

Prof. Robin Nelson

CREW's *Terra Nova*: experiencing modes of immersion in actual-virtual space (*Terra Nova* presented by CREW, 09 August, Kaai 16, Hasselt, Belgium as part of the *Theater op de Markt* Festival 09-12 August, 2012).¹

Introduction: CREW's project

At the core of CREW's current performance project is the experience of immersive dislocation by means of virtual reality head-mounted display (HMD) sets, Omni-Directional Video (ODV) and earphones.² Like much contemporary performance practice, CREW typically offers an active experience in place of the alleged passive reception in the serried rows of building-based theatre auditorium seating. So much is 'experience' the requirement of contemporary performance, that a decade ago I coined the term 'experienter' to replace the inadequate 'spectator' or 'audience'.³ However not all experiences offered by contemporary theatre are of the same kind and, even amongst those in which new media technologies are deployed, there are further important distinctions to be made between complete immersion in a virtual world and 'both-and' actual-virtual hybrids. In a piece by CREW, participants not only move through actual space they simultaneously become 'immersants' in virtual space. In the term coined by Benford and Giannachi marking a distinction from full virtual reality immersions, 'both-and' Mixed Reality Performances afford:

the possibility of creating such hybrid performative and participatory environments in which real and physical data appear, but not so much integrated into one another but rather juxtaposed on top of or next to each other (2011: 5).

The specificity of the experience depends upon the particularity and modality of the actual-virtual mix in any given piece. A key purpose of the account of an experience of *Terra Nova* to follow is to bring out some of the specific complexity of juxtaposition and layering involved. In expounding their concept of 'trajectories' through an experience in Mixed Reality Performances, Benford and Giannachi, 'consider an experience to be a complex mixture of space, time, interfaces and performance roles that are connected to a sophisticated structure using computing technologies' (2011: 14). As we shall see, such a formulation is appropriate to *Terra Nova*.

Given the hi-tech specification of the HMD/ODV kit, CREW pieces have hitherto been restricted to short individual immersions because few headsets were available. Sometimes the overall event involved post-immersion observation of others undergoing the experience, and on occasion an exchange ('head-swap') of environment of two immersants in different actual locations was effected, as in *Double U* (2009). Until *Terra Nova*, however, a larger-scale theatre multiple immersant, but hybrid, theatre performance has not been attempted by CREW.⁴

Terra Nova draws loosely on the experience of R.F. Scott and the ultimately disastrous voyage to the Antarctic in 1911 as he aimed to be the first person to reach the South Pole. In a poetic text by Peter Verhelst, Scott's imaginary interior monologue, spoken by an actor in an intimate space, explores aspects of the testing experience of Scott and his team as they perish on their return having been beaten

to the pole by just one month.⁵ The metaphor of *Terra Nova* extends, however, beyond the hallucinatory mind-set generated by this specific extreme experience into realms of the augmented imaginary afforded by the contemporary virtual reality dimension of the theatre experience. Each of the fifty-five 'experiencers' involved in the overall event undergoes an immersion by way of ODV/HMD in the course of the event.

The structure of *Terra Nova*

Formally, *Terra Nova* is in five sections each with five groups of eleven experiencers. Each group literally has a different experience in respect of the sequencing of the sections and the particular immersion it undergoes. CREW now has eleven headsets and hinged, door-like, but tilting, boards which allow the experiencer's sensorium, once in virtual space, to be additionally dislocated in actual space. The 'doors' tilt back through ninety degrees to become 'beds'. In some sections of *Terra Nova* immersants are also propelled around the actual space on office chairs such as to create an interesting frisson between the experience of actually moving whilst also hurtling down a virtual corridor or tunnel.

