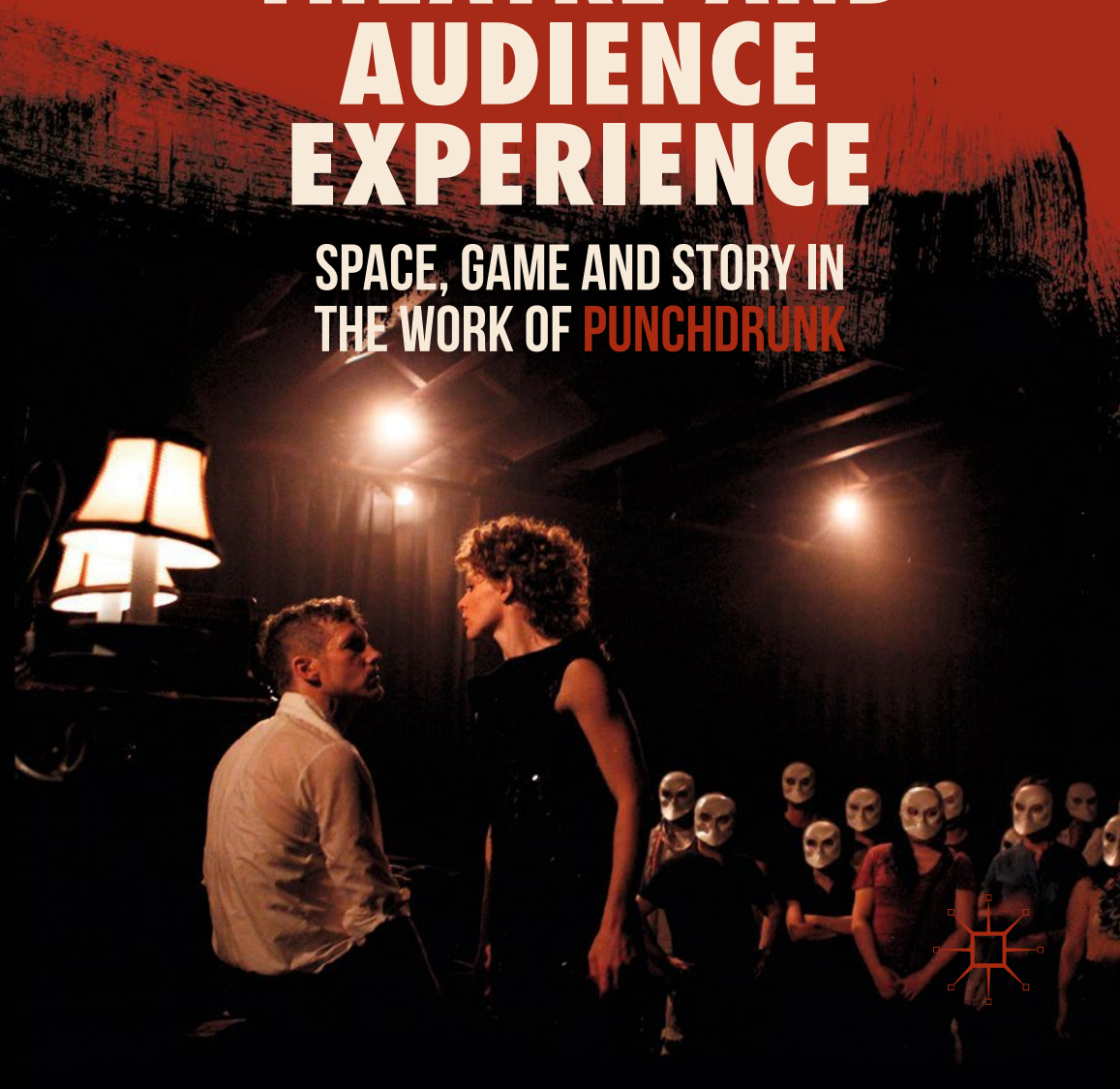ROSE BIGGIN

IMMERSIVE THEATRE AND AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE

SPACE, GAME AND STORY IN THE WORK OF PUNCHDRUNK

Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience

"Rose Biggin offers a richly nuanced model for understanding immersive practice that will be applicable well beyond the example of Punchdrunk. Interweaving theories of interactivity, aesthetics and ludology, the careful frame Biggin establishes lets her skilfully unpick the structures of theatre events and probe the nature of 'immersion' at the level of audience experience. Punchdrunk's pioneering work emerges vividly in this discussion, with the author's research into audience response demonstrating why their practice has drawn criticism as well as extraordinary devotion. This energetic, imaginative and intelligent study will be a catalyst for further scholarship in the field."

