

The Promise of Experience: Immersive Theatre in the Experience Economy

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In June 2012, I was kidnapped: abducted in Damascus by soldiers loyal to the Syrian Ba'ath Party and taken to a detention centre for political prisoners. The allegations against me and my party of fellow tourists were that one of us had leaked information concerning local atrocities that the authorities deemed to be damagingly unrepresentative, warranting severe punishment so long as the alleged antagonist remained anonymous. We were condemned to incarceration among beaten and bruised inmates, listening to their stories and tortured screams, culminating in the binding of one of our party to a chair inside a torture chamber – the dissenter having finally been identified.

However, these events took place not in Damascus, but at Shoreditch Town Hall in London's trendy East End. This was a performance by the Lebanese writer and director, Lucien Bourjeily, which was based on his travels to Wadi Khaled. Wadi Khaled is a region in Lebanon, bordering Syria, which has come to function as a refuge for those fleeing the Syrian civil war. The resulting performance, called *66 Minutes in Damascus*, was commissioned by the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) and premiered at LIFT 2012.

The argument put forward in this essay can be briefly summarized as follows: (1) immersive theatre (of which I take *66 Minutes in Damascus* to be an example) is based on and tends to idealize particular forms of audience experience; (2) but there is clearly a

distance between the kinds of sensory experiences that are actually experienced by audiences and their ideal forms; (3) nonetheless, audiences are often encouraged to strive towards securing these ideal forms, despite of their unattainability; (4) however, if ignored, the gap between the many possible experiences of immersive theatre performances and whatever ideal Experience is flaunted can, in certain circumstances, produce ethical compromises that are misleading and unrepresentative. This is particularly so when a kind of ‘knowing’ that is grounded in the experiential fails to acknowledge an insurmountable distance between a witnessing or consuming audience and whatever or whomsoever’s idealized experience is positioned as something to be (failingly) accessed through audience immersion.

The ambitions of this essay, then, stretch beyond a specific examination of *66 Minutes in Damascus*. Rather, I will be addressing what I call ‘the promise of Experience’ in a number of immersive theatre performances, understood in a twofold sense: both as sensuous experience and as acquired knowledge. In both cases, my concern is with the ‘gap’ between possible (lived) experiences and an ideal (promised) Experience. I am also interested in the possible insights that might arise from comparative analyses of immersive theatre and exponents of a rapidly growing economy premised on experience production, often referred to as the ‘experience economy’. I ask: what can the experience economy tell us about the promise of Experience? What is bound up in this twofold promise of Experience? And what might be lost in transmission?

While immersive theatre is notoriously hard to define, I see it as a practice premised on the production of experiences, where participating audiences are frequently invited to interact and move within installation-like environments. Various modes of participation might be deployed to engage audiences in and with an immersive theatre event. These modes may include: multi-sensory stimulation; an encouragement to seek out something, or someone; the playing of a role (either clearly specified, or ambiguous); dialogue; interaction;

and the performance of tasks. I suggest that these modes of participation are all geared towards the arousal of an audience member's experiential faculties. This does not leave participants in some kind of lobotomised stupor, nor does it prevent continuous opportunities for cerebral, reflective and critical forms of audience engagement. But these modes do signal an aesthetic focus on experience production among participating audiences: that is, sensuous experience – as something produced by an aesthetic stimulus and by virtue of the environment in which it is experienced – is itself prone to aestheticization.

I will consider the above definition of immersive theatre as a means of thinking through what the promise of Experience might mean, both in the abstract, as a generalized feature of immersive theatre performances and, in the final third of the essay, as it specifically applies to *66 Minutes in Damascus*. In the next section, I explore what the notion of ideal Experience in immersive theatre might mean, drawing on a performance by an important progenitor of the immersive theatre style: Punchdrunk's *The Crash of the Elysium* (2011-12). I am particularly interested in the uses to which such idealized experiences might be put, as a promise that cannot be fulfilled, not just within theatre contexts, but outside of them as well. The section after that explores where this kind of theorization has found close scholarly counterparts: that is, in economic and marketing theory, particularly that dealing with the economization and marketization of customer experiences. This section compares, firstly, Florida's Walt Disney World Resort with Hilary Westlake's *Dining with Alice* (1999). Secondly, it compares US, UK and Japanese horror house culture with one of Punchdrunk's corporate performances for Sony, titled *And Darkness Descended...* (2011). The aim of these comparisons, which culminates in an address of authenticity in the experience economy, is to contextualize the idealization of experiences as something that is, ultimately, marketable and consumable, while at the same time giving rise to an opportunity for theorising the productive capacity of a participant in this idealization. This will provide theoretical grounding for an

analysis of other-oriented experience in *66 Minutes in Damascus*, culminating in a critical examination of a promised Experience that dangerously fails to be transmitted to audiences (as opposed to fruitful failure), despite immersive theatre's aesthetic rootedness in experience production.

A brief note on terminology: where the 'e' of 'experience' is capitalized, I refer to the idealization of immersive experiences, noting especially that the transcendent notion of Experience remains unachievable in its pseudo-Platonic perfection, but is nonetheless incentivised as a participatory goal; when it is not, I refer to immersive theatre experiences as they manifest among participating audiences. The notion of an idealized immersive Experience is not intended to rub over the specific motivations, wants and desires of audiences, nor is it meant to erase the particularities of how experience feels, or what experiences end up being pursued, or how they are felt; rather, I will be looking at how the securing of an abstract and unattainable Experience is a goal and purpose for participating audiences in immersive theatre. It is not language, necessarily, or even design, that appears as immersive theatre's most important aesthetic characteristic, although each may still be important: it is experiential engagement.