At the specific event attended, my partner and I were in different groups but both our groups, along with one other, first experienced the spoken Scott narrative over two sections each lasting some fifteen to twenty minutes. In a darkened studio lit only by light-reflecting matting under our seats, we sat in a horseshoe with an actor at its open end, also lit largely from below but with an additional tightly focused spot. Indeed the light-absorbing carpet a couple of metres square on which the actor performed was 'mown' intermittently with a fluorescent lighting bar by a supporting actor/technician in order to top up the light level. The supporter, fully in view alongside the main actor, also manipulated the sound level and sound effects since the sonic environment of the entire event was transmitted through earphones. Thus wind noise, electronic sound effects and the actual sound from the neighbouring studio where other groups were undergoing immersion was subtly mixed throughout.

The opening lines of Verhelst's text set up the event on several levels:

Because we don't know where our voyage will take us [...]
 Because we are heading for a blind spot on the map of the world [...]
 Because we don't know if we will return [...] or in what state we
 will return [...] or if we'll have changed even more than the rest of
 the world, or if anyone will still know us.
 To embark on our voyage we need immutable laws – the law of
 slowness, the law of force that changes motion, the law of action
 and reaction.
 We have a task.⁶

These words are patently applicable to the Scott context but they are also very pertinent to the emotional state of the experiencers in the warehouse spaces of Kaai 16. We have arrived at a studio by the canal on the edge of Hasselt; we know that we are going to be immersed in virtual reality at some point, but we don't know when [...] or how we will feel. It's a bit scary and the intimacy constructed through the

headphones of the actor's low-key delivery is at once reassuring and broadly interrogative as he evocatively sketches epic journeys of all kinds through the ages:

The most important law is: nothing goes to waste. Everything that dies becomes a building block for something new. That is our belief as we stand on the deck of our ship, the Terra Nova, inhaling the age-old atoms of our predecessors. Christopher Columbus [...] And the atoms of Ferdinand Magellan. And those of David Livingstone, and Alexander the Great [...]

With each breath we take something flares up inside us. The atoms of Vasco de Gama, Andrew Huxley, Walter Rudolf Hess, Vilayanur Ramachandran [...]

Up on the deck of the Terra Nova we do not feel we are leaving behind our homeland, but life as we always knew it. What is that cloudy stain on the X-ray? What does the law of incomprehensible matter entail? Is it possible to indicate a point in our brain where the formula of the universe is engraved?

After some twenty minutes, the studio door is slid open and a figure in a brown coat and boots struts in and authoritatively signals that one of the groups - but only one - should follow her. It is neither mine nor my partner's group. Our wait to be called is to be longer allowing our anticipation and apprehension to build. The door slides closed echoing noisily (through our headphones). The green, light-absorbing carpet is re-infused and the actor continues. Some of the text relates to the physical experience of Scott and his team:

What is freezing cold? You trudge across an endless white plain, you hear creaking underfoot, and you shoot right through your own skull into the deep. That is freezing cold.

Other aspects deal with their hallucinations under extreme conditions as they trudge into the void. But many sections resonate on several levels and speak directly into our ears, interpellated as an inclusive 'we', about our ambitions, hopes and fears:

We who want, we who want everything and have everything,
 who want to be first, who thought we would be first in the
 unknown, the never-seen, the unnameable, we who dream of
 treading on virgin ground, we who love to dream,
 who think our promise will be fulfilled, firm in our belief,
 who are unstinting, who will not be contradicted,
 no doubts, not the least hesitation, we who admit doubt with a
 smile, we who laugh at the very idea, we who hold the idea like a
 glass in our hand, close the hand to a fist,
 we who look you in the eye, clenching the fist so the glass
 splinters fly, we who keep looking you in the eye,
 the bleeding fist, you looking back, bleeding back, we who watch
 you in your sleep, we the givers of hope, we who would ever, we

of the newest sin, the newest poison, we of the stillness, the
 great, white, unsparing, unfathomable,
 ultimate stillness, we who whistle in the stillness like crystal glasses,
 who whistle at the moon till there's no moon or sun left, and no
 stars, just us, till there's no shadow anymore, no footprint, no puff
 of breath, no echo,
 we who lose our way in your head, in our head,
 no traces left, no provisions left – the more we search, the more
 lost we seem – until suddenly, arms outstretched, blinded by the
 snow,
 open-handed, palm on your cheek, we come to a standstill, we
 who stand eye to eye with you, you with us, our head in your
 head,
 you putting an arm on our shoulder, we nudging our shoulder
 into your armpit, you leaning on us,
 we throwing you over our shoulder – or was it a leap? – you
 dragging us down with you as you fell – or did you jump? – you
 pulling us upright, hauling us up the mountain,
 a lump of snow and meat, up the mountainside.
 From the top of the mountain we roll down the other side and up
 another one.
 And down again.

