

Sarah O'Brien
Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts
Theatre Studies
Lancaster University
Lancaster LA1 4YW

Keywords:

Practice-as-research
Written thesis
Reflective Judgement
Kant
Eco

Practice-as-Research in Performance: A Response to Reflective Judgement

Sarah O'Brien

Abstract

This article examines 'reflective schema' within the context of its original study by Umberto Eco and Kant; and from the perspective of my own performance making as a recent PaR PhD candidate. This is in response to an article by Susan Melrose, where she suggests that it is through a 'reflective schema' that we can view performance in order to judge its value as PaR (2002). Melrose claims that in using such a schema we no longer need to rely on the 'traditional thesis' as the 'material support' of performance. I argue that if we include the 'traditional thesis' under this model of thought, then it is not simply a material support, it is seen to be essential to the creative process. Therefore, while both acknowledging it as only one possible method and pointing towards its limitations, I also argue that it is useful to understand PaR following a 'reflective schema' as it demonstrates an alternate relation between the traditional written thesis and the performance.

A Student Voice: Initial Thoughts on PaR

At the beginning of the dress rehearsal for *Voice*¹ the performers and I were in our places outside and away from the installation structure. I was at the control desk ready to start

the VCR, which marked the beginning of the performance. Once the VCR was running I checked the timer and ran through the wall of the structure into the centre of it in order to see from what would be an audience perspective. After a few minutes I needed to adjust the lights and the vision mixer, which meant that I had to leave the centre of the structure and return to the control desk. At the control desk I brought up the lights and altered the vision mixer so that the lighting on the two sides of the structure was level with the live feed projection. To do this I had to imagine what it would look like from the perspective of being inside the structure. Then, I returned back through the material wall and into the centre of the structure to see the result of my adjustments and to continue to watch the performance. This going back and forth continued throughout the rehearsal.

This project formed part of a practice-as-research PhD, which began with a series of workshops with several performers in 2002. The workshops were designed around research questions that interrogated the status of the video image in performance – its uses, and the implications of these uses for a discursively produced subject viewing position in performance. Early on, I realised that I was positioning the workshops in such a relation to the research questions that I appeared to be conducting a pseudo-psychological experiment. For example, my first research question simply asked: *Is the perception of the live affected when juxtaposed with the pre-recorded or vice versa? If so, how?* I wondered how practice-as-research, as a subject of the humanities and not the sciences, would differ from this model that I found myself falling into. After running the workshops I realised that I was not asking this question of the performers: I was not trying to uncover answers from what the performers could produce in the space of

rehearsal (e.g. find answers such as: ‘yes, it does affect the live because I saw how performer “A’s” movements/responses altered with the addition of the video image and performer “B” and I perceived this alteration. This alteration involved...’etc.). It was only after the workshops that I realised how, in preparing them, I failed to acknowledge that the research questions were not *only* questions: they were not pure, objective questions that existed outside of the work itself – they were my own hypotheses, my own creations, intentions, imaginings, assertions, inferences, or *beliefs* that I had arrived at based upon my research so far. These questions could be compared to my imagined images of ‘*what it would look like from the perspective of being inside the structure*’ or rather, being at a point in the future, the point during the performance practice. The questions were based upon the organisation of space: the video image and its situation in performance, thus, these beliefs had to first inform the space of rehearsal in order for them to be either developed or challenged.

What I have called ‘beliefs’ here, can be compared to *schemata*:² explicated by Umberto Eco in *Kant and the Platypus* (1997) in his discussion on ‘reflective judgement’ which is subsequently employed by Susan Melrose in ‘Entertaining Other Options... Restaging “Theory” in the Age of Practice as Research’ (2002). In this article Melrose discusses how we might think about the ‘new’ in terms of performance practice, particularly for the submission of a doctoral thesis in PaR. Starting with thoughts from Gregory Ulmer and Umberto Eco, Melrose asks how we might first identify the ‘new’ and how an understanding of this may be useful when considering ‘PhD-worth’ performance:³ ‘My *sense* (and I use the term advisedly) is that identification of PhD-

worth, in these sorts of cases, is schematic, as much as it is logically-determined' (Melrose 2002 internet text, emphasis in original). For Melrose, the *schematic*, or, the development of schemata for the purposes of judging the 'new', closely resembles what I have called 'beliefs':

