

Shaping the Fictional Reality

In environments fabricated to deliver specific experiences, tactically addressing all of the senses is integral to forming that poignant memory in each viewer. Audiences should be treated as Empfinders, or sensing beings. For a show, installation, attraction, or scene to deliver dramatic and striking imagery the designers must not rely solely on visual and verbal elements of storytelling such as in traditional theater and cinema. Smell, touch, sight, taste, sound, and above all illusion can be composed for a true multi-sensory immersive experience.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French philosopher of phenomenology, succinctly wrote in his Phenomenology of Perception: “sensation as presented to us by experience is one of our surfaces of contact with being. (230)” It reaffirms our consciousness, and we internalize sensory experience as truth. Merleau-Ponty also suggested “the constancy hypothesis” is outdated for suggesting that each sensory organ interprets one type of stimulation (237). Perceptive sensory organs work in tandem to conjure experience. Johann Gottfried von Herder was a German philosopher before Merleau-Ponty’s time, who said “Man is a perpetual sensorium commune, who is sometimes affected from one side, sometimes from the other” (244). Each sense has its own world, an arena of vibrations and communication from the surrounding world. Barriers between the senses, however, are permeable and bleed into one another. Each sensation is in some way spacial by the information it reveals to us. Merleau-Ponty wrote, “the senses are distinct and yet indiscernible...the senses communicate in perception just as the two eyes collaborate in vision” (243). One is a sensorium with many working parts-- merely a sum of tissues, and sensory or functional organs, but as Merleau-Ponty describes, “a synergetic system of which all of the functions are taken up and tied together with the general movement of being

in the world” (257). There is a unity between all of our senses-- it becomes one sense, to live and have memory.

Memory and sense are intrinsically linked-- or one in the same. Anamnesis is an evocation of one's past by a present situation that recalls a similarity of sensory input or mental activity. The hum of an old television set long since outdated, a playground skip-rope rhyme, or the timbre of a voice unexpectedly similar to someone not seen in years... One's own mind and memory very well may be a sense in it of itself. The souvenirs brought home at the end of a vacation are memory objects that people will actively put into their collection in order to easily access those memories at a later date. Sonic Experience: a Guide to Everyday Sounds has a passage on this phenomenon which adds, “the more distant and unexpected the reference, the more emotion may overwhelm the listener. The effect is not based on the sound or on its meaning. It is rather the listener who gives it an anamnestic value” (21). One's perception appears within the perspective of their individual history. So, when it comes to the arts and entertainment, the sensory engagement involved in the experience or participation of the audience is going to create stronger triggers of memory and an overall more impactful attraction.

Synesthesia is a fascinating topic study as an example of the permeable barriers between the senses. There can be as many variations of synesthesia as there are sensory input combinations. “Lexical-gustatory” synesthetes, as an example, evoke different kinds of tastes when presented with certain words or sounds, and associations between the senses are constrained by tastes that the synesthetic empfinder has experienced in their life-- it's linked to memory. Average individuals also have synesthetic experiences to some degree, as “sounds modify consecutive images of colors: A more intense sound intensifies the colors, the interruption of the sounds makes them vacillate, and a low sound renders blue darker or deeper

(257)". So, too, do the sensory impaired such as blind or deaf persons experience varying kinds of synaesthesia. "When I say that I see a sound," says Merleau-Ponty, not otherwise noted to have synesthesia, "I mean that I echo the vibration of the sound with my entire sensory being, and in particular that sector of myself that is capable of seeing colors (243)". Rather than each sense being distinctly separate, they often overlap and can blend together as they exist in our minds.

With memory triggers in fabricated environments such as set design one can direct the emotional energy of an audience, particularly through the use of archetype and symbolism. Disneyland does this particularly well, the company mission essentially being "storytelling" playing well to this. Everything from color palette to sights, sounds, and characters are very carefully considered from beginning to end, and for this focus Disney Resorts stand out amongst most other theme parks. Another effective way to create experiences is to forego the expected archetype and create something bafflingly new-- which is what makes immersive art pieces at festivals such as Burning Man so photogenic and memorable, when many can say they "have never seen something like it before"! Creative immersive and participatory experiences are gaining traction in the world of theater, too. A company called Punchdrunk puts on an immersive theater performance called Sleep No More in New York-- they take set design to a new level of audience immersion in their unique production of Hamlet. Audiences are split up and free to wander between immaculately decorated rooms, seemingly stumbling upon and eavesdropping on scenes as the story unfolds-- and there is the feeling of playing a character when everyone along with yourself is wearing a mask. It's very much role playing. With roots in theater, perhaps, and moving into the now dated popularity of tabletop gaming such as Dungeons & Dragons where one creates and becomes a fictional character, to Live-Action-Role-Playing and Renaissance Fairs that some people get shockingly invested in-- it

seems that escapism is a theme that draws the interests of many people. Today, that outlet is markedly found in video games. Story based RPGs (Role Playing Games) are increasingly popular, with titles that draw in millions upon millions of revenue and also arguably stand alone as literary works and series (Final Fantasy, Mass Effect, Bioshock, Gears of War, Fallout, Red Dead Redemption, Elder Scrolls, hundreds of more titles put out in the last few decades).

