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Really Sell It To Me: Immersive Theatre as Ideal Commodity

By Kelsey Laine Jacobson

Abstract

This article considers the multi-sensory, experiential nature of immersive performance through the lens of consumer value perception. Everything from touching, smelling, moving, seeing, and sometimes even tasting are often included in immersive productions, encapsulating a total experience for audience-consumers. The use of such a variety of sensory modalities creates a highly unique show for each attendee, as it is dependent on individual perception and bodily experience. This article suggests that the experience is paradoxically so unrepeatable that it actually encourages attendees to repeat the experience. The variety of sensory modalities used in immersive theatre thus increases its perceived value as a commodity by offering a highly individualized experience that audience members may return night after night for something new. Utilizing theory ranging from Philip Auslander and Peggy Phelan to economists Joseph B. Pine and James Gilmore, it is suggested that immersive productions' unique use of apparent ephemerality, or unrepeatability, induces commodity value.

Really Sell It To Me: Immersive Theatre as Ideal Commodity

By Kelsey Laine Jacobson

In a small, sterile room filled with the overpowering reek of rubbing alcohol, and silent save for the futile rattling of the door handle by others trying to get in, I found myself trapped alone with a strange man. I was exhilarated but not scared. I had, after all, paid – £26.25 to be exact – for this experience: I was in the middle of a highly coveted 1:1 immersive performance in Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man* (2013-14). After locking me in his examination room, the actor playing the Doctor proceeded to remove my mask, whisper urgently in my ear, and kiss my cheek before shoving me out of the room and back into the four-floor immersive set I was exploring, alongside hundreds of other paying ticket holders. The growth in popularity of companies like Punchdrunk who use immersivity as a core tenet of their productions reflects a wider trend toward the commercialization of experience: the desire of consumers, theatre audiences included, to capture a full sensory and affective experience as a commodity. This is not to say that immersive theatre is inherently commercial, but rather to suggest that it is fulfilling a particular consumer desire insofar as it is already entrenched within the neoliberal economic system. Rather than purchase a ticket for a stationary seat in a darkened auditorium, immersive theatre points to a desire for a material experience that involves active participation and sensory activation. Part of the draw of groups like Punchdrunk, with its now familiar immersive style of show (*The Masque of Red Death*, *Sleep No More*, *The Drowned Man*), is that the use of a highly sensory, material experience imbues their productions with authenticity, realness, and liveness: qualities assigned value in a society of

ever increasing reproduction.¹ These characteristics seem, at their core, to subvert commodification since, following the theories of Walter Benjamin and Peggy Phelan, economic commodities may be identified as un-auratic, reproducible, and standardized, or, in other words, far from the unique sensory experiences that Punchdrunk orchestrates. I suggest, however, that immersive theatre's use of sensual materiality actually paradoxically serves to create a more economically valuable and marketable experience. By using a total sensory experience that invokes a sense of the authentic, real, and live, immersive theatre actually allows for the creation of simultaneously one-of-a-kind and repeatable experiences that capitalize on commodification and allow for great commercial, and perhaps artistic, success.

As suggested by the opening anecdote from a performance of *The Drowned Man*, everything from touching and being touched, smelling, moving, seeing, and sometimes tasting are included in immersive performance, activating a kind of Artaudian "total anatomy" (Artaud 86-7). In light of this multi-sensory experience, the usual terms "audience" or "spectator" seem insufficient for immersive theatre: the words are single sense descriptors, privileging either the auditory or visual, while immersive theatre demands the engagement of the whole body. Josephine Machon, in particular, states that while conventional performance typically prioritizes visual spectacle or auditory quality, the priority placed on the olfactory, aural, and tactile is one of the clear distinctions of immersive theatre. In *The Drowned Man*, for instance, audiences were able to explore four floors of a massive former Royal Mail sorting facility, a total of

