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Title: 'You are the victim now': Factoría de Terror and immersive horror theatre in contemporary Spain

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Abstract: This article focuses on Spanish contemporary horror theatre, in particular on a group called Factoría de Terror (Factory of Horror). Normally disregarded by horror scholars – not only in the Spanish academia – theatre has given birth to some of the most shocking expressions in the history of the genre. Here we focus our attention on shows that involve immersion and participation of the spectators, for these are strategies that can only be implemented on the stage, and result in powerful effects when applied to the aesthetics and *ethos* of horror. Factoría de Terror's projects will serve to illustrate this insufficiently acknowledge potential of theatrical representation.

Keywords: Factoría de Terror, horror, immersion, participation, Spain, theatre

Para Zoraida, con todo mi agradecimiento.

Introduction

In the studies in weird and supernatural fiction, in horror and science fiction, theatre has always played the part of the Great Forgotten. A dubious honour, shared with poetry, the case of theatre is particularly unfair, as it has been the cradle for some of the most notable expressions in the imaginative and, so to speak, affective domains of artistic creation. Focusing on horror, we can think, for example, of the Théâtre du Grand Guignol, or of Maurice Maeterlinck's disturbingly atmospheric dramas, and also, of the pieces written in the wake of the gothic boom, back in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or of the abundant and influential stage adaptations of classics like *Frankenstein* (Shelley 1818) or *Dracula* (Stoker 1897). Dread and horror are a part of theatre's DNA since its very origins, as shown in Aristotle's definition of tragedy and by several of the infamous pieces composed by Sophocles and Euripides (*Bacchae*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Medea*). Moreover, the links of theatrical representation with death and other unearthly realities have been so fruitful and recurrent as to give rise to whole scenic genres, prior to modern notions of fiction or science, such as the dances of death (meaning the hypothetical staging of the *Danse Macabre* Medieval paintings), the mystery plays or the *autos sacramentales*.

> While it is rare to find a horror play today, what is clear is that the theatre does historically have a relationship with the horrific and that horror theatre has at some points proven to be a fruitful genre for theatre makers,

says Richardson (2015: 28) in one of the few monographic essays about horror on the stage (if we do not count those specifically devoted to one of the above-mentioned forms, which do not always address their genre-status, anyway, or study them in the light of other similar scenic formulae); this is why it seems so unjust for theatre to hold such an irrelevant position in current investigations in horror or the fantastic, or for these genres to be so disregarded by theatre specialists.

The situation is especially worrisome in countries like Spain, whose contributions to these fictional categories have had a much weaker impact on society than those coming from cultures such as the British or North American ones. The attitude of local critics has not been of great help, either: until recent times, popular and non-realistic modes were systematically neglected by prejudiced academics, and research on them was very scarce (and not only in the theatre studies area). Even though this state of things has started to change in the new millennium, and Spanish production has begun to draw attention both from domestic and foreign scholars – as this very issue of *Horror Studies* reveals – there is still a long path ahead, and plenty of dark spots to shed light on. The case of theatre is telling. Although recently claimed as a major contributor to the history of the fantastic, science fiction and horror in the Iberian peninsula – in works by De Beni (2012), Checa (2009), López-Pellisa (2013), Martín Rodríguez (2018) or myself (Carrera Garrido 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019), for instance – it is still rare to find a chapter devoted to this medium in a project like the one that summons us. That feels wrong, at least in the horror field, for two main reasons, of historiographical and theoretical nature: first, because, despite appearances, there exists a substantial repertoire of plays, authors and companies that, hardly ever tackled from the genre perspective, puts into question the irrelevance of theatre in this respect (Carrera Garrido

2016: 92–96), and second, because the stage, which in the face of the fantastic and science fiction confronts deep semiotic and aesthetic limitations, has, in contrast, a huge potential when it comes to the expression of the horror genre.

In one of his works, Checa (2009: 157) doubts that 'spectators of fantastic, science fiction or horror theatre can reach the same immersion levels readers find in the Literature or Film of this genre' (my translation). I think that is only true if we are speaking about the dramatic representation of a story based on the archetypical elements and figures of the genre (Carrera Garrido 2015, 2016: 88–91). Everything changes if we shift the focus to the generation of the affects and sensations associated with the horror mode: after all, these determine the nature – even the name – of the category (Carroll 1990: 14). Here, the stage features possibilities of immersion unthinkable in other media, as it can involve the audience, both physically and emotionally, in the spectacle and make it feel what the characters are experiencing. Some of the most stimulating, and transgressive, contemporary horror plays are, not by coincidence, founded on this device. Maybe their results lie far from perfection in poetic or aesthetic terms, and yet they make the most of the specificities of theatrical communication, and they do it for the benefit of the horror genre.

