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Swift, Elizabeth ORCID: 0000-0002-9566-5472 (2019) Practical spectating - an exploration of the multiple roles of the intermedial performance audience. International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media, 15 (2). pp. 166-182. doi:10.1080/14794713.2019.1638646

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14794713.2019.1638646>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14794713.2019.1638646>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/6985>

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Practical Spectating – an exploration of the multiple roles of the intermedial performance audience

Abstract

The process of experiencing theatre is shifting from watching to doing. As genre-busting performance work generates new modes of practical spectating, questions emerge about the evolution of the spectator and how we can reason about their role. This article is informed by developments in participatory and immersive theatre – but it focuses specifically on the spectator of intermedial performance and explores their relationship to work in which digital and live elements are conjoined. In exploring the roles of the spectator, the article examines the work of practitioners who use virtual reality (VR), immersive and surveillance technology and 3D film. I suggest that modes of reception, provoked by intermedial performance, merit specific forms of analysis, and I expound on how possible worlds theory and conceptual blending can be deployed in considering practical spectating. Borrowing terminology from digital theory the article explains how intermedial performance may be considered an ergodic artform. I look at how the experience of spectating takes on the quality of a personal journey, that may be at once emancipatory and restrictive, but which persistently provokes new questions about the production and reception of art.

Key Words

intermedial performance; possible worlds; conceptual blending; spectator

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Introduction

When theatre invites its audience to engage with digital elements as part of the production - whether this is through watching part of the performance as a video alongside the live actors, or by accessing part of the work through a digital device like a tablet or virtual reality headset - the relationship between spectator and performance changes. It is no longer an exclusively live on live experience. Digital media has become involved in an explicit manner and set up its own unique dynamic with the spectator. This article is about what makes intermedial performance - that is performance that juxtaposes live and digital elements and foregrounds the interconnectedness of media - a distinctive experience for its audience. It looks at how we can reason about spectatorial practices triggered by the interplay of the live and the digital in theatre.

In 21st century performance analysis the consideration of the changing role of the audience is an increasingly prominent area of enquiry, and one which particularly focuses on immersive and participatory forms. However, these emergent genres are by no means the only arenas where changes in audience behaviour are being played out. Intermedial performance has been consistently revealing ways to reimagine the audience experience for decades. Such performance work may often have a crossover with immersive and participatory practices - for example in the work of Blast Theory, Ontroerend Goed, and of Theatre Conspiracy which will be discussed here - but it does not necessarily include explicit physical interaction. However, by requiring audiences to navigate the different reception strategies provoked separately by digital media and live action, it brings about a complex mode of engagement. It interrogates changing

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dynamics between the audience and production and prompts new ways of facilitating the aesthetic exchange between them.

In forwarding appropriate methodological approaches for considering the audience experience of intermedial performance this article identifies two theories which emphasise the complexity of the act of spectating as an evolving and changing process. Cognitive science, and specifically the theory of conceptual blending, provides insights into how a spectator responds to the double digital/live experience that is characterised by intermedial work. Possible worlds theory provides a methodology for a forensic analysis of the unique dynamic established between an individual and an intermedial production. Both these provide a way of reasoning about what is at stake as we choose to position digital media at the heart of a live event.

In instigating this enquiry, it is useful initially to identify the distinguishing characteristic of intermedial performance which provokes a distinctive response, or spectatorial practice, from its audience.

Ergodic artworks and practical spectating

In ergodic literature, non-trivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages. (Aarseth, 1997, 1)

