

# Theorising the Popular



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Edited by

Michael Brennan

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In memory of Deborah Lynn Steinberg



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# INTRODUCTION

## WHY THE POPULAR MATTERS

MICHAEL BRENNAN

Popular culture is as diverse as it is complex. Produced at the level of creative industries in film, television and multimedia, amongst others, and at the level of lived experience, as well as in the interstice between, popular culture, as it is understood here, is a rich source of meaning, a basis for pleasure and identity. Far from disparaging popular culture as all that is vulgar, base and without value (as has often been the case in traditional literary criticism and a “mass culture” approach), the essays contained within this edited collection attempt to theorise the significance of popular culture as something valuable in its own right. Popular culture, in this way, both reflects and is fashioned from wider social events occurring at local, national and geo-political levels; from relations between people in terms of class, gender, “race,” and sexuality; from the interaction of history and memory; and from the everyday use in which people take up and use the products of popular culture in their everyday lives.<sup>1</sup> Culture is, after all, as Raymond Williams once suggested, ordinary, even if the meanings and uses to which it may be put can be quite extraordinary.<sup>2</sup>

“The popular” should not of course be confused with “populist.” For 2016 has been characterised, and will perhaps be remembered above all else, as a year when populist movements in Britain and the United States expressed their incredulity towards political elites (in the decision delivered by the UK referendum on continued membership of the European Union and the victory of Donald Trump in the U.S presidential election). Nevertheless, and while not directly equated with populism, the study of popular culture within British culture studies (especially in the work of Stuart Hall and colleagues at the now defunct Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham) has always been in critical tension with populism, not least in the attempt to theorise Thatcherism—a term which Hall himself coined—and its hegemonic sway on the popular imagination.<sup>3</sup>

“The popular” in this sense (as distinct from populism), while also disruptive of old certainties, especially elitist distinctions between “high” and “low” cultural tastes, has the potential to be “read against the grain,” often containing progressive elements that challenge dominant structures and attitudes. From the outset, attempts to theorise popular culture within the UK, first in the work of early pioneers such as Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, and later in the establishment—and subsequent closure—of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, have found themselves under fierce attack.<sup>4</sup> Analyses from within sociology and cultural studies have indicated that such vehement attempts to police the borders between “high” and “low” culture reveal as much about political investments in class, gender, “race” and sexuality as they do about culture itself as artifact.<sup>5</sup>

Popular culture in this way, as Mikhail Bakhtin effectively demonstrated in his study of Rabelais and the world of medieval carnival, has the power to destabilise and disrupt not only the distinctions between “high” and everyday culture but also the boundaries between the established orders and “lower” social classes.<sup>6</sup> Far from being “populist,” popular culture and its academic study has the potential to function as a site of insurgency, which, more often than not, refuses to submit to the cultural dominance of the dominant class. Popular culture matters because it provides a source of everyday meaning and functions as a basis of identity for many subordinated groups who use it as a resource in ways that, paradoxically, may also serve the interests of dominant social groups.<sup>7</sup> As creative “bricoleurs,” popular culture is routinely “made from within and below, not imposed from without or above.”<sup>8</sup> Linked to this is our democratic understanding of “theory” as providing a basis or starting-point for discussion and dialogue rather than as an end in itself. To this end, and following the work of Mieke Bal, “theory” is conceived here as an analytical tender or motion; an explanatory and systematic attempt—in ways that demand and imply analytical rigour—to understand and render meaningful all variety of popular cultural phenomena and their everyday uses. To theorise the popular, as the contributors to this collection do, means to attempt an interpretation; to provide a “proposal that can be presented to others...formulated within the framework of systematic theory” in ways intended to provoke further discussion.<sup>9</sup> It is in this spirit that the book was conceived and it is my hope that this is how it will be read.

The collection of essays contained within this book emerges from the fifth annual *Theorising the Popular* conference held at Liverpool Hope University in June 2015. At a meeting between the Department of Media

and Communication and the Vice Chancellor, Professor Gerald Pillay, in 2009, he suggested the formation of a Popular Culture Research Group. This led to a university-wide seminar series, often including visiting scholars, and since that time *Theorising the Popular* has gone on to become an annual international conference, attracting early career researchers, practitioners from within creative industries and the performing arts, as well as established scholars from a wide variety of academic disciplines. Its purpose has always been to challenge academic hierarchies and to demonstrate that the “popular” is as intellectually rigorous as “high art” and that “high art” is rooted in the “popular.”