—Dr. Frances Babbage, *Reader in Theatre and Performance, University of Sheffield, UK*

"Alongside the fascinating, in-depth study of the company, this volume offers us a new framework for analysing immersive experience in performance. This is something I can use in the studio with the next generation of theatre-makers, helping them think about how and why they might create immersive experiences."

—Professor Jane Milling, *Associate Professor in Drama, University of Exeter, UK*

"This is a distinctive and very useful study, with detailed analysis and original theorisation, challenging as well as celebrating the work of this important company."

—Dr. Gareth White, *Reader in Theatre and Performance, Royal Central School of Speech & Drama, University of London, UK*

Rose Biggin

Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience

Space, Game and Story in the Work of Punchdrunk

palgrave
macmillan

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Acknowledgements

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Immersive Theatre, Immersive Experience

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

> The essence of Punchdrunk is that you have to *feel* it.
>
> (Barrett in Machon 2013: 163)

How exactly to define immersive theatre? In 2012, Lyn Gardner called *immersive* "theatre's new buzzword" and joked that, as a result of various associations with trendiness or cutting-edge experimentation, or promises of excitement and wonder, in marketing terms *immersive* had come to mean "practically anything that isn't a play by David Hare" ("Theatre Roundup: Advice for Playwrights"). But some people can, and presumably do, become highly engaged while watching a Hare play: so while this definition is, of course, too broad to be useful, it is also not quite broad enough.

This book proposes a distinction between immersive theatre and immersive experience as a new way of looking at audience experience in a form of theatre that is often characterised by certain aesthetic signifiers or audience configurations. I draw from philosophical aesthetics, cognitive science and computer games to define immersive *experience* as a graded, fleeting, intense and necessarily temporary state defined by an awareness of its temporal and spatial boundaries. Immersive theatre, then, is a genre of theatrical work in which certain audience configurations might be expected, but in which immersive experience itself can only be allowed for, not guaranteed. With this distinction in place, it is

possible to consider how different aspects of an immersive theatre production might achieve various effects on its audience.

My discussion is broadly divided across three areas: environment and space; narrative and story; and interactivity and game. These aspects make much immersive theatre visibly different to (for example) a proscenium arch production: the ability of an audience to wander with apparent freedom through a spatially innovative environment, usually scenographically rich and multisensory; a non-chronological and/or impressionistic approach to narrative; and interactive elements or characters, often with an emphasis on empowerment, choice or freedom for the spectator. Each chapter in the book considers the relationship(s) between these areas and immersive experience.

Throughout the book, my discussion is framed using productions by the theatre company Punchdrunk. They are a prominent company working in the form: in 2008 when speaking of "the kind of work that is being called 'immersive theatre' […] the leading company working in this idiom is probably Punchdrunk" (Nield 2008: 531); by 2011 they could be called "immersive theatre pioneers Punchdrunk" (Arnott 2011: n.p.). Or at least, pioneers of a current interest in the form: the traits listed earlier regarding space, narrative and interactivity can be traced at least to the early twentieth century in terms of performance history, and immersive experience per se goes back long before that (as does my own definition of *immersion*.) Punchdrunk's work has an international reach: *Sleep No More*, which premiered in London in 2003, continues to run in New York (2011–) and recently opened in Shanghai (2016–). Punchdrunk's prominence in the contemporary theatrical landscape, and their continued association with immersive theatre as a form or genre, makes their work ideal for providing extended case studies of immersion and audience, and keeping my analysis to a single company gives this project a focus for its theory. There is also a practical reason for the Punchdrunk focus which is worth declaring at the outset. The process of research that informs much of this book was made possible due to my having continued access to the company, giving me the means to consider their work closely.

This book is the product of research conducted as part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) between Punchdrunk and the University of Exeter between 2010 (when the company were celebrating their ten-year anniversary) and 2014. As an embedded CDA researcher, I was able to explore audience

immersion with access to Punchdrunk's archives and through interviews with company members, as well as through maintaining an extended presence at rehearsals and performances. In this way this book sits in the tradition of Spectator-Participation-as-Research (SPaR) approaches (Heddon et al. 2012), a methodology in which writers draw on first-person accounts of their own experience as audience members alongside more theoretical writing (Babbage 2009; Machon 2016; Alston 2016a). I remain extremely grateful to Punchdrunk for their openness and enthusiasm throughout the process of my research. It is important to stress, however, that although I spent time embedded within the company, I have never been a member. My research conclusions are my own, and my arguments do not reflect the opinions of Punchdrunk.

