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On Formativity: Art as Praxis

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Abstract

Luigi Pareyson's concept of formativity is one of his most relevant and original concepts. In this paper I will give a short exposition of this concept in Pareyson's *Estetica* and try to show how it can account, better than other object-, subject-, target- oriented theories, even of some features of contemporary art. The very relevant innovation that we can find in this concept is the shift from a concept of art as poiesis—as it is in Aristotle, namely, as a production of an object—to the concept of art as praxis, that is, as an activity which involves the entire doing of the artist. As a doing that invents the form of doing, formativity appears as a kind of schematism that operates, not only without concept, as it is in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, but even without object. The thesis here suggested is that formativity can be understood as a transcendentalism of invention.

Keywords: Pareyson, aesthetics; formativity, work of art, invention, poiesis, praxis

I

The goal of this article is to discuss the concept of 'formativity' formulated by the Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson, the teacher of more well-known philosophers as Gianni Vattimo and Umberto Eco at the University of Turin.¹ This concept is presented by Pareyson in his book *Estetica*, published in its first edition in 1954, with the subtitle *Teoria della formatività (Theory of formativity)*. The word 'formativity', a neologism that Pareyson himself defined as "inelegant", expresses one of his most innovative ideas. As it is clear from the very beginning of the Preface, Pareyson avoids 'form', which would mean the conclusive and definitely static moment of a

process, and instead chooses ‘formativity’ in order to denote the generative process, the dynamical and processual moment of forming. The ‘aesthetics of formativity’ concerns then the creative, poetical process of art.

“To form means to make – *poiein*”, so Pareyson writes (1974, p. 59). It is a definition that at first seems to be consonant with a long standing tradition, since it associates formativity, as the peculiar nature of art, with *poiesis*, that is, to production. However, the concept itself of formativity and the central position it assumes in Pareyson’s aesthetic theory make this definition, not so much problematic, but at least reductive, risking the concealment of the truly innovative import of such a theory. If forming, as the particular character of art, were only *poiesis*, i.e. the production of objects, the capacity of the theory of formativity to explain some phenomena of contemporary art would be significantly downsized. I would like to show, instead, that merely by assuming formativity as the essential nature of art, Pareyson can account (even if not intentionally) for some of the peculiarities of contemporary art, but only at the price of challenging (which is not a loss) the coincidence of formativity and *poiesis*.

II

The definition of art as *poiesis* dates back to Aristotle. In fact, in the sixth Book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle includes *techne* among those dianoetic virtues that concern not knowledge, but making: more precisely, it regards the production of objects, or *poiesis*. Art is a part of that field of human acting which deals with the production of objects that are not generated in nature, and that differs from another kind of doing, namely, *praxis*. “While making (*poiesis*) has an end other than itself, action (*praxis*) cannot; for good action itself is its end.” (Aristotle 2009: 1140b)

By referring to their end, Aristotle then established a clear distinction between productive, heterotelic doing, whose end is external to the action itself, and non-productive, autotelic doing, whose end is the fulfilment of the good. He in fact writes that “neither is acting making nor is making acting”. (ibid., 1140a) *Poiesis* and *praxis* therefore cover two fields that do not

overlap, and that are not included one into the other (ibid.), just their corresponding virtues do not overlap: *techne*, on one hand, and *phronesis*, on the other.

Another difference between *poiesis* and *praxis* concerns the very nature of these virtues. In fact, *techne*, which corresponds to *poiesis*, makes use of a knowing that relates to the nature of the object, while *phronesis*, the virtue of *praxis*, cannot rely on such a thing: the fact that it does not produce an object removes the possibility of ruling its acting on the basis of some eternal or contingent nature. Therefore, it is neither science nor art (ibid., 1140b), but an experiential knowing, which has evermore to cope with unscripted situations, and thus is intrinsically innovative.

Beside these differences, there is something common to *poiesis* and *praxis*: deliberation (*bouleusis*). It is in fact necessary in all those acts that depend on human being, whether they are productive or non-productive, and concern not the end, but the means, i.e. what leads to the end: “We deliberate not about ends but about what contributes to ends. [...] The subject of investigation is sometimes the instruments, sometimes the use of them; and similarly in the other cases – sometimes the means (*di’ou*), sometimes the mode (*pôs*) or the means of bringing it about (*dià tinos*).” (Aristotle 2009, 1112b) What *poiesis* and *praxis*, the productive and non-productive doing, have in common is then the deliberation on the means, or more generically, *on the way of achieving or carrying out the action*. To this aim, art can rely, as we said, on the materiality and specificity of the object to be produced, which orients the choice of the more suitable technique for its fulfilment, whereas *praxis* is uniquely oriented by the good, and by its inevitable contingency, since it depends on the *kairos*, on the opportune moment. The absence of the object in *praxis* makes the value of the deliberation consist completely in the way of doing, in the *eu* of the *eupraxia*.

