

**Space and the Senses:  
the (syn)aesthetics of Punchdrunk's site-sympathetic work  
by  
Josephine Machon**

**Abstract**

My intention with this paper is to discuss the work of Punchdrunk, founded by Felix Barrett, with particular reference to *Faust* (2006-7), Punchdrunk's most recent event that enjoyed a run at Wapping Lane, supported by the National Theatre. In doing so I will apply '(syn)aesthetics', my appropriation of this term, as a theory which embraces both practice and analysis in order to show how the '(syn)aesthetic style' identifies a particular, exciting contemporary performance practice exemplified by Punchdrunk's work. Furthermore, I hope to show that (syn)aesthetics, as an interpretative device, is a vital mode of appreciation to analyse such work.

**(Syn)aesthetics and the Visceral <sup>1</sup>**

T]he senses . . . become directly in their practice theoreticians (Karl Marx qtd. in Michael Taussig, 1993: 98).

There is a mind in the flesh, but a mind as quick as lightning. And yet the agitation of the flesh partakes of the mind's higher matter (Antonin Artaud, 1978: 166).

It would be interesting to develop a language that reflects the immediacy of the experience. I'm interested in words that describe and aren't necessarily academic structures, language that's spontaneous and descriptive and inventive (Maxine Doyle, 2007: 4).

In opening this paper, I am reminded of a student of mine who, reflecting on her recent experience of Punchdrunk's *Faust* (2006), drew attention to a desire to be able to articulate her response in an academic setting and her frustrations at not

having the analytical tools to do so, stating simply, 'I have real trouble *talking* about it' (in Barrett, 2006: n.pag). During this discussion as a whole it was noticeable how my students and I, along with the critics whose reviews we referenced, turned to metaphor and analogy, highly charged descriptive language to help make sense of our experiences of the work. It is such an approach to *talking* about the work, thinking about it, (re)creating the experience of it (without losing the immediacy of that experience), that I intend to hold on to in this discussion.

By examining the (syn)aesthetics of Punchdrunk's site-sympathetic work I hope to demonstrate that within the fused approach of (syn)aesthetics lies a discourse that defines simultaneously the impulse and processes of production *and* the subsequent appreciation strategies which incorporate reception and interpretation. (Syn)aesthetics endeavours to embrace the sensual immediacy of the performance event via highly charged vocabulary that is embedded within academic analysis. It thus enables a *talking* about it that plays with the senses, in the very act of that talking.

(Syn)aesthetics, which adopts certain diagnostic features of the physiological condition of synaesthesia as put forward by Richard E. Cytowic (1994, 2002) and A. R. Luria (1969), is a strategy of analysis that prioritises individual, immediate and innate processes of recall. It provides a mode of analysis for non-genre specific performance which harnesses 'the visceral'. (Syn)aesthetic analysis comes into play where the form and content of the artistic work is executed in a way that fuses the somatic ('affecting the body' or 'absorbed through the body') and the semantic (the 'mental reading' of signs) in execution and reception. As I will go on to illustrate, with (syn)aesthetic work, subsequent processes of intellectual analysis thus rely on an individual's corporeal memory of the piece. It also embraces intertextual practice, thereby celebrating the ludic play between, and flux within, the linguistic, corporeal, visual, aural and technological.<sup>2</sup> Following this, arguably, in responding to performance work which resists

closure, so too does the (syn)aesthetic mode of appreciation and analysis resist closure (see Machon, 2001a, 2001b).<sup>3</sup>

### **Punchdrunk – Experiential Performance**



Image courtesy of Punchdrunk: Sam Booth in *The Firebird Ball* (2005). Photo: Sam Holden.

Punchdrunk's work exploits the multi-dimensional, multi-sensual possibilities of the (syn)aesthetic hybrid and the presence/*prae sens* of the actual body as text is predominant in performance.<sup>4</sup> Punchdrunk also play with textual sources, pushing the spatial, temporal, conceptual and corporeal dimensions of these visceral-verbal texts to unusual and exhilarating ends.

