

*Space and Non-visibility in Performance:  
Experience and Affect in the Cycle of Cultural  
Consumption*

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# DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Sofia Apospori, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the non-visual in performance and aims at developing a critical frame for the examination of non-visibility. The critical frame of non-visibility is culturally materialist and it is concerned with methods, elements of performance and forms that move beyond the level of visibility; the examination of performative practices that engage –in one way or another– with the non-visual lies at the epistemological heart of this thesis. Through the participant observation of three case studies and a small-scale practice-as-research project this thesis examines why and how the critical frame of non-visibility is relevant to current discourses of theatre and performance. Deciphering a conceptual connection between the non-visual and blindness, the discussion of the thesis explores the ways in which non-visual performative practices can expose, reinforce and/or undermine both our cultural assumptions about blindness and the actual ways in which we consume the non-visual.

The culturally materialist frame within which non-visibility will be examined is informed by a critical frame that draws from political philosophy, phenomenology and human/cultural geography. The combination of sources from the three disciplines demonstrates that we are currently witnessing a new phase in the history of capitalism that is positively identified as ‘the experience economy’ by Pine and Gilmore in *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business is a Stage* (1999) and negatively identified as the ‘new era of the inhabitable map’ by human geographer Nigel Thrift in *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (2008). This new phase in the history of capitalism has resulted in cultures that appropriate the concept of experience and fetishise multiple/alternative embodiments on the grounds of economic profit. Considering various –and often contradictory– aspects of non-visibility in performance against this cultural and socio-political backdrop, this thesis attempts to establish a departure point for the future development of a theory of non-visibility in performance, while being aware of the perils of romanticizing the non-visual as a means of misinformed (and hollow) reactions to ocularcentrism in ‘the new era of the inhabitable map’ (Thrift 16).

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# Introduction

then to my hand that is free rather some other part I  
say it as I hear it brief movements of the lower face with  
murmur to the mud

it comes close to my eyes I don't see it I close my eyes  
something is lacking whereas normally closed or open my  
eyes

if that is not enough I flutter it my hand we're talking of my  
hand ten seconds fifteen seconds close my eyes a curtain  
falls

(Beckett, *How It Is* 9)

During one of my regular visits to Tate Modern in 2009 I noticed a large steel construction that took up a substantial part of the Turbine Hall. I walked towards it intrigued. When I reached the far end of the hall I turned around and I was faced by an elevated steel box whose sides were about 15 meters high and 25 meters long. The box was open-ended on one side with a ramp that enabled the visitors of the gallery to walk in and out of the structure. This curious part-installation part-sculpture was Miroslaw Balka's *How It Is* and it added a new dimension to the space that it occupied; it looked like Tate Modern had acquired its very own "black hole" because looking at *How It Is* from a distance I could tell that its space was enfolded by darkness. I hesitantly walked up the ramp and as I entered this immersive sculpture the highly visual world of the Turbine Hall started to fade out. While light peeked through the entrance of *How It Is*, approaching the far end of the steel construction I could not rely on my vision at all. I reached out for its walls and I realised that they were dressed with velvet. A weirdly warm and comforting sensation, I thought, in this immeasurable space. When I finally reached the wall at the far end I stood still and took the atmosphere in. This was one of the few instances in my life when I had not only experienced a sculpture from within, but also faced virtual darkness in a gallery. The feelings that emerged were contradictory as I tried to adjust to this unusual environment: on the one hand, I felt

small and insignificant compared to the vastness of *How It Is*. On the other hand, I felt absorbed and exhilarated by the unfamiliarity of the experience. Resting on the far end velvet wall, listening to the voices of the rest of the “inhabitants” of this space and the echoes that their voices left as traces, paying attention to the sounds of footsteps that had a strong auditory impact against the steel floor, a myriad feelings and memories crossed my mind: the safety and warmth that I felt as a toddler when I used to sneak in my parents’ bed early in the mornings, the first moment when as a child I realised my own mortality, my adolescence that was dark and explosive, the calmness that I felt whenever my friends and I spent summer nights at the beach near Athens, my bewilderment in terms of the universe and our place in it and so on. What fascinated me about *How It Is* is that Balka’s creative intentions were not visible and obvious within the spatial boundaries of the sculpture. Constructing such an open-ended piece (both literally and figuratively speaking), Balka invited his audience to experience *How It Is* in their own personal way. I believe that this simple yet ingeniously creative idea was so effective because of the gradual darkness that enfolded the visitors of *How It Is* as they braved the unknown. Setting up such a piece in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern gallery, Balka made an artistic statement: there is more to the arts than meets the eye.

I decided to begin the discussion with Balka’s piece for two reasons. Firstly, I see my visit to *How It Is* as an (experiential) metaphor that stands for the research process that has resulted in this thesis. Doing research on non-visibility in performance, I set off from a highly visual culture (Tate Modern) and gradually delved into the realm of non-visibility (the far end velvet wall of *How It Is*). Trying to leave behind a large part of the way in which I am conditioned to interact with culture, I stepped into the unknown and attempted to develop my personal (analytical) interpretation of the place of non-visibility in the cultural context of contemporary London.

Secondly, the consideration of Balka’s piece introduces some points that will be recurring in the discussion of this thesis. Incorporating virtual darkness, *How It Is* focuses on the corporeality of its visitors and their affective responses. At the same time the non-visual form of *How It Is* moves beyond the level of the corporeal and the affective. In “Miroslaw Balka in Conversation” the artist recalls that he conceived of and designed *How It Is* before he projected meaning to it. He notes that he initially decided to design a large steel structure that would not only command the Turbine Hall, but also engage with the form of darkness. As the design was completed and the time of the exhibition approached, *How It Is* had to be framed for curatorial and marketing purposes. At this point Balka, pen and paper at hand,



noted down some keywords and phrases in response to his design. His list is as diverse as the affective responses that *How It Is* might instigate: “Jack the Ripper”, “hell visions”, “The Plague of Darkness (Dorè)”, “black holes”, “U.F.O.”, “open graves”, “Treblinka”, “big black vibrator”, “my cellar entrance”, “Plato’s caves”, “Noah’s Ark” and “Jonah” are just some of the themes that Balka projected (“Explore How It Is”). A closer look at the title of the piece might shed light on the diversity in which this brainstorming exercise resulted.

*How It Is* was partly inspired by Beckett’s homonymous “novel length monologue” (Alderman 82). In “Torturer and Servant: Samuel Beckett’s *How It Is*” scholar Gary Alderman describes Beckett’s *How It Is* as

a representation of a creative artist’s ‘grand narrative,’ an organization of memories from which the male speaker draws the necessary plasma of guilt and self-disgust so as to sustain a new fiction. As creator, he lives in a primordial world of mud and darkness, outside life, listening to the voice of his thoughts and beseeching that voice, as if external to his consciousness, to allow him to participate in the creative process. (82)

Being a self-referential “monologue” that illustrates the complexities of the creative process of writing, Beckett’s *How It Is* is at once autobiographical and fictional. With (his) *How It Is* Balka materialised the self-referentiality that is inherent in Beckett’s piece through a consciously non-visual form. After having created a steel construction that is an interpretative materialisation of the creator’s “primordial world of mud and darkness” (Alderman 82), Balka projected his personal “grand narrative” (Alderman 82) that is informed by his corporeal and affective memories (“my cellar entrance”), parts of the cultural history of darkness (“Plato’s Caves”, “Noah’s Ark”, “Jonah”, “The Plague of Darkness”) and one of the most prevalent dark corners in the history of the world (the Nazi extermination camp of Treblinka). Working literally with the obscurity that shapes the earlier stages of the creative process, Balka created a tabula rasa to be filled with meaning(s) by him (as an artist) and the piece’s visitors who at once received and produced its poetics through their corporeality and affective responses.

The interplay between the tabula rasa of a form and the emergence of meaning does not only denote the different (intertwining) levels entailed in the production/reception of a cultural phenomenon, but also indicates its subsequent position in the fabric of cultural phenomena and the world that produced it. In her article “Performance Remains” performance scholar Rebecca Schneider uses the term “material remains” to consider what

is left in “the archive” after the here-and-now of a performative event has come to an end (100-108). Highly dependent on the here-and-now of the embodied and affective responses that *How It Is* instigates, Balka’s invitation to produce meaning in the sculpture also results in as many “material remains” as the visitors that stepped into his darkness. Retaining her “grand narrative” as it was shaped by the piece, each visitor preserves the experiential sculpture in the corpus of her memories and as such she places it between the corporeal, the affective, the cognitive and the cultural. The “material remains” of *How It Is* consist of what remains in the memories of Balka and the sculpture’s visitors; but they also consist of more than that.

In tangible terms Balka’s grand narrative is the most prevalent “material remain” in “the archive” that accompanies *How It Is* (Balka’s list, a catalogue, interviews, press reviews, an interactive application that can be found on iTunes etc.). This grand narrative is filled with contradiction. Referring frequently to his catholic upbringing through various themes in his list, Balka also refers to an anti-Semitic act of genocide; he sees Plato’s caves and Gustave Dorè’s *The Plague of Darkness* as being parts of the same space; he merges urban myth with history and history with science; he projects the psychoanalytic and the erotic on the same space as he projects science and science fiction; he thus establishes an interplay between the subjective, the corporeal and the affective on the one hand and the historical, the cultural and the socio-political on the other hand. Balka’s darkness is therefore not only a material condition that invites its visitors to perform introspection by way of their embodiment but also a metaphorical device that –due to its multiple layers– entails everything and nothing all at once.

In his discussion with curator Paulo Herkenhoff Balka admits: “I am still ‘blind’, actually, when I stand in front or under or in this sculpture. I still feel ‘blind’, so I always need to look at this page [referring to the list of themes that he drew] to know what this work can give out.” (“Miroslaw Balka in Conversation”) Referring to the metaphorical conception of blindness as an inherent part of the reception of a (virtually) blacked-out environment, Balka raises two important questions: What do we “see” in the arts when we are (figuratively) blind? And in what ways can this act of “blind looking” inform us about the relationship between the subjective, the corporeal, the affective on the one hand and the intellectual, the cultural, and the socio-political on the other hand?

It is these questions that led me to the concept of non-visibility in performance; since non-visibility is a rather obscure concept at this stage, I thought that I might take the opportunity and clarify my understanding of it in this introduction. I commenced the

research that led to this thesis with a rather black-and-white mentality that was shaped by the binary of visibility versus non-visibility. Everything that I came across and could qualify (even in the slightest sense of the word) as visual I instantly overlooked; everything that concealed the visual completely I highly embraced. Because of this uncompromising approach to the research topic, at the early stages of my research I had a very clear (yet misleading) conception of the particular characteristics that contribute to the definition of the non-visual: the non-visual spaces that I was looking for were performance spaces that were experienced on a material level. Concealing fully the visual dimensions of performance, these spaces would host experimental performances that would not only make a clear stance against the ocularcentric structures that shape the late capitalist West, but also –almost axiomatically due to their darkness (I thought at the time)– result in participatory experiences that react to the premises of mainstream (visual) culture.

Eventually I realised that this conceptualisation of non-visibility was just that: a conceptualisation, a hypothesis that would be tested out by way of an academic experiment. I thus had taken the negating “non” in the term non-visual too literally. Why then frame this thesis with the term non-visibility in order to signify cultural phenomena that move beyond the realm of visibility? Looking for possible “others” to the visual –other than the non-visual– I turned to the work of French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman and specifically his work *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*. In *Confronting Images* Didi-Huberman differentiates between the visual and the visible, and presents the visible as the “other” to the visual. Very briefly put, while the visual signifies the phenomenal aspects of looking at a work of art (as an appearance), the visible is the systematic articulation of the phenomenal experience of looking at it within the frame of the History of Art. Moving beyond the frame of the visual, the visible projects stability to the phenomenality of looking at art:

[p]osing one’s gaze to an art image ... becomes a matter of knowing how to name everything that one sees—in fact, everything that one reads in the visible. There is here an implicit truth model that strangely superimposes the *adaequatio rei et intellectus* of classical metaphysics onto a myth—a positivist myth—of the omnitranslatability of images. (Didi-Huberman 3)

Attempting to capture the phenomenality of looking, the visible becomes a representation of it (a representation of a representation). Working within the frame of epistemology, the visible perpetuates itself to such a degree that it becomes tautological with the visual for the viewer. For example, while looking at Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* I do not engage with the

phenomenal aspects of looking at the painting (the visual), but rather I look at its visible version: the stabilised version of the painting that shapes my experience via multiple –and often diverse– reiterations that have attempted to “capture” and analyse the painting in the epistemological field of the history of art. In this sense, the visible works beyond the realm of visibility and it is –justifiably so in art criticism– the other of the visual. Could such a term be applied to theatre and performance and if so would it be useful in the context of this thesis?

After careful deliberation I realised that there was a reason behind my choice of the term non-visibility. This thesis is concerned with cultural phenomena that go beyond visibility on a *phenomenal* level. The “non” in the term non-visibility alludes first and foremost to the non-visual senses in performance: hearing, touch, smell, taste and kinaesthesia. While the visible is the other to the visual in Didi-Huberman’s paradigm, it signifies the articulation and systematisation of visual experience. What drew me to Balka’s *How It Is* and the case studies of this thesis is what performance scholar Josephine Machon identifies as “the sensual exchange that can occur between diverse performance languages; verbal, corporeal, visual, aural, technological and so on.” (*Synaesthetics* 9) In other words, I am interested in the pre-visible aspects of cultural phenomena that are other than visual (to use Didi-Huberman’s terms). In an attempt to articulate and analyse my experiences of the case studies I might somewhat contribute to making non-visibility in performance visible; nonetheless, it is the pre-visible aspects of the case studies that has been the starting point of my research. In this sense, the term non-visual in my thesis denotes methods, elements of performance and forms that move beyond the visual and it is concerned with the non-visual senses as much as the invisible [both the “unable to be seen” (“invisible”) and the inarticulate/non-systematised].

Through this refreshed understanding of the non-visual I realised that there is indeed an increasing number of non-visual phenomena in the cultural landscape of London that didn’t fit in with my hitherto conceptualisation of non-visibility. The focus of my research shifted and instead of examining the case studies that I had assembled for my thesis against a theoretical hypothesis, I examined them as phenomena in their own right. This is when non-visibility turned into something tangible, something *of* and simultaneously *about* the fabric of everyday life that surrounds me. Far from negating the visual, non-visual phenomena establish a dialogic rapport with visibility and they function as phenomenological, artistic, cultural and socio-political “arrows” that point towards an experiential realm that moves beyond visibility. At the same time, these non-visual

phenomena –far from the few exceptions in a highly illuminated world– are latent with the cultural and the socio-political because they reflect, reinforce and/or undermine the fabric of the world in which they are produced and/or received. How so?

Going back to *How It Is*, it is an exhibition that incorporates phenomenal darkness and invites its visitors to engage with the act of “blind looking”. Beyond its aesthetic and (intellectual, historical and socio-political) poetic aspects, the darkness of this space is materialised in a specific context. *How It Is* is part of the Unilever Series in one of the main cultural institutions in the UK. Not only does Tate Modern receive generous annual funds from the Arts Council Britain, but also it collaborates with private sponsors –such as Unilever– to fund numerous exhibitions. An enterprise in its own right (hosting shops, cafeterias and restaurants in the midst of artworks that form the contemporary Western canon), Tate Modern informs the cultural consciousness of both the inhabitants of London and the UK that visit it and the numerous sightseers that consider it as one of the main tourist attractions of the city. Useful in considering the cultural and socio-political implications of this is Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological/anthropological conceptualisation of “taste” in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. In this work Bourdieu links the formation of taste to class:

Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin. (1)

Proposing that the formation of taste is dependent on one’s upbringing and education, Bourdieu argues that –far from a matter of intuition– taste is explicitly linked to class. Within Bourdieu’s –useful for the consideration of the socio-political aspects of the arts– paradigm Tate Modern addresses specific classes (locally, nationally and globally) and shapes their cultural consciousness as far as the visual arts are concerned. As such, it is one of the major institutions in London that implicitly –if not explicitly– shape the politics of visual culture and perpetuate the preservation of the class system that is currently in place in London and the UK. The addition of Balka’s darkness to the “repertoire” of this “haven” of the visual arts therefore is indicative of something more; by creating the commissioned *How It Is* for Tate Modern as part of the Unilever Series –yes, the Unilever company of Pot Noodles, Lipton,

Dove and Persil to name just a few brands—Balka also injected his aesthetics and poetics into a complicated network of power relations that inform the production and the reception of the arts.

Recent studies on the current phase in the history of capitalism suggest that the capitalist appropriation of ocularcentrism [what French philosopher Guy Debord identifies as the society of the spectacle (see Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*)] has come to an end and that it has been substituted by what Pine and Gilmore positively identify as “the experience economy” (1) in *The Experience Economy* and human geographer Nigel Thrift negatively identifies as “the new era of the inhabitable map” (16) in his *Non-Representational Theory*. In this new phase the capitalist market has appropriated not only the cultural form of the visual (the spectacle) but also the experiential. Investing in the affective potential of fabricated environments, “the new era of the inhabitable map” (Thrift 16) capitalises on embodiment and occasionally fetishizes alternative embodiments (Balka’s “blind looking” comes to mind here) on the grounds of economic profit. Considered within this frame, Balka’s darkness in *How It Is* can be understood as a complicated and contradictory phenomenon: it is concerned with the body on a phenomenal level; it gives rise to numerous and diverse affects; it is indexical of some of history’s dark corners; it functions as a socio-political commentary of these dark corners; it bears a conceptual affinity to blindness; it “takes place” in one of the major institutions in London that inform the politics of visual culture in the UK (if not the Western world); and it is part of an urban landscape that is increasingly shaped by fabricated environments that capitalise on the affective potential of multiple embodiments. How does one articulate and analyse such a complicated phenomenon?

This thesis will attempt to answer this question and as such the aims at hand are twofold: firstly, this thesis aims at establishing a critical frame, the critical frame of non-visibility, for the examination of cultural phenomena that engage with experience on a level that goes beyond visibility. Aiming at moving beyond the limitations of theoretical boundaries, the critical frame of non-visibility will be equally interested in the subjective, the corporeal and the affective on the one hand and the intellectual, the cultural and the socio-political on the other hand. Moving in the space between phenomenology and cultural materialism, the development of the critical frame of non-visibility in this thesis will hopefully function as the basis for the future development of a theory of non-visibility in performance. Secondly, this thesis aims at developing a methodology that is compatible with (but not restricted by) the critical frame of non-visibility. This methodology will be qualitative and its

starting points will be the location of suitable case studies, the participant “observation” of these case studies and a small scale practice-as-research project that will test out practically some of the theoretical conclusions that will be drawn from the participant “observation”. Since the critical frame of non-visibility will develop between the empirical and the culturally materialist, the case studies will be located from a range of contexts that entail the theatrical, the performative on the social plane and the performative on the artistic plane. As such, the methodology will be framed by an epistemology that draws equally from theatre and performance studies.

More specifically, the first chapter will attempt to locate the topic of this thesis in the wider fields of theatre and performance studies. Deciphering a distinction between two differing traditions in the Western history of theatre and performance since the early modern era, the discussion in this chapter will differentiate between practices that (have) develop(ed) within the perspectival tradition and practices that (have) develop(ed) within the anti-perspectival tradition. Far from setting up a (chronological) relationship of precedence between these two traditions and a binary for the discussion that is to follow, I will demonstrate how the non-visual has been entailed in practices of the perspectival tradition and I will discuss the ways in which the anti-perspectival tradition –with its focus on subjectivity, corporeality and affect– has materialised the non-visual into tangible elements of performance and eventually the tangible non-visual form of darkness. Considering the existing theatre and performance studies literature in depth, I will also attempt to decipher the gaps within it. Suggesting that the socio-political dimensions of the non-visual have been implicated by various sources, yet not explicated, I will then lay out the research questions that will serve as the starting point for the analytical discussion that is to follow.

The second chapter will serve as a conceptual frame that examines some of the socio-political variables that will inform the ensuing chapters. The discussion will focus on a few sources that range from Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore’s *The Experience Economy* and human geographer Nigel Thrift’s *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics and Affect*. While Debord and Thrift develop their discussions within a neo-Marxist frame that is in accordance with the culturally materialist frame of this thesis, Pine and Gilmore’s *The Experience Economy* has been developed as a modus operandi for aspiring entrepreneurs at the advent of the experience economy. Despite developing their discussion within an antithetical to this thesis frame, I think that it is a useful source that will shed light on the –reductive– conceptualisation of experience

within the premises of the experience economy. Throughout the discussion of the second chapter, I will be cross-referencing the theoretical conclusions that I draw with literature from theatre and performance studies that engages with the politics of performance. As such, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which the conceptual frame that I will set up in this chapter will serve as the basis upon which the non-visual in the case studies and the practice-as-research project will be examined.

The third chapter will focus on the first case study of the thesis: the audio description of *Edgar and Annabel*, a performance that took place at the “The Paintframe” of the National Theatre as part of the repertoire of a small-scale new writing festival. While not obvious in its engagement with the non-visual, the practice of audio description attempts to translate the visual in terms of the linguistic. It moves beyond the frame of visibility and it differs from Didi-Huberman’s “visible” because –while articulating the act of looking at theatre– it attempts to articulate the visual in phenomenal terms and not as part of a wider epistemology. Focusing on the relationship between the visual and the linguistic, I will examine audio description as a practice that develops in response to the social inclusion agendas of major theatrical institutions such as the National Theatre. As such, I will analyse the practice of audio description as a socio-politically latent practice; I will not only focus on the phenomenal aspects of audio description with the help of Steven Connor’s cultural history of ventriloquism, but will also consider the ways in which audio description addresses the social inclusion of audience members with visual impairments. In doing this, I hope to demonstrate how the incorporation of the non-visual in the practice of audio description reflects and/or undermines aspects of the cultural, social and political fabric of London.

The focus of the fourth chapter will be the case study of Dans Le Noir, a restaurant chain that provides its customers with the –rather unusual– experience of dining in a completely blacked-out dining room. Examining the cultural history of the restaurant, I will decipher its affinity to the performative and I will consider the ways in which the non-visual form of darkness is incorporated in a social space that is “staged” as an affective environment. Dining in complete darkness, the (sighted) patrons of Dans Le Noir engage with an embodied and affective experience that lies between the subjective, the corporeal and the affective on the one hand and the (visually) imaginary on the other hand. Exploring the ways in which the experience establishes a sense of place for its patrons, I will consult Doreen Massey’s work in order to start unpacking the socio-political dimensions of the case study. The discussion will eventually focus on the metaphorization of the dark dining room of Dans Le Noir. Marketing the experience of dining in the dark as a social act that sheds light on the



experience of blindness, *Dans Le Noir* invites its (sighted) patrons to “play blindness”. Examining the mechanics of the transition from (personal) place to metaphorical space, I hope to illustrate not only how the alternative embodiments of people with visual impairments might be fetishized on the grounds of economic profit but also the relation of such an appropriation to the creative class of London and the premises of the experience economy.

The discussion of the fifth chapter will develop in response to *The Question*, an immersive theatre project that was developed by Extant, the only professional theatre company in the UK that is led by artists with visual impairments. Aiming at establishing a self-consciously non-visual space, Extant have produced a project that responds to the (mis)conception of blindness equals darkness and reacts to the misapplication of the form in cultural phenomena such as *Dans Le Noir*. Incorporating the same form as *Dans Le Noir* but using it from a diametrically different perspective, Extant respond playfully to the metaphorization of the non-visual form of darkness. Examining *The Question*, I will consider the ways in which the piece addresses the body, deconstructs metaphorical (mis)conceptions of blindness by way of its aesthetics and poetics, and incorporates haptic technology as a navigational system in the dark. In doing so I hope to demonstrate how a project that has been prompted by genuine creative impulses and a self-reflexive socio-political agenda can use darkness as the unifying form for an experience that blurs the boundaries between the sensual and the socio-political. Moving within such a critical frame, I hope to illustrate why Extant’s *The Question* is a project that establishes a performative political ecology of the non-visual in the midst of capitalist-fuelled fabricated environments.

The final chapter will function as both the conclusion of the thesis and a provocation for the future development of a theory of non-visibility in performance. The focus of the discussion will be “*Rockaby* in the dark”, a practice-as-research project that I developed in response to the theoretical conclusions that I drew from the case studies. Having deciphered that the concept of blindness is addressed on a conceptual level by all the case studies that I examined (from Balka’s *How It Is* to Extant’s *The Question*), I decided to attempt to bring the non-visual back to the theatre (that is, the theatre whose starting point is the dramatic text) and stage Beckett’s *Rockaby* in the dark. As I shall discuss, Beckett’s work is rich in metaphors of blindness; in devising the piece I wanted to see how the discussion of this thesis could inform the immersive and blacked-out staging of a play that entails metaphors of blindness. Attempting to produce a piece that at worst was informed by and at best echoed the performative political ecology of the non-visual set out by Extant, I also wanted to examine

how the case studies of this thesis might inform performative practices that engage with the non-visual. In doing so I hope that I will have developed the critical frame of non-visibility in such a way that it can function as the basis/provocation for the future development of a theory of non-visibility in performance. Bearing in mind the cultural and socio-political landscape of London, I hope to not only illustrate the context in which the non-visual currently “takes place”, but also to produce a convincing argument for the relevance of non-visibility in contemporary discourses of theatre and performance.

# 1. Visuality and Non-visibility in Theatre and Performance

## Introduction

In *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking* theatre scholar Maaïke Bleeker examines the ways in which the sense of vision is addressed in performance. Focusing on the practice of spectating, she undertakes a thorough examination of the ways in which spectators –as (cultural) bodies that actively see– interact not only with the theatrical medium but also with what she eventually identifies as visuality in the theatre. The main component that structures the visual in the theatre is, according to Bleeker, the *theatron*:

[t]he word theatre is derived from the Greek *theatron* which denotes the place from where the theatrical event is seen. The theatre organises the relation between those seeing and what they see, mediating in a specific relationship between the two. The theatre, therefore, (or so it would seem) presents the object *par excellence* for an analysis of visuality as a phenomenon that takes place within the relationship between the one seeing and what is seen and against the backdrop of culturally and historically specific visual practices. (2)

Examining the etymology of the word theatre, Bleeker stresses the centrality of the visual in the communication processes that take place during a theatrical event. She brings to the forefront the important component of place in her consideration of visuality and thus stresses the cultural specificity of visuality in the theatre. More importantly, she indicates that theatre and visuality are interwoven to such a degree that it is almost impossible to discuss the theatre without considering visuality.

In a similar vein, in *Feeling Theatre* performance scholar Martin Welton observes that “[g]iven theatre’s origins in bright light by which it might be seen (and thus, importantly, borne witness to)”, the theatre that undermines its visual qualities “might ... be considered as limiting of theatrical experience, if not anti-theatrical outright.” (52) Bleeker and Welton’s remarks bring to the forefront a crucial question in terms of the validity of non-visibility as a frame for the critical examination of theatre and performance. If the visual is central to not only the theatrical experience but also the critical understanding of theatre as a cultural

practice, in what ways has the non-visual shaped theatre practices and informed theatre scholarship?

While there is an evident scarcity of studies that examine non-visibility in performance, the visual elements of performance and what might be understood as visibility in the theatre have recently been examined systematically in the fields of theatre and performance studies. The examination of work that focuses on the visual not only sheds light on the relationship between visibility and the non-visual, but also allows for greater understanding of what might eventually be defined as non-visibility in performance. Hence, the aim of this chapter is the examination of the non-visual in relation to visibility. Recalling parts of the history of visibility in the theatre that –in one way or another– engage with the non-visual, I will differentiate between the perspectival tradition and the anti-perspectival tradition. Far from setting up a binary that will frame the discussion of this thesis, this differentiation denotes different –yet, as I shall demonstrate in the course of this thesis, not always distinct– approaches to theatre and performance-making. I will begin the discussion by considering the non-visual within the perspectival tradition and examine some of the ways in which the non-visual has been supporting “systems of vision” in performance. Still moving within the frame of the perspectival tradition, I will then examine briefly the history of theatrical lighting, an addition to performance that paradoxically projected a form on the non-visual: the form of darkness by way of the theatrical blackout. Considering the ways in which the blackout has framed our spectator consciousness, I hope to demonstrate how the non-visual has shaped our experiences of perspectival theatre since the late nineteenth century. Building on this, I will then examine the ways in which the non-visual form of darkness has been used within what might be understood as the anti-perspectival tradition. I will consider the non-visual form of darkness not only in terms of the elements of performance that can be found within it but also in terms of embodied experience, presentation and representation. In doing so I hope to illustrate the ways in which the non-visual and non-visibility in the theatre have been important –yet somewhat overlooked– aspects of both the production and the reception of theatre and performance.

### **The Non-visual and the Perspectival Tradition**

Bleeker’s *Visibility in the Theatre* and Dominic Johnson’s *Theatre & the Visual* are perhaps the two studies that examine the relationship between the visual, modern visibility and spectatorship in greater detail. While Bleeker’s study is more comprehensive in that it explores the ways in which scholars might use visibility as a critical frame for the analysis of theatrical practices, Johnson’s study is more of a provocation for the consideration of the

visual in the theatre, since –as he suggests– “[d]espite the centrality of looking to the experience of the theatre, relatively little has been published on the visual as a condition of the production of meaning in contemporary theatre and performance studies.” (75)

Interestingly, both Johnson and Bleeker often discuss the visual and visibility in the theatre in terms of the invisible, in other words the elements that cannot be seen during the theatrical event. In the Introduction of *Theatre & the Visual* Johnson notes that

[w]hat we see in the theatre is an effect of what is concealed. Similarly, it could be said that in any performance, what we see often depends upon relationships to theatre that are evoked but not explicitly staged or performed. The visible elements of a theatrical production are therefore ghosted by ideas, identities, and histories that may evade full representation. This is not to say that theatre’s inability, reluctance, or refusal to show certain things is a weakness. On the contrary, theatre often plays powerfully with the anomalous visual effects of hiding and revealing. (6)

Johnson suggests that the visible qualities of theatre and performance presuppose the presence of invisible elements whose existence is nonetheless significant to the production of a theatrical whole. Framing the relationship between the visible (the visual in Didi-Huberman’s paradigm) and the invisible as the relationship between the revealed and the hidden, Johnson brings to the surface a significant negotiating process that –I would argue– informs many (if not all) of the stages of theatre making; from playwriting, to dramaturgy, to scenography, directing and acting itself. Even in metatheatrical performances whose self-referentiality aims at disclosing the hidden and concealed aspects of the creative process, it is impossible to reveal everything that has contributed to the creation of a theatrical whole by virtue of the visible. In this sense, the visible is bound to be haunted by “ghosts” according to Johnson’s vivid impression; in other words, one cannot discuss the visible without considering the invisible qualities that it entails.

Similarly to Johnson who speaks of “ideas, identities and histories” that accompany the visible elements of performance, Bleeker observes that

[t]he dramatic frame provides unity and coherence in view of purpose and reason and shows the world according to invisible beliefs about world order, history and reality. These beliefs are not represented on stage in the sense that they are being made present or visible by means of theatre signs. Instead, they speak

through, or are implicated within, the structure of the representation itself. (41)

Referring to the self-sufficient dramatic frame that drives what Hans-Thies Lehmann identifies –by implication– as dramatic theatre in his study *Postdramatic Theatre*, Bleeker defines the hidden and concealed qualities that accompany the visible in performance (again, the visual within Didi-Huberman’s paradigm) as “beliefs about world order, history and reality”. At the same time, Bleeker gets more analytical than Johnson when she identifies the invisible qualities of performance as elements that function within the mechanism of theatrical representation. According to Bleeker, theatrical representation enables the effective co-existence of visible and perceptible elements on the one hand and the ideas and beliefs that shape them on the other hand. In this sense, theatrical representation functions as the enabling frame that makes the communication through a range of theatrical presentations possible. Examining the mechanics of theatrical representation Bleeker notes that

[t]he staged character of the theatrical event makes it by definition antithetic to modernist notions of authenticity and truth, thus condemning the theatre to presentational strategies that, in order to convince as true and authentic, have to be aimed at obscuring or erasing traces of its own condition of being staged. When this relational character of the theatrical event does become visible, it can only appear as failure. (3)

The relational character of the theatrical event –in other words the relationship between presentations and representations on the one hand and presentations, representations and the audience on the other hand– is shaped by the interplay between visibility and invisibility. As long as the audience receive the representational frame through visible presentations, the modernist illusion that the presentations onstage are authentic and true remains intact; as soon as the representational frame itself becomes visible the illusion falls apart. In order to illustrate this point further the discussion warrants a brief consideration of the concept and practice of perspective.

While I do not want to reduce the discussion to pseudo-historical acts for the sake of rhetoric, a close examination of the history of theatrical spectatorship (see, for instance, Bennett; and Wiles) suggests that the early modern era witnessed a shift in the practice of theatrical spectatorship. This shift occurred because of a number of factors that led to the relocation of the theatre from the outdoors to indoor buildings, a move that eventually

redefined completely the framing strategies of the theatrical event. Firstly, the introduction of printing technologies transformed the role and function of theatre within the social fabric. The rise of printing technologies led to the institutionalization of drama in Europe and the emergence of commercial theatre companies that sought to be housed in professional theatre buildings (see McConachie 175–9). In its turn the commercialization of theatre in sixteenth century Europe resulted in not only the professionalization of the theatre craft but also the eventual redefinition of the theatron. As opposed to, say, the ancient Greek theatron that was a place of seeing in the midst of a natural landscape (Wiles 184) or the medieval pageant wagon that planted the religious to the social through impromptu and hyper-visual theatrics (Wiles 74–81), the theatron of the early modern era is a separate purpose-built building whose architecture facilitates an altogether different way of spectating. From the seventeenth century onwards spectators were presented with “scenic practices ... that were organized according to the laws of perspective and framed by a proscenium arch.” (McConachie 185) The introduction of the perspectival proscenium arch not only redefined the audience’s ways of seeing in the theatre, but also established the active interplay between visuality and the non-visual in the theatre as we understand it today.

Bleeker examines perspective as the artistic mechanism that shaped visuality in the theatre of the early modern era. It was developed as a specific technique by painters during the Italian Renaissance and later influenced visual and performing arts practices across Europe. Perspective employs visual presentations that provide the viewer/spectator with the illusion that what is presented before her eyes is “the world as it is” (this is the reason why the term Perspectivalism is interchangeable with the term perspectival illusionism in art history). In order to achieve the effect of “the world as it is”, perspective hides the representational frame within which it works. “The intertwining of what is seen and what is not seen”, Bleeker suggests, “brings about the attractiveness and even the credibility of the perspective image.” (47) Elaborating on the ways in which perspective tactfully conceals its representational mechanics, Bleeker remarks that

[p]erspective presents a model of how representation is firmly on the side of the one who looks, and not on the side of who is seen. This model ... illuminates how it is invisibility rather than visibility that equals power in the field of vision. Perspective ‘theatricalizes’ the field of vision. It creates a ‘scenographic space’ in which all that is seen is in a sense staged for the viewer. At the same time, this staging aims at an effect that is quite the opposite of being

theatrical: the promise presented by perspective is one of directness, immediacy, it is the promise of Alberti's *finestra aperta*.

(99)

Bleeker observes that the perspectival image attempts to erase any traces of the representational processes that led to its creation; a tree on a perspectival painting, for instance, has to appear as a presentation of a tree "as it is" rather than the representation of a tree. There is an interesting paradox within this paradigm: while the presentation of the world "as it is" through the use of perspective can only be achieved through the theatricalization of vision and the visual, the desired effect of perspective is ultimately anti-theatrical, "one of directness, immediacy, [and] ... the promise of Alberti's *finestra aperta*". In this sense, the invisibility of not only the representational frame but also the high theatricality of the perspectival image ensures the convincing visibility of presentations.

In its turn the invisibility of the representational frame and the hyper-theatricality of the perspectival image presupposes the invisibility of the viewer/spectator. In *Postdramatic Theatre* Lehmann observes that "[t]he point about perspective is that it makes totality possible precisely because the position of the viewer, the point of view, is excluded from the visible world of the picture, so that the constitutive act of representation is missing in the represented." (79) Lehman observes that the invisibility of the representational frame depends on the invisibility of the viewer/spectator. In attempting to create a picture of the world "as it is", perspective leads to the production of a self-sufficient whole that does not have any room for the presence, let alone the subjectivity, of the viewer/spectator. Discussing the phenomenology of realism –the perspectival theatrical practice par excellence– in "Sensing Realism: Illusionism, Actuality, and the Theatrical Sensorium", Stanton B. Garner notes that

[i]f illusionism requires that the spectator become invisible in relation to the dramatic world, then his or her sensory participation in the field of performance must be carefully delimited. Touch, taste, and smell –the senses that most undermine the distinctions between subject and object, here and there– are strictly contained, or bracketed entirely. Sight and hearing are subordinated within the directed operations of watching and listening; the participants in a potentially open field of visual and auditory stimuli (to which they themselves contribute) are disciplined as "spectators" and "audience." Eye and ear are dematerialized as sensory agents,



denied their own location, so that they may serve as receptors of theatrical and dramatic information. (118)

Garner suggests that the assumed invisibility of the spectator within the perspectival tradition results in a disembodied way of spectating. Disregarding completely the more intimate (non-visual) senses of touch, taste, smell and –I would add to Garner’s list– kinaesthesia, the perspectival tradition focuses on sight and hearing, the senses that receive stimuli from a safe –to the perspectival project– distance. Within this spectatorial paradigm both eye and ear are conceptualised as disembodied parts that do not belong to a subjective being but rather correspond to –the all-important to modernism– notions of rationality and objectivity. In this sense, the perspectival tradition in the theatre not only calls for the invisibility of the representational frame and the invisibility of the audience, but also warrants the invisibility of each audience member’s subjectivity and corporeality.

In her article “On Taking the Blind in Hand” performance scholar Rebecca Schneider offers an interesting conceptualisation of the invisibility of the audience and each audience member’s subjectivity and corporeality. Discussing the conditions that shape the communication process in the perspectival tradition, Schneider notes that

[w]e might say that [in the ancient Greek theatron] vision took place – arranged into a cultural formation which, with the Renaissance and neoclassicism, would develop into perspective, a model to which we are arguably "habituated" to this day. The theatron separates the actor, one who acts, from the audience, those who view – and that space institutes reception as distanced from action, and action as blinded to reception. ... The ancient theatron is an incubatory model for the later extremes of perspectival viewing by which a theatregoer becomes not a participant but a spectator, not countenanced by the scene but disembodied. ... Here then, we find the institution of active blindness and inactive vision in the theatron of performance and rhetorical discourse, an institution historicized as founding a distinction between art and ritual. (“Blind” 26–7)

Even though theatre historians that have examined the development of theatrical space might challenge Schneider’s argument that the perspectival stage is the uncontested offspring of the ancient Greek theatron (see, for instance, Wiles), Schneider makes some interesting remarks with regards to the practice of spectating within the perspectival

paradigm. Firstly, the invisibility of the audience and the invisibility of their subjectivity and corporeality are conceptualised as “inactive vision”. The notion of “inactive vision” not only reinforces Garner’s conception of the spectator as a set of disembodied eyes and ears but also implicates the passivity of the audience during the theatrical event. Secondly, Schneider considers the invisibility of the audience, their subjectivity and their corporeality in terms of the practice of acting. Establishing a relational frame between actor and spectator despite the clear division of stage and auditorium, Schneider argues that the audience’s “inactive vision” presupposes and/or results in the “active blindness” of the actor. This metaphorical impression suggests that within the perspectival paradigm the actor functions as an a-live version of the perspectival image in Italian Renaissance painting; establishing a picture of the world “as it is”, the actor has to remain within the self-sufficient world set by the proscenium stage in order for the illusion of the world “as it is” to remain intact.

This brief consideration of the ways in which representation, presentation and perspective have functioned in the perspectival tradition since the early modern era have brought to the forefront some useful remarks in terms of the critical frame of non-visibility in the theatre. Within the frame of dramatic theatre (see Lehmann) representation, presentation and perspective are defined in terms of visibility and invisibility. While the visible is reduced to tangible presentations that give the spectator the illusion of a self-sufficient version of the world “as it is”, there are a number of components that make the communication within the perspectival paradigm possible *because* of their very invisibility: firstly, “ideas, identities and histories” (Johnson 6) or “beliefs about world order, history and reality” (Bleeker 41); secondly, the representational frame itself; thirdly, the audience; and fourthly, the subjectivity and corporeality of the audience. In this sense, the interplay between what is seen and what is not seen lies at the core of the perspectival tradition in the theatre. In this tradition visibility is concerned with the presentation of the visual illusions of modernism, while non-visibility entails all the invisible components that would break the illusions maintained by visibility were they to become visible themselves. An element that facilitated this enabling (to visibility) function of the non-visual was –paradoxically– theatrical lighting, the focus of the following section.

### **The Non-visual in Modernism: A Brief Consideration of Theatrical Lighting**

In “Sensing Realism” Garner observes that

[t]he technological developments that enabled and accompanied the realist revolution in the nineteenth century worked both to heighten the verisimilitude of the represented world and further to

enclose this world in representational self-sufficiency. The institution of gas lighting, for instance, allowed light on stage to assume greater perceptual realism, but it could do so only through the eclipsing, the putting out of play, of the actual lighting (or non-lighting) of the theatrical auditorium as a whole. Light, in this sense, is fictionalized and at the same time detheatricalised, in that its technological origins in the performance moment are placed 'out of attention'. (116–7)

Garner's account of the technological transformations that accompanied the realist revolution in the theatre implies that the emergence of sophisticated lighting technologies resulted in the introduction of light and darkness in the theatre. By way of light these technologies facilitated not only the framing of the self-sufficient world ("as it is") onstage but also the invisibility of the representational frame itself. By way of the darkness of the auditorium these technologies reinforced the invisibility of the audience as well as the invisibility of the subjectivity and corporeality of each individual spectator.

Historian Craig M. Koslofsky traces the emergence of lighting technologies in "[t]he slow movement of European festivals and celebrations into the night, which had begun in the fifteenth century [and] quickened in the seventeenth." (244) The nocturnalization of festivities and entertainment occurred initially in courts across Europe, since the use of artificial lighting at night was an expensive pursuit that was accessible only to the nobility. One of the oldest surviving references to the benefits of the contrast between light and darkness in the theatre is by Italian playwright and court doctor Leone Di Some. In *Dialogues of Stage Affairs* Di Some examines the function of different elements of performance. Demonstrating rather rigorously that he is a man of scientific reason as well as theatrical artistry, Di Some observes that "[i]t is a natural fact ... that a man who stands in the shade sees much more distinctly an object illuminated from afar" (qtd. in Koslofsky 257). Considering the mechanics of visual perception in the theatre, Di Some acknowledges not only that light can be used as a framing device for the visual onstage, but also that the contrast between the light of the stage and the shade in the auditorium can facilitate the framing of the visual even further. Moreover, endorsing the mechanics of the perspectival image, he is in favour of the distance between the visual onstage and the invisible seer in the auditorium.

Di Some's confidence in the framing potential of theatrical lighting was firstly materialised in the extravagant spectacles of the nobility across Europe during the late

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when impromptu lighting technologies made their first appearance. For instance, Koslofsky reports of a 1653 spectacle in which King Louis XIV of France established his royal presence as “le roi soleil”. As Koslofsky notes, “[t]he performance was the ‘Ballet de la Nuit’ of Isaac de Benserade – and here, as in countless other spectacles of the era, a darkened background enhanced the appearance of a radiant monarch, evoking his power to dispel darkness and bedazzle his subjects.” (239) The spectacles of Louis XIV –along with the spectacles of the Medici Court and the Stuart Masques of Ben Johnson and Inigo Jones in England– employed the contrast between the light of the stage and the shading of the auditorium in order to overwhelm audiences and to assert the nobility’s authority. Gradually, however, theatrical lighting lost its political alignment to the nobility; initially it made an appearance in “temporary perspective stages with movable scenery” only to be fully incorporated by the “permanent Baroque perspective theatres” (Koslofsky 251). By the time of the Restoration in England, Koslofsky notes, “the simple staging and open-air, daytime performances familiar to us from Elizabethan theatre had been supplanted by the darkened perspective stage.” (255-6)

While the benefits of darkness in the theatre and the auditorium had been the preoccupation of an increasing number of theatre-makers and architects throughout the seventeenth century (see Koslofsky 251–258), the complete darkening of the auditorium was systematised during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indoor productions during the seventeenth century were, surely, not as exposed to light as outdoor daytime productions had hitherto been; nevertheless, as Welton suggests in *Feeling Theatre*

[t]he chandeliers and sconces that lit the playhouses of Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries diffused light throughout the shared space of the stage and the auditorium. This facilitated the audience in looking not only at the stage, but also at one another. (65)

Even though the use of candlelight as a lighting technology during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contributed to the attainment of the chiaroscuro effect on stage (especially through the interplay between light and shadows), the lack of control of candlelight could not result in an auditorium where the audience is “*left in darkness like the night*” as opposed to the striking “daylight on the stage” (Furttenbach qtd. in Koslofsky 257). In this sense, the lack of control of lighting undermined the perspectival tradition’s attempts to render the audience completely invisible, since on the one hand –as a collective– the

audience could see themselves seeing and on the other hand –as individual spectators– they maintained their subjectivity (if not corporeality) within the theatrical event.

The clear contrast between light and darkness was eventually achieved with the development of sophisticated lighting technologies such as gas and electric lighting that allowed for greater control of light (see Garner, “Sensing Realism” 116–7; and Welton, *Feeling Theatre* 67). While in *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* Wolfgang Schivelbusch hesitantly indebts the virtual darkening of nineteenth century theatre auditoria to the darkened auditoria of the then new art-form of the cinema, visual studies scholar Johnathan Crary indebts this new phenomenon to Wagner and his experimentations with the Gesamtkunstwerk. In *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* Crary observes that

[o]ne of Wagner’s “reforms”... involved the transformation of the nineteenth-century theater into a construction of visibility that more rigorously structured the spectator’s perceptual experience. His aim was to establish a “theatron,” a “place for seeing,” and it was through the collective act of seeing that the semblance of a community would come into being. ... He also initiated the idea of near-complete darkness as a way of heightening the intensity of lighting effects on stage and preventing peripheral distraction. The multiplication of proscenium arches combined with the extreme darkness of the theatre was intended to detach the illuminated stage from any legible relation to the rest of the opera house. (250–1)

Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk is, according to Crary, a modern re-interpretation of the ancient Greek theatron as a place of seeing. Nevertheless, Wagner’s re-imagination of the ancient Greek theatron entails elements of the perspectival tradition, since the invisibility of the audience is of utmost importance to the establishment of the hyper-visibility of the stage. The invisibility of the audience is reinforced by the “near complete darkness” of the auditorium, a condition that results in the re-definition of the hitherto function of the non-visual in the theatre. As well as denoting all the invisible elements of performance that maintain the illusion of perspectival visibility, the non-visual in the theatre of the nineteenth century acquires a tangible form: the form of darkness. The most consistent manifestation of darkness in conventional theatre from the nineteenth century onwards is the theatrical blackout.

While the non-visual form par excellence in conventional theatre as well as a significant aspect in the spectator's experience of the theatrical event, the blackout has received little attention by theatre and performance scholars. Erin Hurley is perhaps the only scholar that has considered the blackout as a theatrical moment in its own right. In "Blackout: Utopian Technologies in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*" Hurley examines the blackout in terms of the theatrical universe that it reinforces and/or interrupts. Early on in her discussion Hurley observes that "[b]lackouts help establish the world of the play as a distinct conceptual universe." (209) While the initial blackout signifies the start of the theatrical event in that it demarcates it from the social aspects of theatre-going in general, subsequent blackouts serve as short-lived breathers that provide the audience with an opportunity to reflect on everything that has just been witnessed. Elaborating on the blackout as the provider of fleeting moments of reflection Hurley notes that

[w]hen a lit image is suddenly plunged into blackout conditions, an after-image is produced. Hovering for a moment before fading, belatedly, into obscurity, the apparition burned onto the retina captures the outline of what had previously been lit. Put differently, one "sees" phantoms. Seeing ghosts, seeing in the theatrical blackout, is to experience what Marvin Carlson calls 'the haunted stage.' The haunted stage is a melancholic environment that wears its history on its sleeve/stage, in its substances. (207)

The blackout, according to Hurley, does not obstruct seeing; it enables a different kind of seeing in the darkness. The blackout and its non-visual form serve as elements that reinforce the visual aspects of production: on the one hand, the spectator sees an after-image of what has just been witnessed and in this brief moment of reflection she is able to instil the ephemeral theatrical moment in her consciousness. On the other hand, this non-visual reflective breather that takes place between the visual moments of the theatrical event enables the spectator to consider what she has just witnessed in relation to the corpus of her theatrical and cultural memories. Referring to Carlson's conception of the "haunted stage", Hurley sees the blackout as the theatrical moment in which "this ghostly quality, this sense of something coming back in the theatre" (Carlson 2) is mostly experienced. Discussing his conception of "the haunted stage", Carlson notes that

the stories [theatre] chooses to tell, the bodies and other physical materials it utilizes to tell them, and the places in which they are told ... are ..., to a striking degree, composed of material 'that we

have seen before,' and the memory of that recycled material as it moves through new and different productions contributes in no small measure to the richness and density of the operations of theatre in general as a site of memory, both personal and cultural.

(3–4)

Providing the spectator with a momentary breather from the dramatic action and enabling the noticeable interplay between the visual (what is seen in the dramatic moment) and the non-visual (what is not seen in the theatrical present), the blackout places the visual aspects of performance within the historical frame of visibility in the theatre as a whole. This framing is facilitated not only by each spectator's "memory, both personal and cultural" but also by the blackout's non-visual form. In this sense, the blackout –in its non-visual glory– serves as a reminder of the fact that what is being witnessed to in the theatre will always be subject to a process that is conditioned by "[t]he retelling of stories already told, the reenactment of events already enacted, the reexperience of emotions already experienced." (Carlson 3) Hurley elaborates on this function of the blackout when she observes that

[a]s the eye wanders in visual indistinction, it sees potential elsewheres, other times, past –and in the context of theatrical recycling– future forms. ... [T]his practical impossibility might spotlight an alternate mode of perception that acknowledges phantoms and indeed expects audiences to sense phantoms in the dark. (212)

Reiterating the paradox according to which the non-visual form of the blackout highlights the visual histories of theatre as a whole, Hurley resonates both Johnson and Bleeker's impressions that the visible qualities of theatre are accompanied by (invisible) "ideas, identities, and histories" (Johnson 6) and "beliefs about world order, history and reality" (Bleeker 41) respectively. At the same time, she adds material substance to these invisible qualities by way of the non-visual form of darkness. She not only suggests that we identify the experience of the blackout as "an alternate mode of perception", but also argues that –through its materiality– the blackout can serve as the index form for the past deeds and future developments of theatre and –I would argue– performance. In this sense, the darkness of the blackout –in other words its non-visual form– can serve as a fertile ground upon which the examination of non-visibility in theatre and performance can be facilitated. The task at hand therefore is the examination of the materiality of the non-visual form of darkness in the theatre while also keeping in mind the series of invisible qualities that non-

visuality within the perspectival tradition entails. The next section will discuss literature that considers the materiality of the non-visual form of darkness in not only theatre but also interdisciplinary arts practices.

### **The Non-visual Form: Darkness and Non-visual Elements of Performance**

Theatre company Shunt premiered *The Ballad of Bobby Francois* at their space in Bethnal Green in May 1999. “Based on the true story of the South American rugby team who, after crashing in the Andes, stayed alive by eating each other”, *The Ballad of Bobby Francois* “takes you to the top of a mountain where the survivors huddle in the wind and show you the end of civilisation. Very clever, very disturbing.” (Gardner) The piece was highly praised not only for its ingenuity but also its intensity. One of the key features of the piece that reinforced this intensity was the re-enactment of the plane crash in a prolonged and complete blackout. In *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* performance scholar Josephine Machon recollects her experience of this moment quite graphically:

[i]n Shunt’s *Ballad of Bobby Francois* (1999-2001) there is a multisensory destruction of an aeroplane fuselage, occurring in a blackout with an evocative sound score and the tangible sensation of the machine being destroyed around and within the audience. Audience imagination in the moment and any ensuing narrative and thematic impressions are triggered by this spatial and aural assault on the senses. (58)

Stripping the theatrical moment off of its visual qualities completely, Shunt created an environment that, according to Machon’s account, was predominantly aural and kinaesthetic. The aural elements of the performance not only gave way to the imaginative faculties of each audience member, but also conveyed a (sensed) spatiality by virtue of their surround arrangement. With the complete and prolonged concealment of the visual Shunt benefited from the intensity that is generated in the non-visual form.

*The Ballad of Bobby Francois* is a good example of performance practices that differentiate themselves from the perspectival tradition by valuing both the materiality of the body and the subjectivity of the spectator. In “Stumbling in the Dark: Facets of Sensory Perception and Robert Wilson’s ‘H.G.’ Installation” performance scholar Stephen Di Benedetto locates these performance practices historically when he suggests that

[s]ince the late 1950s there has been a growing consciousness of the ways in which artists can engage a spectator using stimuli other than sight and sound, and artists have become increasingly



conscious of the ways in which the spectator's range of perceptual experience can be a part of an artistic encounter. Examples abound, from the Light and Dark artists, who tried using gases to build a colour and aroma composition, to the Brit Pop artists who created site-specific installations which took advantage of architectural spaces, local smells, and textures. Performers have used everything from food Fusco and La Baraca), to effluvia (Franko B) to trigger visceral sensations in the viewer. (273)

Resisting the modernist conception of the disembodied eye and ear fostered by the perspectival tradition, artists that work within the paradigm illustrated by Di Benedetto also resist the invisibility of the audience and the invisibility of their subjectivity and corporeality. These performance practices not only test and challenge the boundaries of human perception within the artistic realm, but also continuously re-define the nature of a range of artistic media. Being the products of interdisciplinary practice and thus extremely diverse in terms of both their aesthetics and their poetics, the artworks within this anti-perspectival paradigm have one thing in common in that they "demand that the spectator should become increasingly aware of his/her perceptions as well as of the triggers of those perceptions to engage with the expression of the artwork." (Di Benedetto 273) Di Benedetto not only stresses the importance of embodied experience in practices that in one way or another re-evaluate the mechanics of human perception, but also brings to the forefront an important point: the non-visual form should not only be examined in terms of the absence of the visual form but also with regards to tangible *elements* of performance that are not visual themselves.

Amongst theatre semiotics and their taxonomical obsession with systems of meaning (see, for instance, Helbo; Pavis and Daugherty; Aston and Savona; and Elam), and studies that have focused on the phenomenology of the theatrical experience (see States, *Great Reckonings*; Garner, *Bodied Spaces*; Rayner, *To Act, to Do, to Perform*; and Rayner, *Ghosts*) one can find sporadic accounts and analyses that briefly consider either elements of performance that cannot be classified as visual or the engagement of the human sensorium through elements that function beyond the visual. *The Senses in Performance*, edited by Sally Banes and André Lepecki, lies between theatre semiotics and phenomenology and is perhaps one of the most systematic and comprehensive studies to date that examine performance practices within the anti-perspectival paradigm. As Banes and Lepecki suggest

[w]ithin the history of theatre and performance, historians, theorists, and critics have either totally ignored certain senses and certain sensorial experiences or, at best, relegated them to the periphery of critical attention and of theoretical investigation. Indeed, besides certain sights .... and sounds ... usually attached to specific linguistic referents, a whole plethora of sensorial information in performance has been discarded, unnoticed and poorly documented. (3)

Acknowledging the primacy of the visual and the (text-based) aural in the fields of theatre and performance studies, Banes and Lepecki note the evident scarcity of literature that examines non-visual elements of performance in a systematic manner. At the same time and in a similar fashion to Di Benedetto, they suggest that while theatre and performance scholarship has been mostly preoccupied with the visual and the (text-based) aural, practitioners have developed a longstanding “consciousness” (Di Benedetto 273) of the artistic possibilities that the engagement with the non-visual senses might open up. They remark that

live performance often does involve the senses in ways that transgress the boundaries of the visually iconic and of the linguistically and musically sonic. Taste, touch, smell, vestibular and kinaesthetic senses, pain, and hearing sound *qua* sound are pivotal sensorial experiences in making and experiencing performance across cultures. In the West, modern and postmodern attempts to re-involve audience members in sensory experiences ... have led to experiments with theatre architecture and technology as well as to new forms of staging theatre, dance, opera and performance art. (3)

Placing the anti-perspectival performance practices that Di Benedetto identifies within the frame of modernism and postmodernism, Banes and Lepecki bring to the forefront not only the fact that there have been modernist anti-perspectival movements that opposed the perspectival regime of modernism but also the point that the modernist perspectival proscenium stage has been endlessly redefined by postmodern practices that have been exploring the non-visual sensorium of the spectator in a range of spatial arrangements. Along these lines, the presence of non-visual elements of performance can be traced in performance practices that range from the avant-garde of the early twentieth century (for

instance, Marinetti's Tactilism or Symbolist theatre) to the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s (for example, Allan Kaprow's Happenings and the Fluxus movement) and contemporary practices that address the non-visual senses in new and exciting manners (for instance, the edible installations of Spanish artist Alicia Rios or Diane Borsato's *Touching 1000 People*).

