

# Punchdrunk: Performance, Permission, Paradox

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## Abstract

This essay explores the techniques that Punchdrunk uses to generate a sense of freedom and empowerment for the individual audience member. Second, it analyzes the fiscal, spatial, and conceptual restrictions of this system of empowerment. Finally, it examines the material nature of the production and the commercial realities of its current iteration.

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Punchdrunk's theatrical installation pieces have significantly influenced both contemporary installation art and theatrical practice. Though Punchdrunk has been well known for nearly a decade in Europe (tickets to a Punchdrunk piece sell faster than many rock concerts in London, where the group is based), U.S. artists and audiences have connected with Punchdrunk's work through *Sleep No More*, which currently runs in three disused warehouses in New York City and previously played in abandoned elementary schools in suburbs of Boston and London. Based loosely on the plot of *Macbeth* and invoking the visual rhetoric of Alfred Hitchcock films, notably *Vertigo* and *Rebecca*, *Sleep No More* is a vast art installation populated by nearly silent actors. Audience members don masks and choose their own route through the performance space.

Punchdrunk frames their work in a rhetoric of audience empowerment and emphasizes the role of each audience member's individual choice in their pieces. Punchdrunk argues that their work disrupts the traditional role of the spectator, which Punchdrunk sees as intellectual rather than emotional or instinctual (Machon 2009, 89). The first part of this essay will explore the techniques used to generate this sense of freedom. *Sleep No More* and other Punchdrunk pieces create an extremely intricate system for the integration of audience members into the world of the installation. Inside the piece, performers often directly avoid audience members, refusing to provide a single linear narrative and encouraging individualized plot experiences.

Second, I will explore restrictions on this system of empowerment. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, Punchdrunk installations limit, guide, and often directly control the audience's gaze and narrative experience. The performance spaces of pieces such as *Sleep No More* are themselves full of physical barriers and spatial divides. Finally, this essay will explore the profoundly object-

based nature of Punchdrunk installations. Full of a wildly intricate series of props and detailed set adornments, *Sleep No More* often presents a clearer narrative through stationary objects than through performers. The commercial nature of *Sleep No More*'s current New York run also poses challenges to the rhetoric of empowerment, further limiting who can enter the installation and the kinds of experiences visitors can create.

Writing about Punchdrunk's work poses the significant challenge of describing countless events occurring simultaneously across dozens of performance spaces within the piece. *Sleep No More* presents an additional obstacle: the different spaces of the Boston, New York, and London productions necessarily produce different interactions and narratives. I will confine my study to the two American productions I have experienced in person and stipulate which production I am referring to when differences arise. While many of the interactions and visual settings I describe were witnessed repeatedly in my six visits to *Sleep No More*, I hope to remind the reader that my own interpretations are guided by a necessarily incomplete experience of the performance.

When drawing generalizations about the different versions of *Sleep No More*, it is important to note that when the piece was first created in 2003, founder Felix Barrett had not yet envisioned the way in which his company would remount it. In an interview with Josephine Machon following the London version, he claimed that "we approach each project as 'one building builds the show'; it is 'specific' but it's sympathetic in the way it's devised. The thought of transferring . . . to a different space, different country, different cultural references is daunting" (Machon 2009, 93). Increased exposure to new audiences, aesthetic expansion of the original London production, and the opportunity for profit all may have shifted Barrett's thinking about the site-specificity of *Sleep No More* and other Punchdrunk pieces. The possible economic motivation for these remounts will be discussed in the final part of this essay.

Though Barrett and other Punchdrunk artists use the common term "audience" to describe the paying attendants of their performances, I will offer an alternative terminology. Audience members have been given a myriad of names in the aftermath of performance studies' shakeup of theatrical scholarship. Borrowing from Louis Marin's dubbing of Disneyland customers in *Utopics: Spatial Play*, I will henceforth refer to Punchdrunk attendees as "narrator-visitors," emphasizing the role that the personal interpretations of these narrator-visitors play in the creation of the theatrical event. Marin stresses the foregrounding the narrator-visitor has received before arriving at Disneyland: "The coming back of reality as a fantasy, as a hallucinatory wish-fulfillment, is in fact mediated by a complete system of representations designed by Walt Disney and constituting a rhetorical and iconic code and vocabulary that have been perfectly mastered by the narrator-visitor" (Marin

1984, 246). In *Sleep No More*, this vocabulary includes Shakespeare's play, Hitchcock's sights and sounds, and prior knowledge of Punchdrunk's techniques and approaches.