¹ See, for instance, Carol Martin's *Dramaturgy of the Real World Onstage* and *Theatre of the Real*, in which she suggests that a trend toward theatre of the real has developed in response to a society of ever-increasing technological capability and the "mediatization of everyday life" (2), and points to a surge in popularity of what she terms theatre of the real: works that incorporate some aspect of perceived realness in content, frame, or effect, including site-specific, verbatim, non-actor, and also applied theatre (3).

more than 100 rooms representing everything from a trailer park, to a psychiatric ward, to sand dunes. As an audience member in the show, you were free to follow characters loosely enacting Buchner's 1837 *Woyzeck*, or wander independently and investigate anything that came across your path, from bundles of letters to bottles of tequila using any or all of your five senses. Elinor Fuchs similarly posits the necessary acknowledgement of the full-body quality of immersive theatre: "In the conventional theatre I am 'audience' or 'spectator', all ears or all eyes, and otherwise cut off from the full response of my body. But *Tamara* [an immersive theatre show] wants my body" (132). Perhaps, then, the term "consumer" is more appropriate than "audience" or "spectator" when it comes to immersive theatre: audiences have an ineffaceable effect on the performance as they touch, take, feel, smell, taste, see, hear, and move around the immersive environment, sometimes literally consuming the materials of the set. In this way, immersive theatre both acts on the body vis a vis the senses and is acted upon by the bodies of the audience members as they *consume* and experience it through all the senses.

Machon suggests that the result of this total sensory immersion is to create a kind of (syn)aesthetic experience in which audiences can understand a performance through the body, rather than solely through the mind: "Wrapped up in a (syn)aesthetic response is the notion that the body is the sentient conduit for the appreciation of artistic work in general, and immersive performance in particular" (105). The potential of the body to enable appreciation or understanding of an artwork as a 'sentient conduit' is, in fact, further supported by cognitive theories of perception. The standard cognitive science definition that "Perception is the set of processes by which we recognize, organize, and make sense of the sensations we receive from environmental stimuli," (Sternberg and Sternberg 85) is a denotation that in and of itself seems to echo ideas of

distinct bodily and cognitive means of understanding, as sensations must be first 'received' by the body and then 'reorganized' or made sense of in the mind, in two distinct steps. At a conceptual level, cognitive processes of 'making sense' may be further envisaged through bottom-up theories that "describe approaches where perception starts with the stimuli whose appearance you take in through your eye [...and] are data-driven," or through top-down theories that posit that "perception is driven by high-level cognitive processes, existing knowledge, and the prior expectations that influence perception" (Sternberg and Sternberg 96). Fittingly, Machon and Stephen Di Benedetto suggest that such "foreground[ing of] the sensuous matter of the human body" (Machon 36) is a key feature of immersive performance and its invocation of body-based perception. Machon writes that immersive theatre:

Emphasize[s] the human capacity for perception, which shifts between realms: between the sensual and intellectual; between the literal and lateral. These realms are defined by their outcomes for each individual, distinguishable by a *felt* appreciation of 'making sense' in a semantic and cerebral fashion and '*sense-making*', understanding through somatic, embodied perception via *feeling* (both sensory and emotional) created in performance. (104)

Just as the aforementioned cognitive science definition of perception separates the process of perception into both top-down and bottom-up pathways, Machon clearly points to differences between top-down 'making-sense' semantically and cerebrally, and bottom-up "sense-making" modes of perception through embodied and somatic means, to point to immersive theatre's uniquely emphatic incitement of perception that is foregrounded through the body. The use of bodily sensation, she writes, "has the capacity to invoke a whole repertoire of emotions allowing audience-immersants to understand themes and narratives in a