Ideal Experience: Idealism, Pragmatism and *Doctor Who*

While canonical texts, inspiring design or engrossing choreography might all play an important role in immersive theatre performances, these tend to be subsidiary to an audience's pursuit of intimate, challenging, titillating, erotic, confrontational, or escapist experiences. These, and other experiences, might then be correlated as the pursuit of Experience, where a plethora of potential, individually designated experiential desires are subsumed beneath the idealized guise and goal of an über-experience.

Take as an example Punchdrunk's immersive theatre performance for children and their families, *The Crash Of The Elysium*. *The Crash* was created in collaboration with the creative team behind the British Broadcasting Corporation's cult television franchise, *Doctor Who*. In this performance, which I saw at the Ipswich Arts Festival in 2012 as an 'After Dark' performance for ages 13 and up, participating audiences were faced with the task of helping 'the Doctor' save the world from impending doom. The Doctor, played at the time by Matt Smith, is the protagonist of the television series: a time traveller forever defending earth and the rest of the universe from various alien invasions and apocalyptic threats. Smith's Doctor featured in *The Crash* as a mediated presence on television screens at various intervals throughout the performance.

Outfitted in a costume reminiscent of a protective fertiliser suit, the audience wormed their way through the labyrinthine interior of a ship-cum-spaceship – The Elysium – all the while led by Captain T. Solomon and Corporal Albright. Weeping Angels, terrifying 'living' stone statues from the television series, played a murderous game of Grandmother's Footsteps with the audience throughout their journey. Many wires were plugged into walls. Many hanging bits of plastic were scampered through. A door was opened with an angle grinder. A deserted circus from another time popped up somewhere inside The Elysium. Tasks and challenges abounded as we traipsed through this ship, music blasting from unseen speakers, culminating in the satisfying reward of vanquishing the Angels, saving both the Doctor... and Planet Earth!

Punchdrunk's work for adults aims to place greater onus on the 'freedom' of audiences to move through usually very large aesthetic spaces. But aside from a more controlled pathway through the performance, *The Crash* is typical of Punchdrunk's immersive theatre brand and goes a long way as an example to help introduce why the pursuit of Experience seems so central to audience participation in immersive theatre. The fact that

The Crash was designed for children does not detract from a comparable sense of adventure, intrigue and fun that seems to characterize Punchdrunk's other, adult-oriented work. The tasks performed, the environments explored, the escape from perceived threats, the wearing of a costume and the inevitable finale: all of this was with an eye to putting you, the experiencer, in the world of *Doctor Who*, as an accomplice to this much-loved British cult emblem. What is encouraged from participating audiences is a sense of aspiration: to *be there, feelingly*, as a part of the Doctor's entourage of world-savers. The mystery of the performance thrives on producing the belief that there is always more to be experienced and that an experience can always be bettered, or that the environment can be explored in other ways, with greater gusto, or with a greater investment of belief and commitment. While audience members will experience many different interactions, tasks and challenges as they pass through the performance, there remains a more elusive, more perfect *Doctor Who* Experience that sets a participatory incentive and goal. Justifying and evaluating this kind of assertion, as it might apply to immersive theatre more generally, is an important goal of this essay – a goal that demands reflection, first of all, on the idealization of experiences.

Richard Sennett identifies himself as a second wave pragmatist philosopher and his book *The Craftsman* provides a good, if counterintuitive place to start thinking about the distance between lived experience and ideal experience. Pragmatism engages with human activity and, for Sennett, experience 'unifies all of pragmatism' (Sennett, 288). A twofold understanding of 'experience', blurred in the English word, is considered in Sennett's reading of pragmatist thought. The first of these derives from the German word *Erlebnis*, which 'names an event or relationship that makes an emotional inner impress' (Sennett, 288). The second derives from *Erfahrung*, meaning 'an event, action, or relationship that turns one outward and requires skill rather than sensitivity' (Sennett, 288). For the time being, *Erlebnis* will pull focus. In the context of this essay, *Erlebnis* might usefully refer to an emotional

inner impress as it occurs and is pursued by audiences in immersive theatre performances. Experience production, as an aesthetically central characteristic of immersive theatre, might then be defined as that which affects audiences and impresses on an audience's thought, behaviour and feeling. Moreover, my suggestion is that an idealized form of *Erlebnis* (one of two possible ideal forms of experience along with *Erfahrung*) is centrally positioned in immersive theatre performances as a *telos*, or aesthetic goal of participatory activity, and that this *telos*, because of its idealized form, is chased but never secured. A sensuous experience of *Doctor Who*, for instance, can always be made more fulfilling, more perfect, more authentic. Because of the audience's participatory status and the perception of responsibilities that might come with participation, it falls upon the participant to help achieve this more perfect experience, just as that pursuit might be rejected, or scoffed at. I am consequently noting a distinction between a pragmatist understanding of *Erlebnis* (and, later in the essay, *Erfahrung*) and an idealist understanding, focusing on how both forms can be theorized in immersive theatre and how their relationship can illuminate the functioning of audience participation wherever these forms are identifiable.

