**Writing the Embodied Experience: Ekphrastic and Creative Writing as Audience Research**

Matthew Reason

**Abstract**

This paper explores the potential for spectator-authored creative writing as a vehicle to re‑present the experience of watching dance. Examining a research process that worked with creative writers and experienced dance spectators, it describes how the production of ekphrastic writing, that is texts that seek to evoke another non-textual art form, might allow audience members the opportunity to articulate embodied and emotional responses to dance that are often considered beyond discourse and ineffable.

\* \* \*

**Introduction**

After watching a dance performance with friends we often leave the venue and find ourselves asking each other, 'What did you think?' Or perhaps, alternatively but no more insightfully, 'Did you enjoy it?' That we often willingly and eagerly engage in such conversations, however, does not necessarily make them satisfactory or easy. There is a particular difficulty in communicating non-linguistic experiences, such as the experience of watching dance, through the medium of language. As Maxine Sheet-Johnstone declares, it is possible to argue that ‘the lived experience of dance is ineffable’ (1979: 65). Although this paper is focused specifically on spectators’ experience of dance, such questions of emotion, embodiment and ineffability could also relate to other art forms and other audience encounters.

This paper presents both a challenge to this notion of ineffability, and at the same time an enquiry into exactly what the spectator’s lived experience of dance entails. It does this through presenting and analysing the processes of a research project that sought to elicit spectator-authored creative writing. This was done through participatory workshops where invited audience members were supported by a creative writing tutor in re-presenting their experience of watching dance through poetry and prose. This paper examines how the results are a form of ekphrastic writing, that is texts that seek to evoke another non-textual art form, and creative products that potentially manifest the experience of the spectator/author to the reader/researcher. In analysing the resulting creative works the paper considers the potential for crafted, creative writing to give audience members the opportunity to articulate embodied, kinesthetic and experiential responses to dance that are often considered beyond discourse and ineffable.

**Dance Audiences and the Ineffable**

When seeking to explore audiences’ experiences of dance or theatre, researchers frequently use talk as a means to access spectators’ responses. Willmar Sauter, for example, describes his audience research in terms of hosting a series of ‘theatre talks’ where the ‘aim was that the “interview situation” should not be too different from what theatregoers normally would do’ (2000: 176) and which took the form of post-show conversations amongst friends and acquaintances over tea and coffee. My own audience research has similarly often taken the form of conversations about the performance, in which spectators often participate enthusiastically, demonstrating an eagerness to talk and share experiences. As dance critic Deborah Jowitt writes, ‘People like to talk about dances afterwards in order to prolong their [the dances’] ephemeral existence’ (1977: 101).

However, while people might like to talk about their experience of watching dance, they often find it far from easy. In my own research with dance audiences there almost invariably comes a moment when participants assert this linguistic challenge. Typical remarkshave included: ‘It’s hard for me to articulate’; ‘I can't be that good at expressing myself, I was just absolutely mesmerised’; or ‘it is difficult to describe, I think, cause there's a lot to it, isn't there.’ Occasionally participants are more reflective on this ineffability, aware that they know something beyond their words. One spectator, for example, remarked:

[It is difficult] to explain something that's physical. When you're watching dance, it's a visual thing, so to try to put into words the moves they were doing… I find it frustrating.

While another said ‘I don't know exactly how to tell you about this, it was something, you know, it was in my feet and my head’.

Such articulations of ineffability – that is the sense that we know something but are unable to put it into words – is of course not unique to dance but also felt in response to other arts encounters, such as theatre, music or fine arts. Art frequently presents us with stimulus to which we manifestly do respond and engage but in a manner that we find hard to externalise verbally. Crucially the statement of ineffability claims that there is *something* there, something we know we *know* (perhaps sensually, kinesthetically, somatically, experientially) rather than a simple absence of knowledge or absence of experience. As Sheets-Johnstone writes in relation to articulating the qualities of a particular movement within dance, ‘However ineffable the qualities might be we nonetheless experience them’ (2005). Or, as one dance spectator commented: ‘Sometimes you experience something and you cannot explain.’

Importantly, Sheets-Johnstone argues that the ineffability of dance is not purely a matter of spectators lacking a specialist technical vocabulary through which to account for what they see. While she recognises the limits of dance’s technical vocabulary, and observes that movement qualities are ‘challenging to describe’ as they are often ‘intricate dynamic forms that commonly have no name’, she adds that

One could, of course, make up a word, but making up a word misses the point: qualitative aspects are not easily packaged, being not only fleeting and evanescent but having complex, subtle, and intricate shadings. One cannot make up a word for something one cannot package. (2005)

Technical vocabulary, in other words, is not the real issue here. Instead it is the embodied experience of the movement, in all its detail and complexity, in all its particular qualities of effort and flow and dynamism, which we are striving but failing to articulate.

There is a question here as to whether stating, in Sheets-Johnstone’s words, that ‘we nonetheless experience’ such qualities should be considered different from stating that we nonetheless notice them or are consciously aware of them. From the perspective of embodied phenomenology, in which Sheets-Johnstone would locate herself, the ‘lived experience’ is rooted in the body and in sensorial experience known through the body. As she writes elsewhere, ‘When a dance is there for us […] we have a lived experience. Judgements, beliefs, interpretations are suspended: our experience of dance is free of any manner of reflection’ (1979). Such a pre-reflective and embodied understanding of the lived experience means that experience might be considered very different from conscious awareness. This contrasts with ideas of experience developed within social phenomenology, which focuses instead on how individuals construct meaning for themselves through a process of reflection, articulation and social exchange. Alfred Schütz, for example, writes that lived experiences are not meaningful ‘merely by virtue of their being experienced or lived through’ but instead ‘those experiences are meaningful which are grasped reflectively’ (1967: 69). This relationship between embodied and reflective lived experiences (and it is telling that the same phrase is used across the phenomenological perspectives) is something that I will return to later when thinking about the philosophical implications of the research to ideas of aesthetic experience.

