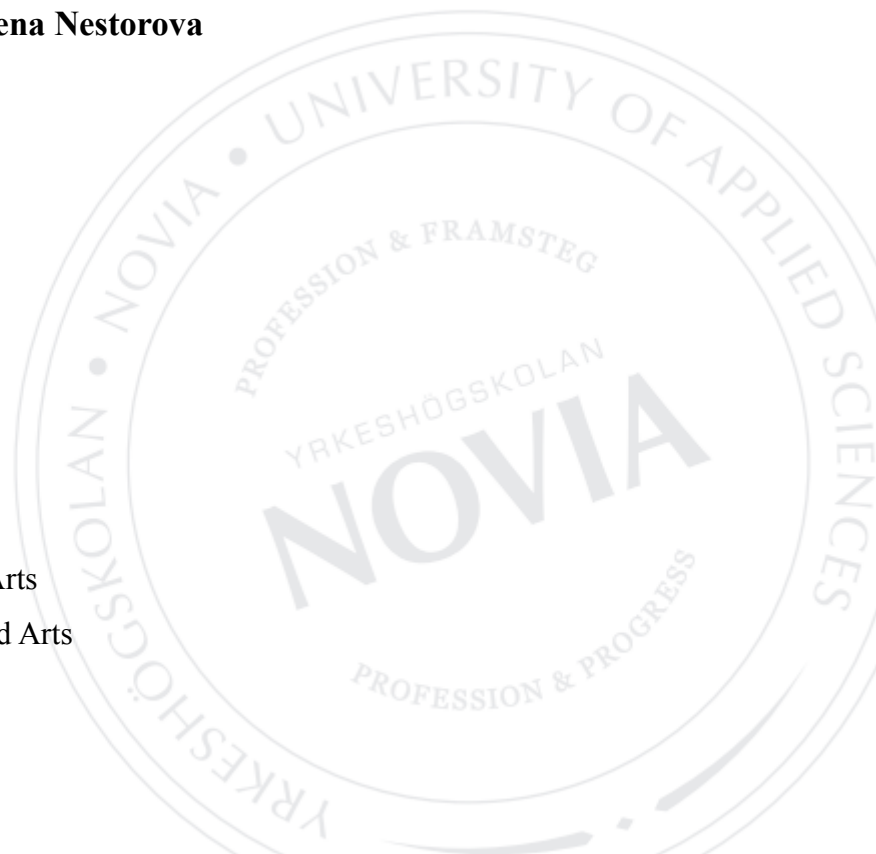


A Justification to Paint Cockatoos

A Self-Reflective Research on the Impacts of Critical Thinking and
Self-Criticism on Creativity

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Abstract

This research focuses on finding and analyzing the different effects which critical thinking has on creativity in comparison to self-criticism. My main research question is how does mere criticism differ from critical thinking? The reason I ask this question is the simple yet profound realization that I have all my life confused them with one another, which has harmed my creativity. The research method I have chosen to use is an autobiographical case study, which involves psychoanalytical elements. It is built on the Hermeneutic circle model and I have used self-invented analogies and metaphors as tools to clarify and concretize my internal, abstract phenomena.

Tuukka Tomperi, a senior researcher of Tampere University's Faculty of Education and Culture discusses in his publication the reasons why critical thinking is so commonly equated with or misinterpreted as any type of skillful thinking (Tomperi 2017). His thoughts and ideas are a continuation of long history of philosophers and scientists, who have dealt thoroughly with similar questions. The books and publications of Matthew Lipman, John Dewey and Dr. Peter A. Facione, who conducted the *Consensus Statement Regarding Critical Thinking and the Ideal Critical Thinker* (Facione 1989), have played a key role in my search for answers and solutions to my research problem. I have related my experiences to their thoughts and applied their theories in order to change my way thinking. As a result of this process I have succeeded to deepen my understanding towards the meaning of critical thinking, which in turn has led me to achieve emancipation from the factors which I find harmful for my creativity. Analytical thinking, reasoning and decision making are undeniably intertwined with the informative processes provided by intuition (Raami 2015). Together they create a complex entity that is in constant transformation.

Language: English

Keywords: Self-Criticism, Critical Thinking, Intuition, Creative Process, Art, Painting, Rules, Self-Reflectivity, Emancipation, Change

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Introduction

This is an exploration which aims to identify the characteristics and functions of critical thinking and self-criticism in relation to intuition and the creative process. It is based on personal observations and epiphanies that led to – and were formed during – this explorative process. Confusing self-criticism for critical thinking has been extremely deceptive and harmful for my creativity and professional self-esteem. It has led to the empowerment of the Inner Critic instead of strengthening of my critical thinking skills. By limiting intuitions freedom of expression, my Inner Critic has become the main obstacle in my career as an artist. I do not aim to declare or prove the importance of critical thinking, which is unquestionable, but to find out how it is formed and how it differs from mere criticism.

The research method I have chosen to use is an autobiographical case study, which involves psychoanalytical elements. It is built on the Hermeneutic circle model and I have used self-invented analogies and metaphors as tools to clarify and concretize my internal, abstract phenomena.

The main focus of this research is on my own internal conflicts generated by the dominance of the Inner Critic. I have invented examples and analogies to support and clarify these observations and theories. These analogies open a door to my thoughts and ideas as they embody abstract concepts by comparing them with concrete phenomenas. Through these analogies I have achieved perspective and sense of proportion towards the subject matter. Inventing these analogies has thus been an essential part of this extremely intimate process of growth and transformation.

No matter how personal and unique these dilemmas and insights feel to me, I am nonetheless aware of the long history of philosophers and scientists, who have dealt thoroughly with similar questions. The publications of Matthew Lipman, John Dewey and Tuukka Tomperi have influenced my study as they analyze and profoundly specify the purpose and defining characteristics of critical thinking. Lipman's main focus is on the massive impact critical thinking has on the educational system *Thinking in Education* (Lipman 2003), whereas Dewey discusses its substantial role as a part of the art experience in *Art as Experience* (Dewey 1936). Tomperi, in turn, has comprehensively summarized their main thoughts in his publication about the philosophy and teaching of critical

thinking (Tomperi 2017). I can relate the main issues of my study to their theories, which have helped me build a deeper understanding of my Inner Critic.

