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Anamnesis (remembered)

ABSTRACT

Anamnesis (remembered) *remembers, constructs and questions aspects of Anamnesis – a screendance project exploring memory and loss that I initiated and developed in collaboration with Cormac Lally, Bagryana Popov and David Corbet. The writing covers four aspects of the project's development and form–content: (1) the beginnings of the project; (2) a discussion of the collaborative processes used in the development of Anamnesis, in particular the use of contradiction and tension to propagate uncertainty (itself a critical aspect of memory); (3) an overview of Bergson's notions of memory, perception and corporeality, which acted as a background context for my work on the project; and (4) a discussion of 'discursivisation' processes in writing about creative arts research, and the epistemological challenges generated by the presence of uncertainty and ambiguity in practice as research.*

KEYWORDS

screendance
Bergson
memory
collaboration
practice as research
uncertainty

*we were all steering and listening and measuring the moment
we were surfing
and we were kind of mucking around
the film was still up in the air
between all those people in the room
and then Cormac
he wanted to know (as we packed up and Simon nearly lost his wedding ring)
what is this film about what are we trying to do*

*I remember saying a few sentences which seemed to make sense . . .
a film which suggests story, which is about love and forgetting
which does not give the story away fully,*

*because of the quality of forgetting
and because of an aesthetic/formal desire to not be too literal
to leave some story to the senses, to be decoded
to leave gaps to be filled.*

Bagryana Popov, dramaturge (2009)

INTRODUCTION

Anamnesis is a screendance project by Cormac Lally, David Corbet, Bagryana Popov and Simon Ellis, with performances by Liz Jones and Simon Ellis and additional voice by Bagryana Popov (Ellis et al. 2009). The film's publicity describes it as visiting 'the volatility of memory within the mind of an elderly woman' (Ellis 2008a), and it poetically represents an undefined relationship between an older woman and younger (dancing) man. *Anamnesis* can be viewed at http://bit.ly/ske_anamnesis.

This article, 'Anamnesis (remembered)', is a poetic and occasionally analytic consideration of ideas and issues around the production of the film *Anamnesis*. Thomas McEville describes how content accrues to a work through time: 'Whatever occurs to a work as its history unfolds becomes part of the experience of the work, and part of its meaning' (McEville 1991: 79). I understand McEville to be articulating something that is unavoidable: this current writing (completed more than a year after the film's première) will add to the entire form-content of *Anamnesis*. Here I attempt to speak briefly about the film, and think of the writing as existing primarily in parallel to *Anamnesis*, with occasional conceptual or even theoretical interventions that reach across to the film's form-content. I understand this exchange – between the film itself and my writing in and around it – to be a delicate balance, and in *Anamnesis (remembered)* I attempt to resist fixing the meaning of *Anamnesis*, as if I were an all-knowing author.

I have included short personal communications from the five artists involved in the development of *Anamnesis*. These notes include my own voice, written far in advance of – and oblivious to – this article. The notes are placed in the text – aligned far right – and are intended to act as voices that question the reduction of *Anamnesis* to a systematized argument. They are not formatted as conventional quotes or citations that are blended into the article simply to add weight to my discussion but rather act as poetic interjections that evoke the process of the project's production.

Anamnesis (remembered) is divided into four parts: (1) 'A poetic rendering' – a brief introduction about the seeds of *Anamnesis*'s development; (2) 'Collaboration' – my experience of the collaborative environment and how we built mnemonic fragility and uncertainty into the film's development; (3) 'Bergson's memory' – an overview of core aspects of Henri Bergson's writing and thinking about memory that I 'held' throughout the development of *Anamnesis* and (4) 'The discursivisation of *Anamnesis* and practice as research' – a discussion of how Bergsonian memory might intersect with the form-content of *Anamnesis*, which is then paradoxically framed by my reading of processes of 'discursivisation' in relation to practice as research.



Figure 1: Anamnesis publicity still of Liz Jones, courtesy of Cobie Orger

A POETIC RENDERING

*searching, speaking a lot, returning to moments of movement, moments of text,
we talked a lot*

*the talking felt directed in a gentle way, by a process of being interested in some-
thing and therefore it gaining credence, taking shape*

*Simon came back with text edited from his grandmother's interview
as a result of our talking,*

*finding certain moments, qualities, in what she said and how she said it,
fascinating and beautiful*

Qualities of his grandmother's interview:

listening – her quality of interested, empathetic listening

repeating some things

looking at the camera – is that thing going to shoot me?

a gentle forgetfulness

Bagryana Popov, dramaturge (2009)

Anamnesis was seeded in part from an interview with my grandmother, Gladys Eastwood (Ellis 2000). The interview was originally conducted as research for the development of the performance project *Full* (Ellis 2001), and was an awkward attempt to document or record some of the significant things about Gladys's life. The footage is dominated by the failings of her memory, and the frequent repetitions of jokes, pauses and expressions of concern for the well-being of various members of her family. *Anamnesis's* dramaturge, Bagryana Popov, suggests 'there are so many events in her silence' and there is a quality of graciousness and ease that seems to transcend (or mask?) the difficulty she has with the situation (Popov 2008). If 'good memory is something other than recall without fail' (McQuire 1998: 168, original emphasis), then perhaps

Gladys's struggle and quiet acceptance of the loss of her memory constitute a beautiful remembering.

As the script and physical states for the actor Liz Jones were being developed, we turned to the footage of Gladys Eastwood speaking to spark a poetic rendering of her manner on screen. We dwelled on the gaps in Gladys's quavering identity, and resisted making sense of her story. The texts performed by Liz Jones became a fluid mixture of her personal memories, some of Gladys's actual words and script constructed by rest of the creative team.

I had to try to reach the inner truth of the failing mind [...] failing and yet utterly truthful in its unmediated, unselfconscious searching for the past. The sense of silence that I experienced was also quite unique in this piece [...] the silence of stillness [...] almost a meditation. I found [Gladys's] quiet dignity an inspiration and drew repeatedly on the visualization of Gladys to achieve the quality of physical presence, the embodiment I was seeking.

Liz Jones, actor (2010)

When asking people to recount their lives, Susan Engel suggests that they talk about 'internal turning points – experiences that marked changes in perspective, understanding, or their sense of self in relation to the world' (Engel 1999: 97). These internal turning points were fabricated for the film's script, and are not explicitly dramatized in the film itself. The creative team's focus was on building a collection of movement and textual spaces that suggest a relationship between the two protagonists, and in which conventional narrative structures were undermined. The man in *Anamnesis* is a figure who features ambiguously in the older woman's memory, 'with all that this entails, not merely of the consistent, the enduring, the reliable, but also of the fragile, the errant, the confabulated' (Casey 2000: xxii).

We are very focused on these extraordinarily subtle moments in which Liz's character slips between knowing and not knowing. These gaps in her lucidity (that she hides so well): the blink of an eyelid, the turn of her head, the pause before she asks a question. Might these spaces become the 'portals' for the presence of the 'danced landscapes'?

Simon Ellis, performer (2008b)

COLLABORATION

The collaborative processes used in *Anamnesis* were developed in response to my ongoing concerns about practice as research methods and the form–content of their creative outcomes. My interest lies in generating internal logic between the creative research methods and their outcomes (for example Ellis 2008c; Ellis & Corbet 2006; Ellis 2005). If a project is practice-led, then its outcomes ought to reflect – and be appropriate to – the investigation of that practice. Such an imbricated relationship between method and outcomes is not a given (or even particularly common) in practice as research. In *Anamnesis* the collaborative team experimented with spiralling the project's methods onto its form–content in quite simple ways. For example, we severely limited the time the actor Liz Jones had with the script so that we might capture her grappling with not quite knowing or remembering the words, or getting them right.

*wanting to keep a documentary feel, an unassuming tone
wanting to stay away from acting a character*

*The shock of the day of the shoot
the difference of quality once something is being caught on camera*

*How to not catch and package that which we are filming
how to keep the tremulous feeling of discovery
and the gentle flow of conversation going
which made the work so enjoyable*

Simon gets nervous

I get a little nervous

*Cormac is filming with that exquisite focus and intensity of focus which only
photographers and camera people have.*

Bagryana Popov – dramaturge (2009)

We also decided to work in a more collaborative way than is usual during the post-production phase of the project where the editor might be left to edit and then the composer asked to write music for the initial cut. The sound designer David Corbet, the cinematographer Cormac Lally and I developed a method of remote collaborative editing. We wanted to gently undermine any singular voice in post-production, and utilize our diverse skills. We shared the raw video and audio materials on external hard drives and then worked with Final Cut project files that synchronized across our three workstations automatically via the free cloud-based software called DropBox. This allowed us to ‘share video editing ideas and allow current revisions to be managed internationally with very little difficulty’ (Corbet 2010). The dramaturge, Bagryana Popov, became our ‘outside eye’, checking in with edits perhaps once every fortnight when they were uploaded to Vimeo.

Working with artists from other disciplines is inevitably demanding, not least of all because of what Hal Foster describes as a ‘used car syndrome’:

... people from different fields will always get attracted to the most conservative ideas from the other fields. This way you end up with the following equation: ‘you buy my used car, I buy your used car, and then we end up with two really shitty cars’.

(Ekroth and Wallenstein 2001)

Foster’s ‘used-car syndrome’ was most readily apparent during the production of *Anamnesis* in two ways: firstly, in dealing with the movement qualities of my dancing ‘character’, and secondly in the differences in approaches to narrative structures between the members of the creative team.

Bagryana Popov and I have worked together for a number of performance projects, and yet I am still pleasantly surprised (as a dancer) by the permission she gives me to work with what I think might be movement clichés. These could include gesture or overtly emotional embodied states – things that choreographers with a formal dance background might be less comfortable working with. The net result in *Anamnesis* was of a broadening of the movement qualities we explored in the lead up to the shoot.

Conversely, the sound designer – David Corbet – and I found ourselves increasingly drawn to narrative structures that are at odds with the relatively abstract nature of our disciplines. Our curiosity was somewhat tempered by



Figure 2: Anamnesis publicity still of Simon Ellis, courtesy of Cobie Orger.

the theatre-trained Popov and cinematographer Cormac Lally who, paradoxically, became drawn to more abstract representations. This ‘friction’ pushed the creative team towards identifying narrative elements and working with ways of questioning the representation of these elements in the film.

Far from ending up with ‘two really shitty cars’, these more conservative aspects of our disciplines served to provoke questions about our respective assumptions and aesthetic biases as we worked in production and post-production.

I engage with collaborative processes for two key reasons: firstly, as a means of undermining the conventional status of the choreographer or director as the person to whom a work belongs, and, secondly, as a means of generating argument, tension and exchange. In this way, the project becomes a place where things can go wrong, a place for play, complexity and for allowing differences to surface. The process of making work like *Anamnesis* can be conceived as a kind of ‘wicked problem’ (Rittel and Webber 1973: 155) – a system of problems interacting with other problems.

However, collaboration alone is not in itself worthwhile. If the ‘aesthetic’ is akin to the ability to think contradiction (Rancière, cited in Bishop 2006) then, in *Anamnesis*, the contradictions afforded by the team’s close inter-disciplinary dynamic affected the aesthetic tone of the work. In other words collaboration generated the ideal conditions for contradictions to emerge, which could be responded to (or simply left alone) in the development of an aesthetic outcome.

The autonomy and trust that existed in this project was significant. The sense that each collaborator was able to guide the work without needing to have a director overseeing was both freeing and a little anxiety-provoking. I think it leads to a more explorative approach as each element of the work has no solid base or track from which to start from. This links in with the notion of ‘not knowing’[as] being an active choice of allowing the experience, skills and intuition of each creator to interact without too many prescriptions.

David Corbet – sound designer (2010)

Although I am a choreographer, I don’t assume that physical action will be part of an aesthetic solution or provocation. In fact, I feel no pressure to foreground the corporeal in any given project or outcome, perhaps because it is so deeply part of how I understand making work. If movement is my skin, how might I imagine its dissolution, or rupture; or at the very least how might my skin touch or be touched by others, and by other disciplines? This is liberating because it means entering a project with no strong ideas about a work’s eventual modality. Rather, we – the collaborative team – begin to respond to the ideas and contradictions so that the developing work somehow respects our dialogues.

The film gently and gradually was built element by element, (theatre, dance, film, sound) with every person’s response to what he/she saw in the room. The work seemed to make itself in that gentle layering of elements. It is a collaboration of disciplines which snuck up on me. I was surprised at the combination of elements coming together with a strange mix of precision – rigour and effortlessness.

Bagryana Popov – dramaturge (2010)

The collaborative process also seemed to contribute to a type of uncertainty or even absence that exists in the film. This is manifest in particular in the spaces between the older woman’s words, the unresolved nature of the relationship between the man and the woman and the possibility that perhaps his presence is entirely fabricated by her quavering memory.

Rather than lock down the tone of the film from the outset, we worked hard to keep delaying decisions so that clarity in our understanding of the film’s form–content might emerge gradually. This occurred, for example, in the shaping of the movement materials in which we worked towards a series



Figure 3: *Anamnesis* publicity still of Simon Ellis, courtesy of Cobie Orger.

of psycho-physical states that were able to be modified and adapted to the conditions and possibilities available during the shoot.

The film's dramaturge, Bagryana Popov, described the film's development as a space that contained 'the feeling that time is long and that there is time to make something beautiful [...] that there was no great pressure for a resolved form, a purity of meaning' (Popov 2010).

I find that the sense of ownership about the work is so different from other more traditional models of collaboration. While the final product only literally carries my contribution as the sound design, I feel as though my input is represented in other ways in the other components that make up the work.

David Corbert – sound designer (2010)

BERGSON'S MEMORY

In this section, I would like to explore how my understanding of Bergson's ideas on memory was with me during the development of *Anamnesis*. My intention is not to integrate these ideas – or other contrasting or supporting theories of memory – into a formal theoretical and interpretive analysis of *Anamnesis*. I will discuss my rationale for this approach in the final section of this article, which looks at the discursivisation of *Anamnesis* and practice as research.

In *Matter and Memory* (1988), Bergson sets out to describe a difference in kind between memory and perception. Rather than memory merely being a weak version of perception, or 'an assembly of nascent sensations' (Bergson 1988: 139), Bergson suggests that pure memory (or memory that is not yet recollected) must commence with the past itself, rather than in a present experience, perception or phenomenon.

Why is Bergson's struggle to discern qualitative differences in kind – such as perception and memory – important? In *Bergsonism*, Deleuze suggests

that the blurring of 'things' into composites has left us incapable of distinguishing between the elements that comprise composite phenomena. Deleuze uses the example of recollection and perception, which are mixed to the point where we cannot recognize what starts with recollection and what starts with perception. As we 'have lost the ground of composites' (Deleuze 1988: 22), memory and matter in representations have become indistinguishable.

Bergson outlines a tripartite theory of memory consisting of pure memory, representational-memory and habit-memory (Bergson 1988). Representational memories are 'iconic recollections representing the past' (Mullarkey 1999: 48). They refer to a specific event that has a date and can therefore never be repeated identically. Habit-memories, on the other hand, are associated with corporeal habits that can be repeated at will. Although both these types of memory commence with the body, they exist, according to Bergson, as a duality. Habit-memories involve inattentive recognition and result in shifting away from an object of perception towards habitual physical actions. In contrast, representational-memories require attentive recognition, and bring the object closer into detail.

These two types of memory are collectively known as image-memories in which an image is 'an existence placed halfway between the thing and the representation' (Bergson 1988: 9), and therefore differs from representation by degree. Image-memories are actual (as opposed to virtual), and considered to be homogenous recollections in the sense that they occupy space, or are given 'a body, to render it active and thereby actual' (Bergson 1988: 66).

In contrast to image-memories (both habitual and representational), Bergson indicates that pure memory is 'neither habit nor imagination'¹ (Mullarkey 1999: 51), and differs profoundly from memory actualized in an image (Bergson 1988). Pure memory is an entirely heterogeneous virtual kind of memory, which is not simply a form of reproduction or duplication referring to the past, but is the past that persists into the present. Pure memory is pure because it is unrecollected, and any other form of remembering or recollection is 'one simplification or another of this virtuality' (Mullarkey 1999: 51). However, pure memory possesses a 'radical powerlessness' (Bergson 1988: 141) because of its not possessing any utility until it is actualized or translated into the present (when it then ceases to be a pure memory). Thus the memory of a past state is characterized by understanding the nature of the present; a present that is 'real, concrete [and] live' (Bergson 1988: 137).

Bergson's description of recollection involves the passage from pure (virtual) memories (real, but not actualized in space) to (actual) images. Actualizing the virtual is not one of resemblance, but rather is an action of 'difference, divergence and creation' (Olkowski 1999: 232) based on the usefulness of the memory to a present situation. As the image is actualized it 'tends to imitate perception' (Bergson 1988: 134), whilst at the same time remaining deeply attached to the past. This distinction is significant because without such a difference in kind, memory simply becomes a poor cousin of perception, or a weakened perceptual state, rather than a phenomenon through which the past persists in multiple modes (Ansell-Pearson 2004: 6). In other words, if the image did not retain a relationship to the past we would not know it as a memory and it would simply be something felt or noticed without an awareness of a connection to the past.

1 *'Imaginer n'est pas se souvenir'*. In *Matter and Memory*, this is translated as 'To picture is not to remember' (Bergson 1988: 135).

In Bergson's discussion of the recollective process of actualizing memory (that is, the transition from virtual to image), he states that pure memory can only ever be recollected with 'bodily movement' (Bergson 1988: 52). In this respect, the lived body is viewed as the principal site for remembering and recollection (Ansell-Pearson 2004: 5), as well as being an image that is distinct from all others 'in that I do not know it only from without by perceptions, but from within by affections' (Bergson 1988: 17).

[The film] made me aware of a grieving which is part of the loss of memory. Of the question – who am I if I don't remember even the most profound loves, connections, events? Who is a person? What are the stages of a person? The way the film eventually had a sad and loving quality – a loving portrait of someone who is being gradually lost. Just on the edge of traumatic. But not tipping into that. I liked that. The lightness, one step back from the awfulness of that loss.

Bagryana Popov – dramaturge (2010)

The corporeal world of *Anamnesis* exists in parallel with my understanding of Bergson's preoccupation with the body as image, and his thesis that the human body makes remembering possible. At the same time, the synergy between Bergson's 'body as image' and *Anamnesis*'s corporeality invites questions about the construction of images (in the representational sense of the word) through *Anamnesis*'s dancing/moving body. How are these representational and corporeal images remembered and by whom? What if the body we are witnessing is fragmented, dissolved or even simply imagined? Who is responsible for the forgetting and loss?

In the script for *Anamnesis*, we sought to stretch the elderly woman's recollections to the point that they exist in a perceptual vacuum, as if her struggle to remember the unstable past has broken the Bergsonian link between memory and perception. What if she no longer recognizes these feelings and thoughts as memories? They become perceptual experiences shorn of felt contexts. Are these even her memories? Are they fabrications? Or are they the slightest sense of a feeling? At times I imagine the same memory (uttered or seen) might oscillate between being an image as perception and an image linked to the past.

THE 'DISCURSIVISATION' OF ANAMNESIS AND PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

As a choreographer-dancer working in practice as research, I am seduced by the centrality of the corporeal in Bergson's writing on the nature of memory. Crucially, however, the collaborative team did not discuss Bergson's writing during the creative process, nor did we seek to develop some sort of creative response to – or illustration of – theoretical concerns. I am also wary of contributing to the theory–practice binary, particularly as it has emerged that 'continuing, commonsensical use of these terms condemns all of us to inadequate ideas and ways of knowing' (Melrose 2002b). Rather, Bergson's thinking and analysis of consciousness, perception and memory have been with me for many years, delicately – and in the background – shaping my understanding and experience of time and remembering as I develop performative and mediated artistic-scholarly propositions.

The enfolding of theory into practice (and vice-versa) inform the diverse methods that artist–researchers adopt in developing work, whilst affording multi-modal (and polysemic) research-as-practice outcomes. As such, this writing and its theoretical/conceptual concerns are practice, and do not exist as part of an imagined hierarchy within the various modes I use to communicate and suggest possibilities. *Anamnesis (remembered)* contributes to the poetic and analytic articulation of ideas surrounding the development and production of *Anamnesis*, and its concerns for perception, remembering and memory.

Simon played me some very moving footage of his Gran which had lots of emotion. The proposal was to make a work that captured this emotion. The work has two very different ‘characters’. As I watched the rehearsals I tried to get a sense of the feel and the space they inhabited. That brought questions about filming the piece. Is it dark, light, is it shot slow-mo, close-up, out of focus? Having worked with Simon and David previously, I can usually improvise and experiment knowing that what I bring to the piece will mostly resonate with their work.

Cormac Lally, cinematographer (2010)

The strange process of ‘discursivisation’ (Melrose 2002a) – in which scholars write meaning and complexity into art works – is fundamental to scholarly writing in performance studies, and is not necessarily a process that artists are comfortable with. In this connection, artist Randall Szott writes:

We are not your intellectual playthings. Perhaps you see something publishable, a critical opportunity, but we reject your representation and demand our autonomy. We might not have read your recent darlings (Rancière, Agamben, etc.), but you have not lived our lives either. We refuse to meet on your terms within your own idioms – prejudged by your theoretical dogmas.

(Szott 2010)

The significant danger (particularly in writing about a work I was deeply involved in developing) is that this writing ends up limiting the meaning potentials of the film for its various audiences. My writing about Bergsonian memory is not designed as a theoretical ‘analysis’ of *Anamnesis*, and nor is it an effort to imbue or load *Anamnesis* with theory to justify it as ‘scholarly’. Rather, I suggest that this writing is, like all rememberings, a construction based on need, context and an embodied relationship to the past. If the writing in this article – and the film to which it is related – is seen as a memory in itself, then it is inevitably laced with uncertainty, gaps and the capacity to be rendered (or even published) as something other than what I suggest. I see this as a valuable situation, in which my grip on the film’s form–content is continuously loosened.

My drive to infect *Anamnesis* with uncertainty and ambiguity – through collaborative processes, broken script and even this article – also reflect a paradox in practice as research, in which the academy’s desire for certainty in what we perceive and know is constantly undercut by the fragility of our memories and remembering, and the relative messiness of the processes and outcomes of practice as research. The capacity to recognize, accept and

value the uncertain or doubtful – something that Keats described as ‘negative capability’ – is fundamental to practice as research, both in the nature of its creative outcomes, and how these outcomes are discussed. Far from being merely a ‘weakened form of perception’ (Ansell-Pearson 2004: 3), memory steers uncertainty and fragility into the foreground of epistemological concerns about what it is that we know as a consequence of creative arts practice as research, and how it is that we know it. If practice as research is to be useful, then it ought to secede from a culture of interpretation filled with the logic of certainty. Rather, the value of such research lies in the possibilities for meaning that are afforded by the form–content of its various outcomes and portfolios, and the ambiguities and questions raised by these endeavours.

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