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ON FORM AND STRUCTURE: UMBERTO ECO AND THE BASIS
FOR A POSITIVE PHILOSOPHY OF THE ARTS

Abstract

This essay has two aims. The first is to offer an explanation concerning the problem of form in Umberto Eco's philosophical research, showing that he deals with it while admitting that form can be a temporary element connected to a system of relationships which may be subject to variability. Namely, his reflection is open to the issue of structure. The second aim is to identify some principles that, according to this theoretical approach, may be considered a basis for a positive philosophy of the arts whose adoption might also lead to the understanding of their most recent evolutions. Focusing above all on the work Eco carried out in the years preceding the elaboration of his semiotic theory, I will pursue the following two objectives. After introducing some aspects of Eco's philosophical methodology, I will focus on the theme of form, considering it in meta-operative terms in light of Luigi Pareyson's 'theory of formativity' and in relation to the issue of structure. In the final part of the essay, I will then show how this theoretical approach provides significant resources for a positive philosophy that can successfully address the evolution of the arts.

1. Between Application and Criticism

Since the second half of the 1960s, Umberto Eco's research¹ has been decisive, first and foremost, for the development of semiotics. As he stated several times, semiotics can be conceived as the synthesis of various theoretical

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations from the Italian volumes of Umberto Eco and other authors have been translated into English by me.

disciplines which originates in ancient philosophy and finds its roots precisely in the culture of that time. In this context, Eco undertakes an investigation into the nature of signs and texts, considering in particular how they are received and the role that interpretation plays in the processes of understanding.² His research programme, however, branches out in several theoretical directions: from philosophical studies of medieval culture to research on communications and the mass media; from investigations in aesthetics and contemporary poetics to the development of semiotics in relation to linguistics and the philosophical and cognitivist studies on language.

His research from the years before the elaboration of his semiotic theory, i.e. the studies of the late 1950s and 1960s, is of considerable interest for at least three reasons: it reveals the meaningful aspects of Eco's approach to philosophical investigation; it shows his interest in the issue of form; and it offers various theses which remain insightful to this day, especially those concerning his philosophical reflections on the arts.

Let us first consider Eco's philosophical approach. Two aspects in particular characterize it:

On the one hand, philosophy is distinguished by the application of a method according to which *doing philosophy* means proceeding through the selection and study of the most appropriate theoretical references for the pursuit of research questions, the analysis of research objects, and their subsequent theoretical elaboration. At the same time, this practice implies the need to recognize its limits and possibilities by also considering the objective of the investigation and how it might be achieved using the tools chosen to conduct it. An example of this approach is found in Eco's reflection on theoretical elaboration, in which he highlights its essential instability. As a model that aims to make reality temporarily intelligible, it is natural to find some contradictions in the theoretical system. Therefore, the philosopher's task is not to eliminate those contradictions but to reveal them where none at first appear.³ This research not only aims to pursue its stated goal but will also assess itself continuously according to its method. This idea allows us to recognize in Eco a conception of philosophy as a practice that obtains even more meaningful results if – together with the meta-reflection on the chosen research method – it also provides an opportunity to apply its tools and clarify

² According to Eco, one of the assumptions of semiotics is the possibility to trace the variability of cultural changes and the production of signs. This approach is also at the basis of his idea of 'code': a set of rules that may vary even within a culture (see Eco [1984] 1997). To further expand the study of semiotics in relation to practices and cultures, which may also be developed considering differential relations, see Paolucci 2010: 173-251; 253-335.

³ Eco presents this reflection in the preface of his *Il problema estetico in Tommaso d'Aquino* ([1956] 1982) [The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas], a book that was originally his degree thesis. We will return to this remark later in the next paragraph.

its objects of investigation. This approach stands out in the first essays of Eco: in his analyses of the aesthetic problem in medieval culture and in particular in the thought of Aquinas (see Eco [1956] 1982), in those on contemporary artistic practices in relation to disorder and indeterminacy (see Eco 1962), and in his studies on the theoretical and applicative problems of aesthetics (see Eco 1968b).

On the other hand, Eco's philosophical approach is characterized by its critical attitude. Doing philosophy means articulating reasons in order to defend one's arguments more effectively. For Eco, this means trying to follow theoretical directions, even unusual ones, that allow contradictions and possibilities to emerge during the development of the research itself. In other words, this means questioning references and theories through the choice of the appropriate tools and their application to the objects of investigation. An example can be found in the essays of *Opera aperta* [*The Open Work*] (1962), a volume dedicated to contemporary artistic practices in which the choice to trace new research directions, by making contradiction a crucial device for the advancement of the investigation, shows that his philosophical approach operates at the intersection of application and criticism. Indeed, Eco's philosophy values the potential of its application to the various objects of investigation and the criticism that animates and directs it towards its objectives.

In this phase of his work, the reflection on method is pivotal, first and foremost because it is also oriented by the possibility of admitting interdisciplinary research. «During this [phase], the philosopher takes note of the research carried out by the various disciplines and tries to reduce the various methods and the various results to descriptive models, capable of reflecting the structure of the various phenomena investigated and the various processes investigated».⁴

In fact, the objects of Eco's philosophical research in the early 1960s belong to both theoretical and practical dimensions: from investigations on the sociology of art regarding the limits of aesthetics and the concept of "Gestalt" to the issues of art's definition, experimentalism, and the features of diverse contemporary artistic practices. In the essays dedicated to theoretical problems, Eco's meta-reflexive inclination appears more clearly, while his critical philosophy stands out in those dedicated to practical problems.

The two tendencies that characterize Eco's philosophical approach – the applicative one and the critical one – seem to converge in a particular theme that occupies most of his research and that emerges in this period: the problem of form. It is an object of investigation but also a crucial device that advances his research in what might be described as a meta-theoretical way. The centrality of the problem of form is certainly confirmed in the many essays dedicated to

⁴Eco [1963b] 1983: 283-284.

aesthetic thought in medieval culture and contemporary artistic practices, but also in other texts that have been decisive for the grounding of his studies in semiotics. The essays collected in his *La struttura assente* (1968a) are one example in which the problem of form is addressed through analyses which are also articulated on two levels: the theoretical one – focused on the themes of meaning and signs, of information and codes, of the structure and production of forms – and the practical one – developed by reviewing problems concerning architecture, cinema, painting, and advertising.

