

The Enactive Nature of the Relationship between Criticism and Aesthetics: From Practice to Theory to Pedagogy

评论与美学间的能动关系：从实践、理论到教学法的发展历程

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Abstract

This article delves into the intricate relationship between criticism and aesthetics, emphasizing its enactive nature. It explores how this relationship informs pedagogy and has culminated in the creation of an innovative undergraduate aesthetics course centered around the practice of writing critiques. Moreover, it illustrates the dynamic process through which practice gives rise to theory, subsequently influencing pedagogical approaches, and, intriguingly, circling back to practice. To elucidate this flow of ideas across the realms of practice, theory, and pedagogy, we introduce several key concepts. These include the paradigm of creation research, also known as practice as research, which forms the foundation for much of our exploration. Additionally, we delve into the paradigm of enaction, inspired by the work of Francisco Varela in the cognitive sciences, to shed light on the cognitive processes underpinning our study. This article is the culmination of nearly a decade of interdisciplinary research that traverses the domains of creation research, enaction, phenomenology, criticism, aesthetics, and pedagogy. Throughout this journey, we have sought to unravel the intricate connections between criticism and aesthetics, ultimately paving the way for an innovative approach to teaching aesthetics at the undergraduate level.

Keywords: criticism, aesthetics, enaction, practice as research, creation research, pedagogy, enactive pedagogy, francisco varela, interdisciplinarity, phenomenology

摘要

本文探究了评论与美学之间错综复杂的联系，强调了评论与美学间的能动性。文章探讨了两者的联系如何影响教学法，并最终围绕撰写评论展开实践创立了一门创新的本科美学课程。本文还阐明了一个动态的过程，通过这个过程，实践产生了理论，随后影响了教学方法，奇妙的是，理论又回归于实践。为了阐释这一跨越实践、理论和教学领域的思想之流，我们引入了几个关键概念。这些概念包括创造研究范式 (the paradigm of creation research)，也称为实践研究 (practice as research)，这构成了我们大部分探索的基础。此外，我们还受弗朗西斯科·瓦雷拉 (Francisco Varela) 认知科学研究的启发，深入探索了“行动”范式 (the paradigm of enaction)，以阐明支撑我们研究的认知过程。本文是近十年跨学科研究的结晶，横跨创造研究、行动范式、现象学、评论、美学和教学法领域。通过整个探究历程，我们试图揭开评论与美学之间错综复杂的联系，最终为本科阶段美学教学的创新方法提供条件。

关键词: 批评, 美学, 行动, 实践研究, 创造研究, 教育学, 主动教育学, 弗朗西斯科·瓦雷拉, 跨学科, 现象学。

Introduction

This article delves into the intricate relationship between criticism and aesthetics, emphasizing its enactive nature. The culmination of nearly a decade of interdisciplinary research spanning creation research (practice as research), enaction, phenomenology, criticism, aesthetics, and pedagogy, this work strives to explore the connections between these diverse fields. Given the interdisciplinary nature of our research, we aim to establish a foundational understanding of each discipline involved, providing sufficient context to guide readers through our central argument: the interplay between criticism and aesthetics, its enactive character, and how these insights have led to the development of a novel approach to teaching aesthetics at the undergraduate level.

In contrast, traditional approaches to teaching aesthetics typically involve exposing students to seminal texts within the field and familiarizing them with abstract concepts. However, these methods often fall short in bridging the gap between theory and practical application. Students may gain theoretical knowledge but lack opportunities to understand how these concepts can be put into practical use, whether for the purpose of describing artwork through written or oral expression.

Additionally, this article endeavors to illustrate the cross-pollination of ideas across disciplinary boundaries, tracing their journey from practical application to theoretical formulation and subsequently to pedagogical implementation. It highlights the cyclical nature of knowledge dissemination, where concepts migrate from practice to theory, and, in some instances, return to practical application.

To provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of our research trajectory, we structure this article as follows:

Creation Research and Its Role: In the initial part of this article, we elucidate the concept of creation research (practice as research) and its pivotal role in shaping the ideas presented here. By offering a clear definition and providing two pertinent examples, we lay the foundation for our exploration. The rationale for commencing with creation research lies in the fact that most of the ideas underpinning this article were cultivated within this paradigm, making it the logical point of origin for our research journey.

