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The Concept of Mimesis: History, Meaning, and Epistemic Context

Mimesis Kavramı: Tarih, Anlam ve Epistemik Bağlam

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Abstract

From Ancient Greece the concept of mimesis largely defines our understanding of art right up until the end of the eighteenth century, when it is drastically suppressed, until it re-emerges in the mid-twentieth century with a new focus, characterized not through philosophical aesthetics this time, but through the social and cultural sciences. Viewed historically and systematically, mimesis or imitation can be reconstructed as a concept which revolves around two poles, namely a world-reproducing and a world-creating pole, that fundamental aspect of art as a realistic mirror of nature, and art as its own, autonomous world. As imitation of action mimesis finally proves to be a primarily practical and social capacity.

Öz

Antik Yunan'dan başlayarak on sekizinci yüzyılın sonuna dek sanat anlayışımızı büyük ölçüde belirleyen mimesis kavramı, bu dönemde radikal biçimde baskılanmış, ancak yirminci yüzyılın ortalarında bu kez felsefi estetiğin çerçevesinde değil, sosyal ve kültürel bilimler bağlamında farklı bir odakla yeniden ortaya çıkmıştır. Tarihsel ve sistematik açıdan bakıldığında, mimesis ya da taklit, sanatın hem doğanın gerçekçi bir aynası olma hem de kendi özerk dünyasını kurma yönündeki temel boyutlarını ifade eden, dünyayı yeniden üreten ve dünyayı yaratan iki kutup etrafında yeniden inşa edilebilecek bir kavram olarak belirir. Eylemin taklidi olarak mimesis, nihayetinde esasen pratik ve toplumsal bir yeti olduğunu kanıtlamaktadır.

Keywords

Imitation of nature,
creation,
realism,
action,
philosophical
aesthetics,
social and cultural
sciences

Anahtar Kelimeler

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Introduction

Mimesis may rightly be deemed the oldest and at the same time most sustainable philosophical-aesthetic concept. From Ancient Greece it largely defined our understanding of art right up until the end of the eighteenth century, when it was drastically yet not altogether suppressed. In Ancient Greek, the word “mimesis” stems from “mimos,” a Thespian, an actor, or more loosely a presenter, and translates to the Latin “imitatio,” the English “imitation” and the German “Nachahmung” (imitation) or “Nachbildung” (copy or replica or reproduction). A crucial element of the concept has always been that imitation presupposes that there is something to be imitated, and something worth imitating; and equally crucial is that imitation cannot create anything new. Viewed historically and systematically, however, the meaning of mimesis can be analytically reconstructed using precisely the concept of the creation. What appears to be the external opposite of mimesis increasingly emerges as its internal anti-pole. Via various important conceptual-historical stages along the way, imitation and formation, emulation and creation, orientation to a pre-given and invention of something new ultimately become one. In the words of Stephen Halliwell, mimesis is “an intrinsically double-faced and ambiguous concept”; a concept which revolves around two poles, namely a “world-reflecting” and a “world-creating” pole, that fundamental aspect of art as a “mirror” of nature, and art as its own, autonomous, fictive world.¹

Ancient Ontology

It was Plato who first theorized about the concept of mimesis, and his theory was sufficiently critical to render mimesis a topic for the philosophy of aesthetics and for art. Plato’s criticism was essentially twofold: firstly, concerning the ontological status of mimetic actions and productions, and secondly concerning their pedagogical-moral impact. He formulated – as to point one - his famous ontological criticism in the tenth book of *Republic*. Using the example of painting, he presents the reasons fundamentally dictating that art must be banned from the ideal state. A work of art is the “mirroring” of a random individual object, which according to Plato’s theory of forms is in turn the replica of a “form” or an idea – a bed can only be crafted if a mental picture and therefore a concept of a bed already exists.² Insofar a work of art is the “imitation of a phenomenon” the imitation of an object produced from a conceptual template as its orientation; and, as such, a work of art is furthest away from how something truly is.³ As an “imitator” or “recreator”, the artist ranks third in the hierarchy of divine creator of beings or essences beyond the world of phenomena (‘transcendental Ego,’ as Kant would call such a creator) and a materially

¹ Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 22–23.