Eco's philosophy, precisely because it was developed through application and criticism, is thus characterized by a versatility of investigation which proceeds on theoretical and practical levels.

2. *The Sense of Contradiction*

But why should these aspects concerning his philosophy interest us? And why should they be taken into account when considering the question of form mentioned above?

In my view, because it is precisely in Eco's philosophical approach to the problems of aesthetics and its objects of investigation – namely, from the issues of meaning and communication to those of poetics and works – that one finds the issue of form at the centre of his reflection. Rather than deal with mere semblance or the external aspects of a work, his is essentially a reflection on the adequacy of the operational, theoretical, and explanatory resources with respect to the variability of reality.

Making sense of the form of things means not only being able to grasp their essence, but also understanding how they are made. This recognition necessarily implies that there is a gap, a *difference*, between reality and knowledge. The ways of meaning that make it possible to understand the former, its aspects and the objects in the external world, are always susceptible to amendment. Theories are falsifiable. However, the very attempt to understand their objects grants them a form, that is, makes them intelligible and explainable. At the same time, one must also recognize the elusiveness, the contradictory nature of these objects. As Eco argues, it is also a matter of admitting that such difference is a sign of an underlying instability, perhaps even of a *non-origin* – at least according to the post-structuralist thinking that guided some of his investigations.⁵

Making sense of form is therefore also a matter of contradiction, or rather, the admission of a lack of perfection and, at the same time, a declaration of transformability. Eco keeps these two aspects in mind during the execution of his own studies, which confirms their centrality. Thus, form is not only the

⁵ See Eco 1968a.

object of his theoretical investigations but also a practical device for making a meta-theoretical point.

In his essays, this second aspect of form appears clearly: through writing, the content that the writer aims to communicate *takes form*. On several occasions Eco writes that his is not a unitary theoretical elaboration but a proposal of single parts which together reveal the relationships and connections of a global theoretical image. In the introduction to the first Italian edition of *The Open Work* (1962), he writes that the essays collected in the book offer different points of view to deal with the same phenomenon – indeterminacy in relation to disorder and the possibilities available to the arts to give it some form – in order to present a proposal for discussion. In the introduction to the second edition (1967), Eco specifies that those essays should be considered as studies of the history of poetics, that is, research on certain operational programs implemented by contemporary artists: studies that offer different readings around the problem of the semantic ambiguity of the arts in close relationship with the dialectic between form and openness, namely, between the work and its structural and interpretative variability.

Eco continues to emphasize the lack of unity in his theoretical proposal even at the beginning of *Kant and The Platypus* (1997), where he admits presenting not a theory but a set of studies that may have connections between them.⁶ In it he first of all argues about *being*, about its substantial and connective nature, about *something* and its possible interpretations. The gap between reality and knowledge returns to the foreground once again. The difference is also evident when the question arises: «Why is there being rather than nothing?». Indeed, Eco remarks that «[t]he very fact we can pose the question (which we could not pose if there were nothing, not even the posers of the question) means that the condition of every question is that being exists».⁷ More than just the world or merely the mind, in the transition from thing to word, Eco writes, being becomes a problem precisely because we talk about it. Nonetheless, the theory discovers its own limits, which makes it more or less adequate to explain its objects which may display their instability, variations, and contradictions.

However, in this section my concern is not an exegesis of the method that guides his writing. Rather, I would like to point out a symmetry: Eco's signaling on theoretical non-unity, on the multiplicity of points of view in his writings, reveals the centralization of the problem of form in his research program (especially in the phase preceding the elaboration of his semiotic theory), along with his conception of structure that is developed by considering its natural susceptibility to variations. I will consider the latter topic, while keeping form as the central focus, through an investigation of some of his early studies.

⁶ Cf. Eco 2000: 1-2.

⁷ *Ibidem*: 17.

Eco's critical path concerning the issue of form originates in his earliest writings and is intertwined with his investigations in philosophical aesthetics. In the study dedicated to the aesthetics of Aquinas, he notes that medieval aesthetics is much richer than its modern counterpart and considers it to be a sort of philosophy of art *ante litteram*. Developed at various moments by different authors, Eco considers it to be a set of observations regarding the challenges of understanding human practices and poetics. In the course of this study, Eco also focuses on aspects of his own method, namely, the aforementioned symmetry, which he achieves by reasoning about difference in terms of contradiction. Retrospectively, he notes that instead of being considered a defeat, contradiction is «a victory for those who believe in philosophical activity as something that is continually being repeated».⁸

Contradictions in theoretical systems indicate the degree of variability in their objects of investigation and in their structure. Precisely for this reason, addressing the problem of form means dealing with it not only as an object of investigation but also as an element of one's methodological operation – that is, as the first factor that questions the very stability of a theoretical model developed with specific aims in mind. In the preface of the second Italian edition of *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, while appraising a posthumous remark, Eco asserts the philosophical need to produce contradictions by observing that the Scholastic approach, which aimed to offer an immutable and systematized image of reality, had its limits. He writes:

Thomas Aquinas did his job with serious alacrity, which was to show that things had the immobile and perfect form that God had assigned to them. We must do our job showing that when we arrive at a satisfactory image of things, the proof that this image is satisfactory must be given by the fact that its deepening will generate a new contradiction.⁹

The contradiction is equally crucial. From it derives new ways of seeing things and new theoretical directions. And it is exactly these features that interested Eco since his earliest writings.