I cite the text at some length partly to convey its intrinsic poetic merit in conveying the Antarctic experience but more to give a sense of the atmosphere building up through an empathy with Scott invited by the soft, low-key but affective delivery of the actor in a space visually minimal but audibly rich. It might be regarded as setting the scene of a traditional dramatic narrative structure generating a distinctive atmosphere of risk and anticipation of what will happen to us in our actual-virtual journey through *Terra Nova*.

But the specific narrative context is tempered with an historical and philosophical contemplation of bigger issues about the point of ambition and those drivers in our lives which inexorably impel us but which may, in the fullness of things, bear little significance, disappointment even. And yet, in the actual space, we are full of excitement and anticipation. In short it is already a hybrid actual-virtual experience. We are immersed in our imaginations, connected with the other members of the, as yet, collective theatre audience but isolated, even from our neighbouring group members, by our earphones. The sounds and words are delivered to all but, in their intimacy and allusiveness, they are delivered to each of us alone. We are simultaneously afforded both a collective and an individual experience. We are in hybrid space and time: actually together in a theatre space but also alone in a digitally constructed and conducted soundscape; together in Hasselt time but imaginatively in another time and space.

The studio door slides back a second time and my partner's group is summoned by the great controller to follow her into the next space. But my group is not abandoned: we, too, are called forth to move into the neighbouring studio where I am able to witness my partner being lined up with her colleagues against one of a row of eleven, door-shaped, boards - upright at this point, and holding the harness of the

ODV/HMD kit. Each immersant is assisted into the straps of the harness of the rucksack which holds the computer equipment. As they raise their arms to engage the harnesses, an image of multiple crucifixions, briefly materialises. Each wears a pair of spectacles the 'lens' of which are effectively miniature projection screens. Because a complete black-out surround is needed, flaps of cloth are fixed tightly around the spectacles. The earphones - temporarily removed to allow the mask fitting - are finally put on again to restore the sound-track accompanying the immersive video. Each immersant is assisted into a dark brown cotton coat, similar to those worn by the great controller and her assistants. From the outside, the overall effect is vaguely military, perhaps First World War, as if all might be in uniform wearing gas masks. But there is no specificity beyond the collective image and no apparent relation between any characterisation by costume and the on-screen visual imagery.

As the immersion of my partner's group (C) begins, my Group (D) sit on benches along the side of the large warehouse space to watch the immersants being led and propelled through the actual space whilst seeing a 2-D projection on a large screen at the end of the space of what the members of Group B are experiencing more vividly in 3-D through their HMD/ODV headsets.

Group C immersion experience⁷

As noted, the experience of each of the five groups and of each individual within each group is different. It is not possible to relate all perspectives but the account of my own experience generally related in this article is augmented at this point by my partner's insider account of approaching her HMD/OMV immersion experience and thus the 'I' of the subject shifts temporarily:

The group files into the darkened space and each member is silently assigned to an assistant by the fearsome controller. I notice an audience seated on benches and feel as if I am being prepared for something unknowable that my partner and the others must witness. I am strapped into the harness attached to the upright board by my assistant. I notice the white rose and other small oddments in the pockets of his brown overall. He is young and helpful and this goes some way to ease the sensation of crucifixion which I feel as my arms are stretched across the board to accommodate the harness and the flaps of cloth are wrapped over my eyes. I sense the board moving backwards and am afraid to let my head fall backwards until the assistant gently places my head on the rotating board. I try to relax into the experience.