direct and affective manner,” such that, by preferring the somatic, immersive theatre utilizes a kind of natural bottom-up system of processing that emphasizes the corporeal over the cerebral in perception (Machon 77). Di Benedetto echoes this, writing that “Artists who harness more than our eyes and ears encourage us to wake up, to be alert to the world around us, and to interact actively with the objects and creatures around us. It is an invitation to live, to feel, and to be part of a larger community” (134). In particular, it is worth noting that he highlights the word “live” in his argument for sensory-based processing. If the method of experiencing immersive theatre (through bodily sensation in a bottom-up process) is fundamentally the same as the way in which a person’s body perceives the live, real world, as the similarity of the above scientific and theatrical descriptions of perception would suggest, then a sense of liveness or realness orchestrated by the activation of sensory somatic perception in immersive performance certainly seems resultant. In a conventional theatre production we may see and hear the playworld, but we are not “inside” it; in immersive theatre, we experience a simulated totality of experience in which we are able “to live, to feel, and to be part” as Di Benedetto describes (134). This a constructed liveness that points not just to ephemerality or lack of technological mediation, but a liveness achieved through a mirroring of real and theatrical perceptual systems that make use of full-body experience, such that any distinction between the two is negligible (if even present at all).

This connection between a sense of liveness and the invocation of sensory perception may be traced through several performance theorists. In his frustration with theatrical practice that allows for a passive and disengaged spectator, Jacques Derrida explains Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty as being “not a *representation*” but “life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable” (Derrida 234). Artaud too, then, sees a connection

between the invocation of the bodily senses and real life or liveness through his sensory- and reality-based Theatre of Cruelty. Rather than representing something using signs, textual or otherwise, that must be analyzed intellectually, Artaud desires some more immediate method of communication that bypasses representation and instead uses the real, live things. Punchdrunk, fittingly, uses real rubbing alcohol to scent its rooms² and real booze in its bar, invoking ostensibly real sensory experience through the use of real materials. Artaud writes of the importance of this kind of thorough sensory materiality to create a 'real' experience: "We want to make out of the theatre a believable reality which gives the heart and the senses that kind of concrete bit which all true sensation requires" (85). In this way, making immersive theatre feel live and/or real seems to be a clear effect of its use of sensory activation.

Elinor Fuchs further argues for a connection between liveness and sensuality by pointing to Elaine Scarry's explication of the word "presence," highlighting its etymological roots in *prae-sens* or "that which stands before the senses" (Scarry 197). Machon reinforces this idea by highlighting the resultant ephemerality of immersive theatre: "What is clear is that the sensual worlds created exploit the power of live performance. Immersive practice harnesses the lasting ephemerality of performance as an artistic medium of expression" (43). Liveness, after all, is one of the core qualities of performance as an art form according to Peggy Phelan who writes: "Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance" (146). By utilizing an intensely sensory experience, immersive theatre seems unequivocally

² I participated as a student scenographic designer in Punchdrunk's Design Masterclass, and this information comes from conversations during this experience.

live and ephemeral. After all, as audience members, people are really running, touching, eating, and smelling: basic bodily functions that cannot but occur in real time. Each distinct sensory moment is fleeting and unique such that even if you were to exactly retrace your steps, it would be a slightly different experience. For Phelan, this is where performance's power lies: in its refusal to be repeatable, such that "Performance's independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically is its greatest strength" (149). She suggests an element of ontological impossibility in something being both live performance and repeatable, even invoking economic terminology to point to performance's separation from it: "Performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation... Performance resists the balanced circulations of finance. It saves nothing; it only spends" (Phelan 148). If immersive theatre is indeed a uniquely consumable, live, sensory experience, it seems undeniable that it lasts only momentarily and cannot be repeated.

