IMMERSED OUTSIDERS

An exploration in the augmentation of immersion and separation in performance and scenography

Jamie Lu

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Introduction

Long before I got into this industry, as a regular theatregoer, I fell asleep at least once in almost every mainstream London theatre sized large or small. By the snoring noises I overheard sometimes, I noticed that it's not just me who find conventional theatre performance boring.

Theatre critics like Lyn Gardner pointed this out in her article for the Guardian.

> If they were TV shows we'd probably turn them off and do something else, but because we've forked out £40 (or more) and are stuck in the middle of a row, we stick it out and clap politely at the end…We need more nights that really blow us away, and make us fall in love with theatre all over again. (Gardner, 2013)

Josephine Machon described the experience of traditional theatre as "The audience remain physically separate to the action, seated in an auditorium or a cordoned viewing area, attending (albeit corporeally) in this spectatorial fashion." (2013, p. 56) When sitting in a traditional theatre auditorium, audiences are physically separated from the performance area, isolated from the fictional world of the performance on stage. This setting obstructs the audience from getting more direct stimulations from the performance, including but not exclusive to sound, lighting, smell, or even the energy coming directly from the performer. Machon also argued that "Any (good) performance establishes its own world, creates a sense that performers and design combine to summon up an imagined world for which the audience suspends its disbelief for a given period of time." (2013, p. 57). She points out that as the audience starts to "suspend their disbelief" and diving into the narrative, they are emotionally included in the "imagined world".

The relationship between the separation and immersion in a traditional theatre setting is relatively stable. When seeing a traditional theatre performance, audiences are separated from the physical space of performance while immersed in the fictional world. The more someone is experienced in the traditional theatres, the less they will pay attention to the area around them. Instead, they'll only focus on the fictional world on stage and forget about themselves. To some extent, this is an advantage for delivering a narrative in theatre. Still, the sense of spectating a story unfolding from a safe distance makes the physical stimulations mild on the audience, while the psychological stimulations can be strong.

Devices like the fourth wall either exists or doesn't exist throughout most performances unless a switch is indicated. There is not much opportunity to raise the audience's self-awareness of being excluded or included in the performance. The audience forgets about their own beings and becomes a passive receiver of the narrative.

Theatre practitioners and theorists over the years had many innovations of breaking the traditional theatrical conventions. Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty aimed to reclaim the ritualistic nature of theatre, abandon the language and meaning, giving audiences intensive and direct stimulations like lighting and sound, creating an intense sensory experience to explode the performance onto the

audience. He wants to 'shock and confront the audience, to go beyond words and connect with the emotions: to wake up the nerves and the heart.' (Tripney, 2017)

His theory was practised and developed by many later theatre practitioners. Many theatre pieces can fit in Artaud's theory, including many different types of immersive theatre pieces. On the other hand, Bertolt Brecht aimed to alienate the audience to a distance that they no longer empathise with the characters and the story. By not allowing the audiences to immerse in the fictional world, they can become hyper-aware of their own situation and be critical.

Many other theatre practitioners in history have been trying to disrupt traditional theatrical conventions in many ways. The two theories mentioned above are most relevant and inspiring to most of my practices. I wondered if there's any way to augment the sense of separation and alienation and the sense of immersion so that both can become critically aware to the audience. However, might too much self-awareness become disruptive to being aware of and engaged with the narrative and characters I.e., the dramaturgy outside the spectator? And following that, how can the deceptive aspect of performance be exposed and still be engaging? How can we give the audience a more engaged and more critical position by adding immersion to alienation and exposing the deception without destroying the sense of narrative and character?

Most of my practices focused on playing with the boundary between immersion and separation in a relatively traditional theatrical form: text-based performances. The principle of simultaneous separation and immersion in the history of theatre

is balanced. In other words, the facts of being separated from the stage physically and connected psychologically do not conflict with one another primarily because the physical position of the audience is passive/inactive, whereas the psychological engagement is active/dynamic. When our physical and sensorial position becomes more dynamic or mobilised so that one becomes more aware, how then might this conflict with or complement the psychological engagement of the spectator? In other words, is it possible to reconcile Artaudian and Brechtian approaches without the critical distancing/ alienation becoming an obstacle to immersion?

Different contexts might require different approaches, as I discovered through practice; therefore, even though the aim was the same, there will be various possible ways when dealing with different contexts. In this SIP Portfolio, I would introduce my explorations on these questions around immersion and separation by examining some of my practices with different focuses. To present my attempts of exploring the possibilities of blatantly enhancing immersion and blatantly enhancing separation to maintain the audiences' critical distance with the narrative while being immersed.

The Mild and Timid Attempt:
Orfeo and Eurydice

Take Brecht's alienation effect (also known as the distancing effect) to start with. He aimed to keep the audiences away from empathising with the story, to understand the story from a critical distance. He had a whole series of technics to achieve the distancing effect, including breaking the fourth wall and directly addressing the audiences, narration, captions, etc. All these techniques aimed to disrupt the stage illusion and raise the audience's self-awareness.

In a traditional theatre setting, audiences are naturally divided from the world on stage. For a Brechtian theatre piece aiming to alienate the audiences, this physical division between stage and auditorium can be seen as an advantage. If we can remind the audience of their own side of the space somehow, they can be more aware of themselves. As they're physically separated from the action on stage, this attempt of reminding can be made by breaking the traditional convention of the stage being the container for the performance and have actions happen within the audience.

By drawing the performance closer, the audience is in a less separated and more immersed situation. Consequently, we might expose some of the stage gimmicks to some audiences, which isn't ideal in a traditional theatre setting. But it can become a great advantage for my approach to raising the audience's awareness while distancing them mentally by exposing the artificial nature of being in a theatre performance.

In my very first project in this course, I had an element of highlighting this divide between audience and performance by having the auditorium and the stage confronting one another through expanding the performance area to the auditorium.

Designing for the opera Orfeo and Eurydice by Gluck, mainly
following my instincts, my priority when starting the design
was visualising the fictional spaces. The opera has two main
fictional spaces: the underworld for the deceased and the up-
per world for those still alive. My initial approach was how
to represent and connect the two spaces in my design.

The venue was Sadler's Wells Theatre, a traditional prosce-
nium arch theatre with a large auditorium. As a speculative
design, I was able to use the venue in every possible way.

Although it was still the beginning of my design journey, my
instinct was to use the space less traditionally. Separating
the upper world and underworld physically into two archi-
tectural spaces seemed to be a reasonable choice to make.
The space inside the proscenium-arch is traditionally the
performance space, where all the scenes take place. When a
scene change happens, usually, there will be changes to the
set and lighting on stage, and audiences will perceive it as
a change to space and time in the story. I was looking for a
way that's more natural and straightforward. Then I decided
to use the areas outside the proscenium-arch, including the
auditorium, as my performance space.