Punchdrunk's work is committed to a multi-sensual performance that explores a somatic/semantic exchange at every stage of the process. The initial aim of Felix Barrett, the founding artistic director, was to challenge and to change the nature of the audience experience; to 'focus as much on the audience and the space as...the performers and the text'.<sup>5</sup> This took him out of conventional theatre

spaces to alternative sites where the emphasis was on the space itself; the imaginative transformation of the space and its relationship with the audience:

I was very interested early on in installation, just as a word. I didn't use it as an art-world definition but more to define space that is inherently theatrical and yet has no performance within it...I'm a firm believer that every space you go into is saying something, there are echoes in the walls. All we do as a company is draw those out...It's about making that theatrical, letting that wash over you, so that that triggers the audience's imagination (Barrett, 2007: 4).

With a Punchdrunk event, the space invites you to interact with it, has its own quality and ambience, without the performers. Punchdrunk rejects the passive obedience expected of an audience in more conventional theatre experiences in favour of the audience rediscovering 'the childlike excitement and anticipation of exploring the unknown...of adventure'.<sup>6</sup> Barrett experiments with an entirely sensate connection with space. In Punchdrunk work;

space speaks to you, you create your own world within it – space becomes alive and charges the imagination – your imagination then flavours the space – you draw on a database of sensation in the experience' (Barrett, 2006: n.pag).

As this suggests, Punchdrunk's (syn)aesthetic hybrid is created in such a way *in order to produce* a visceral response in the audience. Punchdrunk render an explicit recreation of sensation within their events via a fusion of visual, physical, verbal, aural, tactile, haptic and olfactory means.<sup>7</sup> Such a manipulation of the sensual capacity of installation encourages the making-sense/*sense-making* process of (syn)aesthetic appreciation throughout any journey taken through it.<sup>8</sup> As Barrett explains above, it also manipulates the imagination to such an extent that a '(syn)aesthetic sense', which draws on the noetic and ineffable, may be achieved.<sup>9</sup>

This fusion of the senses in the visual, spatial, aural and olfactory design demands an engagement of the senses in the immediate experience of the work.

Barrett asserts, and as the *Faust* example below illustrates, the sensual details of the design 'give the audience the chance to really become part of it' (Barrett, 2007: 5).

In addition to this, in Punchdrunk work the audience also adds an architectural dimension within the space. This is heightened by the Punchdrunk prerequisite that all members of the audience wear a mask. These masks at once allow for anonymity and a sense of (role)play within the performance itself. As an audience member the mask allows you to take risks, to step outside of yourself and enter into the adventure of the event.

In all of the Punchdrunk events that I have experienced I have always taken delight in the way in which the audience, included in this way, frame the sequences as they watch. It is often breathtaking to become aware of the way in which fellow audience members have, unwittingly, choreographed themselves into beautiful, carnivalesque sculptures. These masked, still bodies looking on, literally become part of the architecture. Furthermore, the mask becomes another ludic element which destroys the traditional divisions of conventional theatre and ensures the audience actually become part of the (syn)aesthetic hybrid:

The mask is the most crucial part in a way. a clear division is established between audience and performers yet you're allowed to get as close as you want. It allows you to probe further than you would do. The mask allows you to function as a voyeur, as a camera because you're more aware of where you're looking, what you choose to see and your peripheral vision is slightly affected. Other audience members don't necessarily inform your experience, don't affect it because they become part of the space. They're ghosts, you can forget about them. They can melt into the aesthetic or they can form walls (Barrett, 2007: 9-10).

The fusion of elements, within Punchdrunk's work thus foregrounds the playful *prae sens* of the human body as space via this audience engagement and ludic composition. Additionally, Punchdrunk also focus on the performing body within space. The predominance of the human body as text, specifically as translator in

a very real (re)writing of the body *from* text, is a crucial making-sense/sense-making signifier in Punchdrunk's (syn)aesthetic hybrid.

## Performing Bodies in Space



Image courtesy of Punchdrunk: L-R Geir Hytten, Robert McNeill, Elizabeth Barker, Hector Harkness, Gerard Bell, Dagmara Billon, Mark Fadoula, Andreas Constantinou, Sarah Dowling in *Sleep No More* (2003). Photo Stephen Dobbie

In early Punchdrunk work, Barrett identifies that the images he created became more evocative than the words in the dialogue he had directed. As a result he sought out a choreographer, Maxine Doyle, to work with in order to explore the power of a physical language and the eloquence of the human body within the space. Doyle is inspired by 'the dancers' ability to feel the space, touch spaces textures surfaces, temperatures' (2006: 1). By giving in to the haptic, multi-sensual qualities of space the choreographed body is enabled to be:

more than human...to use the architecture as a springboard for different possibilities to jump, to fall, to crash, to bang, to impact, to place themselves within an already existing physical context (Doyle, 2006: 1)

