

Mimesis

María Antonia González Valerio

The concept of mimesis is situated mainly in the field of aesthetics. Its relevance to the philosophy of nature must be considered from an aesthetic and historical perspective, since it has constantly been present in the histories of philosophy and art. This text focuses only on some important moments: Plato and Aristotle; modernity (essentially German idealism and Romanticism); the modern concept of representation as distinct from mimesis; and the debate that occurred during the twentieth century regarding the ontological and aesthetic status of mimesis. The aim of this article is to provide a theoretical framework that can place the concept of mimesis within the current debate surrounding the philosophy of nature, by showing the different relations that this concept has established between art and nature. For this purpose, the concept of mimesis is identified here by two of its fundamental attributes: its ontological commitment to name and to signify the world, and its construction of meaning depending on internal coherence.

Citation and license notice

González Valerio, María Antonia (2021): Mimesis [English version]. In: Kirchhoff, Thomas (ed.): Online Encyclopedia Philosophy of Nature / Online Lexikon Naturphilosophie. ISSN 2629821. doi: 10.11588/oepn.2019.0.79538

This work is published under the Creative Commons License 4.0 (CC BY-ND 4.0).

1. Introduction

Mimesis has been a widely-known concept in the realm of aesthetics since antiquity,¹ especially in relation to questions regarding the artistic practices and ontology of artworks. Its relevance and importance were the subject of intense debate in the twentieth century, and it is still being discussed in the present day. The current validity of the concept is linked mainly to the field of aesthetics: the place it might therefore occupy within the philosophy of nature, or *Naturphilosophie*, calls for some discussion in the context of aesthetic categories and philosophical problems. Because the relationship of art and nature via mimesis has been the object of various interpretations in the history of philosophy, and because there is no single or common meaning of the idea of art as mimesis of nature, it is a challenge to establish – or even to postulate – a nexus between aesthetics and philosophy of nature through the concept

of mimesis. Mimesis, in terms of concepts in the history of philosophy, is probably the most pertinent one for explaining what art is (or is not): there is no moment in this history that does not deal with the idea of mimesis in an effort to elucidate the mode of being of art, from literature to visual arts, including music, dance, happenings, and even bioart.

1.1 Transformations of “Mimesis”

The concept of mimesis has gone through radical transformations in its meanings and applications. It has lost the different meanings it possessed in Greek tradition – these are not preserved in the later conception of mimesis as “imitation.” Mimesis has been rejected and affirmed throughout history; it has been both friend and foe. Because a complete survey of the complex and dense history of the concept of mimesis is not the aim of this text,² I have organized the present exposition

¹ The question about mimesis belongs to a pre-Platonic time, see Halliwell (2002: 15), Brecolouaki (2015: 221), Tatarkiewicz (1980: 266).

² Some excellent studies are available: Halliwell's (2002)

aforementioned *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, for example. See also Auerbach's (1953) *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* and Lima's (2010) *Mimesis/Nachahmung*.

according to moments of special significance that can help in rethinking, via mimesis, the relation of art to nature.

The first historical moment is the multiplicity of connotations that the concept of mimesis has in Plato's philosophy, and Plato's introduction of the theory of sensible and intelligible worlds which will be an axis for the discussion about Platonism and mimesis. Plato's ideas about mimesis will bring forward important ontological and aesthetic aspects of the concept. In Aristotle's analysis of tragedy in his *Poetics*, mimesis can be thought of as a building block of an artwork's internal coherence. From this perspective, the concept of mimesis pertains not only to an artwork's relationship to the world of the senses or to an eternal model, but also to the structure that configures its mode of being. In Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, the sensible entity is presented as something caused. The distinction between natural and artificial entities is established according to the different causes. The artwork is mimetic and an artifact; therefore, the concepts of mimesis and *techné* are linked in the history of aesthetics. The ideas retained from Plato and Aristotle for the analysis of the concept of mimesis in this article are as follows: multiplicity of senses; ontological level; the construction of the artwork's internal coherence; and different modes of causation for the sensible entities.

The second historical moment analysed here is modernity. Although many aspects of the concept of mimesis may be considered from the points of view of the Hellenic tradition, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and early modernity, this text will focus on modern idealism and its context. The reason for this choice is the fundamental importance of the modern idealist conception of life for the nineteenth-century development of the life sciences, as well as in the debate between vitalism and mechanism. In the nineteenth century, life and nature were understood either within the framework of Newtonian physical-mathematical laws or as creative forces; although other aspects were considered too, for instance, organisms as organized beings and the spontaneity of nature. Modern idealism's concept of nature cannot be fully understood without the notion of art, since for idealism, art would gain an ontological centrality: that of art as nature, and of nature as art.

The third moment explored consists of the explanation of the modern concept of representation, which is

distinct from the concept of mimesis. The concept of representation has been crucial for the establishment of subjectivity. The modern subject is conceived of as a representational subject that will have the object as its Other – modernity, therefore, rendered nature an object, an image, a representation.

The fourth moment analysed is the recuperation of the concept of mimesis undertaken by hermeneutics in the twentieth century, especially by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricœur. The ontological approach of hermeneutics to language necessitated a revision of the link between words and things via mimesis. Art, especially literature, played a central role in hermeneutics, as a pre-eminent mode of being of language. The concept of mimesis mediated the configuration of the world.

Finally, a brief presentation is included on three positions that have been contrary to the recuperation of the concept of mimesis in the twentieth century: that of structuralism, exemplified by Roland Barthes; that of post-structuralism, exemplified in the work of Jacques Derrida; and that of the art world, exemplified by Arthur Danto.

The conclusion of this analysis points towards introducing the concept of mimesis into the contemporary debate of life sciences and philosophy of nature, and how this introduction could be significant for discussions of some main issues, providing a scope to understand nature as a complex compound of matter, internal coherence, and narratives.

1.2 Artwork, Mimesis, and Reality

To understand the historical transformations of the category of mimesis, it is important to state that, since the beginning, the category of mimesis has established different ways of understanding the relation of art to reality, and that it has also had different uses and meanings. The category of mimesis has been used as an explanation of what language, images, and artifacts are – hence its centrality to the field of aesthetics. Furthermore, it is a category that establishes the relationship of an artwork to reality: to nature, being, life, the world, history, and so on; the specific understanding and definition of the reality being referred to and produced by the artwork depends on the epoch and on the history of philosophy. That relationship between art and reality is also established depending on whether

the representation is assumed to have ontological pre-eminence or whether it is assumed to be grounded in a pre-existing reality; these two possibilities are characteristic of the debates around mimesis. Hegel, for whom the artwork has ontological pre-eminence as manifestation of the Idea, is a good example of the first possibility (see 3.3). Plato, who affirms that the artwork is a copy of a pre-existing model, is an example of the second (see 2.1). Both perspectives will be discussed further on.

In reviewing the idea that the category of mimesis establishes a relationship of the artwork to reality, what has been stressed by the philosophical analysis of this category is that we are dealing with an ontological concept that furnishes not only what the artwork is, but also what the reality is that it represents: ideas, truth, nature, being, life, the world histories, and so on. Another way to emphasize the relationship of the artwork to reality through mimesis is by explaining the relationship with the “world-reflecting” or “world-creating” models: “The history of mimesis is the record of a set of debates that form themselves around a polarity between two ways of thinking about representational art. The first of these ideas [the world-reflecting model] places central emphasis on the ‘outward-looking’ relationship between the artistic work or performance and reality (‘nature’, as it is often, though problematically, termed in the mimeticist tradition), whereas the other [the world-creating model] gives priority to the internal organization and fictive properties of the mimetic object or act itself” (Halliwell 2002: 23). For Halliwell, this dichotomy is grounded in two contrasting positions: realism and fictional coherence. However, as will be seen later, following Paul Ricœur’s hermeneutics, the tension between these positions is what actually constitutes the artwork as a “synthesis of the heterogeneous”: “By this I am attempting to account for the diverse mediations performed by the plot: between the manifold of events and the temporal unity of the story recounted; between the disparate components of the action — intentions, causes, and chance occurrences —

and the sequence of the story; and finally, between pure succession and the unity of the temporal form, which, in extreme cases, can disrupt chronology to the point of abolishing it” (Ricœur 1992: 141). This synthesis of the heterogeneous works both ways, with fictional coherence and with reference to the ‘real’ world. In a way, the history of aesthetics and the history of art, or of the concept of mimesis, can be narrated as having this tension as the axis on which its plot turns.³

The concept of mimesis is also relevant in the history of the concept of *techné*, since it implies the establishment of a relationship with nature through production (mainly of artifacts). Nature’s design was the model to be followed in the production of artifacts: originality was not valued until the appearance of a creative self-consciousness in the interstice of Middle Ages and Modernity (see Blumenberg/Wertz 2000). From that point forward, the ideas of art’s autonomy, novelty, freedom for the creator, and genius gained more and more presence. Nature lost its binding character and appeared as something to be produced by the artistic and technical will, as in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883–1885).

