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Negative Dialectics and the Audience
in HBO/Punchdrunk's *The Third Day: Autumn*

By Bo Kampmann Walther

Introduction

In a September 2020 online interview on YouTube, British actor Jude Law described the filming of the HBO and Atlantic Sky miniseries *The Third Day* (2020) as “exhausting, even to the point where it almost killed me” (2020). The video interview features Law in conversation with Felix Barrett, founder and artistic director of the UK-based immersive theatre group Punchdrunk. Together, they reflect on the preparation and eventual downsizing due to Covid-19 of *Autumn*.¹ This particular episode is notable for being a twelve-hour, single-camera live broadcast, streamed via HBO’s and Sky’s Facebook pages on October 3, 2020.

While the rest of the miniseries adheres to a conventional episodic format, *Autumn* distinguishes itself as a durational performance designed to be both physically immersive and conceptually experimental. Originally envisioned as a large-scale theatrical festival with live audience participation on Osea Island, England, the event had to be restructured due to Covid-19 restrictions (Ritman 2020). Instead of having an on-site audience, the festival was transformed into a durational video performance, streamed online to viewers who experienced the spectacle remotely. This shift fundamentally altered the nature of immersion: rather than engaging with the environment in

1) **Note on orthography:** I have chosen to italicise both *Autumn* and *The Third Day: Autumn*, indicating that the live event functions as an episode within the television series while also standing as a self-contained event in its own right.

Cover photo: Jude Law perches atop a pole in freezing water—part of the fictional rituals in *The Third Day: Autumn*, but also designed to test the stamina of the lead actor. (Punchdrunk/Felix Barrett and Dennis Kelly, director of photography: Ole Bratt Birkeland BSC)

a communal, participatory setting, audiences became social media observers of Law's endurance trials. Unlike traditional theatre or even live-action role-play, which depend on the spatial co-presence of performers and spectators, this format positioned viewers in scattered, private settings, where they could tune in and out at will, potentially missing key moments and experiencing the event in a fragmented form.²

The Third Day unfolds the individual journeys of Sam (Jude Law) and his wife Helen (Naomie Harris) as they arrive on the enigmatic island of Osea at different points in time. The narrative spans six episodes divided into two distinct halves. The first half, "Summer", directed by Marc Munden, follows Sam's encounters with a group of islanders who are resolute in preserving their traditions at any cost. The second half, "Winter", directed by Philippa Lowthorpe, focuses on Helen, an audacious outsider, who arrives on the island in search of answers regarding her husband's disappearance and other mysteries. However, her arrival precipitates a contentious struggle to determine the island's fate. Osea Island is situated in the estuary of the River Blackwater in Essex, East England. Covering approximately 1.3 square miles, it is connected to the north bank of the river by a causeway, which is submerged during high tide. Consequently, the island can only be accessed at specific and precise intervals. The miniseries capitalises on this 'portal' to a fantastical realm imbued with quasi-religious symbolism and a history steeped in violence. Law's statement about the physically demanding nature of the production seamlessly merges with the poetic atmosphere of the show and further contributes to his persona, renowned for physicality and expressive presence (Basti  n 2017).

The geography of Osea plays a crucial role in the aesthetic and thematic continuity between the miniseries and the festival event. In both formats, the island operates as an isolated liminal space, a setting where normal rules of time, identity, and reality seem to dissolve. At the time of the YouTube video,

2) Perhaps history repeats itself in the sense that today's social media audience—despite the cocooning restrictions of Covid-19—resembles the middle-class theatre-goers of the 1970s and 80s who, as Graeme Kirkpatrick notes, "would really have preferred to be watching TV but felt compelled by social expectation to go to the theatre". These were the same stifling conditions already diagnosed by Adorno, who described a stage bound by the text and an audience by "bourgeois conventions" (Kirkpatrick 2018; Adorno 1998a).

Autumn, which won the RTS Award for best Live Event in 2021 and the DQ Daily Award for Drama Craft at the C21 International Drama Awards 2020, was still in the process of production. In retrospect, Law's quip about the challenges of acting seems particularly fitting within the immediate context of *Autumn*. During this live event on Osea Island, Law endures a myriad of uncanny rituals. As one critic noted, "Honestly, you can't fault his commitment". Audiences on the Sky and HBO Facebook pages resonated with Law's gruelling trials as he dug his own grave for over an hour, pulled a wooden boat through muddy fields, and perched atop a pole in freezing water. These feats correspond to the "Esus and the Sea Festivals", a pagan (and fictional) ritual that tests the prospective "Father" of Osea Island, culminating in a fittingly rural rave party.

As the live event unfolded, audiences watching on Facebook seemed to forget about the fictional narrative in which Law's character, Sam, is recognised as the long-awaited heir to the Fatherhood of Osea through a series of violent events. Instead, they celebrated the "incredible stamina" of Law the actor, as one commentator put it.³ Or perhaps, they fêted Jude Law the person. This was different than *Collider*, among many others, gearing up for the live event stating that "actors" would stay "in character for 12 hours" (Radish 2020). One could argue that *Autumn* transitions from a meticulously crafted piece of immersion, designed to blur the line between fiction and reality while remaining unmistakably fictional (the Punchdrunkian trademark), to a complex hybrid where realism is pushed to the brink of being just reality. We find ourselves watching Jude Law engage in various activities on a Saturday morning and afternoon. As Ammar Kalia pointed out in his *Guardian* review:

As [Law] becomes more and more like the mud he is sinking into—exhausted, battered and leathery—the scene questions the very nature of acting. How far can we push realism until it is just reality itself? (Kalia 2020).