On the operations of reflective judgement, Eco notes that "[r]ather than observe (and thence produce schemata, the reflective judgement produces schemata to be able to observe, and to experiment. My suggestion here is that devising practices, in the mainstream (e.g. in the recent work of Lepage, together with Complicite and DV8) operate through the (experimental) schemata of reflective judgment - that is, they "produce schemata [in the devising workshop] to be able to observe... " [...] "With this schematism", Eco adds, "the intellect does not construct the simple determination of a possible object, but makes the object, constructs it, and in the course of this activity (problematic in itself) it proceeds by [a crucial] *trial and error*" (Melrose 2002. My Emphasis).

Eco (and Kant before him) were referring to how we can perceive; how we interpret everyday experience and how, in order to interpret or detect the 'new' in our world experience, it is necessary to first *produce* something from the 'intellect', that is, produce a set of concepts that you already know but perhaps in a new order—the *schemata*—in order to first make the object and discover whether what you produce is a correct interpretation of the world through trial and error. My 'beliefs' then could be understood as the production of schemata that outline the theoretical process of the performance. The 'object' of the schemata that Eco describes here includes both the production of the object by the 'intellect' *and* ['crucially'] the event; that is, the 'playing out' of these beliefs through the event. The 'intellect'—my beliefs or rather, the reasoning, meaning, idea or intention that supports these beliefs—cannot possibly fully determine this object

before a certain amount of time or activity has passed. It is through ‘the course’ of an ‘activity’ that ‘schemata’ are produced, which are objects evolving by and through the continuing process of the workshop, or in my case, also in the edit suite or at the drawing board,⁴ but the determination of this object of reflective judgement itself is left open, evolving in time.⁵

According to Melrose, if a performance can prove its theoretical worth in this way then it has no need for its ‘material support’ (i.e. the ‘traditional’ written thesis), which is necessarily limiting. But it must be noted here, that Melrose is specifically contesting the primacy of the traditional written thesis as a judgement of a PaR doctoral thesis, describing it (along with the viva) as an ‘ancient’ ritual. My written ideas or ‘beliefs’ do not differ from this understanding of the schemata of reflective judgment because these beliefs (my ‘objects’) *include* the practice of writing. Does this process, then, render the thesis writing redundant in terms of theoretical worth in PaR? To answer this question I’d like to compare this schematic movement to the movement described in the opening example. The process described above compares to how I see the way meaning was produced in my own thesis. Superficially, we could say that in this viewer/director situation I was constantly moving in between two spaces: inside the structure I could focus on the particular activity, outside I get absorbed in a general picture or belief of what I could see. Therefore we can understand how the written component – one that *can be seen* to take place outside of that particular context – has no bearing upon the theory produced within that movement. However, by taking a closer look at the process of

theory in the schemata of reflective judgement, we can see how this idea can be contested.

Schemata and Reflective Judgement

The notion of the schemata of reflective judgement was first discussed by Immanuel Kant when asking how we can identify (and understand) what we experience in the world (in an everyday sense). First, according to Kant, we have what he calls ‘sensible intuition’, that which our senses receive from the world, and in order to interpret these into something that we can know and understand we must ‘match’ them to a general concept already present in our intellect. However, ‘[...] pure concepts of the intellect are heterogeneous with respect to sensible intuitions’ (Eco 80-81) and therefore something else is needed to mediate between these two faculties:

[...] we need a third mediating element that, so to speak, makes it possible for the concept to wrap itself around the intuition and renders the concept applicable to the intuition. In this way the need for a *transcendental schema* comes into being. (Eco 81)

To illustrate the nature of the schema, Eco draws upon an example given by Kant in the first *Critique* where he talks about Thales and the identification of an isosceles triangle. Thales took the general rule of *one* isosceles triangle in order to identify all possible others: it was from that general rule he was able to *construct* future isosceles triangles, thus being able to identify them. It is this general rule that can be understood as a ‘transcendental schema’, the concept that links the sensible to the conceptual. The *schemata* are therefore all of the general rules that govern the trajectory of identification;

offering a pre-designed system that I must follow like a flowchart (does it have three sides? Yes/No If yes, then go to... etc), thus schemata are time-based and systematic; dependent upon ‘diagrammatic representations’ already laid down for us to trace (Eco 83).