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the ontological status of the artifact as a produced, sensible entity is no longer established by the intelligible world. For Hans Blumenberg, this means that the contemporary concept of nature has nothing in common with the ancient one, in which nature was thought of as an eternal model and the concept of mimesis prevailed. This open question about the ontological status of the artifact endures, and is currently being discussed by the philosophy of technology.

2. The Concept of Mimesis in Plato and Aristotle

2.1 Plato – Mimesis as Copy of an Original

Mimesis is not a monolithic concept. Even in giving a general overview of the concept, one must point to the diverse meanings and roles attributed to mimesis in

³ In his analysis of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Ricœur emphasizes how the plot produces a concordant discordance, and this is a fictional coherence that introduces a poetic logic with causation: “The art of

composition consists in making this discordance appear concordant. The “one because of [*dia*] the other” thus wins out over “one after [*meta*] the other” (52a18-22)” (Ricœur 1984: 43).

Plato's philosophy, e.g., he explains the ontological status of the artifact through the example of the production of a bed by an artisan: this bed is twice removed from the truth, thus situating the artifact in a dependent relation to nature and being. The artisan's bed, or any artifact, according to Plato, is a copy of the true bed; that is, the idea of the bed produced by God (Plato *Republic*: X, 597c). The carpenter copies the true bed, thus making it twice removed from the bed's true being. A bed painted by a painter is three times removed from the true being of the bed, since the painter copies the bed produced by the carpenter, which itself was already a copy of the idea of the bed (ibid.: 597d–e). This metaphysical argument turns on the distinction between originals and images.

Book X in Plato's *Republic* is emblematic of his critique of the arts and poetry. Poets are banned from the republic. However, it is widely affirmed in contemporary interpretations that Plato's argument goes beyond stating that art simply copies sensible reality as it is. The argument must be analysed in the context of the notions of verisimilitude and the ethical implications of the artwork. As examples see Halliwell (2002: 56 f.), and Giovanni Reale (2008⁴) who, following Werner Jaeger (*Paideia. The Ideals of Greek Culture*), maintains that *Republic* is primarily a book about education and only secondarily about politics. Education or paideia in ancient Greece was performed mainly by poetry, therefore *Republic* is an attack against Greek tradition and

its educational system, where history, politics, and morality were communicated by poetry. Instead of being educated by poets and by the (confusing) example of the many characters presented in their works, young people should be educated in philosophy through the dialectic method. Episteme instead of doxa – this is the thesis that Plato defends in *Republic*. The poets and painters dwell in doxa and they only present copies or images but not true being – since they contemplate not the Ideas but the sensible world, which is already a copy of the eternal model.⁵

In Plato's *Timaeus*, the sensible world is understood as mimesis of the intelligible one (48e–49a⁶), it is a product of the demiurge. Several problems appear with this thesis, for example, the participation of the sensible entities in the intelligible forms. The universe is produced by an artisan or demiurge (29a), who contemplates the intelligible forms in order to produce the sensible world. The demiurge, who is good, is a category between the intelligible and the sensible, and is the cause of becoming (29d–31b). There is an original model, and the sensible world is its copy in a state of continuous change (48e). In *Timaeus*, contemplation as creation has an ontological meaning. The demiurge produces the sensible world by contemplating the eternal model, and the mediation is produced via the mathematical order. It is necessary that this cosmos be a copy or image of something else

⁴ See the chapter “L'oralità poetico-mimetica cardine della cultura e della formazione spirituale dei greci e scontro frontale di Platone con essa”.

⁵ However, not every contemporary reading takes this line. As an example: Spanish philosopher María Zambrano (1996) presents a completely different approach to Plato's critique towards poets. She argues that Plato condemned poetry to live in slums because he could not tolerate immorality, and poetry is as immoral as flesh itself. Zambrano's approach, based on her own philosophy of the “poetic reason”, highlights the production of poetry not from reason but from inspiration and madness. Zambrano focuses not as much on the concept of mimesis as on the other concept central in understanding Plato's ideas about poetry (one that also makes his philosophy very different from Aristotle's regarding art production): mania. Let us remember

that “like all achievements which are not wholly dependent on the human will, poetic creation contains an element which is not ‘chosen’, but ‘given’; and to old Greek piety ‘given’ signifies ‘divinely given’” (Dodds [1951] 1997: 80). Plato refers to mania and poetry on several occasions, e.g., *Ion* 533d–534e, *Apology* 22b–24a, *Phaedrus* 244b–245b, *Laws* 719b.

⁶ “We must, however, in beginning our fresh account of the Universe make more distinctions than we did before; for whereas then we distinguished two Forms, we must now declare another third kind. For our former exposition those two were sufficient, one of them being assumed as a Model Form, intelligible and ever uniformly existent, and the second as the model's Copy (μίμημα δὲ παραδείγματος), subject to becoming and visible” (Plato *Timaeus*: 48e–49a, cf. ibid.: 50c).

(29b). The demiurge orders reality with geometrical forms and numbers (53b–d).

Timaeus is a dialogue of peculiar importance for a philosophy of Nature, since it describes the genesis of the universe as a tale. It also accounts for the creation of the body and soul of the world, as well as the creation of human beings, including anatomy, physiology, pathology, and therapeutics.⁷

The concept of mimesis also appears in Plato as something that can represent human actions through, for example, characters and the psychological effects of those actions (*Republic*, III, 393c). In *Republic* III Plato discusses literary mimesis, and there he distinguishes between mimesis and diegesis, the first being direct speech and the second narration. The critique goes against mimesis: the poet (in his example Homer) can mimic the speech of a character, impersonating that character (393a7–b2). The discussion of mimesis and diegesis is an account of literary genres, narrative or diegesis is represented by the dithyramb, mimesis corresponds to theater and there is also a mixed mode that combines mimesis and diegesis in the epopee.⁸

The concept of mimesis also establishes the relation between language, thought, and reality (see *Cratylus*). *Cratylus* is a good example of the debate around mimesis and words. The condition, or presumed

condition, of words being mimetic of reality has developed from theories about the origin of language to theories that establish the mimesis of words by onomatopoeia; from theories that base mimesis in a theological metaphysics (as in the case of Augustine) to theories that radically deny any postulate of mimesis (as in the structural linguistics of Ferdinand Saussure). (For a history of the interpretations of *Cratylus* see Genette 1976.) The concept of mimesis also explains the production of images as being faithful to a model (*eikastike*) or as distorted (*phantastike*) (*Sophist*). Gilles Deleuze provides a reading of the category of mimesis in *Sophist* as a key to Platonism: “Platonism thus founds the entire domain that philosophy will later recognize as its own: the domain of representation filled by copies-icons, and defined not by an extrinsic relation to an object, but by an intrinsic relation to the model or foundation” (Deleuze 1990: 259). These are only a few of the many ways in which the concept is addressed in Plato’s philosophy. This brief approach to Plato’s philosophy is presented here merely as a paradigm of the complexity of the concept of mimesis, which cannot be interpreted or understood in just one sense, as Halliwell (2002) among others has demonstrated. The Greek concept of mimesis can hardly be understood using the contemporary concepts of “copy” and “imitation”. The Latin

⁷ For a unifying interpretation of Plato’s philosophy of nature as a teleological cosmology based on the good (order and proportionality) see Johansen (2008). The binary logic presented in *Timaeus* (sensible/intelligible, model/copy), and elsewhere in Plato’s philosophy, has been the object of strong criticism since the nineteenth century. Nietzsche, for example, announces an “inverted Platonism”: “My philosophy an inverted Platonism: the farther removed from true being, the purer, the finer, the better it is. Living in semblance as goal” (as cited in Heidegger [1936–1946] 1991: 154. The original is in Nietzsche *KSA* 7, 7 [156]: 199). French post-structuralism will inherit Nietzsche’s thoughts regarding binary logics and mimesis, from Gilles Deleuze to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. It is worth mentioning here Jacques Derrida’s (1993) interpretation of *Timaeus* because it offers another ontological possibility than that of the mimetic sensible world. It is centered on the category of “khora”, which does not belong either to the *eidos* nor to the mimesis.