3) In this sense, the social media audience can be said to reenact the role of the Shakespearean theatre spectacle. In Shakespearean theatre, the audience played an active role, often engaging directly with the performance (Robertson 2001). They would shout, clap, jeer, or cheer, bypassing the fictionality of the characters and reacting openly to the drama. This participatory atmosphere blurred the line between performers and spectators, making the audience an integral part of the theatrical experience.

In this article, my aim is to explore the significance of this shift from the cultural politics of Punchdrunk to the spikey social media comments as a form of critique. I will further discuss this shift in relation to Theodor Adorno's concept of negative dialectics. Three pertinent questions arise: First, does the embrace of realism as "just reality" serve as a substitute for celebritisation (Rojek 2001; Holmes 2010)?⁴ Second, do the spectators on social media appropriate the immersive theatre experience, transforming it into a quixotean spectacle where they shower praise upon the main performer on stage? I use the term "quixotean" inspired by game scholar Miguel Sicart who argues that Don Quixote, just like Law, plays along with whatever setting he is in and is aware of how these make-believe worlds work (Sicart 2018; Walther 2025a). And third, building upon this, does the series challenge the audience to accomplish the ultimate feat of liberating realism from its role as a representational commodity, transforming it into a pure expression of "just reality"? If the latter holds true, if the display successfully merges with reality, then *The Third Day: Autumn* can be viewed as an allegory of Punchdrunk's failure: the stage of Jude Law portraying the fictional character Sam converges with the stage of Jude Law the actor picturing Jude Law the person. Thus, the fiction ceases to be mere 'fiction' in the conventional sense, as it imposes itself downright on reality. The hole that Law is digging could very well be intended for the burial of representational fictionalisation.

This critique serves as the focus of the subsequent inquiry. Law's actions and the spectacle they create on our screens may aspire to what Adorno referred to as "negative dialectics": the endeavour to acknowledge the non-identity between thought and object while still pursuing the project of conceptual identification. In this context, fiction represents Adorno's 'thought', while the 'object' represents the desired realism. If fiction succeeds in capturing reality,

4) The celebritisation of Jude Law plays a central role in the immersive impact of the *Autumn* performance. His fame blurs the line between actor and persona, drawing viewers in through both expectation and subversion (Walther 2025b). Law's established image lends authenticity to the demanding tasks he undertakes, enhancing the realism of the 12-hour show. This realism challenges audiences to look beyond his celebrity and engage with his endurance. Social media responses often oscillate between admiration for Law's stamina and engagement with the fictional narrative, complicating the suspension of disbelief. His dictated performance, shaped by both narrative and audience expectations, subtly critiques celebritisation by pushing it toward raw exposure. This shift from persona to human experience echoes Adorno's idea of non-identity—an attempt to express "just reality"—while simultaneously satirising it.

then there is an element of identity. Fiction and reality, thought and object, can then converge to form a new synthesis. The Festival (what is left of it) somehow seems to demand the audience to both believe in and negate this synthesis. Maybe all the fire and scorching that transpire in *The Third Day: Autumn* is a symbol of 'negation' and the wildlife of non-identity. Given that this is theatre, there must be a stage upon which the drama of this obliteration of the stage is performed. Law assumes a role on both stages: he is Punchdrunk's go-to guy, and he is also the actor tasked with fictionalising what is deemed 'real'. However, the audience clearly identifies most with Law as the authentic man in his late forties (now 52), as if he has been freed from the tangled web of multiple roles. What is left is not Sam the character nor Law the actor but, simply, a guy doing his quixotean thing. It is precisely this Adornian essence, the critique of how critique itself is represented as an amalgamation of thought and object, exemplified in our case through the remarks on social media, that will be examined in the subsequent sections following a brief introduction to immersive theatre.

Immersive theatre

Immersive theatre is a form of theatrical performance that aims to create an immersive and interactive experience for the audience. Unlike traditional theatre where the audience remains passive observers, immersive theatre invites the audience to actively participate and engage with the performance in various ways (Machamer 2017; Hogarth et al. 2018). In immersive theatre, the performance takes place in non-traditional theatrical spaces such as warehouses, abandoned buildings, or site-specific locations. The audience members are often free to move around the performance space, exploring different scenes or interacting with the performers and objects. This spatial immersion contributes to a heightened sense of realism and presence (Frieze 2016). The narratives in immersive theatre are often non-linear or fragmented, allowing the audience members to create their own unique experiences by choosing which scenes to follow or characters to engage with. This element of agency gives the audience a sense of being co-creators of the performance (Mitra 2016), blurring the boundaries between performers and spectators.

Immersive theatre often incorporates various sensory elements to enhance the audience's immersion stressing its close affinities with transmedia and the ludic narrative (Machon 2013; Machon 2016; Biggin 2017; Fensham 2021; Skjoldager-Nielsen 2021). These may include lighting, soundscapes, multimedia projections, tactile sensations, and even tastes or smells. By stimulating multiple senses, immersive theatre aims to create a fully immersive and visceral experience that resonates with the audience on a deeper level.