The diversity of papers presented annually at this conference, reflected here in this anthology, demonstrates the rich diversity of the field of study, often in ways that traverse disciplinary boundaries and borders: from film, television and communication studies, through sociology and cultural studies, to studies of theatre and the performing arts, as well as queer, gender and sexuality studies. Thus, as Graeme Turner notes, while the study of ordinary or popular culture—broadly conceived as cultural studies—has achieved recognition as a field of analytical inquiry in its own right, it is neither a discrete or homogeneous formation, nor is it particularly easy to define.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, there are commonalities in the essays contained in this edited collection, not least the sustained focus on culture as a proxy for distinction related to social divisions of gender, class, “race,” sexuality etc., and on the value placed in and on popular culture as a vehicle for identity, critique and resistance.

The first three chapters of the book reflect on the increased popularity of interactive theatre. The first, by Russell Anderson, examines the boom in immersive, interactive theatre, especially nuanced debates about the nature and extent to which it facilitates human agency through the perceived increase in choice afforded audiences by their participative involvement in the direction and development of storylines and plot. Anderson reflects on the complex relationship between interactive theatre and popular culture, especially the influence of other media and genres—from ICT developments in hypertext and gaming, to “renaissance fairs,” role-play evenings, and re-enactment weekends—in how we “read” and respond to interactive theatre.

Chapter 2, by Catriona Craig, addresses issues raised in the theatrical performances embodied in comedy improvisation, focusing in particular on the long-form improvisation troupe, *Austentatious*, and their creation of “an extemporised ‘Jane Austin novel’” from a title “suggested by a member of the audience in each performance.” In so doing, Craig discusses issues of gender and class as they appear at the intersection of

“high” and “low” cultural forms—the “middlebrow.” Here in particular Craig discusses the ways in which comedy improvisation of this sort, comprising structural affinities that appear closer to feminine writing, allows the potentially subversive escape from mainstream phallocentric culture. While drawing attention to sociological analyses of culture and taste as invariably classed and employed as social markers of distinction, Craig suggests that the irreverence of comedy improvisation as performed by Austentatious is indelibly inscribed with the popular through its rejection of all that is scholarly and useful.

In the third chapter, Laurie Slegtenhorst reports her empirical research into the interactive musical, *Soldier of Orange* (*Soldaat van Oranje*), about the Dutch resistance in Nazi-occupied Holland during the Second World War, reflecting upon what this reveals about wider public participation in contemporary popular historical culture. Slegtenhorst’s chapter is also about agency, especially the ways in which the vexed moral choices faced by Dutch citizens during the Second World War are deployed to provoke debate as well to enhance the audience’s sense of involvement in the narrative. Slegtenhorst reflects on the special effects employed in the musical—as “staged authenticity”—in order to create an immersive sensation for the audience of being present in the narrative. In discussing the opportunities for public engagement afforded by the musical, Slegtenhorst explores the intersections of history, education and commemoration and the potential the musical has for shaping Dutch public memory, especially among subsequent post-war generations who did not experience the war first-hand.

The following three chapters address issues largely contained within the realm of television and the changing landscape of a post-television age—though the boundaries between various genres of popular culture are themselves increasingly “leaky.”<sup>11</sup> Michael Brennan’s discussion of Christopher Hitchens’ public dying in chapter 4 illustrates not only the porousness of boundaries between genres (especially television and YouTube, and the journalistic and literary realm, in which Hitchens plied his trade), but also between public and private domains, as well as between what can be considered “popular” and “high-brow.” Brennan suggests that Hitchens’ brand of writing and public performance straddled the divide between journalistic invective and learned scholarship, and that Hitchens’ highly-charged public (and political) performances in televised debates, and on the video sharing platform YouTube, served to blur the lines between “popular” and “high-brow.” Hitchens’ choice to narrate his own experience of terminal cancer, Brennan suggests, serves also to undo the



private as the primary locus of the dying, providing an opportunity for the re-admittance of dying (and death) within the (cultural) public square.