Putting a video game story experience into corporeal environments, such as Escape The Room, an interactive game now with locations in many major cities, is a prime area for development that has not yet been fully explored. In theme parks such as Disneyland, to immersive theater and Role Playing Games, you have the opportunity to escape the life you currently lead for a time in order to escape into one that is foreign and exciting. Keeping with the current technological trend, Virtual Reality also plays a part in the evolution of this kind of new entertainment where “you” are the star. A “Virtual Reality Theme Park” called The Void is opening, soon, using environmental props to further immerse the player such as ledges to physically jump off while wearing the headgear and details such as atmospheric mist while standing near, say, a waterfall in the game world. Especially with incredible investment going into the development of Virtual and also Augmented reality, such as the Oculus Rift, Microsoft Hololens, Google Glass and Google Cardboard, the union of virtual and physical spaces and architectures is fast approaching.

Perception and architecture overlap in phenomenology. Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Albert S. Bregman and others all have produced writings on the role of architecture shaping sound experience and, simultaneously, sound informing our perception of the architecture. Acoustic and other sensory arenas are directly affected by the presence or absence of physical structures. We all can echolocate to an extent in this way. Our senses work in response to our surrounding environment, communicating the characteristics of the local space to build a

sensory understanding of the world around us. Acoustic ecologist and composer R. Murray Schafer poetically describes in The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World, "hearing is a way of touching at a distance". Sensory dimension is vast beyond the physical boundaries of an architecture. The reverberation of sound within architecture have a distance multiplier depending on the surrounding structure, giving a richness to sensory information about the space. An auditory illusion of space can be accomplished by measuring that reverberation time. Recording the actions of a sound within a space, like a balloon popping, is the first step in creating an Impulse Response. When the vibrations of the sound decay beyond audible levels, that is the limit. This information can be used as a filter for other sounds, so you can take any one recording and apply an impulse response to give the illusion that you are, for example, in the echoing passageways of a cathedral. There are many creative mathematical techniques such as Fourier Analysis, which analyzes the waveforms of recorded sound to create a usable algorithm, and other aural rendering techniques currently in use to aurally accompany virtual reality worlds. Max Mathew's "The Ear and How it Works" and "The Auditory Brain" concerns the illusion of space we can create with slight echo delays, and turning a mono sound file to faux stereo. This would have great application in the world of theater, film, and video game experiences. In the world of entertainment, audiences already have an impressive suspension of disbelief for the sake of their own enjoyment. Mimicking more open space by having control of reverb, or generally being mindful of "head related transfer processes" would give a more realistic simulation of human perceptions of sound. We are bound to the limits of our body structure, so techniques such as using microphones in model ears for recording are quite clever. In order to trick the ear, we must be aware of how to manipulate the gaps of information filled in by the brain. We must become auditory illusionists!

Cezanne said that a painting contained, in itself, even the odor of the landscape-- imagery so convincing that it triggers in the mind a scent that we imagine fits the very scene depicted on canvas. The senses, of course, can be fooled. Illusion is a gripping kind of entertainment, because it challenges the communication our senses relay, our beliefs, and even our understanding of physics. Trickery is mentally engaging, and we can see from the popularity past of magicians, artists, and fantastic theatrical displays that creating a sense of the unreal fantasy and otherworldliness prompts and sustains interest and suspension of disbelief. Some illusions rely on testing the limits of the mind, such as some optical and auditory illusions. Others are carefully crafted mimics. I Hate Perfume is the name of perfumier and olfactory visionary Christopher Brosius' personal line of fragrances. None of them smell like typical perfumes, but instead are vials of memory scents, encapsulated and bottled. He conjures the distinct smells of old library books, wet autumn leaves, a particular memory of a trip to the beach in 1966, just a few examples. His unorthodox scents are just that-- take for example a scent he calls CB Beast:

"Roast Beef is a gorgeous mouth-watering smell: rich, savory with all the gravy and roast vegetables you can imagine. I was elated when this accord was finished because it was perfect and it was very very hard to do. However, I quickly realized that I considered it to be virtually unwearable. Who wanted to smell like Sunday lunch...? ... At first whiff it definitely smells very meaty and rather like an excellently seasoned beef consommé. But as it warms on the skin, it loses that literal impression and quickly becomes deep, rich, smoky, spicy, indefinable and frankly delicious. It does not smell like "perfume" but it does smell GOOD."