In this text, I intend to focus on a significant example: the performances carried out by Madrid-based group Factoría de Terror (Factory of Horror). Featuring original pieces within their production, heavily influenced by the horror and gothic canon – in literature and, especially, in cinema – the aspect I am most interested in is the collective's dealings with immersive theatre: from more conventional shows, where a *fourth wall* stands between the actors and the audience, and the latter is only occasionally

addressed, to fully immersive and participatory shows, ranging from haunted house attractions to events reminiscent of the Cluedo game. Although barely considered by specialists in the immersive paradigm, the concept and functioning of such spectacles match, to a great extent, those of this theatrical form. In fact, most practitioners of this kind of horror include, in the promotion of their activities, the word *immersive*: see, for instance, La Caja del Terror (The Box of Horror), a theatre recently opened in Madrid, whose founders define their spectacles as 'interactive theatre, where horror is not seen or felt only from the seat and the public abandons its role of spectator to become a part of the narrative' (Escandón 2016, my translation), an obvious marketing strategy, considering the current boom of this staging formula, and yet pertinent to the mechanisms displayed. Other related forms, in the margins of theatricality, would be the 'dark rides' that one finds in amusement parks or fairs, escape rooms, zombie apocalypse runs or the numbers of magic and illusionism that, significantly, many of the groups – La Caja del Terror, among them – feature in their programmes. The enormous trendiness of these entertainment options – in Spain and in other countries – demands attention from experts both in theatre and the horror genre, which feeds them on a formal and thematic level. This article focuses on a very particular case, a pioneer in these respects.

Immersive theatre and horror

Let us begin by explaining what immersive theatre is and why it proves to be so effective when it comes to engendering the affects that critics like Carroll or Williams consider to be distinctive of the horror genre. These authors, as is known, privilege the physical, corporeal and instinctive factors, both in representation and in reception of horror pieces, over the most immaterial and atmospheric ones, studied, among others,

by Freeland (2004). Thus, Carroll (1990: 21) argues that 'the character's [and, therefore, the viewer's] affective reaction to the monster in horror stories is not merely a matter of fear, i.e., of being frightened by something that threatens danger. Rather threat is compounded with revulsion, nausea, and disgust', while Williams (1991: 4), who includes horror among the *body genres* – along with pornography and melodrama – defines as a key element 'the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen' (see also Aldana Reyes 2014, 2016). These specialists' conceptions seem, indeed, particularly fitting for such a visceral, physical, domain like theatre. As it happens, the stage has given birth to several expressions that, albeit not always properly acknowledged, have been deeply influential in this notion of the genre. Badley (1996: 3) gives an idea of this influence when, referring to 1980s body horror, she states that fiction 'returned to its theatrical roots – in the freak show, the phantasmagoria, the wax museum, the Theatre [*sic*] du Grand Guignol of Paris, the Theater of Cruelty'.

Concerning immersion, it must be said, in the first place, that every spectacle is, by definition, immersive: in all of them are the spectators drawn to the world inhabited by the characters: apart from this projection (made, anyway, in the realm of imagination), they are physically near the space where actors perform their roles and props symbolize the *diegesis*. If it wanted, the audience could climb onto the stage and step into the action; in that situation, dramatic illusion would be shattered. It would remain intact, in contrast, if it was the performers – or rather, the personages played by them – who addressed the public: by speaking to it and acknowledging it as a legitimate interlocutor, existent in the characters' ontological sphere, they would be allowing it to take part in the representation and turn into a dramatic entity,[1] a deceitful possibility, no doubt, as

there will always prevail a breach between the being created in the performance and the real person who observes the show and endows it with meaning. It does not prevent, though, the trick from taking effect, and the borders between both universes from blurring, at least for a second. That is what, with systematic insistence, immersive theatre aims to do.

This type of staging demands that the spectators engage in the show with their whole body and senses, abandon the interpretation codes that have predominated in the western tradition – of a strong rational basis – and give themselves up to an in-the-flesh experience. To attain such a goal, it does not only erase the distance that used to separate the actors from their audience, enabling physical, *real*, interactions; the performance is also brought to environments that bear little or no resemblance to the accustomed design of conventional stages: spaces where performers and spectators can mingle and blend together, natural or urban spots that, when invaded by the performance, originate new meanings, or that are consistent with the meaning and aesthetics of the play. Such are the principles of the so-called *site-specific theatre*, also applicable, in my opinion, to the model of horror theatre that interests us (in which imagination is downplayed by sensorial experiences). Symptomatically, Galluzzo (2016) mentions performances of 'classic horror tales' in places like cemeteries and mausoleums, and it is becoming increasingly common to hold shows in everyday environments such as bars, apartments and lifts, fostering nearness and intimacy with the public (something that can contribute to the generation of fear and other related affects). According to Molanes Rial (2017: 2): 'This kind of stage performances explores the properties, qualities and meanings of a particular space, establishing a two-way relationship between the spectator and the specific place'; and a few lines below:

‘This chosen space exerts a direct influence in the structure, planning and creation of the staging, with which it establishes a dialogue’ (Molanes Rial 2017, my translation). The way I see it, this is a vision that can also be applied to artificial structures, expressly designed for the exhibition of certain materials, such as fair booths or attractions in theme parks; after all, these sites are also far from conventional stages, providing new forms of perception and, like site-specific and immersive plays, attracting audiences that do not necessarily see themselves as theatre-goers.