I raised the orchestra pit to the stage level, removed about
seven rows of front row auditorium seats, then added a Hanam-
ichi that's available to use according to the theatre, which
is like a catwalk that connects the stage and auditorium.
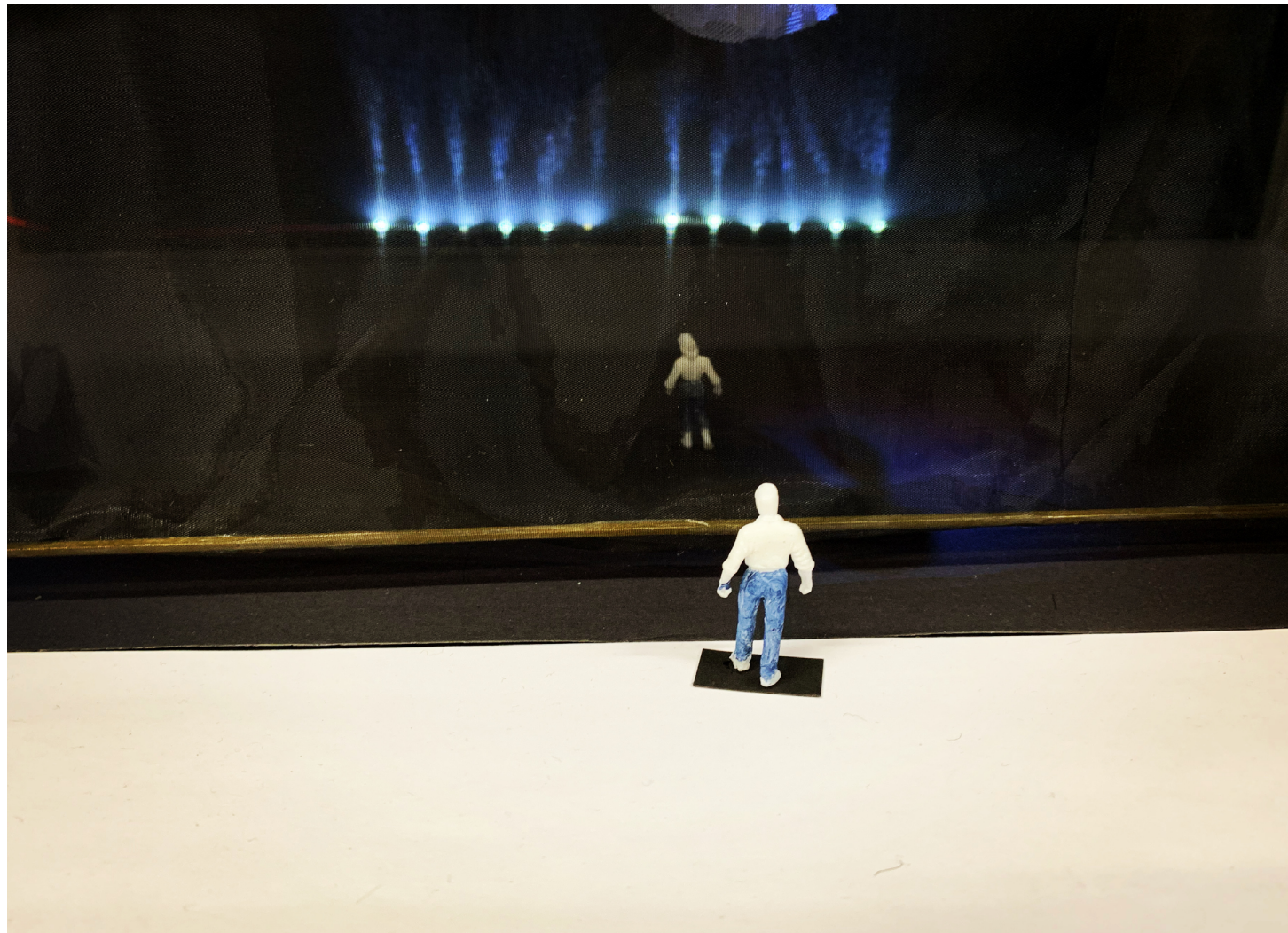
By extending the performance space to the auditorium, the whole auditorium becomes available for me to play with. I decided to use the area outside the proscenium-arch "upper world" and inside the "underworld". So instead of changing one physical space into different fictional spaces, I kept them separated, and they have their designated functions to serve the story.

I went for a more straightforward option to represent the journeys that characters made between the spaces, instead of the traditional way of blacking out and the scene just magically changed. I only needed to have the performers make the journey on their feet with the spaces separated and co-existing.

Apart from making the journey between the spaces physical and visible, a more important reason here is by extending the performance space to the auditorium. I broke the natural boundary at the proscenium-arch that traditionally separates the action and the audiences. Not completely abandon this architectural boundary, I used it as a boundary between the living and the death. Within the fictional setting of having two different worlds, I put the space where the audiences occupy the world for the living, the orchestra, the god characters, and those who're still alive co-existing in this world outside the stage. This move puts the audiences closer to the action and more immersed, as they now share the performance space with some of the characters.

But this is not enough for my approach to raise their awareness of the separation and immersion. It's not an innovation putting some part of the actions in the auditorium. When the audiences step into this space, it's already been like this, so this was only a less traditional way of using the theatre space. They are still in the same situation of being immersed while separated as the audiences are in a conventional theatre.

I did two things in this design that I think aimed to enhance the audience's self-awareness: 1. I used massive fabric to represent the force of death, which appears at the back of stalls and being carried onto the stage. It wipes Eurydice onto the stage with it to represent her death at the beginning. 2. I put a snipper who disguised as an usher in the auditorium, and he will kill Eurydice when she falls back to death at the end of the opera.

One abstract and one realistic, both being my approaches to represent the transition between living and death, I realised it's probably not a great choice to stage two deaths on the same character with two completely different styles in one show. But in this portfolio, I see them as two different approaches trying to engage the audiences in the performance.

The fabric option starts with a group of chorus members holding the fabric from the back of the stalls onto the stage. On their way, most of the audiences sitting in the stalls will for a while be covered under the massive black fabric that will block their light and sight and putting them in a relatively isolated situation. Being covered gives them no choice but to focus on whatever they can still see: the people around them and the fabric itself, the sense of being isolated will also be raised.

For people sitting in the circle and above, their perception will also be affected. When the fabric enters their sight, it blocks what's under the fabric to them. It will be a mystery to them what was going on down there until the fabric reaches the stage, and they can see Eurydice is on the stage, and Orfeo is alone on the raised orchestra pit.

The fabric moves from within the auditorium to the stage. Some of the audiences sitting underneath can even raise their hand and touch it, which intensifies the sense of immersion; when it's on stage, it becomes unreachable and separated from the audience. By this transition from reachable to inaccessible, I wish to play with the audience's expectations about what will happen in this performance. As it was the very beginning of the performance, I wanted to put an idea in the audience's mind that performance can happen around them in this show and allow them to wonder if it's going to happen again or not? Whenever they feel some movement happening around them, even if it's not part of the design, it can trigger their suspicion if it's part of the show. As the show continues, some of them might realise that there isn't much action around them. The sense of being a passive spectator in the auditorium is also something I'd like them to have.

For the snipper scene, the performer who plays the snipper will be in the space from the beginning disguised as an usher. When it's time for them to kill Eurydice, they can pick up the gun hidden in the auditorium and pull the trigger. The surprise of a gunshot coming from within the auditorium for some people can be a very shocking experience. Depending on technically how real we can make the scene look, it can be, to an extent, an intensified immersion. An unexpected gunshot just beside you while you're focusing on the story on stage can be both distracting and immersive. It forces the audience to turn their attention to the auditorium and reminds them about the border that separates them from the performance.

The problematic side of this design was when an action like this that involves stage tricks happens (we can't use a real gun in a theatre for obvious reason), it might reveal the artificial side of the performance. The distraction from this revealing can become a reminder for some audiences about their situation of being in a performance. The audiences become more aware that they're in the auditorium as passive spectators. According to Brecht's theory, they can then keep a distance from empathising with the story and become critical about the whole situation of seeing a performance, be aware of more aspects of the performance rather than only immersing in the story.