I find myself staring into a small unadorned and whitewashed church with a few simple chairs placed on a stone floor. The sparse congregation is dressed in black and the scene is reminiscent of a peasant Sicilian post-war community. A priest-like figure looms up to obscure the congregation, his face filling the ODV screen and speaking directly to me in enigmatic phrases, repeated down left, in French, by another priest: "we have waited for you [...] we knew you would come [...]". It begins to feel as if they are officiating at my funeral. This dawning realisation is disturbed by the sudden appearance of a more youthful figure in black charging down the aisle with energy and intent. I realise that he carries a gun; the point blank shot is fired just as I realise I am

his intended target. This potentially terrifying realisation seemed to leave me calm, as if I had had an opportunity to experience safely something beyond death, or at least to rehearse a sensation that might coincide with the final moments of conscious experience.

Group D immersion experience

At the end of Group C's immersion, office chairs on wheels remain scattered through the space and the members of Group D are invited to occupy them. Headsets and overalls are brought to them and they are prepared for their turn at HMD/ODV immersion. It begins with images of two or three rats - very large white rats - in a white space. There are rat screeching sounds in my ears. At one point one of the rats walks directly towards me, close up and uncomfortable. Suddenly I am hurtling through a white space down a wide corridor. It looks like the space inhabited by the rats. I can't be sure. I am moving physically (propelled on the chair) and virtually at the same time. It's a dislocating experience. There is a strange sense of rapid shifting between one sensual mode and another as my eyes struggle rapidly to scan the virtual space for rats as my body is kinaesthetically disposed to resist the forward propulsion. I seem to be approaching a room at the end of the corridor. Momentarily it occurs to me that the rats will be in the room at the end and I will have no means of escape. My body flexes in tension. I come to rest and am led (I think) by my assistant from the chair to the reclining bed device.

Relieved to have escaped the rats, I am physically tilted backwards but virtually set before a table.⁸ My arm seems to be physically lifted and the forearm dropped on to the table. I am unsure if this is physically happening or a virtual construction. I see a hand - my hand? - and a prosthetic hand and forearm. I see a white box placed over my forearm on the table and a white rat is introduced into one end of it. I feel actual sensations as if the rat is sniffing around and walking across my physical hand. I struggle to remind myself that these sensations, though real enough, are mechanically contrived with sprays and brushes and do not signify the presence of a rat nibbling my hand. I am uncertain. A man in a white coat - a psychiatrist? - approaches. He wears wire-framed spectacles and hands behind his back, steps forward to bring his face very close to mine. He confides in me that we have shared an interesting journey but that he has now zipped up the sleeping-bags of the others. I am in the tent with Scott and realise oblivion is also my fate. The door-bed slowly tips back upright and I am returned, with some relief, to the actual space of the performance.

Benford and Giannachi note that:

participants [in mixed reality performances] remain unsure as to what is real and what is performed. This, and the uncertainty it raises, constitutes one of the mechanism by which space can be experienced as uncanny (2011: 45-46).

Although Blast Theory's work, of which they largely speak, is very different from CREW's *Terra Nova*, disjunction and spatial uncertainty were certainly aspects of my experience. Indeed, the misperceptions of what had actually happened to my body in the account above ultimately testify to the effectiveness of the disjunction and the

specificity of a distinctive experiential mode, blurring my sense-perception of actual and virtual space.

In the final section of *Terra Nova* as sequentially experienced in time, the members of Group E are technologically immersed. Once they are kitted up, their door-beds are tipped backwards and pushed close together to make a large rectangular block which is moved physically on wheels through the space, now blue-lit, in what appears from the outside as an effective, if lumbering, choreography. The single block is divided into two and manoeuvred by the assistants around the space until the door-beds are finally returned to the upright position in a square in the middle of the space and the immersants set to walk freely, gently guided away from collisions by their assistants.