Nor is my focus on Punchdrunk intended to suggest that their work is in any way the definitive example of any theatrical form, technique or trope. *Punchdrunk* and *immersive theatre* are not synonymous, and any research into the wider genre of immersive theatre must of course take in more examples than the productions of a single company, however influential or "pioneering" (Hoggard 2013) that company may be perceived to be. My being embedded with Punchdrunk for a time enables their work to be considered here in detail, as well as drawing on exposure to ongoing processes and archive material: and a long-form critical study of their work is overdue. However, this book's other (and to some extent primary) aim is to develop theoretical perspectives on immersive audience experience that will be of use for considering other immersive-identifying theatrical forms. Focusing on one company allows this book to propose approaches to analysing immersive work—in reference to interactivity, narrative and environment—that I hope will be of use to other researchers, students, artists and makers.

Sophie Nield's definition of the "kind of work that is being called 'immersive theatre', in which the audience inhabit the space of the play alongside the actors" (2008: 531) makes spatial and structural elements key to whether a piece of work might be defined as *immersive* or not. A pragmatic outline of what happens in terms of performer action and movement—the basic structure of audience logistics and layout—makes a show immersive in terms of its shape. Nield's definition continues to specify that actors and audience jointly inhabit "a tricked-out space […] perhaps infused with smells, sounds" (2008: 531). This kind of emotional/visceral/multisensory experience is often cited as what makes Punchdrunk's work uniquely exciting, as in Barrett's emphasis on *feeling*

it at the beginning of this chapter. The form of an immersive production and the sensory experience aimed for within it are closely linked, the former facilitating the latter: Punchdrunk's own statements of intent emphasise emotional, visceral and sensory excitement rather than offering a pragmatic description of their shows' logistics, as being what makes a Punchdrunk experience a truly *immersive* one ("this work only functions if there's a sense of mystery […] It's about a heightened state of awareness. The more real it is, the deeper it becomes." Barrett in "Burn the Seats," 2013). The word *immersive*, therefore, might describe the shape or genre of a production, or the emotional quality of experiencing it. And immersive experience can be felt within any theatrical form: it is just as possible to become highly emotionally engaged in a piece of end-on proscenium arch performance as it is to feel indifferent or bored while moving through a production that described itself as *immersive* on the posters.

> Your productions seem to center around this idea of "mystery." Why?
>
> [Barrett:] I think it's because mystery instigates a state of tension in the audience and there's an apprehension and a sort of nervous excitement that comes from not knowing what's going to happen next. And because that's the state you're in when you're exploring, or adventuring, or maybe doing something that's illicit, it's totally charged. *That's why Punchdrunk could never do a comedy, because it's a totally different state.* We're trying to empower the audience by making them feel like they're the most important person in the space, and that they're doing something they shouldn't be and the more they work the more they'll discover. You need that tension to be there in order for that to work. (Barrett interview in Godbout 2012: n.p.; my emphasis)

In this quote, Punchdrunk's Artistic Director explicitly locates immersive experience as a primarily *emotional* phenomenon, a product of instinctive emotional response. Immersive theatre, framed in this way, is all about audience effect, and formal decisions are made with a view to how they will produce these effects (rather than being made simply for novelty's sake). For Barrett, being "immersed" in a Punchdrunk show is all about experiencing a specific, limited set of emotions—fear, mystery, "nervous excitement," apprehension—and a sense of transgression and danger: "illicit" activity that goes against (unspecified) rules. Immersive experience can certainly be facilitated by an atmosphere of menace, by drawing

on tensions of secrecy or mystery and the illicit excitement of apparent rule-breaking. In the quote above, Barrett expands this into a wider statement about genre. By explicitly excluding comedy, immersive theatre and its emotional effects are by default tied to drama and tragedy; and many of Punchdrunk's productions do sit firmly, aesthetically and atmospherically, in the trappings of tragedy and its sub-genres of mystery, horror, and crime.

In this book, I argue that this is a fundamentally limiting way of theorising immersive experience, and one which, by association, impoverishes our perceptions of immersive theatre's potential.

Immersive experience is not a felt/not-felt binary but a graded and temporary state, defined (somewhat paradoxically) by the existence of its boundaries. By uncoupling "immersive experience" the sensation and "immersive theatre" the form, I argue for a distinction between content, form and effect. Ultimately, immersive experience must be facilitated by an interplay between content and form: one is not the natural and automatic result of the other. The "totally charged" excitement Barrett describes previously is not the inevitable result of a production taking a certain form: the question then becomes one of *how* content, form and effect might facilitate immersive experience. The sensation of breaking rules that Barrett champions might actually be adherence to a new set of rules. The distinction between "immersive theatre" and "immersive experience" also helps us escape the (ultimately unhelpful) truism that all theatre can be immersive in one way or another.

