their journey to Borduria, prospective visitors are sent a 15-minute introductory video visually mapping the tellingly named country, which borders on Narnia and Middle-Earth, and includes provinces and towns called Avalon, Lilliput, and Kafka. In a comically self-referential description, involving a narrator and the border guards Uri and Molotov speaking with a supposedly Eastern European accent, the viewers are alerted to the blurring of the boundary between fiction and reality, and to the existence of rifts enabling transfers between Borduria and London across time. The use of a "bloody and brutal *Macbeth*" is linked to an annual Urivision song contest, whose winner is allowed to become a character within a story selected by the weird sisters of Borduria, namely Shakespeare's play. When the contest is being disrupted by dissident groups hoping for a "Bordurian spring," the associative (il)logic of this comically nightmarish rendering seems to prepare the visitors for the experience of the tight grip of a totalitarian regime intent on "mak[ing] Borduria great again."

On arrival, the thus prepared visitors to Borduria are met by border personnel, handed travel visas, have to sign consent forms (including a medical form), and exchange British pounds into the local currency before they are allowed to enter what associatively evokes links to a former Soviet bloc country of the 1960s and 1970s, but also stretches back and forward in time alluding to totalitarian regimes throughout the 20th century and extending into the future in different parts of the world. They are then ushered in groups by a bellboy into the building through an underground parking area.⁶ The performance takes place on three floors of the 27-floor high building including the rooftop, while the rest of the building remains sealed off to the audience, who thus only get to know a segment but never the whole picture of the site. The bellboy remains with the group throughout the performance as a kind of stage manager, on whose orders and guidance the group has to depend, being led from one performance space to the next and being kept waiting in their apartments in-between.

In Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* the obscurity, or rather secrecy, of the site is even more strikingly emphasized, starting with the already mentioned allusion to an enigmatic history of the hotel, and continued by its lack of visibility on arrival, announced

6 There were three different levels of tickets for the audience: 1) the simple ticket, including not even a cot to sleep on, 2) a cot, yet audience members opting for those tickets had to arrange for a sleeping bag, and 3) full service or deluxe, including dinner and a made bed.

by an inconspicuous small sign in a fairly bleak warehouse district, where the guests are welcomed in a narrow entrance area by a bellboy, who ushers everyone into an elevator to the Manderley Bar. In contrast to Rift, where the visitors of Borduria are first met by uniformed border personnel and then remain under constant supervision by their assigned guard, the bellboy in *Sleep No More* immediately leaves the guests on their own to explore the lavish décor of the Manderley Bar and to have a drink before they continue on their journey into the interior of the building, exploring what seems like a maze of floors and rooms containing – as advertised – more than 100 (Piepenburg 2011) environments.

In keeping with the distinctly different worlds created for the event, guests of *Sleep No More* may book a table and indulge in dinner at the Heath Restaurant or spend more time consuming absinthe-infused cocktails in the bar during or after the event, while visitors to Borduria only have a short bar stop on their way, where they can purchase drinks and later share the fairly simple dinner during the banquet scene with Macbeth. The dystopian atmosphere of a totalitarian regime is kept throughout the performance until the end, when the victory of Malcolm appears as a continuation rather than change of regime, as the visitors are made to pledge allegiance at gunpoint before they are allowed to finally retreat to their bedrooms. The cutting of the last scene of Malcolm's coronation on the rooftop on the next morning followed by a fairly opulent breakfast during the course of the production's running time seems in line with the emphasis on the upkeep of this fundamentally dystopian outlook of Rift's production.

