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## Chapter Eight: ‘Tell No One’: Secret Cinema and the Paradox of Secrecy

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Secrecy has enjoyed the limelight in twenty-first-century theatre and performance. First of all, secrecy has played an important role in the design of audience participation. UK-based companies like Punchdrunk and Coney set tasks and challenges for participating audience members that involve the discovery of secrets or covert forms of audience participation. Second, theatre and performance branding, particularly in the marketing strategies of London-based theatre companies, has embraced secrecy as a trope. Examples include the Lyric Hammersmith’s Secret Theatre Company, Secret Theatre London and Secret Cinema, which have all marketed theatre performances to paying audiences without telling them what the performance will be and encouraging those in the know to keep schtum. However, it’s odd that secrecy has become so *prominent*. For Sissela Bok, a secret is ‘kept intentionally hidden, set apart in the mind of its keeper as requiring concealment. ... The word “secrecy” refers to the resulting concealment. It also denotes the methods used to conceal’ (Bok 1989: 5–6). So is secrecy still secrecy once concealment of a secret is coupled with an advertisement of secrecy? What do secrets become once packaged and sold to anyone who is able and willing to afford disclosure?

Theatre especially – the home of spectacle and of public scrutiny – is surely the last place one would expect to find a turn towards secrecy. This turn, albeit a fairly minor turn – more of a glance, perhaps – is concerned with (1) audiences becoming co-conspiratorial clue crackers and (2) a paradoxical form of marketing that promotes secrecy as a spectacle and as

a commodity. In this chapter, I want to address how these two aspects of secrecy inform one another. There are important connections to be made between the design of audience participation and theatre marketing, and secrecy can elucidate some of these connections. More specifically, I will be addressing spectacular and paradoxical secrecy, aiming to establish and unravel the roles and uses of the commodified secret and its relevance to audience participation and immersion in contemporary theatre.

The next section begins by setting out some of the ways that contemporary theatre companies have been promoting secrecy in the design of participatory theatre, before turning to secrecy as a trope in theatre branding and marketing and reflecting on where this turn fits within audience participation studies. The section after that considers what I call the ‘paradox of secrecy’, which refers to the spectacular presentation of secret content in commodity form. I will be addressing how techniques used to prepare audiences for role playing, interactivity and immersion in Secret Cinema’s *The Shawshank Redemption* (2012) give rise to this paradox, paying special attention to the ‘keying’ of secrecy in theatre marketing and branding. Finally, the chapter assesses the role and uses of commodified secrecy in *Shawshank*, focusing on a complex layering of audience inclusivity and exclusivity and its relevance to the aesthetics and politics of audience participation and immersion.

### **Secrets and secrecy in contemporary theatre**

Coney is one of the most innovative experimenters with secrecy in participation design, by which I mean the dramaturgical and formal crafting of participatory procedures and the management of participation over the course of a live participatory performance, as well as periods of time both after and, especially, before. Coney are a collective of artists and game designers that claim to be run by an enigmatic entity called ‘Rabbit’, and they base their work

on three founding principles: adventure, curiosity and loveliness, although a fourth principle, namely reciprocity, has also been noted by co-founder Tassos Stevens.<sup>1</sup> Stevens has run workshops as training programmes for ‘Playful Secret Agents’ (Machon 2013: 199), which flags the importance of secrecy and playful conspiracy to members of the company, who are clearly invested in exploring their connotations and potential. However, more pertinent to this chapter are Coney’s performances for playing audience participants. A good example is *The Loveliness Principle* (2010–12), in which participants, among other similar tasks, are invited to ‘reverse pick-pocket’ strangers by surreptitiously placing or attaching thoughtful, hand-written messages somewhere on or inside of the stranger’s clothing or possessions – slipped inside a jacket pocket, for instance, or in the strap of a bag. In both the workshop and the performance, a playful approach to secrecy in the design of participation is used to explore sociality between people who have not met before.

It is worth noting that another piece by Coney, called *The Gold Bug* (2007), was featured as a performance within a performance in Punchdrunk’s influential immersive work, *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007–08). *The Gold Bug* was both an online game and a live theatre experience embedded within *The Masque*. The live component could be accessed either by winning tickets via the online game, which involved clue cracking and commitment to an online narrative, or by stumbling across the interloping performance as a Punchdrunk audience member. Aside from this collaboration, however, where there are clear links between the two companies, Punchdrunk and Coney load secrecy with different meanings and orient secrecy towards different ends. Rather than drawing on secrecy to promote explorations of sociality, Punchdrunk approach secrecy as a vehicle for generating greater audience investment in the world and ideology of an immersive performance. For instance, prior to the launch of *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* (2013–14), critics were invited to a ten-minute ‘live trailer’ in a dilapidated shop on Kingsland High Street in East London.

The live trailer was also made open to the public, although it was extremely difficult to find out where the trailer was happening, beyond a vaguely defined area, not least because Punchdrunk asked critics to keep the precise whereabouts under wraps. This was a trailer to be discovered by keeping an eye open for something out of the ordinary, which turned out to be the word ‘*Psychic*’ scrawled in glowing pink neon lettering in a shop window.