One of the first documented projects in the U.K. that experimented with the employment of outright non-visual elements of performance in the midst of darkness was Robert Wilson's *H.G.*, "the first ever commission made in Britain by acclaimed US theatre artist Robert Wilson and his long-term collaborator, sound and light architect Hans Peter Kuhn." ("Robert Wilson and Hans Peter Kuhn: *H.G.*") Produced by Archangel and performed in the vault tunnels of Clink Street in 1995, the piece was an installation in which "Wilson harnessed the environment to create a maze of still lives that the spectator had to stumble through to see, navigating a dimly lit or pitch black environment to find the various rooms of the installation." (Di Benedetto 273) As such, *H.G.* invited its audience to actively explore an environment that set up a whole "universe" in its own right; the world of *H.G.*, a character that was based on the nineteenth century author H.G. Wells.

In "Stumbling in the Dark" Di Benedetto focuses on *H.G.* as a case study and his examination of the piece is phenomenological in that it is based on his personal experience as well as accounts of the experiences of other audience members. While engaging with a scholarly practice that brings to the forefront some important points with regards to embodied experience and the subjectivity of the audience, Di Benedetto is eager to observe the challenges that performance scholars face when forced to discuss sensation, embodied experience and the subjectivity of the spectator. In an attempt to address these challenges he cites the feminist writings of cultural theorists Joanna Frueh (see *Erotic Faculties*) and Emily Jenkins (see *Tongue First: Adventures in Physical Culture*), as "it is useful to examine the ways in which an alternative narrative form allows one to speak about the visceral response to art. By relating artistic experience to physiological experiences [scholars are] able to speak succinctly and specifically about mediated artistic experience." (275)

Leading by example, Di Benedetto relates his sensations and the accounts of the sensations of other audience members to the overall experience of *H.G.*, a useful case study "because it eliminates the performer's body and text. The actor's body is here the body of the spectators as they bounce through the range of experiences of the installation: unwittingly, they become the actors of the piece." (275) Resisting fully the tendencies of the perspectival tradition, *H.G.* brings the spectator centre-stage as she becomes the actor within the environment of the installation; not only is her presence [and thus (in)visibility]

central to the creation of meaning in *H.G.*, but also her corporeality and subjectivity become the focal points of reference in this meaning-making process. Within this frame Di Benedetto considers embodied experience in relation to *H.G.*'s artistic whole. As he notes early on in his discussion,

[t]he environment harnessed ambient sound (the railway lines above, dripping water, and a designed soundscape), texture (dirt, water, dust, smoke, the hard ground, soft dirt, humidity, and temperature), vision (sculptural objects, light, dark, and shadow), and taste/smell (mould, smoke, damp, and dirt). These elements both guided the spectator through the environment and served as a means of understanding the way in which the different rooms related to one another. The sensations provided spectators with a range of responses with which to become conscious of the surrounding world. (273–4)

Dividing the elements of performance according to their corresponding senses, Di Benedetto accounts for the presence of elements that addressed his senses of hearing, touch, smell and (by way of association) taste. These non-visual elements not only functioned in aid of the spectator's sense of kinaesthesia as she moved around the different spaces of the installation, but also provided the spectator with the "raw materials" through which she could eventually make sense of the piece –somewhere between sensation and cognition.

Interestingly for the discussion of this chapter, the sense of vision contributes to this meaning-making process because it unfolds through the interplay between light, shadow and darkness. Considering darkness as one end of the continuum that entails different degrees of lighting, Di Benedetto conceptualises the darkness of *H.G.* in visual terms. He elaborates on this relational conception of darkness when he remarks that

[e]ven in a darkened space, we need light to see the forms in front of us. This was taken to the extreme in the *H.G.* installation. The spectators were led into a dark, dank underground system of tunnels. The only light was from the tableaux installations. Spectators moved tentatively forward, testing the ground in front of them and feeling for the walls. Form was revealed and shaped by light cutting through the darkness at different intensities. ... But some scenes were purposely left dark, allowing the spectator to question the identity of the figure lurking near the pole. (281–2)

The interplay between light, shadow and darkness in *H.G.* resulted in the chiaroscuro effect that is reminiscent of the perspectival tradition. Many objects of the installation acquired a hyper-visibility that was achieved through the contrast between the lighting that framed them and their surrounding darkness. At the same time, however, these instances of hyper-visibility were informed by instances of persevering darkness that stressed the corporeality of each individual spectator. This darkness not only challenged the staged hyper-visibility of the perspectival tradition, but also enabled the presence of an absent character. The impression that the character of H.G. is lurking in the shadows only managed to reinforce the anti-perspectival feel of the piece: the “blinded action” of the actor in the perspectival proscenium arch (Schneider, “Blind” 27) was substituted by the “inactive vision” of an implied character in a staged environment. In its turn the “inactive vision” of the spectator in the perspectival tradition (Schneider, “Blind” 27) was replaced by her embodied action in H.G.’s world. Speaking of his embodied action in *H.G.* Di Benedetto recollects that

[t]he act of moving or stumbling through the dark heightened my awareness of the environment. My senses were heightened because I needed them to move through the space – an experience not unlike a memory of being a child with my brothers wandering through the woods on a dark moonlit night. (282)

Assuming a rather Darwinian approach to “spectating”, Di Benedetto suggests that the environment of *H.G.* forced him to engage in the re-hierarchisation of his senses in order to survive in the midst of the interplay between light, shadow and darkness. Projecting a material dimension to Hurley’s impression that in (theatrical) darkness the spectator acquires an “alternate mode of perception” (212), Di Benedetto is able to speak about the re-hierarchisation of his senses because of the existence of non-visual elements of performance in *H.G.* In other words, it is the presentation of these elements that allowed him to compensate for the occasional deprivation of vision through the use of the non-visual senses of hearing, touch, smell, taste and kinaesthesia.

At the same time, the interplay between light, shadow and darkness also encouraged Di Benedetto to project a personal memory on the environment of *H.G.*. Recollecting a childhood walk in the “woods on a dark moonlit night”, Di Benedetto’s personal memory of darkness haunted the environment of the piece. The non-visual form of darkness and the interactive nature of the installation brought to the surface a memory by way of sensation rather than cognition. As such, the environment of *H.G.* and the interplay between the visual and the non-visual within it led to the projection of Di Benedetto’s personal poetics to the

overall poetics of the piece; because of the aesthetics of darkness, sensation and memory merged in order to produce a highly personal and thus subjective response to *H.G.*'s environment.

While Di Benedetto's account of *H.G.* has brought to the forefront some useful remarks in terms of the use of non-visual elements of performance, *H.G.* was nonetheless an installation that engaged with light and shadow as much as darkness. The first theatrical experiments that used darkness in a fully-fledged and durational manner occurred during the 1990s across Europe (for instance, French Le Theatre La Rubrique's *Cendres de Cailloux* performed in 1993). In the UK, the first systematized attempt to engage with a form that had hitherto been considered as "outright anti-theatrical" (Welton, *Feeling Theatre* 52) was undertaken by the Battersea Arts Centre in 1998. *Playing in the Dark* was a small scale festival that entailed a range of events from *Shakespeare in the Dark* ("well-known performers from the RNT ... perform short excerpts of Shakespeare in the dark"), to *Bach in the Dark* ("the occasion enables both audience and performer to explore the contours of the music without any visual contact") and *Dark Dinners* ("experience the sensuality of eating in the dark") ("Playing in the Dark"). The festival

respond[ed] to arguments from writers and directors that the power of the spoken word in theatre to excite the imaginations of audiences has been bamboozled by visual effect. In the homeland of Shakespeare, this is cruel. Shakespeare's theatres had no scenery and his scripts often asked his public to imagine more than they could see. ("Playing in the Dark")

Acknowledging the disabling effects that the primacy of the visual might have had on theatre-makers and spectators alike, *Playing in the Dark* championed both the spoken word and the imaginative faculties of the audience. At the same time, it invested in the subjectivity and corporeality of the spectator as much as *H.G.* did albeit in a different way and in a theatrical setting. With the exception of *Dark Dinners* that invited the audience to engage with the unusual experience of eating in the dark, the theatrical and musical events of *Playing in the Dark* placed the audience in darkened auditoria in a similar fashion to theatrical events within the perspectival tradition. The difference however was that the darkness of the auditorium was extended to the performance spaces of *Playing in the Dark* as well. Placing the audience under the same (non-)lighting conditions as the performers, the events of *Playing in the Dark* were paradoxically reminiscent of the ancient Greek theatron where "the Attic sun [beat] down on thespians and spectators alike" (Welton, *Feeling Theatre* 51). While

in ancient Greece the relationship between spectator and actor was visible by way of all-encompassing sunlight, the relationship between spectator and actor in the events of *Playing in the Dark* was facilitated by all-encompassing darkness. As I shall discuss shortly, this condition occasioned not only the redefinition of the interplay between the visual and the non-visual in the theatre but also the injection of the embodied into the clearly demarcated theatrical setting of the perspectival tradition.

One of the standout performances of the festival was Sound & Fury's *War Music*. Sound & Fury are perhaps the only company in the UK that has experimented consistently with the non-visual form of darkness since the late 1990s. *War Music* –their debut piece– was based on the reimagining of parts of the *Iliad* by poet Christopher Logue; it was set during “the 10th year of the Trojan war. Ever since Achilles withdrew his troops in fit of rage, the Trojans have had the upper hand. In a desperate act to make his companion see sense, Patroclus begs Achilles to let him lead the men and win glory for the Greek army... with tragic consequences.” (“War Music”) *War Music* was predominantly an aural piece that broke the boundaries between stage and auditorium not only through the form of darkness but also through the actors' movement in-between the audience. As such, the performers took up the same space as the audience whose senses of hearing, touch and kinaesthesia were the major channels of communication during the piece.

In “Seeing Nothing: Now Hear This...” Welton begins his account of the production by noting that the “darkness [of the piece] ... meant that the familiar visual cues, which would have allowed an audience to remind themselves that they were attending theatre, were withdrawn.” (146) Implying that the conventions of spectating are set through predominantly visual cues, Welton suggests that theatrical darkness has the potential to disguise the social aspects of attending a theatrical event. The result is an experience that not only destabilizes the premises of visibility in the theatre, but also forces the spectator to engage with the theatrical medium in an altogether different mode. Recounting his personal experience as well as consulting the accounts of the experiences of other audience members, Welton observes that

[i]n *War Music*, in pitch blackness, and unattached to any perceivable symbol, gesture, motif or facial expression, the words of Logue's text were afforded no permanence. In the darkness, they could come into being only in the actors' mouths, in the spectators' ears, and disappear. ... Doubtless, many spectators (and indeed the actors themselves) made concerted efforts to construct

a picture/film in the head; maybe they actually managed to do so. Even if this were the case, is it legitimate to describe their experience as an attempt to reconstruct the visual as if it might be something we could understand if taken out of their heads? (“Seeing Nothing” 151)

In the non-visual form of theatrical darkness the aural –the only tangible element of performance due to the concealment of the visual– becomes both the focal point for the production of meaning and a fluid element whose ephemerality is stressed. Welton not only implies that the visual usually affords the aural with substance onstage, but also suggests that the concealment of visual aesthetics in the theatre does not necessarily imply the absence of visual poetics. Considering the mechanics of reception in complete darkness, Welton argues that –at least for the sighted audience members of *War Music*– the non-visual experience of the piece was informed by the imaginative reconstruction of the visual. In doing so he not only questions the possibility of a purely non-visual experience in the theatre, but also suggests that the non-visual form of darkness presupposes the (re)presentation of the visual in the minds of sighted audience members.

Nonetheless, the reconstruction of the visual as a “picture/film in the head” is not a good enough model for the full disclosure of what happens in theatrical darkness, according to Welton. As he observes

*War Music* restricted the tendency toward the visualization of experience; it had to be approached in its own way. The visualization of experience extends into the conception of the imagination as a “picture/film in the head.” I do not intend to propose that this is a wholly false account; rather, I hope to suggest not only that can imagination employ and draw on the full range of human sensation, on our sensory relationships with the world, but also that the realm of imagination is as much one of immediate experience as it is of the distanced contemplation suggested by a picture-in-the-head model. (“Seeing Nothing” 151)

While *War Music* as a theatrical event in the dark resisted its conceptualization in visual terms and invited the audience to engage with the theatrical medium in a different way, the visual was nevertheless present via the imaginative faculties of each audience member. Far from abiding to the “picture-in-the-head” model that presupposes the distance between different elements of performance and the spectator, the type of imagination employed at



*War Music* was rooted in the embodied experience of each audience member, since “the performance constantly directed one’s attention ‘inwards’ *via the auditory and haptic senses.*” (Welton, “Seeing Nothing” 154; emphasis added) This engagement of the audience via two non-visual sensory channels encouraged the audience to establish an active dialogue between the non-visual and the visual by way of experiencing the piece at the interface between sensation and imagination. This embodied engagement of the imaginative faculty of the audience therefore resulted in a unique experience during which the imaginary visual was re-conceptualized within the frame of the embodied non-visual. Welton supports this impression by suggesting that

*War Music* allows us to consider vision in terms of an altered sense ratio from within a visual culture. This offers an opportunity to “make sense” of theatrical vision afresh, to reclaim the visual in the theatre for the realm of the senses. The importance of representation, interpretation, the symbol and the text will doubtless remain, but with their place within the theatrical sense ratio altered. (“Seeing Nothing” 152)

Alluding to the ocularcentrism that has prevailed cultural practices since the establishment of the perspectival image, Welton observes that the non-visual form of darkness allows for the sensory re-evaluation of visuality through the possibilities opened up by the non-visual form of darkness. The mechanism of representation, the process of interpretation and the communication of symbols by way of the text are at work in darkness, since we are discussing a theatrical event after all. However, these components are redefined by the heightened materiality proffered by the non-visual form of darkness. As Welton argues

[r]ather than existing in terms of representation and interpretation, *War Music* can be considered as an embodied event played out sensorially rather than conceptually. This has important ramifications for a wider theory of theatrical performance: it suggests on the one hand that representation, if not an overemphasized concern in both critical and practical approaches, too often obscures the necessity of experience, which is always grounded in the sensual. On the other hand, since even in conventional performance actors (and therefore spectators) rarely see themselves directly, performing surely has more to do with

negotiating a process of incorporation sensorially than with merely representing. (“Seeing Nothing” 154–5)

The representational frame cannot be self-sufficient in theatrical darkness as it relies on the embodied experiences and the imaginative faculties of the audience. As such, it becomes “visible” through presentations that –by way of their tangible and ephemeral nature– expose the gaps within it. At the same time, the interpretation of the symbols and the text that are communicated in the dark are informed by the audience’s heightened perceptual processes; in this sense, both the audience and their subjectivity and corporeality become “visible” in the dark as well. The non-visual form of darkness therefore is the anti-perspectival form par excellence: while the perspectival tradition aims at concealing the means of theatrical production, the anti-perspectival form of fully-fledged and durational darkness strives, paradoxically, to make evident all the intricacies of the theatrical event. Addressing the spectator in an intimate way, theatre in the dark presupposes the audience’s subjectivity and corporeality because it focuses on the body as the main site of the production of meaning in the dark.

While Di Benedetto’s account of *H.G.* demonstrates that the interplay between light, shadow and darkness entails a number of elements of performance that are by definition non-visual, Welton’s article on *War Music* highlights the fact that theatrical darkness can heighten the subjectivity and corporeality even of an audience that behaves according to the conventions of the perspectival tradition. On the one hand, the understanding of non-visual elements as (sonically) aural, tactile, olfactory, gustatory and kinaesthetic places the non-visual form of darkness within the tradition of (modern and postmodern) performance practices that presuppose the subjectivity and corporeality of the audience. On the other hand, the embodied engagement of the imaginative faculty of an audience seated in darkness shifts the dynamic between presentation and representation; while in the perspectival tradition presentations function in the service of a representational whole, in theatre in the dark representations become (re)presentations that are subordinate to the experience of a presentational whole. As such, whether in the frame of an installation that engages with the contrast between light and darkness or in the frame of a theatrical event that engages with the complete concealment of the visual, the form of theatrical darkness is by definition anti-perspectival. Relying on the presence of the audience and thus resisting the invisibility of the audience and the invisibility of their subjectivity and corporeality, the artistic pursuits that use the non-visual form of darkness encourage the production of meaning through the interplay between sensation, memory and/or imagination. As such,

one cannot discuss the non-visual without considering the embodied experience of anti-perspectival artistic practices.

### **Identifying the Gaps in Theatre and Performance Scholarship**

In this chapter I have examined the non-visual and non-visibility in the theatre within two differing traditions, that is the perspectival and the anti-perspectival traditions. While the practices that can be considered as anti-perspectival emerged as a reaction to the perspectival paradigm of modernism, theatrical events that function within the perspectival tradition have persevered throughout the years and make up a large part of the theatre and performance landscape of the contemporary West. At the same time, the corpus of work that values the presence, subjectivity and corporeality of the spectator has been growing exponentially; in this exponential growth, the non-visual has become a phenomenon worthy of attention.

*Theatre in the Dark* was a symposium that took place at the University of Surrey on July 12<sup>th</sup> 2014. The day was keynoted by Martin Welton and Josephine Machon and the topics that were covered ranged from theatre and aurality (Lynn Kendrick), to blindness and theatre in the dark (Amelia Cavallo) and the challenges of documenting performances in the dark (Katerina Papadakou). While the range of material covered was diverse as different speakers approached the non-visual form of darkness from different perspectives, the general consensus of the day was that theatre in the dark is becoming a legitimate type of theatre in its own right. The symposium ended on the encouraging note that the task at hand for theatre and performance scholarship alike is to develop not only suitable methodologies for the examination of the non-visual form of darkness but also an epistemology that enables us to explore the intricacies of addressing the audience beyond the boundaries of visibility.

This task presents theatre and performance scholars with a number of challenges. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the non-visual form of darkness cannot be considered in its own terms but rather in relation to the visual. Equally, non-visibility can only function as the critical frame for the examination of theatre and performance when examined in relation to visibility in the theatre. Even though Johnson suggests that the studies that examine the visual and visibility in the theatre are scarce, I contend that the relationship between visibility and non-visibility has implicitly framed the analysis of the perspectival theatrical event since the rise of theatre semiotics in the 1960s. In fact reiterating Banes and Lepecki's suggestion that theatre and performance studies have been rather ocularcentric, I believe that the visual has been the preoccupation of the analysis of theatre and performance extensively. Perhaps what is scarce is not the preoccupation with the visual per

se, but the systematic interrogation of the visual within the frame of visibility. In its turn, with the exception of the work discussed in this chapter, the focused and systematic examination of the non-visual and non-visibility has been largely overlooked.

I hope that in the discussion of this chapter I have demonstrated that the non-visual has shaped a noteworthy part of the communication processes that have taken place in the theatre since –at least– the rise of modernism. As I have argued, when considered within the perspectival tradition, non-visibility entails all the invisible elements whose very invisibility makes the communication of the visible possible. With the introduction of theatrical lighting not only was this function reinforced, but also the non-visual assumed a form, the non-visual form of darkness. Understood as the virtual darkness of the auditorium from the nineteenth century onwards as well as the complete darkness of the blackout that precedes and interrupts the hyper-visibility of theatrical events within the perspectival tradition, the non-visual form of darkness allows for the historical and cultural contextualisation of the visual as we experience it in the here-and-now of the theatrical event.

The extension of the non-visual form of darkness beyond the auditorium and/or the time limitations of the blackout was facilitated by anti-perspectival modernist and postmodern artistic practices that called for the incorporation of elements of performance that can be considered as outright non-visual. Engaging the spectator's body via channels that move beyond the realm of the visual and the (text-based) aural, these practices serve as the predecessors of the newly established practice of theatre in the dark. These practices are essentially anti-perspectival in that they focus on the corporeality and subjectivity of the spectator; not only is the spectator forced to utilise her more intimate senses in order to create meaning in artistic events that conceal the visual, but also –in the absence of the visual– she employs her memory and/or imaginative faculties in order to make sense of what she experiences. The interplay between sensation, memory and imagination therefore lie at the core of the reception of theatre in the dark; in this sense, the spectator's embodied experience is the focal point for the critical examination of the non-visual form of darkness.

Considering the work that I have covered in this chapter, I think that there is an element that has been implied by many of the sources cited but not explicitly expressed. As I have indicated, the non-visual has been a key aspect of practices since the early modern era and the form of non-visual darkness is currently becoming a cultural phenomenon in its own right. While the sources that I have cited –and especially Di Benedetto and Welton– have considered the *experience* of the non-visual and the form of darkness in performance, there is an area of investigation that warrants further attention: the politics of the non-visual.

The questions that arise in this area of investigation are the following: what does the critical frame of non-visibility in performance consist of? In what ways do non-visual elements of performance and the non-visual form of darkness change the dynamics of interaction in performance and what can these changes tell us about the socio-political landscape from which they emerge? And –more importantly– in what ways does non-visibility in performance expose, reinforce and/or undermine the political, social and cultural frames that surround it?

Arguing that the critical frame of non-visibility can, paradoxically, unveil insights that will deepen our understanding of the relationship between contemporary practices and the world that surrounds them, this thesis will attempt to answer these questions by examining current practices that engage with the non-visual. The analysis will combine theatre and performance scholarship that focuses on embodied experience and the –rather fashionable– concept of affect on the one hand and work that examines the politics of performance on the other hand. In the following chapter I will discuss aspects of this scholarship in conversation with sources from other disciplines in order to illustrate the conceptual frame in which this thesis will unfold.

## 2. “Spectacles” of Experience: Visuality, Non-visibility and Contemporary Capitalism

### Introduction

In his *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* historian Martin Jay makes an interesting observation: “[a]s a diurnal animal standing on its hind legs, the early human being developed its sensorium in such a way, as to give sight an ability to differentiate and assimilate most external stimuli in a way superior to the other four senses.” (5) In this quotation Jay identifies the primacy of vision as a physiological necessity. The relationship between the sense of vision and the sensory stimuli that can be found in the world is, according to Jay, inevitable. If what Jay suggests is viable, what is the place of the non-visual in our world? Is the topic of this thesis trying to move against our physiology? The closer examination of subjectivity, corporeality and affect from a cultural and socio-political perspective would suggest that the answer to this question is not as straightforward as it would first appear.

In the previous chapter I discussed the non-visual from a theatre and performance studies perspective. While I acknowledged the distinction between the perspectival and the anti-perspectival traditions and the implications that such a distinction has had on the non-visual since the early modern era, I also observed the centrality of embodied experience throughout the history of anti-perspectival practices. In *The Senses in Performance* Sally Banes and Andre Lepécki discuss embodied experience as both a methodological and an epistemological tool in performance scholarship. Focusing on the ways in which the senses in performance can be used in scholarly work they argue that

[a] performance theory of the senses would allow for an accounting and a critique of whole hegemonic and majoritarian politics of the perceptible and the imperceptible, of the significant and the insignificant, of what emerges within the field of attention and what will remain unremarked. ... [A]s the senses shift in relation to social and cultural changes, what they also change are the political conditions of possibility for entities, substances, bodies, and elements to come into a being-apparent. (2-3)

Banes and Lepécki observe that the discussion of the senses in relation to performance necessitates that the senses are explored through a socio-political perspective. They

acknowledge that the senses are shaped differently in different cultures and observe that the ways in which the senses are employed in performance are reflective of the ways in which each culture treats the different senses. What is more, Banes and Lepécki's observation implies that performances can function as spatial assemblages, as micro-sites that illuminate the ways in which the body is conditioned by the socio-political dimensions of a specific culture. In this sense, the relationship between a performance, its spatial arrangements and embodied experience can be seen as a reflection of the interaction between a body and the culture in which she lives.

The aim of this chapter is to provide this thesis with a critical frame that will inform the analytical discussion of the chapters to follow. What I am looking for in this chapter is a way to conceptualise the distinction between the perspectival and the anti-perspectival in terms of the politics of (non-)visuality. The key themes of subjectivity, corporeality and affect will be a recurring point of reference throughout the discussion of this chapter, but they will be cross-referenced with scholarship from other fields that examines the cultural and socio-political dimensions of (non-)visuality in the contemporary West. In this chapter therefore I will open up the scope of the discussion and I will consult political philosophy, phenomenology and human geography in conversation with scholarship from theatre and performance studies.

More specifically, I will begin the discussion by considering the socio-political dimensions of visuality in the late capitalist West. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* will prompt the discussion of this section. While forty years old, *The Society of the Spectacle* serves as a useful starting point for the discussion; not only does it develop within a culturally materialist frame that illustrates how visual culture relates to capitalism, but also it examines the ways in which visual culture has informed the embodied experience of the urban landscapes in the contemporary West. In considering Debord's work, I hope to establish the departure point from which the socio-political dimensions of the non-visual (in performance) will be examined. As such, Debord's political philosophy will be cross-referenced with Peggy Phelan's political ontology of performance. Illustrating the fluid boundaries between the performative on the socio-political plane and the performative on the artistic plane, Phelan's work will assist me in starting to address the question of where might the socio-political lay in terms of the non-visual in performance. At the same time, since this thesis intends to illustrate the culturally specific frame within which *current* anti-perspectival practices develop, the discussion will then address the forty year old gap between the publication of *The Society of the Spectacle* and the present. The research that has led to this chapter

suggests that the dominant form of the society of the spectacle (the visual) has given way to a new experiential form that is materialised by way of fabricated environments. The current phase in the history of capitalism has been labelled “the experience economy” and in examining the main characteristics of this economy I hope to illustrate the ways in which embodied experience has been redefined in relation to capitalism. I will thus consider the impact that the capitalist appropriation of experience might have had on current anti-perspectival practices. The sources that will assist me in this cover a range of perspectives. I will initially examine *The Experience Economy* written by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore. While this is a business manual whose conception of embodied experience is rather reductive and utilitarian, I turned to this source for two reasons: firstly, I examine *The Experience Economy* as a primary source that demonstrates the ways in which experience is conceived of and addressed by the experience economy. Secondly –and building on this– there seems to be an abstract/conceptual association between the modus operandi of the experience economy and theatre and performance. Examining this association, I will outline not only how the experience economy has appropriated some of the variables of communication in theatre and performance but also the implications of this appropriation in terms of the non-visual in current anti-perspectival practices. I will thus also consult the work of performance scholar Maurya Wickstrom who examines the association between the mechanics of the experience economy and the medium of performance from a performance studies perspective. I will also recall the work of performance scholar Josephine Machon because she has developed a summative epistemology for the examination of the themes of subjectivity, corporeality and affect in current anti-perspectival practices. As such, I will attempt to outline some of the points of contact and/or divergence between the experience of the capitalist market and the experience of contemporary performance practices. Building on this, the discussion of this chapter will end with the examination of space as a methodological and epistemological device for the exploration of the relationship between the non-visual, anti-perspectival practices and the experience economy. In this section, I will draw from Merleau-Ponty’s early phenomenology of space and Nigel Thrift’s non-representational theory that projects a political dimension on phenomenology. I will examine the relationship between embodied experience and space and I will also consider some of the ways in which space reinforces and/or undermines the socio-political world that entails it. Hopefully, this will bring to the surface some useful remarks that will complete the outlining of the –often contradictory– variables that shape the critical frame of this thesis: the points of contact and/or divergence between the themes of subjectivity, corporeality



and affect, the non-visual in performance and the socio-political premises of the experience economy.

### **The Society of the Spectacle: The Politics of the Perspectival and Anti-Perspectival Traditions**

One of the most passionate political examinations of the relationship between visibility and embodied experience can be found in the work of French Marxist theorist Guy Debord. Debord was a founding member of the Situationists, a collective of artists and intellectuals that responded critically to the cultural dimensions of the post-war Western world. Debord and the Situationists – influenced by the wave of Marxian and Marxist theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Antonio Gramsci and Walter Benjamin– embarked on a close examination of the relationship between the economy, politics and culture. Interestingly enough for this thesis, the term that encapsulates the culture of late capitalism for Debord and the Situationists is “the spectacle”.

In the *Society of the Spectacle* Debord chooses and manages the word spectacle as a double mechanism for his cultural analysis; not only does it denote the primacy of the visual in contemporary urban landscapes [“urbanism... is capitalism’s method for taking over the natural and human environment” (95)], but also it indicates the ways in which these landscapes are controlled (by the production system) and consumed (by the citizens of the society of the spectacle). Debord accounts for the primacy of the visual on the grounds of the primacy of vision, the result of “the *weakness* of the Western philosophical project” (*Society* 11). At the same time, he argues that the spectacle surpasses the primacy of vision and the visual: it is also a “visual reflection of the ruling economic order” (*Society* 10) whose language “consists of signs of the dominant system of production – signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-products of that system.” (*Society* 8) The process that enables the circulation of these signs is the mechanism of representation: “In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (Debord, *Society* 7). By examining the culture and politics of the society of the spectacle in terms of experience, Debord implicitly identifies a significant rupture in the embodied experience of the late capitalist West. The phenomenological proposition according to which body and world function collaboratively in the shaping of experience is redefined in late capitalism where the body interacts with the predominant *features* of its surrounding environment (i.e. spectacles) and not the (cultural) world as a whole. As Debord argues

[t]he spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: “What appears is good; what is good appears.” The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply. (*Society* 9–10)

Far from claiming the presence of a universal reality that is shaped by the subjectivity of each perceiving subject, Debord resonates Marxian and Marxist theories when he brings to the forefront the idea that historical realities have been manufactured according to the standards of the economic order that corresponds to them. In the case of late capitalism reality is shaped by spectacles, appearances that are re-presented and reproduced as closed systems of communication that do not lend themselves to interaction. Paradoxically, these appearances both indulge and anaesthetise the senses; while the indulgence of the senses stems from the body’s over-exposure to visual stimuli, their anaesthetisation lays on the body’s interaction with re-presentations and their reproduction. As such, the embodied experience of the society of the spectacle is shaped by fragmented visual instances that do not correspond to a comprehensive phenomenal world. Nevertheless, because of the representational and reproductive power of all its fragments, the society of the spectacle provides its inhabitants with the *illusion* of a whole.

An example will illustrate this point more clearly: while walking out of the Piccadilly Circus underground station in London, the huge advertising billboard (fig. 1) on what is



Figure 1. Coca Cola Advert Campaign Piccadilly Circus

referred to as the “Monico building” appears before my eyes. The light that is reflected from the billboard goes through the corneas of my eyes; the receptors attached to my eyes transfer the sensory data collected to the particular part of my brain that will process the reflections of light into images;

the perceptual cycle of my experience is complete as I have engaged with what appears at the top of the “Monico building” through my sense of vision. This brief and highly reductive account of this perceptual instance is functioning within a phenomenological paradigm. According to Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the experience of the

perceiving subject is defined by actions that the tangible world performs on the human body. The nature of these actions could range from the presence of an object (the advertising billboard on the Monico building), to a specific situation (it starts to rain as I walk towards the advertising billboard on the Monico building) to an evolving event (after five minutes of staring at the advertising billboard the rain stops and a rainbow frames the Monico building). Merleau-Ponty defines the actions that the world performs on the perceiving subject as “motives ... the situation as a fact” (*Phenomenology* 301–2). The term “motive” insinuates the presence of two parties: the motivating agent (the tangible world) and the motivated recipient (the perceiving subject). Merleau-Ponty does not conceive of the world as a generating machine that addresses the perceiving subject with an abundance of actions that have to be tended to. The perceiving subject is indeed exposed to a number of objects/situations/events, but she has the prerogative of making a decision on whether to respond to them or not (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 302). The relationship between the perceiving subject and the world therefore is a relationship of reciprocity.

According to this phenomenological paradigm, the billboard on the Monico building presents itself before my eyes and I perceive it; this exposure should signify a point of interaction as well. Do I really interact with the billboard as a presentational instance in the phenomenal world and what are the variables that shape this experience? When considered in relation to Debord’s political philosophy, the answer to this question is not as clear-cut. While I acknowledge the presence of, say, the Coca-Cola image on the billboard I also recognise the fact that this image is an advertisement, a manufactured visual product that aims at addressing my consumerist behaviour. I have treated the image of Santa Claus indulging in a bottle of Coca Cola as fictitious since firstly, I was told –to my detriment– that Santa is not real and secondly, I comprehended the function of advertising. I do not consider, therefore, that the image of the Coca Cola advertisement is a presentation in the sense that it will give me an affirmation of my existence as a body in the phenomenal world. What is more, although I am (in)voluntarily exposed to the image of Santa Claus savouring a bottle of coke, I do not interact with it. Nonetheless, one could argue that the advertisement could make me crave a Coca-Cola, something that would lead me to the nearest shop with a vast supply of the product. This interaction however would be with the actual product that is advertised—the content in the Coca Cola bottle—and not the image of the advertisement itself. My interaction with the latter therefore is not only one-sided but also utilitarian; it capitalises on the potential of an advertising billboard to prompt consumerist behaviour.

An instance of a representational appearance is both decipherable and welcome (see artistic representation) because it is understood as distinct from the “real world”. The problem arises—and I believe this is one of Debord’s main arguments with respect to the illusion of a (re)presentational whole—when one representational instance is exponentially multiplied to such a degree that the aesthetics and poetics of an urban landscape are shaped by countless reproduced representations. Consider the fact, for instance, that the aforementioned Coca Cola advert appears not only on the Monico building but also on television, on newspapers, on magazines, on the sides of buses and so on. In this sense, the Coca-Cola advert and the multiplicity of its reproductions become an integral part of the visual landscape that defines my overall experience of London. The boundaries between a presentation, a clear representation (an advertisement) and the reproduction of this representation become blurry, since representations are present (if not present–ed) regularly in the fabric of everyday life. In this sense, since the society of the spectacle is shaped by an abundance of manufactured and reproduced appearances, it becomes an artificial environment that challenges my ability to distinguish between representations and presentations in everyday life. Within the society of the spectacle, therefore, a whole is not defined by the sum of its units (the continuity between presentations and occasional representations), but rather by the supremacy of one representational *form*, the visual form, or the spectacle.

The presence of one predominant representational form not only interferes with the body’s interaction with the phenomenal world, but also fosters a passive mode of behaviour that is defined by the “passive activity” of consumption. Debord recalls Marx clearly when he argues that

[i]n the spectacle’s basic practice of incorporating into itself all the *fluid* aspects of human activity ... we recognise our old enemy *the commodity* ... The fetishism of the commodity – the domination of society by “intangible as well as tangible things” – attains its ultimate fulfilment in the spectacle, where the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality. (*Society* 19)

Since Debord is a Marxist the concepts of commodity and commodification are applicable to more than just the evaluation of goods. As the quotation above suggests the notion and practice of commodity and commodification do not necessarily correspond to the “demand

and supply” model and they do not apply exclusively to the assessment of the value of material goods. Instead, the transformation of spectacles into commodities is the mechanism through which the spectacle locates itself at the centre of human activity. As such, the entry of the spectacle in the cycle of consumption is enough for the spectacle to become “real”.

The insight above is significant in understanding the ways in which the human body functions in late capitalism, since the commodification of the spectacle implies the commodification of the body and experience itself. The body is surrounded by representational landscapes that cultivate the consumption of reproduced goods and ideas rather than the perception of the phenomenal world; the body is thus shaped by way of behaviour rather than sensation. Debord’s brief historical overview of the trajectory in the Western economy illustrates this point further. He distinguishes between three different stages in this history that I have identified as the feudal, capitalist and late capitalist stages. In the (pre-modern) feudal economic order experience is shaped by the interaction between the body and the phenomenal world: “I am therefore I experience”. The body relates to the phenomenal world and the senses are the central reference point of experience. In the capitalist economic order the interaction shifts as experience is shaped by the body’s relation to the capitalist market: “I have therefore I experience”. No longer is the body conceived of as the site of sensation, but rather as the source of production (labour) and the site of possessions—the more one has in the capitalist system, the more one experiences.

Late capitalism retains the mentality of the capitalist system but modifies its fundamental form. This order is not only concerned with material possessions but also with the intangible possession of the image; the mantra of the society of the spectacle is “I appear therefore I experience”. As well as being the source of labour and the site of possessions, the body reduces her sensorium to the level of appearances; she is exposed to a series of fragmented visual representations and she is defined as one of the multiple representations within the spectacle’s illusory whole. In the society of the spectacle, therefore, the body becomes an appearance amongst appearances that do not lend themselves to interaction; she not only blends in the urban landscape to the point of virtual invisibility, but also her subjectivity and corporeality are subjected to the effects of the spectacle. As such, the self is understood as a commodity amongst commodities and in its turn embodied experience – reduced to the plane of the visual– becomes a commodity in its own right.

In the *Society of the Spectacle* Debord develops an anti-perspectival political philosophy in order to examine a culture that bears the marks of the perspectival tradition

discussed in the previous chapter: the self-sufficiency of the mechanism of representation, the invisibility of the representational form as well as the invisibility of the “spectator”, her subjectivity and corporeality are elements that can straightforwardly be applied to the society of the spectacle. Like the spectator of a performance that belongs to the perspectival tradition, the inhabitant of the society of the spectacle does not have access to the workings of representation in the fabric of the spectacle; at the same time, her presence, subjectivity and corporeality are overlooked, a tactic that serves the self-sufficiency of the spectacle and the illusion of a whole. The society of the spectacle therefore implements the characteristics of the perspectival tradition beyond the realm of the theatrical and the artistic to the cultural and –ultimately– the socio-political. But how does such an implementation affect the socio-political dimensions of anti-perspectival artistic practices?

Performance scholar Peggy Phelan focuses on the task of answering this question in her seminal work *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Championing the medium of performance rather than the institution of theatre, Phelan places the analysis of anti-perspectival practices within the socio-political frame of an ocularcentric culture. While not exclusively engaging with performance as her case studies, Phelan examines an array of practices in close conversation with the culturally-specific world that surrounds them; as such, she develops critical equivalencies between the performative on the socio-political plane and the performative on the artistic plane. The most prominent critical equivalency is the relationship between the visible and the invisible. Starting by problematizing the methodology of visibility politics Phelan argues that

[t]he dangerous complicity between progressives dedicated to visibility politics and conservatives patrolling the borders of museums, movie houses, and mainstream broadcasting is based on their mutual belief that representations can be treated as “real truths” and guarded or championed accordingly. Both sides believe that greater visibility of the hitherto under-represented leads to enhanced political power. The progressives want to share this power with “others”; conservatives want to reserve this power for themselves. Insufficient understanding of the relationship between visibility, power, identity, and liberation has led both groups to mistake the relation between the real and the representational. (*Unmarked 2*)

Echoing Debord but at the same time projecting his work on the neo-liberal realities of the late twentieth century West, Phelan acknowledges that visibility politics have become part of the agendas of both the dominant system and the communities/groups that react to this system. More specifically, Phelan observes that visibility politics can at best reassure minority groups that they have been exercising their civic rights and at worst perpetuate the premises of the dominant system (*Unmarked 2*). Phelan's mistrust to spectacular politics does not necessarily derive from the driving need of visibility per se, but rather from the fact that visibility politics are interwoven with the mechanism of representation, a mechanism whose invisibility presupposes the effective affirmation of the power of the dominant system.

When considered in relation to the society of the spectacle, Phelan's mistrust to visibility politics is more than justified because even the manifestations of resistance follow the mantra of the society of the spectacle ("I appear therefore I experience"). As such, these manifestations become part of the fabric of the society of the spectacle, fragmentary appearances in the illusionary representational whole of the spectacle that do not actually destabilise it. Combining psychoanalysis, feminist writings and –I would argue– a Marxist political conviction because of her explicit resistance to commodity culture, Phelan proposes an alternative to visibility politics: the *practice* of invisibility.

Far from "suggesting that continued invisibility is the 'proper' political agenda for the disenfranchised", Phelan observes that "the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying. There is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal." (*Unmarked 6*) Moving beyond the binaries of visibility versus invisibility and power versus powerlessness, Phelan argues that the practice of politics in (late) capitalism can unfold beyond the mechanism of visual representation. Freed from visual representation, politics can take place in the domain of the unmarked through an "*active vanishing*, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility" (Phelan, *Unmarked 19*). Phelan not only problematizes the binary of visibility versus invisibility as construed by visibility politics, but also raises an interesting point for the discussion of this thesis; in the ocularcentric culture of the society of the spectacle the refusal to become and remain visible is a latently political practice. The medium par excellence that should be used as a model for this practice is, according to Phelan, the medium of performance. Phelan argues that

[p]erformance, the genre of art in which disappearance (the failure of the given to be seen to remain fixed in an arrested projection) is part of the aim of the work, must take a more central place than it

currently holds in the landscape of contemporary representation. As more and more artists working in a wide range of visual forms, from sculpture, to photography, to film, to dance, take up the appellation “performance artist,” we begin to witness the recognition of the necessity of this shift. (*Unmarked* 91)

Acknowledging the inevitability of the use of representation in the arts, Phelan identifies performance as the paradigmatic cultural practice that challenges the illusionary whole of the representational form of the spectacle by way of its resistance to reproduction. Phelan constructs an ontology of performance that uses representation but refuses reproduction; not only does performance refuse to “take the payoff of visibility” because of its ephemeral nature, but also it is a form of “*active vanishing*” since the interplay between the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible are central features of the liveness of the theatrical event (Phelan, *Unmarked* 19). It could thus be argued that Phelan politicises the perspectival and anti-perspectival distinction that I made in the previous chapter. While the conception of the disembodied eye/I in the perspectival tradition encapsulates the ocularcentric tendencies of the (late) capitalist era [“Perspectivalism turns the one seeing into a detached spectator rather than an actor in the visible world and thus supports the illusion of the detached disembodied eye/I ‘just looking’” (Bleeker 61)], the anti-perspectival tradition values the liveness and ephemerality of performance and can thus be also defined as anti-spectacular or counter-spectacular. What is more, the focus on embodied experience in the anti-perspectival tradition not only redefines representation by way of tangible presentations, but also resists the –all-important to the society of the spectacle– reproduction of the performative event itself. Elaborating on this, Phelan argues that

[p]erformance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance’s being, like the ontology of subjectivity..., becomes itself through disappearance. (*Unmarked* 146)

Stressing the spatial and temporal ephemerality of performance, Phelan adds a political dimension to the visibility-invisibility continuum discussed in the previous chapter. By making the mechanics of its production visible, the anti-perspectival performative event



counteracts both the invisibility of the audience and the invisibility of their subjectivity and corporeality. At the same time, the visibility of the mechanics of a production as well as the visibility of the audience, their subjectivity and corporeality remain unmarked in the fabric of the society of the spectacle because “[p]erformance’s only life is in the present” (Phelan, *Unmarked* 146). Through the disappearance of the anti-perspectival performative event, therefore, the audience, their subjectivity and corporeality assume a political dimension because their embodied experiences remain intact in the corpus of their memories without becoming part of the spectacle; in other words, their embodied experiences of the performative event have escaped the process of commodification.

When considered in relation to the society of the spectacle, its appropriation of the perspectival tradition and the range of anti-perspectival performative practices, non-visibility assumes a rather ambiguous –if not contradictory– role. On the one hand, in the ocularcentric culture of the society of the spectacle non-visibility functions as a frame that entails all the invisible elements whose very invisibility makes the preservation of the society of the spectacle possible. The means by which the invisibility of these elements is reinforced is the commodification of the image, the body and embodied experience itself. When considered in relation to the *Society of the Spectacle*, therefore, non-visibility bears the commodifying mentality of the capitalist system. On the other hand, the *materialisation* of non-visibility through anti-perspectival performative practices exposes the invisibility of the mechanisms that sustain the society of the spectacle and it provides the inhabitants of the society of the spectacle with embodied experiences that remain invisible to and unmarked by the fabric of the spectacle. As such, the materialisation of non-visibility through anti-perspectival practices can encourage a political and self-reflexive mode of being, according to which the “*active vanishing*, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility” (Phelan, *Unmarked* 19) becomes a *modus operandi* for the inhabitants of the late capitalist West.

### **The Experience Economy and the Commodification of Anti-Perspectivalism**

While Debord developed his anti-perspectival political philosophy during the 1950s and 1960s, his Marxist understanding of the commodification of the body and embodied experience is particularly current when considered in relation to the development of what might be identified as the late-late capitalist era. In the last chapter of the *Society of the Spectacle* Debord notes that while the predominant form of a culture may change, the internal logic that drives it forward remains the same. He predicts that the form of the spectacle will be at some point expendable; nevertheless, the ways in which capitalism uses

a predominant cultural form in order to maintain the status quo will remain the same (Debord, *Society* 180). Interestingly enough, Debord's Marxian prediction has turned out to be rather accurate; a closer look at the contemporary cultural landscapes of the West suggests that the predominant form of the spectacle has given way to a new form that functions according to the same capitalist logic as the spectacle. In *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* anthropologist Michael Taussig notes the emergence of brands and branding in the domain of contemporary capitalism. Focusing on the ways in which branding addresses the consumer he remarks that

[i]t's clear that brandscape architects and designers find neither the privilege traditionally accorded to sight and vision in the Western world, or the seductions of the Internet primarily useful in seeding the brand into customers. They're working in a different medium: it's a somatic epistemology, an embodied comprehension. They're creating mimetic environments in which there is a 'palpable, sensuous connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived.' (21)

The primacy of vision and the visual, a condition that was the result of "the *weakness* of the Western philosophical project" (Debord, *Society* 11), materialised by the perspectival tradition and fully implemented on a socio-political level by the society of the spectacle has, according to Taussig, lost its appeal in the cycle of consumption. The emergence of brands and branding has resulted in the development of a "somatic epistemology" that is concerned with experience on a phenomenal level. Architect Otto Riewoldt reinforces this impression when in *Brandscaping: Worlds of Experience in Retail Design* he argues that "by enabling and anchoring immediate brand experiences, the IT age has actually upgraded the physical location. We are not talking here about virtual non-experiences in the no-mans-land of the Internet, but about concrete encounters in real locations." (8) In a similar fashion to Taussig, Riewoldt observes that the emergence of branding has resulted in a new predominant form in the capitalist West. The shift from the visual to the experiential is perhaps paradoxical in light of the exponential technological developments such as the invention of computers, vpns, the internet and numerous portable devices that have currently re-shaped contemporary everyday life. While these technologies are a significant part of the capitalist market, they are framed by what appears to be the exact opposite of the virtual worlds proffered by technology; brands that capitalise on the potential of brandscapes that provide

the consumer with “concrete encounters in real locations”, in other words with fully-fledged embodied experiences.

In their *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore have produced a business manual that functions as a *modus operandi* for businessmen at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *The Experience Economy*, as the title suggests, identifies a relatively new and growing trend in the history of capitalism that has its roots in the 1990s: the experience economy. Pine and Gilmore place the term ‘experience’ within an economic frame when they suggest that

[e]xperiences represent an existing but previously unarticulated *genre of economic output*. Decoupling experiences from services in accounting for what businesses create opens up possibilities for extraordinary economic expansion— just as recognising services as a distinct and legitimate offering led to a vibrant economic foundation in the face of a declining industrial base. (ix–x)

Pine and Gilmore’s conception of experience enables them to re-evaluate embodiment in terms of economic profit. Far from developing their discussion in a phenomenological frame, Pine and Gilmore see in experience a means to a new mode of consumption; in the experience economy consumers do not only pay for the acquisition of goods, services and appearances but also for embodied experiences that frame the practice of consumption. This conceptualisation is formulaic and it divides experience into four different realms: the realm of entertainment, the realm of education, the realm of aesthetics and the realm of escapism; the parameters that define whether an experience is entertaining, educational, aesthetic or escapist are the axes of absorption to immersion on the one hand and passive to active participation on the other hand (Pine and Gilmore 30). A business that rents out a tennis court, for instance, provides its customers with an educational experience because they can be absorbed in the activity of playing a tennis match; a company that hosts a multiplayer online role-playing game supplies its subscribers with an escapist activity since they participate in a self-sufficient fictional world by way of role-playing. Equally, the 3D version of *Avatar* provided its audience with an aesthetic experience, while Forced Entertainment’s highly absorptive and affective *Bloody Mess* treated its audience with an entertaining experience.

The examples above—and perhaps the last two examples according to which *Avatar* is an aesthetic experience as opposed to Forced Entertainment’s “entertaining” *Bloody Mess*—reveal that Pine and Gilmore’s formulaic treatment of experience is reductive. In their

attempt to develop their analysis in terms of economic output, Pine and Gilmore have ignored the fact that experience is not only shaped by the objects/situations/events that produce it but also by a number of factors that result in the subjectivity of the perceiving subject. Going back to the tennis example, I can argue that playing tennis can be an educational, entertaining, and/or escapist activity depending on the context of each game: if I rent out a tennis court in order to have a tennis lesson, my experience will be educational. If I enjoy the tennis lesson, my experience will be both educational and entertaining. If I use the tennis lesson that I enjoy as a way to momentarily stop thinking about the thesis that I am writing, it will be an educational, entertaining and escapist activity at the same time. Pine and Gilmore's formulaic treatment of the notion of experience therefore seems to be both reductive and restrictive.

Nonetheless, Pine and Gilmore use the formulaic treatment of experience as a means to an end; the four realms of experience are identified as the four distinct "ingredients" that lead to the creation of "a rich, compelling and engaging experience" (Pine and Gilmore 39). As the two authors suggest

[t]o design a rich, compelling, and engaging experience, you don't want to select and then stay in just one realm. Instead, you want to use the experiential framework ... as a set of prompts that help you to creatively explore the aspects of each realm that might enhance the particular experience you wish to stage. (39)

While distinguishing between four different realms of experience, Pine and Gilmore encourage the creation of experiences that are simultaneously entertaining, educational, aesthetic and escapist. Interestingly, they use a –rather unsettling– metaphor to illustrate their point: the process of producing an all-encompassing experience in the capitalist market is associated with the process of staging a theatrical production. The grounds on which the metaphorical association between a business and a stage is materialised is the notion of embodied experience itself. In the introduction of *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and its Theatrical Seductions* performance scholar Maurya Wickstrom makes an observation that explains the metaphorical association between a business and a stage further, albeit with an apprehensive and critical sentiment:

[C]orporations produce subjectivity as aspects of their brands through mimetic and identificatory processes akin to those of performance, somatic and embodied. ... They have deemphasized the consumption of specific commodities and instead create

experiential environments through which the consumer comes to embody the resonances of the brand as feelings, sensations, and even memories. (2)

Unlike Pine and Gilmore, Wickstrom examines the association between a business and a stage with accurate concepts that resonate with theatre and performance scholarship. As such, she not only substitutes “the stage” with the medium of performance in general, but also explains capitalism’s increasing interest in performance on the grounds of its affective potential. Even though it is difficult to find a definite and clear-cut definition of affect in the literature of affect theory, in “Winnicott, Tomkins, and the Psychology of Affect” psychiatry scholar Paul C. Holinger defines affect based on his reading of Silvan Tomkins, the father of affect theory. Affect, according to Holinger’s reading, is defined as “innate biological (universal) responses to various stimuli, with the responses being manifested through the skin, vocal apparatus, musculature, and autonomic system, particularly the facial region.” (156) Within Tomkins’ paradigm affect lays in-between sensation, emotion and cognition; affective responses presuppose the embodied interaction of the subject with her surrounding environment. Setting up fabricated environments that address their customers on an embodied level, the corporations to which Wickstrom refers attempt to re-locate the “passive inactivity” of consumption in-between sensation, emotion and cognition and it is in this sense that the metaphorical association between a business/corporation and performance has emerged.

Implicitly Wickstrom notes the (socio-political) end of the perspectival tradition and its appropriation by the society of the spectacle. The invisibility of the spectator/perceiving subject, her subjectivity and corporeality is turned on its head in the experience economy; the inhabitants of the experience economy become valued “participants” of the fabric of everyday life whose sensations, emotions and cognitions are the source of economic profit. Staging well-orchestrated environments, the business models that abide to the experience economy address their customers on a very personal and intimate level through affective experiences that incorporate the capitalist logic of commodification; the more “rich, compelling, and engaging [an] experience” (Pine and Gilmore 39), the bigger the profit. While unsettling, this approach to profit-making is rather ingenious: by staging an environment a store regenerates itself every time a customer walks through the door because her affective response is bound to differ from the affective responses of other customers. In the experience economy, therefore, the customer, her subjectivity and corporeality are far from invisible; they assume a centre stage position.

In this sense, the experience economy is arguably the uncontested offspring of the society of the spectacle, since the form of the spectacle has given way to the form of fabricated environments that encourage consumerist behaviour. (Re)-presenting the illusion of intimacy and utilising the non-visual elements of anti-perspectival artistic practices, the experience economy has once again expanded the human sensorium from the visual to the fully embodied. The mantra of the experience economy is “I am therefore I experience”. Unlike the mantra of the feudal era, however, it retains the “I have therefore I experience” of the capitalist era and the “I appear therefore I experience” of the late capitalist era. As such, the experience economy has appropriated the characteristics of the anti-perspectival tradition beyond the plane of the performative to the plane of the cultural and socio-political. While the ways in which the dominant system organises human activity have changed, the aim of maintaining the status quo has remained the same; (capitalist) history repeats itself.

The commodification of embodied experience as a whole –iterated by champions of the capitalist system such as Pine and Gilmore and critics of that order such as Taussig and Wickstrom– has significant implications when considered in relation to the status of performance in the experience economy. As I discussed in the previous section, performative practices of the anti-perspectival tradition challenge the perspectival tradition and its socio-political appropriation by the society of the spectacle. If embodied experience and the subjectivity that it calls for have entered the consumptive domain of the experience economy, how can we examine the political dimensions of performative events that function according to the anti-perspectival paradigm?

Useful in answering this question is the recent work of performance scholar Josephine Machon. In *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* Machon observes that “[s]ince the late twentieth century a performance style has emerged which exploits diverse artistic languages to establish an “experiential” audience event via the recreation of visceral experience.” (1) As I discussed in the previous chapter, the emergence of artistic practices that are consciously anti-perspectival dates back to the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, while the post-war era solidified the experimentation with embodied experience into systematic artistic practices. What Machon adds to the discussion of the previous chapter is the examination of a new phase in the history of anti-perspectival practices whose emergence is –chronologically speaking– in alarming proximity to the emergence of the experience economy (the 1990s). In *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and*

*Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* Machon reinforces this impression when she observes that

the increasing desire for this kind of practice and growing fan-bases have come about due to a desire for genuine physical connection. A need to feel sensually and imaginatively alive in the way that one does after a revitalizing walk, experiencing a fairground ride, engaging in extreme sports, pushing oneself to the front at a gig. ... [T]here is a genuine wish to make *human* contact, often with another human as much as with the work itself; an enthusiasm for undergoing experiences that both replace and accentuate the live(d) existence of the everyday world. (25)

The association between experiential pursuits of leisure on the one hand and the visceral performance practices of the late twentieth century on the other hand projects a demand and supply aspect to the emergence of this new type of anti-perspectival practice; it also suggests that the spectator consciousness of contemporary audiences has become increasingly geared towards performative events that address them on an embodied and affective level. Placed within a culturally materialist frame, the need for “physical connection” and the wish “to make human contact” are not straightforwardly genuine because they can be perceived as symptomatic of the needs and wishes encouraged by the experience economy. As such, when considered in relation to the capitalist market and the spectator consciousness that it results in, the anti-perspectival practices of the late twentieth century could imply the commodification of performance itself, a condition that would –at least on the surface– challenge Phelan’s political ontology of performance.

Resonating Stephen Di Benedetto, Martin Welton and Erin Hurley amongst other performance scholars that are interested in the relationship between performance and affect, Machon coins the term (syn)aesthetics. She uses the term not only to define the anti-perspectival practices of the late twentieth century, but also to identify the methodological and epistemological frames within which they can be examined. Playfully alluding to the fusion of the senses stimulated by synaesthetic experiences, Machon argues that (syn)aesthetic practices resist the codification of aesthetic communication via distinct sensory channels. This results in “performance work which constantly resists and explodes established forms and concepts” (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 4), moves beyond the boundaries of an organised artistic movement and refuses to commit to any type of categorisation. Machon’s conception of (syn)aesthetics suggests that even if contemporary anti-perspectival

practices share the dominant form of the experience economy, they differ significantly from the fabricated environments of the capitalist market. Firstly, they remain invisible and unmarked within the fabric of the dominant system by way of the constant re-invention of their aesthetics and poetics. And secondly, they enforce the visibility of the representational frames that shape them through the provision of “imagined” embodied experiences. As Machon argues

where history and social relationships are enacted through the body the audience becomes intensely aware of the human body as a site of performed history and *actual* history; the body as the site where ‘power is enacted or struggled over’. ... The polyphonic body, with its potential to represent itself as a site of struggle and conflict, exposes the Dionysian traits of duality, disturbance and playfulness. It can expound the lived experience of an individual (gendered, sexual, historical, political and so on) by ensuring that, ‘the entire symbolism of the body is called into play’.  
(*(Syn)aesthetics* 64)

As opposed to the experiential form of the experience economy that hides the representational mechanisms that maintain it, anti-perspectival performative practices function explicitly within frames that –at least spatially and/or temporally– differentiate themselves from the rest of the socio-political world by way of representation. In these frames the body is not treated as a sensation-originating machine that can be addressed by an abundance of visual and non-visual (re)presentations, but rather as the valued site whereupon sensation, emotion, cognition and the socio-political histories marked on the body coincide. As such, anti-perspectival performative practices have the potential to highlight “the *lived* nature of ... representations” (Machon, *Immersive* 44) and it is at this point where the “gendered, sexual, historical, political and so on” (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 64) individual spectator assumes socio-political agency through her “imagined” embodiment.

When considered in relation to the society of the experience economy, its appropriation of the anti-perspectival tradition and the range of contemporary anti-perspectival performative practices that resist capitalism’s appropriation, non-visibility assumes an even more ambiguous role than its role in the society of the spectacle. Firstly, non-visibility still functions as a frame that entails all the invisible elements whose very invisibility makes the preservation of the experience economy possible. Secondly, non-



visuality has been materialised on the socio-political plane, since non-visual elements that address the senses of hearing, taste, smell, touch and kinaesthesia have become significant features of the fabricated environments of the experience economy. Thirdly, the non-visual form of darkness has established itself beyond the frame of performative experimentation, and therefore, should be considered as an – increasingly popular– cultural form in its own right. Dining in the dark, auditory video games, reality television shows whose contestants go on blind dates in the dark, are just a few of the cultural instances that appropriate darkness in one way or another; far from using darkness as means to create counter-spectacles, these instances fetishize the non-visual form of darkness on the grounds of economic profit.

