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It's All about You: Immersive Theatre and Social Networking

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Abstract: Since the millennium, immersive theatre has developed and emerged into the mainstream, with companies like Punchdrunk enjoying immense popular success. This shift in the theatre world has corresponded to significant changes in technology. Alongside the advent of Google and the entrance of video gaming into the wider public consciousness, the popularity of social networking has proved such that it has quickly become an intrinsic part of many people's everyday lives. Currently almost a billion people, one-seventh of the world's population, log into Facebook daily, and that figure is rising. As the time spent on social media escalates, it inevitably impacts on how we think, behave and communicate, with effects reaching far beyond the self to every corner of our lives, theatre included. Building on theories recently presented by neuroscientist Susan Greenfield, this paper considers the relationship between social networking and mind change in theatre audiences. In particular, it focuses on how changing patterns in our communication and relationships with others, and in our construction of identity and sense of self, have brought about corresponding changes in what we want as audience members, and in the context of supply and demand, have responded to and shaped immersive theatre.

Keywords: immersive theatre, social networking, Facebook, audience

If you place a human brain in an environment where there is no obviously linear

sequence, where facts can be accessed at random, where the gap between stimulus

and response is minimal, and where time is short, then your train-of-thought could be

derailed. Add in the sensory distractions of an all-encompassing audio-visual and you

might become, as it were, a computer yourself: a system responding efficiently and

processing information very well, but devoid of deeper thought. (Greenfield 12)

Advances in digital and cellular technology have transformed the way we live. From working and learning to shopping, socializing and playing games, there is now little that cannot be done through our mobile phones or computers. Supply and demand go hand in hand, and the rate at which technology is being developed is rivalled by the all-encompassing nature of its use. Europeans typically now spend more time in front of a screen each day than they do asleep, and as much time communicating electronically as face-to-face. Inevitably, this is impacting on how we think, behave and communicate, with the effects reaching far beyond the self to all corners of our lives, culture included.

Since the beginning of the millennium, arguably the biggest single shift in the theatre world has been the emergence and popular embrace of immersive theatre. A widely employed term, immersive theatre is nevertheless largely accepted as describing a form of experiential performance in which mobile audiences are often participants as much as spectators, and physically plunged into the world of the play, itself realized in the form of an installation or through being set in an expansive environment.

Associations between the popular acceptance of immersive theatre and technology have not gone unnoticed. Much has been made of its emergence as part of the experience economy and it can be no coincidence that its movement into the mainstream has coincided with the entry of video gaming into the wider public consciousness. Discussion has also

considered the salve immersive theatre offers to a populace craving sentient contact in an age when ever more time is spent in front of a screen. So far less attention has been given to the nature of actual mind change caused by the digital revolution and its role in popularizing and shaping immersive theatre. It is this I wish to explore here.

Before going further, it should be noted that neuroscientist Susan Greenfield bases her argument quoted above on two main principles: that the use of technology is pervasive, and that mind change, while being multifaceted, falls into three main categories. In particular, she aligns search engines with changes to learning and memory, video gaming with issues of attention, aggression and addiction, and social networking with identity and relationships. While acknowledging each of these categories is different and primarily affects different areas, it also needs to be recognized here that none operates in a vacuum and there is inevitable overlap in their workings and impact. For reasons of clarity and space, this article focuses on the relationship between social networking and immersive theatre.

The discussion encompasses immersive theatre as a trend in general. With regard to the contested nature of the term, however, consideration will be limited to works that fit the criteria noted earlier. In particular, discussion is conducted through the lens of three specific productions from Britain, chosen to provide a cross-section of audience experience: Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* (2013), chosen because of the production's structural narrative and audience configuration, as well as its popular success; Kate Bond and Morgan Lloyd's *You Me Bum Bum Train* (hereafter *YMBBT*) (2004), included for the singularity of its cast-audience ratio and the way it reflects growing levels of narcissism and changes in identity; and Blast Theory's *Rider Spoke* (2007), included in relation to its reflections on self-disclosure and human interaction.

