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PAPER

The Encounter with the Real: What Can Complicite's Theatre Performance *The Encounter* Teach Us about the Future of VR Narratives?

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The most recent emergence of relatively inexpensive VR technologies has received an enthusiastic attention from the entertainment industry, visual and multimedia artists, and academia. The world of computer gaming is thriving with the new VR platforms and the number of VR games is multiplying exponentially. Similarly, quite a few research projects have been funded in order to explore the potential of the immersive technologies in disciplines as wide and different as health care, nuclear decommissioning and nonfiction immersive documentaries. Similar to the advent of its various digital predecessors at the end of the last century, the encounter with this highly interactive and immersive technology has stirred up the discussion about the nature of the medium and its relation to its predecessors. A particular interest seems to be placed in the narrative possibilities of the medium. Parallel to this shared enthusiasm, however, one can also easily sense equally shared disappointment with the current state of affairs when it comes to the artistic climaxes delivered in the VR medium. The voices from both the entertainment industry and creative academia are clearly dissatisfied with the rather rudimentary narratives presented in the most of VR games, as well as more artistically ambitious immersive experiences. The medium which claims the highest technological level of immersion still struggles to keep its audience truly immersed in its fictional realities. In this article I argue that the answer to this challenge might come outside of the world of immersive interactive gaming, and that the key for understanding the nature of immersion might come from the realm of theatre. My study of Complicite's performance The Encounter demonstrates that this work manages to achieve the level of immersion unconceivable for any existing VR experience. The key elements for this success are the profoundly relevant subject matter (the narrative based on Petru Popescu's Amazon Beaming), ingenious use of binaural immersive sound, and extraordinary story-telling performance delivered by Simon McBurney. In other words, it is the combination of the performance's intertextuality, the multimediality of its means of expression

and the intense presence of its narrator/protagonist that accounts for extraordinarily immersive viewers' experience. If the medium of VR is ever to achieve a comparable level of narrative and formal complexity, it needs to break away from the vacuum of the games-logic based interactivity and shift towards a more intertextual, multimedial and narratorial aesthetic.

Keywords: virtual realities; complicite; total theatre; immersive technologies; immersive narratives

> *When the ear is penetrating, it becomes an eye.*
>
> Rumi, *Masnawi*

Introduction

The virtual reality technology (VR) has been with us since mid-sixties of the last century. Until a decade ago, however, it was used almost exclusively in the highly specialised scientific and military labs. It was only recently that VR emerged as a popular media. Contemporary surge of immersive technologies, which Mandy Rose calls 'third wave of VR' (2018), coincides with the more visible presence of VR in the online entertainment and social media contexts. The world of computer gaming is thriving with new VR platforms; number of VR games is multiplying exponentially. The most recent emergence of relatively inexpensive VR technologies has also received an enthusiastic attention from visual and multimedia artists, and, subsequently, academia. Quite a few research projects have been funded in order to explore the potential of the immersive technologies in disciplines as wide and different as health care, nuclear decommissioning and nonfiction immersive documentaries.

Similarly (and parallel) to the advent of its various digital predecessors at the end of the last century, the encounter with this highly interactive and immersive technology has stirred up the discussion about the nature of the medium and its relation to its media forerunners. A particular interest has arisen in the narrative possibilities of the medium. A rich and complex body of work has been written on the account of the media that promises to enable its spectator/participant to penetrate the famous 'Alberti's window': to find themselves *inside* of and to *interact* with the work displayed. A great emphasis has been placed on VR's capability to offer

non-linear narrative, of the kind that characterises games and game-like story lines. This innate capability of the medium to naturally deliver 'writerly' texts[1] has without a doubt huge advantages and offers great amount of freedom to the user/participant. Whether this apparent *freedom* has actually and positively been *liberating* from the 'narrative slavery' imposed by the centres of powers, and, perhaps more importantly, by our socially and culturally conditioned selves, is an open question though.

Parallel to the shared interest and enthusiasm about the narrative possibilities of VR, however, one also encounters a shared disappointment with the current state of affairs when it comes to the artistic climaxes delivered in the VR medium. Voices from both entertainment industry and creative academia are expressing a clear dissatisfaction with the rather rudimentary narratives presented in the most of VR games, as well as in more artistically ambitious immersive experiences. The medium which claims the highest technological level of immersion still struggles to keep its audience truly immersed in its fictional realities. This can be explained, though only partly, by in the VR's technical shortcomings (the high-res content is still very limited and dependent on the processing power of the computers) and the restricted amount of time (twenty minutes, approximately) that the audience can wear the cumbersome headset safely and before it becomes physically unpleasant.

In this article I will argue that the answer to the major challenge of fulfilling the unique aesthetic potential of the VR medium (in terms of both narrative and sensorial experience of the viewer/participant) might come outside of the logic of immersive interactive gaming, and that the key for understanding of the nature of immersion – which contrary to the prevailing opinion might actually have a truly liberating effect on its participants – could come from the realm of literature and theatre. It is my hope that in my study of Complicite's performance *The Encounter* I will be able to demonstrate that this work manages to achieve the level of immersion followed by an undisputed aesthetic achievement unconceivable for any existing

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[1] Here I refer to Roland Barthes' definition of readerly and writerly, as opposite types of literary texts, defined in his book S/Z (1970). Whilst *readerly* refers to the text which supposedly does not encourage any active position of the reader in relation to the text, *writerly* is seen as active process of co-writing of the creator of the text and its reader/co-creator.