To be clear: I am framing immersive theatre as an experience-centred style of theatre, where Experience provides both an incentive to participate and a participatory crux around which an aesthetics of participation might be seen to revolve. In this, immersive theatre is not alone. This centralization of experience in immersive theatre, a form of cultural production, chimes with a late-twentieth century economic paradigm shift that led James Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine to introduce the term 'experience economy'. Briefly, the experience economy refers to a general shift in production from a service economy to an economy which produces experiences. It refers to the marketability of experiences and includes the incorporation of memorable customer experiences into the design of a product, as well as the marketing strategies used to sell a product. Coffee shops like Starbucks do not just sell coffee; they sell

a fusion of jazz, leather sofas and a writer's workplace conducive to Apple Mac *savoir-faire*. Niketown on London's Regent Street do not just sell shoes and sportswear; consumers can have their Flyknit trainers steam-fitted before trying them out on a tread-mill, or they may prefer a slightly less sweaty game of table football by the Mercurial Tuning Shop counter. As Maurya Wickstrom suggests, shop designers behind businesses such as these 'overtly poach the theatrical. They have deemphasized the consumption of specific commodities and instead create experiential environments through which the consumer comes to embody the resonances of the brand as feelings, sensations, and even memories' (Wickstrom, 2).

In what follows, I hope to identify some similarities between the production, celebration and marketability of experiences among participating audiences in the experience economy and immersive theatre. My feeling is that the reduction of an understanding of experience to *Erlebnis* and the conflation of experience in its ideal and lived forms may well come at a high price in certain contexts. What are the implications of idealising emotional inner impresses? And what about *Erfahrung*? But first things first: what can the experience economy tell us about the promise of Experience in immersive theatre?

From Wonderland to Horror Houses: The Uses of Ideal Experience

In the next three subsections, I will be focusing on the promise of Experience as it manifests in immersive theatre performances, but also in the experience industry, experiential marketing and the experience economy. The point is to set out a context from which an analysis of audience participation in immersive theatre might stem and to consider how the integration of experience within contemporary forms of economic production might usefully inform an examination of audience engagement in immersive theatre performances.

Marketable Experiences

By the experience industry, I mean to identify a group of companies or businesses (including theme parks like Disneyland and themed restaurants like Planet Hollywood) that provide experience platforms for paying consumers: that is, themed environments that draw on liveness and eventfulness to elicit sensuous responses from audiences/customers. Such platforms build coherent aesthetic spaces synergised around a central theme that bleeds into the architecture and décor of an immersive environment, augmented by the costuming of service workers or role-playing actors. This coherent aesthetic immerses customers as they take on the role of audiences who participate through interaction with characters and with a themed environment. The thing sold, to borrow from Pine and Gilmore, is an experience that ‘lingers in the memory of any individual who was engaged by the event’ (Pine and Gilmore 1999, 12-13).

Two of the better-known purveyors of experience are Disneyland Park in California and Walt Disney World Resort in Florida. As Anna Klingmann suggests, these recreation locations are based on ‘the choreography of scripted sequences that are compounded with the identity of a brand. [...] Every ride, every building in the theme parks represents part of a story’ (Klingmann, 69-70). Experience consumers engaging with these scripted sequences at Disney World Florida are immersed within a very large, but coherent space that surrounds them completely, rendered in the style of Disney animations. Disney World Florida is a resort synergising four theme parks: Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Disney’s Hollywood Studios and Disney’s Animal Kingdom. In Magic Kingdom, interactive ‘character greetings’ are on offer in designated zones, or on chance promenade encounters. Inside Beast’s castle from Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), audiences meet characters from the film (played by actors as

well as animatronic machines) and have the chance to perform in role to help tell the tale. Even restaurants offer Disney themed events at 1900 Park Fare, including the Wonderland Tea Party and Cinderella's Happily Ever After Dinner: dining experiences featuring characters from Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) and *Cinderella* (1950), respectively. What all this amounts to is the provision of experiences within an über-experience: a potpourri of interactions, tasks, challenges and encounters correlated as the Disney Experience.

In both Disney World and Punchdrunk's *The Crash*, participating audiences, or experience consumers, immerse themselves in themed environments derived from film and television respectively. Opportunities arise to interact with characters while engaged in situations that aim to place the audience at the centre of a themed milieu. Within the idealized Experience of both Disney World and *The Crash* – where escape within closed representational environments is invited – there are numerous tasks and challenges to be completed; whether it is helping Belle relate the tale of *Beauty and the Beast*, or breaking a code by plugging and unplugging wires from a wall in *The Crash*, experiences within an Experience are offered as explicitly participatory vehicles for drawing audiences closer inside an immersive world.

The incorporation of food within a themed experience is a point worth dwelling on. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* inspired Walt Disney and the Wonderland Tea Party via the Disney brand. The book also inspired *Dining with Alice*, first performed in 1999 at the Larmer Tree Pleasure Gardens in Salisbury and revived in 2011 for the Norfolk and Norwich Festival at Elsing Hall, Norfolk. *Dining with Alice* was produced by Artichoke and directed by Hilary Westlake, who is best known for directing the Fifty Years Parade for the Golden Jubilee in the UK in 2002 and as a co-founder of Lumiere & Son Theatre Company. The 2011 iteration of the performance was held in Elsing Hall's gardens and

featured a decadent menu of edible curiosities by Bompas and Parr, including mock turtle soup and “‘Drink Me’ quinine and bitter orange constitutional’. Each course of the feast took place in a different part of the gardens, where audiences could meet different characters from Carroll’s book in surroundings that site-sympathetically aided the immersion of audiences in a ‘wonderland’ of fairy lights and horticulture. In both Disney World’s Wonderland Tea Party and *Dining with Alice*, the eating of themed food literalizes the consumption of a themed aesthetic in environments evoking the ambience of Alice’s journey down the rabbit hole. Audiences are also joined in their culinary experiences by characters plucked from Carroll’s story. Taken together, both the Wonderland Tea Party and *Dining with Alice* thrive on the provision of immersive other worlds, helped along by the participatory mediums of eating and interaction. Both function as vehicles to promote an engaging experience of Alice’s adventures. Whether framed as art or entertainment, comparable aesthetic features contribute towards comparable ends: an immersive Experience of Wonderland that can be consumed, literally, turning attention towards an inner impress as the hedonic reward of participation.