Since Shakespeare's tragedies and Hitchcock's films may lack the pervasive influence of Disney's movies, television shows, resorts, cruise lines, toys, and theme parks,<sup>1</sup> Punchdrunk often draws on our generalized understandings and misconceptions of their specific content. *Sleep No More* divorces the plot of *Macbeth* altogether from Shakespeare's language, often eliding characters and events for the sake of a streamlined narrative. Similarly, characters culled from Hitchcock's canon (The Second Mrs. de Winter and Mrs. Danvers from *Rebecca*, for example) are often imbued with narrative details and costume pieces drawn from other Hitchcock figures. Just as characters from different Disney films play alongside one another at Disneyland, the characters in *Sleep No More* present a form of intertextuality to the narrator-visitor. Upon meeting an actor in a dark hallway, a narrator-visitor is often unsure whether the character is drawn from *Macbeth*, a Hitchcock film, or some amalgamation of the two.

To introduce the range and scope of *Sleep No More's* installations, let me describe the barrage of imagery that accompanied my first hour inside the Massachusetts performance space. As I walked from floor to floor and room to room, hoping to create some sort of outline of the space and its limits, every new door seemed to open into a self-contained world with little or no relationship to what came before it. One room was filled with twelve claw-footed bathtubs, one of which contained a live eel. Another room was covered with cardboard boxes and carpeted with straw. An ornithological laboratory was teeming with preserved birds and handwritten field notes. A dark lounge transformed into a strobe-lit, techno-fueled orgy of stage blood, naked bodies, and a lifelike goat head. A ballroom became a forest, filled with the sights, sounds, and smells of actual evergreens. Some narrator-visitors attempt to experience the breadth of the physical space, as I did, but many prefer to follow a character on his or her individual journey. By choosing to follow Lady Macbeth or Hecate, for example, a narrator-visitor would experience only a small percentage of the performance space.

Punchdrunk views this freedom of choice as fundamentally empowering. Barrett argues that "empowerment of the audience" is "central" to Punchdrunk's work (Machon 2009, 89). The company's website expands this sense of agency beyond Barrett's understanding of the narrator-visitor's empowerment: "audiences are invited to rediscover the childlike excitement and anticipation of exploring the unknown and experience a real sense of adventure" (About 2012).<sup>2</sup> Josephine Machon offers a valuable theoretical model for Punchdrunk's work alongside her interview of Barrett in *(Syn)aesthetics*. Defining the term (syn)aesthetics (which she draws from

a neurological disorder of sensory stimulation) as "a fused sensory perceptual experience and a fused and sensate approach to artistic practice and analysis," Machon also focuses on the link with childhood and youthful play: "interestingly, the majority of current research in the area presents strong arguments for synesthesia being present and active in all human perception from birth but, whereas the majority of humans filter this out and learn to separate sensual experience, only a minority retain this unusual perceptual ability" (Machon 2009, 14-15). How might this majority of non-synaesthetic adults transition from everyday life into the role of a Punchdrunk narrator-visitor?

Marin's study of the transition into the decidedly childish Disneyland space in *Utopics: Spatial Play* again provides a helpful point of comparison. He describes a three-part transition into the world of Disneyland, including "the outer limit of the parking area, the intermediary limit of ticket booths, and the inner limit of the route made by the Santa Fe Railroad" (Marin 1984, 242). As customers leave behind their cars, a vestigial link to the world outside the park, they are gradually immersed in a world of childlike adventure. Even after these three limits, customers are guided along Main Street U.S.A. until the full breadth of the park's districts and choices for movement become visible and viable options.