What is interesting here is that spectators’ expressions of frustrated ineffability could be seen as articulations (even if failed articulations) located in the space between the two lived experiences. They represent at once the beginnings of reflective meaning making and, at the same time, utterances that recognise that the experience itself while still known and felt is already only a trace.

The perception of experiential ineffability, therefore, is not a matter of technical vocabulary, nor as simple as stating that some things are beyond language. It is, however, a challenge for any researcher looking to find out how audiences experience, remember and make sense of their dance watching experiences. In the past I have sought to address aspects of this challenge through using visual arts workshops with audience members, asking them to draw what they saw or felt as a way of communicating their experience non-verbally (see Reason 2010b). This research can be located within a growing tradition of creative and arts-based research methodologies that seek to mediate participants’ responses through a particular activity – most prominently drawing and painting but also creative writing, model making, collage and video diaries. These approaches draw on traditions of art therapy and the use of ‘projective techniques’ within market research and have also been utilised in media and cultural research (see for example Gauntlett 2007).

However, while conducting research that utilised drawing as a non-linguistic methodology, I became interested in whether rather than seeking to escape from language as inadequate it might be as beneficial to address language directly and pursue strategies to enhance its use as a creative and expressive form in its own right. Stating that something is ineffable can at times seem an easy escape from the challenge of accounting for an experience through language. In this context, perhaps through engaging with approaches rooted in poetry and creative writing, and working in the format of participatory creative writing workshops, it might be possible to address or at least explore further the challenge of the embodied ineffability of dance.

Potentially, the challenge (even impossibility) of the task, almost becomes the point. Meaning and insight are produced through the struggle to articulate, and within the gaps and the failures as well as the successes. Here I find Neilsen’s reflection on ineffability in relation to linguistic expression of feeling or experience particularly useful:

*Language is always inadequate*. We dance with the impossible each time we put words on the page. It is far better to dance with impossibility than to accept the first ordinary word that comes to mind, the easy cliché. (cited in Prendergast 2009: xxvi)

Here Neilsen firstly, and rightly, recognises that there is nothing unique to the observation of ineffability to relation to writing or speaking about dance. There is a similar challenge in accounting for the particular embodied or experiential qualities of our daily encounters in the world – although perhaps there are some experiences which we are motivated more strongly to try to articulate and where the difficulty is therefore more acutely felt. Secondly, that while we might recognise this impossibility, rather than avoiding the challenge it is valuable to try to go beyond the first draft and to engage with the craft and practice of writing.

With these objectives in mind, and as part of the wider Watching Dance: Kinesthetic Empathy project (see www.watchingdance.org), I designed a test project to explore the potential for post-performance creative writing workshops with dance audiences. The proposal was to conduct two creative writing based workshops: one with participants who were experienced in or students of creative writing; the other with participants who were experienced dance spectators but were without experience of creative writing. Each workshops would be three hours long and be facilitated by Sherry Ashworth, a lecturer in creative writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. The workshops would take place two to three days after the participants attended a dance performance, which was by Rambert Dance Company at the Lowry Theatre, Manchester in September 2010.

**Writing as Research Methodology**

Within the broad area of creative or arts-based qualitative research, there is a vibrant strand that is interested in the use of writing – particularly poetry and creative or expressive writing – as research methodology. In a chapter offering a meta-analysis of the use of poetry in research, Monica Prendergast identifies these as two broad categories within the field of writing as research methodology, which she distinguishes by the mode of voice that is engaged:

VOX AUTOBIOGRAPHIA/AUTOETHNOGRAPHIA – Researcher-voiced poems are written from field notes, journal entries, or reflective/creative/autobiographical/ autoethnographical writing as the data source. […]

VOX PARTICIPARE – *Participant-voiced poems* are written from interview transcripts or solicited directed from participants […] (2009: xxii)

Continuing on from my exploration of participant drawings, I was naturally primarily interested in the second category here and in approaches where participants are invited to utilise creative or expressive writing during interviews or workshops. Specifically I wanted to explore what poetry, or other creative writing, spectators might produce in response to watching dance. This will be expanded on in a moment. However, considering Prendergast’s first category, I also became interested in the potential for poetry to be considered as a form of research dissemination and its value and status as expressive and communicative *art* rather than more loosely being an arts-*based* approach designed to access something other than itself. Poetry as a form of research dissemination might include poetry written either by the researcher or the participant or by utilising, editing and compressing interview data into a poetic form. As Patricia Leavy puts it:

The representation of data in poetic form is not simply an alternative way of presenting the same information; rather, it can help the researcher evoke different meanings from the data, work through different sets of issues, and help the audience receive the data differently. (2009: 64)

Laurel Richardson usefully elaborates on this potential to receive data ‘differently’ through poetry when she writes that ‘poetry can evoke embodied responses in listeners and readers by recreating speech in ways that traditional research prose cannot’ (cited in Faulkner 2009: 16). In terms of dance audiences, my initial objective was to explore how participant voiced poetry and creative writing might communicate spectators’ embodied responses better to *me*, the researcher, without at that stage thinking of the writings as the output and public form of the research findings in their own right. However, there is clearly the potential for participant produced, crafted and reflective pieces of writing to increasingly speak for themselves, at least partially obviating the always problematic requirement of the researcher to speak for the participants. With participant produced creative writing, perhaps the researcher becomes instead a kind of curator and analysis becomes a form of literary exegeses.