This book considers various aspects of immersive experience—the emotional, the physical, the *sensation* of immersion in place, space and story—to examine in detail what is actually meant by being "immersed" across these different contexts. I argue that immersive experience might be facilitated by a production's form or its content, or through the reciprocity of both: atmosphere/mood and logistics can be manipulated to facilitate immersion. But they do not guarantee it. A feeling of repetition might prevent immersion much faster than innovation within that repetition can allow for it. Implicitly, then, running throughout this book is the suggestion that it would indeed be possible to make an immersive comedy.

Founded by the alumni from the University of Exeter in 2000, Punchdrunk's early work showed several now-established spatial and experiential trademarks. Often drawing on classic texts (*Romeo and Juliet* in 2003's *The Firebird Ball*; *Macbeth* in *Sleep No More* [England

2003; Boston 2009; New York 2011-]), these productions turned large non-theatrical spaces into design-rich environments through which the audience was allowed to wander, arriving upon scenes out of the text's original order, and finally gathered together to witness the finale. *Faust* (21 Wapping Lane, 2006–2007) and *The Masque of the Red Death* (Battersea Arts Centre, 2007–2008) were commercial and critical successes: Gardner called *The Masque of the Red Death* "undoubtedly the theatre event of 2007" (2007b), and its run was extended due to demand. These productions established a physical grammar for "typical" Punchdrunk shows concerning use of space and story, and movement of audience (as summarised in Nield's definition previously). Later productions would be compared to these, in terms of both structure and logistics and the quality of their visceral emotional punch. *Tunnel 228* (Old Vic Tunnels, Waterloo, 2009), *The Duchess of Malfi* (Great Eastern Quay, London, 2010) and *The Drowned Man* (31 London Street, 2013–2014) all followed this format, as well as shows that deviated from it—*It Felt Like A Kiss* (Hardman Square, Manchester: 2010), *The Crash of the Elysium* (Salford Quays: 2010) and *The Borough* (Aldeburgh: 2013)— could be considered unusual by their linear narratives, their lack of performers or their occurring outside. But these productions can still be considered from the perspective of creating immersive experience in their audiences. And if experience is what makes for a Punchdrunk show, rather than the physical signifiers, these latter productions are not as atypical as a description of their deviances from the template might suggest.

Over the course of the company's work there has been a huge rise in Punchdrunk's prestige and visibility, both nationally and internationally. In the 2011 Arts Council England funding reshuffle (where many companies faced substantial cuts), Punchdrunk received "a hefty rise" of 141% (Higgins 2011: "the great axe falls"). At the time of writing *Sleep No More* is still running in New York after premiering in 2011, and in Shanghai from November 2016 (Hemley 2016). Punchdrunk Enrichment continues to produce successful work for children and communities; Punchdrunk International provides bespoke commercial projects to national and international audiences; Punchdrunk Travel, an expansion of the one-on-one form for individual participants, is still in experimental stages.

Regrettably, this book does not focus on the company's enrichment and commercial strands; these aspects of Punchdrunk's work merit detailed consideration elsewhere.

Since its founding in 2008, Punchdrunk Enrichment has undertaken a series of superb projects with and for communities, schools and children, including *The Uncommercial Traveller* with local communities; installation-based *Under the Eiderdown* for primary schools; and family adventure shows *The House Where Winter Lives* (Story Studio, 2013) and *Against Captain's Orders* (National Maritime Museum, 2015). This branch of the company's work deserves a book of its own.

Punchdrunk's commercial projects have seen experiences and theatrical experiments tailored for brands including *The Black Diamond* for Stella Artois (2010), a Louis Vuitton store launch (2010) and W Hotel (2011). While one way of negotiating the contemporary theatrical landscape ("theatre and business are discovering ways of working together that may bring money into theatre in a way that [Arts Council] subsidy no longer can" Gardner 2006a: n.p.), this work has attracted considerable criticism, particularly regarding the ethics of this form of immersive advertising. (Further accusations of succumbing to economic imperatives have been levelled at *Sleep No More*: "Is this a sell out I see before me?" Gillinson 2012: n.p.) The intersection between immersive experience, commercial imperatives and audience care is one of particular tension, and this area is a continual source of interest in scholarship of immersive media (see Rose 2012; Alston 2013, 2016a; Gordon 2013; Frieze 2017). This book does not engage in this dialogue directly; rather, its aim is to lay out theoretical concepts for approaching immersive theatre and audience experience to provide a toolkit for further exploration that can include this area.