In *Immersive Theatres*, Josephine Machon notes that all the practitioners she talked to agreed on one thing: that the increasing appeal of immersive theatre related to a desire

amongst audiences for sentient contact, often with other humans as much as the works themselves (25). One of the hallmarks of the digital age is increased loneliness, with rises most significant amongst younger age groups. The Mental Health Foundation recently reported that for the first time, more 18-34 year olds felt lonely than the traditionally most-at-risk group of over-55s (see Mental Health Foundation).

Social networking is particularly interesting in this regard since part of its popularity has been credited to the fact we are lonely. Yet as evidence suggests, the more connected we are online, the more isolated we feel. We are, of course, very connected, as the example of Facebook, the world's largest social network, demonstrates. As of 30 June 2015, Facebook claimed 1.49 billion monthly active users, with 968 million logging in daily. 844 million of those typically access the site via their phones or tablet, with the average smartphone user checking-in fourteen times a day. The median Facebook user has 200 friends. Beyond Facebook, China's Qzone has 629 million active monthly users, Google+ 343 million, Instagram 300 million, and Twitter 284 million. In this capacity, a desire for increased sentient contact makes sense.

There is an alternative theory however, which explains the appeal of social networking less in terms of socialising than self-disclosure. Here, being connected is a necessary condition but not the primary allure of the medium. People have an innate need to self-disclose. As a recent Harvard study demonstrated, sharing information about ourselves, as promoted by social networking sites, activates the reward systems in the brain in the same way food and sex do (Tamir and Mitchell 8038-8043). In this study, the need for self-expression proved so great, numerous participants were even willing to give up monetary rewards for the opportunity to talk about themselves. The results also suggested the existence of a cyclical feedback for self-disclosure rewarding and perpetuating the sharing of personal information on a basic biochemical level. Much of the appeal of social networking therefore,

is rooted in a biological drive of which users are largely unaware and find difficult to control voluntarily.

One theory is that the pull may simply be the opportunity to transmit personal information on a previously unparalleled scale; Facebook, Twitter and others offer people easy access to the largest personal audience most have ever had. Another recent study revealed that Facebook members who use the site to collect a large network of virtual friends report greater happiness than those who use it to maintain close, real-life friendships (Manago, Taylor, and Greenfield). Moreover, members claim to derive most satisfaction when considering their network of friends as their own personal audience to whom they transmit unilaterally, as opposed to being involved in mutually reciprocal exchanges or more offline (real-life) relationships within their online networks. Certainly, one concern associated with the pervasive use of social media is its link to growing levels of narcissism. A recent meta-analysis considering data collected from 15,000 American college students over thirty years, confirmed a consistent increase over time (Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing). Significantly, a correlation appeared between participants' birth year and rising narcissism scores, with levels notably accelerating in the last decade, a timeframe that corresponds to the advent of social networking among digital natives. This casts an interesting slant on how we are becoming prone to position ourselves as theatregoers. Adam Alston singles out immersive theatre in particular here, arguing it is narcissistic, "because the experience is all about you, the participant" (130).

At the extreme end of the spectrum, works like *Rider Spoke* rely directly on self-disclosure to function. Blast Theory's piece, which has been presented in numerous places since first premiered at the Barbican, London, lasts one hour during which participants cycle alone around the surrounding streets equipped with game console, GPS and earpiece. It offers audience members the opportunity to stop at moments of choosing and listen to earlier

participants' recorded confessions and in turn gives them the chance to tape their own. Inasmuch as the effective eavesdropping is an inducement in itself, it also serves as a reminder to participants that an unseen audience will be listening to their own confessions soon after. It is also worth noting here that it is not just the performance framework that offers spectators the impression of safety from consequences; when spectators record their thoughts, they do so anonymously and cannot see those who will hear them. If the need for self-disclosure is innate, research has also shown that when communication is conducted without face-to-face contact, excluding visual cues like facial expressions and body language that might make us second guess what we reveal, it leads to a corresponding increase. Social networking obviously encourages this.

