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The aesthetic experience in the Reggio Emilia Approach

Abstract

The Reggio Emilia Approach is an educational philosophy in which the aesthetic dimension and the search for beauty are considered fundamental aspects. This paper explores the aesthetic education provided in Reggio Emilia educational centers for early childhood by deepening the relationship and partnership between the Reggio pedagogue Loris Malaguzzi and important exponents of the Italian Neo Avant-garde Gruppo 63, as well as international Avant-garde art experiences such as Fluxus and the Wiener Aktionismus.

The paper reconstructs the important connections between phenomenological aesthetics and the Reggio Emilia Approach. Furthermore, it highlights how the epistemological basis of the Reggio Emilia Approach lies not only in constructivism but also in phenomenological aesthetics, exposing the fallacy of some of the main criticisms made about the Approach. Finally, it highlights that, regarding digital technologies, the Reggio Emilia Approach offers a significant possibility to interpret aesthetic education in the digital era.

Keywords

Reggio Emilia Approach, Atelier, Aesthetic education

1. Introduction

In the educational philosophy that goes by the name *Reggio Emilia Approach*, one of the most relevant approaches to education at an international level (Heckman *et al.* 2018), the aesthetic dimension and the search for beauty are considered fundamental elements and essential qualities in learning and in educational processes (Giudici, Cagliari 2018, Cagliari 2019).

In order to support the abovementioned ideals, each municipal infant-toddler Centre and preschool in Reggio Emilia has an atelier, a

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space closely connected to the other school environments, where children explore visual and expressive languages in strict synergy with verbal, body and logical ones (for a deeper analysis see *Charter of services* 2017). The atelier was formally established as a physical space within each preschool according to Article 7 of the 1972² *Regulation of the municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia*: “Within each preschool is hereby established an ‘atelier’ workspace, [...] with the aim of promoting free artistic, manipulation and construction activities” (Lorenzi, Canovi 2001: 99).

Furthermore, in the Reggio Emilia educational centers for early childhood, teachers work together with *atelieristas*³, educators with an artistic background who support and develop children and adults’ expressive languages as part of a complex knowledge building process, thanks to engagement with a wide range of materials and different expressive techniques (Gandini 2012a, Edwards, Gandini 2018).

2. Loris Malaguzzi’s early conception of art in society and education

The Reggio pedagogist Loris Malaguzzi, in an article published in 1945, wrote a paragraph entitled *The concept of art* where he developed his seminal ideas regarding the relationship between art, society and school, considerations clearly inspired by Marxist ideology⁴.

He claimed that despite the impossibility to create an artist on demand, the necessary conditions to support artistic manifestations could be created through a social process⁵ aimed at making culture enter “slowly but surely into the customs of our people” (Malaguzzi 1945a).

² Nevertheless, some of these activities were already offered at first municipal preschools Pastrengo and Rosta Nuova, built respectively in 1963 and 1964.

³ Role pioneered by Vittoria Manicardi in 1965 at the preschool Rosta Nuova (later renamed Anna Frank), a former nursery school teacher at the Udi Toddler Center Villa Cella, called directly by Loris Malaguzzi in 1965 due to her drawing skills.

⁴ Malaguzzi’s political and philosophical proximity to the Marxist-Leninist ideals are proven by the fact that he joined the Italian Communist party in 1945.

⁵ The opening epigraph of the essay is indeed a quotation from Vladimir Il’ič Ul’janov (Lenin): “For art to reach the people, and the people art, we must first of all raise the general level of education and culture”. The quote was likely taken from Clara Zetkin (1939).

In order to realize this goal, he proposed actions that anticipated some of the main features that characterize the Reggio Approach to education. For example, he underlined the necessity of organizing visits to art venues and sending travelling exhibitions around the country⁶.

Shortly afterwards, Malaguzzi wrote a second essay for the same magazine. By commenting on Tolstoj's conception of art, he claimed that "art could and should have a substance and a main aim: education and evolution. A constant and progressive improvement for people who, through intermediate and necessary processes, can reach an ideal path that will improve their life" (Malaguzzi 1945b).