Experiential Marketing

Bernd Schmitt identifies a shift in marketing strategies towards the end of the twentieth century away ‘from thinking about an isolated product’, towards a focus on ‘the experiences provided by the consumption situation’ (Schmitt, 27-8). A consumption situation refers to the scenario in which a product is consumed, as opposed to the functionality, value, or quality of a particular product. For instance, the in-store treadmill at Niketown provides consumers with a participatory scenario where they can try out trainers in an experiential scenario. The product remains functional, but the techniques employed to market that product shift

attention away from the specific qualities of the shoes, towards a lived experience of their use. The situation in which the functionality of the shoes operates – running on a treadmill – is explicitly foregrounded in an ‘experiential marketing’ strategy that directly engages the customer’s first-hand experience of running.

Experiential marketing has evolved into increasingly theatrical forms. Punchdrunk, for instance, have created immersive theatre performances to help market products and brands for Louis Vuitton, Sony PlayStation and Stella Artois Black, where products, or an aesthetic based on a brand, were incorporated into the design of immersive theatre events. *And Darkness Descended...*, for instance, functioned as a marketing event for Sony PlayStation’s sci-fi shoot-em-up computer game, *Resistance 3*. In this performance, participating audiences (primarily competition winners and press – I was not there) were grouped and had to work together to fulfil tasks and challenges in a post-apocalyptic environment in railway arches beneath London’s Waterloo Station. Comparable to *The Crash*, participants had to try and contact Joseph Capelli, the main character from the computer game, only instead of Weeping Angels, they had to resist the world-conquering Chimera: a zombie-like alien species intent on destroying humankind. Sound, lighting and smell were all used to help ground participating audiences at the centre of an experiential landscape appropriate to the game, a landscape that could be explored, interacted with and sprinted through. The better the grouped participants worked together, the longer they would ‘survive’ in the experience.

And Darkness Descended... can be seen to draw on a particular strand of the experience industry. In the United States, particularly during Halloween, ‘haunted houses’ such as Los Angeles’ and New York’s Blackout, also called ‘horror houses’, invite participating audiences to experience terror and revulsion in threatening and, sometimes, abusive immersive environments. The audience experience at Blackout includes: physical

manhandling, the proposition of sucking a tampon, waterboarding beneath a sodden hood, fishing a key out of a full toilet bowl, verbal assault and numerous other confrontational modes of engagement (Hoby, n.p.). In Japan, *obake yashiki* – which translates as ‘ghost house’ – invite audiences, usually during the summer, to experience encounters with bloodied, mutilated zombies and other creatures of the night. In the United Kingdom, Zed Events offer zombie apocalypse experiences, where participating audiences try to avoid being bitten by their flesh-hungry pursuers in an abandoned shopping mall, or manor house, by firing mock firearms after being trained in their soldierly use. Punchdrunk’s *And Darkness Descended...* fits into this area of the experience industry, where fear and risk are key parts of the attraction. But for Sony, via Punchdrunk, an experience platform is instrumentalized. *And Darkness Descended...* is not just an experience platform. The profitability of terrifying experiences is engaged, but re-directed as a marketing initiative. The experience is not just framed as a terrifying and potentially profitable end in itself, as it is in commercial ghost houses; rather, a branded experience of terror is used to market a product. The audience experience in *And Darkness Descended...* is co-opted as a vehicle for communicating and marketing a brand identity.

For those experiencing events like *And Darkness Descended...*, memorable, emotionally voluminous experiences become linked to a product or brand that aligns itself with a given ideal Experience. Even for those unable to experience the event first-hand, if the event was a success then a branded experience might become an enviable thing and that envy is likely to positively affect the product or brand behind the event. Experience can be co-opted for use as a marketing strategy and immersive theatre makers can and, indeed, are being employed as a means to that end. It seems to me no accident that the likes of Sony and Stella Artois Black have turned to Punchdrunk as creative partners to help market their respective products. Experiential marketing and immersive theatre performances share an

aesthetic stake in the production of experience, as *Erlebnis*, among participating audiences. And the ideal Experience that attracts consumers and audiences to the event, as opposed to lived experiences, is the theatre or product marketer's most profitable asset.

Authenticity in the Experience Economy

Experiential marketing strategies encourage a broadening of our conceptual horizons away from the specificities of an experience industry and towards a much wider, more pervasive experience economy. In such an economy, experience platforms are adopted to help market a product, or a brand, or products are designed with their experiential use in mind. These experience platforms might be inspired by the likes of Disney World, but they might also take a lead from immersive theatre. In turn, immersive theatre companies can be seen to learn from, or at least mirror, how components of the experience industry operate aesthetically, such as Japan's *obake yashiki* – a cultural form that is said to have explicitly informed *And Darkness Descended...* (The Tru). As such, businesses in the experience economy can be seen to draw on the experience industry, learning from its experience platforms and installing counterparts as a means to the end of selling products. At the same time, immersive theatre companies like Punchdrunk are functioning within an economic milieu that increasingly centralizes experience production. Likewise, such companies can be seen to incorporate a comparable ethos within their production practices.