The focus of chapter 5 is also televisual, as Alison Offe explores the cultural and historical re-appropriation of Anne Boleyn, and the Tudors, as refracted through the popular Showtime series, *The Tudors*. Offe discusses the significance of Anne Boleyn for contemporary audiences, reflecting on the popular cultural tropes through which she has been portrayed in televisual and cinematic depictions—typically as a manipulative, cynical, and power hungry temptress, often in ways that are not supported by the historical evidence. Offe suggests that popular representations of Anne Boleyn, such as that in *The Tudors*, can have a powerful effect on the cultural (and historical) imagination, fixing in the audience's and wider society's mind an enduring image of a popular cultural icon.

The focus on television as a site of contemporary popular culture is also the subject of Pavao Parunov's discussion, in chapter 6, of the critically acclaimed series *Breaking Bad*. Drawing upon debates and theoretical frameworks within gender and masculinity studies, Parunov theorises the complex relations between notions of "masculinity in crisis," the anti-hero trope within popular cinematic culture, and the reconstituted representations (and relations) of masculinity made available in a changed television landscape of "pay-cable-networks." The nature of contemporary television, Parunov suggests, increasingly resists monolithic representations of masculinity but instead demands greater levels of agency on the part of the audience in ways that invite the continued (re-)negotiation and performance of gender as a lived identity.

The following four chapters address issues and are located within the bounds of what can be loosely called the literary realm. Indeed, Eric Sandberg's discussion, in chapter 7, of criticisms levelled at Dorothy L. Sayers' genre of crime fiction by the literary critic Q. D. Leavis speaks very decidedly to issues of literary worth and to attempts to police the boundaries between what is seen to demarcate "high" from popular culture. Sandberg's essay takes Leavis to task for her three-fold criticism of Sayers' fictional work as lacking literary worth, chiefly: for lacking emotional depth; peddling a form of intertextuality (or allusion) that is superficial and "lite"; and for failing to engage substantively, and in any meaningful way, with conceptual ideas. While defending Sayers' work on these grounds, Sandberg's essay suggests that Leavis' criticisms say more about attempts to contain Sayers' work within the bounds of the "popular," as a byword for all that is meretricious, than they do about the intrinsic properties of the work itself.

The focus of chapter 8 by Estelle Vallas is Guinevere of Arthurian legend, as refracted through Bernard Cornwell's historical *Warlord Chronicles*. In attempting to understand the significance of Guinevere for contemporary popular culture, Vallas at once situates Cornwell's representation of Guinevere against the backdrop of feminist debates throughout the twentieth century, while also asserting the historicity of feminine power and independence as a feature of Celtic Britain in the ancient world. Thus, modern representations of "female power in the Celtic world," as Vallas suggests, while "not a modern fictional development," need to be understood within the context and matrix of the contemporary Women's Movement and male anxieties about the ascendancy of women within society. There are clear parallels here in Vallas' discussion of representations of Guinevere with Alison Offe's discussion of televisual representations of Anne Boleyn, another iconic feminine figure within British cultural history, as well as with Zlato Bukač and Jelana Kupsjak's discussion, in chapter 9 (below), of gendered representations of lead women characters in American superhero comic books.

Here, in chapter 9, Bukač and Kupsjak focus on Carol Danvers, the alter ego and lead protagonist in the *Ms Marvel* comic book series. Allied to the paucity of female superheroines in a genre of popular culture dominated by male-lead superheroes, Bukač and Kupsjak draw attention to the hegemonic representation of superheroines such as Ms Marvel through the matrix of gender and sexuality. The ideological reproduction of gender binaries in these comic series, they suggest, cannot be examined in isolation of the wider social, political and historical context in which such characters—and the storylines in which they are involved—are developed. The introduction of Ms Marvel as a standalone female lead in the forthcoming *Captain America* movie is itself, Bukač and Kupsjak suggest, a reflection of contemporary gender relations in society, including the hypersexualisation of female protagonists.