The popularity of repeat visits to Punchdrunk productions (bloggers online describe upwards of seventeen trips to *The Drowned Man*,³ and Jeremy Barker cites a superfan in his article who has attended Punchdrunk's New York hit *Sleep No More* thirty-seven⁴), however, challenges the idea of liveness and reproducibility as being mutually exclusive. Despite its liveness, as cultivated by the use of a subjective sensory experience, consumers buy "reproductions" of their original experience and attend the ostensibly same event multiple times. In this way, the highly individualized, live, sensory-based experience is perplexingly also a repeatable commodity that is enduring and long-

³ See for instance, Gail Bishop's blog <https://gailebishop.wordpress.com/tag/drowned-man/> and *At the Gates Guarded by the Horses* <http://templestudios.tumblr.com/post/65913090844/trust-me-ninth-journey>

⁴ The blogger superfan he describes operates the tumblr blog *They Have Scorched the Snake...but not killed it, bitches!* <http://scorchedthesnake.tumblr.com>

running: *The Drowned Man*, for instance, ran for more than a year, and *Sleep No More* has been running since 2011. In fact, the means by which immersive theatre is able to create a kind of ephemeral, live experience may paradoxically be the same means by which it becomes a reproducible experience. For instance, though the experience is unequivocally live, the use of body sensation also cultivates a more lasting experience through strong embodied memory. Machon writes: “the live performance of the work is fleeting and only of the moment, never to be repeated in any form, yet it also lasts in the receiver’s embodied memory of the event,” (44) suggesting that immersive theatre is both ephemeral and enduring. Further evidence of this may be taken from immersive theatre’s aforementioned regular activation of the olfactory system through the use of specific scents, such as the smell of rubbing alcohol in the doctor’s office. Scent is the sense most strongly tied to memory, and immersive theatre’s unique use of this sense and its connection to the limbic system facilitates the creation of strong embodied memories by connecting the somatic and cerebral (Machon 77). “Interpretation triggered by smell, taste or touch in particular is therefore affective and experiential, semantic sense (cerebral meaning-making) cannot be dissociated from somatic *sense* (embodied *feeling*)” (Machon 285) such that the use of smell, taste, and touch in immersive theatre allows for the creation of enduring memories that live on in the audience’s mind potentially even longer than non-immersive performance, paradoxically creating a long-lasting experience simultaneous to its ephemerality.

Furthermore, crafting subjective sensory experience in immersive theatre creates a highly unique experience for each audience member that is paradoxically so unrepeatably that it actually encourages attendees to repeat the experience. In other words, since every second of the experience for every single individual attendee is inherently unique, being

dependent on several uncontrollable factors ranging from their myriad individual choices in exploring the set, compounded by the same myriad choices afforded to all the other audience members present, the performance is completely unrepeatable, even if the same audience member attended every performance in the entire run. This absolute unrepeatability draws audiences back to the show in order to experience that which they did not get to in their first visit without the risk of boredom through repetition. Immersive theatre's invocation of a sense of liveness, then, as created through its reliance on sensory experience actually imbues rather than deprives, as Phelan suggests the experience with commodifiable value: it entices audiences to return again and again. Rather than liveness being a means to resist the "balanced circulations of finance" Phelan describes, the liveness of immersive theatre performance is actually poised to take full advantage of systems of financial circulation. Immersive theatre manages to create a kind of repeatable liveness, being both ephemeral and preserved in embodied memory, and both one-of-a-kind and repeatable over a run. Intriguingly, then, immersive theatre commodifies the very aspects of live performance that are said to resist commodification: Elinor Fuchs states that "Because [immersive theatre events] are designed to offer a different experience at each visit, they can be merchandised as events that must be purchased over and over again: the ostensible evanescence and non-repeatability of the live experience ironically become selling points to promote a product that must be fundamentally the same in each of its instantiations" (52). To quote Phelan's phrase again, though "Performance's independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically is its greatest strength" (Phelan 149), Punchdrunk's immersive theatre seems to have lighted upon an almost infinitely reproducible model that has

audiences returning again and again not in spite of, but for exactly that: mass re-productions.