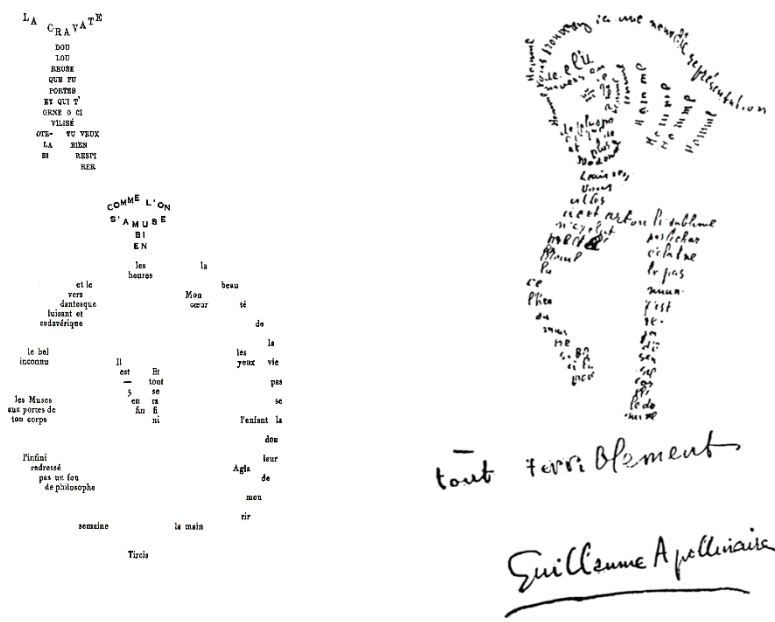
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In the late 1990s Digital theorist Espen Aarseth first employed the term ‘ergodic’, to define a quality of engagement typically required both of a player encountering a computer game and a reader engaging with a hypertext fiction in the digital environment. Derived from the Greek words for work (*ergon*) and path (*hodos*), the neologism, ergodic, encapsulated what Aarseth identified as the ‘nontrivial’ effort that was required by digital literature to ‘allow the reader to traverse the text’ (Aarseth 1997, 1-2). He was isolating that not only playing, but reading, now required more than ‘trivial’ engagement, which he exemplified by the act of turning pages. Instead, reading in a digital context now needed decision making and exertion by the reader, not only in order to make the online text actually function, but also for them to benefit from a new kind of payoff. Payoffs in return for ergodic engagement were various – from choosing your own bespoke route through a digital text via its hyperlinks, as in the case of Michael Joyce’s pioneering interactive digital novel, *afternoon – a story*, (1990), to deciding the fate of the main character in a computer game. The defining characteristic of such ergodic works was the promise of creative agency; agency that had hitherto, more commonly, only been the province of the author.

Aarseth was an early adopter of the idea that systematic new methodologies were needed in order to reason about new activities of engagement provoked by ergodic digital texts. Furthermore, he recognised that ergodic practices existed offline, and also prior to the digital age. These were those provoked by various kinds of artworks which demanded ‘nontrivial’ engagement as a catalyst. He identified the Ancient Chinese book of wisdom, the *I Ching* (1122-770 b.c.), which contains thousands of possible texts which emerge according to how the ‘reader’ manipulates three coins, as a complex example. More recent and simpler examples were Guillaume Apollinaire’s

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Calligrammes (1918), pictorial poems to be read in different physical orientations, and Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch*, an episodic novel which can be read in different sequences by 'hopscotching' through its 155 chapters. Certain types of performance could also fall into this category if they provoked their audience to respond in a nontrivial manner, for example Forum theatre, or plays which ask the audience to decide between alternative endings, or pantomimes. The most prescient example of an ergodic artwork that I will be discussing here is intermedial performance.



Guillaume Apollinaire: Calligrammes

The notion of the ergodic provides a way to reason about a quality of audience engagement that is not necessary either emphatically participatory or immersive, but is active and practical, inasmuch as it converts 'trivial' reception into a process of individual creation, and involves the spectator in making decisions about their mode of engagement based on aesthetic challenges or questions posed by their encounter with the work.

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The ergodic work of art is one that in a material sense includes the rules for its own use, a work that has certain requirements built in that automatically distinguishes between successful and unsuccessful users (Aarseth 1997,179).

Consequently, it may be argued that all theatre is, to an extent, ergodic. As a condition of its mimetic status, theatre physically represents, for its audience, something that is not there, and for this 'something' to be realised in the minds of the audience, non-trivial work is needed. It is easy to forget the complexity of the business of engaging with theatre. This is partly because the era of Naturalism diminished our sensitivity to the significance of the active role of the spectator as it positioned the audience as a homogenous passive group, required to subscribe to the 'truth' of the drama, remove itself from the frame, and overlook its own role in the manufacture of this illusion (Worthen 1992). Although Coleridge's often quoted maxim concerning 'the willing suspension of disbelief' (Coleridge [1817] 2009, 237) is frequently applied to the experience of theatre, it is in fact a far from adequate encapsulation of the complexity of the audience experience. When we are watching a performance, we do not defer aspects of our understanding and processing of the material presented, rather we enter into a game of balancing our double perception of the mimetic and the actual; it is an extraordinarily sophisticated aesthetic response, one that, in the view of French philosopher Rene Girard, forms an intrinsic dramatic tension driving human societal life (Girard 1979, 143-154). The cognitive scientist Mark Turner acknowledges the efficacy of new techniques and contemporary media in artistic representation but points out that while 'The power of mimetic expression can be furthered by technology, [...] the roots of that very expressive style go deep into the earliest evolutionary layer of human emergence' (Turner, 2006, 19).