Although our personal experiences often serve as a starting point for our inquiry, it may be tempting to categorize this work within the realm of autoethnographic research. However, we contend that a more precise framework for our research lies in the domain of phenomenology. Importantly, our approach to phenomenology is grounded in its practical utility rather than its theoretical aspects. While figures like Husserl have provided the theoretical foundations of phenomenology (as demonstrated in Husserl, 1985), our approach aligns more closely with the practical application of phenomenology, as exemplified by methods like the explicitation interview developed by Vermersch (refer to Vermersch, 2012, for instance). This practical orientation allows us to employ phenomenology as a robust tool for our research, transcending its role as mere theory.

Enaction as a Key Concept: Following our introduction to creation research, we delve into the concept of enaction and its application to the creative process and pedagogy. This concept serves as a crucial bridge, connecting our exploration of the relationship between criticism and aesthetics and our subsequent focus on pedagogical innovation.

The Discovery of the Criticism-Aesthetics Relationship: We proceed to elucidate how we unearthed the intricate relationship between criticism and aesthetics, primarily through practical experiences (hence our detailed exploration in the first section dedicated to practice as research). We will also address the enactive nature of this relationship, as mentioned in the second section on enaction.

Application to Pedagogy: Finally, we discuss the practical application of our findings to pedagogy. This phase serves as both a testing ground for the relationship between criticism and aesthetics in the classroom and a demonstration of the enactive nature of pedagogy.

Creation Research and Its Role

Let us embark on the task of defining creation research, often referred to as practice as research. In the body of literature dedicated to this paradigm, we encounter a range of synonymous terms, each closely related but not entirely interchangeable. According to the classification developed by Giacco (2018, 2021), these terms include practice-based research (Candy, 2006; Candy & Edmonds, 2018), art as research (Macleod & Holdridge, 2006), practice as research (Elkins, 2009, 2014), practice-led research and research-led practice (Easton, 2011; Smith & Dean, 2009), art practice as research (Sullivan, 2009), artistic research (Borgdorff, 2012), research in art (Borgdorff, 2012), research-creation (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2015), and creation as research (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2015).

In the French language, a similar array of terms exists, including “recherche création” (Bruneau & Villeneuve, 2007; Gosseling & Le Cogui c, 2006), “recherche et creation” (Fourmentraux, 2011), “recherche-cr ation” (Giacco et al., 2020; St evance & Lacasse, 2013), and “recherche en cr ation” (Martinez & Naugrette, 2020).

Personally, I advocate for the use of the term “cr ation recherche” in the French language, which can be aptly translated into English as “creation research.” By presenting this plethora of terms for the same research paradigm, it becomes evident that encapsulating the essence of this paradigm in a single term is a formidable challenge due to its inherently polymorphic nature. Furthermore, the issue of translation compounds this challenge, as each native language endeavors to grasp the concept within its own cultural context.

As one might expect, defining the creation research paradigm is also a complex endeavor. Its inherently polymorphic nature presents a formidable challenge in encapsulating its essence within a single definition. This paradigm embodies a multitude of approaches, each contributing to its rich tapestry and making it resistant to being neatly encapsulated by any single concept or term. Nevertheless, despite its multifaceted nature, we can begin to unravel its essence by highlighting a few key characteristics.

Within the realm of practice, and particularly through artistic endeavors, lies the potential to cultivate novel forms of knowledge. Thus, art practice emerges as a distinct avenue for the generation of new insights. However, the incorporation of such knowledge into the broader pool of “scientific knowledge” necessitates certain conditions, among which we can traditionally find reproducibility or falsifiability.

Indeed, the question of what qualifies as scientific research is inherently complex and nuanced. Although scientific communities endeavor to adhere to certain criteria and standards, the practical application of these criteria often varies significantly from one community to another. This variability underscores the dynamic and context-dependent nature of scientific inquiry.

As a practitioner—setting aside the designation of “artist” for the moment—I am immersed in a field of knowledge through my practice. In the course of engaging with my practice, I am compelled to draw upon both practical and theoretical knowledge to inform the decisions I make. Moreover, the act of practice itself engenders the generation of novel ideas, concepts, and decision-making frameworks—essentially, new knowledge emerges from the crucible of practice.

However, not all of this newly generated knowledge may attain the status of scientific knowledge. Yet, there exists a subset that possesses the potential to do so—it hinges upon the practitioner’s ability to articulate this new knowledge in relation to the corpus of accepted scientific knowledge within their community. Herein lies a paradox: If the newly generated knowledge bears sufficient resemblance to existing paradigms, it is more readily accepted by the community. Conversely, if it proves too disruptive or innovative, the risk of rejection looms large.

By now, it is our hope that the reader has gained a clearer understanding of what is meant by “*création recherche*” (creation research)—a form of practice-based research that sits at the intersection of practical engagement and scholarly inquiry.

Before delving into how this paradigm of creation research relates to the central topic of this article—a topic we will explore in greater detail later—allow me to present two examples of how I apply this approach in my own research.

One of the primary focuses of my research is the creative process itself. As an artist, I immerse myself in the creative process through practice, thereby gaining insights, ideas, and intuitions about its inner workings. Subsequently, I don my scholar’s hat and subject these emergent ideas—this new knowledge—to scholarly scrutiny, contextualizing them within the existing literature.

In addition to this contextualization, I employ methodological tools to refine and elaborate upon these initial insights. For instance, I utilize the explicitation interview (Vermersch, 2012, 2014) or its autoexplicitation variant (Vermersch, 2007) to delve deeper into the nuances of my preliminary ideas. This iterative process underscores the reciprocal relationship between practice and research: practice begets research, and research, in turn, informs practice.

However, as mentioned earlier, certain conditions must be met to facilitate this seamless articulation between practice and research and between creation and scholarship. These conditions serve as the scaffolding upon which the symbiotic relationship between practice and research is erected.

The second example pertains to pedagogy. Indeed, the endeavor to formulate theories about pedagogy without direct teaching experience proves to be a formidable challenge. It is through the act of teaching, through immersive classroom experiences, that educators glean new insights and generate novel ideas about pedagogical practices.

Rarely does a new theory about pedagogy materialize out of thin air; rather, it emerges from the crucible of practical application in the classroom.

Once again, we witness the reciprocal relationship between practice and research in action. Through direct engagement in the classroom, educators generate theories about pedagogy—practice serves as research. Subsequently, these theories are revisited and refined through ongoing classroom experimentation and application, thereby enriching both theory and practice.

Indeed, this bidirectional flow between practice and research underscores the dynamic and iterative nature of the pedagogical process. The classroom serves as both a laboratory for theory generation and a testing ground for theory validation and refinement. In the subsequent section, I will revisit these two examples to illustrate how they are pertinent to the central theme of our inquiry.

Enaction as a Key Concept

Before delving deeper into the concept of creation research (or practice-based research), it is imperative to explore the concept of enaction, as it forms a pivotal cornerstone of our subsequent discussion. Enaction, as elucidated by Varela et al. (1991) in their seminal work *The Embodied Mind*, initially emerged within the realm of cognitive science, with a particular focus on the visual perception of colors.

In essence, enaction posits that our perceptions are not passive reflections of an external reality but are actively shaped by our cognitive frameworks. Conversely, our cognitive frameworks are also dynamically influenced by the stimuli we perceive. In simpler terms, our ability to perceive something is contingent upon it making sense to us within the context of our existing cognitive structures. However, the act of perception itself serves to expand and refine our cognitive frameworks, allowing for the assimilation of new information and experiences.

In essence, enaction underscores the reciprocal relationship between perception and cognition, wherein perception is not merely a passive reception of stimuli but an active process of sense-making that continually shapes and is shaped by our cognitive understanding of the world through our way of interacting with it.

The revolutionary nature and profound implications of the concept of enaction spurred its widespread application across various disciplines. Originally rooted in cognitive science, enaction swiftly became a pivotal paradigm that transcended disciplinary boundaries and found resonance in diverse fields.

In the realm of cognitive sciences, enaction emerged as a transformative framework, reshaping fundamental understandings of perception, cognition, and embodiment (Stewart et al., 2010). Its influence extended into the domain of pedagogy, where scholars explored its implications for teaching and learning processes (Duzert, 2016; Magrin-Chagnolleau, 2015; Trocmé-Fabre, 1987, 1999). Moreover, enaction made significant inroads into philosophy, particularly within phenomenology, where it enriched discussions on embodied experience and intersubjectivity (Depraz et al., 2011).

In aesthetics and the philosophy of art, enaction sparked new inquiries into the nature of aesthetic experience and the relationship among perception, creation,

and interpretation (Magrin-Chagnolleau, 2017a). Its relevance also extended into consciousness studies, where scholars explored the role of embodied cognition in shaping subjective awareness and phenomenal experience (Bitbol, 2014).

The widespread adoption of enaction across these diverse fields underscores its versatility and transformative potential as a theoretical framework. Its ability to shed light on the dynamic interplay among embodied action, perception, and cognition has fueled innovative research agendas and opened new avenues of inquiry across the sciences and humanities alike.

The creative process, like many cognitive processes, exhibits an inherently enactive nature. Enaction provides a compelling framework for understanding the dynamics of the creative process, which unfolds as a complex interplay among cognition, embodiment, and environmental stimuli.

At the outset of the creative endeavor, individuals draw upon their existing cognitive knowledge and experiences related to the task at hand. This cognitive foundation often serves as the impetus for initiating the creative project—it shapes the initial idea and informs the initial approach to the task. However, as individuals begin to engage with the creative project—whether it be an artistic endeavor, a research project, or a writing project—they do so within a specific environment characterized by various contextual factors, such as the physical space, social interactions, and external constraints.

These environmental stimuli, in turn, exert a profound influence on the creative process, shaping and refining individuals' cognitive understanding and approach to the task at hand. The iterative interaction between the individual and their environment—wherein perceptions, sensations, cognition, feelings, and affects are deeply intertwined—constitutes the essence of embodied cognition.

One example of such an enactive creative process is a work I did as a photographer many years ago on Muir Woods Monument Park. I went there with a friend and started taking pictures, relying on my experience and knowledge as a photographer. At the same time, I was living a new experience and being in a new environment, which guided me to approach taking pictures in a different way, one that was more in relation to the experience I was going through. It resulted in a series of photographs and the publication of a book (Magrin-Chagnolleau, 2017b). One example of these pictures is presented here (Figure 1).

Embodied cognition, as encapsulated by the concept of enaction, underscores the inseparable relationship between mind and body in the process of cognition. It emphasizes that cognition does not occur in isolation within the confines of the brain but is intricately intertwined with bodily experiences, actions, and interactions with the environment. Thus, the creative process unfolds not only within the confines of individual thought but also through embodied engagement with the world.

The concept of enaction can also be applied to pedagogy, shedding light on the dynamic interplay among teachers, students, and the learning environment. Although not every pedagogical approach is explicitly enactive, elements of enaction can be found to varying degrees across different instructional methodologies.

At one end of the spectrum, even the most structured and predetermined pedagogies contain enactive components, as teachers inevitably respond and adapt to the unique



FIGURE 1 | Muir Woods Spirits #16.

dynamics of each classroom setting. However, at the opposite end of the spectrum lies an explicitly enactive pedagogy—one in which the teacher relinquishes strict control over the instructional process and allows the learning environment to shape their teaching approach.

In an enactive pedagogical framework, teachers set broad learning objectives for their classes but refrain from prescribing rigid instructional methods in advance. Instead, they remain open to the unfolding dynamics of the classroom, attentively observing and responding to the needs, interests, and expectations of their students in real time. This approach requires teachers to actively engage with their students, seeking to understand their backgrounds, motivations, and learning preferences to tailor the learning experience accordingly.

An enactive pedagogy prioritizes flexibility, spontaneity, and responsiveness, eschewing the rigidity of predetermined lesson plans in favor of an adaptive and emergent teaching style. By embracing the unpredictability of the learning process, teachers create opportunities for meaningful engagement, exploration, and discovery within the classroom.

However, implementing an enactive pedagogy can pose challenges within educational systems that prioritize standardized curricula and predefined learning outcomes. Nevertheless, creative strategies and innovative approaches can be employed to navigate these challenges and create space for enactive teaching practices to flourish.

In the subsequent sections of this article, we will revisit the concept of enactive pedagogy, exploring its potential benefits and implications for student learning and engagement within the contemporary educational landscape.

The Discovery of the Criticism-Aesthetics Relationship

My journey into criticism as a practice commenced with the founding of an academic journal¹ dedicated to creation research in 2014. The journal, encompassing performing arts, visual arts, and sound arts, provided a platform for the exploration and dissemination of critical insights. Initially focusing on film, I gradually extended my critiques to encompass theater, music, dance, painting, and literature.

Engaging in criticism necessitated reflection on the subjects at hand and the manner of articulating insights. Despite possessing a foundational understanding of aesthetics, the practical act of writing critiques spurred a deeper exploration of aesthetic concepts. Through this experiential engagement, criticism became a pathway to the enrichment of aesthetic knowledge.

Conversely, insights gleaned from aesthetics found resonance in the process of critiquing artworks. Pre-existing notions about aesthetics were recontextualized and deepened through the act of engaging with diverse artistic expressions and articulating critical perspectives.

This reciprocal relationship between criticism and aesthetics, wherein each informs and enriches the other, underscores the dynamic nature of artistic engagement. The interplay between critique and aesthetic understanding serves as a cornerstone for further exploration, paving the way for insights into creation research and its implications for pedagogy and artistic practice.

Before delving further into the intricate relationship between criticism and aesthetics, it is imperative to acknowledge another activity that significantly contributed to my understanding of artworks: making art. Engaging in the creative process provided invaluable insights into the nuances of artistic expression, deepened my appreciation for the vocabulary of art, and honed my ability to articulate aesthetic concepts.

The journey through experiencing artworks, writing about them, and engaging in artmaking embodies a series of practices that have culminated in a deeper understanding of art and its manifold dimensions. These practices have not only facilitated engagement with artworks but have also led to scholarly research and theoretical reflection on art, the creative process, and the experiences associated with these practices.

Indeed, the act of experiencing artworks, whether through observation, contemplation, or participation, constitutes a practice in its own right. It involves the active engagement of the senses, emotions, and intellect, fostering a dynamic interaction

¹ The journal *p-e-r-f-o-r-m-a-n-c-e*.

² Phenomenology, as delineated by Husserl (1985, 1992), has been a significant area of interest for me due to its ability to probe lived experiences and provide tools for comprehension. This interest also led me to explore the explication interview developed by Vermersch (2012, 2014).

between the viewer and the artwork. Similarly, writing about artworks involves the practice of critical analysis, interpretation, and articulation—a process that deepens one's understanding of art and its various meanings.²

The Enactive Nature of the Criticism-Aesthetics Relationship

Let us now delve deeper into the nature of the relationship between criticism and aesthetics. For the scope of this discussion, I will focus solely on elucidating the interconnection between criticism and aesthetics, refraining from delving into their respective relationships with the act of making art, a topic that warrants separate exploration.

The concept of enaction, as discussed earlier in this article, proves to be highly relevant here. As previously mentioned, the act of writing about art not only involves conveying existing aesthetic notions but also entails the potential discovery of new concepts through the process of writing. Put simply, as I articulate my thoughts on art, I draw upon a cognitive framework and vocabulary that are already embedded within my mind. However, the act of writing about art also serves to expand my understanding of aesthetics. Through the act of critiquing, my cognition undergoes modification, transformation, and expansion, thereby enriching my knowledge of aesthetics. In essence, the relationship between criticism and aesthetics is inherently enactive in nature, as the process of critiquing actively shapes and enhances my understanding of aesthetic principles and concepts.

This process is inherently experiential, rooted in the act of engaging with art and conveying those experiences through writing—a domain that aligns closely with phenomenology (Husserl, 1985, 1992). Phenomenology and enaction have long been intertwined, as highlighted by scholars such as Depraz et al. (2011). Indeed, much of our engagement with art is experiential in nature: From observing artworks to articulating our impressions in critiques, each step involves a subjective encounter with aesthetic phenomena.

The close relationship between enaction and phenomenology stems from their shared emphasis on the transformative power of experience on cognition. As we engage with the world, our experiences shape and mold our cognitive frameworks, leading to an enactive process of cognitive transformation. This interconnectedness underscores the profound impact of lived experience on our understanding of the world and ourselves.

Given the transformative nature of experiential engagement with art, it becomes pertinent to explore how these insights can inform pedagogy.

Application to Pedagogy

The enactive connection between criticism and aesthetics underscores the transformative potential of writing critiques—an experiential process capable of reshaping cognition regarding both criticism and aesthetics. Recognizing this, it became evident that integrating criticism and aesthetics could offer an effective approach to teaching aesthetics to students.

That is how I conceived the idea of offering a course titled “Criticism as a way to train the aesthetic judgement.” The premise of this course is to engage students in the practice of writing about artworks they admire while articulating the reasons behind their preferences. Through this exercise, students draw upon their existing knowledge of art, discourse, and aesthetics. During class discussions where students present their texts, peers can provide feedback, and I, as the instructor, can subtly introduce additional aesthetic concepts and vocabulary. This process enables students to gradually incorporate new ideas and concepts into their critiques, thereby broadening their understanding of aesthetics with each subsequent writing endeavor.

I had the fortunate opportunity to pilot such a course in 2020 at Chapman University as part of their Honors program. This program is designed for the university’s top students and is tailored for smaller class sizes, typically capped at 15 students but often comprising around 12 to 14. Emphasizing extensive in-class discussions, I approached the course within the framework of enactive pedagogy. Although I maintained clear objectives as an instructor, I allowed myself ample flexibility in structuring activities for each class throughout the semester. Additionally, I was fortunate to be in a situation where a detailed syllabus was not required of me.

The activity of writing about art proved highly effective in fostering an understanding of aesthetics among the students. Engaging in peer feedback sessions allowed for an initial expansion of everyone’s knowledge regarding aesthetic vocabulary and concepts. My interventions further complemented this process, always anchored in the ongoing class discussions—a testament to the enactive nature of my pedagogy.

To bolster their theoretical understanding, I selected several relevant books for the class (Berleant, 2016; Carroll et al., 2019; Cazeaux, 2011; Goldblatt et al., 2017; Klevan & Clayton, 2011; Rawls et al., 2019; Wood & Lodge, 2013) and occasionally distributed chapters from these texts to be discussed in the following week’s session. However, I adhered to the principles of enactive pedagogy even in this aspect: while I pre-selected the books, I chose the chapters for discussion based on the relevance to the preceding class discourse. This approach facilitated students’ ability to relate the chapter content to their recent discussions, enhancing comprehension and engagement.

The final critique they composed, in comparison to the initial critique crafted at the outset of the semester, exhibited notable advancements in their grasp of aesthetic concepts. This improvement aligns with the objectives of the class and underscores the efficacy of the enactive approach employed therein.

Conclusion

In this article, I pursued several objectives. First, I introduced the concept of creation research (also known as artistic practice as research), highlighting its relevance in understanding the dynamic interplay between criticism and aesthetics. Second, I explored the concept of enaction as a lens through which to comprehend cognitive activities, particularly the relationship between criticism and aesthetics.

Next, I shared my personal journey with criticism, illustrating how it enhanced my understanding of aesthetics—a tangible demonstration of creation research in action, specifically as a critic writer. Through this exploration, I uncovered the enactive nature of the relationship between criticism and aesthetics, inspiring the creation of a new course aimed at teaching aesthetics through critique writing, employing an enactive pedagogical approach.

For me, this endeavor represents the culmination of years of interdisciplinary research spanning creation research, enaction, phenomenology, criticism, aesthetics, and pedagogy—a convergence of diverse fields into a singular course that embodies the collective knowledge derived from these threads, interwoven into a cohesive whole.

Moving forward, the next phase of this research involves further testing the efficacy of this course in diverse educational settings (pedagogy), as well as validating the enactive relationship between criticism and aesthetics (phenomenology).

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declare no conflicts of interests.

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