As for immersion itself, there are several degrees. Machon (2013: 62–63) lists three: ‘Immersion as absorption’, ‘Immersion as transportation’ and ‘Total immersion’. It is an important distinction, and it is so because, even if some critics – including Machon herself – think that the spectators’ integration into the fictional and scenic spaces automatically changes them into active subjects (with the same privileges as the play’s actors and the characters that they embody), this does not even happen on the ‘total immersion’ level. As stated, the public never abandons its defining function: to see and make sense of what it is seeing. At most, it may become, in shows heavily founded on interaction and participation, what Machon (2013: 64) calls an ‘audience-spectator-watcher-protagonist-percipient’ (Machon 2013: 64). In those cases, the attending public ‘maintains the skills and desires of the audience-spectator, yet additionally takes on the responsibility of direct involvement, closer to performer-collaborator’.

Participation is, at any rate, another trait that has distinguished theatre since its ritual origins, and if the arrival of modernity reduced it to a minimum,[2] that was only due to specific notions of dramatic representation. The avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, led by theorists like Artaud, Grotowski and Artaud, did their best to

restore this aspect, and that is still the aim of many current experimental stage directors and groups. Their final objective: to free the audience from its traditional passive – or contemplative, at most – position, achieve, as Rancière (2009) desired, its emancipation. This concept, which, if strictly applied, dismantles the very essence of theatre, can, nevertheless, endow a show with a great reactive power both in the ideological and in the affective/emotional sense. This becomes especially clear in spectacles that foster both immersion and participation, and more in particular, in those expressions that attract our interest in this article. The spectator, as soon as he or she sees himself or herself turned into the protagonist of the story, assumes a responsibility, an *agency*, that up until that point belonged only to the fictional characters. This reinforces what White (2013) calls *horizon of participation*, encouraging the audience's empowerment. At the same time, though, it strengthens the sensation of vulnerability, the feeling of exposure to a state of affairs that, albeit still unreal or fake, is not lived through others' eyes or bodies anymore. It is in this respect that theatre proves more effective than other arts or media in the engenderment of the most characteristic responses in horror fiction. This applies not so much to the aspects that, as visual impact or special effects – even the enactment of subjectivity (Carrera Garrido 2017: 77–83) – have witnessed a more convincing treatment in film, comic books or videogames, rather to the eventuality of transforming the audience into spiritual and bodily participants of the universe staged. If, like Barceló (1999: 99–100) and many others argue, empathy with the fictional beings' predicament is a key aspect in the reception of a horror story, would it not be better if the identification was (or seemed to be) total?

As Fischer-Lichte (2008: 40) remarks: 'The spectators do not merely witness these situations; as participants in the performance they are made to physically experience

them'. Such corporeality is perceived even in the least participatory shows, and especially in those that lend priority to the body over the fictional side, closer, then, to the happening form than to conventional drama. Thus, even when there is not a consistent notion of the diegesis, the attraction of the audience to the staging space and its transformation into subject of the performance – either as an agent or as an observer – activates a facet in the spectators that, when safely sitting in the theatre's seats, remained neutralized. The effect, of evident carnivalesque-Bakhtinian echoes, intensifies as soon as they realize that it is not only that they have become characters of the fiction, but that fiction *has become apparently real*. As White admits:

> There are also potentially risks in taking part in an activity that is not enjoyable, or which might even be distressing, *actual physical risks involved in the activity*, and risks that a performance will bring dangerous consequences after the show is complete. (2013: 77, original emphasis)

It is in such tension between the real and the pretended, the physical and the imaginary, the lived and the performed, where theatre goes well beyond other media in its ability to arouse proper reactions in the receptor of a horror piece. While some movies or books play with the idea of a fiction becoming true, of horrors trespassing the frontier between life and art, between the actual and the imagined – see *Dèmoni* (Bava, 1985) or even *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984) – it is only theatre that can actually break the fourth wall and *truly* enact the dissolution of barriers.

It is a cliché to say that reading a horror novel or watching a film of this genre is like riding a rollercoaster. As Brigid Cherry remarks:

> It implies a wild swing between slowly building expectations of something terrifying or dreadful, and the climactic moment of terror at the height of this anticipation, as well as an escalation of terror, anxiety, excitement and thrills in the aftermath. (2009: 53)

If strictly considered, this analogy is far from accurate: as Carroll (1990: 240, n. 21) argued, while the first two activities do not entail any obvious risk for the reader or the cinema-goer, the latter might include unforeseen circumstances leading to serious physical harm, even death. Theatre presents a completely different case: as conceived in this article, it also incorporates the possibility of genuine risks, and even if they hardly ever become a reality (the same way as rides very seldom end up in tragedy), the prospect of real danger makes the spectacles threatening rather than only disturbing. This threat involves the elements of the diegesis and, especially, to the props, techniques and devices used to figure it. The same can be applied to amusement park dark rides, the closest relatives of rollercoasters and clearly related to the forms of staging studied here. According to expert Ndalianis (2010: 22), while in a film 'our responses are generated via the intermediary main characters', in rides 'we lose this intermediary and it is we, the ride participants, who become the protagonist'. As she explains, '[h]orror rides focus […] on the affective assault on the participant […]. For the horror rider, the fear of death and bodily destruction is one step closer to being a real threat', a significant statement, followed by a lucid reflection on the typical reception of art-horror:

> Carroll suggests that in horror films, via the character's responses, the spectator is often 'counselled' to 'the appropriate reactions to the monsters', which usually comprise 'shuddering, nausea, shrinking, paralysis, screaming, and revulsion. […]'. In rides, however, there is no need for these parallels to invoke such affective responses. Leaving the story behind, dark rides that incorporate wild roller coasters, for example, have no problem in causing many riders to shudder, feel nausea and scream.

In other words: the differentiation between *metaphysical* and *physical fear* – which Roas (2011: 94–96) uses to characterize the type linked to the fantastic and distinguish it from the one predominant in horror – becomes literal in cases like these. It is not an intellectual or an imaginative game anymore; neither does it have to do with the abstract or philosophical boundaries of reality: the anxiety, and the bodily reactions shown by the audience, stem from the possibility of actual suffering and, therefore, of the concrete questioning of what is real and what is not.

Another related issue, very recurring in general investigations on the horror genre (Tudor 1997, among others), is why anybody would be willing to expose himself or herself to these dangers and extreme emotions, reaching severe levels of intensity in shows whose performers are allowed to touch, even hit, the attendees. Although the theorization about the pleasures of horror in cinema and literature can be partially recycled for this sort of theatre, I find it much more appropriate to consider the strongly playful component of the show – inasmuch as the analogies with videogames are frequent, to the point of sharing the same theoretical framework (Machon 2013: 59–63) – and a trait that defines, according to critics, all varieties of immersive theatre: their

nature of genuinely lived experiences, not read in a book or contemplated on a screen, something capable of causing a sincere catharsis among the spectators or, in brief, 'remind[ing] an individual what it is to feel alive' (Machon 2013: 72).

Notwithstanding these games with the borders of reality and the experiential side of the performance, it must be remarked that immersive staging does not give up diegetic representation, or even the development of plots in the most traditional understanding of the term: narratives partly or totally indifferent to the public's entering the dramatic space, the impact of its decisions in the course of events or their interaction with fictional beings. There usually is, in this sense, a pre-established plan that, albeit deeply flexible on occasion, points to the control that, after all, is exerted by the creator of the spectacle: a figure that White (2013: 31), using Game Studies terminology, calls *procedural author*. Details like this one reveal that, despite appearances, we are not that far from the most spread notion of theatrical representation, with a plot, characters and so on; the difference lies in that, in this paradigm, it is combined with non-transferrable aspects of the medium, which, as we see, turn out to be highly efficient in the field of horror.

Only in recent times has the potential of the immersive-participatory model started to be acknowledged in academia. Genre studies have also shown some interest in the topic, and yet there are still few scholars or works that consider the artistic and theatrical legitimacy of the most festive and carnivalesque shows. The case of haunted attractions and the like, very rarely approached from these fronts, is the most symptomatic. I can understand the doubts concerning their aesthetic or intellectual depth, in the light of their links with the entertainment industry and the quality of the themes and motifs

displayed – part of a genre customarily dismissed by high culture representatives. Questioning their ability to shake the attendees' conscience in the ideological sense, bearing in mind the emphasis on the emotional and instinctive, is also understandable. What I cannot fathom is how come, up until now, almost nobody has appreciated their evident theatrical nature, not even in relation to expressions like the ones described here, when the similarity is apparent on every level: from the spatial to the relational or participatory one, not to mention basic aspects like performance and pretence, or the eminently playful orientation of the show (see Carrera Garrido 2014). That happens, mostly, in the academic field, also in that of groups whose connection with the world of art and scenic experimentation is not under suspicion, not as much among the community of fans or practitioners themselves, who are reluctant to categorize their creations as simple attractions and demand serious acknowledgement. See, for instance, how enthusiastically Galluzzo speaks about haunted attractions, establishing links with distinguished precedents in experimental theatre and scenic horror:

> All around the globe Live Haunted Attractions bring in millions during the Halloween season. These 'Haunted Houses' have started evolving into new and avant garde forms, all aimed at terrifying you in a myriad of ways. Shows like *Alone: The Existential Haunting*, *Blackout*, *Delusion*, *The Great Horror Campout*, or *Zombie Joe's Urban Death* harken back to the Grand Guignol and Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, frightening us in new, experimental, and unexpected ways. (2016)

As revealing as Galluzzo's words is the answer given by one of the creators of a spectacle mentioned by him: the 'extreme haunt' *Blackout*. When asked whether the

show could be termed an artistic experience, director Kristjan Thor replied: 'It's much more performance art than haunted house' (Fortune 2014; see also Bishop 2016). The fact that he marked a difference between one thing and the other does not necessarily indicate his willingness to underestimate this type of theatre; on the contrary, I would say that it denotes his desire that it be taken seriously, far from the prejudices surrounding the world of popular expressions. The same attitude can be traced in the members of the Haunting community – closely related to the authors of *Blackout* – in whose web the adjective *immersive* is constantly used and where we can read an article entitled 'Why immersive theater matters, what it is, and how to get involved' (Winters 2017a; see also 2017b). Among its theses, it contends that immersion, in its horror variety, encourages three elementary responses in the audience: the emotional, the artistic and the communal, a vision that bears a huge resemblance with that presented by Machon and other experts of the area.