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The significance and sophistication of the role of the audience, and the historical tendency to ignore this, emerges in Jacques Ranciere's seminal essay, *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009). In a manner that echoes Aristotle's development of the concept of the ergodic, he stresses the complexity of the activity of spectating.

The spectator also acts, like a pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares interprets [...] She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way (Ranciere 2011, 13).

Ranciere recognises that activity is an *a priori* condition of spectating, rather than it being a condition awarded to it by various explicitly participatory modes (Ranciere 2011, 17). This theme is elaborated by Alice Breeman who observes that new theatrical forms should not be considered to be the instigators of new perceptions about the audience. Rather it is our own patterns of perception that should be identified as influencing how we consider the audience/ performance dynamic.

The notions of actor and spectator must be challenged and questioned, not through changing their particular positions in the process of performance. But by means of acknowledging their equal importance for the transmission of knowledge. At this point, potential for the emancipation of the spectator appears (Breeman 2018).

Ranciere's and Breeman's arguments are reminders, in the wake of what Celia Pearce refers to as theatre's 'participatory turn' (Pearce 2016, 446), of the fact that all theatre depends on a sophisticated interaction between performance and spectator, through a mutually dependent relationship. However, the scale is long and slippery from the spectator of Naturalistic theatre - kept quiet in the dark on a bolted down seat, with their

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phones firmly on silent - to the frantically interacting Punchdrunk super-fan.

Somewhere along this scale is a point where the spectator is prompted to engage in a manner that differentiates itself both from physical participation and passive consumption, yet which is characterised by an emphatically nontrivial response that seems to demand a mode of analysis that responds to its particular qualities. Intermedial performance is located at this point: it is here that ergodic status is generated by a theatre hybrid that is not quite participatory, but not quite passive; emphatically live but also digital; temporally present but also time shifted. This is a liminal zone where the activity of the performance unsettles many of the accustomed roles of actor and audience. In contemporary intermedial performance ergodic engagement is a trope that is increasing evident, and relevant, inasmuch as it leads to a more forensic process of spectator analysis than we have been used to in either traditional Naturalistic theatre or new participatory modes.

***Blank Out* – and the play of changing perspectives**

Without imagination – the willingness to construct things from virtually nothing, to enter into the minds and bodies of never known others, to sympathise with actions of appetites we may abhor, or that leave us cold, to feel out the fullness in apparent emptiness, to find adjectives and connections where the daily minds see only separation – we risk being no more than number crunchers. But I stress: imagination is of little use without technique; and more than that, without moment-by-moment alertness to specific theatrical technique. Everything else follows in its wake. Without such imagination the play is nothing; without it I don't write a word (Palfrey, 2014,12).

Blank Out, the 2016 -18 chamber opera by the Dutch composer Michel van der Aa, requires its audience to continually shift perspective from a singer performing live onstage to a video backdrop made up of live-streamed and filmed footage. Frequently the audience has to blend two digital and live sources as the action crosses from stage to

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screen or adjust their perceptive mode as the piece tricks the eye in to a momentary confusion about what is real and what is film.

The opera is based upon the work and life of South African poet Ingrid Jonker. It centres on a relationship between a man and his mother and uses live performance, electronic and acoustic music, and 3D video projection, to explore memory and the ways in which people reconstruct and deal with traumatic life events.



Blank Out

Within the performance is a small architects' model of a house. At times the onstage projection shows the view from a video camera that the performer, soprano Miah Persson, moves around the model. Doing this she not only changes her visual surroundings but also appears to be 'playing' her environment. At other moments the projection operates more traditionally to extend and enhance the settings of the narrative; it includes external footage of a Dutch country garden which, we conjecture, belongs to the model house. The impression is given to the audience of being sometimes inside and sometimes outside the house. As the piece unfolds the text and music

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becomes disjointed; words accumulate and loop as the world of the model and the onstage business is juxtaposed with the projected images. A man, baritone, Roderick Williams, appears on film and a story emerges of how he witnessed his mother's drowning as a boy and is now re-living the trauma of his past. The woman on stage is his mother and memories and reality fuse across the digital/live divide of the performance.

Van der Aa is, unusually, both a composer and a filmmaker. His notable intermedial works, in addition to *Blank Out*, include *Sunken Garden* (2013) which involved 3D projections, and *After Life* (2006), in which characters duetted with virtual versions of themselves projected on screen. For him the crafting of the digital and live elements is one concurrent operation, and in this respect his approach is different from the usual performance practice of assigning different jobs to different specialists. In an email discussion he described to me how the music and video develop alongside one another, allowing the two forms to extend one another in a: 'play of changing perspectives'. He explains: 'This wouldn't be possible if I were to give a score to a director and ask him or her to make a film for it to use in the staging' (Van der Aa, 2018). He identifies digital technology as tool which gives him an 'extra language' with which to connect to his audience.