VR experience. The key elements for this success, I will argue, are the profoundly relevant subject matter (the narrative based on Petru Popescu's *Amazon Beaming*), the ingenious use of binaural immersive sound, and the extraordinary story-telling performance delivered by Simon McBurney. In other words, it is the combination of the performance's intertextuality, the multimediality of its means of expression and the intense presence of its narrator/protagonist that accounts for extraordinarily immersive viewers' experience.[2] This might suggest that if the medium of VR is ever to achieve a comparable level of narrative and formal complexity, it needs to break away from the vacuum of the games-logic based interactivity and shift towards a more intertextual, multimedial and narratorial aesthetic.

In her comprehensive and groundbreaking book *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001) Marie-Laure Ryan offers a long list of theories including the work of the scholars from the disciplines of empirical literary studies, cognitive psychology and analytic philosophy including Victor Nell's analysis of the psychological state of being 'lost in a book', Richard Gerrig's concept of transportation, and Kendall Walton's theory of fiction as game of make-believe and his concept of 'mental simulation' (15). Ryan's core argument is that the notion of immersion requires much more empathy from the scholars *immersed* in poststructuralist's 'horizontal' view of the world and that immersion, far from being the passive submission to the text as the more critical partisans of interactivity would have it, is a complex process involving higher mental faculties in the process of meaning making.

> We are so used to reading classic narrative texts—those with a well-formed plot, a setting we can visualize, and characters who act out of a familiar logic— that we do not notice the mental processes that enable us to convert the temporal flow of language into a global image that exists all at once in the mind. (16)

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[2] In the latest published version of the Popescu's novel from 2016 one can read the following praise for Complicite's stage production: 'A tour the force that shows contemporary theatre at its most immersive and thought provoking' (*Financial Times*), 'Spellbinding' (*Telegraph*) and 'An unforgettably brilliant work of total theatre' (*Herald*).

In support of my argument, beside the Ryan's work I will also refer to some of the 'standard' academic works concerning our complex and troublesome relationship with the multi-media technologies including Parker-Starbuck's *Cyborg Theatre*, Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation*, and Auslander's *Liveness*, as well as the texts primarily concerned with the VR such as Jerald's *The VR Book* and Lanier's *Dawn of the New Everything: Encounters with Reality and Virtual Reality*.

Theatre Complicite

Theatre company Comlicite has been on the forefront of the theatrical innovations since its beginnings in the 1980s, when a small number of Jacques Lecoq's former students decided to form a theatre company. The company's philosophy was to engage with the possibilities of the physical movement and theatrical imagination as the main ingredients for its work. They aimed to stir up the theatrical status quo of the time, and to engage with the new theatre audience challenging and reshaping at the time widely accepted image of the British theatre as the text(play)-based art form. Following in the footsteps of their former teacher, their first works were strongly characterised by Lecoq's imaginative and playful spirit. Gradually, though, they also discovered and embraced the expressive possibilities brought by emerging media technologies, the creative use of which will become one of their hallmarks. *The Elephant Vanishes* (2003), *A Disappearing Number* (2007), and *Master and Margarita* (2011) are just a few examples in which creative use of audio-visual technologies brought yet another dimension to an already incredibly abundant and fresh theatrical vocabulary. The technology became, so to say, another main actor, a necessary partner within a complex interplay of other theatrical means and devices. It is important to emphasise that two of the three mentioned productions were adaptations of existing literature, and that the Complicite's approach to theatre making has always been based on the long devising process in which very often a book of fiction or non-fiction serves as an initial stimulus for the group's theatre work. Some of their earlier works were also inspired by literature; for example, *The Street of Crocodiles* (1992) took its cue from the writings of Bruno Schulz and *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol* (1994) from the writings of John Berger. (It is perhaps

not irrelevant to mention that Complicite's co-founder and current artistic director Simon McBurney has a degree in English Literature.)

A book, too, was a starting point of McBurney's more recent theatrical adventure deep into the hidden parts of Amazon's rainforest and the heart and mind of Loren McIntyre, a National Geographic's photographer who, as the Complicite's website suggests 'found himself lost among the people of the remote Javari Valley in Brazil'. Petru Popescu's *Amazon Beaming* serves here as a narrative framework for the group to devise a piece which is much more than a book adaptation, in which different geographical spaces and times, various scientific voices brought in different modes and media – and different ontologies – merge together into a profound study of the human condition. There is much to be said about this production, and much has already been said as *The Encounter* has been a topic for the numerous highly enthusiastic reviews. The aim of this paper, however, is to try and shed some light on the *immersive* character of the production and to offer some ideas and proposals in relation to artistic devices used in the production, which might prove useful in our understanding of how the latest Extended Reality (XR)[3] immersive environments can actually and truly become *immersive* for their respective audience/participants/users.

Immersion vs Presence

In his *VR Book* Jason Jerald offers some clarifications on the use of terminology in VR/AR context. The term *immersion*, he explains quoting Mel Slater and Sylvia Wilbur, describes the technological aspect of the experience, not the experience itself.

> Immersion is the objective degree to which a VR system and application projects stimuli onto the sensory receptors of users in a way that is extensive, matching, surrounding, vivid, interactive, and plot informing [Slater and Wilbur, quoted in Jerald (2015)]. (45)

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[3] Wikipedia explains Extended Reality (XR) as 'a term referring to all real-and-virtual combined environments and human-machine interactions generated by computer technology and wearables. It includes representative forms such as augmented reality (AR), mixed reality (MR) and virtual reality (VR) and the areas interpolated among them. The levels of virtuality range from partially sensory inputs to immersive virtuality, also called VR'.