But what is the experience economy and how might it differ from the service economy that, for some time, has been positioned as the dominant economic paradigm in the social sciences? The service economy refers to a genre of economic output that is not primarily based on the cultivation of commodities, or the manufacturing of goods, but the delivering of services. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri maintain, the service economy

‘results in no material and durable good’ and the labour practices caught within it tend to be ‘immaterial (...) – that is, labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication’ (Hardt and Negri, 290). But Pine and Gilmore propose that a new genre of economic output has become identifiable, referring to a comparable, progressive process of economic evolution that led to the service economy arising out of a goods-based economy. ‘When a person buys a service’, they argue, ‘he [sic] purchases a set of intangible activities carried out on his behalf. But when he buys an experience, he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages – as in a theatrical play – to engage him in a personal way’ (Pine and Gilmore 1999, 2). The experience economy markets eventfulness, either as a commodifiable entity in its own right (as in the experience industry), or as a marketing tactic that is tied into the marketing of services or goods (as in experiential marketing). In both cases, experience production is drawn into an overtly economic terrain.

Earlier in the essay, I referred to Wickstrom’s observation that store designers ‘overtly poach the theatrical’. For her, mimesis plays a fundamental role in this poaching, understood as ‘a capacity that allows us to travel a spectrum along which we encounter, or live, the truth of the make-believe’ (Wickstrom, 19). She is interested in the ways that businesses deploy mimesis as a marketing strategy, borrowing from the representational medium of theatre and applying it to the provision of experiences. What is so interesting about this onus on mimesis, particularly as Wickstrom defines it, is how it balances against the writing of Pine and Gilmore in a more recent publication: *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*. Published just short of a decade after *The Experience Economy*, *Authenticity* reconsiders how businesses might utilise experience ‘in a world increasingly filled with sensationally staged experiences – an increasingly *unreal* world’, suggesting that

contemporary consumers ‘choose to buy or not buy based on how *real* they perceive an offering to be’ (Pine and Gilmore 2007, 1: original emphasis).

Pine and Gilmore echo Wickstrom’s point that mimesis tends to be deployed in the experience economy as a marketing strategy, but they make the anti-theatrical, prejudicial assumption that mimesis equates to the contrived. The key phrase in Wickstrom’s definition of mimesis is ‘the truth of the make-believe’. What this key phrase flags, in relation to the search for authenticity, is the possible provision of ever more total and perfect experiences – that is, the provision of a perfectly truthful Experience as a promise that is never quite lived up to.

‘The authentic’, as it applies to ‘an authentic experience’, will be understood in what remains of this essay in comparable terms as an ideal that can never quite be fulfilled. That is to say that authenticity will be considered as having no material or empirically verifiable reality; it arises from an investment of a truth that is subjectively identified and defined. It is therefore not antithetical to mimesis, nor is it antithetical to actuality, or reality. Authentic experience, as that which arises through representation and a reading of representation, exists as a transcendental crux between the real and the faux (see Schneider, 41), as something that might have a perceived reality, but only via a personal investment in an idealized notion of experience.

It seems to me that immersive theatre environments, as environments that correlate, or synergise, various aesthetic elements with what we might call a ‘brand identity’, provide a touchstone for experience-led businesses to exploit. The perfection of mimesis to the point where make-believe is granted an encompassing sense of reality is what might encourage audiences/consumers to invest authenticity into representational space, particularly when an

audience/consumer's experience is drawn on to help validate or ground that sense of authenticity.

Indeed, the elicitation of experience through audience/consumer participation has been approached by Pine and Gilmore with what seems to be a comparable point in mind. They identify how the establishment of a sense of authenticity in the experience economy is likely to involve an integration of the personal in the self-customization of goods in the experience economy. What better harbinger of authenticity than a thinking, feeling 'I' who validates a reality for themselves? Better yet, the reality of a brand! As Pine and Gilmore suggest:

the most direct way to help individuals fashion their own self-image: let people define and even create their own offerings. When consumers design their own footwear online at miadidas.com or NIKEiD.com, style their own clothes at landsend.com, configure their own car at mini.com or scion.com, express themselves at cafepress.com or zazzle.com, or craft their own music playlists for their iPods, the output automatically qualifies as authentic for the consumer. (Pine and Gilmore 2007, 12-13)

What emerges here is the counter-intuitive possibility of mass customization: a paradoxical form of tailoring that aims to marry a consumer's participatory engagement with a product, which promises an ideal experience of its use, to his or her own establishment of a sense of authenticity as it arises from that participatory and therefore personal engagement. The fairly standard offering of an iPod, or a Mini – or a customizable computer game, or just about anything that can be both mass produced *and* customised, albeit with limitations – are granted a sense of authenticity through the perception of a tailored experience and a limited form of co-production.

But why is a sense of authenticity aroused through the perception of a tailored experience relevant to immersive theatre? A sense of authenticity might be derived from an individual's personal, affectively charged investment in something that may occur in spite of a fairly standardised stimulus. In the next section, I will return to *66 Minutes in Damascus* and unpack what the attribution of authenticity might mean in the context of a fairly standardised theatre event, particularly regarding the kind of Experience that offering promises. The promised Experience, in this case, is an Experience of captivity and torture in a Syrian detention centre that is repeated for different audiences night after night. What this promise omits for audiences, emerging scar-free from their titillating ordeal, might just form the basis for a critique of a particular immersive theatre performance as an experience-centred art form. What needs to be established next is a more fulsome understanding of experience, as it might apply to immersive theatre, but also what limitations, such as those just explored in relation to the experience economy, might plague this more fulsome understanding.

