

# **Cross-Media Audience Experience: Objectivity Through Subjectivity**

## **Abstract**

The article presents an analysis of a fragment of multimedia performance by the Japanese theatre company Gekidan Kaitaisha in 2004. The piece involved a performer physically responding to recorded images, displayed on a nearby laptop, of military surveillance footage of the bombing of a village in Afghanistan. As an observer of the piece I was shocked both at its content and at the strength of my emotional response. In this article I deconstruct my subjective response to the event, in order to understand the mechanics of the performance.

**Cross-Media Audience Experience: Objectivity Through  
Subjectivity  
By  
Jodie Allinson**

I am sitting in the café in Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff. It is late afternoon. There is a cup of tea in front of me but I am too preoccupied to drink it. My head is full of thoughts about the piece of performance that I have just seen. This short piece, barely ten minutes long, featuring a solo performer and a piece of recorded video footage, has impacted upon me on many levels – physically, emotionally, cognitively and viscerally. I am still reeling from the shock.

Later that day. I am trying to recall other performance events I have experienced that provoked such a shift in my awareness. I cannot think of any. It is starting to become vitally important for me to know why the performance impacted on me in this way. I think that it may have something to do with it being a piece of cross-media performance. I am excited because if this is the case it could inform my own work as a cross-media practitioner, work that attempts to actively engage the audience in a process of questioning our relationship to media structures and images of the body.

Two months later. I am writing a paper on ‘Cross-media audience experience’. I am using it as an opportunity to return to and analyse the performance. I begin with an attempt at an objective description of the content, form and context of the performance. It provides me with the following information:

I was attending a three-week residency with the Japanese theatre company Gekidan Kaitaisha. The project, entitled ‘Dream Regime’, took place in Cardiff in January 2004. A group of 27 performers, visual artists, academics and activists had travelled from locations across Britain, as well as from Indonesia, East Timor, Australia, America and Japan, to participate in the project. ‘Dream Regime’ was intended as a collaborative investigation into aspects of globalisation, violence and war, and their impact upon notions of ‘the body’ and ‘the body in performance’.

The piece of performance in question took place on the afternoon of the second day of the residency. The set-up was quite informal – we were sitting on the floor of the dance studio, where we had done all of our work up until this point. A small area for the performance was cleared. On a small table at the back of the space was a laptop. Adam, the performer, waited silently in the space. No explanation as to the nature of the performance was given before it began.

I find it impossible to give an exact, minute-by-minute, linear description of the performance, because it did not seem to happen in that way. So instead I divide the performance into two discernible aspects – the recorded images

that appeared on the laptop and the live performance that occurred alongside them.

On the laptop screen appeared images and an accompanying soundtrack of voices. The images were military satellite pictures showing the bombing of a village in Afghanistan. The voices were of the military personnel in the air and on the ground, giving instructions on what to target and where to bomb. Most of the images were grainy and various shades of grey, but heat sensing technology showed the explosions and the bodies of people in the village as bright white.

Adam performed around, and with, these images. He was responding to these images by making his body 'empty' – taking the images inside him and pushing them back out. He continually moved through and around the space, at times almost falling into the audience or into the wall.

Again, I find it difficult to give an exact, factual report of his performance. There was no score to refer to. The quality and nature of his physicality and movement in the space seemed to defy objective description.

I realise I need to know more. To do this, I decide to analyse my subjective experience of the event. To help me do this I return to the logbook and journals I kept during the residency, and use them to trigger a series of recollections, in the hope that they can tell me more.

I begin by looking at the drawing I made a few hours after the performance. It shows the contours of the space, the sketchy outlines of windows, a computer screen resting on a small table, and bags and other personal belongings scattered around the edges of the room. There are four outlines of Adam's body, in various stages of movement. I have written some things around the different sketches. They are 'Adam starts - he reflects the images he sees.' 'Adam's face is hollow' 'He seems off balance' 'His body seems to hang off him' 'Adam falls against the wall - this happens again' 'His foot catches my bag'.

I remember at times feeling transfixed by the sheer physicality of Adam during the performance. I therefore decide to focus initially on exploring the importance of Adam's body as a physical presence in the room. I search for words to help me begin this exploration, and eventually decide to classify Adam's body as 'real', on the basis of it being physically present in the same space as me. In opposition to this, I categorise the bodies displayed on the laptop screen as 'fictional'. I base the use of the word 'fictional' on the notion that they are images of bodies and not the actual bodies themselves. Any understanding that I have of the actual bodies behind the images can only be constructed, an act of imagination, as I am basing that understanding on a recorded and mediated version of external form.

On the basis of these definitions I then equate the 'real' body to the 'live' performance, and the 'fictional' body to the recorded images. This leads me to pose the following question: Does placing a 'live/real' body next to

'recorded/fictional' images of bodies expose the actuality of the latter? In other words, did Adam's physical presence force me to acknowledge that behind the recorded images lay an actual situation, in which real bodies were dying?

As soon as this question is formulated I realise its limitations. Basing a definition of 'real' on physical presence and then placing this in opposition to 'fictional' is too narrow. It ignores the suggestion of fiction that performance evokes. It also disregards the fact that the recorded images, as signifiers of a real event, cannot be exclusively construed as 'fiction'. Equating 'live' to 'real' and 'recorded' to 'fictional', based on the above definitions, therefore becomes extremely problematic.

I decide to investigate the aspects of the 'real' that exist in the recorded images. And in order to trigger further memories of the original event I return to the drawing I made.

This time I focus on the sketch of the laptop. Rising in bubbles above the computer screen I have written the following statements 'They zoom in on buildings' 'Voices on the ground tell them which targets to go for' 'They close in on their targets' 'Little white bodies run from the image of the blast' 'They run in all directions' 'They are tracked as they run' 'The voices say "get him"' 'They bomb the civilian' 'This goes on and on and on' 'It is endless' 'They keep bombing buildings and bodies' 'This is unbearably real'.

I remember, at some point in the performance, noticing I was crying, and being a bit surprised by it. I think this was because at first I didn't fully comprehend what I was seeing. It was a few seconds after that that I had the realisation that the white blobs were people and that when the images of the explosions went over them that was probably going to mean they were being killed. And then I realised that must be why I was crying.

I wasn't prepared for what I saw or the reaction I had. So far in the residency we had participated in a lot of discussion. We had discussed globalisation in quite an abstract, non-specific way. We hadn't gone into any particular situations. The 'real world' hadn't intruded into our performance space up until this point and I wasn't really expecting it to.

I realise that in this recollection I am equating the recorded images on the laptop with 'the real world'. This prompts me to redefine 'real'. I take out 'physical presence' as a necessary factor and instead focus on the notion of 'actuality'. The death of the bodies on the screen is not fictional it is actual. The corporeality of these bodies therefore cannot be disputed and as such they must be defined as 'real'. In contrast to this I begin to see the performer as the fictional element in this equation. There is a tacit agreement that the conditions of performance somehow 'protect' the performer from harm – we assume that whatever he may present to us on the notion of mortality is not intended to result in his actual death. Therefore in the moment of performance the performer's body becomes fictional; something that is, albeit

temporarily, protected from the implied consequences of possessing actual corporeality.

On this basis I reverse my original definitions and ascribe the 'fictional' body to the live performer and the 'real' body to those indicated by the recorded images. From this I formulate a new question: Does placing the 'real/recorded' body next to the 'live' body exposes the latter as 'fictional', thus revealing the performance as a safe construct, designed to protect us from the actualities of the events referred to by the video?

This could explain the response I had to the performance. I could argue that I was disconcerted by the piece because of the sudden intrusion of the 'real' into the comfort of the 'fictional'. However, I am still unhappy with such binary oppositions that force the location of the 'real' into either the 'live' or 'recorded'. I think it may be more complex than that. I decide to return again to an analysis of my subjective experience of the event.

This time I recall fragments of action or brief moments of awareness that stood out in contrast to the surrounding performance context. There was one point where Adam, seemingly unaware of the proximity of the audience, almost fell into them, causing some spectators to quickly shift position. On another occasion he nearly tripped over my bag and then got his leg caught in the strap. Both times he continued his performance despite the fact that his 'fictional' actions, even on a small scale, threatened to result in actual harm to either him or the audience. Similarly, moments where I was absorbed in the 'real world' of the video images would suddenly be disrupted by a sense of frustration at the poor sound quality that made it difficult to hear the dialogue between the military personnel. At these points cognisance of the technological apparatus that was facilitating the display of these images undercut my perception of the images as 'real'.

I realise that these fragments or moments acted as disrupters to a mode of viewing I had established at those particular points. As such they challenged how I received the performance, and questioned the notion of the 'real' body as something that was located solely in either the live performance or in the recorded images.

This means that if, during the process of viewing, I assigned the 'fictional' body to Adam, an aspect of his performance would then interrupt that and inscribe his body as 'real'. However, this definition did not remain stable either, for, as I argued earlier the juxtaposition of the images of the bodies on the laptop contested such a definition. Momentarily, then, the 'real' body existed in the recorded images. Yet once again this notion was interrupted by an intruding recognition of the laptop as a piece of equipment constructing a series of images.

I now stop trying to understand my reaction to the performance through the construction of mutually exclusive and dichotomous categories. Instead I propose that placing live performance and recorded media next to each other can instigate a dialogue about the body and the nature of corporeality,

through a continuous displacement of the 'real' body from the live action to the recorded medium and back again. This displacement can disrupt our understanding of what is 'real' by undermining a stability or consistency of definition of either the 'live' or the 'recorded' in relation to the 'real' or the 'fictional'.

However, I realise at this point that in formulating this notion of the 'real body' I have only examined two sets of bodies that were part of the performance event – Adam as performer and the bodies displayed as images on the laptop. I have not included my body or the others in the audience in this search for the 'real' body. Understanding others' and my somatic experience of the event now becomes particularly important. I begin with myself, and return once again to the drawing.

I see that I have drawn myself as if viewed from behind. It is a very rough pin sketch. To the right of my body I have drawn a frontal view of my face in more detail. Around the sketch of my body I have scribbled in red and yellow pencil, and written 'I feel like something has been ripped open.' Next to my disembodied face I have written 'At some point I start to cry. I notice some people. Some are visibly upset. Some are not.' To indicate other spectators in the room I have written 'We are here', and drawn some wavy lines indicating the perceived limits of the playing space.

I then recall that for the first part of the piece I was primarily focused on Adam's body. It felt as if I had stopped inhabiting my body, and I had certainly forgotten that there were other people in the room. Once I had noticed my crying I became aware of my own body, and as I started thinking more consciously about the situation I remembered the other people and wondered if I was the only person in the room who was affected. Then I heard the changes in Rhys's breathing. He was sat to the right of me. I did not know him well but from this point on I became very aware of how the performance was impacting upon him physically and emotionally. I could sense even slight changes in his body even as I was observing my own. His arms were hugging his knees into his chest and his breathing was quite irregular and laboured.

I realise that my awareness of my own body and that of others fluctuated during the performance. At times it felt like my body disappeared, whereas at other times, usually my most uncomfortable moments, I became acutely conscious of the psycho-physiological response I was having. On a similar vein, there were times when I forgot about the other people in the room and there were others when I became extremely focused on the minute details of another person's bodily experience.

As I am considering this I read something by Johannes Birringer. While discussing another practitioner's work he refers to 'a fundamentally humanist concern to reconcile technological abstraction with the physical and kinaesthetic experience of time.' (Biringger, 1998: 157-158) I realise that my own bodily experience as an audience member, my own "physical and kinaesthetic experience of time" throughout the duration of the performance,

is vital to any understanding of 'the body' that this piece provokes in me. The shock, the tears, the desire to run away, the sound of breathing from the person next to me all formed the basis of my own bodily experience; and at these points of intense corporeal awareness the 'real' body was firmly located in me.

I therefore extend the above idea to include the individual bodies of the audience members. The process of continuous displacement of the 'real' body can now include that of the watching audience member, as well as the performer and the recorded images. I decide that through combining the live body with recorded images of bodies the performance worked to destabilise my understanding of what is real. The bodily response it engendered in me intensified this process by adding my body to the equation. This destabilisation of my sense of the 'real' disrupted the security of the performance space as well as triggering some kind of embodied realisation of the concept of mortality in a war situation. As a person who has never been in a war situation and whose only knowledge of it comes through the filters of the media system, this was something that previously I had only considered in an abstract way.

Of course, I am excited by the possibilities that this idea offers. It proposes that presenting live performance and recorded media together can work to challenge established modes of receiving the form and content of both. Yet I have to question whether I have provided a sound basis for this idea. After all, it is based on analysis of a series of personal recollections. Was an investigation of subjective experience the appropriate method to use for the development of a concept of this kind?

I am sitting at a computer writing an article. It is now over two years since I saw the performance. In that time I have returned to that event over and over again. I have read and re-read my journal and logbook. I have discussed it with friends. I have written about it and thought about it from many different angles. And each time I do this I always have to begin with myself. From the perspective of 'cross-media audience experience' I have to begin with me as an audience member, because that is where my main access to the experience lies. And it seems impossible to begin to understand notions of the body in performance without taking into consideration my own body and its relationship to the other bodies in the event.

## **References**

Birringer, Johannes (1998) *Media and Performance: Along the Border*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press

## **Jodie Allinson**

Jodie Allinson is based at the University of Glamorgan, Wales, where she is currently undertaking a doctoral study of the multimedia performer. Her

investigation, which is primarily practice-based, focuses on the creative processes utilised by such performers and how an understanding of these processes can inform performance pedagogy. Jodie is also a performer, deviser and facilitator, and has worked with a variety of groups exploring the theory, practice and context of performance through the creation of original work.