However, the contrast between 'traditional' and immersive theatre is both historically and academically problematic. 'Traditional theatre' often serves as the avant-garde's counter-image—bourgeois theatre of the 19th century with proscenium stages, darkened auditoriums, and realistic acting. This peaked with naturalism around 1900 but has always coexisted and overlapped with other theatrical forms. It was not dominant before the 19th century, is not now and was never fully hegemonic. Treating it as a monolith obscures the diversity within theatrical practice; even naturalism varied across regions and cultures. Positioning it merely as a foil to avant-garde theatre oversimplifies their entangled relationship. Avant-garde movements often drew on and transformed conventional forms. Immersive theatre, rather than constituting a break, belongs to a long history of experimental, participatory practices like promenade and site-specific theatre.

Returning to the techniques of the political theatre of the 1960s and 1970's⁵, but without the explicit imperatives, contemporary immersive theatre can assume many different forms and styles, ranging from intimate one-on-one experiences to large-scale productions involving a substantial number of performers and audience members. One example is *Sleep No More* (2011) by Punchdrunk, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Set in a multi-story building, participants freely explore a meticulously designed environment and encounter various scenes and characters. Wearing masks, the audience move through the space at their own pace, experiencing the story from different perspectives and piecing together the narrative fragments (Reilly 2019).

Punchdrunk is a commercial success story of a theatre group not only able to finance itself but also to produce compelling plays that reside on the

5) A notable example of this could be Richard Schechner's "environmental theatre" (Schechner 1968).

threshold between avant-garde installations and ‘proper’ theatre. The group is clearly focused on creating vivid experiences for the individual spectator. Consequently, Punchdrunk has been both acclaimed and criticised for their work, which promises “absolution from the mundane by entering into collaborative, reciprocal, inherently social relationships with actors [...] shorthand for selling tickets to elaborate and expensive fancy dress parties” (Ramos et al. 2020, 2).

Rather than pursuing the possible double standards of Punchdrunk, the following analysis will instead focus on how *Autumn* deconstructs the boundaries between reality and fiction and transforms realism into an odd or even new form of reality. This play with boundaries—which are essential for distinguishing between reality and artwork—threatens to erase the traces of fictional narrative. Moreover, if this narrative ceases to exist, the critical possibilities are seemingly in danger of evaporating, thereby rendering any Adornian stance futile. Where then ‘is’ critique? Where does it ‘live’? Strangely enough, as we shall investigate below, it might exist within the live social media comments.

Commenting upon *Autumn*

The live stream *The Third Day: Autumn* began on October 3rd, 2020, 09:30 AM on Sky’s Facebook page. It opens with a slow and meditative tracking shot across the Osea causeway lasting more than an hour, “an exercise in patience”, as *Guardian* critic Ammar Kalia puts it. The onscreen text explains that around this time of year the island’s Esus and the Sea Festival is held, where children perform pagan rites to enter adulthood and a new adult leader must undergo a defiant ordeal to prove himself. Long into the stream, we watch Jude Law sleep for ten minutes after which he drags the shell of a boat for an interminable half-hour before being made to stand in the freezing wind on a pedestal at sea.

“I cannot take my eyes off The Third Day Live. It is so visually stunning and Jude Law’s stamina is blowing me away”, one spectator texts. Another person banters: “Watching the insane ‘the third day’ livestream on hbo’s facebook page. i hope jude law is getting paid A LOT for this. i wouldn’t be

surprised if they started waterboarding him (sic)". Law is "truly being put through the ringer", and "Jude Law has really been through it so far", two comments read. "Been watching jude law stand on a pole for 20 mins before he fell in lol", one remarks followed by a grimacing smiley. As if to gently josh the general amazement by the show, one fan jokes that they find it "riveting" that they got to watch Law dig a hole in the ground for an hour. One viewer writes: "The Third Day live on @SkyArts today is absolutely mesmerising. Incredible stuff from Jude Law and everyone involved. @PunchdrunkInt are absolutely ground breaking".

Punchdrunk founder and co-director of the live event Felix Barrett explained to *IndieWire* that he wanted to make something that "transcended television":

"There is something interesting about a story transcending the media you're telling; how you can actually be watching a TV show and then the fourth wall of the screen can fall open and you fall inside it. Then the story passes back into television to wrap it up" (2020). This 'wrapping up' would then be the three last episodes of *The Third Day*, of which *Autumn* forms the perfect middle entitled "Winter".

Also, the camera work involved in *Autumn* gets noticed and celebrated. User sitdowncomedian writes on *Medium.com* that "[T]he camerawork was unlike anything I've seen on a live broadcast—cinematic quality, and the sound capture was exceptional. And soon that single camera was covered in rain spatters" (2020). Sitdowncomedian reports that "[T]he hashtag was trending on Twitter all day and it was great to gather snippets of information in real-time and see what other people hadn't noticed as well as to pick up on clues". Praising the one-take concept of *Autumn*, the *Medium* review concludes with the prospect of television audiences redefining the medium, "especially during these times" (referring to Covid-19). "[W]hat else can be created in one continuous take?"