The discovery of secrets, particularly the secret depths of a performance that might take place behind locked doors, or in hard-to-reach recesses of vast buildings, is also something that characterises Punchdrunk’s large-scale work more generally. In *The Drowned Man*, audiences could purchase considerably more expensive tickets that would enable them to experience a prologue and special scenes that audiences who could afford only the cheaper tickets would not be party to, which introduces a connection between secrecy and wealth. If you have the cash to flash, you can put yourself in a better position to learn more about the bewildering and complex worlds of a Punchdrunk work, albeit an investment that may not ultimately pay off.<sup>2</sup> Comparably, diners at The Heath – a fairly expensive noir-themed restaurant on the sixth floor of Punchdrunk and Emursive’s revived production of *Sleep No More* (2011–) in New York – are privy to secret encounters and information that are not available elsewhere in the multi-storey immersive environment. Those who can afford the cost of the menu, whether or not they choose to experience the rest of the performance, open up possibilities for intimate interactions with performers mid-meal, and they may also find cryptic notes pertinent to the performance hidden in the food.<sup>3</sup> Punchdrunk’s ‘Key Holder’ funding scheme, which puts a fresh spin on more conventional friendship schemes, is also premised on revealing company ‘secrets’ in accordance with the amount donated, among other privileges.<sup>4</sup>

Coney and Punchdrunk therefore gear secrecy towards different ends while nonetheless sharing common elements: withholding information from audiences and potential

audiences, exploring participation as a process of discovery and revelling in the possibilities of clue cracking and problem solving. However, the connections between theatre aesthetics (participation design) and economics (theatre marketing) are much clearer when secrecy is used as a trope in participatory theatre branding and marketing. Secrecy sells. Secrets are owned and they can be exchanged. As with other forms of property, secrets can be profitable – and not just to the blackmailer. Trade secrets most clearly indicate the inherent allure, tradability and profitability of secrets. Trade secrets usually refer to hidden information of some kind, such as a secret ingredient in a recipe, or a particular kind of expertise, rendering knowledge as a form of intellectual property. However, *secrecy itself* can also function as an alluring, tradable and profitable commodity. This is a kind of secret that flaunts itself as a secret, a spectacular secret – paradoxical secrecy that thrives on implied naughtiness and exclusivity. This is Victoria's Secret, the secret-as-brand, the secret that's out. This is commodified secrecy that welcomes all, at a price.

This kind of secret is the kind snapped up by theatre branders and marketers, and not just of performances that involve audience participation. For example, London's Lyric Hammersmith theatre launched a season of plays in 2013 that it called 'Secret Theatre', in part as a pragmatic response to building works that hindered the Lyric's normal operation. While the site around the Lyric auditorium was affected, the auditorium itself remained largely untouched. In response, as artistic director Sean Holmes put it, the Lyric 'decided to make this auditorium a flexible space hosting whatever audience we could get in through back doors and goods lifts. A Secret Theatre at the heart of a building site' (Holmes 2013). Paying audiences bought tickets that were labelled simply 'Show 1', 'Show 2' and so on, and audiences were encouraged to keep play titles to themselves, with some taking it upon themselves to reprimand one another for revealing content to prospective audiences (Orr 2013). Each of the unspecified plays was performed, directed and designed by a Secret

Theatre Company and ranged from productions of classic texts, such as Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), to new writing, including Caroline Bird's *Chamber Piece* (2013).

Another example is Secret Theatre London, which launched in the same year as the Lyric's Secret Theatre season, but it has nothing to do with the Lyric and in fact grows out of a North American company called Brooklyn Studio Lab. Their first production in the UK was a 2013 site-generic theatre adaptation of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). As with the Lyric's Secret Theatre, audiences of *Reservoir Dogs* bought tickets for an unspecified performance in advance of the event, which was revealed only as the performance unfolded. Nonetheless, as Nathan Brooker writes, audiences were still told that they were buying tickets for a Tarantino adaptation, and while the specific film was kept secret, 'it doesn't take the most powerful brain in London to guess which of his eight films it was likely to be', seeing as the event was 'marketed as a site-specific production staged in a warehouse' (2013).

Both the Lyric's Secret Theatre Company and Secret Theatre London market not-so-secret secrets as an alluring feature of marketing campaigns. These campaigns appeal to the involvement of prospective audiences as public secret spreaders who ideally withhold disclosure of a performance's content but announce to friends and networks that secret content is available. The aim is to maximise the number of people who are 'in' on a public secret.

Both the Secret Theatre Company and Secret Theatre London create work in the long shadow of another company that helped to cultivate the turn towards secrecy in theatre branding and marketing: Secret Cinema. Secret Cinema is enormously successful in the UK, routinely attracting crowds in the tens of thousands over the course of a run. The company was founded in 2007 by Fabien Riggall, although it grew out of two other companies formed

by Riggall in 2003 and 2005, respectively: Future Shorts and Future Cinema. All three incarnations continue to stage film screenings inside immersive theatre landscapes that mirror environments featured in the film. These environments contain actors who perform in roles inspired by, or directly borrowed from, the film prior to (and sometimes during) the film screening. Audiences are also encouraged to wear costumes appropriate to each event and to interact with the performers. Future Shorts screens short films, and Future Cinema screens feature films. What Secret Cinema does is add another layer to the live feature-length theatre/cinema experience. As with the Lyric's Secret Theatre Company and Secret Theatre London, audiences do not know the film and accompanying immersive performance in advance of the event, although they are given clues (such as a dress code) via email bulletins and other marketing resources. This is unlike another of Riggall's initiatives, namely Secret Cinema Presents, where the film title is included in theatre marketing. With Secret Cinema Presents, the notion of 'secrecy' has little currency as a meaningful concept but a great deal of currency as an initiative that can build on the successes of both a well-known theatre company and a well-known film, such as their 2014 adaptation and screening of *Back to the Future* (1985). The production sold 40,000 tickets at a cost of £53 each within the first hour of going on sale (Aftab 2014).