⁸ In the *Poetics*, Aristotle calls the genre of drama mimetic, and the epopee narrative. In general, both he and Plato agree in the classification of genres and the way in which they interpret mimesis as the direct speech of the characters and diegesis as the narrative representation. However, according to the literary critic Gérard Genette, mimesis is diegesis, because to understand mimesis as direct speech is actually no mimesis at all, since it is just the repetition of an oral discourse. There has to be a verbal representation of a non-verbal reality, and this is what narration is about: “Literary representation, the mimesis of the classical notions, is thus not the narrative plus the discourses. It is the narrative, and only the narrative. Plato opposed mimesis to diegesis as a perfect imitation to an imperfect imitation. However, a perfect imitation is no longer an imitation; it is the thing itself. Ultimately, the only imitation is the imperfect one. *Mimesis* is *diegesis*” (Genette 1976: 5).

translation of mimesis as “imitation” was generally understood merely as “copy”. It was then translated into modern languages as “imitation” (English), “imitación” (Spanish), and “Nachahmung” (German). The concept of “imitation” has a negative value for contemporary aesthetics, but it is important to remember that it is due to the loss of meaning that the concept has suffered. The Latin tradition translated the “mimesis” of Aristotle’s *Poetics* into “imitation” without broader justification: “There is no doubt that the prevalent sense of mimesis is the one instituted by its being joined to *muthos*. If we continue to translate mimesis by “imitation,” we have to understand something completely contrary to a copy of some preexisting reality and speak instead of a creative imitation. And if we translate mimesis by “representation”, we must not understand by this word some redoubling of presence, as we could still do for Platonic mimesis, but rather the break that opens the space for fiction. Artisans who work with words produce not things but quasi-things; they invent the as-if. And in this sense, the Aristotelian mimesis is the emblem of the shift [decrochage] that, to use our vocabulary today, produces the “literariness” of the work of literature” (Ricœur 1984: 45).

The concept of mimesis is embedded in aesthetics, metaphysics, ethics, technical production, politics, culture, psychology, and the philosophy of nature. In any case, according to Plato, the poetic arts have the power to produce an alternative world with resemblance to the original one, while the products of art (*techné*) find their place in the sensible world as copies of an eternal order.

2.2 Aristotle – Mimesis as Internal Coherence

In Aristotle, the concept of mimesis is of paramount importance, although it will be presented here in less detail than Plato’s conception of the idea has been.

The concept of mimesis is at the core of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, in which he explains tragic poetry as the mimesis of actions (*mimesis praxeos*).⁹ The main argument of *Poetics* concerns an understanding of plot, the soul of tragedy (*Poetics* 1450b20–25), as *mimesis praxeos*. Poetic mimesis is never explained simply as, nor pretends to be, a duplication of reality. Rather, it is characterised as a verisimilar production that generates certain effects in the spectator, namely recognition and catharsis, through pity and fear (*eleos* and *phobos*). Meaning-making and verisimilitude, rather than resemblance to a model, are what are important in the arguments Aristotle presents in *Poetics* (1451a36–1451b10). The concept of mimesis brings about the relationship of language to the world, although it is not a matter of reference but of ordering what there is. Poetic mimesis is an organization of the human world: “[T]he concept of *mimêsis* serves as an index of the discourse situation; it reminds us that no discourse ever suspends our belonging to a world. All *mimêsis*, even creative – nay, especially creative – *mimêsis*, takes place within the horizons of a being-in-the-world which it makes present to the precise extent that the *mimêsis* raises it to the level of *muthos*. The truth of imagination, poetry’s power to make contact with being as such – this is what I personally see in Aristotle’s *mimêsis*” (Ricœur 2003: 48).

Poetic mimesis opens the door to the realm of fiction, which is neither closed in itself nor self-referential, but which establishes a rupture and a union with the world of praxis. In its representation of action (*mimesis praxeos*), poetic mimesis not only belongs to the poetic realm but also to the realm of ethics.

For Aristotle, tragedy, in its mimetic character, is not demerited, not even influenced by its adaptation to reality; it is not obliged to be true in telling what actually happened. What is relevant is not the trueness of the actions narrated but the congruence of those events within the tragedy. What is key is the plot, as something

⁹ “Praxis” in Aristotle’s *Poetics* means “action”: “In *Poetics* 6 (1449b24) Aristotle defines tragedy as *mimesis praxeos*, ‘imitation of action’. ‘Praxis’, ‘action’, in this context is often taken to refer to the deliberate action of a rational being, a technical sense the term sometimes has in Aristotle’s ethical writings. [...] In the *Poetics*, however, Aristotle’s focus is on the action and not on the agent: tragedy is imitation of

action and not of human beings (50a16–17). A poet must imitate an action, if he can be said to write a tragedy at all. But he need not always give us enough information about how this action is done to allow us to determine whether the agent deserves praise, blame or neither. Hence, praxis in the *Poetics* does not mean a ‘morally qualified action’” (Belfiore 1983: 110–112).

autonomous in regard to the referent, the parameter not so much of adaptation, but of concatenation or sequentiality of what is represented, that is, of its verisimilitude. What needs to be verisimilar or plausible is not the action but the organization of the actions: “It is clear, then, from what we have said that the poet must be a ‘maker’ not of verses but of stories, since he is a poet in virtue of his ‘representation,’ and what he represents is action. Even supposing he represents what has actually happened, he is none the less a poet, for there is nothing to prevent some actual occurrences being the sort of thing that would probably or inevitably happen, and it is in virtue of that that he is their ‘maker’” (*Poetics* 9: 1451b20).

The idea of verisimilitude or plausibility has sometimes been interpreted as if in Aristotle the category of fiction was already operating (see Halliwell 2015). The idea of verisimilitude has been of paramount importance for literary theory, which has discussed it profusely, since in a sense the status of fiction depends on the actuality of the events related and the coherence of the story. But fiction is not the same as mimesis, although some authors have interpreted it that way.¹⁰

In Aristotle’s considerations of nature in *Physics* II, the sensible entity as a compound of matter and form (*synolon*) is explained via the theory of the four causes: material cause (i.e. the wooden structure of a house), formal cause (i.e. the aspect of house), efficient cause (i.e. the architect), and final cause (i.e. shelter) (*Physics* II, 3; *Metaphysics* V, 2, 1013b5). The distinction between nature and art is central, because natural entities contain within themselves the principle of motion and rest, while that principle is external to artifacts. The final and formal causes are determinant in the production of artifacts (*Metaphysics* VII, 17). The final cause is related to the movement of nature towards the realization of its own form (*eidōs*), the formal and final cause are the same in the case of nature (*Physics* II, 199a20–31). Consequently, for natural entities *telos* is at the same time *arché*, while for artificial entities the

telos does not coincide with the *arché*, not the architect but *shelter* is the final cause of the house.

In *Physics* there is also an analogy between art and nature – art represents (mimics) nature: *he techne mimeitai ten physin* (194a22) – this plays an important role in terms of understanding sensible entities through the final cause, because both are goal-directed and therefore related to final causes. However, the analogy between art and nature does not mean that art must imitate nature as its model, but that artifacts and natural entities are both compounds of form and matter (the architect needs to know the form of the house but also its matter), and both are produced as means to an end. The arts are fabricated within the possibilities of nature, for example, within the possibilities that wood and stones have for shelter; if nature were to produce a house, therefore, it would produce the house as art has done (*Physics* II, 199a10–15).

2.3 After Plato and Aristotle – Some Consequences for Art Theory and Aesthetics

Aristotle’s analogy of art and nature was later misinterpreted as the motif of *ars imitatur naturam* (art imitates nature), which had different meanings in medieval arts. In the Renaissance, from the fourteenth century onwards, the motif of *ars imitatur naturam* became a maxim that would later be contested by modernity, especially in regard to its foundational principle of the aesthetic realm as independent from epistemology and ethics. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the system of fine arts gave independence to artistic productions, which were no longer to be measured according to science and morals. Following the work of Alexander Baumgarten (1750), a new realm of independent sensible experience and knowledge would be named “aesthetic”. During the eighteenth century, fine arts were in general understood as representational arts: they depicted nature, human actions, affections and morals; an imitation of an idealized nature is no longer

¹⁰ Notably, Walton (1990) builds a whole theory around mimesis as fiction. Mimesis is a representation that makes the spectator/reader believe in the represented world, the fictional world. Walton understands mimesis as the games that children play,

where for instance a rock appears as a monster, and that artworks have a similar character, inasmuch as the representational games are “props” which trigger a disposition in the spectator where something fictional is true in a specific fictional world.

pursued, since the ideas of creativity and expressivity become more and more important. Nevertheless, arts are considered imitation, and there are laws for this imitation to happen, not as a mere copy of what there is, but as a transformation. The artist should imitate but not exactly. Charles Batteux, for example, refers to this in terms of liberty and precision: “Imitation, in order to be as perfect as it can be, must have two qualities: exactitude and freedom. One regulates imitation and the other animates it” (Batteux 2015: 45).

In eighteenth century English aesthetics, the pleasure obtained from an artwork depends on the recognition of what it depicted. For the neo-platonic aesthetic of Shaftesbury, art is mimetic or representational (al-though not every kind of art – he notably excludes architecture), and it should represent beauty and moral virtues. The artist needs to know the formal properties of beauty and human virtue in order to represent them correctly. For Hutcheson, arts are also representational, although they do not have to depict what actually exists in nature. The pleasure of imitation is at the centre of his understanding of art as recognition of something that it resembles.

