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The notions of creativity and meta-operativity in Emilio Garroni.
Recent interpretations in the Italian aesthetic debate on technology / Manera, Lorenzo. - In: AESTHETICA.
PRE-PRINT. - ISSN 0393-8522. - 119:(2022), pp. 115-126. [10.7413/0393-8522095]

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18/04/2024 23:12

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The notions of creativity and meta-operativity in Emilio Garroni. Recent interpretations in the Italian aesthetic debate on technology

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ABSTRACT

This contribution addresses Garroni's notions of creativity and meta-operativity on three levels, exploring recent interpretations and relationships with contemporary aesthetic reflections about technology. Firstly, the paper discusses how Garroni (1976, 1977, 1978) developed a reflection focused on aspects of creativity and meta-operativity of human behaviour by drawing on Kant's Third Critique. His conception of creativity refers to a form of 'productive imagination', a meta-operative process which allows us to deal with novelties by creating new rules and developing a dynamic relationship between creativity and legality. Secondly, the paper explores how the Italian philosopher (1986) foresaw the possibility of establishing meaningful forms of relationships with reality by analyzing the concept of experience, which allowed Aesthetic experience to be considered as a way of renewing the agency and the heuristic potential of creativity, intended as the main characteristic that defines the human behaviour. Thirdly, this contribution explores how, by drawing on an understanding of aesthetics intended not as a 'philosophy of art' but, in a broader sense, as a 'non-special philosophy', the author (2005) developed a comprehensive reflection on the concept of perception that has led to the development of the concept of meta-operativity. Finally, this contribution discusses how the latter was reinterpreted in contemporary aesthetic reflections on perceptual aspects that define our relationship with technological devices.

KEYWORDS

Meta-operativity, Creativity, Aesthetics, Digital technologies, Aesthetic Experience

1. *The notions of meta-operativity and creativity in Emilio Garroni*

Between 1976 and 1978, the Italian philosopher Emilio Garroni wrote three essays dedicated to Kantian topics. In the first, titled *Estetica ed epistemologia* (Garroni 1976), the author underlined the insufficiency of the transcendental schematism of Kant's First Critique, limited to the condition of general knowledge, and insisted on the relevance of the epistemological genesis of the Third

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Critique, focused on the possibility to return to the conditions of experience and make them explicit.

In the second essay of what has been defined a ‘Kantian trilogy’¹, entitled *Ricognizione della semiotica* (1977), Garroni criticized the classificatory nature of several semiotic procedures, unable to define “the problem of the conditions that allow something to become a sign, namely signifier and signified”.² Furthermore, the author tried to both re-define the status of semiotics and to further clarify its relationship with Aesthetics.³ Starting from an analysis of the descriptive and classificatory nature that define several semiotic processes, Garroni underlined the need to revisit central theoretical issues of semiotics, such as the links between meanings and referents, by discussing the merely descriptive nature of several semiotic procedures and by arguing for an opening of semiotics towards the non-signical. In particular, the Italian philosopher, drawing on the Kantian schematism of the Third Critique, argued against a referentialist conception of language and introduced a parallel between the linguistic and the operational (and perceptive) functions:

It is legitimate to say that ‘operation’ and ‘referent’ are the same and identical thing, seen from two different points of view, from the point of view of the implicit context and from the point of view of the explicit context. The ‘referent’ is not the ‘thing itself’, but our way of operating on things, of manipulating and configuring them as the implicit correlate of language (Garroni 1977, p. 69).⁴

By establishing a parallel between the linguistic and the operational traits of our nature, Garroni proposes a further link between the metalinguistic function and the meta-operative attitude, the latter consisting in an internal and distinctive feature of human technical behavior. Such an attitude is expressed in the use of tools not just to pursue a specific goal, but in using them to build further ones. It is the aspect that distinguishes the one-dimensional operative behavior of non-human animals from the multi-dimensional one which characterizes our species, a type of behavior that inherently contains forms of generalization.

Furthermore, as underlined by D’Angelo (2007), in the essay Garroni highlighted the interdependency between the operational

¹ Cf. Bufalo (2011, p. 145).

² “Il problema delle condizioni (e del loro statuto) per cui un qualcosa diviene segno, cioè nello stesso tempo significante e significato” (Garroni 1977, p. 33).

³ For a recent analysis of Garroni’s semiotic perspective, see Grillo and Guagnano (2020).