As the audiences might have different previous experiences of seeing performances, they might react differently to the same stimulations. For the very experienced audiences, nothing that happens in the theatre is real is in their subconscious. That's why sometimes when an accident happens, audiences would assume it was part of the show design. In the film Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) (2014), when the main character, a theatre performer, shot himself on the stage on press night, the critiques in the auditorium who are undoubtfully experienced in various theatre performances, all assumed that the suicide is part of the show design. In 2013, when the ceiling of Apollo Theatre collapsed during a performance of The Curious Incident of The Dog in the Night-Time, people first assumed "it was a part of the show". (BBC NEWS, 2013) At the same time, someone with limited show-seeing experience might find some of the intensive theatrical tricks horrifying and believed it.

By having the snipper in the auditorium, it requires more stage lighting and sound equipment to be added to the auditorium, where is not supposed to draw the audience's attention in a traditional theatre setting. This transformation in an area in the auditorium would complicate the space and create a split to the reality the audiences are in. It becomes a space that sits on the boundary between the fictional and the real world. No matter how audiences perceive this transformation of space, it would put them in an unsettled status of questioning.

To destabilise the often-forgotten relationship between separation and immersion, I tested out two techniques in this design: revealing the border and revealing the artificiality.

Allowing the audience to become aware and consider their own separated and immersive position with the performance, the stage, and the narrative, we'll have different ways of engaging and responding. With an enhanced sense of immersion pairing with an enhanced sense of separation, the stable relationship between immersion and separation becoming destabilised.

Still working within the framework of conventional theatre setting, it was a mild and timid approach to try to destabilise the traditionally stable status of spectating a performance.

Tools for Invading Senses and intensifying Immersion: Theatre of Cruelty

Alongside designing for the opera, I did a research project about Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. I found that Artaud's legacy doesn't lie only in the pieces that fit his manual of making a piece of theatre of cruelty, but any performance that cut the process of digesting the information from language and give the audiences direct sensory stimulations. According to the series of case studies I did, there can be different approaches to achieve a piece of theatre of cruelty. It also led me to think about how the theatre of cruelty can be used in relation to immersion and separation in my practice.

Theatre practitioners over the years have been innovating on invading the audience's senses and giving them direct and immersive stimulations in different ways. For pieces that utilised binaural sound technology, it is the sonic world they used to immerse the audiences. Companies like Darkfield and Sound& Fury mainly focus on using sound to give the audiences a sonic experience that's otherworldly and immersive. Depending on the context, this kind of performance sometimes requires putting the audience in a completely dark space. To some people, this kind of immersion in theatre performances are aggressive. It set the audiences in a relatively defenceless situation, which might be controversial in some cases. Still, it can become a powerful tool to intensifies the impact on the audiences' sense of immersion. As I mentioned in the last chapter, the more experienced someone is in a specific type of theatre, the harder they can be shocked. The disbelief they suspend for the performance is stronger when they know what to expect. The advantage of using technologies like binaural is that it is new to most theatre audiences. It can have such a substantial impact on people's sense of hearing, to the point that what content and information it holds becomes less important. It brings a unique sound quality that someone who has never experienced before will very likely be shocked. And this shock can be both immersing or alienating.

Using different techniques to intensive and direct stimulations can be used to intensify the immersion was my original understanding of theatre of cruelty. During my second year of study, I experienced a "theatre of cruelty" in my private life that opened my mind to new possibilities, which I find shockingly powerful.

I watched a live event online during the lockdown and had overwhelmingly strong and unexplainable emotions afterwards. I got very emotional and confused for a week, the feeling was so strong that I could not sort my mind clear, nor can I explain my feelings. Logically speaking, it shouldn't give me such strong emotions, as it was a talk show that only touched on casual and entertainment-related topics. I was so confused that when one of my friends who missed the event asked me to summarise the event for her, I couldn't even gather the words, all I said was, "it was too much, I don't know how I should describe it".

One week after the live event, I suddenly knew what was going on with me when I re-watched the recording. My finding was that the two speakers' emotions in this talk don't fit what they speak. It feels like while two people passionately embracing each other, what they speak is the weather is good today, or when they're behaving like they're deeply in love with each other, what they say is introducing themselves to each other.

I realised the emotional information I got directly from watching the speakers' actions by my animal instinct was too strong. At the same time, the logical side of my mind couldn't process why a casual talk can give me so much emotional information. When these two sides of my mind come together, it causes chaos.

In the preface of his book Theatre and its double, Artaud wrote: 'But however we may cry out for magic, at heart we are afraid of pursuing life wholly under the sign of real magic.' (2018, p. 4) For me, this illogical feeling of fear towards things we can't instantly explain might be more powerful than we expected.

When encountered something that doesn't have an instant answer, there's a chance that audiences can be alienated from the story and focusing on the shock or fear within them instead. And this can be caused by too much immersion.

I am a human being with logical minds and an animal born with animal instincts capable of capturing the unexplainable, or illogical, pure emotional information and empathising with other people, so can my audiences. The power of logic and language is strong, but we humans as animals, our instincts might be equally strong but overlooked. Therefore, after being strongly affected by it, I firmly believe Theatre of Cruelty will be effective when making a performance. It's not only the stage effects that I can use to stimulate the audience's sensations directly; things that don't make sense but have deeper emotions buried can also be sensed.

This experience let me think that unexplainable emotions can also be a way of immersing the audience. Also, I realised that empathising with the performance, either logically or non-logically, is unavoidable and sometimes be helpful. Instead of following the Brechtian theory of avoiding it, I wondered if it will be more potent to put the audience in a more intensive immersion first, then pointing that out to them. Then I can further destabilise the relationship between immersion and separation.

Audience Agency as A Way of Raising Self-awareness: Performing Research

Following the previous research, I further explored the genre of headphone theatre in a collaborative research project.

I focused on analysing how different forms of headphone theatres work and what role headphones play in each of these forms. By doing several case studies and experiments, we managed to sort the already existing headphone theatre pieces into two main categories: Participatory, interactive, and non-participatory. Then further categorised them into six sub-categories:

Currently existing forms of performances using headphone

Participatory, interactive

Non-participatory

1 2 3 4 5 6
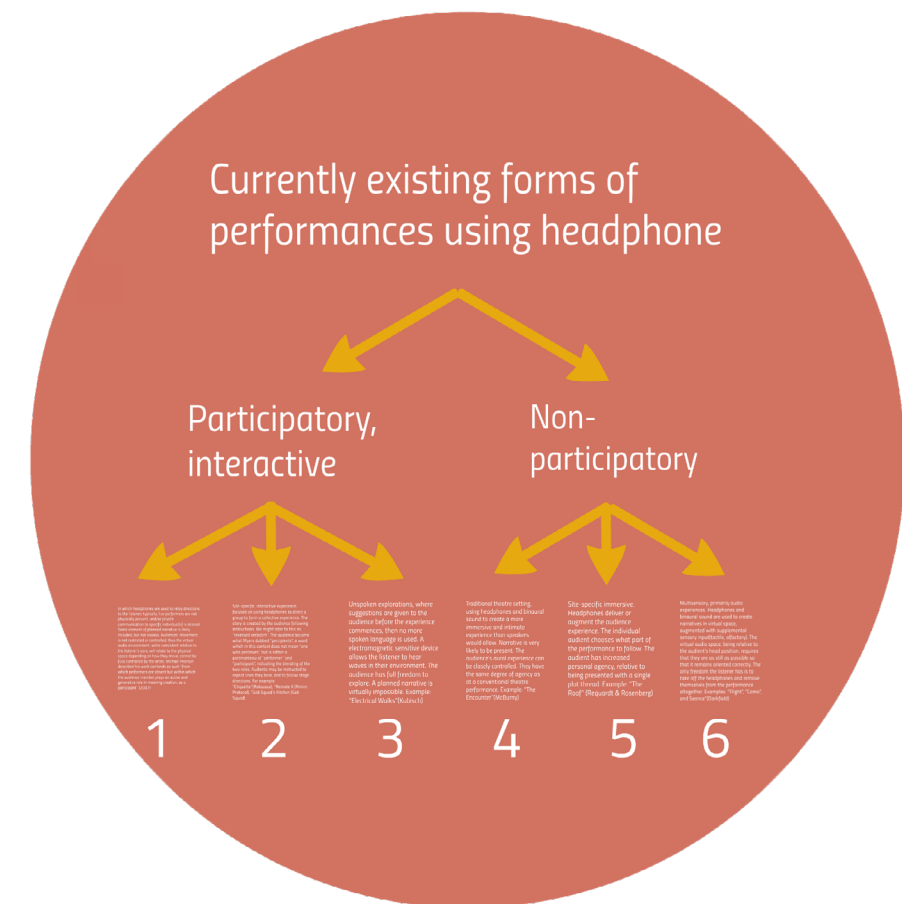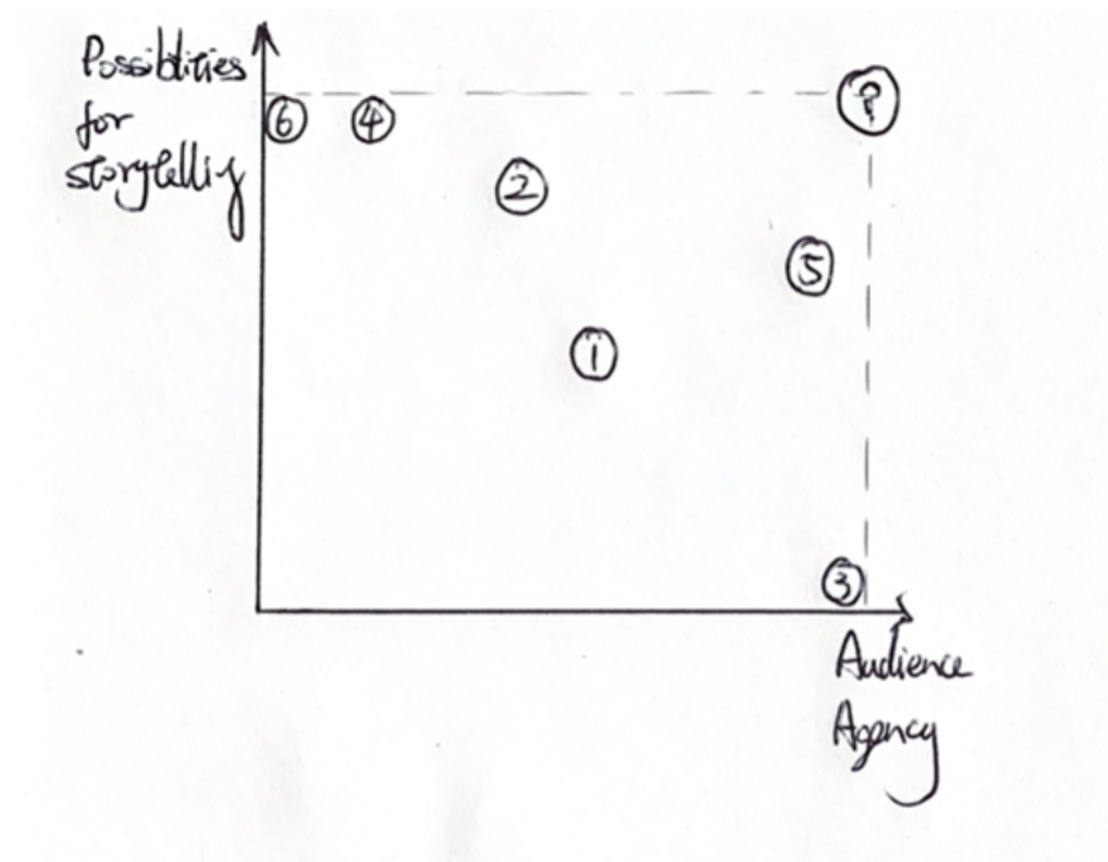
By placing them in a graph showing the degree of audience agency and the possibilities for storytelling, it's clear to identify that in currently existing performances that involved headphones, the more passive audiences are, the easier it is for storytelling, and vice versa. Giving audiences agency is one thing that's opposite to traditional theatrical conventions. It means we cannot have complete control over what the audiences hear and see, making telling a full story problematic.

While headphones are great tools for immersing audiences, giving the audience the freedom to decide where and what they want to see and listen might be a way of raising their self-awareness. By gaining agency, the audiences are free to determine whether they still want to follow a storyline or explore the other possibilities the show offers instead.