A user called Luis_989 remarks on the website *Letterboxd*: "Don't know if this will be taken down, considering the miniseries haven't been finished but this 12-hour experiment, was a massive and mesmerising experience. The ambition in terms of narrative, ambiance and scope was just fantastic. And this was a TV production" (2020). Law's achievements as a hybrid actor/person calls

for attention: “Incredible recognition to Jude Law who was literally immersed and consumed within his performance. Simply spectacular. He deserves a lot, a lot of credit for what he accomplished here”.



As part of the fictional “Esus and the Sea Festivals”, in *The Third Day: Autumn*, Jude Law pulls a wooden boat through muddy fields. (Punchdrunk/Felix Barrett and Dennis Kelly, director of photography: Ole Bratt Birkeland BSC).

“Is it pretentious”, Luis_989 asks rhetorically. “Yes, but you cannot pull off a trick like this without being pretentious” (2020).

During the conclusion of the coastal path scene an incident garners attention from viewers. As the camera captures an old man gathering oyster shells, two hikers suddenly enter the frame and exclaim, “The festival’s been cancelled”. Remarkably, these are the first spoken words in nearly an hour, and aside from faint murmurs, they also mark the final utterance. Considering the immersive nature of this theatrical production, one might argue that this dialogue lacks immersion. Instead of drawing the viewer deeper into the experience, it jolts them out, serving as an anti-suspension of disbelief. The reference to the cancelled Punchdrunk event, known as the “Festival”, is a nod to the significant gathering that was intended to take place but fell victim to Covid-19 restrictions.

There is a possibility that the two hikers represent what literary theory refers to as implied readers (Iser 1974; Richardson 2007). These hypothetical readers are the intended recipients of the work, inviting them to step into the diegetic world while still maintaining a communication channel with the outside. Alternatively, these characters could be interpreted as stage workers possessing partial knowledge of the fiction, predominantly observing it from an external perspective, busy as they are with stage building, carrying gear, or serving meals to the ‘proper’ actors (or styling English singer and songwriter Florence Welch who also stars in *Autumn*). One of Punchdrunk’s many clever inventions is that the audience upon entry is given a mask, while the players are not. The audience is then being led into smaller groups to choose their own adventure. Are the “hikers” members of the audience that somehow tiptoed past the Covid restrictions and now duly report back to their fellow devotees, “The festival’s been cancelled”? Or could it be that their part in the diegetic world was to ‘mask’ themselves as gatekeepers of the theatre experience, making sure that the ‘causeway’ between outside world and inside fiction remains open and closed?

As we will explore below, this interplay between the inside and outside of the diegesis—akin to the hikers being masked members of the fiction as well as masked members of the audience—serves as a prominent feature not only in immersive theatre but also in the realm of critique.

Negative dialectics

Law appears to embody himself more than the fictional character “Sam”, which sparks discussions revolving around celebrity culture. His acclaimed achievements are attributed to his hard work and willingness to push the boundaries of his craft. However, beneath this glorification of Law, evidenced by the comments we saw above, there exists a curiosity concerning fiction itself. I propose that this curiosity contradicts Adorno’s concept of negative dialectics, which serves as a response to both Kantian and Hegelian philosophies. Consequently, it is intriguing to consider that the social media landscape during the airing of *Autumn* becomes more ‘critical’ in nature, while Adorno’s viewpoint becomes somewhat diminished.

Before we turn to Adorno, the multi-layered criticism enmeshed in immersive theatre is worth mentioning. As stated before, it seeks to challenge passive spectatorship, where the audience members are mere observers. By inviting the audience to engage with the performance, immersive theatre can critique the hierarchical relationship between performers and spectators, encouraging a more active role in the creation and interpretation of the work. Also, there is a critique of institutional power at work: immersive theatre provides a platform to question institutional power structures, whether they are social, political, or cultural. By dunking the audience in a specific environment, for instance when Punchdrunk stages *The Drowned Man* (2013) in a vacant sorting office in Paddington, or when the group transforms a real warehouse block in Manhattan's Chelsea neighbourhood into a fictional 1930s-era establishment called the McKittrick Hotel in *Sleep No More* (2011), immersive theatre creates a space for exploring and questioning dominant ideologies.

It is exactly this eye on ideologies that Adorno finds missing in Kant and Hegel, and which he seeks to refashion in a new and more troublemaking metaphysics (Geuss 1975; O'Connor 2004). Contemporary immersive theatre and Adornian thinking share ruination and decay as important themes that not only inform theatrical performance design but also set the stage of modernism's burgeoning hope, as Adorno poetically investigates in his *Minima Moralia* (1978) (Wellmer 1991; Jay 1996). He would probably have been against immersive theatre, at least in its popular form, as he associated phantasmagoric effects with the production of spectacles and an attendant passivity in the viewer (Adorno 1991), which he labelled "distractedness" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). He nevertheless believed that genuine critique required an examination of the prevailing ideologies and dominant forms of thought. It involved challenging the status quo and unveiling the hidden mechanisms of power and domination. Adorno argued that critique should go beyond superficial appearances and delve into the underlying structures that perpetuate social inequality.