Sometimes the video extends the physical space of the stage (for example the 3D projections in *Blank Out* and *Sunken Garden*). Sometimes the video creates a new layer to look inside of the heads of the physical singers/characters on stage. I copy them in the video layer and they sing duets or trios with themselves (*After Life*). This enables me to show an internal dialogue or internal conflict (*ibid*).

The effect of this simultaneous approach to the live and mediated elements is to put the spectator in a privileged position. We are able to gaze into the internal and external

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worlds of the characters – to engage directly in the psychological forces that are graphically represented in the interrelations between bodies and screens. Yet at the same time the spectator is kept at work, having to shift our perspective as the juxtaposed film and live action forces on us different points of view. In *Blank Out* the film introduces sudden changes of size or scale, like a close up of the model house or of the woman crossing the stage then appearing in the projection. The live and digital materials each engender a different kind of intimacy and cognizance with the spectator.

The continual riffing on the condition of spectating prevents spectators relaxing into a state of passive reception. The productions, as digital/ live hybrids, problematise any default reception strategy that either form on its own may indicate, and so undermines certain assumptions based on the conventions of audience reception. An outcome of this is that the spectator is required to enter into a compositing process as they make significant decisions about how to assimilate the work, as part of their practice of viewing it.

This prompts a considered formulation of our relationship with the work as it positions us to adjust our strategy of reception according to its modes. The qualities of practical spectating engendered here resonate with the concept of the ergodic artwork and provoke a consideration of *how we* engage with the piece which is as significant as what the piece is about. Van der Aa's work sets in motion a multi-faceted syntax of reception for its spectators as they engage with the complex landscapes of the performances. The composer foregrounds an interplay between the work's physical live properties - its bodies, voices and spaces, and its mediated presentation - the film and the camera's processes made apparent through the use of the live link. This has the

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effect of involving the spectator in a creative, practical and self-reflexive process of engagement that exceeds the receptive modes indicated by either the dramatic or filmic forms employed.

Michael Booth discusses how types of live performance emphatically expose and call to attention the complex workings of the spectators' minds as they engage in multi-faceted work. 'Artists are cognitive scientists in the wild, doing the work to make visible to us features and problems of cognition that we otherwise would not notice' (Booth 2017, vii).

Conceptual blending and the spectator experience

In looking at the processes our minds go through in encountering intermedial performance, cognitive scientists Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's formulation of conceptual blending provides a useful theory for understanding how the spectator unconsciously blends different perceptions through a cognitive process which generates their aesthetic experience. They outline that when watching any kind of play we blend two separate perceptions: one of the actors as real people and the other of the fictional characters they play.

Dramatic performances are deliberate blends of a living person with an identity. They give us a living person in one input, and a different living person, an actor, in another. The person on stage is a blend of these two. (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002, 266).

The facility to engage with this 'double- scope blending' (*ibid*) is a distinguishing feature of the human capacity for creativity and the essence of mimetic engagement.

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The spectator is attracted to the theatre because of the compelling nature of perceiving fiction and the reality combine through the illusion of the performance: 'The power comes from the integration in the blend' (266). And they add: 'In drama the ability to live in the blend provides the motive for the entire activity' (267).

The concept of conceptual blending, which acknowledges the complexity of aesthetic engagement, lends itself to the further levels of connections in intermedial performance. This is because in intermedial performance double scope blendings proliferate beyond actor and character, to encompass the mediated and the live, the nuances of temporalities attached to both forms, and the multiplicity of different environments, scales and ranges that accompany the incorporation of digital media in a performance. This capacity to 'create' something from a complex conceptual blend is not only an inherently human action (Turner 2006, 17), but also in this case, where the blend involves multiple digital and live sources, it is an experience that resonates with our contemporary culture.

Our era is characterised by its limitless layers of mediated information and, as Marshall McLuhan predicted (McLuhan 1967), we have honed an ability to engage with a technological/live environment in which we blend digital and real experiences. Consequently, our practical modes of engagement with everyday life, with its multiple screens and mediated interactions, inform and elucidate the practices of spectating fostered in the intermedial performance environment, where the dynamics between the juxtaposed live and mediated elements replicate and respond to those we encounter in our media saturated culture. In intermedial work of the kind created by Van der Aa we are not suspending our disbelief, rather we are conceptually blending the elements of

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digital and live performance, engaging in an individual and reflexive relationship with the work as we play between the modes employed, using the kinds of mental processes that distinguish our time and culture.