In other words, it is the occurrence of the physical stimuli produced by the different technological means which counts as immersion. The more and richer variety of the technological means there is, the higher level of immersion is potentially achieved. In this respect immersion is striped of any psychological subjectivity and can be quantified as an 'objective degree of stimuli', 'the greater immersion a system/application provides then the greater potential for a user to feel present in that virtual world' (46). The concept that those of us who come from the 'traditional' multi-media study context refer to as *immersion*, Jerald describes as *presence*, '[p]resence, in short, is a sense of "being there" inside a space, even when physically located in a different location (46).' Jerald goes on to say:

> Whereas immersion is about the characteristics of technology, presence is an internal psychological and physiological state of the user; an awareness in the moment of being immersed in a virtual world while having a temporary amnesia or agnosia of the real world and the technical medium of the experience. When present, the user does not attend to and perceive the technology, but instead attends to and perceives the objects, events, and characters the technology represents. Users who feel highly present consider the experience specified by VR technology to be a place visited rather than simply something perceived. (46)

This accords with the Ryan's statement on relationship between immersion and presence: 'Whereas the technological approach asks what features of digital systems produce an immersive experience, the phenomenological issue analyzes the sense of "presence" through which the user feels corporeally connected to the virtual world' (14).

It is not difficult to notice a striking similarity between Jerald's concept of *immersion* and what David Bolter and Richard Grusin term *hypermediacy*, the (on the first sight paradoxical) notion that as technology and media multiply we are getting closer to *immediacy*, i.e. a sense of 'unmediated' experience of the *real* (2000). One example offered by Bolter and Grusin is the online and TV news coverage in which the multiplication of various forms of media come with a promise to get the

viewer closer to the 'reality' of what is being covered, i.e. the greater the mediation (*hypermediacy*), the greater the sense of an 'unmediated' access to the real, i.e. *immediacy* (9).

In the remainder of this article, I will be using 'immersion' in the sense which Jerald ascribes to it.

VR in Performance

Virtual Reality is a relatively new medium. I use the term 'relatively' because, as I said earlier, even though the VR has been present in scientific and military laboratories for several decades now and many of our everyday technological objects and gadgets own their design and production to VR, it is only recently that more serious attention has been given to its potential to host fictional and non-fictional narratives (traditionally associated with film, video or multimedia). Interest in this particular aspect of immersive technologies seems to be growing rapidly and there exist in the UK a number of specialised agencies founded and supported by the UK government (such as Immerse UK, Digital Catapult, etc.) whose sole purpose is to accelerate this development. As a result, for example, one can notice an enthusiastic interest by the non-fiction artists, who are embracing VR as a very convenient medium to place their audience 'in the middle of' the documentary story. Quite a few immersive documentary films are being made and there are already several festivals dedicated to 360-degree video format.[4]

Due to its very sophisticated technical capabilities for interaction, VR is often associated with the 3D computer games. Indeed, the same software tools used in 3D games design, such as Unity, are usually employed in the production of the VR content for the fictional and non-fictional immersive narratives. The current heightened interest in the VR on the side of art communities and academia is to a great extent the result of the availability of the relatively affordable VR equipment that had traditionally been accessible only in the very specialised places. The

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[4] See, for a comprehensive study on immersive documentary, Rose, M. (2018). The immersive turn: Hype and hope in the emergence of virtual reality as a nonfiction platform. Studies in Documentary Film, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2018.1496055.

new wave of the affordable equipment has been developed by the companies whose primary motivation has been to broaden their audience's interest in the entertainment content. As is often the case, however, this offers the artists outside of the entertainment industry the opportunity to get the benefits of the readily available technology.

The appearance of the VR in the context of performance and theatre is the result of this process. However, in spite of the fact that in the last decades we have witnessed the birth and a fast expansion of *immersive theatre*, an umbrella term for a very diverse range of theatrical work which put an emphasis on the more active role for its audience immersed in the complex spatial narratives outside of the conventional theatre houses, the use of immersive VR technologies in theatre is still a rarity. The adoption of the new medium in performing arts, however slow, is nonetheless becoming noticeable, as the venues and companies are beginning to equip themselves for the anticipated 'new wave' of digital expansion, which indeed might turn out to be an *immersive revolution*. Immersive Storytelling Studio at the National Theatre is a case at point, with the several projects already running, the latest of which is *All Kinds of Limbo* (2019). This project, in addition to the fully immersive headset-based 360-degree VR performance, also runs as a holographic spatial experience, playing the content of the VR experience in the physical space of the gallery using the transparent video projection screens. Performance artist Marina Abramovic utilises the VR medium in the form of an AR (augmented reality) meditative immersive installation in her new work *The Life* (2019). The audience, wearing the AR HoloLens glasses, can see both the physical space of the gallery (including the other members of the audience) together with the augmented, three-dimensional video image of the artist. Theatre company 59 Productions used the fully immersive headset-based VR experience *A man called Peter Stillman* as an additional part of their theatre project *City of Glass* (2017). Probably the closest to the truly theatrical engagement with the VR is the project *Draw Me Close*, the coproduction between the National Theatre's Immersive Storytelling Studio and National Film Board of Canada, written and directed by Jordan Tannahill, which opened in 2019. In the words of the producers:

> [T]he project takes a deceptively simple and humanistic approach to the immersive medium: it allows the audience member to experience life as Jordan inside a live, animated world. Jordan Tannahill's mother is played by an actress whose movements are translated into the virtual world using motion capture while she engages with you in the physical world. Both actor and audience member experience an early childhood memory as they bring it to life. (National Theatre Website, accessed on 8 October 2019)

The production is currently on tour in Canada (as this text is being written), and its return to the UK is planned for the summer of 2020. There are a couple of R&D projects which are currently in development commissioned by The Royal Opera House's Digital Department where the new technologies are being tested by the opera makers. One can certainly expect many more to follow as the equipment becomes even more accessible to the wider communities of theatre makers.