Following the argument that immersive theatre has the potential to be both ephemeral and enduring, one can further destabilize conceptions of liveness beyond Fuchs' insights by suggesting that immersive theatre's sense of the "live" is not ontologically intrinsic to the work of art, but largely cultivated, like an aestheticized realness. Martin Barker, for instance, suggests that the valorization of the spontaneity of live theatre is more affective than actual (28). This is simply to say that audiences want to experience theatrical events "*as if* they had elements of uniqueness" (28) even if the actual variations between performances are miniscule and free of consequence. My 1:1 experience felt extremely special in the moment because the doctor had to pick me out from a group of masked audience members and then respond to my unique presence and conversation. However, this 1:1 experience is repeated not only every night the show plays, but multiple times during the same night, as the show operates on a system of performance "loops" in which characters have a series of scenes they perform over and over again in the same order. The doctor also follows a prescribed script every single time, and must stick to a very strict timeline in order to stay on the "loop". This means my unique, special experience was actually one that was been repeated hundreds of times over the course of the run to hundreds of people. The feeling of unique privilege and liveness I experienced was not really accurate; instead it was a carefully cultivated aestheticization in which the appearance of uniqueness was reinforced through the use of the physical exclusivity of a locked door preventing others from coming in, and the perceived spontaneity of my unscripted responses. Aesthetic frame, in this case, created the impression that the content of the experience was one-of-a-kind.

This example points to liveness not necessarily as a product of ontological or intrinsic being, as Peggy Phelan suggests, but as an affective quality, with the potential to be extrinsically crafted. Philip Auslander accordingly writes that: “The emerging definition of liveness may be built primarily around the audience’s affective experience. To the extent that websites and other virtual entities respond to us in real time, they *feel* live to us, and this may be the kind of liveness we now value” (62). Following this, it may be argued that Punchdrunk’s shows utilize liveness not necessarily in a denotative sense, but affectively by making shows *feel* live and thus authentically unique and real. Steven Connor similarly states, “In the case of ‘live’ performance, the desire for originality is a secondary effect of various forms of reproduction. The intense ‘reality’ of the performance is not something that lies behind the particulars of the setting, the technology and the audience; its reality consists in all of that apparatus of representation” (153). In other words, the realness or liveness is an aesthetic: all the sensory details of Punchdrunk make it feel more real than it may actually be. The rubbing alcohol scent is not the result of the doctor character actually performing medical procedures, but was sprayed into the room shortly before the performance by a volunteer and checked by a designer to ensure its accuracy and standardization. Resultantly, Punchdrunk’s liveness becomes repeatable and reproducible: the live and real qualities of the show are really just “performances” of the real and live, aesthetic tactics and a specific frame that create a sense of unique, real experience. In fact, one may even go so far as to invert Walter Benjamin’s core tenet that authenticity produces aura, and argue instead that in this case, aura produces authenticity. This cultivated, constructed, and ultimately reproducible liveness of immersive theatre experiences suggests the potent power of sensory experience to incite qualities of

liveness and, contrary to Peggy Phelan, questions how fundamental qualities of ephemerality really are to performance.

Furthering this argument, Auslander troubles the idea of liveness by connecting it not to intrinsic ontological qualities, but to external materiality, suggesting that when it comes to materials, there is little distinction between recorded television and live performance: “The televisual image is always simultaneously coming into being and vanishing; there is no point at which it is fully present ... At the electronic level, the televisual image is hardly a petrified remnant of some other event ... but exists rather as a lively, and forever unresolved, process” (48-9). Most importantly, in terms of the senses, there is “no sensuous distinction between the live and the repeat or replay” (Cavell 86). Auslander continues on: “The tape that I initially placed in my VCR or audio player started disappearing the moment I began watching it or listening” (49) through the natural processes of deterioration that commodities are subject to, as when a tape wears away, gets scratched, or breaks completely. “Since tapes, films, and other recording media deteriorate over time and with each use, they are physically different objects at each playing” (Auslander 49), making each and every instance of reproduction distinct, even if imperceptibly so. To the extent that material commodities degrade over time, Auslander suggests that just like performance’s ephemerality, “In a very literal, material sense, televisual and other technical reproductions, like live performances, become themselves through disappearance” (50). His argument, then, centers on the material as indicative of the ephemerality or liveness of the artwork, regardless of whether it is the body in performance art or the DVD of a recorded television show.