Immersive Choreography⁷

Both productions are characterized by an interplay between rapid movement (advising audiences to wear comfortable shoes) and quiet, more intimate moments sometimes in connection with one-on-one encounters with actors. Rift's *Macbeth* forces its visitors, the moment they have entered the underground parking area, to run up a couple of floors and through the corridors, while Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* offers its guests the choice of chasing after an actor running past, or of staying behind. Consequently, Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* advises all guests, who must wear masks and have to remain silent throughout the event, to experience the performance alone creating their own individual journeys⁸ over the course of the three-hour "looped" performance consisting of "three repeat cycles [enabling them to] choose to revisit incidents, or stumble across them again by chance" (Barrett qtd. in Worthen 2012, 82). However, while this contributes to and foregrounds the uniqueness of each spectator's experience, the free-roaming of a promenade production is limited by blocked passage-ways or the disappearance of actors behind closed doors, thus not only inviting, but forcing the spectators to "plot," as Rancière calls it, a new path in the "forest of things" (16).

In contrast to the separate experience encouraged by Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, Rift's production enforces a collective experience by forming groups of eight to twelve people who have to stay together over the whole 12-hour-period sharing the same sleeping quarters, the same table during the dinner, waiting together in their apartments in front of black and white TV sets to be ushered by the bellboy into the next live action scene.

7 Cf. W.B. Worthen's use of the term (2012, 89f.).

8 "Free-roaming performances encourage audiences to plot their own ambulatory paths through an aesthetic space, or a series of spaces, which may or may not contain performers" (Alston 2016b, 109).

Both productions attempt to accommodate as many spectators as possible and were or, as in Punchdrunk's case, still are consistently sold out. It could be argued that particularly in Rift's production the commercial considerations collide with the artistic endeavor, as the coordination of "three casts [...] performing the text simultaneously [...] several times in an evening" (Drew 2014) leads to long waiting times for the audience between scenic enactments in order not to cross paths with others and thus to the impossibility of free roaming. On the other hand, the necessity of being kept waiting in a group of initial strangers bound together by circumstance rather than choice seems quite fitting for a scenario characterized by war and an imminent threat of destruction, foregrounding the vulnerability of not being in control of events. This is emphasized by the scenes shown on the TV screens, centering on the approaching war situation posing an imminent threat to be reckoned with at any moment.

While Rift's nightmare of war invades from the outside, turning the visitors into – sometimes complicit – victims of a situation beyond their control, Punchdrunk's nightmare emanates from within the lavishly decorated interiors implicating the guests in an increasingly "personal journey" (according to the program's promise) into an interior world of the mind. Whereas Rift takes away the illusion of a mastery of events as soon as the guests cross the fictional border to Borduria, Punchdrunk plays with the illusion of control by encouraging the guests to probe into secrets laid out for them.

The (Narrative) Maze

In both productions the maze-like quality of the chosen site is vital to the intended visceral effect. In Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* the notion of the house as maze is aptly linked to the notion of madness, inspired by Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), as the performance space is carefully mapped out over the different floors in terms of a gradual journey into the interior maze of the mind leading up from the Lobby (and Manderley Bar) on street level, to the residential floor, and the floor featuring shopkeepers engaged with decisive aspects of human life (including a taxidermist, a tailor, a mortician, a confectioner, and a detective), up to the King James lunatic asylum (with an operating theatre), before the climactic scene takes the audience downstairs to the basement Ballroom. However, a factual re-construction of the floor-plan turning the image of an impenetrable maze into an unambiguous structure cannot and must not happen during the visit, which depends on necessary blanks and gaps preventing the construction of a unified picture.⁹ The site-specific structure of the maze is thus centrally connected to the narrative maze in the experiential performance event ("[...] every space you go into is saying something, there are echoes in the walls. All we do as a company is draw those out [...] so that that triggers the audience's imagination" [Barrett, qtd. in Machon 2013, 4]).