Returning to the theatrical legitimation of these forms, it is a goal that professionals of the sector have been pursuing before the current boom. Aware of their perception in society as mere entertainment activities, some practitioners already endeavoured in the past to claim a spot in the cultural scene of their country. Good evidence of these attempts of recognition may be found in an interview that took place in Spain in 2008, when a link between horror and theatre sounded even stranger than today, as haunted attractions and interactive shows were still seen as simple games. 'Today we want to take a closer look at a reality much more widespread than it seems',[3] said the starting lines of this encounter with workers of amusement parks like Port Aventura or Parque de Atracciones de Madrid (García Valdivia 2008), 'a successful formula that has been triumphing for years in Spain and abroad, a theatre form that, because of lack of

knowledge, is usually misunderstood and, on occasion, despised: horror theatre'. And later: 'It is interesting, people who enter a haunted attraction do not imagine that what they are going to find is actors and actresses, who have even had to pass an acting audition', to which one of the interviewees replies: 'Oh yes. That is one of the greatest disadvantages we endure: the lack of appreciation', and another adds:

> [I]n a show like a haunted attraction you do not have clapping, very few value your work. People consider it another attraction of the amusement park, and very few stop to contemplate, I don't know, the atmosphere created by the scenery, for example, the special effects, the meditated light for each room, the sounds, the music, all of which are, generally, well-crafted elements and worthy of attention. (García Valdivia 2008)

This second voice belongs to the founder of Factoría de Terror: Zoraida Marín (Madrid, 1982). In another part of the talk, she emphasizes the genuinely dramatic nature of these spectacles, relating them to immersive and site-specific theatre:

> Sure, yet it is a different sort of theatre. We keep acting, but we are not on a stage, we are with the audience. It is very similar to street theatre, we must elicit certain feelings, in this case fear, in a public that passes you by. (García Valdivia 2008)

A trained psychologist with studies in performance art, Zoraida's work, carried out far from big venues and that ranges from acting duties to the elaboration of pieces as author, adapter and procedural author, has not raised the interest that it undoubtedly

deserves. Created in 2004 and significantly resized three years later, under the name La Antigua Factoría (The Old Factory), Factoría de Terror (currently out of business) was a pioneer not only in its efforts to normalize the presence of the horror genre on the stage, but also in its multifaceted exploitation of the diverse possibilities that theatre provides to elicit fear. Maybe 2019, at the peak of popularity of the immersive paradigm and with the growing acceptance of fantastic and horror fiction in Spanish society and the Hispanic Studies area, is a suitable time to assess the scope of this group.

Factoría de Terror

Based on her work experience in several haunted attractions throughout Spain and abroad – like El Viejo Caserón (The Old Ramshackle House), in Madrid's Parque de Atracciones, Halloween walkaround rides in Port Aventura Park (Tarragona), Casa de Miedo (House of Fear), in La Quinta de Melque (Toledo) or world-renowned Blackpool's Passage of Horror – and fruitful exchanges with professionals from the different fields of horror in film and theatre – directors, make-up artists, playwrights, gaffers, sound technicians – Zoraida's endeavours cover all possibilities that the stage presents to the horror genre. Her work ranges from the most recognizable concept of theatrical representation, at one extreme, to the sphere of installation art and happening performance, at the other. For her company, there is a non-problematic continuity among all these forms: the various arts that converge in theatre receive specific attention, to the point of constituting isolated realities – make-up workshops, special effects tutorials, filmmaking projects – traditional staging coexists with clearly immersive and interactive mechanisms. These, despite preventing, at times, the construction of complex narratives or the building-up of non-archetypical characters, always respect the so-called *fictional agreement*. This pact is, in fact, taken to daily

contexts and situations, like the screening of a movie or a dinner with friends, where the performance may achieve reactions unfeasible in the well-known and comfortable context of a theatrical auditorium.[4]

This expansion in the activities of Factoría de Terror relates both to the very notion of the format studied and the broad and unprejudiced understanding that its members have of theatre and stage creation, in tune with what we have seen in the previous section. I am assuming that it will not be necessary to insist on the importance of meeting the spectators in non-theatrical/found spaces, attracting it into the action or strengthening the intimacy of the encounter. These practices, which constitute the basis of the immersive-participatory paradigm, can be all traced in the performances led by Zoraida's team. She is, according to her own words, a regular spectator of Madrid's *off* theatre, especially of performances that play with the dissolution of limits between the audience's space and the stage. In this sense, some names and shows are worth mentioning, like Microteatro por dinero (Micro-Theatre for Money) or the immersive adaptations of José Martret and Alberto Puraenvidia, particularly their version of Macbeth (M.B.I.G.). Staged in an old flat of the centre of the capital known as Pensión de las Pulgas (Flea Lodge), this space 'necessarily implies an immersive effect, not only because the barrier between actors and spectators gets broken, but because of the situation of physical proximity […] resulting of the small size of the rooms' (Laín Corona 2017: 254, my translation). Again, this is something that permeates the creations of Factoría de Terror, both its most conventional pieces and those that favour the participatory and playful facets of immersive theatre.