As a theatrical event, *Rider Spoke* may be rare in the extent to which it relies on self-disclosure but it is far from unique, as works like Onterend Goed's *Internal* (2009), Retz's *The Trial* (2013), and National Theatre Wales's *Bordergame* (2014), to name a few, demonstrate. The use of self-disclosure, however, is just one of many varied ways immersive theatre is being structured to provide the sense that it is all about you, the audience.

One of the most familiar techniques employed in immersive theatre is to offer spectators agency, or the sense of it at least, by giving them a degree of freedom to navigate the world of the performance, and in so doing, allowing them to create their own unique and personal experience. Punchdrunk, in particular, are renowned for this practice. For *The Drowned Man,* the company transformed four floors of a disused sorting office in Paddington into a 1960s Hollywood film studio and nearby town, and allowed spectators to roam (largely) free, exploring the installation at will. In numerous interviews, artistic director Felix Barrett consistently emphasized the importance of an individual experience, talking about the spectators as directors metaphorically shooting their own individual director's cut of the fictional versions of Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* being performed.

Perhaps the sense of immersive theatre being all about you is most strongly apparent in the pieces catering for audiences of one. Few examples are as extreme as *YMBBT* with its single audience member and cast numbering 200. However, the popularity of what has become known as the one-on-one experience has grown in recent years, giving rise to dedicated theatre festivals such as those at Battersea Arts Centre in 2010 and 2011, which were advertised under the banner of 'Theatre Crafted for You Alone'. Today a few companies like Onterend Goed specialize in the form, while a growing number of others incorporate the opportunity for numerous, shorter one-on-one encounters into their shows.

The one-on-one is an intrinsic part of most Punchdrunk shows, and the opportunity to experience such an encounter is highly sought-after by fans. One-on-ones are exactly what they sound like: private interactions for individual spectators with a single member of the cast. In Punchdrunk shows, typically the actor will acknowledge an individual spectator, lead them to an isolated place, remove their mask and involve them in a few minutes of intense, private interaction. *The Drowned Man* offered sixteen such possible encounters for spectators, ranging from sharing a dram of whisky and being blindfolded, to giving a sponge bath or having your tarot cards read. Punchdrunk's self-titled 'superfans', those who attend shows multiple times and often extend the experience by writing online, regularly note these moments of private interaction as the beginning of their fixation. Hannah Young, administrator of *The Drowned Man* Facebook page, acknowledged that many fans visited the show repeatedly just to collect one-on-ones, helping each other achieve this goal by posting detailed floor plans and multiple spoilers online. As the terms of their Key Holder (subscription) scheme indicate, the company are clearly aware of their value. Basic annual membership of a £30 Valet Key will afford subscribers a newsletter and priority booking, while £250 and a Bow Key offers these and the guarantee of at least one one-on-one experience in the coming year.

The pleasure derived from such encounters invariably ties in with the rise in narcissism and need for agency associated with the burgeoning use of social networking. It also necessarily involves active interaction with a member of the cast. Facebook users may claim they derive most satisfaction from social networking when regarding online friends as their own personal audience, but just knowing they are there is not enough. As Ryan O'Connell commented in *Thought Catalog,* "People forgetting about my existence is what really gets to me. If I went to a party or on a vacation and didn't document it on my Facebook, did it really happen? Does it just chip away at my presence as a human being and force me to wear an invisibility cloak?" Self-disclosure is not an end in itself. We post information about ourselves for people to see, but to confirm the existence of that audience and ensure we do not feel invisible, they need to respond. It is interesting in this context to reflect on the mixed reviews with which *Rider Spoke* was met. Comparative to the one-on-ones just discussed, what was demonstrably missing in Blast Theory's piece was any facility for human interaction that could allow for feedback. While many critics who took part admitted to being intrigued by the piece, in the fifteen reviews consulted for this article, just over half confessed to finding the piece confusing, slow or lacking in stimulation. The solitary nature of the experience was consistently highlighted, but this in itself did not appear to be the main problem. Rather, it became frustrating by virtue of the lack of any coherent response being offered to participants' confessions.