So as much as site is all-important and the space dictates what to do at every point, from the moment that the space is agreed and as the rehearsal process

begins, the space also yields to the performers' interaction. Space as site/sight and body as sight/site of performance thus begin to merge.<sup>10</sup>

Doyle is particularly inspired by the play with proximity; the exciting exchange that occurs as a result of the proximity of the audience to the performers:

[T]here's no concession to the physical of the choreography in relation to the audience's proximity to it. And that's a challenge. Audiences have to become part of the choreography, have to engage on a kinetic level in order to survive. It becomes quite Darwinian. If you're not responding on a physical level you lose out – sometimes physically – you have to develop your physical intuition. You see it in audiences, you see audiences who are not aware of their physical body, who aren't aware, and then you see audiences who are really on it (Doyle, 2006: 3).

This corporeal play is most apparent in the 'final' sequence in Punchdrunk's *Faust*, Faust's descent into hell, a full body impact piece where Mephistopheles hurls himself around the space in an aerial display of choreography. Aside from the felt energy of the sequence generated by his movement, the haptic experience of the locomotion of his body in space, swinging from his rope, he will actually kick those not spatially, corporeally aware.

As this illustrates, for the duration of Punchdrunk's *Faust*, the individual audience member experiences space and bodies both internally *and* externally. This provides a reciprocal exchange of *feeling* within this communal event. Such shared feeling, activated by haptic reciprocity, comes to the forefront in the experience of the tactile and kinaesthetic moments between performer/s, audience member/s and space. It is the immediacy of this embodied engagement in the actual moment, which *cites* the experience in the perceiving body and ensures an equivalent corporeal memory is triggered in any subsequent processes of recall.

## Playing (with) the Text



Image courtesy of Punchdrunk: Fernanda Prata and Geir Hytten in *Faust* (2006). Photo Stephen Dobbie.

Punchdrunk's approach is to play with the presence of writerly text within the experience. In early productions, Barrett became dissatisfied by the way that the dialogue, once met by the audience, lost the power that it had on the page or in a more conventional theatre setting due to the fact that it was overwhelmed by the space and the atmospheric journey towards the text that the audience had taken. As a result, for Barrett and his audiences, the dialogue served only to destroy the magic and mystery of the event. Consequently, Barrett resolved to be less concerned with the content of the play in favour of *playing* with the content of a play. He chose to pare verbal text right down, irrespective of the fact that the sources that he was turning to were weighty theatrical tomes such as Shakespeare, Chekhov and Goethe.

Although the dialogue is almost absent in Punchdrunk's recent productions, the complexities of these rich literary sources remain, due to the philosophical

challenges and visceral lyricality that is embedded in the writing and brought out by the space and the dance. As Barrett puts it, the choice of such rich source material is as much to do with the 'detail, the minutiae of the text' which 'is then scattered over the piece' so that it provides the maze-like pathway, the 'complex journey through', as it is about;

[T]he time and place, the way the pentameter has an atmosphere in itself because it is so specific to that particular era. It feels as if it's from another land, it's otherworldly...[I]t's that atmosphere that lies within the text. We try and flush out, deconstruct and scatter that across the building...making that atmosphere three-dimensional (Barrett, 2007: 10-11).

The space allows the text to be opened up on a multi-dimensional level. In this way, the text itself becomes entirely visceral. Characters that only have brief moments in the original play extend these moments in a three hour run. In *Faust* we can remain with old Faust in his study, stay with him as he leads us along his own journey to hell, until the point where, powerless, he looks on as a ghostly trace at Gretchen's tormented demise. We can sit at a bar as a, previously silenced, previously frozen, Edward Hopper subject makes sparse conversation, pours us a shot. We are able to enter the seedy motel rooms, root through drawers, piece together clues before we are drawn out into the heady, carnivalesque Walpurgis dance; all the time experiencing different tangents, unseen moments that exist, unbeknownst to us, in the source material.

This ludic, deconstructive play with the text causes time to kaleidoscope. All the characters are under scrutiny; all of the characters exist in the space all the time for the full 180 minute run. Focus shifts away from one protagonist. Narratives and experiences are to be found on different floors, behind every door. Only the narrative of the space is, for each individual member of the audience, a constant *prae sens*.