*Sleep No More* utilizes a system of integration similar to the three-part threshold theorized by Marin. In both Massachusetts and New York, narrator-visitors wait on the street before waiting again inside a large gate, gradually being introduced into the space in small groups. In a move perhaps taken from the marketing of trendy nightclubs, the visibility of a long line outside the performance space nightly also contributes to the publicity effort. Like the plays of Shakespeare and the films of Hitchcock, the presence of a line of people on a city street has a shared vocabulary. If a long line has formed, something interesting *must* be happening. The "cool factor" of the performance is reinforced by the willingness of New Yorkers and Bostonians to wait in inclement weather for a chance to enter the space.

The intermediary limit, to use Marin's term, is the most jarring of the three. As strains of Bernard Herrmann's moody scores for Hitchcock films swell, narrator-visitors enter a dimly lit maze of black velvet walls. In my own first visit, I found this to be the most uncomfortable and frightening aspect of the performance. Disoriented and squinting, I was forced to grope along the maze's walls and begin the ambulatory and sensorial tasks that would comprise my journey throughout the performance. Barrett notes that Punchdrunk pieces always contain such an "entrance point to the world we create, which is like entering a decompression chamber, to acclimate to the world before being set free in it" (Machon 2009, 90-91).

After escaping the maze, I entered the third, most elaborate limit. One by one, the other narrator-visitors and I entered the Manderley Bar, a lounge — complete with a live jazz trio — that

draws its name from Hitchcock's 1940 film *Rebecca*. Small groups were called forward and handed plastic carnival masks by a friendly guide and told the two most important rules governing their visit to *Sleep No More*: narrator-visitors may not speak and may not, when inside, remove their masks. I was also encouraged to explore on my own.<sup>3</sup> By this point, the limits had raised exponentially my anticipation of the performance. As I started to enter the child-like state that Punchdrunk and Machon have described, I desperately longed to see the installation, to move freely, and to play.

Though I personally accepted and was invested in the empowerment that the mask provided me as a narrator-visitor, many others around me were resistant to *Sleep No More*'s insistence upon mask-wearing. Punchdrunk choreographer Maxine Doyle picks up on Barrett's idea of empowerment, arguing that the mask is "the one thing that removed that sense of trepidation, whatever baggage you're bringing in, it's neutralized by the mask. So you can be a timid person, but be crazy in the show world" (Machon 2009). The trepidation Doyle describes is explored at length by Nicholas Ridout in *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* as an immense feeling of embarrassment. He stresses the ways in which face-to-face encounters put pressure on the audience member: "If it is not clear what the rules are . . . then we don't know what responses to engage when the encounter comes" (Ridout 2006, 79). The mask is a central tool for Punchdrunk to take the fear of embarrassment off the mind of the narrator-visitor. When narrator-visitors remove their masks, which are often uncomfortable and hot to wear for the three-hour performance, actors may walk up to them and silently put them back on. While I did feel liberated by the mask as I wandered the installation, others seemed to find a new form of embarrassment in the cumbersome mask and the sweat generated by wearing it.

After donning their masks, narrator-visitors were herded into an elevator by a deranged bellhop. As he hummed the bars of Cole Porter's "Let's Misbehave," the bellhop began to drop narrator-visitors off on various floors.<sup>4</sup> They were not given a choice of destination, and although the narrator-visitors were divided in a seemingly arbitrary way, the bellhop often deliberately separated couples and small groups by blocking a narrator-visitor's exit with his arm. The first stop was always the same in my repeated visits to *Sleep No More*: the bellhop allowed one narrator-visitor off, then barred the rest of the group from leaving, smirking at the stranded narrator-visitor's confusion as the elevator doors shut.

The elevator is one example of the central paradox of *Sleep No More*. While Barrett, Doyle, and the Punchdrunk website consistently frame the experience of the narrator-visitor with terms like "empowerment" and "possibility," the space and the movements of the actors in it are constantly limiting and constraining; they prevent the narrator-visitor from exploring the full range

of choices. Just as Marin highlighted the forced narratives of Disneyland as he mapped the ways each element contributed to the overarching story, *Sleep No More* offers a fundamentally limited range of options to the narrator-visitor. The outer walls of the installations themselves serve as a powerful physical reminder of the various restrictions inside them.