In *What is art* (1897) Tolstoj argued, in dispute with Maier, Eschenburg, Eberhardt and Baumgarten⁷, that in order to reach the real meaning of art, it is necessary to stop considering it as a means of pleasure and, instead, to interpret it "as one of the conditions of human life. Considering art in this way, we cannot fail to see that art is a means of communion among people" (Tolstoj 1897: 37). Malaguzzi's particular interests for art and theatre fell on fertile ground (for a critical analysis see Canovi 1998). In fact, in the early '50s he frequently visited the neorealist (and later expressionist) painter Vittorio Cavicchioni. His house was frequented by a group of intellectuals, among which Renzo Bonazzi, Franco Boiardi and Ennio Scolari (Lorenzi, Canovi 2001). There Malaguzzi started a close friendship and collaboration with the poet and playwright Corrado Costa, who later became part of the Italian Neo Avant-garde movement Gruppo 63⁸, as well as with Renzo Bonazzi, who later became the mayor of Reggio Emilia and strongly supported the Gruppo 63.

In 1951 Renzo Bonazzi, in the role of municipal councilor, proposed to Malaguzzi to collaborate with the Reggio Emilia municipal Psycho-Pedagogical Medical Centre for Early Childhood (Gazzola 2008: 199).

⁶ The first travelling exhibition, conceived by Malaguzzi and his close collaborators, was shown at the Stockholm Modern Art Museum Moderna Museet in 1981, with the title *The eye, if it leaps over the wall*.

⁷ "According to Baumgarten [...] the aim of beauty itself is to be pleasing and to arouse desire (*Wohlgefallen und Erregung eines Verlanges*)" (Malaguzzi 1945b: 17).

⁸ The creation of the group was preceded by the activity of the journal *Il Verri*, founded by Luciano Anceschi in 1956.

In line with the political convictions mentioned above, Malaguzzi considered the Centre as an institution aimed at defending the good of society (Malaguzzi 1951). At the Center, Malaguzzi started to study and interpret drawings made by children aged 4 to 10, moved by the conviction that the evolution of their drawings corresponded to a broader linguistic, cognitive and social process of development⁹.

In his comments on the *International exhibition of children's drawings* held in Reggio Emilia in 1953, Malaguzzi stated that the correspondence between drawing competence and intellectual maturity should lead to a radical reconsideration of "the traditional problems and methods of teaching art, just as in a broader sense it shifts the entire, integral issue of education" (Malaguzzi 1953: 43). In this statement, the Reggio pedagogist declares that early childhood education should be redesigned based on an innovative approach to art and on a renewed interest in children's drawing, "with its evocative and precise language [...]. It is up to all of us to capture its essence and work with passion" (Malaguzzi 1953: 44).

3. *Origin and development of the preschool ateliers*

Inspired by the turmoil that characterized the cultural life of the city, by the Deweyan theories and by local experiences of pedagogical activism (for a deeper analysis see Hoyuelos Planillo 2004: 35), when the first Reggio municipal preschool opened in November 1963, Malaguzzi intended to propose innovative didactic and artistic experiences.

In a speech held in March 1963 during a symposium, Malaguzzi underlined the importance for his conception of innovative and active education of Dewey's laboratories, as they emphasized "the need to look at educational solutions in the spirit of research" (Malaguzzi 1963: 71). As to reach this goal he proposed to an artistically skilled nursery teacher, named Vittoria Manicardi, to join the staff of the second opened preschool Rosta Nuova. As recalled in a brief memoir, when she started to work at the preschool in 1965, children "used to draw, but almost always only with pastels or markers. They almost never used temperas or watercolors, and he [Malaguzzi] wanted to start try them" (Lorenzi, Canovi 2001: 167).

⁹ Malaguzzi explicitly referred to the theories of the German psychologist Charlotte Bühler (Malaguzzi 1953).

In order to make it possible, Manicardi and Malaguzzi designed easels specifically suitable for 3 to 6 years old children, equipped with an opened drawer that could contain many cans of paint. This feature allowed children “to blend different colors. Each time the child could create the color he preferred” (Lorenzi, Canovi 2001: 169).

Given the absence of a physical space designed as atelier, in the first municipal preschools children were offered the possibility to spontaneously leave the sections in small groups, as to paint on sheets of paper and cardboard of varying form and size in the main opened area of the school.