Seen from a purely technical point of view, Complicite's performance *The Encounter* does not fit directly into the *immersive* category, as there is no use of any 360-degree visuals (neither on headsets nor as video projections), neither it requires from the audience any extra activity except to wear the headphones. Furthermore, its use of the 'conventional' video projections is actually unusually sparse compared to the company's previous works. What is present, however, as the main means of immersion (to use Jason Jerald's terminology), is the immersive binaural sound. Nevertheless, the use of this sole immersive technical device brings this work, in my view, much closer to the ideal of the perfect VR experience than any of the above-mentioned experiments. So, what is going on in this unusual theatre production?

The Encounter

Mandy Rose (2018) finds it rather paradoxical that VR, with its seemingly 'isolating' characteristics has become so popular medium for the documentary art form which is intrinsically linked and dependent on *reality* and *real*. The same curious observation may apply to the case of *The Encounter*. The audience is asked to wear the headphones throughout the show and are explicitly warned that the show would not make any sense without the proper use of the headphones. Similarly, the seemingly informal

introduction to the show delivered by McBurney was extensively dedicated to our other well-known 'isolating' companion, the famous iPhone. And yet, the iPhone will be used consistently throughout the show and all factual, documentary material (audio recordings of Petru Popescu and many other non-fictional protagonists and experts on the subject), will be delivered using the Apple's gadget.

This problematic relationship with the media technologies links very well with the subject matter of the book on which the play is based. Namely, in its main story line the National Geographic photographer Loren McIntyre embarks on a journey to find Mayoruna people, a hitherto (1969) 'invisible' Amazon tribe, and to document them through the lens of his photo camera. The topic of media technology as a means of alienation and colonisation is present from the outset in both Popescu's novel and Complicite's performance. In the introduction to Popescu's book, McIntyre writes (2016):

> [I] was torn by the usual dilemma of a lensman who aims at unknown and unknowing targets. He wants to bring back a great picture that makes the viewer say "Wow!" yet he's morally uneasy about exposing innocents to alien societies and possible future intrusion by aliens, by us. (22)

The topic of media technology is introduced very early in the narrative and it will stay present in the background throughout the story, even if McIntyre's journey as a photographer, measured against its initial goals, will dismally fail. As the story gradually shifts from the explicit critique of our 'mediatised' eye, it becomes a journey of profound discovery of a different kind, and the trip which was initially set out to be a media assignment in pursuit of a hidden reality of the 'undiscovered' people transforms into a journey to the *reality* of McIntyre's upmost inner self.

As he retells the story of McIntyre, Simon McBurney takes his audience on a similar journey, with a mirroring trajectory: using the very technology that he explicitly blames for the political and social ills of our times – including our disconnection from our own selves – he manages to create a space for the real encounter, with both the long-forgotten territories of our inner being and 'the distant other'. This is by all means a rare and spectacular achievement.

The Encounter is a one-man show in which McBurney, using primarily cutting-edge sound technology easily jumps from place to place (Amazon forest to his home in London), from present to past and vice versa, and from his role of the narrator to a range of different characters. The pitch of his voice and his accent are simultaneously changing in an instant as he transforms from being Simon McBurney and becoming Loren McIntyre, or, at some points, a new character – a strange, but still organic blend of both of them. The technical trick which facilitates this effective narrative metamorphosis is, however, revealed even before the trick was applied. Even more than that: the audience is actually asked to test the very technology for themselves, and the use of different microphones and sound loop-pedals was explained in great detail. Similarly, the binaural technology working behind the totem-like 'Sennheiser head', one of the rare scenographic objects on stage, had been explored even before the 'actual' show started. Nevertheless and despite of all of this, we soon and fully go along with the illusion that Simon and Loren are indeed two characters played by two different people, and that many more different people and creatures are present on stage. This happens – it goes without saying – in our mind's eye and on the level of the play's fictional universe, which is exactly what one expects from good fiction. It as a rare occasion that Brechtian defamiliarization of the theatre stage does the job so convincingly and reinforces Ryan's claim that a deep absorption in the construction/contemplation of the textual world causes our immediate surroundings to disappear from our consciousness (94).

Subject Technology

We are almost instinctively led to believe that the success of the work of art that has ambitions to be immersive is directly dependent on its capability to erase all signs of the presence of technology (i.e. 'mediation') involved in it. At least in the long history of theatre design there have been many examples of this 'hiding' practice and this philosophy can be witnessed in almost every theatre today in which the numerous bits of technology which serve to provide light, image and sound, are meticulously masked and placed somewhere hidden. Indeed, a sudden and unplanned appearance of a piece of theatrical equipment in the middle of the immersive narrative would be

considered a grave mistake on the side of the stage manager. However, this counts for most of the works of this kind, but obviously not for all of them. One example that immediately comes to mind is Jennifer Parker-Sturbuck's classification of *Subject Technology* in her 'cyborg theatre's mutating double helix' (2011, 38).

> Cyborg theatre is processual, "becoming" through its integrations; it illuminates and projects bodies as they shape-shift through current trends, transforming them into potential entities that combat and highlight fixed notions of what "human" can mean in relationship to embodied technology (that is, in explicit relation to technologies, a luxury still not afforded to all bodies). Each of the couplings imagines different potentials and questions raised by the convergences of the body and what I argue is a subject technology. (39)

Running a risk of over-simplifying her illuminating and complex ideas, I would say that one of the things that Parker-Sturbuck is saying in her book, is that the relationship between our bodies and technology on stage is a relation of constant flux in which our bodies as well as technology are going through a perpetual processes of reinvention. The bodies and technologies involved in this process always appear in this context either as *abject* (something to avoid and keep hidden), *object* (something which is useful and instrumental), or *subject* (something of great importance and integrity). This distinction seems highly applicable in the case of *The Encounter*. Describing *Object Technology* as presented in some of Bob Wilson productions Parker-Sturbuck states: 'If the technology were to fail or be removed, the performance would be altered, but could still continue – the action is enhanced by this technology, not fully dependent upon it' (48). This certainly would be very different if one could imagine the Comlicite's show without its sophisticated sound technology. Having this in mind, and following this logic, it becomes obvious that the technology in this production quite rightly deserved to be introduced as one of the main actors in the production, a *subject*. By paying the homage to the technology involved in the show, McBurney was also trying to point out to our unbreakable bond

with the technology itself. However, as I said earlier in the text this show is not about technology, or at least not predominantly about it, but about something much more urgent and profound.