Attention and approval are important. In infancy, caring attention from an adult is needed for survival, and as we grow up, adult approval is one of the most powerful rewards we can receive. They are so important that scientists believe the human growth hormone is actually released in proportion to the amount of caring attention a child receives. Of course, the importance of such recognition does not diminish with age, and unlike in the real world, Facebook and Twitter can always be relied upon to provide an almost instantaneous response

to demands for attention. For the most part, this audience is also an approving one. While there are obviously exceptions, most people active on social networking sites surround themselves with 'friends' who are like them and generally approving of their comments and activities. Those who fail to meet the test are easily screened out.

In contrast to the mixed reviews for *Rider Spoke*, reactions to *YMBBT* have been almost universally positive, so much so that when tickets went on sale for its September 2015 run, they sold out in seconds. In considering the appeal of the production, intense interaction with the cast arguably plays a key role. Audiences in *YMBBT* are assigned an assortment of roles, performing alongside the cast in a series of unconnected scenarios. Because spectators go through one at a time, they are effectively cast as the central player in a performance that has the sense of existing for them alone. Examination of numerous reviews from *YMBBT*'s history reveals that a common concern amongst participants before the show is the stringent role-play requirements that will be demanded of them and for which they cannot prepare. Having been through the experience, many also highlighted the encouragement and positive feedback provided by the cast throughout. No matter what choices a participant made when, for instance, asked to deliver the eulogy at a funeral or give a pep talk to a football team, the cast were always encouraging and responsive. The euphoria participants expressed on exiting the experience is often credited in part to this.

The biochemical cycle of self-disclosure and approval as perpetuated by social networking also has implications for audiences in the way it affects our construction of identity. Just as social technology has made it easier to get attention, or be 'famous', it has equally become increasingly important to do so. Inevitably however, a trade-off is involved, primarily in the form of privacy. Prior to the advent of social technology, privacy was an intrinsic part of the way we formed our sense of identity. Traditionally, we saw ourselves as individual entities, in contact with the outside world but distinct from it, interacting with it

when and how we chose. We had a private internal life of secrets, memories and dreams. This formed a narrative providing us with our own way of linking past, present and future, and an ongoing subjective commentary to mesh past memories and future hopes with the events of each day.

This private storyline is now being opened up to an external audience. Whereas previously we would vary what and how much we revealed to different friends, Facebook users today regularly post personal information that is shared with hundreds of 'friends' at a time, many of whom will respond and shape the internal narrative via rapid-fire feedback. In turn, each of these friends could easily pass that information on to the hundreds on their page. A particular identity, therefore, is arguably no longer just an internal subjective experience. Rather, as a recent report to the UK Government, "Foresight Future Identities", suggested, it is something increasingly constructed externally, and arguably less robust and more volatile (see Government Office for Science), a theory echoed by Larry Rosen in *iDisorder:* "On MySpace for example, you have to write yourself into being: in other words, you have to craft an impression of yourself that stands on its own. Is it the end-all and be-all in developing your sense of self? Of course not. But online expressions are a meaningful by-product of identity formation" (34). This is particularly true given that while people look for approval online, their audience also has the potential to be capricious, judgmental, and not least, to make comparisons.

Social networking sites are tethered to our real lives and do not afford us the anonymity of, say, earlier Internet forums or chat rooms. Inevitably, therefore, the identity we construct for ourselves is mediated through the awareness of how others react to us and the need to adapt our image to present it in the best possible light. In other words, Facebook and its cohorts encourage the realization of sociologist Erving Goffman's 'front-stage' self, where

identity is less a true depiction of our real selves than a deliberately constructed, socially-desirable version of the self to which individuals aspire.

To some degree, this online self is inevitably fictional and psychologists such as Larry Rosen, author of *iDisorder,* believe the pervasive nature of social networking could cause the gap between this idealized front-stage self and the real-life backstage self to grow, leading to increased feelings of disconnection and isolation. One likely outcome is, again, an exaggerated obsession with the self and burgeoning levels of narcissism. In immersive theatre, this returns us to the growing emphasis on the individualized, interactive, responsive experience already discussed. It also raises the question of how this sense of lack and the concern to bridge it affects audience expectations and experience. On a basic level, there is the concern to fill one's life with activities deemed 'Facebook-worthy', a pressure increased by the problem of comparison and the so-called perfect lives of our online friends. Beyond this, immersive theatre can variously offer audiences the chance to temporarily fulfil dreams or become that ideal self in the context of a safe environment.