This idea works quite well when identifying things that have a general formula of which no part exists outside the rule (like a triangle), but it does not yet explain how we are able to see ‘empirical concepts’ (for example ‘a dog’):⁶ empirical concepts are objects encountered in everyday experience that we cannot anticipate, in other words, the ‘new’. Thus, Eco goes on to ask: ‘*What happens when we must construct the schema of an object that is as yet unknown?*’ (Eco 2000: 89 Emphasis in original). This brings us to the other notion cited by Melrose: the notion of Kant’s *reflective judgement*, which is a faculty of thought discussed in the *Critique of Judgement*:

Judgement is the faculty of thinking of the particular as part of the general, and if the general (the rule, the law) is already given, judgement is *determinant*. But if *only the particular is given and the general must be sought for*, judgement is *reflective*. (Eco 90. Emphasis in original)

For example, when I enter the structure of *Voice* I encounter a particular experience: I encounter that which cannot stand as a general rule for the whole of *Voice* because each time I enter the structure (and at each moment in the structure) I encounter something unique or particular. Using this logic, we could say that the *general rule* for the idea or concept of *Voice* is still in process – it is still being ‘sought for’: I am still learning about *Voice* each time I encounter it. It is in this way that my judgement of *Voice* is *reflective*.

On the other hand, however, there were certain beliefs or rules⁷ (schemata) that existed before the process of making *Voice* that I could identify (and express in my written thesis) from these particular visits, and it is in this way that particular sections of *Voice* can stand for a more general idea or rule. Thus, whether a judgement is reflective *or* determinant depends upon the *pre-existence* of a general rule (schema), which is already *present* in the case of the determinant judgement and *initially absent* in the case of reflective judgement.

It is this ‘initially absent’ (but pre-existing) schema that is confusing about reflective judgement: how do all of these particular experiences come to stand for the general schemata? For the unique or particular, the general does not in fact exist – and vice versa – they chase each other in an endless circle. If the general schemata are ‘rules’ for performance and the particular is the ‘act’ or ‘practice’ (revised assertions, making decisions in the creative process e.g. the following questions that ‘carry’ the previous questions), then the rules are how I am able to identify a particular practice, yet, at the same time, it is through the practice that I encounter that which serves to create the rules. The question then remains: how did I see the first rule? In other words, the earlier question is repeated, how can we identify the ‘new’? This problematic circle between the general and the particular remains mysterious in Kantian terms,⁸ but Eco takes Kant’s ideas further, developing what he calls a ‘late’ schematism (citing Vittorio Mathieu which he translates here from Italian): ‘The intellect makes experience by designing the structure according to which the driving *forces* of the object can *act*’, therefore, the ‘rules’ are developed through ‘*trial and error*’ (Eco citing Mathieu 97 my emphasis).

Implicit in the idea of ‘trial and error’ is an agent that/who must decide whether the trial (the rule) is an ‘error’ or not, that is, whether or not it constitutes part of the practice. If the structure of the rule is designed ‘according’ to the forces of an object, then it is *force* (or our pure intuitive sense of that force) that confirms whether the rule is ‘correct’ or not. However, this cannot be to say that if the rule is ‘wrong’ there is *no* force, because if there is no action of the object (if there is no intuitive sense) then how could we know that something is *there* in order to necessitate a re-writing of the rule? There cannot be an absence of force if the rule is ‘wrong’ but instead, the absence of *the rule* that *accounts* for the force. Therefore the ‘new’ is that *intuitive sense*, that particular thing, that *disrupts* or *perverts* the current rule(s): it is that which calls for a *new* general rule to be made.

It is this sense of the schematic that Melrose applies to the judgement of a PhD worthy performance: it should implicitly display and reveal the limitations of a general rule(s) (i.e. disrupt) rather than conforming (as with determinant judgement). In this way she *reverses* the more traditional relationship that the written section of the thesis has to the performance:

[...] performance production, pursued to recognisable disciplinary standards, is not commensurable with its material support - through which nonetheless that performance is made to work, made available, examined. (Melrose np. Emphasis in original)

It is not ‘commensurable’ because it necessarily exceeds its material support, disrupts or perverts it. In this way, *any* ‘built machine’, completed written work, documentation or unchallenged schemata cannot reflect the operations of a ‘working theatre’.⁹ In PaR then,

theory is and remains in process and it is in this way that Melrose views theory in performance practice as reflectively judged schemata and writing as its incommensurable limitation.

As I was writing the thesis I did not experience it as a limit to the construction and appreciation of my performances, indeed, it played a role that is comparable to schemata. When writing the thesis I was also writing to find my own voice. Once established, it was this voice that marked the ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ of my practice. It allowed me to see the ‘new’; not strictly on a phenomenological level, but the constructed story of the thesis, one of my own making, offered the rules for me to follow when identifying the ‘new’ (or the ‘original contribution’) that my performances could be seen to offer. In this way the written thesis, for me, worked very much like a *conclusion*: it could be said that the knowledge in both the thesis writings and the performances that come *before* a conclusion remains latent until the conclusion serves to unpick, tie up and order this knowledge in ‘reflective judgement’.

Performance, Writing and Schemata

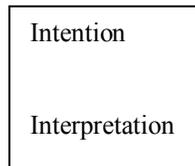
The relationship the written form of the thesis has with the process and performance practice may historically appear to be both an interpretation and outline of intentions: a justification of the practice and perhaps, even, a best practice guide. This understanding is in keeping with Melrose’s argument that the ‘material support’ (i.e. written thesis, documentation) limits the way in which we judge performance in PaR. Therefore to understand the written component as an interpretation would necessarily delete the

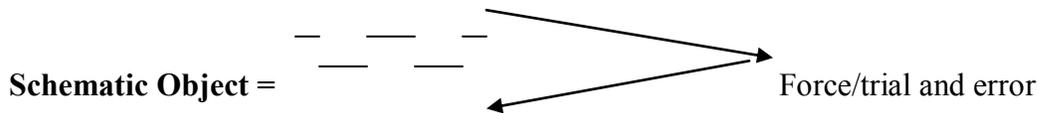
performance event and its value. There is a problem, however, with seeing the written component as a limit or ‘deletion’ of the practice. At the end of Melrose’s citation, Eco describes the ‘object’ as going through a process of ‘trial and error’. As I have argued, such a process implies that the object in play produces ‘forces’, and it is the identification of the *absence of a rule* that *accounts* for the force. So on what basis do I decide when something in the work identified is unaccounted for? Indeed, upon what basis can any viewer of the work decide this? What does it mean to find ones *voice*?

According to reflective schemata, in order to seek the ‘new’ in performance *alone* both I and any other viewer must interpret the decisions made in order to see how these ‘decisions’ are ‘disrupted/perverted’ by the work. There are three problems with this: first, the object that is to go through ‘trial and error’ must be identified. Without identifying this ‘object’ before or during the performance, there is no basis for a decision to be made. It could be said that if it was essential for a performance to identify this object itself then there is a danger that it would lack the necessary event of ‘trial and error’ – its *raison d’être*. I argue that in *retrospectively* providing a frame for the performance, writing liberates it. Second, to understand the written as this ‘object’ of a performance is to ignore the ‘trial and error’/force/‘*intuitive sense*’ that occurs within the production of writing and the reading of that writing. Third, without the writing there is danger in accepting the final performance as existing only as an expression of ‘play’ (‘trial and error’/force/meaning existing only as ‘*intuitive sense*’) and not as an ‘object’ itself. If one option for practice-as-research is to adopt reflective schemata, then I would argue that writing be seen as an essential component of this option. The benefit of

understanding the relation between the written and the performance components of the thesis as reflective schemata is that this theory *rejects* the idea that writing is a simply the justification (‘material support’) of performance. To apply reflective schemata to PaR without the writing, without the ‘material support’, I would have had to attempt to reveal my ‘rules’ within the performance (thus limiting it creatively) in such a way that these can be identified by everyone, including and especially the examiners. Is this really possible? Could I have achieved that timeless and universal ‘ah – eureka, I get it!’? Historically speaking, it would be absurd to say that this is what performance aims to achieve.

It is useful, however, to consider how *both* the final thesis writing and performance can be understood in terms of reflective schemata. To do this it is necessary to split the ‘schemata of reflective judgment’ into two components: *intention* and *interpretation*.¹⁰ Although I could not have anticipated what was to be produced in the workshop, edit suite or drawing board, I relied upon the pre-established assertions that set up the work (my imagined whole; my blueprint, the ideal repeatable image) as a kind of lens through which I could identify the successful ‘thing’. In other words, I could only interpret something as ‘working’ if that ‘thing’ bore some characteristics of my intentions (which, incidentally, were also interpretations as they were the research questions). It is in this way that a successful ‘thing’ is an unexpected (disrupted, perverted) *repetition* of my intention, located through my *interpretation*, and thus points to the *next* intention to be put to trial.





In order to visualise this we could compare it to the opening example of my experience in *Voice* where I had to run in and out of the installation, passing through the wall of the installation structure, between the control centre and the audience space: between the place of intention (control centre) and the place of interpretation (audience space). In between these spaces (when running) was the moment of the indeterminable, the moment of play.¹¹ The object may change or develop throughout the process but each time it is judged, identified, analysed, discussed and so on, as *having* ‘changed’ or developed’ it necessarily *returns* as a new (old/disruptive) object.

Once I had produced my first performance, which was formed on the basis of basic phenomenal questions that depended upon my own perspective alone, I could then begin to interpret it within a broader theoretical perspective of ‘performance’. For example, I could begin to analyse and situate the performance from the position of the critic: i.e. where does the performance belong? Historically? Culturally? To which genre does it belong? What aspects of the performance can be identified elsewhere, in other performances or art practices? Who has written about those practices? And with these interpretations I can then develop the thesis (again, Eco’s object) through the writing processes *in the same way*. It was the interpretation of my performances that led me to research video art and video installation, which in turn, led to the outline of my final

written thesis. Schemata of reflective judgment can therefore be seen to apply to a general level of the process, where rules can be identified through the repetition of the intentions and interpretations. Thus intention (determinant) was guided by interpretation (reflective) and each fed the other in a kind of “hermeneutic circle”;¹² a Heideggerian notion illustrated well by James L. Kinneavy:

A simple example may help to explain this circularity. When I begin a sentence, you assume that I have a full sentence meaning in mind and you relate each word separately to the provisional whole you have projected by context. Each word refines and changes the original whole, so that the meaning of each word is determined by the meaning of the developing wholes, and these words themselves determine the developing wholes. So the meaning of the parts depends on the wholes, and the meaning of the wholes depends on the meanings of the parts. There is a circularity. But it is a necessary circularity. This is the hermeneutical circle. (np)

The meaning (object) produced at each stage of the performance process is determined by the meaning of the developing thesis, and these stages of the performance process determine the developing thesis. This split between intention and interpretation is therefore helpful for the process of understanding ‘meaning making’ in a PaR thesis by establishing a possible relationship between the performance and the written component of a thesis.

We are reminded here however, that the ‘new’ (that sits between intention and interpretation) is not pure – it is not an absence of force – it is an absence of the rule that *accounts* for the force and appears in the form of compromised rules – old rules that have exceeded themselves. Thus, in following the schema of reflective judgement it is not

necessary to follow intention and interpretation in a linear manner in practice. Intention and interpretation *are* the rules and the ‘new’ is the tension between these two spaces of reflection and *not* the ‘mysterious’ time that passes between them. The ‘new’ in performance then, can only be recognised because it is not entirely new: it is an old thing that is warped or perverted, an old that is more or less than itself. It is a ‘new’ that I could only recognise through analysis, and thus only communicate once the performances were over. I had to identify first how the rules were old and to do this my writing and other writings were essential, and only then could I understand what I was doing with these old rules in both my writing and performances. The written component and the creation of performance were therefore absolutely necessary for the production of each. My performance practice could not have a thesis without having rules to break and these rules had to be set out by the written thesis in order to offer the performance freedom to play. But importantly, my rules did not necessarily have to take place *before* the performances – I found no need for there to be an imposed linear timeline that demands a before and after.