In her book *Poetry as Method*, Sandra Faulkner explores a range of issues relating to the use of poetry within social research. Her emphasis is on the potential for ‘reporting’ research through verse. Her reasons for this include the ability of poetry to evoke embodied experiences and to manifest the complexity of the social world. Noticeably a sizable element of the book is concerned with poetic craft and the study of poetry as form, and this emphasis on the *quality* and *art*ness of arts-based research is a provocative theme in this area. For Faulkner, Prendergast and others it is essential for any researcher wanting to use poetry as methodology to engage fully with the aesthetic qualities of the medium. Faulkner, for example, writes that:

My interest in poetic craft was born out of frustration with some poetry published as academic research that seemed sloppy, ill-conceived, and unconsidered. Just because research poetry is published in academic journals, read at academic conferences, or merely labelled academic, does this mean there should not be a concomitant interest in poetic craft? (2009: 19)

While Prendergast states that:

My intention to articulate a methodology for poetic inquiry is to position it as an artistic practice carried out within a research framework that cannot and must not diminish the critical/aesthetic qualities of these kinds of poems as *poetry* (2009: xxv)

In the context of reporting research findings through poetry – Prendergast’s category of ‘researcher voiced poems’ – this is extremely demanding simply because of the inherent challenges of writing good poetry but is perhaps fair enough. If the motivation is the different kind of sensibilities that poetry is able to communicate to the reader, then in order to fulfil this objective poetically voiced research needs to be strong research *and* strong poetry. In the context of participant voiced creative writing, which is my primary focus and Prendergast’s second category, this proposal seems additionally problematic. Initially at least it appears to potentially devalue some responses on literary grounds that are nothing to do with the integrity or interest of the individual’s response. It seems to introduce an ethically uncomfortable element of evaluation – is this participant’s response ‘good’ enough?

Another question that this discussion raises is the nature of the difference between writing per se and creative writing or poetry. Or even, more subtly, between poetry and poetic writing. It is possible to argue that, in terms of the kind of social research being discussed here, any form of writing provides space for reflection that immediate spoken responses do not allow. Similarly such writing might easily slip into the ‘poetic’ as author-participants attempt to articulate something at the edges of their conscious sensibility. When such poetic responses becomes poetry as a definable form is beyond the scope of this paper, although a key element might include the nature of the author’s and reader’s focus and intent when engaging with language. To consciously think of something as poetry is to call upon a particular kind of attitude to language that is different – in intent and attention if not necessarily in actual form and content – to everyday speech.

Taking these two considerations together, in setting up this project there was the motivation to facilitate the participants in creating literary responses to dance that could be as 'good' – that is as crafted, nuanced and evocative – as possible. And moreover that had an explicit intention to actively engage participants with the nature and quality of their writing; to focus attention on how and why particular words and images were being used. In this manner the writing workshops run with dance spectators needed to be more than simply another form of focus group where the motivation was to gather responses that could then be analysed or sifted through for meaning. Instead the workshops had to be genuine creative writing workshop that sought to help the participants develop their writing, to craft and hone their responses, and thereby perhaps enable their writing to begin to articulate something of their sensorial, emotional or embodied experience of dance.

**Ekphrastic Writing**

Not surprisingly none of the discussion about poetry and creative writing as research methodology considers its potential in terms of spectators’ responses to dance or even art more widely. However, there is a tradition of writing that does something similar, which is ekphrastic writing. Ekphrasis is the literary description or recounting of an event, thing or experience in the world. More commonly, as ekphrastic poetry, it relates to the evocative description of a work of visual art; less commonly ekphrastic art produces transmutations between language and music. Writing about ekphrasis, Marjorie Munsterberg states that ‘the goal of this literary form is to make the reader envision the thing described as if it were physically present’ (2009). This is certainly a clear articulation of the motivation, yet it is one that most writers recognise is held simultaneously with an appreciation of its impossibility. As Tamar Yacobi writes, the act of representing an artwork in language ‘is to frame one act of communication within another’ and therefore involves translation, transposition and intermedia quotation (2000: 719).

Remembering that the original artwork is itself often already a representation, this means that ekphrasic writing operates in a series of dualities: one communication within another; one frame within another; one representation within another; one set of authored perspectives within another. It involves an act of transposition that invites the reader to access something new, which is informed by not just by the original art work but also by the sensibility of a new and reframing author. This provokes what Michael Benton describes as a ‘seeing double’ as the ‘ekphrastic spectator’ contemplates one art work through the eyes of another artist, always maintaining awareness of the existence and separate authorships and perspectives (1997).

Benton describes the result as a potential clash or potential enhancing of readings. Yacobi describes the result of an inherent instability. Ekphrastic writing is also an intermedial example of Jacques Derrida’s notion of the countersignature. This concept describes how the ‘signature’, that is the particular form and idiom of one text, invites ‘counter-signatures’ that iterate and re-present the original. A process of quotation that is also a process of misquotation, of translation and transposition (see for example Caputo 1997: 189).

As a research methodology the fact that this is not a straightforward task of translation provides a particular point of analytical interest. In my research the act of ekphrastic writing required participants to actively reflect and consider their response to the performance. It required them to interrogate their experience and invest creative effort in re-presenting this to a second ‘ekphrastic spectator’, who is invited to contemplate (might we also say invited to know? to experience?) one art work through the perspective of another person. As a countersignature to the original artwork, the ekphrastic writing produced by dance spectators represents a trace of the experience that also generates a kind of experience in its own right.

**The Creative Writing Workshops**

For the creative writing workshops two groups of participants were recruited. The first group consisted of seven writers, all of whom were students on either undergraduate or postgraduate creative writing programmes at Manchester Metropolitan University. None of this group were regular dance watchers. The second group consisted of eight experienced dance watchers – defined by watching live dance on average at least six times a year over several years – none of whom had experience in creative writing. The formation of these groups was directed the interest of the Watching Dance project in how differences in familiarity in watching dance impacts on spectators’ experience: in what and how they watch, in what they remember, and, potentially, in their cognitive processing and brain activity as they watch. The project was particularly interested in the embodied and kinesthetic engagement of experienced spectators and any contrasts that might be made with novice or inexperienced spectators.