One of the central intellectual implications of critique, according to Adorno, is the rejection of instrumental reason and the demand for a more dialectical approach to knowledge (Smith 1999). He argues that instrumental

reason, which reduces everything to calculable and manipulable forms, has become dominant in modern society, leading to a distorted form of rationality, chillingly rendered in his co-authored book *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Critique, in Adorno's view, aims to counter this one-dimensional thinking and restore a more comprehensive engagement with reality (Edgar 1999).

Adorno's critique of Kant in *Negative Dialectics* roots itself in this broader philosophical project of re-evaluating traditional metaphysics. One of Adorno's main criticisms of Kant concerns his understanding of reason and the limits it imposes. Kant emphasises the autonomy of reason, arguing that reason provides the grounds for knowledge and moral judgments. Adorno challenges this view, asserting that reason is deeply entangled with historical conditions. He argues that reason is not a detached force but is shaped by societal structures, thereby influencing and twisting our understanding of the world. Kant's overemphasis on reason leads to a neglect of the non-identical aspects of human experience, preventing an understanding of reality in all its self-contradictory complexity (Cook 2001). In the Kantian philosophy reason "proceeds according to its own meaning and its own inexorable ideal of cognition" rather than being subject "to a natural and irresistible temptation" (Adorno 1990, 244).

Furthermore, Adorno slates Kant's notion of the subject as a self-determining entity. In line with Marxism, he argues that Kant's transcendental subject neglects the material conditions that shape individual agency: "His apriorism deprives pure action of the very temporality without which simply nothing can be understood by 'dynamics'" (Adorno 1985, 507). He contends that the subject is not a self-contained entity but is deeply embedded in a network of social relations and power structures. By failing to account for these influences, Kantianism perpetuates a false sense of individual freedom and neglects the systemic forms of domination and oppression present in society.

In reviewing Hegel, Adorno finds that the notion of totality tends to suppress the particular and the non-identical, reducing them to mere moments within the overarching system. According to Adorno, Hegel's emphasis on totality neglects the irreducible differences that exist, thereby failing to account for the conflicts within social and historical contexts. From this follows an

attack on mediation, which Hegel developed in *The Science of Logic*, originally published between 1812 and 1816. Hegel argues that contradictions are resolved through a process of dialectical mediation, whereby opposing forces are reconciled within a higher synthesis (Hegel 2010). Adorno defies this idea by suggesting that the process of mediation leads to the suppression and negation of the particular and the negative. Hegelian dialectics tends to smooth over contradictions, obscuring the repressive aspects of sociality and perpetuating a harmonistic view of reality. This process culminates in the “damaged life” that Adorno and Horkheimer scrutinise in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Although Adorno acknowledges Hegel’s “primacy of the subject” that enables a philosophising about the dynamic nature of knowledge, he parts company with Hegel when he writes that the “prevailing trend in epistemological reflection was to reduce objectivity more and more to the subject. This very tendency needs to be reversed” (Adorno 1990, 7). In Hegelian dialectics there is a correlation between totality, positivity, and identity. Since negations, in Hegel’s view, are mediated in a positive synthesis, identity arises through the reconciliation of opposites, resulting in a higher fusion that encompasses both. Adorno claims that this emphasis on identity fails to account for the non-identical, which is an essential aspect of human experience. Hegel’s philosophy quashes the critical dimensions of thought, stifling dissent with the existing social order. However, since Adorno does not neglect the necessity of conceptual identification, it would be wrong to conclude that negative dialectics does not operate with a synthesis. The difference between Hegel and Adorno is that whereas Hegel’s identity amounts to a congruence between identity and non-identity, Adorno’s amounts to a non-identity between identity and non-identity (Zuidervaat 2015).

Maintaining fiction

In his article “On Immersive Theatre”, Gareth White contemplates the shifting roles of actors and audience in the context of theatre, drawing from his personal experience. He reflects on Punchdrunk’s production of *Tunnel 228* (2009), an immersive theatrical performance inspired by Fritz Lang’s silent movie *Metropolis* (1927), which takes place in the tunnels beneath Waterloo

Station in London. During his exploration of the expansive and dimly lit environment, White stumbles upon a hidden office where an actor awaits. Engaging in a dialogue, White is “conscious both of cooperating with the actor in maintaining the fiction of the situation, and of resisting the malevolent designs his character tried to draw me into” (White 2012, 231).

White explains that part of the fictionality he strives to uphold is the illusion that the performer is enticing him into the inner circle of the sinister organisation that serves as the focal point of *Tunnel 228*. This is the fourth wall of the screen that “fall[s] open and you fall inside it”, which Punchdrunk founder Felix Barrett talks about. However, this inclusion in the inner workings of the fictional world does not grant him privileged insight; rather, the “expanded perception” of this world is “a result of the imaginative filling in on gaps” (White 2012, 231). As White and the performer from Punchdrunk engage in dialogue, both parties, as actor/performer and spectator-turned-performer, critically examine their own performances as well as each other’s. United in the performance, they obstruct access to the ‘true’ interior of the fiction while yearning for its reality.