Instead of being offered a new reading of an albeit well-known Shakespearean play, the visitors of Rift's and even more so of Punchdrunk's immersive production are left with only the "shadow of a plot" (Brantley 2011). Being primarily engaged in an experiential venture, the question of the 'source text' might be deemed almost irrelevant. However, although the experiential effect certainly does not depend upon a previous

9 This is facilitated by an elevator journey releasing passengers at two different stops into sometimes dimly lit blocked or open passage-ways, up and down staircases, leading through dark corridors to doors to be opened and into rooms, which might be "furniture-cluttered" (Brantley 2011) but otherwise empty, or revealing actors engaged in disturbing scenarios.

knowledge of Shakespeare's text, it is certainly different for a 'knowing' audience who can and inevitably will make connections between what they experience and what they know about *Macbeth*. But, no matter how 'knowing' the audience is, all interpretive attempts to identify Shakespearean characters, scenic images and constellations, sometimes seemingly providing clues to a character's back-story, have only limited value. The visitors are constantly reminded that the human desire to make sense tends to turn the unfamiliar into the familiar, to (re)discover the already known. This resistance against the protective fiction of interpretative closure is emphasized by continuously foregrounding the notion of choice and the concomitant necessity of revisions in the process of making meaning. At the same time, the experiential event needs the backdrop of a certain shared 'vocabulary' against which it can unfold, which may be most conveniently provided by globally known pre-eminent canonized texts.

Like Punchdrunk's and Rift's versions of *Macbeth* many immersive ventures use as preferred locations former multi-storey warehouses or apartment buildings, or former psychiatric hospitals (*Then She Fell* by Third Rail Projects in Brooklyn, New York 2016), or underground stations (*Alice Adventures Underground* by Les Enfants Terribles in The Vaults under Waterloo Station in London 2015). The maze as physical structure and as central image foregrounds the interest of immersive productions in exploring the nightmare experience of the uncanny and the trauma of the abject, drawing upon the fear (and desire) of being submerged by images and being drawn "toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982, 2). The theatre of immersion is inevitably engaged in an exploration of boundaries of the self through the notion of embodied presence involving the relation between experience and reflection, engagement and distance, self-oblivion and self-awareness.

The Web of Images: Materialization and Enactment

In both productions audiences are entering a world, where the boundary between madness and sanity, reality and fiction seems to have dissolved. Consequently they are confronted with disjointed scenic images and separate objects instead of narrative coherence.¹⁰ Both productions play upon – visualize, materialize and enact – central verbal and scenic images from Shakespeare's play, interweaving associations with blood, death and sleep. With the murder of Duncan in his sleep, Macbeth and his Lady have invited a dissolution of the boundary between waking and sleeping, most famously enacted in Macbeth's nightmarish visions and the sleepwalking of the Lady. Punchdrunk not only encourage the guests to take a tour through the protagonists' brains flooded with images, but to experience their own involvement in this endeavor. By contrast – as many reviewers have pointed out – in Rift's production lack of sleep is literally inflicted upon the visitors through an exhausting performance followed by a short and uneasy sleeping time on the floor, or in rather uncomfortable beds in apartments equipped with 'bloody' towels.

While Rift foregrounds the victimization, but also the complicity of selected visitors who may witness and be asked to wash away the blood after the murder, Punchdrunk expand this arguably most powerful image of the play into a series of related scenic enactments involving a man washing clothes, and a suggestive suicidal set-up with a woman (whom we are encouraged to identify as Lady Macbeth) in a bloody bathtub. The associative imaginative links of blood to death/murder and birth/children

10 In his excellent reading of *Sleep No More* Worthen describes it as a network of "verbal imagery" as scenic landscape, "detached from narrative and dramatic logic" (Worthen 2012, 85).

in Shakespeare's verbal web are expanded into different scenarios including a scene with a pregnant woman first reaching for, but then suspiciously turning away from offered milk, alluding not only to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, but also to Hitchcock's classic noir *Rebecca* (1940).¹¹ The conspicuous absence of children in *Macbeth* is evoked in richly furnished children's bedrooms full of toys, as well as in the disturbing array of jarred fetuses on display in an apothecary setting.