Mimesis is a category that has never been understood or applied in an unambiguous manner. It has had different meanings and uses in the history of Western thought. As we have seen, in Plato and in Aristotle it does not carry the same meaning, and within their philosophies it is sometimes also ambiguous. Art has never been a copy of what there is, of reality, since it is not a duplication but always a transposition of reality in a different medium. Art is a power of transformation, of production of what there is. How this transformation has been evaluated during history has also changed a lot; ideas of truth, verisimilitude, plausibility, falsehood, deception, among others have been relevant to the debate. The appearance of the category of fiction in literature has changed the way in which the relationship of the discourse to reality can be understood. And in the twentieth century there are many theoretical positions about what fiction means, from a cognitive perspective to a narratological one.

There have been moments of an “ultra-mimetic” impulse in the arts, an impulse that survives even in

our era, with examples ranging from social realism to the paintings of Chuck Close and the sculptures of Duane Hanson. The way in which some contemporary literature reflects the flow of consciousness in a very realistic manner can also be considered as a kind of “ultra-mimetic” impulse, as in the case of Virginia Woolf or in the almost literal reproduction of “real” dialogues that we see in contemporary movies.

Conversely, there have been moments of “anti-mimetic” impulse, for example in twentieth century expressionism or suprematism. In this, the medium also needs to be considered. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin tell the history of different modes of representation stretching from transparency to opacity. This means that in the history of images and representations we can find an attempt to make the medium disappear and bring forth the presence of the thing in itself, and at the same time an attempt to erase the traces of mediation. As an example: since the seventh century, painting has tried to conceal the medium and to present the things in themselves: “but they are all attempts to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation” (Bolter/Grusin 2000: 11).

The counter state to this is hypermediacy: “the logic of hypermediacy expresses the tension between regarding a visual space as mediated and as a rear space that lies beyond mediation. [...] In the logic of hyper-mediacy, the artist (or multimedia programmer or web designer) strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgement. She does so by multiplying spaces and media and by repeatedly redefining the visual and conceptual relationships among mediated spaces-relationships that may range from simple juxtaposition to complete absorption” (ibid.: 41).

Immediacy and hypermediacy are comprehended within the wider concept of “remediation”, which for Bolter and Grusin means that media is constantly transforming previous media, absorbing them, reconfiguring them, remediating them.

The history of the category of mimesis and the way in which it is interpreted to understand art practices and art traditions is still constantly changing, and it will continue to change, since art practices are constantly refiguring art’s relationship to the world.

3. Mimesis in German Idealism and Romanticism

Before briefly analysing some paradigmatic moments in the history of the development of the relation between art and nature, namely, the philosophies of Kant, Schelling and Hegel,¹¹ we should establish a panorama of how the idea of nature understood was within the framework of Romanticism, because a constant impetus in the systems of those three thinkers is a concept of nature that cannot be interpreted only through mechanism.

In critical reaction to a mechanistic worldview, in which nature is free of teleological forces (*causa finalis*) and is explicable solely through mechanics and *mathesis universalis*, certain philosophies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries postulated an idea of nature as creativity and ordered unity. The *ars imitatur naturam* was no longer understood as the imitation of natural phenomena, natural beauty, natural values, natural expressions, natural appearances, and so on. The relationship between art and nature was transformed because the latter was interpreted much more as *natura naturans* than as *natura naturata*. From the eighteenth century to the twentieth, from the work of Johann

Gottfried Herder (*genetische Kraft*) to that of Henri Bergson (*élan vital*), the mechanistic worldview was criticised and the concept of vital force was asserted against it. In this context, another important concept is that of organization related to living beings, from Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis to Immanuel Kant.

The ideas of vital force and of nature as creative belong to the conflict between vitalism and mechanism that began in the seventeenth century. The conception of the relationship between art and nature depends heavily on this debate, and therefore also on the transformations of the concept of mimesis. If nature is understood as creative force, as in Sturm und Drang and Romanticism, then it is not surprising that the idea of the mimesis of nature will be viewed critically, since freedom and imagination are some of the core values of these movements. The dream world (*Traumwelt*) and mystic traditions are a common source of inspiration for the production of art, for example, in the works of Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder.

The idea of nature that Romanticism will defend is contrary to Cartesian mechanistic natural philosophy: nature is not only a force or a living organism with soul, but also the interior life. For the poet, creation requires

¹¹ To talk about Modern idealism in this sense make us think about the important difference between Kant and Hegel on this regard. Nature has a significant part in Kant's concept of the sublime, since the judgement is a response to magnitude and power in nature (see Kant *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, [1790] 2000: §§25, 28). The beauty of nature is paramount in Kant's aesthetic: "The self-sufficient beauty of nature reveals to us a technique of nature, which makes it possible to represent it as a system in accordance with laws the principle of which we do not encounter anywhere in our entire faculty of understanding, namely that of a purposiveness with respect to the use of the power of judgement in regard to appearances, so that this must be judged as belonging not merely to nature in its purposeless mechanism but rather also to the analogy with art. Thus it actually expands not our cognition of natural objects, but our concept of nature, namely as mere mechanism, into the concept of nature as art" (ibid.: 129 f.). What is fundamental to stress is that the idea of nature that is formed in Kant's third critique goes along with a certain subjectivation of nature, that is, that freedom and morality are not antitheses of

nature. Hegel criticises Kant's aesthetic, but even though he states that there is no beauty in nature and that art should not imitate (in the sense of *Nachahmung*) nature, he is defending throughout his whole philosophy a spiritualization of nature that is effectuated teleologically and historically, and art is a way in which the Spirit transforms nature; art is work. Also for Hegel, art is representation (in the sense of *Darstellung*) of a religious and mythologic truth. "Therefore the work of art stands higher than any natural product which has not made this journey through the spirit. For example, owing to the feeling and insight whereby a landscape has been represented in a painting, this work of the spirit acquires a higher rank than the mere natural landscape. For everything spiritual is better than any product of nature. Besides, no natural being is able, as art is, to present the divine Ideal" (Hegel [1835] 1975: 29). The central problem, then, is not beauty in nature, but what *is* in relation to nature. The concepts of art, nature and mimesis and representation intertwine in idealism, as is particularly clear in Schelling's philosophy of nature.

interiority; a travel to the deepest and most obscure regions of the soul – examples being Novalis, Gérard de Nerval, Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin and even Nietzsche’s Dionysianism.

If nature appears as something to be imitated, it is not as phenomena organized by mechanism or even as natural beauty, but as creative and destructive force. Art should represent nature as it is, and not only in its beautiful aspects, but all nature, all of being, as Victor Hugo demands in his preface to *Cromwell*, talking about the incorporation of the grotesque into art: poetry will thus “begin to do as nature does, to combine in her creations (without however confusing them) shadow with light, the grotesque with the sublime, in other words, body with soul, the beast with the spirit; for the point of departure of religion is always the point of departure of poetry. Everything is connected” (Hugo [1827] 1912: 14 f., translation mine¹²).

3.1 Kant – Mimesis as the Power of Nature

Even if mimesis as such is not a central concept in Immanuel Kant’s philosophy, the place that art occupies within his post-critical philosophy of nature is quite relevant to the present discussion. According to Kant, art is something organized and purposeful. Art is related to nature through the judgment of taste, where natural beauty appears as free beauty and is subject to a pure, uninterested judgment of taste, while art is adherent beauty where concepts are involved (Kant *Critique of Judgment* 1790: §16). Art is also linked to nature in the production of art, where, through genius, nature gives the rule to art (ibid.: §46).

Kant’s argument is not that art is a mimesis of nature, as in the motif of *ars imitatur naturam*, but that the creative power of nature is what animates the process of creating the artwork. The mechanisms of nature can give no account of purposiveness, since “mechanism” is a constitutive concept of reason (*Verstand*) that involves solely linear causal chains (*causa efficiens, nexus effectivus*). In contrast, the organized being is regarded as a natural end (*Naturzweck*)

that contains a formative power within itself. Such an end cannot be explained in terms of mechanism in determining judgments (ibid.: §65) but necessitates the presupposition of an end in itself (*causa finalis, nexus finalis*) – nota bene understood by Kant as a regulative principle of reason (*Vernunft*) in reflective judgments only. Organized beings and artwork coincide (and differ from mechanism) in that they involve purposiveness. However, art *is* the result of a specific external purposiveness, while organized beings are only to be *judged* as a natural internal purpose.

3.2 Schelling – Mimesis as Unity

If there is no possibility of producing scientific knowledge of nature by organized beings, because purposiveness goes beyond the determining judgment in Kant’s system, the philosophy of nature that emerged in Romanticism and speculative idealism would defend the comprehension of nature as an ordered and knowable whole, as in the works of Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling.