It is possible for the outside observers to watch what they are going through on the small screens mounted on the front and back of the harnesses. Beckoned to follow the great controller (now in a white coat on-screen), they are walking through a series of indistinct, but tunnel-like, interior spaces. A group of people ahead is squatting on small stools (or stones, or mushrooms) and the immersant is required to step deftly through them. Up ahead a man, naked to the waist, can be discerned apparently wielding an axe. As the immersant gets nearer, the man seems to be breaking up large blocks of ice with an axe. The immersant needs to pass him and proceed into what looks like a Turkish bath ahead, with a number of figures swathed in towels. At the last moment, the direction veers left into underground, industrial tunnels. Ahead white-clad figures carrying HMD/ODV kit on their backs and linked by a rope are discernible trudging through a snow-scape. A stick is placed in the left hand of the immersant who is thereby invited to join the chain and fall into the collective rhythm as together they walk slowly towards the whiteout of oblivion, accompanied by the soft sound of Mahler's Ninth Symphony.

As an outsider, I was drawn to walk with them, literally in the space and metaphorically in respect of the overall theatrical experience.

Intimacy, impact and modes of experience

In *Terra Nova*, CREW have demonstrably developed their project of immersive dislocations into a truly theatrical structure. Though, as noted, each of the five groups of experiencers enters the cycle at a different point, for my group the event of *Terra Nova* involved a relatively traditional dramatic structure. The scene was set by way of a low-key, imaginative, narrative immersion (exposition) drawing me into the experience of Scott at the Antarctic (obstacles) towards loss of the means to sustain life (crisis) and a recognition of impending and inevitable death (the *anagnorisis* of Aristotelian tragedy). This is, however, just one time-frame, 'plot time, the temporal structure of the narration of the story' of the five distinct layers proposed by Benford and Giannchi in mixed reality performances. The others are: story time, schedule time, interaction time and perceived time (see 2011:71 and 96). The story time, the temporal structure of the underlying story world, comprising the journey of Scott and his team, is most pressing in Sections 1 and 2, and at the end of Section 5 of *Terra Nova* (as experienced in this sequence). Schedule time, the time at which the narration is made available, features in the five section structure and the movement between them. Interaction time, defined as, 'the times at which a participant chooses

or is able to interact' is less relevant to *Terra Nova* than many of Blast Theory's pieces since, other than choosing to withdraw from the HMD/ODV immersion, there was little choice of when and where to interact since engagement is heavily directed by the great controller. Perceived time, however, is itself multi-layered in *Terra Nova* since, besides the actual duration of the overall piece (c. 90 minutes), the individual segments varied in perceptual duration. Most marked overall, perhaps, was a sense of timelessness, of temporal oblivion, an effect, no doubt, of 'multiple time-scales that rub up against one another' (Benford and Giannachi: 95). The journey through and beyond time involved several kinds of immersion and it is illuminating briefly to consider how each was experienced and how the various kinds of immersion function in relation to each other and to the overall narrative trajectory.

It must be stressed, however, that there is no singular, universal experience of *Terra Nova*. Other members of Group D on the occasion of my experience will have brought a different horizon of expectations and will have experienced the event otherwise. Each individual within each group in any case has an individual personal encounter with the event. Part of the point of *Terra Nova* is to lead experiencers to question whether they really see or feel what they think they see or feel. Indeed, the noted disposition of contemporary theatre to afford experiences rather than meanings derives in part from the recognition of plurality in the backgrounds and the sense of self-identity amongst those who attend a performance event. We might collectively share a sense of disjunction, but the specificity of that dislocation is singular to each.

Although in digital culture there is a tendency to afford aspects whereby individuals might shape their own experiences within a pre-constructed form, some commentators on the use of new media in live performance regret what they see as a loss of intimacy in the direct relation between actor and audience live in the here and now.⁹ Indeed, a trend in 'one-to-one' direct encounter performances has recently emerged, perhaps in reaction to the alleged rarity in digital culture of direct face-to-face interaction.¹⁰ Though, since I adhere to the view that all presentations are mediated, I do not subscribe to the negative view, I recognise the difference marked by Auslander's use of the term 'mediatized' (1999: 03) to denote live events which embrace digital technologies. In respect of the encounter, however, Bruce Barton has proposed that, 'mediatization alters the very *nature* of intimacy' suggesting that multi- and cross-modal sensory perception 'confounds perceptual expectation and complicates habitual cognitive patterns of experience'.¹¹ In *Terra Nova*, the dislocations of the mediatized immersive experience sit interestingly in tension with the more familiar narrative experience (as I have constructed it above). I propose in what follows to unpack some different senses of intimacy, immersion and narrative, using my own specific experience of *Terra Nova* as a prompt to some more general reflections.

