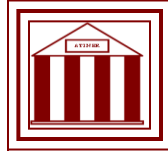
Athens Institute for Education and Research
ATINER



ATINER's Conference Paper Series
PHI2012-0196

The Role of *Mimesis* in Aristotle's *Poetics*: A Fundamental Cognitive System

Mariagrazia Granatella
Doctoral Student, Philosophy
Università di Pisa
Italy
Université Paris-Est
France

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
Email: info@atiner.gr URL: www.atiner.gr
URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research.
All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the source is fully acknowledged.

ISSN **2241-2891**
12/09/2012

An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

Granatella, M. (2012) "**The Role of *Mimesis* in Aristotle's *Poetics*: A Fundamental Cognitive System**" Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: PHI2012-0196.

The Role of *Mimesis* in Aristotle's *Poetics*: A Fundamental Cognitive System

Mariagrazia Granatella
Doctoral Student, Philosophy
Università di Pisa
Italy
Université Paris-Est
France

Abstract

This paper describes and evaluates the role of *mimesis* in Aristotle's *Poetics* with the aim of demonstrating how a philosophical theory of human cognition lies at its core. I first examine how the ancient notion of *mimesis* is more complex than its conventional translation as imitation currently conveys and, especially, that *mimesis* is far from providing a static model of artistic representation. I will try to use the rich semantics of the ancient notion of *mimesis* in order to extricate this notion from the *impasse* to which it has been relegated as mere simulation and reduplication. Secondly, this point of view on *mimesis* will prove to be a powerful critical instrument towards a fresh appraisal of Aristotelian *mimesis* that, I suggest, is inherently anthropological and psychological. Through an analysis of several important Aristotelian passages, it will be shown how Aristotle identifies *mimesis* as a feature of human nature that can explain the existence of poetry, to the extent that it makes human actions unique and specific. Under the influence of Aristotelian paradigms we can see that the problem of *mimesis* is not only the 'fraught' relationship between art and reality but rather the problem of human understanding and human cognition.

Contact Information of Corresponding author: mariagrazia.granatella@live.it

Mariagrazia GRANATELLA (Palermo, 9/11/1983). After earning a degree in Philosophy of Knowledge and Communication at the University of Palermo, she continues her studies in Philosophy and Forms of Knowledge at the University of Pisa. Her research concerns the ancient philosophical theories of mimesis, with particular attention to their heritage in French aesthetics of the eighteenth century.

> If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do". (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, remark 217)

In the short story entitled *Averroes's Search*, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges imagines the difficulty of Averroes, the famed Islamic philosopher, in translating Aristotle's *Poetics*.

History records few acts more beautiful and more pathetic than this Arabic physician's consecration to the thoughts of a man separated from whom he was separated by fourteen centuries. To the intrinsic difficulties we should add the fact that Averroes, who had no knowledge of Syriac or Greek, was working on the translation of a translation. On the previous evening he had been nonplussed by two equivocal words at the beginning of the Poetics*: the words* tragedy *and* comedy. *He had encountered them years before in the third book of the* Rhetoric. *No one within the compass of Islam intuited what they meant. Averroes had exhausted the pages of Alexander of Afrodisia in vain; vainly he had collated the versions of the Nestorian philosopher Hunain ibn-Ishaq and of Abu-Bashar Mata. The two arcane words pullulated in the text of the* Poetics*; it was impossible to elude them.*[1]

The Islamic philosopher did not understand what a play was, due to the absence of live theatrical performances from his own cultural milieu, in contrast to that of ancient Greece. But ironically in the story, while glancing out of his window, Averroes casually observes some children playing and acting: one was playing the part of a muezzin; another played the part of the minaret; another, that of the faithful worshipers. So, what we seek is often nearby: while Averroes did not understand what a play was, he observed those children creating a kind of theatrical performance.

What merits emphasis in this story is that, on the one hand, Averroes could not understand the terms *tragedy* and *comedy* because theatre and drama were unknown to his medieval Islamic world; on the other hand, the imitative and fictionalising behaviour of children can count as an example of the human propensity toward mimetic activity. This propensity is natural and universal, beyond territorial limits.