At the same time, the materialisation of non-visibility through anti-perspectival performative practices resists commodification and exposes the invisibility of the mechanism of representation in the fabricated environments of the experience economy. Not only does it provide contemporary audiences with embodied experiences that remain invisible to and unmarked by the commodity market, but also it highlights “the *lived* nature of [socio-political] representations” (Machon, *Immersive* 44) by way of embodied experience. The task at hand –and the main focus of this thesis therefore– is the examination of the affective non-visual qualities of current anti-perspectival practices in relation to various socio-political aspects of the experience economy. In what particular ways do these practices reinforce, expose and/or undermine the socio-political frame of the body-centric culture that shapes the contemporary West? Useful in answering this question is the methodological and epistemological device of space, the focus of the following section.

### **On Space: Phenomenology and Non-representational Theory**

In the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty dedicates a whole chapter to the examination of space; at the start of his examination, he observes that

[s]pace is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible. This means that instead of imagining [space] as a sort of ether in which all things float, or conceiving it abstractly as a characteristic that they have in common, we must think of it as the universal power enabling them to be connected. Therefore, ... I catch space at its source, and now think the relationships which underlie this word, realizing then that they live only through the

medium of a subject who traces out and sustains them; and pass from spatialized to spatializing space. (284)

Merleau-Ponty engages with a methodology that attempts to examine the whole (the tangible world) in relation to its parts (particular spaces) and as a result he attaches a rather transcendental quality to space. While space is part of the tangible world, it is also the palpable reflection—a micro-version— of this world in general. The means through which space reflects the world is its ability to shape, maintain and/or challenge interactions, whether they are the interaction between the perceiving subject with an object/situation/event or between two—or more—perceiving subjects. Each specific space is therefore a mechanism amongst mechanisms (other spaces) that reflects the “essence” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* vii) of the world through its “universal power” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 284) to establish connections in the tangible world.

Merleau-Ponty’s distinction between “spatialized” and “spatializing” space illustrates the affinity between the perceiving subject and space even further (*Phenomenology* 284); while the term “spatialized” signifies a predetermined structure (a space that has already been created), the gerund “spatializing” indicates the conception of space as a process, as something that is constantly (re-)shaped by the human activity within it. In this sense, not only does space have the ability to create, maintain and/or challenge relationships for the perceiving subject, but also the perceiving subject has the ability to transform space. Mirroring the reciprocity between the perceiving subject and the tangible world, the relationship between the perceiving subject and a particular space is—in theory—a rapport between equals. This observation brings to the forefront a crucial point: for Merleau-Ponty space has the potential to define the nature of experience as much as the perceiving subject herself does.

Merleau-Ponty reinforces this point when he suggests that the ability to move around and understand space is engrained in the perceiving subject. The reason for this is the perceiving subject’s very nature:

The possession of a body implies the ability to change levels and to ‘understand’ space, just as the possession of a voice implies the ability to change a key. ... We must not wonder why being is orientated, why existence is spatial, why ... our body is not geared to the world in all its positions, and why its co-existence with the world magnetizes experience and induces direction in it. The question could be asked if the facts were fortuitous happenings to

a subject and an object indifferent to space, whereas perceptual experience shows that they are presupposed in our primordial encounter with being, and that being is synonymous with being situated. (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 292–4)

Merleau-Ponty stresses that the ability to understand space comes naturally to the perceiving subject. Making both a methodological and an epistemological comment here, he observes that the examination of space in terms of experience cannot be facilitated through a reductive approach that examines space on the sole grounds of perception. Since space and experience presuppose one another, the experience of space involves something that goes beyond the tangible. The intangible qualities of the experience of a space are explained on the grounds of not only the space's ability to reflect the tangible world in general but also the perceiving subject's ability to take in space intuitively. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty's early phenomenology defines experience as the experience of a series of spaces, that can both manifest the "essence" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* vii) of the world to the perceiving subject and enable the subject's "primordial encounter with being" through the "universal power" of space (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 294).

While Merleau-Ponty's engagement with universality challenges my culturally materialist disposition and the cultural specificity that I hope this thesis will employ, his early phenomenology illustrates the centrality of space as a methodological and epistemological tool for the examination of the embodied experience of the non-visual. The phenomenological desire to establish a philosophy that describes the "essence" of human existence aside, Merleau-Ponty's examination of space inevitably necessitates the examination of space within the frame of its (culturally, socially and politically) particular context. Even though this task was not materialised by Merleau-Ponty himself, it has been taken up by a range of philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists and human geographers who are interested in the cultural specificity of the embodied experience of space and the affects that it gives rise to. A theory that examines the relationship between space, affect and embodied experience from a political perspective is non-representational theory.

Having developed in the field of human geography, non-representational theory focuses on both human activity and the ways in which environments and objects carry agency. It examines not only the ways in which human activity occupies space but also the political dimensions of the relationship between human activity and the spaces that it occupies. More specifically, it analyses space on both a micro (a room in a house) and a macro-level (a whole urban landscape) and as such it is concerned with the multiple and

often contradictory dimensions of everyday life. One of the main characteristics of non-representational theory is its methodological and epistemological focus on the relations that occupy the range of spaces that host human activity. On the one hand, the relations that are inherent in spaces (the relations between humans and objects, between humans and spaces and between humans themselves) are telling of the socio-political dimensions of everyday life. As such, they can be used as a methodological tool with the help of which human geography can be examined. On the other hand, the relations that are maintained in particular spaces allow for the examination of the socio-political dimensions of everyday life beyond the boundaries of constructivism and not as a stable artefact. In light of this, non-representational theory examines the socio-political in everyday life as a process that is shaped by “the leitmotif of movement” (Thrift 2) between a series of spaces. Within this epistemological frame human activity is examined as a practice. In *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* human geographer Nigel Thrift argues that

[n]on-representational theory concentrates ... on *practices*, understood as material bodies of work or styles that have gained stability over time ... In particular, these bodies’ stability is a result of schooling in these practices, of each actor holding the others to them, and of the brute ‘natural’ fact that the default is to continue on in most situations. These material bodies are continually being rewritten as unusual circumstances arise, and new bodies are continually making an entrance but, if we are looking for something that approximates to a stable feature of a world that is continually in meltdown, that is continually bringing forth new hybrids, then I take the practice to be it. (8)

Thrift observes that non-representational theory is concerned with the material aspects of everyday life. Valuing the corporeality of the body in a way that echoes Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of space, non-representational theory acknowledges the fluidity that is inherent in the interaction between a body and its environment. At the same time, Thrift observes that the body does not exist in an apolitical world and this is how non-representational theory complements Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in a culturally-materialist way. Thrift argues that experience is shaped by the constant interplay between the body and a socio-political world that entails socio-political practices. While the body is open to the continuous adjustment to its surroundings, the socio-political practices with which the body engages project on these surroundings constancy. Focusing on the

examination of socio-political practices (rather than on the examination of socio-political institutions), Thrift makes an epistemological statement: while providing constancy, socio-political practices can change because they are performed by “material bodies” (Thrift 8). In light of this, Thrift implies that the materiality of the body and the socio-political practices with which the body engages presuppose one another. While the “material body” enables or disables the preservation of socio-political practices (Thrift 8), socio-political practices compensate for the rapid developments that occur in contemporary urban landscapes by providing the “material body” with a sense of constancy (Thrift 8). The “non-representational” in the term non-representational theory can be thus explained on the grounds of this theory’s preoccupation with socio-political practices instead of socio-political institutions. Far from examining human geography through representations that illustrate established institutions, non-representational theory focuses on the (re)presentations with which the “material body” engages on the socio-political domain (Thrift 8).

Thrift argues that non-representational theory resists the temptation of theorising space and insists on examining space as a “practical set of configurations that mix in a variety of assemblages thereby producing new senses of space.” (16) Being the site that enables social-political practices, space is the mechanism that assembles objects, situations, occurring events and “material bodies” (Thrift 8). What is more, it enables them to form relationships and thus to interact. Thrift also recognises that space can only be understood in relation to the experiences of the “material bodies” that occupy them (Thrift 8). Echoing Merleau-Ponty he suggests that every “material body” that walks into a space has a unique experience of this space (Thrift 8). Interestingly, Thrift takes the phenomenological conception of space a step further when he suggests that the unique experience of every “material body” that enters a space contributes to the definition of that space as a whole (Thrift 8); once a new element enters the physical boundaries of a space (whether animate or inanimate) a “new sense” of that space is created (Thrift 16). Reflecting non-representational theory’s focus on relations, Thrift understands space in relation to the experiences of the “material bodies” that occupy it (Thrift 8).

Interestingly, non-representational theory is methodologically interested in the concept of performance. Thrift sees the concept of performance as a useful methodological device for the exploration of the relationship between the body, affect, socio-political practices and the spaces that entail the three. He observes that the concept of performance enables the field of human geography to examine the matrix of relations that shapes everyday life from an experiential rather than a representational point of view. Far from

orderly, this methodological approach to human geography examines the material body as an actor who engages in a mutual relationship with the multiple layers of everyday life. What is more, this methodological approach provides human geography with a discursive context that embraces the contradictions in everyday life and illustrates the points of contact and divergence that shape and maintain the matrix of relations in given socio-political spaces.

In the previous section I discussed how the experience economy maintains a metaphorical association between a business and a stage on the grounds of the affective potential of performance. Widening the association between a business and a stage to the association between the medium of performance and contemporary urban landscapes in general, Thrift provides the discussion of this thesis with a strong epistemological –if not methodological– frame for the examination of the experience economy. He suggests that the affective environments that take up contemporary cities are revealing of the socio-political dimensions of “the new era of the inhabitable map” (16). Illustrating the specific characteristics of this “new era”, Thrift observes that

three formative tendencies ... now structure—and rule—experience in capitalist economic formations: prospecting across the whole of bodily experience, but most especially in the ‘anteconscious’, thus reworking what is regarded as labour, class, invention, and, indeed, much of what was traditionally regarded as political economy; attempting to produce instant communities, worlds gathered around products and production processes which themselves become a vital part of what is regarded as product and production process; reworking space and time so that they fit this new kind of life, most especially by producing new prostheses which are also additions to cognition and precognition. (23)

Thrift’s account of the “three formative tendencies” that have redefined contemporary capitalism demonstrates the ways in which the experience economy has moved from the domain of the consumerist market to the domain of the cultural, social and political. Firstly, Thrift remarks that the new era’s preoccupation with the body has resulted in the redefinition of both the economic base and the superstructure of the capitalist system. The growing trend of affective events and environments and the commodification of experience itself have resulted in a new mode of life according to which the materiality of existence is the focus of attention. In this new mode of life the notion of labour –resonating the power relations of the capitalist era, but also bearing the culturally-laden formations of the late

capitalist era— has moved from the domain of the visual to the domain of the embodied. What is more, by addressing the body on an “anteconscious” level, contemporary capitalism has ingeniously managed to move the iterations of power to a pre-reflective and thus pre-linguistic frame; when power struggle is experienced but not iterated, the prospect of socio-political resolution (if not revolution) becomes virtually impossible.

Secondly, Thrift notes that capitalism’s growing interest in the concept and practice of community has resulted in not only the redefinition of community but also the denigration of its socio-political mechanics. While communities have been an anti-capitalist force worthy of attention (especially up until the late 1990s in the UK), they are now being appropriated by contemporary capitalism. Incorporating communities to the fabric of the experience economy, contemporary capitalism trivialises them by turning them into harmless manifestations of collectivity. As such, it provides its inhabitants with pseudo-communities that at best reassure us (falsely) that we perform resistance and at worst remind us that the premises of the consumerist market cannot be overcome. More specifically, Thrift notes that the way in which contemporary capitalism assembles communities is twofold: on the one hand, communities consume as they take part in affective events and inhabit affective environments. On the other hand, communities produce the product that they consume because the affective events and environments that they consume are reinforced by their participation in them. In light of this, Thrift argues that the current interest in the notion and practice of community can be seen as one of capitalism’s attempts to reinforce its momentum by virtue of the commodification of embodied experience as a whole.

Lastly, Thrift makes an observation that sheds an interesting light on the discussion of this chapter when he suggests that the urban landscapes of the experience economy are constantly re-defined by the systematic production of fluid spatialities and temporalities. Importantly, the fluidity of space and time in the contemporary West is reinforced by the use of technology. While contemporary capitalism encourages the embodied experience of its landscapes, it is nonetheless the embodied experience of hybridised spatial and temporal settings that is being promoted. Masking the representational frames within which they function, these hybridised spatialities and temporalities give the impression of immediate experiences, while implicitly they mediate experience as “additions to cognition and precognition” (Thrift 23).

Even though I have only touched upon just a few key ideas in Thrift’s work, I hope that I have illustrated how non-representational theory can be used as a politically-driven critical frame with the help of which its readers can examine the ways in which the

materiality of the body has become the new investment of the capitalist system. Arguably, it is a critical frame that makes its readers question the ways in which the body relates to the various cultural and socio-political practices by way of the examination of the affective spaces of this new era. Far from being a pessimistic account of the current status-quo, however, Thrift's non-representational theory is a call for action as he observes that once we become conscious of the underlying socio-political forces that shape our affective experiences of the world we can react via "the construction of new counterpublics through the assembling of more performative political ecologies." (22) Elaborating on his conception of "performative political ecologies", Thrift gives a range of examples that he identifies as "experiments currently taking place with new political forms of effective togetherness":

there are all the experiments aimed at disrupting given spatial and temporal arrangements in an age when 'the speed at which new products appear and reconfigurations of technological systems take place precludes the possibility of ever becoming familiar with a given arrangement'... Then, there are the myriad experiments that set out to invent flexible models of imagination and narrative outside the enforced routines of consumption. And, finally, there are all the experiments that want to understand and work with the 'animality' of bare life, both as a means of understanding what elements of being are included but do not count and as a means of tapping that vital force. (22)

The "performative" in Thrift's conception of the "performative political ecologies" as well as the characteristics of these experiments (the disruption of "spatial and temporal arrangement", the invention of "flexible models of imagination and narrative" and the reinforcement of the "'animality' of bare life") lead to the impression that anti-perspectival performative events have the potential to be some of the "new counterpublics" (Thrift 22) in "the new era of the inhabitable map" (Thrift 16). Far from wanting to appoint to these practices the pressure of being revolutionary agents, I believe that the embodied experience of anti-perspectival practices retains the makings of politically charged statements that at worst can function as a mode of critical engagement and at best can temporarily prompt a reactive mode of being in the experience economy. Nonetheless, as I discussed in the previous section, the ambiguous status of non-visuality in the society of the experience economy should function as a cautionary flag that challenges the straightforward assumption that anti-perspectivalism automatically makes a performance politically laden.



As such, the task at hand is the location of anti-perspectival performative spaces that not only engage with the non-visual, but also take place in the fabric of the experience economy; it is from this starting point that the discussion of this thesis will examine the ways in which these micro-spaces –while remaining unmarked– challenge and/or reinforce capitalism’s attempts to anaesthetise the body through sensory overload.

### **The Conceptual Frame of this Thesis**

I hope that in the course of this chapter I have demonstrated some of the most crucial cultural, social and political dimensions of (non-)visuality within the domain of the post-war capitalist West. I followed Banes and Lepécki’s lead in attempting to decipher the components that shape and maintain the relationship between the artistic and performative on the one hand and the cultural and socio-political on the other hand. Through the Marxian and Marxist frame provided by *The Society of the Spectacle* I have demonstrated how the perspectival tradition was implemented on the socio-political plane between the 1950s and the 1990s and how the anti-perspectival tradition has been appropriated by the capitalist market from the 1990s onwards. Within this frame anti-perspectival practices functioned as counter-spectacles in the society of the spectacle and can operate as “imagined” environments in the experience economy. The conceptual and political framing of non-visuality therefore has resulted in multi-layered and often contradictory conceptions of the notions of embodied experience, affect and space in performance. The ambiguity of these concepts not only demonstrates the complexities of the politics of performance, but also warrants the examination of the topic of this thesis through specific examples.

As such, I have decided to examine the topic of this thesis through particular case studies. Adhering to my culturally-materialist disposition, I have decided to focus on an extremely specific culturally-specific context, namely the contemporary urban landscape of London. London is not only the city that I have been experiencing on a day-to-day basis for the past ten years but also a cultural centre that hosts a wide range of cultural phenomena. Following Thrift’s lead, I have located particular spaces in contemporary London that engage with the non-visual and are reflective –in one way or another– of different aspects of the experience economy. I have focused on three case studies whose spatial, temporal and/or socio-political articulations differ in order to cover as much ground as possible in the limited space of this thesis. The first case study is the practice of audio description, a practice that engages with the non-visual by way of language and that develops as part of the social inclusion agendas of major theatrical institutions. The second case study is the experience of dining in the dark; while it examines the non-visual form of darkness beyond the boundaries

of artistic experimentation, it is a useful case study in that it will enable the examination of darkness within a wider socio-political frame. The third case study is *The Question*, an immersive performance in the dark devised and performed by theatre company Extant. Informed by the discussion of *Dans Le Noir* I will attempt to consider the non-visual form of *The Question* in relation to some of the socio-political components of the experience economy. Since the topic of this thesis is concerned with the relationship between space and non-visibility, the methodology with which I will examine the aforementioned case studies is rather empirical. Through participant observation I will account for my personal experiences as well as consult (when possible) the accounts of experiences of other participants. These accounts will move between sensation, emotion and cognition; Machon observes that in

(syn)aesthetic interpretation .... ***the original visceral experience remains affective in any subsequent recall.*** Following this any semantic or intellectual analysis that follows is influenced by this affective state, the analysis and articulation of that analysis is invested with that rich and felt quality of experience.  
(*Syn)aesthetics* 18; emphasis in original)

As such, the starting point for the examination of the case studies will be the performance of a scholarly practice that preoccupies itself with sensation, affect and the memory of this affect. Based on this practice I will then be using the critical frames that I have outlined in this chapter in order to interrogate (performance) space, sensation and affect in relation to their wider context.

Following the examination of the three case studies I will then focus on the practice-as-research project that will be accounted for in the final chapter of this thesis. In “Practice as Research through Performance” Baz Kershaw makes a remark that somehow justifies my readiness to experiment with the production of a non-visual space:

performance practice as research typically generates generic research issues relevant to an especially broad church of research methodologies. This is because it inherently challenges binary formulations—such as conventional polarities between, say, theory and practice, rationality and creativity, process and product, artistic and academic—through the degrees to which it successfully evolves methods that are holistic in conception and operation.  
(123)

Kershaw brings to the forefront the fact that practice-based research has the potential to inject theory into practice and practise into theory, rationality into creativity and creativity into rationality, the artistic into academia and academia into the artistic. While almost self-evident for my generation of emerging researchers who have walked into a discipline that celebrates its multiple methodologies and epistemologies, Kershaw's remark serves as a useful reminder of one of the most distinct features of our discipline: the elements of the "binary formulations" that inhibited a "holistic" approach to theatre and performance up to the 1990s presuppose one another (Kershaw, "Practice as Research through Performance" 123). In light of this, I believe that this thesis will benefit from the injection of theory into the blank canvas of a non-visual performance space. In this way I will not only test out the practical application of the analysis of the three case studies, but will also address the binary between (emerging) researcher and participant-observer: I will use the conclusions that I will draw from "spectating" the three case studies of this thesis, experiment with them practically and then draw further theoretical conclusions refreshed –and hopefully informed– by way of practical experimentation. As such, I will be able to outline the markings of a departure point for the future development of a theory of non-visibility in performance that – as I discussed in the introduction of this thesis– is the purpose of my research. But before I do so, let me put this critical frame to practice and examine the first case study of this thesis: the audio description of *Edgar and Annabel*.

### 3. Audio Description and the Power of Vulnerability

#### Introduction

Selma Jezkova (Björk) is the main character of Lars Von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*. While juggling between motherhood and her job as a factory worker, Selma suffers from a condition that gradually reduces her vision. As the narrative develops we witness Selma's gradual journey into blindness and in one of the most beautiful scenes in Von Trier's film Selma goes to the cinema with her co-worker Kathy (Catherine Deneuve). The deterioration of Selma's vision has reached a stage at which she cannot see clearly. Aware of this Kathy takes Selma's hand and enacts the film's action on her palm through the mere use of only two of her fingers. In this charming moment we witness the interplay between the visual and the non-visual in action: the imagery of the film is (re)presented on Selma's palm through Kathy's tactile rendition of the visual.

When I watched this scene from *Dancer in the Dark* I was impressed by Kathy's improvised move; she had effortlessly fashioned a way in which the visual and the non-visual might interact. As I had already started working on the research topic of this thesis, I kept a mental note of this scene. A couple of months later I started doing research on audio description. In the Arts Council's *Disability Access: A Good Practice Guide for the Arts* Andrew Holdsworth-Wild, Jayne Earnscliffe and Jo Verrent argue that

[p]rovision of audio description will enable visually impaired people to fully enjoy performances and exhibitions. In a theatre performance, an audio describer who is seated in a soundproof booth with clear sight of the stage, will provide a continuous dialogue of actions taking place, intermingled with descriptions of the stage set, lighting and performers' costumes to enhance the picture. (37)

When I was doing research on audio description the scene from *Dancer in the Dark* came to mind. It became clear to me then that what had drawn me to the practice of audio description was not only the fact that it is a form of non-visual "spectatorship" but also its ability to connect the visual with the non-visual by virtue of language, its momentum in shaping "a continuous dialogue" between what appears on stage (the visual) and its linguistic

rendition (the non-visual) (Holdsworth-Wilde, Earncliffe and Verrent 27). In response, I have decided to begin my examination of the relationship between space and non-visibility in performance with an exploration of the practice of audio description. Taking place between the visual and the non-visual, the practice of audio description can be seen as a useful and tangible way to begin unfolding the critical frame of non-visibility in theatre and performance. My analysis will focus on one case study with the help of which I will unpack some of the multiple dimensions of audio description. Attempting to establish a connection between the subjective, corporeal and affective qualities of the case study and its socio-political implications, I will examine the practice of audio description from the perspective of its social politics.

Bridging the gap between the visual in performance and the non-visual sensory palate of audience members with visual impairments, conventional audio description belongs to the social inclusion agendas of major theatrical institutions. Examining the social turn in the arts in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Arts and the Politics of Spectatorship*, art historian Claire Bishop argues that major theatrical institutions have been prompted to develop their social inclusion agendas since the rise of the New Labour in 1997 (13). This prompting not only reflects the social politics of the New Labour party, but also reinforces the affinity of neo-liberal politics to the experience economy; considered within Thrift's paradigm, conventional audio descriptions are "new [cultural] prostheses" to the theatrical experience of audience members with visual impairments. As such, they are a fertile ground upon which the interaction between theatre, our body-centric culture and social politics can be examined. What can the practice of audio description tell us about the points of contact and/or divergence between theatre, experience, affect, social politics and the socio-political system from which they emerge? The aim of this chapter is to answer this question by examining the function of the non-visual in such a complex network of power relations.

Before I disclose the structure of this chapter I would like to make a methodological note. Every time that I attended an audio described performance I was faced with an important methodological dilemma: do I close my eyes or keep my eyes open during the performance? On the one hand, as the quotation from the *Disability Access* guide suggests, audio description is directed to people with visual impairments who—to a greater or lesser extent—do not experience the visual aspects of a performance. In this sense, in order to get a good impression of audio description I would have to close my eyes. On the other hand, I was cautious of the fact that by closing my eyes during the performance I would—in bad taste—*simulate* the experience of having a visual impairment. Having attended a few audio

described performances, I had the chance to test out different experiential methodologies – each of which gave my research a different focus. The first time that I experienced audio description, I decided to ignore the visual elements of performance as much as possible. This methodological approach was not successful because—unlike the spectator consciousness of audience members who have a visual impairment—I am not used to the reception of an audio described performance and I missed a significant part of both the dialogue of the play and the audio description itself. The second time that I attended an audio described show I hesitantly decided to watch the performance as I normally would, but with the addition of a headset that would give me access to its audio description. This methodological approach made instantly more sense to me as watching the audio described performance I realised that there are two levels of spectatorship in audio description: the spectatorship of the audio describer on the one hand and the spectatorship of audience members with visual impairments on the other hand. Crucially the audio describer’s articulations of her experiences of the visual dimensions of a performance inform the spectatorship of audience members with visual impairments. Acknowledging that I am writing from the perspective of my sightedness, I decided to identify experientially with the spectatorship of the audio describer while considering the spectatorship of audience members with visual impairments through literature that examines its function on experiential, cultural and socio-political terms. This methodological and epistemological decision not only facilitated my research on honest and concrete experiential grounds, but also enabled the ensuing discussion of this chapter to develop at the interface between visibility and non-visibility in the theatre.

This chapter begins with an account of my experience of the audio described performance of *Edgar and Annabel* performed at the National Theatre in 2011. Since it is impossible to provide a full transcript of the audio description in the limited space of this chapter, I will focus the account of my experience on the most interesting instances that illuminated the relationship between the visual and the non-visual. I will then examine the first level of my experience of *Edgar and Annabel* that revolved mostly around the visual and the aural/oral. Kaja Silverman and Maaïke Bleeker’s discussion on proprioceptivity have provided the discussion of this section with a useful conceptual device because it illustrates the interplay between the visual and the non-visual even in theatrical settings that do not engage with the non-visual senses directly. Having examined the visual and the non-visual aspects of my experience of *Edgar and Annabel* on affective terms, I will then focus on the audio description of *Edgar and Annabel*. I have decided to use Steven Connor’s work on ventriloquism in the discussion of this section; even though it might appear as an unorthodox

scholarly decision, Connor's work raises some useful points in relation to the cultural specificity of voice and its relationship to space. As such, the discussion in this section will enable me to consider the practice of audio description in relation to the perspectival tradition that I discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. Lastly, informed by the discussion of the third section, I will consider the politics of the audio description of *Edgar and Annabel* in terms of not only its relation to creative approaches to audio description (see Kaite O'Reilly and Graeae theatre company) but also Nigel Thrift's concept of "microbiopolitics" (187). In doing so I hope to illustrate how the non-visual practice of audio description can acquire some of the characteristics of practices from the anti-perspectival tradition that counteract ableist and ocularcentric structures in the contemporary West and open up multiple creative possibilities for practitioners of multiple abilities.

### **Edgar and Annabel I: Experiencing the Visual and the Non-Visual**

In August 2011 I heard that the National Theatre has embarked on an interesting project called the "Double Feature in the Paintframe". In "The Paintframe: National Service" Alice Jones illustrates the concept of this project rather colourfully:

Backstage at the National Theatre, a coup is in progress. Four young playwrights have taken over a vast hangar, usually reserved for painting the sets used in the Olivier, Lyttelton and Cottesloe theatres, to stage their South Bank debuts. From this week until the end of the summer, the Paintframe – as the new space has been christened – will play host to four colourful new plays. (n.p.)

The idea of gaining legitimate access to one of the backstage areas of the National Theatre while attending four productions of new writing whet my spectatorial appetite. When I found out that the National Theatre had arranged audio described performances for these productions I jumped at the opportunity and booked my ticket for the audio description of the first "Double Feature in the Paintframe". What I encountered on the day was not only two interesting pieces of new writing but also an appropriate case study for this chapter.

I will focus on the audio described performance of *Edgar and Annabel*, one of the two productions that I experienced in the Paintframe of the National Theatre. While both audio described performances were interesting, *Edgar and Annabel* provides this thesis with a fitting case study: as I shall discuss, the aesthetics and poetics of the production revolve around the binary of visibility versus non-visibility and as such lend themselves to the discussion of this chapter. I shall begin with a brief overview of the play before I account for my experience of the production and its audio description.

Sam Holcroft's *Edgar and Annabel* takes place against a dystopian backdrop that resonates with George Orwell's *1984*. Holcroft does not specify the location and time of the setting, a creative decision that makes the play alarmingly relevant. The two main characters of the play Marianne (Kirsty Bushell) and Nick (Trystan Gravelle) are part of an anarchic and anti-establishment organisation that is affiliated with one of the minority parties of the government and operates against a system of tight control and monitoring. As Miller, one of the main agents of the organisation, contends in Scene Four:

MILLER: ... [c]os it's disgusting. It's disgusting that our friends are arrested for telling a joke. It's disgusting that doctors are surrendering our records. It's disgusting that nobody knows who to trust. I don't want that for my country. Adam [the leader of the minority party that is affiliated with the organisation] doesn't want that. I want to believe it's possible to have fairness, and opportunity and for kids to learn from their teachers[,] not spy on them. And I'll do anything, anything, by any means, to make that happen. (Holcroft 27)

The way in which this organisation operates is rather ambiguous throughout the play, but there are two main components of their action that are clearly communicated to the audience: on the one hand, the organisation is devoted to anarchic feats against the system by assembling improvised bombs and attacking targeted locations. On the other hand – and more interestingly for this chapter – the organisation is committed to providing its members with false identities in order to both protect the members and safeguard its cause. Knowing that every household in the country is monitored by the government, the organisation provides its members with well-rehearsed “legitimate” lives.

Marianne and Nick take up the fictional life of Edgar and Annabel, a typical middle class couple whose political apprehensions do not go beyond recycling. Every detail in Marianne and Nick's fictional life is tended to by Miller and the organisation; even the dialogue between Edgar and Annabel is carefully written by Miller because it is obvious that the conversation in their house is monitored by the government. Throughout the action of the play – and specifically during the scenes that take place in Edgar and Annabel's kitchen – Nick and Marianne read their lines off of a meticulously prepared script. What is heard (Edgar and Annabel's dialogue in the script) and what appears on stage (Nick and Marianne's actions) rarely coincide, something that results in dynamic dramatic situations that question



the relationship between the non-visual (what is heard) and the visual (what is actually seen) within the imaginary confines of a totalitarian order.

In anticipation of experiencing the production of this play on a rainy August afternoon I searched for the Paintframe at the back of the National Theatre building. I walked past the Stage Door and the Cottesloe theatre and saw a wooden construction from afar that turned out to be the box office of the Paintframe. I stepped in the National Theatre's new space through a heavy steel door, went down four steps and after walking through a narrow and short corridor I encountered a rather confusing space that was still –and unapologetically– under construction. The separate areas of the Paintframe were demarcated with the help of visible rigs and curtains; the first two spaces that I came across were an improvised foyer and a bar area.

After I talked to a member of staff and I was given a headset for the audio description I was led to the performance area in advance of the rest of the audience in order to listen to the pre-show notes. I took a seat and turned on the headset; a very discreet droning sound reached my ears. While I waited for the pre-show notes to begin, I absorbed the space that I was in. The space –as I experienced it– manifested itself in two ways: the visible performance area of the Paintframe was a huge warehouse space –paint all over the walls and on the concrete part of the floor. A makeshift wooden floor, visible rigs and steel constructions set out the seating area for the audience. In one end of the space there was an improvised proscenium stage that contained what looked like the kitchen of a new purpose built flat.

At the same time, the subtle buzzing sound coming from the headset that I was wearing expanded the space that I inhabited. Had I waited for the start of the show without the headset my sense of space would have been confined within the boundaries of the visible space that surrounded me. Nevertheless, the sound coming from the headset implicated the presence of its source that –as I realised after I carefully searched around– was invisible to me. Whether this source was located in close proximity to or in great distance from me was not clear at this point. What was certain, however, was the fact that this discreet auditory stimulus had modified significantly my visual experience of the performance area.

Before I even started looking at the details of the set I heard a brittle male voice that spoke in a clear and neutral accent. The audio describer commenced on the pre-show notes, while the droning sound of the headset became the soundscape of his description. Interestingly the sound of a human voice gave me a better sense of the distance that lay between the source of the auditory stimuli that I was listening to and me. Whether

estimating the distance accurately or not I got the impression that the male voice was in the same space as I was. The content of the pre-show notes and the audio description of the actual performance verified this impression.

As I was listening to the description of the set during the pre-show notes I could examine the linguistic information against information that I received visually. There was a dynamic interplay between the visual and the linguistic: had I been observing the set of *Edgar and Annabel* without the pre-show notes, I would initially try to get a visual impression of the set as a whole. I would then pay attention to particular aspects of the set such as the general aesthetics of the design and particular props that could give away some of the action that might occur during the performance. Relying solely on my vision, I would never identify the exact dimensions of a performance space or define the positioning of the objects that occupy the set of a production. Disclosing minimal information about the general atmosphere of the set, the audio describer gave factual and specific information about it:

*Edgar and Annabel* takes place in the kitchen of Edgar and Annabel's apartment. It is a modern and minimal kitchen with new appliances and functional furniture. ... The ceiling is about two meters high off the ground. ... At the centre of the kitchen there is a wooden table and two wooden chairs at each side of the table. ... Along the right wall of the kitchen there are cupboards underneath of which there is a worktop with a sink on its far end. ... High up and attached to the ceiling there is a television set whose screen is not visible to the audience. ... On the left-hand side of the kitchen there is a door, which leads outside.

Predominant in the description of the set were terms that have to do with spatial dimensions and spatial orientation. The linguistic information that the pre-show notes disclosed shaped my experience of the set in a way that was quite unusual for me: while visually I maintained a distance from the set, linguistically I was walking through it. What is more, the description of the set given by the audio describer placed Marianne and Nick's kitchen within the wider frame of the play's poetics. The information that "there is a door which leads outside" suggested that there is more to the play's world that cannot be grasped from the set's visual and visible dimensions.

While the description of the set evolved around the interplay between the visual and the linguistic, the description of the characters in the production was an altogether different affair. The audio describer disclosed information about characters whose physical

characteristics I could not yet see. Never before had I awaited with such anticipation the entrance of a character onstage as the audio describer informed me about Marianne, an “attractive” woman “in her early 30s” whose expression is “between questioning and exasperation”; Nick, “a young man in his 30s” with “thick dark hair” and a “look about him” that suggests that he is “more collected than Marianne”; Tara who has an “urban hairstyle” and a “glint in her eyes, which is similar-looking to Marianne’s”; and Mark who is “taller than Nick”, has “mousy blonde hair” and a “collected demeanour”.

By the time the description of the characters had finished the doors had opened for the rest of the audience. After a short pause the audio describer assured me that “the audience is now coming in as the performance will begin shortly”. As the audience was settling in the seating area I noticed that the character of Marianne walked on stage. The description of the character of Marianne during the pre-show notes was clarified as soon as Kirsty Bushell walked onstage. The audio describer shifted back to his descriptive practice and disclosed in a succinct way:

Marianne enters the kitchen. She begins mixing a salad dressing on the right-hand worktop. She collects herbs from the vegetable rack, which is situated at the left-hand side of the kitchen. She collects parsley leaves from the rack and carries them to the chopping board.

The interplay between the visual and the non-visual that had already started in the description of the set during the pre-show notes continued as I also observed Marianne’s movement onstage. As she was making the salad dressing the audio describer made an unexpected observation:

In a moment the front door will open. Nick will enter holding an umbrella and a pocketbook. Marianne will be shocked and startled. She will turn off the radio. In the meantime Marianne keeps preparing the salad dressing. She is chopping more herbs.

As the audio describer said this there was a change of dynamic in the description of the performance: while both the pre-show notes and the description of the action that Marianne engaged with was facilitated through the use of the present tense, the audio describer shifted to the future tense and made a prediction about the imminent (“in a moment”) action of the performance. At this point, the audio describer focused on an aspect of the performance that was not yet visual. As a result, this instance of the audio description shifted

my relationship to the production in an unusual way as I knew what was going to happen before it even occurred.

As soon as Nick entered stage left I heard that he was “holding an umbrella and a pocketbook”; he took two scripts out of his bag and tried to hand one over to Marianne. Upon Nick’s entrance the audio describer disclosed that he “holds two scripts out, while reading off one script. He hands a script to Marianne. She refuses to take it. ... Nick perseveres. ... Marianne takes the script. She starts reading off the script. ... They both turn the pages of their scripts”. As Nick walked in and started to read off the script instantly the audio describer’s voice overlapped with the dialogue of the play; in this instance the non-visual of the audio description and the non-visual of the performance (the dialogue) competed against each other. As the scene progressed, however, the dialogue of the play became the focal point of the performance. When the scene came to an end the audio describer disclosed that “Nick exits the kitchen. Lights snap to semi-darkness”.

During the transition between the first and the second scenes of the performance the audio describer disclosed that “Marianne clears up the kitchen table. ... The tidying is done. ... Lights up where Marianne meets Miller.” The second scene of the performance was staged in the area of the auditorium that was situated in front of the stage. Breaking the “fourth wall” of Edgar and Annabel’s kitchen, Marianne –shortly followed by Nick– met with Miller at a secret “meeting place”. The breaking down of the “fourth wall” was visible as Marianne stepped down from Edgar and Annabel’s kitchen and waited for Miller to arrive at arm’s length from the audience. The way in which this aesthetic of the performance was described was through the expression “[l]ights up where Marianne meets Miller”.

During the second scene of the performance the dialogue between Miller, Marianne and Nick disclosed that Nick was a new recruitment to the organisation and that he had replaced Carl as the new Edgar –hence Marianne’s “shocked and startled” expression upon Nick’s entrance in the opening scene. The reasons for Carl’s replacement were ambiguous and inconclusive because Miller refused to share any details with Marianne. Throughout this scene the audio describer withdrew from the soundscape of the performance, but as the scene came to an end he disclosed that “[l]ights fade. Electric lights flicker”.

The performance progressed with the action interchanging between Edgar and Annabel’s kitchen and “the meeting place”. The audio describer made the occasional comment that clarified the action, but his auditory presence was felt throughout the performance –even when he appeared to be overshadowed by the dialogue of the play. During the sixth scene of the performance, however, he adopted an active role. This was

perhaps the most visually intricate scene of the production because the contradiction between what is heard and what is shown was inherent to its staging. The audience could hear Edgar and Annabel entertaining their guests Tara and Mark (whose “real” names were not disclosed in the audio description). While the soundscape of this scene consisted of casual chatter amongst Edgar, Annabel, Tara and Mark and a karaoke competition, the visual action of the scene contradicted its auditory action: on a visual level Marianne, Nick and their guests collaborated in making an improvised bomb. Having the music of Jefferson Starship’s “Nothing’s Gonna Stop us Now” and Cyndi Lauper’s “Time after Time” as a cover, the four characters took turns in singing and working on the bomb respectively. This carefully choreographed scene was exclusively focused on the visual apart from the soundscape of the karaoke songs and the occasional conversation between the (doubly fictitious) characters.

The audio describer took centre stage during this scene and attempted to convey the visual action in as much detail as possible:

Marianne switches on the TV and the Playstation. They all place their scripts down as though they prepare for action. They all whisper to each other nervous and edgy. As Tara sings Marianne and Nick clear the table. Nick takes a soldering iron from the floor panel below the table. He moves a chair. Tara and Mark move out of the way as Nick stands on the chair. He retrieves a box from the ceiling panel. He sits at the table and starts using the soldering iron. ... Semi-darkness; lights flicker. Lights up. ... Tara and Nick take over from Nick and Marianne. The couples switch microphones ... Semi-darkness; lights flicker. Lights up. ... Nick puts some final touches to a wine bottle bomb. Nick sighs a sigh of relief. Marianne and Nick hug. They all retrieve to their scripts.

During this scene the relationship between the visual and the non-visual was intensified not only onstage but also in the audio description as it brought my attention to the minor details that I would have missed had I only watched the scene. The audio describer’s non-visual account of the visual elements of performance focused on both the actions of the characters and the objects that the characters used during the making of the bomb. After Tara and Mark left a narrative twist occurred. According to the audio describer,

Marianne and Nick start cleaning up. Nick replaces the floor panel and brushes past Marianne. ... The tidying is done. They stand side

by side at the table. ... Suddenly he pulls her into a firm kiss; she reciprocates. They look down on the scripts. ... She pulls him into another kiss. Their eyes meet as though they're longing for each other.

The interweaving of the dialogue between Edgar and Annabel on the one hand and the action between Nick and Marianne on the other hand resulted in a sequence that was interesting because the audio description occurred in the pauses between the lines of Edgar and Annabel's dialogue. Although the audio description informed the audience of the onstage action, the description intervened with the pauses that were vital to the build-up of the tension between Marianne and Nick. At this point and minutes after the dynamic description of the choreography that framed the making of the bomb, the momentum of the audio description changed; no longer was the audio description complementary to the aesthetics of the performance because it interfered with the rhythm of the auditory aesthetics of this scene.

In the following scenes the romantic tension between Marianne and Nick intensified even if –or because of the fact that– they could not act on their romantic impulses freely. The slightest sound that would suggest a contradiction between what is being said (Miller's script) and what is being heard would make them suspicious to the monitoring agency that works for the government. The audio describer was once again overshadowed by the dialogue of the play; apart from the occasional clarification he let the dialogue speak for itself. The dialogue between Annabel (Marianne) and Edgar (Nick) disclosed that there had been an anarchic attack against the government. Upon receiving the news from Annabel Nick had to respond "in character" and as Edgar he defied the anarchic action and assured his audience (both the monitoring agency and the actual audience of the performance) of his "patriotism" and love for his country. This was a step too far and the scene ended with Nick refusing to continue reading out Edgar's lines.

In the following scene the audio describer disclosed that "Marianne hears a key through the door. Another man enters the kitchen. He's almost identical to Nick. ... Marianne is in a state of shock. ... The new man gives her new a script. She doesn't take it. ... She shifts her weight back." The shock that overcame Marianne stemmed from the fact that (the new) Edgar was obviously and visibly not Nick. According to the audio describer, Marianne's reaction lay on the fact that "another man enters the kitchen" who is "almost identical to Nick". At this point, the visual and the non-visual did not work collaboratively as what I saw onstage did not coincide with the information that I received from the audio description.

Nonetheless both the visual aspects of the performance and the audio description moved within a similar –yet not identical– affective frame.

In the penultimate scene of the performance the “fourth wall” broke for the last time as the audience was transferred to the location “where Marianne meets Miller. Marianne looks edgy and tired”. The dialogue between Marianne and Miller disclosed that Nick was thought of as a liability by the organisation and, as a result, was no longer working for it. The audio describer disclosed that “Marianne looks as though she’s given up”. At the end of the scene “Marianne strides off one direction; [Miller] to another. Lights down”. Seconds later as “lights brighten in the kitchen ... another woman enters dressed identically to Marianne. ... Lights down”. In the final moment of the performance both the visual and the non-visual worked in tandem and in a fast pace in order to illuminate the last intense moment of the production. The house lights went up and my experience of the audio described performance of *Edgar and Annabel* had come to an end.

## **Edgar and Annabel II: Feeling the Visual**

The National Theatre is undeniably one of the major theatrical institutions in the cultural landscape of London and the UK. Since its establishment in 1963 and along with the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal Opera House and –more recently– the Barbican, the National Theatre has not only received a significant percentage of the annual funds available from the Arts Council, but has also had a major influence on the formation of the conventional theatre scene in London. One of the main purposes of the National Theatre has been “the constant revitalisation of the great traditions of the British stage” (National Theatre 5), but since the rise of the New Labour Party and the appointment of Sir Trevor Nunn as its artistic director it has opened up the scope of its cultural agenda. By 2011-12 and under the artistic direction of Nicholas Hytner (appointed in 2003) the National Theatre had self-admittedly been “striv[ing] to be a national centre of theatrical arts, central to the creative life of the country and unmatched in the world for scale, range of repertoire and audience reach.” (National Theatre 5) The audio described performance of *Edgar and Annabel* illustrates the National Theatre’s commitment to widening not only its repertoire but also its audience reach. *Edgar and Annabel* was written by an emerging playwright, took place in a space other than the three venues of the National Theatre and one of its performances was audio described. While not ground-breaking in any way if we consider, for instance, the performances that belong to the anti-perspectival tradition that I discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, by National Theatre standards *Edgar and Annabel* can be seen

as a performance that indicates –amongst other things– the opening up of the National Theatre’s cultural scope and agenda.

My experience of *Edgar and Annabel* therefore took place in a conventional setting. Despite the impromptu nature of the Paintframe and the occasional breaking down of the “fourth wall” during the performance there was a proscenium arch stage that demarcated clearly the performance space from the auditorium, the audience sat quietly in a darkened auditorium and the elements of performance that framed the aesthetics and the poetics of the production were visual and auditory. Nonetheless, entailing a theatre performance as per usual but with the additional dimension of audio description, my experience of *Edgar and Annabel* was unusual –at least in terms of my spectator consciousness. Not only did I tend to the visual and non-visual aesthetics and poetics of the production as I normally would have, but also I was –voluntarily– exposed to a linguistic commentary that drew even more attention to the visual dimensions of the production. My experience was thus shaped by two levels that warrant closer examination: my exposure to the aesthetics and the poetics of *Edgar and Annabel* itself and the alteration of my experience by the linguistic rendition of the visual through the audio describer’s practice.

*Edgar and Annabel* is a play that questions the relationship between visibility and non-visibility within the confines of an imaginary totalitarian order: on the one hand, the visual dimensions of life in private households and carefully selected public locations escape the monitoring system of the government. As such, some of the visual dimensions of the play’s dystopian city remain paradoxically hidden and “unmarked” (Phelan, *Unmarked* 3) in this totalitarian order. On the other hand, the aural dimensions of life in private households is judiciously monitored, making carefully selected public locations the only site in which the inhabitants of this totalitarian order can express themselves freely. In this sense, the aural and the spoken word are marked, recorded and reproduced so as to ensure that the inhabitants of the totalitarian order are complying with its premises. Holcroft manages the dynamic between the visual and the aural in an interesting way that can be seen as a self-referential commentary on the relationship between the visual and the aural in conventional theatrical practices. Juxtaposing the visual and the aural elements in his play, Holcroft questions not only the primacy of the visual in practices that belong to the perspectival tradition but also “the privileged status of written texts” (Johnson 3) in practices that have been –and still are– developing with the dramatic text as their main reference point (see Lehman). In *Theatre & the Visual* Dominic Johnson observes that



[v]isual signs conspire to produce meaning for the viewer, as they emphasise or undermine the words that may be spoken by performers. ... [I]n the even most traditional theatre productions, the text wrestles –for primacy, or equanimity– with other modes of representation and perception, including what is shown or concealed in the visual world of the theatre. (4-5)

Engaging with the contradiction between visual signs and the spoken word in his play, Holcroft provides a self-referential commentary that functions alongside the dramatic world that he sets up. Throughout the course of the production that I experienced the validity of the visual representations that were presented onstage was reinforced by the invalidity (the *doubly* fictitious nature) of the dialogue that was spoken in Edgar and Annabel’s kitchen. Setting up a representational frame that undermines its self-sufficiency through both its aesthetics and its poetics, the production of *Edgar and Annabel* invited me to not only question what I see and what I hear, but also to pay close attention to the visual and aural representations of the performance in order to make sense of the juxtapositions that framed the production. But how can my actual experience of the visual and aural elements of the production be examined and understood?

In *Feeling Theatre* Martin Welton observes that “we experience the theatre –even installed in seats as looking spectators or as a listening audience– as a dynamic process.” (10) While not as evidently engaged with the subjectivity and corporeality of the audience as the practices that belong to the anti-perspectival tradition, the conventional setting of a clearly demarcated darkened auditorium engages with the visual, the aural and –in some cases– the olfactory (see, for instance, Fleischer; Banes, “Olfactory”; and Garner, “Sensing Realism”). Sitting in a darkened auditorium silently, we nonetheless experience certain sensations that in their turn give rise to specific affects. The mechanism with the help of which sensation, cognition and affect coincide –even in the most conventional of settings– is, according to Welton, the mechanism of proprioception (*Feeling Theatre* 102). In *The Threshold of the Visible World* film scholar Kaja Silverman uses the term “proprioceptivity” in order to denote the interplay between the visual and the non-visual aspects of experience in the formation of the “corporeal ego”. She observes that

[p]roprioceptivity, which is central to the formation of the corporeal ego as is the visual imago, derives etymologically from *proprius*, which includes among its central meanings ‘personal,’ ‘individual,’ ‘characteristic,’ and ‘belonging to’; and *capere*, which

means 'to grasp,' 'to conceive,' and 'to catch'. It thus signifies something like 'the apprehension on the part of the subject of his or her 'ownness''. This notion must be distinguished from identity, which, at least in the case of the visually unimpaired subject, depends upon the image. Proprioceptivity can best be understood as that egoic component to which concepts like 'here,' 'there,' and 'my' are keyed. ... Indeed, proprioceptivity would seem to be intimately bound with the body's sensation of occupying a point in space, and with the terms under which it does so. It thus involves a nonvisual mapping of the body's form. (16)

Developing her feminist discourse at the intersection between phenomenology and psychoanalysis and explicitly referring to Lacan, Silverman argues that the corporeal ego is formed by the visual imago on the one hand and proprioceptivity on the other hand. While the visual imago contributes to the establishment of the subject's identity, proprioceptivity functions as the mechanism that enables the corporeal ego to get a sense of space; the visual imago engages in an inward movement (from the outside world to the self) and proprioception does exactly the opposite as it enables the self to assume a position in the world and to get a sense of this position. One of the basic presuppositions of the function of proprioception is that it entails "a nonvisual mapping of the body's form" (Silverman 16) within the wider spatial fabric that surrounds it. Establishing a connection between the visible world and the non-visual aspects of embodied experience, proprioception can thus be seen as the mechanism that not only bridges the gap between the visual and the non-visual in embodied experience, but also substantiates the self at the "threshold of the visible world". In *Visuality in the Theatre* Maaïke Bleeker discusses this interesting function of proprioception in explicit relation to visuality when she notes that "[p]roprioception mean[s] to grasp, conceive or catch what is seen through a process of bodily responsiveness." (144-5) Perceiving the visual dimensions of the world that catch my attention, I not only tend to my visual imago, but also process the visual by way of the "non-visual mapping" (Silverman 16) of my body; I smell, I taste and/or hear an image (moving or not) as much as I look at it by way of my corporeal memories. As such, the proprioceptive mechanism of my corporeal ego not only roots the visual dimensions of my experience to my embodiment, but also gives me a sense of the spatial arrangements between my body and its surroundings; I both engage with the visual from a distance and bring it close to me, make it my own through the corporeal memory of my non-visual senses. Discussing the affective qualities that the

mechanism of proprioception gives rise to in the theatre, Bleeker argues that proprioception initiates a process of “inner mimicry” that is grounded on the spectator’s corporeality (145). Far from “feeling what the other body seen is feeling” during this process one uses her

own bodily feelings and kinesthetic responses to make sense of a body seen. Understood in this way, inner mimicry does not present a link to an original universality, but describes a bodily process of culturally specific meaning-making. It would come to mean a way of making things one’s own through a process of non-visual mapping of what is seen on a culturally inflected body. (Bleeker 145)

Bleeker observes that proprioception enables the non-visual “translation” of the visible world by way of the affective: when I see a body feeling I do not automatically mimic her feelings through the visual. Instead, the visual stimulus of a body feeling resonates on a level that goes beyond the visual and into the corpus of my corporeal and affective memories. As such, the sight of a body feeling onstage initiates a process of inner mimicry that is not only grounded on the non-visual aspects of the spectator’s embodied experience, but also enables the spectator to apprehend her “ownness” (Silverman 16) during the theatrical event. It is at this point where the issue of cultural-specificity becomes relevant because the sight of a body feeling –as well as the subject’s visual imago and her “non-visual mapping of [her] body’s form” (Silverman 16)– belong to a specific world whose parameters are defined beyond the level of subjective corporeality. And it is at this point where the critical frame of non-visibility in the theatre assumes political latency in relation to the visual aspects of performance.

In my experience of the performance of *Edgar and Annabel* I observed the minimal and realistic aesthetics of the set and the breaking down of the fourth wall; I watched the lights go up and down a couple of times to signal the change of location or the passage of dramatic time; I listened carefully to the (fictitious and doubly fictitious) dialogue of the play, while I saw “bodies feeling” within the confines of a fictional totalitarian order. While proprioception functions as a useful conceptual mechanism for the examination of the interplay between the visual and the non-visual in spectatorship, the actual mechanics of proprioception and the process of inner mimicry that it initiated in my experience of *Edgar and Annabel* are hard to record and articulate because they function on a visceral, pre-linguistic level; what can be a form of documentation however is the account of my affective responses to the sight of other bodies feeling. I witnessed the characters’ reactive aspirations

with excitement, paid close attention to the premises of the totalitarian order with distress, welcomed the –predictable– development of romance with interest and treated the eventual replacements of Nick and Marianne with surprise. Even though the account and articulation of these affects seems rather clinical and reductive compared to the actual feelings that informed my experience of *Edgar and Annabel*, they imply that “even installed in [a seat] as [a] looking [spectator] [and] as a listening audience” (Welton, *Feeling Theatre* 10), I experienced the performance in a way that goes beyond the mechanics of seeing (and looking) in the theatre and into the domain of “the non-visual mapping of [my] body’s form” (Silverman 16) and the affective. Looking at bodies feeling, listening to the dialogue that contradicted the sight/site of their emotions and being in the midst of sensation and cognition for the duration of *Edgar and Annabel*, I was able to engage with the fictional and doubly fictional worlds of *Edgar and Annabel* by way of the corpus of my corporeal and affective memories. The degree to which this process was “culturally inflected” (Bleeker 145) will be discussed in relation to the second aspect of my experience of *Edgar and Annabel*; the linguistic rendition of the visual by way of the audio describer’s practice.

### **Edgar and Annabel III: The “vocalic space” of Audio Description**

In *Dumbstruck: The Cultural History of Ventriloquism* scholar Steven Connor discusses the history of ventriloquism within the frame of a history of sound and the voice. While ventriloquism is quite different to audio description in its phenomenality and the experiential effects that it has on its audience, it is nonetheless a practice that engages with the aural/oral as much as (if not more than) the visual. Connor’s study is relevant to the discussion of this chapter because he not only examines the voice as a practice, but also considers the culturally-specific frames that have shaped this practice since the pre-modern era. A focal point in his discussion is the relationship between the visual and the aural/oral in the practice of the voice. In the opening chapter of his study Connor implicitly notes that while the feudal era was shaped by cultures of orality, the modern era (the economic product of capitalism and the cultural product of Perspectivalism) was shaped by cultures of literacy in other words “sighted” cultures (ch. 1). Noting this cultural shift Connor remarks that

[h]istorians of the passage from orality to literacy have suggested that the most important difference between a culture based upon sound and one based upon sight lies in the relation of language to temporality. For literate or, so to speak, ‘sighted’ cultures, words are thought of as forms of record, signs capable of capturing bits of the world and of experience, and holding them in place. In aural-

oral cultures, words are events; in visual-literate cultures, they are mnemonic objects. (ch. 1)

Functioning between the visual and the oral/aural, the practice of audio description captures the visual and transforms it to something oral that reaches its audience by way of the aural. Examined within the critical frame that Connor establishes, the practice of audio description takes the stability that is ascribed to the visual, in other words the perceptible “forms of record, signs capable of capturing bits of the [dramatic] world”, and transforms them into events, perceptual instances that can be experienced in a fleeting and indeterminate manner. This practice does not only highlight the experiential aspects of a performance beyond the frame of the perspectival tradition, but also locates the experience of a production on the audio describer’s very own corporeality. Being a mediator-spectator that bridges the gap between the visual elements of a performance and the non-visual experiential palate of her audience, the audio describer attends tentatively to the visual, translates it non-visually through the mechanism of proprioception and then communicates her visual experiences in a non-visual form whose aural aesthetics reinforce the impermanency that is inherent in the ontology of the performative event (see Phelan, *Unmarked* 147-166).

The aural/oral practice developed by the audio describer of *Edgar and Annabel* functioned on three levels. On one level the audio describer identified the props that complemented the action onstage: “table”, “chairs”, “pocketbook”, “script” and “soldering iron” were some of the words with the help of which the audio describer facilitated his non-visual description of the visual. On a second level the audio describer referred to the action onstage: “Marianne enters the kitchen”; “Nick holds two scripts out, while reading off one script”; “[Marianne, Nick, Tara and Mark] place their scripts down, as though they all prepare for action”; Nick “suddenly pulls [Marianne] into a firm kiss”; “Marianne strides off one direction; [Miller] to another”. Referring to the action onstage, the audio describer not only alluded to the kinaesthetic qualities of the performance, but also articulated the use of performance space in the production. On a third level the audio describer used language that alluded –at least on experiential terms– to the visual: “dark hair”; “mousy blonde hair”; “lights snap to semi-darkness”; “lights up where Marianne meets Miller”; “lights flicker”; “[Marianne and Nick’s] eyes meet, as though they’re longing for each other”; “another man enters the kitchen. He’s almost identical to Nick.”; “Marianne looks as though she’s given up”; “lights brighten in the kitchen ... another woman enters dressed identically to Marianne.” As the audio describer referred to colour, the light design, the characters’

appearance and their expressions he injected the visual by way of the linguistic. But why would the audio describer use language that does not resonate with the experiential palate of his audience?