Communication Paradox

The technology that we use today provides us with the fastest and most efficient means of communication that the humans have had access to throughout history. Yet simultaneously it can act as its main obstacle, making any truly meaningful communication impossible. The same applies to language itself, if one trusts the poststructuralists. Yes, we are clearly able to communicate more or less successfully on a horizontal level, concerning an extremely wide range of ideas and facts; nonetheless, if one wishes to communicate the contents belonging to the depths of one's being, one usually concedes that it's something that goes beyond language. The Complicite's work seems to go straight into the heart of the matter of this phenomenon.

In October 1969 Loren McIntyre embarks on a journey to the hidden parts of Amazon in order to take the photographs of Mayoruna people, the local tribe who at the time lived hidden from the curious and greedy Western gaze. Very soon he makes his first contact with the tribe, but at the same time he loses track of where he is and is not able to return to the position from where he began the journey. His self-confidence is regained to a certain degree when he realises that members of the tribe are friendly and that he will not be killed or left alone to die in the forest. In a matter of just few days he is literally striped-off of his outside Western attributes as he loses his photo camera, his watch and his Adidas trainers. Desperate and bewildered by his new situation in the middle of the rainforest he experiences something which he describes as a loss of identity: 'he was reduced just to the body, he was purposeless'. In return he gains friendship with the headman of the tribe, Barnacle. The most curious thing happens when McIntyre realises that he is able to communicate the *verbal* content of his mind *non-verbally* with the tribe headman in some form of telepathic exchange. 'Some of us are friends' is the sentence which repeatedly comes to McIntyre's mind from that of the headman. The communication goes on: 'you are sad because what was in the dark should have stayed in the dark'. 'How did he know

about my camera' was McItyre's response. He couldn't believe that he was talking to the tribe's headman in this way; 'now, either I had to accept what was happening, or I was to assume that I was hallucinating'. Soon he learns from Barnacles that the whole tribe was on the move. He explains that there has been a period of ill fortune for the tribe brought by the white people who were coming from the sky; in order to renew their wellbeing the tribe was planning go to *the beginning*. Later on, the concept of different times which run parallel to each other is presented to him by the tribe headman and the group of shamans, translated by Câmbio, a member of the tribe who happened to know some Portuguese. In the following episode McItyre experiences a strong hallucination in which he realises that he is a part of the forest, that 'the forest becomes his brain, his brain becomes the forest'. McIntyre's mind is perplexed, 'drifting between the dream and reality', but he gradually accepts the version of reality lived by the tribe and decides to stay with them and to follow them right to *the beginning*.

The Hard Problem of (Shared) Consciousness

Going through the notes from the workshops from different phases of the project development (available on Complicite's website), one can notice McBurney's insistence that the production they were building up should be about consciousness. The theme of the consciousness and meaning making is interwoven into the very fabric of the book and here below is a paragraph in which McIntyre ruminates on the origins of language.

> The Mayoruna. What mystery there is in names. How does a tribe come to name itself? How did such words become formed; how were they thought up, combining certain sounds and not others? Did they occur at random, an utterance from one tribesman spontaneously adopted by the tribe? Or were they played with, rehearsed till habit and general acceptance confirmed them into the vocabulary? How did all that come about? (54)

A number of psychologists, scientists of consciousness and science writers were invited to take part in the company's workshops in order to stir up the discussion

and to offer new and fresh views on the subject matter. Marcus du Sautoy, Oxford Professor of Mathematics and Charles Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science was one of them. He explains his involvement with the project and the significance of Loren McIntyre's telepathic experience in light of the emerging field of the science of consciousness:

> Simon's catalyst for this journey into consciousness was the book Amazon Beaming. When I started reading this true account of a National Geographic photographer, Loren McIntyre, getting lost in the Amazon and being picked up by the elusive Mayoruna tribe I couldn't see the connection with consciousness. But it is when McIntyre and the head of the tribe, Barnacle, start communicating that I understood the link. They share no language but McIntyre describes the sensation of 'beaming' where thoughts from Barnacle appear in his head. It is as if the two minds have found a way to enter the conscious world of the other. McInytre was a man of scientific persuasion and was sceptical of ideas of telepathy and yet when they eventually met up with a tribe member who did speak Portuguese it transpired that Barnacle had indeed been trying to communicate with McInytre. (Complicite website)

Clearly, here we have at hand a proposal for an immediate form of communication which literally goes 'beyond language', the proposal that naturally appears suspect to the modern mind accustomed to an exclusively materialistic way of understanding the world. Complicite's project raises the question of possibility of such communication. This question, thus posed and in the context of a work of theatre art, is far from being a mere treat for the followers of the New Age movement. The so-called Hard Problem of Consciousness, named by the philosopher David Chalmers, is one, in the words of Marcus du Sautoy, of the big unknowns of the modern science that many believe might stay unknown forever. 'How does the collection of electrons, protons and neutrons that make up the stuff inside your head give rise to a sense of self, a sense of consciousness?' On top of that sits the fact that we are all trapped inside our own consciousness. How can one possibly be able to even presume that someone

else's consciousness is like one's own, and that one's consciousness does not play tricks on one presenting its own imagery as that of another, as arising out of other's consciousness?