Possible worlds theory

Instead give me, uninterrupted, a new world for the evening. Don't allow me the temptation to check my phone, 45 minutes in, to have the politics and the work rush back in. Inwind[sic] me from scrolling' (Parkinson, 2018,17)

Despite its association with contemporary Sci-fi and concepts of the multi-verse possible worlds theory is an historical philosophical concept dating back to the 18th century and the work of metaphysician Gottfried Leibniz. Leibniz suggested that God conceived of infinite possible worlds before choosing the best of them as the actual world for us to inhabit (Ronen 1994: 5). His work in this area found little favour among his contemporaries and it was famously lampooned by Voltaire in *Candide*. However, the idea that there exists a multiplicity of distinct possible worlds which might have been, or which possibly could be, alternatives to our own, proved to have traction and went on to inspire many innovative approaches to logic, philosophy, mathematics and literary theory. It is its most recent incarnation, as a concept adopted by digital theorists to reason about participants' interaction with games and online fiction, that is of particular use here-

Digital analysts were attracted to the way in which possible worlds theory had been used by literary theorists and philosophers in the 1970s to analyse both the creative role of the reader, and the significance of individual perception, in defining an aesthetic

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experience. One of the literary pioneers of possible worlds theory was Umberto Eco who believed that the reading process could be mapped in terms of possible storyworlds created by reader as well as author. He developed the concept of the open text in 1962 and went on to forward the theory that the reader creates an imaginary world as they progress through a narrative. He described the literary text as ‘a machine for creating possible worlds’ (Eco 1984: 246) and said that a reader’s engagement with a fiction involved them exploring the possible worlds of the unfolding narrative, drawing on their own actual worlds (or life experience) as they go, and only gradually adopting the author’s version. This was known as the *abstract* view and demonstrated an application of possible worlds theory which acknowledged that an aesthetic process could be determined – at least to an extent - by the participant as well the originating artist.

At a similar period in the late 20th century possible worlds theory was adopted by modal philosophers to explain relative values of truth statements by measuring them against a modal system; rather than evaluating utterances as true or false, they could be evaluated relative to their possible worlds, so something true in one possible world might not be in another. The modal philosopher, David Lewis, developed an application of possible worlds theory which prioritised the significance of the individual’s position in terms of the object of contemplation. From the perspective of Lewis’s ‘modal realism’ it is the individual’s point of view that converts a possible world into an actual world; this is known as the *concrete* application of possible worlds theory (Menzel 2013) and it advocates that we are surrounded by innumerable possible worlds which have the same status to one another but what is ‘actual’ depends on the perspective of the person inhabiting a world (Ryan 2012). Consequently, using concrete possible worlds theory, we

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can surmise that what constitutes an aesthetic experience of a text is governed by what the reader / spectator perceives rather than by what the author intends.

Digital theorists Marie Laure Ryan and Alice Bell have observed that both these interpretations of possible worlds theory provide tools and a language that respond to experiential, immersive and imaginative qualities of computer games and digital fiction. They have appropriated possible worlds theory in examining how narrative worlds are created through the readers' interaction with fictional works located in the digital environment, such as Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (1995) and M.D. Coverley's *Califa* (2008). They realised that possible worlds theory was particularly appropriate for digital fiction because, unlike books, the reading process was not just something existing in the mind of the reader but could be actualised through the links activated at the computer screen by the reader as they choose a pathway through a book (Swift, 2014, 49).

The notion of possible worlds responds to a textual environment that contains innumerable narrative possibilities that become actual through the reader's action. As Alice Bell argues: 'Possible worlds theory [...] is able to accommodate the multi-linear hypertext fiction structure rather than attempting to manipulate it into a pseudo-linear format' (Bell 2010: 26). I would suggest that for similar reasons possible worlds theory also provides a means of reasoning about many kinds of performance, but particularly intermedial and immersive work, in which different individuals may have different, but equally valid, experiences. It initiates a process of regarding spectating in a way that legitimises the participant's performative act and incorporates it into a view of what the event actually is. Furthermore, it formally recognises that certain

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performance practices are contingent not on the spectator as abstract concept, but far more specifically on the particular individuals present at any one time each of whom may have agency in the creating of a narrative event.