Useful in answering this question is the conceptualisation of the practice of audio description as a “vocalic space” (Connor, ch. 1). Connor argues that “[v]ocalic space signifies the ways in which the voice is held both to operate in, and itself to articulate, different conceptions of space, as well as to enact the different relations between the body, community, time, and divinity.” (ch.1) Examined as a “vocalic space”, the three levels of the audio description of *Edgar and Annabel* can be understood as follows: the first two levels of the audio description articulated the audio describer’s position as a mediator-spectator that articulates the visual via the oral/aural. Not only did he identify props, but also he addressed his audience’s kinaesthetic and proprioceptive mechanisms in order to raise our spatial awareness. The third level of his audio description –the injection of the visual into the oral/aural– can be seen as his enactment of “the different relations between the body [and] community” (Connor, ch. 1). In “The Language System of Audio Description: An Investigation as a Discursive Process” Philip J. Piety suggests that

[i]t is important to note that persons with visual impairments, unlike many who are deaf, do not have a unique language. They are members of speech communities that are made up mostly of people without significant visual impairments. The language that consumers of audio description use in daily life is thus shaped by the sighted world. (n.p.)

While I do not agree with Piety’s generalised sentiment that there is one, unique sign-language for people with hearing impairments (as this approach reduces disability to a scientific model instead of identifying it as a set of plural and culturally specific alternative embodiments), I believe that Piety nonetheless makes a valid remark in terms of the relationship between language and the multiple experiences of visual impairment. Resonating the ocularcentric tendencies of “the Western philosophical project” (Debord, *Society* 11), their materialisation through the perspectival tradition and –perhaps– their socio-political implementation by way of the society of the spectacle, language functions within the frame of visibility as much as –if not more than– the frame of non-visibility. The reason why the language of audio description often refers to the visual is language’s symbolic function. Indeed, in *The Construction of Social Reality* language philosopher John Searle observes that

[t]here are words, symbols, or other *conventional* devices that *mean* something or express something or represent or symbolise something beyond themselves, *in a way that is publicly understandable*. ... Language ... essentially contains entities that symbolise. ... Thus the sentence “I am hungry” is part of language because it has representational or symbolic capacities by convention. But the actual feeling of hunger is not part of language because it represents its conditions of satisfaction intrinsically. You do not need language or any other sorts of conventions to feel hungry. (60–1)

Searle highlights an important feature of language: when he suggests that language has symbolic as much as representational qualities, he implies that language is conditioned to function not only within but also beyond the boundaries of embodied experience. Through the repeated use of words and expressions the language user reaches a point where she can engage with the symbolic nature of words and expressions while bypassing their relationship to embodied experience. When I say “the sky is blue”, for instance, I might refer to a particular sky or I might refer to the common-sense knowledge that “the sky is blue”. In the second case the words “sky” and “blue” acquire a symbolic value because they are expressed independently of a “real” sky and a “tangible” blue.

It is in this sense that the “vocalic space” of the audio description of *Edgar and Annabel* enacts “the different relations between the body [and] community” (Connor, ch. 1): engaging with symbolic language as well as language that resonates with his embodiment, the audio describer of *Edgar and Annabel* established a “vocalic space” that bears the marks of not only “the passage from orality to literacy” but also the development of “‘sighted’ cultures” in which “words are [stable] ... forms of record, signs capable of capturing bits of the world and of [visual] experience” (Connor, ch. 1). The “vocalic space” of the audio description of *Edgar and Annabel* therefore articulated not only the relationship between the audio describer and the visual dimensions of the performance but also the culturally specific parameters of the language that he used; a language that bears the marks of an ocularcentric tradition and –in many ways– an ableist culture. But in what ways did the “vocalic space” of the audio description of *Edgar and Annabel* “enact [some of] the different relations between the body ... time, and divinity” (Connor, ch. 1)?

Listening to the audio describer during the performance of *Edgar and Annabel*, I got a clear sense of his presence even in the dialogue-heavy sequences of the play where he

withdrew. The droning sound of the headset implied his presence even when he fell silent, while the wide –yet miniscule– distance that the sound of his voice had to cover (from the sound-booth where he was to the microphone that he used to the headset that I was wearing to my ear) gave me the impression that he was just addressing me instead of a wider audience. Nonetheless, his brittle and clear voice, his steady rhythm and the composed and neutral tone of his delivery even in the scenes during which the tension of the dramatic action escalated (such as the sixth scene of the production) resulted in an aesthetic of formality that suggested not only his distance from the theatrical event but also the professional capacity with which he addressed me. Far from being a personal and performative decision, the audio describer’s aesthetic of formality attempted to increase his credibility amongst his audience by giving the general impression of neutrality.

In “Universal Design on Stage: Live Audio Description for Theatrical Performances” John-Patrick Udo & Deborah I. Fels differentiate between conventional and creative audio descriptions. The difference between the two lays not only on the aesthetics of communication between the audio describer and her audience but also on the ways in which audio description relates to the performative event. Noting the evident lack of studies that examine audio described theatrical and performative events, Udo and Fels observe that the popularity of conventional audio descriptions in the theatre is symptomatic of the scarcity of critical sources that examine audio description in relation to the theatrical event itself (189-90). This scarcity has resulted in descriptive practices that follow the same guidelines that audio descriptions in the media of film and television do. According to Udo and Fels “the majority of these guidelines assert that describers must provide objective description that is not an interpretation of what is on the screen, only what the describer sees.” (189) Producing a conventional audio description, the audio describer becomes a disembodied eye/I that echoes the values of the perspectival tradition, a professional spectator –rather than a mediator-spectator– whose visual perceptions and the communication of these perceptions rely on calculated observations. But since the audio describer’s engagement with language is rooted in her corporeality and it develops as a *practice*, is it possible for her to produce an “objective description” (Udo and Fels 189)? In other words, can the “vocalic space” of audio description be a space of calculated observation and objectivity?

Useful in answering this question is the late work of Ludwig Wittgenstein because it examines language in relation to experience. In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein argues that language shapes what we experience as reality by way of its function within the frame of “language game[s]” (7). A “language game” consists of “language and the actions



into which it is woven” (Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 7) and its purpose is to “emphasise the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 15). Wittgenstein consciously chooses the word “game” to indicate that language (as activity) is rule-governed; the rules that govern a language game are *learnt social practices*. In the same way that I learn how to use cutlery when I eat, how to drive on the right-hand side of the road and how to play volleyball, I learn that the colour of the sky is described as light blue and that the colour light blue can be used linguistically in such and such an occasion. Wittgenstein’s conception of the “language game” enables him to engage—at least implicitly—with the sociology of language, in other words the position that language holds in social relations. Building on this Wittgenstein suggests that in the use of language there are multiple sets of rules that paradoxically both determine and are determined by the particular *context* of a language game. Not only can the social world affect the context of a language game, but also the activity of a language game can affect the spatial and social frameworks within which it unfolds. In this sense, the late Wittgenstein does not consider language as a closed and predetermined structure but rather as a mechanism whose limits are constantly redefined by the relationship between the social context of a language game and its users. In fact Wittgenstein goes as far as suggesting that as beings who engage with language, we cannot experience without the conceptual mechanism of language: “It is in language that an expectation and its fulfilment make contact.” (*Investigations* 138) As such, while philosophical investigations that precede *Philosophical Investigations* conceive of language as a tool that serves the development of knowledge, Wittgenstein’s late philosophy treats language as a source of knowledge in its own right; the field where (embodied) experience and its articulations coincide.

Within this frame language entails both the subjectivity and the corporeality of the language user. When considered in relation to Wittgenstein’s late philosophy of language, the guidelines of conventional audio description lose their momentum as the idea of a disembodied eye/I that communicates her visual impressions via observation and objective articulation is simply a conceptual construct. Furthermore, the fact that the communication of her visual impressions is facilitated via *spoken* language makes the call for objectivity seem even more fruitless. Examining both the phenomenality and the socio-political dimensions of the voice, Connor argues that

[t]o speak is to perform work, sometimes, as any actor, teacher, or preacher knows, very arduous work indeed. The work has the voice, or actions of voice, as its product and process; giving voice is

the process which simultaneously produces articulate sound, and produces myself, as a self-producing being. (ch. 1)

Connor observes that the process of voicing oneself and making one's presence felt in the world presuppose one another. Far from being a characteristic that belongs to the self, the voice is an activity according to Connor. Echoing Wittgenstein here, Connor roots spoken language in human activity and at the same time gives it an additional dimension: by voicing oneself one is also producing *herself* in the fabric of the world that surrounds her (ch. 1). Connor's conception of the voice as an event that simultaneously asserts subjectivity and projects this subjectivity to the world brings to the surface the interesting phenomenon according to which the subjectivity of the speaker entwines with the culturally specific world that surrounds her. Connor argues that

[m]y voice, as the passage of articulate sound from me to the world –usually, though by no means invariably, the social world– is something happening, with purpose, duration, and direction. If my voice is something that happens, then it is of considerable consequence to whom it happens, which is to say, who hears it. (ch. 1)

It is the “purpose, duration, and direction” of the voice that make it lie between the speaker's subjectivity, the general context in which her voice-as-activity occurs and her audience. Within this frame it can be argued that the audio describer's subjectivity and corporeality are not only rooted in her visual and non-visual experiences (by way of the mechanism of proprioception) but also in the *event* of audio description itself: the voicing of the audio describer's visual experiences within the specific context of a theatrical event to a specific audience in this theatrical event, an audience that –more often than not– does not index embodied experience in visual terms. The question that arises is how this event is framed.

To answer this question I turn once again to Connor. One of the most interesting aspects of Connor's critical examination of the voice in relation to ventriloquism –and perhaps the most relevant aspect of his work in relation to this chapter– is his engagement with voices that “appear to issue from elsewhere than their source.” (ch. 1) Providing a historical survey on ventriloquism, Connor observes that “this rather abstruse and specialized practice provided different cultures with a way both of enacting and of reflecting upon the powers and meanings of the voice as such.” (ch. 1) Questioning the relationship between the stability of the visual and its verification by the aural and vice versa, the disconnection of the voice from its source in ventriloquism has been acting as a cultural

prompt for culturally-specific understandings of the “power of the voice”. Whether linked to the metaphysical (a prophet speaks in languages as her body is “possessed” by a spirit) or “the psychotic and the ecstatic” (Connor, ch. 1), the dissociation between the spoken word and its visible source on the socio-political plane has always been understood as a commentary on –if not a demonstration of– power. Understood as a commentary on power, the dissociation between the voice and its source can produce affective responses that lay on the negative end of the affective spectrum as “human beings in many different cultural settings find the experience of a sourceless sound uncomfortable, and the experience of a sourceless voice intolerable.” (Connor, ch. 1) Such affective responses rely on the fact that

[a] voice without an origin, which is usually to say, a voice immune to the powers of the eye and the categorical cognitive functions associated with it, will emphasize the power of voice as utterance and effect over against its associations with presence and intention. (Connor, ch. 1)

While the image/sight of power is a stable artefact that can be perceived as a presence with a visible intention, the sound of a voice whose source cannot be seen encapsulates fleetingly and indeterminately the utterance and its effect all at once. In other words, the sound of a voice whose source cannot be seen *is* the sound of power because by voicing her –invisible to her audience– self she allows her utterance and its effect to temporally coincide. The “vocalic space” of an imperceptible to the eye voice therefore demonstrates not only the relations between “body [and]... community” by way of its engagement with symbolic language but also the position of the body with regards to “time, and divinity” (Connor, ch. 1) no matter how the “divine” is defined in each given time and place.

Examined as a voice without an origin, the voice of the conventional audio describer is a voice imperceptible to the eye because firstly, her practice functions as a complementary device to the theatrical event and secondly, her practice addresses an audience whose embodied experience revolves around the non-visual senses. According to Connor, in the multiple embodiments of visual impairment the imperceptible to the eye voice acquires great momentum within the fabric of everyday life given that its source can be acoustically and kinaesthetically located in space. Addressed as such, “[t]he blind person lives in his body rather than in the world: but it is a particular kind of body, a body given compelling but impermanent shape and volume by the experience of sound, which establishes strange continuities between the inside and the outside.” (Connor, ch. 1) At the same time, the imperceptible to the eye voice whose *location* cannot be deciphered maintains its affinity to

questions of power even in embodiments whose experiences revolve around the utterances of “invisible” voices. Connor remarks that

John Hull, who was able to interpret his blindness as a return to the oral and sonorous dimensions of religious experience, suggests that there is ... a fundamental difference between a divine principle that yields itself up to sight and one that does not. Sound is more readily associated with the transcendent, because sound ‘suggests that over which we have no power’. (ch. 1)

Linking the “invisible” voice to the transcendental, Connor (by way of Hull) notes that it is not the invisibility of the source of the voice per se that locates the imperceptible to the eye voice to the transcendental, but rather the mechanics of its interaction; the powerlessness with which one interacts with the “invisible”, the transcendental voice. Even if I can hear a “sourceless” voice, the voice performs in whatever way she wants and she shapes her event according to her own agenda whether it is personal, cultural, political and so on. In this sense, even if the alternative embodiments of people with visual impairments are more accustomed to the phenomenon of an “invisible” voice, the voices whose location cannot be sensed and whose performance takes place within a non-dialogic frame are voices that are bound with questions of power.

The ambiguity as to where exactly the audio describer stands –literally and figuratively– within the wider frame of the theatrical event makes her a voice whose source cannot be sensed by sighted audience members and audience members with visual impairments. But what is this voice’s relation to power, if any? Safely sitting in her booth, the audio describer has an eagle’s eye view of the production that she describes; not only can she see the visual dimensions of the performance clearly, but also she occasionally predicts the visual and/or the kinaesthetic elements of performance before they even occur. Wearing headsets that transmit a constant –yet discreet– buzzing sound, the audio describer’s audience is not only conscious of the fact that at any moment the audio describer might perform an utterance, but also –when she does– the effect of her utterance temporarily coincides with the utterance itself; performing the event of an audio description, the voice of the audio describer comes across as the voice of a *professional* spectator, a disembodied eye/I that catches the visual dimensions of the performance as soon as –or even before– they occur. What is more, while ever-felt as a voice in the overall experience of her audience, she “appears” to be remarkably absent from her practice; attempting to recreate the conceptual construct of objective observation, she masks her subjectivity and

corporeality through an aesthetic of formality. As such, the power of the unlocated voice of the audio describer lies on her attempt to recreate and enact the principles of observation, clinical calculation and rationality. She is, in other words, not only the voice of Perspectivalism but also the voice of reason that has dominated discourses of power since the early modern era and has competed with discourses of embodied experience, subjectivity and affect.

## **The Politics of Audio Description**

The practice of audio description has been developing for virtually thirty years now (see Piety). According to Udo and Fels “it developed out of newspaper-reading services for individuals who are blind or low-vision.” (195) Pfanstiehl, the American founder of live audio descriptions in the theatre, saw a correlation between the act of reading a newspaper and the act of articulating the visual dimensions of performance (Udo and Fels 195). Thirty years later audio description has developed into a systematic practice and has been adopted by a range of media around the Western world. Being presently the most widespread form of access aesthetics for people with visual impairments in the UK, the practice of audio description is generally received positively by audience members with visual impairments. Having gained access to an artform that –in its perspectival manifestations– encourages the practice of spectating as much as –if not more than– hearing, audience members with visual impairments have been able to enjoy a range of productions that –more often than not– take place within the boundaries of established theatrical institutions that include the incorporation of access aesthetics to their policies and budgets. An audience member with visual impairments that attended an audio described performance by VocalEyes (the most prominent audio description service in the UK) remarked that “having experienced [the audio description], it was to me an oasis in the middle of a desert as I thought theatre was barred to me for ever. Every time I go to the theatre now I really look forward to it as much as I ever did when I could see.” (“Audience Feedback”) Another audience member observed that “[i]t makes such a difference to me actually being able to follow the plot and have the visual aspects of the play highlighted; so much more enjoyable for me, and I do not need to ask my companion questions so we can just relax and enjoy.” (“Audience Feedback”) Speaking of his first ever audio description, Toby Davy recalled that

it was an amazing experience. For the first time I was able to follow the play, I knew what the stage was like, I knew what the set was like, I knew what the characters looked like, things were being described during the play ... It was great because it meant that I

was able to access theatre in a way that I had never been able to before. (VocalEyesAD)

While not exhausting at all, this feedback from audience members with visual impairments suggests that audio description can not only be seen as a utilitarian practice in the midst of the theatrical event but also as an experience in its own right. Giving rise to affects that lay on the positive spectrum of responses such as enjoyment and excitement (the enjoyment and excitement of gaining visual access to a theatrical event above all), audio description succeeds in both providing audience members with visual impairments with access to theatrical events and allowing theatrical institutions to reach out to audiences irrespectively of their visual abilities. But what does this mean in socio-political terms?

Useful in answering this question is art historian Claire Bishop who in *Artificial Hells* examines artistic practices that are socio-political by way of their participatory forms. In doing so she not only illustrates in great depth the socio-political landscape that surrounds socially inclusive art, but also suggests that participation has taken up different shapes from the early twentieth century onwards. While not engaging with the practice of audio description explicitly, Bishop notes that the artistic interest in social inclusion in the UK (having emerged from the development of community theatre in the 1960s) should be examined in relation to the social inclusion agenda of neo-liberal politics that was firstly implemented by the New Labour party in the 1990s. Discussing the neo-liberal social inclusion agenda, Bishop notes that

[t]he solution implied by the discourse of social exclusion is simply the goal of transition across the boundary from excluded to included, to allow people to access the holy grail of self-sufficient consumerism and be independent of any need for welfare. Furthermore, social exclusion is rarely perceived to be a corollary of neoliberal policies, but of any number of peripheral (and individual) developments, such as drug-taking, crime, family breakdown and teenage pregnancy. Participation became an important buzzword in the social inclusion discourse, but unlike its function in contemporary art (where it denotes self-realisation and collective action), for New Labour it effectively referred to the elimination of disruptive individuals. To be included and participate in society means to conform to full employment, have a disposable income, and be self-sufficient. (*Artificial Hells* 13-4)

Bishop argues that far from promoting the development of “realisation and collective action”, the social inclusion agenda has aimed at extinguishing difference on the grounds of the profit-making objectives of the capitalist market. The more citizens are involved in social life, the greater the number of “self-administering, fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state and who can cope with a deregulated, privatised world.” (Bishop, *Artificial Hells* 14) While the participatory practices in Bishop’s study develop in critical conversation with the fetishisation of the process of social inclusion, the status of the conventional practice of audio description in the midst of (neo-liberal) social inclusion practices becomes ambiguous.

While not a participatory art per se but rather an additional device that enables the inclusion of audience members irrespectively of their visual abilities, conventional audio description belongs to the social inclusion agendas of major theatrical institutions in London (and the UK) as part of their audience development strategies. The effect of such strategies is commendable because –beyond the boundaries of political theorisation– audience members with visual impairments *do* get to experience productions that they otherwise would have found confusing [“I was finding it really hard to follow what was going on onstage; I couldn’t really see what was going on; I only had the dialogue and what the actors were saying, and it was getting more and more difficult” (VocalEyesAD)]. Nonetheless, the motivations behind such strategies raise a number of questions about the political efficacy of such a model to social inclusion in the arts. It is not a coincidence that conventional audio description is implemented by institutions such as the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Barbican, the Almeida Theatre and so on. The question about the political efficacy of conventional audio descriptions in such major institutions arises by the fact that access aesthetics is part of their audience development strategies. In the case of subsidized theatrical institutions not only does the outreach to otherwise excluded from the theatrical event audiences comply with the social inclusion agenda of the neo-liberal state, but also it adheres to the criteria of the (closeted neo-liberal) Arts Council that funds them. In the case of commercial theatres their audience development strategies are interchangeable with their marketing plans; the more alternative embodiments they can accommodate, the more the ticket sales. Considered within this frame, the motivation behind the incorporation of access aesthetics in the agendas of theatrical institutions becomes of questionable ethics; the vocalic space of conventional audio description –established by the “invisible” voice of a disembodied eye/I– acquires a socio-political

dimension and becomes a quick-fix answer to the issues of social inclusion paradoxically raised by the state and the Arts Council alike.

Fortunately, audio description has received the attention of a number of practitioners that are interested in the creative possibilities of the practice and thus develop their work beyond the prescriptive boundaries of neo-liberal social inclusion agendas. Playwright Kaite O'Reilly, theatre company Graeae, and theatre company Extant are perhaps the most prominent practitioners in contemporary London that engage with the gap between visual and non-visual perception creatively. While I will consider the creative approaches of O'Reilly and Graeae in this chapter, Extant's work will be considered in greater detail as the case study of chapter five.

Kaite O'Reilly is one of the "playwrights emerging from disability arts and culture who are incorporating so-called 'access devices' into the dramaturgy of their plays." (O'Reilly 33) In "A Playwright Reflects on 'Alternative Dramaturgies'" O'Reilly discusses audio description as a form that can lead to the development of "alternative dramaturgies" and thus enrich contemporary theatrical practices for practitioners and audience members with disabilities as much as able-bodied theatre-makers and spectators. Reflecting on her practice, O'Reilly notes that she is "particularly interested in exploring the overall impact on the dramaturgy that this additional development [audio description] may have." (34) Elaborating on this she remarks that

[i]n my own practice, I prefer to use it only fleetingly as a 'straight' access device, focusing instead on exploring it creatively – as an aesthetic, as an unreliable narrator, as an extra character, spoken by all the cast or only one, as a separate, non-naturalistic narrative thread, impacting on the action and everything that's said. (34)

Having a visual impairment herself, O'Reilly is interested in the incorporation of the aesthetics of audio description into the wider aesthetics of the theatrical event. Unlike conventional approaches to performance, O'Reilly's manifesto for "alternative dramaturgies" by way of the practice of audio description calls for the development of an active and dialogic relationship between the audio descriptive devices and the theatrical event itself. In this creative frame the vocalic spaces that are established by the audio description on the one hand and the dialogue and soundscape of the theatrical event on the other hand are entwined to such a degree that audio description becomes an integral part of the aesthetics and poetics of the theatrical event as a whole. Setting up a transparent



relationship between these two vocalic spaces, O'Reilly calls for the development of theatrical events that revolve around an aesthetic of access.

A similar approach to theatre-making is adopted by theatre company Graeae. Discussing Graeae's *On Blindness* with Josephine Machon, playwright Glynn Cannon recalls that

[w]e talked about audio-description and including that in the text but also the big thing that we talked about all the time, a thing that I talk about a lot in theatre in general, is the gap between audience and performance. You want the audience to want to come and fill that in; in terms of information given and in terms of the blanks. That was the ethos to some extent; that there was an equality of chaos. (161)

Interestingly, Sealy and Cannon's conception of audio description is the complete opposite to conventional conceptions of this practice. While conventional audio descriptions attempt to fill in the [perceptual] gaps of a theatrical event by way of the practice of audio description, Graeae attempt to maximise these gaps in order to invite their audience to engage actively with the theatrical event as a whole. It is in these gaps that the company engage with the "idea of tapping into the imagination ... making [the] audience perceive something that is intangible" (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 163), while they establish "new vocabularies and different approaches that refer to the sensual." (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 165) Conceived of as a creative medium with the help of which practitioners can establish "new vocabularies" that set up a dialogic relationship between the visual and the non-visual in embodied terms, audio description can function within the anti-perspectival paradigm because the linguistic – as practice – serves to enhance the visceral and the experiential.

The main difference between these creative approaches to audio description and conventional audio descriptions is the fact that they utilise systems of vision in different ways. While, as I discussed in the previous section, conventional approaches to audio description function within the perspectival frame of objective observation, creative approaches to audio description engage with what Bleeker identifies as the process of "focalisation" (27). Bleeker remarks that

[p]erspective tends to focus attention only on what is seen, and to direct attention away from the position from which things are seen. In this way, the relationship between the thing seen and the determinism inherent in from where it is seen is obscured.

Focalization, on the other hand, describes the precise relationship between the subject viewing and the object viewed as it is given within the particular construction of the visual, verbal, or multimedia text. (27-8)

The concept of focalization and Bleeker's understanding of it are useful in the discussion of this section because creative approaches to audio description are not necessarily concerned with the linguistic rendition of an object seen, but rather focus on the positions of the elements of performance (visual and non-visual alike), the relations that are established between them and the communication of these relations by way of the creative management of access aesthetics. An example will illustrate this point further.

In her conference paper "Integrated Audio Description", playwright Alex Bulmer discusses Graeae's production of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (performed in 2006-7). Noting the production's incorporation of audio description in the theatrical event, Bulmer argues that "what Graeae is doing is not so much audio description but creating a descriptive narrative that is woven within the piece to tell the story, so it is very much a part of the overall artistic concept." (n.p.) In the transcript of her conference paper one can find the written extract of a scene from the production in which the lines that function as audio descriptions are transcribed in italics:

[Music under]

*KATE. An expensive hotel room. Two people. Ian is 45, Welshborn but lived in Leeds much of his life. Kate is 21, a lower middle-class southerner.*

IAN. Excellent

KATE. Isn't it amazing?

*KATE. Ian has spread a small pile of newspapers on the bed and goes straight to the minibar where he pours himself a large gin.*

*KATE. He leans out of the window into the street and looks back into the room.*

IAN. I've shat in better places than this.

*KATE. He goes to have a drink.*

IAN. I stink, do you want a bath?

*KATE. Shakes her head.*

*KATE. Ian goes into the bathroom, and we hear him running the water. (Bulmer)*

Appointing audio descriptive lines to the characters of the play instead of a disembodied and "invisible" eye/I that does not belong to the dramatic world, Graeae's creative approach to audio description allows for descriptive lines to assume a position, in other words to

unapologetically embrace the agency that is inherent in the communication of the visual via the linguistic. Read out as stage directions rather than objective accounts of the visual dimensions of the performance, the descriptive utterances in this extract not only become a part of the dramatic world of the production, but also resonate with the positionality of specific characters. For instance, the description “*Kate: Shakes her head*” has a different dynamic to the description “*Kate: Ian goes into the bathroom, and we hear him running the water.*” (Bulmer) While in the first instance the character of Kate assumes a position in relation to herself and communicates this position to the audience, in the second instance she reinforces her position in relation to the character of Ian and respectively lets the audience know. Being the sole audio describer in this extract, the character of Kate assumes the position of a subjective seer whose linguistic renditions of Ian’s actions onstage –as well as her own actions– articulate the power relations between the two characters. Kate is present as she not only attempts to engage with Ian through the dialogue of the play, but also records linguistically the action onstage. Ian, on the other hand, is virtually absent, engrossed in his self-absorbed world. The interjection of audio descriptive lines as part of the performance not only illustrates linguistically the systems of vision –and power– that are at play during a production, but also undermine the self-sufficiency of the representational frame of the production. In this sense, such creative approaches to audio description raise questions about the relationship between visibility and non-visibility in the theatre and celebrate the positionality of multiple and/or alternative embodiments in relation to an ableist and ocularcentric culture. It is at this point that the endorsement of the process of focalization in the mechanics of audio description makes the practice evidently political. As Bleeker remarks

[f]ocalization draws attention to the position from which things, people and events are seen and also how this subjective position mediates the vision presented to us. Focalization helps to clarify how such subjective positions implied within the address presented to us by, for example, a theatre performance, invite us to take up these positions, identifying with the point of view they present us with. (28)

Developing a practice of transparency in their use of descriptive utterances, creative approaches to audio description make the positions that frame the communication between the performance and the audience “visible” via the aural. In doing so they not only separate the vocalic space that they establish from the social space that entails ambiguous social

inclusion agendas, but also celebrate multiple embodiments by way of the multiple possibilities that the incorporation of access aesthetics *within* the theatrical event might result in. As such, the vocalic space of audio description has the potential to contradict ableist and ocularcentric models of experience in favour of alternative embodiments that open up a wide range of creative and experiential possibilities. Crucially this creative approach to the practice of audio description has the potential to turn a theatrical event that takes place in an otherwise perspectival setting into a “performative political ecology” to use Thrift’s term (22).

Commenting on *Peeling*, a play that O’Reilly developed in collaboration with Graeae, theatre scholar Josefina Komporalý argues that “while the most vulnerable figure transforms into the most powerful one, established hierarchies of gender and corporeal ability are undermined; *peeling* [sic.] makes its mark as a radical and quietly ground-breaking show.” (qtd. in O’Reilly 33) I would argue that the radical elements in *Peeling* lay on its embracement of the vulnerability of the human condition; this approach not only projects empowerment to alternative embodiments, but also allows for access aesthetics to assume political agency. The celebration of multiple embodiments by way of audio description could potentially turn the vocalic space of audio description into a space where “microbiopolitics” (Thrift 187) are practiced in a self-reflexive way. In *Non-representational Theory* Thrift observes that

much corporeal experience is based on bodily states that underline corporeal vulnerability, such as fatigue and exhaustion or pain and suffering or exposure to extreme cold or heat or lack of sleep ... corporeal life is inherently susceptible, receptive, exposed; open beyond its capacities to comprehend and absorb. One should not overdo this condition of vulnerability, of course ... but neither should one underplay it. (239)

Thrift argues that in “the new era of the inhabitable map” (16) the body is often conceived of as an invincible sensation-originating machine. This model of the body “underplays” at best and overlooks at worst the vulnerability that is inherent in human existence. Thrift observes that there is great affective and political potential in the creation of spaces that not only acknowledge and celebrate human vulnerability, but also “act as a prosthesis which offers cognitive assistance on a routine basis” (98) because “the prosthesis is not a mere extension of the human body; it is the constitution of this body qua ‘human’” (Stiegler qtd. in Thrift 239). Implicitly embracing the disability model of embodiment according to which conceptions of “normality” are re-defined as “temporarily able-bodied” experiences (see

French et al.; and Charlton), Thrift implies that the spaces that embrace human vulnerability and complement it by way of cultural prosthetic aids have the potential to enter the terrain of “microbiopolitics” (187). Elaborating on his examination of this form of politics, Thrift remarks that

*[m]icrobiopolitics [is] a new domain carved out of the half-second delay which has become visible and so available to be worked upon through a whole series of new entities and institutions. This domain was already implicitly political, most especially through the mechanics of the various body positions which are a part of its multiple abilities to anticipate. Now it has become explicitly political through practices and techniques which are aimed at it specifically. (187)*

Establishing a connection between the biological and the cultural, microbiopolitics engage with bodies as political agents within the wider socio-political fabric of everyday life. Conceiving of the body as a political entity, they engage with the human potential as well as the limitations of human experience and they attempt to materialise the potential of the human body by way of cultural interventions. While such an approach might have alarming political implications (see, for instance, the biopolitics of the Nazi regime by way of eugenics) the “micro” in the term microbiopolitics calls for the emergence of a plurality of practices and techniques. Illustrating the political potential of such practices and techniques, Thrift argues that

we require a microbiopolitics of the subliminal, much of which operates in the half-second delay between action and cognition, a microbiopolitics which understands the kind of biological-cum-cultural gymnastics that takes place in this realm which is increasingly susceptible to new and sometimes threatening knowledges and technologies that operate upon it in ways that produce effective outcomes, even when the exact reasons may be opaque, a micropolitics which understands the insufficiency of argument to political life without, however, denying its pertinence. (192)

Engaging with practices and techniques that address human vulnerability in creative and empowering ways, creative approaches to audio description can be seen as a “microbiopolitics of the subliminal” since they have the potential to invest in the political by

way of the embodied and the affective. Focusing on the body and celebrating multiple embodiments, creative approaches to audio description invite the audience to fill in the gaps maintained by the dialogic relationship between the visual and the non-visual, celebrate their subjectivity and engage with imaginative practices whereupon their own interpretation of the visual is translated into non-visual embodied understandings by way of the mechanism of proprioception. In this sense, creative approaches to audio description can inject some of the characteristics of the anti-perspectival tradition even in events that function within the boundaries of institutions that embrace the perspectival tradition. They not only celebrate the different subjectivities of each audience member, but also value the human body as the site of knowledge and (potentially) political empowerment. As such, the vocalic spaces of creative audio descriptions –marvelling in their plurality– can contradict the premises of ableist cultural spaces and challenge the ocularcentric tendencies that still resonate in our culture even after the advent of the experience economy.

### **On the Power of Vulnerability**

In this chapter I have discussed the audio described performance of *Edgar and Annabel* from a number of perspectives. Firstly, I discussed briefly the interplay between the visual and the non-visual in a performance that takes place in a conventional setting and under conditions that resonate with the perspectival tradition. Discussing Silverman and Bleeker's examinations of proprioception, I came to the conclusion that –even in the most conventional of settings– non-visibility can function as the critical frame with the help of which the visual is understood in terms of the non-visual, corporeal and the affective. Secondly, I discussed my experience of audio description in relation to some of the most pressing issues that stem from the conventional approach to audio description. Developing her practice between the visual and the aural/oral, between her subjectivity and the conceptual construct of objectivity, the audio describer of a conventional audio description establishes a vocalic space that is at once an event and an affirmation of her contribution to the wider frame of the theatrical event. The fact that the audio describer's voice, in other words the vocalic space that she establishes, is imperceptible to the eye makes conventional approaches to audio description explicitly connected to questions of power. More specifically, I illustrated how the voice of the conventional audio describer is the voice of reason and the perspectival tradition. Thirdly, considering the general politics of audio description, I discussed an alternative to conventional approaches to the practice that undermines both the role of the audio describer as a disembodied eye/I and her performance

as the voice of the perspectival tradition. Creative approaches to audio description not only problematize the affinity of access aesthetics to neo-liberal social inclusion agendas, but also set up vocalic spaces in which the plurality of multiple embodiments can be empowering. Functioning within the frame of what Thrift identifies as “microbiopolitics” (187), creative approaches to audio description embrace human vulnerability and comment on the relationship between the visual and the non-visual, the biological and the cultural, ocularcentrism and the experience economy.

While the case study of the audio description of *Edgar and Annabel* has made the relationship between the critical frames of visibility and non-visibility in the theatre more complex, it has also brought to the surface an important point that will inform the discussion of the following chapters: in a cultural and socio-political landscape that is increasingly concerned with the body, experience and the generation of affects, the experience and creative articulations of alternative embodiments have the potential to counteract the models of embodiment according to which the body is an invincible sensation-generating machine. Within this frame the celebration of the power of vulnerability becomes a significant aspect of the “performative political ecologies” that Thrift calls for (22). Not only can the power of vulnerability make a statement against the fetishisation of the process of social inclusion in the state and in major theatrical institutions, but also it can lead—as I hope I have demonstrated—to new vocabularies that move beyond the articulations of experience in our body-centric culture. It is this advantaged position (the “one step ahead”) that makes the power of vulnerability and its creative articulations (in space and beyond it) worthy of attention. In the following chapter I will step away from the theatre and onto the cultural plane of the urban landscape of London; I will not only discuss the first case study of this thesis that engages with the non-visual form of darkness, but also examine the ways in which the performative aspects of a cultural practice beyond the boundaries of a theatrical setting reinforce and/or undermine the embracement of the power of vulnerability that can emerge from the engagement with the non-visual.

## 4. “Playing Blind(ness)” in Dans Le Noir

### Introduction

In the *Sociology on the Menu: An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society*, social scientists Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil examine the social dimensions of eating from both a historical and a sociological perspective. Beardsworth and Keil observe that the social practice of dining out is shaped by “a commercial nexus between a consumer and a service provider” (121). Outlining the particular characteristics of this “commercial nexus”, Beardsworth and Keil remark that in the social space of a restaurant

[t]here is artifice and pretence, diners are under close surveillance from waiters, they are guided through the menu so that the waiter is between food and eater, wine waiters subdue the diners and establish boundaries and hierarchies and assure diner discomfort. The restaurant owner greets and guides in ways which enhance control. (120)

Beardsworth and Keil observe that the social space of restaurants is shaped by a number of factors that reinforce the “consumer”-“service provider” relationship: when I dine out in a restaurant in London the food that I consume is prepared for me. In most cases of the slow food industry I will be served by waiters. I am expected to consume food in a standardised manner by using the props provided by the restaurant (cutlery, plates, glasses etc.). Furthermore, the fact that I dine in the presence of strangers means that I have to abide to the table manners that I learnt as a child. Lastly, at the end of my afternoon or evening dining out I have to pay a bill that reflects –or at least should reflect– the quality of the food that I have consumed.

Interestingly most of the factors that shape the social space of a restaurant are highly dependent on appearances. When I walk in a restaurant I can tell that it is a restaurant through visual clues: the dinner tables, the chairs, cutlery, glasses are some of the few props that form the visual landscape of a restaurant. This visual landscape is also informed by the presentation of food. In her article “Foodtainment” performance scholar Joanne Finkelstein notes a new phase in the history of dining in which the food industry is informed by the mechanics of the entertainment industry in order to produce unique experiential products for their customers. This merging of the culinary, the aesthetic and the



performative is, according to Finkelstein, mostly evident in the visual dimensions of food. Finkelstein argues that

[t]he actual presentation of food in restaurants, in display cabinets in markets, in the gourmet section of department stores, and at gastronomy festivals has become a feature of the everyday. These presentations are designed to privilege the idea of food and insert it into daily life without, at the same time, making it banal. Restaurant cuisine accomplishes this by promoting fashionable styles. ... Presenting food in accord with fashion bestows upon it a multiplicity of functions, making it seem a plaything, an aesthetic object, a status symbol, entertainment and more. (130)

Finkelstein suggests that the merging of the culinary and the aesthetic/performative results in elaborate presentations that resonate with the fashion trends of each season. Placing the visual above the olfactory and the gustatory, restaurants that belong to the foodainment industry invest in the possibilities that such an approach might have in the practice of dining. Far from consuming food for the purposes of nutrition, the customers of such restaurants consume aesthetic experiences by way of food that is a symbolic as much as a material part of the fabric of everyday life. As such, the (re)presentational qualities of food (its visual dimensions) transform food from a utilitarian material aspect of everyday life to an aesthetic commodity in its own right. The question that arises at this point is quite predictable given the topic of this thesis: what happens when a restaurant turns off the lights of its dining room and conceals from its patrons the visual dimensions of food?

In this chapter I will discuss the first non-visual space that I identified during my research: the dark dining room of the Dans Le Noir restaurant in London. Being a restaurant, Dans Le Noir is above all a social space where the social activity of dining takes place. While a social space, Dans Le Noir conceals the visual dimensions of its dining room and invites its customers to experience the social activity of dining in complete darkness. In doing so it produces highly affective experiences for its patrons that, as I shall discuss in this chapter, lie between the performative/theatrical and everyday life. The case study of Dans Le Noir is useful for the discussion of this thesis because it not only offers a fertile ground upon which the non-visual form of darkness can be examined, but also it enables the discussion to deal with space at the interface of the performative and the habitual and the habitual and the socio-political. But how does one examine a social space that entails both the performative and everyday life?

While the critical frame of the second chapter has provided this thesis with a clear conceptualisation of space as a socio-political vessel, it hasn't illustrated the exact ways in which space can be examined. The focus should be placed on the interaction between the body, the configurations in a particular space and the practices entailed in it; the question that remains unanswered however is how could this interaction be framed theoretically and eventually articulated in a systematic manner. Useful in addressing this question is Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. While forty years old, *The Production of Space* is a seminal work in the Marxist corpus of writing; not only does it develop in a culturally materialist frame, but also –by focusing on the intricacies of everyday life– it goes beyond it. As such, *The Production of Space* offers invaluable methodological insights in terms of the examination of social space and the other spaces that are entailed in it. Acknowledging the complexity of examining social space, Lefebvre also discusses the challenge of articulating one's findings. Commenting on the relationship between space and discourse, Lefebvre remarks that:

[e]very language is located in a space. Every discourse says something about a space (places or sets of places); and every discourse is emitted from a space. Distinctions must be drawn between discourse *in* space, discourse *about* space and the discourse *of* space. There are thus relationships between language and space which are to a greater or lesser extent misconstrued or disregarded. (132)

Distinguishing between three different types of discourse in the analysis of space, Lefebvre suggests that the relationship between space and discourse is multidimensional. Lefebvre's distinction between the propositions "*in*", "*about*" and "*of*" (132) demonstrates that one cannot engage with all the dimensions of space at once. If one is to discuss a particular space on a discursive level, she has to clarify the perspective from which she discusses it. The methodological questions that emerge from Lefebvre's understanding of the relationship between space and discourse are the following: what is my position in relation to a given space? On what grounds do I discuss this space and who do I address? What is the particular focus of my discursive examination of this space?

Informed by these methodological questions and the conceptual distinction between the propositions "*in*", "*of*" and "*about*" (Lefebvre 132), the aim of this chapter is to examine the social space of *Dans Le Noir* in order to illustrate the characteristics of the relationship between space and non-visibility at the interface of the performative and the

social. While not spectatorship in its strict sense, the experience of the non-visual space of Dans Le Noir engages with the aesthetics of dining and promotes the production of poetics that are rooted in the aesthetics of dining. As a result, it will hopefully inform the discussion of the ensuing two chapters that discuss non-visibility in relation to performance spaces while problematizing the clear binaries and boundaries between the performative and everyday life.

I will begin the discussion of this chapter by discussing my experience *in* the dark dining room of Dans Le Noir and I will focus on my personal experience. Attempting to decipher the specific characteristics of the interaction between my body, the dark dining room of Dans Le Noir and the social practice of dining, I will “set the stage” for the discussion of the ensuing sections of this chapter. I will continue the discussion by contextualising my experience of Dans Le Noir by way of the restaurant’s cultural history. In doing so I will illustrate the performative affinity between Dans Le Noir, the performativity of darkness and the performativity of food in general. Assisting me in this will be the work of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett that examines in detail the intersection between the performative and the culinary. After this concise cultural history of Dans Le Noir I will focus on the most predominant quality of the dark dining room of Dans Le Noir: its performativity by way of its affective darkness and the dining activities of its patrons. Attempting to bridge the gap between my personal experiences, the articulation of my experience and some more generalised remarks, I will consult an ethnographic survey on Dans Le Noir that was undertaken by cultural geographers Tim Edensor and Emily Falconer. In this section I will discuss the performative dimensions of dining in the dark, the interplay between the social space of the restaurant and the production of place as well as the affective effects that such an interplay might have. Lastly, I will conclude the discussion of this chapter talking *about* Dans Le Noir and I will thus refer to the critical frame that I outlined in the second chapter of this thesis while examining the politics of Dans Le Noir in relation to its self-proclaimed status as a social enterprise. With the help of the critical insights of performance scholars Jen Harvie and Maurya Wickstrom I will problematize such a conception and examine Dans Le Noir in relation to not only the urban landscape of London but also some of the characteristics of the experience economy. Within this frame I hope to demonstrate the various –and often contradictory– dimensions of the non-visual form of darkness within a frame that lies between both the performative and everyday life, and the experiential and the political.

## Being in the Dark

Situated in a rather quiet square near Farrington tube station in London, the social space of Dans Le Noir does not look like a typical restaurant from the outside. If you peek through the restaurant's front windows you will see a bar at the far end of its well-lit foyer, a set of sofas on its right-hand side corner and a row of lockers taking up the entirety of its left-hand side wall. The visual clues that are present in the foyer give the initial impression that Dans Le Noir is a poorly and oddly decorated bar.

When my friends and I entered the foyer of Dans Le Noir we were greeted by the head waiter of the restaurant whose friendly tone indicated that he had encountered the look of anticipation and apprehension on our faces many times before. We were asked to leave our personal belongings in a cabinet whose key was the only item that we were allowed to hold on to when we would enter the dark dining room. Mobile phones, watches and anything that would emit the slightest amount of light and would disrupt the complete blackout were strictly prohibited under the restaurant's regulations.

Once our head waiter had ensured that we abided to the rules of dining in the dark we were presented with the different menu options, four pre-set menus that were surprisingly distinguished by virtue of colour: blue stood for the fish menu, green for the vegetarian menu, red for the meat menu and white –the tabula rasa of all colours– denoted the chef's surprise menu. Our experience began with the highly visual activity of choosing a colour that was appointed to a specific menu and this created an interesting dynamic between the visual and non-visual in the particular setting of Dans Le Noir. Colour, the only visual element that was entailed in our non-visual experience of dining in the dark, provided us with –limited– information. The identification between colour and taste introduced us to an interesting motif that was maintained throughout our experience of dining in the dark: in the context of Dans Le Noir the relationship between the visual and the non-visual was conveyed as the relationship between the known and the unknown. Even the white option in the menu that was the chef's surprise functioned within the frame of the known albeit to a more limited extent; white, the colour of all colours, probably stood for a menu that combined some of the options offered by the other three menus. The surprise in the white menu was a matter of agency rather than a matter of top secrecy; by choosing the white menu you placed your trust to the chef's discretion, who –on your behalf– created a well-rounded meal. Blindly trusting the chef of Dans Le Noir and anticipating the surprise –not the unknowingness– that would come from an array of tastes, we decided to opt for the white menu.

Once we had decided on the menu option the head waiter introduced us to Brian, our waiter for the night, whose behaviour was friendly yet professional. Before we entered the dining room Brian gave us a concise description of what was about to happen: we would enter the dark space. We have to be cautious and follow his instructions at all times. In case we need any assistance during the evening, we should call out Brian's name and he will come to us; we should not move around the blacked-out space on our own because this could create a health and safety hazard. Brian's instructions were reassuring because they not only prepared us mentally for the whole experience, but also demonstrated that the restaurant's policy is concerned with its clients' health and safety. Brian turned around in a highly performative manner and instructed us to form a line by placing our hands on each other's shoulders. He informed us –in a steady voice– that we were just about to enter the dark room. We moved through the first set of curtains, then a red-lit corridor and finally through a set of heavy velvet curtains. We had finally walked “dans le noir”.

I had mentally prepared myself for encountering a completely blacked-out space, but the darkness of the Dans Le Noir dining room was inviolable; the *total* absence of the visual. As much as I had tried to imagine what the blacked-out space would feel like, the reality of the experience of stepping into such darkness absorbed me instantly. As I was reflecting on my initial reaction to the blacked-out dining room Brian led us to our table and instructed us to stand still as he tended to us one by one. Since I was the last in the line that we had formed before we entered the dining room I had to wait before Brian took me by the arm, pulled out my chair and guided my hand so I could feel out my seat. I eventually sat down and what followed was a linguistic introduction of the setting of our dinner table: “In front of you you will find your cutlery [Pause] and two glasses; the large glass is for water and the small glass is for your wine, which will arrive shortly. [Pause] Is everyone OK?” The rhythm of linguistic communication had changed dramatically once we had entered the dining room. The instant interplay between word and image was challenged by the absence of the visual and as a result Brian's linguistic descriptions were obstructed by small pauses that would allow us to confirm that what was being said was factual and accurate. My instinctive reaction was to feel out the small space that was assigned to me on the dinner table in order to verify that Brian's words corresponded to something tangible.

The non-visual space of Dans Le Noir forced me to restructure the way in which my body behaves. In the absence of the visual the boundaries of my personal space had to be defined consciously and with the aid of the more intimate sense of touch. From the moment that we entered the dining room to the instant that I settled at the dinner table touch was

the prevalent sense in my body: before I sat down I had to feel out my chair in order to take a seat. When I was finally settled I had to feel the props on the dinner table that lay in front of me. Even though this set of tactile motions occurred almost instinctively at the time, it is now evident to me that I was searching for a form of sensory reassurance within the blacked-out space of the restaurant. Since I was about to engage with the social practice of dining out, I needed to somehow ensure that this non-visual space complied with the general standards of the restaurant industry, to examine whether or not it followed the basic premises of the practice of dining out.

While my tactile impressions reassured me of this on an intimate level, the presence of auditory clues in the dark dining room gave me a sense of its potential size. Hearing the voices of the other diners on the one hand and the sound that the use of cutlery, plates and glasses makes on the other hand provided my sense of space with perspective. The numerous voices and sounds that I could hear were mainly differentiated by virtue of volume. Some of them resonated in my ears quite clearly; others resembled more of a soft echo. My sense of space in the non-visual dining room of Dans Le Noir was thus informed by the social activity that took place in it. The space of the room revealed itself as a matrix of personal spaces since the only way that I could define it was through the interplay between the personal boundaries of my body on the one hand (acquired through the tactile impressions of my immediate surroundings) and the other diners' presences on the other hand (experienced in the form of auditory clues that filled in the room).

Brian arrived with our water and wine; he served us our drinks and encouraged us to feel our way around the dinner table. After all, our glasses were made from very thick glass that doesn't break, he assured us. Once our starter arrived I cautiously felt the boundaries of my plate that gave me the impression of a geometrical square; the food was arranged in the middle. I grabbed my fork and knife making sure that I held my knife in the right direction and started eating. I instantly became conscious of the empty movements in the space of my plate; I was trying to pin my food down with my fork but the absence of the visual made the habitual activity of eating rather challenging. Pinning my food down turned into a matter of chance rather than a matter of skill.

The tastes that were present in the starter felt strong and bold and I could easily differentiate between things that were sour, salty, sweet or bitter. The textures were equally discernible: crunchy, diluted, thick and treacly. The dinnertime conversation between my friends and I turned into a linguistic guess-game as we attempted to make sense of our dishes. Listening to the fellow patrons sitting close to us, we realised that we were not alone

in this. Our tongues became the hands of our mouths and we felt our way around the mouthfuls of unknown food items.

As the main course arrived I thought that I could smell fish, but once I started eating I realised that I had confused the smell of meat for the smell of fish. There was something brittle that I tried to pin down with great difficulty and after a while I decided to disregard table manners and use my hands. The motion from plate to mouth became much easier and soon I was enjoying a piece of potato. The tastes of the meat on my plate were varied; it must be a selection of different meats, I thought, and the linguistic guess-game between my dining companions and I confirmed this. I instantly recognised the taste of lamb –the most celebrated of meats in the Greek cuisine. My next mouthful was that of liver, something that I would not have eaten had I been able to see my dish. The very next bite was of another type of meat that I could not identify –I asked my friends whether or not they knew what it was. The absence of the visual meant that I needed to describe this type of meat in as much detail as possible but by that point we were all lost in a world of meats and couldn't identify who was eating what and when.

As I previously mentioned, I initially experienced the space of Dans Le Noir through the interplay between my tactile sensations and the auditory presences of others; in terms of my personal experience this can be understood as the interplay between the intimate and the (relatively) distant. When the food arrived the balance between the intimate and the distant changed as the tactile, olfactory and gustatory sensations that I experienced reinforced my sense of personal space. As I focused on both the effort and the sensations of eating in the dark, the matrix of social relations within the dining room reduced in size; the distant to me patrons did not have an auditory impact on me anymore. The only auditory stimulus that I focused on by that point was the conversation that I was having with my friends who were in close proximity to me. Upon the arrival of food I experienced a different space even though physically I was still in the same room. Were this room a visible space, it would have maintained its size on the grounds of its visible boundaries. But in the absence of the visual the size of the dining room of Dans Le Noir shifted according to my activity within it. I therefore experienced two different versions of the same room: “the ample” version before we were served by Brian and “the intimate” version after the food had arrived.

The arrival of the food did not only shift my experience of the size of the space, but also changed the way in which my friends and I dealt with the non-visual form of darkness. As I have already mentioned, once my friends and I started eating we resorted to a guess-game in order to ‘make sense’ of our olfactory and gustatory sensations. Widespread

(mis)conceptions about the practice of dining in the dark would suggest that the sense of taste is intensified upon the absence of the visual. Within the constraints of “the intimate” version of the space of Dans Le Noir taste was, indeed, experienced intensely; nonetheless, an intense tasting experience was not enough. Language was involved in every of my mouthfuls as my engagement with it followed each tasting sensation and projected it to the realm of my visual imagination.

When we had all decided that we had finished our main dish (we couldn’t be sure, after all) Brian cleared up our table with great ease. By this point I felt that the space of the dining room had shrunk, possibly due to the fact that more diners had arrived as we were having our starter and main dishes. I obviously could not tell by visually calculating the numbers, but the amount of different voices had increased significantly and the soundscape of the restaurant (the sound of cutlery on plates, glasses on tables etc.) had tripled in volume.

About five minutes later Brian brought our dessert and for the last time in the evening I cautiously felt my way around the new plate that consisted of two small pots (one cold and one warm) accompanied by something soft on the side. I decided to start with the cold pot that contained either ice cream or frozen yogurt. Its taste was quite ambiguous as it was citric and plentiful at the same time; a bizarre blend of lemon and butterscotch came to mind. I then ate what turned out to be a generously chocolate-filled crepe. Lastly, I had a taste of the contents of the warm pot whose light texture and rich flavour suggested that it was probably a chocolate soufflé. After I ensured that I had taken the last bite of the soufflé my gastronomic journey in Dans Le Noir had come to an end. I could now relax and take in the pitch darkness as much as I could.

After a while Brian approached us, made sure that we had all finished our desert and asked us whether or not we were ready to walk out of the dining room. He instructed us to stand up and form a similar line to the one we had formed when we entered the dining room. We moved into the space, passed through the curtains that had revealed to us the unconceivable darkness of the dining room, walked through the red-lit corridor that had led us in and finally arrived at the well-lit foyer. We received a warm goodbye from Brian as we thanked him for his assistance throughout our experience. We paid the bill and stepped into the familiar and well-lit urban landscape of London.

### **Dans Le Noir and the “Theatrics of Darkness”**

In the beginning of the twentieth century the Futurists held an event entitled *Tactile Dinner Party*. Being a practical reflection of Filippo Marinetti’s aesthetic of Tactilism [“[i]n the aesthetic of tactilism, touch supplants vision in the privileging of the five senses and holds



powers available to be tapped and explored” (Fisher 167)], *Tactile Dinner Party* attempted to shock the body by exposing her in an environment that would force her to reevaluate the use of her senses. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in “Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium”, Marinetti and his troupe asked their diners

to wear pajamas, sit in a darkened room, and bury their faces in salad to activate the skin on the outer cheeks and lips. They might fondle a tactile device while eating ‘polyrhythmic salad’, listening to music, and smelling lavender perfume. Or, since tasting did not require swallowing, they were prepared to put things into their mouths that could not be swallowed. (7)

While not a dinner in its strict sense (not that one would expect a straightforward dinner from the Futurists), *Tactile Dinner Party* is the first recorded “dark dinner” in the twentieth century cultural history of Europe. Focusing on the tactile, the olfactory and the aural, the piece raised questions about not only the primacy of vision but also the nature of food at the rise of modernism. Appearances can be deceiving; but then again, so can sensations, sounds and smells at the time of the industrial nation.

Almost a century later *Dans Le Noir* has been staging dinners whose unifying form (darkness) is the same as the form of the *Tactile Dinner Party*. The “ingredients” with which the body is addressed however have changed. What has occurred in the meantime? In order to answer this question I will briefly examine the cultural history of *Dans Le Noir*. *Dans Le Noir* is a project that was initially undertaken by Ethik Investment Group. After finding a source of finance in Eduard De Broglie, “a specialist in innovation and corporate social responsibility” (*Dans Le Noir*), Ethik Investment Group oversaw the opening of the first restaurant of the project in Paris in 2004 that was soon followed by the opening of the London and Moscow branches in 2006 and the Barcelona branch in 2009. By 2011 Ethik Investment Group oversaw six restaurants in total with the branches of New York and St Petersburg being the last two additions to their “non-subsidized ‘in the dark’ restaurant chain” (*Dans Le Noir*). In the history section of its website the concept of the restaurant is indebted to the “old idea used by associations for people with blindness since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century”, “designers and researchers like Professor Andreas Heinecke in Germany”, “the works of Michel Reilhac in France” and “the work done in France since 1997 by the Paul Guinot Association for people with visual impairments.” (*Dans Le Noir*) A closer look into this list of inspirational sources suggests that the cultural history of *Dans Le Noir* is, indeed, routed to the performative if not the theatrical; a history that is situated between

performative manifestations of the non-visual form of darkness on the one hand and the performativity of food on the other hand.

In 1988 social entrepreneur Andreas Heinecke started his first experiments with the concept and practice of *Dialogue in the Dark*. The concept behind the project is rather straightforward: “visitors are led by blind guides in small groups through a specially constructed and totally darkened exhibition – where sounds, wind, temperatures and textures convey the characteristics of daily environments such as a park, a city or a cafe. In the dark, daily routines become a new experience.” (*Dialogue in the Dark*) Focusing on the sensational and the affective, *Dialogue in the Dark* aimed at not only addressing its visitors on new experiential terms, but also raising social awareness about the multiple embodiments of people with visual impairments:

A reversal of roles is created: sighted people are torn out of their familiar environments, losing the sense they rely on most – their sight. Blind people guide them, provide them with security and a sense of orientation – transmitting a world without pictures. The blind and partially sighted guides open the visitors' eyes in the dark to show them that their world is not poorer – just different.

(*Dialogue in the Dark*)

This unique at the time concept, the injection of the non-visual form of darkness into an exhibition space and the focus on social awareness by way of this form, drew the attention of not only the media in Germany but also like-minded creatives who were interested in the possibilities that such a project might open up. By 1991 *Dialogue in the Dark* held exhibitions in Berlin, Karlsruhe and Hannover and in 1992 the project made its first international appearance in Paris. It is at this point when Andreas Heinecke was approached by transmedia writer, director and producer Michel Reilhac; Reilhac’s proposal to Heinecke concerned the rather unique idea of “staging” a dinner in the dark at the theatre festival of Avignon in 1993. Heinecke brought in the concept and the expertise in the non-visual form of darkness, Reilhac the production skills to make the event theatrical and the Paul Guinot Association for people with visual impairments the perspective of the multiple embodiments of people with visual impairments; *Dark/Noir* was the first –recorded– dinner in the dark in the contemporary cultural history of Europe and it took place within the frame of a theatre festival.

The reception of *Dark/Noir* was self-admittedly warm and it encouraged Reilhac to not only continue his dining experiments, but also produce a television talk show in the dark;

the show was filmed in infrared mode and one of the two hosts had a visual impairment. In 1997 Reilhac once again collaborated with the Paul Guinot Association for people with visual impairments to co-produce *The Taste of Darkness (Le Goût du Noir)* in Paris, a project that led to the opening of the first impromptu restaurant in the dark in 1999. By 2004 the concept had been appropriated by Ethik Investment Group and the first restaurant of the Dans Le Noir chain made its appearance in the urban landscape of Paris.