Turning to immersive theatre, it clearly plays into such conceptions of liveness by being almost entirely reliant on the material: audiences are

able to touch, taste, smell, hear, and see any number of objects, settings, and bodies, and these sensory possibilities are what define it as immersive. The design of Punchdrunk specifically prioritizes detailed props and sets, pointing to the dependency of immersive theatre on materiality for its activation of the senses and the resultant suggestion of liveness. Despite Auslander's argument that the material disappears and is irreproducible in both live and recorded performance, there is, however, a degree of reproducibility in Punchdrunk's shows: if materials are moved or stolen, they are reset or replaced rapidly. One blogger, for instance, noted a time when she thought an actor was unable to find a prop he needed for a scene. In that particular moment, a very real, unique event occurred, outside of the normative reproduction: a mistake. By the next "loop" within the same night, however, she notes that the prop was there ("Trust Me"). Materiality, therefore, is an unstable marker of liveness. Despite the argument suggesting that materiality can indicate ephemerality through its natural degradation, even materials can be "reproduced" within the context of performance to a standardized degree. To explicate, one of the scenographic designers of *The Drowned Man* described the necessity of having a stockpile of identical plastic toy horses in stock, as they were continually stolen. Though audience members may see only one such plastic horse and imagine its presence through hundreds of shows, it may in fact be a replacement of a replacement of a replacement. Punchdrunk's materiality, then, contributes to its invocation of a sense of liveness, but also is still at its core a repeatable, reproducible event. While conventional theatre is often able to achieve the same reproducibility, it is immersive theatre's unique degree of activation of bodily sensation in audiences and its attendant curating of an affective liveness and realness that marks its ability to reproduce as unique. Fittingly, Auslander points to the "reductive binary opposition of the live and the mediatized" (3) and I concur that a

simple binary between the one-of-a-kind and the reproducible is impossible: if the material can be both disappeared through use and reappeared through replacement, distinctions between the live and the mediatized seem unstable.

As noted above, Phelan suggests that liveness is the quality that allows performance to resist commodification: “to the degree that live performance attempts to enter into the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology” (146). However, rather than resist the prevailing authority of neoliberal economic systems, the sensory dependence of immersive theatre actually reinforces economic trends. Immersive theatre is clearly connected to economics, simply by virtue of requiring monetary capital for its functioning within the overarching, omnipresent economic paradigm of the 21st century. Auslander sums that “It is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media” (45). Rather, the utter dependency of theatre on commodification and economics is an enduring and pervasive effect of functioning in contemporary society, in which Barabara Kruger suggests the most fitting mantra is “I shop therefore I am” (Kruger). Sean Cubbitt similarly posits, “in our period of history, and in our Western societies, there is no performance that is not always already a commodity” (283-4). Though Cubbitt and Auslander seem to agree that theatre is irrevocably a kind of commodity, Hans-Thies Lehmann troubles a simplified relation between theatre and economics by pointing to the challenges faced by theatre in competitive capital markets: “the cultural ‘sector’ increasingly falls prey to the laws of marketability and profitability, and here an additional disadvantage becomes apparent: theatre does not produce a tangible object which may enter into circulation as a marketable commodity, such as a video, a film, a disc, or even a book” (16). His