The Promise of Experience in *66 Minutes in Damascus*

While customization did not play such a central role in *66 Minutes in Damascus*, the deployment of audience participation and the elicitation of emotional engagement was nonetheless played upon to instil a sense of the authentic: in this case, the possibility of experiencing incarceration as a political prisoner in a Syrian detention centre.¹ I want to reflect on some quite serious issues that can arise when understanding that is framed as authentic is derived from sensuous experience, at least in relation to what might be lost in the process; in other words, I want to critique what happens when *Erlebnis* is positioned as a

¹ See also Badac Theatre's notorious role-play performance *The Factory* (2008), in which audiences were positioned as Holocaust victims enduring persecution in a Nazi concentration camp.

vehicle for understanding a supposedly ‘authentic’ experience of political detention in Syria. This is not to argue that sensuous experience is somehow without meaningful validity and I acknowledge the valuable and illuminating advances that have been made in studies of affect, corporeality, embodied knowledge and kinesthesia over the past decade, especially.² What I am arguing, though, is: that this performance, as immersive theatre, is based on experience production and that it idealizes the prisoner experience; that there is slippage between the kinds of sensory experiences that immersive theatre is based on and their ideal forms; that these ideal forms (in this case the prisoner Experience) can be aimed at, but not fully secured by audiences; and that a failure to take account of the gap between lived and ideal experience is ethically compromised, especially when authenticity is attributed to *Erlebnis* as a form of experiential knowledge that is wholly one’s own.

It is worth elaborating my anecdotal description of the production, which was only briefly relayed at the head of this essay. I was greeted by two smiling ushers brandishing disclaimer forms at the beginning of the performance. Disclaimers are no stranger to the experience industry; for Blackout horror house, a disclaimer warned of ‘[g]raphic scenes of simulated extreme horror, adult sexual content, tight spaces, darkness, fog, strobe-light effects, exposure to water, physical contact, and crawling’ (Hoby, n.p.). The disclaimer for *66 Minutes in Damascus* reigned in the extremities and downplayed the onslaught of particulars:

This performance is a physical, interactive experience in which you will be required to stand for relatively long periods of time. The performance is not suitable for those with claustrophobia and contains nudity and scenes that some may find disturbing.

Despite the immersive nature of this performance, we encourage you to remain aware of your surroundings and in particular the uneven floor surfaces. If you feel in distress

² See, for instance: Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010); Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2009); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999); and Susan-Leigh Foster (2011).

at any time during the performance please state clearly your desire to leave. A member of the cast or front of house team will escort you to the nearest exit. (LIFT)

There is no escaping the fact that *66 Minutes in Damascus* was a public performance in a space sanctioned for public performance. The disclaimer demonstrates sympathy for an audience's welfare by giving them advice on what to do should the performance become too distressing, while also being courteous enough to warn of uneven floor surfaces. Legal precautions aside, the disclaimer builds a sense of anticipation and excitement before entering into an experience. It contributes to the development of risk perception among participating audiences, as well as the possibility that behind a representational façade there may in fact be real danger. It sets the performance up as one would market a bungee jump: as an exciting and fun courting of risk, where safety measures and risk assessments allow thrill to arise, despite the fact that there may be little, or no physical danger. Like the bungee jump, one can *feel* at risk without being put in genuine danger. This allows risk's affective and psychological impact to be felt – thus maintaining a form of risk – without the risk being one of physical danger.

Signed off and ready to go, I was ushered into a waiting-area-cum-hotel-foyer. Lukewarm tea waited on the table and the hotel receptionist asked if I had come far. 'West London', I replied. Others soon joined to make a group of about eight of us in total. Another member of hotel staff collected us so that we might begin our tourist's induction to the city of Damascus. Weaving our way through the building, it was not long before a group of armed soldiers confronted our gang and shoved us against a wall with our hands pressed hard against it, above our heads, in what was to become a familiar stance over the next hour. Black hoods were placed over our heads and, blindfolded, we were led outside where a van awaited. We were bundled one by one into the back of the van (the soldier was kind enough to make sure that none of us tripped or banged our heads) before driving off via a series of right turns.

On reaching a standstill we were hurried back out of the van, still with our hoods on, this time with the guards reminding us to remain vigilant of the uneven floor surfaces.

Once the hoods were removed, we found ourselves in the room of a supervising military officer inside a Syrian detention centre. A picture of President Assad looked out at us, regally, from behind his desk. The officer claimed that there was one among us who had sent a dispatch from the hotel we were staying in which detailed slanderous atrocities witnessed on the streets of Damascus. An act of disobedience such as this could not be dismissed without consequence. In what remained of the performance, by numerous dastardly means, our oppressors would get to the bottom of this situation and distribute punishment appropriately; in a sequence of monologues and duologues, audiences watched, listened to and interacted with prisoners trapped in dark and tiny cells. We heard disturbing reports of rape and about the games played by prisoners to make time pass a little less tortuously. And we were encouraged to be submissive to the reprimands of guards each time an infantile giggle, or ill-placed exploration of an environment, was committed out of turn.