This focus on the multidimensional text(ure)s of the site enable the company, and thus the audience, to become aware of details and texture in the narratives,

themes and concepts of the textual source as much as the space. Key to this approach is the fact that, for both Barrett and Doyle, the meat of the textual source, its very essence, exists in ‘the unseen words’ (Doyle, 2006: 3). These unseen words are made manifest in the multi-sensory exchange that occurs in the special (syn)aesthetic hybrid that is Punchdrunk work.

### **Space, dance and the ‘ineffable’**

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Image courtesy of Punchdrunk: Geir Hytten in *Sleep No More* (2003). Photo: Stephen Dobbie

The multidimensional potential of the space as manipulated by Punchdrunk allows a drawing out of the ‘unseen words’ and experiences that exist in the textual sources. As a result a very real experience of the ineffable is made *pr(a)esent* within these productions. The merging of space and bodies as site/sight/cite of performance brings about a ludic and unusual confrontation with the concepts and stories within the source material. In particular, in relation to the dancing bodies that interpret the text, in turn interpreted by the perceiving bodies, the space itself allows access to something sensual that exists with the psychology of the characters and their narratives. As Doyle puts it, the space ‘

helps you solve the conundrums' (2006: 2)

In *Sleep No More* [2003] the performer playing Macbeth was having real difficulties accessing the psychology of Macbeth before he kills Duncan. He just couldn't get it in the rehearsal studio. But as soon as he discovered this room, with spikes all over the walls he was instantly able to find something that opened that up for him. The spikes and the claustrophobic dimensions of the space, allowed him to unlock what he should be feeling and communicating at that time. So the space offers up more possibilities for the performer to interpret their role beyond the immediate and beyond the studio. It offers both physical and psychological dimensions (Doyle, 2006: 1 ).

The body moving in space thus ensures the intangible is made tangible. Similarly in *Faust*, the performer playing Faust was experiencing problems interpreting the emotional and psychological wilderness that leads to his final damnation. Doyle made him return to the play text and, in 'playing in his story' (Doyle, 2006: 2) he found a dark stairwell, his own hell, where suddenly his textual narrative became truly physical because of the space it was in. Furthermore, 'when the audience came in to the equation it became bigger – grew organically (Doyle, 2006: 2). Thus, in Punchdrunk's work the site not only works out the internal experiences via external means but also enables a sensuous interpretation for the performer as sight/site/cite, which is in turn sighted/cited in the corporeal and intellectual experience of the audience. This visceral experience allows for the intangible psychologies present in the narrative of these sources to be made tangible. Ideas that exist in the text are literally fleshed out, presented and appreciated corporeally, which demands a sensate involvement from the audience. This ensures the making *sense/sense* making process of (syn)aesthetic appreciation is called into play.

With *Faust*, Barrett and Doyle grappled with how to communicate some of the more complex academic ideas via the language of space and movement; 'how do you clarify the detail of quantum physics' via movement language (Doyle, 2006: 3, emphasis original)? Barrett translated those ideas into the space, allowed the space to speak the concepts. Dense artistic and philosophical

narratives are actually made tangible, the *prae sens* of the literary is truly *felt*. As Doyle puts it, 'you enter the space and you can see the equations and touch the experiments' (2006: 3). Thus the sensual potential of Punchdrunk's (syn)aesthetic hybrid makes the complexity of all that is available in the words more apparent. These moments become like the scene in the film *Bladerunner* (1982) where we see the protagonist insert a photograph into a hi-tech piece of equipment which allows him to go behind the image, see into the corners and crevices of the room in a three-dimensional way, in a way that the standard two-dimensional image does not allow. In a similarly evocative and highly imaginative way, Punchdrunk open up the multi-dimensional possibilities that exist in the source material which enables the audience to experience the narrative from inside itself via this clever and sensate deconstructive play.

### ***Punchdrunk's Faust – 21 Wapping Lane...***

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Image courtesy of Punchdrunk: 21 Wapping Lane, London. Photo Colin Marsh

Punchdrunk's *Faust* (2006-7) is exemplary of their work. At the forefront of this event is the engagement of the senses and the imagination. The audience becomes aware of the fear and uncertainty even on the journey there. Senses are switched on to the presence of adventure, of discovery, of the unknown. Wandering through dimly lit streets and housing estates towards the derelict warehouse that is 21 Wapping Lane only serves to fuel this sense of trepidation and excitement.

