

## Book Reviews

DOI 10.1515/jcde-2014-0037

**Josephine Machon.** *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013, xix + 324 pp., € 22,30.

With *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, Josephine Machon has written a useful and very necessary book. It is the first monograph that is solely devoted to immersive theatre, a phenomenon of huge popularity, which has nonetheless given both critics and scholars a hard time to pin down and to conceptualise (Remshardt; White; White). Machon's book sets out to fill this lacuna. The study is divided into two parts, of which the first one provides definitional approaches to immersive theatre, traces its theatrical heritage and offers theoretical models for its understanding. The second part is a sourcebook of interviews with eleven leading practitioners in the field of immersive theatre.

Right from the beginning, Machon acknowledges the diversity of performative practices that have been called immersive, ranging from small-scale one-on-one performances to the epic worlds of Punchdrunk. Consequently, finding a binding and striking definition is impossible, but certain common characteristics can be identified (xvi). For Machon, the pivotal point of these is a multi-sensorial, physical experience that provides room for interaction: “[I]mmersive experiences in theatre combine the act of immersion – being submerged in an alternative medium where all the senses are engaged and manipulated – with a deep involvement in the activity within that medium” (21–22). Immersive practices, for Machon, are a counter-movement against a virtual society that is characterised by social networks and second hand encounters. Immersive theatre offers real sense experience through sensual stimulation (26). This approach is obviously highly problematic as it is laden with essentialist notions. However, she argues that all forms of immersive theatre are specifically designed to give thick, bodily experiences that speak to all the senses. The physical presence of the audience within the performance (she calls it *praesence*, seeking to engulf all the sensorial impressions) leads to a privileged experience that is stronger than conventional theatre and will last longer in one's body's memory (44).

Immersion is then defined by three categories: absorption (fully engaged in terms of imagination and concentration), transportation (a world that is both a mindspace like in a video game but also a real physical space), and total immersion (*praesence*) (62–63). Immersive theatre, according to Machon, can be used as

“a visceral and participatory audience experience with an all-encompassing, sensual style of production aesthetic” (66). According to this definition, ‘immersive theatre’ must be seen as an umbrella term under which various forms of theatre with varying degrees of immersion are housed. In order to clarify this definition and make it fruitful for analysis, Machon suggests a scale of immersivity along the criteria of ‘being-in-its-own-world,’ space, scenography, sound, duration, interdisciplinarity, bodies, audience and politics of participation (93–100).

Immersive theatre to her is a practice that is fundamentally rooted in interdisciplinarity. While some companies (e.g. Lundahl & Seidl) make excessive use of technology, others rely more heavily on participation (e.g. Adrian Howells) or sets (Punchdrunk). Consequently, inspirational forerunners are to be found in a number of disciplines. Machon finds Modernist theatre experimentations, Wagner’s idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Artaud’s total theatre to have influenced these practices (29–31). Overall, she traces a very sensible lineage from installation art, happenings, environmental theatre and Artaud’s ‘total theatre’ to Grotowski’s experiments with activating the audience (38–40). Whether the comparison with Kaprow’s happenings (31) will hold up seems uncertain, however, as most immersive theatre follows a strict, if tacit, choreography and plotline while Kaprow’s Happenings were designed to be fundamentally open and in the moment. Whereas Kaprow always wanted the outcome to be uncertain, the outcome and ending of a show by, say, dreamthinkspeak or Punchdrunk, is predetermined. What most of the ‘ancestors’ of immersive theatre that the author discusses have in common is a strong rejection of text and semiotics and an emphasis on instinct, physicality and spontaneity – in short a Dionysiac theatre.

Studying such events that seldom have a written, textual basis seems hard, if not downright impossible. Machon is quick to remark that each immersive performance is “frustratingly fleeting, literally ‘of the moment,’ utterly experiential in the ‘you had to be there’ sense” (96). Consequently, an analysis has to draw on individual, biased experience and can never claim objectivity in any traditional sense. Each performance experience is unique for the individual and for every session. Machon utilises her concept of (syn)aesthetics, which she had developed in her earlier work *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* (2009), to develop a descriptive framework. By (syn)aesthetics she means a strategy of bodily thinking, of being in the moment, of visceral sense-making that is intuited and not intellectually or semantically achieved (104–106). In her argument, the number of sensorial stimuli in an immersive event is much greater than in any traditional theatre where usually sight and sound will be the only active senses. The experience for spectators is thus necessarily much thicker, which translates into a more forceful experience and memory of the performance. She argues convincingly that the multitude of senses activated can create an experience that

transcends what is perceptible beyond the surface (78–80) and leaves the participant with an “embodied memory” (97). To put it briefly, the sum of sensorial stimulation is greater than its parts and different for each individual spectator. The strong sensory impression is precisely what lends immersive theatre its force and popularity with diverse audiences. She claims that this experience cannot be shrugged off like a bad play; the “experience bleeds into the real world” (55). In the following, Machon further develops a number of descriptive terms for these experiences:

Here ‘haptic’, ‘haptically’, ‘hapticity’ [...] is used in relation to the performing, perceiving, sensual body, alongside ‘tactile’ as the latter tends to connote only the external quality of touch by hand. ‘Haptic’ emphasises the tactile perceptual experience of the body as a whole (rather than merely the fingers) and also highlights the perceptive faculty of the bodily kinaesthetics (the body’s locomotion in space), which involves proprioception (stimulation produced and perceived *within* the body relating to position and movement *of* the body). Haptic perception encompasses the sensate experience of an individual’s moving body, and that individual’s perceptual experience of bodies of others. (283)

According to her, the visceral perception of a number of senses is also able to generate higher forms of meaning which are validated not by intellectual reflection or semantic coding / decoding, but which are viscerally felt:

I use ‘noetic’ (from the Greek derived, *noēsis*, *noētikos*, *nous*, meaning inner wisdom, subjective intellect or understanding) to denote knowledge that is experienced directly and can incorporate sensations of transcendence. Noetic understanding traverses the ineffable (that which cannot be put into words) in that it can make physically manifest complex emotional or social experiences that defy explanation yet are *felt* and consequently the thing shown *feels understood*. (284)

This approach will certainly invite criticism from a number of corners. The unilateral focus on the body as the locus of experience seems like a return to essentialist notions and re-opens old debates of the body as privileged over the mind.