² Plato, *Politeia*, trans. Friedrich Schleiermacher, ed. Walter F. Otto and Ernesto Grassi (Rowohlt, 1958), 596e.

³ Platon, *Politeia*, 598b.

productive creator of works.⁴ Insofar as Plato measures mimesis ontologically against truth or reality as that which truly exists, it is primarily associated with deception.

This understanding of mimesis has become canonical for the conception of art. Somewhat dramatically, one could say that it has “hunted” and persecuted aesthetics like a curse.⁵ Plato himself ultimately linked his criticism with a call to ban art from the ideal state altogether. Actually, the traditional interpretation of Plato’s writing that mimetic works are (aesthetic) imitations of (crafted, material) imitations of (conceptual) forms overlooks the fact that it is not nearly as unambiguous as it initially appears. One could even call this interpretation “seriously misleading.”⁶ It certainly bears no relation to an understanding of mimesis discussed by Plato himself in the 3rd book of *Republic*. Here he relates mimesis not to poetry or painting, but to music. The “original connection” within Ancient Greek culture namely consists in dance, that is group dance, which “rules out all realism from the start.”⁷ “Mimos” to this extent means “the actor of bacchantic consecrations,” the “presenter of, participant in the orgiastic game.”⁸ Accordingly, the concept of mimesis primarily means not deception, but presentation.

This leads into the second main level of criticism for Plato, which is not ontological, but pedagogical-moral. It is not the possibility of deceptive imitation, which is a problem here, not a wrong presentation of what really is, but the possibility of exposing one’s own identity by identifying with what is wrong, namely the multitude of passions. Problematic, therefore, is not the work of art as a result of mimesis, but the execution of mimesis itself, as well as its consequence for the executing subject: the mimetic dissolution of ego identity.⁹

With Aristotle, things take an affirmative turn, and a significant re-accentuation takes place. The dualistic core interpretation of mimesis as reference to the world and yet creation of the world, as art epistemically dependent of reality and yet pursuing its own rationality, unequivocally shifts its focus to the latter. The narrow and predominantly disparaging interpretation of mimesis as mere imitating, reproducing, copying, recedes into the background. “Notwithstanding Plato”, Aristotle provides with this philosophically clear and newly substantiated orientation to “presentation” the “most influential and most adaptable” of all conceptions of mimetic art.¹⁰

It is true that one cannot call upon *Poetics*, that work by Aristotle so key to the theory of art, to substantiate mimesis as art imitating nature. In it and many other texts about poetry, the

⁴ Platon, *Politeia*, 597d/e.

⁵ Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 5th ed. (Phaidon, 1977), 83.

⁶ Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 138.

⁷ Heinz Koller, *Die Mimesis in der Antike. Nachahmung, Darstellung, Ausdruck* (Francke, 1954), 45; cf. 104.

⁸ Heinz Koller, *Die Mimesis in der Antike*, 39, 47.

⁹ Cf. Plato, *Politeia*, 395c; Koller, *Die Mimesis in der Antike*, 57; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Platons dialektische Ethik und andere Studien zur Platonischen Philosophie* (Meiner, 1968), 198f.