What sets Secret Cinema apart from their Secret Theatre compatriots is a more concerted effort to match secrecy with role playing, interactivity and immersion in an event that exceeds the duration of a live theatre performance. Secret Cinema exemplifies how the roles and uses of secrecy in participation design and theatre marketing can complement one another. From the outset of a marketing campaign, the company encourages audiences to collude in an agenda that presents itself as secret, engendering audiences as colluding participants. While the possibility for audiences to make a meaningful intervention in live performance is fairly limited in Secret Cinema's participation design, an audience's role in

performance is nonetheless keyed as a part of a 'secret' world. Audiences have a part to play, even though their playing is unlikely to affect the unfolding of a performance all that much, and this part is impacted by a framework for audience participation that joins together live theatre aesthetics and the marketing of a theatre event.

There is a tendency in audience participation studies to approach participatory art and performance either as an intervention in the material networks of capitalism or as a complicit feature or effect of the political ideologies that facilitate capitalist hegemony. For example, in *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud influentially explores the 'models of sociability' proposed by relational artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick. Promoting inclusive and convivial forms of audience participation, Bourriaud argues that relational artists 're-stitch the relational fabric' of a capitalist society, suggesting that these artists find ways to oppose processes of alienation by remodelling the sphere of interhuman relations (2002: 36). In *Conversation Pieces* and *The One and the Many*, Grant Kester also examines the value of artists offering up 'models of sociability', focusing especially on dialogic exchange in socially engaged art and performance (2004; 2011). Contrastingly, Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* questions the ethical impulses of artists and scholars to celebrate the inclusion of participants in consensual forms of engagement if convivial inclusivity comes at the cost of more radical shocks to the ordering of social relationships (2012). Bourriaud, Kester and Bishop all evaluate participatory encounters in light of non-art contexts. However, while they sketch important connections between aesthetics and these contexts, particularly capitalist economies, more work needs to be done to address the imbrication of economics *within* theatre aesthetics, specifically – and particularly the aesthetics of audience participation in theatre.

These authors have set the terms of debate not just in contemporary art history but in theatre and performance studies as well, which is partly why I choose to survey their work

with such rapidity; it is well-trodden territory. Performance scholars Shannon Jackson<sup>5</sup> and Jen Harvie,<sup>6</sup> for instance, have both offered balanced assessments of convivial and dissensual participatory art and performance practice that builds on and challenges this discourse. Jackson and Harvie address how socially engaged performance and relational art can comment on and propose alternatives to material systems of production and support (especially Jackson), and they critique the potential complicity of these artists and performance-makers in the material networks of capitalism (especially Harvie). However, I want to widen an understanding of performance, particularly immersive theatre performances, as opposed to socially engaged performance, so that it includes the moment that a prospective audience member comes into contact with a marketing campaign. In this chapter, it is not so much funding and diverse forms of performance production that piques my interest, necessarily, which play important roles in other studies of audience participation in contemporary theatre and performance, like those of Jackson and Harvie, which tackle the economic conditions of production and reception. Rather, focus is placed squarely on the promotion of performance – how it appears and especially how it is sold to a prospectively participating audience member. This is important when addressing the immersive work of Secret Cinema, because the frameworks that guide audience participation are founded at an early point of encounter with performance: the point of promotion.

Scholars such as Gareth White<sup>7</sup> and Josephine Machon<sup>8</sup> have come closest to this approach, and their work will inform this chapter; however, neither scholar chooses to focus on the relationships between aesthetics and economics, which are important foci when economic concerns, such as commodification, influence theatre aesthetics. Additionally, given their popularity, Secret Cinema has remained curiously unrepresented in studies of audience participation and immersion. This may be due, in part, to their overtly commercial status, but this ought to incentivise, not deter, critical enquiry. The secrecy flaunted and

ultimately commodified by Secret Cinema raises important questions about audience agency, inclusivity and immersion that merit scholarly attention. What are the roles and significances of secrecy in Secret Cinema's marketing campaigns? In what ways might these roles and the relationships between them inform the commodification of secrecy? And what is the relevance of secrecy for the study of audience participation and immersion?

### **The possession of secrets and the paradox of secrecy**

Secrets and secrecy can give rise to communities of people, mutual understanding and resistance against intolerance or injustice – for instance, the uses of identity markers and codes by homosexuals in societies that consider homosexuality taboo, particularly via dissimulation and camp. Another example would be the 'craftivist' movement explored by Dawn Fowler in this volume, in which (usually) anonymous individuals and groups covertly insert objects, often knitted and displaying activist slogans and/or content, in public spaces. However, secrecy can also inculcate obedience to the state, noting that 'protection' of a citizenry can also work as a form of disenfranchisement. An example here is the threat of prosecution for leaking information that is otherwise withheld from a public.