An extremely curious ability, and there is untapped potential in creating experiential scents to be used to tell stories. Another oddity I've stumbled across concerning sensory trickery concerns

taste. Lick Me I'm Delicious is a curious company run by self-proclaimed "food geek" chefs. I bring them up because of a wonderfully odd device they've fabricated that pumps mists of flavor into the air so that one may goûté a certain flavor without actively consuming anything. It exists as an interesting insight into the possibilities of incorporating "taste" as a sense without dealing with food preparation and avoids many complications that come with serving food to others. These inventions and similar ideas are present in some attractions and theme parks-- again recalling the accomplishments of Disneyland Parks, who have been incorporating illusionary scent and touch for many years in attractions like "Soarin' Over California", "Alien Encounter: Extra Terrestrial" now "Stitch's Great Escape", and also "Honey I Shrunk the Audience", by using not only hydraulics to put movement into guest seating and rooms that can shake like earthquakes, but also cleverly pumping harmless air towards people in particular patterns to make one feel breathed on, run across by rodents below, and also to smell sweet oranges or salty sea breezes. These illusions in addition to analog and digital effects, smoke and mirrors, surround sound speakers, lighting, set, costume, character, are all facets of possibility in the realm of what might make a fictional reality. Even within reasonable means of production it is possible to produce a more fully sensory immersive experience; be it for the possibilities in installation art, immersive or even passive theater, film and video games, theme parks, or virtual and augmented reality. Olafur Eliasson made a sun, Berndnaut Smilde a cloud. A few horror-enthusiast parks go all out for Halloween and create elaborate scenes in jump-scare mazes, Les Enfants Terribles in London created an immersive theater experience for Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Banksy's Dismaland was an artistic collaboration of huge critical commentary artworks. There are rain rooms, labyrinths, and infinite galaxy rooms made of mirrors and blinking LEDs. Even hacker-art and especially burner-art is all about immersion, interaction, and good fun-- and it doesn't have to take much.

Last night I participated in a “spontaneous” caravan of immersive, participatory, and interactive experiences in the back of box trucks. It’s a small community of artists and fun-lovers, for now, and growing. These imaginative spaces built into moving vehicles are produced within a day, conceptualized within a few weeks, and the location of the event can be anywhere we choose. We send invitations revealing our next “secret” location via a small email list or word of mouth, and hope that curious strangers will wander in and discover a seriously sensational event taking place--for them. Everything that gets put together is essentially what we have readily available for decoration and activities. In other words, it’s usually what we have in the basement. However, because we are a community of artists, architects, programmers, and visionaries (which is anyone out there willing to say, “hey, I have an idea, too!”), something fantastically fun is almost sure to come about with the materials available. Joe Carter, a show and ride engineer, wrote this advice on going for simple creative solutions:

“Multifaceted, complex, and tricky creations may impress peers, but when the rubber hits the road, it’s the simple solutions that are elegant. Simplicity is especially appreciated as a project nears completion because it is cost-effective in materials, time, and labor. Simple designs in most fields are the most dramatic and memorable. Even complex electronic and software systems are at their best when their user interface-- the part the audience sees-- is simple and easy to access.”

Immersion is entertainment, is escapism, is learning empathy, training your brain for improvisation, acting, playing, and how to make decisions. Escape the Room makes puzzles to challenge clever resourcefulness, more popular video games involve tasking the player with occasionally difficult moral decisions, deciding left or right, or if to take that strategy. As much as it is or can be Choose-Your-Own-Adventure brought to life, immersive experiences can also

truly be beneficial to train people in skills (US Army, Cooking Mama, Surgical Simulation, Astronaut Training) and furthermore compassion through learning to empathize and see themselves within many situations and in the shoes of “others”. Dialogue In The Dark is a “dialog social enterprise” museum in Israel that leads small groups of people in a series of rooms that are pitch black, but produced to give visitors an understanding of what it is like to perceive as a blind person, lead by blind guides through the space. One room smells like earth, the floor is soft and squishing beneath your feet. The air is humid, and chilled. The next room simulates a city, there is concrete, and traffic noise, it’s busy and tighter and-- you bump into a car. The matrix of possibilities here is vast and unfathomable, and the future seems that it may be ripe with spacial storytelling and worldbuilding as themes of art, literature, and entertainment are pursued in many realms and on many platforms.