In 1966 Manicardi, Malaguzzi and other close collaborators organized a public exhibition of the drawings and paintings realized by the children in the foyer of the municipal theatre. At the entrance of the exhibition, the preschool’s easels had been installed under the portico, as to allow any child who passed by to paint. The same year the municipal preschools Rosta Nuova and Pastrengo (later renamed Robison) started an experimental work with 4 and 5 years old children, based on the books *Pinocchio* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Remembering this experience, Vittoria Manicardi declared that “each section had a free space in front of the entrance door, as to allow children to play freely. The angles began to appear”¹⁰ (Lorenzi, Canovi 2001: 169). Commenting the pioneering project, Malaguzzi wrote that it offered children, “even three-years-old, a genuinely expressive joy, which is progressively invited into more and more representative and motivational languages” (Malaguzzi 1968: 132). Such symbolic and representative languages have been explored in the following years, in particular under the suggestion, among others, of Gombrich’s reflections (1960) on perception and on the relation between meaning, form, content, and contexts in art (Hoyuelos Planillo 2004: 113).

Regarding the development of the ideas and values underlying the atelier, the atelierista Veà Vecchi wrote in fact that over the years it has been managed to “replace the initial aesthetic parameters, which stemmed from a knowledge of adult art with more appropriate evaluations for the languages of children” (Vecchi 2010: 37). In children’s processes of exploring expressive languages, within the Reggio Emilia Approach it has indeed become particularly important to avoid formal

¹⁰ The “angles” were a seminal version of section’s atelier, later named micro-atelier.

copying of existing artistic works and, instead, to grasp poetic suggestions for approaching materials and things (Vecchi, Giudici 2004: 10).

4. Loris Malaguzzi and the Italian Neo Avant-garde

In 1954, a year after the abovementioned statement of Malaguzzi on the role of art in education, Malaguzzi and Costa started to work on a project called *Teatro dei ragazzi - Children's theatre* (for a more detailed analysis see Marani 1954). During this experience Malaguzzi, in the role of theatre director, staged the scripts written by Costa (Costa 1954) and realized surrealist musical fairy tales in form of ballets. Their fellowship continued and they founded in 1959¹¹ the Teatro Club, an Avant-garde cultural group aimed at “deconstructing the ritual situation of theatrical experiences” (Borghi 1991: 160). In an essay on the theatre club, Sandro Panizzi wrote that the proposal was not much about making theatre, rather it was to create a new and young public “able to critically interpret Avant-garde theatre proposals and the main problems related to art and communication that was emerging in those years” (Panizzi, 1991: 109).

Commenting the Malaguzzi and Costa theatrical projects, the former Reggio councilor for culture Laura Artioli wrote that “in these adventures, the principle of the *many languages*¹² started to emerge” (Artioli 2001: 205), a suggestion also proposed in Alfredo Planillo’s reconstruction of Loris Malaguzzi’s pedagogical biography (Planillo 2004: 27). Furthermore, Artioli wrote that the main elements connecting his role as theatre director and his role as pedagogist were due to his aversion to “the boredom of habit and the rejection of the mundane, intended as necessary aesthetic requirements” (Artioli 2001: 206). Malaguzzi and Costa’s theatrical activities lasted until 1962 (for an effective synthesis see Malaguzzi 1991).

The same year Costa published a poem (1962) in the journal *Il Verri*, directed by Luciano Anceschi, and became, in the early '60s, “the protagonist with Adriano Spatola and Patrizia Vicinelli of the *Emilian*

¹¹ The exact date is January 1959 (see Davoli 1978: 106). In Cagliari *et al.* 2016 is reported the date of 1958.

¹² Later theorized as the theory of the hundred languages, meaning the different ways children represent, communicate and express their thinking in different media and symbolic systems.

Avant-garde”, as Anceschi stated in a memorial essay dedicated to Costa (Anceschi 1991). Costa’s friendship and collaboration with the abovementioned poets and artists resulted in the conception and publication of the Neo Avant-garde journal *Malebolgie*, “expression of the Gruppo 63’s surrealist section” (Celli 2003), published from 1964 to 1967 (see Gazzola 2011). Luciano Anceschi’s student and aesthetic Professor Ennio Scolari¹³, Anceschi’s son Giovanni (artist and designer), Giorgio Celli, Corrado Costa and Antonio Spatola constituted, among others, the journal’s editorial committee. A notable fact is that Malaguzzi knew personally and collaborated with Ennio Scolari, Adriano Spatola, Corrado Costa, Giorgio Celli and Giovanni Anceschi¹⁴. The latter participated in 1962, as member of the Avant-garde movement Gruppo T, in the first exhibit of cinematic and programmed art organized by the designer and artist Bruno Munari.