Machon underpins her (syn)aesthetic point with a number of theories and theorists that lend themselves to the description of such events. She finds Deleuze’s ‘immanence’ to be a concept resonating with (syn)aesthetics and immersive performance (108–110), but she also employs the West-African concept of *seselelame*, which fuses bodily knowing and all senses into thinking (111–112). She also seeks to apply Eco’s ‘open work’ to immersive theatre, but it remains unclear where the translation from Eco’s text-based concept to a visceral experience takes place (113–116). Her reading of Rancière’s emancipated spectator somewhat misses the point when she takes him too literally:

Rancière's call for an emancipated spectator who becomes an active participant in the work of art is modelled in genuinely immersive theatre practice. The creative agency experienced within the artwork of the audience-participant has the potential to lead to a political agency on an individual or collective level. The inherent politics of the work, as brought about by the democratic practice of shared experience, demonstrates the profound potential of this artistic form. (120)

Rancière, however, does not necessarily have a spectator in mind who is walking about. His main concern lies with abolishing the dichotomy of passivity in spectating and activity in acting. Indeed, he explicitly states that “[e]mancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting [...]. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions” (13). Furthermore, as is evident in many of Punchdrunk's performances, the politics of performance, or, in Rancière's terminology, “distribution of the sensible” (42) are in this sense heavily policed through stewards, forced silence and a fixed narrative through line. She furthermore discusses Bourriaud's ‘relational aesthetics’ and sees immersive practice as an “antidote to the alienating experiences of globalisation and virtual socialising and networking” (121). Whether all immersive practices can be counted as relational seems doubtful as many of them consciously separate the audience from each other (e.g. Punchdrunk's masks) and do not provide “moments of sociability” (Bourriaud 33). In the case of one-on-one performances, this can surely be applied. Nonetheless, it remains questionable whether one-on-one, according to her own definition, should actually be included under the umbrella of immersive theatre. Do one-on-ones really provide a space where participants are so completely absorbed to the point where they forget everything around them? Machon provides a number of theories more, such as Gaston Bachelard's ‘poetic spaces,’ Dorren Massey's spatial politics and Juhani Pallasma's theories on activating architecture.

This hodgepodge of theories and approaches from fields as diverse as semiotics, sociology, politics and architecture may at first seem erratic and superficial, but Machon's purpose seems to be to cover the widest possible range of theories which can contribute something to the discussion of immersive theatre. Therefore, the superficiality with which she treats some approaches and the eclectic choices can be forgiven if one reads this chapter as a proposal for further discussions on aesthetic paradigms. One should view her (syn)aesthetic approach along the same lines. It is easy to dismiss it as useless because it essentially reduces description to saying ‘I felt that way,’ which would obviously be a step back from scholarly analysis. This shortcoming must, however, be viewed in the light of the subject matter. Immersive theatre is extremely diverse and individualistic in its perception. The terminology describing it must also be tainted with subjectivity.

While it would be truly fishy to speak about a performance of, say, Dennis Kelly's *Love and Money* in that way, for an immersive performance this terminology is the only way of coming close to understanding it.

The greatest shortcoming of the book is certainly the blatant lack of critical reflection on any of the issues and / or theories discussed. There is no single line discussing or critiquing both the performative practices and Machon's aesthetic theories. One cannot shake the feeling that the book is at times fuelled by fandom that seeks to "celebrate" (xvii) immersive theatre, rather than analyse it. The second part of the book provides a rich and useful variety of source materials from interviews with leading practitioners, critics and scholars, as well as an annotated resource section, which includes homepages, blogs and video material (291 ff.). In this section, the purpose of Machon's book becomes clear: it sees itself as a first of its kind study that wants to support and instigate further research into this popular genre of contemporary theatre.

Machon's book is groundbreaking in the sense that it offers insightful and controversial arguments for the definition and theoretical conceptualisation of immersive theatre. Its strength lies not so much in its methodological rigour but in the plenitude of arguments and theoretical approaches offered. In part, this is surely indebted to the diversity of practices under scrutiny, but it is also the beginning of a serious discussion on immersive practices. Certainly a number of her arguments are highly disputable, and this volume is very much apt to spark scholarly debate on immersive theatre and advance its scholarly and aesthetic understanding.

## Works Cited

- Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Paris: Les Presses Du Réel, 2002. Print.
- Machon, Josephine. *(Syn)Aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009. Print.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso, 2009. Print.
- Remshardt, Ralf. "Die Dreigroschenoper (the Threepenny Opera)/ the Masque of the Red Death." *Theatre Journal* 60.4 (2008): 639–43. Print.
- White, Gareth. "Odd Anonymous Needs: Punchdrunk's Masked Spectator." *Modes of Spectating*. Eds. Oddey, Alison and Christina White. Bristol: Intellect, 2009. Print.
- White, Gareth. "On Immersive Theatre." *Theatre Research International* 37.3 (2012): 221–35. Print.