With each group we asked the participants to briefly introduce themselves to each other and it was noticeable how strongly the dance spectators identified themselves with dance. Meic, for example, described himself as somebody who ‘loved contemporary dance’ and had been watching it since the 1970s; Sheila as somebody who ‘adores dance’; John had ‘loved dance from an early age’. For the majority of them dance was central to their sense of self and something they had engaged with often since childhood. This contrasted strongly with the writers group, for whom dance was marginal (perhaps taken once or twice by friends or did a dance class as a child but never since) or entirely absent from their life (for a couple this was the first time they had seen as contemporary dance at all).

All the participants were given tickets to see Rambert Dance Company, who were performing a triple bill consisting of three pieces of contemporary dance: ‘Hush’ choreographed by Christopher Bruce; ‘RainForest’ choreographed by Merce Cunningham; and ‘Awakenings’ choreographed by Aletta Collins. Of these three the most prominent was ‘Awakenings’, a dance adaptation inspired by Oliver Sack’s book of the same name on encephalitis lethargica (or ‘sleepy sickness’). For audiences this subject matter engaged with experiences of friends or family suffering from similar symptoms of loss of speech, movement and ability to engage with the world around them. Of the other pieces, ‘RainForest’ was a revival of one of Cunningham’s classic ‘nature studies’, first performed in 1968, and staged against a backdrop of Andy Warhol’s installation *Silver Clouds* featuring helium-filed silver pillows that float around in mid-air.

The participants attended a midweek performance and took part in a creative writing workshop on the following Saturday. In the period between these dates we asked each of the participants to complete some short writing exercises. For this we simply asked them to find somewhere peaceful to sit down for a moment and think about the performance, then write ‘free flow’ in response to the following prompts:

On the evening after the performance:  
Write for two minutes about things you saw in the performance  
Write for two minutes about things you thought in response to the performance  
Write for two minutes about how you felt while you were watching the performance  
  
On the following day:  
Do these exercises again without looking at your writing from the previous occasion.

By ‘free flow’ writing we explained that they should aim to keep their pen moving for the whole time, trying not to analyse what they were writing as they were doing it, not worrying about punctuation or spelling, not correcting mistakes and so forth.

These tasks were primarily intended to generate material for use within the workshops, as I will go onto explore in a moment. Indeed, as the focus was to be on how participants actively worked with language, rather than on taking their first utterances as automatically the most valid or insightful utterance. Additionally, because of the writing methods employed by Sherry Ashworth in the workshops, several of the images, phrases and ideas that appear in the participants’ final texts can be traced back to these initial notes and it is perhaps the developed or refined versions that should be taken as the definitive utterances. However, three points are worth noting.

The first is that broadly the dance watchers, despite being non-writers, on the whole wrote more than the creative writers. They typically had more to say.

Second, and connected to this, these initial writings usefully illustrate how greater experience in watching a particular art form produces an increased literacy in both prosaic and more complex forms elements of engagement. On the prosaic level several of the creative writers were confused by the notion of a triple bill of contemporary dance where the three pieces are not connected. Susan, for example, writes, ‘the three performances must have been meant as stand alone performances as there was no tangible through-line’. At a more nuanced level Mike writes reflectively on the degree of implied specialised literacy that is required of a spectator, observing that he felt:

Tense – not bored but excluded. Trying to grip onto meaning but finding that none of the meaning-making tools at my disposal were any use. Felt as though I had to learn a new language. Understood why non-poets are hostile to poetry – it can feel like its own world that is deliberately exclusive.

Another writer, Greg, similarly writes of how he wondered about what he should be looking at and how he should be responding: if he should be enjoying the movements for their own sake or trying to ‘work out what each piece “meant”’. He asks himself if he should have pored over the programme ‘to try and get more out of it’ before commenting that he ‘just gave in and WATCHED’.

Unsurprisingly the experienced dance spectators weren’t asking themselves these sort of questions. From the pragmatic level of all already knowing the convention of a contemporary dance triple bill, to the more abstract level of ‘how’ to watch, the whole experience was far more familiar and comfortable to them. In critical or conceptual terms this clearly affirms Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of ‘cultural capital’, which he formulates in terms of ‘the capacity to see is a function of knowledge […] a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded’ (1984: 3).

A third broad point to draw from these initial pieces of writing is a slight and perhaps unsurprising increased sense distance between the first and second iterations. For example, it is largely in the second pieces of writing that participants start making comparisons to other art forms or experiences (and variously mentioned are *Waiting for Godot*, David Bowie, Kurt Vonnegut, Brian Aldiss, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Buster Keaton) and largely in the second pieces of writing that they start speculating on the nature of dance or dance watching in a general sense. Many of the comments self-reflective above, for instance, are taken from the second sets of writing. Or, in another example, when writing about what she felt the first time around Susan (from the writers group) comments on the particular dance performances seen, stating which ones held her interest most and which alienated her (‘I felt the more fast paced routines held my interest…’). The second time around this shifts to speak about dance in general as a form (‘I think that dance is a medium with a…’).

For a couple of the experienced dance spectators this took the form of more general descriptions of why they liked dance, that started to detach themselves from the specific performance seen. Peter, for example, writes that:

I love dance because when it is good, when you’re watching something amazing it provokes an emotional reaction in itself, that isn’t reliant on sad words or mournful music. It communicates directly to me in a way that is far more profound than other types of theatre.

While Morven writes:

How incredible it is that humans can express such a diverse range of experience and feeling through their physical presence; how the angle of a foot or the curve of a spine can echo the primal responses to the difficulties and challenges of life around us.