Science writer Rita Carter, whose book *Consciousness* played one of the most important roles in Complicite's explorations into *The Encounter* and who was also involved in the workshops, slightly demystifies the telepathic encounter between the McIntyre and the chief Barnacle saying that:

> Our brains have some staggeringly powerful tools to help us know what other people are thinking. Mirror neurons, for instance, are brain cells which automatically put us in a similar state of mind to those around us – we don't have to think about it at all. (Complicite website)

Whatever the answer to all these questions might be, it is extremely rare today that a theatre work, or a work of art of any kind, tries to engage itself and as well as its audience so thoughtfully with such complex subject matter, making us appreciate profound ideas that are crucial for understanding of our humanness. Let me conclude this part with Du Satoy's homage to McBurney's extraordinary achievement.

> The idea of a shared consciousness is of course central to the act of theatre. We all come together and share in conjuring up and losing ourselves in a common story. What Complicite has done in *The Encounter* is to accentuate that sense of the actor penetrating your consciousness by the extraordinary use of headphones. Using the technology of a binaural microphone Simon manages to beam his thoughts deep into your conscious mind.

The Encounters with the Real

Jaron Lanier is very often called the father of Virtual Reality, although the term 'godfather' would suit him better as he is the one who gave the name, rather than life, to the phenomenon in question. In his book *Dawn of the New Everything: Encounters with Reality and Virtual Reality* (2017), Lanier describes history of VR and his own role in the development. Being one of its earliest enthusiasts and one of the most

credited people for the development of the VR culture, it is interesting to notice Lanier's somewhat inversed look at the potential of this technology for the future of humankind. Instead of looking for meaning inside the virtual worlds he proposes that the VR's best virtue lays in the fact that it can help us to see better the *reality* which sits outside its immersive contents.

> Everyone becomes used to the most basic experiences of life and our world, and we take them for granted. Once your nervous system adapts to a virtual world, however, and then you come back, you have a chance to experience being born again in microcosm. The most ordinary surface, cheap wood or plain dirt, is bejewelled in infinite detail for a short while. To look into another's eyes is almost too intense. (98–99)

In another paragraph he goes a step further and explains how the VR experience is actually leading its participants to go inside their inner selves and helps them to make true connection with their own consciousness. He proposes an experiment in which all elements of the VR content are gradually erased until the participant stays alone with their own sense of being.

> VR lets you feel your consciousness in its pure form. There you are, the fixed point in a system where everything else can change. (…) Most technology reinforces the feeling that reality is just a sea of gadgets; your brain and your phone and the cloud computing service all merging into one superbrain. (…) VR is the technology that instead highlights the existence of your subjective experience. It proves you are real. (101)

There is a somewhat strange yet strong resonance between Lanier's ideas and the themes and motifs found in *The Encounter*. They both seem to claim that there is something outside of us, deeply engraved in the very core of nature, which is at the same time the very centre of our own selves, our consciousness – our true essence. Whoever is familiar and look favourable to the teachings of Carl Gustav Jung or Joseph Campbell, or in that regard any of the great spiritual traditions, will

be able to recognise where I'm going with this argument. However, I don't want to claim that either Lanier or McBurney are necessarily spiritual people (however we want to understand this overused term), but they are certainly inquisitive enough not to block themselves with any self-imposed restriction when it comes to human knowledge. In this regard it is helpful to mention that somewhere else in his book Lanier's testifies that sometime in the early days of his engagement with VR he seriously believed that the new medium would provide us a possibility for 'shared lucid dreaming' (11). Sadly, the world has changed since then and the VR utopia has been replaced by an unprecedented uncertainty about our future. Our understanding of reality and our trust in even a possibility of existence of any *reality* outside our subjectivity, seems to be so openly and seemingly convincingly put into question on many different levels. The responsibility of media technologies for this confusion is without a doubt one of the most significant and obvious ones. Adam Curtis, in the opening of one of his truly thought-provoking mega-documentaries *HyperNormalisation* (2016), reveals a complex mix of factors and mechanisms which have brought us to 'this strange place'.

> [This film] is about how, over the past 40 years, politicians, financiers and technological utopians, rather than face up to the real complexities of the world, retreated. Instead, they constructed a simpler version of the world in order to hang on to power. And as this fake world grew, all of us went along with it, because the simplicity was reassuring. Even those who thought they were attacking the system – the radicals, the artists, the musicians, and our whole counterculture – actually became part of the trickery, because they, too, had retreated into the make-believe world, which is why their opposition has no effect and nothing ever changes.

It is very difficult to argue against the accuracy of this depressing diagnosis of the ills of our times. The things only got worse in the last three years after the film was released and new and dangerous cracks are appearing wide open. The oversimplified 'solutions' seem to attract more and more people and we see the rise of all sort of far-right

phantasmagorias all over the planet, whilst the anxieties about our near future begin to dominate our everyday lives. The strong reference to this mixed virtuality is clearly visible and dominates one very important aspect of the Complicite's production. Is it because we only now (every day with more and more clarity) see the urgency of some sort of returning to our own *beginning*, that we get so immersed into this strange true story? Is it because the story is addressing something in us that already know that we ARE nature and that everything what we do with the nature is inevitably coming back to us? Are we starting to become aware that in our cosmic 'job description' maybe we are the creatures who are in charge of the well-being (and not only of destruction) of this beautiful Earth – are we becoming homo-ecologicus?