⁴ “È lecito dire che ‘operazione’ e ‘referente’ sono la stessa e identica cosa, vista da due punti di vista diversi, dal punto di vista del contesto implicito e dal punto di vista del contesto esplicito. Il ‘referente’ non è la ‘cosa stessa’, ma il nostro modo di operare sulle cose, di manipolarle e configurarle come il correlato implicito del linguaggio”.

and linguistic aspects of human behavior in order to re-examine the themes of the various arts' codes and the topic of 'artistic languages'. In particular, the author criticized the conception of the latter as inherently linguistic phenomena by emphasizing the importance of the meta-operative aspects in the definition of the different artistic codes.⁵

The Italian philosopher further developed the topic of the meta-operative character of human behaviour in the third essay dedicated between 1976 and 1978 to Kantian topics, entitled *Creatività* (2010), originally written as an encyclopedia entry.

In the essay, the author argues that the concept of creativity – far from referring to the Romantic ideal of spiritual activity, the *Schöpferischer Geist* or *élan vital* characterized by the absence of rules, conditionings and boundaries, able to open territories that common conscience is normally unattainable – instead refers back to a solid epistemological framework and should be thought of as the human capacity to transform cognitive models in order to adjust to the environment. In contrast to the Romantic and Idealist view of creativity, intended as a spiritual activity, Garroni argues that the capacity to change practical conducts and cognitive modules is based on a relationship of interdependence between creativity and the 'legality', or the accordance to the laws, of the intellect.⁶ Such interdependency consists of a set of human conceptual devices, such as the categories that we situate within different experiential and contextual frameworks in order to adapt to the environment and to execute the cognitive and operative tasks that allow our species to elaborate non-predetermined solutions by constantly developing new behaviors and representations.

In commenting such processes, Garroni detects a further aspect related to the notion of meta-operativity. The author argues, on the one hand, that the meta-operative ability which characterizes our species involves both the ability to produce tools with other tools, that allows to determine a class of possible aim, and a meta-representative capacity able to determine several possible aims and concerns. On the other hand, the human operations that involve the imagination and meta-representative skills are developed within a dynamic of legality. Such a dynamic relationship and interdependence between rules and creativity is a condition able to provide

⁵ The controversial issue of the appropriateness of the definition of the 'artistic languages' was already addressed in an essay published almost ten years earlier, titled *Semiotica ed Estetica* (Garroni 1968).

⁶ In their note to the translation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Garroni and Hohenegger (2011) explicitly declared their preference for the quoted translation (*conformità a leggi*) instead of legality (*legalità*) for the Kantian notion of *Gesetzmäßigkeit*.

a theoretical framework that explains the unicity of the human creative behavior. The meta-operative aspect of human behavior implies, in fact, a “representative and reflective distance to objects” (Garroni 2010, p. 52), which determines a high degree of uncertainty and disorientation. Creativity can therefore be conceptualized as a peculiar form of adjustment to such a condition, an adaptive procedure based on the elaboration of a pre-established solution which is strictly related to a dense network of rules.

2. *The relationship between ‘legality’ and creativity*

By relating the notion of creativity to the human process of adaptation, in *Creatività* (2010), Garroni depicted our species’ creative strategies as an integral part of our behavioral apparatus. Furthermore, the author described it as an innate biological equipment aimed at facing, on the one hand, a condition of uncertainty and disorientation experienced within the environment. On the other, the representative and reflexive distance that we establish with objects is aimed to organize and control the experience through processes of generalization that produce a dense set of rules which need to be applied in specific contexts and situations.

The application of constantly evolving principles and general laws within a specific setting, or in certain circumstances, gives origin to creative behavior, since the understanding of such set does not constitute a sufficient condition for its application. In elaborating the theory of creativity as a characteristic trait that makes humans extraordinarily performant in terms of adaptation and distinguishes us from other species, Garroni drew on a theoretical actualization of Kantian philosophy. According to his interpretation, the assimilation of an exemplary form of reflecting judgment with taste entails the role played by a work of imagination – defined by Garroni as a ‘free schematism’ – which does not match with the ‘objective schematism’ of the First Critique, where perception refers to the process of recognition of the perceived objects. Furthermore, if in the *Critique of Pure Reason* the German philosopher described the interrelation between creativity and legality in terms of a process of unification of the multiplicity, in the Third Critique Kant insisted on the constructive and creative nature of the reflective faculty of judgment, on the agreement between imagination and intellect.