While the UK does not seem to have been leading the way in terms of the incorporation of the non-visual form of darkness on the artistic and cultural plane, the Southbank Centre in London hosted a guest exhibition of *Dialogue in the Dark* in 1995 after the exhibition had taken place in various cities in Germany and Paris as well as in Brussels, Bruges, Budapest and Montreal. As I have already mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, Robert Wilson's *H.G.* was perhaps the first performative engagement with the non-visual form of darkness in the UK in 1997 soon to be followed by the *Playing in the Dark* season at the Battersea Arts Centre in 1998. One of the main events of the repertoire of *Playing in the Dark* was *Dark Dinners* devised by The Bretherton Consultancy with Martin Gent from Da Da Dum. The advertising blurb of the event read as follows:

'I can't eat in the dark – I can't see where my mouth is'

Do you eat in front of the mirror?

Experience the sensuality of eating in the dark. Find out how food tastes, smells, sounds and the variety of its textures, highlighted when we can't see it. Each dinner will have a different theme and a different venue – does atmosphere alter the way we eat? Discover how conversation changes in importance when you cannot watch the faces of the people around your table. ("Playing in the Dark")

Engaging with the sensational and affective potential of the non-visual form of darkness, The Bretherton Consultancy and Martin Gent aimed at creating an atmosphere that would frame the social experience of dining. It is this preoccupation with atmosphere across the continuum of creative approaches to darkness during the 1990s that make the cultural history of Dans Le Noir a history that is in conversation with some of the anti-perspectival practices of the time. In an interview about *Playing in the Dark* Tom Morris, the then artistic director of Battersea Arts Centre, argued that "the only reason why people would bother to go to the theatre is that they become imaginatively involved in a way that is totally different from what happens on film or TV" (qtd. in "Battersea Arts Centre"). It is not a coincidence

that while focusing on the affective and imaginative potential of theatre, Morris not only embraced the hitherto rarely explored non-visual form of darkness, but also encouraged its application on a wide range of events – from the theatrical (as in the case of *Sound and Fury's War Music*) to the musical and the culinary. By adopting such an approach and identifying these events as theatre, Morris invested in the theatrics of darkness whose creative potential was becoming increasingly evident across Europe at the time.

In the context of *dining in the dark* the theatrics of darkness are doubled since dining can be seen as a performative experience in itself –even under the brightest of lights. Being located between the theatrical and everyday life, the history of the experience of dining (from the extravagant Tudor banquets held by a gluttonous Henry VIII to the Al Mahara underwater restaurant in Dubai's Burj Al Arab and everything that lies in-between –a reductive and anti-climactic illustration, I know) is full of examples that demonstrate the intertwining of the biological and the social, the social and the cultural, and the cultural and the theatrical. While the examination of the relationship between the performative and everyday life has been examined thoroughly by Richard Schechner and the field of performance studies through predominantly anthropological and sociological perspectives (see Turner; Levi-Strauss; and Goffman) and the relationship between theatre and everyday life by Alan Read and a number of theatre scholars who are invested in challenging the presence of binaries –and boundaries– in the critical discourses that examine theatre, it is the work of performance scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett that seems to be leading the discussions on the relationship between food and performance. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett examines not only the performative aspects of eating, dining and dining out through a historically and culturally-specific approach but also the use of food in theatre and performance. Examining the relationship between food and performance, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes that

[w]ith the French Revolution, but already before it, such courtly practices as the banquet were supplanted by new forms of festivity ... and new forms of sociability. ... With the weakening of guilds, proliferation of free-lance cooks, the professionalizing of chefs, and the emergence of restaurants, food becomes part of a different mode of sociality, one that is more intimate and better suited to focused attention on the nuances of taste. The restaurant emerges as the dedicated space of food theatre. (“Making Sense of Food” 75)

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that the professionalization of cooking led to the emergence of dining in the domain of leisure. This change in the contextualisation of dining not only added to the secular conception of food as more than a means of survival and nourishment (the Greek symposia in the Periclean Athens come to mind here), but also resulted in the emergence of restaurants who professionalised the presentation of food (visual and/or non-visual) and provided their customers with a staged environment for their practice of dining. While the performative is inherent in most –if not all– restaurant settings (whether “good” or “bad” to use Alan Read’s conceptualisation of the terms), some restaurants are more theatrical than others. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that

[s]elf-cossciously theatrical restaurants heighten the already staged nature of public eating places. Some clearly demarcate the front and back regions, with serene dining rooms out front and industrial kitchens in the back. Others bring the back region of the performing kitchen forward and restage it as a back region. Artisanal techniques are specially suited to staging and are frequently visible from the street or dining room of even ordinary restaurants. (“Making Sense of Food” 75)

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett implicitly appoints the theatricality of restaurants to the interplay between the visual and the non-visual. While some restaurants conceal the mechanics of their (re)presentations (the self-sufficiency of the representational frame in perspectival practices comes to mind here), other restaurants literally stage the preparation of food in front of their customers’ very own eyes. Whether the theatricality of the restaurant comes from the incorporation of food in artistic performative practices or vice versa is not quite clear; but artistic performative practices have shaped –in one way or another– the “spectator” consciousness of the patrons of theatrical restaurants.

The incorporation of food in performance has not been a recent phenomenon. While in “Sensing Realism: Illusionism, Actuality, and the Theatrical Sensorium” Stanton B. Garner has suggested that food has been used as a medium that reinforces the self-sufficiency of the representational frame in the realist project (115-122), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett draws from a range of performative traditions to demonstrate that food –its materiality, presentation, multiple representations and symbolism– has frequently drawn the attention of practitioners and performance artists. The list of examples is refreshingly long, but I will name just a few in order to give a general impression of the variety and diversity of practices: the “musical revues of the 1920s that featured anthropomorphized fruits, vegetables,

chickens, pastries” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Making Sense of Food” 82); Allan Kaprow’s *Eat* Environments that exemplify how “food has figured prominently in the events, activities, happenings and environments of Allan Kaprow, whose theory and practice blur life and art” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses” 19); performance artist Cosey Fanni Tutti’s *Women’s Roll* (1976) during which she “slashed her clothing and created artificial wounds using both stage make-up and crushed berries” in order for the “spectators to get ‘an unpleasant visual stimulus but a pleasant olfactory stimulus’, thus perhaps unsettling their views of how to interpret this display of a woman’s body” (Banes, “Olfactory” 32); Bread and Puppet Theatre’s “distribut[ion of] bread at their performances” that aims at functioning as “the basis for transforming an audience into a community, by breaking bread and eating together” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Making Sense of Food” 83); Bobby Baker’s literal kitchen sink *Kitchen Show* whose “smells ... were a reminder that this was a workplace as well as, for the moment, a play space” (Read, ch. 3); and Mr. Fast Forward’s *Feeding Frenzy* (1999) during which “[i]n precisely 90 minutes, each of four cooks prepares ten portions of ten courses. The amplified sounds of chopping, sizzling, steaming, and grinding are part of ‘an instructional, time delineated score,’ performed by four musicians on strings, reeds, pipa, and keyboard.” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Making Sense of Food” 78)

While by no means exhaustive, the examples above demonstrate that “[t]he materiality of food, its dynamic and unstable character, its precarious position between sustenance and garbage, its relationship to the mouth and the rest of the body, particularly the female body, and its importance to community, make it a powerful performance medium.” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses” 11) Crucially the range of practices that have incorporated food in performance results in an interesting –and I would argue politically charged– diversity of aesthetics and poetics. Food can be used literally for the fetishization of the female body (as in the case of the 1920s musical revues), symbolically as a means for the empowerment of the female body (as in the case of Tutti’s *Women’s Roll*), or somewhere along the continuum in order to establish a social commentary about the different social roles that a middle-aged woman in the UK plays (as in the case of Bobby Baker’s *Kitchen Show*). It can be used as a means to enhance the sense of community by way of “communion” for the audience (see Bread and Puppet Theatre) or as a direct means whose preparation functions as an acoustic commentary on the emergence of “fast food nations” (see Mr. Fast Forward’s *Feeding Frenzy*). Lastly, and perhaps more relevantly for the discussion of this chapter, food can function as an aesthetic medium that blurs the boundaries between art and life (as in the cases of Kaprow and, once again, Bobby Baker).

The boundaries of such categorisation are surely not rigid, but they nonetheless demonstrate the dialogic relationship that food –as a performative medium– sets up between not only the artistic and everyday life but also the material and the socio-political.

So where do the theatrics of *Dans Le Noir* stand within the context of such rich and “stirring” traditions? As I have already mentioned in the discussion of this section, *Dans Le Noir* entails a form and a practice that make the non-visual space of the restaurant performative; while the non-visual form of darkness was recognised during the 1990s as a highly affective form that was theatrical by way of the atmospheric (amongst other things), the practice of dining in the setting of modern and contemporary restaurants is, according to scholars that examine the relationship between theatre and everyday life, performative in itself. The questions that arise at this point can be grouped in two clusters: firstly, how is the performative act of dining performed in the dark, how is the experience of *Dans Le Noir* affective and in what ways are the affects that are brought to the surface reflected upon and understood? And secondly, in what ways did the consumption of food as a performative medium in *Dans Le Noir* articulate the relationship between the artistic and everyday life, the material and the socio-political? In the following section I will address the first question.

### **Speaking of *Dans Le Noir*...: The Dark Theatrics of *Dans Le Noir***

In “*Dans Le Noir? Eating in the Dark: Sensation and Conviviality in a Lightless Place*” cultural geographers Tim Edensor and Emily Falconer note that

[a]s a multiplicity of opportunities continually emerge in the expanding leisure market, penetrating everyday routines and rhythms, it is increasingly possible to experience more modest engagements with unfamiliar sensation by brief excursions into the extra-ordinary. The temporal oscillation between the unfamiliar and familiar is being transformed, so that where the mass excursion, annual holiday or carnival once served as prescribed times and places for extended immersion into social and sensual difference, regular experience is now often punctuated by multiple flirtations with alterity. At *Dans le Noir?*, visitors plunge into an unfamiliar condition for about two hours. ... [W]e suggest that such attractions are “sites of ordered disorder”, encouraging a ‘controlled de-control of the emotions’, and a conditional engagement with sensory oddness. (2-3)

Reinforcing the affinity of Dans Le Noir's cultural history to the history of the performativity of food and the use of food as an expressive medium in theatre and performance, Edensor and Falconer note yet another shift in the food industry since the professionalization of the consumption of food from the late eighteenth century onwards (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Making Sense of Food" 79). The food industry –hitherto a central feature of the domain of leisure within the fabric of everyday life– has become a field of entertainment in its own right. Being the leading voice in the articulation of the merging of the food and entertainment industries, Joanne Finkelstein has, as I mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, coined the term "Foodtainment" (see Finkelstein 130-136). While Finkelstein focuses most of her discussion on the visual qualities of the "Foodtainment" industry (by discussing the imperatives of the visual presentation of food), she also suggests that "ambience and the aestheticization of food have made eating-out into a fashionable performance, and, as such, part of the expanding, insinuating performance industries." (131) Finkelstein as well as Edensor and Falconer note the cultural "transaction" between the food industry on the one hand and the performance industries on the other hand; observing that presently the food industry is projecting elements that were once appointed to performance on the fabric of everyday life ["ambience and aesthetisation" in the case of Finkelstein (131) and "unfamiliar sensation by brief excursions into the extra-ordinary" in the case of Edensor and Falconer (2)], the three writers explain the performativity of restaurants on the grounds of their potential to momentarily suspend the spatial and temporal configurations of everyday life. As such, both critical approaches –each from the premises of their own disciplinary agendas– implicitly suggest that the appeal of restaurants such as Dans Le Noir lies on their ability to establish a sense of place within (the wider configurations of a) social space for their patrons.

Setting up the discussion of Dans Le Noir at the interface of leisure and tourism, Edensor and Falconer identify the experience of dining in Dans Le Noir as a "gastro-tourist" experience (5) and the patrons of the restaurant as "food tourists", what is now most commonly identified as "foodies" (4). The projection of terms that stem from the socio-cultural examination of tourism is far from coincidental; Edensor and Falconer justify their use of terms on the grounds that the experience of dining in the dark unfolds at the intersection between the known and the unknown. Examining the spatial and temporal configurations of such oscillating experiences in the fabric of social space, social geographer Doreen Massey argues that

[i]f space is rather a simultaneity of stories-so-far, then places are collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power-



geometries of space. Their character will be a product of these intersections within that wider setting, and of what is made of them. And, too, of the non-meetings-up, the disconnections and the relations not established, the exclusions. All this contributes to the specificity of place. (*For Space* 130)

Developing her discussion based on a Lefebvrian conception of social space, Massey notes that the configuration of place interferes with the temporal uniformity of space. Far from establishing an exclusively antagonistic relation to space (even though at times they can and they do), places are spatio-temporal configurations in which identity (the offspring of “the visual imago” to use Silverman’s conception) is informed by its articulations in space. Such articulations can lead to the establishment of collective spatio-temporal identities in the form of communities or it can lead to their disintegration. While Massey is eager to point out the perils of the romanticisation of place as the nostalgic and local “other” to the increasingly globalised platforms that shape social space (see *For Space* 138-142; also, “Don’t Let’s Counterpose” 24-5), she also suggests that “what is special about place is precisely [its] throwtogetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now...; and a negotiation which must take place within and between both human and non-human.” (*For Space* 140) Suggesting that place should be considered beyond the conceptual boundaries of the notions of community and the local, Massey makes a methodological remark that projects place on the discursive frame of embodied experience. Examining the “unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now” (Massey, *For Space* 140) through the device of place, the (interdisciplinary) scholar can examine the ways in which the “human”, the “non-human” and their socio-political articulations interact by way of embodiment. While Massey’s conceptual and methodological context offers an understanding of the ways in which the visual aspects of embodied experience [the mechanics of the “visual imago” (Silverman 16)] contribute to the formation of identity and thus place, it does not make clear the ways in which the non-visual aspects of experience contribute to the negotiations that take place in the “here-and-now” of a blacked-out space such as the dining room of *Dans Le Noir*. I thus need to go back to the account of my personal experience as well as Edensor and Falconer in order to decipher the particular characteristics of the relationship between the non-visual form of darkness and the negotiations that lead to the establishment of a sense of place for their patrons.

The discussion of being *in* *Dans Le Noir* has shown that the interaction between my body, the non-visual dining room and the social practice of dining shaped my experience in

a rather interesting way. As I could not get a definite sense of the size of the dining room I experienced two versions of one single space: the “ample” and “intimate” versions of the room. The “ample” version was shaped mostly by auditory presences and the “intimate” version was formed by gustatory and olfactory sensations. While both versions of the space reinforced my sense of self in the dark by way of my corporeality, it is not quite clear as to which version of the space –if any– contributed to the emergence of a sense of place for me. In the case that either or both of them did contribute to the establishment of a place in the darkness of Dans Le Noir in what ways did they do so? Useful in answering this question and in moving my personal account to a discursive frame that goes beyond my personal experience is Edensor and Falconer’s ethnographic examination of the experience of dining in Dans Le Noir. Discussing the expectations that accompany the “foodie” consciousness of the patrons of the restaurant, Edensor and Falconer observe that

[i]n seeking authenticity and cultural capital, food tourists attribute a sense of *place* to their sense of *taste*. ... The affordances, materiality, staging and symbolic qualities of place are entangled with the sensory and social experience of dining. A stimulating, affective environment and a sense of place is crucially produced by those who provide gastro-tourist experiences. (5)

Appointing the emergence of a sense of place to the sensation of taste, Edensor and Falconer implicitly comment on the relationships between expectation and realisation (for food tourists) and aspiration and achievement (for restaurant owners) that frame the field of gastro-tourism or the foodtainment industry (to use Finkelstein’s term). On the one hand, half wrought by expectations and half open to the possibilities of dining in an unusual environment, the patrons of Dans Le Noir –as food tourists– are drawn to the concept of the restaurant in order to not only test out –and possibly reevaluate– the perceptual mechanics of eating, but also to temporarily form their identities beyond the realm of the “visual imago” (Silverman 16) by focusing on gustatory sensations. As such, they expect the injection of an exaggerated form of the affective into the habitual by way of “a ‘controlled de-control of the[ir] emotions’ and a conditional engagement with sensory oddness” (Edensor and Falconer 3); crucially they project their expectations on the plane of gustatory sensation. On the other hand, Ethik Investment Group and Eduard De Broglie, as “provide[rs] of [a] gastro-tourist experience” (Edensor and Falconer 5), attempt to project the performative on the fabric of everyday life by framing their patrons’ experiences in such a way that the “ordered disorder” of darkness (Edensor and Falconer 3) echoes the “symbolic qualities of place”

(Edensor and Falconer 5). The focus is not placed on the sensational and affective effects of taste –as Dans Le Noir’s patrons would have it– but on the “forms of conviviality, informality ... hospitableness [and] intimacy” (Edensor and Falconer 5) that emerge in the context of an unusual dining experience. As such, the expectations/aspirations for the establishment of a sense of place in Dans Le Noir are partly shaped by the sensational expectations of its patrons and partly framed by the careful staging of Dans Le Noir as an affective environment. Of course, the gap between expectation and realisation on the one hand and aspiration and achievement on the other hand can be vast. How do the expectations of the patrons of Dans Le Noir and the aspirations of Ethik Investment Group actually translate in the dark dining room of the restaurant?

Edensor and Falconer’s ethnographic methodology revolves around interviews with diners and the experiences of a specifically formed focus group. Evaluating the data that they collected, Edensor and Falconer note that

[c]learly, most diners were unprepared for a sensual encounter with darkness despite their anticipation, and they evoked varied responses to this unfamiliarity. Yet in dealing with dark space, most diners explained that in the absence of vision, they sought ways to become attuned to the conditions and situate themselves in place, often by following the familiar routines of eating. ... This engagement with dark space led to a closing in of attention to a limited perceptible space, to a focus on the immediate parameters within which one could eat, drink and converse with companions.

(7)

Edensor and Falconer observe that due to the non-visual form of darkness many of the patrons of Dans Le Noir resort to the familiarity of the habitual practice of eating in order to establish the sense that the dark dining room of Dans Le Noir is a restaurant, in other words that it is a familiar to them spatio-temporal setting, a place. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the practice of eating is one of the three elements of dining that make the production and consumption of food performative [the other two being the practice of cooking as *doing* and the presentation of food as a show (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses” 1-2)]. Performing their roles as diners, the patrons of Dans Le Noir project familiarity on an otherwise unfamiliar setting. Indeed, while I was dining in Dans Le Noir, the oscillation of my embodied experience between the gustatory, the olfactory, the tactile, the kinaesthetic and the aural was reassuringly complemented by the presence of the props of

dining that enabled me to behave (at times successfully and at times unsuccessfully) according to the social customs of dining in Europe. At the same time, I also engaged with the aural/oral that ensured the communication between my friends and I. The aural/oral, functioning by way of the linguistic for the purposes of the identification of food items and the articulation of sensation, projected an additional sense of familiarity; not only did the conversation attempt to fill in the sensational “gaps” in the absence of the visual, but also it fed into my visual imagination by establishing a connection between taste, word and image. As such, the aural/oral provided the soundscape that usually accompanies the experience of dining while at the same time serving the rather utilitarian function of projecting “normalcy” within the frame of the “ordered disorder” (Edensor and Falconer 3) of the dark dining room.

While the performance of eating and the actions that complement it project on the dining room of Dans Le Noir a sense of constancy, its ever-present and all-encompassing darkness frequently counteracts it. Reinforcing this impression, Edensor and Falconer agree that

[f]lavour is ... not only understood through the palate; rather, the same foods are tasted differently in different spaces. Taste is place and space specific, shaped by pre-existing social histories, memories and imagined geographies. Dining involves an evocation of multi-sensual memories of food in particular locales (e.g. fish and chips on the seaside pier, scones and jam on fine bone china in cosy tearooms, and ale out of pint glasses in dark pubs). In the dark, devoid of the visual information upon which to place taste in its correct locale, familiar foods, tastes and textures become *displaced*. (10)

Edensor and Falconer equate place with taste and as such situate taste beyond the limitations of sensation and beyond the physical boundaries of a restaurant. “Taste is place” because it acts as a prompt for the emergence of various corporeal and affective memories and as such it links the personal with the cultural and the subjective with the social. Interestingly for the discussion of this chapter, Edensor and Falconer discuss the equation of taste with place on the grounds of the visual. It is not possible to get a sense of place in the dark, they suggest, despite the patrons’ repeated attempts to project familiarity by way of their performance in the dark. Taking this impression a step further they argue that

[d]ining in the dark provokes ambivalent reactions, many of which enhance experiences, others which solicit discomfort and anxiety.

The inability to recognize food and space, and the geographical context integral to most forms of gastro-tourism produced both enjoyment at the thrill of discomfort, and fear and uncertainty amongst diners. Without the sense of sight, the routine affects and the embodied memories and imagined geographies that contribute to the *place(ing)* of taste become distorted and unrecognizable in the dark. (14-5)

Commenting on the range of affects that were documented in the study and that spread across the affective spectrum (positive and negative alike), Edensor and Falconer implicitly suggest the centrality of the visual in the consumption of food. But when “familiar foods, tastes and textures become *displaced*” (Edensor Falconer 10) do they not set up a new place that retains some of the familiarity of places of the past while functioning within the frame of the unfamiliar? In other words, when place (as taste) is displaced does it not establish a new place that functions within a different affective and corporeal frame?

While I do agree with Edensor and Falconer’s general sentiment that the “foodie consciousness” of contemporary food tourists is largely shaped by the visual, I believe that the displacement of place-as-taste in the dark establishes a new place that functions at the interface between the visual and the non-visual. The visual cues of the dining experience in Dans Le Noir are, indeed, concealed; but the discussion in the thesis thus far has demonstrated that the non-visual is not an altogether absent element from the corpus of our corporeal and/or affective memories. What is more, in *Feeling Theatre* Martin Welton suggests that “[s]eeing *nothing* is still some sort of seeing ... Even whilst not seeing the surface or substance of objects, we see the dark itself - seeing something, even if no *thing*.” (72) While seeing “no *thing*” in the dark dining room of Dans Le Noir, we see the darkness itself. Taking this a step further, I would suggest that even though this darkness does not enable us to place –with (visual) certainty– our overall experience within the frame of a familiar *setting*, it functions as a blank canvas that prompts sensations, brings to the surface a number of corporeal memories that have been (in)formed by our non-visual senses and fuels our visual imagination. By “seeing *nothing*” (Welton, *Feeling Theatre* 72) in the dark dining room of Dans Le Noir, we therefore see a particular darkness that is shaped by non-visual sensations, corporeal memories and our visual imagination. In this sense, the “*place(ing)* of taste” in Dans Le Noir “takes place” by way of proprioception in reverse: through the “non-visual mapping of the body’s form” (Silverman 16), the body becomes conscious of the interplay between the gustatory, the olfactory, the tactile, the aural and the

oral, which in its turn gives rise to the visual imagination of the restaurant's –sighted– patrons [an impression that is also shared by Edensor and Falconer (14)]. This interplay between the visual and the non-visual undeniably gives rise to a range of affects and affects do not just occur in abstraction and only in response to perceptual stimuli from the body's surrounding environment; they emerge from the body's very own subjectivity and from the corpus of the body's corporeal and affective memories. It is this “throwntogetherness” of the non-visual senses with the visual imagination, “the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now” that lies between embodied and affective experience on the one hand and corporeal and affective memories on the other hand, and the “negotiation ... between both human [the patrons] and non-human [the actual dinner setting]” (Massey, *For Space* 140) that constitute a new place for each of the patrons in Dans Le Noir despite the initial displacement of taste from the frame of familiarity.

The result is a plurality of places that develop in tandem with each other. Edensor and Falconer were surprised to see that one of the most solid outcomes of their ethnographic survey on Dans Le Noir was the “intensification of social engagement.” (15) Elaborating on this, they observe that

dark dining solicited an intensification of social engagement, producing an affective connection between diners and a shared sense of adventure that resulted in enhanced forms of producing intimacy through touch, a suspension of social judgement provoked by the inability to assess appearance and eating habits, and a spreading conviviality through which social restraint was cast aside. This seems to have been truly liberating for many people and highlights the pervasiveness of visual judgement of others and its limitations. (15)

Enabling the development of multiple places due to the absence of the visual dimensions of dining, the darkness of Dans Le Noir also provides a platform for amplified versions of communication and intimacy. Relying predominantly on the tactile and the aural/oral for their communication, the patrons of Dans Le Noir not only pay close attention to one another, but also feel more open to sharing affective and sensational responses that spread across the sensational continuum. As such, while not always producing the desired effects of “conviviality ... [and] hospitableness” (Edensor and Falconer 5) due to the negative affects that the darkness might give rise to, the restaurant's aspiration to stage an environment that creates a sense of “informality ... [and] intimacy” (Edensor and Falconer 5) is often achieved

*because* of the darkness and the multiple places that it encourages to emerge. Crucially, the communication in the dark is informed by embodiment and affect on the one hand and experience and imagination on the other hand. In this sense, the darkness of Dans Le Noir is highly theatrical: it encourages not only the performativity of dining but also the performativity of the senses and the body as a means of both “making sense” and communication. Through a carefully staged eating environment that gives rise to multiple sensual and performative places, Dans Le Noir turns its patrons into temporary performers whose heightened behaviour not only changes the dynamics of the dark dining room, but also revolves around elements that bear an affinity to the anti-perspectival tradition; subjectivity, corporeality and –a paradoxical and heightened– visibility. Nonetheless as I mentioned in the second chapter, a body can shape a space (into place, as the discussion of this chapter has demonstrated) as much as the socio-political dimensions of space can shape a body. How exactly then do the subjective, multiple and sensual places that emerge in the dark relate to the general space/environment of Dans Le Noir? In the next section I will examine the restaurant’s “performative profile” in order to answer this question.

### **Talking About (The Politics of) Dans Le Noir**

While the discussion of space from an experiential point of view is quite straightforward and the discussion of a specific quality of a space is manageable, the task of talking *about* a particular space is rather ambiguous. What does talking about space look for? Signs, configurations, contents? In an attempt to answer these questions I will recall a lengthy quotation from Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* that alludes to the particular characteristics that constitute social space:

(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object. At the same time there is nothing imagined, unreal or ‘ideal’ about it as compared, for example, with science, representations, ideas or dreams. Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others. (73)

Lefebvre gives a detailed account of the particular characteristics of social space: as a mechanism that maintains and reinforces social relations it is inclusive and enclosing of

“interrelationships” (73); it produces and is produced at the same time; it is tangible and intrinsic; and it bears the past, the present and the future simultaneously. Talking about social space therefore is talking about these very characteristics. Far from intimating signs, configurations or contents, these characteristics indicate that a discussion about space is a discussion of processes that connect, produce and maintain both the relational and the temporal aspects of experience. In short, talking about a particular space, one talks about its general *context*. In order to examine the general context of the dark dining room of Dans Le Noir I need to firstly locate its place within the urban landscape of contemporary London and secondly to consider its relation to it.

Useful in considering the urban landscape of London is performance scholar Jen Harvie’s recently published *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*. Developing within a culturally materialist frame, *Fair Play* echoes the scholarly aims of Claire Bishop’s *Artificial Hells*. Nonetheless, while the former departs from a performance studies perspective, the latter frames its discussion in terms of art criticism. The intersections in their discussion are noteworthy, but Harvie, perhaps slightly more systematically than Bishop, examines the socio-political parameters that frame creative practices specifically in London. The third chapter of Harvie’s *Fair Play* focuses on the examination of space, while “ask[ing] how current patterns of organizing and distributing space affect social relations, what social relations we want and how we might achieve them through art practices that make critical spatial and social interventions.” (110) Addressing these questions, Harvie explores the “recent urban cultural theory on so-called “creative cities” and their “creative class” that has influenced cultural and development policy in the United States in particular, but also the United Kingdom and other countries.” (113) Harvie, by way of urban studies scholar Richard Florida, notes that

workers distinguished by their creative talent are now driving post-industrial knowledge-based or “creative” economies. ... In order for cities to be prosperous and to become successful creative cities in this creative economy ... they need to concentrate on attracting and retaining not major companies or organizations, but this creative class of workers; in turn, the work will be drawn by this class of talented workers, alongside a provision of technology and a climate of tolerance. (115)

Identifying London as a creative city, Harvie remarks that since the New Labour government in 1997 there has been an increasing interest in the economic potential of the creative



industries as “artists, arts and culture are currently being instrumentalized as economically important.” (64) Identified “as economic miracles” (Harvie 64), the creative industries have been used as models for the transformation of the cultural, social –and outright political, Nigel Thrift would suggest (183-5)– dimensions of the fabric of everyday life in London. Far from the aesthetisation of everyday life within, say, a Situationist frame that aims at the “abolish[ment of] any distinction between play and seriousness, or between art and everyday life” (Andreotti 215) via the production of “confusionist counterrevolutionary processes” (Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations” 26), the current appropriation of creativity aims at the development of an environment that attracts the creative workers of the global economy (working in the creative industries or beyond them) on the capitalist grounds of economic profit. This process does not only problematize the political dimensions of the relationship between the artistic/performative and everyday life, but also results in the development of greater social inequalities. As Harvie suggests, London hosts some of the wealthiest and poorest portions of the population in the UK (112-3) while its status as a creative city intensifies class divisions even further:

The social world of creative cities is by no means entirely “feel-good” ... since it is fundamentally based on and actively fuels fierce market competition between cities, nations and even neighbourhoods; exacerbates socio-economic inequality; and privileges neoliberal ideologies and characteristics of individualism and chosen nomadism. (119)

Suggesting that the creative aspects of a creative city like London are only accessed by those who can afford them, Harvie implicitly argues that the instrumentalisation of the arts and culture contributes to greater divisions between the prosperous creative class and the lower-income classes that live in the city. As such, while a “feel-good” development for anyone who can be part of the social world that it establishes, the creativity injected in the fabric of everyday life reinforces both the capitalist market and the neoliberal ideologies that support it.

Examined within the critical frame that Harvie establishes, the socio-political implications of the cultural history of *Dans Le Noir* become somewhat ambiguous. While a highly affective environment that enables its patrons to establish a personal sense of place and heightens the means of communication between them, Harvie’s critical examination of London brings to the surface the following questions: who are the patrons of *Dans Le Noir*

and in what ways is the cultural history of Dans Le Noir appropriated for the capitalist purposes of economic profit?

With the average price of £50 per person (excluding drinks), Dans Le Noir addresses a specific clientele whose “foodie consciousness”, as I discussed in the previous section, makes them food tourists seeking dining experiences that are performative by way of the experiential. Elaborating on this, Edensor and Falconer insightfully argue that

[e]xperiencing new, often ‘local’ fare plays a major role in seeking distinction and cultural capital and constructing a cosmopolitan identity for the discerning food tourist or “foodie” willing to adventurously taste the unfamiliar and thereby demonstrate aesthetic judgement, taste, fashion and style. (4)

Placing their discussion within a frame that clearly resonates with Bourdieu’s conception of cultural capital, Edensor and Falconer suggest that the taste (literally and figuratively) of food tourists is not only preoccupied with the creative, affective and experiential potential of the “adventurous” and the “unknown”, but also aims at increasing their cultural capital within the frame of the cosmopolitanism that is especially prevalent in creative cities. What Edensor and Falconer do not discuss, however, is the fact that the clientele of gastro-tourism (the foodtainment industry) as food tourists, or in Harvie and Florida’s terms as creative workers, unconsciously exacerbate the class divisions in the creative cities that have developed gastro-tourism in the first place. By having developed a taste for the creative, the adventurous and the unknown they experience *their* version of their creative city, while citizens in the lower-income areas of that city find gastro-tourism inaccessible in economic –if not cultural– terms.

Within this frame the darkness of Dans Le Noir can be seen as a cultural form that moves beyond the affective and the experiential. It is not a coincidence that the darkness of Dans Le Noir is not the only non-visual exception to the otherwise illuminated urban landscape of the creative city of London. Darkness is being appropriated by a variety of cultural phenomena that aim at addressing the creative class’s “need” to increase their cultural capital by way of the affective, experiential and creative: from the peculiar phenomenon of “ghost tourism” that invites visitors to explore cultural heritage sites in the midst of darkness (see Holloway); to concerts in the dark (see “Eclipse: Amadou and Mariam”); to exhibition centres and art venues that “inspire visitors to explore museums and art galleries at night by torchlight” (Edensor and Falconer 4); and the new age phenomenon of floatation-tank therapy that invites its clients to relax in a completely blacked-out egg-like

container (see, for instance, *London Float Centre*), darkness is being used in a variety of settings while increasingly becoming a cultural phenomenon in its own right.

The question that arises is in what ways the darkness of *Dans Le Noir* differs from other cultural manifestations of darkness. The cultural history as well as the marketing of *Dans Le Noir* suggest that the restaurant operates as a social enterprise. While Heinecke's *Dialogue in the Dark* had the clear aim of raising social consciousness via the objective of the non-visual form of darkness and Michel Reilhac's dining experiments developed in *collaboration* with the Paul Guinot Foundation, Ethik Investment Group and Eduard De Broglie persist in continuing this legacy through the marketing of *Dans Le Noir* and the hiring of waiters with visual impairments. While promising an "unbelievable experience" to its customers (*Dans Le Noir*), *Dans Le Noir* also promotes the dark dining room as a space that simulates the experience of blindness. In the "Frequently Asked Questions" section of the restaurant's website the answer to the question "Why are the waiters blind?" is the following:

Blind people are naturally more efficient in the darkness and are the best to do the job in such context. You will become blind for at least an hour and a half, and you will have to trust your server. It is a true "transfer of trust", and an amazing and positive approach to raise awareness about blind disability and disability in general.

*(Dans Le Noir)*

Hiring blind waiters and claiming that "you will become blind for at least an hour and a half" (*Dans Le Noir*), Ethik Investment Group and de Broglie establish an association between the "pitch darkness" (*Dans Le Noir*) of the restaurant's dining room and blindness. They assert that the restaurant –as a social enterprise– makes a political statement through this association: by creating an environment that simulates the experience of blindness, *Dans Le Noir* invites its patrons to reevaluate the ways in which they conceive of blindness. The experience of dining in the dark therefore can raise awareness of blindness as a disability. Ethik Investment Group and de Broglie make a very big claim by suggesting that the embodied experience of dining in the dark (and the affective and corporeal complexities that rise within it) can raise awareness on blindness as a disability because –if anything– the multiple embodiments of blindness are rarely (if ever) equated with the (sighted) experience of a completely blacked out space (see RNIB). As such, Ethik Investment Group and de Broglie adopt a rather medical –and thus abstract– model of blindness that fails to acknowledge the experiential and social diversity that arises from the multiple embodiments of blindness;

such a model nonetheless satisfies their clientele's cultural "needs" for "a temporary confounding of the senses" and "an openness to difference that may contribute to the acquisition of cultural capital and self-development" (Edensor and Falconer 2). Indeed, Edensor and Falconer observe that "[t]he experience [of dining in the dark] facilitated another more political, social function" (13) for a significant percentage of their interviewees. They note that

[t]he provision of dark dining has been partially motivated by a desire to create empathy with the blind and visually impaired, and provide insights into the ways in which they apprehend the world. This was appreciated by several diners, such as Nina, 27: 'I loved it completely. Everyone should have to experience to gain insight into the world of the blind!' Others expressed an enhanced empathy following the experience of being assisted by the staff: 'If I see blind people I shall help them with directions, because I appreciated all the help I received just for a few hours during the experience.' (13)

While Edensor and Falconer demonstrate scepticism about the social efficacy of *Dans Le Noir*, their findings demonstrate a rather alarming dimension to the experience of dining in the dark. While the creation of enhanced empathy is a desirable social effect, empathy has to emerge from an informed position. The restaurant's clientele is led –encouraged in fact– to experientially equate blindness with the experience of being in the dark for an average of two hours. The patrons of *Dans Le Noir* that claim to have experienced what blindness is not only undermine the multiple dimensions of the experience of having a visual impairment in an ocularcentric world, but also widen the gap between disability and ability by adopting wide misconceptions about blindness from the perspective of their sightedness. Equally, the patrons that express enhanced empathy for people with visual impairments also function within the frame of their sightedness; I will feel more for "the blind" because I have now experienced first-hand how difficult it is to function without my vision. These patrons not only overlook the fact that people with visual impairments are used to being in the world without relying on their sight (of course, this is not to say that the ocularcentrism in our world doesn't present them with challenges), but also develop their empathy on rather patronising grounds. In either case, the patrons of *Dans Le Noir* that claim to have been exposed to a socially-conscious as much as an affective experience feed into their cultural capital, while maintaining the belief that they have nurtured their "self-development" (Edensor and

Falconer 2) by experiencing complete darkness. The means through which this attitude is encouraged is, as I shall discuss shortly, the metaphorization of the dark dining room of Dans Le Noir; a process that projects the conception of blindness on the multiple subjective and sensual places that emerge in the dark.

In *The Production of Space* Lefebvre makes a useful observation in terms of the relationship between social space and the process of metaphorization:

Words and signs facilitate (indeed provoke, call forth and –at least in the West– command) metaphorization – the transport, as it were, of the physical body outside of itself. This operation, inextricably magical and rational, sets up a strange interplay between (verbal) disembodiment and (empirical) re–embodiment, between uprooting and reimplantation, between spatialization in an abstract expanse and localization in a determinate expanse. This is the ‘mixed space’ – still natural yet already *produced* – of the first year of life, and, later of poetry and art. The space, in a word, of representations: representational space. (203)

While acknowledging the semantic potential of metaphors, Lefebvre recognises that metaphors can be found in social space as much as in language. He defines the space on which metaphors are projected as “representational space”. His analysis treats “representational space” as an inherent part of social space. A “representational space” can be produced by the interplay between a subject’s engagement with abstract concepts on the one hand and her embodied experience on the other hand. Going back and forth between “verbal space” (in the case of Dans Le Noir the medical model of blindness and its re-iteration by way of the restaurant’s cultural history and marketing) and “physical space” (in the case of Dans Le Noir its dark dining room), the subject not only receives the metaphorical aspects of space, but also contributes to its “metaphorization” further by endorsing the interplay between the “verbal” and “physical” aspects of that space. Lefebvre identifies the production of “representational space” as a creative process since it encapsulates the set of creative impulses (both oppressive and reactive) of any given society. At the same time, since “representational space” exists within the boundaries of social space it entails both the social practices that are inherent in social space and the creative impulses that are encouraged or undermined by any given society. Placing the representational within the social, Lefebvre implicitly comments on the fluidity that is inherent in everyday life and reinforces the

recurrent point in the discussion of this chapter about the variability between the artistic/performative and the habitual.

Considered within Lefebvre's critical frame, the current emergence of creative cities can be explained on the grounds that the representational spaces that are produced in London have become tautological with the social spaces that address its higher-income citizens. In this sense, the urban landscape of contemporary London entails a number of representational spaces that, while distinct, have become indistinguishable from the social spaces that host, for instance, the non-visual form of darkness and gastro-tourism among other phenomena. Such a development functions as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, the creativity that is inherent in these representational spaces has become a prominent part in the fabric of the everyday life of London's higher-income citizens. On the other hand, as I discussed earlier in this section, this enhanced creativity –and the representational spaces that foster it– have entered the domain of capitalist economics that results in greater social inequalities in the urban landscape of London; they have entered, in other words, the premises of the experience economy.

Useful in the discussion of the relationship between the metaphorization of space and the premises of the experience economy is semiotician Alexandros Lagopoulos' article entitled "The Semiotics of Social Space: Metaphor, Ideology and Political Economy". Discussing the exponential growth of "creative" spaces in the urban landscapes of the contemporary West, Lagopoulos argues that

[t]he 'metaphorization' of built space goes hand-in-hand with its 'Las Vegasization' and 'Disneylandization'. Meaning, spatial experience, and identity are today integrated into the circuit of capitalist profit and thus depend on it. This is how place refers us back to space and its commodity aspect. (209)

Comparing them to the cultural phenomena of Las Vegas and Disneyland, Lagopoulos observes that the creative environments of the experience economy use the materiality of metaphors that are inherent in representational space in order to produce highly affective experiences and a stronger sense of identity for their clients. Enabling the production of multiple places for each and one of their clients, these creative environments not only prescribe the mechanics of the production of place and identity, but also use processes that currently reflect the relations of production in capitalism. As long as one belongs to the creative class and engages with the capitalist market by way of the affective and the experiential, she can not only establish multiple places in the landscape of her creative city,

but also construct her identity within the –harmless to the capitalist system– frame of her corporeality and subjectivity. This current dependence of the formation of place and identity on the affective and experiential resonates with the individualist values of neoliberalism. Divide and conquer, said the ancient Greeks, and this mantra could not resonate more with the neoliberal politics of creative cities and the experience economy. A closer look at the “celebration” of individualism by way of the subjective, the corporeal and the affective in the experience economy suggests that it does not lead to the diversity and difference that one would initially assume.

Useful in examining the exact mechanics of the fabrication of place and identity in the premises of the experience economy is the work of performance scholar Maurya Wickstrom. In *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and its Theatrical Seductions* Wickstrom, discussing the mechanics of the representational spaces that can be found in the contemporary West, notes that

[t]o play this way, between the real and the really made up, is to play at a moment where what we are is not yet determined, where one thing but also another paradoxical thing might be true simultaneously. Our mimetic proclivity to play across this spectrum of indeterminacy, to take as real what is not real, is simultaneously a desire to respond to the world with ‘an ineffable plasticity’. (20)

When considered in relation to the critical frame that Wickstrom sets up, the social efficacy that Ethik Investment Group and de Broglie appoint to Dans Le Noir loses its momentum. While enabling its patrons to establish multiple places by way of the corpus of their affective and corporeal memories, Dans Le Noir sets its stage between the “real” and the “really made up”, in other words between the physical space of the dark dining room on the one hand and a space that self-admittedly simulates blindness on the other hand. In doing so Dans Le Noir engages with the metaphorization of its dining room by way of the medical model of blindness. Some of the patrons of the restaurant, as the discussion thus far has demonstrated, attempt to articulate their experiences not only in terms of their sensations, affects, imagination and memories but also in terms of the poetics of the representational frame of the dark dining room. As such, these patrons employ their “mimetic proclivity to play across [the] spectrum of indeterminacy” (Wickstrom 20) and in the midst of the non-visual form of darkness they are encouraged to “play blindness”. Demonstrating the complexity in the relationship between the corporeal/subjective/affective on the one hand and metaphor, representational and social space on the other hand, this process is politically

latent but not in the socially conscious sense that Dans Le Noir proclaims. Examining the mechanics of mimesis in relation to creative cities and their highly affective environments, Wickstrom further argues that

[c]alling out from us our mimetic tendencies as a productive capacity allows the designers of these environments to release the self from its boundaries, and to give us the sensation that our identity is escaping foreclosure (even as the script of the play reencloses us, giddy with our felt escape, into the corporate agenda). Without knowing ... I begin to rehearse and produce as a quality of my own subjectivity the continual, restless, movement of capital. Indeterminacy and motion feel like a part of me. It feels good. My body opens and responds. (20)

Wickstrom suggests that the individuality and subjectivity that arises through our mimetic capacities in carefully constructed and marketed environments develop within the boundaries that are set out by the environments themselves. Inviting us to marvel on the power of our corporeality, these environments treat our mimetic capacities as an end in its own right. In the case of Dans Le Noir Ethik Investment Group and de Broglie both fetishize non-visual embodied experience and use this fetishization as a (political) means to its own end. While they invite their sighted patrons to “play blindness” they also implicitly contribute to the preservation of the power relations in the creative city of London: you can “play blindness” and through “playing blindness” you can identify and/or empathize with “the blind” by way of your very own corporeality; you therefore have performed your part in the social politics agenda. Resting assured that they have performed their social responsibilities by way of an unusual embodied experience, some of the patrons of the restaurant get the best of two worlds: they manage to not only engage with an unusual and affective gastro-tourist experience that increases their cultural capital, but also to work on their “self-development” (Edensor and Falconer 2) by way of their mimetic capacities and their “ability” to “play blindness”. In this sense, the conditions that frame the dining experiences in Dans Le Noir replicate the productive forces that currently shape the experience economy; while a creative worker is encouraged to engage with the urban world through her (controlled) creativity, her body and the affects that accompany her embodied experiences, her attention is side-tracked from debate, discourse and forms of political engagement that actually could counteract the ocularcentric tendencies that result in disabling environments for people with visual impairments (see Charlton). As such, while claiming to be a social enterprise, Dans Le



Noir is a corporation that feeds into the social divisions and inequalities that shape the urban landscape of the creative city of London: their patrons might eat, temporarily “play blind” and then return to their affectively and experientially charged lives in order to seek out the next urban “adventure”. At the same time, Dans Le Noir expands its corporation while setting up new restaurants around the world and “the blind” remain “blind” in the social consciousness of the creative class of London.

### **“Playing Blindness” in the Capitalist Market**

In this chapter I examined the first case study that entails the non-visual form of darkness. I hope that in the course of the discussion I have demonstrated the affinity of the cultural history of Dans Le Noir to the performative histories of darkness, food and food performances and the complexities that such an affinity can give rise to. Indeed, as the discussion in the fourth section has indicated (“Speaking of Dans Le Noir”) the performative potential of the non-visual form of darkness –when coupled with the performativity of the practice of dining– can result in the emergence of multiple places for its “spectators” that turn them to performers in their own right. Addressing the non-visual senses but not being restricted by them, darkness shapes experience by way of the subjectivity, corporeality and imaginative faculties of those who experience it. Encouraging a mode of “spectatorship” that bears an affinity to the anti-perspectival tradition, the non-visual form of darkness has the capacity to not only heighten sensations and affective responses, but also to be the basis for enhanced forms of communication between those who inhabit it. As such –on an experiential and affective level– darkness bears the marks of an enabling –for the “spectator”– form.

At the same time, the (mis)application of this form in the particular setting of Dans Le Noir demonstrates that darkness also bears an affinity to (mis)conceptions of blindness. The metaphorization of the dark dining room in terms of blindness projects a socio-political dimension to the form that warrants careful attention. Addressing predominantly the creative class of London, Dans Le Noir not only perpetuates class divisions by feeding the cultural capital of its patrons, but also –through the metaphorization of its dining room– contributes to wider divisions across the spectrum of multiple abilities. Utilising the affective potential of darkness, the restaurant chain encourages a misleading –and hollow– form of mimesis. Fetishizing the alternative embodiments of blindness on the grounds of economic profit, Dans Le Noir encourages its patrons to “play blindness” in order to get a better understanding of the experience of blindness. As such, the self-proclaimed status of Dans Le Noir as “a social enterprise” becomes highly problematic. When the words “social” and

“enterprise” are used in tandem, the social runs the risk of entering the domain of economic profit. While I do not want to reduce the discussion to a rigid Marxist critique that overlooks the grey areas where the subjective, the corporeal and the affective lie, I also cannot ignore the implications that are entailed in the process of using a social cause for the purposes of – substantial– economic profit. While Dans Le Noir is eager to point out that it is the first non-subsidised chain of dark dining in the West, this at arm’s length position does not make it immune to neo-liberal social inclusion agendas whose motivations are ambiguous. Instead, this position is indicative of the appropriation of creativity by neoliberal capitalism and the fetishisation of multiple embodiments that it can lead to. In this sense when considered within the wider socio-political frame of the creative city of London, the non-visual form of darkness has multiple and contradictory dimensions: it gives rise to unusual embodied experiences; it invites those who experience it to tap into the corpus of their corporeal and affective memories and beyond the realm of visibility; it enables the emergence of multiple sensual places; it encourages the more intimate communication between those who experience it; but it also bears an affinity to metaphorical conceptualisations of blindness that can be appropriated by corporations and enterprises that are driven by the premises of the experience economy. In this sense, the ways in which the body relates to a blacked-out space depend on the ways in which darkness is “staged”; while it does disrupt spatial and temporal arrangements due to the concealment of the visual, it can either entail “flexible models of imagination and narrative” (Thrift 22) or “instant communities, worlds gathered around products and production processes” (Thrift 23) that are assembled in order to consume, produce (sensations, affects and “blindness”) and consume what they produce. As such, the examination of darkness has illustrated both its (experientially and affectively) enabling possibilities and its (socio-politically) disabling potential. In the case of Dans Le Noir the “power of vulnerability” that can emerge from the non-visual loses its momentum: instead of reinforcing the “human” in the human factor that is heightened in the dark, the darkness of Dans Le Noir projects embodied experiences and the affective responses that emerge from them to the level of (ill-conceived) abstraction. In the following chapter, I will focus on a case study that turns Dans Le Noir’s socio-politically disabling darkness on its head: *The Question* by Extant Theatre Company.

## 5. *The Question and the “Non-capitalist Economy of the Gift-Society.”*

### Introduction

In the early 1920s the Dada movement developed a set of practices that attempted to resist the commodification of the arts and the premises of capitalism. Engaging with practices that projected the aesthetic on the fabric of everyday life and vice versa, the Dadaists developed a range of artistic experiments; one of these experiments was *Excursions and Visits*, a number of loosely planned yet impromptu strolls around Paris that took place in 1921. “Instead of drawing attention to picturesque sites, or places of historical interest or sentimental value,” *Excursions and Visits* was devised “to make a nonsense of the social form of the guided tour.” (Bishop, *Artificial Hells* 69) Virtually a decade and a half later and demonstrating that his Surrealist artistic sensibilities stemmed from Dadaist preoccupations and procedures, André Breton “took some momentous walks” (Adamowicz 18) around the least glamorous parts of Paris at night. Moving the Dadaist urban strolls into the night, Breton aspired to project his “sense of the city’s geography” by exploring Paris’ dark and concealed corners and leaving his mark on them (Adamowicz 53). For instance, in his 1937 nocturnal stroll entitled *L’amour Fou* Breton and Jacqueline Lamba took “a stroll lasting several nocturnal hours, unwittingly re-enacting an itinerary laid out in an automatic poem penned by the writer eleven years earlier.” (Adamowicz 18) Developing nocturnal strolls as a systematic Surrealist practice, Breton not only devised the first performance pieces in the midst of the (semi-darkness of the) night, but also influenced some of the neo-avant-garde practices in post-war Paris. Almost thirty years after *L’amour Fou* and in their attempt to “investigat[e] the effects of spaces upon consciousness and the impact of different surroundings on the imagination,” (Fontana-Giusti 262) the Situationist International played around with the “nocturnal ambience” of Paris (Bishop, *Artificial Hells* 78). Showing interest in the performativity of human activity at night, the SI proposed, for instance, “nocturnal parties in the metro tunnels” of Paris amongst other “wild ideas” that aimed at the aesthetisation of everyday life away from the illuminated landscape of their city (Fontana-Giusti 262).

Breton and the SI’s interest in the performative potential of the urban night illustrate not only some of the ways in which the urban landscape and the absence of –natural– light can coincide in order to produce a backdrop for performance but also the fact that the

possibilities that lay in the absence of light and the visual have been part of the experimental practitioner consciousness of both the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. While not like the darkness of, say, the darkness of *Sound and Fury's War Music* (see chapter 1) or of *Dans Le Noir*, the darkness of the night is pregnant with the possibilities that the artificial darkness of contemporary artistic practices display: the tendency to move beyond the visual and into the corporeal, the focus on non-visual perception and the interplay between the sensed, the hidden and/or the concealed. It is in this line of practice therefore to which outright anti-perspectival practices belong: a practice whose preoccupation is the meeting point of embodied experience and art beyond the boundaries of the visual and visibility. The focus of this chapter is *The Question*, a non-visual and immersive theatre project that was devised by Extant Theatre Company and echoes the creative impulses of the anti-perspectival tradition. But before I focus on Extant's work, let me briefly consider the artistic landscape in which *The Question* has been developed.

A close look at contemporary artistic practices that somehow echo Breton and the SI's line of practice demonstrates that there have been two approaches to the aims of challenging the audience's visual perception and concealing or subtracting the visual dimensions of performance. The first approach concerns the aesthetic and poetic device of blindfolding the audience: from Imagen Theatre Group's 1992 production of *Ariadne's Thread (El Hilo de Ariadna)* where "participants were led blindfolded through a labyrinth, entering rooms with distinctive scents (such as those associated with a schoolroom or a child's nursery) that were meant to evoke distant memories" (Banes, "Olfactory" 32); to Complicité's 1999 piece *Mnemonic* that in one scene invited "[t]he audience ... to don [a] blindfold and touch [a] leaf [that was placed under their seat] and to meditate on the appeal of the texture of its veins to their own, quite personal memories and histories" (Welton, *Feeling Theatre* 71); and Louis De Bernières' *Sunday Morning at the Centre of the World* produced by Bad Physics in 2011 where "[b]lindfolded for the duration of the piece, half of the audience ... experience[d] the play not only through hearing the dialogue, but also through the exhilaration of live sound effects, smells and touch", while "the rest of the audience ... watch[ed] this played out in front of them as a performance within a performance, witnessing the effects created as well as the reactions of the audience experiencing them." ("About: Sunday Morning") While not exhausting, the aforementioned examples demonstrate artistic practices that maintain the visual dimensions of performance, while concealing (some of) them from (all or part of) the audience's perceptual palate.

The second approach emanating from the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde preoccupation with the urban night focuses on the non-visual form of artificial darkness. Subtracting the visual dimensions of performance completely, these practices have developed a more “holistic” approach to the non-visual that invites the audience to not only re-hierarchize the use of their senses, but also to experience theatre and/or performance at the point where non-visual perception and visual imagination meet. Intrigued by the creative, experiential and affective possibilities that the artificial removal of the visual dimensions of performance might have, theatre practitioners and companies that experiment with and/or incorporate the non-visual form of darkness in their practices develop work that can be theatrical (as in the case of Sound and Fury’s *War Music*), or performative/interdisciplinary (as in the case of Robert Wilson’s *H.G.*). The list of such practices includes the work of Sound and Fury, Shunt (*Ballad of Bobby Francois*, 1999-2001), Chris Goode (*Who You Are*, Tate Modern, 2010), David Rosenberg (*Ring*, 2012-2014) and Extant leading the way in the development of this newly-established genre of practice.

The aim of this chapter is twofold: firstly, in this chapter I will consider the ways in which the non-visual form of darkness is incorporated creatively in theatrical and performative practices. Secondly, I will examine some of the political implications that such incorporation might have from the perspective of the participatory frames that it establishes. I will begin this chapter by discussing Extant’s creative ethos, present some technical information on *The Question* and then focus on my personal experience of the non-visual environment developed by Extant. I will start the analytical discussion by considering the tactile and haptic aspects of *The Question*; Josephine Machon’s work on immersive theatre and the Jennifer Fisher’s work on touch performances will inform the discussion in terms of the characteristics of immersive theatre and the cultural history of touch performances. The discussion will then focus on the aural/oral aspects of *The Question* while also addressing the question of “where does the drama rest” in *The Question*. The scope will become increasingly political and this is far from coincidental because the interplay between the tactile and the auditory is where the politics of *The Question* start to unfold. Lastly, the final section of this chapter will develop within a political frame that will examine critically the politics of participation that are an inherent part of the production; Gareth White and Claire Bishop will inform this section, as they will provide the discussion with some useful methodological insights for the critical examination of the device of participation in theatre and performance. In considering the multiple layers of Extant’s *The Question* I hope to

demonstrate that –when handled with genuine creativity and care– the non-visual form of darkness is latent with creative, affective and socio-political potential.

### **Experiencing *The Question***

Extant is the only professional theatre company in Britain that is led by artists with visual impairments. Their work is inclusionary on two levels: on one level, Extant are committed to providing blind and partially sighted actors with physical theatre training and employment opportunities. They devise workshops and research projects that focus on movement and go beyond the boundaries of conventional forms of theatre. On another level, Extant are committed to producing work that is inclusionary for audience members with visual impairments and at the same time addresses a mixed audience of multiple visual abilities. In light of this, Extant attempt to bridge the gap between visual and non-visual “spectatorship”.

Extant are wary of the fact that the mainstream theatre industry in Britain includes blind and partially sighted audience members through conventional approaches to audio description. As I discussed in the third chapter, playwright Kaite O’Reilly identifies Extant as a theatre company that engages with the practice of audio description creatively. Conscious of the fact that any association with the practice of audio description might “type-cast” the company as an access aesthetics company, Extant not only argue that audio description obstructs the experience of performance, but also fully reject audio description in favour of a new holistic approach to performance that, while aiming at creating work that is accessible, develops pieces whose artistic merit is as important as the social efficacy agendas that inform it. Extant overcome the barrier of having to refer to the visual through language by concealing the visual dimensions of performance. In the past they produced work that was exclusively auditory. More recently they have developed a new approach by producing work that is interdisciplinary and engages with the non-visual form of darkness. Utilising this form, the company address their mixed audiences on equal grounds: sighted, partially sighted and blind audience members are exposed to the same elements of performance and engage with highly interactive environments that entail not only non-visual aesthetics, but also, as I shall discuss in the ensuing sections of this chapter, non-visual poetics.

In order to produce experiential performances Extant develop their work by experimenting with performance space; as such, the relationship between space and non-visual “spectatorship” is central to the research that is undertaken by the company. The case study of this chapter belongs to this research agenda. As Extant suggest on the website of *The Question*, the aims of the project are to “create an immersive theatrical environment, to

locate dramatic action within the audience's physical experience, to develop novel sensory substitution technology for navigation and to research the ways that [a] haptic device can integrate with audio, narrative and tactile art forms." (Extant) The result is a multi-layered project that addresses the audience on numerous levels. Being "an immersive theatrical environment" (Extant), *The Question* is partly an installation. "Locating the dramatic action within the audience's physical experience" (Extant), *The Question* is also a performance. "Develop[ing] novel sensory substitution technology" (Extant), *The Question* is also a mixed media piece and an engineering experiment. Bearing these multiple layers, *The Question* is presently an artistic and cultural phenomenon in the urban landscape of the creative city of London that engages with the non-visual form of darkness while at the same time self-consciously producing non-visual aesthetics and poetics.