For me, an even more intriguing and, dare I say, even more urgent idea beams from this work: the idea that somewhere on one's deepest level, somewhere close to the very essence of what one is and what one can become, we all share the same *consciousness* – that we are in fact one thing, the *Being*. This is by no means a new idea, but it is one about which the best language that one can use to talk about is probably that of silence.[5] This is clearly a topic for another academic discipline, but I believe it is worth mentioning in this context, because it is the very subject matter of the work in question. This is a piece that not only thematises but takes place in this shared consciousness. On one level it is about the *meeting place* of McIntyre and Mayoruna's headman, where the 'beaming' between the two minds is occurring, the 'old place' that we need to remember. In one of the conversations with Câmbio, McIntyre asks him to explain how it was possible that Barnacle spoke to him when the headman did not speak any Portuguese. 'Maybe he spoke to you in Old Language', answers Câmbio, 'the language that you don't need to learn, but to remember'. On another level this is a *meeting place* where some truths about our own mysteries have been revealed. Maybe, after all being a part of this performance we actually had a case of 'shared lucid dreaming' that the godfather of VR Jaron Lanier was dreaming about in the early days of the new medium.

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[5] In fact, the silent meditative practices used to ponder down (or rise up) to this shared place have been known to the humankind for millennia.

Somewhere half-way on their journey to *the beginning* the Mayoruna tribe voluntarily and passionately destroy all their possessions. Everything from the spears to the necklaces is put on the pile and burned down. The utensils, work tools and weapons are inhabited by the spirits who are making tribe's journey impossible; 'they are jealous, they hold us still, still in time' explains Câmbio, 'these things die here so that we can return'. 'Imagine us burning all our possessions so as not to remain still in time!' wildly exclaims McIntyre. In one of the most remarkable scenes in the show he thinks aloud the surreal image of the streets in America put on fire and the people burning all their possessions in a purifying ritual. The whole scene turns into McBurney's explosive combat against the technology present on stage. In the middle of it, after destroying the microphones and loudspeakers, in the moment when he is just about to finally smash his iPhone with the hammer, McBurney/McIntyre is interrupted by the iPhone's ringing. Another world from another time dimension is interfering again, and we are back to McBurney's home apartment where his young daughter is calling from to let him know that she has just had a bad dream. The sudden turn and beautiful intimacy and familiarity of the scene works as a strong emotional tranquiliser for the madness expressed just a moment ago. We are overwhelmed with the nostalgic warmth and love brought by a glance of *reality* contained in this exceptional moment, and we are not sure any more if we still want him to crash the damn iPhone, or if the gadget is already so intrinsic to our sense of who we are. The spirits who live inside the gadget are obviously too strong adversary to be defeated by a single blow of a hammer prop.

You Will Prove That It Is Real

Throughout the journey before the ritual McIntyre fears that the *beginning* that the headman is referring to is in fact the end – the physical death of him and all members of the tribe. As they are getting closer to the place the fear is growing stronger to the point when he starts to make plans to run away from the tribe. Applying another naïve escaping strategy, he is suggesting that the ritual might not be necessary; he will talk to the Brazilian government to protect the tribe and to replace them somewhere safe from the oil companies. 'They will always come looking for their oil

with guns and planes and alcohol', answers Barnacle. Even after McIntyre has been reassured that they are not going to die he is still uneasy to take part in the ritual and asks why they need him to be there. 'Because you will prove that this is real' comes a 'beaming' answer from the headman to his mind.

The performance does really end at the *beginning*. The tribe eventually reaches that cross point where different dimensions of time mix and from where everything that we know about this world actually originates. It is difficult to describe the events involved in the ritual and the scale of revelations which occur during the chain of events. McIntyre's consciousness blends with Barnacle's, as he blends with the animals which are present there at the *beginning*. He describes that his body has been liquefied, but at the same time he *knows* that all of this which is happening to him is *real*. Nevertheless, as one part of his consciousness merges with the nature his other self is protesting and we hear him shouting 'I am not nature, I am not a molecule, I am not an atom; I am a modern man!'.

The storyline of the performance then jumps fast-forward through the novel and we now see Loren McIntyre in his office writing on a typewriter his letter to Barnacle, and next moment we learn from McIntyre that Barnacle was already dead, and next moment we learn from Petru Popescu (talking from the iPhone) that Loran McIntyre is also dead and we are left alone with Simon McBurney, but just for a moment, as in the next one his daughter reappears to ask for a good night story, and we listen McBurney reading from the book how sometime, long time ago, when everything was perfect and in order, some of the sons and daughters of the River made a mischief and knot by knot, all water from the River came down and overflowed the Earth, and we hear the child falling asleep, and we hear reverberating in our Sennheisers 'some of us are friends', but we are not aware of the headphones, neither are we for a prolonged moment aware that we actually sit in the theatre until the applause wake us up from this shared dream.

And here we are, back again, straight in the sum of the fragments of human consciousness called London Tube. The cyclic nature of time experienced in the Comlicite's masterpiece seems not to apply to the perpetual buzz and chaos of the metropolis. The guy next to me is checking his Facebook account and I can't stop

myself from peeping into the small screen on which a man is doing something odd and ridiculous with his body. Somewhere down the train somebody is probably watching her favourite sitcom, somebody else is playing their virtual Champion League final, and yet another person is destroying never-ending army of invading candies, whilst their toddler boy is trying to reach for the water bottle from the pushchair. All of them deeply immersed into the content displayed on the screens and headphones attached to their smart phones. One is inevitably prompted to notice how the same term *immersion* could mean two so remote and different things. Yet, at the same time, this familiar scene from the Tube triggers another idea closely related to the show, and which can help us to better comprehend Complicite's ability to get us so engaged and immersed into the content for more than two hours. Here Walter Benjamin's idea on 'cultural' vs 'natural' senses seems to apply perfectly well.

> During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence (…) [H]uman sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well. (216, 222)

Philip Auslander is contemplating on this in detail in his landmark work *Liveness*, offering a range of examples that come both from the world of pop/rock entertainment and theatre. Particularly relevant for this essay is his quote from Roger Copland who explains the use of microphones in contemporary theatre.