suggestion that theatre lacks the tangible, as typically ephemeral performance does, makes clear how immersive theatre may be able to somewhat subvert this perceived detriment. By engaging with all the senses, and in some cases even providing a very physical takeaway (as in the aforementioned mysterious disappearance of several model horses from the set of *The Drowned Man*) and the discussion of self-procured souvenirs ranging from handkerchiefs to “a mason jar of tissues that various Hecates and a few Boy Witches have handed to him over the last two years” on the tumblr blog about *Sleep No More, The Bloody Business* (“Anonymous Asked”), immersive theatre offers a sensual tangibility that conventional performance does not. In what Elinor Fuchs calls “shopping theatre” in her chapter on immersive performance, “the real, material object becomes important, not so much to cling to realism as a form, as to guarantee the tangible value, the ‘real goods’ of the spectacle” (135). With immersive theatre being a form almost entirely predicated on sensual materiality, it provides the tangible, “real goods” desired by consumers and thus sidesteps the challenge faced by typically fleeting, ephemeral theatre productions.

Admittedly, the sensual materiality of immersive theatre is not really a typical tangible commodity in the same way a DVD or book is, but economists B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore suggest that consumer desire has since moved on. They argue that ideal commodification is no longer tied to such physical takeaway objects, but rather to full sensory experiences, actually making immersive experiences even more attractive than a book or cassette to modern audiences. In fact, Pine and Gilmore’s Experience Economy actually replaces tangible objects altogether, substituting the term “commodity” with “experience,” which happens to be exactly what immersive theatre offers. Interesting, too, is that Pine and Gilmore posit that the typical “method of supply” of the Experience

Economy is “revealed over duration”, while the “factors of demand” are “sensations” (6) as opposed to, for example, the traditional Commodity Market being characterized by “storage in bulk” and “characteristics” for those two categories, respectively. Pine and Gilmore’s pinpointing of the importance of duration and sensation in their classification of the Experience Economy is even further indicative of the aptitude of immersive theatre for commercialization; as previously argued in this paper, duration and sensation are key characteristics of immersive theatre and its ability to craft what feels like a live, instantaneous experience. Rather than finding the commodification or commercialization of the immersive theatre experience a detriment or defection away from performance, as Phelan seems to warn, it may in fact have the potential to enhance its valuation and offer perceived “added value,” at least commercially.

Philip Auslander defines the cultural economy, following Adorno’s cultural industry, as “both the real economic relations among cultural forms, and the relative degrees of cultural prestige and power enjoyed by different forms” (1). Accordingly, in addition to the potential extra “real” economic value offered by immersive theatre following the postulations of the Experience Economy, immersive theatre’s specific form also enjoys an arguably greater degree of perceived cultural value and prestige than non-immersive performance. Its predication on a unique but also repeatable experience, for instance, creates a highly valuable commodity that is effectively always personalized: “The non-reproducible element comes largely from the consumer narcissistically investing their own personality and desire. The reflection appears unique to each participant, but the mirror remains much the same” (Alston 131). Or, as Auslander puts it “the ostensible evanescence and non-repeatability of the live experience ironically become selling points to promote a product that must be

fundamentally the same in each of its instantiations. The promise of having a different experience at each attendance at an interactive play is meaningful only if each is clearly recognizable as a different experience of the same, essentially static, object” (Auslander 53). Thus, even if Phelan believes a performance can escape commodification if it is ephemeral, it is actually this quality of being inherently different on every return visit that increases immersive theatre’s perceived cultural capital: “The less an event leaves behind in the way of artifacts and documentation, the more symbolic capital accrues to those who were in attendance” (Auslander 67). By putting its non-repeatability literally centre stage, immersive theatre actually accrues greater symbolic value and prestige.

Of course, the situating of immersive theatre within an economy of neoliberal principles affects the form of the art work itself: Alston articulates the ways in which immersive theatre can be co-opted by a neoliberal agenda that privileges those artists and audiences who are the most fulfilling of the neoliberal tenets of individualism, entrepreneurialism, and self-interest. For instance, the National Theatre’s introductory page to *The Drowned Man* states: “Your curiosity is key. The more you explore, the richer your experience will be. Delve in, be bold, and immerse yourself,” clearly prioritizing autonomous exploration and placing the onus of ensuring a positive experience not on the artwork, but on the consumer. There are elements of independence (it is suggested via email before you attend that you should not try to stay with those you entered with, and during the initial elevator ride only a few audience members are let out at each floor, effectively separating couples and groups), as well as choice and its resultant stakes (if you explore this room, will you see a key scene, find a hidden clue, or end up far from the action?). Many bloggers also describe their desire to score a 1:1 experience: “I was dressed in lace, and one of my fellow Execs gave my