*The Question* is a collaborative project between Extant, the Computing Department of the Open University and Battersea Arts Centre. The creative team of the project consists of artists, engineers and academics who are invested in developing an inclusionary and unconventional mode of "spectatorship". While *The Question* is still a work-in-progress, it had a five-day test run at the BAC in June 2010. This is when I had the opportunity to meet Extant and volunteer in the test run of *The Question* as a project assistant. Since this chapter focuses on the relationship between space and non-visual "spectatorship", however, I will not discuss the details of the creative process and focus on my experience of *The Question* as an audience member instead.

The most prevalent feature of *The Question* is the darkness that is inherent in the performance space. Maria Oshodi, the artistic director of Extant, observes that

[t]hough there have been other theatrical experiences created based on dark environments, sensory spaces and promenade performances, there has not yet been created a non-visual set for blind and sighted audiences to explore virtually and actually in the dark, as they journey through a narrative dealing with themes of the 'hidden'. So, *The Question* focuses on the experience of the audience. (Extant)

Oshodi remarks that in producing *The Question*, she consciously concealed the visual dimensions of the medium of performance in order to create the first self-consciously non-visual performance space in the contemporary theatre industry in London. Creating an environment that enfolds the audience by way of its inherent darkness, Oshodi invites her audience to not only engage in explorations that rely on non-visual perception, but also to

step into the critical frame of non-visibility itself. The means through which this is achieved will be discussed throughout this chapter. Before I move to the critical part of the discussion, however, I need to provide some technical information on *The Question* as well as account for my experience of the piece as an audience member.

The blacked-out performance space of *The Question* entails four “target zones” (Oshodi et al. 2) that are set up in distance from one another. The audience has to walk around the blacked-out space in search of the four zones. In order to enable the audience to navigate in the dark Extant and a team of humanoid robotics and technical engineers (led by Adam Spiers) have developed a haptic device. The creative team of *The Question* have christened the haptic device the “Haptic Lotus” because it looks like a mechanical Lotus-flower. The “Haptic Lotus” works through infrared technology: beacons that activate the device are grouped in clusters that are strategically placed close to the four zones of the performance space. In each performance every audience member is given a “Haptic Lotus”. Once an audience member approaches one of the four zones she walks past a cluster of beacons that activate the device: the “Haptic Lotus” vibrates and its petals open. Once an audience member walks away from a zone (and the cluster of beacons that activate the device) the petals of the “Haptic Lotus” close. In one of the evaluation reports of *The Question* (“In the Dark: Designing Navigation for a Haptic Theatre Experience”) Oshodi et al. explain the logic behind this navigational system:

moving the device from beacon to beacon a person is able to determine if they are getting closer or further away from the target zone. This form of active exploration may be thought of as analogous to the ‘hotter/colder’ children’s treasure hunting game, in which the treasure hunter is only told whether they have got closer or further away from the treasure. In much the same way the haptic theatre technology never informs the user directly in which direction the target is located. This they must determine through active exploration, moving around in the environment to get more data. (2)

The “hotter/colder” logic behind the haptic technology means that the “Haptic Lotus” does not restrict the audience members from exploring the dark performance space freely (Oshodi et al. 2). The device is only activated once an audience member approaches a zone; since the four zones are situated in distance from one another the audience can also



experience moments of free play and exploration around the dark performance space. On this rather positive note, I will begin the account of my personal experience of *The Question*.

Before I walked in the performance space of *The Question*, a member of the crew gave me a pair of headsets and a “Haptic Lotus”. There was a Velcro strap attached to the “Haptic Lotus” so it was securely fastened on my right palm. The infrared technology of the navigational system was activated: the “Haptic Lotus” vibrated and its petals pulsated once. The swift movement of the petals was accompanied by a buzzing sound that gave the “Haptic Lotus” a character of its own, a rather confident and assertive persona. While I had known that *The Question* uses haptic technology for the navigation of the audience, this was the first time that I realised that my experience of the dark performance space would be highly informed by this strange and charming robotic device.

When I walked into the performance space I faced complete darkness and complete silence. I walked towards the first zone and as the petals of the “Haptic Lotus” opened, the text through the headphones was activated:

At point A: a time when there was no object permanence and events happened moment by moment. ... Things only had passing existence in the void. ... No world out there and so nothing to exist in relation to. Without an ‘I/eye’, any contact with phenomena caused the tactile space of the body to extend; the haptic space of the skin expanding to fill the missing vision space.

A male and crisp voice spoke on top of a soundscape of baby sounds. Listening to the recording, I felt the first zone with my left hand. I let the different surfaces of the set to guide the movement of my hand: my hand went up and down and to different angles as I felt the contours of the different shapes. The variety in the textures of the surfaces meant that each surface had not only a different feel but also a different temperature; the plastic was rather cold, the leather slightly warmer, while the velvet and the rest of the textiles were warm to the touch.

After I had listened to the recorded text in the first zone and had tactilely explored the set in detail, I walked away and the “Haptic Lotus” reacted rather snappily as its petals moved inwards. While I had an idea of where the second zone was, the complete darkness had distorted my sense of orientation, so I relied on the device to find the second zone. After a minute of wandering around in complete darkness and silence the “Haptic Lotus” vibrated again, its petals opened and I was in the second zone. The recorded text was activated and the first thing that I heard was the soundtrack of a boxing match: a bell ringing and a crowd

cheering and applauding. A few seconds later, I heard another male voice through my headphones:

Which is the globe and which is the cube?... Conditioned throughout the years, I have an understanding of when and why words such as see, light and dark are used and when the sighted can't see something because it is too dark. I learnt that this way of knowing to them was not even open to them under all conditions. Also, darkness has all the secondary meanings that it has for the sighted: difficulty with perception of the unknown, threat, danger or warmth, safety and the guard against intrusion.

Listening to the text while tactily exploring the set, I realised that the auditory and the tactile complement one another: the set comprised of spheres and cubes that were hanging from thin strings and I attempted to figure out "which is the globe and which is the cube" through my sense of touch. Looking for shapes, I came upon different textures, which intensified my tactile sensations of the "globe[s]" and the "cube[s]". When I walked away from the second zone, the petals of the "Haptic Lotus" closed; a few seconds later, I heard a voice whose quality was different to the recording. It was a live voice that came from the same space that I was in: "the haptic space of the skin extending to fill the missing vision space." Echoing the recorded text that I had listened to in the first zone, this live voice established a link between the recorded text and the performance space that I had experienced thus far through the sense of touch.

Finding the third zone of the performance space was a bigger challenge because it was in another corner of the performance space. As I approached the third zone the "Haptic Lotus" vibrated but then stopped. I moved a couple of steps back and it vibrated again. I switched the direction to which I was heading and the petals of the "Haptic Lotus" opened. A few seconds later I heard the recorded text:

Matter does not exist with certainty at definite places, rather shows tendencies to uncertainty, always uncertainty. Somewhere between this minute reality and our ordinary macro-level the uncertainty cuts out back into the Euclidean line so clearly seen by some. But for those who do not see these lines, for us who live in tactile and auditory space, the probability and uncertainty of the micro-level still remain. Position is never certain. Momentum is the

only thing known. So rather in object space, I move instead through a time-space continuum.

The tactile set of this zone was different. I could feel surfaces that were distinct and I distinguished the chair, the table and the tea set that took up this zone. The warmth of the wooden table and the chair was juxtaposed to the cold china of the tea set that was attached to the table. At the same time, the table and the chair were cut in half and attached to the wall; this was the first instance when my tactile exploration of the set was abruptly disrupted by the cold surface of the wall. As there wasn't anything else to explore in this zone, I waited for the recorded text to end and I moved to the last zone of *The Question*.

Moving from the third to the fourth zone was the easiest part of the exploration of the performance space. Having gained a sense of orientation by this point, I headed confidently towards the fourth zone. The "Haptic Lotus" humoured my confidence and a few seconds later it opened its petals. As I moved through a corridor of inflatable toys I also listened to the last part of the recording:

If vision is not inherent, then morality, achieved through seeing God's world, cannot be born to us either. ... What we need then is a symbol or a metaphor, something to conceal our explorations of the broader human condition of what is innate and what is learnt. I recently received this question by letter from the Irishman Molegue: suppose a man born blind and taught by his touch to distinguish between a cube and a sphere. Suppose then that a cube and a sphere placed on the table and the blind man to be made to see ... and whether by his sight before he touched them he could now distinguish which is the globe and which the cube.

Walking through the corridor of the inflatable toys I got a sense of the playfulness that is inherent in this zone. Listening to the question that led to the creation of *The Question*, I wondered the reverse: had I not seen the inflatable toys during the set-up of the installation, would I be able to tell what they are through the sense of touch? When the recording ended, I walked away from the fourth zone and the "Haptic Lotus" vibrated once more. The infrared technology of the navigational system was switched off and the "Haptic Lotus" turned into a lifeless mechanical device again. A few seconds later the exit door of the performance space opened and I walked through a short corridor that led me back to the highly vibrant and visual space of the BAC.

## The (Syn)aesthetics of Touch in *The Question*

As I discussed in the second chapter the term (syn)aesthetics signifies the anti-perspectival practices that focus on the experiential aspects of performance and aim at engaging with their audiences on a visceral level and at the point where the spectator's subjectivity, corporeality, affective reactions and cognitive responses coincide. Since (syn)aesthetics functions as an umbrella term for work that resists categorisation, (syn)aesthetic practices can be found across the continuum of creative work: from the playwriting of Naomi Wallace (see Machon, *(Syn)Aesthetics* 132-143), to the elaborate choreographies of Akhram Khan (see Machon, *(Syn)Aesthetics* 112-123), to the creative approaches to audio description by theatre company Graeae (see Machon, *(Syn)Aesthetics* 160-1) and the immersive pieces of Punchdrunk (see Machon, *(Syn)Aesthetics* 89-9) and Shunt (see Machon, *(Syn)Aesthetics* 100-111). While Machon argues that all immersive practices are (syn)aesthetic, in *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* she is quick to raise a cautionary flag with regards to the use of the term immersive. Acknowledging that the term has become a buzzword in the field of contemporary theatrical and performative experimentation in the UK, she notes that "[i]n theatre discourse 'immersive' is now attached to diverse events that assimilate a variety of art forms and seek to exploit all that is experiential in performance, placing the audience at the heart of the work. Here experience should be understood in its fullest sense, to feel *feelingly* – to undergo." (*Immersive* 22) Suggesting that immersive theatre is characterised by its explicit interdisciplinarity and concern with the subjectivity and corporeality of the audience, Machon notes that in immersive practices

the audience is thrown (sometimes even literally) into a totally new environment and context from the everyday world from which it has come. These environments are seemingly outside of 'everyday' rules and regulations and always have expectations of physical interaction. All elements of theatre are in the mix, establishing a multidimensional medium in which the participant is submerged, blurring spaces and roles. ... What these experiences ensure is that each particular environment has its own order and logic; a logic that encourages a spontaneous response from its audience, and requires a personal abandonment of everyday boundaries. Such performances can offer lawbreaking conditions to roam free, take risks, be adventurous. (*Immersive* 27-8)

Machon implicitly suggests that what differentiates immersive theatre from other (syn)aesthetic practices is immersive theatre's unique preoccupation with performance space. Transforming performance space into an elaborate environment that enfolds the audience, immersive theatre transfers the set that can be seen through "Alberti's *finestra aperta*" in perspectival practices (see Bleeker 97) from the stage to a three-dimensional space that invites the audience to interact with elements of performance in a direct manner. Nonetheless, Machon emphasises the fact that a three dimensional space that enfolds the audience does not an immersive theatre piece make. Immersive theatre entails an environment, while at the same time occasioning the devices of "narrative, character and theme" (Machon, *Immersive* 28) as much as other genres of theatre do. The difference between immersive theatre and, say, Complicité's *Mnemonic* is the proximity that immersive practices establish between the audience, the dramatic devices that shape the poetics of a piece and other elements of performance that inform both its aesthetics and its poetics. Constructing environments that enfold the audience, immersive theatre practices –more often than not– redefine the role of the spectator or audience member to that of "participant-performer-[and]player" (Machon, *Immersive* 62). Setting up a world that is distinct from the fabric of everyday life by way of its dramatic, aesthetic and poetic devices, immersive theatre turns the audience into participants that interact with this world; in their turn, the audience –as participants– become part of the immersive world and a sight/site of performance for their fellow audience members/participants. What is more, experiencing, participating and performing, the audience enter the domain of play because –in their hybridised identities– the audience engages in mimetic behaviour that is both encouraged by the immersive environment itself and developed independently via the corpus of the audience's affective and corporeal memories. As such, the audience become a crucial element of performance amongst other elements of performance because –through their interaction with an immersive environment– they fill in the gaps that are intentionally left blank to be filled by the audience. The result is not only a type of practice that engages with some of the most important aspects of the anti-perspectival tradition, but also the establishment of "creative world[s] via [the audience's] own imagination, fused with [their] actual presence, fused with [their] bodily interaction with the physical (and sometimes virtual) environments and other human performers." (Machon, *Immersive* 62) Immersive theatre therefore enables the physical, the corporeal and the imaginary to coincide in performance. The question that arises is in what ways the non-visual form of darkness affects these rather general characteristics of immersive theatre practices.

Briefly considering immersive practices that experiment with the non-visual form of darkness, Machon argues that

[p]ractitioners who experiment with taking sight away completely, ... illustrate the shifting of perception that occurs when sight is removed and space is reconfigured, forcing an audience member to attend by using the full sensorium in experiencing the work. This serves to accentuate embodied perception by heightening holistic sensory awareness. (*Immersive* 81)

Machon suggests that the removal of the visual dimensions of performance from an immersive environment not only intensifies the impact of the subjective and corporeal in audience reception, but also provides audience members with a chance to receive the experiential elements of performance devoid of the implications of sensorial categorization. It is in such practices that the aural/oral, olfactory, kinaesthetic and –occasionally– gustatory merge in order to enable the audience to produce their own (syn)aesthetics based on the aesthetics and poetics of the piece on the one hand and their personal sensations, affective reactions and cognitive responses on the other hand. Nonetheless, immersive pieces in the dark usually focus on the amplification of the address to one or two senses. In the case of *Sound and Fury*, for instance, the focus is placed mostly on sound, as the company creates immersive soundscapes that set up a fictional fabric whose narrative, characters and themes address the audience's sense of hearing and implicitly, as I discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, their imaginative faculties. In the case of *Extant* the focus is placed on the aural and the haptic. As Machon notes

*Extant* Theatre is experimenting with immersive technologies, prioritizing haptic engagement that locates the 'drama' within an audience-participant rather than outside of her or him, to be heard or 'seen'. ... Through this *Extant* is examining the ways in which a performance is *actually located within* the audience participant's body and imagination. This illustrates the interactive relationship required in the practice and makes tangible the notion of audience-participant as 'site/cite' of performance. (*Immersive* 81)

Machon suggests that *Extant* are distinct from other immersive theatre companies that experiment with the non-visual form of darkness because of the incorporation of immersive technologies. Considering the implications that this incorporation can have on the audience's sensorium, Machon focuses on the sense of touch and argues that the company achieves the

bridging of the gap between the corporeal and the imaginary by way of –predominantly– the tactile. As the account of my experience of *The Question* has demonstrated, the sense of touch was addressed in two distinct ways: on the one hand, as I have already suggested, the four zones entailed objects of various shapes, sizes and textures that could be explored through the sense of touch. On the other hand, each audience member held a “Haptic Lotus” that vibrated and pulsed in order to navigate her around the dark performance space.

Discussing the sense of touch in relation to performance, in “Tangible Acts: Touch Performances” art historian Jennifer Fisher indebted the development of modern and contemporary touch performances to the Futurists and more specifically Filippo T. Marinetti’s practice of Tactilism. Referring to the friction between the senses of touch and vision in the “aesthetic of tactilism”, Fisher argues that for Marinetti

touch supplants vision in the privileging of the five senses and holds powers available to be tapped and explored. Marinetti defined the ontology of tactilism in relational terms, as preconscious perception that discerns feeling as knowledge as distinct from intellectual cognition. ... In this regard, Marinetti articulates a prescient understanding of the neurophysiology of touch. It is the tactile modality of proprioception that can qualify the ways in which the interstices between people are intensified, where the spaces of proximity become charged. This dislocation of contiguous knowledge from the certain meanings of spoken discourse locates touch as a first-order kinesthetic event, one that is irreducible to language. (167)

Framing the relationship between the visual and the non-visual as the antagonistic relationship between vision and touch, Marinetti produced performances that either undermined the use of vision completely (as in the case of the *Tactile Dinner Party* that I mentioned in the previous chapter) or retained the use of vision only to degrade it via tactilely elaborate ensembles that –visually– made no sense at all. Examining in detail the mechanics of touch, Marinetti aimed at not only addressing his audience on a visceral level, but also developing a self-consciously anti-perspectival practice whose aesthetics and poetics revolved around the “non-visual mapping of the body’s form” (Silverman 16) by way of the mechanism of proprioception. In this sense, Tactilism aimed at by-passing the visual by not only undermining the representational self-sufficiency maintained by realism’s fourth wall (a relatively new, yet established genre at the beginning of the twentieth century), but

also by addressing the audience via a sense that –by definition– necessitates the proximity between the performance and the audience. Such an artistic legacy makes touch performances the anti-perspectival mode of expression and reception par excellence. As Fisher notes

[t]ouch performances pose a unique challenge to conventional visualist aesthetics. They dissolve the separation of artist and audience and conceptually frame the proximal interstices. Often, the beholder in effect co-creates the piece as visual apprehension gives way to the immediacy of kinesthetic involvement. (166)

Fisher suggests that –even under the brightest of lights– touch performances can challenge some of the main premises of the perspectival tradition. By valuing the subjectivity and corporeality of the audience touch performances not only set the mechanism of proprioception in motion, but also engage the audience’s sense of kinaesthesia. When I explore an object through the sense of touch I also move my hand in order to get a detailed tactile impression of this object; in order to make sense of my sensations, touch and kinaesthesia complement one another and contribute towards the establishment of a personal poetics via “the non-visual mapping of [my] body’s form” (Silverman 16).

Since the tactile set of *The Question* was in a dark performance space, the interplay between the senses of touch and kinaesthesia was intensified. As the audience did not have access to the visual, the tactile exploration of the set was steered by the surfaces of the set itself. The sense of touch facilitated the exploration of the tactile set and the tactile set navigated the movement of the hand through a range of shapes, textures and contours. The interplay between the sense of touch and the sense of kinaesthesia was shaped at the intersection between the “non-visual mapping of the body’s form” (Silverman 16) on the one hand and the tactile set on the other hand. Sensation, cognition and everything that lies between them functioned in tandem as the aesthetics and poetics of the piece merged to the point where their boundaries were not easily decipherable. It is in this sense that Extant’s preoccupation with the sense of touch locates the performance, as Machon notes, “within the audience participant’s body of imagination” and that the audience-participant becomes the “‘site/cite’ of performance” (*Immersive* 81).

Having implicitly developed from the historical legacy of tactilism, *the Question* is, according to Oshodi, “an exciting breakthrough into touch theatre” (Extant). Concealing the visual dimensions of performance completely by way of the non-visual form of darkness, *The Question* echoed some of the aesthetic characteristics of the Futurists’ *Tactile Dinner Party*



while not endorsing its poetics of prompting –brilliantly– nonsensical behaviour [burying one’s face in “salad to activate the skin on the outer cheeks and lips”, for instance (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses” 7)]. Nonetheless, the element of play (a central feature of both the legacy of tactilism and contemporary immersive theatre practices) was prevalent throughout the piece. As an audience member remarked during one of the audience feedback sessions for the piece, what he liked about *The Question* was “the fun-ness of it”, while another audience member noted that her memory of the piece revolves around “the tactile stuff; it felt like an adventure” (Extant). In a similar fashion, another audience member remarked that

[w]hen you’re blind you don’t often get the opportunity to wander freely in a space physically and to play with things that you encounter. So, it’s that license to play, to just investigate what’s around you with your hands when you’re not being observed. I mean, I know we were, but in the sense when everyone else is in the same position and you’re not being observed or judged on your movement then that’s quite liberating, that was fun. (Extant)

This feeling of the “license to play” stems from the trust that most –if not all– of the audience of *The Question* placed on Extant, the BAC and –implicitly– the health and safety regulations that shape performative events throughout London. The spectator consciousness of contemporary audiences in the UK is partly informed by the fact that if something has received the clear to be presented to an audience as part of the repertoire of an established cultural institution, it must be safe. Of course, theatre companies can either reinforce this impression or –to an extent– undermine it in order to shape experiences and bring to the surface desirable affects and effects (as the immersive work of theatre company Punchdrunk often displays). In the case of Extant, the company aims at establishing a safe space in the dark that can become a place of play and exploration for each of its audience members.

This safe approach to the development of an immersive environment was implemented fully in *The Question*. If the non-visual form of darkness does not instigate affects that lay on the negative end of the affective spectrum for an audience member (since, as I discussed in the previous chapter, this is sometimes the case), there is an inherent playfulness in the activity of searching for tactile islands that wait to be explored in a blacked-out space. The “pleasure of the hunt” is not only intensified by the non-visual form of darkness, but it is also informed by affective and corporeal memories that come to the surface through the senses of touch and kinaesthesia. For instance, the tactile sensation of

tartan surfaces in the second zone of *The Question* reminded me of my grandmother's living room, as she always used tartan throws on her sofas. The simultaneously tactile and kinaesthetic exploration of these textiles brought to the surface feelings of reassurance as I remembered how my grandmother's tartan throws felt against my toddler body the –far too many– times that I drifted off on one of her sofas. This corporeal memory was accompanied by affects that lay on the positive end of the affective spectrum: recalling the sensation of tartan as a toddler, I also recalled the comfort and security that I felt those late nights when the (toned down) adult conversations in my grandmother's living room were the soundscape of my light sleep. The exploration and sensation of tartan and the affective responses that it instigated through the “non-visual mapping of [my] body's form” (Silverman 16) could not have been the same for the other audience members that were exploring the same surfaces that I was; as such, the tangible exploration of the blacked-out environment of *The Question* enabled me to establish a personal poetics while using my subjectivity and corporeality as the main reference points throughout this process.

While the interplay between the sense of touch and kinaesthesia was informed by the interaction between the tactile set of *The Question* and my proprioceptive engagement with it, it was also affected by the navigational system employed by Extant. The navigation of an audience in a blacked-out immersive environment is, perhaps, one of the biggest challenges that a company experimenting with the non-visual form of darkness has to face. How does one ensure that the experiential and affective potential of darkness is maintained while the health and safety of an audience is not compromised? One approach to this challenge is to let the audience sit or stand still as in the case of the work of Sound and Fury, Chris Goode and David Rosenberg. While this approach deals with the pragmatics of health and safety in a hands-on way, it can also limit the possibilities of tactile exploration and interaction that –as I have discussed in this section– has become a crucial feature in –if not a trademark of– the work of Extant.

Another approach to the challenge of navigating the audience in a blacked-out environment is the employment of the oldest (recorded) haptic device in the history of humankind: the haptic “device” of human hands. Swedish artistic duo Lundahl and Seitzl play with the navigational potential of human hands in *Symphony of a Missing Room*, a piece that has taken place in a variety of European museums since its development in 2010. Wearing goggles that recreate the non-visual sensation of a blacked-out space, the audience of *Symphony of a Missing Room* also wear headphones through which they can hear a “disembodied female voice”, while “someone's hand softly holding yours offer[s] gentle

guidance.” (Jones, R. 274) Having had the chance to experience an extract of the piece at the *Theatre in the Dark* symposium that was held at Surrey University in June 2014, I have to say that the result is an extremely intense performance piece that places the theme of human interaction at the centre of its aesthetics and poetics. Lundahl and Seidl appoint a dancer to each audience member who acts as a guide during the highly subjective and affective journey in her (personal) darkness. The sensation of fingertips on your fingertips, sometimes offering stable reassurance and sometimes playfully instigating “catch me if you can” sequences, leads you to various corners of the performance space while human contact –as both a navigational “device” and an aesthetic and poetic medium– informs your movement every step of the way. In one instance (my personal favourite) a loud waltz breaks the fragmented narrative of the “disembodied female voice” (Jones, R. 274) and the fingertips (paradoxically both disembodied and belonging to a subjective agent at once) invite you to a frantic dance around the space. At this point, sensation and affect merge into an overwhelming whole as the playfulness of the navigational device of a dancer’s fingertips allow you to let go while knowing that your safety is literally in safe hands. In this sense, the “haptic device” of human hands can become an inherent part of a performance while also addressing the navigational challenges the stem from the pragmatics of the non-visual form of darkness.

Developing from a different perspective that is not necessarily preoccupied with the aesthetic and poetic possibilities of navigational devices, the third approach to the challenge of navigation in the midst of darkness is the use of “immersive [haptic] technologies” (Machon, *Immersive* 81) as in the case of *The Question*’s “Haptic Lotus”. Being a robotic navigational device, the “Haptic Lotus” addressed the senses of touch and kinaesthesia in a rather ambiguous way; through its vibrations and pulsations the “Haptic Lotus” informed differently the experience of each audience member. As I have already mentioned in the previous section, the device developed a rather lively persona throughout my experience of the piece, but it did not complement my experience on an aesthetic and/or poetic level. Interestingly, a significant percentage of the audience of *The Question* felt the need to remark on the effect that the use of such a robotic device had had on their overall experience of the piece. An audience member noted that “[t]he Haptic Device as a thing I quite enjoyed – its feeling and using it as a tool. I liked the way it pushed out on my fingers and I could go on in and out like this [doing an inward-outward movement with his fingers]”, while another audience member projected an additional role to the “Haptic Lotus” by recalling that

I really particularly loved the way the Lotus stayed with you as a sort of, almost like a little friend that accompan[ies] you in your

journey. And it was a beautiful metaphor of knowledge and consciousness and awareness. If you're reading the wonderful Philip Pullman novels I suppose it's the equivalent of a demon.  
(Extant)

Whether a "thing" that makes the impact of tactile sensation even stronger, a lively "guide" that assists you in navigating around a blacked-out space, or "a little friend" that adopts the poetic persona of Pullman's creative conceptualization of "demon", the device intensified the anti-perspectival sentiment of *The Question* by valuing the subjectivity and corporeality of each of its audience members. Nonetheless, if there is one aspect of the "Haptic Lotus" that was evident in the experiences of all the audience of *The Question*, it was the fact that the device –as opposed to the haptic "device" of fingertips-on-fingertips in Lundahl and Seidl's *Symphony of a Missing Room*– functioned as an additional sense in the midst of darkness. Adam Spiers, the robotics engineer that led the production of the "Haptic Lotus" notes that

*The Question* is particularly interesting to me because of this concept of ... sensory substitution and sensory augmentation. It's doing something which no one can experience without the technology; so, we're not saying 'Oh, this is what it's like to be blind', [be]cause it's not. ... [H]ere's a sense you can only have with the device in your hand. (Extant)

Addressing the sense of touch and directing the sense of kinaesthesia, the "Haptic Lotus" can be seen as a device that creates an additional sense that enables the body to navigate around the non-visual form of darkness. Spears identifies the "Haptic Lotus" as a device that creates a new sense, because it does not provide an outright tactile sensation and it does not redefine the audience's kinaesthetic sense. It combines the two senses in order to provide the audience with orientation and as such it acts as prosthesis on the audience's body; whether it is received as a prosthetic device that assists in orientation and thus enhances the mechanism of proprioception (as in my case), a device that augments –yet not substitutes– the sense of touch or an outright aesthetic device that informs the overall poetics of the piece, the "Haptic Lotus" extends the sensorium of the audience of *The Question* and thus acts as a device that –literally and figuratively– makes sense only in the non-visual and immersive form of darkness. It is in this sense that *The Question* is, indeed, "an exciting breakthrough into touch theatre" (Extant); incorporating cutting-edge technology, Extant not only raise a noteworthy question about the role that technology has to play in immersive

theatre, but also address the challenges of non-visual perception through the “haptic sense” that, according to Fisher, “encompasses touch, kinaesthesia and proprioception” (178) all at once.

### **The Drama in *The Question***

In a filmed interview to filmmaker Terry Braun Maria Oshodi discusses *The Question* while reflecting on its strengths and weaknesses and considering points for the project’s future development. While celebrating the incorporation of the “Haptic Lotus” in the immersive universe of *The Question* as a unique and efficient navigational device, she also notes that it is difficult to analyse the piece within the frame of theatre discourse. Building on this Oshodi notes that

it’s hard to tell at this point exactly where the drama rests. Is it in the thrill of moving through unpredictable landscapes? Is it in the relationship of being guided by a haptic device in the dark? Is it in the chance moment where the active interaction with the tactile objects happens to coincide with the part of the narrative that is just being heard in that moment? (Extant)

Reflecting on the complexities of analysing immersive work that incorporates a number of elements of performance and utilises a range of experiential and dramatic devices, Oshodi implicitly notes the fluidity that is inherent in (syn)aesthetic practices that resist categorisation. Nonetheless, while I agree with Oshodi in that the challenges of articulating and analysing multi-layered experiences are noteworthy, I also acknowledge the fact that immersive theatre engages with the dramatic devices of “narrative, character and theme” (Machon, *Immersive* 28) as much as more conventional approaches to theatre-making do.

While Machon refers to these dramatic devices, she does not offer a comprehensive account of the ways in which they are employed by practitioners and received by audiences of immersive theatre. In his article “On Immersive Theatre” theatre scholar Gareth White notes that while helping us “understand the corporeal character of audience experience” in immersive practices, Machon’s work

does not explain another facet of the sensations they generate: the feeling that if we work hard at our role in them, and pursue the action and the performers, we will gain access to the interior of the drama itself. Machon helps to explain how we perceive work like this where the physical and interactive relationships offered in it are complex and multifaceted, but does not explain what we will

find if we are tempted to pursue the inside of the work even further, or where we will meet the boundary between the work and ourselves as we pursue it. (229-30)

Challenging Oshodi's impression that the process of locating the drama in immersive theatre is an ambiguous pursuit and taking Machon's work on immersive theatre a step further, White remarks that there is an "inside of the work" of immersive practices that is not as apparent as the elements of performance that address the audience on an embodied level. At the same time, implicitly problematizing distinct binaries such as the Cartesian binary of body (outside) vs. mind (inside), aesthetics vs. poetics, production vs. reception and so on, White remarks that "the Interior of the drama itself" is located in the tangible elements of performance; in other words, if we temporarily suspend our preoccupation with the corporeal and the affective effects that immersive theatre has, we will be able to find the drama at the aesthetics and the poetics of interaction that instigate the corporeal and the affective in the first place. Since White makes a point that is hard to ignore or challenge, in this section I will attempt to figure out "where the drama rests" (Extant) in the immersive environment of *The Question*.

*The Question* was written by Oshodi herself. The script was inspired by *On Blindness*, the published correspondence between blind philosopher Martin Milligan and sighted philosopher Bryan Magee. The correspondence between the two philosophers focuses on the relationship between experience, knowledge and language as Magee and Milligan argue about the ways in which the world can be experienced and understood. The discussion between the two revolves around the question of whether or not the experience of a blind person is significantly different to the experience of a sighted person. Magee and Milligan engage in a philosophical debate that is informed by their respective experiences and understanding of the world. Magee examines blindness as the lack of vision and as such he supports the hypothesis that the experience of a blind person must be significantly different from the embodied experience of a sighted person. Magee posits some of the main questions that inform his hypothesis in the first round of correspondence between the two philosophers:

[I]f it is true that all our empirical concepts must derive ultimately from experience, you can have no empirically based conception of what a visual appearance is, and therefore cannot have any such conception of what it means for anyone or anything to have a visual appearance at all, and therefore cannot know what it is for anyone

to look like anything. This forces me to the conclusion that your concept of 'knowing a person' must be importantly different from mine. What, in either case, does the difference consist in? And what practical difference do these differences make? Can they be articulated in language? (2–3)

Magee develops his argument within an empirical frame and –from the standpoint of his sightedness– he presumes that blind experience is shaped merely by the lack of vision as his concern is to decipher the differences between visual experience and non-visual experience. In a moment of reflection he wonders whether or not language has the potential to bridge –what he considers to be– the gap between sighted and blind experience. In response to Magee's questions, Milligan not only makes some empirical observations about his embodied experience of blindness, but also brings to the forefront a remark that sheds an interesting light on the blacked-out environment of *The Question*:

We don't live, as it is sometimes supposed, in a 'world of darkness', because, not knowing directly from our own experience anything about light, we don't have any direct experience of darkness. Nevertheless, we can understand what I think can be called the primary meaning of 'darkness' as being 'a state of affairs where there is little or no light'; and, as I have already said, 'light' can be understood by blind people as 'that which makes things visible'; and "visible" as 'object of a kind of awareness specifically associated with the use of eyes.' (11)

Milligan stresses the fact that the association between darkness and blindness is a misconception that is reinforced by the cultural assumption that blindness is the lack of sight. In light of this, he suggests that visual experience *can* be understood by people with visual impairments by virtue of language. In chapter three of this thesis I argued that an audio describer uses visual terms in his descriptive practice because of language's affinity to the symbolic. Milligan maintains this position and takes it a step further: while the term "darkness" cannot be understood on an experiential level by a person with visual impairments, it is meaningful to her on a conceptual level. What is more, Milligan argues that symbolic language is an inherent part of embodied experience. Echoing Wittgenstein and reinforcing Searle's analysis of the mechanics of symbolic language, Milligan examines language from the perspective of language use. As such, he suggests that even though the term "darkness" is understood on a conceptual level by people with visual impairments, it *is*

part of their experience because they use the term in exactly the same way as sighted people do. Milligan therefore argues that the gap between visual and non-visual experience is addressed in the domain of language use. More importantly, Milligan maintains that even though the characteristics of visual and non-visual experience are different on an embodied level, the understanding of the world by sighted and blind individuals is not as diverse as it would first appear because they both engage in the use of the same language –symbolic or not.

The debate between Milligan and Magee illustrates that for Magee the experience of blindness is a mode of experiencing the world in a fragmented way: the body and language function separately towards the creation of meaning. Milligan however maintains that the experience of blindness is fluid and it is shaped by the interplay between the body and language. In light of this important epistemological difference, an important binary emerges: Magee’s metaphorical conception of blindness (since his account of it is based on conceptual hypotheses) versus Milligan’s empirical account of blindness (since he bases his arguments on his personal experience).

Moving within this philosophical frame, the audio design of *The Question* consisted of Oshodi’s recorded text and Peter Boshier’s sound design that complemented the text. The recorded text presented the fragmented life narrative, the experiential articulations and the reflective thoughts of a fictional character called Kalabi; a “blind geometer”, Kalabi struggles “with scientific, philosophical and cultural perspectives on the question of knowledge through sensory translation, and what ultimate impact this has on his identity.” (Extant) Establishing a “vocalic space” (Connor, ch. 1) whose source is evident in the affectively and reflectively latent thoughts of the “recorded Kalabi” and the voice of the “live Kalabi”, the recorded text of *The Question* developed a fragmented –yet summative– narrative. The interplay between the recorded and the live Kalabi not only projected the character and his narrative on the blacked-out environment of *The Question*, but also gave the audience the impression that “the tactile and auditory space” that they explored was a distinct world that is established by Kalabi’s subjectivity and corporeality.

Kalabi’s voice was clear, warm and latent with the childlike curiosity of a scientist. Sharing parts of his life narrative, Kalabi also recalled –in the fashion of auditory flashbacks– voices from his past; as opposed to the crisp nature of Kalabi’s voice, these voices were hollow and reverberant, almost echo-like. For instance, a high-pitched, yet distant female voice –possibly the voice of Kalabi’s mother– disrupted his monologue frequently: “But you are a blind scientist, for god’s sake!”, she interrupted repeatedly as Kalabi presented the



audience with his articulations of experience and reflective thoughts. At the same time, Kalabi was also haunted by philosophical voices from the past; the debate between Milligan and Magee, for example, was auditorially staged as a boxing match. Commenting on his experience of blindness as well as listening—along with the audience—to voices from the past that haunt him, Kalabi presented a narrative that resonates materially with the rest of the elements of performance. Constantly asking questions (for instance, “Which is the globe and which is the cube?”) and often reaching conclusions by way of the articulation of experience (such as “for us that live in tactile and auditory space, the probability and the uncertainty of the micro-level still remain”) Kalabi projected a strong narrative on the blacked-out environment from the perspective of his blind embodiment.

Far from outshining the recorded text, the audio design that complemented it added depth to the soundscape of the performance. The sounds that augmented Kalabi’s narrative were not only amplified versions of parts of the soundscape of everyday life (birdsong, the sound of speedy cars, the sounds of a science lab), but also sounds that are related to the experience of blindness (the sound of a watch for people with visual impairments, the sound of a cane on the pavement, the sound of footsteps increasing in volume as someone approaches you). Reinforcing the impression that the blacked-out space was shaped by Kalabi’s particular embodiment, the sound design not only functioned as an immersive technology whose raw materials stemmed from the fabric of everyday life, but also—via its special effects—enhanced the drama that was projected on the overall immersive environment of *The Question*.

The overall sound design of *The Question* therefore established the drama of the piece while also justifying the presence of the tactile set. Projecting an additional, symbolic dimension to each audience member’s highly subjective and affective interaction with the set, the sound design brought all the elements of the blacked-out environment together. Useful in illustrating this point further is the examination of the sense of touch beyond the levels of the affective and the corporeal. In “Tangible Acts” Fisher notes that in the pre-modern era the sense of touch was conceptually linked to sighted (mis)conceptions of blindness: “[b]efore the Enlightenment, allegorical representations of touch were typified by depicting the absence of vision, portraying blind individuals engaged in the haptic exploration of objects.” (166) While in the antiquity allegorical articulations of blindness conceived of it as either punishment for one’s transgressions (see Oedipus) or a spiritual gift (see the seer Tiresias) and in the early Christian era blindness was—predominantly—explained on the grounds of sin, the cultural imagination of the Middle ages leading up to

the Enlightenment either conceived of people with visual impairments as courageous martyrs (the allegorically blind noble and heroic figures come to mind) or as charity cases (recall the figure of the blind beggar) (for a detailed account of representations of blindness see Barasch). With the exception of the seers of antiquity and the heroic figures of the Middle Ages the general cultural history of blindness is a history of not only oppression, but also the production of negative archetypes. As such, the allegorical association between the sense of touch and blindness is indicative of not only the negative articulations of blindness by way of –predominantly– degrading archetypes but also the “low status” of the sense of touch in the cultural history of the West as “a crude and uncivilized mode of perception” (Classen, *The Deepest Sense* xii).

Implicitly making a sarcastic remark on both the cultural histories of blindness and touch, *The Question* placed the sense of touch at the centre of the aesthetics of the blacked-out environment that it established. At the same time, it complemented the tactile set with a narrative, a character and a soundscape that presented its audience with not only a distinct immersive world in its own right but also a commentary on the embodiment of blindness *from* the perspective of the embodiment of blindness. As such, when sighted audience members explored the tactile set of *The Question* they were exposed to both their affective and corporeal memories and a cultural commentary on the oppressive structures that have framed the multiple embodiments of blindness and the (“low status” of the) sense of touch in the Western world. Ingeniously making the intangible tangible and inviting its audience to come to these cultural and socio-political conclusions by way of their embodied explorations in the dark, *The Question* presented its audience with far more than the materialization of narrative and character; it presented its audience with the chance to question the set of ocularcentric attitudes that have framed the social experience of people with visual impairments and to discover the joy, playfulness and flexibility that frames the actual multiple embodiments of people with visual impairments. “For us that live in tactile and auditory space”, Kalabi says, “the probability and the uncertainty of the micro-level still remain.” Far from a remark on the limitations of the multiple experiences of people with visual impairments, this remark –heard in the midst of diverse tactile sensations and playful kinaesthetic explorations– is the celebration of uncertainty and the multiple corporeal and affective possibilities that might rise from it.

In this sense, *The Question* engages with the interplay between the allegorical and the embodied by virtue of the non-visual form of darkness and the elements of performance that are entailed in it. The facts that Extant is the only professional theatre company in the

UK that is led by artists with visual impairments and that *The Question* is a piece that examines the experiential differences between sight and blindness allow for the development of a narrative that is personal and political at the same time. Utilising the non-visual form of darkness, Extant create a distinct world that playfully and sarcastically responds to not only ocularcentric attitudes to blindness but also the wide (mis)conception (adopted, as I discussed in the previous chapter, by cultural phenomena like *Dans Le Noir*) that the experience of blindness is the same as the (sighted) experience of darkness. In response, Extant produced a representational space –to use Lefebvre’s useful term– in order to gradually deconstruct it; they produced *The Question* in the midst of the material manifestation of the metaphor of metaphors in terms of blindness (blindness=darkness) in order to enable the audience to question not only the allegorical in relation to the embodied, but also the metaphorical in relation to the empirical.

Along with a strong narrative and a character that actively searches for the answer to the question of how do we “acquire knowledge by way of sensorial translations”, the material employment of the metaphorical conception of blindness equals darkness also bears the “narrative of ocularcentrism”, in other words what Debord identified as “the *weakness* of the Western philosophical project” (*Society* 11). While not a narrative in its strict sense, the “narrative of ocularcentrism” is as rich and imaginative as any play in the Western canon; it entails multiple and diverse stories and characters that range from Cupid/Eros, Oedipus, Tiresias, Samson and King Lear to Wally Krew (*See no Evil, Hear no Evil*, 1989), Frank Slade (*Scent of a Woman*, 1992) and other ocularcentric representations/imaginings of what the experience of blindness might be like. In this sense, while the narrative and character of the “blind geometer” Kalabi presented the audience of *The Question* with a simultaneously personal and political position, the “narrative of ocularcentrism” implicitly addressed the audience’s ocularcentric imaginings only to be exposed and deconstructed. The unifying theme of *The Question* therefore was the narrative’s continuous deconstruction by way of the audience’s embodiment. In this sense, the “drama of *The Question* rests” (Extant) in the interaction of the material and tangible elements of the piece with the metaphorical, allegorical and philosophical abstractions that its material aspects and the embodiment of the audience are continuously invited to overcome.

### **“Aesthetics of Invitation”: The Politics of *The Question***

Creating an immersive environment in the dark and projecting on it a narrative, a character and a theme that bridged the gap between the empirical and the metaphorical as well as the embodied and the allegorical, Extant have set up a performance that has

intentionally left gaps that are to be filled by the audience's embodiment and participation. The license to play in the blacked-out performance space of *The Question* has been previously addressed in the discussion of this chapter, but in this section I will examine it in relation to the politics of participation. During one of the feedback sessions for *The Question* an audience member remarked that "I could choose what I wanted to listen to and I could choose where I wanted to be. I didn't feel like I had to stay at a certain place for longer than I wanted to. So, the freedom I had to move around was brilliant." (Extant) This "freedom to move around" in the blacked-out environment of *The Question* meant that the audience could not only explore each of the four zones for however long they wanted to, but also that the sequence of the narrative provided by the sound design depended on the individual journey of each audience member. As such, there were numerous ways in which the audience could follow Kalabi's life narrative, experiential articulations and philosophical remarks. Whether in chronological sequence or in an episodic manner, each audience member's journey in the dark was unique by way of not only their tactile explorations of the set but also the sequence of their movement in the blacked-out environment. In this sense, the audience's participation in *The Question* was a significant aspect of the piece. But how can Extant's incorporation of the device of participation be examined in socio-political terms?

Useful in answering this question is the work of two scholars who have not only produced comprehensive critical surveys on the practice of spectatorship (each from their disciplinary agendas), but also problematized the romantization of participation as a self-sufficient means of politically charged spectatorship: Gareth White's recently published *Audience Participation: Aesthetics of Invitation* and Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells: Participation and the Politics of Spectatorship*. White frames his examination in critical terms when he acknowledges that for some practitioners in the history of contemporary anti-perspectival practices the device of participation has been considered as "a solution to questions asked about conventional theatre." (*Audience Participation* 18) Referring explicitly to Boal and also suggesting that Schechner and Izzo have also occasionally fallen prey to such absolutist participatory agendas, White raises a cautionary flag with regards to the examination of the device of participation by suggesting that it should "be questioned in its own right" (*Audience Participation* 18). In a similar fashion but from a historical perspective, Bishop argues that the "social turn" of the arts during the 1990s and 2000s is not a recent phenomenon and that participation has been used as an artistic device since –at least– the beginning of the twentieth century and the emergence of the European avant-garde

movements. For instance, at the beginning of the twentieth century the Futurists –as I have already indicated– attempted to break the boundaries between the performance space and the audience. Bishop notes that

Futurism created the conditions for a symbiosis between an artistic embrace of violence and audiences who wanted to be part of a work of art and feel legitimated to participate in its violence. Importantly, this applied not only to working-class members of the audience at Futurist *serate* but also to the upper and middle classes who threw vegetables and eggs, and brought along car horns, cow bells, whistles, pipes, rattles and banners. The aim was to produce a space of participation as one of total destruction, in which expressions of hostility were available to all classes as a brutal form of entertainment. (*Artificial Hells* 46)

Noting the Futurists' desire to awaken the audience and take them out of the (silent) comfort of the seats of darkened auditoria, Bishop implicitly argues that the Futurists' practice was outright anti-perspectival in that they aimed at making the audience visible to itself. Of course, the affinity of the Futurists' participatory agendas with the themes of "violence" and "total destruction" are telling of the Futurists' affinity to fascism, a point that demonstrates that participation has not been the "prerogative" of artistic agendas that only lay on the left end of the political spectrum. Taking note of participatory practices in the cultural and socio-political history of the twentieth century West, Bishop examines a range of approaches to participation whose aesthetics and agendas are diverse: from Proletkult theatre and the mass spectacles that accompanied the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia during the 1910s (see *Artificial Hells* 49-66), to the Dada movement that attempted to aestheticize everyday life as a means of political reaction in the 1920s (see *Artificial Hells* 66-75), to the neo-avant-garde wave that reflected the general sentiment of cultural and socio-political upheaval in Europe and the US during the 1960s (see *Artificial Hells* 77-104) and the social inclusion agendas of the community arts movement in Europe and the US during the 1980s and 1990s. Examining a range of participatory practices Bishop demonstrates that participatory audiences have been conceived of differently throughout the cultural history of participation. Whether conceived of as "the masses" (Bolshevik Russia), "the crowd" (Futurists and Dadaists), "the people" (neo-avant-garde) or "the excluded" (community arts), participatory audiences have reflected and/or undermined the distinct socio-political dynamics of a given time and place

and thus provide the discourse of the politics of theatre and performance with a useful means of critical exploration.

Examined within this frame, the participation of the audience in *The Question* is bound to be reflective of the socio-political world that surrounds it; namely, London (on a micro-level) and the UK and –perhaps– Europe (on a macro-level). Useful in the examination of the relationship between the participatory practices that occur in *The Question* and the socio-political world that surrounds them is the term “procedural authorship” proposed by White in *Audience Participation*. Discussing the complexities that are entailed in the production of work that intentionally leaves gaps to be filled by an audience, White uses the term “procedural authorship” in order to demonstrate the creative work that is at hand when a significant part of the aesthetics and the poetics of a piece rely on the audience’s participation. White notes that

[a]uthorship is generally a relationship of agency with regard to an art object or a relatively defined art experience: a writer claims responsibility for a text, a painter for a painting, a performer for a performance. But procedural authorship is agency at a remove; though a procedure might be regarded as a kind of art object, it is only such a thing because it has the potential to give rise to actually occurring performances. (*Audience Participation* 195-6)

Proposing the term “procedural authorship”, White establishes a parallel between the creative processes that take place in the creation of participatory pieces of theatre and performance and the creative processes that inform the production of computer games. Participatory theatrical and performative practices, in a similar manner to computer games, do not produce a self-sufficient end-product, but rather “writ[e] the rules for the interactor’s involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant’s actions.” (Murray qtd. in White, *Audience Participation* 31). Setting up an environment of multiple interactions “procedural authors” not only create “a world of narrative possibilities” (Murray qtd. in White, *Audience Participation* 31), but also develop their world in relation to the spectator consciousness of their audiences.

In order for an audience to recognise and interact with the “aesthetics of invitation” that a participatory piece sets forth, the “procedural author” needs to ensure that the production of these aesthetics is based on the common ground between the artistic and cultural on the one hand and the social and political on the other hand. As White suggests

[t]he frames of audience participation are always citational, always make use of the material of the rest of everyday life, and our actions within them are always mediated by our learned dispositions towards behavior (*habitus*) and our usable social attributes (*capital*). In giving an invitation to participate, the procedural author articulates a relationship between the participant, these contexts of pre-theatrical and outer frame of performance, and the performances that might be given in the frame of participation. (*Audience Participation* 54)

Developing his discussion on participation in conversation with Bourdieu (see *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*), White acknowledges that the “labour” of “procedural authorship” is inherently socio-political. Referring to “the systems of dispositions (*habitus*) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions” (Bourdieu 6) as well as Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of the capital (whether economic, social, cultural or symbolic), White projects the process of “procedural authorship” to the complex fabric of the socio-political world that instigates it in the first place. Addressing the audience on an experiential level, the “procedural author” takes into account both the material aspects that frame the productive forces of the economic capital of her world and the embodied cultural capital that resonates with her audience. Framing an environment of interaction, the “procedural author” –implicitly or explicitly– mobilises social capital by enabling social interactions. Mobilising social capital, the procedural author can also mobilise symbolic capital, especially “when status relationships affect participants’ perceptions of each other and ultimately the way they interact with each other.” (White, *Audience Participation* 51-2). Addressing her audience in a cultural setting, the procedural author addresses her audience’s cultural capital, in other words “the skills and knowledges that participants can bring into the interaction with them.” (White, *Audience Participation* 52) The “labour” of the procedural author therefore is –at least implicitly– informed by “the matter of the defining character of social background”, since procedural authors “do not know their audience personally, as is often the case in audience participation.” (White, *Audience Participation* 53) In this sense, the mechanics of “procedural authorship” and the participatory frames that it produces bring to the surface some crucial questions in terms of the socio-political dimensions of participation: who exactly does a participatory piece address? In what ways does a participatory piece address its audience? How do the “aesthetics of invitation” in a participatory piece relate to the socio-political world that produces them? And lastly, what

do these “aesthetics of invitation” accomplish on both an aesthetic and a socio-political level, if anything? Such questions not only problematize the binary of active versus passive in discourses of participation, but also place the critical analysis of participation at the interface of the aesthetic and the socio-political and as such, enable the discussion to develop in culturally materialist terms.

Producing work that is accessible to both members with visual impairments and sighted audience members, Extant’s “aesthetics of invitation” are inclusive and attempt to address the frequent exclusion of audience members with visual impairments from mainstream theatrical events. Their work is experimental and it develops through prolonged periods of research and development. At the time that I did my fieldwork on *The Question*, the project was in a research and development phase that is still ongoing presently. Aiming at reaching a wider audience once the piece and the use of the “Haptic Lotus” are further developed, the “aesthetics of invitation” of *The Question* have hitherto addressed an invited audience of “arts professionals, academics, and technologists” (Extant). Far from purposefully limiting the range of their audience, Extant acknowledge that *The Question* –at this current stage– could not enter the theatre market and reach a wider audience because the unpredictability that arises from the use of a –tailor-made for the piece– robotic device is still a matter that needs to be addressed.

While writing this section I debated on whether or not the information about the range of Extant’s aesthetics of invitation warrants inclusion in the discussion of the politics of participation in *The Question*. After careful deliberation I decided to include it because these are the mere facts in response to the question of whom does *The Question* address; more importantly, this information is indicative of the creative processes that currently shape the work of a significant number of experimental theatre companies in the UK. Undeniably, *The Question* addressed specific individuals that in one way or another belong to the creative class of London. As such, the habitus and the cultural capital that informed the procedural authorship of *The Question* were matched by the habitus and cultural capital that the audience of *The Question* brought in when they (literally) responded to Extant’s (aesthetics of) invitation; an interdisciplinary team of artists, academics and robotics engineers addressed an audience of “arts professionals, academics, and technologists” (Extant).

Nonetheless, far from adopting an attitude that preserves the elitist status of experimental practices, Extant responds to the –often harsh– realities that theatre companies have to face in order to receive funding at a time when the funding towards the



arts has undergone significant cuts. As Jen Harvie discloses in *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, an increasing number of theatre and performance companies in the UK depend on “the three-legged stool that supports the arts: public funding, private funding and commercial income.” (Forgan qtd. in Harvie 152) While Extant are one of the fortunate companies that continue to receive their annual funding from the Arts Council England after the significant cuts that it has implemented since 2011, *The Question* –due to its interdisciplinary nature– has been funded by The Technology Strategy Board. The reception of funding creates a set of responsibilities and I think that this is why “the aesthetics of invitation” of *The Question* are addressed exclusively to individuals from the creative class. Aiming at addressing the funding agenda of The Technology Strategy Board, Extant have undergone meticulous evaluative processes that are preoccupied with the technological efficacy of the project instead of the social inclusion aims and objectives that are the driving force behind Extant’s creative ethos in the first place. Indeed, in *Artificial Hells* Bishop observes that “the contemporary discourse of socially engaged art ... is frequently characterised by an aversion to interiority and affect: it can often seem that the choice is between the social *or* the solipsistic, the collective *or* the individual, with no room for manoeuvre between the two.” (53) While Bishop makes an important remark with respect to the question of the efficacy of participatory arts, I believe that due to an increasing number of companies that rely on private sponsorship, the matter of efficacy is no longer only measured in terms of the social but also in terms of the technological (as in the case of *The Question*) and other variables depending on the agendas of private funding boards and private sponsors. In this sense, a project whose “aesthetics of invitation” are creatively invested in matters of “interiority and affect” while addressing a wide audience irrespectively of their visual abilities is implicitly forced to limit the range of its invitation to specific individuals of the creative class (whether blind, partially sighted or sighted) in order to satisfy its (private) funder’s particular agenda. As such, due to pragmatic reasons that reflect the current economic hardships that the arts sector in the UK has had to face, the cultural capital of *The Question* circulates amongst the creative class that created it.

Nevertheless, despite the compromises that Extant have had to make with respect to their (participatory) audience reach at this research and development stage of *The Question*, the actual mechanics of participation in the piece are noteworthy in the sense that Extant have not compromised the aesthetic and poetic quality of the piece in order to entertain matters of (technological) efficacy. Resisting the “aversion to interiority and affect” (Bishop, *Artificial Hells* 53), Extant have not only created a tactile and auditory space that

resonates with the subjective, the corporeal and the affective, but, as I discussed in the previous section, have also ingeniously addressed their inclusion agenda by way of *The Question's* narrative, main character (Kalabi) and theme. Central to the procedural authorship of *The Question* is the interplay between the visual and the non-visual; what is more, through the sarcastic metaphorization of the blacked-out environment of *The Question*, Extant successfully manage to place the interplay between the visual and the non-visual within the frame of socio-political discourse. Not only do they challenge ocularcentric assumptions about blindness through an environment that invites its (sighted) audience to question these assumptions by way of their embodiment and their corporeal and affective memories, but also they provide audience members with visual impairments with a space that is shaped by the license to play, an experience that, as I discussed in the second section of the chapter, is not as easily attainable for people with visual impairments in a highly ocularcentric world. As such, the procedural authorship of *The Question* makes “political ideas sensual, so that they are *felt* by the audience, so that intangible concepts are encountered physically and in that way, made tangible.” (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 133) The way in which this is accomplished is the fact that the mechanism of participation in *The Question* takes place between the metaphorical and the empirical on the one hand and the allegorical and the embodied on the other hand. While the blacked-out tactile environment addresses the audience on an embodied level that makes them question the premises of *The Question* on an empirical level, the narrative, the character of Kalabi and the theme of the piece project on this experience the metaphorical and the allegorical only to deconstruct them. In *(Syn)aesthetics* Machon makes a point that illustrates this approach to participation clearly:

The ‘politics’ of sensuous knowledge highlights the potential of the body as the site of performance signification and as the modality for, and cite of, experiential interpretation. This is important in situations where the performances themselves present, as well as produce, a series of sensations which are disturbing in essence because of their visceral impact and demand an appreciation strategy that is firmly based in corporeality. (24)

Focusing on the audience’s body as the site of participation, *The Question* addresses its audience with multiple visual abilities on a visceral level, while at the same time it invites their corporealities to adjust to an environment that is equally unusual to audience members with visual impairments as it is to sighted audience members. Interacting with an

environment that is set up in the midst of the non-visual form of darkness, the audience of *The Question* engage in mimetic behaviour that resembles the metaphorical and allegorical conceptions of blindness. Indeed, the audience of *The Question* “play blindness” as much as the patrons of *Dans Le Noir* do. Nonetheless, there is a main difference between “playing blindness” in *Dans Le Noir* and “playing blindness” in *The Question*: “playing blindness” in *Dans Le Noir*, the (sighted) patrons of the restaurant assume that they perform a socially conscious act. “Playing blindness” in the immersive blacked-out performance space of *The Question*, the audience also listen to a narrative that challenges wide (mis)conceptions about blindness every step of the way. As such, the participatory audience of *The Question* “play blindness” while being conscious of the fact that they have been doing just that: playing. The “as if” quality that is projected on the blacked-out environment of *The Question* not only intensifies the sense of play that is inherent in many immersive theatre pieces, but also assumes a political aspect because the audience, participating by way of their corporeality and cross-referencing their sensations with the narrative of the piece, eventually become conscious of the distinction between fact and fiction on the one hand and between sensation and allegory on the other hand.