> [O]n Broadway these days even nonmusical plays are routinely miked, in part because the results sound more 'natural' to an audience whose ears have been conditioned by stereo television, high fidelity LPs, and compact disks." The use of almost invisible microphones placed on the bodies of the actors only reinforces our perception of an amplified voice as 'natural'. (2008: 38)

Following on this logic, are we to wait for some sort of VR Walkman until VR gets fully and 'naturally' integrated into mainstream theatre? The idea of people wearing VR headsets roaming around the busy streets engaged in their immersive home

entertainment, mixing with the self-driving cars, is probably the scariest (and most ridiculous) one so far, but one can also see something of a trend in it.

Conclusion

I believe that Virtual Reality is already technically developed enough today that it could be integrated into a complex theatre work. On the other hand, and maybe more importantly, the example of *The Encounter* can teach current and future VR artists several lessons on how to tell a truly engaging and immersive narrative in an environment oversaturated with technology.

As I have demonstrated in this essay, key factors in Complicite's project's success are: 1) profoundly relevant subject matter (the narrative based on Petru Popescu's *Amazon Beaming*), 2) ingenious use of binaural immersive sound, and 3) the extra-ordinary story-telling performance delivered by Simon McBurney.

1) The first and the most important one is the result of the performance's *intertextual* nature. Throughout its duration, the show is an open arena where different texts intermingle in a kaleidoscopic mosaic of differ-ent voices, different points of view and different ontologies. The core text, *Amazon Beaming*, offers a framework that is open enough to host all these different voices and enable them to participate in a meaningful and aesthetically effective interaction. Can one imagine that the aesthetic potential of the VR media is such that it would enable it to reach simi-lar heights? The first attempts made by people from the theatre world to bring VR to stage are certainly encouraging, as the examples referred to in the previous session of this text demonstrate. Once these different media come close enough to create an organic whole, a new level of *presence*, which is so inherent to both media, might indeed be reached. 'Maybe we could even say: when two or more different art forms come together a process of theatricalization occurs' writes Chiel Kattenbelt (2008: 20). His brave statement on theatre, as being the only true multimedia – *hyperme-dia* – where the processes of remediation have naturally been taking place for centuries, is a fitting conclusion to my point.

2) All these rich textual layers are brought together using *multimedia*, both literally (as technical means of expression) and meta-textually (persistent references in the show to its own multimedia character). The use of binaural sound is the most obvious one, but a range of other media, too, is present: a book, a photo camera, VHS tape, iPhone, etc. Obviously, they are not there just as 'meta-props of multimediality': they are inherent to the story line, hence their presence on stage. There is a lesson here, too, for the makers of VR theatre: when choosing the subject matter, one should carefully consider what naturally and organically fits to this medium in the terms of the compatibility with its language and aesthetics.

3) There is a huge capacity for confusion when it comes to the use of the term *presence* in the VR and theatre contexts respectively. In the context of theatre, *presence* relates to the physical presence of the performer in front of the audience and the here-and-now nature of the theatrical event. Also, when referring to the 'quality' of performer in theatrical jargon, one often hears that a particular performer 'has presence'. In the VR jargon, however, as I discussed earlier, *presence* is used to designate the sensation induced in the audience/participants of being physically present within the non-physical, fictional world created by VR. However, this terminological confusion might be a rather useful one here. As *The Encounter* demonstrates, all these *presences* can be present, indeed often simultaneously, in the work of good theatre art. McBurney's powerful *presence* as a performer is beyond question, as is the immediacy of the audience's sensation of being present in the midst of the fictional universe of the show (by means of, amongst other devices, the ingenious use of sound technology). In a way, this whole show was about presence: the joint presence of minds of human beings in the midst of a deep mutual exchange, an experience of shared consciousness. Is not that the ideal that we so much appreciate in any work of art, VR included?

In conclusion, thinking about the best ways for fulfilling some of the unique aesthetic potentials of the VR medium (in terms of both narrative and sensorial experience of

the viewer/participant), the new and fresh ideas might come outside of the world of immersive interactive gaming. Or to quote Ryan once again:

> [I]f interactivity is conceived as the appreciator's engagement in a play of signification that takes place on the level of signs rather than things and of words rather than worlds, it is a purely cerebral involvement with the text that downplays emotions, curiosity about what will happen next, and the resonance of the text with personal memories of places and people. On the shiny surface of signs—the signifier—there is no room for bodies of either the actual or the virtual variety. (21)

Even the key concepts for understanding of the nature of immersion – which might have a truly liberating effect on its participants – could come from and in the interaction with theatre. Complicite's production analysed here demonstrates what can be achieved using technically only a single immersive element, immersive sound. If we are to trust Jason Jerald and other VR and media scholars, more technical elements added to the virtual environments will inevitably lead to more immersion and consequently to even more extended sensation of *presence*. The possibilities look rather merry and exciting. Virtual Reality is undoubtedly the medium of the future as it is a converging point of very many disciplines and computer and media technologies involved in its creation. It will possibly provide us with yet another tool that can bring us even closer to the dream of totally immersive fictional worlds. It is, however, the medium which stands on the peak of the technological progress of a civilisation which is going through a profound crisis because it is losing the sense of its very *raison d'être*. As long as we use it to keep attempting to tell stories about who we truly are, the hope will not be forever lost. The stories about 'the angel with the tail of a donkey', as the Poet of the Eternal Love, Rumi loves to call us from his 'old place'. I would only add, an angel with the tail of the donkey and a smart phone.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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His current research project focuses on developing the prototype of CYBERAMA: reconfigurable, responsive architectural space which integrates smart construction materials, cutting-edge software and multimedia technologies, with the aim of providing a new kind of stage for the emerging performance practices.

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