III

We can then say that the choice of the way of doing, the deliberation, represents the common trait to both, *poiesis* and *praxis*, although with different presuppositions and conditions.

Pareyson's aesthetics—because it takes formativity, that is, the invention of the way of doing, as its basic concept, —posits itself exactly in this field common to *poiesis* and *praxis*. Moreover, by assuming formativity as the essential nature of art, it extends the concept of art beyond the restricted field to which Aristotle limited it, that of the production of objects, and turns it, I would say, into a transcendental dimension of every human operativity, that is, of human acting in general—thereby ridding itself of the fact that it aims at the production of objects. One can then say that formativity is not properly *poiesis* but *praxis*. This is the idea I would like to support here, which questions the clear separation that Aristotle traced between them. In essence, with his theory of formativity, Pareyson undertakes a double operation: he finds in the invention of the way of doing the specific trait of art, but, at the same time, assumes it as the specific character of every human acting, even if it is non-productive. The following quotation states this very clearly:

Every human operation is always formative, and even a work of thought and a practical work require the exercise of formativity. A virtuous action [also *praxis*, G.C.] must be invented as that which is required by the moral law in that specific circumstance, and must be performed and achieved with a movement that at the same time invents the better way of carrying it out; in posing and resolving a problem, in deducing consequences from a principle, in conducting a demonstration, in connecting arguments in a systematic whole, the implementation of movements of thought is always needed, and so the discovery, through an act of invention, of what reason requires in that specific case, as well as the explicit formulation of thoughts. Productive force and inventive capability are then required by thought and by action, since the speculative and practical operations are made by a formative activity that in that specific field performs and produces the works at the same time it invents the way of doing them. (Pareyson 1974, p. 23)

In this long passage it is clear that for Pareyson formativity is not the exclusive territory of art in a strict sense (that is, as *poiesis*), but covers all human operations, and thus also *praxis* and even thought, or theory. This entire field requires formativity, the invention of a way of doing, at the same time that it is the production of an object.

In order to better understand this point, we could refer here, I suggest, to the Kantian schematism. The schematism is for Kant “a hidden art in the depths of the human soul, whose true operations we can divine from nature and lay unveiled before our eyes only with difficulty.” (Kant 2000, p. 273 - B 180-181) In the *Critique of Pure Reason* the schematism mediates between concepts (i.e. forms of a necessary synthesis) and sensibility, and consists in the production, not of objects, but of methods, of operative monograms, in order to give images or objects in experience to concepts. In the *Critique of Judgment*, instead, the schematism of art consists in schematizing without concept, and is therefore free, because unbundled of the necessary synthesis of the understanding. Like this kind of schematism, formativity is certainly free; indeed, it schematizes without concept, without a category of the understanding. However, its peculiarity is that it can schematize even without object. It is actually a schematism that concerns principally, and even uniquely, the way of doing as such. That’s why it is not *poiesis* but *praxis*. What in the Aristotelian classification was a trait, not of a *poiesis* but of a *praxis*, namely, the autotelic nature and the central position of the *way of doing*, becomes for Pareyson the essence of formativity as distinctive of every human action. Every human action is art, and as formative – autotelic – is praxis. In this way a conceptual shift is achieved where art and praxis, aesthetics and ethics, indeed, aesthetics, ethics and theory find a significant point of conjunction. It is a shift whose first movement can be found again in Kant, in the *Critique of Judgment*, where this point of conjunction appears as a bridge connecting the territories of pure reason and of practical reason. Judgment is a function of the imagination, that is, of the capacity of forming, of creating forms. Here for Kant – and evidently also for Hegel and for Pareyson – the space of freedom opens: works of art, as well as every human operativity, are traces of this freedom in the world. Freedom appears, gives itself a sensible existence in the work of art – which is the invention of a way of doing – and art is nothing other than freedom which manifests itself in the world. Among all the definitions of art that have been created and can ever be done, this one remains, in my opinion, far and away the best.

Nevertheless, freedom, which appears in art, does not consist so much in the creation of new objects, but rather in the invention of new ways of doing, of acting, of representing, of thinking. Every human acting is art inasmuch it shows this freedom, which distinguishes its doing and producing from the natural, more precisely automatic, production. A technique as a mere implementation, exempt of deviations, of a pre-fixed and pre-established plan, is not actually human; it is the activity of a machine, which therefore is not free. The possibility of inventing the way of doing is then what makes formativity the peculiar trait, the very essence, of human existence. No properly human acting is possible without being formative, that is, without being free, and then art.

IV

Now let's test Pareyson's theory, which unfortunately is little known by the international public, in relation to contemporary art. It indeed has resources that can better interpret the peculiarity of contemporary art than other aesthetic theories - object, subject or target oriented - do. The limit of all these aesthetic theories is that they only work so long as one already knows how to identify an object of art, since all, at the very end, are focused on the object. Alternative theories, such as Arthur Danto's relational theory or George Dickie's institutional theory, as far as they can have several points of contact with the Pareysonian theory (in particular the former one), nonetheless have the flaw of assuming a factual field - the world or a group of critics, scholars, historians, institutions - as a basis for the decision about what is art. They therefore risk developing into a sort of 'artistic positivism,' which is actually the greatest enemy of every artistic creation. According to these theories, a work of art is such when it is accepted and included in a world or in an institutional system. Pareyson's concept of formativity, instead, avoids the flaws of these theories, whose limit is represented by the very 'litmus test' of every theory of art: the ready-made. Duchamp's *Fountain* or *Bottle Rack* indeed challenge every objectual conception of art, as well as every expressive or functional conception, and have with every institutional theory an

evidently ironical relation: in the moment they are accepted in the world or in the field of art, they are *de facto* ‘sterilized’—they lose their critical, unconventional, innovative import, that is, their opposition to every institutionalization and positivization of art. On the contrary, from the point of view of Pareyson’s theory of formativity, ready-made works show that the very essence of the work of art consists in the ‘way’ it has been done and not in its objectual properties. As we read in the previous quotation, even a conceptual operation is for Pareyson *formative*, and thus art. The simple idea – and I say just the *idea* – of signing a urinal and displaying it in a museum, and not the mere *fact* of displaying it, is what makes it art, as invention, never before made, and the expression of an act of freedom. What is decisive is the formative process that led to this outcome, its invention, the idea behind it, which has to be grasped, has to be understood. Conceptual art challenges every theory of art, every *aesthetics*, inasmuch as every aesthetics concentrates on the sensible qualities of an object, to which we traditionally refer when define it as a work of art. Formativity, on the contrary, makes clear that a work of art, in order to be grasped just as art, has to be, not perceived, but interpreted.

In the case of the ready-made, the theory of formativity provides then us a criterion for evaluating the artistic nature of the work: it consists in the invention of a new, unprecedented way of fulfilling, and at most even of considering the object, be it a urinal, a bottle rack or a Brillo Box. This new way can consist in something minimal, and negative: that is, in *not considering* the object as it appears, that is, as an object of senses, or as it is understood by common opinion. Consequently, and this is the point I would like to stress, by suspending its everyday reality, this minimal negativity makes the work of art in principle irreconcilable with every institutional, that is, every positive theory of art. The invention of a new way of doing confers to the work of art a differential trait, which constitutes the unity of originality and continuity, which is, as Pareyson writes, the very temporality of a work of art. But just for this reason every work of art brings with itself, in the form of a difference, a negativity that no positivization or

institutionalization of art will never be able to efface and shall never efface

V

These considerations might encounter an objection. We can indeed say that with his definition of formativity Pareyson succeeds in explaining the artistic nature, even purely conceptual, of Duchamp's works only because, eventually, formativity covers all of human doing, and thus lacks that specificity that should distinguish art from other human activities. Every human operation is artistic,

so that we can say that the whole of spiritual life is, in some way, 'art': in every field of human operativity nothing can be done without inventing in some way the way of doing. Whatever we do, we need 'art,' and no thing can be done without 'art': there is no human business, albeit humble, tenuous and insignificant, that does not require, in him who attends to it, 'art', that is, the capacity of inventing the way of doing by doing [inventare il modo di fare facendo], and of doing by knowing how to do, and nothing can be reached if doing does not become inventive as well as productive, attempting and figuring as well as performing and achieving [inventivo oltre che produttivo, tentativo e figurante oltre che esecutivo e realizzatore]. (Kant 2000, p. 273 - B 180-181)

If every operation is formativity, then everything—from the *Gioconda* to the ready-made to the chairs in this room—is art. However, this generalness, or better, this generality of formativity, which covers any human activity, even the more humble and utilitarian ones, does not trim away and efface the specificity of art. Indeed, art is that sphere of human acting where formativity emerges *as such*, where it becomes dominant, since it is the aim itself of acting. It is a 'forming for forming', just as in the case of the ready-mades: they can be very trivial, everyday, already made objects, so that the operation that elevates them to art really produces nothing, and confers to them no utility (indeed, it consists in the suspension of their utility). The artistic operation that makes art a certain production of human activity concentrates in the *way* of doing, in the form, and then at least in the *way* of considering them. The specificity of art consists for Pareyson in being *pure formativity*:

The artistic operation is a process of invention and production performed not in order to fulfill works that are speculative, practical, or whatever they can be, but only for itself: forming for forming, forming by pursuing uniquely the form for itself: *art is pure formativity*. (ibid., 64)

Works of art are thus not forms insofar as they are works, that is, because they are material objects, but are works insofar as they are forms, because, namely, they are formed objects:

formativity succeeds in being pure [and thus art], that is in forming forms, which are nothing other than forms, and which require to be considered only as forms, only if it is formation of a physical matter, given that only physical matter, once it is formed, is form and only form. (ibid., 42)²

What makes art a work of art is not then its materiality but the fact of having a form. The ready-made shows then the purely transcendental nature of artistic invention, which invents a ‘condition,’ in the double meaning of the term: a possibility that produces a new status, an operation that is then *formative* and *transformative* at a transcendental level, a level of a higher-order praxis, which is not that positive of the empirical object. Formativity, as a general trait of every human doing, therefore finds its purity in art, which the ready-made expresses to the highest degree.

VI

The theory of formativity differs, as I believe I have shown, from all the aesthetics that today occupy the scene of philosophical debate. Pareyson’s is not, actually, an object-oriented aesthetics, since it does not focus on the object, on its qualities, on its properties, does not assume, above all, the object as the determining factor for deciding what is art. Neither is it a source-oriented aesthetics, similar to that of Collingwood or Croce, which when Pareyson published his *Estetica* dominated the Italian philosophical scene: an aesthetics that sees in the work of art the expression of feeling or subjective contents of the artist. It is not even a target-oriented aesthetics, since it is completely alien to a functional consideration of the artwork, that is, to a consideration of the

effect that it provokes or should provoke in the user or the spectator. It is not a relational or institutional theory of art, because these theories result in a positivization of the world of art and of what is art. Unlike these aesthetics – that take into account firstly the object, the subject or the goal of the artistic creation, or lose the negative nature of art – Pareyson's aesthetics is focused on formativity, the character of every human activity, "for which it is, at once, production and invention," a doing that, by doing, "invents the way of doing." (Pareyson 1974, p. 18). Therefore, it cannot but challenge what is already constituted and established. The very object of Pareyson's aesthetics is here: neither the work, nor the subject, nor the end, but the *way* of doing.

I believe that we could call this aesthetics 'transcendental' – which in this sense is, as I said, Kantian – since with the word 'transcendental' we mean a knowing that concerns not the object but the way of relating to the object. It is, however, a transcendentalism in which the form, the way of this relation, is itself invented, is even the real object of the creative act: the aesthetics of formativity is what we could call a 'transcendentalism of invention,' meaning what is primarily invented through the creative act is the way of doing. The form, which Pareyson points out with the word 'formativity,' is the form of doing. What the artist invents is first of all a technique, or more precisely, a style.

There are works that do not express anything and do not say anything, but their style is very eloquent, because it is the spirituality itself of the author. One will say that, just in this sense, art is expressive, and the feeling is present inasmuch it results completely in the form; but we do not see then why it would be necessary to claim that only through feeling the spiritual life could penetrate in the art, and that only through a lyrical condensation it could turn into an image; because the spiritual life, in the infinite richness of its aspects, makes itself, as a whole, style and way of forming; in the same way, even the more stylized arabesque, the coldest architecture and the more elaborated counterpoint, which do not express for themselves any feeling, and do not have any lyrical character, contain a whole civilization made style, a whole way of interpreting the world and of acting in front of life, a whole way of thinking living and feeling, a whole collective and personal spirituality in the infinite richness of its aspects. (ibid., 38-39)

By assuming formativity as the distinctive trait of every human operation, and then of praxis, which finds in art its highest purity, Pareyson tried to say, in conclusion, that all of human life, from the more elevated to the more humble, does not express, at least not primarily, a content, a feeling or a specific meaning, but a way of being, a ‘style’: he tried to tell us that every human operation, and perhaps more deeply the human life as such, is ultimately a work of art.

NOTES

¹ The bibliography of Luigi Pareyson accessible to the English readers is till now not so wide. I can point out Pareyson 2009 and 2013. For a general presentation of his philosophy, see Chiurazzi 2015.

² The observation in square brackets is mine). The same idea is expressed in an essay in which Pareyson sums up in few pages and in a very comprehensive way his aesthetic theory. See Pareyson (1965, p. 103).

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