¹⁰ Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 151; cf. 152.

expression is namely nowhere to be found.¹¹ *Poetics* is far more concerned with “mímesis práxeon kai bíon.” “Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life.”¹² Life consists in actions “that do have their end in themselves and therefore make sense in itself.”¹³ Practice excludes actions which, for example in the case of crafting, are only the means to something, namely the means to an end. By presenting human actions guided by the senses, on the other hand, poetic mimesis elicits certain reactions in its audience, namely insight and “purification” (*catharsis*), and does so through *phobos* and *eleos*, traditionally translated as fear and pity, but more recently also as shudder and misery.¹⁴

Aristotle discusses mimesis not only in the poetological-aesthetic, but also in the anthropological and natural philosophical context, however. Accordingly, poetry can essentially be traced back, firstly, to the specific capability of human beings to imitate, and to learn through imitation, as displayed from earliest childhood.¹⁵ This is an anthropological and psychological-pedagogical finding which has held strong right up until the scientific debates of today. Aristotle’s dynamic concept of nature as presented in *Physics* and *Metaphysics* is, secondly, of crucial significance for an understanding of art in its relationship to nature. Accordingly, nature does not so much mean the totality of the given, but far more the underlying productive principle, an academic distinction for which the terms *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* were coined. It is, of course, a matter of controversy whether or not Aristotle actually does go beyond Plato’s ontology, whether or not his conception of nature admits creativity or just “the eternal self-repetition of being,” defining nature as the “epitome of what is actually possible.” In his pioneering essay on the imitation of nature, Hans Blumenberg advocates the creativity-critical interpretation. Accordingly, “possible” is “only ever what, according to its *morphé*, is already real.” Human beings crafting and acting “produce what nature *would* produce, its – and not their – immanent ought” (*immanentes Sollen*).¹⁶

Early Modernity and Creativity

Aristotle’s conception of mimetic art was to set the tone for more than 1500 years, with the first tentative step away from it not noticeable until 1450. It was then that Nicholas of Cusa introduced the figure of the “layman” (*idiota*) who, in contrast to the Aristotelian scholars, did not acquire his knowledge from books. Skilled in the humble craft of spoon carving, the layman can claim that his skill leads to the production of something not found in nature. The spoon is new and original. It

¹¹ Cf. Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 151.

¹² Aristotle, *Poetik*, ed. and trans. Manfred Fuhrmann (Reclam, 1982), 21.

¹³ Ernesto Grassi, *Die Theorie des Schönen in der Antike* (Dumont, 1980), 167.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Poetik*, 19.

¹⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Poetik*, 11.

¹⁶ Hans Blumenberg, “‘Nachahmung der Natur.’ Zur Vorgeschichte der Idee des schöpferischen Menschen” (1957), in *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben. Aufsätze und eine Rede* (Reclam, 1981), 71, 73.

should be noted that with this *technical* craft or art form, which is expressly different from the art of painting or sculpture, Nicholas of Cusa, as a humanist theologian and philosopher, draws level anthropologically with the specifically Christian idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. The act of creating something new, originally reserved for God, is bestowed on his human likeness, modestly at first and yet with a considerable long-term impact. Here we see for the first time in Western European culture “the union of achievement and self-confidence” which will then be elaborated in the late eighteenth century with the utmost resolution in German Idealism; man is “what he does and what he can do.”¹⁷ The “sense of *illegitimacy*” concerning what man has claimed for himself, the effort required in order to distance oneself from the ontological paradigm of the Ancients, is still clearly very noticeable at this time – the Renaissance.¹⁸ Raffael, for example, speaks of forming a painting according to an idea (*idea*); Leonardo da Vinci speaks of using shapes which do not exist in nature (*forme che non sono in natura*); and Giorgio Vasari speaks of nature being conquered by art (*natura vinta dall'arte*). Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, citing these quotations, notes with an element of national pride that it was a Polish Jesuit writing in Neo-Latin, namely Kazimierz M. Sarbiewski, who as a contemporary of Descartes in the first half of the seventeenth century first dared to use the expression “creator” for the poet and artist.¹⁹