From the outset, on entering the seedy down town bar you become aware that this *Faust* is firmly located in 1950s small town, Southern state America. This is an ominous, unsettling, liminal realm that is otherworldly and dangerous. Jive music echoes around the building's corridors, girls with bright red lips and coiffured hair, full skirts with petticoats and pump shoes run past on their own journeys. There are cold forgotten rooms filled with shelves that contain religious and philosophical books on wisdom, faith and the supernatural, illustrating the human capacity to desire knowledge beyond all knowledge. In eerily musty, deserted offices, antique typewriters are left unattended, midway through transcripts of biblical text; a subversive setting, accentuated by explicit references to the echoes, overtones and menacing imagery of Edward Hopper and David Lynch.

Throughout the journey taken, there is no sequence of events imposed upon the experience; the audience are dropped off randomly at various stages (unless you should happen to annoy the lift operator assigned to take you down to the pits of hell, in which case he decides at which level you are ejected, and whether or not you will be thrust into the unknown alone). The only condition is the wearing of masks; carnivalesque masks which play on the divide between performer and spectator, simultaneously enabling each individual to lose a sense of inhibition by having their identity taken away, entering in a world where we too become otherworldly. These masks, as well as being a Punchdrunk trait, serve to add to the

supernatural and religious overtones emphasised by the many posters proclaiming that tonight is Walpurgis Night, a night of ludic revelry, a night of witchcraft and devilry.

### **Punchdrunk's *Faust* and the audience experience**



Image courtesy of Punchdrunk: Fernanda Prata and Geir Hytten in *Faust* (2006). Photo Stephen Dobbie

One need only glance at the many reviews, extolling the power of Punchdrunk's *Faust* to note the language used to describe the work; intoxication, senses, discovery, play, these are examples of words repeated throughout each critique. Rachel Halliburton, a first time visitor to a Punchdrunk event writes:

Often the sensation of entering a room is that of being swallowed up into the darkness, with the floor uncertain beneath your feet as you try and decode the sounds, sights, and symbols that become clear as your senses gradually reorient themselves... Sometimes it feels as if you're in a

dream, sometimes as if you're stumbling through a horror film set – being confronted by a range of phenomena .... In one particularly evocative installation, you're greeted by the smell of fir trees, before you make your way through a glade that opens up to reveal scenes of eroticism and violence in a bar at the end of it (2006: n.pag)

Such a summation of the event illustrates the quality of felt experience at the epicentre of the work. It is an intoxicating experience that is truly (syn)aesthetic, at once as disturbing as it is exhilarating. As a result the making *sense/sense* making of the work becomes paramount in this analysis. The whole experience, played on a loop so that time itself is ludically controlled, allows for a feeling of transcendence, out of body experiences, which engage a (syn)aesthetic sense in the constant moment(um) of appreciation.

Punchdrunk's *Faust* embraces sensation. The experience arises from the atmosphere established from the outset by the unique (syn)aesthetic hybrid rather than an intellectual pursuit of narrative. The human body is engaged as an holistic entirety; body and mind experience the work together:

You can open the drawer, you can root around, see the pen that wrote that letter, smell the ink.... A lot of it's to do with...that extra sense and the power of the imagination (Barrett, 2007: 5)

In this way, Punchdrunk events make the audience aware of a (syn)aesthetic sense, where the intellect yields to the power of the body. For the performers, it makes every event equally challenging as each night has to be played as a game in relation to the audience's participation in that game:

I've seen the dancers becoming really skilled in changing the movement language in response to other bodies and other bodies in space...they become part of the spatial composition. And the other thing is that sense of the potential excitement of that experience for the audience; to really feel a body moving in front of you, behind you and around you. I think that's really exciting (Doyle, 2006: 4).

Individuals are made acutely aware of their participation in this game in the one-

on-ones (should you be so lucky as to experience one). These are moments of chance meetings where suddenly, randomly, you may be taken into a room with a lone performer, whether a protagonist or a 'secondary' character. This character will place the individual audience member in a space, the bar, a motel room, an office, a beauty salon and interact only for you, without words, just briefly, but causing time to be suspended as he or she does so. Here, sometimes, the audience member's mask is removed, which serves to make the experience even more electric. This direct physical engagement ensures the experience of bodies as site, sight and cite of performance is made manifest. Furthermore, this predominance of the body as site/sight/cite allows for a real reve(a)ling of and in the text.