The final chapter, chapter 10, by Kasandra-Louise Paterson, focuses on the young adult literature of two hugely popular novels (and series of novels of which they are a part): Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* and Veronica Roth's *Divergent*. Paterson's chapter discusses the powerfully symbiotic relationship between the issues confronted in these novels—namely, the search for self-identity and the moral choices confronting the "point-of-view" protagonists, often in vexed circumstances—and the parallel social issues facing their (largely) young adult readership. Paterson draws out the significance of agency and autonomy confronting the protagonists in these stories in ways that not only engage their young

adult readership (and audience) but also invite participative involvement and social activism.

My intention in this edited collection of essays is to stimulate critical reflection and discussion on multifarious elements of popular culture. I hope that this collection succeeds in this aim and that it provides a starting point for those both new to and those more established within the academic study of popular culture.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Richard Johnson's, and later, Paul du Gay *et al's* notion of the "cultural circuit" (Johnson, "What Is," du Gay *et al*, *Doing Cultural Studies*).

<sup>2</sup> Williams, "Culture."

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Hall, *Hard Road*, and Hall and Jacques, *New Times*.

<sup>4</sup> Founded by Richard Hoggart in 1964, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the university of Birmingham was closed, controversially, in 2002, despite an international campaign to save it (see Connell and Hilton).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*.

<sup>7</sup> Fiske, *Reading*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Fiske, *Understanding*; *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Bal, *Narratology*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Turner, *British*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Fiske, *Understanding*, 101.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# INTERACTIVE THEATRES: STRUCTURES, AUDIENCES AND HYPERTEXTUAL CULTURE

RUSSELL ANDERSON

*You are in a forest: there is smoke in the air, through which you can see figures dancing—moving together, lifting one another, drifting apart. Another figure passes in the distance, and you decide to follow, slipping between trees and passing abandoned caravans, when suddenly the forest gives way to a corridor, and a staircase. You descend, and find yourself in a nightclub, where a man on his knees is about to be executed...*

*You are a citizen of a small country fresh from revolution. You and sixty others have been chosen to represent the people: to choose how the country will be run. What sort of government will you form? How will you allocate scant resources? Can you convince the others to agree with your ideas? People are shouting, nobody is listening, and the clock is ticking...*

*You are tailing a man through central London. He wears a suit, and carries a briefcase. You are carrying an identical briefcase, and need to switch them without his noticing. A voice buzzes in your earpiece: "Have you got it yet? We need that laptop!" The man stops and sits on a park bench: this is your chance. You take a deep breath, and walk forwards...*

These are all experiences found in various interactive, immersive, and playing theatre pieces produced in the last few years. The theatre is currently experiencing a boom of these kinds of performance, and although there is no one format or genre which can be used to describe them, they are connected by the common theme that they re-contextualise how the work communicates with the audience: whether by physically placing them within the performance world, allowing them control or

influence over the narrative, or by supplementing traditional forms of presentation with communications technology and social media.

The rise in popularity of immersive and interactive theatres at this point in history is not coincidental: indeed, it is inherently related to developments in information and communications technology, and the influence this is having on contemporary culture. This chapter intends to explore how interactive theatre forms are evolving to reflect this influence, examining the underlying cultural changes informing these developments, and examining the particular methods some performances are utilising.

## **Cybertext: the Dominant Media Epistemology**

In his book *Liveness*,<sup>1</sup> Philip Auslander posits the notion of a dominant media epistemology: that within any culture, there is one medium which sits in a position of primacy above all others, which in turn adapt their methods of presentation to mimic it. The reason for this is not simply exploiting the dominant medium's popularity, but is related to the ways media communicate to their audiences. Bertolt Brecht recognised that:

old forms of communication are not unaffected by the development of new ones, nor do they survive alongside them. The filmgoer develops a different way of reading stories. But the man who writes the stories is a filmgoer too. The mechanization of literary production cannot be thrown into reverse.<sup>2</sup>

Brecht here describes a process whereby a dominant medium informs the conventions and languages through which audiences decode not only that medium, but all other media alongside it. Additionally, because the makers of other media are also audiences of the dominant medium, this language will inform the creation of further work in other media. However, the intrinsic languages of other media may be starkly different, and the cultural saturation of particular conventions may impact a new audience's decoding of older media. For example, the speedy editing and multiple camera angles of contemporary film and television leads Arnold Aronson to ask how, for audiences accustomed to this method of presentation,

the comparatively tame images of a stage play or even a musical [are] possibly to be comprehended? I do not mean "liked," I mean *understood* ... The relatively static and monochromatic lighting typical of most stage dramas is virtually below the threshold of visibility.<sup>3</sup> (Emphasis original)

The implicit suggestion here is that, in order to remain understood, older media may need to adapt their presentation methods simply to be able to

communicate with the evolving audience effectively.