My main concern about this performance was the positioning of its audience in role, a role over which that audience could mistakenly claim mastery and brag like some playboy of the western world: 'I was there, man!' The audience are imagined in advance of their arrival as a potential knower to be enlightened about the persecution of political detainees in Syria and this imagining is implicit in the handling of participating audiences in the performance. The form of knowing in question is one premised on Experience, in the flesh: that is, on first-hand experience as *Erlebnis*. It is this imagining and handling that I have in mind when describing how audiences are ideally figured in *66 Minutes in Damascus*: as an audience that is either sympathetic towards the treatment of Syrian political prisoners and is interested in having the basis of that sympathy confirmed through an authentically framed Experience of

political detention, or that can be made sympathetic to that treatment through realising the promise of an authentic prisoner Experience.

Of course, the issue is that there is a chasmic difference between the reality of brutality for political prisoners under the Assad regime that the reputedly true stories in the performance look to represent and an authentic framing of a prisoner Experience for audiences that are free to walk out of a performance that lasts sixty six minutes. By placing emphasis on the immediacy and seeming validity of personal, particularly emotional experience as a channel for authenticity, the performance frames the prisoner experience as something that can be owned because it is filtered through the personal – ownership of an unclaimed experience, if you like, that was never experienced in the first place. My complaint is not that such a controversial and difficult subject was chosen to be represented; my complaint is that the piece masquerades as offering so much more than representation by virtue of the participatory demands it places on an audience playing the role of detainee. Not only that, but it implicitly looks to place audiences in a position of knowing founded on an authentic framing of the detention centre Experience, a kind of knowing that links up with an emotional experience of feigned brutality.

To borrow from Jill Bennett, an artwork like this, at best, should be understood ‘as *transactive* rather than *communicative*. It often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the “secret” of personal experience’ (Bennett, 7: original emphasis). But *66 Minutes in Damascus* attempts to merge a given audience member’s own personal experience, specifically as it is experienced through sensation, with the personal experience of an unknown, abstract other. It seems to be invited by the artwork, which ends up nullifying the piece’s potential to transform the participant’s perception in an empathic way that preserves the necessary distance between one who empathises and one who is empathised

with. Instead, what is invited is what Bertolt Brecht might call ‘crude empathy’: ‘a feeling for another based on the assimilation of the other’s experience to the self’ (Bennett, 10).

In a brief, promotional interview, Bourjeily describes what audiences might hope to expect from an experience of the performance: ‘this play is not going to be a traditional kind of play. In a way it’s an immersive experience where the audience will have the opportunity to experience first-hand and to interact, talk, even sense what it is like to be in a detention centre in Syria. [...] And the audience will come out of the play as they would come out in real life from a detention centre’ (Bourjeily). This assumes that the audience experience plays a vital part in the production of the truth of the make-believe, where an attempt to convincingly frame authenticity is taken to be synonymous with the production of an other’s experience that can be known. Moreover, a significant basis for this supposed knowing is a particular form of experience: *Erlebnis*. In other words, what stimulates an emotional inner impress within an experience platform – the playing of a role – is treated as a potential trigger for guaranteeing a sense of what it must be like to be a political detainee in Syria.

There is a fundamental problem with engaging and figuring audiences in this way that becomes most clear when an alternative definition of experience is taken into account, a definition which is clouded in English parlance. As Sennett explains, the German word *Erfahrung* denotes ‘an event, action, or relationship that turns one outward and requires skill rather than sensitivity’ (Sennett, 288). *Erfahrung* refers to a form of knowledge, particularly practical knowledge, that may be learnt or acquired, or that may arise from disposition. 66 *Minutes in Damascus* conflates *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, but to the detriment of the latter; it works on the assumption that an appeal to emotional experience can foster adequate knowledge of an other’s practical experience.

I am not suggesting that this fostering is altogether impossible, only that it can prompt extremely misleading forms of understanding, in certain circumstances. Following Sennett, *Erfahrung* turns one outwards, towards others, but this is not what is encouraged in *66 Minutes in Damascus*. This performance places participants in an environment that is all about what goes on inside the body, conflating an emotional inner impress with an understanding of someone else's pain and suffering. The problem is – and this is the crux of my argument – that this conflation ends up producing a gap between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* that is loosely and dangerously plastered over. The gap is not acknowledged as a gap and two very different forms of experience-based knowledge are mistakenly framed as being synonymous with one another (implied in the promotional interview with Bourjeily quoted above). There is no turning outwards towards the other in this performance; there is only a non-relational inwardness that is antithetical to communicative understanding.

In my analyses of *The Crash*, *Dining with Alice* and the experience economy, I explored how Experience can be figured as a promise. Working towards the fulfillment of this promise can be fun, rewarding and immensely pleasurable. In *The Crash*, for instance, the promise is to engage in the fantasy of helping the Doctor save the earth. What is more, particularly in *The Crash*, it may be argued that audience participation functions much like a skill to be worked out alongside performers and other audience members and this skill might be fruitfully nurtured as a form of *Erfahrung*. There is an outwardness implied in this understanding of experience that Sennett may well recognise as a healthy form of pragmatist sociality.³ My focus in this essay, though, has largely been on the figuring of Experience, in its ideal form, as a promise and how that promise can only ever be realized imperfectly. I have been addressing a gap between lived and ideal experience, but there is also a gap, which

³ As I have argued elsewhere, this skill might also be deployed in profoundly unsocial ways, particularly if competitive initiative is used to maximise the number, or intensity of experiences. This competitive initiative might detrimentally impact on the experience of other audience members, or may result in an unfair distribution of participatory opportunity (Alston, 2013).

is only now coming into focus in my address of *66 Minutes in Damascus*, between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. The outwardness towards the other that is asked of audiences in *66 Minutes in Damascus* turns out to be premised on and limited to its opposite: a focusing of attention on an emotional inner impress. This, I contend, is a damagingly misguided invitation to an understanding of the other.

