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Introduction

It is hard to find, throughout the history of Western thought, a concept that should have been born under a more unlucky star than that of mimesis.

This concept survived the philosophical censorship that created it (book ten of Plato's *Republic*) as it later survived religious censorship, proving to have the vitality of a «natural force», which Aristotle had already foreseen:

«Imitating [*mimesthai*] is natural to humans and becomes apparent as early as childhood. Man differs from other animals in that he is capable of imitating [*mimetikotaton*] and it is thus he acquires his early knowledge. All men enjoy imitating.» (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b)

This statement must be read in the light of Plato's commentary. Indeed Plato, as we well know, saw imitational techniques (particularly pictorial mimesis) not so much as a merit as, I quote, as a «weakness of human nature».

«It is to this weakness of our nature that the shadowy painting [*skigraphia*], the art of the charlatans [*goeteia*] and a hundred other similar inventions speak and apply all the prestigious techniques of magic [*thaumatopoia*].» (Plato, *Republic*, 602cd; see also 607c).

Téchnē mimetiké is a copying process; the mimetic activity produces phantoms (*phantasmata*) and make believes (*eidola*); the only measure by which mimesis can be judged is precisely that which invalidates (and condemns) it: truth.

A second problem arises from the very beginning, alongside this first theoretical one: the lexical ambiguity of the word. All the commentators of Plato and Aristotle have deplored it. I have neither the intention nor the capacity to make here a summary of all these difficulties. Let me only point out two facts. First, that *imitatio* is not a fully satisfactory translation of *mimesis* (one of Aristotle's American commentators, G. F. Else, suggest «imitating», which would better translate into English the connotations of the Greek suffix *-sis*). Secondly, that the concept seems to have generated, from the very beginning, various oppo-

sitions: *mimesis/diegesis*; *eidolon/idea*; *natura naturans/natura naturata*; *imitatio/superatio*; *mimesis/phantasia*; *similitudo/dissimilitudo*, etc.

Around 1400, after a long period in which the concept of mimesis, or rather that of similarity (*homoiosis*, *adaequatio/similitudo*) had been strongly questioned, art as *techné mimetiké* made a new appearance onto the stage of Western culture. And it did so with such emphasis and on so many levels of artistic and theoretical expression that a systematic mind like Aristotle's would have certainly felt baffled.

This is the phenomenon we are here to discuss, at the initiative of CIHA and particularly of Professor Rudolf Preimesberger, with whom the idea originated.

This section does not have a basic thesis. It has been rather conceived with the purpose of opening (or reopening) a discussion. The year 1500 itself can only be considered a working hypothesis. Nothing special happened in 1500, of course. But a lot of things did happen around 1500, of which many originated before 1400 and many were to influence Western art long after 1600. Therefore, our talks will span a long period of time, with a view to clarifying several aspects in the evolution of the concept of mimesis.

I would (however) like to open our session if not in a polemic manner at least in a questioning one.

It is hardly likely that when Caravaggio, or one of his followers (*Fig. 1*), around the year 1600 painted *Narcis* (today in Palazzo Corsini, in Rome), he should have been thinking of Alberti's words:

«Narcis, who changed into a flower, was the one who invented painting. For what else do you imagine that painting does if not reflecting appearance through art as the surface of water reflected his face?»

Nevertheless, this work is extremely significant of what some modern commentators, using a famous phrase of Lacan, called the «mirror stage» of Western painting.

It seems to me that the emblematic value of this painting lies not so much in the chosen theme as in the ways this theme was treated. It is a duplicated, and to a certain point reversible, image. Narcis' arms make up a circle which encompasses the model and his reflection. There is a limit – the diameter of this symbolical circle – which cumulates at least three functions: that of separation, of contact and, most important of all, of support. Of all the numerous mirror experiments in Western painting, the Corsini *Narcis* is possibly the most outstanding because of the subtle way in which the fundamental conflicts of mimetic representation are staged.

The history of Western painting is punctuated with such instances of self-reflection, of meditation on representation and its limits.

It would be possible, and probably not uninteresting, to retrace the history of mimetic representation, as seen from within the representation process itself.

Such a research would obviously have to answer a question which could be considered as a subtext of our present discussions: can we speak today about the Pictorial Mimesis around 1500: from the perspective of a «mirror stage» that has been definitely closed (*Fig. 2*)?



1. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (attributed to), *Narcis*, about 1600 (Rome, Galleria Corsini)



2. Marcel Duchamp at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (photo: Ugo Molas)