Such engagement with the process of “procedural authorship” not only projects the socio-political on the subjectivity and corporeality of each audience member, but also is bound to have an impact on a wider socio-political level. In *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and its Theatrical Seductions* (the recurrent to this thesis) Maurya Wickstrom makes a noteworthy remark that sheds an interesting light on the “play [of] blindness” that occurs in the blacked-out environment of *The Question*:

The revolutionary potential of ... mimesis is that the blurring of self and other can confound practices of domination. A mimetic world is a ‘spiritualized’ one, with animals, plants and humans miming, becoming one another, giving the self away into an exchange with otherness that then comes full circle in a cycle analogous to that non-capitalist economy of the gift-society. (67)

The easiest creative route for Extant would have –somewhat justifiably– been to produce a blacked-out space that functions as the materialisation of an anti-ocularcentric manifesto. They could have created a piece that is equally affective from the sole perspective of multiple embodiments of visual impairment that disregards visual perception altogether. Instead, Extant opted for the more challenging route that places vision and blindness, the visual and the non-visual in conversation with one another. While sighted audience members of *The*

*Question* temporarily “played blindness” in order to eventually deconstruct metaphorical and allegorical conceptions of blindness, they simultaneously “gave their [sighted] self into an exchange with otherness”, in other words they engaged with elements of the procedural authorship of *The Question* that came from the empirical perspective of the multiple embodiments of people with visual impairments. Equally, while audience members with visual impairments momentarily “played blindness” according to some of the premises of ocularcentrism, they temporarily suspended their –justified– social disbelief in order to paradoxically experience blindness from the perspective of sightedness. In doing so they also “gave the[ir] self into an exchange with otherness” in order to eventually deconstruct it by way of their subjectivity, corporeality and the corpus of their affective and social memories.

Useful in illustrating this point further is Thrift’s conception of “the poetics of the unthought” (16). Thrift suggests that space has the potential to “form ... a poetics of the unthought ... a well-structured, pre-reflective world which, just because it lacks explicit articulation is not without grip.” (16) Thrift’s conception of the “poetics of the unthought” reinforces the “non-representational” in the term non-representational theory (16); suggesting that the reception of a space is defined by the materiality of the body, Thrift implies that the embodied experience of a space is entwined with its affective, social and political dimensions on a pre-reflective level. This entwinement occurs because a material body engages with the presentations that are inherent in a space-as-assemblage and not the representations that maintain a space-as-institution (Thrift 8). Thrift also notes a series of occurrences that illustrates the relationship between micro-spaces and macro-spaces succinctly: the “poetics of the unthought” of each material body, contribute to the “poetics of the unthought” of a micro-space which in their turn contribute to the “poetics of the unthought” of a macro-space (Thrift 16). What is more, “the poetics of the unthought” of macro-spaces interact with one another and as such, project on the world an ontology that is based on the materiality of the body. This ontology is telling of the socio-political dimensions of particular parts of the world, since it is based on the interaction between the body, a particular space and the wider socio-political space that she inhabits.

The poetics that each audience member of *The Question* produces can be seen as “the poetics of the unthought” since it is rooted on her corporeality as much as it is rooted on the cross-referencing of her corporeality with the narrative and main character of the piece. As such, the poetics that are based on the materiality of each audience member’s body (bodily sensations and affective responses alike) resonates in the dark performance space of *The Question* and informs the overall poetics of the performance: “the poetics of the

unthought” of each audience member, contributes to the “poetics of the unthought” of the micro-space of *The Question* (Thrift 16). Following Thrift’s paradigm, I can assume therefore that the “poetics of the unthought” of each audience member that contribute to the “poetics of the unthought” of the micro-space of *The Question* also contribute to the “poetics of the unthought” of the macro-space of contemporary London which in its turn is part of the matrix of macro-spaces that contribute to the ontology of the contemporary West (Thrift 16). As such, the blacked-out environment of *The Question*, while encouraging solitary journeys in the dark, also encouraged an implicit dialogue between not only the multiple embodiments of vision and visual impairments but also visibility and non-visibility; a dialogue that resonates with what Wickstrom identifies as the “non-capitalist economy of the gift-society.” (67)

If there is one aspect of the procedural authorship of *The Question* and the participatory practices that it resulted in that was similar for all audience members irrespectively of their visual abilities, it is the use of the “Haptic Lotus” as a navigational device. While not necessarily an aesthetic and poetic device for all of *The Question*’s audience, the “Haptic Lotus” played a significant part in the experience of the blacked-out environment. Created in response to the navigational needs that arise in darkness, the “Haptic Lotus” is perhaps the most distinct non-visual element of *The Question*. Significantly different to the sensation of fingertips-on-fingertips that I experienced in Lundahl and Seitl’s *Symphony of an Empty Room*, the sensation of the “Haptic Lotus” functioned as a bodily prosthesis that only made sense in the darkness of *The Question*. Nonetheless, as I discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, Thrift suggests that the production of “new prostheses which are also additions to cognition and precognition” are one of the three basic “formations” of the premises of the experience economy (23). Leading to the creation of a temporary new sense for the purposes of navigation, the “Haptic Lotus” results in the hybridisation of the blacked-out environment of *The Question*. How can this hybridisation be understood in relation to one of the three “formations” of the socio-political premises of the experience economy?

While I do share Thrift’s wariness towards the intervention of new technologies in the human sensorium, I believe that the examination of the *context* of such interventions is important in considering the socio-political implications of technologically enhanced prostheses. For instance, whenever my brother –an enthusiastic gaming programmer– informs me about the latest developments in virtual reality, I frequently wince in distaste while thinking that the contemporary entertainment consciousness of the inhabitants of the

Western world is becoming increasingly dependent on gadgets that function as new prostheses in the human sensorium in order to give us access to virtual worlds. At the same time, whenever I hear about the use of sophisticated prosthetic limbs by, say, war veterans, I cannot but appreciate the positive impact that such technologies can have on a personal and social level. So in what ways can the use of new prostheses in performance be understood?

Useful in answering this question is Machon's brief consideration of the use of new technologies in immersive theatre. In *(Syn)aesthetics* Machon notes that

[a]udio-visual, automated, digital media and biotechnologies in artistic practice may enable experiential perception, particularly those which demand an interactive response and/or are concerned with the exchange between the live(d) experience as a result of technologies employed. Design and technological aspects in live performance can be manipulated in order to strengthen and foreground the liveness of the live moment. Technology and multimedia design can be interwoven in order to add to the sensate quality of the piece as evidenced in the work of *Bodies in Flight*, *Curious*, *Graeae* and *Shunt*. The employment of diverse technologies within live performance serves to produce symbiotically compelling performance languages which assert a (re)valuation of live presence in mediatized performance. (25-6)

Acknowledging the specificities of the performative context within which "biotechnologies" –amongst other technologies– are used, Machon implicitly refers to the ontological status of performance as a means of negotiating the various variables that make up the fabric of everyday life on both a personal and a socio-political level. Machon brings to the forefront the fact that participatory practices that stem from processes of procedural authorship are bound to reflect the materials of production and the productive forces that shape the current capitalist premises of the experience economy. While the undisputed use of "new prostheses" in, say, computer gaming runs the risk of perpetuating the productive forces and the relations of production that produce them, the critical use of "new prostheses" in performance places cutting edge technologies in conversation with lived and embodied experience. Being framed side by side embodied experience in performance, these "new prostheses" can at worst point towards the differences between the technological and the

embodied and at best, as Machon suggests, lead to the “(re)valuation of live presence in mediatized performance.” (*Syn)aesthetics* 25-6)

*The Question* takes this comparison between the biotechnological and the biological to the extreme: on the one hand, the audience feels tactilely surfaces that are diverse in both their (historical) range and their textures. As I have discussed, such embodied interactions lead to the emergence of the “human” in the human factor; affective and corporeal memories that (as in my case) can even stem from the (chronological) depths of toddlerhood. On the other hand, the audience of *The Question* is navigated around the performance space by a robotic device that functions as an extension of their sensorium. Key in the procedural authorship of *The Question* and the participatory practices that it results in is thus the interplay between not only the organically tactile and the biotechnological but also the subjective/affective and the objective/unknown. Setting up such an interplay, *The Question* not only invited their audience to question the acquisition of “knowledge through sensory translation” (Extant) in an increasingly hybridized world, but also to question the nature of experience across a range of visual abilities. Considering that haptic technologies have been thought of as a possibility for the navigation of people with visual impairments on the social plane, Extant incorporated the “Haptic Lotus” in order to make –yet another– socio-political statement by way of the embodied: the multiple embodiments of people with visual impairments belong to the same fabric that the multiple embodiments of sighted people do, the fabric of the (increasingly hybridized) experience economy. Once again, the dialogue between visibility and non-visibility that the procedural authorship of Extant implicated “comes full circle in a cycle analogous to that non-capitalist economy of the gift-society.” (Wickstrom 67)

### **The Performative Political Ecology of the Non-visual**

In this chapter I have examined the non-visual form of darkness within a frame that is artistic and performative. Discussing the multi-layered aspects of *The Question*, I have hopefully demonstrated that the implications of the incorporation of the non-visual form of darkness in performance are noteworthy. *The Question*, an immersive performance that aesthetically resonates with the anti-visualist sentiment of Marinetti’s Tactilism, addressed its spectators on the levels of the subjective, the corporeal and the affective on the one hand and the cultural, social and political on the other hand. On an experiential level, the dark environment of *The Question* shaped a rather unconventional form of non-visual “spectatorship”. Through the soundscape of the performance it established an aesthetic of expansion that reinforced the interplay between (Kalabi’s) past and the here-and-now of the

performance. Through the tactile set *The Question* established an aesthetic of intimacy and enabled the audience to establish the poetics of their personal tactile experiences. Lastly, through the “Haptic Lotus” *The Question* provided its audience with an additional sense that enabled them to access the four different zones of the performance space and the aesthetics and poetics of the performance. Within this frame, the non-visual “spectatorship” that was encouraged by the dark environment of *The Question* focused on the interplay between the tangible and the intangible, the distant and the intimate.

At the same time, framing its aesthetics and poetics via the tactile, the haptic (tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive all at once) and the aural/oral, the non-visual and immersive environment of *The Question* not only problematized the ocularcentric sentiments of “the Western philosophical project” (Debord, *Society* 18), but also made a socio-political comment on the processes that frame the acquiring of knowledge in the midst of an increasingly hybridised –yet highly experiential– world. As such, the procedural authorship that was undertaken by Extant for *The Question* made “[socio]-political ideas sensual” (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 133) while projecting the themes of blindness and vision onto a dark and non-visual environment that gave the audience license to play.

In this sense, *The Question* is a cultural phenomenon that incorporates the non-visual in a rather holistic manner; form and content coincide in order to establish a fragmented –yet summative– environment that can be explored by the audience on multiple levels. Extant have not only managed to challenge the perspectival premises of conventional audio description in their attempt to bridge the gap between visual and non-visual perception, but have also achieved the development of a practice that informs the critical frame of non-visibility from an aesthetic, poetic, cultural and a socio-political perspective. In doing so they have not isolated their non-visual practice from its (perceptually speaking) other, but have placed the visual and the non-visual in conversation with one another in order to enable their audience to come to their socio-political conclusions by way of the subjective, the corporeal, the cognitive and the affective.

What the examination of *The Question* has brought to the forefront is that the non-visual –when shaped by genuine creative impulses and informed by a self-reflexive socio-political agenda– can result in a practice that politicises the sensual. The starting point of this approach is the metaphorical equation of blindness equals darkness. Unlike *Dans Le Noir* that capitalises on this misconception, Extant work with it (de)constructively and as such make the form pregnant with socio-political possibilities. Extant have thus developed a “performative political ecology of the non-visual”, to use Thrift’s conception (22). They



“disrupt ... spatial and temporal arrangements” (Thrift 22) by concealing the visual dimensions of performance and thus challenging both the hierarchisation of the senses and the ocularcentric structures that have resulted in this hierarchisation; they have invented a “flexible model of imagination and narrative” (Thrift 22) that coincides with the non-visual and tangible aspects of *The Question*, depends on the participation of the audience and thus merges the subjective, the corporeal and the affective with the cultural, the social and the political; and –paradoxically – they reinforce the “‘animality’ of bare life” because of the use of haptic technology (a new prosthesis) that juxtaposes the embodied and the technological and invites the audience to reflect on the place of the body in an increasingly hybridised world. Thus, Extant’s performative political ecology of the non-visual embraces the “power of vulnerability” that resonates with the non-visual and reminds us that in the midst of an economy that is preoccupied with the experiential, the arts have an advantage. The experiential in the arts is the locus of reception, interaction and/or participation, but at the same time it is shaped by values that have –hitherto– escaped the capitalist appropriation of experience and the fetishisation of multiple embodiments. Valuing the subjectivity, corporeality and affective responses of each of their audience members, Extant set up a creative dialogue that encourages mimesis that is informed, inspired and anything but hollow. This openness to the exchange of embodiments and ideas has resulted in a practice that moves beyond the commodifying tendencies of the experience economy; it is, in other words shaped by the “non-capitalist economy of the gift-society” (Wickstrom 67). We might live in a body-centric culture, yet it is practices like Extant’s that undermine it by reminding us that while embodied and affective experiences are great, we are also made of more than just a body.

## 6. Provocation for A Theory of Non-visibility in Performance: The Non-visual Political Ecology of (Re-)Affirmation

### Introduction

The focus of the final chapter is a practice-as-research project that I devised in response to the conclusions that I drew from the case studies of this thesis. Since I will refer to various points that have arisen in the discussion thus far, this chapter will function as both a provocation for the future development of a theory of non-visibility in performance and a conclusion to this thesis.

Looking for a common thread beyond the non-visual between the discussions of the previous chapters, I realised that the case studies (from Balka's *How It Is* to Extant's *The Question*) establish a connection between the non-visual, non-visibility and blindness. Balka's metaphorical impression that he was blind whenever he stepped into *How It Is*, audio description's attempt to bridge the gap between visual and non-visual perception for audience members with visual impairments, Dans Le Noir's (mis)application of the metaphorical association between blindness and darkness and Extant's creative and socio-political response to the fetishisation of the multiple embodiments of blindness by way of darkness suggest that the non-visual –surpassing the plane of visibility– is somehow linked to either the multiple embodiments of blindness (audio description, *The Question*) or to metaphorical conceptualisations of blindness [*How It Is*, audio description (again), Dans Le Noir and *The Question* (again)]. As such, this chapter begins with the conclusion that the critical frame of non-visibility should be informed –in one way or another– by the social politics of blindness and their relation to the body-centric culture in which we live; it thus “takes place” between visibility and non-visibility, the subjective, corporeal and affective and the cultural, social and political. A brief recap of the discussion thus far will illustrate this point further. While *Edgar and Annabel's* audio description establishes a “vocalic space” that endorses the cultural and socio-political premises of the perspectival tradition, Dans Le Noir and *The Question* use the non-visual form of darkness and articulate –diametrically opposing– power relations: Dans Le Noir invests in the metaphorical (mis)conception of darkness equals blindness and enables its sighted patrons to increase their cultural capital. Inviting them to “play blindness” in complete darkness, Dans Le Noir also invites its patrons to perform a –misinformed– social act that caters to their need to self-develop. Responding to such (mis)applications of darkness, Extant's *The Question* creates a metaphorical

environment whose multiple elements contribute to the deconstruction of metaphors of blindness. Subverting the power relations that are articulated by ocularcentrism and cultural phenomena such as *Dans Le Noir*, *The Question* makes “political ideas sensual” (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 113) and merges the subjective, the corporeal, the affective and the socio-political in a fragmented –yet summative– way. It suggests, therefore, that artistic practices that are guided by genuine creativity and a self-reflexive socio-political agenda can engage with the non-visual and darkness in a way that is distinct from the capitalist appropriation of the non-visual. The first –and rather general– question that arises is in what ways these conclusions could inform the increasing number of performative practices that explicitly entail non-visual elements of performance and/or incorporate the non-visual form of darkness.

In an attempt to address this question I decided to work on a text from the Western dramatic canon and to stage it in the dark. The critical and conceptual frame of the discussion in this thesis informed the practice, but it was particularly Nigel Thrift’s conceptualisation of “performative political ecologies” (22) and its materialisation by Extant’s *The Question* into a concrete “performative political ecology of the non-visual” that were the main reference points throughout the project. In “Practice as Research: Transdisciplinary Innovation in action”, Baz Kershaw argues that

PaR ... presents fundamental challenges to established processes of knowledge making in the academy, but what is the basis of this potential? Short answers can be derived from the centrality of *creativity* to its research methods, and especially from the capacity of creative acts to embrace contradictions. That has been the source of PaR’s fundamental troubling of the epistemology/ontology binary, of unsustainable bifurcations between becoming and being. Its creative projects can be productive in subjecting such binaries to flights of imaginative fancy as a method that *logically* stretches the bounds of established sense. Hence performing arts PaR has been a paradoxical project because ... performance (and therefore theatre) is rife with paradox. (65)

Embracing the paradoxical nature of PaR, I thought that it might be useful to stage a play that has been –predominantly– staged according to the perspectival tradition in the anti-perspectival form of darkness; I also felt that I should address creatively the association

between the non-visual and blindness and the (mis)conception of darkness equals blindness from the embodied perspective of my sightedness; lastly, I wanted to explore how the non-visual could reinforce the –paradoxical in itself– “power of vulnerability” in order to create a safe space that acknowledges and celebrates the limitations of the human body while also encouraging moments of interaction, participation and free play. Central to these initial intentions are the themes of subjectivity, corporeality, affect and the “aesthetics of invitation” (White, *Audience Participation*), the key premises of the anti-perspectival tradition. According to Kershaw’s taxonomy of the “minimal constituents” of PaR, these are the “key issues” that informed my practical research (“Practice as Research: Transdisciplinary Innovation” 65). The other constituents of PaR, Kershaw suggests, are a project’s “starting points”, its “aesthetics”, its “location” and the means of its “transmission” (“Practice as Research: Transdisciplinary Innovation” 65-66).

Having located the key issues that framed the project, I decided to work on Samuel Beckett’s *Rockaby*, a play whose phenomenality is mostly non-visual (aural) and resonates with Beckett’s metaphorical preoccupation with blindness. The project was entitled “*Rockaby* in the dark” and the “starting points” of the project (Kershaw, “Practice as Research: Transdisciplinary Innovation” 65) can be summarised in the following questions: How can a dramatic text that entails metaphors of blindness be staged in conversation with the critical frame of non-visuality and what does this mean in practical terms?

In what ways does a canonical text that is latent with metaphors of blindness function within the frame of procedural authorship? How can the procedural author project the text on an immersive, interactive and blacked-out environment that addresses the audience on both a subjective, corporeal and affective level and a socio-politically latent way?

How can the (politically latent) conception of “vocalic space” (see Connor ch.1) inform the procedural authorship of projecting a “voice play” (see States “Playing in Lyric Time”) on a three-dimensional blacked-out environment?

Where does the socio-political lay in this particular “aesthetics of invitation” –if anywhere? I acknowledge that these questions could not possibly be addressed fully through a small-scale research project; nonetheless, since the project and this chapter function as a provocation for the future development of a theory of non-visuality in performance, I hoped that these starting points would frame the small-scale PaR project while raising more questions for future consideration. Based on these starting points, the aesthetics of “*Rockaby* in the dark” were shaped by the merging of non-visual aesthetics and the “aesthetics of invitation” (White, *Audience Participation*). “*Rockaby* in the dark” was thus an

immersive staging of Beckett's *Rockaby* that entailed non-visual elements of performance, utilised the non-visual form of darkness and invited the audience to (inter)act with its aesthetics and contribute to its poetics. Framed as such, the aesthetics of the piece would – at least implicitly – address the issue of the socio-political latency of the non-visual and the critical frame of non-visibility.

The methods that I used for the project reflect the critical approach that I have attempted to adopt in the examination of the case studies and are thus interdisciplinary. More specifically, they emerge from issues raised by disability studies, theatre and performance studies and cultural materialism. The chapter is structured according to the different methods that were used during the project: I will begin by examining how Beckett's work entails metaphors of blindness. Consulting Peggy Phelan's "Lessons in Blindness from Samuel Beckett" I will attempt to decipher the ways in which Beckett's work is latent with metaphors of blindness and I will examine the disability approach to metaphor in order to consider possible ways of addressing the metaphors of blindness in *Rockaby*. In the next section I will disclose how I worked in order to locate the two most prevalent metaphors of blindness in *Rockaby* and I will discuss the creative cross-referencing of these metaphors with Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen*. I doing so, I hope to illustrate how the ocularcentric mechanics of metaphors of blindness can be addressed via creative cross-referencing and as such I will consult Kleege's autobiographical writing on the (embodied and social) experience of blindness. The discussion will then focus on the recording of the "vocalic space" of V and the methods that Katerina Damvoglou (the actor performing V/W), Konstantinos Thomaidis (the choreographer of the project) and I engaged with in order to face the challenge of staging a canonical play in the dark. Leading the discussion of this section will be Bert O. States' "Playing in Lyric Time: Beckett's Voice Plays", a phenomenological examination of Beckett's voice plays that illustrates the constituents of an acting style that resonates with the phenomenal aspects of his aesthetics and poetics. Disclosing the different aspects of this stage of the project I hope to demonstrate the variables that are at play when a canonical play is staged as an immersive piece that engages with the non-visual; I also hope that the discussion in this section will justify the design of the immersive environment of "*Rockaby* in the dark" that is the focus of the following section. Discussing the various elements that made up an installation inspired by *Rockaby*, I will demonstrate how I attempted to project the aesthetics and poetics of the text on a three-dimensional space while intentionally leaving gaps to be filled by the audience on a subjective, corporeal, affective and participatory level. Lastly, I will discuss the four performances of "*Rockaby* in the dark"

[Studio Theatre (Royal Holloway), 2010]. Central to this section is the discussion of the documenting and evaluative challenges faced when the “disappearing act” of performance (see Phelan *Unmarked*) takes place within a non-visual form that conceals its appearances in the first place. The discussion of this section will develop in conversation with Rebecca Schneider’s “Performance Remains” and will attempt to discuss the remains of the “material remains” of “*Rockaby* in the dark”; as such, it will raise some questions that could probably inform the provocation for the future development of a theory of non-visibility in performance that is the focus of the discussion in the conclusion of this chapter and this thesis in general.

### **Beckett, *Rockaby* and Metaphors of Blindness**

In “Lessons in Blindness from Samuel Beckett” Phelan argues that blindness is a recurrent theme in Beckett’s work. Referring to a “number of Beckett’s most riveting characters [who] are blind, or nearly so”, Phelan implicitly suggests that the relationship between visibility and non-visibility lies at the heart of Beckett’s work (“Lessons in Blindness” 1281). Elaborating on this, Phelan notes that

[a]t the center of Beckett’s project is a question about how to see and how to be seen. As his work moved from the page to the stage to the screen, its visual sensibility became heightened and more focused. What is startling about the account of seeing that his work offers us is how deeply it touches the consequences of not seeing. Writing about the paintings of Geer van Velde and Bram van Velde, two abstract expressionists whose work Beckett frequently praised, he put their project this way: ‘To force the fundamental invisibility of exterior things till the very invisibility itself becomes a thing[.]’ (“Lessons in Blindness” 1281)

Beckett’s work develops within a paradigm that, while interested in the impact of the visual and visible onstage, is also invested in the creative potential of the invisible. Carefully constructing the visible, Beckett is also concerned with what remains unseen. Placing the visual and the invisible as well as the visual and the non-visual (aural) side by side, Beckett’s work not only raises questions about the perceptual mechanics of looking in the theatre, but also acknowledges the *instability* of this act. What is more, the instability of looking in the theatre is articulated by both the aesthetics of Beckett’s work (the visual is surprisingly stable in some of his later plays) and its poetics. As Phelan argues,

[t]h[e] experience of looking and not finding and then finding and seeing only what I had not seen reenacts the essential rhythm of Beckett's dramas. His plays remind us that seeing (that rare and ephemeral thing) is a shot across the eye's dark orbit. His dramatic characters circle around that circumference, alternating flashes of insight with stumbles and falls in blinding alleys. Blink, and we miss it. And since we must blink, we do. ("Lessons in Blindness" 1287)

Placing his (blind and sighted) characters along a metaphorical continuum whose ends are conceptualised vision ("insight") on the one hand and conceptualised blindness ("blinding alleys") on the other hand, Beckett not only provides a dramatic commentary on the relationship between visibility and non-visibility in experience, but also produces a dramatic frame according to which the relationship between the seen and the unseen serves as a grand metaphor for the production of meaning in (artistic) experience. This frame resonates with Beckett's affinity to existentialism while it is also rich in socio-political implications. Indeed, Phelan remarks that "[l]ike many artists who came of age after World War II, he was deeply affected by the scandal of ethical blindness underlying the catastrophe of the Holocaust." ("Lessons in Blindness" 1281) Affected by the personal, philosophical and socio-political implications that the Second World War had had on his generation, Beckett engaged frequently with the theme of "ethical blindness" and created characters that are unable or unwilling to see (for instance, Hamm in *Endgame* and Pozzo in the second act of *Waiting for Godot*). Turning the political into the personal only to deconstruct the mechanics of seeing and then to elevate them afresh to the plane of the socio-political, Beckett developed a corpus of work that is thus rich in metaphors of blindness.

The representation of blindness in the arts has been the focus of study across a range of disciplines (see de Man; Kleege; and Barasch). Nonetheless, despite the systematic examination of blind characters in the Western canon, the use of *metaphors of blindness* in dramatic literature has received little attention. Where do plays that are rich in metaphors of blindness lay in terms of the social politics of disability and how can these metaphors be handled in performance in a way that does not widen the gaps across the continuum of people with multiple visual abilities? Useful in answering this question is scholar Amy Vidali's "Seeing What we Know: Disability and Theories of Metaphor". In "Seeing What we Know" Vidali critiques the embodied turn in the examination of metaphors (see, for example, Lakoff and Johnson) for the able-bodied assumptions that it employs; at the same time, she also

argues against discursive models that examine metaphors of blindness as dead metaphors that perpetuate ocularcentrism. Indeed, Vidali notes that

[w]hile it is reasonable to assume that able-bodied people profoundly influence metaphors through their physical and cultural experiences, I am dissatisfied with an approach to metaphor that assumes that the building blocks of language are formed by able bodies and are transferred to those with disabilities by contagious contact. People with disabilities, and their bodily experiences, also inform how metaphors are created and used. (39)

Challenging hitherto approaches to the examination of metaphors of disability, Vidali echoes both Wittgenstein and –implicitly– Milligan: while she considers the formation and implementation of metaphors of disability in terms of language use, she also suggests –the (surprisingly and frequently) overlooked by theories of metaphor fact– that people with disabilities have equal rights to language use. Within this frame, Vidali proposes “a disability approach to metaphor” that

attends to how diverse bodies impact metaphor acquisition and use, which shifts disability away from something only ‘used’ or ‘represented’ by metaphor. Instead, disability interprets, challenges, and articulates metaphors. A disability approach to metaphor must engage the full range of disability; resist the desire to simply ‘police’ or remove disability metaphors; actively transgress disability metaphors by employing a diverse vocabulary; and artistically create and historically reinterpret metaphors of disability. (42)

Vidali does not shy away from the facts that metaphors of disability exist and that they are a significant part of language use. Far from proposing the banishment of such metaphors, Vidali suggests that we examine them in relation to the disabilities that they conceptually employ; she also argues for the *creative engagement* with such metaphors in ways that go beyond the domain of everyday life language use.

Producing *The Question* in the midst of a (metaphorically) blacked-out environment while engaging with the creative deconstruction of metaphors of blindness, Extant developed a practice that moves within the frame of Vidali’s disability approach to metaphor. As I stressed in the previous chapter, however, Extant addressed metaphorical (mis)conceptions of blindness from the empirical and socio-political perspective of the



multiple embodiments of people with visual impairments. At this point, two crucial questions arise: in what ways could sighted practitioners engage with dramatic texts that employ metaphors of blindness from the perspective of a disability approach to metaphor? And more importantly, since the non-visual form of darkness bears metaphorical connotations of blindness, what can sighted practitioners learn from the disability approach to metaphor in order to avoid the fetishisation of both the form and the multiple embodiments of people with visual impairments? In answering these questions Vidali is implicitly hesitant as she argues that metaphors of disability should be reclaimed by communities of people with disabilities: “we engage the possibility of reclaiming these metaphors in our own communities.” (51)

I do agree with Vidali’s general sentiment that a disability approach to metaphor should be –first and foremost– employed by people with disabilities; nonetheless, I also think that this approach might be creatively, culturally and socio-politically beneficial to able-bodied practitioners too. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Extant establish a dialogic rapport between visibility and non-visibility and –in doing so–they set up environments that resonate with the premises of the “non-capitalist economy of the gift-society” (Wickstrom 67). Producing aesthetics of exchange, Extant not only challenge ocularcentric tendencies, but also invite sighted audience members to experience the company’s sensual politics by way of their embodiments and affective responses. Since a noteworthy amount of plays are rich in metaphors of blindness and the (metaphorically latent) non-visual form of darkness is becoming increasingly popular amongst sighted practitioners, wouldn’t it be constructive to engage with an approach that resonates with Extant’s “non-capitalist economy of the gift-society” (Wickstrom 67) and encourages the sharing of ideas between the multiple embodiments of practitioners (and researchers) irrespectively of their (visual) abilities?

I would like to respond affirmatively to this question. When a sighted practitioner (and researcher) adopts a disability approach to metaphor, she does not engage with the issue of (artistic and political) representation, since –as far as metaphors of blindness are concerned– the issue of representation is, indeed, the prerogative of people with visual impairments. Intending to adopt a disability approach to metaphor in “*Rockaby* in the dark”, I also attempted to engage with the challenges of responding to ocularcentric culture from the perspective of the social politics of blindness. Far from claiming that I developed a socially-conscious practice on behalf of people with visual impairments, I was interested in addressing the issues that the critical frame of non-visibility has brought to the surface in an informed manner. As such, I hoped that the exchange of ideas that bridge the gap between

visuality and non-visuality, sight and blindness, embodiment and metaphor would inform a practice that develops in response to a culture that is increasingly interested in the fetishisation of multiple embodiments. So, how can Vidali inform the critical exchange of ideas between visuality (and all that it entails) and non-visuality (and all that it bears)?

Vidali argues that “rethinking the relationship of disability and metaphor must ... be creative, historical, even literary” since “creative engagement with disability metaphors can further complicate, or ‘denaturalize,’ ideas of how bodies and metaphors interact.” (49) She suggests that the creative re-evaluation of metaphors of disability should be informed by cultural specificity and the literary contexts in which they have been formed and employed. Interestingly, Vidali also notes that

[s]uch an approach turns disability metaphor ‘on its head,’ by claiming that it is the spaces that are not ‘seen,’ that are seemingly ‘unknown,’ that must be accessed to contravene the metaphors, and approaches to metaphor, that currently limit disability. For rather than ‘seeing clearly’ or moving ‘into the light,’ the relationship of metaphor and disability is informed by resistance of tidy theories and engagement with the ambiguity that lies at the heart of disability, of language, and of knowing. (51)

Echoing Phelan’s conception of invisibility in *Unmarked*, Vidali places the creative examination of metaphors within the frame of the unmarked that resists the stability of (visual) representation; she also implies that the disability approach to metaphor has the potential to destabilise the reproduction of metaphors that can lead to the perpetuation of able-bodied articulations of disability. As such, she implicitly projects the disability approach to metaphor on not only the frame of Phelan’s political ontology of performance but also on the critical frame of non-visuality. If taken literally, Vidali’s proposal projects an interesting dimension on “*Rockaby* in the dark”: the metaphors of blindness in *Rockaby* –already (re)produced in a literary context– should be examined in relation to a culturally specific context. At the same time, their creative exploration should take place in a space that is not “‘seen’ [and] ... seemingly ‘unknown’”. While the non-visual form of darkness is the most obvious form for the creative examination of metaphors of blindness, it is also, as I have discussed in the previous two chapters, the material metaphor of metaphors with respect to blindness. The culturally specific examination of these metaphors should therefore function as a mode of cross-referencing that will eliminate the possibility of exponentially reproducing metaphors of blindness in the dark.

As such, when I started working on “*Rockaby* in the dark” I decided to locate the most prevalent metaphors of blindness in *Rockaby* and to cross-reference them with a text that is written from a disability studies’ perspective. The choice of the text was a creative decision that by no means aimed at analysing the metaphors within a linguistic epistemological frame; instead, it aimed at widening the scope through which the metaphors in *Rockaby* would be addressed creatively. Basing this decision on Vidalí’s provocations and taking the lead from Oshodi’s use of *On Blindness* in *The Question*, I wanted to cross-reference the metaphors in *Rockaby* with a source that discusses blindness from an embodied and empirical perspective. Since the V/W in *Rockaby* is female, I searched for a female voice amongst the corpus of autobiographical writing on blindness (see Lusseyran; Hull; and Kuusisto) and Georgina Kleege’s *Sight Unseen* seemed like a suitable and up-to-date source. Aiming at engaging with a critical exchange that considers the interplay between the metaphorical and the empirical, the allegorical and the embodied and visibility and non-visibility, I felt that the combination of *Rockaby* and *Sight Unseen* could return some useful results at the first stage of “*Rockaby* in the dark”. In the following section I will account for the main aspects of this stage in greater detail.

### **Procedural Authorship I: The Metaphors of Blindness in *Rockaby***

W sits on a mechanical rocking chair expressionless; after a few seconds of silence she utters “More”; a recorded voice, “V”, starts speaking a fragmented and repetitive text. The dramatic action –if any– rests on the fact that the recorded voice occasionally slows down after which W commands “More”. Throughout *Rockaby* there seems to be a contrast between a hopeful but long-gone past and a very static and hopeless dramatic present. The abstract nature of the play leaves the text open to interpretation. There are however some key characteristics that hint towards a rather open-ended interpretation. In *Party Pieces: Oral Storytelling and Social Performance in Joyce and Beckett* English scholar Alan W. Friedman observes that

[r]epeated recountings of former days in *Krapp, Play, Eh Joe, That Time, Rockaby*, and *Ohio Impromptu* imply that the past retains force, distract from the sentimentality or banality of the recalled stories and the vacuity of the present, and become a way (whether desired or not) of holding death at bay. (151)

*Rockaby* is a play that deals with the themes of isolation, entrapment in one’s own past and the active nostalgia for the past as a means to avoid death. W is an old woman, who listens to V reminiscing of recurring themes from the past while facing death. Here is an extract

from the play that I found particularly interesting in terms of the research agenda of “*Rockaby* in the dark”:

V:at her window  
let up a blind and sat  
quiet at her window  
only window  
facing other windows  
other only windows  
all eyes  
all sides  
high and low  
for another  
at her window  
another like herself  
a little like  
another living soul  
one other living soul (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 437)

In this extract V discloses information about W’s life. W is recalled to have been sitting at a window with “blinds up” in search of connection with “another like herself.” The repetition of the words and phrases that contribute to the establishment of this image from the past suggests the recurrence of it. W has spent a large part of her life (her whole life perhaps) looking for “another like herself.” This active search –the act of looking– is inherent in the poetics of the play. Towards the end of the play, however, W seems to have given up on this search:

V: with closed eyes  
closing eyes  
she so long all eyes  
famished eyes  
all sides  
high and low  
to and fro  
at her window  
to see  
be seen (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 441)

W has lost hope in finding “another like herself” as her “famished” eyes are closing. The “blinds” are still up, however, as W longs “to see” and “be seen.” The feeling of isolation and entrapment is intensified towards the end of the play when W no longer actively searches; all she is left with is the reminiscence of her desire to look “for another like herself” in a distant –yet paradoxically present– past.

Since the play would be staged in an immersive environment, I had to decide on whether or not this environment would allude to the past. Would it (re)present the current situation in which W is (“with closed eyes/ closing eyes”) or would it (re)present the past that is echoed by V (“let up a blind and sat”)? Since the text proposes that W is an old woman who listens to V and due to the paradoxical strong “presence” of the past in the overall poetics of the play, I felt that the immersive environment should combine both the present and the past. This could be achieved through a virtual darkness where shadows can be sensed but not deciphered in detail. Basing this decision on the poetics of the play, I felt that this was the most suitable backdrop for the interplay between the metaphors of blindness in *Rockaby* and the non-visual aesthetics of “*Rockaby* in the dark”.

More specifically, since the binary of looking vs. not looking is expressed by way of the binary of past vs. present in the play, I worked with the text in order to decipher the metaphors of blindness that are entailed in it. The metaphors that I felt were prevalent were “blind pursuit” and “blind hope”. The metaphor “blind pursuit” is connoted by the relationship between the echoes of the past (the recorded V) and the dramatic present of W. W is presently in complete isolation as her search for “another like herself” in the past has not been effective; this futile search –looking for “another like herself,” “one other living soul”– can be interpreted as W’s “blind pursuit” for connection. Considering the existential frame within which Beckett developed his work, the loneliness and isolation of W’s present is due to the futility of the existential condition in general: no matter how one leads her life her efforts can only take her so far, since life is constantly conditioned by the –immediate or distant– prospect of death. Within this frame, W engaged in a “blind pursuit” not knowing exactly what she was looking for and how to get it (merely sitting “at her window”).

According to the metaphor “blind pursuit”, the pursuit of something can be blind when we do not take into account the discouraging variables that should stop us from pursuing it in the first place. The negative connotations that the source domain of the metaphor (blindness) projects on the target domain of the metaphor (pursuit) is indicative of the sighted (mis)conception that –in the absence of sight– the search for something is challenging if not completely futile. The consideration of the “blind pursuit” metaphor in

relation to Kleege's autobiographical writing problematizes the abstract premises of the metaphor from the perspective of Kleege's embodied and social experience of blindness. Discussing her interactions with people who can see, Kleege recalls instances when her personal and professional ambitions were received in a way that demonstrates the general ocularcentric sentiment behind the "blind pursuit" metaphor. In an anecdotal account Kleege recalls that

[o]nce, at a party, a man I was speaking to was almost reduced to tears to learn that I am a blind writer. There was a tremor in his voice as he kept repeating something about 'the word fading.' As far as I could understand it, he was picturing a page of print disappearing before my eyes word by word, as if written in invisible ink. It was a vivid image but bore little resemblance to my reality. Sensing that he was most disturbed by the idea that my sight loss was still in progress, I tried to tell him that, unless some other visual condition develops, the word had already 'faded' as much as it ever will. And as far as these things go, a writer is not a bad thing to be if you can't see. There are other ways to write, other ways to read. It is easier for a writer than for a visual artist, a race car driver, or an astronomer to compensate for sight loss. I might have even mentioned Homer, Milton, and Joyce, the sight-impaired literary luminaries most often invoked at such times. I wanted to say, 'This is not a tragedy. This is merely a fact of my life. Get over it. I have.' But he had already receded from me, become preoccupied with a new, reductive view of me and my restricted future. (13-4)

Kleege implicitly notes that the equation of blindness with futility in the "blind pursuit" metaphor is not just a linguistic construct that comes up in language use in the form of a dead metaphor; the association between blindness and the assumed challenges that it denotes for people with visual impairments is an active social construct that informs the social perception and imagination of sighted people. Subverting such perceptions, Kleege implicitly suggests that the connotations in the metaphor "blind pursuit" are visualist and ocularcentric constructs. Referring to blind writers that hold significant positions in the Western literary canon as well as disclosing her personal thoughts on her "type-casting" as a blind writer, Kleege suggests that her blind embodiment does not really define her identity as a writer. Her personal and professional writerly ambitions are similar to writers who are

sighted; as such, her actual ambitions and her career as a writer do not bear any similarities with the sentiments expressed in the metaphor “blind pursuit”. Instead, her “blind pursuit” of being a writer is full of the creativity, (self-)discovery and the flexibility that such a career might bear.

As the metaphor “blind pursuit” is inherent in the text of *Rockaby*, I felt that I needed to ensure that the environment of “*Rockaby* in the dark” would also challenge the ocularcentric constructs that project the concept of futility to the concept of blindness. Somehow, I wanted to invite the audience to perform this metaphor (even implicitly) in order to deconstruct it and to re-interpret it in a positive manner. The virtual darkness of the environment of “*Rockaby* in the dark” would not subtract the visual dimensions of performance completely but would instead conceal them in the midst of shadows and thus eliminate their value. I felt that the difference between the complete absence of the visual and a denigrated version of the visual is significant. The absence of the visual suggests the complete negation of it; a denigrated version of the visual is reflective of the fact that while the visual is part of the fabric of everyday life, the ocularcentrism that shapes metaphors of blindness need not be part of the same fabric. By not embracing the metaphorical association between complete darkness and blindness, I consciously decided to create an environment that would invite the audience to engage with a non-visual (yet not “blind”) pursuit. At this stage of the project, therefore, I decided to develop explicit connections between the elements of the installation and the performance of *Rockaby*; the elements that address the audience’s senses of hearing and kinaesthesia (the recorded V and W) would be connected to W’s dramatic present. The elements that address the senses of touch, taste and smell would allude to W’s fictional past, evoking both a sense of nostalgia and contributing equally to the non-visual aesthetics and poetics of the overall environment. In light of this, I hoped that the audience would decipher the connection between the different elements of the immersive environment and establish a poetics of their own through non-visual explorations that would juxtapose the “blind pursuit” of W in her search for “another like herself.” (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 437)

The next metaphor that I felt was implied by the text of *Rockaby* was the metaphor “blind hope”. Also echoing Beckett’s affinity to existentialism, W’s “blind pursuit” is accompanied by “blind hope”, the driving force that sustains her in looking for “another like herself” (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 437). Since the text revolves around the binaries of past versus present and looking versus not looking, Beckett provides his hypothetical audience with enough information in order to decipher the fact that W’s search was carried

out in vain. Entrapped in the present while listening to echoes from the (present) past, W has accepted that the hope that guided her search for connection was “blind”. The fragmented, repetitive and compulsive text that is “spoken” by V reinforces the sense that W has been guided by “blind hope”: she engaged in a “blind pursuit” fuelled with hope that was based on nothing other than her continuous and driven desire to connect.

According to the “blind hope” metaphor, the hope that something –that is unlikely to happen– will happen is blind. Echoing “the knowing is seeing” metaphor that, according to Vidal, is the metaphor that has informed the formation of many metaphors of blindness (see “Seeing What we Know”), the “blind hope” metaphor suggests that in the absence of visual data the feeling of hope is misguided. Kleege undermines the general assumption that the life of a person with a visual impairment is hopeless. While she mentions that ocularcentrism can result in disabling environments for people with visual impairments, she is adamant to deconstruct the archetypical figure of the “blind beggar” who leads her life in “blind hope”. In an anecdotal fashion Kleege recollects that

[a]n eye doctor once praised me for the way I lead my life. I had just given him a copy of my first novel. He said that most people with my condition become invalids and recluses. I was at first pleased with this affirmation, but then I thought about it. He was not so much praising me as defining what he considered ‘normal’ for the blind. By his definition, the blind beggar does pretty well - at least he gets out of bed each morning and hauls himself and his dog down to the subway token booth. If I had expressed disappointment to that doctor, said I wished I had continued my education, had published more, or had a better job, he might have consoled me. ‘Don't press so hard,’ he might have said. ‘No one expects you to live up to the standards of sighted people.’ When the sighted label the accomplishments of a blind person as ‘exceptional’ or ‘overcompensating’ they reveal their diminished expectations for life without sight, and a superstitious belief that should belong to another era. (27-8)

Kleege remarks that the –frequently– patronising encouragement that people with visual impairments get from sighted people comes from the personal and social discomfort in which the fear of blindness results. Conceptualising blindness as the complete absence of sight and presuming that life without sight is at best a challenge and at worst a stalemate,



many sighted individuals genuinely assume that the positive attitude that many people with visual impairments adopt is not only a cause of admiration but also a matter of –literal and figurative– blind hope. Nonetheless, visualist and ocularcentric conceptualisations of blindness ignore the *actual* embodiments of people with visual impairments. While ocularcentric societies often produce disabling obstacles, people with visual impairments lead full and rich lives as much as sighted people do. As such, it is not “blind hope” that is unwarranted but rather the visualist lack of hope for people with visual impairments.

As the text of *Rockaby* implicitly conveys the “blind hope” of W, I needed to ensure that I would address the abstract association between “blindness” and “unwarranted hope” through the staging of “*Rockaby* in the dark”. Moving within a similar frame to the one addressing the metaphor “blind pursuit”, I realised that the virtual darkness of the environment of “*Rockaby* in the dark” would also undermine the abstract associations that the metaphor “blind hope” maintains. The text patently evokes the “blind hope” that guided W in her “blind pursuit” for connection. In light of this, I wanted to convey that while W did not find the connection that she was looking for, she accumulated *something* in the process of looking for “one other living soul”. While the interaction between V and W would reinforce the absolute binary between the act of looking (past) and the withdrawal to the state of not looking (present), I wanted the elements that address the senses of touch, taste and smell to evoke a sense of nostalgia that suggests that W has accumulated something from the process of looking for “another like herself” (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 437). Exploring the virtually dark environment, the audience would perform W’s “blind pursuit” that was guided by “blind hope” and come to the realisation that W’s hope was anything but “blind” as she gained –if anything– corporeal and affective memories in her life’s journey. As such, I hoped that the abstract association between “blindness” and “unwarranted hope” that the poetics of *Rockaby* maintain would be addressed by “*Rockaby* in the dark” via the audience’s subjectivity, corporeality and participation. In this sense, by addressing the two metaphors at this stage I had settled on the idea that the audience would walk around the space and perform the metaphors in order to become alternative personas of W. By actively engaging with the gustatory, the olfactory and the tactile in virtual darkness they would each bring their subjectivity and corporeality to the character of W who searches into her past and comes to the realisation that it consisted of more than just looking for “one other living soul” (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 437).

## Procedural Authorship II: On “Vocalic Space” and “Self-Representation”

The staging of hitherto perspectival dramatic texts in an immersive environment has been undertaken by some of the leading immersive theatre companies in London. For instance, Punchdrunk have produced “reworkings” of *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Faust* and *The Duchess of Malfi* (Punchdrunk). Even though these pieces developed in conversation with the dramatic texts, the term “reworking” –used by Punchdrunk themselves– is crucial in understanding the position of the dramatic text in the overall process of procedural authorship. In *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* Josephine Machon observes that

(syn)aesthetics does not push the potential of linguistic practice to the background nor does it focus on verbal practice as the foremost language in performance. Instead it fuses these theories in order to articulate a response to work which plays with the possibilities of an interdisciplinary approach. (Syn)aesthetics prioritizes a *style* of practice which is attributable to certain writerly theatre just as is it present in multimedia events and purely physicalized performance. (53)

Being a type of (syn)aesthetic practice, immersive theatre works with dramatic texts as much as it works with other media and elements of performance. The difference between the conventional and the (syn)aesthetic/immersive staging of dramatic texts lies on the interdisciplinarity that informs the creative processes of the latter. The dramatic text functions in a network of media whose roots lay in installation art, video art, (sometimes) the culinary arts and even computer gaming [for instance, Punchdrunk’s ... *and darkness descended* (2011)]. This interdisciplinary approach and the fusing of different creative media of expression can not only project the dramatic text on space, but also make the poetics of the dramatic text sensual and felt.

Bearing in mind that the text of *Rockaby* would be an element of performance amongst elements of performance, Damvoglou and I worked closely with the play in order to ensure that Beckett’s text would fit in coherently with the overall feel of the virtually blacked-out environment. Beckett’s dramatic texts –and especially his voice plays– are highly affective and their aesthetics and poetics are filled with creative cues for experimentation. How can these plays be rendered so that the quality of the text is not compromised by the projection of its aesthetics and poetics on a three-dimensional environment?

Useful in answering this question is the work of Bert O. States who has focused on the phenomenology of theatre, while preserving the dramatic text at the heart of his critical enquiries. In "Playing in Lyric Time: Beckett's Voice Plays" States argues that "Beckett seems to have unleashed a new demand on the actor's expressiveness[.]" (453) Focusing on Beckett's voice plays (*Eh Joe*, *Not I*, *That Time*, *Footfalls*, *Rockaby* and *A Piece of Monologue* amongst others) States observes that in performing a Beckett (voice) character, the actor goes beyond the "self-expressive", the "collaborative" and the "representational" and enters the realm of the "self-representational" where the character and the "logos" of the character coincide so as to produce an order that is distinct from other dramatic representational modes; as such, the actor performing a Beckett (voice) character becomes the site/sight/cite of "the self-absorption of the lyric voice" ("Playing in Lyric Time" 455). Elaborating on this, States argues that

the stage-figure (that is, the actor-character entity) seems not simply to be a character played by an actor who is ultimately performing for us and sharing with us a certain confidence (if only that we will all behave politely); she also seems to be a character who is *real*, but not simply real as the actor's body, and an actor who is performing, but not exactly for us. Something in the way she comports herself, or exists on stage, leads us to feel –though this is all part of the illusion– that she is there *for* herself, *as* herself (whatever that may be!), but that this self somehow includes a player of sorts, or someone who is motivated by the task of representing herself for herself--"whom else"? as the Voice says in *Rockaby*. ("Playing in Lyric Time" 454)

States suggests that Beckett's voice plays set the variables for a rather unique theatrical situation in which the actor is situated somewhere between the "real" and the fictional and as such does not acknowledge the presence of the audience. Far from performing within the paradigm of "inactive vision" (see Schneider, "Blind" 27) according to which the actor does not acknowledge the audience because of the self-sufficiency of the representational frame, the Beckettian (voice) character seems to be performing "herself [to] herself" as she engages with a practice of self-representation.

Considering *Rockaby* in relation to States' conception of self-representation, the idea of V performing for W is quite palpable; V (the recorded voice of W) speaks a fragmented and repetitive text that resembles a stream of consciousness. Reaching the end of her life

and filled with the existential angst that her impending death has brought about, W does not listen to V in order to communicate her life narrative to an audience but rather in order to hold “death at bay” as Friedman puts it (151). Moving within a self-representational frame W –by way of V– is “less a human being, or a character, than the material ‘husk,’ or *en-soi*, of the hovering consciousness.” (States, “Playing in Lyric Time” 457) So how does one perform “the material ‘husk’ of [a] hovering consciousness” (States, “Playing in Lyric Time” 457)?

States answers this question in a way that I found particularly useful with regards to “*Rockaby* in the dark”. While briefly, he refers to Heinrich von Kleist’s “On the Marionette of Theatre” and he suggests that the actor performing a Beckett (voice) character should resemble the phenomenality of a marionette by way of two distinct principles: firstly, “an intense inwardness of concentration” and secondly, “an almost avaricious economy of movement” (“Playing in Lyric Time” 462). While the first principle is achieved through the “rhythmic bass clef” in Beckett’s text (States, “Playing in Lyric Time” 462) and the phenomenality of the voice in which it results [“language seems to belong to the speaker who is making a sustained effort to do something *to* speech” (States, “Playing in Lyric Time” 459)] the second principle is achieved through “a kind of body-honesty ... [the] demonstration of an ideal –indeed, inhuman– economy and absence of affectation, or actor-consciousness” that echoes the phenomenality of the performance of a marionette (States, “Playing in Lyric Time” 462).

Performing a stream of consciousness, therefore, the actor of a Beckett (voice) character should perform –at least in theory– on the level of the pre-cognitive and the pre-conscious. Arguing that “Beckett ... [has] unleashed a new demand on the actor’s expressiveness” States –implicitly– identifies Beckett’s voice plays as one of the precursors of what Machon identifies as contemporary (syn)aesthetic writing (“Playing in Lyric Time” 453). Entailing characters that move within the frame of self-representation while at the same time placing the focus on the phenomenality of the voice and requiring the kinaesthetic phenomenality of a marionette, Beckett’s voice plays intertwine elements that are interdisciplinary. At the same time, they also call for an interdisciplinary approach to acting that goes beyond the “self-expressive”, the “collaborative” and the (self-sufficiently) “representational” (States, “Playing in Lyric Time” 454) and taps into the primordial, the visceral and the affective. As such, this interdisciplinary approach to writing and acting has “a certain ‘shapeshift’ morphology, its only constant being the fused somatic/semantic

manner of its performance style and subsequent audience response.” (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 4)

Moving within a frame that was inspired by States’ phenomenological examination of Beckett’s voice plays, Damvoglou and I focused on developing two aspects of the performance of V/W during the rehearsal process. We firstly decided that the recording of V would establish a “vocalic space” whose phenomenality of sound would resonate with the overall atmosphere of environment of “*Rockaby* in the dark”. Secondly, we agreed to address the challenge of translating the visual dimensions of W’s performance in the dark by way of the kinaesthetic. The key in making the abstract qualities of the text felt in the dark, we thought, was the interaction between the “vocalic space” established by V and the live dramatic action of W.

Being a central aspect of the dramatic text, the audio recorded voice of V shapes not only the overall staging of the play but also the audience’s experience of the performance. Discussing *Rockaby* in *Beckett in Performance* Jonathan Kalb observes that

[t]he primary experience of *Rockaby* is that of a lullaby, an unchanging rhythm of words that lulls us into tranquillity until we are startled by the words ‘Fuck life’ near the end, which make us perceive, at least in the woman’s final moments, much more canniness than her previous near-catatonia has suggested. (12)

Working on the text, Damvoglou and I tried to retain what Kalb identifies as the “unchanging rhythm of words that lulls us into tranquillity” (12) while at the same time we aimed at making the phenomenality of the voice evident by way of Damvoglou’s heightened performativity. Since I wanted to experiment practically with States’ idea of “an intense inwardness of concentration” (“Playing in Lyric Time” 462), the first stage of the rehearsal process focused solely on vocal work. *Rockaby* is a dramatic text that establishes a “vocalic space” through –predominantly– a recording; considered in relation to Steven Connor’s *Dumbstruck*, this “vocalic space” is paradoxically both at a distance from its source (in that it is not spoken by W but by the recorded V) and in close proximity to it (W’s recurrent command “More” establishes a connection between V and W). Experimenting with the proximal distance that is established between V and W, Damvoglou and I realised that the further V appears to be from W, the better. As we wanted to heighten the sense of “inward concentration” (States, “Playing in Lyric Time” 462) in the performance of V, her proximity to the kinaesthetic phenomenality of W would undermine such an approach to V’s performance. As such, we decided to stage V’s “vocalic space” as an event; a stream of

consciousness that appears to be developing on the preconscious, pre-reflective or unconscious level. Useful in this approach was Connor's conception of the "vocalic body":

[t]he principle of the vocalic body is simple. Voices are produced by bodies: but can also themselves produce bodies. The vocalic body is the idea –which can take the form of dream, fantasy, ideal, theological doctrine, or hallucination– of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice. (ch. 1)

Being a "body" within a body, the "vocalic body" takes hold of the corporeal body while also projecting on its embodied experience a dimension that goes beyond the physical and the tangible and into the unconscious and/or the spiritual. The relationship between past and present that is established by *Rockaby* suggests that V is a "vocalic body" that emerges from W's corporeal body. At the same time, due to Beckett's dramatic device of separating V from W by way of the recorded and the (a)live respectively, the "vocalic body" of V assumes a life of its own that cannot be controlled by W in any way other than the (slightly defeatist) command "More" and the enraged "Fuck life" towards the end of the play. As such, the "vocalic body" of V assumes agency and functions in the domain of the unconscious and the dreamlike. The separation between V and W not only establishes the "vocalic voice" of V as a separate expressive domain in its own right, but also results in distinct power relations between V and W. As Connor observes

[t]he 'sound hermeneutic' identified by Rick Altman determines that a disembodied voice must be habited in a plausible body. It may then appear that the voice is subordinate to the body, when it [sic.] fact the opposite is experientially the case; it is the voice which seems to colour and model its container. (ch. 1)

Discussing the phenomenality of a "disembodied voice", Connor argues that it is the "vocalic body" that appears to be in control of the corporeal body. Shaping both the poetics and the aesthetics of a voice-event, the "vocalic body" takes on the dominant performative role while the "plausible body" to which it belongs assumes a secondary role. This articulation of the structures of power between the "vocalic" and the corporeal bodies by way of the performative establishes a "vocalic space" that –as I discussed in the third chapter– can allude to the unconscious, the cultural, the spiritual and/or the godly. In this sense, the "vocalic body" of V commands the corporeal body of W and it establishes a "vocalic space"

that alludes to the futility of conscious thought in relation to W's –impending– death. The “vocalic space” established by V's “vocalic body”, therefore, is defined by “an intense inwardness of concentration” (States, “Playing in Lyric Time” 462) while at the same time it resonates with an existential understanding of the futility of the human condition; in other words, through its affinity to power it paradoxically illustrates the powerlessness of conscious thought and the reflective embodiments in which it results.

Attempting to produce a “vocalic space” through V's “vocalic body”, Damvoglou and I focused on the rhythm of the text while also establishing a “melody” through different tones in different parts of the text. The focus on the rhythm and melody of the text not only enhanced the phenomenality of sound and the performativity of V, but also exaggerated the paradoxical impression that V is a disembodied and powerful voice that, nonetheless, belongs to W's (corporeal) body. I decided to record the text manually on an old cassette-recorder. This was a practical and creative decision: firstly, the budget for this project was low. Secondly, cassette-recorders do not allow for sound editing, so the recording was performed and recorded in “real time”. While this approach meant that the recording process lasted longer, it also meant that the rhythm and melody of the text would be preserved and that the “vocalic space” established by V would be devoid of software interventions. Furthermore and on a phenomenal level, the sound of a cassette is easily distinguishable. While not as effective as the quality of sound produced by a gramophone or a vinyl player, the contemporary audience consciousness is used to the crisp sound of mp3/mp4 tracks and, as such, the (far from crisp) sound of a cassette alludes to the (not so long-lost) past. The recording acquired a nostalgic dimension through the quality of sound of a cassette while the momentum, the rhythm and melody of the “vocalic body” of V were maintained.