This damaging quality is rendered all the more so because of the theatrical mode chosen to mediate the invitation. Because of immersive theatre's positioning of experience production at the heart of its aesthetic, experience as it is lived through participation is especially important. The infiltration of emotional experience as an aid for the ascription of authenticity to a particular form of knowledge, such as knowledge of what it is like to be a political prisoner, is likely to hinder an adequate understanding of that form of knowledge. Experience platforms like *66 Minutes in Damascus* depend on figuring audiences in a role that they are encouraged to submit to as implicated subjects. *Erlebnis* is used as a means to the end of stimulating this submission and implication. Crucially, this means failing to equate a subjectively defined emotional inner impress with the elusive promise of securing an Experience of political detention that cannot – indeed, should not – be fulfilled. The issue arises when that failure is not identified as a failure and when opportunities to recognize that failure, which might otherwise be embedded in the performance, are not evident (see postscript).

In conclusion, this essay has looked at the promise of ideal Experience in immersive theatre performances. This promise results in a gap between an Experience to be ambitiously, but failingly, secured by participating audiences (and the artists anticipating them) and the many possible experiences which might actually be lived. This gap may, frequently, be without much import; but when the ethical stakes are raised, and when distinct forms of experience are conflated in participatory invitations, the consequences can be profoundly

concerning. The uses of experience production in immersive theatre performances like *66 Minutes in Damascus* are prone to instrumentalization as a vehicle for the authentic, co-opting an emotional inner impress (*Erlebnis*). There is much to learn here from the experience economy, where the extraction of experiences from consumers has been usefully theorized, if disconcertingly so. Whether applied to a brand experience, or an immersive experience of what it is like to be in an other's shoes, the attractiveness of personal engagement in a participatory experience may well come at a price. The ascription of authenticity to the reality we experience is, of course, not equivalent to reality as it is experienced by others. However, once conflated, the promise of an unattainable Experience in explicitly participatory and immersive contexts is especially prone to be mistaken for a knowable reality and reduced to a consumable product for an audience's delectation.

Postscript

66 Minutes in Damascus culminated in an audience member being selected for torture in a room cluttered with what I assumed to be appropriate accoutrements, an assumption primarily derived from Hollywood (blowtorch, battery and crocodile clips, barbed wire, pliers and so on). She turned out to be a friend of another audience member (or, at least, the audience is led to believe that this is the case). When asked to leave, leaving that friend alone with the guards in that torture chamber, the friend said: 'I'm not leaving. I'm not leaving without my friend'. The others promptly left, but I was interested in this provocation. If we really were to buy into the truth of the make-believe, as it was framed in this performance, then it seemed only right to stay. 'I'm with her', I said. 'I'm not going either'.

At this point, the machinery of the theatre appeared to break down – to borrow vivid phrasing from Nicholas Ridout – because our refusal to leave gave rise to a kind of infection,

detrimentally impacting on the truth of the make-believe (Ridout, 168). The truthful fiction of the immersive world fell apart, stripping the representational functions of the props and muddying the characters of both performers and audience. It was only on our slightly disappointed acquisition to the demands of the guard that the motor of representation jerked back into some form of life, but by this point we had lost the others and were left to wander the corridors of the building alone – not as characters, at least for me, but as confused and disappointed cultural consumers. Had we been explicitly addressed as *audiences* after our resistance to the performance, then perhaps the performance might have usefully accommodated this productive fracturing of a promised Experience. But we were swiftly interpolated back in role and, in that interpolation, the performance attempted to plaster over and ignore the disruption. A rather startled guard stumbled across us, forced us against a wall and hurried off to enquire as to why we were ambling through the space on our own. He must have taken pity on our sorry attempt at subversion, for, on his return, we were fumbled back into the supervising officer's office, joining the rest of our cohort. As it turned out, we were all free to go.

Immersive theatre thrives on the participation of audiences within a fictional world that aims to envelop them. However, as with the theatre more generally, it is also prone to that fiction breaking down and with that collapse, I suggest, falls the façade of authenticity from the interface between an experiencing subject and an environment invested with authenticity. In most circumstances, our participatory disobedience would be unhelpful, unrewarding, unfulfilling and an unnecessary nuisance to the performers and other audience members. In this circumstance, however, it seemed a justifiable course of action. In the attempt to instrumentalize emotional experience, as an awareness provider, it seemed fair to ask: why not play the game and act *as if* the experience were real and *as if* we had the capacity to resist the future atrocity that presented itself to us? Why not try to act on the

authentic as a means of accessing the real? Once spurred to action, the pretence was inevitably revealed as pretence and our 'authentic' experiences were left floundering in a confused scurry towards freedom. Our participatory efforts to co-make-believe brought the promise of an authentic Experience crashing down into the ruins of a broken fictional world. This aroused sympathy for the performers, whose labour we had inadvertently mocked, but none for the characters, because they no longer existed as something to invest belief within. The stage of our experience platform had cracked, together with any hope of owning, of possessing, an experience which was not ours to possess.

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