Immersive theatre has become a popular area for study as well as an oft-used phrase: in 2014 Lyn Gardner referred to "the much overused term 'immersive'" in her review of an unsuccessful production that seemed "more of an aimless wander" than the environment-sensitive theatrical adventure implicitly promised by the term (2014: n.p.). There is an increasing academic interest in the topic of immersive performance, and these studies often use Punchdrunk as a point of focus (Nield 2008; Babbage 2009; Machon 2007, 2013; White 2005, 2012, 2013; Eglinton 2010; Shaughnessy 2012; Gordon 2012; Purcell 2013; Worthen 2012; Alston 2016a; Dinesh 2016; Frieze 2017). There is an increasing interest in how to create immersive theatre (such as Warren 2017), and journal issues that focus on audience studies are likely to feature a strand on immersive or interactive theatre, such as *Participations* Volume 12, Issue 1 (although I myself supplied one of these); and the

Journal of Contemporary Drama's special immersion issue (Volume 4, Issue 1), which featured multiple entries on Punchdrunk. The fashion for theatre describing itself as *immersive* has led to backlash on occasion, a sense of immersion fatigue: in 2009 Charlotte Higgins asked, "Immersive Theatre—Tired and Hackneyed Already?" and described feeling "unmoved; bored, even" at finding herself being "blindfolded *again*" (n.p.; original emphasis). The question of whether all immersive theatre is tired and hackneyed aimless wandering is founded on an assumption that immersive theatre and immersive experience are one and the same, and that to be awake to the gimmicks of the former is to be immune to the magic of the latter.

Contemporary celebratory discourses around immersive theatre tend to emphasise audiences as a group of separate individuals having unique experiences:

> No two audience members within the spaces have the same show and every evening the experience you've had is yours and yours alone, and in fact even if you're holding hands with your loved one when you arrive we'll make an effort to try and separate you because you'll have a better time when you're fighting for yourself and you're selfish for once. (Barrett 2014: talk at "Experience Economy" Remix Summit)

The relationship between participation and passivity in theatre is already in question: Freshwater suggests that "the belief that participation empowers has become a compelling orthodoxy in theatre and performance studies […] it often seems to be applied reductively and uncritically" (2009: 36); Shaughnessy (2012) draws on Rancière to question whether physical inactivity automatically equates to passivity; referring to a history of unsuccessful promenade productions of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Dusinberre rightly notes that "physical participation does not necessarily create imaginative participation" (2006: 67). This book proposes a vocabulary and set of theoretical concepts for approaching immersive experience while remaining aware of this distinction, in order to consider how it is claimed to manifest in immersive theatre, and who is doing the claiming.

Here are two introductions to the two main areas in which this book sits. The first looks at approaches to audience in theatre, film, television and cultural studies. Much analysis in this book comes from observing idealised spectator perspective implied by the work, to discuss how

Punchdrunk craft and facilitate immersive experience in their productions, and drawing on my own presence at rehearsals and performances (SPaR) in order to place individual accounts in the context of that implied audience member. The second section considers current understandings of *immersion* in other fields—cognitive science and psychology, philosophical aesthetics, virtual reality (VR) and computer gaming—to build a working (re)definition of immersive experience that will be used throughout the body of the book.

APPROACHES TO AUDIENCE

> Since 2000 Punchdrunk has pioneered a game changing form of immersive theatre in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds. ("Punchdrunk", description on the *Sleep No More* New York website)

The importance of the audience has always been a theatrical truism. In Brook's famous formulation a theatrical experience is defined by human connection created by the act of spectatorship: "A man walks across this empty space while someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (1968: 9). The description of Punchdrunk above appears on the website for the New York production of *Sleep No More*—a site and production that establishes the company's international profile. While this description contains language of innovation ("pioneering"; "game changing"), it also places Punchdrunk firmly in a tradition of making work that explicitly emphasises its relationship to audience. This tradition has precedents in other fields than performance history: Bishop (2006) charts a trajectory in contemporary fine art away from viewer as passive spectator and towards active participant. The description given previously defines the "immersive" form by its spectator-performer dynamic (the audience get to "experience" the company's "epic storytelling") as well as its spectator-space dynamic, with the description of "sensory theatrical worlds" and the way audience members (are invited to) experience them. It is particularly important to pay critical attention to the relationship between tradition and innovation when work describes itself as "game changing," as it pre-supposes an understanding of the implied original game.

