



DRAMATURGIES OF IMMERSION

Analysing Poetics of Immersion
and Emersion

EDITED BY

Janek Szatkowski and
Thomas Rosendal Nielsen

ROUTLEDGE



DRAMATURGIES OF IMMERSION

Dramaturgies of Immersion draws on case studies from international productions to conceptualise and analyse the state of contemporary immersive theatre. Immersion appears in different forms, raising the core question: What is at stake in immersive theatre for participants, artists, and society? The answer depends on the underlying values of the different immersive poetics.

The book takes a multifaceted approach to immersive theatre and its dramaturgies to explore the forms of emersion rendered possible by immersion in a number of cases from international and Danish performances. The edited collection examines how theatre in the 21st century finds adequate forms that allow it to both entertain and stay socially relevant. The chapters build on each other, developing a specific way of thinking about and analysing dramaturgies in immersive theatre, as well as offering tools for dramaturgical analysis.

An insightful exploration of the potentials of immersive theatre, *Dramaturgies of Immersion* is essential for advanced undergraduate and postgraduate students of dramaturgy and immersive theatre, scholars and researchers in these fields, as well as theatre practitioners.

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*Edited by Janek Szatkowski
and Thomas Rosendal Nielsen*

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PREFACE

A seven-year research project into immersive theatre performances in Denmark conducted by staff members of the Department of Dramaturgy and Musicology, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University, Denmark and affiliated PhDs, present the results of their investigations.

The point of departure is an interest in scrutinising immersive theatre as an important new form of theatre in search of what kind of inherent values emerge. The focus is upon the dramaturgies of immersive performances, understood as “the work of the work of actions” in the situated and staged encounters between performers and audience. Such dramaturgies of immersion combine specific modes of aesthetic experience and specific modes of creative production through their singular poetics. In the range of examples observed in this study, there seem to be much more at stake in immersive theatre than the experience of immersion in itself. Something emerges through immersion. The meaning of these experiences of immersion and emergence depends on the different social horizons of the participants. We cannot predict the meaning of these experiences for the individual participants, but we can interrogate the values inherent in the dramaturgies. There are different stakes within society and different stakes for different participants. We push these differences to the margins in order to focus on the dramaturgical operations of the poetics in practice. The question then is “*seen from the perspective of the values reproduced by the poetics, what is at stake in the immersive situation for the participants, artists, and for society?*”



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DRAMATURGIES OF IMMERSION

An introduction

Janek Szatkowski and Thomas Rosendal Nielsen

In recent years, the concept of *immersive theatre* has been a warm topic in artistic and academic discourse, designating a development within 21st-century theatrical poetics. Definitions of immersive theatre abound, but a common denominator is the indication of a *theatre that invites the audience to physically step into the staged reality*.

Nevertheless, the concept remains contested. Some artists declare their use of immersive strategies in their performances, promotion, and reflections while others doing comparable work express strong reservations towards the theoretical adequacy and ideological connotations of the concept. Some even do both. In academic circles, immersive theatre performances have been praised for their bold and pertinent experiments, but at the same time criticised for manipulation of the audience and appeasement with neoliberal pressures. And of course, there is also the claim that there is nothing new under the sun: what about medieval theatre, what about the historical avant-garde, what about process drama etc. A cynical observer might claim that these kinds of conceptual polemics provide bread on the table for academics who are no less caught up in the neoliberal competition for producing the best obsolete argument of tomorrow than the artists are caught up in following the hype and claiming their originality at the same time. Instead of giving in to this cynicism, let us dare assume that something important is at stake in these practices and discussions.

In this book, we argue that the fuzz about immersive theatre is not just a terminological quarrel. It concerns the question of how theatre in the 21st century finds adequate forms that allow it to both entertain and stay politically and socially relevant in a society marked by political polarisation, widespread psychological distress, and environmental catastrophe. In our current mediatised society, theatre is a marginal cultural activity. This position in the periphery makes it urgent for artists

and scholars to explore how theatre can present society to society in an engaging way. Poetics since Aristotle have been concerned with this question of why and how to do this. The development of contemporary theatre poetics is characterised by a broad range of experiments, ranging from investigations of digitalised formats, decolonising the classical repertoire of the West to making theatre with non-human actors. Immersive theatre is one such strand of contemporary experimental poetics. The concept has even become a successful marketing term that makes it possible to connect very different forms of experimental theatre and popular entertainment¹ by a label that provides some clarity of expectation to the audience. We aim to contribute to a critical discourse that interrogates the implicit value assumptions and affordances of selected immersive theatre practices. It is our intention to emphasise how dramaturgies of immersion create very specific predicaments of the problems and concerns of contemporary society.