The visibility or invisibility of a secret's content can differentiate one person or group from another, and an important source of this differentiation is possession. I might possess a secret that I want to safeguard, and were you to find out about it you may end up in a position of power over me, bringing with it the threat of exposure. For psychological anthropologist T. M. Luhrmann, who draws on Georg Simmel, knowledge is 'a form of property, in that it can be possessed. ... And, like the difference between private and public property, it is secret knowledge that evokes the sense of possession most clearly' (Luhrmann 1989: 137).<sup>9</sup> For Luhrmann, '[p]ossession differentiates. Concealed information separates one group from

another and one person from the rest. What I know and you do not demonstrates that we are not identical, that we are separate people' (1989: 137). In other words, there are links to be made between secrets, possession and property, and these links impact on how people relate to one another; they impact on 'interhuman relations', as Bourriaud might put it. You are either differentiated from the rest by being 'in' on a secret or you are excluded from that knowledge. This is one way in which secrecy might foster a sense of community grounded in a shared but exclusive knowledge, especially if that shared knowledge is bound up with an aspect of identity that is common and visible, or noticeable, among secret sharers – in the form of behavioural traits, for instance, or knowing facial gestures. Secrets can also be exchanged through bargaining or being marketed and sold in the same way that one would sell any other commodity.

Instead of secrets that are kept on the down-low, or leaked secrets, I want to focus on the 'paradox' of commodified secrecy. In putting forward this paradox, I refer, in part, to Beryl L. Bellman, who suggests that '[t]o tell a secret is to do secrecy. The methods used in that accomplishment are part constitutive of the phenomenon' (Bellman 1981: 8). For Bellman, the paradox of secrecy is that a secret becomes itself through its own negation. 'The informant who is telling a secret', he writes, 'either directly or tacitly makes the claim that the information he or she speaks is not to be spoken' (1981: 10). In other words, a secret is defined as much by revelation, or the threat of revelation, as it is by its being hidden. For Bellman, a secret is defined by its being announced as that which is not meant to be announced, even if this 'announcement' takes the form of private recognition. However, the paradox of secrecy, as it appears in recent theatre and theatre marketing, is more about making the announcement of a secret, as a secret, as spectacular as possible. The paradox of secrecy in this context is about striving to *involve* prospective audiences, rather than exclude

them. The secret itself – such as the title of a performance – does not need to be revealed to achieve the desired involvement; it is enough for the framework of secrecy to be flaunted.

As Jack Bratich acknowledges, secrets are ripe for incorporation within the ‘Society of the Spectacle’, as Guy Debord famously dubbed twentieth-century consumer society, giving rise to what Bratich calls ‘spectacular secrecy’. Bratich highlights how the Debordian Spectacle ‘usually signifies a heightening of the visible’ through commodification, elaborating that secrecy has now ‘become integrated into (no longer expelled from) the spectacle’ (Bratich 2006: 495). The resulting ‘spectacular’ secrets are made hyper-visible as an extension of the Spectacle’s thirst for commodification.

Spectacular secrets, once applied to the context of capitalist markets (digressing from Bratich’s specific interest in homeland security), are granted an exchange value premised on the exclusive allure of secrets. Spectacular secrets capitalise on the desire of consumers to be included and involved with the knowledge and opportunities that a secret is supposed to hide, which is the basis for the paradox of secrecy. This paradox, in my formulation, is thoroughly bound up with capital as it circulates in the information economy. While secrecy is fundamentally concerned with possession – with possessing a secret – the paradox of secrecy is concerned with possessing secrets in commodity form and displaying secrets hyper-visibly. Commodified secrets in this paradoxical scenario are spectacular, even while the information attached to a secret-cum-brand is hidden.

The paradox of spectacular secrecy is clearly applicable to marketing and branding strategies – such as those of the Lyric’s Secret Theatre, Secret Theatre London and Secret Cinema – that appeal to desires to be ‘in’ on a secret. As such, secrecy’s antithesis – publicity – is incorporated into a strategic deployment of secrecy to garner interest and sell tickets. This paradoxical incorporation involves using the spectacular image of secrecy as exclusive

information, purportedly available only to a privileged few but actually available to anyone who is able and willing to purchase a ticket while tickets are available.

Interestingly, the secrets of Secret Cinema – the location and title of the film to be adapted and screened – do not really hide that much about what to expect from a Secret Cinema performance, at least for those who have heard about, or experienced, their work before. The same devices for preparing, engaging and immersing audiences are used for each show: role playing and encouraging investment in a character assigned in advance of a live performance; costuming audience participants or asking them to prepare their own costumes; incorporating performer-audience interaction and the chance to eat and drink in themed environments; immersing audiences in locations that derive from a film; and presenting a film screening. These commercially friendly devices provide a fairly standard framework for each show, which mitigates the risk of paying to see a performance that may not appeal to personal taste. While content will vary, the immersive and participatory characteristics of a Secret Cinema performance will vary much less.

Preparing for an immersive experience is an important part of each Secret Cinema performance that builds a sense of anticipation and excitement surrounding the possibilities of secret content. Decoding cryptic clues about a forthcoming experience, especially via project websites, email and social media; developing an awareness and understanding of an assigned character; and preparing a costume all position prospective audiences as participants in the development of an ambiguous aesthetic, which is appealing precisely because its meaningfulness is ambiguous in the lead-up to a live performance. It is therefore important to take these preparatory procedures seriously, as they extend the parameters of participation design and, once scrutinised, reveal important connections between the marketing of an event and the aesthetics of audience participation and immersion within a live performance.

