
Mimesis in Plato & Pliny

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An investigation of mimesis in creative production is useful in developing a wider understanding of relationships between art & society. This essay explores the role of mimesis in Plato's 'Republic' and Pliny's 'History of Art'. Although Plato and Pliny have produced a repertoire of material, this discussion is limited to two of their works.

Auerbach [4] develops the concept of mimesis through a discursive analysis of literature from archaic times to the mid-nineteenth century³. The concept is refined by Gebauer & Wulf [3] through investigation of contemporary media, use of a broader historical perspective and extrapolation to the future⁴. Melberg [1] adds a late-twentieth century mass-media view⁵ and Cohen [2] contributes to an understanding of the concept's boundaries⁶.

The definition of Mimesis is vague, and under continual refinement due to the evolving nature of its study⁷. The accepted meanings, and accents, seem to revolve around the general idea of 'interpretation and representation in the creative process', irrespective of the field of production⁸. Isolating the definition involves investigating issues of knowledge versus truth, and flaws in the process of interpretation and representation⁹.

Plato's 'Republic' [7] was written in the fourth century BC, and describes an ideal society that is based upon a particular development and organisation of people and their activities. This model is defined without reference to implementation detail, and aims to provide a guiding framework rather than an absolute plan¹⁰. He covers a range of topics, with specific concern for the training

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³ This work reads like a series of individual analyses to develop some understanding about mimesis, but lacks a clear resolution of the issue outside of these analyses.

⁴ They involve late twentieth-century media, and consider future '*simulcrum*' where imagination will create a reality, and feedback to extend imagination: ultimately a world in which is the complete creation of mind.

⁵ Melberg's argument is that mimesis eventually becomes repetition, which relates to the idea of '*simulcrum*' when extended to the limit.

⁶ Cohen looks at the concept of anti-mimesis, which assists in refining and understanding the boundaries of mimesis.

⁷ The general trends in the scholarship seem to be 1) from literature to mass media and 2) from limited analysis to broader analysis.

⁸ It is my belief, from an understanding of the area, that the underlying abstraction in the definitions, irrespective of the media, are about how reality is interpreted, and then reproduced in the creative act, whether music, literature, dance or speech.

⁹ There are interesting similarities between this and studies of creativity in cognitive science and design.

¹⁰ The framework is almost exclusively concerned with people and their processes, it ignores the surrounding environment, and assumes that it is ideal: for instance, the environment may cause distortions of reality.

and activities of community leaders: the Guardians and Philosopher Kings¹¹. The consequences of deviating from this ideal model are also discussed¹².

Pliny's 'History of Art' [5] was written in the same period, and provides a rolling description of the development of arts and artists from the first century¹³. He covers the fields of silver chasing, bronze statuary, painting, clay modelling and marble sculpture and takes into account subject matter, workmanship, art usage and artists lives. Whereas Plato defines a model for society, Pliny merely recounts events surrounding the development of art¹⁴.

Mimesis plays a central role in Plato's construction of an ideal society, and this is visible in all descriptions of creative activity. For Plato, the expressed goal is to create a stable, well-oiled society, by a controlled and precise execution of physical and mental activities¹⁵. With Pliny, who is only concerned with a history of art, mimesis is used to illustrate the technical nature of material art¹⁶. Pliny displays a limited, and different, understanding of mimesis compared to Plato¹⁷.

Plato's use of mimesis as the basis of a stable and ideal society begins with his division of labour when 'illustrating first principles of social organisation'¹⁸. He indicates that people should do what they are best at and, for a man, 'the one thing to which he is naturally suited'¹⁹: warning that 'the shoemaker should not try his hand at farming or weaving'²⁰. There is evidence in Pliny for a similar understanding of the individual nature of creativity, and the importance of its alignment with productive pursuits²¹.

In addition to the productive class, Plato defines an organising class that is composed of people who have superior intellectual ability. Again, there is a correlation between individual nature of creativity and its expression in a work role. The Guardians are predisposed to looking after the community²², and therefore defining the reality of the community. Philosopher Kings are 'those whose passion is to see the truth'²³, which results in their continuing education to refine and develop intellectual capabilities.

Irrespective of class, Plato suggests that all individuals during their impressionable childhood – 'those who are young and sensitive'²⁴ – should be educated with morals and stories to set a firm

¹¹ They are responsible for the highest levels of organisation and guidance in society, and so their nature must be highly specified.

¹² The format of this book is such that an initial argument for the structure of the society is presented, then any potential problems and distortions are laid out.

¹³ While seemingly comprehensive, a consistency, depth and breadth of analysis are lacking.

¹⁴ Pliny does draw some conclusions, but is generally concerned with recounting evidence.