Analysing dramaturgies of immersion

The six studies presented in this volume do not have one firmly established methodology or epistemology in common. They are, however, the product of a long-term collaboration in a research group at the Department of Dramaturgy and Musicology, School of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University, and they do reflect an attempt to synthesise and develop a perspective on immersive practices that supersedes individual contributions. Central to our mode of investigation is the orientation around the concepts of dramaturgy and poetics. Both require specification, since both concepts have a rich and ambiguous history.

The concept of dramaturgy has had a revival in the past 20 years or so, with several important international publications on the topic, most of them moving beyond the narrow colloquial understanding of dramaturgy as simply the structure or composition of a dramatic text or narrative fiction. The more expanded conceptions of dramaturgy often play on the etymology of the word, the two Greek roots *dran* and *ergon*, meaning action and work, respectively. In this way, Eugenio Barba famously described dramaturgy as “actions at work” already in 1985, marking the inclusion of non-textual and non-narrative elements in processual compositions. More recently Konstantina Georgelou, Efrosini Protopapa, and Danae Theodoridou in 2017 defined dramaturgy as “working on actions” marking the reflective and sometimes subversive practice of the makers. Coming from a University department, which since the 1960s has used the word as the name of its broad and constantly evolving subject, we hesitate to settle on one fixed definition of the word, even though we are closely aligned with not least Barba’s definition. This wide idea of dynamic and inclusive compositions of action is one sense of what we are suggesting with the word “dramaturgies” in the title. More theoretically stated – and coupling to the etymology – one could perhaps phrase the object of our interest more precisely by moving to a second-order perspective on dramaturgy as “the work of the work of actions”, corresponding to a similar idea of dramaturgy as a

science on “communication of communication” (see Szatkowski, 2019). What we aim at here is not a formalistic description of the aesthetic qualities or potentials of a given performance, but the values of the workings of the doings so to say. Dramaturgy would then be the theory-in-praxis that aligns and in some cases disturbs or displaces the relations between core artistic values, programmes for rehearsal and creation, and modes of distribution and experience.

In this sense, our approach to analysing dramaturgies is closely related to the tradition of theoretical poetics; the tradition of observing and describing the relationship between the artistic, social, and political values and the means of an artistic practice. Aristotle’s famous theory of tragedy thus ascribed a specific social value or purpose to tragedy, namely catharsis, and systematically accounted for the techniques through which this purpose was achieved through the drama. The methodological standards of modern scholarship and science required the development of a distinction between normative and descriptive poetics, thus distinguishing between poetics as the hierarchical artistic programmes developed and articulated or implicated by artists, and a ‘heterarchical’ (i.e. not binding results in advance to decided valid principles) poetics (or poetology) as the theoretical accounts and critique of such programmes by academics. This distinction is not as easy to uphold as it may sound, neither is it universally acknowledged by academics that it should be. Is Martin Esslin’s famous account of the Theatre of the Absurd thus a normative or a descriptive poetics? In addition, how about Josephine Machon’s book on Immersive Theatre? It is neither our task nor intention to solve this mess (nor to judge whether it needs be solved). In this book, we are not interested in providing an artistic programme, a declaration for or against certain immersive theatre practices. We are interrogating how the immersive practices are programmatic in themselves, how they are developing, and differentiating immersive poetics as response to general or specific social predicaments. One of the benefits of this focus on the differentiation of immersive poetics is that it relieves the inclination towards making too strong genre generalisations and causal inferences between form and effect, and replaces it with the task of describing as precisely as possible the configuration of values, forms of communication, modes of making and modes of experiencing in relation to specific practices.

Janek Szatkowski has in his recent book, *A Theory of Dramaturgy* (2019), described this relation between dramaturgy and poetics in further detail in the form of a “poietic hierarchy”. The idea is that the (implicit and explicit) values of the poetics are governing and emerging from specific modes of making (poiesis) and experiencing (aisthesis), and the dramaturgy is the form of communication, the theory-in-praxis, through which this pyramidal triangle of values, production, and reception is unfolded and held together. Poetics (in the plural) take form as dramaturgy (in the plural) and vice versa. So what we are trying to offer here is both an expanded view on different dramaturgies of contemporary immersive theatre practices (such as the dramaturgy of **SIGNAs** immersive performance *The Open Heart*)

and on the different poetics (such as a poetics of intimacy through immersion) that emerges across these practices.