YMBBT is effectively constructed around this concept, and discussions and reviews by participants tend to linger on the possibilities these weird and wonderful worlds afforded them. In any of the production's various incarnations, one could find oneself chopping vegetables in a restaurant kitchen, lecturing to a gallery on contemporary art, doing an interview in front of paparazzi, leading an exercise class, teaching a hoard of teenagers, taking part in a game show, performing a solo karaoke, riding a bobsleigh, rinsing someone's hair in a salon, interviewing an inmate, or making an important decision about the security of the country as the head of MI5. As Andrew Dickson said:

It felt almost entirely euphoric: a once-in-a-lifetime chance to break the rules and see what you were capable of. […]. For me, the most arresting moment of all – summit of

a lifetime's daydreams – was emerging to find myself in front of a live chamber orchestra, with a baton and a copy of the overture to Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* (if I had my time again, I'd have attacked those woodwind arpeggios near the top with a bit more determination).

The performance framework of a Punchdrunk show is very different, but considered this way, some of the appeal is comparable. Returning to the one-on-ones, the critic Agnès Silvestre noted that when fans of the New York production of *Sleep No More* recounted their experiences online, they went into minute detail, dissecting them to such an extent it reminded her of recalling encounters with a lover. What particularly struck her was that the writers never referred to the character with whom they had the encounter, but only the actor playing the character during that performance. A company member explained this phenomenon in terms of the intimacy and proximity to the performers. These, he believed, allowed the spectator "to project onto those characters a version of themselves they'd like to be: a lover they'd like to have, a life they'd like to live" (Silvestre). Noting the consumer economy in which we live, Silvestre reinterpreted this audience-performer relationship as mirroring that of consumer to advertisement. When reconfigured in the context of social networking, it equally fills the gap between back-stage and front-stage self that Rosen describes.

So far this article has considered how the various impacts of social networking have helped move the focus of spectators inwards, shifting the demands towards the experiencing self with the growing desire for an individual, interactive and endorsing experience. But other elements historically considered a staple of 'traditional' theatre, where the spectator's gaze has necessarily been directed outwards, have also been reconfigured, and it is to these that I would like to turn now and in particular, to the roles of character and narrative.

Greenfield argues, "If you believe that you need to be more beautiful and richer than the next person in order to have significance, and if you see other people also as commodities for enhancing your perceived significance still further, it is inevitably going to affect the level or depth of actual connection you have with other people" (129). If the pervasive nature of social networking impacts on our sense of self, by extension it must also affect our relationship to other people. In the extreme, there is the possibility of others being reduced to a series of ticks in boxes, assigned little independent worth despite constant comparisons. That may indeed be excessive, but numerous recent studies have underlined a general and significant decline in levels of empathy. (See for instance, Konrath. O'Brien and Hsing (2011); Twenge and Foster (2010); Stewart and Bernhardt (2010))

In immersive theatre, it could be argued the role of character has not only shifted, but also been reduced in status. If Aristotle were alive today and assessing immersive theatre for a new *Poetics*, it is unlikely character would still be second in importance. Of the three works in focus here, character in the traditional sense has no place in *Rider Spoke*. *YMBBT*, meanwhile, offers only unconnected sketches in which the cast are merely supporting characters to facilitate the participant's own starring role. They are, in fact, glimpsed so briefly by the audience, there is little time to register them as anything more than a stern security guard or unruly student, and the sum total of character amounts to little more than the occupation assigned as needed for the relevant scenario. Perhaps it is worth noting that the single negative review I came across seemed to allude to this. As Lyn Gardner said, "Once you remove the wow factor, it's heartless stuff, so devoid of any real emotion other than astonishment, that I left feeling not elated, but curiously empty".