What I find intriguing in White’s reflection is the coexistence of multiple layers required for immersive theatre to be effective. First, there is the need to maintain the notion of fiction. Second, there is the desire to gain access to the inner workings of the artwork, which ultimately proves to be an illusion. And third, this illusion operates under the belief that the interior can be transformed into a pure exterior. However, the core of fictionality, its deepest layer, is not only inaccessible, but perhaps even non-existent; there is simply no way to reach it. And even if we were to discover something ‘real’ within the fiction, we would no longer be inside it—we would already be outside. Any merging of the inner fiction and outer reality is counterproductive because once achieved, it would dissolve the fiction that initially sparked the desire to merge. If there are no distinct sides of fiction and the outside world, then the question of transparency becomes moot. Ultimately, it becomes a vicious cycle, further underlining White’s narrative of upholding fiction at any cost. Fiction *must* exist for the dream of non-fiction to thrive. This also explains the necessary distance between performer and audience member: the performer must have access to the interiority of the diegesis, as opposed to the audience

who can only hope of being allowed in. This brings Jacques Rancière to argue, in a discussion of the political potential of the participatory performance, that true emancipation lies not in the upheaval of the gap between actor and spectator but, rather, in the “respectful distance” (Rancière 2007, 271).

One might contend that this tension between intimacy and distance, interior and exterior, is precisely the immersive theatre’s version of fiction. It is a fiction that blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality while also casting doubt on the possibility of accessing such a fused state. This aligns with Adorno’s notion of non-identity, a place that cannot be visited, inhabited, or perhaps even fully conceptualised, but nonetheless persists as a desire (Freyenhagen 2008).⁶ Programmatically speaking, the language of immersive theatre is that of non-identity.

Beckettian endgames

I want to push this idea of a theatre of non-identity by making a detour to Adorno’s reading of Samuel Beckett and then compare it with *The Third Day: Autumn*.

Rather than accepting the commonplace analysis of Beckett’s plays as a parade of irrational cynicism, Adorno argues that in a post-Auschwitz era, where art is seen as either a “vile accomplice” perpetuating the violence of instrumentalisation or an ignorant carrier of barbarism, culture must strive to “provide ‘meaning’ to a society threatened by emptiness and universal alienation” (Adorno 2019), as expressed in his work *Notes to Literature* (1945). Adorno suggests that Beckett’s play *Endgame* (2009) constructs a platform dedicated to making sense of metaphysical loss, offering the only rational response to the dilemma of a culture that has become either malevolent or barbaric. The antidote to a life in the aftermath of Holocaust, a cultural

6) One could argue that White’s experience does not blur fiction and reality but rather activates two layers of consciousness in the immersive theatre spectator. Yet, if these layers were clearly distinct, a firm boundary between the spectator’s ‘reality’ and the ‘fiction’ would be required. This boundary, however, is continually dismantled as the show unfolds. White’s example demonstrates this: once he begins to explore and engage with the fictional system, he enters a state that is neither fully real nor entirely fictional. One might speculate that, in this moment, as both participant and would-be co-author, White inhabits an Adornian non-identity, hovering between fiction and reality.

landscape of “filthy refuse”, is to embrace non-identity as a form, exemplified in Beckett’s theatrical composition.

Endgame depicts the lives of two characters: Hamm, a disfigured Hamlet⁷, confined to a wheelchair, and Clov, his servant. Secluded from the outside world in what appears to be a post-apocalyptic setting, they engage in bleak dialogues that deviate from logic yet retain a certain level of articulation. Adorno reflects on this truncated yet meaningful form of communication in his essay “Attempt at Understanding Endgame” from 1961, as he suggests that it represents a stage amidst the ruins of subjectivity (Adorno 2019). Throughout the play, Hamm and Clov continually bicker and, at one moment, Clov reaches his breaking point:

CLOV:
I’m leaving you.

HAMM:
No!

CLOV:
What keeps me here?

HAMM:
The dialogue.

(Beckett 2009, 39)

Soon after, they engage in a dispute regarding the act of opening the window:

HAMM:
Open the window.

7) Or jambon, a cut of pork.

CLOV:
What for?

HAMM:
I want to hear the sea.

CLOV:
You wouldn't hear it.

HAMM:
Even if you opened the window?

CLOV:
No.

HAMM:
Then it's not worth while opening it?

CLOV:
No.

HAMM (violently):
Then open it!

(Beckett 2009, 42f)

Clov's inability to leave Hamm due to the nature of theatrical form, namely the ongoing "dialogue", resonates with the audience of *Autumn* who continue to watch the 12-hour programme despite the cancellation of the Festival. Originally, the Festival served as their entry point into the theatre of *The Third Day* and a ticket to the world of celebrity spectacle. Despite their differences, both *Endgame* and *Autumn* play with situations that would lead to their termination: Clov threatens to leave the stage (which is impossible since he is bound by "the dialogue"), and the contemporary audience is met with a

closed Festival. Yet, both narratives persist like ‘end-games’. Opening the window to listen to the sea or continuing to watch the show after the Festival has been annulled becomes pointless (but no less fun). Non-identity, as a marker negating narrative progression—represented by the window that will not open and the Festival that will not show—is embraced on stage, allowing us to witness its “contradictory rationality”, as Adorno describes it. Non-identity becomes visible to the audience not by listening to the sea, but through the representation of the refusal of this; not through a festival, but through its displacement.

In contrast to this approach of positioning and eradicating non-identity simultaneously, which would align with the ideal work of art according to Adorno, the *Autumn* commentaries express a commitment to non-absurdity. They do not seem to care about the annihilation of the subject into mere thingness that Adorno worries about. Instead, the absurdity of Beckettian nothingness is glorified as a boundary-breaking form of entertainment.