It is in this spirit that here I want to address one of the most fundamental elements in the theoretical framework of the *Poetics*: the role of the notion of *mimesis*. In the eyes of many, *mimesis* has the status of an outmoded aesthetic doctrine; a broken column of an obsolete classical tradition. But recent years have seen a number of efforts to rehabilitate *mimesis* at various levels of aesthetic thought, and at the same time a mass of work has appeared on various facets of the whole phenomenon of mimeticism in psychology, biology, anthropology and beyond.

The viewpoint I adopt here on *mimesis* will be situated within the theories of artistic *mimesis*, *i.e.*, the contexts in which the word *mimesis* is used in

[1] Borges, J. L. (1967). 'Averroes's Search.' In: *A personal anthology*, New York: Grove Press, p. 202.

connection with works of art. The kind of research I have in mind is one that looks to ancient roots of the history of *mimesis* to show how this notion is far from providing a static model of artistic representation. The main issue which concerns me can be stated with simplicity: can we understand the mimetic activity expressed in an art form – such as tragedy or comedy – as an offshoot of a natural and universal human capacity, which is also needed in the fabric of actual lives outside the theatre? I would like to discuss this hypothesis in order to demonstrate that a philosophical theory of human cognition[1] lies at the core of Aristotle's reformulation of the notion of *mimesis*, contained in his magnificent *Poetics.*

Ancient mimesis

Numerous anecdotes -- about painted grapes that attract sparrows, painted horses that real ones neigh at -- show that in antiquity the mimetic view was part of commonsense.[2] Asked whether he can imitate the soul, the painter Parrhasius replied: 'How can it be imitated since it has neither shape nor colour [...] and is not visible at all?'[3] These words give us an indication of the Greek way of looking at a work of art: the idea that art mimics reality in a different medium.

However, from the point of view adopted in this article, the importance of *mimesis* lies not in any narrow or fixed conception of art, but rather in the depth of questions as to how, when, and why the practices we have come to call *art* become a philosophical problem. Because the search for origins is a risky, and often barren enterprise, I suggest that we should trace the major paths by which the philosophical problem of *mimesis* has come about. The path sketched by Aristotle is one of these.

For Aristotle (as for Plato before him, and subsequently for most other classical thinkers) *mimesis* was key to the primary question of the relation between works of art and the world. As Göran Sorbom noted at the beginning of his book, *Mimesis and Art. Studies in the Origin and Early Development of an Aesthetic Vocabulary*, the word *mimesis* 'has been used, first of all, to describe the basic character of works of art and as a means to tell what distinguishes works of art from any other kind of phenomenon; but it has also been used as a psychological explanation of the way in which we experience and react to works of art.'[4] But, if Plato and Aristotle have always, and rightly, been placed at the foundations of this tradition, and regarded as its originators, their usage of the Greek word *mimesis* (a usage which could be called aesthetic) is not a radical innovation.

---

[1] For *cognition* I mean the action of knowing, taken in its widest sense, including sensation, perception and conception. More specifically: the distinctively human mechanism of receiving information, activating knowledge and learning.

[2] See Panofsky, E. (1968). *Idea*, transl. by Joseph J. L. Peake, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

[3] Cited in, Webster, T. B. L. (1939). 'Greek theories of art and literature down to 400 B.C.' *The Classical Quarterly* 33, p. 167.

[4] Sorbom, G. (1966). *Mimesis and Art. Studies in the Origin and Early Development of an Aesthetic Vocabulary*, Stockholm: Svenska bokförlaget, p. 11.

Studies such as those started by Hermann Koller and Gerard F. Else[1] have shown that there are passages in the extant literature before Plato in which *mimesis* and its cognates occur in connection with works of art[2] (above all *mimema*, *mimetes*, *mimetikos* that, in turn, derived from the verb *mimeisthai*; so, as suggested by Sorbom, we can call this words group *mimeisthai*-group).