So, while conceptual blending allows us to understand something of the spectators' mental processes triggered by intermedial work, possible worlds theory responds more specifically to the actual lived experience a spectator has. It endows their practical and perceptual activity with a world-making status and this differentiates it from reception theories based on examining the interpretative activities of the reader. Furthermore, it provides a conceptual framework which matches and responds to the characteristics of the practices of spectating which are increasingly dominant in contemporary performance work.

***Foreign Radical* – the changing worlds of a performance**

Foreign Radical, by Theatre Conspiracy (2015-18), uses projected films and interactive games to engage spectators with recent US laws for interrogating suspect terrorists. The piece opens in a starkly lit room in which a naked man is restrained at a table. It soon becomes apparent that the setting is an airport border control and we, the spectators, are to be quizzed and cajoled into deciding the fate of this unnamed interrogation victim.

At the helm of this participatory and immersive experience is Milton Lim as the 'host' who relentlessly fires questions at us: 'have you ever taken part in a political protest?', 'how often do you change your online password?', "have you watched online porn in the last 24-hours?", in order to decide who among us are the most suspicious.

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According to our answers we are sub-divided into different groups, taken to different spaces and given new tasks. Videos of Arabic and Farsi text, surveillance camera footage and unidentified middle eastern landscapes are projected all around. At one point some of us are instructed to search a suitcase and report back on suspect items found. Knowing we are under close cctv surveillance by other spectators in one of the other spaces, we tentatively rummage. Nails, drugs, and some dodgy looking items in a bag that might be part of a bomb, are unearthed and, on the basis of those, we must decide the fate of the owner of the case. At the end of the piece the man from the first room reappears, now clothed. He takes charge of proceedings and turns the interrogation onto particular spectators with apparently benign questions about their experience of travelling across borders. But the videos tell another story and we realise that in this context nothing is what it seems.



Foreign Radical

The performance cleverly uses and manipulates spectator choice to allow us to experience directly the processes used by security services in response to the US government agenda. While aspects of the piece were overplayed and rather clumsy, its

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power as a performance resided in its central conceit – that it was able to visibly and meaningfully respond to the decisions spectators made during its course. Consequently, we became implicated in its processes and culpable in its outcomes.

The audience was encouraged to stay after the performance and discuss what had happened – in fact this discussion was an important aspect of the event because we had all experienced different things; essentially, we had seen different shows. And each personal experience of the performance that was shared in the after-show chat was ghosted by other possibilities, stories that might have emerged, had we responded in a different way.

The notion of possible worlds theory indicates that for all the things that happen, other possibilities remain unrealised. What *is* the ‘actual world’ depends ultimately on our own experience. David Lewis advocated that the defining quality of an actual world was that it was labelled so by the person who exists within and speaks *from* it, and so articulates their own personal perspective: “‘actual’ is indexical like ‘I’ or ‘here’ or ‘now’: it depends for its reference on the circumstances of utterance, to wit the world where the utterance is located’ (Lewis in Stalnaker 2003: 67). Thus Lewis’ explanation of the terms actual world and possible world establishes the significance of the point of view, the lived experience, of the person occupying their actual world.

Our actual world is only one world among others. We call it alone actual not because it differs in kind from all the rest but because it is the world we inhabit. The inhabitants of other worlds may truly call their own worlds actual, if they mean by actual what we do (Lewis in van Inwagen 2011: 297).

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In Lewis' modal universe there is no *a priori* original world that serves as a reference or model for others: for him the status of all worlds is relative and whether they are actual or possible depends on the position from which they are viewed. The implications of this when applied to the experience of the performance spectator are considerable.

There is no straightforward fictional world presented in *Foreign Radical*, all that exists is our lived experience of it. A diversity of different kinds of narrative technique is used that provokes continually changing immersive relationships with the spectator, and what the performance *is* depends both on *what* is viewed and *how* the viewing operates. The work's fragmented and fluctuating nature forces the spectator to consider their consequent changing relationship to it: the dynamic between their actual world and the worlds of the performance, therefore becomes paramount. Possible worlds theory provides a way of reasoning about the reader's singular practice of engagement which repositions itself continuously in response to the multiple and unstable elements of the work. Bell explains that the theory can 'be used to show how different readers can experience different events, different versions of events, or contradictory events in the same text' (Bell 2011: 69).