Since nature is not completely explicable via mathematics or physics, mechanical laws are not the only ones which explain matter. The place of life in the physical world also demanded the understanding of development, generation, adaptability, mutation, growth etc., which pointed in turn to a universal physics that would be, as Schelling claimed, speculative. Nature as a creative system (*natura naturans*) is a continuity that goes from minerals to plants to animals to humans. There is a continuity and a connection between the inorganic and the organic, as stated by Herder and Goethe, until Schelling described it as system of nature (*First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, II, 1799). Unity, organization, force, process of formation, and transformation are some key concepts in this comprehension of nature, which conceives of nature as an organism organized through a universal principle: the world soul. Using these concepts, Schelling postulated a unified theory of nature.

¹² The French original reads: “Elle se mettra à faire comme la nature, à mêler dans ses créations, sans pourtant les confondre, l’ombre à la lumière, le grotesque au

sublime, en d’autres termes, le corps à l’âme, la bête à l’esprit; car le point de départ de la religion est toujours le point de départ de la poésie. Tout se tient.”

This idea of nature is embedded in an aesthetic worldview: nature, as an organism, is an artwork, an original poetry of the spirit. Mimesis is present in Romanticism as *mimesis physeos*; that is to say, the artwork no longer represents the beauty of nature as a model but as creation and productivity. Goethe, Schlegel, Schiller, Schelling, Novalis and even Nietzsche each conceive of nature as creative force. Nature as a totality can only be represented through art, the symbol of the infinite. Nietzsche's is an aesthetic vision of life: "viewing science through the optic of the artist, and art through the optic of life" (Nietzsche [1872] 2000: 5).

3.3 Hegel – Mimesis and the Sensible Appearance of the Idea

For Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, art is not the mere imitation (*Nachahmung*) of nature but rather a sensible manifestation or representation (*Darstellung*) of the Idea, which occurs and develops historically in itself. "Art and works of art, by springing from and being created by the spirit, are themselves of a spiritual kind, even if their presentation assumes an appearance of sensuousness and pervades the sensuous with the spirit" (Hegel [1835] 1975: 12). Likewise, art is not the imitation of nature but a reality superior to nature, as nature is exteriority that will and must become spirit (and thus interiority). The production of spirit, even in error, is superior to the production of nature and has more vitality than the natural form (Hegel 1817: §248). For Hegel, the Idea must appear in art as vitality, as vital reality.

Art is also the intimate mirror of a society, because it shows the moral, political and cultural truths and the intimate wisdom that configures a society. According to Hegel, there is a strong ontological nexus between an art form and the epoch it belongs to. The Idea also develops and manifests itself in nature in a teleological movement, and nature is exteriority that will become spirit. The spirit must recognize itself in nature as a living totality: a system, a necessity. Art and nature are thus, in Hegel's system, moments of the recognition of spirit, and the path through the absolute Idea and its self-realization. They are both understood in a teleological and historical framework. In Hegel's aesthetics, art is a kind of mimesis in the sense of representation of the historical moment, or *Zeitgeist*. In the twentieth

century, the effects of this interpretation of art would be defining for movements such as Marxism and socialist realism which sought to represent historical reality, as well as for the discussion of the importance of biographical and historical conditions on an artwork's origin. (For a broad discussion about literature's dependence on classical aesthetics of imitation of nature when it intends to represent social conditions leading to the aporia of representation or transformation of social conditions of existence, see Jauss 1982.)

Finally, let us keep in mind that since modernity, the concept of mimesis has been contested and discussed in these closely-related ways when assuming the independence of the artwork from reality:

- the possibilities of the artwork for structuring and governing itself
- the inner teleology of the artwork
- the artwork being significant in and of itself
- the artwork having a structure explicable only within an aesthetic framework.

The conception of art as mimesis has come to the fore whenever aesthetics pursues a confirmation and emphasis of the place of the artwork in the world, as well as art's influence and effects on the constitution and transformation of reality.

4. Representation and Mimesis – Alternative Concepts of Mediation

The concept of representation is related to the Greek concept of mimesis, but can signify something different if perceived through the perspective of modernity. The German terms *Nachahmung*, *Vorstellung*, and *Darstellung* belong to this perspective. Representation can be understood either as mimesis and imitation or as the relation of subject to object. The paradigmatic sensible representation, as in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), is the way in which the human mind, through the combination of receptivity and spontaneity, through the combination of sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*) and the intellectual faculty of representation (*Vorstellungskraft*), can constitute the phenomenon; sensible representation, in this sense, means *Vorstellung*, that is a discrete mental state of which the mind is aware and by which the mind is aware of something else. The sensual object of representation is the result of an activity of rational organization applied to the

content of sensual receptivity. Thus, the sensual object is the result of the subject, although it will always depend on the material provided by sensation. The object is, in a way, a composition of the transcendental subject's rational organization that produces unity (concept) from multiplicity (sensations).¹³

The modern understanding of objects as subjective representations is in part what Martin Heidegger names *Die Zeit des Weltbildes* (1938) – *The Age of the World Picture* (1977). Nature becomes an image of the subject. It is neither a copy nor an imitation of a reality that exists prior to the image. The totality of the entity is configured through the subject's activity of structuring. In this manner the object is represented (*vorgestellt*) and the being of the entity is understood as represented. What kind of reality do we face with objects as representations of subjects? The entity only is if it is configured within the subjective representational structures, there is no plain entity that could be just what it is (presence as *Anwesenheit*) as in ancient Greek philosophy or, as a created entity, in the Middle Ages. Following Heidegger's argument, thinking is now reduced to representation (*Vorstellen*) and calculation. The technical domination of the world is, for Heidegger, related to this condition, because only a subject that is reduced to the activities of representation and calculation (and that reduces the entity to a mere represented image with no being of its own) is able to consider nature as exploitable and available for human consumption.

Jacques Derrida's commentary on Heidegger's *Die Zeit des Weltbildes* emphasizes that the experience of the entity is, in modernity, nothing but representation. Another possibility must therefore be brought about: to think about the limits of representation, that is, to think about that which is unrepresentable, which escapes the possibilities of representation and that has even been forbidden to appear as representation by

the law. The question remains there, what is beyond phenomenality? Is the psyche understandable via representation (the discussion involves Freud and Lacan), are the categories of representation the ones that allow us to think nowadays the problems of subjectivation, of becoming subject? (See Derrida 1987.)

"Mimesis" in the Greek as well as "representation" in the modern sense, describe ways of determining what the sensible entity is. The order and form of the entity belong to an intelligible aspect, whether the *ei-dos* of a substance or the intellect of the subject. To this extent, mimesis and representation are concepts that can be thought about together, though they do not signify the same. In modernity and afterwards, representation must always be considered within the concept of subjectivity. In any case, what is important to acknowledge and emphasise is that mimesis and representation are both mediations, and that something is therefore mediated through them.

In many respects, representation is the concept that can be analysed and criticized to think about the modes in which the world is constructed in modernity and late modernity. The history and archaeology of representation can manifest the several epistemes that organize world ideas: as Michel Foucault shows in *Les mots et les choses* (1966; *The Order of Things*, 1970), there are different orders and codes according to distinct cultures, epochs, languages, and techniques. The production of nature is a question of ordering and interpretation, of producing unities and identities – of different modes of representation.

5. Mimesis in the Twentieth Century Debate

In contemporary aesthetics there is a recovery and reformulation of the concepts of mimesis and representation, in order to address what art is expected to be in

¹³ The tension between what is provided by the intellect and what is provided by the phenomenon is discussed (but not solved) by Kant with the transcendental schema: "In all subsumptions of an object under a concept the representations of the former must be homogeneous with the latter, that is, the concept must contain that which is represented in the object that is to be subsumed under it [...]. Now it is clear that there must be a third thing, something

that must be homogeneous with the category, on the one hand, and with the appearance, on the other hand, and that thus makes possible the application of the category to the appearance. This mediating representation must be pure (i.e., without anything empirical), and yet must be both intellectual, on the one hand, and sensible, on the other hand. Such a presentation is the transcendental schema" (Kant [1781/1787] 1999: A136/B176).

philosophical discourse. In the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricœur, mimesis is the central concept.

5.1 Gadamer – Mimesis as Language

For Hans-Georg Gadamer, language is the way in which being occurs, language is a manifestation or mimesis (*Darstellung*) of what exists. This means an ontologization of language: “Being that can be understood is language” (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 470). Being occurs as language, because it can only be represented (*dar-gestellt*) and understood as language.¹⁴ Gadamer states the universality of language, but this does not imply the view that everything is clearly and distinctly expressible in words. It means, on the contrary, that language in its ontological scope gives sense to everything, even if it does so confusingly. The human world is always the world of meaning, and therefore the world of language: “All human speaking is finite in such a way that there is laid up within it an infinity of meaning to be explicated and laid out. That is why the hermeneutical phenomenon also can be illuminated only in light of the fundamental finitude of being, which is wholly verbal in character” (ibid.: 454). The world, in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, is the result of its historic comprehensions and interpretations, which occur as language. The world is mediated by language. Because the world and experience are framed within language, there is no referent to which language can point. Language is understood as representation, as mimesis: “Let us start from the basic ontological constitution, according to which Being is language, i.e. visualisation (*Sichdarstellen*)” (ibid.: 481). Mimesis is therefore a movement of being through which being becomes a manifestation of itself.