When we give audiences the choice of being immersed or separated and the freedom to switch whenever they want, the traditional spectatorship is disrupted. When the audiences consciously make an informed decision, the boundary between immersion and separation is exposed and becomes dramaturgically significant. No matter how they decide between immersion and being an outsider, or occasionally switching in between, every time they make a decision, it is an opportunity for them to reflect on their position and situation. When the audience agency becomes the centre of the dramaturgy, it will be impossible to still unconsciously immersing in a story while being separated.
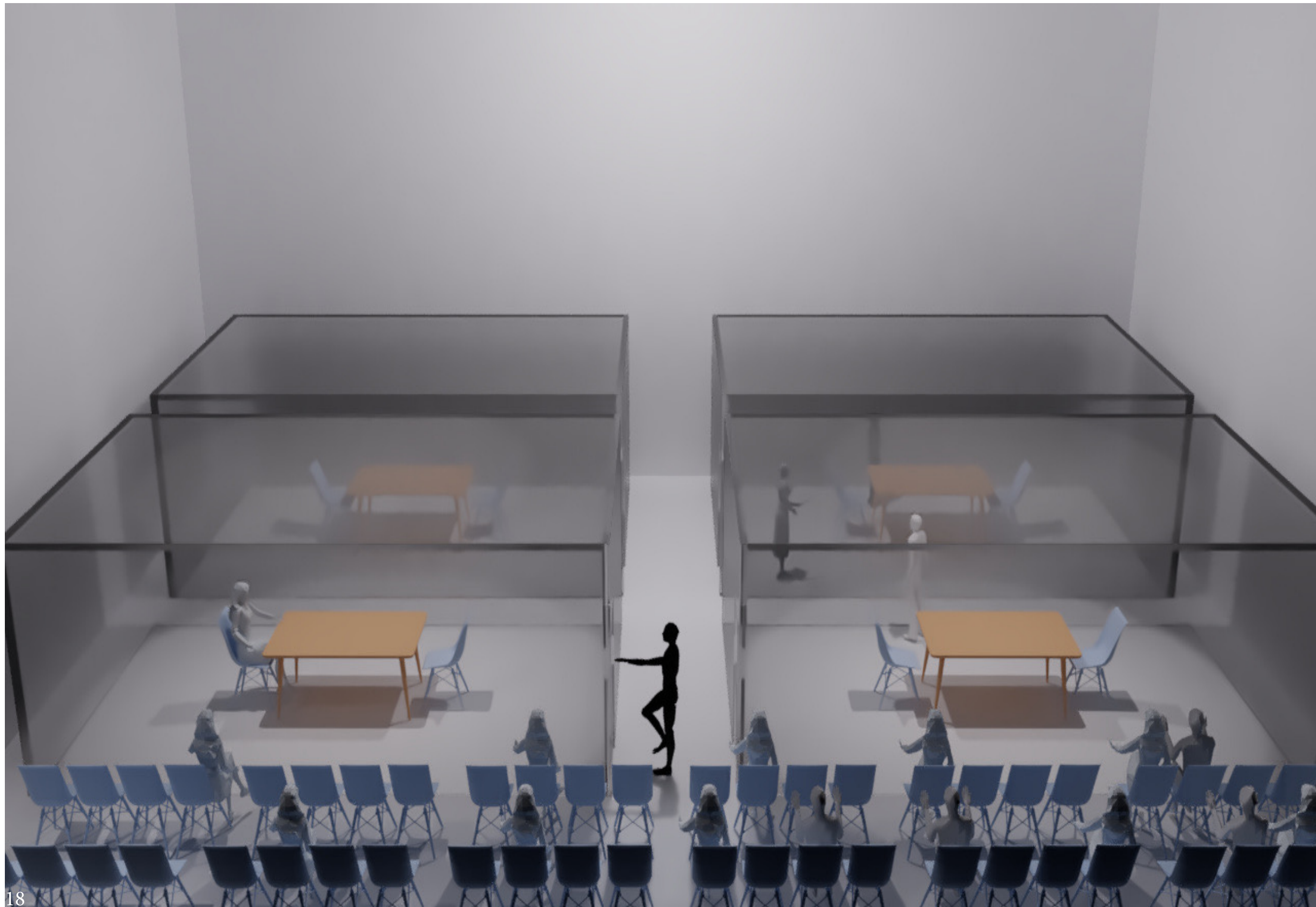
As a result, I came up with this design that might be an interesting container to hold a headphone theatre piece that gives audiences a certain degree of agency and still has a narrative. Putting four soundproof glass rooms in the space, each has a microphone inside, giving the audiences headphones and a switch to choose which one of the four-room they want to listen to. They can walk and get closer to each glass room or switch channels during the performance, or even get in one of the rooms.

There is an auditorium area in the space for the people who went for a more traditional experience. But when they can see other audiences walking and exploring the space, even they don't join them, it is still a disturbance to this relatively traditional option. And as the space is flexible, the performers might also enter the auditorium area and interact. Therefore, this design holds the potential for a performance that no one can passively enjoy the story and forget about themselves, not even they wish to.

Using Audio Technology to Play with the Reality: Aurality

Further down the road of exploring headphone theatre, I got the opportunity to realise a piece of headphone theatre in the Aurality optional unit. Before I get into my own work, one theatre performance that utilised binaural technology that interests me was The Encounter (2016) by Simon McBurney. It manipulates the audience's senses by complicating the visual and audio world in a relatively traditional theatre setting.
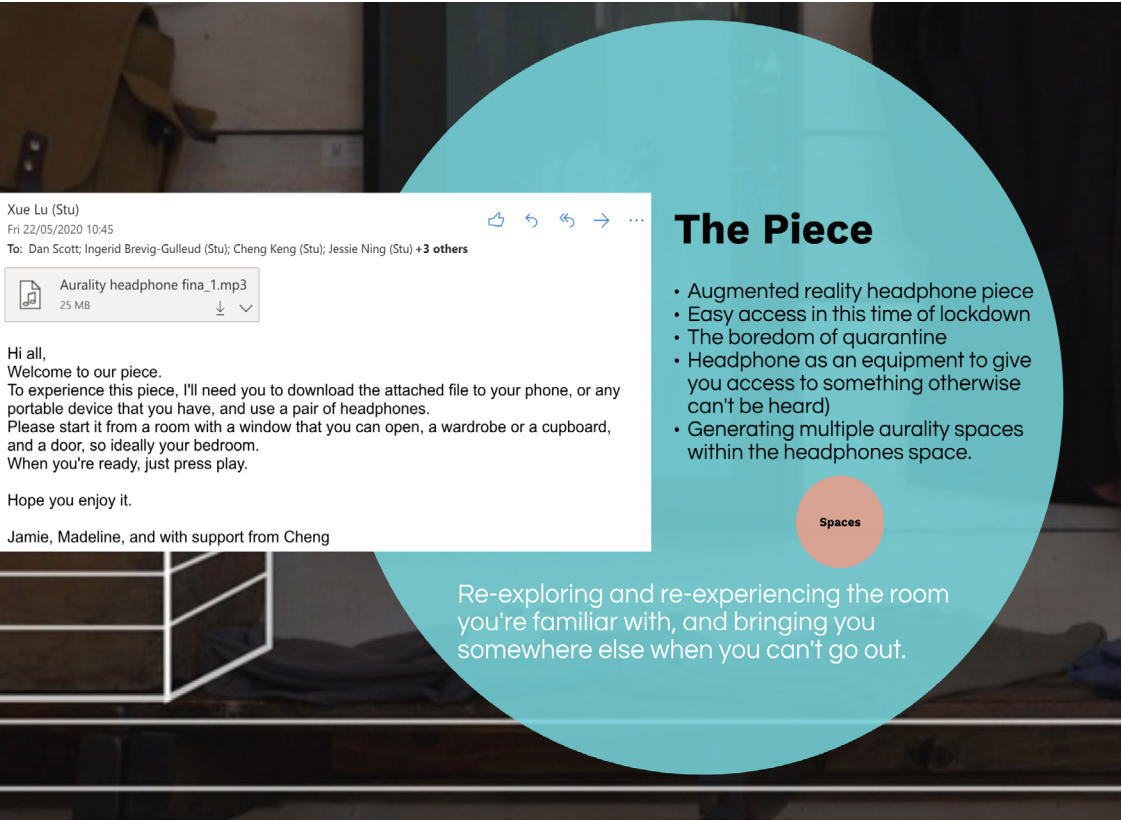
It is a performance that sonically immersed the audiences into a world somewhere else, but at the same time, their visual perception stays in the theatre. As an audience, you become more separated from the stage. It is made more obvious that you're in a bubble separated from the stage and the auditorium, which complicates the fourth wall. There are three worlds all together in this performance:
•   The physical world in the theatre, where you can see one person on stage using various props and equipment to create the sound you hear.
•   The live sound world, in pair with the live performance but sometimes mixed with the third world.
•   The fictional world of the Amazon rainforest.

The contrast between visual and auditory made it more complicated and more obvious, thus make the whole experience unsettling and putting the audience in a situation that they'll need to question what they perceive constantly.

We produced a 5 mins audio piece for people to experience in their own bedroom (https://soundcloud.com/jamie-lu-2/aurality-headphone-fina) as it was the beginning of the covid lockdown in London, and the whole unit was on Zoom; everyone was stuck in their home. Taking place in their own bedroom, we used a voice guide to give them directions and associated different types of recordings to the movements. For instance, when they open their wardrobe, they hear a strong wind sound comes out of it, and when they put their ear on the door, they hear scratching noise on the other side. We hoped that adding fictional elements to a space that the listener is familiar with can heighten the contrast between fiction and reality and bring uncertainty.