Punchdrunk typically base their works on classic tales (*The Drowned Man* on *Woyzeck, Sleep No More* on Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* Goethe's *Faust* and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*), and thus the worlds they create are populated by the fictional

characters that drive these. Within these worlds, however, characters rarely speak and typically suggest what is happening to them through physical performance. Because of the way *The Drowned Man* was geographically mapped out, with itinerant spectators witnessing different scenes in different orders, there was a necessary degree of stereotyping of characters to allow audiences to recognize quickly what they saw. Easy identification was vital, even more so because the number of scenes in which characters would originally have appeared was heavily reduced; in the first two hours of Punchdrunk's three-hour show, many key scenes were variously repeated to increase the number of spectators likely to see them. Almost any scene would serve to illustrate this, but to take one at random: in the rundown town outside Temple Studios there was an Edward Hopper-like bar where, for a time, a lonely woman sang torch songs. As she did so, the bartender chewed hard on a cocktail stick and maintained a studied look of intense brooding. So too did the lone drinker seated at the bar, a drugstore cowboy 'ne'er-do-well' and 'other man' in one of the fictional love triangles. In line with his villainous role, he presented heavy stubble under a cowboy hat tipped forward over his eyes and stared menacingly into his drink.

This is not to say that character, or character depth, are not important. In lieu of complex dialogue that brings out personality and relationships and clearly develops the plot, for instance, Punchdrunk painstakingly construct intricate environments**,** filling them with personal possessions to offer audiences an intimate insight into the complex lives and minds of their characters. The detail of *The Drowned Man* was such that on the walls of the fictional Temple Studios, clipboards displayed the medication of everyone in the Studio, right down to their prescriptions and dosages. The live bodily representation by actors, however, was limited by the verbal constraints and structural configuration of the production. Too much depth or nuance, or too-complicated a character narrative, would simply have been confusing for spectators. Punchdrunk seemed to acknowledge this; in line with most of their shows,

different actors played different roles on different nights and did not actually get a mention in the programme.Of course, character exists in relation to narrative, and it is not simply that where one finds one, one finds the other, but what those terms mean in a particular context. Which leads to the question of social networking and the construction of meaning.

In the 1960s there was a well-known saying in the science community that "thinking is movement confined to the brain". Just as movement is characterized by a chain of connected actions taking place in a particular order, so too is thought. A thought has a beginning, middle and end linked in a linear sequence that operate together in a cause-and-effect chain. This sequence goes to the core of how the brain processes ideas, distinguishing a train of thought from an emotion, which by contrast can be instantaneous, one-off and indiscriminate. Not surprisingly, the same intricate sequencing of cause and effect with its direct and indirect consequences has characterized the conventional narratives that have historically dominated the stage. From Aristotle to the Neoclassical theorists, the consistent argument has been that the more true-to-life and the more effectively and intricately woven, the more absorbing the story. The same standards have been held for character. Complex characters that hold intrinsic significance by virtue of past actions or through their association with others have traditionally been considered well-drawn, more realistic and easier for audiences to relate to.

Conversely, a Facebook identity is implicit rather than explicit. Users may effectively write themselves into being, but rarely is this through long detailed narratives explaining their attitudes or strategies for coping with everyday life. Identity is shown rather than told, revealed in glimpses as users stress their likes and dislikes primarily through brief comments and images that from the outside appear indiscriminately. Thus, if someone posts a picture of a dress without also providing a clear explanation, it is left to their audience of 'friends' to infer what they will. In real life, the dress would likely tie-in to a personal story. Without

context, its significance is open to interpretation, and the dress exists as a fragmented piece of information amongst many other fragmented pieces of information. A user's network of 'friends' is left to read these moments and construct the surrounding narrative.

Similarly, much immersive theatre moves away from imposing meaning, often through removing a clear cause-and-effect narrative. This is by no means to say the linear narrative is obsolete. Game-based immersive theatre where participants are driven by objective is understandably reliant on it. In other cases where narrative is employed, however, it is not always readily apparent, and as with Punchdrunk, the way it is constructed and presented and how that relays into audience experience often reflect parallel changes. As Barrett says, "[t]here are two ways of watching a Punchdrunk performance. Either you can follow one character and treat it as a completely linear show, or you can follow your instincts, treat it as free-form exploration and let the beats of architectural detail lead you" (qtd. in McMullan). The problem with the former is that the physical mapping of Punchdrunk's shows often defies the possibility of linear coherence, something that seems almost deliberate.