This section considers three areas of exploration regarding the question of audience: methodological approaches in theatre scholarship; in

film, television and cultural studies; and in studies of immersive theatre and Punchdrunk. These fields provide the frameworks for the approaches in this book. It is also important to note that the criticism considered in this section occupies a landscape that is also populated by a more informal blog/fan site discourse. The result is a rich ecology of discussion, analysis and interaction on, and with, immersive theatre: Chap. 4 is situated within these wider discourses.

Approaches to Audience: Theatre and Performance Studies

Studies of theatre audiences have begun to use methodologies drawn from the social sciences and cognitive studies, using a mixture of data collection (often interviews or the writer's own attendance) and the application of theoretical concepts to case studies. The tension between individual experiences and writing about "the audience" as a single group becomes particularly relevant to theatrical events designed to facilitate individual journeys.

Freshwater has pointed out that theatre academics rarely consider asking theatregoers what they thought of a show: "audiences are beginning to be trusted by practitioners and by industry. But it seems that theatre scholars have yet to develop this trust" (2009: 74). She notes that theatre studies have historically had a low level of engagement with the methods of cultural studies. It is usually theatre marketing departments that conduct any audience research; not many academic studies of theatre ask people who aren't practitioners, scholars or critics, as television and film studies do. Theatre and film/television studies can even appear mutually exclusive in their interest in audiences: Bennett's study of theatrical spectatorship (1997) deliberately omits television; Freshwater notes that in Brooker and Jermyn's (2003) summary of historical approaches to audience, "Theatre is notable by its absence" (2009: 79). Barker suggests "Academic study of theatre audiences has been, to put it kindly, spasmodic and discontinuous" (2003: 1). There is a gap to be bridged between theoretical constructs and descriptions of actual audience experience.

Bennett's influential *Theatre Audiences* (1997) traces a history that begins with democratic Ancient Greek amphitheatres, where theatre attendance overlapped with civic duty, and moves through to nineteenth-century naturalism with its clear separation and darkness between audience and performance. The move is towards an increasingly passive

audience, a historical narrative that would be seconded by Punchdrunk: "they [the masked audience of a Punchdrunk production] are removed from the traditional role of the passive, hidden audience" (Barrett in Machon 2013: 160). Carlson states that "much theatre theory still regards the theatre performance as something created and set before an essentially passive audience," which fails to consider "what demands and contributions it [the audience] brings to the event" (1989: 82). Carlson was writing in opposition to much theatre scholarship at this time, which was overly literary and relied heavily on analysis of text instead of considering the live event as a whole. However, the assumption that traditional theatregoing is inherently passive remains persistent today, not least in the rhetoric of immersive theatremakers.

Bennett suggests that the business of buying a ticket, agreeing to watch the action, and so on constitutes a "social contract" (1997: 204) between spectator and production. This concept of the social contract can be used to interrogate the way immersive theatre promises (either implicitly in being so-called or explicitly in its promotional rhetoric) an "immersive experience"—an adventure of heightened emotions, of visceral, sensory intensity—before the production has even been attended. Much criticism of immersive theatre comes about in response to a perceived gap between the promise of experience implicit in calling a production "immersive" and the reality of physical pragmatics in the space: a fundamentally *dishonest* social contract. Hence, Worthen comments negatively on ushers who "intervene to police the spectacle" (2012: 95) and Shaughnessy suggests that

[the] rigorous and sometimes coercive, stewarding, or policing, of the behaviour of participants in immersive performances means that their freedom of manoeuvre can be quite severely restricted, their range of interactive possibilities relatively limited, and their freedoms more rhetorical than real. (2012: n.p.)

The pragmatic necessities of immersive theatre get in the way of the promised pleasures of immersive experience. For Goode this is a gap with damning political implications:

The most immersive theatre now being made—or the most interactive, or that in which the audience is most mobile, or that in which actors and audience most concertedly share the same "space"—may very well in the

event replicate and even reinforce the power structures of "conventional" theatre; it may offer carefully crafted simulations of freedom and power-sharing that, once tested at their borders, turn out to be the most disappointing apparitions. Indeed, it's these supposedly free-range experiences that often have to operate under conditions secured by extremely precise and accurate control mechanisms in order to achieve the audience's sense of fluency in movement and curiosity. (2015: 223)

Any meaningful distinction between "immersive" and "traditional" theatre dissolves: both forms can replicate the flattening conservatism of Brook's "Deadly Theatre."