¹⁵ There are interesting similarities between Plato's society as a 'world view', and other 'world views', including primitive societies (e.g. New Zealand Maori) and contemporary science. These seem to create stable and meaningful belief frameworks for people to exist within. They are all associated with creating an internal balance of mind using an external reality.

¹⁶ He displays interest in the technical nature of the works themselves, along with the development of the technical nature over time.

¹⁷ As it will be discussed later, this is reflected not only in subject matter, but in the construction of the works themselves.

¹⁸ [7] Book 2 (368).

¹⁹ [7] Book 2 (370).

²⁰ [7] Book 2 (374).

²¹ [5] (61), a 'painter when asked which of the earlier artists he followed pointed to a crowd of people and replied that nature should be imitated and not any artist', implicitly demonstrating that one should follow one's own creativity.

²² [7] Book 3 (412), discusses the qualities required by the guardians.

²³ [7] Book 5 (475).

²⁴ [7] Book 2 (376), when referring to literary education.

foundation for future life: 'the first stories they hear shall aim at producing the right moral effect'²⁵. An understanding that the mind is under continuous development throughout life is reflected in warnings about the effects of bad stories regardless of age²⁶.

Mimesis plays a less significant role in Pliny than it does in Plato. Evidence on the representation of social reality and ideals can be found in Pliny's commentary on silver chasing, with 'the use of cups to represent battle scenes and reality'²⁷, and with the ancients not 'making status of individuals' unless they 'deserved immortality by some distinction'²⁸. The role of art in society is also clear when Caesar decides that all pictures and statues should be made public property²⁹, but Pliny does not provide any further analysis.

Plato uses material art objects as part of life long education to continually transfer, reinforce and develop the ideal social reality. Basic education involves the art of story telling³⁰ for emotional education, and the art of science and dialectic for intellectual education³¹. Science develops internal analytical skills, and dialectic develops external communication and negotiation skills³². This education refines mimetic ability, and is itself transfer social reality from one generation to the next. Philosophers, who must perceive truth, receive 'an education more pursuant to noticing the defects and flaws in the construction or nature of things'³³.

Plato acknowledges the consequences of imperfection in the mimetic process by way of describing imperfect societies in book 8. Each imperfection relates to a psychological defect of character³⁴, which then reflect into the character of society: affecting the interpretation and representation of reality. In book 10, Plato attacks poetry. However, he attacks poetry – and any material – that appeals to the emotional mind, rather than the rational mind³⁵.

There is evidence to show that Pliny does understand mimesis in the context of material art objects. He says that two cups were imitated '... with such nicety that scarcely any difference can be detected between the original and the copy'³⁶. He also understands the appropriateness of materials to the representation of reality with artists using iron 'so that the rust might show through ... and express the blush of shame'³⁷.

Pliny's understanding of the real and ideal as aspects of mimesis is indicated in comments such as 'lysisistrators rendered likeness with exactitude, for previous artists had only tried to make them as beautiful as possible'³⁸, and one artist 'only cared for the physical form, and did not express the sensations of mind'³⁹. The mimetic transfer of technique and style, between artists and as a

²⁵ [7] Book 2 (

²⁶ [7] Book 2 (378).

²⁷ <book xxxiii, 156>

²⁸ <16>

²⁹ <26>

³⁰ [7] Book 2 (377), indicates that the stories must be approved by the Guardians, who are sufficiently trained to understand the impact of the stories on the education of the children, and the reality of society

³¹ [7] Book 7 (521), describes the education of the philosopher, which is used to train the guardians and philosopher kings.

³² It seems sensible that once the intellect is well developed in its logical abilities, well honed and trained after many years in the sciences, it can then focus on using these to develop an understanding of the external world.

³³ Book 3 (401).

³⁴ The flawed forms are Timarchy, Oligarchy, Democracy and Tyranny.

³⁵ When discussing basic education in book 2, he does ensure that this distinction between types of poetry is made clear.

³⁶ (47)

³⁷ 140

³⁸ 153

³⁹ 58

technical development in its own right is display in how 'art started to differentiate itself and at last discovered light and shade'⁴⁰. This illustrates that the value in the development of representation (i.e. the evolution of mimesis) is related to its ability to depict reality more precisely.

Mimesis plays a role in the construction of the works themselves. Plato uses reasoned dialogue – perhaps dialectic⁴¹ – to convince the reader of the validity of his model. He draws upon everyday personal experiences – the average individual's reality – to do this: a powerful means of creating a new reality based on an existing one^{42,43}. His various warnings about maintaining the stability of society are metaphors for the need to maintain the stability of its mimetic processes⁴⁴.

Pliny's work is not as structured, systematic, conceptual or rigorous⁴⁵. It lacks an understanding of the finer points of aesthetics and the nuances of language and dimensions of creativity⁴⁶. As with Plato, these features are observable in both the subject and construction of the work⁴⁷. It is interesting to use this finding as a basis for further understanding the universality of mimesis to the authors and in their works⁴⁸.