In *The Drowned Man*, Punchdrunk presented two fictional narratives running simultaneously. Both were loosely based on *Woyzeck*, Büchner's notably unfinished work, but one was set inside the fictional Hollywood Temple Studios and the other in the dilapidated LA desert town outside it. The two versions were intended to be mirror images of each other, only with the genders reversed. Arguably, this would be confusing enough for an audience even before considering the way the stories were presented. Where there was direction, it was primarily provided by the performers who, in following their narrative paths, invited spectators to go with them. Thus, no two spectators' experience was the same, and rarely did audiences emerge with a clear understanding of the overarching narrative behind

the experience. Typical of comments by visitors was that by Poly Gianniba who said, "if there was a story, I didn't find it".

References to the lack of a coherent narrative in discussions about Punchdrunk are commonplace, but for the most part are presented as observations and not couched in value judgements. If, as social networking encourages, we become used to receiving information out of context and rarely hearing the whole story, and if we think more about our needs while empathizing less with others, then so long as the immersive, sensory experience is spectacular enough and caters to our individual experience, perhaps a coherent narrative is not necessary. In the case of *The Drowned Man,* the production's run was extended twice and ultimately played to over 170,000 people.

Without a clear storyline, the question of how audience interest is maintained for the three-hour performance remains. Gareth White offers one suggestion: "the moment-to-moment 'what happens next' of conventional narratives is replaced by thoughts of 'where is he going' and 'what's in the next room?'" (225). In terms of how the audience is thinking then, the mental driver is the thrill provided by a constant stream of quickly satisfied moments of anticipation. If so, this would parallel the operational design of social networking sites.

Structurally, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr. and the like are designed to appeal to sensations and raw feelings, rather than sustained thought. Behavioural psychologist Susan Weinschenk, author of five books considering computer systems and the user experience, argues that social networking is set up particularly well to trigger the release of dopamine, the brain's feel-good neurotransmitter. Taking her reasons and applying them to *The Drowned Man,* or indeed any major Punchdrunk production, its appeal becomes readily apparent.

Firstly, Weinschenk highlights the importance of the way social networking sites operate chiefly through small bits of information. It is when the brain receives pieces of

information that while not exactly inconclusive, are too modest to satisfy completely, that the dopamine system is most powerfully stimulated. Further, since we are not completely satisfied, the inevitable outcome is a perpetuating cycle as the brain is left craving more. In line with this, *The Drowned Man* is effectively comprised of small bits of information all acting as clues to what is going on. Given that there is always more to see and it is very difficult to piece a Punchdrunk narrative together, audiences are never quite satisfied and continually want more.

Hand in hand with this, Weinschenk notes the pleasure afforded by anticipation. Neuro-imaging studies show higher stimulation from the expectation and unpredictability of a reward than actually receiving one. Just as the possibility that someone has commented on your status on Facebook or Twitter is often more exciting than the actual comment itself, in *The Drowned Man*, the idea of what might be in the next room is often far more stimulating than what is actually there.

Finally, social networking provides easy and almost instant gratification. Particularly now that so many people are accessing their accounts via smartphones, a rapid response is not only likely, but expected. The speed of such reactions, however, calls into question the depth of reflection involved, both in sending and receiving such messages. In *The Drowned Man*, satisfying the question of 'what's in the next room' is quickly and easily achieved without sustained or concerted mental effort. Moreover, as soon as concentration wanes and the threat of boredom ensues, spectators can move on. Those 'addicted' to social networking and who spend a lot of time on Twitter or Facebook inevitably find it difficult to concentrate for periods long enough to, say, make it through a complex three-act linear drama. But, returning to the argument about supply and demand with which I began this article, now there is an ever-increasing number of immersive theatre companies like Punchdrunk around, the whole point is they do not have to.

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