We included different types of audio in this piece and explored what each one of them does to the audience's perception. We had the voice guide and some fictional noises recorded in mono, the environmental ambient sound in stereo, and the sound we would trick the audiences into believing to be real recorded in binaural. We found that depending on the context, these different recording techniques can give the audience different senses of locating the sound. Mono recording can provide a sense that the sound is happening in the middle of your head. Stereo can form a sonic bubble around your head; the sense of location is relatively blurry. Binaural put the whole body of the listener as the centre of the recording space with a precise sense of location. It records the acoustic feature of the space as well. Using binaural, we have several indoor sounds recorded as markers to pull the audience back into their room.

Spaces

Mono: Voice guide (voice in your head)
Telephone pickup noise (accessing sound can't be heard, like toy story, also fits the recording method)

Stereo: Environment like beach, strong wind, etc.
(The new space you entred)

Binaural: Close ups like cupboard knocking (realistic almost physical experience)
Outdoor space
Domectic space, like pingpong ball noise (A marker to pull the participants back to their room from where ever they were auditorily)

Mixed: Sound after lying on bed (dreamy space, the space in your mind between awake and asleep, a state when it's too quite you can suddenly notice a lot of noise that you don't normally hear)

Xue Lu (Stu)
Fri 22/05/2020 10:45
To: Dan Scott; Ingerid Brevig-Gulleud (Stu); Cheng Keng (Stu); Jessie Ning (Stu) +3 others

Aurality headphone fina_1.mp3
25 MB

Hi all,
Welcome to our piece.
To experience this piece, I'll need you to download the attached file to your phone, or any portable device that you have, and use a pair of headphones.
Please start it from a room with a window that you can open, a wardrobe or a cupboard, and a door, so ideally your bedroom.
When you're ready, just press play.

Hope you enjoy it.

Jamie, Madeline, and with support from Cheng

The Piece

• Augmented reality headphone piece
• Easy access in this time of lockdown
• The boredom of quarantine
• Headphone as an equipment to give you access to something otherwise can't be heard)
• Generating multiple aurality spaces within the headphones space.

Spaces

Re-exploring and re-experiencing the room you're familiar with, and bringing you somewhere else when you can't go out.

While the listeners have headphones on, we can't control what is in their reality, like doorbell ringing, car noises, shouting, etc. All these are the elements that are not in our control, and even they're wearing headphones, depending on what type of headphones they own, they can still hear a lot of different noises. And that becomes a bonus element if it does happen, as it brings confusion to the audience. When the listener suspended their disbelief to enjoy this fictional sound piece like this, whatever they hear, it will be difficult to tell if it's part of the design. If it's a phone call that's not stopping, or someone keeps banging on the door, then the listener might find out in a few seconds. If it's just a random noise like a dog bark, or a car passing by, unless they listen to it again, then there's a big chance that they will never find out that it was in reality.

By constantly switching the sonic spaces in the headphone and giving directions for them to move, the audiences must constantly switch their minds between the immersive sound world and their room in reality. We arranged the content carefully so that the listeners are not able to immerse themselves fully. At the same time, some of the binaural sounds are too real not to believe. Instead of suspending their disbelief, the listeners might have to do the opposite: to remind themselves of the disbelief and constantly question what sound is in reality and what is not.

Dramaturgical functional Scenography:
Fear and Misery of the Third Reich

At the beginning of the SIP unit, I finally started a design focusing on immersion and separation-- Fear and Misery of the Third Reich by Bertolt Brecht. For a video demonstration of this design, please go to: https://www.jamieludesign.com/exhibition-alternative for three stop motion animations.

This play consists of dozens of short stories, each independent from the other, and are life stories under the Nazi regime. Not focusing on the Nazi as a historical dictatorship war machine, I took this play as a mirror to reflect our life today (2020 summer, to be precise). The Covid-19 divided us deeply. People react to the same situation differently due to their cultural background, life experiences, and information source. All we did was pointing the finger at each other but not trying to understand why we act differently.

Taking this as a starting point and the central concept of the design, I divided my audience into groups and physically divided them with a wall in the middle of the stage. The only way for the audience to "see-through" the wall is when a live stream is projected on the wall showing the other side. But in fact, no one would know if it's real live-streamed or pre-recorded.
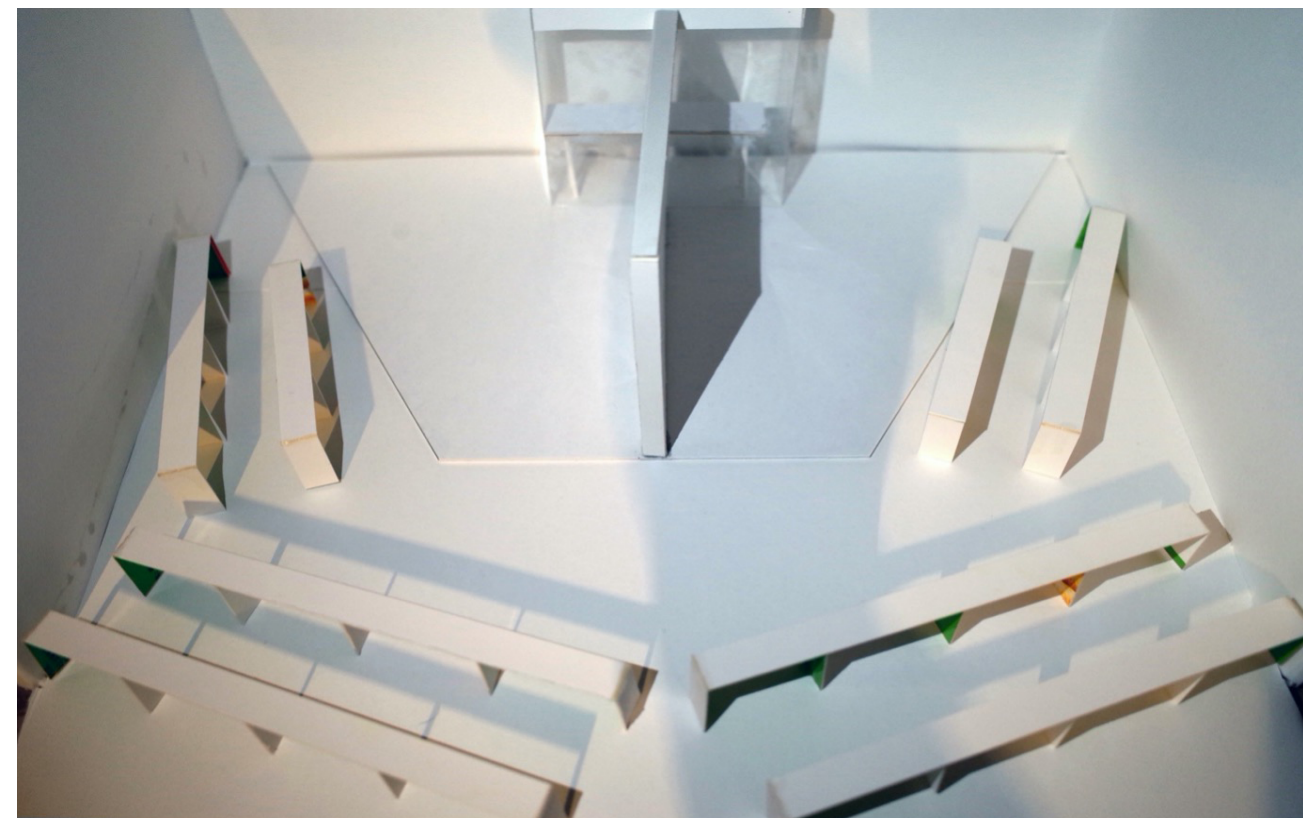
The headphone I gave the audience worked as a second divider in this design; nobody would be 100% sure what everyone else is listening to when they're on headphones. Am I listening to the same thing with the people sitting beside me? How about the people on the other side of the wall? How would I know for sure? This person beside me turns out to be a performer, is there more of them? Or are they all performers? I didn't laugh while other people laughed. Are they listening to something different with me? Am I missing out? There will also be questions around the physical wall, like what is going on the other side? This projection says it's a live stream, but is it live for sure?