With Plato, the concept of mimesis is bound with truth and rationality, but remains grounded in reality that is observed. He says that the 'harvest they reap from representation is reality'⁴⁹ and deviating from this will destroy existing reality⁵⁰ though downward spirals of activity that ultimately lead to destruction⁵¹. As mimesis finds its penultimate expression through the Guardians – who organise society at the highest level – there are numerous references to their need for a refined sense of truth and rationality, and their need to remain away from negative forms⁵².

For Pliny, his limited concern with the interpretation and representation of reality in material art objects esteems exactness of perception and realistic portrayal of static events. In one case, the

⁴⁰ 64

⁴¹ The definition of dialectic seems to be under dispute, perhaps the Republic itself is an expression of dialectic.

⁴² The Philosophers may have been trained by using a similar approach to continually refining and developing their understanding of reality.

⁴³ The power in this approach is similar to that in the sciences based upon working from 'first principles': because one has an understanding of the basics, it is easier to extrapolate and develop more complex forms.

⁴⁴ This continues to illustrate higher levels of metaphorical co-incidence and reflection across the work, and reflects the general principle that group behaviour is always an aggregate of individual behaviour, and small errors in individual behaviour will extend to large errors in group behaviour, therefore the need to perfect the individual.

⁴⁵ Pliny reads like an extended dialogue, which perhaps it is based upon. There are some sections where the overall subject matter can be inferred, which is followed by a statement of the form 'and now having explained this, I will move onto ...'.

⁴⁶ Plato's depth and universality is very interesting, and is co-incident with higher forms of music, physics and (in general) complex systems.

⁴⁷ Pliny has a different objective to Plato, and it could be argued that Pliny does not need to use the same sort of reasoned dialogue to make a convincing argument. However, regardless of the particular style, conclusions can be drawn from the nature of both works.

⁴⁸ This is not necessarily a valid assumption to draw upon all the time, because both the poet and the physicist understand multiple the multiple levels of dimension to structures, but may use plain language to explain them.

⁴⁹ [7] Book 4 (395).

⁵⁰ [7] Book 3 (387), contains discusses about lying and unreal images of reality, as further indication that truth and reality are at the core of his ideal interpretation and representation of reality.

⁵¹ [7] Book 4 (400) contains discussion about the cycle of untruths and misrepresentations leading to even further untruths and misrepresentations.

⁵² It is acknowledged that even the highly educated and developed Guardians are susceptible to influence if they try to interpret (bring into their own reality) untruths.

artist 'felt that he had not perfectly rendered the foam of the painting' and, after many tries, accidentally created the effect he wanted so that 'this chance became the mirror of nature'⁵³.

Through both works, people are, ultimately, the mediators in the process of mimesis⁵⁴. Plato refines the mimetic process through life long education, and the appropriate selection of people for reproductive tasks: even when reproducing the species itself⁵⁵! The highest degrees of education are reserved for the Philosopher King, who has a perfected ability to see through reality to the underlying truths. Pliny focus towards material art production says little about refining the process, other than general on innovations that bring forward increased realism.

It is clear that the concept of mimesis is aligned with the process of creativity, regardless of the media in which it is undertaken. Plato displays a high degree of understanding, which is reflected through his subject and its expression, whereas Pliny has a less refined view. This may not be surprising, as Plato is concerned with creating a new world, which entails universal creativity, however Pliny is only concerned with describing a world [6].

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- [1] Melberg, Arne. "Theories of Mimesis", 1995. Cambridge University Press, ISBN 0-521-45225-0.
 - [2] Cohen, Tom. "Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock", 1994. Cambridge University Press, ISBN 0-521-46013-1.
 - [3] Gebauer, Gunter & Wulf, Christoph. "Mimesis: Culture, Art & Society", 1995. University of California Press, ISBN 0-520-08458-6.
 - [4] Auerbach, Erich. "Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature", 1953. Princeton University Press, ISBN 0-691-01269-5.
 - [5] Jex-Blake, Katherine. "The Elder Pliny's Chapter on the History of Art", 1896. MacMillan & Co, London, ISBN 0-781-120568-9.
 - [6] Goodman, Nelson. "Ways of Worldmaking", 1978. Harvester Press, ISBN 0-85527-773-4.
 - [7] Waterfield, Robin. "Plato, Republic", 1993. Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-283370-7.
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⁵³ [5] Book XXX 102

⁵⁴ Even in social mimesis through public works of art, the people are the eventual constructors of these works, and therefore shape the reality that is presented to the viewers.

⁵⁵ In Book 5 (459), Plato describes the need for sex to occur as little as possible between 'men and women of a vastly inferior stamp' and that the offspring of the second group should not be brought up.