Because it presents the ontological argument regarding being and language, the concept of the artwork has a central role in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, from *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960; *Truth and Method*, 1989) to his later texts of the 1990s. Play is the artwork’s mode of being, since play is movement that delimits its own space as self-representation, producing a transformed world: “The being of all play is always self-realization, sheer fulfillment, *energeia* which has its *telos* within itself. The world of the work of art, in which play expresses itself fully in the unity of its course, is in fact a wholly transformed world. In and through it everyone recognizes that that is how things” (Gadamer [1960] 2004: 112). (For a broad discussion and explanation of Gadamer’s aesthetic-ontological thesis of the artwork as play, see González Valerio 2005.)

What, then, is represented in the artwork? Conceptually, Gadamer recovers mimesis mainly from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Mimesis as *poiesis* orders and constructs the world as language, as meaning. Its (ontological) task is to put forward meanings, to represent a common truth: “And so, if I were to propose a universal aesthetic category that encompasses the categories of expression, imitation and sign developed at the beginning, I would like to take up the oldest concept of mimesis, which meant the representation of nothing but order. Testimony to order - this seems to have always been valid, provided that every work of art, even in our world that is changing more and more into uniformity and seriality, testifies to the spiritual power of order that is the reality of our lives. The work of art is an example of what we all do by being here: the constant building of the world” (Gadamer [1967] 1999: 36, my translation¹⁵). But no praxis, no world, no image or word, can be the model for mimesis – it brings into being what was not there before.

¹⁴ Not all the receptions of Gadamer’s thesis affirm that there is an ontologization of language. Some authors instead perform an epistemological turn, and then sustain that this thesis deals with comprehension and communication, for example Grondin (2001) and Rorty (2001). What they do not consider with an epistemological turn is the role of mimesis, which is central in Gadamer’s argument.

¹⁵ German Original: „Und so möchte ich, wenn ich eine universal ästhetische Kategorie vorschlagen sollte, die die eingang entwickelten Kategorien Ausdruck,

Nachahmung und Zeichen in sich schließt, an den ältesten Begriff von Mimesis anknüpfen, mit dem Darstellung von nichts anderem gemeint war als Ordnung. Bezeugung von Ordnung – das scheint von eh und je gültig, sofern jedes Werk der Kunst, auch noch in unserer sich immer mehr ins Uniforme und ins Serielle verändernden Welt, die geistige Ordnungskraft bezeugt, die die Wirklichkeit unseres Lebens ausmacht. Im Werk der Kunst geschieht beispielhaft, was wir alle tun, indem wir da sind: beständiger Aufbau von Welt.“

5.2 Ricœur – Mimesis as Action

For Paul Ricœur, literature is also mimesis. Ricœur differs from Gadamer's perspective in terms of the universality of hermeneutics and of the ontologization of language. The concept of mimesis present in Ricœur's philosophy is born of his sweeping and profound analysis of Aristotle's *Poetics*. For Ricœur, it is important to simultaneously maintain the coherence of the artwork, its internal order, and its reference to the world. In *Temps et récit* (1983–1985; *Time and Narrative* 1984–1988) and *La métaphore vive* (1975; *The Rule of Metaphor*, 1977) he studies the construction of the narrative literary text and the figure of rhetoric, attending to how the concept of mimesis can be understood as something that produces the internal logic and organization of language, and that at the same time produces the configuration of narrative time, of narrative identity (since *Temps et récit III*, 1985, but extensively in *Soi même comme un autre*, 1990), and of metaphoric truth. The metaphor re-describes reality and the narrative text refigures temporal experience. Ricœur describes in great detail the process of mimesis, which he calls the "triple mimesis," emphasizing that it is a movement from the world to the text and back to the world.

By building on the concept of mimesis as presented in Aristotle's *Poetics*, Ricœur links the concept of mimesis with that of mythos and establishes the binomial "mimesis-mythos", which means that mythos is *mimesis praxeos* and disposition of facts – the implication being that mimesis occurs only in and through the plot, while the plot occurs only in and through the mimesis. Ricœur calls this co-dependence a "relationship of essence": "This equivalence first of all excludes any interpretation of Aristotle's mimesis in terms of a copy or identical replica. Imitating or representing is a mimetic activity inasmuch as it produces something, namely, the organization of events by emplotment. [...] Platonic mimesis thereby distances the work of art by twice over from the ideal model which is its ultimate basis. Aristotle's mimesis has just a single space wherein it is unfolded—human making [*faire*], the arts of composition. If therefore we are to conserve the character of mimesis as being an activity which poesis confers on it, and if, moreover, we hold tightly to the guideline of defining mimesis by mythos, then we ought not to hesitate in

understanding action—action as the object in the expression *mimesis praxeos* (50b3)—as the correlate of the mimetic activity governed by the organization of the events (into a system)" (Ricœur 1984: 34). Imitation, or representation, is a mimetic activity insofar as it produces something: precisely the disposition of facts through the construction of the plot. Because the disposition of facts is an order (synthesis of the heterogeneous, discordant concordance), then what mimesis produces is fundamentally an order. In Ricœur's hermeneutics, ordered praxis appears as the correlate of mimetic action.

5.3 Language and Mimesis in Structuralism and Post-Structuralism

Language and mimesis are essentially intertwined in hermeneutics. The comprehension and interpretation of the world depend on a mimetic enactment in which being occurs or happens. The historicity of language; its independence from the author or sender; the production of always-reinterpretable meanings; the generation of categories as ways of being for the entity; the openness of language; the impossibility of controlling or objectifying it; the identity of being and *logos* without the reference to an external or second world – all these are important statements of hermeneutics. Moreover, the statement that being manifests itself through language and as language is at the core of the reflection upon mimesis and the artwork. (A larger exposition of these thesis is to be found in González Valerio 2010.) Nevertheless, there is also a current and vehement critique of mimesis that extends from structuralism to post-structuralism to the philosophy of art, as exemplified in the theories of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Arthur Danto.

For structuralism, the linguistic sign is not mimetic and has no commitment to the referent, since there is only the signifier and the signified. Literature is a game of words, meanings, and structures. Its analysis must therefore be situated not in the realm of reality but in the realm of signifiers and their combinations: "Narrative does not make see, it does not imitate; the passion that may consume us upon reading a novel is not that of a "vision" (in fact, we "see" nothing), it is the passion of meaning, that is, a higher order of relation, which also carries its emotions, its hopes, its threats, its

triumphs: “what goes on” in a narrative is, from the referential (real) point of view, strictly speaking: *nothing*; “what happens” is language alone, the adventure of language, whose advent never ceases to be celebrated” (Barthes 1966, 27, my translation). Language is set free from reference and worldliness. It can be transformed and transfigured in literature following its own rules. The story appears as an instance that can be thought of as a combinatorial game of the code’s elements: language and story. Barthes’s structuralism allows analysis to escape from the discussion of imitation. For Barthes, the multiplicity of narratives, of stories, must be set aside in order to achieve unity for the analysis and to reduce multiplicity and heterogeneity to a single structure. To reach the essence of the story, the protoform (and indeed, reaching it seems to be the goal of Barthes’s structuralism), the system must be ahistorical, a-chronic, and consisting of unchanging structures.

If Ricœur’s hermeneutics fought the structuralist approach to literature, it is because he thinks that literature has the obligation to transform human existence and experience, and to not be enclosed in itself. The concept of mimesis has been the theoretical strategy to move from linguistics to ethics, and from ethics to ontology.