Both Auslander and Aronson write of television as the dominant medium, but even at the time of writing—the close of the twentieth century—the tide was starting to turn towards cybertext and hypercommunication; so much so that it led Bolter and Grusin to argue that “[w]e inhabit cyberspace just as previous generations inhabited nature, or even earlier generations lived in a theocentric world ... [i]t is a theology of cyberspace.”<sup>4</sup>

It would be difficult to argue that the current dominant medium is anything other than cybertext or hypercommunication. From the ubiquitous use of mobile devices, web services, and social media, to the adaptation of television to cybertextual modes of presentation (on-demand services, “red button content,” or the adoption of split-screens or multi-perspective “windows” within a single frame), the early twenty-first century is characterised by a permanently connected, responsive, and multi-optioned media culture: as Birringer terms it, the “contemporary technosphere.”<sup>5</sup>

With this being the case, Aronson’s question of how “the comparatively tame images of a stage play or even a musical [are] possibly to be comprehended?”<sup>6</sup> becomes particularly pertinent to theatre makers in a culture based around a multiplicity of choice, interactivity, and user-generated content. The question, then, becomes one of how the theatre is adapting to respond to the current dominant media epistemology. In order to begin to answer this, it may be worth examining the theatre’s ongoing relationship to popular culture.

## Theatre and Popular Culture

Attempting to demark a boundary between theatre and popular culture is a potentially misleading endeavour. Throughout history, different forms of theatre have variously been perceived as ranging from the pinnacle of “high-brow” culture, to the lowest and most dangerous popular culture (often worthy of censorship or outright prohibition). In addition to this, the labelling of theatre as separate from popular entertainments such as song or dance is rather problematic, as highlighted by Christopher Balme:

Since the Renaissance, we can observe the evolution and institutionalization of dramatic, music, dance and puppet theatre ... It is erroneous to assume that these theatre forms have always existed in splendid isolation. Dramatic theatre without musical accompaniment, for example, was only introduced in the late nineteenth century. There are countless historical genres that mixed, in various combination, speech, song and dance.<sup>7</sup>

In the twenty-first century, interactive and immersive theatre forms have particularly tangible connections to contemporary popular entertainment. Even before its current boom in popularity, interactive performance was appearing in non-theatrical environments. For example, Gary Izzo<sup>8</sup> offers an analysis and practical guidance to producing interactive performances in the style of open-ended “renaissance fairs” or re-enactment weekends. Similarly, murder mystery role-play evenings and weekends—where participants gather in costume, assume a role, and interact with professional actors to solve an Agatha Christie-style murder mystery—have proved significantly popular over the last few decades.

The gaps between these events and theatre are closing fast: techniques similar to Izzo’s can be found in numerous interactive performances, and Gareth White’s referencing of Izzo’s work<sup>9</sup> helps to canonise it within the developing interactive theatre movement. The murder mystery concept has also been picked up by many interactive theatre companies, employed in performances such as Produced Moon’s *The Hawke Papers* (2013) and Strange Fascination’s *Secrets: The Mustard Twenties* (2015).

Perhaps the most obvious point of comparison between interactive work and other popular forms is found in gaming. Alongside the rise of interactive theatre, there has been a boom of live-gaming experiences, where participants are tasked with solving a series of practical and mental puzzles within a given time. These games, such as *Time Run London* (2015), are often highly performative: players may be greeted by a character who outlines the scenario and narrative purpose behind their puzzle solving, and offers help if they become stuck.