3. *Form as a 'Substantial Organism'*

The presuppositions for tackling the issue of form originate with a highly articulated reflection, one of a meta-theoretical nature, first developed in his study on Aquinas' aesthetics. According to Eco, Aquinas' aesthetics has two traits: it is coherent but, as a theoretical system, still contains a contradiction;

⁸ Eco [1956] 1982: 11.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

and, it is proof – one of the most comprehensive – of the presence of aesthetic reflections in the Middle Ages. Both traits attest to a pre-modern origin of aesthetics as a theory of beauty and art.

It is also an important precedent for the philosophy of art, one whose ‘identity’ is associated with the nineteenth century, as taught by the Hegelian lesson that understands it as a philosophy dedicated to the spirit that makes art possible, to its beauty, as well as to the deep bond between spirit and matter, thought and sensitivity. The philosophy of art, as Friedrich W. J. Schelling (1802-04) wrote, is based on the relationship between thought and reality to the extent that: «[a]rt is the real, the objective; philosophy is the ideal, the subjective. The task of the philosophy of art could therefore be predetermined in these terms: to present the real, contained in art, in the ideal».¹⁰ Schelling highlighted precisely the problem concerning the possibility of presenting what is real in the ideal. That is, in Eco’s terms, to develop a theoretical system that can give a satisfactory account of reality. It is, however, a system that, inevitably, also has flaws and can be inadequate. Once again Eco brings difference, found in theoretical elaborations since antiquity, to the forefront of the discussion.

Eco’s interest in the assumptions of medieval aesthetics is motivated by this awareness. Eco writes that art and beauty are the two main reference points for medieval aesthetics: a reflection, often not only philosophical but also theological, which investigates the production of works and experiences with nature to capture the most important traits of aesthetic pleasure.

The aesthetic issue in Aquinas is examined by first demonstrating the link with metaphysics. Eco’s first step is a reflection on being and its transcendental properties. More precisely, on beauty considered as a transcendental in the light of an aesthetic sensitivity, or as he clarifies: of an ‘aesthetic vision of things’, present in the classical tradition and recovered in the medieval one.¹¹ One of the most important theoretical implications of this investigation is the recognition of participation in Beauty, which Eco describes as a «constant property of all being».¹² He therefore develops a reflection on the relationship between form and beauty, a link that appears in the *Summa* of Albertus Magnus. Eco makes it clear that the form can be considered as the «objective character of Beauty» because, as he explains, «what distinguishes beauty is not the fact that it is regarded in a certain manner, but the fact that form shines forth, a fully objective harmony, in the proportioned parts of the material».¹³ Albertus Magnus insisted

¹⁰ Schelling [1802-04] 1997: 70.

¹¹ In this regard Eco writes: «However, the strongest impulse underlying the medieval aesthetic conception of the world came from neo-Platonism—to some extent from Proclus and Porphyry, but principally from Dionysus the Areopagite» (Eco 1988: 23).

¹² Eco 1988: 37.

¹³ *Ibidem*: 46.

on the objective aspect of Beauty by considering it a coextensive property of being, thus anticipating Aquinas. Recognizing the platonic influences in the reflections of Albertus Magnus, Eco notes that even for Aquinas, the Beautiful is a transcendental, «a property coextensive with being».¹⁴

In his study of medieval aesthetics, Eco examines a particular theme that is crucial for his investigations: that of the 'aesthetic visio', i.e. an immediate intuition of the aesthetic essence. With this concept Eco refers to a direct experience of contact and reception that concerns above all the form and its apprehension:

the distinctive character of the aesthetic *visio* is that it grasps the form in the sensible and through the sensible, and it is through the apprehensions of sense that the light of being enters the intellect. Aesthetic pleasure is the repose of the intellect when it rejoices without labour or discussion; freed from its natural labour of abstraction, it 'drinks the clarity of being.' The critical activity which properly belongs to the intellect comes afterward. The aesthetic moment is contemplative, uncritical, blessed.¹⁵

Eco also assumes that there is a link between an aesthetic and an intellectual intuition, trying to clarify whether the latter is conceivable in Thomistic thought. If so, the position of the visio (the immediate vision) is not between sensitive perception and intellectual abstraction. Rather than promoting a metaphysical vision, Thomistic aesthetics defends the possibility of a tangible and verifiable beauty of things. Moreover, Eco notes that three formal criteria of beauty are presented in it: proportion, integrity, and clarity – namely, criteria that allow for the identification of the aesthetic object. All three refer to the concept of "form", which Eco recognizes as decisive for the aesthetic thinking of Aquinas.

Through the investigation of the Thomistic texts, Eco emphasizes that form is pivotal because it determines how a certain thing can be and because it is an indispensable reference for the conferment of its aesthetic value. On the one hand, the Beautiful «is grounded in form», and on the other, «as a transcendental, for instance, is coextensive with being; but a thing has being insofar as it actualizes a rational structure that 'informs' the material».¹⁶ Furthermore, form is also a condition of possibility for perfection since the form «establishes certain conditions and determines others».¹⁷ In addition to being an «objective foundation of beauty»,¹⁸ form in fact has a dual nature which characterizes it:

¹⁴ *Ibidem*: 46.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*: 60.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*: 66.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*: 67.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

it is «an immanent pattern in things» and is «the thing itself conceived of as an ‘organism’ structured and governed by the inner laws of its composition».¹⁹

In light of these remarks, Eco develops his investigation by taking into account the teachings drawn from the philosophy of Luigi Pareyson (1954), for whom the form determines and organizes a thing because of its ‘internal laws’ – that is, by virtue of its autonomy, which is based on self-regulation and a purpose that make the design of a certain thing possible. Yet, if for Pareyson form is, on the one hand, determination, an organization that tends towards finiteness and coherence, it can, on the other hand, be considered in a relational perspective since it derives from one change and anticipates another. In this view, Eco argues, form can be considered ‘open’, i.e. always in formation.²⁰ This is crucial and allows Eco to show that for Aquinas, as opposed to Aristotle, form is conceived as essence, as substance, «the focal point of the organization, the selection, and the life of substance’s own multiple aspects. It means the structural constitution of a concrete thing».²¹

In this investigation, through which he assesses the possibility of conceiving the form as a «substantial organism»,²² Eco therefore identifies the prerequisites for theorizing about openness. The form, in this view, would be close enough to a substantial organism, «in its structural aspect» although «other than its ontological-metaphysical dependence».²³ Eco’s reasoning highlights the mutability that characterizes form – the uncertainty that enters the scene on the level of reality and that at times can also contradict its theoretical elaboration. For this reason, Eco writes, regarding the issue of proportion: «as we shall see, the concrete reality was constantly undergoing change even though its philosophical definition might remain the same».²⁴

4. *The Law of Form*

The adequacy and stability of theories are at the heart of Eco’s critical reflection, who elaborates his theses in order to study objects that also show their instability and indeterminacy. The field of the arts, a set of human practices originally much wider than it is understood today,²⁵ is therefore an important reference for his research to which he regularly returns.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*: 68.