In order to add an affective quality to the recording that would enhance the “vocalic space” established by V, I decided to play music in the background while Damvoglou and I recorded the text. Whilst doing character work in the preliminary stages of the rehearsal process, Damvoglou and I sketched out W's biography and we placed her life trajectory between the 1920s and the present. Following this chronological frame, W would have been in the prime of her youth during the late 1930s and I decided, therefore, to use music from that era; in the final recording of V, one can hear “Stein Song” by Rudy Vallee and His Connecticut Yankees –a dynamic tune with a marching rhythm– and “Stardust” by Islam Jones and his Orchestra that has a mellower and nostalgic tone. These two songs

complemented the text in a fragmented manner; parts of either song would come in and out of the recording while there were also moments when there was no background music at all.

When the recording of V was completed, Damvoglou and I moved to the second phase of the rehearsal process that aimed at establishing the link between V and W. At this stage we faced the challenge of having to translate the visual elements of Damvoglou's performance to non-visual elements that would be perceived and felt in the dark. Following States' theoretical proposal, we knew that the best way to translate the visual into the non-visual would be via the kinaesthetic. Nonetheless, Beckett's text suggests that W is rather expressionless as the mechanical rocking chair rocks her during the scene; the lack of expression is an aesthetic and poetic statement that is communicated through the visual. How does one translate this visual statement by way of the kinaesthetic?

Initially I thought that the lack of expression could be translated as the lack of movement; an expressionless face that is seen, however, does not have the same impact as a motionless body in the dark because a static body might not be felt at all in the absence of its visual dimensions. I thought about incorporating audio description, but –as I discussed in the third chapter– conventional audio description develops within a self-sufficient representational frame and creative audio description interferes linguistically with the aesthetics and poetics of a play. While Kaite O'Reilly incorporates audio description in her own writing and Alex Bulmer is talented enough to incorporate audio description in other playwrights' plays (see Graeae's production of *Blasted*), I felt that interfering linguistically with the playwriting of Beckett would be sacrilegious, to say the least. After careful deliberation, I decided to go back to the initial idea of translating the visual into the kinaesthetic. Instead of translating the phenomenal qualities of an expressionless face, however, I decided to focus on the affective qualities that an expressionless face communicates and attempt to recreate a similar affective effect by way of the kinaesthetic.

This is when Thomaidis joined Damvoglou and me as the choreographer in the project. The question that was instantly raised was how to best approach the "space" that lies between the affective effects of the visual and the affective effects of the kinaesthetic. One option was to rehearse the play visually, record our affective responses to Damvoglou's performance and then develop movement sequences that would bear similar affective responses. I was against this approach because "*Rockaby* in the dark" would bear the marks of the affective responses that Thomaidis and I had and would thus interfere with the audience participation in performance. Of course, the "ghosts" of the affective and reflective responses of the creative team of a project are bound to be entailed in the "final product"



that the audience experiences. In the case of procedural authorship, however, the acknowledgement of these “ghosts” is a significant part of the creative process. As Gareth White notes in *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of Invitation*, the “agency [of procedural authors] could become structurally reproductive or structurally transformative”, as procedural authors “make tactical moves under the strategic influence of the dominant disciplines of theatre culture.” (55) Staging Beckett’s *Rockaby* as an immersive piece of theatre, I intentionally aimed at creating an environment that would move within the anti-perspectival paradigm that values the subjectivity and corporeality of the audience. In doing so, I was hoping –amongst other things– that a text that has hitherto been produced according to the perspectival tradition would be experienced via the embodied and the affective by the audience. In projecting the affective responses that Thomaidis and I had to the visual dimensions of the piece, I would undermine one of the most noteworthy aspects of immersive theatre practices; the “rediscovery” process with which the audience engages. As Machon argues in *Immersive Theatres*,

[r]ediscovery is central to the experience [of immersive theatre]; of space, narrative, character, theme and sometimes even of unknown depths, or hidden emotions and memories specific to that individual participant. This rediscovery through active decision making is transformative; in terms of the way the individual audience member influences the shape of the ‘show’; and transformative, like a rite of passage, where one can be personally and positively changed through the thematic concerns of the event, communicated via its experiential form. (28)

Hoping to create an immersive environment that –at least on a theoretical level– would be “structurally transformative” (White, *Audience Participation* 55), I had to retain the element of “rediscovery” in the procedural authorship of “*Rockaby* in the dark”. Experiencing a well-known piece by way of the embodied, I wanted the audience to rediscover W through the kinaesthetic and their corporeal and affective memories. By focusing on the translation between the affective qualities of the visual and the affective qualities of the non-visual, not only would I be projecting traces of the perspectival paradigm that I wanted to avoid, but also I would –implicitly– inject our subjectivities in the “narrative, character and theme” of “*Rockaby* in the dark”. In this sense, the use of our reflective interpretations of the text seemed to be a more suitable approach than the use of our affective responses to the visual aspects of its performance.

We decided therefore to work straight from the text: Thomaidis, Damvoglou and I identified the points where Damvoglou would subtly react had the play been staged visually. We observed that the repetition of words and phrases in the text not only shaped the aesthetics of the text, but was also telling of its poetics: the words and phrases that were repeated in the text were the most prevalent echoes from W's past. As such, these would be the points of the play to which W would react. To begin with, we focused on the expressions "high and low" (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 435) and "at her window" (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 437). We then added the words "long" (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 435), "down" (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 440) and "rocker" (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 440). We purposefully left out the repeated words "blind" (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 437) and "eyes" (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 437) because we wanted to avoid producing kinaesthetic representations of representations (words and metaphors) that bear an affinity to (mis)conceptions of blindness.

Aiming at developing a sequence of movements that echoes States' proposal of "an almost avaricious economy of movement" ("Playing in Lyric Time" 462) via the kinaesthetic phenomenality of marionettes, we recalled von Kleist's "On the Marionette Theatre" that provided the choreographic process with a clear focus:

Each marionette ... has a focal point in movement, a center of gravity, and when the center is moved, the limbs follow without any additional handling. After all, the limbs are pendula, echoing automatically the movement of the center. These movements of the center are very simple. Every time the center of gravity is guided in a straight line, the limbs describe curves that complement and extend the basically simple movement. Many times when the marionettes are merely shaken arbitrarily, they are transformed into a kind of rhythmic movement that in itself is very similar to ... dance. (1)

Thomaidis and Damvoglou worked intensively in order to establish Damvoglou's "center of gravity". In doing so, they developed a loose choreography based on the list of words and phrases that we had put together: each word and phrase was appointed a staccato movement that started from Damvoglou's "center of gravity" and resembled more of an impulse rather than a dynamic movement. Every time V would utter one of the words and phrases from the list, Damvoglou would perform the respective movement. We rehearsed

the choreography along with the recorded text and we realised that it became rather predictable after a while. While the audience wouldn't be able to see Damvoglou, they would feel kinaesthetically the same seven movements over and over again. In need of inspiration we –once again– recalled von Kleist's essay and instead of examining the kinaesthetic phenomenality of the movement of marionettes, we focused our attention on the spatiality of their movements:

marionettes, like fairies, use the earth only as a point of departure; they return to it only to renew the flight of their limbs with a momentary pause. We, on the other hand, need the earth: for rest, for repose from the effort of the dance; but this rest of ours is, in itself, obviously not dance; and we can do no better than disguise our moments of rest as much as possible. (3)

Focusing on the interaction between the marionette-like and the human-like in an attempt to develop “an almost avaricious economy of movement” (States, “Playing in Lyric Time” 462), Thomaidis added another layer to the choreography; he laid down some spatial rules that echoed the interplay between the interaction of the body with “earth as a point of departure” and the interaction of the body with earth as “a point” of support. Upon hearing each word or phrase Damvoglou had three options: she could either remain still, she could perform the movement in/around/on the chair that we used as a prop or she could perform the movement on the floor. The movements remained the same while the levels on which they were performed differed according to Damvoglou's decision.

At this point another question emerged: would W interact with her environment and the audience? While States notes that the actor performing a Beckett (voice) character does not acknowledge the presence of the audience and that she appears to be performing for herself, he also argues that “the point of epiphany [in Beckett's voice plays] is the place where the apocalyptic and the cyclical worlds meet. The cyclical part of it is the oral account of the protagonist's history that we hear; the apocalyptic part is the wall-less room outside time and the figure of the protagonist[.]” (“Playing in Lyric Time” 457) While the cyclical world in *Rockaby* is established by V's “vocalic space”, the apocalyptic world is the existential space that –paradoxically– surrounds V and W but does not entail them. Once this existential space turns from a “wall-less room” to a three-dimensional environment that is inhabited by V, W and the audience, the dynamics of interaction shift: W and the audience enter the “apocalyptic world” as much as the “vocalic space” of V does. As such, the power established by the “vocalic space” of V is undermined by a spatial configuration (an environment) that

turns V,W and the audience into equal components of this configuration. In this sense, the point of epiphany in an immersive staging of *Rockaby* [the merging of the cyclical world (V's vocalic space) and the apocalyptic world (the immersive environment itself)] is only reached once the self-representational frame of V/W is broken. In "*Rockaby* in the dark" therefore we essentially created a self-representational frame (via the vocalic and the kinaesthetic) in order to invite the audience to break it. Key in this process would be the corporeality and participation of the audience who –in challenging the self-representational frame of V/W– would undermine W's loneliness and sense of entrapment; thus, they would also re-interpret positively the metaphors "blind pursuit" and "blind hope" that are communicated by the poetics of the text.

Taking this a step further, I decided that W would control the "vocalic space" of V. V would be heard through a small cassette player which W would hold; whenever W felt like it she could rewind or fast-forward the recording. Based on this decision I might be accused of interfering with the rhythm that is inherent in the text. I feel that the rhythm was retained, because it was (re)presented in the recording; at the same time, I felt that it was more important to empower W by enabling her to interfere with the internal logic of V's "vocalic space". In order to reinforce this sense of empowerment, I also decided that W's choice on whether to perform a movement on the first (stillness), second (chair) or third level (floor) would be informed by the audience's presence during each performance; whenever the audience would approach her, W would react to their kinaesthetic "feedback". As such, W would be the "live" element amongst the elements of the environment of "*Rockaby* in the dark" and she would project physical qualities to the recorded text informed by her interaction with the audience. Within this frame, the self-representational world established by V/W would be contested by not only the participation of the audience but also W's interaction with them.

### **Procedural Authorship III: The Environment of "*Rockaby* in the dark"**

The final stage of "*Rockaby* in the dark" was the set-up of the non-visual environment. As I have already discussed, during the first stage of the process and while working on the metaphors of blindness that are inherent in *Rockaby* I felt that an installation that would entail elements that address the senses of touch, smell and taste and that allude to W's past would be the most suitable approach in terms of the poetics of the play. These elements would not only make the past tangible, but would also invite the audience to perform the metaphors "blind pursuit" and "blind hope" in order to positively re-interpret them. As the character work that Damvoglu and I engaged with had located the prime of

W's youth at the 1930s, I decided to frame the entire installation within that particular era. Nonetheless, the creative focus was still quite loose, so I needed to locate a more specific theme for the framing of the environment. At the early stages of the process and while I was still working on the text, a documentary that I had watched years ago kept coming to mind: *Grey Gardens* by the Maysles Brothers (1975). Following the everyday life of Edith and Edie Beale, aunt and cousin of Jackie Onassis respectively, *Grey Gardens* depicts the social fall of the two former socialites to a state of seclusion in their mansion in the Hamptons (USA) otherwise known as "Grey Gardens". Apart from the terrible living conditions under which they lived at the time the documentary was filmed, what drew me to *Grey Gardens* was Edith and Edie's long lost nostalgia for the past and the feeling of entrapment they felt at the time the documentary was filmed. While searching for a unifying theme for the installation of "*Rockaby* in the dark", I decided to use *Grey Gardens* as inspiration. This was a creative decision that projected a particular place to the 1930s era, the time when Edie Beale –like "our" W– was at the prime of her youth. The elements of the installation would allude to the Hamptons (USA) of the 1930s, a place and time that are indexed in the contemporary spectator consciousness by way of the historical and the traces that the historical has left in our nostalgia-latent culture. While not relating directly to our current embodied experiences of the creative city of London, the theme of "1930s Hamptons" would implicitly form the basis of the "shared resources" (White, *Audience Participation* 54) between the audience and the procedural authorship at hand. Nonetheless, while the unifying theme of the procedural authorship was the 1930s Hamptons, I wanted to ensure that the "staging" of the installation was loose enough to be accessible to someone who isn't necessarily familiar with this place and era.

After choosing a unifying theme for the installation, the first issue that I had to address was the navigation of the audience around the virtually dark environment, an issue that –as I discussed in the previous chapter– can be quite challenging. I had already tested what the Studio Theatre would be like in the absence of light; even though it was not a pitch dark environment, it was still impossible to rely on my vision to move around the dark space. Partly due to health and safety reasons and partly due to the fact that I wanted to frame the space and allow the audience to either "follow" this frame or (playfully) challenge it, I felt that I needed an improvised "navigational system" to support (yet not guide) the audience in their exploration of the dark environment.

Influenced by the theme that I had projected on *Rockaby*, I decided to navigate the audience with a path made out of sand. Discussing the sensation of bare feet on the ground

from a performer's perspective, in *Feeling Theatre* Martin Welton observes that the "foot [is] the point of connection to a material reality of space; one which offers support and resistance, and to which one is attached, a feeling which is known, in the parlance of the rehearsal room as 'groundedness'." (114) Discussing the support that the sensation of grounding one's feet on the ground might offer as well as the "resistance" that the floor might show in the midst of physically demanding performances (and the accidents that this resistance might occasionally result in), Welton contextualises the sensation of feet on the floor in terms of the sense of kinaesthesia and the mechanism of proprioception:

[t]he awareness of the foot as more than a blunt instrument, but as something articulate and articulable – a zone of attention through which the world is engaged – brings with it an awareness of space which is not only, or primarily, governed by the coordinating gaze or scanning vision. The two are of course not unrelated, but the sense of space given by the foot is one which is both more immediate and more ephemeral. Space both announces its material reality beneath the pressure of the sole of the standing foot as a surface and texture which affords and restricts movement, and is experienced as a potential in the proprioceptive quality of movement felt through its raised partner. (*Feeling Theatre* 115)

When considered in relation to the non-visual form of darkness, the sensation of feet on the ground acquires even greater significance. Being a means through which the body literally connects with space, the sensation of feet on the ground is also a way in which the body can assume a position in space. As such, the sensation of feet on the ground utilises the senses of touch (skin on the ground) and kinaesthesia (moving feet on the ground) while also enabling the "non-visual mapping of the body's form" (Sliverman 16) *within* space by way of the mechanism of proprioception. Entailing the tactile, the kinaesthetic and the proprioceptive, the sensation of feet on the ground is, essentially, a haptic sensation [the etymology of the word haptic from the Greek "haptikos" suggests that the haptic sense "encompasses touch, kinaesthesia and proprioception" (Fisher 178)]. In this sense, the "navigational system" of a path made out of sand would address the audience's haptic sense as *The Question's* "Haptic Lotus" did but through a different set of limbs and without the use of technology.

Since I was aiming at creating a safe environment that would enable the audience to overcome negative affects that might arise in the midst of darkness, I felt that the sensation of sand on the audience's feet would provide them not only with navigation but also positive affects [a sense of support and "groundedness" (Welton, *Feeling Theatre* 114)]. To intensify this aspect of the "navigational system" I decided to invite the audience to remove their shoes before they enter the environment and to consult the tactile sensation of sand on their feet in order to follow –or divert from– the different roots that I made out of sand. The audience would thus be navigated according to a logic that is similar to the "hotter/colder" logic of *The Question's* "Haptic Lotus"; they would literally find their way around the virtually blacked-out environment of "Rockaby in the dark" by way of the warm sensation of sand on their feet as opposed to the cold sensation of the concrete floor that framed the path. The haptic sensation of sand on their feet would thus inform their overall experience of "Rockaby in the dark" while at the same time it would –hopefully– provide them with a "safety blanket" in the midst of virtual darkness.

After I had chosen the navigational method that I would use I started setting up the environment. The way in which the space was set up was rather simple. Framing the space and rather close to its edges, I set a path made out of sand that had the shape of a horse-shoe: one end started at the entrance of the performance space and the other end led to the exit of the performance space. At various points of the horse-shoe-shaped path I made thirteen new paths that headed outwards and towards the walls of the space. At the end of each path I placed a chair (unfortunately not a rocking chair) that functioned as a stand for the various elements of the installation. The audience would follow the "junctions" through the haptic sensation of sand on their feet and would be guided to items that addressed the senses of smell, taste, touch and—towards the end I decided—hearing as well. After background research on the culture of the 1930s USA the objects that I used for the installation were: an old school musical box, a tin full of traditional candy, banana bread (baked according to an American recipe from the 1930s), fresh fruit (a treat at the time considering the declining economy), flowers (narcissi because of their prevalent smell), perfume (Guerlain's "Vol de Nuit" –a perfume sold during the 1930s and still available today), a wooden box filled with talcum powder and rose-smelling soaps, three different types of aromatic tea, a box of cinnamon sticks and cloves (whose smells added to the sense of nostalgia), three hats, long velvet gloves and scarves, and an old cassette player (unfortunately not a gramophone) with a copy of the recording of V that the audience could play if they decided to do so.

While the paths that headed outwards led to the objects that comprised the installation, I also made three paths that led to a circle at the centre of the performance space. This circle would contain the performance of *Rockaby* as W, her hand-held cassette player (with the recording of V) and her chair would be located there. It was rather small as I felt that a confined space would intensify the staccato and marionette-like qualities of W's movement; I also wanted to evoke the feeling of entrapment while addressing the audience's sense of kinaesthesia. Following these three paths the audience would get close to the performance and –if they decided to do so– they could even step in the circle and undermine V/W's self-representational world even further. In light of this, the audience would interact with the performance of *Rockaby* and shape the overall environment of "*Rockaby in the dark*" as much as the rest of the elements did.

This final stage was undeniably not as controlled as the creative processes that took place in the previous two stages. This decision was deliberate as I wanted the elements of the installation and the general layout of the environment to invite the audience to discover the different aspects of the production while engaging in playful exploration; it was through their interaction with the elements of the installation and W herself that the audience would participate in the overall poetics of "*Rockaby in the dark*". Discussing the participatory mechanics of immersive theatre, Machon observes that

[i]mmersive practice creates a space for reinvigorating human interaction and exchange, however 'fictionalised' the encounter might be. At the very least it causes an audience member to attend to the interaction and exchange occurring in the moment, whether or not she or he is 'enjoying' it. Such work negotiates open relations where the status of the individual experiencing the work 'alternates between that of passive consumer, and that of witness, an associate, a client, a guest, a co-producer and a protagonist.'

(*Immersive* 72-3)

While, as I have discussed, the poetics of *Rockaby* function within an existential frame and can thus bring to the surface negative affective responses, the immersive form –more often than not– hosts positive affects that are brought to the surface via the audience's embodiment and their interaction with the form and/or each other. As I have mentioned in the previous section, I found the tension between the text (the self-representational domain of V/W) and the immersive form (the virtually blacked-out environment of "*Rockaby in the dark*") quite fruitful. Bearing in mind that one of the aims of the project was to invite the



audience to perform and positively re-interpret the metaphors “blind pursuit” and “blind hope”, the tension between the dramatic and the immersive on the one hand and the negatively affective and positively affective on the other hand was a welcome addition to the overall atmosphere of the virtually blacked-out environment. As such, I hoped that the audience –via their embodiment and participation– would “alternate between [the roles] of passive consumer”, “associate”, “guest”, “co-producer” and “protagonist” (Machon, *Immersive* 73) and in doing so they would challenge both the self-representational frame within which V/W performs and the negative affective responses that the “vocalic space” of V establishes. I hoped, in other words, that W’s affectively negative stream of consciousness would be challenged by positive affects that reinforce the audience’s sense of support, playfulness and optimism about the opulence of the human “condition”.

### **“Rockaby in the dark”: Theatrical Darkness, Documentation and Evaluation**

When all the elements of “Rockaby in the dark” came together we opened the doors to a small audience. The range of our “aesthetics of invitation” was limited as the project was advertised on the Royal Holloway campus. The reasons for this were twofold: on the one hand, the budget of the project was small and I couldn’t afford to include marketing expenses in it. On the other hand, the “location” of the project [to use Kershaw’s term (“Practice as Research: Transdisciplinary Innovation” 66)] was an academic department and the project was developed accordingly. The fact that “Rockaby in the dark” was developed as research in a university department allowed for greater freedom because I didn’t have to cater to the efficacy criteria of a funding body and I didn’t have to gain permission from the Beckett estate for the creative and methodological decisions that I made. Savouring our “freedom”, we decided to let five audience members in at a time and –based on the turnout on the day– we ended up doing four runs of the production with five audience members in the first three runs and six audience members in the last run of the day.

This is the point where the discussion makes a leap because performance is “a disappearing act” that cannot be captured and reproduced (see Phelan, *Unmarked*). Such a conception of performance is great when considered in relation to the ontology of performance in the midst of contemporary cultures that attempt to capture experience in space and time. Nonetheless, it also raises a crucial question: how does one document and evaluate a “disappearing act”? The topic of this chapter, the case studies of *Dans Le Noir* and *The Question* and the examples of theatre/performance in the dark that I have referred to in this thesis complicate this question further: how does one document and evaluate a

“disappearing act” that is already concealed from the human eye even as it takes place in front of an audience?

The first step in addressing the challenge of documenting and evaluating a performance that moves within the frame of non-visibility was to consider the documentation and evaluation processes that were employed in the case studies of this thesis. The lack of documenting and evaluative resources for the audio description of *Edgar and Annabel* not only highlighted the ephemerality of the practice, but also demonstrated how conventional audio description functions as a “quick-fix solution” to the social inclusion agendas of major theatrical institutions. While the process leading to audio description leaves behind it what Kershaw identifies as “integral documentation” (the audio describer’s “script drafts”, notes, various recordings of the pre-show notes, etc.) (PARIP), the actual live audio description is not “transmitted” through “external documentation”. Furthermore, the audience of *Edgar and Annabel*’s audio description was not invited to give any feedback, so I doubt that it was evaluated via the audience’s response. General evaluative resources on audio description function predominantly within a quantitative frame. The scarce qualitative resources available are provided by VocalEyes and they consist of brief –and positive– audience responses that only reinforce the facts and figures of the organisation’s quantitative findings. Do all audience members with visual impairments approve of audio description? In an informal conversation about audio description Maria Oshodi told me that she was against audio description because –her vivid expression has stayed with me since– “it’s the equivalent of you watching a production with sunglasses on”. Such responses are absent from the few evaluative resources of conventional audio description, a lack that somehow reinforces the point that conventional audio description is a “quick-fix” that addresses the social inclusion agendas of theatrical institutions by way of facts and figures.

Dans Le Noir –being a financially self-sufficient cultural phenomenon in the urban landscape of the creative city of London– need not necessarily be concerned with documenting and evaluative processes. Nonetheless, the marketing strategies adopted by Ethik Investment Group and Eduard de Broglie have branded Dans Le Noir as a “social enterprise” and have thus produced a trail of external documentation: a promotional DVD is being sold online and at the foyer of the chain’s restaurants, the dining rooms of the restaurants are being monitored by CCTV cameras (footage from which has made it to the final cut of the DVD), the (positive) feedback from the restaurant chain’s patrons is a central feature of its website and good reviews complement the “positive vibe” that Ethik Investment Group and de Broglie want to communicate to potential patrons. As I have

discussed in the fourth chapter, Dans Le Noir has recently attracted the attention of the academia and Edensor and Falconer's ethnographic survey is perhaps the most reliable source of documentation and evaluation of Dans Le Noir to date. Basing their survey on the affective responses of a number of patrons, Edensor and Falconer have produced an analysis that problematizes the overall positivity that the marketing strategies of Dans Le Noir want to reinforce. Consulting various patrons by way of focused discussions that are preoccupied with the affective effects that the experience of dining in the dark has had on them, Edensor and Falconer have effectively produced a third-party evaluation that suggests that the experience can –at times– instigate negative affects and the feelings of discomfort and insecurity.

Extant's *The Question* has adopted the most systematic and self-reflexive approach to documentation and evaluation amongst the three case studies. As I discussed in the fifth chapter, *The Question* has been funded by the Technology Strategy Board and one of the main aims of the project has been the evaluation of the technological efficacy of a robotic haptic device in performance. While the focus of the evaluation has been placed on matters of technological efficacy (the fact that the evaluation of the project was undertaken by the Computing Department of the Open University is not coincidental), the evaluation of *The Question* has produced a rich corpus of internal and external documentation that "captures" different aspects of *The Question*. Extant have set up a micro-site for *The Question* and on this website one can watch a short documentary on *The Question* that entails: interviews of the creative team of the project, brief audience feedback, video footage from the CCTV monitoring of the performances and video footage from the infrared camera that was used in order to capture the production on ground level and from within the space. Furthermore, the website entails the recorded extracts of *The Question's* text, press reviews and the evaluative report that the creative team wrote after the five-day run at the BAC in 2010. The website is exemplary in its ability to transmit various aspects of the project and to provide evidence that the multiple layers of *The Question* have resulted in a project whose merits range from the efficient incorporation of the mechanism of participation to the effective use of the social politics of disability. What the website lacks in, however, is the transmission of the personal and affective effects that the project has had on its audience. This point brings me back to a full circle in the discussion of this section thus far: with the increasing popularity of affective and immersive forms of performance, how can one capture and evaluate the subjective, the corporeal and the affective effects of an artistic medium that is ephemeral

and only makes sense (literally and figuratively speaking) in the here-and-now of the performative moment?

Useful in addressing this question is Rebecca Schneider's "Performance Remains". Considering the ontology of performance in relation to the conceptualisation of "the archive", Schneider proposes that we shift the focus of the discussion and instead of conceiving of performance as the "disappearing act" that refuses to "remain", we should examine it as a practice that paradoxically is both a "disappearing act" and a means of alternative "remains". Interestingly, central to Schneider's reconceptualization of "performances-as-remains" ("Performance Remains" 104) is a resistance to the ocularcentrism that has shaped "the archive" since the Greek antiquity. I will recall a rather long extract from Schneider's article because it warrants inclusion in the discussion of this thesis:

[P]erformance appears to offer disappearance - and thus performance suggests a challenge to the 'ocular hegemony' which, to quote Kobena Mercer, 'assumes that the visual world can be rendered knowable before the omnipotent gaze of the eye and the "I" of the western cogito' (Mercer 1996: 165). There is a political promise to this equation: If performance can be understood as disappearing, perhaps performance can rupture the ocular hegemony Mercer cites. And yet, in privileging an understanding of performance as a refusal to remain, do we ignore other ways of knowing, other modes of remembering, that might be situated precisely in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently? The ways, that is, that performance resists a cultural thrall to the ocular—a thrall that would delimit performance as that which cannot remain to be seen. (101)

Echoing Phelan here—but from a different perspective—Schneider argues that according to the ocularcentric premises that have shaped the formation of archives, performance is conceived of as antithetical to its—predominantly—visual remains in the archive. This conception not only trivialises the ontology of performance within the frame of the archive, but also places the focus on the visual and material remains instead of the medium of performance itself. The conception of performance as a disappearing act that fails to be reproduced by the archive has therefore side-tracked our attention from the fact that the very ontology of performance could be used as a means of documentation as well; in other

words, if we place our focus on “the ways in which performance [does] remain”, we will be able to reconceptualise the archive beyond its ocularcentric limitations. In developing her thesis, Schneider suggests that we “resituate the site of *any knowing* as body-to-body transmission” (“Performance Remains” 105) and that we use performance itself as a means of its documentation. She argues that we need “to articulate the ways in which performance, less bound to the ocular, ‘enters’ or begins again and again, as Gertrude Stein would write, differently, via itself as repetition –like a copy or perhaps more like a ritual– as an echo in the ears of a confidante, an audience member, a witness.” (“Performance Remains” 106) While Schneider proposes that we use the medium of performance as the main means of the documentation of performance, she regards the process of re-enactment as a valuable addition to the archive. Through its re-enactment, performance can not only preserve its material remains beyond the limitations of ocularcentrism, but also acquire an (additional) affinity to ritual by way of its documentation.

While Schneider proposes the re-enactment of performance as a methodology of documenting a practice that is paradoxically both a disappearing act and a means for the preservation of –visual as much as non-visual– material remains, she also notes that “performance does not disappear though its remains are immaterial- the set of acts and spectral meanings which haunt material in constant collective interaction, in constellation.” (“Performance Remains” 104) Alluding to the corporeal and affective memories that are created in the audience (as both individual spectator and a collective body), Schneider implicitly remarks that there is value in considering such memories as part of the archive. Reinforcing this point and projecting it on the frame of (syn)aesthetic practices –while not necessarily being concerned with issues of documentation– Machon argues that “(syn)aesthetic disturbance defamiliarizes ‘known’ experience and causes a (re)awakening of a fused cerebral and corporeal memory. It thus has the potential to provide an audience member with a complete corporeal memory in any subsequent processes to recall.” ((*Syn)aesthetics* 20) Noting the impact that (syn)aesthetic –and immersive– practices might have, Machon argues that (syn)aesthetic practices have the potential to create corporeal (and I would argue affective) memories that stay with the audience after the end of the performative moment. In this sense, the combination of Schneider’s thesis on the reconceptualisation of the archive and Machon’s observations on the lasting impact (the remains, if you like) of (syn)aesthetic practices upon their audiences results in a re-definition of the archive that places the audience at the centre of not only evaluative processes but also documentation. In other words, within the paradigm set by Schneider’s thesis and

Machon's remark, the audience are the valuable and connecting link between documentation and evaluation; they can be the main agents through which documentation and evaluation become tautological.

Addressing the challenge of documenting and evaluating "disappearing acts" that take place in the midst of virtual darkness, I kept two points from the discussion above: firstly, the documentation of performance need not move within the frame of visibility. And secondly, the audience's corporeal and affective responses and the memories that they result in could be an important part of both the "archive" of the project and the process of its evaluation. Informed by these two insights I decided not to document the four performances of "*Rockaby* in the dark" via infrared recording, even if both the case studies of *Dans Le Noir* and *The Question* use(d) that ocular technology for the purposes of marketing and documentation/evaluation respectively. Aiming at documenting the project in a way that would reflect both the non-visual form of darkness and the central issue of the audience's subjectivity and corporeality in performance, I decided to record each audience member's journey with the help of small mp3 recorders. The mp3 recorders were attached to the audience's clothes so that they could move freely around the space. In using such a documenting method I hoped that I would get an auditory sense of each audience member's experience as sounds (the performance, the sound of the musical box, the sounds of the audience's tactile explorations and so on) would come in and out of focus and would thus give me an idea of each audience member's whereabouts at particular moments and her general trajectory in the environment for the duration of the performance. Nonetheless, reasoning is one thing and practical achievement another. Unfortunately, the results that this documenting approach returned were not as comprehensible or as useful as I hoped they would be. The quality of the recordings was really bad as the microphones rubbed against the audience's clothes and interfered with the soundscape of each audience member's journey. The little that can be heard merges into an incomprehensible whole (in retrospect, with how much precision can the microphone of a small mp3 recorder record surround sound?); I have thus decided not to accompany the thesis with the documentation of "*Rockaby* in the dark" and not to include the –virtually non-existent– findings that the documentation returned to the evaluative discussion that is to follow.

Despite the –humbling– fiasco of the auditory documentation of "*Rockaby* in the dark", I have "integral documents" that have informed the discussion in the previous sections, notes that I took while I was sitting quietly in a dark corner of the Studio Theatre during the four runs of the production and audience feedback. As I aimed at getting feedback

that would be based on the subjectivity and the set of –rather short-term– corporeal, affective memories of the audience, I purposefully didn’t prepare questionnaires that –at the time, I felt– would direct the audience’s responses. While the scope of the feedback focuses on the affective responses of the audience, it is rather limited and does not answer questions that would shed more “light” on the research questions that framed the project in the first place. In retrospect, the material “remains” that I have of “*Rockaby in the dark*” do not bear the traces of the ocularcentrism that informs “the archive” and I still stand by this decision. At the same time –with the exception of the brief accounts from the audience feedback– the material remains of the project are largely shaped by one voice; my voice that happens to bear the agency of a research agenda and thus loses its credibility, as Kershaw rightfully notes (see “Performance as Research”). If I were given the chance to change *one* aspect of “*Rockaby in the dark*”, therefore, it would definitely be the documentation and collection of evaluative resources. But since time-travel is not yet possible, let me disclose what remains from the material remains of “*Rockaby in the dark*”.

Interestingly, each performance of “*Rockaby in the dark*” was distinct; the audience in each run sensed each other’s (inter)action in the dark and somehow worked collaboratively towards the establishment of the poetics of the performance. Based on the notes that I kept, the audience of the first run kept a distance from W and they mostly interacted with the elements of the installation. None of the audience followed the paths that led to the performance circle at the centre of the environment. The correspondence between the performance of *Rockaby* and the elements of the installation, therefore, was established at a distance from the performance circle and V’s self-representational frame was maintained throughout. According to an audience member from this run (say, Sally) the “[j]ourney through the dark=brilliant! At moments [I] felt like a child at the beach digging through the sand for treasures—that as the text evoked time, memories and passage.” Sally’s journey through the virtually blacked-out environment of “*Rockaby in the dark*” brought to the surface affective responses while it also established a connection between the performance of *Rockaby* and the interactive elements of the installation. In *Immersive Theatres* Machon observes that “[t]he concurrent and consequent affects of form and event are instinctive *and* intellectual, the intellectual often arising from the instinctive *and* intellectual, the intellectual often arising from the instinctive experience of the work.” (32) Sally’s response indicates that the environment instigated personal affects that lay on the positive end of the spectrum and a sense of nostalgia; these responses not only lay between the corporeal (“like a child *digging* through the sand”) and the affective, but also functioned

as the gateway through which the poetics of *Rockaby* could be accessed. In this sense, the interplay between the corporeal and the affective was also informed by the interplay between “the instinctive *and* [the] intellectual” (Machon, *Immersive* 32).

The second performance was slightly more interesting in that the audience approached the performance circle; after exploring part of the installation two audience members followed the paths that led inwards. Upon the audience members’ approach, W’s performance was slightly modified; she (re)acted to their presence and the self-representational frame of V’s performance was broken. Interestingly, in breaking V’s self-representational frame the audience experienced a shift in W’s behaviour that paradoxically intensified W’s longing for human connection. Being close to two “other living soul[s]” (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 437) and not being able to touch them, W was displaced from V’s self-representational frame to a place where the possibility of contact was equally valid as her longing for human connection. In this sense, her hope for connection –far from blind– was justified as the words “eyes” and “blind” made up the soundscape of this rather touching moment. An audience member from this run (say, Fiona) noted that the “choice of objects was fantastic. I loved the feeling evoked by the smell of soap versus the feeling evoked by food. I also loved the crazy cassette player and the choice it gave me to disrupt this space. I would have liked to try it at night-time in pitch darkness, as I think it would be more challenging.” Referring to the corporeal and the affective as well as the interaction that she had with the environment, Fiona saw her participation as a means of playing and disrupting the overall environment of “*Rockaby* in the dark”. What is more, she saw the different elements of performance as antagonistic with one another (“the smell of soap *versus* the feeling evoked by food”). Employing her subjectivity, corporeality and affective responses, Fiona came in “*Rockaby* in the dark” in order to be engaged physically and to be challenged; as such, the virtual darkness of the environment interfered with her overall experience. At the same time, Fiona’s overall feedback does not make it clear whether or not the setting was successful in communicating a connection between the performance of *Rockaby* and the rest of the environment to her. Fiona’s response, while highly personal, is indicative of a specific spectator consciousness that is emerging in tandem with the increasing popularity of immersive theatre in the UK. Discussing the “tastes and types of audience members responding to” immersive theatre, Machon notes that immersive theatre attracts a specific demographic of audiences: “people [who want to] feel involved, invited” and who “even do not perceive the work to be ‘theatre.’” (*Immersive* 23) This spectator consciousness stems, according to Machon, from “a need to feel sensually and imaginatively



alive in the way that one does after a revitalizing walk, experiencing a fairground ride, engaging in extreme sports, pushing oneself to the front at a gig.” (*Immersive* 25) Focusing on the subjective and the experiential, this spectator consciousness might sometimes bypass the interplay between “the instinctive *and* [the] intellectual” (Machon, *Immersive* 32) and this is something that wasn’t explicitly addressed in “*Rockaby* in the dark” while it should have been.

During the third run an audience member approached W, tried to figure out where she is in the darkness and handed over a hat and a scarf that she had found in one of the installation stands. W initially hesitated but eventually she reached out and put them on. Satisfied that she had dressed W, the audience member continued her exploration in the dark. As soon as she came across the banana cake, she went back to the performance circle and handed some banana cake to W; she literally tried to feed W who took the cake and ate it. During this run there was a very direct and touching connection between the performance and the elements of the installation. This connection not only indicates that for this audience member the interplay between “the instinctive *and* [the] intellectual” (Machon, *Immersive* 32) was at hand, but also placed the audience member in the rather interesting position of a mediator between W’s past (the objects of the installation) and present (W herself). Breaking the self-representational frame that the “vocalic space” of V/W had established, the audience member also –implicitly– deconstructed the metaphors of blindness that are inherent in *Rockaby*. Through her kinaesthetic and tactile interaction with W, W’s pursuit and hope for connection were far from “blind”, as in the midst of the virtually blacked-out space W paradoxically managed to connect in a touching moment of caring interaction. Not surprisingly, the poetics of this run were more optimistic and they provided W with closure, even if it was towards the end of her life.

This was perhaps the most affectively intense run and this is demonstrated by the diverse affective responses that I got from this audience’s feedback. While four audience members articulated positive affects, one audience member (say, Lucy) evoked strong yet mixed feelings: “Really beautiful... I was really moved. I was slightly scared, but also excited.” The non-visual form of darkness can evoke, as I discussed in the fourth chapter, negative as much as positive affects. The cultural history of darkness suggests that at times it can allude to the supernatural (see Koslofsky), to “ignorance, irrational fear and superstition” (Edensor and Falconer 3), to the inspirational (see Raymo) and the religious (see Dora). While extremely concise (this is all that this audience member wrote on the feedback sheet), this audience response seems to encapsulate many of the affects that have been articulated by

the cultural history of darkness since the early modern era. Experiencing a range of affects all at once this audience member indicates that a blacked-out immersive environment has the potential to heighten the paradoxical nature of performance (see Kershaw “Practice as Research: Transdisciplinary Innovation”) by way of the weight that the cultural history of darkness bears on our subjectivity, corporeality and imagination on a visceral level.

Lastly, during the fourth run the separation between the performance and the objects of the installation was intensified. The audience engaged with the exploration of the dark environment by interacting mostly with the elements of the installation. The self-representational frame established by V was maintained and by the end of the performance W’s pursuit for connection had remained “blind” and her “blind hope” was rather justified; the association between her non-visual, sensory past (the objects of the installation) and her present (the “vocalic space” of V that stressed the futility in her search for connection) was not established. An audience member from this run (say, Elina) reinforces this impression: “[v]ery moving and absorbing for all the senses—even more so if you take completely the light away—for example, in a performance at night-time. Childhood themes very evocative—and at times very emotional, like the little device on the right side chair that plays a childhood, lullaby-type tune, or the hats and gloves that feel like they belong to your mom, or the sweet-smelling cinnamon in the tins. Loved the energy of Katerina [the performer]—absorbing enough to attend to even if all the other elements aren’t there.” While Elina’s description of some of the elements of the installation articulate the reasoning behind their selection and the connection that they had with the poetics of *Rockaby* (“lullaby-type tune”, “feel like they belong to your *mom*”) she didn’t make explicit in her overall feedback whether or not the environment was successful in establishing a connection between its various elements. Nonetheless, Elina’s feedback indicates that her journey in the dark was an affective process and –like other audience members– she resorted to childhood memories via the piece’s invitation to explore and the general feel of nostalgia.

While I only disclosed four extracts from the audience feedback, they are indicative of some general themes that emerged from the overall audience feedback on “*Rockaby* in the dark”. Firstly, all of the audience alluded in one way or another to the affective effects that the piece had had on them. Secondly, most of the audience commented on the playfulness that was inherent in their corporeal engagement with the elements of the virtually blacked-out environment (frequent allusions to childhood memories reinforce this impression). Thirdly, almost half of the audience commented on the virtual darkness of the environment and suggested that a complete blackout would have made the overall

experience more effective for them. And lastly, virtually one third of the audience remarked that they had established a connection between the performance of *Rockaby* and the overall environment of “*Rockaby in the dark*”.

Since a significant part of my research agenda was shaped around the metaphors of blindness that are inherent in *Rockaby* and I also wanted to problematize the metaphorical (mis)conception of blindness equals darkness, I have to remark that none of the audience mentioned blindness in their feedback. This absence could be understood in two ways: on the one hand, I could argue that the project managed to incorporate the non-visual form of darkness while setting up an environment that didn’t raise any associations between darkness and blindness, despite the fact that the poetics of the play are latent with metaphors of blindness. In this sense, while half of the audience remarked that they would have preferred a complete blackout, I could say that I stand by my decision of incorporating virtual darkness in the environment. What is more, the measure through which I could tell whether or not the metaphors of blindness were –implicitly– re-interpreted by the audience’s corporeality and participation was by whether or not V’s self-representational frame was broken; in two of the performances the frame was broken and in the other two it remained intact. As such, “*Rockaby in the dark*” managed to set up an environment that only partially encouraged the performance of the metaphors “blind pursuit” and “blind hope”.

On the other hand, I cannot help but wonder whether the –social in the case of “*Rockaby in the dark*”– politics that inform the procedural authorship of a project have any relevance when they are not communicated clearly to the audience. The reason why *The Question* is such a remarkable project is the fact that it made “political ideas sensual” (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 133) in an explicit manner. Bearing this in mind, one crucial question remains to be answered: where does the socio-political lay in the “aesthetics of invitation” of “*Rockaby in the dark*”–if anywhere? In light of the four radically different versions of the same performance, I can assume that the non-visual aesthetics of “*Rockaby in the dark*” contributed to four different versions of the performance’s poetics depending on the audience’s interaction with the environment. Discussing participatory art projects –while conceptualising them as a form of “delegated art”– in *Fair Play* Harvie argues that

delegated performance offers audiences potentially expanded degrees of agency in making art and its meanings, enabling individual expressivity, extending to all participants the opportunity to be an artist and democratizing the role of the artist. ... Access to being an artist is opened to everyone, regardless of

how excluded from art people might otherwise feel they are, whether due to restraints that are material (not having art's tools) or educational (not having art instruction) or because of the enormously powerful and pervasive constraints of cultural capital, which actively and passively collude to train many people to believe that certain areas of cultural practice are simply 'not for them'. (36)

Working within the anti-perspectival paradigm, "*Rockaby in the dark*" attempted to develop a framework that instigated affective responses for the audience. Experiencing a performance that was devised from a research agenda that focused on the subjectivity, corporeality and affective responses of each "spectator", the audience of "*Rockaby in the dark*" hopefully experienced a performance that invited them to temporarily turn into artists and engage with a playful process that took place between the corporeal and the affective, "the instinctive *and* [the] intellectual" (Machon, *Immersive* 32) and the threshold between visibility and non-visibility. At the same time, "*Rockaby in the dark*" invited each audience member to establish a personal "poetics of the unthought" that was projected on the blacked-out environment and merged with the "poetics of the unthought" of the other audience members in each run (Thrift 16). In doing so, it invited the audience to not only fill in the gaps that were intentionally left blank in the creative process, but also to sense each other in the midst of the virtual darkness of the environment. Attempting to heighten the mechanics of interaction via its inherent darkness, "*Rockaby in the dark*" tried to set up temporary "micro-communities" that haven't been assembled in order to experience –as intact sensation-originating machines (Thrift 23)– while they consume. Instead, the motive behind the assembling of the four "micro-communities" of "*Rockaby in the dark*" was to bring together five people who explore the "power of vulnerability" in the dark as a collective of "temporary artists" that negotiate their experiences on a visceral level and via their subjectivity, corporeality, affective responses and intellect. If there was one socio-political dimension in the "spectatorship" of "*Rockaby in the dark*", this is it; but I think that there is a long way to go before I could identify the project as a practice that resonates with the "non-capitalist economy of the gift-society" (Wickstrom 67) and Extant's performative political ecology of the non-visual. The reason I am saying this will be illustrated in the final section of this thesis.

## A Political Ecology of (Re)Affirmation in Performance

Looking back to the whole process of “*Rockaby in the dark*”, I realise now that there was a missing component from the creative process that affected the whole outcome of the project. While the process was informed by the critical frame of non-visibility and the materialisation of the project engaged with methods that dealt with the non-visual on an aesthetic and poetic level, there was a significant gap between theoretical intention and practical application. Wary of reproducing an environment that would bear the metaphorical association between darkness and blindness, I shied away from applying the disability approach to metaphor to the overall environment of “*Rockaby in the dark*”. Engaging with the social politics of blindness in a more explicit way, I would not only have devised a project that echoes Extant’s performative political ecology of the non-visual, but would also have produced an environment that responds to the ocularcentric structures that inform metaphors of blindness by inviting the audience to explicitly deconstruct the metaphors in a conscious and self-reflexive manner. What this means practically, is that a complete blackout (as half of the audience pointed out) would have been more effective in establishing the interplay between the metaphorical and the empirical. Furthermore, the metaphors should have been an inherent and felt part of the overall environment and W’s kinaesthetic response to the words “blind” and “eyes” (Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* 437) would have been a good starting point for the implementation of such an approach. Instead, the metaphors “blind pursuit” and “blind hope” were a set of remains (to use Schneider’s term) of the creative process that were faintly echoed in the virtually blacked-out environment.

In the second chapter I noted that according to Thrift one of the “three formative tendencies” (23) of “the new era of the inhabitable map” (16) is the address of the inhabitants of the experience economy on an anteconscious level (23). Addressing us on this level, the capitalist market diverts our attention from not only the power relations that are iterated in the experience economy, but also the possibility of (re)action. In the discussion of the second chapter I argued that when power struggle is experienced but not iterated, the prospect of social and political resolution becomes virtually impossible. Attempting to produce an environment that takes place between the subjective, the corporeal and the affective on the one hand and the cultural, social and political on the other hand, I overlooked this significant point. Thrift’s “performative political ecologies” (22) are reactive to the status quo because they address the body on an experiential and affective level while at the same time iterating issues that have to do with power relations, power struggles and their function within our body-centric culture. In this sense, “*Rockaby in the dark*” would

have echoed Extant's performative political ecology of the non-visual if the friction between embodiment and metaphor was explicitly iterated. The power of the social politics of disability lies on the fact that the political becomes personal and vice versa; addressing an audience of multiple embodiments through non-visual aesthetics and poetics, "*Rockaby in the dark*" should have made "political ideas sensual" (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 113) while celebrating the "power of vulnerability" in an explicit manner. Up until the moment we performed "*Rockaby in the dark*" in front of an audience, I realised that the "human" in the human factor (written repeatedly on my notes, highlighted with different colours, circled time and time again) was just a conception. It was only after the world of V/W was inhabited by the audience that I realised what I had meant on a theoretical level: one of the biggest assets of performance is that it moves between the levels of theoretical abstraction and concrete materialisation. When we discuss an audience in theatre and performance discourse, we talk about real people with real bodies and real memories (affective and corporeal) who interact with a performance in a tangible way that –perhaps– will never be fully deciphered in academic discourse. It was at this moment when I realised that the socio-political potential of the non-visual in performance lies on the intertwining of the personal with the political; the iteration and sharing of ideas in material settings, in "real" time and via numerous modes of communication.

There is a quotation in Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* that I have been meaning to use throughout the discussion but something kept me from using it. Writing up this final section of the thesis, it has become clear to me why I haven't used it in the discussion thus far. The quotation reads as follows:

the task today is to produce a viable international alignment of leftist political movements and a reassertion of art's inventive forms of negation as valuable in their own right. We need to recognise art as a form of experimental activity overlapping with the world, whose negativity may lend support towards a political project (without bearing the sole responsibility for devising and implementing it), and – more radically – we need to support the progressive transformation of existing institutions through the transversal encroachment of ideas whose boldness is related to (and at times greater than) that of artistic imagination. (284)

Based on the discussion of this thesis, I would beg to differ with Bishop. I think that the issue at hand today is not the creative alignment of the arts with Bishop's utopian conception of

the “international alignment of leftish political movements” because such movements are not necessarily concerned with the complex –and often contradictory– premises of the creative cities of the world and the experience economy that fuels them. Recent developments in world politics have not only proven the inefficacy of right-wing agendas, but have also demystified the reactionary potential of the left. I think, therefore, that the “task today” is to look beyond political alignments and beyond structures of absolute negation. As the body and its affective potential are appropriated by capitalism and the structures that support it, I think that to negate the body would be counter-productive if not self-destructive. Instead, we need to take advantage of the arts’ paradoxical position of being part of the fabric of everyday life while also being distinct from it (see Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life*) and to develop *practices of human (re-)affirmation*. This, I think, is where the political potential of the arts currently lies and this is why and how caring produced non-visual practices and the critical frame of non-visibility become relevant: through their paradoxical (re-)affirmation of the “human” in the human factor by way of a phenomenal negation (*non-visual* elements of performance and the *non-visual* form of darkness). Such practices and such a frame –as other frames, I am certain– invite us to re-discover time and time again what capitalism has been trying to negate and ignore (as if it will go away) since its rise in the early modern era: our humanity.

It is within this frame that the examination of the non-visual has taken place in this thesis. Looking back to the critical frame that I outlined in the second chapter, Thrift’s call for more “performative political ecologies” (22) has finally become something tangible while the main characteristics of these ecologies have become intrinsically related to the non-visual and the critical frame of non-visibility. Examining a variety of spaces that range from a “vocalic”, to a social and a performance space while also attempting to produce an environment that encapsulates Thrift and Extant’s ideas, I have realised that the relationship between space and the practices that take place within it are not dependent on a body that is conceived of in abstraction, but rather on multiple bodies and multiple embodiments that sense, feel and carry the memories of their sensations and feelings in a way that is intrinsic to the definition of the self on both a personal and a socio-political level. What is mostly precious about the arts and performance in particular, is their ability to address the subjectivity of individual spectators while also connecting it to a collective (mini communities), to the intellect, to cultural agendas, to social politics and –perhaps– the outright political. In attempting to answer the question of where do the politics of the non-visual lay, I have repeatedly come back to the idea that the politics of the non-visual in

performance lay on its ability to engage with elements and a form that are appropriated by capitalism; yet, in this engagement the non-visual in performance manages to recover elements that capitalism has been trying to suppress and/or overlook.

The departure point of this thesis was the argument that the non-visual has been a significant part of theatrical practices since –paradoxically– the emergence of the perspectival tradition in the early modern era. Framing the experience of the theatrical event through carefully constructed systems of vision, the perspectival tradition also resulted in the concealment of aspects of the theatrical event. The critical frame of non-visibility in the perspectival tradition is therefore concerned with: the invisibility of the representational frame that results in the illusion of a self-sufficient world on the proscenium stage; the “inactive vision” (see Schneider, “Blind” 27) of actors/characters performing on the proscenium stage; the invisibility of the audience, their subjectivity and corporeality that is encapsulated in the conception of the spectator as a disembodied eye/I; and the non-visual form of darkness in the blackouts that occur between the highly visual and illuminated sequences that are presented onstage through a system of vision that materialises Alberti’s “finestra aperta” in theatrical terms.

At the same time, the historical allusions that I have made throughout this thesis demonstrate that since the emergence of the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century and the more systematic re-iterations of these movements by the neo-avant-garde of the mid-twentieth century there has been an interest in practices that develop within what I have identified as the anti-perspectival tradition. Far from suggesting a clear-cut binary, the differing terms perspectival and anti-perspectival function as the two terms that lay at each end of a continuum that demonstrates the fluidity and frequent paradoxical nature of performance; anti-perspectival practices can entail elements of the perspectival tradition (conventional audio description) and canonical texts whose performance history places them within the perspectival tradition can be staged via non-visual elements of performance and a non-visual form (“*Rockaby* in the dark”). If anything, this continuum invites us to critically examine theatre in terms of visibility and non-visibility and the mechanics of seeing on the one hand and “sensing” on the other hand. But then again, the boundaries of these mechanics are, as I hope I have demonstrated, far from clearly demarcated. In any case, the critical frame of non-visibility in the anti-perspectival tradition is concerned with: the paradoxical “visibility” of the audience; the self-conscious focus on the audience’s subjectivity, corporeality and affective responses; the incorporation of non-visual elements of performance in theatrical and performative practices; and the more



recent emergence of the non-visual form of darkness in the fabric of the artistic and cultural worlds.

As such, the critical frame of non-visibility has been developed in conversation with some recurring themes across the few settings that have been examined: the audience's subjectivity, corporeality, affective capacities, imaginative faculties as well as their (implicit or explicit) participation. In examining them in relation to non-visual elements of performance (language, the aural/oral, the gustatory, the olfactory, the tactile and the haptic) and/or the non-visual form of darkness, this thesis has humbly added to the anti-perspectival list of themes the following: the theme of the "power of vulnerability" that stems from practices that acknowledge and celebrate the limitations of the human body while opposing conceptions of the body as an immaculate sensation-originating machine; the theme of mimetic engagement with the concept of blindness ("playing blindness") that can either reinforce wide (mis)conceptions about the multiple embodiments of blindness or deconstruct such misconceptions by embracing the "power of vulnerability"; and the theme of the non-visual and "non-capitalist economy of the gift-society" (Wickstrom 67) that functions as the creative basis for the development of a dialogic rapport between the multiple embodiments across the continuum of vision and blindness and between the critical frames of visibility and non-visibility.

Through these additions I have examined the politics of the non-visual from the perspective of multiple embodiments. I have argued for the potential of the non-visual to challenge the ocularcentric structures that lead to the articulation of uneven social relations between people with visual impairments and temporarily sighted people. I have also argued for the value of self-reflexive non-visual practices that focus on the development of creative dialogues and the exchange of ideas between people with multiple embodiments. More specifically, I have attempted to articulate the ways in which the non-visual is experienced on an embodied level and in doing so I have argued that the non-visual has the potential to make the intangible tangible, to heighten interaction (with objects, performers and other "spectators" alike) and thus to provide the basis for the development of temporary, yet summative micro-communities. As the difference between *Dans Le Noir* and *The Question* has demonstrated, the non-visual form of darkness can develop two (amongst other, I am certain) types of micro-communities: firstly, micro-communities that are assembled in fabricated environments where embodied experience is an end in itself (for the consumer) and a means to a (profitable) end (for the provider). And secondly, micro-communities that turn its members into temporary artists whose subjectivity, corporeality and affective

responses function as a starting point and a gateway to the imaginary, the intellectual and (in its best manifestations such as *The Question*) the social and the political.

So, what does the provocation for the future development of a theory of non-visibility in performance entail? It is a provocation that embraces the conceptualisation of performance as a (literally and figuratively) “disappearing act” not only on an ontological level but also on a methodological level and in relation to “the archive”. It is also a provocation that is interested in the critical and creative engagement with the themes of the “power of vulnerability”, the self-reflexive and socially sentient act of “playing blindness” and the non-visual and “non-capitalist economy of the gift-society” (Wickstrom 67). It is, lastly, a provocation that prompts the (re)affirmation, celebration and exploration of the diversities in human embodiment, the creative impulses that respond to these diversities and the pragmatic socio-political urges that guide these impulses.

The socio-political context within which the arts are currently produced and received is complex: social inclusion agendas address “the excluded” with quick-fix solutions that do not develop in conversation with the diversities in human embodiment; the concept of the creative city has been materialised around the world and the emergence of the –global and mobile– creative class has widened local class divisions even further; the global economic crisis has resulted in the economic instability of the arts sector, something that has led various theatre companies (that do not work in the commercial sector) to seek out private sponsorship that shapes creative practices according to the variables of each sponsor’s efficacy agendas (social, technological, entrepreneurial and so on); and the urban landscape of the creative cities of the world are shaped by the experience economy that (literally) invests in and fetishizes multiple/alternative embodiments on the grounds of economic profit.

In the midst of such a complex fabric of everyday life the creative and critical examination of non-visibility becomes relevant because non-visual spaces –among other spaces, I am certain– have the potential to remind us that the corporeal and the affective effects that we get from the experience economy are empty vessels compared to the corporeal and the affective effects that we get from the arts. While valuing the embodied, the affective and the subjective, carefully produced non-visual practices remind us –paradoxically through their increased affectivity– that we also carry an imaginative faculty whose limits are endless; intellect that allows us to project meaning (embodied or not) to embodied practices; and a social and political consciousness that can be heightened by way of not only the personal, the sensual and the felt, but also the informed exchange of

“imagined embodiments” and ideas. It is in this sense that the provocation for the future development of a theory of non-visibility in performance calls for the (re)affirmation of the “human” in the human factor. There are numerous and noteworthy practices that engage with such approaches as the discourse on contemporary performative practices demonstrates; but in the midst of our body-centric cultures their socio-political implications and potential become pointedly relevant. There is more to culture than meets the eye; but there is also more to the arts than meets the body.

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