Critical discourse

Existing research has had its core in studies of particularly English productions that have unfolded in the past 20 years or so. The precarity of public theatre funding in England have left its mark on the field of immersive theatres (Bucknall, 2023, p. 219). A divide between the commercial successful (e.g. London-based Punch Drunk) and the non-commercial (e.g. **Cross Collaboration** or **ZU-UK**) has created debate and even a manifesto for a ‘post-immersive theatre’ (Ramos & Maravala, 2020) arguing for new groups of audiences and alternative ways of immersion. However, it is not only a question of economic struggles. It also involves important differences in the ‘how’ of theatre of immersion. British researchers (Alston, 2016; Biggin, 2017; Frieze, 2016; Jarvis, 2019, Machamer, 2017; Machon, 2013; White, 2012) have analysed and commented upon works of companies such as **Shunt**, **Punchdrunk**, **Zecora Una Theatre** and many others, which have been explored in detail. The *Canadian Theatre Review* has published a special issue on immersive theatre (Willis & Alvarez, 2018).

In his latest book, Gareth White (2023) has continued the important discussion of scholarship on participation in immersive theatre. He does so by introducing nine authors of recent publications on the subject. It is an inspiring landscape and White affords a focus on the crucial investigation of *how* immersive performances generate a field for negotiation of meaning. Commenting upon Machon (2013), White emphasises how the notion of embodied physical meaning-making constitute the ground for anything conscious or conceptual, for which Machon uses the concept “worlding”.² Worlding takes place in the immersive theatre, understood as a fusion of what is sensed and what is understood. Lavender (2016) reminds of the double experience of “being in play” and “experiencing ourselves having an experience”, which he frames as *mise en sensibilité*. This double experience³ is actualised as an event with the spectator inside the play situation.

The diversity of forms of immersive theatre, however, makes it important to qualify these common denominators in order to qualify critical observations. One important example was Alston (2016) pointing to the dichotomy in immersive theatre not only as being accordant with forces in neoliberal economy and experience economy, but also as having the potential of disruption. By being deeply involved in the ‘experience machine’, the spectators may come to re-know themselves in the particular moment, but also to re-know the conditions that embed the work and how it implicates the single participant. The estimation of whether immersive theatre is affirmative or disruptive of neoliberal economy would, according to White, require the aesthetic experience to invite “A reflexive participation that makes the process of engagement into a problem, thus exposing the economic assumptions that it embeds and echoes” (p. 21). This marks an epistemological question of the

possibility of consciousness being able to be *simultaneously* in immersed mode and in reflective mode. The question is also raised by Royona Mitra (2016) who approaches the concept of immersion from the ideas in the Sanskrit dramaturgical treatise *Natyashastra* (compiled between 200 B.C.E and 200 C.E). The position is described as:

... immersion can also be theorized and experienced as an embodied, psycho-physical state that transpires interstitially between any audience, any artist and any art that is primarily premised on gestural dimensions of communication, and regardless of interactivity.

(Mitra, 2016, p. 89)

In this sense, all spectatorship is immersive. It should not be regarded as a specific trait for a theatre form. Mitra questions – in a discussion with Gareth White – whether spectatorship in a full sensorium immersion allows members to “retain their ability to effectively critique and remain ‘outside’ of the event” (p. 94). White answers by suggesting that the *contradiction*, which Mitra addresses could be better used by embracing it as such and use it to explore the critical potential in participatory performances.

Sruti Bala (2018) investigates the participants who run *against* what the performance demands and expects, those who are ‘unruly and counter-intuitive’. Bala suggests that they produce diverging meanings in a ‘process of becoming’. To what degree does the dramaturgies of immersive theatre provide possibilities for such diverging actions, and just as important *how* are such actions already positioned by the poetics.

Nicolas Ridout (2015) describes the theatre event as a form of life where people are not working but still labouring passionately with a thing that produces nothing, and that does not matter in the sense that most labour otherwise matters. Ridout does not consider theatre molested by ‘false excitements of joining in’ as the best condition for a critical theatre. Here a distinction between the concepts ‘critical’ and ‘affirmative’ aligns to the discourse in Alston (2016), where the possibility for immersive theatre to be disruptive was propounded. Again, White reformulates it as the problem of how the ‘mundane’ is brought into the theatre, and how it is then treated as ‘not mundane’ and how this enables the participants to ‘sense themselves sensing’.

In the current debate between the commercial and the non-commercial forms of immersive theatre, White underlines his position by stating that even the most ‘culinary’ immersive performances are dependent on deferred meaning, emergence, and incompleteness. Even though these elements are allied to an experience economy, it does not devalue them entirely. It is obvious that it also contains the question of funding. Funding is of crucial importance for theatre as it is price heavy in wages, making the cost per spectator very high. Public funding or funding by ‘festivals’ can to some degree lessen the dependence on huge audiences willing to

pay considerable amounts to be entertained. However, public funding also comes with strings attached. There are major differences in the cultural politics of European countries, and this might explain some of the differences in the evolution of immersive theatre.