… it would be a mistake to imagine that [Deadly Theatre] moribundity is the sole preserve of the "traditional" fourth-wall narrative play, drooping under hot lights and cumbersome costumes and blocked to death. The amount of executive control and hypernaturalistic detail required by some immersive theatre productions is not only deadly in itself but flashily deceitful in the simulation of liveness it sells (far from cheaply) to its flattered audiences, who are no more creatively or meaningfully exploring the syntax and parameters of their freedom than are bored frightened teenagers drinking themselves daft in a city centre precinct on a Friday night. (Goode 2015: 284)

The dishonesty of the social contract, framed here as inherent to immersive theatre's form, amounts to a betrayal of its audiences from which it seems difficult to recover.

Bennett's "Theatre Audiences, Redux" (2006) identifies a sociological turn in theatre and performance since 1997's publication of *Theatre Audiences*, and an increasing interest in the field in using methodologies from the social sciences. However, she suggests the most significant advances in audience studies continue to occur outside of academic research. Studies conducted by marketing departments or audience research reports by government bodies are where any real attempt to understand an audience can be found: "the audience has become an important object of study, not necessarily or even frequently motivated by the discourses of theatre studies, nor by our theatre history making, but by the economic realities of the cultural industries" (226). Bennett notes that "The study of audiences has also reminded the theatre scholar of his or her own implication in the production-reception framework" (226). The situatedness of the writer is of particular interest in this

project, as the tension between the absent idealised spectator for whom the shows are created, and the individual actual participants, is important to bear in mind when studying immersive performance and the creation of immersive experience.

Knowles (2004), Tulloch (2005) and Reason (2006) express an awareness of the need to include audience response, rather than relying only on theatrical reviews, to build up an idea of a production's theatrical effects. Tulloch has also written on television fan audiences (Jenkins and Tulloch 1995), and his study of audience response(s) to the theatrical event (2005) bridges a gap between these two fields with different histories of audience research: discussing audiences from the theoretical perspective of theatre studies and drawing on methodologies from cultural and media studies such as focus groups and individual case studies. Reason (2010) also uses sociological methods such as interviews to obtain primary data, aiding a discussion of the theoretical theatrical event with specific details from audience members. Megson and Reinelt (2016) undertake empirical audience research into audience value and Dinesh's (2016) qualitative experiment contrasted the effects of an "immersive" production with a more "conventional" one. This book has a similarly twinned approach of primary data and theoretical concepts (the SPaR model). While discussions draw on my own presence at Punchdrunk rehearsals and performances, any personal readings and responses are not intended to be definitive but to provide a focus for discussing how *immersive experience* manifests in relation to the three main themes of this book.

An interesting recent approach to immersion in theatre is the "cognitive turn" identified in McConachie and Hart (2006). McConachie's cognitive approach to theatre audiences argues for "conceptual blending as the cognitive basis of spectating" (2008: 18). This book proposes a definition of immersive experience that is strongly linked to an awareness of boundaries. Although I do not draw on cognitive studies directly, *conceptual blending* (discussed in more detail in the section on immersion later in this chapter) is useful for demonstrating immersive experience as a state that is able to be aware of its boundaries and forgetful of them at the same time. Immersive experience can be defined as a sensation of complete engagement to the point of forgetting anything outside the immediate moment: "…we never want anything to happen that breaks the spell. If they [the audience] suddenly remember they're in London in 2007, then we've failed" (Barrett in Gardner 2007a: n.p.). This book

proposes a more nuanced definition of immersive experience that is founded on an awareness of their boundaries and can exist in the interplay between the "spell" of the performance and the reality of "London in 2007."

Many concepts familiar to drama—including doubling and empathy in the business of spectating—when seen through the lens of cognitive science, are given a neurological basis and, through it, an evolutionary purpose:

> Our muscular, chemical, and neurological responses to others' emotions are often so small that they escape conscious recognition, but they can have a significant impact on our behaviour. In other words, evolution has equipped us to attune our bodies to the emotions of other people; this basis for our sociality as a species is inherited and embodied. Embodying other's emotions produces emotions in us, even if the situation is an imagined or fictitious one. (McConachie 2008: 67)

This reading of emotional empathy defines theatrical spectatorship as a set of embodied cognitive processes. Bogart also offers a description of theatrical spectatorship that blends cognitive activity with emotional/visceral affect:

> [Affect is defined as] the thrill of being in the presence of actors who are radiantly experiencing the present moment […] Affect means "feeling associated with action." Our blood rushes faster, our mirror neurons spike new synaptic activity throughout our bodies, adrenalin courses throughout the system […] This visceral experience, one of the leading attributes of all encounters with art, is a large part of why we bother to engage with art in the first place. The increased adrenalin resulting from the experience sharpens the mind and focuses the attention. (in Hurley 2010: xii).