Like the murder mystery, gaming dynamics have been adopted by multiple theatre companies, as in CoLab’s *Hostage* (2015), METIS’ *World Factory* (2015), and Block Stop’s *By the End of Us* (2015).<sup>10</sup> The line between what makes one experience “game” and another “theatre” is indistinct, and perhaps best considered by looking at the work’s focus. The National Theatre Wales’ *Bordergame* (2014), for example, was intended to highlight the experiences of refugees attempting to cross international borders. Coney’s *Adventure 1* (2015) explores questions of financial regulation and responsibility. Both of these performances use their game-like structures to artistically investigate and communicate their themes. By contrast, *Time Run*’s narrative is fairly arbitrary (the players need to find a historical relic), without any connection to wider artistic themes: the primary focus is on the completion of the various puzzles.

It is also of interest that the corporate world has begun to take notice of this kind of performance. Punchdrunk have created bespoke events for several companies, but it is DifferencEngine’s creation of the



theatre-game *Battlefield Hardline: Live* (2015) to promote the launch of Electronic Art's computer game *Battlefield Hardline* (2015) that most clearly demonstrates how the worlds of theatre and gaming are becoming significantly intertwined.

As well as the connection to popular live experiences and games, interactive and immersive work often has intertextual connections to a wide range of cultural reference points. Describing Punchdrunk's repertory, Jennifer Flaherty states how they have "performed a variety of immersive theatrical events, from *Oedipus* in a Victorian garden to a ball inspired by *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Firebird* to a *Doctor Who* fan experience,"<sup>11</sup> and describes *Sleep No More* (2011) as "a noir-style mash-up of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Hitchcock's *Rebecca*."<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Flaherty also identifies the case of a fantasy novel directly inspired by *Sleep No More*, suggesting a symbiotic relationship between immersive theatre and popular culture:

The show developed a passionate fan following, including author Erin Morgenstern, who drew upon her experiences with *Sleep No More* as she was developing the magical circus at the center of her debut novel, *The Night Circus*.<sup>13</sup>

One final, and perhaps unexpected, intertwining of this work with wider popular culture is its enthusiastic fandom. This is particularly true for Punchdrunk, although it exists in relation to immersive theatre in general. Flaherty describes a significant online presence for fans of *Sleep No More*, who not only discuss the performance itself, but

have developed online communities to share their experiences ... These fans create critical and creative essays, fiction, artwork, and music to chronicle their experiences. They take photos of the objects they have received during performances: playing cards, masks, keys, rings, even tearstained tissues.<sup>14</sup>

This kind of fan responsive-creation might normally be associated with blockbuster films, television shows, or popular book series, and to find it in relation to a piece of theatre—albeit a long-running one—speaks to the complex relation between the boundaries of interactive theatre and popular culture.

## The Languages of Interactive Theatre

Given this complex inter-relationship of theatre and popular culture, and the influence of a dominant media epistemology, it should be of little

surprise that twenty-first century theatre is seeing an increased incorporation of the language of cybertext, hypercommunication, and gaming experiences. This language can essentially be summarised through three key elements:

1. Multilinear narrative structures;
2. A re-defined, active audience role, and;
3. The incorporation of hypercommunicative technology.

Before investigating how these are utilised in particular performances, though, it is necessary to explore an underlying fourth element: *agency*.

One of the central suggestions raised regarding interactive texts—and interactive performances—is that they offer their reader/audience an increased level of agency over the work: it is common in the analysis of interactive narratives to find statements such as “[t]he user cocreates the story,”<sup>15</sup> “readers become co-authors,”<sup>16</sup> or “[t]he sharp division between author and reader ... has begun to blur and threatens to vanish.”<sup>17</sup>

However, this is not a universally recognised suggestion. Countering the idea that the interactive reader has a co-creative role, Markku Eskelinen argues that:

In their processes of navigation readers don't become writers but a species of co-narrator at best in their capacity to choose (prefabricated) paths ... one should not mistake one's changing interpretations for changing texts.<sup>18</sup>

Charles Deemer supports this argument, stating that:

[d]espite the new power given readers in creating “what happens next,” the writer is still in control of the material in a very essential way: s/he creates the universe of language within which everything happens.<sup>19</sup>

How, then, are these perspectives to be reconciled? The answer may lie in an understanding of *agency*. Crucially, Janet Murray identifies the difference between interactivity and agency:

Because of the vague and pervasive use of the term *interactivity*, the pleasure of agency in electronic environments is often confused with the mere ability to move a joystick or click on a mouse. But activity alone is not agency. For instance, in a tabletop game of chance, players may be kept very busy spinning dials, moving game pieces, and exchanging money, but they may not have any true agency. The players' actions have effect, but the actions are not chosen and the effects are not related to the players' intentions.<sup>20</sup> (Emphasis original)

Carr et al. expand on this idea, stating that agency concerns:

the ways in which people make things happen, or influence events, through exercising some element of personal control. Agency, then, involves *intentionality*: it is not just a matter of expecting or predicting future events, but also of intervening proactively in order to bring them about.<sup>21</sup> (Emphasis original)

From this, we can recognise that to *offer* agency within an interactive system—what might be considered “objective agency”—the system must grant its user *intentional actions*, *proactive involvement*, and an *influence over the outcome*. Whether simply navigating a pre-written system (and not contributing to its content), constitutes an influence over the outcome is debatable, no matter how many potential endings there are. Marie-Laure Ryan, for example, suggests three “levels: of interactivity:

1. *Reactive*: a system not relying on any deliberate action on the part of the user, for example, an artwork which reacts to ambient noise levels.
2. *Random selection*: the user takes deliberate action, but cannot foresee what the consequences will be, for example choosing between two options without indication of what the outcome will be.
3. *Productive action*: the user’s contribution leaves a durable mark on the textual world, “either by adding objects to its landscape or by writing its history.”<sup>22</sup>

Here, there is a clear distinction between navigating a pre-written structure<sup>23</sup> (random selection) and contribution (productive action), a distinction that suggests a work needs to offer the chance to contribute content in order to offer objective agency.

There is, however, another branch in this debate. Ryan continues exploring the complex relationship between agential interactivity and coherent storytelling, suggesting that:

The mark of a well designed interactive plot resides indeed in its ability to limit the choices of the user while maintaining a sense of personal freedom [without the user feeling] manipulated by the system.<sup>24</sup>

The suggestion of a “sense of personal freedom” relates to the phenomenological understanding of agency—what might be considered “subjective agency.” As summarised by Gallagher and Zahavi:

In general ... we can identify three aspects of the sense of agency that are normally integrated with each other:

- Sense of agency as first-order experience linked to intentional aspect (task, goal, etc.) ...
- Sense of agency as first-order experience linked to bodily movement ...
- Sense of agency as second-order, retrospective attribution.<sup>25</sup>

These elements of *intentional aspect* (having a conscious reason for your action), *bodily movement*, and *retrospective attribution* (the ability to connect the resultant outcome to one's action) are closely related to, but not quite the same as, the previously suggested *intentional action*, *proactive involvement*, and *influence over the outcome*. In fact, subjective agency might mean that a user *does* feel a sense of agency when navigating a pre-written interactive text: they can choose which section to navigate to, they will experience the act of (for example) clicking a mouse on the appropriate link, and they may attribute the outcome ("I have arrived on this particular page") to their actions.

It is not the intention of this chapter to argue that either objective or subjective agency is "more correct" or offers "more agency" than the other. Indeed, both forms of agency can be extremely useful artistic tools. The importance of agency to many creators of interactive performances as both an artistic element, and also a marketing tool ("you choose the ending!"), is an indication of the extent to which co-creativity (or perceived co-creativity) is a central part of contemporary interest in interactive work: contrary to the clichéd perception of audience participation as an opportunity to drag an unwilling audience member onstage, and lead them through an embarrassing ordeal controlled by the performers, modern interactivity is more concerned with allowing its audience/participants tangible agency within the developing work—a relationship very much in line with a cultural epistemology of connectivity, choice, and user-generated content.

Having investigated the concept of the contemporary dominant media epistemology, explored its relationship to popular culture, and unravelled the concept of agency, this chapter will now examine how some contemporary performances demonstrate an evolving performance language in line with the contemporary interactive epistemology.