Elizabeth Klaver has observed that the application of Lewis' theory to a theatrical performance operates in a different way to Eco's approach because it does not sanction the notion of a privileged real-world perspective existing outside the system of possible worlds. This refusal to recognise a difference in status between different possible worlds means that Lewis' theory does not allow a differentiation between the imaginary world of a performance and the real world of the audience in terms of any assumed difference of status. Neither the world of the spectator, nor of a performer nor even a character in a play may be considered more or less authentic than the other. Rather they function as

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equivalent alternatives to one another, different possibilities whose actuality depends on the circumstances of viewing. For Klaver the application of Lewis' modal realism to theatre means that:

A play in performance under these rules is just as existentially real as the real world. In fact, following Lewis, the fabula, the performance, and the real world of the audience would not differ at all in manner of existing; the only difference would lie in such things as where they exist and what stuff they have in them (Klaver 2010: 50).

In *Foreign Radical* there is a levelling of differences between our real lives and the worlds of the performance as the realities and the fictions are comprehensively mixed together creating a real sense of slippage between what is actual and what is possible. For it is our real-life commentaries, interactions and games, during the course of the evening, that determine the fictional outputs of the piece.

Simon Palfrey, who writes on the possible worlds of Shakespeare's plays, acknowledges the similarity of status in the worlds that are actualised in a performance and those which are not. And he also divorces the play in performance from any *a priori* status it has and notes how these unrealised aspects of the piece ghost the experience of it.

The actual stuff of the play is not (*original*) derivative of some primary truth or place; it is not what Austin calls constative, or even really mimetic. Instead we get a world of severed asymmetric instants, botes[sic] of time, correspondent to specific technologies. Each formactive [sic] event – a line, entrance, cue-space, metaphor, disguise – produces its own laws, chances, causes and character (Palfrey2014, 138).

Palfrey acknowledges that the events of the performance produce their own realities which are independent of anything that might have existed before the unique congress

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of the performance and its particular spectators at a specific time and place. He goes on to discuss the significance of the unactualized possibilities held within the piece:

The crucial distinction of a playworld is this: as in the extratextual world these things do exist independent of anyone's notice, but they are inoperative without such notice; the unexhausted qualities of the object are otherwise unacted possibilities (Palfrey 2014,140).

The experience of *Foreign Radical* is always incomplete because it flaunts its unrealised possible worlds. What would have happened with different spectators? what will happen next time? Neither the spectators, nor the makers really know. But we do realise that the mix up of fiction and reality make up a commentary on a certain state of affairs, and where and how we position ourselves in terms of the possible worlds of the performance has a real impact on this commentary.

However, if we gain agency in work of this kind, one thing we lose is critical perspective: through becoming implicated in the production, external objectivity becomes compromised. To take part in this show, to experience it properly, one loses one's ability to judge it impartially because any commentary we might offer will of course be about our bespoke experience. In the case of *Foreign Radical*, the complexity concerning the role of the participating spectator is exposed as the work provokes us to enact a crisis in spectating through manipulating our proximity to its content and operations.

Frogman: telescopes and space travel

At this date I was a lover of the theatre: a Platonic lover, of necessity, since my parents had not yet allowed me to enter one, and so incorrect was the picture I drew for myself of the pleasures to be enjoyed there that I almost believed that

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each of the spectators looked, as into a stereoscope, upon a stage and scenery which existed for himself alone, though closely resembling the thousand other spectacles presented to the rest of the audience individually (Proust, 2014,104).

When a performance requires its spectator to engage in a non-traditional manner, the resultant instability of their role becomes a defining characteristic and one that possible worlds theory can frame and articulate. In Curious Directive's 2017-18 production, *Frogman*, the impact of giving the spectator new ways of engaging with the performance is emphatically realised through a performance that is partly experienced as an in-the-round solo performance, and partly in virtual reality through wearing VR goggles.

On entering the intimate circular auditorium of Bath's Egg Theatre, where the production was presented in 2017, I am directed to a swivel chair and given a pair of VR goggles. In the centre of the room narrator Meera, played by Tessa Parr, sits on a chair in the middle of an expanse of sand and, in response to questions from an unseen interrogator, relates her side of a chilling story of a child's disappearance. It occurred, we learn, on a coral reef off the Australian coast 20 years ago during a boat trip: Meera's father was a police diver leading the investigation; the missing girl, her best friend.



Frogman

The piece is framed around Meera's attempts to recall what happened on the day she last saw her friend. Some of these attempts we watch live as she strings together her patchy recollections through a series of broken monologues; but most of her memories we experience via the VR goggles, which plunge us directly into the world of her past. One minute we are confronting the staggeringly beautiful reef through the eyes of the frogman - this is where the girl was lost. Next, we are in a child's bedroom, peering down from a bunkbed, sharing the excitement of a sleepover.

