

Art as research and its methodologies: approaches to process and practice in a PhD in creative writing.

My research is situated in a long history of Ekphrastic work (work written directly in dialogue with visual art) that goes back to Homer. I am examining the theoretical body of work that debates the significance of this tradition (Hefferman et al) and scrutinizing the primary poetic texts that are its sources, or at least, those which I find note are of particular significance for my own creative endeavours. Indeed, a significant feature of process in this research is my intervention in this tradition as a practising poet. My creative negotiation with ekphrasis entails writing in dialogue with contemporary New Media, paying particular attention to Eduardo Kac and his work on, and in, Holopoetry. An innovative feature of this work is the taking a particular technique i.e aspects of the processes of holography/holopoetry (and to a lesser extent, other visual disciplines) and applying these conceptually to the shaping and structure of a body of poetry which experiments in diverse forms.

The prime mode of my research approach is experiential. For my methodology, as well as reviewing primary and secondary literature, I use the creative process of 'bricolage', which, taking my cue from Claude Levi-Strauss in 'The Savage Mind' who describes the bricoleur as someone who assimilates or makes do 'with whatever is at home' which, in my interpretation, is a mining of influences and resources which 'come in handy for a given project at a given moment'. (1966:19)

I approach my work from not only the stance of an artist/poet but as a feminist and educationalist, bringing all those aspects of my 'identity' to it. There is an important element of a chance and serendipity in this methodological approach (bricolage) in the assembly and selection of what is there. The bricoleur, we learn, or for me, the bricoleuse, 'speaks 'not only with things, but also with the medium of things'.

Inextricably, in adopting bricolage as a methodology, my life experiences, artistic choices are foregrounded as a result.

Connected with this, have begun to construct a methodological framework for my work based on that of Participative Action Research drawing on Sally Berridge's approach in her work on a creative artists' books based PhD in which she adapts the seven key features of action research as set out by Stephen Kemmis and Robert McTaggart (2005 :566-8). Berridge paraphrases these seven key features, and, as she has done in relation to her own research, I do so in relation to mine.

PAR is a social process that 'deliberately explores the relationship between the realms of the individual and the social.' In developing a poetics which begins by

positing my identity as both artist and researcher at the beginning of the project and at stages throughout, the creative work is placed in its social/cultural context .

In PAR, people examine their knowledge, their interpretive categories and their actions in the social and material world. In researching 'ekphrasis' and 'ekphrastic practice,' and I situate my own creative practice in relation to key literature and artefacts; responses to the work and writings of Eduardo Kac, being focal here.

The work is practical and collaborative, examining the social practices that link it to the social realm. This involves my work with supervisors, practising poets, and within the university and, as a poet/performer/ researcher, the belonging to a community of practice as necessary creative precondition.

PAR is emancipatory – i.e. its aim is to help people release themselves from the constraints of the irrational, unproductive, unjust and unsatisfying social structures that limit their self-development and self-determination. Arguably, this allows for a PhD process which is truly reflective and exploratory and an opportunity to embrace a model which is 'non-traditional' and which can be a case-study for future researchers in the field.

PAR is critical. It re-contests and/ or reconstitutes the irrational, unproductive, unsatisfying ways of interpreting and describing the world. This is the creative process itself : the production of poetry.

Sixth, PAR is reflexive, recursive and dialectical, investigating reality in order to change it. This connects with the first point made here as the production of a poetics and the production of poetry go hand in hand.

PAR aims to transform both theory and practice through exploring different theories, practices and discourses. For me, again, linking this with the above, a poetics is different from theory and yet exploration of various theories, practices and discourses enables a symbiotic rendering of poetics and practice.

Such a framework allows for readjustments, revisiting, false starts, revisions. Graeme Harper's outlining of a range of methodologies associated with creative writing research is broadening my perceptions of what constitutes acceptable evidence not least evidence which 'includes writer or writers; process or processes; personal and societal locations; craft instrument and objects; pre-texts; complementary texts; final texts; post-texts; 'central' results and 'attached' results; documents of exchange. (2008:165)

I have, using methods as described, begun to develop a body of new work but have also, in applying, lenses (almost literally) deriving from Kac's theory and practice of holopoetry and other art forms have been able to analyse preoccupations in my work and refine these in the light of current reading and observation. For instance, I note the prevalence of certain image; glass, mirror, water, ice, shadow, with attendant physical properties and metaphorical

suggestion. As such these connect with overarching concerns of identity, memory, urban transitional spaces, real/hyperreal/ surreal. Conclusions drawn at this time indeed note that the investigation and application of concepts and technologies from visual arts are productive sources for development of poetic process and in forging a poetics at the same time.

With the growth of PhD s in creative writing this research, its evidence-base and its methodologies will provide a case-study for practice-led research across disciplines, not solely related to literature and creative writing. It highlights such qualities as 'epiphany' and 'serendipity' as prime impulses and embraces wilful diversity of approaches in how poetic practice might be investigated and poetry produced.

References

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