And a similar conflation of the physical and the emotional—the form and the effect—can be found in the way immersive theatre is framed by makers. Describing the questions and considerations that led to the creation of Punchdrunk and informed its early productions, Barrett suggests that the physically *immersive* shape of a show is connected to the emotional *immersive* experience of it, and that the manipulation of environment and space results in emotional (cognitive, even) responses in an audience member:

> How can I make theatre dangerous again? How can we take an audience out of their comfort zone and put them in a space that's charged, that's got no safety net, and so that suddenly they're adrenalin-fuelled and their synapses are firing and they receive everything tenfold so the theatrical experience can be better received and a show can be higher impact – so we started taking the action outside of theatres and taking it into empty buildings […] and suddenly an audience is learning on the trot, they're living it, they're in it, and it resonates in a deeper place. (2014: talk at "Experience Economy" Remix Summit)

Many of the atmospheric and spatial trademarks of Punchdrunk's immersive form came about from experiments in creating the sensation of a very particular audience experience. Running throughout this book is the contention that immersive experience in an audience member is something that can be constructed, allowed for, and/or facilitated by theatre productions but that can never be guaranteed. Cognitive behaviour is part of theatrical experience, and in the quote above they have a direct relationship. A problem with perceiving these aspects as being so closely linked is it prevents an approach towards immersive experience as a construct that is the product of makers' choices. An analysis of a cognitive studies approach to empathy will illustrate the difference.

Krasner's "Empathy and Theatre" suggests that audiences need to have an understanding of the story or world of a performance, and to have suitably focused their attention on it, before any empathy occurs (2006: 257). McConachie suggests Krasner is conflating empathy with understanding, compassion and sympathy: "Spectators do not wait to deploy empathy, but engage it unconsciously right from the start of every performance to help them figure out where to focus their attention, who these characters are, and what their story is about. Empathy is a proactive search engine that is always ready to engage intentional onstage action and mirror it for meaning" (2008: 72). McConachie's approach is extremely useful for considering the cognitive functions that occur in theatre spectatorship. But from the perspective my definition of immersive experience, what Krasner is pointing out are *barriers to immersion*. Barriers to immersion are discussed in more detail later (in the section on immersion in computer games later in this chapter): simply put, they are aspects that might manifest in either the content or form of a work, that must be overcome to allow for immersive experience. Krasner's suggestion is therefore useful for conceptualising

immersive experience as a series of graded states which must overcome various barriers in order to create and then maintain that state. Drawing on these models, rather than the immediate unconscious engagement of cognitive science, also allows immersive experience to be considered from the perspective of artists who seek to create work that enables or facilitates certain experiences or responses in their audiences. Auslander (1999) argues that the live moment is still ultimately mediatised: McConachie rightly points out that this perspective understands the two to be a binary, whereas "live" and "mediated" actually exist on a continuum, not a dichotomy—a live singer wearing a microphone is both live and mediated (2008: 209). Similarly, this book argues for a definition of immersive experience existing as a series of graded states rather than a felt/not-felt binary. Applying cognitive studies to theatrical experience reminds us that empathy and emotional engagement are processes that are rooted in embodied consciousness. However, considering immersive experience from this perspective risks a reductive or essentialist analysis that defines any experience as immersive if it results in the right kind or amount of cognitive activity. This book is interested in how immersive experience is situated in theatrical production, rather than how it physically manifests in the brain.

The quotation from Brook that began this section placed human connection as central to spectatorship and, via spectatorship, to theatrical experience itself. However audience members in immersive productions may often find themselves alone, in spaces empty of both performers and fellow spectators. In a discussion of audience experience and scenography in immersive space, McKinney describes the scenography of Punchdrunk as one that "challenges and problematizes notions of audience, who are no longer distant spectators of images and pictures that are laid out before them." When considering work with immersive/participatory scenography it is necessary "to consider both the audience as a collective entity and the responses of individual spectators within those audiences" (2012: 221). The tension between considering audiences as a whole group and a collection of individuals has long been identified in audience studies (Bennett 1997) but this arguably becomes even truer in the case of immersive forms, where audience members encounter different moments at different times and literally see the same moments from different perspectives. Nield's "The Rise of the Character Named Spectator" (2008) draws on this paradox by combining the results of a small number of interviews into the creation of a single voice that speaks