Garroni (2010) underlined how the correlation between the intellect and the faculty of judgment, which corresponds to a correlation between legality and creativity, implies that effective knowledge

is possible if a pre-established intellectual background allows one to presume a classification of forms and entities. Such a process directly refers to the conditions for the possibility of knowledge and contributes to defining forms of aesthetic experience that could constitute a prefiguration of cognition, as both involve the ‘harmonious play’ of imagination and understanding. By drawing on the subjective, creative and constructive transcendental principle of the Third Critique, Garroni insisted on the existence of a direct link that connects the specific application of a general rule and the concept of creativity, which takes different forms.

In particular, if a shared form of creativity can be detected in each human practical-intellectual activity, a specialized form of creativity characterizes the arts: “artistic creativity takes place in the form of purely constructive play – in certain cases a simple combinatory activity – under the condition of a general legality, which remains in the background”.⁷ The feature that defines artistic creativity, therefore, is the assumption, as the dominant principle, of constructive meta-operativity, a constructive unity of operative and linguistic determinations that correspond to the Kantian aesthetic unity of representations described in the *Critique of Judgment*. Such a radical concept of creativity implies a shift from the Chomskyan concept of *rule-governed creativity* to the notion of *rule-changing creativity*. The former refers to forms of innovation defined within precise sets of rules and, according to Garroni, represents the condition of possibility for the latter⁸. It consists in a form a creativity able to establish new rules through interactive procedures by favoring what is transformative and dismissing what is irrelevant, discarded thanks to the creative process of change. As underlined by Virno (2010), *rule-changing* creativity is resolved within an applicative form, since it is rooted in the human attitude to re-locate and re-adapt behavior.

In this respect, Matteucci (2019) argued that Garroni’s interpretation of *rule-changing* creativity leads it back to the model of formal transcendentalism of reflexivity, therefore risking to leave aside the analytical and material components which make it possible to value the radically aesthetic competence that defines creativity. In this perspective, creative behavior does not refer exclusively to the establishment of rules and constraints, even those intentionally established. Since creativity corresponds to the enucleation of action

⁷ “La creatività artistica in altre parole si esplica nella forma di un gioco puramente costruttivo – in certi casi una semplice combinatoria – sotto le condizioni di una legalità generale, che rimane per così dire sullo sfondo” (Garroni 2010, p. 182).

⁸ “The *rule-governed creativity* seems to assume, as its condition of possibility, a *rule-changing creativity*” (Garroni 2011, p. 124, our translation).

schemes implemented within the frameworks of different practices, it should be examined not by focusing on the process of the application of rules, but rather “from the standpoint of the application to a rule: it is the search for a rule, an appeal to it, rather than its execution” (Matteucci 2020, p. 170).⁹ Despite the outlined differences, both perspectives entail a concept of Aesthetics intended as a philosophy of sense, as a theory of perception. Garroni re-actualized the Baumgartian perspective in an essay published in 1986, entitled *Senso e Paradosso. L'estetica, filosofia non speciale*.¹⁰

3. ‘Internal image’ and perception

In *Senso e Paradosso* (1986), Garroni developed a concept of Aesthetics intended neither as a philosophy of art nor as discipline characterized by a specific epistemic object, but as a philosophy of sense, or better of the conditions of sense of our experience.¹¹ In the essay, the author conceived of Aesthetics as a theory of perception, a condition not acquired intellectually, but perceived, aimed at looking-through (*guardare-attraverso*) different phenomena and experiences in order to understand their condition of sense.¹²

With such a notion, Garroni referred to the concept of looking-through the phenomena (*die Erscheinungen durchschauen*) developed by Wittgenstein in *Philosophische Untersuchungen*: “We feel as if we had to penetrate phenomena: our investigation, however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the ‘possibilities’ of phenomena” (Wittgenstein 1986, p. 42).¹³ In *Immagine, figura, parola* (Garroni, 2005), the distinction that the author proposed in *Senso e paradosso* between *sense* and *meaning*¹⁴, where the former constituted the condition of existence of the latter, was reformulated. The internal image, namely perception, operates by distinguishing and detecting the salient affordances of the world-environment that are then translated in concepts:

⁹ Matteucci’s argument toward a conception of creativity opened to the theory of the extended mind (2020), finds a parallel with Montani’s re-interpretation of the concept of meta-operativity developed by Garroni, discussed in the last paragraph, and based on the integration of the technical creative phenomenon with the paradigm of the *Material Engagement Theory*, “a strong version of the extended mind theory” (Malafouris 2013, 227).