We can divide the group's production according to several criteria. Let us focus on the degree of proximity or distance from classic theatre, where the aforementioned fourth wall prevails, there is a predetermined plot and little interaction with the spectators. Eloquently, it is in one of their last shows – the diptych *Cerca del miedo* (*Close to Fear*) (2011: see also Agudo 2011) – where they come the nearest to this notion, while most of their repertoire relies on interactivity and immersion, often without focal characters, and yet very rarely depriving the performance of the narrative dimension, no matter how simple this might be. The mentioned play is illustrating in this sense too. The host/presenter – played by David Sánchez, who used to direct the company's spectacles – introduces each of the two short pieces into which the show is divided with a monologue about fear: of the supernatural and of the ordinarily human. In one of them he addresses the audience directly, to ask about its fears, while in the other he brings up the unparalleled possibility that theatre offers of experiencing horror only a step away (hence the title): 'many times have you felt it through a screen; but today, you are going live it up close, so close that it will almost touch you', he says (my translation).

Cerca del miedo, even if staged in other spaces in Madrid (like the Antonio Machado Cultural Centre, or the Tarambana Theatre, in Carabanchel), debuted at a pub called La Escalera de Jacob (Jacob's Ladder), in Lavapiés: there, the audience, occupying the seats of the bar, surrounded a minimalistic scene, of barely eight or ten square metres, where the performers of that time (Alejandro de la Vela and Zoraida herself) played their parts; all of it, though, without enabling real interaction – except for the physical closeness and the resulting intimacy – or attempting to blend reality and fiction.

Other pieces, like *Llantos en la noche* (*Moaning in the Night*) (2007), *La valiente* (*The Brave*) (2009) and *Escena cero* (*Zero Scene*) (2010), distance themselves from these premises. All of them have characters and start from pre-established situations; the first one is even based on a complex script, comprising a dark family story. The group's intentions, however, go well beyond the construction of an object for aesthetic contemplation, or the elaboration of a closed, perfect, discourse. On the contrary: although subjected to a few elementary rules – that the actors, either explicitly or implicitly, make sure the public follows – instability, even unpredictability, is one of the added and appreciated values of the show, stimulating the performers and generating insecurity and uncertainty among the spectators. Zoraida herself shared on the phone her enthusiasm for improvisation; she also told me that the amount of spoken text in these plays increased or decreased depending on the public's engagement. The subtitle of *Escena cero* is sufficiently telling in this sense: 'El terror no está escrito' ('Horror is not written'). As the spectacle was described in the company's dossier:

> Director Silvio Hernán has summoned his performers in the theatre to begin the rehearsals of a new play. The director is delayed and the actors start to feel nervous. Although the theatre is empty, someone closes the gates and they start to hear weird noises. / Anguish will take over the actors, who will start suffering attacks […] From now on, there is only one goal: surviving. (my translation)

In this piece, 'the fourth wall remains intact'; yet, as the leaflet warns us, 'the actors will move through the spectators' space and they will use all the facilities of the theatre. The proximity of the public with the performer will be both physical and psychological' (my translation). A very similar situation is the basis for *La valiente*, whose title alludes to

the play staged in the fiction, interrupted by the occurrence of strange events in the room. It is under the affective state derived from situations like this – narratively open, apparently centrifugal – where the aim of Factoría becomes viable: 'unsettling the brain' ('descuadrar el cerebro'), according to Zoraida's expression, for whom the most important thing is that the spectators feel constantly tense, in danger, that they do not take anything for granted or forget that they are under threat at all times. That is what is implied in the above-mentioned description of *Escena cero*: 'in every corner they [the spectators] will find something disturbing, something that will be watching them from the dark' (my translation).

Such feelings of mistrust and defencelessness become activated in a purely instinctive way in the most conventional haunted attractions, in which attendees are taken from one room to the next by a sort of *cicerone* (or abandoned to their fate) and exposed to shocks where music, screaming, make-up, illumination and special effects, in general, play a major role. In her article on theatrical horror, Rubio (2015: 199) says that in this approach lie some of the best options of theatre to produce intense emotions. What is interesting about her argumentation, though, is the connection that she proposes with the oppressive and labyrinthine spaces of classic horror movies – Hammer productions, more particularly – applicable to the haunted attraction form (which, in fact, she seems to be describing). '[T]heatrical spaces should assimilate these, with spectators walking through them not knowing when horror will show itself, thus producing in them a sensation of uncertainty and fear to the unknown throughout the tour', she says; then, she adds something any theorist of immersion would agree on: 'The tour throughout the scene in this genre should be based on carefully selected resources (namely, lightning, auditive, visual, olfactory devices) which would enable the public to experience the

performance *senseperceptively*, through all the senses' (my emphasis). Indeed, the role of technology in the immersion procedures and the importance of the senses – in preference to rational ways of interpretation – are two defining points of the immersive paradigm.