²⁰ See Eco 1988: 68.

²¹ *Ibidem*: 69.

²² *Ibidem*: 71.

²³ Eco [1956] 1982: 98-99; this is an important clarification which is available in the Italian edition of Eco’s essay.

²⁴ Eco 1988: 80.

²⁵ In his research Eco studies the arts by considering, on the one hand, the extension of the conceptual domain – the modern concept of ‘art’ indicates an area of human activity circum-

In the middle of Twentieth Century the arts reached their maximum transformation. While theories concerning the arts often declared their state of crisis, Eco paid attention to various phenomena that were crucial for their evolutions: the renewal of the production of forms, the uncertainty and ambiguity of aesthetic messages, the interpretative variability of the audience. To address these phenomena, Eco retains the 'openness' of the work as its main reference. First and foremost, Eco identifies two essential relationships: the one between the artist and the work, and the one between the audience and the work. The artist tries to achieve different goals with their work, while the audience offers multiple readings of it, grasping some (or perhaps very few) of the former. Indeed, one of the first conclusions Eco reached is that artists appeal to the «autonomy of perspectives for enjoyment».²⁶ Namely, artists encourage the openness of the enjoyment an audience might have of their works. It is therefore evident that in this phase of his research, Eco is particularly focused on the investigation of the poetics, the work programs of the artists, as well as the resources regarding the level of enjoyment, and more particularly, the act of interpretation.

This initial framework of the theme of openness reveals a theoretical legacy that we cannot overlook – namely, the conception of form that Pareyson developed in his aesthetic theory. Pareyson's theoretical model certainly influenced Eco's reflections; nonetheless, Eco questions that very conception of form and grants it a particular space in his research.

To shed light on these aspects, first and foremost it is important to outline the primary assumptions of Pareyson's "theory of formativity," which is not oriented by principles such as intuition or expression, but rather by those of invention and production. Central to his aesthetic theory is the "formative activity" that determines the creation of a work, namely the performative possibility that animates the artistic production. In addition to the technical and inventive aspects, Pareyson places form in close relation with the process of the work's production, considering the form to be its outcome in a very particular sense: the work is 'pure form', in which multiple elements are coordinated and organized by virtue of its internal articulation – not only in relation to content or material, but above all, to its dynamic character. The work is thus the result of an activity, the artistic one, which has its own legitimacy in being animated by the attempt to invent and organize forms according to the poetics of each artist. Forming therefore means doing. In fact, his theory examines artistic production in its unfolding, offering a conception of the work of art as a 'form' that makes

scribed, differently from the ancient one used for a large heterogeneous set of human practices –, and on the other, the centrality of doing, of operational programs and of the role of rules for doing something in artistic practices. For more details on these topics see in particular Eco (ed.) 1969; Eco [1962] 2006; Eco 1998.

²⁶ Eco [1958] 1983: 165.

manifest a 'way of making art'. The problem of the work's value is therefore linked both to its being 'formed form' and to its nature as 'forming form'.

According to Pareyson, aesthetics operates in philosophy at the intersection of experience and reason. Through his theory, he aimed to explain art by considering it as a formative and human practice oriented by and to its form. Precisely for this reason he coined the concept of «formativity» to indicate a union of invention and production, a practice «which in the course of doing invents 'the way of doing'». ²⁷ In other words, formativity is the act of forming which brings with itself the process of forming and – this is a crucial aspect – which culminates in the production of forms, i.e. of the artworks. As the result of an activity that has autonomy, its own law, the works are successful when they are defined by the very form that makes them beautiful and interpretable.

In this regard, Pareyson writes that «the work, no matter the activity that completes it, cannot succeed if it is not a defined and coherent form»; ²⁸ he also clarifies that:

the character of the form is precisely that it can be contemplated, that is its beauty, so that the same process of interpretation through which we reach a moral or speculative appreciation of a practical or intellectual work also refers to the verification of the character of form it necessarily possesses, and therefore to an aesthetic appreciation. ²⁹

Concerning these theses at the root of his theory, it is important to recognize two aspects.

First, Pareyson defends his theory by establishing a link between beauty, form, and interpretation: the form is conceivable as a metaphysical scheme that determines the appearance of the work, and thus, is constitutive of its being; the work's appreciation, i.e. the ability to recognize beauty, is influenced by the form but always the product of an interpretation.

Second, he elaborates an explanation of art in light of the relationship between thought and morality, which above all reveals the role of interpretation by the artist. Artistic activity, in order to be such, requires thought and morality ³⁰ because the act of forming consists of both. ³¹ The thought «is subordinated to

²⁷ Pareyson [1954] 2002: 18.

²⁸ *Ibidem*: 20.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Cf. *Ibidem*: 24.