**Warming Up**

The participants wrote these initial thoughts in the days between the performance and the workshops, and brought the notes along with them as a raw material for them to refine and develop. Indeed, the first exercise used the free flow writing in exactly this way, with each participant asked to select from their notes the ten words that had the most resonance or significance to them. In each workshop these were then read out, going round the circle of seven people, each reading one word at a time. This was intended as a warm-up exercise but became something interesting, a kind of collaborative 70 word poem (with resemblances perhaps to Tristan Tzara's Dada poems). As each word has its roots, its motivation and stimulaton in the evening of dance performances the whole somehow speaks of that experience. The resulting 70 texts, one from each workshop, are reproduced below and the similarities in word choices both within each text and across the two texts are noticable. Each contains a fair spread of descriptive, thematic and evaluative words:

flow family symmetry charged control clocks pierrot  
posture comedy synchronicity movement spaces convulsions discordant  
gestures frustration disparate dispatching gridlines control frozen  
relationships mechanical crash spirals inflatables imitation blossoms  
interpretation melancholy alienated intentionality reflections machines relationships  
gasps hypnotic physical opposed attracts animals nostalgia  
space confrontational fluid form repel shadows station  
reason loneliness creative flowing clichéd clowns frenzy  
variable rivalry spaciousness naturalness engaged nightmare narrative  
preparedness loss narrative express between elastic physicality  
  
  
childlike stark repetitive tension children fluid alien Pierrot  
play Lowry frozen release automata relationships twee music  
virtuosity desolation pain joyful muted reflection movement stars  
fluid agonising frustration exultation dying childlike disconnected gymnastics  
individuals sadness cyclical primal aching inclusive moonlit tinfoil  
repetition painful trapped feral tired rhythms hostile reflections  
timeless bleakness sadness fluidity floating lightness frustrated awakenings  
obsessive jerky restrictions fixation imbeciles airy distracting changes  
poignant bewildered anger embodiment order siblings history movements  
innocence strange helplessness raw motherless contrasts distorted control

**Free Verse Poems**

The next exercise asked the participants to use their 10 words as a basis for their own free verse poem. For this task they were allowed to add words and could also either stay close to the dance performances or begin to move away to a different but connected expression. These poems therefore developed from the free flow writing, through the process of condensation and word selection to expansion and expression in a poetic form. The results are pieces of ekphrastic writing, that do not seek simply to ‘make the reader envision the thing described as if it were physically present’ (something particularly complex here, as the thing described is not available to you, the new and current reader) but form a transposition of feelings, emotions, connotations. As an ekphrastic spectator we are invited to see one communication through the perspectives, language and idiom of another.

In his free flow writing, for example, Mike made the following imagistic comparison – ‘Made me think of Vonnegut’s syphillites – broken machines, people with things inside them controlling their movements.’ This image can then be seen as the source for his poem:

We were always machines  
but we played at being real  
so convincingly and for so long  
we began to believe it ourselves.

As a piece of writing this steps away from the dance in a direct sense, it does not describe the stage picture or innumerate the dancers and their actions, although it maintains connotative connection in its imagery and concern for movement and identity that was present in different ways in all three pieces of choreography. Instead it operates on a more evocative manner, reaching out to whichever dystopian novel (perhaps [Kazuo Ishiguro](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazuo_Ishiguro)’s *Never Let Me Go*) or movie (maybe Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*) has most resonance with us personally.

With other participants it is again interesting to note this process whereby a phrase found in their free flow writing is developed further into an explicitly poetic form. Greg (from the creative writers group) for example makes a note about ‘RainForest’: ‘one woman rolled with incredible slowness lengthways across the stage’. He also notes of this piece that it made him feel variously expectant, anxious, confused, hypnotic and irritated. One stanza in the middle of a long verse then reads:

Which catches the eye, and keeps it?  
Something jagged and confrontational?  
Or something hypnotically slooooow....

Glynn’s (experienced dance spectator) piece of writing does something similar in elaborating on a phrase or image found in the free flow writing. The first sentence, ‘Figures in a landscape – starkly reminiscent of Lowry people’, is already rich with imagery that reaches out to references beyond the dance. Through combining this with his 10 selected words he reformulates and enriches it further:

Lowry people alone  
Inhabit a stark landscape  
Bewildered, strange country  
Agonising, painful sadness  
Reflection  
bleak desolation  
Lowry people together.

Here the Lowry connotation, remembering that these workshops took place in Manchester, creates almost a double ekphrastic relationship to both the dance and the painter. The result is something that places first Glynn as writer and now us as readers into the interior reflections and mindscape of an isolated individual. Interestingly what this points towards is the ability of dance to project this sense of interiority without any of the common devices – such as voice over, or point of view shot and perspective – that are frequently used to construct such experiences in film.

Other examples stayed closer to a direct representation or description of the dance on stage. This, for example, is from Susan, a creative writer who in her free flow writing describes how she struggled with how to watch the dance and felt excluded by some of it:

Pre-planned symmetry  
Couples move in synchronicity  
Performing in their disparate parts  
Love as a performing art  
A strange crash of themes  
Alienated all of what we dreamed  
And brought us back into the physical  
And my own inner spaciousness alone

Here the first three lines acts as a form of impressionistic description, in a sense of what dance is, with the latter half of the poem bringing us more into the interior responses of her as a spectator – rather than a projection into the dancing figures which is present in Glyn’s and Mike’s poems.

Further examples of the participants’ poems are available on the research blog for this project: <http://audienceswriting.blogspot.co.uk/>.

**Developing the Writing**

The next exercise in the workshops was a paper memory exercise designed to deepen recall of the experience. Dividing a piece of paper into three, participants were asked to jot down memories under the following headings: the performance; my thoughts; distractions. Primarily intended as material for further writing, this exercise does not need reflecting on or illustrating here in detail except to note the inevitable difficulty of separating out these three elements. Where does a description of the performance end and a spectator's commentary on their thoughts begin? What is a distraction to one person is a central element of their performance related thoughts for somebody else. In other words our sense of what a spectator's experience of a performance is needs to go beyond conceiving it as simply what happens on the stage. In terms of ekphrastic writing this means that the re‑presentation might contain descriptions, connotations, reflections, deviations, each a literal step away from the original representation but not necessarily an emotional or experiential divergence.