White defines and maps contradictions inherent in this new theatrical poetics. However that is not enough. The German sociologist and philosopher Theodor W. Adorno developed a dialectic critical theory, where he declared that the autonomy of art is made possible only through art's character as commodity, since it is only in bourgeois society that the artist gains the status of an independent player in the exchange market. In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno (1997) advocates the idea of a 'true consciousness' as an educational goal that should not be forgotten in order to sustain the perspective of the concept of an autonomous and mature human being capable of resisting the repetition of Auschwitz. White adapts Adorno's approach, where contradictions are not simple seesaws of alternatives, neither are they a continuum between contrasting poles.

In his [Adorno's] conception, a shift in balance leads to something unpredictable, a new formation, or allows something hidden within a situation to emerge; each thing contains its opposite in surprising forms, rather than simply negating it or being transformed by it.

(White, 2023, p. 25)

With contradictions as starting points, White's analysis heads towards conflicts hidden within these contradictions themselves. White makes it clear that contradictions do not form or identify a genre or style, neither are they describing an emerging canon, but they represent an "under explored and untapped potential in participation" (p. 26).

That, in some cases the outcome of the contradiction that emerges from participation, seems ultimately to contradict the apparent intent of the performance, which is appropriate to the strategy that I am exploring: an immanent contradiction of what a performance might seem to have assumed of and for itself, not to its detriment or the discredit of the artists concerned, but in evidence of the depth of possibility concealed in performance participation.

(White, 2023, p. 27)

Critical thinking thus provides White with the arguments to identify discrepancies between what the work sets out to do and what immanent meanings its deliberate strategy releases. This 'hermeneutics of suspicion' allows White to select a row of meanings contradicting the apparent intent of the performance. For the analysis of immersive theatre, the *communication of meaning* in any given case remains pertinent as all works of art are part of social communication (even if the leading approach to performance analysis is no longer semiotics). How

does the immersive theatre performances, as works of art, position the agents in dramaturgies that allow negotiations of values to take place implicitly or explicitly? What are the underlying values and assumptions, be they of aesthetic, psychological, sociological, or political concern that orientates the conditions of these negotiations?

Such issues are also explored outside the anglophone research. Karina [Rocktäschel \(2023\)](#) demonstrates how immersion can be described with Sara Ahmed's ([Ahmed, 2007](#)) queer phenomenology. That we all are already immersed in the world has been acknowledged by phenomenologists (Weiss et al., 2020). They describe lived life experience as unreflective or unproblematised immersion in the world. Post-phenomenologists, however, accentuate lived experience as always already orientated by "prereflective sensorimotor and affective body becoming oriented in the world with others" ([Rocktäschel, 2023](#), p. 279 quoting [Whitney, 2020](#), p. 191). The way in which we understand this immersion as being-in-the-world is of importance for how we posit immersive theatre as an active component in a critical discourse ([Hass, 2019](#)). This interrogates the implicit value assumptions and affordances of selected immersive theatre practices.

The Affective Societies centre at Freie Universität Berlin⁴ has also contributed with valuable knowledge on immersive theatre and performance from the German-speaking region ([Kolesch et al., 2019](#); [Mühlhoff & Schütz, 2019](#); [Schütz, 2020, 2022](#)). Theresa [Schütz \(2020, p. 345\)](#) propose a demarcated definition of immersive theatre as genre:

Immersive theatre encompass work outside the institution theatre. It manifests an experiential space that opens up a multi sensorial gestalt, which follows an underlying fiction. The fiction is established relational and in multiple modalities and is asserted as a closed representational system. The participating spectators becomes visitors in the existing fiction and are in many different ways involved in the actions and are thus active as accomplices in bringing the fictional world to life. (...) Immersive theatre use targeted dramaturgical and affective strategies of uncertainty, disorientation, and sensual, narrative, and/or emotional overload.

Art is able to remind us that the realm of the *possible* is not yet depleted. In this way, art establishes a liberating distance to reality. Art may reactivate repressed possibilities. Schütz points to a sensorial gestalt of the world formed by uncertainty, disorientation, and emotional overload with the spectator/visitor as accomplice. What should the experiencing being accessory to a cruel world then generate? Every experience of meaning offers a wealth of further possible experiences. One might ask how the work of art interferes with the structure of consciousness and its values. Schütz suggests further elements (e.g. fiction and specific dramaturgical and affective strategies) as parameters to apply in order to judge something as immersive theatre.