I have used the metaphor of the theatre hall as a tool to separate and distance myself from the research subject. This metaphor has played an important role through the whole process, as it has enabled the projection of different memories and experiences onto the symbolic stage. In that metaphor the theatre stage represents my mind, where the creative processes take shape. The play is a vivid melodrama that is staged within a low budget, academic scenography and there are two main roles: The Inner Critic and the Intuitive Child.

My personal struggles, caused by the imbalance between the main characters, had for a long time been occasional experiences, but quietly managed to grow into constant, energy absorbing black holes. They have been anything but constructive or useful. The Intuitive Child had been systematically restricted and silenced by the dominance of the Inner Critic. The complex, negative effects that arose from this problem were impossible to ignore any longer, which left me with only one option: to turn my theatre binoculars towards the stage and observe carefully who says and does what during the dramatic battle scenes.

In the text I refer to the Inner Critic as “*He*”, which was a result of an interaction between critical thinking and intuition. I use this analysis in chapter 4.1 to demonstrate in practice the requirements by which a good judgement is formed. As the interaction between these two is not always as ideal and logical, I decided to find out, what causes friction between them. Is it possible to intervene in order to prevent the melodrama from turning into a grotesque horror show?

I explore through this research existential matters, that every individual – artist or non-artist – struggles with, if not constantly then at least at some point of their lives. It has been extremely inspiring to notice how eager people are to discuss this topic. Everyone has their own personal experiences and struggles to deal with. The harmful effects of being overly self-critical appear to be obvious to many people, but the means of action to intervene are in turn deficient.

1. The Research Methods of this Thesis

The use of the English language has been an extremely important tool in this process. By using English, instead of Finnish which is my native language, I have succeeded in distancing myself from the obviously close and personal subject matter of this research. The process of verbalizing my thoughts and feelings has been both the biggest challenge and the primary means, which I have used in order to clarify and concretize the otherwise abstract and internal phenomena. I have employed my critical thinking skills in order to develop my expression through writing which in turn has led to their further improvement. This process of development has been the driving force in the formulation of the Hermeneutic circle, in which every realization has led me closer to the core of my research problem as well as expanding and deepening the understanding of the different factors that have influenced its emergence.

The thesis is an autobiographical case study which focuses on the in-depth investigation of my own, internal processes. A case study uses qualitative methods that are suitable for describing, comparing, evaluating and understanding the different aspects of my research. It is also an appropriate research design for gathering concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world subject and allows me to explore the key characteristics, meanings and implications of the case (McCombes 2020). The research involves therapeutic elements characteristic to psychoanalysis as it explores the subconscious processes and aims to discover the roots of the problem.

As for using autobiography as a research method, I quote Ross Mooney in his piece *The Researcher Himself* (1957), where he addresses the “inner drama” of research by writing:

Research is a personal venture, which quite aside from its social benefits, is worth doing for its direct contribution to one's own self-realization. It can be taken as a way of meeting life with the maximum of stops open to get out of experience its most poignant significance, its most full-throated song. (p. 155)

As another tool to separate and distance myself from the research subject. I have used the metaphor of the theatre hall. This metaphor has played an important role through the whole process, as it has enabled the projection of different memories and experiences onto the symbolic stage. After putting them on the stage, I have observed and analyzed them from my seat in the front row. In that

metaphor the theatre stage represents my mind, where the creative processes take shape. The play is a vivid melodrama that is staged within a low budget, academic scenography and there are two main roles: The Inner Critic and the Intuitive Child. An observant guest of the theater can easily notice the misaligned floodlights while some of the sets fall apart during important scenes. The champagne and roses are waiting in the dressing room while critical reviews are knocking on the backdoor with a mallet.

As the main focus of this research is on my own internal conflicts generated by the dominance of the Inner Critic, I have invented examples and analogies to support and clarify these observations and theories. These analogies open a door to my thoughts and ideas as they embody abstract concepts by comparing them with concrete phenomena. The analogies I have created refer to easily relatable, everyday life situations in order to become as tangible and clear as possible. Through these analogies I have achieved perspective and sense of proportion towards the subject matter, that is placed under the magnifying glass. They reveal and clarify cause-and-effect relations, that appear in the research problem. Inventing these analogies has thus been an essential part of this extremely intimate process of growth and transformation.

2. Existential Speculations

“How does mere criticism differ from critical thinking?” is the main question to my research problem. In order to get to the core of it, I had to first answer a few other significant questions: What am I doing, why I want to do it and how is it going to advance my career as an artist? The search for the answers to these questions demanded – as could be expected – great amounts of self-examination, tearing doubts and willpower to maintain a clear view. Dialogues – or rather debates – were often led by strong feelings which represented different perspectives. Like dirty politicians, they campaigned tirelessly and were shameless in using low, populist means of propaganda. All of their emotionally charged claims and arguments – no matter how controversial – appeared credible and attractive. The Intuitive Child had fully employed the creative factory of my brains in order to produce ideas with increasing speed and defiance. Just like a citizen, who is unversed in political games and intrigues, my Inner Critic did not know, which one of them to believe and follow.

Feelings got entangled with reasoning and I had difficulties to distinct questions from answers. Were the judgements consequences of feelings or were the judgements actually the feelings?

While I was sorting out what am I doing, I simultaneously evaluated *how* I am doing it, whether it could be done better and whether it's in my abilities to do it. If these questions had been about a painting, the process would have been the following: *What* is my motive, *why* is that my motive and is that really *my* motive? Am I technically skilled enough to implement this idea? How is the result going to appear compared to similar artworks and how is it going to *stand out* from similar artworks? Are my motivations sincere and genuine or am I doing whatever I am doing in order to impress someone else? In that case, *who*? Also, will this artwork make the world a better place or just add more useless – and possibly toxic – waste to it?

Many times this chain of thought led to exhaustingly existential speculations about the meaning of life in general. That usually made me want to turn my back on art and creativity as a whole. But it isn't creativity that leads us to these dark and deep waters; It's fears, doubts and uncertainty that do that as they disguise themselves in the form of critical thinking. They know perfectly well how to wear that mask in order to gain credibility and authority in the eyes of an insecure soul.

These questions listed above are usually processed and answered automatically and subconsciously, but for the purposes of this research, it was the subconscious itself that needed to be brought to daylight and divided into pieces for a precise examination.

At first, "*How is it going to advance my career as an artist?*" seemed to be the least interesting question and without much significance. I felt the urge to make my thesis *look like* a thesis, which could in turn help make my career to *look like* a career. The fraud attempt inherent in that scheme was too obvious to be ignored and forced me to seriously think about the question. What does it really take to advance my career as an artist? What do I need to do in order to step up to the next level?

3. Consensus Statement Regarding Critical Thinking and the Ideal Critical Thinker

In everyday language criticism is seen as pointing out problems and flaws, but in a scientific context its content is much broader and richer than that. On the other hand, any type of critical thinking is also commonly equated with or misinterpreted as *skillful* thinking. If any type of efficient cognitive processing performed by human intelligence is equated with critical thinking, then critical thinking occurs everywhere in our culture. Critical thinking demands a narrower and more substantive definition, one that does not include everything that requires intelligence, such as solving equations, codes and crossword puzzles. No matter how challenging these tasks may be, they do not fulfill the requirements of the definition of critical thinking (Tomperi 2017, p.1).

I include the following consensus statement in my essay, because it functions as my guideline in my ultimate goal on the way to becoming a better critical thinker.

In 1988-1989 Dr. Peter A. Facione conducted a research project, that employed the powerful research methodology known as the Delphi Method. The Delphi Method requires the formation of an interactive panel of experts, who must be willing to share their expertise and work toward a consensus resolution of matters of opinion. This panel, consisting of 46 persons widely recognized by their professional colleagues, participated in six rounds of questions which called for thoughtful and detailed responses. The panelists worked toward consensus by sharing their reasoned opinions and being willing to reconsider them in the light of the comments, objections and arguments offered by other experts.

CONSENSUS STATEMENT REGARDING CRITICAL THINKING AND THE IDEAL CRITICAL THINKER

We understand critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. CT is essential as a tool of inquiry. As such, CT is a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one's personal and civic life. While not synonymous with good thinking, CT is a pervasive and self-rectifying human phenomenon. The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit. Thus, educating good critical thinkers means working toward this ideal. It combines developing CT skills with nurturing those dispositions which consistently yield useful insights and which are the basis of a rational and democratic society.

Many essential theoreticians in the research field of critical thinking have referred to this report and presented more condensed variations of it before and after it was conducted (Tomperi, 2017). As Lipman writes: “*Critical thinking is thinking that (1) facilitates judgement, because it (2) relies on criteria, (3) is self-correcting, and (4) is sensitive to context.*” (Lipman 2003, p.212)

Most of the studies and theories about critical thinking, both in the field of philosophy and psychology, focus on how to incorporate critical thinking into the educational system. I fully agree on the significant impact it has on the development of the mind. Through this explorative process I attempt to apply their theories and brilliant insights in my own artistic practice. The ability to recognize and acknowledge the essential differences between harsh criticism and critical thinking plays a major role in the pursuit of artistic emancipation from whatever kind of – external or internal – prisons we may find ourselves in.

In his article *The Philosophy and Teaching of Critical Thinking* Tuukka Tomperi, a senior researcher at Tampere University's Faculty of Education and Culture, crystallizes in a sublime way the process, in which a person pursues these qualities: "Self-reflection and -criticism through which we pursue for example objectivity of evaluation, awareness of prejudice and willingness to abandon previous perceptions is – undoubtedly – the greatest endeavor of thinking." (Tomperi 2017, p.7)

3.2 About Flexibility – *The Potentiality of the Rubber Band*

Flexibility and responsibility are extremely valuable qualities of critical thinking. The artist's trade is by nature individualistic and the artistic processes take place mainly in solitude. The development and implementation of ideas and projects are a result of inner dialogues and debates that are based on and formed by series of judgements. People involved in teamwork can brainstorm ideas, get feedback in form of validations or rejections and use the positive group synergy in order to orient themselves and evolve. Flexibility and responsibility must be practiced constantly and consciously, since they are not features which one is "simply born with". If the Inner Critic is incapable of flexibility, he is then also incapable of acting responsibly towards the Creative Child, that needs encouragement and patience in order to evolve safely. Flexibility involves tolerance and acceptance of insecurities and errors during the experimental processes of creativity.

Exaggerated flexibility, on the other hand, might be equated with absence of judgement and limitations. That can lead into a situation, where "everything is ok". Not making choices or judgements, which inevitably involve exclusions and inclusions, approvals or disapprovals, is equally irresponsible as making judgements based on arbitrary criteria or untrue claims. In that sense exaggerated flexibility does not involve critical thinking.

Total inflexibility can easily lead into a situation where everything is restricted and criticized to an extent where nothing is "ok" or "good enough". Thus, if the rubber band of flexibility is at all times stretched to its maximum extent, it in fact ceases to be flexible. It is just overly stretched, which can

cause it to snap. In real life that can be compared for example to a nervous breakdown. If the rubber band is in turn kept loose at all times, it does not get the opportunity to realize its potential to stretch back and forward. Awareness of these extremes reveals the center point and that is the point from which flexibility can operate in the most ideal way.

As I have become highly familiar with the situation where nothing is “ok” or “good enough”, I would eagerly like to explore also the other option in order to locate the center point. I believe finding this point is something that could be experienced as peace or balance and also something that strengthens professional self-confidence.

4. About the Nature of Judgement – *The Blue Chair Analogy*

In everyday language criticism is seen as pointing out problems and flaws, but its scientific content is much broader and richer than that (Tomperi 2017). In its simplest form it can be presented as a judgement about a subject being good or bad. However, these types of polarized judgements don't usually provide us with much information neither about the subject in particular, nor of the background of the thoughts, that led that person to make the judgement (Dewey 1934).

During my life, I have more than often caught myself in situations, where I have formed hasty judgements based on first impressions. The strongest memories I have of such occasions are related to music and art. The more hasty my condemnations have been, the more convinced I have been in turn about their righteousness. As if stubborn certainty about my feelings regarding a certain object would have been equal to what the object *is*. The fact that I was not able to define *why* something was good or bad, was frustrating. I skillfully avoided admitting that by embracing an arrogant attitude and assuring myself, that such a bad song or work of art was not worthy of my exquisite explanations. In the opposite situation I would use the same rhetoric; “*This painting is so ingenious, that it doesn't need explanations!*”

As time passed, my opinions on some of these pieces changed. I had carried them with me for a long time as benchmarks for truly terrible artworks or compositions and suddenly these burdocks revealed themselves to me in a completely new light. I believe that is due to the long lasting, subconscious need to rationalize for once and for all their qualities. To prove that I am right about them being “wrong”.

In order to understand how a good judgement is formed I pointed my attention on the opposite: What leads to a bad judgement? To visualize that kind of a scenario, I invented a simple analogy by using a chair as the target of the judgements presented by two persons.

A chair is a functional object that has both practical and aesthetic purposes and criteria. It can be shaped in endless variations, materials and colors. Its most important requirement is the function as an object on which to sit on.

The Blue Chair Analogy

One day two people – Jack and Louise – walk into a room where this particular chair stands near a table, waiting for some bottom to fulfill its purpose by sitting on it. Surprisingly, instead of sitting down, Jack huffs: “What a bad piece of chair, I surely don’t want to sit on it!” The only certainty this information provides us with, is the fact that *Jack* judges the chair to be bad and that *he* doesn’t want to sit on “a bad piece of chair like that”. We don’t know in which way it is bad and if it is a justified claim or not. We also don’t know on which grounds Jack bases his judgement. On feelings, first impression, associations connected to traumas, or assumptions based on previous experiences? Although the reaction appears to be absurd and irrational, there might nevertheless be a perfectly logical explanation behind it.

If Jack would say: “What a bad, blue piece of chair!” we would now at least know that the chair is blue and according to Jack there is something wrong with that. Or perhaps within the category of blue chairs, this one does not match the requirements. What we don’t know, is if Jack has issues in general with chairs or the color blue or if it is this exact, singular

combination that leads to his judgement. Unfortunately, Jack does not possess the developed critical thinking skills that are required for the interpretation of his emotional messages and he is thus unable to further rationalize his intuitive reaction and condemnation of the chair. He therefore chooses to simply remain standing.

After this confusing twenty-second drama Louise takes a look at the chair, sees four legs, a seat and a back. She likes the blue color, it resembles the color of her bicycle. A quick estimation based on visual observation and previous experiences with chairs leads her to approve the possibilities it is offering. She lands her bottom on it, enjoys for a moment the comfortable feeling of her feet resting, and sighs: “You know, Jack... The way you judged the chair actually says more about you than about the chair. And frankly, that ain’t much.”

Although Louise gets to be wittily arrogant in this story, she does not provide us with any actual information about the chair either. We only know, that her intuition led her to like and trust the seating capacity of it (Dewey 1934, p. 310 – 338) In their defense it must be said, that it is perfectly fine to operate intuitively. Our daily choices are based on intuition and the more effectively we read its signals, the more efficient and appropriate decisions we make about different situations. The reason for me to explore the process of how a good judgement is formed lies in the daily observations I have made regarding my Inner Critic conducting bad judgements. By bad judgements I refer to those, which have not gone through the machinery of critical examination, and where the Inner Critic has functioned merely as the disoriented megaphone for the Intuitive Child.

Although the connection between these two team members is self-evident, the verification and understanding of it requires conscious devotion and willingness to address the weaknesses. By detecting such weaknesses in seemingly insignificant everyday situations, I have succeeded to expand my insights into situations, where critical thinking actually has a significant role. The choice to condemn a chair and the refusal to use its services might occasionally lead to suffering from tired feet, but it will not affect our life much deeper than that. Whereas operating by the same principals while forming opinions about art, for example, would simply interfere with our capacity of expanding our understanding of things.

4.1 A Judgement Formed by the Interaction between Critical Thinking and Intuitive Signals

In the text I refer to The Critic as “He”, although in my mind this critic does not particularly represent either of the two main genders. I was forced to consider this subject matter for the first time when I was about to type down the gender defining word. Personal pronouns in Finnish do not specify whether the subject or object that is being discussed is feminine or masculine, so for me this distinction had not been an issue so far. “She” felt uncomfortable and unsuitable and the constant use of “He or She” would have interfered with the flow writing. Ideally, we should always stop and reconsider when intuition throws a warning triangle on our way. This, however can be extremely exhausting and confusing – especially if we are not capable of interpreting these warnings or if we are not able to distinguish their significance and urgency.

Intuition provides us with a lot of information about both our surroundings and our feelings. This information is for the most part rather subtle or even cryptic and this is a point where the role of critical thinking is emphasized: To read and evaluate the value and credibility of these signals and make decisions or judgements based on those interpretations. The messages our instincts send us are always worth notice and consideration. We do not make them disappear by ignoring them.

To avoid misinterpretations, the Inner Critic that analyzes these signals must have a strong backbone built by critical thinking as well as sensitive antennas. If we would blindly trust our “gut feeling” and let it lead us, we might make choices that extremely unpredictable and unfavorable for us. The “gut feeling” can easily demand short term satisfaction, which in the long run could turn out to be harmful for us. It can for instance be very persuasive about pizza and ice cream being a good choice for breakfast, lunch *and* dinner, but we all know how unhealthy this sort of diet would be in the long run. Intuition appears to possess many of the same features that a little child has. It is driven by desire and immediate impressions and it has no boundaries of its own.

Only after a profound, analytical and critical examination of the gender matter, could I allow myself to go with ‘He’, which was also the first proposition served by intuition. Thus, the decision to use “He” is a good example of a decision based on the deliberate and purposeful co-operation between critical thinking and intuition.

5. Empowerment of the Inner Critic – *The Toddler Analogy*

Critical thinking is commonly equated with or misinterpreted as any type of skillful thinking. (Tomperi 2017, p. 1). In pursuit of the development of skillful thinking, a person may accidentally begin to empower their Inner Critic, which in turn leads easily to overly critical self-evaluation and even brutal judgments based on feelings rather than facts and knowledge. Feelings are of course also *true* and *facts* to ourselves, but if a person has “a bad feeling” about something, that does not yet prove that thing to be *in fact* bad, as I explain in the chapter *About the Nature of Judgement*. Exaggerated criticism manifests itself to me as a negative and judgmental way of addressing things by focusing only on pointing out flaws and problems in them. It is rarely constructive or encouraging, since it invariably lacks empathy and compassion. Where the first mentioned refers to the ability to understand another person’s feelings, the latter requires actual actions based on that understanding.

Being exaggeratedly critical can be misleading, harmful and destructive – especially when the target of the critical attacks is as delicate and responsive as the Intuitive Child and the creative process only can be. I often experience my Inner Critic as an illogical monster, that feeds on whatever defects it can find. Even if there are none, it cleverly invents them in order to survive and justify its existence.

The creative process consists of a line of ideas that in turn generate related ideas that take different directions. It is a messy, chaotic process often bursting from excitement and curiosity. The ideas can be compared with little, unprejudiced toddlers who operate intuitively, fearlessly and spontaneously. If the parent focuses only on pointing out, how bad is the toddler at walking or articulating, that will certainly not encourage the toddler to continue practicing.

I contemplate this claim through the following analogy I invented using a toddler as a metaphor for intuition and his mother to represent the Inner Critic.

The Toddler Analogy

A toddler sees a flower and straight away reaches out his hand to grab it. Then follows a careful examination of the object; color, scent, touch, sound and taste. This examination may take a few seconds or, in a case of deepened interest, a whole lifetime. Based on the experience and impressions provided by the examination, the toddler can now begin to form perceptions and opinions about the object. The next object catching the attention of the toddler is a mushroom. Like the flower, it is bright red and in addition it even has miraculous white dots. The horrified parent jumps in and interrupts the brisk crawl before the little hand reaches the poisonous fly agaric. “Stay away from it, it is dangerous!” the adult scolds the toddler, who does not understand why this pretty object is being condemned as dangerous in contrast to the previous one.

Unlike the adult, the toddler has not yet gathered enough knowledge based on life experience in order to form such distinctions. The toddler is forced to blindly trust the adult. On the other hand, the adult has already earned quite many trust points, by keeping the child fed, warm and safe during its life so far, so the trust is not completely unjustified or “blind”. The mother knows, that it is impossible to always be there to protect and guide the child, so in order to prevent crucial accidents from happening, she prohibits the child strictly from approaching any mushrooms, regardless of their toxicity.

One day the toddler goes to a birthday party, where the table groans with delicacies; cupcakes, cookies, chips, cake and marshmallows, to name a few. The marshmallows are shaped in form of mushrooms and the “But my mom said they are dangerous..!” argy-bargy between the gang of toddlers begins. The allegations regarding the dangers of mushrooms are proven wrong when some of the other toddlers eat the candy without getting sick. Our toddler is both impressed and confused and now there is a conflict between him and the parent.

This conflict raises doubt and mistrust from both sides: Is *everything* the parent has said falsehood and on the other side, at which point does the child possess enough knowledge and wisdom in order to be safely left unwatched?

If the child is not encouraged to explore and make errors – in other words; to freely reach out for different objects – it cannot develop its own discernment. Advanced discernment builds up self-confidence and leads to intellectual and emotional independence. The overly protective manner, in which the parent acts in this case, is justified by the fact, that some of the mushrooms, indeed, are poisonous. But that does not remove the fact, that some are not. The toddler realizes that and decides to proceed independently and in secrecy with a slit-eyed gaze. A dreadful near-death experience caused by a food poisoning teaches him a lesson: “Don’t go on your own and always listen to mom!”

Alternatively, he remembers the warning from the first time and continues to explore the unfamiliar objects carefully and from a safe distance. The lesson learned in this scenario would be, that mom is probably right about the dangers regarding some of the mushrooms but wrong about forming exaggerated restrictions based on generalizations. The toddler has now proven its ability to be discerning and in that way trustworthy to proceed independently in further exploration and development. In this scenario the Inner Critic doesn’t need to magnify his role, because the lesson has been already learned.

5.1 Maximizing Productivity and Efficiency at the Expense of the Creative Process

My relationship with creativity during the past few years could be described as controversial – as if creativity has simultaneously pushed me away and blamed me for not approaching. This has caused discontentment that as a contrast generated vague fantasies of a state of contentment. I projected an image of a whole, “completed” artist fulfilling my artistic ambitions somewhere in the distant future. In that fantasy I am also a “grown up” – and 12cm taller. My height growth ended around twenty years ago and becoming an adult in the traditional and “conventional” way, as seen from a teenagers point of view, still makes me feel uncomfortable. But when it comes to becoming content and whole, the situation feels like now or never.

The first thing that has to be done, when in pursuit of contentment, is to take a step back and locate the causes of discontent. Hence I evaluated the pros and cons of my current situation; during the past few years I had managed to arrange my life to resemble the images I had of my future, taller self quite well. After a decade of more or less aimless drifting, both my living conditions and personal relationships were in a good place. For the first time in my life I even had a proper studio at home. My job as a waitress payed for my expenses and – luckily – I had no bigger health issues. I felt guilt and shame for being discontent, although everything was so well. I felt ashamed for not appreciating enough the privileged circumstances of my life.

Eckhart Tolle, a German-born spiritual teacher, formulates this problem beautifully by claiming that “You find peace not by rearranging the circumstances of your life, but by realizing who you are at the deepest level” (Tolle 2003, p. 52). In my experience, though, you cannot deeply explore your soul, if you are surrounded by chaos and insecurity, which constantly demand your attention.

As for the cons, my job as a waitress did absorb most of my time and energy. It also occupied my mind with things completely unrelated to art. I stayed attached to the art world and life as an artist by exhibiting every once in a while. The artistic work for these one or two exhibitions per year had to fit my daytime job schedule. It led to the pursuit of efficiency in order to produce as much as possible in the shortest possible time. That meant skipping the experimental process and jumping from the idea straight to the implementation.

I maximized productivity by eliminating the possibilities of failure, which come with experimentation. I kept away from the tempting “risky risks”.

Somewhere during that process was where the role of the Inner Critic, “the parent”, became particularly significant: “The parent” had to control and oversee that everything goes as planned in order to get things done before each deadline. Creativity and intuition were subjugated to speak only when addressed and the decision making was strictly in the hands of the Critic.

My explorative journey had begun through the acknowledgement of the destructive and harmful impact the Inner Critic had had on creativity and my aim was to find out how to get rid of him. Being able to locate the factors, that caused him to increase his dominance had a big impact on my

perception of his role as a whole: I had myself invited him to be in charge of my creative factory! He was not an enemy. He was simply doing the dirty job, that needed to be done. Suddenly, and for the first time in my life, I was able to feel compassion instead of anger towards him.

5.2 Where the Box Ends, the Outside Begins

“*Think outside of the box!*” is a commonly used saying to encourage people to think and act bravely and originally. To invent unseen and surprising, creative solutions for different problems. It is a great saying, though in my opinion completely meaningless, unless a person has a clear knowledge of what *the box* is constructed from. The ability to see clearly the limitations – the walls of the box – is necessary in order to define and concretize the prevailing conditions – whereas blurry and shapeless walls are difficult to cross. Defining “*the box*” allows us to see where the “*outside*” begins.

The strong feeling of controversiality and restlessness had overshadowed my creativity for several years, as I described in the previous chapter. As if I was pushed into a corner, where I had very little space to operate. The first thing, that caught my attention was the need for control and rules and the construction they kept upright in order to preserve an illusion of safety and order. As the need for control grew, so did the fear of losing it, and together they created a vicious circle for insecurities to grow in.

Real regulations or restrictions were not an issue for me in this case. By *real* regulations I refer to social and cultural restrictions, agreements and laws. I see them as external conditions that affect for example freedom of expression, health related issues, living conditions, etc. The limitations and rules I am concerned with are mainly my own creations.

However, not all of my self-invented rules are restrictive in a negative way: Sometimes, in order to overcome an artistic block, I use them as a resource for creativity. I could for example limit my options by deciding to paint on only a certain size of wooden board. Other times I would lure creativity to the fore by voluntarily giving up my possession of power to chance through a playful

tombola. These concrete and occasionally complicated constructions created a clear and defined space, within which creativity could bounce wildly or cross over, if it so desired. I believe that the success of these self-created limitations was a result of the challenges they evoke, which in turn activated creativity.

6. A Justification to Paint Cockatoos

In May 2020, during the first wave of the Corona pandemic, I attended a virtual workshop led by Jan Christensen. During that week I created an interactive art work called *The ideal Self-Isolation Situation, Day #275*. It consisted of a question form created in Google Docs and resulted in a painting, that illustrated the statistic data. I presented the process of how the painting took shape with a one minute stop-motion video.

The volunteer participants were random Facebook and Instagram users. My plan was to collect data based on “cold, harsh facts” provided by the statistics and then deliberately “misuse” it by interpreting in an overly simplified and literal manner. The naive painting in expression visualized a fictional scenario, in which a person is home alone for the 275th day of self-isolation. 150 people in total answered the 16 multiple choice questions during the time frame of 24 hours.

While inventing the questions, I noticed the endless possibilities of manipulating the end result. For example the question “Which pet would You choose for that day?” included the options ‘Cat’, ‘Dog’, ‘Fish’, ‘Bird’, ‘Bugs or Insects’, ‘Monkey’ and ‘No thanks, I’m fine on my own’. There could have been ‘Horse’, ‘Snake’ or ‘Sea lion’ as well, but there was not. There was not, because *I* did not want to include them in the picture. I was extremely happy to ignore what is democratically fair and what is not, because this was after all *my* artwork and my self-made rules. I was holding my fingers crossed, hoping the participants would vote for ‘Bird’, so I could paint beautiful cockatoos and other exotic birds flying around the room. To my bitter disappointment the voice of the people went for ‘Dog’.

This is the point, where an extremely important question is evoked: Why did I not just paint a picture of cockatoos in the first place? Why did I have the need to go through this tremendous process in order to get a justification or a “permission” to paint them? I had mobilized 150 people to participate in a questionnaire and only after disagreeing with their choices, was capable of realizing that I actually just want to paint parrots!

Creating a complex construction like that only in order to avoid taking responsibility – or blame – for following my intuitive urge? If ‘Bird’ had won the poll, the responsibility for that would have been borne by the voters. But whose voice was I hearing in my head demanding justifications and explanations for the artistic needs of my soul? Was this intuition’s sneaky way to silence the Inner Critic in order to accomplish its dream? Aren’t cockatoos *good enough* for His Majesty? Inventing runarounds to paint colorful birds reminded me of teenagers when they tell their parents that they are spending the Friday night at a friend’s house watching a movie, while in reality they are getting wasted at the corner of McDonald’s. I don’t want my Intuitive Child to have the need to sneak around in order to get its will!

By noticing the different methods I had been using in order to evade the attention of the Inner Critic, I began questioning his authoritative role. In the following chapter I visualize through one more analogy a creative moment in my studio, where the typical behavior of the Inner Critic towards the Intuitive Child revealed itself to me in its most concrete way. In that situation I was working on a painting and I believe the trigger for the rage of the Critic, was that I accidentally colored over a border of a detail.

6.1 The Merciless Courtroom of the Soul – *The Prosecutor Analogy*

*Historically significant, courageous artists and their creations
are hovering in the room and whispering in the corners.
Nations are marching on the streets for different causes
and resisting others.
Fists raised to the sky for common goals,
fists raised against injustices.*

*Me, I hesitate in the snares of tension and uncertainty
as I consider
using Lemon Yellow instead of Ochre – so familiar and safe, an old friend I can trust
I hear the drums of revolution
as I squeeze the yellow from the tube onto a lid from a recycled yoghurt jar*

*The Prosecutor reminds me of The Rules and Dangers of temerity
Am I making a mistake?
Is this an unnecessary risk?
A risky risk
My hand reaches for the Fly Agaric*

*No!
Mistakes are not allowed!*

*I should know already, what works and what doesn't
I am a professional
after all*

*But unless I take the risky risk
I am nothing but a namby-pamby
Yes, that is what Google translate suggested in order to describe my cowardice
Namby-Pamby*

No one cares about namby-pambys!

Me – the least of all

The trial has begun

In the merciless courtroom of my soul, the prosecutor questions my motives for the choice of color

The defense attorney – that shaky “candle in the wind”- appeals to the judge

by invoking the innocence of the child sitting on the defendant’s pen

“Non compos mentis, Your honor, Non compos mentis!”

But that shit doesn’t fly

The prosecutor presses harder:

Was the defended aware of cause-and-effect and the possible impact on the bystanders –

Creamy White and Moss Green?

What about context? Was that taken under consideration in any way?

The defense mutters something about precedent cases and tries to appeal emotionally to the jury by describing the noble motives of the defended

“But lions are also yellow, your honor...!”

Big words about courage, intrepidity and sensibility are being said

When a glass of water falls down on the table of the clerk

drawing the attention of the courtroom

And the game is lost

Lemon Yellow is a crime

Tomperi presents (Tomperi 2017, p.2) the following claim: “*A critic is a valuer, not a prosecutor*”. He explains how the final evaluation of something is “*a result of an open and previously undefined process*” which “*begins with the abstention from judgements until the subject matter has been analyzed and examined more specifically*”. The whole process requires “*tolerance of uncertainty*”. This idea changed entirely my perception of the role of the Inner Critic. Or rather created a new

alternative to what his role should actually be. All the situations in which the Inner Critic acted exactly in the same way as a prosecutor does, revealed themselves to me in a new light and I began to correct my thinking by replacing the prosecuting actions with actions that were instead evaluative in nature. This simple, yet profound sentence was one of the most important milestones in the Hermeneutic circle of this research.

7. My Perception of Artistic Freedom

When I think of what artistic freedom means to me, I think of Naïve and Abstract forms of art. As role models, who have impressed and influenced me I would like to name Henri Rousseau (1844 – 1910), Cy Twombly (1928 – 2011) and the contemporary Finnish-born painter Janne Räisänen (1971 –). I see freedom and complete disobedience of rules in their paintings – especially in the paintings of the latter two. A unifying factor in the art works of all three is the great amount of childish joy which they generate in me. Of course they all have created their artworks accordingly to their own rules, but what fascinates me is the fact that they don't apply to *my* rules of composition and use of colors. Their works implement the opposite principles of the ones of my Inner Critic. Seen from his eyes they appear as incomplete and sloppy. But the Inner Child in turn bursts of excitement and defiance – these paintings are a call for rebellion!

“In art, the term “naive” implies a simplicity in rendering due to lack of training or skill as in the work of children, folk artists or “outsider artists”. So when we speak of naive art we are referring to a work’s visual qualities. However, to equate the actual quality of rendering in such work with the intended level of rendering sought by the maker is a mistake. It is also a mistake to equate simplicity of rendering with depth of intentional meaning. Genuine naive artists intend to make work that looks like that of sophisticated artists, just as children intend to make work that looks like that of adults; both are only prevented from doing so by lack of ability. Moreover, as the example of children’s art testifies, though they may be unsophisticated in their rendering capacities, they routinely attempt to express the deepest of emotions, including love and grief. Work intentionally made to appear naive is another matter. Such works adopt a pseudo-naive style as an intentional reaction against the polished realism of the academic tradition. Regardless of appearance, pseudo-naive works are extremely sophisticated in their rendering and intentions. If we have come to admire them as “honest” and “true”, it is because this is what the artist has intended.”

(Risatti 2007, p. 223)

8. Metacognitive Reflections on Alternative Research Methods

I was intrigued by the idea of interviewing other people for this study, but that research method would have required a different approach and a deep understanding of the topic in order to be able to create a proper set of questions. The search for and formulation of those questions led to a search for and formulation of answers, which in turn became this thesis. Now, with the findings provided by this process, I am extremely eager to discuss these matters with others and learn about their experiences of self-criticism and intuition.

I am interested in finding out how common it is for artists to be *too* critical on themselves and to what extent this self-criticism goes. Do they experience that criticism as harmful and destructive or as a necessary part of skillful thinking. In other words, is their Inner Critic a responsible guardian of quality standards or a vicious saboteur? I would also like to discuss these matters with people who experience a balance between their inner “team players” - the Inner Critic and the Intuitive Child. That alternative raises a question about the nature of balance per se; does it nurture creativity and productivity or is it the eternal battle between them, the *imbalance*, that in fact keeps the creative engine running?

I explore through this research existential matters, that every individual – artist or non-artist – struggles with, if not constantly then at least at some point of their lives. It has been extremely inspiring to notice how eager people are to discuss this topic. Everyone has their own personal experiences and struggles to deal with. The harmful effects of being overly self-critical appear to be obvious to many people, but the means of action to intervene are in turn deficient. Hereby I continue in the foot steps of Dewey, Lipman and Tomperri by emphasizing how an important role does the incorporation of critical thinking play within the educational system.

9. The Reason for not to Include Images of Paintings in this Thesis on the Research and – *The Brain Wash Analogy*

It might seem strange for a visual artist *not* to use images as demonstrative examples in a thesis, which actually includes the word ‘*painting*’ in its title. The reason behind this decision is, however a result of thorough reasoning: if I would have used images of my artworks, they could have been examples of situations, in which the Inner Critic had been in charge of the creative process in comparison to artworks that were born in situations in which the Intuitive Child had managed to carry out its ideas without the interference of the Inner Critic. The reason I chose not to do that, is because the artworks that I created under the harmful influence of the Inner Critic have a much higher prevalence in my body of work than the ones born under circumstances in which the Intuitive Child was in charge of the process. This set-up is precisely what I want to change in my artistic work.

In order to present a fair comparison between them I would need to show images of works, which don’t exist yet. The transformative process in which the Inner Critic is learning to become more evaluative instead of judgmental, and more constructive and compassionate instead of being accusatory and dictating, is still in progress. I don’t want to disturb that process just yet by unleashing the “Enfant Terrible”, because that would create a chaos in the current situation, where I still need his surveillance and management skills in order to finish this ongoing process. Thus the Intuitive Child has to wait still a little time before it gets its turn.

Another reason for this decision was that I didn’t like the idea of creating artworks *for* this research, as they would have been in the position of serving as illustrations of my thoughts and ideas. The verbalization of my thoughts and feelings was both an extreme challenge as well as the primary method, which I used in order to clarify and concretize otherwise completely abstract, internal phenomena. For now I want my future artworks to serve only the purpose of their own existence. I am happy to acknowledge that I have no control over what may or may not follow from that. The only thing I can affect, is that they become existent. This is an acknowledgment I couldn’t have been able to make before I went through this research process, because back then the Inner Critic

was the head of all operations and he was completely convinced of his power to control and affect everything.

Although I have intentionally kept myself from creating artworks for the purpose of this thesis, one tiny sculpture has however originated in the last hour of this process. It managed to sneak in while the attention of the Inner Critic was focused on following academic instructions. I call this artwork *The Brain Wash* and it is the last analogy I bring forward in this thesis. Its symbolism is as simple and literal as the metaphors are in the previous ones – only this one took one step further and materialized into a physical object.

The material I have used is pink colored soap base, which I have scented with bubble gum fragrance. In the same way as we use soap to wash of dirt and harmful bacteria from our skin, I have during this research process used my brains in order to get rid of undesired and harmful ways of thinking that have stood in the way of my creativity. The sculpture is meant to be used in the exact same way as a regular soap and its dissolution represents the transformation of thinking into purity and clarity.



Brain Wash. Nestorova 2020

10. Conclusions

I have learned by this research process that artistic freedom from a self-built prison can be accomplished by purposeful strengthening of the critical thinking skills, which involve the ability to feel compassion for oneself as well as tolerance and acceptance of insecurity and imperfection. The willingness to re-evaluate our perceptions of our inner team players, which I have narrowed in this study to the Inner Critic and the Intuitive Child, enables deeper understanding of their underlying purposes. That understanding in turn leads to both mental and spiritual development and change for the better.

Many years ago I had a dream about escaping a big white castle – just like the ones in an animated children’s film. I had been imprisoned there for a long time. One day I took a small basket with me and ran away. In panic and fear I crossed the moat surrounding the castle. Wide green meadows opened in front of me and the sun was high in the deep blue sky.

I tried to pick up fruits from gigantic old trees as I was running. The trees became more and more exotic on the way, as did the fruits growing on them. In order to reach them I started bouncing and each bounce was longer than the previous, until I was suddenly flying above the magical landscape. The colors of nature were brightened by sunshine and I was flying in the blue sky, picking up the finest fruits to take with me on that journey.

It was an extremely impressive and empowering dream and I have since then subconsciously yet determinedly searched for ways to accomplish that feeling in real life. I am aware that it is pointless to expect anybody else to be able to experience the same profound freedom and lightness of existence only through reading about it – especially when the symbolism of it is of the most naive and banal kind. Other people’s dreams in general are often experienced as irrelevant or unreliable information. No matter how significant and powerful the signs and emotions generated by them are for the dreamer, others can only comprehend the verbal message. Emotions cannot be transmitted, they can only be evoked and by including a dream into my thesis I am very much aware of the possibility, that the only emotion it is likely to evoke is uncomfortable embarrassment.

Embarrassment, however, is closely related to compassion. Often it can even function as a doorway to it.

During this research process I suddenly recognized the symbols of the dream finally occurring in situation of my life; the castle represented my creative factory that was guarded by the Inner Critic, whom I had myself put in charge of production. The fruits represented all the books and bits of knowledge I had been picking up during this process. The bounces stretched each time to be longer and higher, as did my ability to learn and process information. The old, magnificent trees were carrying more exotic fruits than I could ever fit in my basket. After all, you only get what you get in the intellectual basket shop.

“As the most strictly guarded prisons are the ones we build with our minds, it’s only in the power of our minds to break free from them” (Unknown). Through this explorative process I have finally managed to locate where the walls of the prison end and where the outside begins. Now, it’s time for Cockatoos!

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