## **The Hyperdrama: Punchdrunk**

Punchdrunk are, arguably, the UK's leading immersive theatre company; certainly they are one of the most popular, both among the theatre-going public and within academic circles (a significant proportion of immersive theatre analysis focuses on Punchdrunk). While Punchdrunk's productions are often used as a benchmark for what "immersive theatre" means, in

terms of their narrative structure they create large-scale versions of a format Charles Deemer terms “hyperdrama.”<sup>26</sup> Although this is a term not widely recognised in contemporary analysis,<sup>27</sup> it is useful here in as an indication of the hyperdrama’s structural similarity to hypertext.

A hypertext is a non-linear or multi-linear text comprised of a network of pages connected by links, which the reader chooses how to navigate. The most commonly recognised realisation of this is the World Wide Web, although many stand-alone hypertext fictions have been published (such as Michael Joyce’s *afternoon, a story*<sup>28</sup> or Stuart Moulthrop’s *Victory Garden*<sup>29</sup>). In a hypertext narrative, despite the superstructural text and layout remaining the same, readers may encounter significantly different narratives, depending on how they choose to navigate the text.

A hyperdrama, by comparison, is a play in which multiple scenes take place in multiple locations simultaneously. The audience must choose how to navigate the piece; whether by moving from space to space at their leisure, by following a particular character, by staying still and allowing the action to come to them, or a combination therein.

In this way, hyperdramas can be considered a spatial (and temporal) equivalent to hypertexts, and the narratological demand they place upon their audience is the same: that of constructing an individualised narrative based upon their personal experience of the production. As a result, there has been a great deal of discussion about the changed role of the audience in hyperdrama, with several theorists suggesting that they are offered increased creativity or co-authorship. For example, Elizabeth Sakellariidou asserts that the audience’s “intoxicating gratification is that *they* hold the control of *their* performance in their own hands!”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Flaherty suggests that “[t]he individualized experiences ... allow for infinite opportunities for audience members to stimulate their own creativity.”<sup>31</sup>

These arguments are highly reminiscent of the aforementioned discussions of co-authorship in cybertexts. However, Punchdrunk’s choreographer and associate director, Maxine Doyle, says of the individualised experience that:

[i]t’s great for us when people say that they feel like they were the only person having that experience and it felt like the first and only time that event happened in that way, when in actual fact it’s happened hundreds of times over the course of a run. It’s quite a challenge to make work feel like it’s spontaneous and happening for the first time and it’s because the structure and the organization is really rigorous.<sup>32</sup>

How then, do we reconcile the assertion that audiences' hold creative control of their experience, while acknowledging how rigorously structured Punchdrunk's performances are? It may be that suggestions that audiences are offered "infinite opportunities to explore their creativity" come more from a position of subjective rather than objective agency: although the audience does not have agency over the superstructure of the performance, they have agency over their own experience and the narratives they will construct as a result.

It is worth noting that hyperdramas have existed for decades—dating at least as far back as the 1960s with Richard Schechner's experiments in Environmental Theatre,<sup>33</sup> and having a brief burst of popularity in the 1980s with plays such as *Tamara* (1981), *Chateau de Mort* (1986), and *Hamlet: a New Canadian Play* (1986). However, it is only in the last decade that they have undergone a significant "boom" in popularity: a growth that has clearly mirrored the ever-growing success of cybertextual culture. It may be that these performances are catering to a cultural demand for individualised experiences. What these performances do not offer, however, is an opportunity for audiences to contribute original content, or structures designed to offer objective agency.

### **Branching Trees and Audience Votes: Coney**

The attempt to offer audiences narrative agency is more explicitly explored by Coney, "interactive theatre-makers" and producers of "games, adventures and play."<sup>34</sup> Often straddling the line between theatre and game, Coney's works are impossible to fit into any one genre or format, although it could be argued that the key commonality is an attempt to produce work offering their audiences agency over content. As director Tassos Stevens relates:

In terms of agency there are amazing immersive experiences, such as with Punchdrunk, where you have agency of exploration, but not over the outcome of the piece. Whereas with [Coney's 2012 performance] *A Small Town Anywhere*, there is an agency for the audience in terms of interaction and the outcome is made in response to, by and with them.<sup>35</sup> (Emphasis original)

Coney have explored a variety of methods to achieve their intended outcomes, with the common ground that audiences are afforded some form of narrative influence; sometimes in ways similar to hypertext narratives, but sometimes through methods closer to the world of gaming.