In this piece the shifting of our engagement between the live and the digital is emphatic as we place the cumbersome goggles on our heads in order to become privy to Meera's memories, or take them off to hear her account live. The idea is that we are all somehow part of an investigative team involved in trying to find the truth about the mystery of the girl's disappearance. This narrative technique helps rationalise the use of the equipment, giving us a reason to engage virtually with the piece. VR goggles are a long way from

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being the kind of technology we can simply overlook or ignore, as microphones and stage lighting have become. Therefore, their current best use in theatre is when they have a significant narrative function as they do here, enabling us to slip through time and geographical zones and look around and explore the places we find ourselves in. So, in this production our attention alternates between navigating through the virtual worlds of Meera's memories and engaging with the real-life performance, physically turning on our swivel chairs to alter our viewing angle as we focus on Meera's live monologues.

Possible worlds theory gives us a methodology for considering and framing this double position of being a spectator; sometimes viewing a world from an external position, and other times immersed within it. Ryan elaborates on how these two operational modes of engaging with fiction relate to the concrete and abstract applications of possible worlds theory, using an analogy of telescopes and space-travel:

In the telescope mode, consciousness remains anchored in its native reality. In the space-travel mode, consciousness relocates itself to another world and, taking advantage of the indexical definition of actuality, reorganizes the entire universe of being around this virtual reality (Ryan 2001, 103).

To adopt this metaphor, *Frogman* offers both space-travel *and* telescope modes to its spectators. When we are watching the live performance we are viewing, as though a telescope, from our native reality into the new reality of the story told by the actor – the abstract application. When we put on the VR goggles we locate ourselves, as though by spaceship, into the heart of another world, as the concrete possible worlds theory conceptualises.

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The spectator of the performance consequently gets the sense of being both outside and inside the production. We are sometimes privy to recollections of the central character in our shared present time, but then at other times, through the use of VR, we are right there in the 1990s, in the middle of the central event - the day of the disappearance of the girl. And in both these worlds we have a certain amount of potential agency, though it is differently manifested. In VR we are able to look around the environments, able to focus on what we want, get up close to the action, or move away. Although the form by no means offers a total sense of immersion, it allows considerably more agency than a conventional film could. In contrast, the real life intimate performance reminds us of the agency we always have in theatre, where our behaviour, and our relationship with the performer, is predicated on centuries of ritual surrounding audience behaviours, rather than on the latest manifestations of new technology.

Possible worlds theory foregrounds the active and central role of the spectator in the production of immersive, narrative, worlds. This is partly because it responds reflexively to the multiple-ness of a complex intermedial performance that has the capacity to provoke many possible experiences. In this example by identifying a use of concrete and abstract possible worlds theory, we have a means of framing and naming the types of engagement that each spectator will encounter. Furthermore, we can consider the experience as a journey for the spectator between different modes of encountering, in which they consistently re-position themselves in terms of the aesthetic event. In *Relational Aesthetics* Nicolas Bourriaud commented: 'Producing a form is to invent possible encounters; receiving a form is to create the conditions for an exchange, the way

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you return a service in a game of tennis' (1998). Possible worlds theory provides a way of thinking about production and reception of meaning in intermedial work in terms of the encounters a piece provokes. It promotes the envisioning of an intermedial work as a play of proxemics through which the spectator comes to understand their role by exploring different possible relationships they might have to it.

Conclusion

Intermedial performance in its various manifestations has the power to expose the radically unstable position of the contemporary spectator. New techniques, which explore and exploit the interconnectedness of media and the possibilities of live/ digital juxtapositions within performance, reveal new dynamics between aesthetic production and reception. This article has explored different ways to consider what happens to the practical spectator of intermedial performance and how we can reason about their experience. Possible worlds theory is an ancient approach to conceptualising human issues and I have looked at how it can be applied today to consider new tasks of the imagination provoked by intermediality. Conceptual blending, an aspect of contemporary cognitive theory, provides a scientific underpinning to an analysis of spectatorial practices that emerge in the intermedial event.

The three works considered have demonstrated how dynamics set into motion in intermedial theatre can become articulate on the condition of spectating in contemporary culture. They have shown how particular spectatorial practices, provoked by the juxtaposition of the live and the digital in theatre, reflect our wider interactions within contemporary culture. It is evident that when digital media is positioned at the

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heart of a live event the role of the spectator evolves. Practical and creative responses are incorporated into the remit of reception as spectators undertake cognitive manoeuvres in their response to the hybrid stimuli and mixed messages of intermedial work. Practical spectating becomes a journey of exploration between possible encounters. The conception, production and reception of performance that involves digital media foregrounds and interrogates the changing role and function of the audience and artist and prompts new ways of facilitating the aesthetic exchange between them.

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