In order to choose the works informing this book, we agreed upon the minimal definition of *theatre that invites the audience to physically step into the staged reality*. The use of the concept of *genre* is contested. It may be considered to be too essentialist and normative and to be blind for important differences in the works congregated under a common term. It is an old European struggle to find the balance between whole and part, generalisations and the specific – a futile struggle one might add, if the only purpose is the satisfaction of classification in itself. However, the information carried by conventions of genre do function to align the audience's expectations. Differences, familiarities, and crossovers between genres amounts to complex ecologies through which a multitude of poetics evolve. Genre is all about genesis. Still, immersive theatre as a genre label risks becoming an umbrella term shadowing for the diversity within aesthetic forms (Kolesch, 2021). Rethinking immersive theatre through the concept of poetics offers the challenge to think, differentiate, and distinguish.

Social, conceptual, and cultural contexts

As already stated, the core ambition of this book is to analyse and discuss different implicit and explicit value assumptions that are at stake in selected immersive dramaturgies through the perspective of poetics and how these respond to current social predicaments. The following sections provide context to these discussions. First, in the current section, we introduce two concepts from cultural theory that have been critical to our understanding of the contemporary society in which these practices take part. Then, we introduce some of the conceptual and artistic genealogies that often silently inform current practices and discourses on immersive theatre. After that we give a relatively detailed account on the specific geographical and cultural context in which our cases are located, i.e. Denmark, as we will argue that theatre practices are at once very internationally and very locally situated. Critical differences are often lost if one assumes too much about the general state of the 'global village' in which they take place. After introducing these three contexts, we will end this introduction by pointing to some of the recurring motifs in the chapters of this book.

Theatre participates in society's perpetual observation and description of itself as society – to evoke a core topic from the systems theory of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1998) – in a historical situation where the means and rate of the production of such self-descriptions have immensely multiplied and accelerated. Society is, however, not the context of theatre. Theatre is one of the forms of communication and perception through which society reproduces itself as society. Theatre is a 'fold' in society; society folds and unfolds itself through every singular theatrical performance, and it is in this regard that the case studies in this book can claim to say something about society by describing how immersive theatre practices are examples of how society is giving form to itself. The following investigation of the dramaturgies of these practices aligns its observations with two central

concepts from contemporary social and cultural theory that we will introduce: mediatisation and singularisation.

Mediatisation

Mediatisation in the broad sense of the word is the cultural process through which ‘the media’, in plural and including both mass media and interactive media, emerges as an important institution in society, and simultaneously becomes an integrated part of nearly every other cultural sphere⁵; from the big commons such as politics, economy and religion, to the most trivial everyday activities and intimate social relations – shopping, training, coordinating, dating etc. In a narrower sense, mediatisation is the adaptation of social memory and communication to the changes in the general media matrix. The media matrix is the unified forms of communication available for a society at a given time. When new crucial media forms are introduced, the function of social memory and communication changes to accommodate to the new media matrix. Immersive theatre is in this sense a new form of mediation of society in and to society.

The introduction of the Greek alphabet enabled a transition from a primarily oral society to a society where scripture allowed storing memory and communication, and this heavily influenced the way society reflected upon itself. The Greek theatre, from which we conventionally trace Western histories of the theatre, is but one of the rings that spread from this ancient revolution of the media matrix. The reproduction and circulation of text made possible by the printing press invented in the 15th century made it possible to constitute new forms of administration and new national and international publics, and was thus a pivotal precondition for the development of society through reforms and revolutions into what we today describe as Modernity. Modern theatre took the form of more and more institutionalised and commercialised reproductions of a text-based repertoire that not only convened, entertained, and educated their audiences, but also provided forms to the imagination of common personal and social situations and transformations. The electronic mass media of the 20th century, i.e. radio and television, provided both an opportunity and a challenge to the status and function that theatre had established during the 19th century. Theatre migrated into studios and living rooms through electromagnetic waves and radio and picture tubes, and became radio drama, movies, and TV shows, leaving the ‘traditional’ theatre makers to either build on the synergies with mass media or offer alternatives to the convenience of the televised dramas.

Immersive theatre can be seen as one such alternative, but it emerges on the background of the latest revolution in our media matrix, which commenced around the 1990s, when digitalised communication using the simple binary (0/1) alphabet and the development of computers enabled global networks and advanced algorithms to handle communication of all that may be represented digitally. The new media matrix has changed the conditions of social communication and put pressure on all the ‘old’ media to adapt. The current digital network-based media matrix