While the confrontation with bloody violence has always been effectively used in theatrical ventures, the question of whether and how to give corporeal presence to the weird sisters as signifiers of equivocation seems particularly challenging for productions intent on audience immersion. Neither Punchdrunk nor Rift make any attempt at mystifying the actual presence of the weird sisters. Equivocation is not located in the witches, but rather dispersed throughout the performance venues. Everything is equally 'real' in Punchdrunk's nightmare world of the mind, as well as in Rift's traumatically nightmarish world of war. In Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, one of the most memorable scenes is the naked witches' orgy, reminiscent of a rave, including strobe lighting, earsplitting loud music and culminating in a bloody ritual. The allusion to the history of cultural images of the sexualised witch engaged in forbidden secret acts in the Witches' Sabbath and its voyeuristic implications foregrounds notions of the mastery of the gaze and its reversibility, as the audience watch *Macbeth* being increasingly caught up in the rave and are encouraged to probe into their own involvement in the scene.

By contrast, Rift's *Macbeth* presents the weird sisters gathering round a fire in the underground parking space more as homeless victims of war who later may take guests into "different rooms where each witch talks to us about the blurred boundaries between waking and dreaming life reveal[ing] a trauma she has undergone" (Drew 2014). The production suggests that – like the visitors – the witches are part of a scenario beyond their control, victims or hostages of a situation which, once set in motion, cannot be stopped at will. Consequently, when visitors are asked by Lady *Macbeth* to unsex her (Drew 2014), this foregrounds the exchangeability of positions in a situation when the illusion of the power of the gaze from a safe distance has to give way to a recognition of the experiential complicity with events.

Both immersive productions enact and expand Shakespeare's powerful images of the nightmarish world of madness and war, for an experiential exploration of notions of control and its loss, of illusions of distance and implications of involvement. Shakespeare's verbal web taps into the cultural imaginary, encouraging an investigation into notions of self and other, inside and outside world. This is taken up in these productions, focusing on immersion as a process navigating between the flood of images threatening to overwhelm seemingly safe ego boundaries and the inevitable counter movement of warding them off to safeguard identity. In this sense immersive productions set out to test the limits of art as the inevitably symbolic exploration of abjection as central to the notion of identity and its implications for being in the world. Consequently, immersive productions draw attention to what defies language, and thus can only be alluded to on an experiential and performative level.

The Limits of Language and the Question of I-identity

In Rift's production Shakespeare's text is cut down to a number of familiar passages, which however are defamiliarized, first through the introductory video and later

11 Cf. Scott Brown's review of *Sleep No More* (2011).

through the visitors' bodily involvement in the dystopian war scenario which seems to supersede the Shakespearean text. Through the video the fictionality of the theatrical event is emphasized from the start, drawing attention to the history of fantasy fiction and its intersection with the classical literary canon including Shakespeare and Kafka. At the same time the constructedness and performativity of reality is highlighted by interweaving references to literary genres and contemporary popular culture events like the Eurovision song contest as well as to representations of political systems and events in the news and in fiction. The cartoon-like exaggeration of the characters involved as well as the comic juxtaposition of highly disparate renditions of different events and issues foregrounds the linguistic constructedness of reality and identity, and invites the audience not to trust in language (or in images) when they arrive in Borduria to become part of the performance event.

In Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* on the other hand, language is almost completely "abandoned" in favour of the enacted scenic images or unpeopled spatial scenarios. Rather than being forced to just imagine language as Hilton Als argues with regard to *Sleep No More* (2011, 4), audiences in both productions are invited to experience the gaps between language, visual image, and object world. The productions thus foreground the deficiency of the entry into the symbolic order (through language) via a choreography evoking the (il)logic of the dream.