## **Secret Cinema and the keying of secrecy**

Prospective audiences are usually notified of a forthcoming Secret Cinema performance, in the first instance, via email or social media. There is nothing particularly innovative about this, but what sets Secret Cinema's approach apart from a broader field of contemporary theatre marketers is an extension of the 'secret' trope from the company's brand to the language used in theatre marketing. As Machon observes, immersive theatre companies, such as Coney and Punchdrunk, often use language that is 'evocative of the mystery surrounding the event, perhaps similar to that of secret societies' (2013: 54). However, for Secret Cinema the theme of secrecy permeates their marketing materials to a much greater extent. They flaunt secrecy, much as Secret Theatre Company and Secret Theatre London flaunt secrecy. For instance, Secret Cinema e-bulletins about past and forthcoming work are signed off with the tagline 'Tell No One', followed, amusingly, by a postscript that reads 'Join us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter'.<sup>10</sup> While email and social networks have become dominant marketing media in theatre production, the relationships between marketing form and content in Secret Cinema's tweets and emails is more peculiar. Although audiences are told to 'Tell No One', social media implores them to 'Tell Everyone'.

For comic Daniel Kitson, aside from emailing subscribers to his mailing list, this kind of canny publicity – or indeed most publicity – is shunned, resulting in something far closer to Secret Cinema's principle 'tell no one'. As Dominic Cavendish writes, Kitson 'avoids celebrity and publicity like the plague. ... He seldom, if ever, talks to the press these days, and doesn't invite them to review his stand-up gigs' (Cavendish 2014). But for Secret Cinema, secrecy flows through digital economies of reproduction as an abstract and commodified entity. An audience's first encounter with secrecy in a Secret Cinema

performance therefore occurs before the performance proper as paradoxical and spectacular secrecy. The announcement of secrecy is made hyper-visible.

At the point of first contact with a Secret Cinema marketing campaign, a frame for a series of participatory exchanges that are still to come is put into place. This frame, which is the frame of secrecy, is just as important to a Secret Cinema show as whatever film and accompanying performance is to be screened and staged. It defines what audiences are to become: they are to take on the role of a ‘Secret Cinema society’ member, which is my own term for Secret Cinema’s peculiar rendering of the archaic secret society. Unlike secret societies, the Secret Cinema society is not difficult to enter, provided that audiences can afford to do so. It is the antithesis of W. B. Yeats’ dream of an ‘unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never too many’ (qtd in Freshwater 2009: 44). Secret Cinema dreams of a popular theatre that makes its secret membership spectacular, where admission is by purchase and never too few, so long as a run can accommodate numbers or be extended to do so.

White’s *Audience Participation in Theatre* (2013) reminded me of the usefulness of Erving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis* for the analysis of audience participation in theatre, particularly with regard to the framing of participation. White uses Goffman’s research into social relationality to explore the shared assumptions that make procedures for participation in theatre meaningful. The idea I want to borrow from Goffman, though, is his concept of ‘keying’, which while addressed by White, still merits explication in the context of this chapter (White 2013: 36–37). For Goffman, keying refers to activities that are recognisably ‘bracketed’ from the everyday and that temporarily, but systematically, alter how an activity might otherwise be understood (Goffman 1986: 45). Those who are aware of Secret Cinema must surely recognise that the kind of secrecy that they promote is ‘bracketed’ from less visible, less mediatised, forms of secrecy. Secrecy is in this sense ‘keyed’. While it is still

possible to feel a sense of exclusivity, of being ‘in the know’ and able to cash in on the cultural capital affiliated with the immersive experiences provided by Secret Cinema, the hyper-visibility of the company online and in the media, along with their popularity, precludes clandestine activity while promoting spectacular secrecy. Secret Cinema’s publicity keys secrecy by commodifying secrecy. On the one hand, this negates secrecy as a clandestine activity. On the other hand, because secrecy is bracketed, it doesn’t much matter; prospective audiences are still happy to buy into commodified secrecy.

A forthcoming and unknown film and performance is proposed to prospective audiences as a riddle and as a secret to be kept, so long as the keeping of a secret is retweeted, shared and forwarded. Marketing emails will usually be very brief and may contain a teaser quotation of some sort at its head from a text that has influenced the choice of an as-yet-unknown film, a link to a Facebook page for that particular performance, performance dates, and an ambiguous note stating that the show, for nearly all of their UK performances, will take place in a secret location, and more often than not a secret London location.<sup>11</sup> These publicity emails therefore participate in the keying of secrecy as a paradoxical secret; they mark an organised style of secrecy and frame secrecy as a playful practice attuned to the aesthetic character of a forthcoming performance. These emails are obscurely representative of a performance to come and disclose something of it through cryptic means, but they also ensure that secrecy becomes itself through disclosure – more specifically, through the hyper-visible performance of allegiance to the Secret Cinema society on social media’s various stages.

Secret Cinema’s keying of secrecy has also extended to the design of tickets for some performances. In their 2012 production and screening of Frank Darabont’s film *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), a downloadable e-ticket included a letter signed off from ‘P. Doone – Administrator’ that informed the ticket holder, in brash typescript, that they were

taking part in a profiling campaign and that their identity had been successfully verified. The purpose of this verification remained a mystery until the performance proper began, but the ticket set up a riddle. It added to the mystery surrounding the live event, cohered with the keying of secrecy set up at first point of contact, and developed audience expectation in advance of the participatory encounters that awaited prospective participants.

For this same performance, audiences were asked to sign up to a ‘court summons’ that determined their arrival time, usefully doubling, I imagine, as an innovative means of getting large numbers of audience members into a theatre space without it seeming too much like entering an auditorium at the five-minute call. Each individual was given an alias – a role – and was asked to prepare for the event by learning the hymn *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*; wearing belongings discretely; wearing flat shoes; wearing long hair up, not down; and remembering to follow all instructions immediately once inside the space. Audiences were advised to ‘bring cash – you will be able to buy “library cards” to the value of twenty pounds from your lawyer upon arrival’ (the only valid currency inside the performance for the purchase of food and drink) and were also asked to acquire and wear suits with long johns and vests underneath. Finally and inevitably, the advisory email concluded that ‘[c]ourt proceedings and anything that may ensue thereafter are state secrets – Tell no one’.<sup>12</sup> More explicit parts of a participation design than the textual features of theatre marketing are therefore put into place after first point of contact, but still at a time before arrival at the secret location, further defining the terms of Secret Cinema’s spectacularly secret activities, as well as forthcoming participatory procedures.

So far I have outlined the keying of secrecy before audiences arrive at a secret location for their live cinema experience. But what of role playing, interactivity and immersion in the live cinema experience itself? Role playing as prisoners has an important part to play in *Shawshank*. First of all, costumed audiences ‘complete’ the immersive

environments.<sup>13</sup> There are two phases of costuming in *Shawshank*. In the first, audiences arrive in a costume (a suit with long johns and a vest underneath) that they have purchased, borrowed or made, which requires a form of participatory endeavour. In the second, audiences are required to change into a different costume, a prison uniform, ensuring even greater degrees of homogeneity that is as little affected by personalised costume design as possible. In using costume to foster role-based immersion, then, Secret Cinema use audience members to complete scenographic design, but only in the periods before and at the very beginning of a performance. Audiences participate in the development of a theatre aesthetic, but in a way that requires very little audience responsibility or agency, beyond the creation or purchase of a prescribed costume that, soon after arrival, at least in this performance, is to be replaced with a homogenised aid for both character and scenographic development. Furthermore, as costumed audiences make their way to a performance, this aid also signals to passers-by that something out of the ordinary is happening. The costumes double as an advert once those passers-by feel the need to find out why costumed crowds are flocking to a particular site.

Role playing in *Shawshank* also ties into procedures for interactivity. Audiences spend part of the performance lying in bunk beds inside a prison cell, listening to the advice of other prisoners (actors) who address them as new inmates of the prison. This particular part of the performance involves responsiveness on the parts of both willing participants and actors to engage in dialogue as a vehicle for improvisatory, role-based immersion. While they are addressed as prisoners – prisoners in the re-presented film world of *Shawshank* – it is up to the audience to decide whether they accept and run with the imposed role or choose instead to reject the imposition. As Sophie Nield recognises, addressing audience members in this way can give rise to existential confusion because the spectatorial and role-based forms of audience engagement do not always align. Addressing audiences in role presumes recognition

of the role. When this recognition fails to happen, the conceit of a theatrical scenario can produce an uncomfortable queasiness or a sense of frustration at being recognised as someone *other* at a time when investment in belief is deficient (Nield 2008: 531–544).<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, what the imposition of a role through interactivity seeks to achieve is complicity in the world of performance. This makes the early stages of role development in Secret Cinema’s marketing important, as it is here that the role starts to take shape as something proposed and, ideally, adopted by prospective audiences of their own choosing, although audiences may just as well reject the invitation to wear a costume and reject attempts to cast them in role. However, even if rejected, Secret Cinema’s approach to role-based immersion still flags an *intended* connection between the marketing of theatre and participation in theatre. Ideally, though not for all audiences, the keying of secrecy in advance of a live performance affects how processes of participation unfold. Secret Cinema’s marketing prepares participation and immersion in the world of a performance and renders both not as imminent and emergent phenomena, but as phenomena that transcend and frame improvisatory negotiations of a fictive cosmos.

An important aspect of an audience member’s immersion in *Shawshank* is therefore role based. For example, one of the many rooms that can be stumbled into in the performance is a prison canteen. Throughout much of the performance, up until entering the canteen, I had been annoyed by the fact that the prisoner trousers I had been given to change into were far too big and had to be held up by hand. However, inside the canteen a performer-inmate took me to one side and, from the corner of his mouth, attempted to sell me what he described as ‘contraband’. The contraband in question was a piece of rope that I could use as a belt. While there are grim readings of this particular piece of contraband in the context of a prison, the comedic nature of the exchange was built on a conspiratorial mode of audience engagement

that both solved a practical problem and served to draw me closer into the world of the performance.

The bracketing of a conspiratorial form of secrecy as play is clear in this example; the behaviour of the actor/character is not *actually* conspiratorial but is instead a playful engagement with the coding of secrecy (fortunately, despite my reluctance to pay, he gave me the rope anyway). For Goffman, coding ‘carries the connotation of secret communication’, and in some respects this is what sets coding and keying apart; participants in a keyed activity ought to be aware that the activity is bracketed from the everyday (Goffman 1986: 44). In my exchange with the prisoner, though, secret communication was coded as being *noticeably* and *theatrically* secret. Secrecy *was* present, but only as a product of investment in the bracketing of secrecy set up by Secret Cinema, the heritage of which stretched back to promotional activity. I ended up participating as a co-conspirator and, moreover, as a character within the performance who was addressed as a member of the performance’s world and not as an observer standing apart from it.

The terms of creativity are underwritten in Secret Cinema performances by a procedural and aesthetic logic that is embroiled in a marketing campaign that precedes the performance. Of course, all theatre performances are connected to economic frames that sustain theatre production; however, Secret Cinema use marketing as a part of participation design. Secret Cinema engenders audiences as partakers in paradoxical secrecy, as ‘tell everyone’ secret spreaders who disclose the presence of undisclosed information, and this engendering carries forward into a live performance, the subject of which – an as-yet-unknown film – is to be decoded as the performance progresses. Prospective audiences are asked to prepare for a live event by participating as a co-designer (preparing a costume) and as a performer (preparing a role), and these tasks further serve the gradual unfolding of a mystery. Why this dress code? Why this role? Marketing, preparation for performance and

participation in performance consequently meld in a cohesive project that does not cut off an immersive environment from the economic frames that serve theatre production but rather tie these frames into theatre aesthetics.

### **Secret commodities and audience involvement**

The exclusive allure of secrets within markets is meant to appeal to – or ‘include’ – as many people as possible, converting appeal into sales. This leads me to consider how the paradox of secrecy, as it appears in theatre marketing, can inform what might be meant by inclusive/exclusive and inclusionary/exclusionary participation. The paradox of secrecy ultimately reveals the limitations of these binaries, as it is clear that inclusion and exclusion are not poles that oppose within frameworks for participation but layers that intermingle. In Secret Cinema’s marketing, participants are included in a campaign that positions itself as exclusive. Those who commit to a performance’s preparatory processes are included in a participation design that exceeds live performance, but in ways that may exclude those who do not commit to these processes from enjoying the same levels of immersion and interactivity. Furthermore, participants are included in the exclusive Secret Cinema society provided that they can afford to do so and ‘Tell No One’, which is an exclusionary feature that runs alongside the inclusionary ‘Tell Everyone’ logic of social media. Inclusion/exclusion and inclusivity/exclusivity are not oppositional, or even clear-cut, categories.

This layering of inclusion and exclusion was especially clear in the advertising of a Secret Restaurant inside *Shawshank*. An email was sent out to ticketholders from ‘Philip W. Romney’, who invited the recipient to the Official State Dinner Party for Social Reform. For the staggering sum of £100 per head, audiences were treated to canapés, wine and a three-

course meal by guest chef Alan Stewart and food designers Blanch & Shock. Only a few would have been able to afford to participate in this aspect of the performance, the cost of which dwarfs comparable meals in the UK's top two internationally acclaimed Michelin-starred restaurants.<sup>15</sup> In some respects, then, another kind of secret is instigated: secrets closed off to those who cannot afford to pay such a vast amount of money for their food. 'Secrecy secures', to borrow from Simmel, 'the possibility of a second world alongside of the obvious world' (Simmel 1906: 463). This idea of a second world chimes with the ambitions of much immersive theatre work to be set 'alongside of the obvious world' in a world of its own, seemingly segregated from the material contexts that embed immersive performances.<sup>16</sup> However, the Secret Restaurant is an exclusionary world open only to wealthier members of the Secret Cinema society, comparable to The Heath in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*. Both the Secret Restaurant and The Heath operate as worlds closed off from a wider audience. These are worlds for the wealthy that glorify the excesses of privilege and that aspire to an even more total immersion, layering extant forms of privilege and immersion within an immersive world.

As Bok notes, the Latin term *secretum* identifies that which is kept hidden or set apart (1998: 6). The Secret Restaurant offers membership to a secret society which is set apart from the Secret Cinema society. While secret societies may well provide sanctuary for radicals, rebels, thieves, the ostracised, the disenfranchised and the persecuted, they have also played host to the aristocracy in numerous guises, such as the Venetian *nobili*, Swiss secret officials and German aristocratic families, as Simmel points out (1906: 487). By including the Secret Restaurant within Secret Cinema events and by setting a £100 barrier to entry, a wealth-based system of privilege is constructed within a theatre space that escalates the barrier to entry set up at the box office. To recall Luhmann, possession differentiates. In this case, the possession of wealth is what first differentiates one group of people from another inside and

outside of a theatre space, which then leads to a second stage of differentiation based on the secrets promised by the Secret Restaurant. This evidences a clear translation of wealth into the possession of a secret experience and the knowledge, or memories, that come with such an experience.

For those who want to extend their experience of *The Shawshank Redemption*, there was also an option to spend the night in a ‘Secret Hotel’ at an additional cost of £30. As with Zecora Ura’s *Hotel Medea* (2009–12), Duckie’s *Lullaby* (2011) and Rift’s (formerly Retz) *Macbeth* (2014), audiences had the chance to spend all night within an immersive world and to sleep within that world, which in this case was the *Shawshank* jail dormitories, accompanied by actors maintaining their role for the duration (in the role of prison guard, for instance). As the performance’s programme explains, ‘Secret hotel is for those looking for adventure and mystery. It will transport you into a carefully curated world inspired by our secret production. We are looking to bring back the sense of experience and spontaneity into the world of a hotel’ (Secret Cinema 2012: 2).

The thing purchased – a bed for the night – remains a secret until arrival, like a purchasable surprise party. Neither the location nor the kind of accommodation is known until audience members put on their prison uniform, whereupon some likely assumptions could be made, perhaps with some regret in the case of *Shawshank*. In the Secret Hotel, audiences participate in their sleep. Dozing inmates pay for incarceration, but the kind of incarceration that they pay for is a spectacle that can be safely snoozed through. It is a spectacle that does not need to be watched. It is a spectacle that accommodates thrill as well as slumber. The promised performance is a spectacle not for the spectator but for the audience participant who does not need to spectate in their sleep.

## **Conclusion: audience participation and spectacular secrecy**

In the programme notes for *Shawshank*, which presents itself as a ‘Parole Book’, Fabien Riggall explains his motivation for making immersive theatre: ‘The creative world inside these walls reflects the world we would like to see outside’ (Secret Cinema 2012: 1). I have argued that these worlds are not cut off from one another given the aesthetic and economic connections that link the two. A framework for audience participation and immersion is constructed at a very early stage in an audience’s contact with a performance. Secret Cinema’s marketing campaigns ‘key’ secrecy by precluding clandestine activity while promoting spectacular secrecy. The company figures prospective audiences as secret spreaders who must ‘Tell Everyone’ about the presence of a spectacular secret. This is the paradox of secrecy in Secret Cinema’s work, which informs role playing, interactivity and immersion in a live performance – as well as popularity – by building on a clue-based participation design that precedes live performance and that is thoroughly bound up with promotional interests. What emerges is a complex layering of inclusion/exclusion and inclusivity/exclusivity that is concerned not just with the openness of an invitation to participate but with degrees of openness that relate to disposable wealth and participation in bracketed, spectacular and commodified secrecy that both implies and undermines exclusivity.

I cannot help but wonder whether the growth of secrecy in contemporary theatre marketing is meeting a demand for exclusivity and that immersive theatre companies like Secret Cinema are capitalising on this demand. However, secrecy and participation design can work together in a politically progressive mode, without resorting to the aesthetic and economic logic of the commodity. For instance, Coney uses secrecy in participatory theatre to challenge how strangers are viewed and approached. The point of performances like *The Loveliness Principle* is not to present audiences with clearly defined models of sociability;

the point is to invite audiences to covertly play with sociability and to investigate what constitutes a social bond and our role, as participants, in negotiating that bond. However, compelling issues arise when commodified secrecy is connected to the design of audience participation and immersion. In work by Secret Cinema, what emerges is immersion in the landscape of an unknown film that is not cut off from the world *out there*; what emerges is immersion in a world pervaded by the aesthetics and economics of commodification.

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<sup>1</sup> See Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 199.

<sup>2</sup> See Keren Zaiontz, 'Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance', *Theatre Journal* 66.3 (2014), pp. 413–14.

<sup>3</sup> See Barbara Hoffman, 'Dinner at The Heath more dramatic than delicious', *New York Post* (21 Jan 2014) <<http://nypost.com/2014/01/21/dinner-at-the-heath-more-dramatic-than-delicious/>> [accessed 19 Feb 2015].

<sup>4</sup> See Adam Alston, 'Funding, Product Placement and Drunkenness in Punchdrunk's The Black Diamond', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 32.2 (2012), pp. 193–208; see also Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 179–81.

<sup>5</sup> Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Harvie, *Fair Play*.

<sup>7</sup> Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013); Gareth White, 'On Immersive Theatre', *Theatre Research International* 37.3 (Oct 2012), pp. 221–35.

<sup>8</sup> Machon, *Immersive Theatres*; Josephine Machon, '(Syn)aesthetics and Immersive Theatre: Embodied Beholding in Lundahl & Seidl's *Rotating in a Room of Moving Images*', *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science: Body, Brain and Being*, ed. Nicola Shaughnessy (London: Methuen, 2014), pp. 199–215.

<sup>9</sup> See also Georg Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', *American Journal of Sociology* 11.4 (Jan. 1906), p. 454.

<sup>10</sup> Secret Cinema, 'Secret Cinema Returns. Tell No One', email (8 January 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Secret Cinema ventured outside of London with their Brighton production of Ivan Reitman's cult hit *Ghostbusters* (1984) in 2008. In May 2012, The Other Cinema – another sibling Secret Cinema company – took their production of Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995) to Paris before heading to Sound Central Music Festival in Kabul, Afghanistan, in September 2012. Also, Future Shorts has now presented screenings in over one hundred countries. Nonetheless, Secret Cinema, as an organisation tied to, but distinguished from, these other 'arms' of Riggall's work has primarily remained tied to the UK capital.

<sup>12</sup> Secret Cinema, 'Secret Cinema | Sunday 18th November | Important Information', email (31 October 2012).

<sup>13</sup> See Josephine Machon, 'Space and the Senses: the (syn)aesthetics of Punchdrunk's site-sympathetic work', *Body, Space & Technology*, 7.1 (2007) <<http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/vol0701/home.html>> [accessed 7 December 2010].

<sup>14</sup> See also Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> In the S. Pellegrino and Acqua Panna 'The World's 50 Best Restaurants' list, Dinner by Heston Blumenthal is rated top in the UK, which at the time of writing, offers a three course set lunch for £38. The Ledbury comes next, which offers a three course set lunch for £37.50 and a three course set dinner for £80. There are more expensive tasting menus available, but these offer many more courses in comparison with the Secret Restaurant. S. Pellegrino and Acqua Panna, 'The World's 50 Best Restaurants 1–50', *The World's 50 Best*

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*Restaurants*, William Reed Business Media Ltd (2012) <<http://www.theworlds50best.com/>> [accessed 17 January 2014].

<sup>16</sup> See Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, p. 93.