

INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Spring 2022 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857592633, DOI 10.7413/18258630116

FORMATIVITY

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(First published May 31, 2022)

It. *Formatività*; Fr. *Formativité*; Germ. *Formativität*; Span. *Formatividad*. *Formativity* can be defined as a kind of poietic making where invention and performance take place simultaneously and cannot be parted ontologically. This process results in a form that is endowed with an inner dynamism. The term is most famously known for Luigi Pareyson's *Aesthetics: Theory of formativity*, first published in Italy in 1954. Although the concept of formativity primarily refers to artistic making, formative features can also be detected in other human praxes as well as in the activities of nature, thus establishing a continuity between art and life. The notion of formativity is a morphological one in that it stresses the role of forms, which are regarded as a broad category that ranges from works of art to the products of nature. Nevertheless, formativity entails understanding forms to be active and dynamic entities rather than fixed, static objects. Accordingly, the concept of formativity enhances the moment of formation and the idea that artworks in particular and forms in general should be considered as processes. Formativity is thus closely connected with the concepts of morphogenesis and metamorphosis.

ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPT

The theoretical roots of the concept of formativity can be traced back to the *Goethezeit*, when particular attention was given (a) to phenomena that relate to living nature and (b) to the relationship between human and natural making.

(a) In 1780, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach translated the Latin expression "*nisus formativus*" into "*Bildungstrieb*". This concept can be regarded as a partial but relevant antecedent to the notion of formativity. In Blumenbach's theory (1780), as well as in Immanuel Kant's (2007: 250-253), *Bildungstrieb* is the formative impulse that guides the formation of organisms in an architectural and finalistic fashion: it is the power of matter that results in a self-organized, living body. A more general concept is that of

Bildungskraft, the formative force that pertains to nature in a broader sense, as it includes inorganic components.

Specifically, the concept of formativity can be considered as a legacy of morphology as outlined by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Going beyond the Linnaean world of fixed forms and species, Goethe's research shapes an understanding of nature as a vibrant field of formative forces. Goethe regards the form as a *Gestaltung* rather than as a *Gestalt*: the focus is put on metamorphosis and transformation. Here, *Bildung* (formation) denotes both the product and the process of its production (Goethe 1988: 63). This holds for the concept of formativity as well.

(b) The notion of *Bildungstrieb* has also been transposed from the domain of nature to anthropology and aesthetics. In 1789, for example, Georg Forster (1958) applied the idea of a formative force to artistic and cultural human creations. However, in the same years Kant advocated a clear distinction between natural and artistic formativity. In Kant's view, only human beings are endowed with reason and freedom, and these characterize their formative making (Kant 2007: 132-134, 197-200).

THE ITALIAN DEBATE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

The concept of formativity underwent its most fruitful developments in the Italian aesthetic thought of the second half of the 20th century. Specifically, an "aesthetics of formativity" was outlined by Luigi Pareyson during the 1950s and 1960s. Pareyson's main sources are Goethe's morphology on the one hand and Paul Valéry's thought on the other. Pareyson defines formativity as "a kind of making that, while taking place, makes up its own way of making" (Pareyson 1960: 6). In opposition to Benedetto Croce's neoidealistic account, Pareyson's aesthetics is centered on the making, thus expressing a pragmatic intonation. For Pareyson, any form (whether artwork, ordinary human product or natural entity) displays a *forma formans* (forming form) that never ceases to be at work within the *forma formata* (formed form). "The form is the very process" (Pareyson 1960: 80). Accordingly, Pareyson argues that "the artwork acts even before existing" (Pareyson 1965: 109). The morphological making, especially when artistic, necessitates embodiment. Pareyson thus stresses the necessary role of the artistic matter and of the artwork's physicality (Pareyson 1965: 139-158). Moreover, "The artwork [...] is at the same time law and outcome of the process of its formation" (Pareyson 1965: 110): formative making both establishes and is bound to a law that is intrinsic to the specific form. In Pareyson's aesthetics, formativity belongs to the form itself (as *forma formans*), to the artist (who produces the artwork while making up the rules of that specific production) and to the recipient (who experiences the artwork with an act of interpretation, i.e., with a formative performance).

Pareyson's theory of formativity has been further developed by Italian scholars such as (a) Francesco Moiso, (b) Gianni Vattimo and (c) Umberto Eco. All of them studied at the University of Turin under Pareyson's supervision and have been the mentors of scholars who continue to reflect on formativity in contemporary debates.