Coda

As I touched upon in the introduction, the differences between live performance on-site, video transmission, and video art/performance are crucial for understanding the multifaceted nature of *Autumn* and its relationship to Adorno’s analysis. While they do not constitute part of the live performance event in a traditional sense, the comments play a significant role in the immersive experience. These comments, as a form of public discourse, interact with the audience’s engagement with the performance, offering a layer of critique and interpretation that cannot be dismissed. While the online commentary does not involve direct bodily interaction with the performance environment, it actively participates in the shaping of the cultural context of the event. This is why, although not part of the physical immersion, it remains integral to the broader discussion of immersion in the context of contemporary media consumption. *Autumn* is not merely a piece of video documentation or scripted fiction; it inhabits a liminal space where the boundaries between reality and artifice continually blur. Does the slide into “just reality” occur within the process of fictionalisation, or does it bypass fiction altogether, thereby erasing

the very possibility of art, since no distinction remains? This fluidity challenges the boundaries imposed by genre labels, making the application of Adorno's negative dialectics more apt. By examining the interplay between thought and object—and navigating the line between disruptive art that reveals its own negativity and art that merely engages with negativity conceptually—I argue that the significance lies less in the genres themselves than in the dynamics that emerge between the audience, the performance, and the mediated content, particularly as shaped by social media commentary.

The concept of “just reality” in this context is also mediated, turned into a spectacle, but it is important to note that its mediation is not a straightforward process. When I refer to “just reality”, I do not mean an unmediated or raw form of reality but rather a reality that is perceived and constructed through the lens of the performance and its reception—whether live or mediated through video transmission. In this sense, the experience of reality is itself influenced by the media through which it is conveyed, yet it maintains a sense of authenticity in how it is experienced by the viewer. Therefore, while we can indeed witness and be part of a “just reality”, this experience is negotiated by both the technology that facilitates the transmission and the cultural lens through which it is interpreted. This realisation opens up a more complex discussion about the nature of immersion and reality in contemporary art forms, where the boundaries between the ‘real’ and the ‘mediated’ are continuously conferred.⁸

The current context—marked by the dominance of digital and social media platforms, as well as the rapid evolution of immersive technologies—presents a very different landscape for art and performance than that of Beckett's time. Today, the line between the art object and the audience is often adjudicated not only through traditional performance but also through digital technologies that invite simultaneous engagement from a global audience. This means that the cultural context today is one of pervasive mediation, where art is consumed through multiple channels and where audiences interact with art in ways that transcend the physical and temporal boundaries that traditionally defined the experience of art. This shift calls for an adaptation

8) See *Dramaturgies of Immersion: Analysing Poetics of Immersion and Emersion* (Szatkowski and Nielsen 2025) for a thorough and thoughtful discussion of this.

of Adorno's theories, as the massification and digitisation of art experiences present new challenges to the idea of non-identity and the critical function of art in society. The critique of "just reality", as reflected in the commentary surrounding *Autumn*, aligns with this cultural moment, where the boundary between fiction and reality is not only blurred but actively questioned and redefined.

Throughout this article, I have presumed that the experience of *Autumn* is immersive, or at least that it sparked a form of criticism from the social media realm, which contested the art-critical approach reminiscent of the Adornian regime. However, what is missing here is an examination of the differences between physical immersion in a live theatrical performance, for which Punchdrunk is renowned, and the more physically passive reception of a televised miniseries and intermittent live show. Unlike the visceral engagement of being physically present in a site-specific performance where the audience participates in the unfolding narrative through bodily interaction with the environment and performers social media commenting remains a predominantly passive activity. This distinction is crucial: White's performative journey into the heart of Punchdrunk's dismantling of the boundary between artwork and reality was significant because he engaged with it directly. He was drawn into a physical site that resonated with Adornian non-identity, a space that is neither completely fictional nor purely real, but a complex blend of both. In contrast, the *Autumn* comments does not capture the embodied experience that defines theatrical immersion. The key point here is that these social media remarks can be said to cause non-identity itself to putrefy. In a physically immersive, art-oriented context, non-identity would typically be constructed and celebrated. The immersive quality of the social media commenting dealt with in this article lies in its nature—the most likely unintended idea that it represents something more, something else, and something entirely different from the elevated Adorno stance. This type of engagement may not be immersive in the traditional sense, but it challenges and redefines what we consider as immersion and critical interaction.

The lesson learned from the historical avant-garde, spanning from Duchamp to Debord, is that once it successfully erased the boundary between art and real life, its demise became inevitable. The avant-garde was an act of

self-destruction, and its victory lay in its own death (Bürger 1984; Bolt 2013). As Facebook users observed the unfolding fate of Jude Law while he navigated the terrain of Osea Island, they too bore witness to this synchronised triumph and death of art.⁹ However, their response was characterised by a gesture of critique that is, perhaps, even more significant than the deliberate act of ‘doing’ critique. How did this critique manifest itself? Through verbal engagement with the theatrical spectacle and through Law’s own acknowledgment: that he exists within a fiction and yet, by the end of the day, is nothing more than himself—“just reality”—putting on a good show. This critique, then, resists the concept of non-identity favoured by both Adorno and Punchdrunk. The *Autumn* audience does not long for the destruction of the stage within the stage, as we saw in the reading of *Endgame*, nor for the disappearance of fiction within fiction. Their appreciation of this quixotean drama arises not from allegiance to the Punchdrunk philosophy—which seeks to disrupt the unity between thought and object while still framing this disruption as fiction—but from the sheer entertainment the performance provides. Whether Law is standing tall on a pole in tidal waters, pulling a boat, or wearing a bloodied crown, the spectators find pleasure in the spectacle itself.