Umberto Eco, who wrote the texts for the exhibition (Eco, Munari 1962) recalled it as a significant event for understanding the cultural atmosphere that led to the creation of Gruppo 63 (Eco 2005: 26).

5. Malaguzzi, the poetics of the Neo Avant-garde and the ateliers of the Reggio Emilia municipal preschools

In 1962 Renzo Bonazzi became the mayor of Reggio Emilia and, in 1963, asked Loris Malaguzzi to become consultant for the Reggio Emilia municipal preschools (Malaguzzi 1998). A few months later, through the mediation of Nanni Scolari and Luciano Anceschi, Bonazzi proposed that Gruppo 63 host their second gathering in the Municipal Theatre of Reggio Emilia, held in the theatre’s mirror hall in November 1964 (Bonazzi, 2008).

The role played by Luciano Anceschi in founding the Italian Neo Avant-garde group was decisive (Eco 2003: 21). The development of his conception of poetics contributed to redeeming their status, since they had been discredited in Neo-Italian Idealism as “imperfect, empirical and non-universal” (Anceschi 1960: 320). In fact, influenced by Antonio Banfi’s phenomenological and anti-normative perspective, Anceschi refused any essentialist definition of art in favor of a more

¹³ Often referred to as Nanni Scolari.

¹⁴ For references see Baldini *et. al* (2009: 85) and Parmiggiani (1999: 2).

process-oriented interest focused on how art operates, also inspired by Paul Valéry's notion of poetics, etymologically centered more on the "action which creates than on what is created"¹⁵ (Valéry 1944: 301). In this sense, in Anceschi's conception of poetics "actions are visibly intertwined with thoughts" (Contini 2013a: 250). Similarly, Malaguzzi rejected the Italian Neo-Idealistic view on aesthetics (Malaguzzi 1998a) and considered learning contexts to be spaces where "hands and minds engage each other" (Malaguzzi 1998b: 74).

Anceschi's conception of poetics largely influenced the members of the Gruppo 63. In this sense it's relevant to underline how Malaguzzi's contacts with some of the main exponents of the Neo Avant-garde group continued in the following years, and likely contributed to the development of his understanding and interpretation of art and aesthetics.

To substantiate this argument, some elements appear to be particularly significant. Firstly, the fact that in the early '70s the Gruppo 63 exponent Antonio Spatola was invited to the Diana preschool by Malaguzzi, through the mediation of the school's teacher Laila Marani and the designer Rolando Gualerzi¹⁶. On that occasion, Spatola performed the sound poem *Aviazione/Aviatore* for the children, which he had published in the abovementioned Avant-garde journal *Malebolge* in 1967 (Spatola 1967).

Considering these elements, we can see that Spatola's ideas on the poetic and artistic attitude, intended as a vision of the world that "allows to consider the objects with a different eye, exploiting connections and relations not yet explored" (Spatola 1969: 6), intertwine with what Malaguzzi considered to be the milestone of the culture of the atelier. Namely, the interest "for the plurality and the connections between different expressive languages" (Malaguzzi 1988a). This led to the interweaving of ideas that connected and inspired both Neo Avant-garde poetics and the culture of the atelier developed in the Reggio municipal preschools.

A further relevant element can be seen in Malaguzzi's amicable relationship with the art promoter Rosanna Chiessi, a gallery owner who worked closely with Adriano Spatola, Corrado Costa and Renzo Bonazzi. Rosanna Chiessi, in fact, after having promoted informal and optical art exhibitions in the '60s, established important connections

¹⁵ "[A]vec plus de passion, l'action qui fait, que la chose faite".

¹⁶ Interview with Rolando Gualerzi by the author, January 8, 2019.

with exponents of the Wiener Aktionismus and organized many performances realized by many exponents of the Fluxus Avant-garde movement in Reggio Emilia (Chiessi 1995). Malaguzzi took part in many of the performances proposed¹⁷.

If we consider that the Fluxus movement explicitly strove “for the mono-structural and non-theatrical qualities of a simple natural event, a game or a gag. It is the fusion [...] of children’s games and Duchamp” (Maciunas 1965: 14), we can recognize some the main elements that characterized the conceptualization of the preschool ateliers in the ’70s. In fact, during those years the ateliers became more and more a symbolic space aimed at allowing children to create original and non-conformist images of the world (Vecchi 2010: 138).

In this regard, the relationship between Malaguzzi and the Gruppo 63 exponent Giorgio Celli seems to be particularly relevant. In fact, in 1978 Celli organized an educational and experimental exhibition focused on visual perception, anamorphic art and optical illusions, *The other eye of Polyphemus* (Celli 1978). Malaguzzi, interested in the potential of exploring such themes in preschools, invited the Gruppo 63 exponent to discuss them with teachers and atelieristas (Domus 1980). Malaguzzi became part of the scientific committee of the second exhibition designed by Celli, titled *Eye-hyper-eye* and held at the municipal theatre in Reggio Emilia in 1980 (Celli 1980). As part of the exhibition, Celli included an experimental panel realized by Reggio municipal preschools, *The forms of children’s drawings*. For the exhibition, optical devices, like a praxinoscope, were built and afterwards, upon Malaguzzi’s request, some of them were recreated for the atelier of the Diana municipal preschool. One year later, in 1981, Malaguzzi organized a further exhibition on perception and education, titled *If the eye leaps over the wall*¹⁸. The first catalogue of the exhibition was published in the same year, and Giorgio Celli wrote the introduction where he mentioned the two exhibitions on perception organized previously. He underlined how he had tried to develop an educational discourse on the “current and future problems and possibilities of vision, with a precise philosophy: to go beyond the persuaded eye” (Celli 1981). In this sense, it is interesting to underline that Malaguzzi, in one of his latest reflections on the role of the preschool atelier, referred to Sklovskij’s

¹⁷ As stated by Malaguzzi and Chiessi’s collaborator Rolando Gualerzi in an interview realized on January 8, 2019.

¹⁸ The exhibition was afterwards renamed *The hundred languages of children*.

idea of art being a process that removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways (Sklovskij 1917). He declared indeed that children's art should be intended as an escape from rhetoric and stereotypes (Malaguzzi 1988a).

In the same year of the abovementioned interview, Malaguzzi wrote a critical analysis for the catalogue of an art exhibition organized by Rosanna Chiessi, named *The 5 seasons*. The exhibition inaugurated with a speech by Giorgio Celli (Chiessi 1988), and saw among others the presence of paintings realized by Ugo Sterpini, the most faithful exponent of the surrealist movement in Italy (Bonavicini, Bonilauri 2003). Malaguzzi wrote for the catalogue a critical analysis of one of his paintings (Malaguzzi 1988b) by referring to Barthes' notion of meaning breach¹⁹ (Barthes 1970). This text shows the longevity of his interest and relationship with Avant-garde art exponents and the continuity of interweaves between art and pedagogy in his thought.

A third relevant element can be traced in the presence of texts written both by Corrado Costa and Giovanni Anceschi in the second catalogue of the International exhibition *If the eye leaps over the wall*, edited by Malaguzzi, centered on numerous projects realized in the Reggio municipal preschools (Costa 1984, Anceschi 1984). In his remarks on children's art, in order to argue that the colors and images created by children vibrate in a specific space, but at the same time have symbolic connections with other timeless dimensions, meaning their ideas, Costa quoted Cassirer's *Philosophy of symbolic forms* (1923). These remarks resonate in Malaguzzi's later considerations on the "aesthetic pleasure in children, which is closely woven with symbolic aspects and the pleasure of symbols" (Malaguzzi 1985: 310) and with his understanding of thinking structures, meaning a "cognitive plateau²⁰, a key schema [...] which become timeless and trans-functional" (Malaguzzi 1988c: 325).

¹⁹ Translated from the original French "effraction du sens" (Barthes 1970: 89).

²⁰ The cognitive plateau concept first appeared in Bateson (1982: 113) and was later reinterpreted in Deleuze, Guattari 1980.

6. *The Reggio Emilia Approach and phenomenological aesthetics*

An element connecting the interpretation of children's art to phenomenological paradigms can be identified in Veia Vecchi's²¹ conception of aesthetics.

In her book on the role and potential of ateliers in early childhood education, she wrote a paragraph entitled *Aesthetics intended as an activator for learning* (Vecchi 2010). In the paragraph, Vecchi refers to Deleuze's interpretation of Kant's views on aesthetics, in particular to his remarks on the concept of the sublime. The French philosopher claimed that "reason and imagination accord with each other only within a tension, a contradiction" (Deleuze 2010: 63).

Afterwards Veia Vecchi, going back to Kant's aesthetics, wrote about the existence of a tension between different structures and domains, and how "this tension is often a source for renewed paradigms and, therefore, a producer of creativity" (Vecchi 2010: 8).

This interpretation, despite its interpretative audacity, offers an occasion for deeper analysis. If we consider Kant's understanding of aesthetic ideas, namely a "representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking [...], the *pendant* of an idea of reason" (Kant 2004: 249), it is possible to foresee one of the main epistemological foundations of aesthetic phenomenology. Kant's aesthetic ideas cannot be permanently conceptualized in a definitive manner, since they inherently lead to the creation of further representations. His aesthetic ideas are therefore a continuous process of interrogation, an ongoing production of meaning. In this sense, it seems relevant to underline as well how the preeminence of perception in Husserl's conceptualization does not affect the importance of the role played by perceptual modifiers such as memory and imagination (Husserl 2009: 39). Furthermore, these themes have had many developments in philosophies characterized by a phenomenological inspiration. A relevant example can be found in Ricœur's conception of interpretation, meaning the search for symbolic elements focused on artistic manifestations that constantly generate new structures of meaning, which cannot be reduced to any closed ontology. Consequently, his conceptualization of

²¹ Veia Vecchi is an atelierista who worked closely with Malaguzzi for over 30 years and contributed significantly to the development of the conception and practice of Ateliers in Reggio early childhood educational contexts (see Dahlberg, Moss, 2010).

the creative imagination is indeed a “presentation of the Idea by the imagination that forces conceptual thought to think more” (Ricœur 2003: 358).

If we consider this process of questioning and producing meaning as the founding core of aesthetic phenomenology, it follows that this paradigm, together with the constructivist paradigm (Rinaldi 2006: 96), can be identified as the main epistemological reference of the Reggio Emilia Approach. It therefore seems relevant to note that the fourth proposition on the Reggio Emilia Approach made by Harvard’s Project Zero research group states that ideas are chosen by children’s learning groups “according to an aesthetic of knowledge, a pattern which connects”²² (Krechevsky, Mardell 2001: 244).

This proposition is closely connected to phenomenological accounts of aesthetics. In fact, Elio Franzini suggests that this perspective makes it possible to get a glimpse of the essence of reason, meaning the capacity to constantly discover new possible layers in the evolution of things: through this process of investigation, it becomes possible to “reunify what is only apparently distant, discovering sensitive links between different phenomena” (Franzini 2014: 139). Furthermore, in this perspective reason is interpreted as an integration of the experience in its countless nuances and inexhaustible complexity (Contini 2013b).

7. Misconceptions about the Reggio Emilia Approach and phenomenological perspectives

From this phenomenological perspective, it is possible to identify the misconceptions of some of the most significant critics²³ of the Reggio Emilia Approach. Namely, in Heather Kaplan’s view, new paradigms need to be developed, since according to him the Reggio Emilia Approach considers educational processes exclusively in relation to living subjects, disregarding how “the ways that the agency of matter plays into pedagogy further complicates the possibility of categorical, representative knowledge” (Kaplan 2018: 180).

²² The quotation clearly refers to Bateson’s conception of aesthetics: “By aesthetic, I mean responsive to the pattern which connects” (Bateson 1979: 9).

²³ Other relevant critics have been expressed in Hall *et al.* 2010.

Instead, as highlighted by Dahlberg and Moss, in the Reggio Emilia Approach “the aesthetic sense is fed by empathy, an intense relationship with things; it does not put things in rigid categories” (Dahlberg, Moss 2010: XIX).