For the final third of the workshops the participants were asked to spend a longer period of time on a piece of writing that would provide a more extensive, or more refined and edited, creative response. The instructions for this task contained the following two suggestions:

Either, to write from the perspective of an individual connected to the performance, writing in the first person as either a dancer in character; or a dancer as a dancer; or as a member of the audience.

Or, to write a narrative, in the third person past-tense inspired by the dance.

Interpretation of these instructions was left open to the participants, as was the degree to which they wrote something representative of the dance, something more evocatively connected to the experience, or something departing from the performance but echoing its modes, emotions or experiential qualities. Across the two groups each of these possibilities were pursued, with some pieces of writing clearly emerging from the exercises that had gone before while others started from entirely different places.

The writings that resulted from this exercise are longer than the initial verses and it would be impossible to present and analyse all of them here. They range in form and style. Some explore different forms or genre (such as the obituary or futuristic story). Others provide backgrounds or a backstory to the dance by filling in or providing the narrative. Some step away from the dance entirely and seek to tell a story that replicates the emotional meaning of the dance. Rather than present all of these here, just three are reproduced and briefly commented upon.

First, a piece of writing by Meic, an experienced dance spectator and non-writer, who elected to imaginatively construct an inner world and background narrative for the characters in 'Hush'. Focusing on elements of the scenario sketched out by the costumes, music and set he constructs an image of itinerant fairground people. Interestingly there is very little description of the movement, beyond the labelling at one point of a communal ho-down. Instead his writing focuses on communicating the moods and feelings of piece, the sense of family and the moments of both light and emotional darkness. It is the use of details – the names, the nicknames, the relationships – that are evocative for the reader and provoke investment with the emotions and final sense of loss.

We’ve arrived – and it’s still the same… it’s always the same. They always find the place… Mum and Dad. (Well, that’s what I call them… I can’t remember a time when they weren’t there.) It’s beautiful – the stars, the tent reaching up to the sky, the circus ring, and the space to dance.  
  
And us… Mum and Dad, Estrella (who’s almost grown up), John (definitely not Johnny any more), little Bobby (she just wont come if you say Roberta) and me – the youngest. And now it’s starting: the music… they always find the music… I think they must have had it specially made for us… and we dance. We all have a sort of turn at it… and it’s so much fun, it makes us so happy… and it’s always the same.  
  
Now it’s time for us, the little ones, to sleep. And sometimes we really do, but sometimes we’re allowed to peek, and tonight I’m going to join in… Mum and Dad together, trying to find some space for themselves… Estrella, then Johnny, but then that last bit… the ho-down it’s called, and it’s here and we’re all dancing together and it’s wonderful and we all feel so happy and so safe.  
  
It’s over… we line up, time to go out into the night… where?  
  
But we’ll always come back…. Or usually… and now we can’t. I’m sitting and reading this and it brings it all back… the ritual, the joy, the wonderful protected feeling of that children’s time, long ago. And now, we can’t be together anymore… we can’t go back. With them both gone we’ll never be able to find that place again.  
  
And that, perhaps, is what makes this even sadder.

Next Mike, a creative writing student for whom this was his first experience of watching live dance, developed further a text he had started earlier in the workshop. Again this is primarily a response to – although also equally a departure from – 'Hush'. There are moments in the text that are clearly recognisable to anybody who had seen the performance, the distracting buzzing of an invisible wasp, the grotesque crowds at once both comic and horrifying and of course the general tone and atmosphere. All this, however, is transposed through the prism of language and Mike’s own imagination. Some of the results include a noticeably darker emotional palette and a stress upon dystopian imagery of people as machines or animals.

Memory unspools from us.

We’re a troupe of clowns

distracted by the buzzing

of an invisible wasp,

clapping our hands

in the vague direction of the noise

unaware of the cassette player

squatting like an elephant in the corner.

Our bones must be electric:

even as we sit here

perfectly still, our shadows

convulse on the walls behind us.

We’ve discovered the secret:

we’re not really animals

but facsimiles of animals.

We are broken machines,

have always been broken machines,

though we played at being real

for so long we were beginning

to believe it ourselves. Please,

you who loved us, don’t feel cheated.

Console yourselves with the thought

that if there is a last laugh here,

we’re not the ones having it.

Third, a descriptive internal monologue produced by Sheila, an experienced dance spectator and non-writer. It clearly draws upon both the free writing exercises she did immediately after the performance and the memory exercise conducted during the workshop. Unlike the other two examples above it focuses on the spectator, rather than the performance. This writing responds to ‘Awakenings’:

As ever, the prospect of an evening watching dance provided a sense of anticipation, combined with the feeling: why did my own body not let me be able to do this? It is my favourite way to spend an evening, thought it has to be said that on seeing the absolute hoards of children there my emotions are mixed.

I fight past the kids blocking the aisle into a hot, poor seat with a restricted view and contemplate that it is a good job this is a free ticket. The Lowry really should segregate the paying customer from the school party to a greater extent.

Please let the kids be quiet, switch off their phones and let us concentrate. Glory be, to a greater extent this seems to be happening.

I wonder if after the Rain Forest piece the kids attention will have wandered and they wont be able to grasp the meaning in Awakenings?

I cannot bear the pain of the first dancer to move. It is hitting me so forcibly I want to put my arms around him. He has such a dreadful tic. I wonder if Fraser’s tic is like that? They are so isolated from each other, but on the outside look like a bunch of ordinary people when they are frozen.

I am being emotionally dragged into this faster and harder than I expect. The music – it is staccato and chaotic at times - aren’t they moving well to it? Hasn’t the choreographer done his homework well and felt the rhythm and the emotion. I can hardly bear to watch – the man is walking up and down into glass walls. The girl is imagining her jacket fastenings.

Well, well, two people are trying to dance together, more lyric movement and music and a hint of communication and empathy… but, oh no, she has frozen. And again I wish I could help her communicate with the man.

I wish I could see the whole stage – this seat is awful - why are the speakers arrayed there so they maximise the intrusion on the sight line?

Now where are we going? Oh yes, repetition. Good. That is so relevant here. More repetition of movement. Clever stuff and I love the interpretation of the music. The girls sitting next to me are being so good. They are sunk down in their chairs. Is that because teenagers slouch or because of the power of live performance?

Oh Janet, why did they keep you alive so long after your stroke? This is why we went through what we did to go and talk to you, just in case you could hear.

There are progressively more dancers on stage now, so I think we are building to the finale. I wonder what the lady who wrote in the programme would think of this? I think they are really picking up on her moving world of consciousness that shifts near and far from her. It turns back in on her all the time and never stops. Yes! They have got it, the lone male turning and turning amongst the static dancers. And so it goes on and on.

My god I am tired. I have to write about this when I get back and how am I going just to say what I saw and keep it separate from my emotions? This is not going to be straightforward.

Thank god there will be a lot of coaches and the car park should be ok to get out of. I am so glad I had a chance to engage with this piece.

What this text very powerfully achieves is to place the reader into Sheila’s mind *as if* at the moment of watching, with all the thoughts and feelings that go through one’s head at that moment. I say ‘as if’ for this is inevitably a conscious and selective reconstruction of that experience. It adopts the literary device of stream of consciousness but is not literally such from the moment itself.

What makes it so evocative, however, is its construction of a sense of honesty. Whether Sheila is slightly exaggerating or sending up or being entirely truthful in her portray of herself we cannot know, probably all three at once. Either way the character presented is at moments unsympathetic (if understandable) in her somewhat snotty depiction of the 'children' in the audience and yet in the same piece of writing also utterly sympathetic and clearly moved in a really heartfelt manner by the performance. The blurring and moving between idle thoughts about the car park; evaluative comments on the choreography; personal connotations of friends or family who have been in a similar situation; bitchy comments about the theatre or rest of the audience, all feels utterly true and utterly persuasive. Indeed, Sheila's writing was truly persuasive, particularly in its rendering of such an emotional and intelligent response to ‘Awakenings’. As the workshop ended one of the other participants, who had largely dismissed ‘Awakenings’, commented to Sheila that listening to her had changed his mind about the piece. 'I think I missed it entirely' he said. Listening to somebody so entirely engaged and responsive to a piece of art is an experience that has something of the qualities of perceiving an evocative piece of art for oneself.

**Observing oneself observing**

At the end of the workshops each group had a short reflective discussion about the process. Both groups commented on its value to them, the creative writers in feeling that they had experienced a structured pathway into thinking about something that was otherwise fairly alien to them. Several of them commented on their desire to impose narrative and characterisation onto dance through the process of writing. The dance spectators naturally enjoyed talking about dance and sharing their responses. For some of the participants the process made them feel a little self-conscious, with one remarking on feeling anxious during the performance knowing that they were going to have to write about it afterwards. Another remarked on ‘how strange it was to observe myself observing instead of feeling’; another commented, returning to the theme of ineffability, that she had realised ‘that emotion is primal and that language (or my language) doesn’t seem to be able to encapsulate it.’

The most extensive discussion of this was in fact produced prior to the workshop, by Morven who did an additional piece of free writing as she felt a need to ‘address the issue of myself as observer in some way’. Writing about her sense of observing, Morven said that in her writing she did not want to focus on the technicalities of the movement but rather highlight the emotions she felt she was experiencing:

In a way language cannot do this justice as physical kinetics seem to ‘embody’ (in the literal sense) that raw, unfiltered, unmediated emotional response. What I am trying to do in this writing is to describe and perhaps a better way of doing this is to use the emotions experienced while watching/reflecting on the performance to stimulate another creative process; ie use the sense of feeling and place that this creates to write about something quite different. In that sense, this performance triggered conflict between a sense of safety/home/belonging and that of isolation. The latter wasn’t entirely or predominately negative though – it was as if there was a strange fascination with the odd, the excluded, the mad?, the isolated from society – perhaps always strangely attractive.

This is a clear articulation of both Sheets-Johnstone’s concern about the ineffability of the experiential qualities of the dance and of the objectives of ekphrastic writing. Morven then ended her discussion with a comment about the challenge of this task – ‘I think this is a fascinating process but do worry that I end up sounding like a third-rate dance critic!’ – which states its difficulty and perhaps also our tendency to self-censor around acts of creativity because of our fear of failure and exposure.

During this process I was in the privileged position of neither having to participate in the workshops, nor run them (which was done by Sherry). Instead able to observe and then afterwards engage deeply with the material produced. Through this process I have been struck by how articulations of ineffability, articulations of the difficulty of the task and the fear of producing third-rate writing, are often accompanied by moments of startling clarity, evocation and insight. Sometimes these are fleeting; longer, sustained evocations being far rarer than snapshots, imagistic moments, single pin points of revelation. In conversation these are often the kind of thing that get lost in the sheer speed, transience and volume of our dialogue. Said and then forgotten as we move on. The particular qualities of the utterance are therefore neglected in a manner that is not dissimilar to the ineffability of the particular qualities of dance. Through the process of writing and re-reading, these utterances can be uncovered and we can pause and consider the potential for their close reading.

For example, Peter, one of the participants in the dance watching group and here commenting on ‘Awakenings’, included this line in his second piece of free flow writing about 'things he saw':

Tormented by the body, frozen in stilted motion, a world in which normal movement has become an unfamiliar thing.