Imagination and instinct is key in a Punchdrunk theatrical experience, 'your synapses are constantly firing' (Barrett, 2006: n.pag). As this suggests, the sensory stimuli within the work, from start to finish, allows for a remarkable igniting of *prae sens*.

This giving in to sensation, imagination, instinct and experience, was most charged for me in the sequence conveying Faust's descent into hell: initiated by a lone, powerful female voice singing, swelling in the crumbling chamber, which smells damp, fusty, like it is decaying around you; the temperature is cold yet made strange by the clammy heat of others' bodies in the space; the chill down my neck, along my arms caused by the singing and the imagery around me as much as the cold, dank air. In front of me I watch Gretchen's demise in a cage, the loss of her child, as old Faust looks on, then I am literally spun round by a member of the company to see Mephistopheles hurling himself at young Faust, spinning, and swinging through the air. Faust naked and vulnerable, utterly human, in a chair. The soundscape builds, becomes unbearable, we are plunged into darkness and when the lights come up we are left alone, together, in the space.

## **(Syn)aesthetics and Site-Sympathetic work: towards a definition of visceral performance**

In talking about the show afterwards with my students we used language like walking in limbo, entering a decompression chamber, forgetting about the outside world, entering a trance; of acclimatising to the performance, of walking through a nightmare. One student stated 'I felt like I was living someone else's nightmare...as a piece of theatre it was true, honest, I wasn't in the audience anymore, I was in the performance' (in Barrett, 2006: n.pag). We all concurred that we had stepped into the multidimensional world that Punchdrunk had created. This descriptive language alone highlights a certain dreamlike inhabiting of tangential states within the appreciation experience of (syn)aesthetic work most evident in the experience of Punchdrunk's *Faust*.

With their focus on a spatial and physical approach to the adaptation of a textual source, Punchdrunk's work enables a multi-dimensional, multi-sensual access to the *ideas* as well as the narratives present in the text. This ensures that a corporeal analysis is required in appreciating and analysing the work. Over the last four years, Punchdrunk theatrical experiences have grown in size, both in terms of the spaces employed and in terms of the audiences that visit the event. A consequence of this is that their work is being discussed in critical and academic circles. Indeed, Punchdrunk have been cited by James Purnell, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, as artistic innovators, producing work that, deconstructs canonical subjects in a ways that is both accessible and highly challenging (see Higgins, 2007). I was interested to know from both Barrett and Doyle how, if at all, the analysis of their work impacted on their approach to creating new pieces:

I think it's crucially important in a way. For me as a practitioner, I know that the only way I can work is to rely on instinct. So it's almost like the polar opposite, because if I think about it too much then I would question decisions. I think it's so important that that analysis does happen

elsewhere, so that the work exists in [that] climate. It's fascinating, the responses that people have on different levels, from the pure, immediate response, because it is so experiential, so emotional, to the critical analysis, the deconstruction of how and why it does that. Considering that the work is all about deconstruction anyway, deconstructing a source, it stands to reason that the form then needs to be deconstructed (Barrett, 2007: 15).

Barrett's response supports my own thinking that exciting, innovative work that grows out of and exists in corporeality requires a mode of analysis that is mutually sympathetic. It demands a way of analysing that meets the workings of the performance and allows that deconstructive play to continue. It requires an approach to intellectualising the sensate experience that itself enters into that corporeal play via the vocabulary of embodied analysis. I posit that in applying (syn)aesthetic theory there is an endeavour to hold on to the immediacy, the sensuality of the performance, that (re)creates rather than destroys through the act of interpretation. Doyle concurs;

Sympathetic analysis can always open the work up to an extent. Dialogue is really important – especially with this work because the interpretations are multiple. With this work there are so many possibilities that if people can articulate their individual experience and acknowledge the differences of experience that they have that can only add to the work (2006: 4).

(Syn)aesthetics arguably presents a sympathetic theory for such open and vital performance work as it contains the ineffable within its very construct. Implicit within my use of the term is the notion that such special perception is made unusual due to the unsettling and/or exhilarating nature of *the process of becoming aware* of the fusion of senses within interpretation which can be difficult and unsettling, and/or, exhilarating and liberating.