The lack of language in *Sleep No More* in particular foregrounds the connection between notions of language and character. "We connect with the characters through the thing that we share: language. We can only watch as the performers reduce theatre to its rudiments: bodies moving in space" (Als 2011). At the same time, however, Worthen argues that *Sleep No More* relies on the notion of "knowable and responsive 'characters' to whom the audience [...] respond much as they do to the human being in the social world off the stage" (Worthen 2012, 83). The question of knowability and responsiveness is precisely what is at stake in a production in which the characters cannot be deciphered via language. If the attempt to resort to the knowledge of the source text proves insufficient or inconclusive, the common "instinct to connect observations about dramatic characters [...] to [one's] own life experience" (Yachnin and Slights 2008, 3) takes on urgency and testifies to the power of representation. In this context the intimate one-on-one moments tease out the spectator's awareness of an inevitable oscillation between reading the other in the communicative situation as onstage performer and as offstage human.

The notable "comeback of character" (to adapt Worthen's phrase [2012, 83]) in contemporary media, obsessed with developing complex protagonists – often based upon or at least echoing a Shakespearean model – testifies to the desire to reaffirm notions of individual character at a time when identity (and reality) have become more and more fragile concepts. Thus the acknowledgement and foregrounding of the cultural constructedness and performativity of identity has led to a fundamental mistrust of, and intensified quest for, a unique core of the individual personality. Consequently, the paradox that the closer a character is being investigated, the more its contours dissolve, has been explored in different art forms, from photography and other visual media to the theatre, ranging from Patrick Marber's in-her-face play *Closer* (1997) to immersive Shakespeare productions.

Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* in particular makes use of this blurring of the picture through a zooming in on the event and a concomitant loss of the illusion of a reflective and evaluative controlling distance to encourage the audience to engage in an experiential exploration of their own spectator position. This is particularly evident

in the intimate one-on-one encounters, foregrounding on an experiential level the oscillation between desires for and anxieties about proximity and distance, between getting closer to 'being in the present moment' and the inevitable retreat from this experience accompanied by the tendency to re-establish distance. Although the entry into this process is facilitated by character-driven texts, the process itself is thus not concerned with an exploration of the protagonist's character, but rather with an experiential exploration of the notion of self/identity of the spectator/guest through the scenic images and fragmentary plot scenarios presented, in which the "characters" take on a "depersonalized quality" (Worthen 2012, 83).

Spectatorial Agency: Repetition and Variation

Despite the emphasis on the spectator's agency in immersive theatre, the productions by Rift and by Punchdrunk seem equally interested in foregrounding the limits of this agency, either by casting the audience as hostages following orders, or by letting the audience roam freely to a carefully circumscribed extent. This has been criticized as a flaw of the respective productions, "exhausting" audiences (with regard to Rift), or turning audiences into the performance's "furniture" (Worthen, 2014, 142). However, audiences are not the material backdrop, but rather the living organism for, with and most importantly through whom the performance unfolds, being encouraged to experience themselves in decisively different distinct ways throughout the process.

Thus in contrast to the anonymity of the secret hidden voyeur suggested by the Venetian-style masks, *Sleep No More* continuously foregrounds the voyeuristic situation of looking in on intimate, illicit scenes and its psychoanalytic implications. Thus audiences can hardly evade an awareness of this predicament and of the relation(ality) between spectatorship and agency. While being made aware of the implications of their own voyeuristic desire to probe into others' lives searching through suitcases (Lady MacDuff's suitcase), letters (Lady Macbeth's letter to Duncan) and official files (of mental illness), the spectators at the same time inevitably watch others indulging in the same guilty pleasure, when initial hesitation gives way to increasingly bold invasions of the very private spaces created in the production. Such an exercise in the effects of overstepping boundaries foregrounds the power of what seems like the disinterestedness of 'just watching.' The seeming empowerment of being hidden behind the mask is counteracted by being seen all the time, particularly as audience members may start out exploring rooms alone, but can – and actually will – be joined (or caught) by others any time.

When audience members are encouraged to follow actors who may choose to make eye contact for a one-on-one encounter, the vulnerability and reversibility of the (superior) voyeuristic position is highlighted even more strikingly. Spectators are constantly reminded that they cannot escape performing. It is thus less a "merging of the real and the unreal" which "immersive theatre can echo and amplify" (Dembin 2016, 263) but rather a questioning of the notion of the real. In this sense immersive theatre can foreground the notion of presence as an always already split experience, not a happy forgetting of an 'immersed' self.