Here it is not possible to examine all these passages, but it is of interest to note that in early usages of the words belonging to the *mimeisthai*-group, it is not a copy-situation that is intended, but something else. For instance, in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (the earliest text where a member of the *mimeisthai*-group turns up in an artistic setting) a chorus of Delian girls 'imitate (*mimeisthai*) the tongues of all men and their clattering speech; each would say that he himself were singing, so close to truth is their sweet song.'[3] Though the meaning of this passage is not quite clear, it treats *mimesis* not in a strict portraiture sense but more or less as a type of artistic accomplishment. It involves the creation of something that, through its artistic vividness and recognizability, has a powerful impact on their beholders (hence the idea that a hearer would say it was the sound of his own voice).

We can find a parallel situation in the fragment from Aeschylu's *Theoroi*, in which a chorus of satyrs admire dedicating images of themselves in the sanctuary of Poseidon at Isthmia and speaking of a particular image that is so like their form that it only lacks a voice, as 'the mimetic work (*mimema*) of Daedalus.'[4] Also in this case, we have no reason to believe that *mimema* stands for copy or replica. As noted by Sorbom, 'the fragment does not tell us that there were, in the early classical period, painstakingly realistic works of art but that the Greeks of the early classical period experienced the art of their time as extremely vivid and amazingly full of life.'[5]

Regarded this way, the early occurrences of the words belonging to the *mimeisthai*-group in the extant literature before Plato, become very interesting from a methodological and practical point of view. They constitute the background to the theory of *mimesis* of Plato and Aristotle, and show us that the action of *mimesis*, rather than a simple copy of particular phenomena, was felt as a realization or even exhibition of something that, mediated through the artist's skilled accomplishment, should affect the beholder (in this case for its vivid characteristics, and not for being the concrete representation of a model). At the same time, the aesthetic experience of the beholder is enriched by a subtle awareness that, grasping the mediated fact of the mimetic action, can have several of the resonances in its ranges of significance and, in this way, can acquire cognitive value.

If so, the ancient notion of *mimesis*, far from being captured by an artless notion of imitation, was related to a structure of ideas at whose centre lies a

---

[1] See Koller, H. (1954). *Die Mimesis in der Antike, Nachahmung, Darstellung, Ausdruck*, Bernae: A. Francke; Else, G. F. (1958), 'Imitation in the fifth century.' *Classical Philology* LIII(2): 73-90.

[2] 'Work of art' is here used in the wide sense of the word that includes all kinds of artistic production, such as: paintings, sculptures, poems, pieces of music, dance, etc.

[3] *Hom. Hymn Ap.* 162-64.

[4] Aeschylus fr. 78a.1-12 Radt. Daedalus is the mythological sculptor popularly reputed to have made statues that could actually move.

[5] Sorbom, G. *op. cit.* p. 45.

sense of the vital, mutually enriching bond between art and human experience, taken in its wide sense. For this reason, I would like to discuss how this last point -- namely, the bond between art and human experience -- could be related to Aristotle's theory of the origin of poetry that, I maintain, reflects a more general philosophy of man.

Aristotelian mimesis

We must be clear that, contrary to a common literary tradition, we have no reason to read the *Poetics* as an elegant, polished composition; we have no reason to read the *Poetics* as a 'perfect little work of aesthetic criticism', as noted Oscar Wilde. What we now call the *Poetics* is part of a work which was compiled between 360 and 320 B.C. for use in the education of young philosophers. It was never intended to be available to a wide public, and it was in any case not designated to be read as a creative writing course. Poetry itself does not seem to have been among Aristotle's deepest concerns, but we can argue that Aristotle regards poetic activity as a means by which human beings can explore their own distinctively human world and human capabilities.
We encounter this Aristotelian view at the core of the *Poetics* in the first part of the fourth chapter, where Aristotle identifies two features of human nature that he takes to explain the existence of poetry:

Poetry, in general, can be seen to owe its existence to two chief causes, and these are rooted in nature. First, there is man's natural propensity, from childhood onwards, to engage in mimetic activity (and this distinguishes man from other creatures, that he is thoroughly mimetic and through mimesis takes his first steps in understanding). [*Second*], *there is the pleasure which all men take in mimetic objects.* (*Poet.* 1448 b 4-8)

In this passage, 'often wrongly regarded as marginal or digressive'[1], Aristotle makes two important remarks: on the one hand, poetry takes place only within the area of human action. Accordingly, for Aristotle, there is poetry only where there is mimetic activity. On the other hand, calling humans *thoroughly mimetic* -- namely, the most mimetic of animals -- and citing the capacity of children to learn by *mimesis*, Aristotle stresses that *mimesis* is an important component of human nature, and one that distinguishes humans from other animals.
So, the role of *mimesis* in the *Poetics* becomes more precise: it cannot be a question of imitation as a copy, reflection, or replica, but rather of something else. In this sense, it is essential to separate Aristotelian *mimesis* (that has roots in human nature) from the aesthetic principle encapsulated in the slogan 'the imitation of nature'; that slogan, contrary to a common misunderstanding, is nowhere to be found in the *Poetics* or in any other Aristotelian discussion of poetry. For Aristotle, speaking about the relationship between *mimesis* and poetry is to speak about what humans are singular at producing; and this means that Aristotle regards *mimesis* not simply as an instinctive capacity to generate

[1] Halliwell, S. (2002).*The aesthetics of mimesis: ancient texts and modern problems*, Princeton (N.J.): Princeton university press, p. 177.

elaborate forms of cultural practice (such as comic or tragic theatre), but also as an activity essentially in every case of human learning and understanding - that is to say, in every human experience.

By mentioning children's *mimesis* Aristotle means to cite not simple copying, but an activity that is related to an experience of learning or understanding. Reinforced by the comparison with other animals, this gives the context a force both anthropological and psychological. *Mimesis* in its artistic, but also in some of its non-artistic forms, involves modelling particular media (in the case of children, their movements and words) for rendering and conveying an intelligible configuration of human experience, so as to produce an object or a form of behaviour which is significant or expressive of something. However, as pointed out by Stephen Halliwell, 'nothing said here erases the major differences between children's play and, say, a tragedy by Sophocles or a mural painting by Polygnotus.'[1] If Aristotle sees a common element between them, he identifies this element as a natural human propensity toward mimetic activity, with a concomitant pleasure in learning and understanding from this mimetic activity.

It should be noted that the same link between learning or understanding and the notion of *mimesis* recurs in the *Rhetoric* (1.11, 137 a 31-b12), as well as in the discussion of musical experience in the *Politics* (8.5, 1340 a 14-25).

To return, then, to the section of *Poetics* 4 discussed above, it follows that a valuable step towards a fresh appraisal of Aristotelian *mimesis* is to recognize that we are not addressing a notion with only one meaning, but rather the nodal point of a rich locus of issues that brings together questions of education, culture, psychology, that both requires and rewards examination from a variety of standpoints, as well as the variety of human experience.

As the title of my article suggests, the viewpoint I adopt on Aristotelian *mimesis* is situated within the framework of what I consider to be the study of human cognition, in order to understand what distinguishes humans from other animals. We are now in a position to expand upon an earlier observation: in the fourth chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle calls into question the great riddle of human creativity. This creativity is not assumed as a force that reaches the individual from the outside (like divine inspiration or creative madness), but as a distinctive feature that originates in the individual himself, in its being *the most mimetic* of animals.

It is important to point out that Aristotle does believe in animal *mimesis* -- we only have to think of the references to bird mimicry in *Historia Animalium*.