(Syn)aesthetics is applicable to performance in general, but is most appropriate for any work, like that of Punchdrunk, where the body is prioritised, where the verbal is made visceral and where the fusion of interdisciplinary, hybridised practice is worked in such a way *in order to produce* a sensate response in the

audience. Thus (syn)aesthetics enables the work to be (re)experienced in the act of analysis. It relishes the visceral, the corporeal, in the act of intellectual interpretation and explanation. (Syn)aesthetics thus enables the vitality of Punchdrunk's practice and the immediate, individual response to it to exist in the subsequent academic appreciation of the *whole* experience.

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**Links:** <http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk>

Punchdrunk's latest event is *The Masque of the Red Death* at Battersea Arts Centre, London. September 2007 onwards. See the above link for details.

### **Josephine Machon**

Josephine set up the Physical Theatre Programme at St. Mary's College, Twickenham and has recently joined the academic team at Brunel University. She has co-edited *Performance and Technology: Practices of Virtual Embodiment and Interactivity* (2006) with Susan Broadhurst and is in the process of writing *(Syn)aesthetics – Towards a Definition of Visceral Performance*. Her current practice is concerned with the playful encounters that exist between the body, text, space and technologies. Josephine is Sub-Editor for *Body, Space & Technology*.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'visceral' throughout to denote those perceptual experiences that affect a very particular type of response where the most inward, often inexpressible, emotionally sentient feelings a human is capable of are brought about. The term also describes that which, simultaneously or in isolation to the emotions, affects an upheaval, or disturbance, of the physiological body itself, so literally a response through the human viscera.

<sup>2</sup> Ludic (from the Latin, *ludere*, 'to play') meaning spontaneous, playful. It is also associated with the subversive and dangerous in play.

<sup>3</sup> I have previously outlined my theory in an early edition of this journal. See <http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/vol0102/index.html>, *Body, Space & Technology*, Vol. 1/2. My thinking has shifted and refined itself somewhat since this paper was written, as is to be expected. The general outline does however remain the same.

<sup>4</sup> Presence here is, as Elaine Scarry defines, as in '*prae sens*' 'that which stands before the senses' (1985: 9, 197).

<sup>5</sup> Taken from [www.punchdrunk.org.uk](http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk).

<sup>6</sup> Taken from [www.punchdrunk.org.uk](http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk).

<sup>7</sup> Haptic, taken from Paul Rodaway's usage, emphasises the tactile perceptual experience of the body as a whole (rather than merely the fingers) and also highlights the perceptive faculty of bodily kinaesthetics, (the body's locomotion in space). This encompasses the sensate experience of the individual's moving

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body, and the individual's perceptual experience of the moving bodies of others. the haptic sense in particular enables a very real sharing in audience appreciation due to the 'reciprocity of the haptic system' of perception (Rodaway, 1994: 44).

<sup>8</sup> The fusion of sense (semantic 'meaning making') with *sense* (feeling, both sensation and emotion) establishes a double-edged rendering of making-sense/*sense*-making, which prioritises embodied knowledge. This play with the duality of the word 'sense' is fundamental to (syn)aesthetics. The term 'making-sense/*sense*-making' highlights the fact that human perception, by its very definition, fuses 'the *reception of information* through the sense organs' with perception as '*mental insight*', that is, 'a sense made of a range of sensory information, with memories and expectations' (Rodaway, 1994: 10, emphasis original). Thus, perception as sensation, that is, corporeally mediated, and perception as cognition, intellectually mediated (accepting that the latter also involves cultural and social mediation) (see Rodaway, 1994: 11). Key to (syn)aesthetics is the notion that such special perception is made unusual due to the unsettling and/or exhilarating nature of *the process of becoming aware* of the many fusions of 'sense' within interpretation.

<sup>9</sup> Noetic (from the Greek *nous* meaning 'intellect' or 'understanding'); noetic sense establishes a 'knowledge that is experienced directly' which can provide 'a glimpse of the transcendent' (Cytowic, 1994: 78). Following this, the ineffable is 'that which by definition cannot be put into words' (Cytowic, 1994: 119).

<sup>10</sup> The body as sight/site of performance is developed from Rebecca Schneider's arguments (See Schneider, 1997).