

Creative humanities: thinking, making and meaning

Scott Thurston

Keynote address delivered to 'Creative Humanities: Thinking, Making and Meaning' AHRC North West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership Postgraduate Conference, 19 October 2016.

I was very grateful to be asked to speak at this gathering and it will probably help to tell you a bit about my story to explain how my work might be relevant to processes of thinking, making and meaning.

I would wish however to collapse some of the implied distinctions being made in the title of the conference to suggest that *thinking is making meaning*. But collapsing these distinctions also exposes something that might be missing, that is *feeling*, and the inclusion of embodied awareness that might want to trouble the distinction between thinking and feeling, body and mind. I would also want to insist that creativity is a fundamental part of any human endeavour whether it be a specific artistic discipline, humanities research or any number of other activities from gardening to sport to cooking and so on.

I began writing poetry at the age of 14 as a means of making meaning and constructing an identity for myself as a creative person. When I was 16 I was lucky enough to be taught by the poet and critic Robert Sheppard as I did my A-level in English. Robert introduced me to the innovative poetry scene in London and I began to find myself within a community of writers, culminating in the publication of my first pamphlet of poems a couple of years later with Bob Cobbing's Writers Forum press. As well as reading, writing and listening to poetry at this time I also began to read and study literary criticism alongside the discourse of poetics – by which I mean the discourse that writers produce about writing. These are the preoccupations that took me on to study English literature with linguistics at University and later to take up a PhD in Poetics, also with Sheppard as my supervisor. The PhD included creative

writing, critical writing, interviews with poets and statements of poetics and, ever since, I see my work in all of these discourses as integrated aspects of one creative enquiry. I would also include my teaching activity with undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Salford, my editing work as co-editor of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, and my co-organisation of the Other Room poetry reading series in Manchester as further aspects of this work.

A lot of this activity sounds very intellectually demanding, and it is. It is at least partly in response to this fact that in 2004 I started participating in the movement practice called Five Rhythms – famously lampooned as Rainbow Rhythms in Peep Show. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvN9h00ePNc> 1'52"] Five Rhythms is best described as a movement meditation: there are no steps to learn and movement takes place as an unfolding group and solo improvisation in relation to the rhythmic ideas of flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical and stillness. Participating in this practice has been transformative in my life and work. Developing a more embodied sense of awareness changed the way I thought about the world and particularly the way I write poetry, and, after a few years, I also began to see the potential of this practice for developing my work as a researcher in innovative and radical writing. I began to expand my experience of different somatic and movement technique to include Authentic Movement, Contact Improvisation, Qi Gong and Alexander Technique and to explore improvised performance practices. I started collaborations with a singer and a dancer and I also began to research the history of the dialogue between innovative poetic practice and radical dance forms. This interest took me to New York in 2012 to see a production of the poet Jackson Mac Low's book of poems for dancers called *The Pronouns*. Whilst in New York I also managed to interview the collaborating duo of poet Bruce Andrews and dancer Sally Silvers [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4TwnRNZnHQ> START 0'36" TO TO 2'36"], and took a workshop with the renowned American dancer and choreographer Simone Forti. Whilst I'm still a long way from considering myself as a dancer – and indeed that isn't really the aim – I would certainly call myself a mover and I would say that movement has become as much a part of my creative and research methodology as reading and writing.

To try and illustrate a bit more what this actually means in practice I want to mention my collaboration with my colleague Sarie Mairs Slee at the University of Salford and describe our use of the inspiring work of psychologist Daniel Stern (1924-2012) on the notion of vitality.

Stern's work begins by treating vitality as 'a mental creation, as a product of the mind's integration of many internal and external events, as a subjective experience, and as a phenomenal reality' (Stern 2010: 4), but indicates how vitality also has a basis in physical action and can be best illustrated by beginning with movement. A movement 'unfolds in a certain stretch of time [...] Therefore a sense of time, shape and duration is created in the mind, along with the movement' (2010: 4). In addition to time, movement also brings a perception of a force or forces behind or within the movement, defines a space in which it has to happen and also has a sense of direction and intentionality. For Stern these elements: movement, time, force, space and intention/directionality, are only theoretically different and give rise to our experience of vitality. Examples of how we experience this gestalt might include how we perceive and respond to the 'dynamics' of vitality: 'the force, speed and flow of a gesture; the timing and stress of a spoken phrase or even a word; the way one breaks into a smile' (2010: 6). Stern lists words like 'exploding, swelling, drawn out, forceful, cresting, rushing, relaxing, fluttering' (2010: 7) to show how language conveys this kind of experience.

Stern uses the concept of vitality dynamics to discuss the way we experience cultural products such as music, dance, theatre and cinema. The time-based arts, Stern argues, are concerned with the 'dynamics of experiences' (2010: 75) which they make available to audiences through the basic dynamic elements of each art form, for example, in the musical concepts of intensity, stress, flow, tempo and rhythm. Crucially for my enquiry with Slee, Stern is interested in collaboration across art forms because of how vitality dynamics are 'readily transferable between art forms' (2010: 79). The ability to render similar, but not identical, experiences creates an aesthetic 'magic' of pairing the similar with the "not exactly the same" (2010: 78). Stern recounts his experience of working with the theatre artist Robert Wilson as an example of how the vitality dynamics of 'mental motions' in Wilson's

mind whilst at breakfast – captured in a ‘micro-analytic’ interview – are transformed into the vitality dynamics of bodily movement on stage. This is captured by how Wilson’s experience of his thoughts ‘not quite getting anywhere’ is translated into an actor running in circles that do not arrive at a resolution (2010: 93).

However, Stern does not treat ‘language-based’ arts in the same detail as time-based arts, but simply comments on how the fact that they take place simultaneously in “‘real time’” and ‘narrative time’ complicates the situation. He consciously puts off the problem of dynamic experience in prose and poetry, despite recognising that these art forms have ‘implicit non-linguistic “rules”’ for expressing vitality forms (2010: 77), and ignores the performance aspect of composing and sharing language-based art.

My work with Slee therefore seeks to pursue some of Stern’s own research questions whilst exploring the gap concerning language-based arts. The questions of Stern that are particularly relevant include: ‘can the same vitality forms be triggered by two or more art forms? Will their effects be complementary or additive, or more than the sum of the parts? What may artistic collaborations tell us?’ (2010: 76). Stern’s vitality dynamics therefore provide a theoretical framework through which to observe the effects of combining aesthetic strategies from poetry and dance in new inter- and transdisciplinary ways. Part of the way, for example, in which we investigate this is to combine the words of a co-composed poem with the movement of co-composed choreography and to perform these simultaneously. We have noticed how the combination of words and movement does indeed begin to arrive at something that is more than the sum of its parts and starts to connect with an underlying, shared sense of the vitality dynamics of the piece.

[SHOW VITAL SIGNS REHEARSAL VIDEO]

What fascinates me about this work is that the implications of Stern go way beyond just thinking about artistic practice. It seems that vitality dynamics allow us to get close to the process of how meaning is created in movement, and in other forms. In order to explore this more fundamental question I have

also begun a research collaboration with the dance movement therapist Vassiliki Karkou at Edge Hill University. Since 2014 we have been conducting studio-based practical research to explore the role of language in movement therapy. This has been a profound experience which is now beginning to take shape as a research project. The key theoretical principles underpinning dance movement therapy, according to Bonnie Meekums, include:

- body and mind interact, so that a change in movement will affect total functioning
- movement reflects personality
- the therapeutic relationship is mediated at least to some extent nonverbally
- movement contains a symbolic function and as such can be evidence of unconscious processes
- movement improvisation allows the client to experiment with new ways of being (2005, p. 8)

Meekums sees dance movement therapy as a creative act (2005, p. 14) as well as a form of psychotherapy that takes its place alongside other therapeutic forms such as drama therapy, music therapy and art therapy [Meekums acknowledges 5R as an allied approach to DMT]. As Meekums argues:

All creative acts, whether choreography, science or research, occur within a recognisable creative process. [...] The creative process depends on the capacity of the individual to both make use of and surrender the functions normally associated with ego. There is a rhythmic interchange between action and quiet receptivity, between dream-like states and consciousness, between intuition and the world of the senses, between image and concretisation, between abandonment and control, between individual and shared reality. (2005, p. 14-15)

According to Meekums, this rhythmic process mirrors the infant's engagement and disengagement with its mother as described by Stern's work in the late 70s. It is Meekums' emphasis on DMT as a creative act that makes the psychotherapeutic use of *movement metaphor* central. The movement metaphor is 'a symbol encapsulated in either a movement or posture'. For example, a person may

adopt a hunched posture (movement metaphor) when describing the 'burden' (verbal metaphor) they carry in life (2005, p.22). For Meekums

The movement metaphor exists in the creative space between client and therapist, mediating between the 'symbolic realm' of unconscious material and the 'knowing realm' of conscious awareness. Movement metaphors can thus be seen as a form of non-verbal communication which, when examined, can provide valuable insights into the individual's patterns of behaviour, beliefs and relationships. (2005, p. 23)

Meekums offers seventeen points about the different qualities of metaphor which include insights such as:

Metaphor connects both with past experience and the potential to affect the future by creating a new reality.

Metaphor holds multiple meanings and contexts.

Metaphor can function as a way of expressing something which might otherwise be inexpressible. (2005, pp. 24-25)

Although framed within the context of therapeutic work, it is the creative basis of the therapy that means the concept of movement metaphor is just as relevant for creative practice taking place outside of the therapeutic context as one within it, and indeed may blur the boundaries between them. It seems possible to suggest that the relationship between the writer and the reader could be analogous with that of the therapist and client. The research that I'm conducting with Karkou explores how language can operate alongside, and interact with, movement in a simulated therapeutic situation in order to enhance the awareness of and use of metaphor in both language and movement for therapeutic ends.

It's clear that, in this collaboration, my knowledge and expertise as a writer and critic is clearly in play, although the nature and end of the project is no longer focused on specific critical or creative outputs

conventionally recognised in my discipline. I hope that I've shown how my particular story and interest has led me to new forms of research which represent an embodied, creative approach to thinking, feeling and the making of meaning.

I'll finish by reading a poem.

MOVEMENT STUDY II

in the familiarity of the studio the

return of death crimps the knee

expands out to the right

not being as present the common

narrative the elbows above the

sternum lean forearms into face

left leg points, expands, extends

fertile territory where films lie

being here and to work at being here

the absence of film being a

mechanical expansion into space

with limbs, spine opening

sending heel of hand into floor

recruits spatial flesh necessarily

sit down to write on dirty floor

body folded like a scarf in tripped

time frames subtle to open up in

feeling like a threat body controlled

by weight of the pen