Good evidence of all these aspects within Factoría's production can be found in *Pasadizo al infierno* (*Passage to Hell*): an attraction divided into a series of scenes and staged in the town of Ciudad Real for Halloween; it is set in a mental institution and uses motifs and figures from well-known horror flicks, such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974), Hannibal Lecter, *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), Freddy Krueger, etc. Another example would be *Mil y un terrores* (*One Thousand and One Terrors*), a show offered for nightclubs, heavily based on the spilling of blood. In this same line of visceral and corporeal violence, but with less involvement of the audience and very little (if any) narrative development or character construction, are the performances designed for film festivals like Nocturna, in Madrid, or Blood Film Festival, in Fuenlabrada. In them, like in the other mentioned shows, the members of Factoría attest to their craftsmanship, and to their skills at body contortion, gesturing and vocalization. For refined levels of interpretation and representation of horror, one must turn to more complex spectacles, capable of creating suspense and dramatic tension – reinforced by the interaction between actors and public and the latter's agency – and spatially and conceptually far from typical fair booths.

The above-mentioned *Llantos en la noche*, for example, is a six-hour-long spectacle, conceived for a specific environment: holiday cottages (*casas rurales*). Seven characters participate in the action, speaking among them and giving shape to the plot; yet they

never forget about the attendees, whom they involve in the narrative and lead from one site to another, asking them to do things on their behalf. More than in *Escena cero* or *La valiente*, participants become here the protagonists of the story: they suffer the horrors in their own skin, and the development of the action and resolution of the conflict depend, to a certain extent, on their actions and decisions. The fragments that follow come from the script that Zoraida provided me with; they refer to moments where the collaboration of the public is required, even if in some the action goes on regardless of the players' (for that is what they are, after all) saying or doing anything; it is, in this sense, a fine example of a procedural author's pre-determined plan:

> INSPECTOR**:** Isn't anybody going to tell me anything? *(To the audience)* Will none of you tell me what has happened?
>
> *(Short pause to see if anyone decides to speak. At that moment* ÁNGELA *will cut him/her off.)*
>
> ÁNGELA: Sir, I beg you to let our guests enjoy their dinner in peace.
>
> ***
>
> *(*ÁNGELA *gets scared because she was certain she had collected those sheets and starts to collect everything very nervously. When she calms down, she will try to persuade them [the spectators] into telling her about the* INSPECTOR *and sing to her the tune that would make her remember. When they have sung the tune and*

ÁNGELA *has remembered,* BEATRIZ *will step in, calling for her; she will get close to her and whisper something to her ear.)*

***

(The INSPECTOR *lies outside unconscious, with the letter in his hand. He waits for them to read it by themselves. If they do not read it, he will wake up. He will say the same, no matter if they read it or not by themselves.)*

Llantos en la noche is not, however, Factoría's most ambitious project. Being, according to my judgement, the one that accomplishes the finest balance between conventional theatre's strategies and those of the immersive-participatory form, giving rise to a product where physical horror coexists with a deeper, psychological, version of this affect, there is another one that, close to the limits of theatrical representation, transforms the public into a true lab subject (although without totally depriving it of its agency). I am speaking of the cogently entitled *Experimento Fear 2.0* (*Experiment Fear 2.0*).

According to the play's press kit, its creators pursued 'a good show with great actors and technicians in which the audience's participation becomes essential for the plot to move on' (my translation). First staged in 2009, in the *Albergue Caliga*, in Peñacaballera (Salamanca), and with a duration of four hours, *Experimento Fear 2.0* is presented as 'a study in fear', whose subjects are locked up in an investigations room and exposed, under the surveillance of a prototypical mad doctor, to 'diverse tests and stimuli to observe their reactions and elaborate a report after the recording' (my

translation). Even if the set-up might sound commonplace, there are a few details that add value to the show. Thus, as stated in the dossier:

> The well-crafted scenery and an illumination reminiscent of contemporary horror films turn *Fear 2.0* into a theatrical show worthy of big stages […]. Growing apart from classic stages that are currently being used in this kind of events, the investigation room specifically created for this experiment involves the public in a story with significant possibilities of becoming real. (my translation)