The entryways to many of the rooms in the installation themselves are further manipulated to limit the activities of the narrator-visitors. Many rooms are locked and unlocked periodically throughout the performance in order to facilitate a set or costume change. I often found the unpredictable nature of these closures frustrating in my *Sleep No More* visits. Making a mental note to revisit a room often proved futile when a previously open door became locked. At times, fellow audience members, newly encountered performers, and other physical limitations within the space made continuing to follow a character impossible.

Occasionally, actors bring narrator-visitors into private spaces with them. In order to facilitate a one-on-one exchange, actors will take a narrator-visitor by the hand, lead her into a closet or small room, produce a key, and lock the door.<sup>5</sup> When a close friend was brought into a small room for a one-on-one, I again found myself frustrated when I attempted to follow him and the door was shut in my face. In the several online forums created by fans of *Sleep No More*, these one-on-ones are revered and described in great depth. Repeat narrator-visitors often boast about how many one-on-ones they can experience in a single performance.

In perhaps the most interesting technique for audience manipulation, Punchdrunk employs rotary telephones in many rooms of the *Sleep No More* installation. A narrator-visitor brave enough to pick up a ringing phone may be instructed by an actor to leave the room, to meet the actor in another room, or to engage or avoid another actor. A shy narrator-visitor may have the receiver handed to her by an actor. Once again, choice and personal empowerment are paradoxically limited and constructed. Even if a narrator-visitor "chooses" to answer the phone, she is simply responding in one of two predictable ways to a stimulus provided by Punchdrunk. The tail cannot wag the dog, and the narrator-visitor cannot escape the influence of Punchdrunk's restraints.

The most pervasive form of limitation imposed on narrator-visitors in *Sleep No More* is the presence of Stewards. Silent throughout the performance, Stewards are extensions of the house management staff and stage crew, kept abreast of the performance's progress by radio headsets. Whereas narrator-visitors wear large white masks, Stewards don black masks and dark clothing. Though the bellhop is quick to point out that they exist to help narrator-visitors, their masked stares are often profoundly nerve-wracking, or, to use Ridout's term, embarrassing. Their presence deeply complicates the supposed empowerment the mask provides, adding a third layer to the face-to-

face exchange between performers and audiences that Ridout describes. They also add an element of fright to the performance in the style of a haunted house. I often found myself gasping when I discovered a black-masked face lurking in the corners of a room that I previously thought was empty.

The Stewards serve primarily to protect the props and set pieces rather than the performers.<sup>6</sup> Architecture, set design, and props are the fundamental building blocks of Punchdrunk's pieces. Though Barrett and Doyle frame their work with rhetoric of interpersonal exchange, *Sleep No More* is fundamentally object-based and space-based rather than performer-based. Rehearsals with actors comprise a small chunk of the painstakingly slow process of developing a Punchdrunk piece. Barrett notes that because actor routes and exchanges are intrinsically derived from the space, rehearsals cannot begin until the installation has been nearly completed:

The space is all-important and the way we build the work is about our instinctual response to it . . . The most crucial part of the process in terms of building the show is the first time the team walks around it . . . All we're doing is just harnessing the power of the space, making the building work to its potential. When we plan shows, I deliberately step back from doing too much research on it until the space is fixed because it would completely change the sense, the feeling, the narrative implications of my response. (Machon 2009, 92)

The process of moving from this first walkthrough to rehearsal leads to an even more overwhelming need for detail. The ornithological laboratory, for example, is filled with dozens of handwritten notebooks. Each of these books is filled with hundreds of pages of field notes, handwritten in ink on antique paper that would make photocopying impossible. This relatively minor scenic element of just one room inside the installation required countless hours of labor. And this pattern of detail expands exponentially through the dozens of rooms in *Sleep No More*. Each and every drawer in every desk, dresser, and cupboard in the installation, of which there are hundreds, must be filled with furnishings appropriate to period, character, and situation. Ink must be refilled in pens and typewriters. Perishables must be replenished when narrator-visitors eat or drink them. The trinkets and playing cards given to narrator-visitors must be replaced nightly. The rabbit hole of detail in *Sleep No More*'s prop-centered reality goes deep.