³¹ The relationship between thought and morality, which Pareyson considers decisive for artistic activity and which he poses at the center of his aesthetic investigation, is nowadays a relevant subject in the contemporary debate on art and ethics. The questions dealt with concern various themes: the possibility that works of art can negatively influence, from a moral point of view, the audience; the artist's freedom of expression and possible censorship of the artworks; the 'moral

the formative intention and regulated by the criterion of pure formativity»,³² and morality – deriving from the personality of the artist – is a decision that determines a practical commitment. The work of art therefore implies both. More precisely, it is made possible by «a personal way of thinking and acting, a specific interpretation of reality and a particular attitude towards life».³³

Emphasizing the relevance of thought and morality for Pareyson means placing the *person*, i.e. the artist, at the centre of his theory: an artist's sensations, thoughts, and actions inform and animate their activity. In his view, indeed, this vitality has a peculiar trait: it is necessarily determined by form. Thus, Pareyson writes that «the artist thinks, feels, sees, acts through forms»,³⁴ namely, the artist imprints the work with a particular spirit or style and does so through acts of formativity, that is, by being inclined to pursue form and to form for the sake of forming.

Pareyson's theory is therefore characterized by a deep bond that he establishes between person and form. His idea of the work reveals this deep bond: «[t]he work of art then acquires a very unique character, because it is both matter and spirit, physicality and personality, object and interiority».³⁵ In fact, in order for art to exist, form needs a material that is defined through the pure forming. In other words, a material is required «to make the form exist»,³⁶ to the degree that, «once formed, it must present itself as a pure form, a form that is nothing but form».³⁷ This purity is due to the autonomous possibility that form has of defining material, of making it what it is. It is formed material that has a content, the artist's person in terms of the personal and spiritual character of the artist's style. As he explains, «[m]aking a work of art means only to form a material, and to form it solely for the sake of forming; but in the way in which it is formed, the entire spirituality of the artist is present as a formative energy».³⁸ Therefore, the work *does not merely express* the person of the artist;

rights' towards works of art – e.g. about their ways of conservation and displaying. Depending on the centrality of the link between ethics and aesthetics, admitting or rejecting it, the debate opens up to reflections of different types. For a general overview of these issues, see Gaut 2005. To deepen the main positions that animate the debate (moralism, autonomism and immoralism) and the normative implications, with particular attention to the aesthetic and cognitive values of the works of art and the role of emotions and imagination, see Gaut 2007.

³² Pareyson [1954] 2002: 25.

³³ *Ibidem*: 26.

³⁴ *Ibidem*: 24.

³⁵ *Ibidem*: 54.

³⁶ *Ibidem*: 27.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem*: 54.

rather, according to Pareyson, the work «*is*, as an indivisible whole, the person of the artist who has become a whole material object».³⁹

In his theory, form is an operative element that organizes the work through its very production. It has two features: on the one hand, form manifests itself through the forming process; on the other hand, it determines its own laws. According to Pareyson, form is inalterability and invariability since it is definition, order, and coherence. Form is ultimately the law of organization—so much so that the work of art is «adaptation to itself»⁴⁰ simply because it finds its constitution in form. The latter therefore assumes its incontrovertible character, which is determined by the will of the person who makes it possible. The artist gives a certain form to the work. This occurs in a certain way and not otherwise because it cannot contradict that formulation. «That the work is as it should be and should be as it is, is due to the fact that it was formed in the only way it could and should have been done».⁴¹

Therefore, the successful coherence and completion of a work depend exactly on the form's adherence to its own rules. Namely, its unmodifiability, its uniqueness, and the fixity it determines. Pareyson explains this condition with the concept of «unitotality» [unitotalità], decisive for the integrity of the work.

In the work of art, the parties have a double kind of relationship: each with the others and each with the whole. All the parts are connected to each other in an indissoluble unity, so that each is essential and indispensable and has a specific and irreplaceable location, to the point that a lack would dissolve the unity and any variation would bring disorder. The parts, so connected and joined together, constitute and outline the whole: the integrity of the work results from the connection of the parts with each other.⁴²

The unitotality of the work is the fulfilment of the formative process, its conclusion in the form that gives it its own law of organization. To obtain this result, the artist must first of all learn to make art or imitate and interpret a performative model. The artist begins to do this by repeating models and making her or his own indications that she or he can interpret as *ideas* for doing, as ways of operating.

A final element that must be mentioned in order to clarify how Pareyson's theory influenced Eco's philosophy and his theses regarding the openness of the work of art is that of interpretation.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*: 78.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*: 106.

⁴² *Ibidem*: 107.

Pareyson confers to interpretation a key role for the production of art and for its reception. As «a type of exquisitely active and personal knowledge»,⁴³ interpretation has a productive and formative character which, according to Pareyson, is decisive for the artist and for the audience. Interpretation is receptivity and activity. Through it a person creates and knows a form. Therefore, the artist values what can be considered the interpretative guides for their work. The audience primarily knows why they interpret, that is, why the object of their knowledge ‘resonates’ for them after having been ‘attuned’ to it. This is so, Pareyson writes, because the person is also a form and knows other forms only because one interprets them.

5. *The Structure Principle*

The theory of formativity is an important reference for Eco’s philosophical research and some of its specific theses are particularly influential. For example, those on the physicality of the forming activity and the dialogue with the work’s material orient his thinking on two topics: the way of forming as a commitment to reality;⁴⁴ and the idea that the work is a concrete statement of a poetics, that is, of the work program of an artist.⁴⁵ The remarks on the formative and productive traits of interpretation, and those on its centrality for the production and reception of art, influence Eco in the elaboration of his theses on the open work. He had already underlined these ideas at the end of the 1950s, observing that if openness is usually linked to interpretation in art, things go differently with works that give form to what is indeterminate and indefinite. In these cases, «the use consists in the productive completion of the work; the productive completion in which the act of interpretation itself also ends, because the way of completion manifests the particular vision that the audience has of the work».⁴⁶

The issue, which certainly remains central and at the same time becomes the object of careful investigation, is precisely that of form. Pareyson considers it the result of a process, the outcome of an activity that ends in it. He underlines its unequivocally static nature, its determination and stability. Even though it may be an outcome (the formed form) and also the order that makes it possible (the forming form), the form is ultimately a conclusion, a completion. As a form, the work is complete and unchangeable. Any mutation it might undergo – Pareyson considers in particular transformations of taste and style – is

⁴³ *Ibidem*: 179.