dress a once over and remarked, ‘If you want to be molested by Claude, I’d say tonight’s the night’” and strategize accordingly to make it happen “Which, as you’ll see in my next post, is precisely what I set about doing” (Beret). While for me, as a first time visitor, it was entirely by chance that I experienced a 1:1 performance in what felt like an equivalence of opportunity for all audience members present, “The opportunity to exploit this selection process ... [exists, as] those with enough experience... of Punchdrunk’s work are more likely to be ahead of the game when it comes to exploiting participatory opportunity (Alston 133). This is perhaps why I experienced people being fairly aggressive in Punchdrunk; between the liberation-effect of being masked into anonymity, and the desire to “win” a 1:1 experience or the best sightline to watch a scene, audience members were encouraged to be “in it for themselves.” Though the ideal of the neoliberal society may follow a belief in equal opportunity, the reality of the power of money meant that in *The Drowned Man* you could pay more for privileged access to the “Drafting Room” where a character would direct you to go to areas where more exciting action was taking place. In this way, Punchdrunk productions can use a visceral, sense-based, live experience not to undermine or resist dominant economies, but to fully adhere to and even reinforce neoliberal principles.

If, as Auslander suggests, the markers of media are “mass audience, reproduction, and repetition” while live performance is “identified with intimacy and disappearance” (46), Punchdrunk’s immersive shows somehow manage to straddle these antithetical ideas to produce commodities that can be characterized by all of the above terms. Their immersive shows run for years and attract mass audiences, reaching, though not the equivalent of television audiences, still a far from selective group. They incorporate, at the same time, moments of intense intimacy like 1:1s. Furthermore, the experiences are unique and disappear, never to

be reproduced exactly the same yet are also repeated over and over not only on subsequent nights but within the same night, as the entire premise is built upon highly regulated, highly controlled and reproducible loops. Punchdrunk is also both an art work and a kind of highly successful commercial product, imbricated even further in neoliberal economics following their promotion of Stella Artois beer in *The Night Chaffeur* (2010), Playstation 3 in 2011, and Absolut Vodka in *Silverpoint* (2015) and becoming, essentially, a franchise-able commodity. The name Punchdrunk has become synonymous with a certain working style and set of expectations: it is branding at its strongest, echoing what Auslander suggests is the possibility of performance of becoming “mass-produced” (51). Auslander resultantly writes that there exists a lack of differentiation between the mediatized and the live, in that “all performance modes, live or mediatized, are now equal: none is perceived as auratic or authentic; the live performance is just one more reproduction of a given text or one more reproducible text” (55). Fittingly, *The Drowned Man* is set in old Hollywood, such that it playfully suggests the “*perform[ance of]* the inscription of mediatization within the immediate” (Auslander 57), as it highlights the reproductive capabilities of film within the immediate immersive experience.

Walter Benjamin writes that, in the hunger for reproductions, objects lose their aura: “To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose ‘sense of the universal equality of all things’ has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction” (32), and though Auslander agrees that no performance, whether mediatized or live, can be perceived as auratic anymore, I suggest, conversely, that in the case of Punchdrunk’s immersive theatre productions (and reproductions), it is in fact the opposite: its equivalent reproductions are *all* perceived as auratic and

authentic experiences. Punchdrunk's intense activation of the senses creates affectively, if not accurately, live experiences that gain increased perceived value through their simultaneous uniqueness and repeatability. The immersive experience feels unique, live, and auratic, even while it holds the power of repeatability, making it both a highly valued artistic and commercial commodity.

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