In a general way in the lives of animals many imitations to human life may be observed. Pre-eminent intelligence will be seen more in small creatures than in large ones, as is exemplified in the case of birds by the nest building of the swallow. In the same way as men do, the bird mixes mud and chaff together; if it runs short of mud, it souses its body in water and rolls about in the dry dust with wet feathers; furthermore, just as man does, it makes a bed of straw, putting hard material below for a foundation, and adapting all to suit its own size. Both parents co-operate in the rearing of the young; each of the parents

[1] Halliwell, S. o*p. cit*. p. 179.

will detect, with practised eye, the young one that has had a helping, and will take care it is not helped twice over; at first the parents will rid the nest of excrement, but, when the young are grown, they will teach their young to shift their position and let their excrement fall over the side of the nest.

Pigeons exhibit other phenomena with a similar likeness to the ways of humankind. In pairing the same male and the same female keep together; and the union is only broken by the death of one of the two parties. (*Hist. Anim.* 612b 20-36)

What do we find in this long passage? Certainly, not that the swallows or the pigeons are actors who imitate human life. Rather, in speaking of animal *mimesis*, Aristotle is talking about an activity that is biologically based and which is realized in particular practices and attitudes.[1] So, I am suggesting that we need to take seriously the wider application of *mimesis* in terms of non-artistic forms of human or animal behaviour, not only because humans as well as other animals are mimetics. According to the fourth chapter of the *Poetics* already examined, humans are the most mimetic, and it follows, therefore, that the link between *mimesis* and poetry brings about an augmentation of meaning in the field of what makes human actions unique and specific.
The scope of the Aristotelian notion of *mimesis* can be confirmed by glancing at a section from Book 30 of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata*:

Why should one place more trust in a human being than in another animal? Is it because humans alone among animals know how to count? Or because humans alone believe in gods? Or because humans are the most mimetic of all animals, for this enables them to learn and understand? (*Probl.* 30.6, 956a 11-14)

Is it mathematics, religion or *mimesis*? If we take the question to be asking which of these is most fundamentally human, the choice looks odd. Doubtless there are affinities between this passage and *Poetics* 4. First of all, there is an ethological contrast between human beings and other animals; secondly, we have the same link between learning or understanding and the notion of *mimesis*. In other words, even in the case of *Problemata* 30, *mimesis* seems to constitute an anthropological datum.
So we can make progress with the implications of this important thesis, and in the last section of my article I would like to suggest that we can discern an Aristotelian tendency towards interpreting mimesis as a specific form of signification -- that is, the uniquely human capacity to act and bring about this type of action.

---

[1] It interesting to note that recently there has been an explosion of research in the development, evolution and brain basis of *mimesis*. Some discoveries reveal that newborns have an innate ability to imitate facial expression; these studies have greatly advanced the scientific understanding of early cognition, personality and brain developmen (see Meltzoff, A.N. and Moore, M.K. (1983). 'Newborn Infants Imitate Adult Facial Gestures.' In: *Child Development*, 54, pp. 702-709). Others research have discovered the existence of particular neurons, called 'mirror neurons', that seem to provide a neurophysiological substrate for *mimesis* (see Rizzolatti G., Sinigaglia C. (2006). *So quel che fai. Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni specchio*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore).

Mimesis and human cognition

In the preceding analysis of *Poetics* 4, we saw that Aristotle regards poetry as deriving from the impulse to understand the world, by making and enjoying representations of it. Our natural mimetic ability is able to model particular media so as to create mimetic works that have the power to take us beyond the works themselves, providing an opening to access knowledge.

Aristotle's point has an obvious pertinence to the cognitive experience of what we create by *mimesis*. To confirm this, it suffices to consider that in *Poetics* 4 -- after having identified the two natural causes of poetry, *i.e.*, the universal instinct to engage in mimetic activity and the propensity to take pleasure in mimetic objects -- Aristotle adds the following consideration:

An indication of the latter can be observed in practice: for we take pleasure in contemplating the most precise images of things whose sight in itself causes us pain -- such as the appearance of the basest animals, or of corpses. Here too the explanation lies in the fact that great pleasure is derived from exercising the understanding, not just for philosophers but in the same way for all men, though their capacity for it may be limited. Is it for this reason that men enjoy looking at images, because what happens is that, as they contemplate them, they apply their understanding and reasoning to each element (identifying this as an image of such-and-such a man, for instance). (*Poet.* 1448 b 8-19)