⁴⁴ Cf. Eco 1962: 235-290.

⁴⁵ Cf. Eco [1963a] 1983: 263.

⁴⁶ Eco [1958] 1983: 167.

also affected by an ‘opening’. That is to say, by a possible reconciliation between spirituality and art which is in any case oriented by and to the form: «a certain spirituality already has [...] its own way of forming, that is, an artistic vocation and a congenial style».⁴⁷

On the contrary, according to Eco, the openness primarily concerns a *replacement* that is carried out by the artist on her or his work and that makes the subsequent interpretative autonomy of the audience possible – an autonomy that derives from a change that occurs, first and foremost, on the plane of form. In fact, his explanation in the initial phase of his research is as follows: «the definition of an ‘object’ is replaced by the broader definition of a ‘field’ of interpretative possibilities».⁴⁸

Eco takes the first step in this direction in his study on Aquinas by recognizing the link between aesthetic visio and form – a link on the basis of which the criteria of ontological perfection (the *proportio*: a balance between form and substance; the *integritas*: the substantial completeness) are no longer as decisive as the aesthetic one (the *claritas*: the brightness emanating from what is beautiful). In this regard, Eco writes: «But if we take clarity to mean the capacity in a form to signify its own structure, then we see that form signifies itself as something with integrity and proportion, but only to a perception of it as, precisely, a structure».⁴⁹ The attempt to grasp the essence of things is therefore linked to the possibility of recognizing their mutability, their continuous renewal, and their integrity, which is nonetheless a trace of the variability in agreement with the possibility that the form is a substantial organism. In this sense, Eco also underlines the need to question the primacy of synchrony: the stability and definition of the form is more than questionable. There is a gap between reality and theoretical explanation, which also applies to the philosophical enterprise. «Whenever philosophy claims, ‘This is how things really are’, it performs an act of mystification».⁵⁰

These are relevant remarks that prove crucial for Eco’s reflection on the objective condition of beauty and on the formal foundation of aesthetic value, as well as for the development of his research. If one were to consider the broader context of the reflection on the relationship between nature and culture, Eco develops his research program – from signs to cultural transformations – through an investigation that begins with form, proceeds toward structure, and then

⁴⁷ Pareyson [1954] 2002: 30. Pareyson further develops his thinking on the issues of form, interpretation, and the completeness of the work in some writings subsequent to his theory. See Pareyson 1966.

⁴⁸ Eco [1958] 1983: 166.

⁴⁹ Eco 1988: 190.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*: 215.

ultimately arrives at the code and encyclopedia.⁵¹ In light of these remarks, Eco reaches conclusions which in this sense are of paramount importance: Thomistic aesthetics «focused upon the notion of form, understood as something which can be broken down into elementary parts, the parts being united with one another by means of their relations».⁵² It is an aesthetic of the diachronic. Indeed, one aspect that he underlines in Aquinas is that *essentia*, as a principle of continuous activity and thus as a procedural impulse, is above all nature. From this he begins a reflection on synchrony – the fixity that returns the characteristics of a form within a framework of a structure – and the dialectical diachrony or the evolution of reflection, the evolution of a phenomenon over time.

Synchrony can be connected with dialectical diachrony only if understood within the framework of a dialectic of facts and that synchronic analysis is a purely methodological instrument of a provisional nature. Synchrony, the static formalization of things, cannot connect with dialectic unless it is defined as a methodological moment, an indispensable moment but one which is subordinate to the larger dialectical enterprise.⁵³

Eco places that enterprise at the heart of his theses on the open work, describing it as a dialectic between a form, understood as a system of relationships or structure, and the possibilities of interpretation by those who develop it and those who experience it. In this regard, by presenting a balance of the methodologies in the aesthetic field, Eco clarifies that «through the ‘way of forming’ one can understand everything that was *before* the work, and from the way of forming one is referred to everything that comes *after*».⁵⁴ In some cases, a work can therefore be considered a ‘field of possibilities’, that is, essentially a structure, a system of relationships resulting from its variability, which can also appear through its conformation.

Synchrony is permanence, settlement. It is the relationship between constituent elements which, regardless of evolution over time, guarantees continuity according to a linear order. Diachrony is variability, the process of becoming over time. It carries a trace of indeterminacy. Eco notes that the form, due to its association with synchrony, should be considered an indispensable but temporary tool. Alternatively, he aims at a broader dialectical hypothesis that is proper to diachrony, namely, the recognition of a set of relationships that can be influenced by uncertainty and variability. This set of relationships which is susceptible to diachrony is the structure. Eco does not aim to deny form as a

⁵¹ These passages can be found by considering, in particular, Eco 1962, 1968a, 1975, 1997.

⁵² Eco 1988: 216.

⁵³ *Ibidem*: 221-222.

⁵⁴ Eco [1963c] 1983: 292.

foundation, but to show that form can reveal uncertainty when structures are developed that become its concrete trace.

Instead of assuming an ontological contrast between inactivity and dynamism, Eco proposes the opening of the work, or of the form, that shows it to be a set of relationships. Precisely for this reason the work allows us to consider it as a structure, the result of a dialectic that is subject to variability both in terms of the artist's activity and the audience's reception.⁵⁵ Indeed, Eco is interested in the revelation of the links and the constitutive relationships of certain works which, as they are made, render the gap between fact and interpretation explicit, and which also lack an identifiable foundation, and thus, allow for their re-evaluation as fields of possibility rather than as objects.

The relationship between formalization and possibility therefore stands clearly at the centre of his remarks. Eco tackles this connection through an investigation of structure which considers it an indispensable reference point for grasping changeability – one that eludes and is subject to variability – rather than as an ultimate foundation that is already given, an ontological invariant. The structure relies on the internal cohesion of its constituent parts; however, it is equally the result of the transformations that occur among them and their articulations.⁵⁶ In accordance with these assumptions, Eco develops his studies by considering the form in relation to the structure as a system of relationships.