All these are the questions I'd like my audiences to have and put them in an unsettled state to keep them questioning and staying self-aware. The idea of isolation in a collective experience fascinates me. This kind of not knowing what everyone else is seeing and listening is a very symbolic representation of the experience of living under a dictatorship. The fear of not knowing and no way to know what is happening and having no way to confirm if the information one gets is the truth. This fear is like a background noise that is constantly there throughout the daily life of someone living under a dictatorship. Putting the audience in an experience like this would be my way of interpreting and explaining dictatorship. The scenic and sonic dividers become scenographic dramaturgy and the subject matter of the performance. In a way, this critical distance becomes the immersion in this performance. Audiences are immersed in separation and alienation.

In this design, by exposing the artificiality and manipulation through sound(headphone)/performers (Audience participation and same performer for different characters)/set (the wall)/projection, etc. I managed to highlight the devices and make the audiences more aware of the artificiality of being a part of and not being a part of the other world. Then the idea of deception and manipulation becomes relevant.

I placed a transparent sound booth for a sound operator in the middle of the stage, operating the sound system and even doing some Foley, making it evident that whatever the audiences hear is from that sound booth. The box is visible to all three sections of the audience. In their book Sound and Music for the Theatre, Deena Kaye and James LeBrecht quoted 'The trouble with life is that, unlike movies, it doesn't have background music. We never know how we're supposed to feel. —Lewis Gardner, 1985' (2015, p.1). Background music enhances immersion but also helps control emotions. By exposing the artificiality behind the sound that audiences hear, I wanted to help the audience to become aware that there's an attempt at controlling their emotions and therefore reveals the manipulative side of performance to the audiences.

Concealing certain things to create an illusion relies on devices, such as sound effects. When exposing that, the audiences become more aware of the certain artificiality of the situation and become more aware that it's all constructed. Therefore, by revealing the sound effect blatantly, I'm allowing the audience to see the artificiality and manipulation of sound effects. The manipulation is not limited to the realm of fiction but also a real-life situation of manipulation. When the real world is included, the audiences' position as spectators gained a dramaturgical significance within the fictional world. Therefore, the border between fiction and non-fiction is disturbed. Manipulation of the story is associated with the manipulation of the audience. And this can become questionable.

In our group design for the PQ Common project, my group members and I presented a site-specific design for the play The White Plague by Karel Capek. In this design, we put the audiences in a situation that switches between immersed and separated by sometimes engaging them and sometimes leaving them to bring the audiences a sense of hesitating about what to do next.

The venue we decided to hold Capek's visionary play about a pandemic that's almost exactly like the one we're still in now is the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern. The audiences are physically located at the centre of the space, separated from most performers while there's a coherent storyline for them to follow and immerse in.

Am I Immersed or Not? Playing with Immersion to Raise Awareness: The White Plague

My primary dramaturgical approach to this play was that this country of dictatorship works like a machine. Everyone is replaceable, and no matter who passes away from the disease, there's always someone to take up the position. No one's death would affect the "machine" from running, not even the unavoidable death of the dictator himself that was indicated at the end of the play. My interpretation of the play is that dictatorship is not just a bad guy who screwed everything up; it is a self-contained power system that everyone plays a part in.

Since the Turbine Hall is a massive space and we're making use of most of it. Most of the performers are very far away from the audiences, without a stage and theatre lights to help the audiences to find the focus. Dramaturgically, this indicates no matter how high or low their positions are in this system, the characters are all visually minor and ordinary to the audiences, intensifying the feeling of people working like ants in this society. This distance is also a natural advantage for distancing the audience. When you literally can't see someone clearly, and the focusing point is not as easy to find as it is on stage, it will be extra hard for people to keep focusing on the story.

No matter how we loved to keep the audiences alienated, we are still making a text-based performance that we would want the audiences to at least know the story. To avoid making the whole performance a chaotic mess that nobody can get the story, we introduced a mobile device system that the audiences can get close-up images and having access to secret conversations. Dramaturgically, some dialogues and scenes can't be heard or known by the ordinary people in this society, but we need our audiences to hear. As we kept the fourth wall off and welcomed the audiences into the fictional world, logically, whatever the audiences hear from a loudspeaker, the characters around them hear too. It would be impossible only to let the audiences hear without using head-phones. So, this device becomes the key for us to immerse the audiences and to connect them to the storyline while things happen everywhere around them in such a massive space.

While the mobile device kept the audiences mentally immersed, we could leave the audiences unattended physically.

The performance begins with audiences entering the space with the performers and ends with the performers take off their costumes and mix in the audiences who're leaving the space. We had the performers share the same entrance with the audiences, chatting, and some might even talk to the audiences, giving them a sense of the performers entering the space as ordinary people just like them. It also raises an expectation that this performance will be interactive and immersive.

In fact, except for the entrance and exit, the audience will be left unattended on a platform for the rest of the time and only watching things happening around them. They will not be involved in the storyline, nor can they make any difference to the story. Since there is no fourth wall in this design, the audiences will be like the ordinary people in the society; their existence is acknowledged by the performers but overlooked. Their freedom is granted within a specific area; no one will be guiding and watching them. But when in such an untraditional performance space, it becomes hard even to find a safe space to stay that feels like an "auditorium". Being in the centre of the space, whatever they do, there is a strong sense of being seen and exposed, which is opposite to a traditional theatrical experience. It might take some time for some people to realise that they can move freely and explore their designated area. Every step they take creates strong self-awareness. When there's no requirement for how you should behave, even though people react differently to this kind of situation, it still takes a lot of self-awareness to be there; even not moving becomes a conscious decision. By not interacting and immersing them, we "abandoned" the audiences in isolation that they will be hyper-aware about their position.

The audience enters the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London.

Performers are queueing at both sides of the slope. Propaganda visuals are projected on the side walls

Journalist is handing out headphones and mobile devices to the audience.

(See the video at: 0:00-0:29)

The projection screen falls down when the cure is smashed. The Performers start to take off their costumes.

(Audio Cue 23)
"The Performance is now over, please return your mobile device on your way out."

Performers mix with the audience and leave the space.

There will be a moment for the audiences to finally see themselves in the story, which is probably the only moment we involve them in the narrative, which is when the main character Galen got killed by the crowd in the end. There'll be a camera facing the audience, and the live feed will be projected on a screen opposite to the audience for them to watch themselves. Even though they're the outsiders in this story, eventually, in the image, they're standing with the people in the system, watching the crowd went crazy and not able to do anything. After we excluded them from the story for a long time, finally, we show them that you're actually inside of this the whole time. The transition between separation and the sudden immersion might create a more substantial impact than only separating or immersing them.