Terra Nova's media technological immersion in virtual reality has been outlined in the account above but it remains to address what it adds to a narrative theatre experience and what it affords by way of intimacies. Prager makes a helpful distinction between 'intimate relationships' and 'intimate interactions' (1995:19), the former enduring through time and the latter engaged in the moment. In *Terra Nova* the first level of immersion and intimacy is achieved in the moment, as noted, simply through a compelling narrative engaged by the power of poetry with the spoken word

delivered in a personal address through earphones. As in good traditional storytelling, experiencers are first effectively drawn into the imaginative world of a story. An intimacy is constructed both between individual experiencer and narrator and between individual experiencer and the group in the manner of the 'shared experience' sometimes said to distinguish the relation between audience and performance in live theatre.

The use of mediatized sound in *Terra Nova*, by way of earphones used to convey the sonic environment, militates to some extent against a close intimacy with one's neighbours, though an awareness of others alongside you in the collective audience remains. You are, after all, assigned to one of five groups. However, the earphones extend the sense of personal intimacy with the narrator: the augmented sound draws you not just into Scott's Antarctic but into the world of the narrator's imagination. At this stage, perhaps the strongest sense of intimacy - amounting to a kind of immersion - is with the performer of the narrative and, though it is in the moment, it begins to build what might be a more durable relationship in Prager's terms. Anchored in realist detail but open also to flights of fancy, such immersion is in some sense both virtual and actual and, as with solo theatre performances, it might have been sufficient in itself as a theatrical event. But there was another level of narrative pulsing with a strong sense of expectation and apprehension about how I was to figure in the event through the anticipated immersion in a virtual dimension.

The arc of this second level of narrative rose progressively as we literally and metaphorically journeyed through the various stages of the event and the context broadened allusively. There was a particular sense of intimacy for me in observing Group C's experience of being shot and enclosed in a coffin as I empathetically shared the encounter with my partner who no doubt had an even more intense engagement with events in the 'Sicilian' church. This intimate encounter set up an apparently more direct (though virtual) and even more visceral experience with the rats in Group D's immersion, culminating in a recognition that I was inevitably going to die/ had died, the zip on my sleeping-bag being pulled shut. The virtual reality immersion undoubtedly adds a new level to the notion of intimate encounter, extending the sensorium beyond regular perceptions of the world. The mix of actual and virtual travel, for example, affords a new kind of experience, richer than that of the imagination. Though we speak of 'flights of fancy', it is not quite the same as hurtling physically through actual space and also in a virtual environment.

That the experience is simultaneously both actual and virtual may hold the key to its richness. There may be moments in which experiencers go beyond the 'willing suspension of disbelief' actually to believe they are inhabiting another dimension, but it is the 'both-and' experience of the actual-virtual that is perhaps most effective in combining the sense of intimacy in the moment with something more like an intimate relationship. If my sensorium had responded entirely as if I were locked in a room with giant rats, I should have been completely terrified - by the claustrophobia itself, let alone the rats. The fact that I endured it, even whilst experiencing its discomforts and dislocations, suggests that a trace of actuality awareness remains through the virtual experience. It may be that actuality consciousness flickers in and out. In walking towards terrifying virtual prospects, you can, if necessary, remind yourself that your feet remain on the ground in actual space.