If we are able to take pleasure in contemplating images of normally painful or unattractive subjects, it would seem that the pleasure in question depends on grasping the mediated fact of *mimesis* and is not a direct response to what is represented.[1] As observed by Halliwell, 'to interpret Aristotle's position here correctly, we need to distinguish between two ways in which aesthetic pleasure -- pleasure taken in representational artworks -- may arise in relation to artistic technique, the first being *mediated* through the artist's skilled accomplishment, the second being *restricted* to sensuous properties of the artefact.'[2]

Using this distinction between material or technical properties of the artistic medium and recognizable properties of the artistic construction, Aristotle suggests that pleasure taken in a mimetic object derives from a concomitant awareness of the relationship between the artefact and what it means, *i.e.*, the work's significance.

For example, we can consider with Aristotle an important passage in *Sense and Sensibilia* (3.440a8-9) where he refers to the painterly technique of color overlay used to render effects of haze or of objects seen under water. This description suggests that combining the colors in a certain way – in an artistic way -- the painter makes an artefact that can be perceived and understood as signifying something. Although Aristotle's concerns are here on the visual arts, what he says about the painterly technique of color has implications for his way of thinking about the basic mental operation that makes art possible.

Aristotle seems to suppose that the recognition of the effects of haze depends on the perception of something material, like color, technically and artistically

[1] See also *Rhetoric* 1.11, 1371a 31-b12; *Parts of Animals* 1.5, 645a 7-15.

[2] Halliwell, S. *op. cit*. p. 181.

constructed. But in this material the artist -- as well as the beholder -- can recognize an intelligible content: the effects of haze.

But, in this way, the act of understanding, and its concomitant pleasure, will acquire a richer character, because the mediated fact of the action of *mimesis* has the power to take the beholder beyond the artistic rendering, providing an opening to a significant content.

So, the singularity of the most mimetic of all animals seems to be the distinctively human ability to model particular media that belong to the domain of perception (for example shapes, colors, sounds, words), so as to render and convey the intelligible configuration of human experience.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that this hypothesis can at least do some justice both to Aristotle's own view of poetry as deriving from the human impulse to understand the world, and by making and enjoying representations of it. In this way Aristotelian *mimesi*s, far from being a mere imitation, takes the form of a natural action that in the human being becomes a fundamental cognitive system.

Bibliography

Borges, J. L. (1967). 'Averroes's Search.' In: *A personal anthology*, New York: Grove Press.

Else, G. F. (1958). 'Imitation in the fifth century.' *Classical Philology* LIII(2): 73-90.

Halliwell S. (1986). *Aristotle's Poetics*, London: Duckworth.

Halliwell S. (1987). *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary*, Chapel Hill (N.C.): the University of North Carolina press.

Halliwell S. (2001). 'Aristotelian mimesis and Human Understanding.' In: Ø. Andersen & J. Haarberg (eds.), *Making Sense of Aristotle: Essays in Poetics*, London: Duckworth, pp. 87-107.

Halliwell, S. (2002). *The aesthetics of mimesis: ancient texts and modern problems*, Princeton (N.J.): Princeton university press.

Koller, H. (1954). *Die Mimesis in der Antike, Nachahmung, Darstellung, Ausdruck*, Bernae: A. Francke.

Meltzoff, A.N. and Moore, M.K. (1983). 'Newborn Infants Imitate Adult Facial Gestures.' In: *Child Development*, 54, pp. 702-709.

Panofsky, E. (1968). *Idea*, transl. by Joseph J. L. Peake, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Rizzolatti G., Sinigaglia C. (2006). *So quel che fai. Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni specchio*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore.

Sorbom, G. (1966). *Mimesis and Art. Studies in the Origin and Early Development of an Aesthetic Vocabulary*, Stockholm: Svenska bokförlaget.

Webster, T. B. L. (1939). 'Greek theories of art and literature down to 400 B.C.' *The Classical Quarterly* 33.