For a video demonstration for some part of this design,
please go to: https://youtu.be/QV3DWlnppAE

Image and video credits:

Video editing: Keng Cheng
Sound Design: Jamie Lu
Costume design: Deepanjali, Ingerid Gullerud
3D modeling: Deepanjali
Upper image on page 28 edited by: Keng Cheng

**Separation in an Immersive Experience:
Richard II**

In year two, my company and I was working on realising a performance. Being our most complicated project by far, it was a never-ending journey, and by the time I'm writing this, we're still making changes to our plan and trying to adapt our ideas for the real world. For a video demonstration of this design, please see:
https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLziS6bTh8EYQ4duqas3m57GZPRtF_sBML

As this is a work-in-progress, the plan was different from what is written here when we were filming it. It is more of a demonstration of how the technical part worked with the three groups of audiences.

We adapted the Shakespeare play: King Richard II. Placing the performance in a real restaurant, we wanted first to immerse the audience in an environment that is real and unconventional for performances.

Using headphones as a divider, we sorted the audiences into two groups, each belonging to one of the main characters: Richard and Henry. The Richard group hears what Richard hears, and the Henry group hears what Henry hears. The volunteer audience group doesn't wear headphones and is free to move around the space to decide whom to follow and whom to listen to.

We made a presumption around this setting that, when you only hear one side of the two characters long enough, if we ask people to choose from them, they might choose the one they're more emotionally attached to, despite the objective conditions. But we were also interested in when in a story like Richard II, that one side in the story is clearly doing better than the other side and more suitable for the crown, how people would make their choice.

It didn't take us long to realise that no matter how hard we try to adapt the story into a restaurant setting, it still was an overdramatic Shakespearian play about two people fighting over the crown for quite a long period. There's no easy way of fitting the whole story in a performance that lasts only for a couple of hours in an immersive restaurant setting. The original storyline can't be the "liquid" we use to immerse the audience. We then decided to treat this like a play within a play and alienate the audience from this story completely.

When putting the audiences in such a realistic setting, the time in the performance will need to follow the time in the real world of the audiences; therefore, no skipping through time and space. When we put on a play that requires a lot of transition through time and space, it reveals the artificiality and the fourth wall to the audience blatantly. The performance instantly is separated from the audience. For the same reason, we also tried to reduce the element of stage gimmicks to the minimum. In this kind of close distance, everything that's fake becomes obvious unless we needed to expose that artificiality.

Later we developed a plan to keep the original Richard II story behind the fourth wall and introduce a sub storyline. Using our audio device to reveal the performers as themselves, giving the audiences access to hear some performer's voices off "stage". We also reveal their identity as performers by having a stage manager character, who occasionally breaks the fourth wall to communicate with the audience and the performers. So, the performers' identity becomes themselves as people who are playing Richard II in a restaurant setting. By separating the audiences from the Richard II story, we can then try to immerse them in this brand-new setting of watching a group of people playing in an immersive performance. Their existence has significance in this layer of the fictional world now. Like the previous design for the Brecht play, their situation of being alienated becomes the immersion. The audiences are immersed in alienation in this play as well.

To discuss topics like democracy, the individuals in a system, how the information people receive influences their decision-making, and how people make choices in a group, we arranged the sub storyline more interactive than the first layer. Just like becoming a King is someone's birthright not based on qualifications, a random action will be deciding our leading role between the two equally qualified candidates at the beginning of the performance, like flipping a coin. This arbitrary action is part of how we run this show, and the performers are not happy about it. In the second layer, the performer who plays Henry will speak about their resentment about the show, and it will become visible in the performance of Henry too. Since the audience's votes might be a good way of showing they're better than the other performers, they will also try to impress the audience and win their vote. We wanted the audiences to witness one individual trying to fight the system and what would they do when this individual becomes the beneficiary of the system.

In the end, we wanted to ask the audiences to vote who's their preferred "boss" for the restaurant and announce the result right away. This is an action that looks like it only has to do with the first layer of the story, so the audiences are alienated from the action of voting while being forced into an interactive immersion in the reality layer of the performance. Enhancing or accentuating immersion and separation to the point where they become obvious and part of the dramaturgy, the audiences are not guided anymore in one direction, so there will be more diversity of audience reaction. This diversity creates a whole new level of questioning and thinking to the audiences as they're in a collective experience. In this design, this voting here was the moment we wanted to visualise and expose the diversity of reaction to the performance, provoking more thoughts around decision making in a group environment.

We met some difficulties that we couldn't quite solve when the project is still speculative, and we were hoping to keep explore once we can start working with the performers and real audiences. As the audiences are entirely alienated from the Richard II story, we worry if they will care about the characters in that story enough even to make a decision. Even if they casually participated in the voting, would the action and outcome trigger any thought if they don't care? Another concern is people might be distracted by many things in such an environment, like the food and people around them. They might be too alienated to even care about the stories. It might still be engaging and immersive for some people. Listening to somebody for a couple of hours might actually get them emotionally attached to the people. Still, in this design in general, I find the elements that alienate the audiences stronger than the element that immerses them.

When the audiences are in an immersed environment like this, they can be even more separated than in a conventional show seeing environment. When they're too alienated to a point they might not care about the performance, their position as audiences will no longer be critical but becomes completely disengaged. We were thinking about adding other elements or adjusting some parts of the show to gain more engagement, but it is not yet tested. As a work-in-progress, this project is not complete nor successful, but it becomes a valuable trial and error in exploring a new way to achieve ideal performance.

Conclusion

Now that I went through the practices in my two years on this course, I started to put together a set of "tools" that I can use in the future for different contexts. From Orfeo and Eurydice to Richard II, I went on a not straight-forward journey, departed from a relatively conventional starting point to a situation that I probably pushed too much that it was slightly out of control.

My practices tested different approaches to break the traditional relation-ship between immersion and separation. The techniques include: revealing the artificiality, deceptive and manipulative side of a performance, to raise the audience's self-awareness of their situation of being an audience; break the audience's expectation of being in certain types of performance to raise their awareness; using technology to help intensify the immersion of fiction, so the contrast between reality and fictional becomes more distinct; blurring the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, so the reality becomes part of the fic-tional world, etc. With enhanced immersion and separation to raise questions and critiques, the audiences can indeed become immersed outsiders. After this series of practices, my decisions when doing show becomes more practical and conscious, comparing to when in the beginning, the decision was more or less coming from my instinct.

An important question that I had yet to explore is how much immersion or sep-aration is too much to become detrimental to the spectatorship, something we have been speculating about but hasn't been able to test out on real audienc-es. There should be limits to how you can keep the audience engaged whilst pushing immersion and separation. Some audiences might freak out when it's far too immersive, while some can be disengaged from the performance when the separation is being pushed too far. Not yet being able to bring any of these designs to a live audience, it was hard to tell if some of the techniques will work or not. As a designer for several years, the audiences always surprise me in various ways; it will be foolish to assume how audiences react to certain things when doing a design. A lot of these designs' outcomes also depend on the works in the rehearsal room. What kind of magic happens during the rehearsal would be most unpredictable.

In most of my speculative design, my approach focused on the attempt of re-minding the audience of themselves and keeping them informed. No matter how people react to it, the outcome is open for interpretation from the audience. As a designer, I don't want my audiences to get too comfortable in the audito-rium so that they might fall asleep. This motivation was not only the starting point for this exploration but also, ultimately, the goal.

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