What can we see, what can we know and experience, if we pause and consider this line?

It is something that I suspect we can quite readily agree is an evocative phrase. It is full of affecting imagery, it encourages us to feel what it describes – emotionally and/or physically – rather than simply see it. Importantly it encourages us to engage in this emotional /physical affect whether or not we have seen the performance that is being described. In terms of our engagement with this phrase, the performance itself is no longer relevant as we instead draw on the connotative substance and heft of the words and our own cultural and personal experiences.

In the tradition of ekphrastic writing additionally, the phrase seeks to translate some of the experiential properties of one thing to another – from the dance into language. That is a translation of empathy rather than equivalency – not identical, but the same in its difference.

And indeed, this affective engagement operates through a process of empathy. When looking at this phrase I first thought, well he is simply describing what he saw, dancers performing in a tormented, stilted manner, alienated from their own bodies and from our familiar sense of normal movement. Yes, I thought, I saw that too. Yet there is nothing particularly simple in that description or in that perception, it is particular to us watching in an embodied manner, with and through awareness of human bodilyness. Equally for anybody reading the line the response is rooted, I'd suggest, in reading it with and through tacit awareness of human bodilyness.

What, however, can we say about the extent or exact nature of this empathetic relationship to the performance? I think we can very comfortably say that neither the writer when he was watching the dance, nor the dancers when they were performing, nor you when you are reading the sentence feel ‘tormented’. However, there is an evocation of tormentedness that was first projected by the qualities of the movement to the writer and then (in a translated form) by the qualities of the language to the reader, which we can connect with and be affected by without actually succumbing to.

What happens when we pay close attention to such language, I believe, is that we can read the embodied back into the experience of dance. It is perhaps there again in a line by Mike where he describes ‘boneless clowns and elastic men turning into animals, both reptile and mammal’ or Susan’s image of ‘bodies rippling like waves from top to bottom.’ Or indeed, in many other various examples given in this paper. There are qualities to such language that evocatively invite the reader to kinesthetically empathise and embody the imagery for themselves. Often such language is rushed past as we move onto interpretation (stating what it meant) or evaluation (stating our opinion) or contextualisation (stating what it reminded us of). However, if we slow down and attune ourselves we can read for and with an appropriated embodied sensitivity.

**Lived Experiences**

Earlier in this paper two broadly opposing conceptualisations of the lived experience were presented. Through embodied phenomenology we might consider the ‘lived experience’ as the primary and sensorial perceptual consciousness – perhaps even pre-consciousness – of our embodied encounters with the world. While through social phenomenology the ‘lived experience’ might be framed in terms of the reflective and conscious – perhaps even self-conscious – processes of meaning making and articulation. More profoundly, of course, both kinds of lived experience might be simultaneously and mutually entangled. We reflect in and on the moment of experience; our embodied consciousness informs and shapes our reflective sense of the experience.

Nonetheless, the challenge of representing the nature of the embodied experience within language remains. More particularly in this context the challenge is of communicating something of the embodied experience of dance through language. And yet, as this paper has explored, while difficult, this challenge cannot be reduced simply to an assertion of ineffability. Rather we might consider the potential for linguistic forms and expressions that empathetically manifest something of the embodied to the reader.

As a more speculative conclusion I am interested in how creative reflective responses – such as creative writing or drawing – invite audiences to actively invest imagination, thought, memory, intellect and emotion into an extended experiential engagement with a work of art. In this *longer lived experience* there is the potential for the social and the embodied, the reflective and the experiential, to coalesce. In such processes audiences are involved in both reflective meaning making and, through creative re-presentations, in the re-embodying and re-imagining of the original experience. The result is both a representation and a making present, a transformation of something else and a thing in its own right. The result is a form of ekphrastic audience research that potentially reveals both the embodied and the reflective elements of the lived experience.

**Acknowledgments**

This research formed part of the Watching Dance: Kinesthetic Empathy project, funded by a research grant by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK. I would also like to thank Dee Reynolds for her feedback and insightful analysis; Sherry Ashworth for helping design and run the workshops; and all the participants who took part.

**Bibliography**

Benton, Michael (1997). ‘Anyone for Ekphrasis?’ *The British Journal of Aesthetics.* 37.4. p 367.

Faulkner, Sandra L (2009) *Poetry as Method: Reporting Research through Verse*. Walnut Creek CA: Left Coast Press.

Gauntlett, David (2007). *Creative Explorations: New Approaches to Identities and Audiences*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Jowitt, Deborah (1977). *Dance Beat: Selected Views and Reviews 1967-76*. New York: Marcel Dekker.

Leavy, Patricia (2009) *Method Meets Art: Art Based Research Practice*. New York: Guildford Press.

Munsterberg, Marjorie (2009). *Writing About Art.* Available: writingaboutart.org/pages/ekphrasis.html

Prendergast, Monica (2009) ‘Introduction: The Phenomena of Poetry in Research’ in C Leggo and P Sameshima (eds) *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences*. Rotterdam: Sense Publisher.

Reason, Matthew (2010a) ‘Asking the Audience: Audience Research and the Experience of Theatre’. *About Performance*. 10. 15-34.

Reason, Matthew (2010b) ‘Watching Dance, Drawing the Experience and Visual Knowledge’. *Forum for Modern Language Studies*.Vol 46. No 4.

Sauter, Willmar (2000). *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Schütz, Alfred (1967) The Phenomenology of the Social World. Evanston, Illinois. Northwestern University Press

Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine (1979). *The Phenomenology of Dance*. London: Dance Books.

Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine (2005) ‘”Man Has Always Danced”: Forays into the Origins of an Art Largely Forgotten by Philosophers’. *Contemporary Aesthetics*Vol 3. Available http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=273