For Derrida, the problem with mimesis is ontological and epistemic. The history of literary interpretation has depended on the concept of mimesis, and on the various logical possibilities regarding its relationship to truth. The logic of mimesis is established and produced by duplication, by generating the double of the thing that appears as the Other and which the imitation can only resemble (or fail to resemble), such that (because the value is placed only in the original), the imitation is nothing in and of itself. Derrida’s interpretation of the concept of mimesis is linked to his interpretation of Platonism, following Nietzsche’s criticism. What is at stake here is a narrative about the history of onto-theo-logy; this is why the concept becomes so important in Derrida’s argumentation. I quote him at length because his work is a good example of a different understanding of the concept of mimesis in the twentieth century and summarizes the critique of onto-theo-logies, a critique that is a commonplace of philosophies after Heidegger: “Faced with all this, what does ‘Platonism’ decide and maintain? (‘Platonism’ here standing more or less immediately for the whole history of Western philosophy,

including the anti-Platonisms that regularly feed into it.) What is it that is decided and maintained in ontology or dialectics throughout all the mutations or revolutions that are entailed? It is precisely the ontological: the presumed possibility of a discourse about what is, the deciding and decidable logos of or about the on (being-present). That which is, the being-present (the matrix-form of substance, of reality, of the oppositions between matter and form, essence and existence, objectivity and subjectivity, etc.) is distinguished from the appearance, the image, the phenomenon, etc., that is, from anything that, presenting it and being-present, doubles it, re-presents it, and can therefore replace and de-present it. There is thus the 1 and the 2, the simple and the double. The double comes after the simple; it multiplies it as a follow-up. It follows, I apologize for repeating this, that the image supervenes upon reality, the representation upon the present in presentation, the imitation upon the thing, the imitator upon the imitated. First there is what is, ‘reality’, the thing itself, in flesh and blood as the phenomenologists say; then there is, imitating these, the painting, the portrait, the zographeme, the inscription or transcription of the thing itself. Discernability, at least numerical discernability, between the imitator and the imitated is what constitutes order. And obviously, according to ‘logic’ itself, according to a profound synonymy, what is imitated is more real, more essential, more true, etc., than what imitates. It is anterior and superior to it” (Derrida 1981: 191). The concept of mimesis is criticized in this argument for being nothing more than a duplication, a falsehood, a nothingness which can aspire only to similarity or resemblance. Derrida points out that there is also a distance or temporal difference in this relationship between the imitated and the imitator, since the imitated must exist prior to the imitator.

Derrida’s position on the concept of mimesis is a good example of an understanding of the concept as the mere duplication or imitation of an original. For critics of Platonism (which is distinct from Plato’s philosophy and the history of Plato interpretation), the idea of an original possessing more epistemic and ontological value than a copy is unsustainable, since it devalues the sensible world and becoming. We can contrast Gadamer’s and Ricœur’s approaches with that of Derrida, noting that they have different understandings of the concept of mimesis and different readings

of traditions (especially those related to Greek inheritance). What they have in common, however, is an understanding of the ontological value of the artwork in regard to its construction and transformation of the world. The artwork is not the object of an aesthetic conscience that merely seeks an aesthetic judgement (see Gadamer's [1960] 1999: 48–87 critique of aestheticism), but a dispositive and artifact that produces the sensible world and that puts forward meanings to be interpreted diversely by readers and spectators, where knowledge is brought about by pondering an idea of truth that differs from the *adaequatio rei et intellectus* ("conformity of the thing with the intellect"). The truth that belongs to art cannot be verified or measured – nevertheless, this truth still shapes the world in which we live.

Beyond structuralism and post structuralism, there have been many others uses and accounts of the category of mimesis. For example, in anthropology it has been used notably by James Frazer, who in his seminal book *The Golden Bough* (1890) about magic constantly interprets magic practices as mimesis through similarity or resemblance. The magic effect happens by mimicry in what he calls homeopathic magic. These kinds of practices are considered by Frazer as primitive.

In a similar way, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno state in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/1947) that modernity has repressed mimetic behaviour from ancient times, and that science has controlled our mimetic truth. Pre-modern societies had a more direct approach to things and experiences, they say, as if the concept of mimesis were the opposite of the space of representation; mimesis is understood as something immediate, as an empirical relation to things. There is a colonial vision in these theories, because they assume and affirm that there is more distancing from the immediacy of the objects via rationality and a modern scientific worldview, and that pre-modern societies were more free, and they consider these societies in a positive way, although Frazer never actually visited any of the communities that he describes in his book, and Adorno and Horkheimer assume that these worldviews are not current and they never discuss anthropological examples. There are many communities in the world that cannot be considered primitive or pre-modern, in Latin America just to mention one region, where what

they call mimesis and magic are practices that coexist with science and technology. The early essay of Walter Benjamin *On the Mimetic Faculty* (1933) also considers that pre-modern societies acted in a magical and mimetic way, and that later in time and history the space of representation was founded with a different conception of language (where words signify things, and are not the things themselves, as he presumed shamans to have believed). His idea of the "aura" of the artwork is in part related to these conceptions of mimesis, myths and magic as something related to the empirical object, and not to the space of representation.

Later, in his account of modern art in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno understands the category of mimesis as something related to the materiality of the artwork. The multiplicity of the materiality is transformed, that is, formed and constructed as unity in the artwork through rationality: "The survival of mimesis, the nonconceptual affinity of the subjectivity produced with its unposited other, defines art as a form of knowledge and to that extent as 'rational'" (1997: 54). The materiality is the identity, and is later denied with the construction or form. However, mimesis is not the central feature of Adorno's theory and interpretation of modern art; it is one of many elements he considers with regard to the artwork, along with whole, part, form, construction, etc. What is paramount for Adorno in his negative aesthetics is that authentic modern art is autonomous, is aesthetic appearance and is a disruption of social processes.

5.4 Greenberg and Danto – Mimesis in the Theory of Modern Art

Finally, a brief reference to the incorporation of the concept of mimesis within the art world is necessary for understanding where the debate regarding production and interpretation of contemporary arts currently stands. Inside the art world, discussion focuses on whether contemporary art is still mimetic or not: mimesis, in this context, is primarily understood to be figurative representation and imitation. For Clement Greenberg, Modernism sought to avoid representational content, becoming more and more reflective on art's nature (see his very influential and much-discussed article about representational and abstract

art: “Modernist Painting”, 1960). Arthur Danto continues in the same line of argumentation, referring to mimesis as the imitation theory. Danto rejects this theory on historical terms – according to him, the emergence of the avant-garde and the invention of photography mean that this paradigm is no longer applicable to art. Art is no longer the imitation of nature, and mimesis is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for judging something as an artwork. Modern art is critique, and is reflective on its own procedures (Danto 1964). For Danto, anything can count as art provided it has the theory to support it – this is most obvious in contemporary art, which is highly dependent on explanations and texts.

Greenberg’s and Danto’s arguments, so influential to the contemporary debate regarding representational art, fail to provide an understanding of the concept of mimesis beyond its misinterpretation as imitation of the sensible world. For art theory, in general, the concept of mimesis belongs to the past.

6. Conclusion

The concept of mimesis has been and is still much discussed within aesthetics – references to “mimesis” run throughout the history of aesthetics, since it is at the very core of the interpretation of what art is and what it could be, its representational relation to the world and to art history, styles and models. If so, the question of how to reflect upon mimesis as a relevant concept within the current philosophy of nature – that is, what idea of nature could be related to the concept of mimesis, and what kind of ontology is or could be at stake here – deserves further and larger analysis, although we have provided here some general guidelines.

If in Gadamer’s and Ricœur’s defences of mimesis we gather that (i) the artwork is not a product but a process, that (ii) what is important is not the text but the movement that emerges within it which moves from the historical past towards the opening of interpretations-to-come, and that (iii) this movement as mimesis and mediation indicates the impossibility of determining what a thing is without considering the circumstances of its formation and modification, then perhaps what nature and life are to us might also be framed within the movement of mimesis.

Since Plato, the concept of mimesis has been ontological, i.e., it describes the world’s mode of being. The

world is both mediated and the result of mediations. Nature might be considered not as something that is simply there, but as the result of mediations – and not only evolutionary and phylogenetic mediations in the sense that the living entity is the outcome of biological processes that could be regarded as mediations, but historic mediations as well. Nature, then, is the result of interpretations, of worldviews, of cultures, of circumstances (Williams 1980; Macnaghten/Urry 1998; Kirchhoff/Trepl 2009).

Mimesis is not only an ontological concept: since Aristotle, the concept has also meant the construction of fictional coherence with ethical implications as well. The different narratives that we build about nature have an impact on our behaviour towards nature: technical domination and climate change come to mind as examples. With the concept of mimesis, we have learned that the referent is not something fixed but an outcome of the mimetic movement. What kind of nature corresponds to the narratives of the life sciences in the twentieth century? What kind of epistemes, narratives etc. have been configured in the twentieth century? In mechanism, organicism, embryology, molecular biology, the modern synthesis, evolutionary developmental biology, the extended modern synthesis, niche construction, ecology, landscape, wilderness etc., how has the concept of mimesis, as internal coherence, operated in the construction of these theories and concepts that are mentioned here only as examples? So many questions with the potential for analysis in a mimetic framework are relevant to the contemporary debates in the life sciences, cultural history of nature, iconography of nature – here the incorporation of the concept of mimesis into the development of the philosophy of nature can provide a different approach to shape and understand what nature is and can be in the discourses in the 21st century, assuming that the discourses on nature are also an ethical and political issue that need to be integrated in the context of a broad ontological analysis.

In summation, if the concept of mimesis has historically explained configurations (from language to images) and how they build the world, a philosophy of nature could study and reinterpret the constructions and configurations of the life sciences as historical epistemes that have internal coherence and that model and limit our experience of nature.