When considering the transformations of the arts, Eco applies this conception to show that some works can be examined not on the level of their physical consistency but on that of their constituent relationships: «a structure is a form not as a concrete object but as a system of relationships, relationships between its different levels (semantic, syntactic, physical, emotional; level of themes and level of ideological contents; level of structural relations and structured response of the receptor, etc.)».⁵⁷

Openness in the arts is therefore the revelation of a relational model. The work is open because it is a structure subject to variability. It is neither defined nor unequivocally static, but is rather elaborated by the artist and completed by the audience. It is a field of possibilities that is offered to them and that they can freely experience and interpret. Therefore, on the one hand, openness is the dynamism of the work's structure; and on the other hand, it is completion based on interpretative possibilities. Eco's first analyses therefore show that certain ways of working in music, literature, and painting (considering, for example, the compositions of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luciano Berio, the writing of James Joyce, and non-figurative painting) are expressions of a

⁵⁵ Cf. Eco [1962] 2006.

⁵⁶ See Eco [1968a] 2002.

⁵⁷ Eco [1962] 2006: 21.

new dialectic between work and audience, which also serve as a useful model to explain cultural developments.

Indeed, by claiming that form should be considered as a structure, as a system of relationships in which it is articulated, Eco clarifies that what he seeks is a useful *model* for explaining transformations in the arts. In his work, the structure is therefore a principle, a decisive foundation, which he investigates while maintaining, as a point of reference, the oscillation between object and model, between the dialectical reflection on the form and the effectiveness of its systemic and differential nature.⁵⁸

By admitting that a structuralist impulse crosses the history of thought from Aristotelian philosophy to that of the twentieth century, Eco also considers the structure to be «an operational tool aimed at the discourse on the concrete field of the phenomena addressed».⁵⁹ But in order to grasp this epistemological arrangement, it is important to recognize that the structure also reveals the modifiability of the phenomena observed through it. In fact, what is constant in them are precisely the relationships in their variability. In light of these aspects, Eco thus criticizes the totalizing and static conception of form that Pareyson formulates, precisely because it remains free from variability or adjustments—that is, primarily because the structure is included in the forming project without recognizing the imperfections and irregularities that also belong to it. Instead, these latter are what «bring his phenomenology of art into much more human dimensions».⁶⁰

The form, particularly when conceived in its adamant perfection, cannot respond to the variability and mutations of the flow of events and their vital dynamism. As Georg Simmel also acknowledged, life necessarily enters into friction with form precisely because the latter is form, an attempt at fixity and stability.⁶¹

What it means for Eco to recognize these more human dimensions, in the wake of his investigations on the relationship between nature and culture, can be clarified by considering that, in agreement with his studies, the structure should be considered as an ‘index of variability’. I will try to clarify this concept. Let us imagine having something we call X. The thing is how it is because of its form. However, the form of X is not only its appearance (A), but also the compositional order (F¹) that made it possible. In other words, we hold that: the form (F¹) is at the origin of X; but, being also its appearance (A), the form

⁵⁸ Cf. Eco [1968a] 2002: 259-263.

⁵⁹ Eco [1968a] 2002: 323.

⁶⁰ Eco [1993] 2016: 223.

⁶¹ See Simmel [1918] 1999.

is likewise its conclusion (F²). To clarify this relationship, we can consider the following scheme which I believe can be derived from Eco's thesis:

$$F^1 \rightarrow X \rightarrow A (F^2)$$

Thus, that structure (S) is an index of variability means that it shows that F² could very well not coincide with F¹, or that between the assumption of the stability at the origin of X and its final appearance there may be discrepancies or the realization that the stability of the form is only temporary. The position of the structure in the scheme proposed above is therefore that of an operating tool that detects the indeterminacy, variability, and transformations that may occur in it. The scheme which also includes the structure would then be the following:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{--- S ---} \\ | \qquad \qquad | \\ F^1 \rightarrow X \rightarrow A (F^2) \end{array}$$

The scheme takes into account two aspects of Eco's reflection on the structure that he identifies in the Aristotelian teaching: on the one hand, the relationship between idea scheme and substance, and on the other, the oscillation between concrete form and formal model.⁶²

6. *Elements for a Positive Philosophy of the Arts*

Eco's remarks on the themes of form and structure are certainly an interesting subject of discussion. However, their value can be recognized if particular attention is paid to their use for understanding the evolution of the arts. Eco formulates his theses at a time when, on a national and international level, the arts and the discourses on them are in great turmoil. Between the 1960s and 1970s – from the critical studies of Clement Greenberg, Leo Steinberg, Harold Rosenberg, Lucy Lippard to the semiological ones of Roland Barthes and philosophical studies of Susanne K. Langer, Arthur C. Danto, and Nelson Goodman – the need to formulate useful theories to explain the continuous transformations of the arts becomes increasingly evident. Moreover, these transformations could not be attributed solely to the primacy of form, that is, to their ultimate and unequivocal results. In some cases, artistic practices can end in form; but in others, they can also oppose it.

⁶² For further information on Aristotle's teaching, see in particular Eco [1968a] 2002: 256-258; on the developments of Eco's investigation of the oscillation between object and model, see *Ibidem*: 259-284.