Drawing upon Adorno’s philosophy, this can be understood as the negation of the positive, or, in more modern words, a disruption of the synthesis. Beckettian theatre with its inclusion and satirical rejection of non-identity is the dramatisation of this. But it can also be interpreted as something more radical than what was premeditated by Adorno’s notion of the non-identical. Negative dialectics preserves the non-identical relation between thought and object, meaning it conceptualises this relation since otherwise it would have no language, and yet it scorns its mediation onto a positive, Hegelian synthesis. The *Autumn* commentaries do the exact opposite: they reject any correlation between thought (fiction) and object (reality) focusing instead on the admirable kernel of non-identity that is Jude Law himself; the authentic

9) This recognition—that art can never fully achieve reality without ceasing to be art—is also explored in Adorno’s concept of “late style”, first developed in his 1934 essay “*Spätstil Beethovens*” and later published in the 1964 collection *Moments Musicaux*. Adorno would go on to broaden the idea of “late style” to include expressions of negativity—not as pessimism, but as a critical resistance to false harmony. These works do not seek to resolve the contradictions of life, society, or the relationship between reality and art; rather, they reflect the impossibility of such reconciliation. See also Edward Said’s *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (2007).

person with loads of aura that in the pursuit of “just reality” goes through so much in performing as—himself.

I am not asserting that the social media commentaries surrounding *Autumn* exhibit a self-reflective stance, nor do they politically intend to challenge the orientations of art and its forms. Making such claims would be an abuse of academic analysis. However, what I am suggesting is that these commentaries, rather than simply serving as a straightforward affirmation of hegemonic celebrity culture wherein Law plays a leading role in pushing the boundaries of representational fiction, challenge the transparency between thought and object that Adorno discusses. This challenge involves bypassing the question of how far fiction can extend while remaining within its realm and not crossing into reality. Furthermore, it repudiates the concept of Adornian non-identity, which lies at the core of progressive art. If we were to negate this idea where fiction and reality are irreducible to each other yet still exist within the framework of ‘fiction’, it raises the question of where it would leave us. It leads us to a mode of critique that may be even more critical than the explicitly proclaimed criticism, even if it originates from amateurs rather than trained professionals and reviewers. It becomes a criticism more closely aligned with “just reality” rather than fiction striving to imitate reality.

Autumn ultimately emerges as a doubly troubled work of art. Viewed through an avant-garde lens, it involves two key assumptions. The first assumption, grounded in causality and effect, suggests that this piece of fiction, this artwork, successfully merges with the reality that surrounds it. The second assumption, more critically inclined and rooted in questions of origin, holds that for the first assumption to be realised, we must not disregard the knowledge—and the ontology embedded in that knowledge—that *Autumn* originates from a site of fiction. This was the lesson learned from White, as we saw above.

In contrast, the “just reality” reading, prevalent in the social media commentary, skirts both the causal effect and the tacit, foundational premise. In this view, the celebrated world of *Autumn* is not understood as stemming from a fiction that strives to unmake and unmask itself, but is simply taken as “just reality”. The critical tension, then, lies in this almost gullible—or even foolish—bypassing of both assumptions. This is where the quixotean spectacle,

as previously mentioned, becomes significant: we appear to be dealing with an actor—or a character, or perhaps just a man—who performs on both stages, acknowledging the demands of each. He embodies a character (and the actor playing that character) who pushes realism within fiction to its very limits, while also presenting himself as a subject who endures the tasks and trials imposed upon him. The former involves the application of thought, and perhaps intention, to the artwork. The latter, by contrast, entails arriving at and thereby revealing reality, “just reality”, and nothing more. While we have established terms for the former—avant-garde, Adorno’s non-identity, the Punchdrunk poetic, and so forth—there is a conceptual void surrounding the latter. Yet it may be that this latter stance, the one I have unpacked throughout the article, despite its triviality and lack of intellectual refinement, is in fact the more critical of the two. Perhaps the “hikers”—those implied readers I mentioned earlier who appear at the beginning of *Autumn*—have already given us the cue: “The Festival’s been cancelled”. This might also signal that the era of speaking about a non-identical art, one that strives to be reality while remaining unmistakably fiction, is cancelled. Instead, we are invited to indulge in “just reality”. Finally—and this opens up an entirely different line of inquiry—we might return to Jean Baudrillard (1993), who took a certain pleasure in the fact that audiences, rather than being liberated by the ambitions of probing artworks, consumed them like candy, reducing them to mere entertainment. They were, and still are, “just reality”, after all.

Bo Kampmann Walther is an Associate Professor at the Department of Design, Media, and Educational Science, University of Southern Denmark. He writes about (computer) game theory, media philosophy, and lots of stuff in the interstices of games, fiction, technology, and media. He is also a soccer columnist at the Danish newspaper *Information*.

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