Basic Literature

- Auerbach, Erich 1953: *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Translated from the German by Willard R. Trask. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg [1960] 2004: *Truth and Method*. Second, revised edition. Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London/New York, Continuum.
- González Valerio, María Antonia 2010: *Un tratado de ficción. Ontología de la mimesis*. Mexico, Herder.
- Halliwell, Stephen 2002: *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin [1938] 1977: *The age of the world picture*. In: Tauber, Alfred I. (ed.): *Science and the Quest for Reality*. London, Palgrave Macmillan: 70–88.
- Ricoeur, Paul [1983] 1984: *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*. Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press.

Literature

- Adorno, Theodor W. [1970] 1997: *Aesthetic Theory*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Aristotle *Metaphysics* = Aristotle 1981: *Metaphysics. A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary* by W. D. Ross. Two Volumes. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Aristotle *Physics* = Aristotle 2018: *Physics*. Translated with Introduction and Notes by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett.
- Aristotle *Poetics* = Aristotle 2012: *Poetics. Editio Maior of the Greek Text with Historical Introductions and Philological Commentaries*. Greek, English and Arabic Edition. Edited by Leonardo Tarán and Dimitri Gutas. Leiden/Boston, Brill.
- Auerbach, Erich 1953: *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Translated from the German by Willard R. Trask. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Barthes, Roland 1966: *Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits*. In: *Communications 8 [Recherches sémiologiques: l'analyse structurale du récit]*: 1–27.
- Batteux, Charles [1746] 2015: *The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by James O. Young. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb 1750/1758: *Aesthetica*. Frankfurt/Oder, Kleyb.
- Belfiore, Elizabeth 1983: *Aristotle's concept of praxis in the Poetics*. In: *The Classical Journal* 79 (2): 110–124.
- Benjamin, Walter [1933] 2005: *On the mimetic faculty*. In: *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith. Cambridge/MA, Belknap.
- Blumenberg, Hans/Wertz, Anna 2000: *"Imitation of nature": toward a prehistory of the idea of the creative being*. In: *Qui Parle* 12 (1): 17–54.
- Bolter, Jay David/Grusin, Richard 2000: *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. Cambridge/MA, MIT Press.
- Brecoulaki, Hariclia 2015: *Greek painting and the challenge of mimēsis*. In: *Destrée, Pierre/Murray, Penelope (eds): A Companion to Ancient Aesthetics*. Chichester, Wiley: 218–236.
- Danto, Arthur C. 1964: *The artworld*. In: *The Journal of Philosophy* 61 (19): 571–584.
- Deleuze, Gilles [1969] 1990: *The Logic of Sense*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques 1981: *Dissemination*. London, Athlone Press.
- Derrida, Jacques 1987: *Envoi*. In: *Derrida, Jacques: Psyché. Invention de l'autre*. Paris, Galilée: 109–143.
- Derrida, Jacques 1993: *Khôra*. Paris, Galilée.
- Dodds, Eric R. [1951] 1997: *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley/Los Angeles, University of California Press.
- Foucault, Michel [1966] 1979: *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris, Gallimard.
- Foucault, Michel [1966/1970] 2004: *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London/New York, Routledge.
- Frazer, James 1890: *The Golden Bough. A Study in Comparative Religion*. Two Volumes. London, Macmillan
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg [1960] 2004: *Truth and Method*. Second, Revised Edition. Translation Revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London/New York, Continuum.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg [1967] 1999: *Kunst und Nachahmung*. In: *Gadamer, Hans-Georg: Ästhetik und Poetik. Gesammelte Werke, Band 8*. Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck: 25–36.

- Genette, Gérard [1966] 1976: Boundaries of narrative. In: *New Literary History* 8 (1): 1–13.
- Genette, Gérard 1976: *Mimologiques, Voyage en Cratylie*. Paris, Seuil.
- González Valerio, María Antonia 2005: *El arte develado. Consideraciones estéticas sobre la hermenéutica de Gadamer*. Mexico, Herder.
- González Valerio, María Antonia 2010: *Un tratado de ficción. Ontología de la mimesis*. Mexico, Herder.
- Greenberg, Clement [1960] 1993: Modernist painting. In: O'Brian, John (ed.): *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 85–93.
- Grondin, Jean 2001: Was heißt 'Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache'? In: Grondin, Jean: *Von Heidegger zu Gadamer. Unterwegs zur Hermeneutik*. Stuttgart, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: 100–105.
- Halliwell, Stephen 2002. *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*. Princeton University Press.
- Halliwell, Stephen 2015: Fiction. In: Destrée, Pierre/Murray, Penelope (eds): *A Companion to Ancient Aesthetics*. Chichester, Wiley: 341–353.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich [1817] 2015: *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich [1835] 1975: *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art, Volume 1*. Translated by T. M. Knox. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin [1936–1946] 1991: Nietzsche. Volumes One and Two. Translated by David Farrell Krell. New York, Harper Collins.
- Heidegger, Martin [1938] 1950: Die Zeit des Weltbildes. In: Heidegger, Martin: *Holzwege*. Frankfurt/M., Klostermann: 69–104.
- Heidegger, Martin [1938] 1977: The age of the world picture. In: Tauber, Alfred I. (ed.): *Science and the Quest for Reality*. London, Palgrave Macmillan: 70–88.
- Horkheimer, Max/Adorno, Theodor [1944/1947] 2002: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- Hugo, Victor [1827] 1912: Préface [de Cromwell]. In: Hugo, Victor: *Œuvres complètes. Volume 23: Théâtre, tome I: Cromwell, Hernani*. Paris, Ollendorff: 7–51. Online: https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Livre:Hugo_-_%C5%92uvres_compl%C3%A8tes,_Impr._nat.,_Th%C3%A9%C3%A2tre,_tome_I.djvu.
- Jaeger, Werner [1939] 1986: *Paideia. The Ideals of Greek Culture*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Jauß, Hans Robert 1982: *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*. Translated from the German by Timothy Bahti. Introduction by Paul de Man. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Johansen, Thomas Kjeller 2008: *Plato's Natural Philosophy. A Study of the Timaeus-Critias*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel [1781/1787] 1999: *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel [1790] 2000: *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Kirchhoff, Thomas/Trepl, Ludwig (eds) 2009: *Vieldeutige Natur. Landschaft, Wildnis und Ökosystem als kulturgeschichtliche Phänomene*. Bielefeld, transcript.
- Lima, Luiz Costa 2010: Mimesis/Nachahmung. In: Barck Karlheiz/Fontius, Martin/Schlenstedt, Dieter/Steinwachs, Burkhart/Wolfzettel, Friedrich (eds): *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden. Studienausgabe, Band 4: Medien bis populär*. Stuttgart. Metzler: 84–121.
- Macnaghten, Phil/Urry, John 1998: *Contested Natures*. London, Sage.
- Nietzsche KSA = Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm 1980: *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*. Herausgegeben von Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari. München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm [1872]: 2000. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Plato 1997: *Plato. Complete Works*. Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by John M. Cooper. Vancouver, University of British Columbia.
- Plato Timaeus = Plato 1925: *Timaeus*. In: *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Volume 9: Timaeus. Critias. Cleitophon. Menexenus. Epistles*. With an English translation by R. G. Bury. Cambridge/MA, Harvard University Press & London, Heinemann: 1–253. Online edition: <https://scaife.perseus.org/reader/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg031.perseus-eng2:17-21/> and https://archive.org/details/b2900049x_0009/mode/2up.
- Plato Republic = Plato 2013: *Republic*. Two Volumes. Edited and Translated by Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy. Cambridge/MA, Harvard University Press.

- Reale, Giovanni 2008: Platone. Alla ricerca della sapienza segreta. Milano, Rizzoli.
- Ricœur, Paul [1975]: The Rule of Metaphor. New York/London, Routledge.
- Ricœur, Paul [1983] 1984: Time and Narrative. Volume 1. Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press.
- Ricœur, Paul 1985: Temps et récit 3: Le temps raconté. Paris, Seuil.
- Ricœur, Paul [1990] 1992: Oneself as Another. Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press.
- Rorty, Richard 2001: Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache. In: Bubner, Rüdiger/Figal, Günter/Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich/Habermas, Jürgen/Rorty, Richard/Teufel, Erwin/Theunissen, Michael/Vattimo, Gianni (authors): "Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache". Hommage an Hans-Georg Gadamer. Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp: 30–49.
- Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph [1799] 2004: First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Keith R. Peterson. Albany, State University of New York Press.
- Tatarkiewicz, Władysław 1980: A History of Six Ideas. An Essay in Aesthetics. The Hague, Nijhoff.
- Walton, Kendall L. 1990: Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of Representational Arts. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- Williams, Raymond 1980: Ideas of nature. In: Williams, Raymond (ed.): Problems in Materialism and Culture. London, Verso: 67–85.
- Zambrano, María 1996: Filosofía y poesía. Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica.