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## **Networked Audience Participation: The Futurity of Post-Brexit Democracy in *One Day, Maybe* and *Operation Black Antler***

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### Notes on Contributor

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### Abstract

Where are we in the story of British democracy? Was the 2016 EU Referendum a rehearsal for a new political system of direct democracy that ultimately benefits the far right? Or will the Internet replace the conventional machinery of government with a radical new form of network power where people discursively experiment with new political realities through aesthetic modes of social relations? This article proffers the term ‘networked participation’ to describe a conceptual model of citizenry centred on structuring meaning through the dialogic exchange of information in aesthetic environments. The political ideals of network politics inform my analysis of the complex web of connections that participants scaffold in the performances *Operation Black Antler* (Blast Theory and Hydrocracker 2017) and *One Day, Maybe* (dreamthinkspeak 2017) between identitarian ideology in Britain and competing narratives of democracy’s meaning in South Korea, respectively. This model of audience participation is proffered to develop a theory of social relations produced through a theatrical experience of digital interconnectivity.

## Keywords

Blast Theory; Hydrocracker; dreamthinkspeak; immersive theatre; information age

## Immersive Theatre in the Information Age

To learn which questions are unanswerable, *and not to answer them*: this skill is most needful in times of stress and darkness. (Le Guin 2017, 151, emphasis in original)

In the 1990s, many people thought that the Internet signified a new age for democracy, one in which the tyrannical regimes of the twentieth century, regimes that relied on mass censorship to govern effectively, would be impossible to revive. The period between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the 9/11 terrorist attacks gave birth to global justice movements that believed international networks of political solidarity would produce stronger forms of democracy by enhancing forms of societal participation (Klein 2010). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri contextualise network politics in terms of post-Fordist immaterial labour that produces social relations instead of mass consumable objects (Camfield 2005, 360). But the emancipatory power of networks remains nascent as liberal democracies struggle to adapt from the epoch of late capitalism to the information age.

The information age is characterised by data, documents and Internet-based operations acting as the primary infrastructure of technologically advanced societies (Buckland 2017). Authoritarian regimes, such as Myanmar's, have shown how the Internet can be utilised for disinformation and incitements to violence.<sup>1</sup> Digital networks have also proven to be effective forms of recruitment for the extreme right (Ebner 2020; Hermansson et al. 2020) and changed how the radical right campaign and mobilise supporters.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the leaks into the US government's use of big data to monitor citizens in America and abroad provided by the former analyst at the National Security Agency Edward Snowden (Poitras 2017) reveals the scale of state espionage employed by liberal democracies.

Whilst recognising that the epochal shift from information scarcity to information abundance poses a significant threat to democratic rights and freedoms, and so perhaps makes the idealism of the late twentieth century look misguided, the imaginary of democratic participation operating on the model of networks remains a laudable ideal at a time when rightwing populism, authoritarianism and fascism are in the ascent across the world. Democratic systems that integrate digital networks can allow citizens to directly contribute to policy-making when platforms are designed to build dialogue amongst diverse and polarised groups.<sup>3</sup> Optimally, network politics grants a greater degree of agency to individuals by allowing them to use the Internet as a laboratory for experimenting with alternative forms of political organisation through digital interconnectivity. Acting as a communication node allows humans to collaboratively experiment with new ways of living in imagined political realities where historical cornerstones of liberal democracy such as the nation state and the sovereignty of the individual are reconfigured. The constitutive identities we build for ourselves online makes network politics distinct from non-digital interactivity. The ability for people to perceive themselves as part of ‘a complex informational system’ (Floridi 2014, 69) suggests political realities can also be experienced as work-in-progress systems within digital networks. The Internet enables citizens to assemble on platforms in order to experiment with ways of participating within these systems through the creation, exchange and interpretation of information.

This article frames audience participation in *One Day, Maybe* (dreamthinkspeak 2017) and *Operation Black Antler* (Blast Theory and Hydrocracker 2017) as an analogue for the political ideals that network politics represents. *One Day, Maybe* explores the legacy of the May 1980 Gwangju uprising against the authoritarian government of South Korea and its violent repression by the military. *Operation Black Antler* confronts the moral dilemmas of balancing national security with a right to privacy, free speech and public assembly. Both of

these pieces address how democratic freedoms are under threat in the information age from democratic struggles being appropriated by authoritarian capitalism and the ascendancy of far-right identitarian ideology, respectively.

History and identity now act as the ideological faultlines where new political allegiances are forming in British culture. I saw both pieces in 2017, a year of extraordinary political turmoil following the fallout from the 2016 EU Referendum and the unexpected result of a hung parliament after the 2017 General Election. The long term economic consequences of leaving the European Union have yet to unfold, but as a cultural phenomenon, Brexit represents, to many, an imaginary of Britain as a hyper-capitalist, ethno-nationalist state shorn of the rights, freedoms and responsibilities commensurate with liberal democracy. It has spawned a populist mentality born from a noxious brew of imperialist nostalgia (Bone 2016, 5) and anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim racism (Carter 2019).

The political cultures portrayed in the immersive dramaturgies of *One Day, Maybe* and *Operation Black Antler* embodied how political discourse is practiced in the information age and allowed me to experience potential forms of democratic citizenry in post-Brexit Britain. Luciano Floridi describes the contemporary informational environment as the infosphere. The infosphere is a development of the cyborgian imaginary of the future by including ‘offline and analogue spaces’ (Floridi 2014, 41) that intersects with discourses of posthumanism with its framing of the human subject as part of a ubiquitous bio-techno reality. In distinction from the cyborg, ‘a creature able to bridge the gap between the real and representation, between social reality and fiction’ (Giannachi 2004, 46), Floridi describes the digital human as an ‘inforG’: an interoperable entity residing within an informational ecology where anything can be connected to anything without the necessity of technological augmentation (Floridi 2014, 95-96). It is interesting to note Josephine Machon’s observation that the term ‘immersive theatre’ partly originates from computer technologies and telematics

environments from the 1980s (2013, 58). The digital, it would seem, has always been imbricated with questions of immersion. The audience's ability to participate in the construction of meaning through interactive dramaturgies in immersive theatre turns the theatrical form into an analogous experience of the infosphere's informational architecture. This makes immersive theatre an effective art form to formulate a model of network politics as a counter to the encroaching 'instrumentarian society' where the 'freedom' of each individual machine is subordinated to the knowledge of the system as a whole' (Zuboff 2019, 20-21). The image of people as passive spectators of democracy has resonances with critiques of immersive theatre practice, where 'the continual expression of preference can distract from, and thereby disable, questioning the system as a whole' (Frieze 2016, 5). The choice-making codes that scaffold many immersive dramaturgies can diminish participants' agency by erasing the space necessary for audiences to acquire a critical perspective (Mittra 2016). But as Gareth White states, 'To be immersed is to be surrounded, enveloped, and potentially annihilated, but it is also to be separate from that which immerses' (2012, 228). Hence, participants' capacity to think and act independently does not necessarily become nullified by aesthetic environments.

Aesthetic experiences can enable British citizens to construct new forms of social relations modelled on the ideals of network politics at a time when the ideological divisions between Leavers and Remainers, right and left, progressives and traditionalists, feel irreconcilable. As a counter to its associations with assimilation and de-individuation, I consider the network to be a cultural term signifying an imperative to experience 'productive insecurity' (Stephenson 2019, 20), a process of self-reflexivity leading to new ways of interpreting how history and identity can structure political discourse. I term this conceptual model of social relations 'networked participation' in my analysis of *One Day, Maybe* and *Operation Black Antler*. The political and cultural values of networked participation are

aligned with critiques of immersive theatre I and others published in ‘The Post Immersive Manifesto’ (Lopes Ramos et al. 2020). Networked participation is asymmetrical to Adam Alston’s conception of ‘entrepreneurial participation’ (Alston 2013, 130), which replicates the experiences of ‘[the] unfreedom twenty-first-century citizens are trained to think of as experiences of true freedom’ (Lopes Ramos et al. 2020, 2) by using dramaturgy to turn participation into an experience of commercial consumption. Networked participation is undergirded by imaginaries of intersubjective digital interconnectivity, broadly defined here as ‘an open-ended configuration or topology of shared collective and individual activities’ (Birringer 1998, 289). Nicolas Bourriaud defines relational art as works that ‘seek to establish intersubjective encounters [...] in which meaning is elaborated collectively [...] rather than in the privatised space of individual consumption’ (cited in Bishop 2004, 54). I concur with Claire Bishop’s contention that aesthetic social relations become politically valuable when they produce ‘antagonisms’ in order to ‘expos[e] that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of [social] harmony’ (2004, 79). This perspective offers the possibility for performance to disrupt the perspectives of reality structured by the ethno-nationalism of modern British conservatism that governs post-Brexit Britain. Networked participation does not therefore value ideas of totality or consensus over debate and conflict per se, but treats antagonism as the foundation rather than the telos of democratic participation in contradistinction to the divisive politics of rightwing populism.

In the following section I apply the theoretical framework of networked participation to an analysis of *One Day, Maybe* and *Operation Black Antler*. The analysis of *One Day Maybe* focuses on how the radical and violent history of democracy in South Korea is at risk of fading from historical memory by reducing the idea and practice of democratic freedom to mass consumerism. dreamthinkspeak’s vision of South Korea in 2049 represents a potential direction of Britain’s future. It acts as an urgent warning for opponents of authoritarianism to

imagine alternative visions of society to ones such as the hyper-capitalist dystopia in *One Day, Maybe* by ensuring history is not substituted for populist myth. Far-right identitarian ideology is part of a populist myth of British history in the context of Brexit. Blast Theory and Hydrocracker invite participants to address if mass surveillance is a democratically legitimate method of opposing the far right in *Operation Black Antler*. I proffer some personal reflections on the conflict I experienced as a participant when I realised the portrayal of racists in the performance affirmed classist stereotypes in an effort to disavow racial hierarchies.

## Network Politics in Action

One of the primary drivers of Brexit was the growing loss of faith in the capacity of democracy to enhance human agency in an interconnected world. Many people find the Brexit project attractive for its refutation of the future's contingency, mutability, and inherent mystery. For some on the right, Brexit responds to people's 'need for narrative [...] a quest for meaning and collective identity in a secular, individualistic, economist modern world' (Goodhart 2017, 51-52). But such egalitarian visions are of little interest to the protagonists of Brexit. The rhetoric of the 'Anglosphere' promulgated by Prime Minister Boris Johnson is steeped in the ideology of imperialism (Campanella 2019). Johnson is what the historian Anne Applebaum calls a 'restorative nostalgic' who wants to live in a 'cartoon version of history' (2021, 74-75). As an iteration of restorative nostalgia, the story the Vote Leave campaign told in the 2016 EU referendum followed a familiar pattern:

The nation is no longer great because someone has attacked us, undermined us, sapped our strength. Someone – the immigrants, the foreigners, the elites, or indeed the EU – has perverted the course of history and reduced the nation to a shadow of its former self. The essential identity

we once had has been taken away and replaced with something cheap and artificial (Applebaum 2021, 75).

There is nothing inherently populist or rightwing in the sentiment that stories give our lives meaning. But the social utility of myths rests in their permissive or even promiscuous nature. Their power is determined by their ability to adapt to new political realities, which means genuine democratic participation is predicated on '[a]ccepting that the world is without [intrinsic] meaning'; this knowledge 'liberate[s people] from the confinement in the meaning [they] have made' (Gray 2014, 108). The essence of democratic freedom is discursively imagining alternative forms of societal organisation from the status quo. The imperative of sustaining this spirit of reinvention in democracies is the political substance of *One Day, Maybe*.

The Gwangju Uprising is a foundational myth of democracy in South Korea. The uprising was triggered by the declaration of martial law in the months following the assassination of President Park Chung Hee by the Head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency in October 1979. Protestors assembled outside Choosun University and Chonnam University where they were fiercely repressed by paratroopers. The soldiers were told that the protestors were communists working for North Korea and were to be treated as enemies of the state. Hundreds of protestors were savagely beaten and/or killed. The Gwangju Uprising inspired a nationwide pro-democracy movement that eventually led to the presidential election of the activist Roh-Hyun in 2002. Hang Kim's contention that it is necessary to stand in a critical 'grey zone' in order to 'reconsider the incident and respond to the Gwangju citizens' passion for democracy, which meant for them not more democratic political systems or institutions but peaceful coexistence with fellow citizens' (2011, 613-614) reflects a desire to keep the meaning of the uprising suspended in the country's historical memory. This

suspension affords future generations the right to revisit how democratic freedom is defined and practised.

Artistic director of dreamthinkspeak Tristan Sharps was inspired to create *One Day, Maybe* whilst walking through the new retail complexes in Gwangju. He asked himself how the ‘ghosts of May 1980’ would feel about the state of democracy in South Korea. ‘Would they ask, ‘Is this what I died for? Is this freedom? Does democracy have to equal globalisation?’’ (Sharps 2018). Sharps invokes Kim’s imploration to resist attributing definitive meanings to the uprising by insisting that contemporary globalisation is not the ultimate or final manifestation of the ideal democratic society. dreamthinkspeak framed South Korea as a mirror of the modern globalised world. The British audience experienced a predictable vision of late-capitalist society from the perspective of the dead protestors haunting South Korea in 2049,<sup>4</sup> which turned the temporal fold of *One Day, Maybe* into a hybrid of the ‘now and the then, the presented and the real’ (Schneider 2014, 4).

The performance was staged in an anonymous office block in Hull, a port city in the North East of England. The bland, utilitarian décor and absence of an overt theatrical portal into the dramaturgy made it difficult to determine the boundaries between the real and fictional worlds. The site helped to create a ‘parallax perspective’ (Stephenson 2019, 174) for audiences to negotiate the liminal space between the South Korea of 2049 and our awareness of ourselves as agents in the real world who can (potentially) re-shape political realities outside of the aesthetic environment. In this way, networked participation in *One Day, Maybe* represents the essence of democracy’s centuries-long appeal for citizens to play a meaningful role in the future of their society.

Figure 1. Advertisement for the Kasang Corporation. Courtesy of dreamthinkspeak

When the performance began, I was greeted by a team of smiling apparatchiks from the Kasang Corporation. The assembled participants were told that we were here to

experience the future of retail. Each participant was given a tablet called a K-pad and directed to upload personal information into the Kasang database. After being led into a dark corridor, a hologram of young men and women appeared on a wall. They stared out at us beyond the technological void as one of the Kasang apparatchiks began listing products that are only available because of the holographic people. Their identity was never explained. Like many historical monuments, the audience were invited to revere the ghosts of 1980 without being given any historical context. The sombre atmosphere was broken suddenly when the curtains surrounding the participants fell to reveal a virtual supermarket. The K-Pads lit up with a message saying we had £10,000 to spend.

Shoshana Zuboff argues technology in modern capitalist societies is ‘an expression of the economic objectives that direct it into action’ (Zuboff 2019, 16). Purchasing virtual products deepened the audience’s immersion into the Kasang future by acting as a rehearsal for how all democratic freedoms will be practiced in 2049. The performance of authoritarian democracy in *One Day, Maybe* emulates the ontology of virtual reality, which ‘consists of a dichotomous paradox [...] which locates it as part of the real and its aesthetic, through which it demonstrates its difference from the “real”’ (Giannachi 2004, 123). The real of the future was performed as a continuation of the participants’ present experience of democratic freedom in the information age but amplified into an interactive, Internet-based commercialised reality where human behaviour and thought becomes commodified by the instrumentarian logic of the neoliberal free market.

The virtual future was punctured by real news footage of the Gwangju uprising streamed on screens running across a long wall. Scenes of gunfire and explosions were juxtaposed against the gloss of the retail environment. A space ‘between empathy and criticality’ (Mitra 2016, 100) emerged for participants to experience how the cultural memory

of May 1980 has an antagonistic relationship with the imaginary of 2049. The state violence of the Gwangju Uprising was presented as an integral part of the hyper-capitalist dystopia. Modern China has shown the world that hyper-capitalism is entirely compatible with ethno-nationalism. The notion that for many people on the right China represents the future of globalised societies frames the South Korea of *One Day, Maybe* as a potential future for all liberal democracies.<sup>5</sup> But interweaving the history of democracy within the dramaturgy showed how visions of a society's future can be re-claimed. The history of the uprising was placed in dynamic tension with the narratives and values of globalization. The struggle to reconcile the two compelled the audience to search for what the Gwangju Uprising means in contemporary South Korea, when the future is being shaped by a vision of democracy that seeks to design cultures that follow the dictates of authoritarian capitalism.

The dialogic exchange of information central to networked participation was attenuated most strongly during a mixed-reality game called Hostage 4. The aim was to complete a maze whilst avoiding the military police who were represented by red dots on the K-pad. The tablet also directed the audience to nodes in the maze where we found QR codes to unlock electronic documents. These documents, the Cherokee files, were real communiques between the Korean Special Forces and the US government, who in 1980 had operational control over the Korean army. The files disprove the United States' repeated claims that they did not know the military had been instructed to crush the uprising. Indeed, the Cherokee Files prove that the US gave them tacit approval. Accessing this history in immersive theatre incubated a process of historical interpretation redolent of the ways social relations are scaffolded by the discovery, creation and sharing of documents in digital networks. *One Day, Maybe* was layered with information that needed participants' interaction to become active within the dramaturgy. Unlocking the documents created a state of critical

immersion within the imaginations of the participants who were compelled to interpret the information in relation to the fictional scenes of which we had become a part.

We returned to South Korea 2049 after leaving a memorial for the ghosts of 1980 and entered another hyper-information environment. Giant screens displayed personalised data for each participant. We were given a rating out of five for customer value based on how many clues we had found in the maze, how successfully we avoided the guards and how much information we inputted into the K-pad at the beginning of the show.

Figure 2. The ghosts of 1980. Courtesy of dreamthinkspeak

It is important to note that the inherent subjectivity of networked participation runs the risk of validating so-called post-truth politics as a legitimate form of historical interpretation. In its broadest sense, post-truth describes an ultra-relativist political discourse where opinion elides with facts until the existence of reality comes into doubt (McIntyre 2018, 10).

Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt warns that when individual perspectives are considered of equal historical validity to the documentary record then '[n]o fact, no event, and no aspect of history has any fixed meaning or content. Any truth can be retold. Any fact can be recast. There is no ultimate historical reality' (2016, 23). But the historian is a critical agent in the formulation of historical memory, meaning that the 'language of historical documents is never transparent, and historians have long been aware they cannot simply gaze through it to the historical reality behind' (Evans 2018, 104).

When we consider Evans's quote in the context of *One Day, Maybe*, history in immersive theatre emerges as a series of interactions between documents (the Cherokee files), the virtual presences of the ghosts of 1980 symbolising their affective presence in South Korea's historical memory, and contemporary imaginaries of democracy shaped by the dictates of global capital. This produced an immersive informational environment where the individual participants collaborated in a collective search for meaning. In contrast, 'post-truth

amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not. And this is a recipe for political domination' (McIntyre 2018, 13). Structuring meaning amongst participants in immersive theatre is not the practice of undermining or refuting historical reality. Rather, this reality become an affective presence by undergirding the social relations produced within the network of immersive theatre in order to give participants heterogeneous historical perspectives that political hegemonies seek to prevent from becoming part of mainstream political discourse lest these perspectives place such hegemonies under threat. The Gwangju Uprising was experienced as an idea of democratic freedom in *One Day, Maybe* by remaining suspended in relationality between history and the future.

The instrumentarian future of 2049 is a *theatrum mundi* characterised by a distraction economy and historical amnesia. *One Day, Maybe* cautions us against modelling the futurity of democracy on the behaviours induced by invisible algorithms, lest corporations such as Kasang are allowed to control how citizens can collaborate in building alternative political cultures from those imbricated in contemporary globalisation.

Figure 3. Remembrance ceremony for the Gwangju Uprising. Courtesy of dreamthinkspeak

The familiar vision of a hyper-capitalist society created by technological accelerationism is making its emergence feel almost inevitable in post-Brexit Britain. The 2016 referendum campaign successfully capitalised on the fear many people feel that we are living in a 'zombie democracy', where 'people are simply watching a performance in which their role is to give or withhold their applause at the appropriate moments' (Runciman 2019, 47). The right has successfully capitalised on this modern fear by framing immigration as the ultimate expression of the failure of this interconnectedness to improve people's lives. The knowledge that the digital is changing the world in and of itself is not sufficient to give

people the tools to construct new meanings from the political realities that are coming into being. The feeling of economic anxiety and cultural drift is continuing to feed the growth of nationalist populist rightwing parties in Europe.<sup>6</sup> These parties fall into the schema of ‘Ur-Fascism’, a set of features and habits that ‘allow fascism to coagulate around’ (Eco 1995). The leaders of these parties promise their supporters a future where our dissonant and unpredictable world can be controlled through the assertion of the common will: ‘Having lost their power of delegation, citizens do not act; they are only called on to play the role of the People. Thus the People is only a theatrical fiction’ (Eco 1995). Brexit is part of this movement.

Cas Mudde categorises the contemporary international far right into the two broad groups of the extreme right and the radical right. (Mudde 2019, 30). The extreme right ‘rejects the essence of democracy – the idea of political equality and government by majority’, whereas the radical right lends theoretical support for democracy whilst challenging ‘minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers’ (ibid). The Conservative party and radical right parties such as UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) have spent decades arguing that multiculturalism erodes the social fabric of Britain by creating parallel cultures sustained by a shallow form of tolerance rather than ‘national identity and traditional attachments’ (Scruton 2017, 141). The right now argue that immigration has produced whole cultures of outsiders who do not integrate into what former Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron (2010-2016) once called a ‘collective identity’ (Fekete 2018, 57). The neoconservative commentator Douglas Murray describes mass immigration as a form of colonialism designed to import a new meaning into European civilisation and displace the native populations; thus, ‘Europeans are left in the position of not believing sufficiently in their own story and being distrustful of their past whilst knowing that there are other stories moving in that they do not want’ (Murray 2018, 319). This Powellite<sup>7</sup> racism is

now a pillar of mainstream rightwing politics. In the context of Brexit, the creeds of Burkean ‘One Nation’ Toryism and Thatcherite monetarism have mutated into British ethno-nationalism in the ruling Conservative party. This ideological shift is having a profound effect on how identitarianism is shaping public perceptions of authentic English identity in the body politic.

*Operation Black Antler* enabled participants to imagine how their future selves could exist in the culture of the extreme right. The immersive dramaturgy allowed participants to experiment with constructing new identities in order to see how online socialisation can act as a catalyst for radicalisation. White identity, hostility to Muslim communities and opposition to the ‘Islamisation’ of Britain is the keystone to the identitarian ideology (Pilkington 2016). Believing that a civilizational war between Islam and the west is inevitable, these groups operate as a global network intent on protecting what they consider to be an immutably white European culture.<sup>8</sup> The fictional group the National Resistance (NR) in *Operation Black Antler* mixed the ideologies and organisational structures of the radical and extreme right. This allows me to proffer a broad analysis of how English cultural identity has been weaponized by all manifestations of the far right and now represents a crucial faultline in the struggle for the future of democracy in post-Brexit Britain.

*Operation Black Antler* was performed in Manchester, North West England. I saw it the day after the 2017 General Election and three weeks after an Islamist terrorist attack at Manchester Arena. These recent events acted as an evocative political scenography for the fictional world of *Operation Black Antler*. The performance began when I received a text message instructing me to knock on a door underneath some railway arches. A woman dressed in a blue boiler suit, my ‘handler’, opened the door and led me and another group of participants into a briefing room. Photos and maps adorned the walls. Folders and scraps of paper littered a desk. The handler told us we had been selected to go undercover and infiltrate

an event organised by the NR. Rachel Armstrong, the daughter of one of the group's senior figures, Mackenzie, had advertised a party on Facebook that she was having at a nearby pub, The Peveril of the Peak (which continued its regular service during the performance). Rachel had organised the party to celebrate her admission into the army. The security services believed the NR could pose a risk to national security after monitoring their social media chatter. The handler described the group as 'rightwing oiks with some spicy views on immigration, anti-Islamic, and taking a stand for the flag and St. George' (Blast Theory and Hydrocracker 2017).

Our mission was to track a Person of Interest (POI) to ascertain if the NR should be classified as domestic extremists. My target was Rachel's brother, whose name participants were never told. This would allow the security services to put them under surveillance and then 'get right in there and fuck these people up' (Blast Theory and Hydrocracker 2017). Each team had to come up with a cover story. We decided in my group that I was unemployed and had just moved to Manchester from London to look for work. One member of the group played my aunt, who I was living with, and the other participant played her friend. I had spotted the event on Facebook and decided to go to the party so I could make new friends with 'my sort of people'. As a white man with an east London accent, I was able to draw on a wellspring of grievance to reconfigure my identity into a performance of a 'racialised construction of the working class' (Mondon and Winter 2018, 1). My performed identity was a composite of bits of information I had gleaned watching performances of the far-right's perception of authentic English cultural identity by figures such as Nigel Farage and Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (aka Tommy Robinson, founder of the extreme right English Defence League). My character identified himself as English, which for him could not be anything other than white. This man was an ex-Labour supporter who voted Leave, hated mass immigration and felt that he was a stranger in his own country. All of these

characteristics correspond with the trajectory of extreme right supporters who can be described as ‘converts’: people for whom mainstream politics no longer appeals (Mudde 2019, 78). Brexit, the 2008 banking crash and a decade of austerity have made such conversions a feature rather than a bug in British political discourse. But on reflection the construction of this identity affirmed my classist prejudices and revealed how participants’ political biases can limit the kinds of social relations produced through networked participation. I address these issues in the concluding remarks of the analysis.

Figure 4. Participants being briefed on the National Resistance. Courtesy of Blast Theory and Hydrocracker

The group were greeted by Rachel when we arrived at the pub. After introducing myself and establishing my cover story, I went outside to have a cigarette with Rachel’s mum. She asked why I’d moved to Manchester. I attempted to signal my political outlook by saying London ‘wasn’t like it used to be because immigrants have taken all the jobs and work for lower wages’. The local communities were gone. She told me the same was happening in Manchester. My immersion into the world of NR deepened when we discussed how we thought it would be better if immigrant communities were kept in separate areas of cities. The word ‘ghetto’ wasn’t mentioned but it was clear that this is what we were casually chatting about. I remember being acutely aware that we were standing on a public street where any passer-by could hear us. I felt uncomfortable that I couldn’t hide behind the anonymity of a spectator.

As the performance progressed and I spoke to more characters, it was disturbing to discover how easily I could slip into the role by gently calibrating my identity to conform to the behaviours associated with identitarian ideology. The mainstreaming of the extreme right in the 2010s (Fekete 2018<sup>9</sup>) meant the talking points were very familiar to me – not recognising ‘our’ country, betrayal by the ‘elite’, with white people being demonised for

expressing national pride. But there were also issues that I could speak about that were not a part of my fictional identity. My opposition to austerity and the diminution of public services; the NHS crisis; the rise in violent crime; the recent General Election; the terrorist attack at the Ariana Grande concert; and, of course, Brexit. Talking about these events as part of my performance turned *Operation Black Antler* into a fluid world of fiction and reality. The information was real, but my perception of its causes and solutions was the fiction, producing what Jenn Stephenson describes as an ‘oscillating dual consciousness that keeps the audience perception divided against itself’ that ‘catalyses a distanced aestheticization of immersive performance and constitutes the locus of realness in [immersive theatre]’ (2019, 175).

The intense level of socialisation in *Operation Black Antler*’s dramaturgy embodied the fundamentally important role social networks play in the extreme right’s strategy of radicalisation. Constructing the imaginary of white identity is a social activity in digital networks and, in turn, become a means for users to perform the identity they desire to become. Julia Ebner explains that the Internet is propelling a new generation of far-right radicalisation through a ‘toxic combination of ideological nostalgia and technological futurism’ (2020, 4). She continues:

The radicalisation engines that today’s extremists are building are cutting edge: artificially intelligent, emotionally manipulative and socially powerful. They combine high-tech and hyper-social elements to drive counter-cultures that appeal to the young, angry and tech-savvy (Ebner 2020, 4-5).

The white English identity I performed in *Operation Black Antler* evolved through my interactions with the actors. The alteration of my identity reflects the ways we, as informational entities, construct political realities in digital networks. Our online identities remain metamorphic because they are performed amongst users who continuously reframe our performance in relation to the information that circulates in our networks. The ability to

construct avatars of ourselves in virtual environments constitutes a form of de-individuation in its multiplication of a single self who others perceive as whole in non-digital social spaces. Conversely, the monitoring of the NR members in *Operation Black Antler* mirrored the participatory systems of modern surveillance culture. Modern surveillance technologies ‘interpret life as information and so our lives become that information’ (Giannachi 2006, 42). Performing identities ceases to be a means of exploring new ways of living and interacting when all our actions are classified by behaviour modification systems. *Operation Black Antler* was partly inspired by the increasing powers afforded to the security services through the Investigatory Powers Act, colloquially known as the snooper’s charter (Wall 2018). The Investigatory Powers Act gives the UK government sweeping powers to monitor and retain citizens’ data for the purposes of terrorist prevention and serious crime. Mass surveillance has been the favoured tool of Labour and Conservative governments as part of the War on Terror since 9/11, but it is a blunt and deeply illiberal instrument that does not tackle the underlying causes of political radicalisation. Further, a ‘human-centred approach’ (Ebner 2020, 6) to tackling rightwing extremism would allow all citizens to participate in defending the democratic ideal of racial equality.

Figure 5. Mackenzie played by artistic director of Hydrocracker Jem Wall talking to a participant. Courtesy of Blast Theory

Playing an undercover officer required audiences to become part of the world presented to us during the briefing as one that was separate to our own. However, the ideological divides that defined political movements in the twentieth century cannot be so easily delineated in the information age when the Internet has become the primary space to perform our identities for curated audiences using media content. The desire to join communities to provide a sense of belonging limits the capacity of network politics to liberate us from what we know to be true about the world by treating our identities as

immutable constructs. The construct of English identity the extreme right performs in their networks operates on the same principle; it cannot be anything other than white. Despite its claims to upholding the values of classic liberalism (especially freedom of speech), the British radical right is vehemently opposed to pluralist politics. The political imagination struggles to operate when one labours under the illusion that their perception of reality is reality *in toto*. This is as true for liberals and progressives as it is for the far right. Indeed, Hannah Arendt believed the imagination was a vital political tool for humans to ‘explore the world’s realness and their own’ (1981, 71). The imagination allows us to think discursively by making present in the mind what is absent in the material world. Becoming part of an ‘enlarged community’ (Garsten 2010, 329) allows us to act as citizen-judges to assess the morality of people’s actions effectively.

The mode of imaginative thinking that Arendt wanted to emphasize was that it required us *not* to be fully present to ourselves. The perspective of judge is one that requires me to imagine myself partly outside myself and my commitments, and yet still essentially belonging to the self doing the judging (Garsten 2010, 320, emphasis in original).

Networked participation acts as a performative instantiation of the Arendtian citizen-judge model by allowing individuals to formulate individuated political perspectives as part of a networked thinking event. The ascendancy of the far right is a genuine threat to pluralist politics, but treating it as an alien presence that must be expunged from the body politic through mass surveillance obviates the responsibility of all citizens to recognise that no-one is immune to its ideology.

The members of the NR were working class and conformed to my classist image of what a racist person looks and sounds like. My performance made me conscious of my classist associations with racism. Extreme right groups start as racist mobilisations from outside of the party-political system. Their marches and meetings spring from a groundswell

of anger, fear of emasculation, and resentment towards elites (Fekete 2018, 18). But their views can only gain power and legitimacy if political parties adopt their ideas and translate them into policies. British citizens have witnessed this process occurring in the Conservative party over the past decade. Entrenching the image of a racist as a white working-class man in media discourse is an effective strategy to tarnish anti-racist activism as classist prejudice. The views expressed by the characters in *Operation Black Antler* on immigration, terrorism and national identity could just as easily have come from Conservative party MPs and mainstream rightwing journalists, or indeed from some leftwing British politicians and commentators, and yet the make-up of the NR was pointedly working class. The classist representation of the British far right and mine and other participants' ability to perform the behaviours and characteristics associated with working-class racists with relative ease revealed how the narrative of anti-extremism helps to 'protect the activities of the state, and its security services from any reckoning' (Fekete 2018, 46-47) by dissimulating those aspects of identitarian ideology that have entered the bloodstream of democratic politics. Acting as a surveillance node in the performance left little space to interpret what the actors were saying beyond the narrow confines of my objectives. There was limited opportunity for nuanced interaction because I was forced to perceive each character as a potential source of useful information. Not once were these characters allowed to intrude on the real world of surveillance. Both political realities remained artificially separate.

We can conclude that Blast Theory and Hydrocracker relied too heavily on mediatized perceptions of how the far right think and act in order for the audience to participate in the dramaturgy. A post-show discussion with the participants and company members provided a space to address the classist biases at play, but there was no opportunity in the performance itself to critically interrogate how the context of surveillance determined the social relations between the participants and the actors. The level of control artists can

wield over the interactions that occur in aesthetic environments reveals a significant limitation of networked participation as an alternative mode of political discourse. When the biases of participants are not explicitly challenged as part of an interactive dramaturgy, immersive theatre risks replicating the ideological silos perpetuated by social media.

Re-claiming the right to imagine futures that do not conform to historical or contemporary paradigms requires a deeper understanding of the ways online socialisation creates an interconnected web between ideologies and identities. Interacting in this space shapes the performance of ourselves that are constructed online but inevitably informs our perceptions of our non-digital, some would say authentic selves. Networked participation makes us aware that identity is always in process and is a cornerstone of political agency. ‘We are as disconnected from our future selves as if there were physical space between us. I am not the me I will be in the future. The two of us are essentially separate people’ (Runciman 2019, 202). The irony of living in a fluid digital panopticon is that the pluralism and experimentation that network politics aspires to engender feels unobtainable. Nonetheless, the desire for connection that characterises digital culture will not abate any time soon. The identities participants performed in *Operation Black Antler* were fictional but continue to live in the participants’ memories as part of political realities we could (temporarily) exist in. This knowledge enhances the perspectivalism of participants’ individuated experience and thus better able to judge how the far right is gaining strength in post-Brexit Britain. By framing audience participation as an aesthetic model of network politics, new imaginaries of interconnectedness emerge where the performance of our potential future selves in immersive theatre becomes a form of aesthetic discourse centred on rehearsing new modes of citizen-led democratic participation.

## Conclusion

Despite the political turmoil following the EU Referendum and the Conservative party’s

decisive election victory after running on a slogan to Get Brexit Done in December 2019, the period was in many ways a phoney war for the future of British democracy. The COVID-19 crisis, combined with the Labour party's unwillingness to explicitly oppose the government's authoritarian impulses in the areas of cultural reform and immigration, has postponed the left's reckoning with the new politics of post-Brexit Britain in any substantive sense. But there are few signs that an effective opposition is mobilising against the wave of ethno-nationalist populism sweeping the country outside of the parliamentary system either. The creation of online transgressive and provocative counter-cultures is a significant cause of the identitarian radicalisation of conservatism. This form of 'metapolitics' instrumentalises digital media and cultural narratives in order to enter the bloodstream of political discourse (Ebner 2020, 43). Hence, the aestheticization of democratic politics by the far right cannot be opposed by the conventional machinery of party politics alone. Theatre and the arts have an urgent role to play in countering the futurity of post-Brexit rightwing politics before its most extreme excesses gain hegemony in the coming decades.

Dramaturgies in immersive theatre modelled on network politics have great potential to place individuals in critical relation with this futurity in a performative form that is not available to them in extant political discourse. Admittedly, immersive theatre's predominantly middle-class demographic is a significant limitation of networked participation. Moreover, *Operation Black Antler* required a willingness to be exposed to racist views to fully engage with the narrative. This risk of excluding people who do not conform to white heteronormativity is one that all artists making immersive work must address if it's practitioners do not wish to contribute to our culture's systemic inequalities (Lopes Ramos et al. 2020, 9). But whilst the model of networked participation discussed in this article is developed from two specific forms of immersive theatre, the social relations it describes are intended to be applied to other performance practices which create productive

antagonisms between individuals and political subjects in order to experience new forms of democratic participation in aesthetic environments. These antagonisms embody the necessity of deconstructing rightwing narratives by keeping the idea of democracy in perpetual metamorphosis, where everyone can assert their right to determine its meaning.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>The United Nations has concluded that Facebook played a 'determined role' in the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslim community in Myanmar (BBC News 2018). The Myanmar military created hundreds of troll accounts, news and celebrity pages to spread Islamophobic propaganda, including fake photos of massacres of the Buddhist majority. The military launched a deadly crackdown against the Rohingya in the summer of 2017. 10,000 Rohingya have been killed, 730,000 refugees have fled to Bangladesh and hundreds of villages have been destroyed (Murzor 2018).
- <sup>2</sup>The radical right Brexit party was created by the former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) Nigel Farage in 2019 and later reformed as Reform UK in 2021. The Brexit party was an online organisation that operated more as a hybrid of an e-business and thinktank than a traditional political party. Instead of a manifesto, for example, the Brexit party as of 20 October 2020 had a 'Contract with the People' consisting of a 'targeted set of deliverable pledges' published on their website. It had no members in the traditional sense, only registered supporters who could donate to the party but had no say over its policies. This structure gave Farage a high level of control of the party's entire management, including its policy platforms, spending and

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selection of candidates. The purpose behind these innovations was to use the Internet as a ‘disintermediation’ machine between politics and the public, thus bypassing media scrutiny (Loucaides 2019). Moreover, the Brexit party’s digital performativity allowed it to avoid restrictions on advertising and funding imposed by electoral law so that the party could pursue its radical rightwing agenda. If this is the future of democratic politics then the ‘visual imagery of spectators and performers that dominates modern conceptions of democracy is too humanistic for the digital age’ (Runciman 2019, 158).

<sup>3</sup> Taiwan is an extant model of this kind of network politics. vTaiwan grew out of the Sunflower Student Movement, which started when protestors occupied the country’s parliament for weeks to oppose Taiwan’s trade bill with China. The civic hackers’ collective GOv saw the event as symptomatic of deep-rooted polarisation in Taiwanese society. vTaiwan is a collaborative project between the government and civic hackers in Taiwan to utilise web platforms for citizens to control what questions the government asks its citizens through referenda and elections. Civic hackers are a group who believe the Internet needs a new politics they call ‘multistakeholderism’, a process underpinned by the principle of consensus-finding (Miller 2019).

<sup>4</sup> 2049 marks the centenary of the Chinese Communist Revolution and has become a significant year in the country’s popular imagination. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has declared that 2049 is the year when the country will achieve full modernisation. What form this will take is hotly contested, but all CPC versions of futurity model China as a country moving into a ‘futureless past’ (Pomerantsev 2019, 242-244).

<sup>5</sup> Pro-democracy campaigners in South Korea have drawn parallels with the events of May 1980 and the Umbrella Movement following the implementation of China’s new security law in Hong Kong. Veterans of the Gwangju Uprising believe the Umbrella Movement is showing the world that citizens cannot rely on their government to defend democracy (Lee et al. 2020; also see BBC News 2020).

<sup>6</sup> These parties include the Freedom Party (Austria); League (Italy); Party for Freedom (Netherlands); National Rally (France); Alternative for Germany (Germany); Vox (Spain); Golden Dawn (Greece); Fidesz (Hungary); Law and Justice (Poland); Party for Freedom (Netherlands). The fundamental issues uniting all of these groups are ‘immigration, security, corruption, and foreign power’ (Mudde 2019, 31).

<sup>7</sup> Enoch Powell was a British Conservative MP who was expelled from the shadow cabinet in 1968 for his incendiary ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, where he claimed ‘in fifteen or twenty years’ time,

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the Black man will have the whip hand over the white man'. He became a popular figure on the British far right in the 1970s for his opposition to the Race Relations Act (“50 Years On: Rivers of Blood” 2018).

<sup>8</sup> The collapse of the neo-Nazi British National Party circa-2010 saw a significant change in the tactics of the British far right. The United Kingdom Independence Party under Nigel Farage successfully repackaged their politics, which were then later adopted by the Conservative party. This shift has legitimated racist narratives on national identity and immigration. At the same time as ethno-nationalism has become normalised a new generation of far-right activists, ‘Identitarians’ who work outside the party-political system, has gained influence online. This Identitarian movement was founded by Generation Identity, a group that began as a political meme designed to migrate across platforms. Migrating to online platforms allows disparate groups to unite around anti-Muslim hatred. Message and data are more important than party organisation for Identitarians. There now exists a professional online media ecosystem that pushes conspiracies such as ‘the great replacement’ and other hate speech into public conversation (Lowles and Atkinson 2018).