¹⁰ “Sense and paradox. Aesthetics as non-special philosophy”.

¹¹ As underlined by D’Angelo (2007, p. 27), with the term “sense”, Garroni refers specifically to a condition felt and not learned intellectually.

¹² For a recent analysis of the reflection developed in the essay, see Velotti (2020).

¹³ “Es ist uns, als müßten wir die Erscheinungen durchschauen: unsere Untersuchung aber richtet sich nicht auf *Erscheinungen*, sondern, wie man sagen könnte, auf die die ‘Möglichkeiten’ der Erscheinungen” (§ 90).

¹⁴ Cf. Garroni (1986).

Overall, I will call *internal* image the preceding of an image (sensation), the image as it is currently produced (perception), and the image as it is reproduced or remembered-reprocessed (imagination), in order to distinguish them altogether from the *figure* externalized, for example, through a drawing (Garroni 2005, p. IX).¹⁵

The concept of internal image (*immagine interna*) – the result of an extensive and assiduous reconsideration of the Kantian schematism – does not refer to mental images (*Bilder*), but rather, to the active and constitutively dynamic inspections that involve both the re-working and the imaginative reproduction of memories and perceived objects. Therefore, the notion of internal image – which concerns the paradoxical relationship between determinateness and indeterminateness – allows Garroni to reconsider the relationship between the aesthetic order of the senses and the logical order of meanings. In particular, the author argued in favor of the existence of a synergistic correlation between the sensible reception and the process of conceptual detection of elements. Such a correlation does not refer to a process of continuity between perception and linguistic conceptualization but, instead, to the complementarity between two heterogeneous components. This aspect suggests a unitary movement of sensibility and understanding, between aesthetic and logical-linguistic schematism.

As Velotti highlighted (2013), the analysis of the non-conceptual contents of perception and the overall perspective that emerges from *Immagine, figura, parola* refers to an enactive theory of perception, “a third path that diverges from the ‘analogical’ and the ‘propositional’ ones” (Velotti 2013, p. 6).¹⁶ The concept of meta-operativity previously developed finds further development within this framework, as is specified in relation to the ‘faculty of the image’, which is responsible for the antecedents of the image, the internal images produced in the presence of the objects in the world, and imagination in its specificity.

Instead of the scheme of an object, the internal image is perceived of as an aggregate (*aggregato*), constituted ‘only perceptually’, which might refer to several objects linked by slight similarities. Such prelinguistic forms of aggregation and recognition, even if present in non-human animals, takes on a formative aspect for our species, since “non-human animals do not need to rely on a function of the indeterminate. They do not need the plasticity and

¹⁵ “Chiamerò complessivamente ‘immagine interna’ sia il precedente di un’immagine (sensazione), sia l’immagine in quanto attualmente prodotta (percezione), sia l’immagine in quanto riprodotta o ricordata-rielaborata (immaginazione), per distinguerle complessivamente dalla ‘figura’ esteriorizzata, per esempio, mediante un disegno”.

¹⁶ For a recent comparison between Garroni’s perspective and Alva Noë’s enactive theory, see Velotti (2019).

creativity of perceiving” (Garroni 2005, p. 36).¹⁷ In this respect, Montani (2014) underlined that Garroni’s distinction between the cognitive behavior of humans and non-human animals finds a parallel with the theory of the operational decentralization of pragmatic and intersubjective nature developed by Tomasello.¹⁸ Such a process of intersubjective decentralization, typical of humans and already present in nine-month old children¹⁹, consists in the assumption of other individuals’ beliefs and not only of their intentions as well as in the capacity to understand conspecifics as mental agents. In particular, Montani highlighted how both perspectives refer to processes that involve the sphere of activities where *aisthesis* interfaces with the imagination. The distinguishing requisites of the human experience are developed in such a sphere, where the meta-operational distancing process – which contributes to define both the aesthetic experience and human technical behavior – takes place.

4. *Meta-operativity, technical creativity and digital devices*

As Feyles recently underlined (Feyles 2019), despite the fact that Garroni did not focus his philosophical research on the topic of technique, the question of its relationship with human expressive behavior was deepened in his essays. By following the theoretical pathway of Leroi-Gourhan²⁰ – who underlined the importance of the transformative process that brought our species from the use of raw materials to obtain a single artifact to their use for the purposes of producing diverse utensils – Garroni identified a direct link between the development of an aesthetic faculty and the development of a human technical specificity, highlighting the relevance of reflective traits in material engagement.