There is another mode of experience marginally apparent during - but more so in reflection upon - the experience, and achieved by means of aesthetic artistry. During the experience I became semi-aware of a number of visual and sonic resonances through the different levels of the *Terra Nova* experience which did not close down narrative options, as it typically does in a realist film, but afforded a patterning redolent of more experimental cinema. The creaks of breaking ice, for example, were imaginatively (and at times literally on the soundtrack) heard in the narrative of Scott's hindered progress, continued through the scrapes and clunks as objects and doors were moved in adjacent studios and resonated with the half-naked man breaking ice with an axe. This open structuring (of which narrative form is a part) contributes strongly to my overall sense of the piece in hindsight, a sense, that is, of my enduring relationship with *Terra Nova* as distinct from my experience of it in the moment. My rough and ready measure of a good film is the length of time it stays with me, often in respect of strong visual images. Though I recall some strong visuals, *Terra Nova* stays with me rather as a unique overall experience.

Beyond the theatrical satisfaction of a familiar narrative structure (particularly important to more traditional theatre-goers)¹² is a sense of poetic coherence: the dance of the door-beds and the rhythms of the slow walk into oblivion began to amount to more than the sum of its parts. In the final section, the artifice of the choreography of supine immersants followed by the slow rhythmic progression into oblivion with Scott's team afforded a sense that we were all fellow travellers to a certain destination. We had moved, individually and collectively, beyond theatrical crisis into a denouement. And this is another innovative aspect of *Terra Nova* in finding a way to afford the intense individual experience demanded of contemporary performance but also to connect it with the collective experience of theatre as traditionally conceived - another 'both-and' mode.

But the dislocation of sensory perception at the core of the overall experience is, as noted, in strong tension with the familiarity of narrative structure. The immersion by way of new media technologies radically dislocates the sensorium. It is notable, but unsurprising, that both my partner and I mis-apprehended or mis-remembered aspects of the experience since the empathy (*Einfühlung*) afforded with the extreme experience of Scott on his fated voyage (and by implication with other extreme and near-death experiences), was both direct and oblique. We were disorientated because, in spite of the familiarity of the narrative structure as outlined, the relationship constructed does not primarily appeal rationally to the eye-mind but affords a multi-sensory engagement.

In recent thinking about 'kinesthetic empathy', a potential for 'inner mimicry' or 'kinesthetic sympathy' has been proposed in respect of the physiological responses of experiencers in watching dance.¹³ In *Terra Nova* a broad range of inner and outer modes of *Einfühlung* are deployed.¹⁴ First (as experienced in my encounter) the intimate narration, drawing richly on the imagination by way of poetic metaphor, speaks substantially to the mind through the code of verbal language whilst the cool theatrical set-up and mediatized sound-scape also mobilises a bodily response by way of kinesthetic empathy with the performer in both actual and imaginative contexts. In the immersions, however, experiencers are physiologically manipulated whilst their mind-eye bearings are being simultaneously dislocated by the virtual world generated in their head-sets. Thus, there is a dynamic movement from sound

and sense in words through to a fundamental dislocation of ones proprioceptive sensation of the physical world through virtual displacement and physical manipulation.

In recounting the experience to others since the performance, the common reaction is that it must have been terrifying - and when you realise you have related that you were virtually immersed in a room with giant rats, the reaction is understandable. However, in the actuality of the complex and dynamic virtual-actual experience, the recognition of finite human capacities and the immensity of oblivion were not terrifying, but ultimately rather beautiful and peaceful. Though the experience was profound, it was not harrowing and the fifty-five immersants seemed to depart quietly in reflection. Bumping into a fellow participant in the lift of my hotel the next day, it did not surprise me when he simply remarked that *Terra Nova* had been an unforgettable experience since we had severally and together been performing mixed reality, spatially and temporally networked in a durational theatrical framework.

1 *Terra Nova* was first presented at the Avignon Festival, July 2011 and subsequently at La Chartreuse, Sept 2011, PLACC Festival Budapest, October, 2011, and Steirischer Herbst Festival, Graz, October 2011. Between December, 2011 and August 2012, it has been presented in Lille, Brussels, Paris, Rotterdam, Zagreb, Hasselt and Prato.

2 CREW's project, running since 1998, is manifest in a number of performance pieces, see Vanhoooutte and Wynants in Bay-Cheng *et al*, eds (2010: 69-74).

3 See Bay-Cheng *et al*, eds (2010: 45).

4 For the record it should be noted that *Terra Nova* is not CREW's first attempt to make a large-scale theatre piece. *Icarus* (2001) and *Philoctetes* (2002) were performances for larger audiences (although without immersion technology). In *O-Rex* (2007/2008) CREW for the first time tried to integrate the 'immersive technology' in a theatrical set-up but just one of the audience members was 'chosen' to be the immersant and who experience was then 'staged' and looked-upon by the others. *Terra Nova* is, however, the first theatre piece where a larger number of visitors is invited to become experiencers.

5 They were beaten by Norwegian Roald Amundsen.

6 Text Peter Verhelst, commissioned by CREW, translated from Dutch by Ina Rilke, kindly supplied in advance of the performance attended by CREW team member and company manager, Hilde Teuchies.

7 It must be acknowledged that the accounts of the Group B and C experiences are subjective, relating how it seemed to the experiencer who may be inaccurate in her/his recollections. The Group B experience is courtesy of Dr Avril Haworth.

8 I learn afterwards that in fact there was no physical tilt-back at this moment.

9 The seminal debate sparked between Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander initially through the publication of the latter's *Liveness* (1999) partially in response to Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) still manifest itself in tension between those who adhere to a distinctive ontology of the 'live in the here and now' and those, like myself, who hold that the use of new media technologies in live performances does not negate the intimacy of that experience and, moreover, that intimacies perhaps of a different kind are afforded by some virtual theatre.

10 See Rachel Zerihan's *Study Room Guide* available as a pdf at http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/Study_Room/guides/Rachel_Zerihan.html, accessed, 15 October, 2012.

11 In an unpublished paper for the PaR symposium of ASTR: 01

12 CREW's subvention has been in question partly because the company's early work afforded experiences to individuals rather than larger numbers. To respond to this point may require some attention to traditional theatricality as in *Terra Nova*. Though it may not be the preference of Eric Joris, traditional narrative structure remains a useful device for moving actions through time and space, particularly if other devices are interfering with that time and space. At Hasselt, the audience was not made up of the experimental theatre crowd typically encountered at the Barbican or the ICA.

13 See Reynolds and Reason, 2012: 19ff for the various usages historically of these terms by Theodor Lipps, John Martin and others.

14 As Reynolds and Reason note (2012: 19), 'The term *Einfühlung*, translated into English as 'empathy' by Edward Titchener in 1909, was first used in its modern sense of projecting oneself into the object of contemplation by Robert Vischer (1872) and was later promoted by Theodor Lipps in his writings on aesthetic experience (Lipps, 120, 1923)'.

References

- Auslander, Philip (1999) *Liveness*. London & New York. Routledge.
- Barton, Bruce (2012) 'New Betrayals: Intimacy in Mediatized Performance'. Unpublished papers for the ASTR symposium, 2012.
- Bay-Cheng *et al*, eds (2010) *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*. Amsterdam. Amsterdam University Press.
- Benford, Steve, and Gianncahi, Gabriella (2011) *Performing Mixed Reality*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London. MIT Press.
- Phelan, Peggy (1993) *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London & New York. Routledge.
- Prager, Karen J (1995) *The Psychology of Intimacy*. New York. Guildford Press.
- Reynolds, Dee & Reason, Matthew (2012) *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*. Bristol & Chicago. Intellect.

Biography

Robin Nelson is Professor of Theatre and Intermedial Performance and Director of Research at the University of London, Central School, and an Emeritus Professor of Manchester Metropolitan University. He has published widely on the performing arts and media and on 'practice as research'. He is a co-founding editor of *Critical Studies in Television*, for which he guest co-edited a special issue on Archiving (5/2, November 2010). Recent books include: (co-edited with Bay-Cheng, S *et al*) *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (Amsterdam University Press, 2010), *State of Play: contemporary 'high-end' TV drama* (Manchester University Press, 2007). *Stephen Poliakoff: on stage and screen* was published by Methuen in Spring, 2011 and he has just completed *Practice as Research in the Arts* with Palgrave (Spring 2013).