The Renaissance thus heralded the shift from the paradigm of ontology to the paradigm of subjectivity, a shift particularly linked in the history of philosophy with Descartes. Only with this fundamental-epistemic shift can creativity and innovation become legitimate philosophical concepts. Of course, legitimation evolves differently for art than for science. Whereas “the rationalistic philosophy of a Descartes or the mathematical physics of a Galileo or a Newton” attempt to pinpoint “fields of certainty” from which all else can be rejected as “fantasy”, “imagination” or simply “taste”, art crystallizes its own internal logic to furnish fields of uncertainty with a positive twist.²⁰ During this period of change, concepts such as “imagination”, “illusion”, “semblance” and “deception” are reinterpreted.²¹ The cognitive capacity of imagination proves itself particularly significant with regard to the new status of creativity. It is initially, under the influence of Descartes, opposed to reason (*raison*) and common sense (*bon sens*), but then, with Joseph Addison’s essay “On the Pleasures of the Imagination” (1712), it becomes an independent, third cognitive faculty located between reason and sensuousness, a re-evaluation which is to reach its pinnacle at the end of the eighteenth century with Kant and Fichte.²²

¹⁷ Blumenberg, “Nachahmung der Natur,” 58.

¹⁸ Blumenberg, “Nachahmung der Natur,” 61.

¹⁹ Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *Geschichte der sechs Begriffe: Kunst, Schönheit, Form, Kreativität, Mimesis, Ästhetisches Erlebnis* (Suhrkamp, 2003), 361.

²⁰ Niklas Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Suhrkamp, 1995), 236.

²¹ Cf. Werner Strube, “Illusion,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karfried Gründer (Schwabe & Co, 1976), bd. 4: I-K: 204–215.

²² Cf. Rainer Warning, “Imagination,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter & Karlfried Gründer (Schwabe & Co, 1976), bd. 4: I-K: 219 –220; Jochen Schulte-Sasse,

But until that time, the philosophical theory of art and aesthetics, emerging as a discipline with Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and definitely not by coincidence, will endeavor to redescribe mimesis in an appropriately new fashion as an artistic process which is more than merely imitative. Incidentally, this discussion receives an historical accent at the turn of the eighteenth century through the famous *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, in which the “Moderns”, led by Nicolas Boileau, oppose the French classicists who praise imitation of ancient role models as a timeless ideal of beauty. The problem surrounding any substantiation of Modernity, which ultimately “has to create its normativity out of itself” first “comes to consciousness in the realm of aesthetic criticism.”²³ This is also the context where we find Lessing’s work *Laocoön* (1766). He makes an explanatory link between the concept of imitation and the concept of “expression” (*Ausdruck*) and insists that imagination must be permitted “free play” (*freies Spiel*), for only then can art, seemingly paradoxically, proceed in a seemingly realistic manner.²⁴ Realistic imitation and creative imagination must complement one another.²⁵

Romantic Culmination

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a crucial progression is made from creative-imaginative *complementation* of imitation, to its *guidance*, and then ultimately to its *replacement*. It is a step which leads from “Sturm und Drang” (Storm and Stress) to German Idealism and then to Romanticism, and the concept that connects them everywhere – initiated in France once again by the *Querelle*, and in England at the same time by Shaftesbury – is that of genius as an original creating subject, producing in harmony with nature. With back reference to Aristotle, *natura naturans*, initially attributed by Nicholas of Cusa to the technical art of the “layman”, and in the course of the High Renaissance tentatively and then demandingly to the artist, now definitively becomes, in conjunction with the definitely established philosophy of subjectivity, the “dark” source of art only accessible to the ingenious subject.

Karl Philipp Moritz introduced this final train of thought with his essay “Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen” (On the Formative Imitation of Beauty) (1788). According to Moritz, beauty is presented by the imagination and seemingly a “whole existing in its own right” analogous to the “overall whole which is nature”. The artist as a “forming genius” or, more precisely, as a force “forming from within itself” thus, through his own “driving force” (*Tatkraft*), expresses the

“Einbildungskraft/Imagination,” in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, ed. Karlheinz Barck et al. (Metzler, 2001), bd. 2: Dekadent-Grotesk: 110.

²³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (The MIT Press, 1987), 7–8.