In his view, the process of distancing that characterizes meta-operativity does not rely on instinctive protocols, but rather on Kantian production via ‘rational deliberation’ that characterizes human technics. Furthermore, the sphere of meta-operative distancing is a constitutive aspect of the aesthetic experience, given that such a process is identifiable in each operational human behavior that

¹⁷ “Gli animali non-umani non c’è alcun bisogno che debbano contare su una tale funzione dell’indeterminato. Non serve loro la plasticità e la creatività del percepire”.

¹⁸ Montani referred to Tomasello (1999), whose theory of the operational decentralization has recently been developed in Tomasello (2019).

¹⁹ “This capacity, which I have characterized as the capacity to understand conspecifics as intentional/mental agents like the self, begins to become a reality at around nine months of age” (Tomasello 1999, p. 53).

²⁰ The perspective of Leroi-Gourhan (1964) is already mentioned in Garroni (1977, p. 74) and 2010 (p. 178).

“supposes further operating in general in view of possible operational variables, a specifically meta-operative behavior. In short, any human operation (...) supposes a founding generalization that guarantees its possibility and specificity”.²¹ In this sense, the concept of meta-operativity finds a parallel with Kantian purposiveness (*die Zweckmäßigkeit*) without the presentation of a purpose (*ohne Vorstellung eines Zwecks*). In fact, according to Garroni, both the artistic and the technical attitude are characterized by a process of distancing from the pressure of the material environment and both depend on an aesthetic condition.

The pragmatic feature of technical distancing has recently been addressed by Montani (2020), who applied the notion of meta-operativity to the contemporary scenario, defined by the pervasive presence of digital devices. Such an increasing presence, according to this perspective, attributes central importance to the dialectic of meta-operations.

The author argued that meta-operativity might either evolve towards self-referential escalation, a process of ‘anaesthetization’ that would reduce the contingency of our environment, or move in the direction of its enrichment and re-organization. In the latter case, which is fostered by forms of critical vigilance over self-referential directories made viable both by the technological feedback of extensions and by the prevalence of increased forms of cooperativity, the exercise of new forms of technical creativity could extend our field of organization and enhance human expressiveness. Coccimiglio (2017) highlighted how Garroni’s reflections on the relationship between perception and technique can be reinterpreted to analyze both the influence that digital devices have on perceptive faculties and the role of technology in structuring sensitivity. In particular, the concept of creativity – intended as an indeterminate and polyvalent capacity to adapt to different environments and contexts – can find new developments within the intermedial environment, constituted by a network that connects different medial formats. In such regard, Montani (2021) argued that the processes of remediation allowed today by digital-technology resources causes a profound re-negotiation of the sensitive experience. If characterized by active articulation, it can open relevant and innovative opportunities within the relationship we establish with the world-environment, through the emergence

²¹ “(...) l’operare in generale in vista di possibili variabili operative, cioè un comportamento specificamente metaoperativo. Insomma, qualsiasi operazione umana (...) suppone una generalizzazione fondante che ne garantisce la possibilità e specificità.” (Garroni 1977, p. 94).

of enhanced forms of technical creativity. The described aspect relates to the possibility of developing connections that arise from the interweaving of different media that provide the ‘materials’ for a continuous process of re-mediation and re-interpretation. The heterogeneity of virtual materials allows interactive procedures of reuse and re-organization according to new rules, therefore responding to a procedure that Montani – drawing on Garroni’s interpretation of the Chomskyan concept of *rule-changing creativity* – defines *rule-making creativity* (Montani 2014). This concept, consisting of the aptitude to gradually define new organizational rules throughout the development of the productive process, takes the form of a specific mode of material engagement defined within a field deeply permeated by technological re-mediation processes operated by digital devices. The author (2020) analyzed such processes by deepening the described dialectic of meta-operativity, linking it to the *Material Engagement Theory* (Malafouris 2013), which refers to the assumption that the relationship between the emergence of our symbolic and cognitive attitudes and technical operativity is based on a principle of co-determination. The high degree of plasticity that characterizes digital objects constitutes – not despite but on the basis of their virtuality – a material aspect that strongly influences our technical creative attitude, which fully inscribes them in the dialectic of meta-operativity. This perspective exemplifies how Garroni’s analysis of meta-operative and creative traits of the human technical specificity leads to define new implications, aspects and dimensions in contemporary research on the processes of re-mediation that are rapidly and increasingly modifying expressive human behavior.

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