This discussion of the piece's labor costs leads to a consideration of how it is funded. When *Sleep No More* appeared for its limited Massachusetts run, funded partially by a Mellon Foundation grant won by the American Repertory Theatre (which programmed the piece), tickets sold for twenty-five dollars. Word-of-mouth led to sold-out performances after the first week. Extensions were added as the reputation Punchdrunk enjoys in Europe began to spread in American

theatrical circles. Tickets for the open-ended New York run now sell for one hundred and five dollars and disappear almost as soon as they are made available. Monday performances and late-night showings have been added to meet growing demand.

One final Punchdrunk paradox must now be examined. The company is a registered charity in the United Kingdom, receiving tax exemption and significant yearly subsidies from the Arts Council and The Paul Hamlyn Foundation (About 2012). A base of individual donors, dubbed the Friends of Punchdrunk,<sup>7</sup> functions in the same manner as at a non-profit institutional theater such as A.R.T., which used similar tax-exempt status and Mellon Foundation dollars to develop the Massachusetts version of *Sleep No More*. And yet, the New York production runs on a commercial pricing structure with an open-ended run. Though overwhelmingly derived from the Boston and London productions, New York's *Sleep No More* technically is produced by a private organization known as Emursive rather than by Punchdrunk or A.R.T. Presumably, this makes revenues from tickets, concessions, and merchandise subject to taxation, though the substantial development costs of the massive show were incurred by nonprofits.<sup>8</sup>

Punchdrunk's work will likely become even more paradoxical as its sphere of influence grows. Once a small company known only to the British avant-garde, Punchdrunk now extends its broad reach in Europe to the United States. And interest is not waning: recent episodes of *Gossip Girl* and *Law and Order: SVU* have been set within *Sleep No More*. Pseudo-celebrity gossip blogger Perez Hilton offers frequent updates about the visits of famous narrator-visitors: when recounting the visit of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West to the production, for instance, the website Gawker described *Sleep No More* as a "Sexy Naked Theater Thing." Far from avoiding such exposure, Punchdrunk has invited it, earning cries of "selling out" from longtime fans (myself included) much as a musical group might on the route to superstardom. As someone highly attracted to the piece since it opened in Massachusetts three years ago, I find myself in a situation analogous to that of the die-hard fan of a previously unknown band.<sup>9</sup> As much as I want to decry the watering down of *Sleep No More* for commercial consumption in New York, the piece still thrills and attracts me. The spectacle may have grown too large, but the concepts behind it still deserve the considerable attention it receives from scholars, practitioners, and audience members.

## Notes

1. Particularly among narrator-visitors under age forty, who comprise the majority of ticket-buyers.
2. Like their productions, Punchdrunk's website is designed as a confusing visual landscape. The page that describes the company's work cannot be linked to directly and can be found only by wandering the landscape of fields and isolated buildings to its outer limits. To me, the site



evokes *Myst* and other early graphic adventure video games, which also play out the contrast between user freedom and scripted outcomes.

3. In my six visits to *Sleep No More*, five in Boston and one in New York, the actual text spoken by the guide varied, but always contained these three elements.
4. Three floors in Boston, six in New York. Once inside the installation, the narrators use stairwells to access the other floors.
5. I experienced two of these "one-on-ones" and had several others described to me by colleagues and fellow narrator-visitors. While the actual content of the encounters vary widely, they always end with the actor bestowing a small gift on the narrator-visitor: an inexpensive necklace, a shot of alcohol labeled as absinthe, etc.
6. However, actors can communicate remotely with the Stewards from different rooms. When a friend and fellow narrator-visitor unwittingly blocked an actor's route, the actor picked up a nearby phone and called a Stewart to remove the narrator-visitor.
7. Donors are given an increased number of "keys" to the Punchdrunk website based upon the size of their gifts. Certain keys unlock sections of the website that reveal details of forthcoming work.
8. In addition to their self-imagined productions, Punchdrunk has taken on commercial projects designed for private corporations, including Sony, Stella Artois, and Louis Vuitton.
9. The narrative of the disenfranchised fan I have described is constantly repeated on the production's fan blogs, notably the "*Sleep No More* Crossover Fanfiction Blog": there are complaints that the Massachusetts production was vastly superior to the Manhattan staging, that the increased attention and publicity have made the performances too crowded, and that the cost prevents die-hard fans from returning and exploring further.

## References

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