²⁴ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie,” in *Lessings Werke. Dritter Band*, ed. Kurt Wölfel (Insel, 1967), 21.

²⁵ Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 119.

“creative force” of nature.²⁶ Moritz’ aesthetic reflections are thus akin to an “aesthetic force” as formulated by Johann Gottfried Herder, Johann Georg Sulzer and Moses Mendelssohn.²⁷ This force takes Baumgarten’s original founding definition of the aesthetic as sense cognition (“cognitio sensitiva”) and places the stress not on cognition, but on the senses. It grasps the aesthetic subject as a subject which views itself in infinite contradiction; self-realization includes the dark side of the self. For Moritz, then, “formation” (*Bildung*) or creation becomes not only an adjective to describe imitation, but also a superordinate, guiding principle.

This primacy is even more rigorous in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Based on a reciprocal mirroring of the definitions of art and nature – nature is beautiful when it looks like art, like something made; art is beautiful when it looks like nature, like something not made (§ 45) – Kant defines genius as a “talent for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given”²⁸ and states “that genius must be considered the very opposite of a spirit of imitation.”²⁹ Art is not about imitation, and certainly not about something “to be copied” (*Nachmachung*)³⁰ but about a product of a genius “to be followed” by another genius (*Nachfolge*).³¹ An artist finds role models in other artists and their manner of making art and then attempts to emulate them. His productive capacity is therefore driven on by that of his colleagues. Nature – which is to be imitated – has essentially become inner nature – which is to be expressed – but with the corrective addition that the orientation for this expression of inner nature is to be found in that of artistic colleagues.

With this formulation, Kant comprehensively describes Romanticism in a renewed culmination. Aesthetic “expression” has so much become the matter of central concern that it is tending to replace imitation. With Romanticism, “expressivism” becomes “one of the cornerstones of modern culture.”³² With the stage set first by Herder and in the background by Rousseau, the groundbreaking conviction emerges that the internal must divest itself, that feelings, thoughts and visions must announce and reveal themselves. For the artist this means imitating no longer external nature, but the creative power of nature; and therefore imitating, from a religious, especially Christian standpoint, the “author of nature.”³³ Of course, even now the concept of creation does not replace that of imitation completely. Far more, there remains, for example in A.W. Schlegel, Schelling and Schopenhauer, a characteristic “romantic ambivalence” which rejects the principle

²⁶ Karl Philipp Moritz, “Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen,” in *Die Signatur des Schönen und andere Schriften zur Begründung der Autonomieästhetik*, ed. Stefan Ripplinger (Philo Fine Arts, 2009), 39–45.

²⁷ Christoph Menke, *Kraft. Ein Grundbegriff ästhetischer Anthropologie* (Suhrkamp, 2008), 9.

²⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 175.

²⁹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 176.

³⁰ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 177.

³¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 187, 146.

³² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 376.

³³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 377.

of imitation with reference to the empirical-phenomenal world, but not with reference to the principle of creation, which is represented by nature as it truly is, namely as a consciousness which is not conscious of itself, as a “dark” spirit.³⁴ The more prepared philosophers are to accept this distinction, for example Schelling and Schopenhauer, the more clearly it emerges why not even Romanticism can completely replace the principle of imitation. On the epistemic basis of subject philosophy, the principle of imitation namely guarantees a metaphysics of the absolute, whether it be, as in Schelling’s *System* from 1800, of the absolute Self, in which the conscious and unconscious poles interlace with the help of art; or whether, as in Schopenhauer’s *World as Will and Representation* from 1818, of the “will” as a blind, dynamic force encompassing the totality of being. For Schopenhauer, all forms of art “must be related to the world as the depiction to the thing depicted, as the copy to the original.”³⁵ Unlike architecture, sculpture, painting, theatre and literature, however, music is not “a copy of the Ideas,” in other words – combining Plato and Kant – a copy of the objectification of the will as a transcendental principle, but “a copy of the will itself,” a direct expression of what holds being together at its very core, and “for this reason the effect of music is so very much more powerful and penetrating than is that of the other arts.”³⁶

Influence of the Social and Cultural Sciences

The philosophy of German Idealism and Romanticism therefore permits a synthesis of mimesis and subjectivity. More precisely, on the epistemic basis of the subjectivity principle it permits a version of the mimesis concept which consistently merges its two poles: imitation and creation, both of which had been existent and diverging from the outset. Here, then, a lengthy occidental story comes to an end, and for more than a century the mimesis concept will unsurprisingly cease to play a role in the relevant discussion, at least not a conspicuous or stimulating one. And this will not change until the mid-twentieth century, when it re-emerges with a new focus, characterized internally not through philosophical aesthetics this time, but through the social and cultural sciences.

Philosophically speaking, Theodor W. Adorno takes the credit for bringing this newly accentuated mimesis concept to fruition. In co-authorship with Max Horkheimer, he introduces it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) with reference to Roger Caillois’ considerations about “le mimétisme” and Sigmund Freud’s speculation about a “death drive.” Biology, cultural anthropology, sociology and psychoanalysis here come together to lend support to the philosophical-aesthetic concept of mimesis. Accordingly, mimesis is taken to be an ontogenetically and phylogenetically basic capacity fulfilling a double function: on the one hand, that of safeguarding self-preservation of the human species through adaptation in defiance of superior natural and social forces; on the other hand, that of providing a source of what cannot simply be

³⁴ Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 361.

³⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Dover Publications, 1969), I: 256.

³⁶ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 257.

subsumed by adaptation, in other words a potential for Utopian humanity. Analysis of “imitation” accordingly stretches from prehistoric beginnings to the bourgeois and ultimately totalitarian society of the twentieth century. Art is the result of an “aesthetic behavior” which accepts being descended from a mimetic behavior with biological-archaic roots and a cultic-magical development.³⁷

Besides Adorno, of the twentieth century philosophers it is especially Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur who endeavor to take up the concept of mimesis affirmatively, albeit not always productively. In its establishing of a philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer’s short discussion of the concept remains completely within the Ancient Greek, namely Platonic framework. With reference to imitation and presentation, Gadamer addresses the doctrine of *anámnesis*, according to which cognition is the recognition of pre-sensual knowledge, and emphasizes that “the joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar.”³⁸ Ricoeur also discusses mimesis from the standpoint of hermeneutics, in other words its significance for the act of understanding, but chooses to unravel it in detail, in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* (1983–1985). According to him, only storytelling – narration in the broadest sense – is capable of giving a sensual experience of time. Following on from Aristotle, mimesis is the creative capacity to lend a narrative form to temporal experience. This capacity specifically comprises the three components “prefiguration”, “configuration” and “refiguration”, that means the pre-given understanding (Gadamer’s “structure of prejudice”) the piecing together of the concrete narrative, and the completion of the narrative, of the text object, through the experience of the subject.³⁹ The text of a narrative thus consolidates to a world of experience, just as *vice versa* the world referred to in a narrative assumes a textual form; for there is no access to the world which is free from interpretation, and here that means free from creative emulation.

Language-analytical philosophy also contains an interesting proposal for a new understanding of mimesis. Kendall Walton presents it in his book *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1990). Arts, like children’s games, are familiar with the use of props. Adults behave towards works of art like children who speak to their teddy bears or dress up as princes and princesses. Works of art are therefore – one could even say: nothing other than – props to aid the imagination. For this understanding of art, imagination is the definitive competence.

In contrast, authors such as Arthur C. Danto, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida are primarily critical regarding the concept of mimesis. As an advocate of aesthetic modernism, Danto rather simplistically stresses how it contrasts with the traditional idea of mimesis and

³⁷ Cf. Josef Früchtl, “Adorno and Mimesis,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford University Press, 1998), 1: 23–25; the article refers to the book Josef Früchtl, *Mimesis – Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno* (Meiner, 2024).

³⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (Continuum, 1989), 113.

³⁹ Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 277.

“representation” in art.⁴⁰ The more he abandons his earlier structuralistic thinking, the more Barthes tends towards an antimimetic and antirealistic position, although he seems not completely willing to dissolve the concept of mimesis in a game of interpretations.⁴¹ Derrida is more consistent. Since mimesis is fundamentally based on the distinction between presentation and the presented, then accordingly it takes its place within the opposition which has been canonic since Plato, that between reality and appearance, original and copy, truth and deception. If one follows this very broad assumption of the Platonism of Western metaphysics, the concept of mimesis only retains validity, if at all, by detaching it from this context; this can in turn, however, never completely succeed because, following the “deconstruction” process, there can be no absolute escape from metaphysics. But deconstruction can show the extent to which theorists of mimesis, such as Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*, dissolve academic oppositions such as nature versus imitation, art versus production (craft), or mimesis versus economy within the concepts of genius, technology and “free” art.⁴²

As has already been inferred, the new twentieth century interpretation of mimesis is, however, not exclusively attributable to philosophy. Erich Auerbach produced a literary classic on this theme entitled *Mimesis* (1946). As its subtitle tells us, it is concerned with *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, from Homer to Virginia Woolf. He links the understanding of mimesis with the conception of realism and representation, showing himself to be unimpressed by the tension between imitation and creation, between nature natured and nature naturing.

René Girard, on the other hand, is at home in the grey area between literature, cultural anthropology and philosophy of religion. His stimulating hypothesis, albeit very broad and therefore difficult to test, is that imitative behavior between human beings leads to rivalry and violence due to an ever-growing number of people being enticed during the course of the mimetic process into coveting the same object. The social cohesion thus endangered can only be preserved by turning the collective object of desire on its head and into a “scapegoat”.⁴³ The sociological research which highlights the significance of mimetic action in the social world is, in contrast, far less speculative. Accordingly, social competence is mainly acquired mimetically, in other words through practical and sensual implementations often learnt in rituals, without any conscious registering of their impact.⁴⁴ Michael Taussig, picking up on Horkheimer/Adorno and French poststructuralism, brings a critical anthropological accent to the discussion in his description of inherent colonialistic and racist implications in the relationship of imitation and otherness.⁴⁵ In this

⁴⁰ Cf. Arthur C. Danto, “The End of Art,” in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (Columbia University Press, 1986), 85.

⁴¹ Cf. Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 377.

⁴² Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” *Diacritics* 11, no. 2 (1981).

⁴³ Cf. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

⁴⁴ Cf. Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, eds., *Spiel-Ritual-Geste. Mimetisches Handeln in der sozialen Welt* (Rowohlt, 1998).

⁴⁵ Cf. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (Routledge, 1993).

context it should be remembered that Gabriel Tarde published a book about the “Laws of Imitation” (*Les lois de l'imitation*, 1890) from a sociological standpoint more than a century earlier.

Résumé

As becomes clear in retrospect, the concept of mimesis has over the course of history detached itself with increasing force from its semantic ties to imitation, in the sense of realistic, true-to-life imitation, and released its equally immanent meaning of creativity, until the two either form a consistent synthesis with Romanticism, or the creative meaning acquires a life of its own in the name of expression, imagination and play. Taking up the sociological discussion, and in harmony with the linguistic and also more broadly speaking pragmatic turn of twentieth century philosophy, aesthetic mimesis detaches itself from imitation of nature in favor of the reinstated Aristotelian imitation of action. Between the relation of thinking and being, later of subject and object, the co-subject comes into play as a third and mediating authority. Intersubjectivity then stands in for objectivity, and mimesis proves to be a primarily practical and social capacity. In this way, imitation of role models in art receives support in the social world, with mimetic presentation of this world ultimately aiming to re-figure the political community.

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