Other recent criticisms directed to the Reggio Emilia Approach are based on the idea that the image of childhood promoted in Reggio “is isomorphic to the neoliberal biopolitic²⁴ dispositifs” (Luciano, Giacomantonio 2018: 159). In particular, the authors claim that aesthetic experiences such as “manipulating unfamiliar materials [...] promote processes of normalization that govern the body and soul by acting over time, over space” (Giacomantonio 2018: 164). On the contrary, as shown by a relevant exponent from the phenomenological perspective, the aesthetic object, namely “the object aesthetically perceived, that is, perceived as aesthetic” (Dufrenne 1973: 51), can be conceived of “as the source of a peculiar world that cannot be reduced to the objective world” (Dufrenne 1973: 197). In particular, Mikel Dufrenne, drawing on Merleau Ponty’s insistence on the prevalence of perception in experiential dynamics, emphasized the relevance of existing connections between an aesthetic object and concrete experience, and therefore the possibility to qualify the experiential relationship with an aesthetic object.

If we consider the relevance that Dewey’s view had on the development of Reggio Emilia Approach (Malaguzzi 1990: 377), and then the main element of correspondence between Mikel Dufrenne and Dewey perspectives (for a deeper analysis see Franzini 2007), namely the idea that through the aesthetics experience it is possible to discover the quality and sense of experience itself, it emerges the misconception underlying a third criticism recently expressed by Ingrid Samuelsson and Niklas Pramling (2018).

The critic regards, in particular, the idea that the epistemological base of the Reggio Emilia Approach relies on a “dichotomous view, where knowledge, or rather information, enters the mind from outside” (Samuelsson, Pramling 2018: 1315). Such hypothesis does not find any base neither in constructivists nor in phenomenological paradigms. In fact, in Dewey’s aesthetics (1934) as well as in phenomenological aesthetics (Sepp, Embree 2010), the interactive and intentional correlation between subject and object appears to be a central and

²⁴ The authors are here referring to Foucault’s concept of biopolitic dispositive (Foucault 1976: 45).

inevitable *datum* of experience, since experience itself is characterized by a relational nature.

Furthermore, by considering Carla Rinaldi's view of the atelier, interpreted as a metaphor "for a strategy of knowing, a way of structuring knowledge and organizing learning [...] the essence of school as research" (Rinaldi 2006: 139), the absence of a dichotomous view of subjects, objects and knowledge in the Reggio Emilia Approach becomes even clearer.

8. Digital technologies and phenomenological perspectives in the Reggio Emilia Approach

A further argument in support of the relevance of phenomenological epistemology in the Reggio Emilia Approach is the interpretation of the digital dimension, intended as a series of connective environments in which the exploratory and representative potentials are expressed. In particular, the perspective adopted in the Reggio Emilia Approach towards digital environments is explicitly "phenomenological and ecological"²⁵ (Tedeschi, Bonilauri 2019: 15), and aimed to allow children to discover a new aesthetic dimension.

By proposing this perspective, the above mentioned authors refer explicitly to Paolo Rosa's theory of art in the post-technological age and to the experiences he and others have realized with Studio Azzurro (Rosa, Balzola 2011). In Rosa's view, digital media are considered the most relevant experimental environments of our era, given how they destructure perception and how they may lead to "an aesthetic of relationships, emphasizing social and collective aspects" (Diodato 2016: 34). Inspired by this perspective, in the Reggio educational experience, different learning environments, enhanced by digital technologies, have been conceptualized and realized (for a deeper analysis see Tedeschi, Manera 2018). These experiences offer children and adults the chance to decode, symbolize and re-signify the meaning of the images they create, projecting them in immersive environments and manipulating them with digital and analogic tools. Such contexts are in

²⁵ Ecological in the Batesonian sense, namely the unifying connection between individuals and their environment (Bateson 1979).

fact characterized by great exploratory potential and are aimed at allowing immersive, aesthetic and emotional experiences characterized by increased sensory perception (Cagliari 2019).

These contexts aim to avoid, on the one hand, the experience of a hypertrophy of images, and, on the other, the tendency of passively submitting to digital technologies, elements that Christoph Wulf defined as *mimikry*²⁶, meaning a degeneration of the mimetic processes (Wulf 2014: 256). Instead, by offering the possibility to act and reinterpret environments made of both virtual and analog elements, and to act on different representational and symbolic levels, therefore connoting mimetic processes as creative events, the Reggio Emilia Approach offers a significant possibility to interpret aesthetic education in the digital era.

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²⁶ German translation of the English "mimicry".

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