

## Sanat ve taklit

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### Özet

Bu çalışma tarih boyunca sanat üzerine konuşmuş önemli düşünürlerin sanat kavramına yaklaşımlarını incelemektedir.

Sanatın taklit(mimesis) olduğuna dair ilk yaklaşım Plato'nun Devlet kitabında yer almıştır. Plato, sanatın aslında gerçeğin üçüncü kez taklit edildiğini iddia eder ve bunu örneklendirirken de sofa örneğini verir. Plato bir ressamın çizmiş olduğu bir sofanın idea'lar dünyasında bir imajı olduğunu marangozun bunu taklit ettiğini, sanatçının da marangozu taklit ettiğini dolayısıyla üçüncü kez orijinalinden uzaklaşmış bir imitasyon olduğunu söyler. Dolayısıyla da gerçek olmadığı için de yasaklanmasını savunur.

*Anahtar Kelimeler: Sanat, Plato, Mimesis*

## Art as imitation

### Abstract

This study focuses on the notion of art and the approaches of the important thinkers against the notion of art.

The idea that art is imitation has been mentioned in Plato's Republic for the first time. Plato says that art is the third distortion of reality and in order to support his idea he gives the example of a couch. According to him a carpenter builds many couches that participate in the one idea (form) of couch, which was first conceived by the Great Craftsman, the creator of all ideas. Thus carpenters are twice removed from the reality of couch. Then the artist who paints pictures of couches is three times removed from reality since they produce no more than a representation of the appearance of the idea. Since it is not real it is detrimental and it should be prohibited.

*Keywords: Plato, Art, Mimesis*

### Introduction

Throughout the ages philosophers have wrestled with the notion of art at every possible level. From Plato to Marx, Aristotle to Plotinos, Lukacs to Brecht, history's great minds have theorized about

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the nature of art, testing the depths of human understanding. This paper will focus on the particular theories of one of the first great thinkers to tackle the enigmatic nature of art.

The speculations about the relation among art, imitation and reality originate from the Republic of Plato- a well known Greek philosopher who divides the world into two parts: world of Beings and world of Becomings. Then he considers all kinds of arts as the imitations of the ideas originally available in the world of Beings, which seems to be quite possible. However, the problem arises from considering this imitation as a negative attitude because of its evoking senses instead of addressing the reality and rationality. Thus, it is possible to retain the frame of Plato's cosmos and yet to avoid his derogation of the arts on the ground that they create by imitating natural objects.

Plato defines imitation employing the concept of a couch as an example. There are of course many couches made by the craftsmen but the craftsmen did not make the idea of 'couch'. They simply build many couches that participate in the one idea (form) of couch, which was first conceived by the Great Craftsman, the creator of all ideas. Thus furniture makers are twice removed from the reality of couch. Then the artist who paints pictures of couches is three times removed from reality since they produce no more than a representation of the appearance of the idea. In the other words you cannot sit on the couch in a painting. As a result, Plato interprets this to mean that art cannot give the viewer any real knowledge about the world.

The other important reason for Plato's derogation of the arts on the ground is that art is imitation and illusion, appeals to the part of the soul that is 'remote from intelligence', so fosters inferior thoughts and emotions. He uses example of a man grieving over the loss of his son. When he is alone, the grieving man discharges his feelings in loud, woeful utterances. But in the public view he resists his impulses toward uncontrolled despair and maintains the role of a reasonable man. Poets choose to portray the private moment of life, for instance, the stricken man's wailing and despair. One reason for this is that the 'fretful part' of the soul is the easiest to imitate and is most readily understood by the 'nondescript mob in the theater'. On the other hand, it is hard to portray the rational man, leading an orderly and just life in art, and does not seem to interest an audience<sup>3</sup>. Here Plato seems to be afraid of not only art's being an imitation but also life's becoming the imitation of art. 'For after feeding fat the emotion of pity those in theater, it is not easy to restrain in our own sufferings.'(Plato: 1995) Thus he claims that poetic imitation,

waters and fosters these feelings when what we ought to is to dry them up, and it establishes them as our rulers, when they ought to be ruled to the end that may be better and happier man instead of worse and more miserable.(Plato: 1995)

The cosmos that Plato frames seems quite understandable and agreeable although it doesn't answer all the questions<sup>4</sup>, however his negative connotation of imitation opposes the natural truth about imitation. Plato either forgets or neglects imitation to be a basic human faculty. A baby can learn only through imitation.

Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this that he is the most imitative creature in the world,

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<sup>3</sup> I have just watched the TV program 'Gelinim Olurmusun' and seeing Semra Hanim as the favorite mother-in law, agreed with what Plato says about the interest of audience.

<sup>4</sup> If one had asked him to apply his theory to a horse rather than a couch, there wouldn't have been any satisfying answers.

and learns at first by imitation. And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation.(Aristotle: 1998)

Thus, saying art becoming the third distortion of reality is detrimental and should be banished in a perfect society is not rational. Quite a lot of scholars consider this imitation of reality not as detrimental but helpful and necessary as the main function of literature.

an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with every kind of artistic ornament, the various kinds being found in different parts of the play; it represents men in action rather than using narrative, through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation(or relief – the Greek word is catharsis) of these emotions.(Aristotle: 1998)

Aristotle here suggests that art helps to keep fear and pity in their due proportions by allowing for a kind of ritual purgation of these emotions. In a more general context, the concept of purgation is vital. Plato had attacked much existing poetry because he believed that it excited the emotions indiscriminately, inflaming our senses rather than speaking to our reason. Aristotle puts forward the view that art, while exciting the emotions, somehow controls, and channels them and leads to relief.<sup>5</sup> When you read or watch a work of tragedy you become conscious of your real feelings though you are aware that it is not real and it is imitation. What leads us to this self-purification is the art's probability. Although the work of art is not real and evokes senses, if it is probable as Aristotle insists, it helps people to control those senses through catharsis. 'The poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that may happen.'

This Aristotelian idea of imitation of reality has been the most important function of art for scholars ranging from neo-classical ones to the Marxists with the different considerations of reality. Samuel Johnson praised Shakespeare since he held a mirror to reflect the realities of life to his audience. 'Art and literature are the mirrors of life' says Marxist Plehanov. According to Lukacs,

the goal for all great art is to provide a picture of reality in which the contradiction between appearance and reality, the particular and the general, the immediate and conceptual, etc. is so resolved that the two converge into a spontaneous integrity in the direct impression of the work of art and provide a sense of and inseparable integrity.(Raman: 1988)

Thus the work of art must reflect correctly and in proper proportion all important factors objectively determining the area of life it represents. According to Lukacs, art is a special way of reflecting reality, not to be confused with the reality itself.

What artist reflects shouldn't be the whole picture of life with all details. As Aristotle says art should reflect the probable not the pure fact through some universal and ideal traits. If artist reflected the whole life, there would be lots of repetitions, and nonsense details.<sup>6</sup>Through individual examples artist should provide the universal truths, which differentiates art from history.

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that crying or even swearing function like art and lead to relief.

<sup>6</sup> The details of everyday life like eating three times a day, going to WC several times and so on.

The events happening in real life are not always positive, since life is composed of both good and evil. The villains are not always punished or the good are not always rewarded in real life justly<sup>7</sup>. Since artist should inform and entertain at the same time, it is better to reflect what may happen instead of what happens through some ideal traits and characters to satisfy the needs of the audience.

Although we treated art as imitation up to now, it is not the sole way to approach art. If art were viewed solely as an imitation of life, a whole class of abstract works would not be considered art. Cubism and Pop Art are two types of art that have many valuable characteristics, but are not realistic imitations of nature. The creativity and social implications demonstrated in many works of art are not considered in Aristotle's theory. The imitation theory rewards those who copy nature. Imagination and creativity aren't given the credit they deserve. The originality of an idea should be considered in evaluating its artistic merit.

### Conclusion

Leaving out the idea developed in the last paragraph to another essay since we accept the cosmos of Plato considering the image of art as imitation of nature, we can conclude our thoughts. Plato's cosmos assuming the art as imitation of nature and third distortion of reality is quite agreeable<sup>8</sup>, although it is not possible to consider art something negative because of this. Art is imitation, but so is life. Instead of derogation of art to the ground because of imitation, it should be valued as the main function of art that leads to purgation and purification through which people learn and channel themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> This is the reason why the TV programs about mysterious events have attracted the attention of majority recently very much.

<sup>8</sup> Although Plotinos claims that art reflects the ideas of world of Beings rather than the forms of world of Becomings, which makes an artist more reliable than a carpenter, Plato's cosmos is taken for granted here.