At the level of artistic creation, friction can occur and a gap can impose itself. As the critic Gillo Dorfles recognized while developing his technical discourse on the arts, the need for artistic creation is accompanied by other forming principles. The latter, however, are applicable as constants only to the extent that reality and, above all, the means of expression are taken into account and ultimately make it possible to implement what the artist would like to do. The work is the result of a practice and its unexpected outcomes, along with the changeability of the artist's decisions and preferences. On the basis of these assumptions, it is possible to recognize the continuous evolution of the arts and the renewal of forms.⁶³

From the point of view of the theoretical investigation of the arts, the possibility of considering form in relation to structure presents a precious opportunity, for two reasons: because it considers the openness that characterizes certain works, and because it permits the continuous evolution of artistic practices. In the first case, the object of investigation is the field of interpretative possibilities that the work offers. In the second, it supports the variability that can interfere with the elaboration of a form. In this sense, Eco's conception of 'structure' differs from others who nonetheless offer important resources that broaden the reflection he inaugurated and consider the applicability of his theses for explaining the evolutions of the arts. For instance, the psychologist Jean Piaget considers structure to be a system of transformations identifying three characteristics: totality, transformations, and self-regulation. The totality of structure brings together several elements that are related to each other, and it is precisely this relationality that makes totality possible. Structure is not a static form but gives rise to formalization. In order for this to be possible, it implies a structuring activity susceptible to transformation. Structure is therefore a system characterized by mobility, by the possibility of change. Certainly, the transformations influence the structure. However, it is also characterized by self-regulation, which guarantees its conservation and closure. In this regard, Piaget makes it clear that «the transformations inherent in a structure do not lead outside its borders, but only generate elements that always belong to the structure and that maintain its laws».⁶⁴ The closure of the structure is therefore a definition of its self-regulation, that is, the organization of its laws which also allows for its possible links to other structures due to their consistency.

Among the three characteristics, Piaget focuses in particular on transformation. Eco, in contrast, asserts that if on the one hand the form is not definitive, then on the other the structure is crucial to allow for the variability, indeterminacy, and the possibility that there are multiple forms. His emphasis

⁶³ For more details on these themes see in particular Dorfles 1952, 1959, 1973.

⁶⁴ Piaget [1968] 1994: 44.

is therefore on relationality: the structure is a system of relationships.⁶⁵ Identifying the structure of an object means recognizing a «general model» that could allow that object to connect with others.⁶⁶ Dorflès also went in this direction, noting that a structure, as a global system, can also imply different and even contradictory forms.⁶⁷

Given the continuous transformations that characterize the arts, and considering the needs that are encountered on the theoretical level to face them, Eco's proposal fits equally well within the framework of a reflection developed in the contemporary philosophy of art. As Joseph Margolis writes, to investigate the relationship between art and the rest of cultural phenomena – also admitting that art's meaning is culturally emergent – does not mean denying any discontinuities or theoretical overlaps.⁶⁸ Furthermore, an inquiry into art's link with culture cannot help but imply a connection to art rooted in human nature.⁶⁹ Once again we find a reflection on the dynamism of life, that is, the variability and changes that can also occur in the arts. The starting point could thus be precisely these latter aspects. The sense of a positive philosophy, in agreement with Maurizio Ferraris, would focus on the possibility of developing theories that begin with concreteness, variability, and the things of the world.⁷⁰ That is to say, as Eco has written several times, this means admitting the gap between reality and theory, and thus, considering difference and possible contradiction as resources for a theoretical inquiry.

In light of Eco's conception of structure, we can derive four principles that suggest foundations for a positive philosophy of the arts. I will illustrate them briefly below, even though they have yet to be fully articulated.

(1) *Considering the gap*. Life, the flow of events, can be explained by theory. However, it runs up against obvious limitations when it fails to grasp variations and offer effective explanations. As for the arts, in the course of the twentieth century, philosophers have worked to find a suitable definition. But the problem seems to be that this goal is better suited to an abstract object rather than one that is concrete and subject to possible variability. Concepts can be defined, but how should one proceed with the arts (in the sense of practices, works, materials)? The philosophical definition of art may not suffice. It is

⁶⁵ This meaning is also very important to clarify the concept of 'structure' as an index of variability.

⁶⁶ See Eco [1962] 2006: 21.

⁶⁷ For further details on the reflection on the limits and possibilities of a structuralist aesthetic, see Dorflès [1968] 1979: 204-242; for further information on his remarks on the relationship between form and structure, see in particular *Ibidem*: 211-214.

⁶⁸ See Margolis 1977.

⁶⁹ See Carroll 2004.

⁷⁰ See Ferraris 2015.

therefore important to take into account the gap between reality and theory, the possibility that the second loses its bearings in relation to the resistance posed by the former. It is the renewal of the forms, their possible opening, which first of all implies thinking about the structure, that is, into their relationships and transformations, and thus their variability.

(2) *Admitting variability.* Pareyson's theory shows its limitations for at least two reasons: (i) doing invents the way of doing, and thus there is no project or ideation, as formativity is only the affirmation of the person who works in a manner oriented to and from the form – there are numerous cases in which this thesis is contradicted by projects, the organization of ideas, and activities that guide doing; (ii) the works are forms, and thus defined and unequivocal results, attestations of the stability and conclusion of the process – there are works of art, considering in particular the transformations since the 1960s, that can express or even be identified with their processes and thus are neither definitive nor completed. Eco's theory therefore introduces a very important element: the possibility of tracing variability. His relational conception of form is in fact valuable for trying to consider works by assuming that they are essentially more or less open structures, that is, indexes of different types of variability. According to the scheme proposed in the previous section, considering the structure of the work means considering it in light of the organic nature, the relationship with the flow of events, the instabilities of the processes, and the possibility of expressing indeterminacy.

(3) *Investigating poetics.* These last aspects are expressed by what artists do, by their work programs, their poetics. According to Eco, the structure is an operational tool useful for identifying a system of relationships that would allow different works to be shared. The starting point is therefore art as a concrete engagement in reality—the practices of artists that can be indexed through the investigation of the works. And even if the works are the fruits of conceptualism, they are still materials, concrete entities, physical objects that can have different degrees of expression.⁷¹

(4) *Reformulating critical discourse.* The discourse about the arts also needs to take these parameters into account. The itinerary for a critical reflection should therefore not proceed from theory to objects, but from objects to theory, that is, from reality to a possible explanation that takes into account the possible variations of the form.⁷² Or in other words, a contradiction, which in every sense is pivotal for the philosophical investigation. Exactly as Eco teaches.

⁷¹ To learn more, see in particular Eco [1985] 2015: 155-168.

⁷² On the possibilities of critical discourse, see in particular Eco [1968a] 2002: 270-278.

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