Critics have argued that Punchdrunk's promise of a unique "personal journey" which cannot be shared by anyone else and cannot be repeated (even by the same person), tends to foreground the individuality of the spectator and "produces a narcissistic spectatorship" (Zaiontz 2014, 407). However, rather than satisfying the narcissistic desire for control, the production foregrounds the aspiration of control as delusion. Immersive productions depend upon and can effectively foreground the inter-

play between the desire for control and possession of knowledge on the one hand, and the desire for giving up this control and giving in to the moment on the other. In their engagement with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Rift and Punchdrunk explore the immersive potential of a play, which is very much concerned with notions of control and time. *Macbeth*'s early modern fear of linear time and mortality and his delusional desire for its mastery is taken to its limits in contemporary immersive theatre's obsession with the present.

Immersive Shakespeare: A New Beginning or a Dead End?

Immersive Shakespeare productions do not intend to provide a new reading of Shakespeare's text, but tap into Shakespeare's text as a reservoir of images resonating with our own and thus facilitating an experiential immersion in the performance event. Both productions play upon notions of repetition and adaptation, drawing attention to the rich intertextual web out of which the present moment emerges. Repetition is foregrounded in these productions, via performance loops and multiple casts performing simultaneously, but at the same time undercut as variation via the spectators' choices where and when to roam, or their random selection for one-on-one encounters.

Both productions draw attention to the adaptation process by foregrounding their engagement in a form of cross-mapping of Shakespearean "Denkfiguren" – to borrow Bronfen's terms (2006) – and their afterlife in different genres and media onto the landscape of theatrical immersion. In Rift's production spectators are invited to make links across time between Shakespeare's dark world of *Macbeth* and dystopian visions of war zones from the 20th to the 21st century raising questions about the political dimension of immersive theatre, while Punchdrunk's emphasis on links between Shakespeare's text and the history of noir¹² foregrounds its psychoanalytical interest. The emphasis on notions of trauma and on being caught in a nightmare of terror provides links between both productions. Immersive productions often resort to classic canonized texts written in a dark vein with a notable fantasy potential (cf. Goethe's *Faust*; E.A. Poe's short stories; Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*; Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*).¹³ The mode of the gothic (and the noir as part of it) in these texts evokes a reservoir of images and scenic constellations whose cross-cultural history can be traced in terms of the uncanny, the monstrous, and the abject. Thus Shakespeare's (proto-)gothic potential seems an apt choice for an investigation into the process of immersion. Shakespeare's texts explore processes of transformation (rather than their outcome), laying bare the defamiliarisation and in-betweenness of figurative and literal metamorphoses (cf. Neumeier 2014). The powerful immediate visceral affect of the uncanny and the abject evoked in Shakespeare's plays can facilitate the entry into the immersive experience (of the present moment). In this sense Shake-

12 *Sleep No More* traces the history of noir from the 1940s film noir to more recent neo-noir and puzzle horror in film and TV serialisation, as well as video games, photography and installation art. References range from Hitchcock (*Vertigo* 1958, *Rebecca* 1940), to Stanley Kubrick (*The Shining* 1980) and David Lynch (*Mulholland Drive* 2001, *Twin Peaks* 1990-91), from *Lost* 2004-10 and *Inception* 2010 to *Bioshock* 2007, to Diane Arbus' photography (cf. Brown 2011).

13 Rift's *O Brave New World* (2012), based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, or *The Trial* (2013), based on Franz Kafka's stories *The Trial* and *In The Penal Colony*; Punchdrunk's *Masque of the Red Death* (2007), based on Poe's eponymous short story, or the year before the immersive production of Goethe's masterpiece *Faust* to name just a few.

speare's theatre inevitably is and will remain an exciting new beginning for future ventures of immersion – theatrical or otherwise.

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