(a) From the theory of formativity, Francesco Moiso inherited the interest in the morphology of Goethe and the relationship between *forma formans* and *forma formata*, between form as dynamic *Bildung* and form as fixed *Gestalt* (Moiso 2001: 67; 79-83). By suggesting that reality is a field of constant metamorphosis and claiming that every form (i.e., every entity) is defined by its relationship to other forms, Moiso outlines a morphology of knowledge which reflects the relational ontology that underlies reality. Moiso's morphological encyclopedism can therefore be considered as an original strategy that prolongs the theoretical concerns entailed by Pareyson's theory of formativity.

(b) In his dissertation, devoted to *The Concept of the Doing in Aristotle*, Gianni Vattimo (1961) scrutinizes the notions of *ποίησις* (production) and *πρᾶξις* (intransitive activity) through the lens of formativity. However, his most relevant attempt to develop the theory of formativity can be found in *Poetry and Ontology*. According to Vattimo, whose aim is to show that art has an ontological capacity, i.e., a privileged relationship to the Being, the theory of formativity needs to be developed in an ontological sense to be fully understood (Vattimo 1967: 77). In Vattimo's thought, the concept of formativity accounts for both the radical novelty of the artwork (inexplicable through an extrinsic norm) and its strict legality: the work of art is ontologically new and, simultaneously, it is non-arbitrary, i.e., it is constrained by autonomous rules. Nevertheless, such rules arise throughout the specific process of formation: the artwork displays an intrinsic normativity that leaves room for a degree of transcendence, without being an imitation or a copy of an ideal form. "The artwork carries a law that emerges with it, but that transcends it and judges it" (Vattimo 1967: 80).

(c) The concept of formativity has been adopted and developed also by Umberto Eco in *The Open Work*, where the focus is set on reception and on the political significance of each formative making (Eco 1989). According to the theory of formativity, the recipient opens up the form in order to perform it again: the recipient approaches the artwork in an active manner and provides a personal interpretation of it. Not only does Eco argue that each and every work of art is inherently open (as a degree of openness is a necessary condition for reception), but he also shows that many artistic praxes of the 20th century fall under the category of the "poetics of the open work" or the sub-category of the "poetics of the work in movement". Eco highlights the formativity that pertains to the activity of the recipient, who creatively collaborates with the artist and participates in creatively making the artwork. Once again, the form is deemed more a "field of possibilities" rather than a static structure (Eco 1989: 1; 14; 84-104). In *Form as Social Commitment* (Eco 1989: 123-157), Eco emphasizes the continuity between art and life: works of art do have efficacy, they can act upon reality. By rejecting all aesthetic disinterestedness, Eco argues that the political and ethical value of artworks is to be found in the *way of forming* that they display, rather than in their representational content.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

On the impulse of the Turin tradition, attention has been given to the concept of formativity in many areas of the most contemporary debates, ranging from aesthetics and morphology to theoretical philosophy and metaphysics.

Theoretical investigations have explored the link between formativity and making. One approach suggests that art is essentially a form of non-objectual doing (α πράξις) and that invention primarily concerns the way of making (Chiurazzi 2018). Other approaches focus on the morphological presuppositions of formativity (Vercellone 2011; Vercellone, Tedesco 2020).

In metaphysics, it has been argued that an “absolute formativity” crosses the boundaries between what, in Aristotelian terms, can be defined as φύσει ὄντα (entities that are products of nature) and ποιούμενα (artefacts that result from human production). It is therefore possible to bridge the gap between φύσις and τέχνη by considering formativity as a concept common to both domains. Hence, formativity helps redefine the relationships between nature, art and technology (Porceddu Cilione 2018).

Outside Italy, the concept of formativity has been applied to design research (Ribault 2022), where it can shed light on non-artistic human making and stress the continuity between art and craft.

Finally, the concept of formativity has been fruitfully applied in debates on artistic improvisation, both at a general ontological level (Bertinetto 2009 and 2014; Valgenti 2021) and in relation to the specific arts. Referring to the coincidence of creative and performing activity and of process and product, improvisation is strikingly similar to the concept of formativity. Hence, formativity has been used to describe improvisation in both performing and non-performing arts (e.g., in sculpture, see Iacobone 2021: 587-588, 595). In particular, formativity provides an excellent theoretical basis for the aesthetics of musical improvisation (Zanetti 2015; Bertinetto 2016; Oliva 2018).

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

A. Iacobone, *Formativity*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2022 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2022/spring/Formativity.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630116.

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A. Iacobone, *Formativity*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 5, Milano, Mimesis, 2023.