Viewing the creation of the ‘new’ as a ‘back and forth’ between intention and interpretation via the mysterious event implies it has a linear path – one that ignores the necessary stories that must be created in order to see the new *in* work. For me, intention and interpretation were the same act and it was not useful in performance practice for me to divide them with the unnameable ‘time’ that passes between these two states – only in meaning making (the thesis). I therefore see the schema of reflective judgement as a useful way of thinking about PaR as it demands that there is an outline of the journey of

the theoretical process when creating and critiquing performance. It is useful when thinking about the devising moment – the creative playful moment – it offers a structure in which to communicate that journey in writing.

Works cited

Eco, U. (2000) *Kant and the Platypus* Vintage The Random House Group Ltd. London,

Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time* / translated by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson. London: SCM Press.

Kinneavy, James L. (1987) *The Process of Writing: A Philosophical Base in Hermeneutics* University of Texas, Austin, Texas,
Available at: <http://jac.gsu.edu/jac/7/Articles/1.htm> Accessed 9/07/06

Melrose, S. (2002) *Entertaining other options: Restaging 'theory' in the age of practice as research*. Available at: <http://www.sfmelrose.u-net.com/inaugural/> Accessed 9/07/06.

Contributor details

Sarah O'Brien is a Teaching Fellow at Lancaster University and has recently completed her PhD (PaR) with Theatre Studies section, LICA. Her main research interests are in multi-media performance, video art and installation, live art, performance installation, site-specific and devised performance. Email: s.obrien@lancs.ac.uk

¹ *Voice* was one of the performances that I submitted towards my PaR doctoral degree at Lancaster University.

² Originally discussed in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (180-187).

³ See Melrose "Entertaining Other Options... Restaging "Theory" in the Age of Practice as Research" (2002) <http://www.sfmelrose.u-net.com/inaugural/> 9/07/06

⁴ A large part of the structure of *Voice* was developed at the 'drawing table' shown in 'comic' style images.

⁵ Melrose continues to discuss how the final determination of the work produced from the workshop or in performance can never actually have a final destination: 'Eco adds, in terms which should be familiar to those of us who observe new work emerging: "[I]f a complete synthesis of empirical schemata can never be given, because new notes of the concept [will] always be discovered through experience", then "the schemata themselves can only be revisable, fallible, - destined to *evolve in time*' (Melrose np My emphasis).

⁶ '[...] it is clear that our nice little analogy with the flow chart, which might help us understand how the schematic construction of the triangle proceeds, works far less well in the case of the dog.' (Eco 85)

⁷ My written thesis examines the different patterns or rules in which the use of the video image in performance can fall into. These patterns determine the discursive composition of the viewing space under a Lacanian schema.

⁸ Eco states that for Kant '[...] this schematism of our intellect, which also concerns the simple *form* of appearances, is an art concealed in the depths of the human soul. It is an art, a procedure, a task, a construction, but we know very little of how it works. (Eco 85)

⁹ Melrose states that '[...] working theatre actually fails to communicate its *raison d'être* as built machine: its work, and hence its architectural structure, might be better seen to operate *schematically*.' (np)

¹⁰ In practice I couldn't really distinguish the difference between my intentions or my interpretations, but it is useful to make this divide just for the purposes of explanation and understanding. It therefore seems that the 'mysterious' event that occurs between the two is invented for the purposes of meaning making.

¹¹ We are reminded here that this is an illustration of a process that can be seen to occur on every level of practice and this example therefore is for the purpose of explication and should not be taken as the singular example of the event.

¹² Originally discussed by Heidegger in *Being and Time* (314-316).