The plot twists, and the action of undercover actors, hiding among the public, contribute decisively to this. At a certain point, right after the beginning of the experiment, everything turns out to be a lie: *we* are not really at a medical institution and the reunion's objective is not a scientific test, but for the subjects to be tortured in front of perverts who have paid to watch. The concept, which reminds us both of *Hostel* (Roth, 2006) and *My Little Eye* (Evans, 2002), works perfectly; in an atmosphere of increasing anxiety, combining over-the-top dialogues and actions with scenes and motifs taken from twenty-first-century classics of horror film – *Saw* (Wan, 2004), *El orfanato* (*The Orphanage* (Bayona, 2007), *The Ring* (Verbinski, 2002) –, the spectator is not only a victim or a *voyeur*; he or she must intervene on several occasions to make the narrative evolve. As in one of those 'Choose your own Adventure' gamebooks or in a Graphic Adventure videogame – especially those based on a first-person point of view – his or her elections open up the path, and even if the story remains always, essentially, the same, and there prevail some limits that prevent from wandering off the pre-established route (that is, the procedural author's design), the sense of agency is bigger than in other shows. As White (2013: 12) argues, 'being in a position to take action, taking action,

and having a first-person relationship with that action will inflect the understanding of and the feelings generated by performance'. Allied with the level of immersion and interactivity, this gives rise, in *Experimento Fear 2.0*, to a theatrical experience packed with spooky moments that never neglects the desired effect. One only needs to look at the snapshots and recordings of the audience's reactions, available on the group's Facebook and its YouTube channel, to judge the effectiveness and success of the piece.

Conclusion

In its efforts to impact and immerse the spectators, in its elaborated staging and, also, in its making fear the thematic and structural axis of the show, *Experimento Fear 2.0* brings to mind other theatrical events, like Dyson and Nyman's highly popular *Ghost Stories* (2010), or, in Spain, the extreme haunt *Psicofobia*, held every year since 2009, around Halloween, in a village of Granada (Huétor Vega). Performances like these, and many others, share with Factoría's projects the same objectives: on a superficial level, to offer fun in a way that no other medium can give, and in a deeper sense, to explore the ways in which the theatrical form is able to incorporate the aesthetics of horror, without imitating the apparently omnipotent ways of literature and, especially, cinema. Whenever the stage tries to recreate the mechanisms and effects employed on the screen, the results are poor, disheartening. These have made both critics and the public think that theatre cannot compete in this arena and that, as an artistic medium, it is flawed for the expression of genres that play with emotions and imagination. Accepting the limitations that the fantastic and science fiction modes might encounter for the representation of otherworldly events and creatures, I do not think horror is as hopeless in this respect: maybe when dealing with stories that include supernatural phenomena, that is, things that cannot exist in our reality and, thus, will look awkward when shown

before a theatrical audience, not so much, instead, when involving physical and perfectly conceivable horrors (torture, murder, madness). I mentioned the Théâtre du Grand Guignol at the beginning of the article: that is one of the greatest models for visceral horror in drama, with its displays of violence and extreme situations, and the sophistication of make-up and special effects (Richardson 2015: 14–19); it has also been, as we saw, an inspiration for certain currents in the literature (Badley 1996: 3). Contemporary theatre has, though, taken a step further, by bringing the threats and the suffering to the spectator, in other words, by changing empathy with the characters into an in-the-flesh experience. Naturally, the fictional agreement stands, and nobody is expected to get hurt; yet the effect is much more powerful than the one provided by conventional staging or, of course, the watching of a film. Immersion and participation of the audience are, in this sense, the answers for horror in this medium: a concept that is already being practiced all over the world, with notable success, but that is still in need of serious consideration. That is what this article has attempted to do, resorting to a significant example of Spanish today's theatre and entertainment production. I only hope that Factoría de Terror resumes its activities, as promised, and its world starts to really attract the attention of specialists in theatre and popular genres.

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Notes

[1] That is what critics like García Barrientos (2012: 80–81) call *apelación al público*/*appeal to the audience*. He also distinguishes between *apelación escénica* (*scenic appeal*) and *apelación dramática* (*dramatic appeal*): in the first kind, the characters seem to abandon their world and enter ours, while in the second one it is the public that is apparently drawn to the fictional universe. See, for this and many other aspects tackled in the present article, Carrera Garrido (2019).

[2] It did not disappear, though. As White (2013: 3) says: 'Of course all audiences are participatory. Without participation performance would be nothing but action happening in the presence of other people. Audiences laugh, clap, cry, fidget, and occasionally heckle'.

[3] All the quotations from the interview have been translated by me.

[4] Unfortunately, the group's website is inactive at present, after the dissolution of the collective in 2016. Even if Zoraida plans to resume the shows in holiday cottages, as of fall 2018 this has not happened yet. You still can, though, check the company's blog (http://elespectaculodelterror.blogspot.com/), its Twitter and Facebook profiles (https://twitter.com/factoriaterror, https://www.facebook.com/factoriadeterror and https://www.facebook.com/factoriadeterrormiedo) and its YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnJa0OH9BCKOH08JfKhClKQ). The information displayed on these pages comes either from these sources, from the

materials stored on the webpage (such as a complete dossier of the company, with the CVs of its members, the repertoire of shows and other information of interest) or from Zoraida herself, with whom I have been in contact since May 2017, and who has entrusted me with many other materials (videos, blueprints, scripts, photographs, etc., some of which are reproduced here). Part of them are available to anyone interested, by formal request to the author of this article.