Representation in Art (I)

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Introduction

Beauty is the central concept of the branch of knowledge known as Aesthetics. Beauty is not a simple concept but can be, and usually is, compound. Two aspects play relevant roles within the concept of beauty: an arrangement of all inner constituents on one side, and entities which are referred to by the constituents on the other. The constituents of beauty stand, in fact, for a referential relationship that is commonly called representation. Representation is a concept of the theory of signs. A sign consists of two entities: a representing one (that of what represents something) and a represented one (what is represented by representing). It is quite common to understand works of art as signs *sui genesis*, the meaning of which is detectable through the process of decoding. Such a process is called interpretation. If works of art were about nothing, it would not be possible to interpret them principially, they would be empty, completely uninteresting because incomprehensible. But are the *Ilias*, *Discobolos*, *Hamlet*, Beethoven's *The Fifth Symphony*, the *Night Watch* or *Guernica* pure sounds or blotches of colour or ink? Do they merely represent or are they messages filled with meaning? Consider our artistic experience and let us try to answer the question: are the aforementioned works truly empty? Our research rests on a precondition that successful works of art are communicative so they have meanings expressed in a specific way. Thus, what is interpreted is content. To be comprehensible, such content has to be bound in some way to the actual world, or to a set of possible worlds compatible with the actual one, as expressed in the doctrine of *cognitivism* which states that the measure of artistic value is in direct proportion to the degree of knowledge which is conveyed by a work. The goal of *formalism* is to arrange particular elements encompassed in the concept of beauty into a structure: it is the inner relationship of this concept. So, particular relationships inside the concept of beauty create a kind of construction, which is to be identified with

beauty. Precisely such a construction offers itself as the work's meaning. This should be sufficient as a general introduction.

This paper is a part of a wider program devoted to the concept of representation.[1] The entire program consists of six papers. The goal of the first two is to present a general historical and factual overview. The ensuing parts attempt to bring the concept of representation into mutual relationships with the concepts of *beauty*, *cognitivism*, *formalism*, and *realism.* Arguments offered by various contemporary aestheticians will be mentioned and analyzed.[2] The final goal is an attempt to argue that the depth of a work of art – a factor measuring its importance to human beings – is principially subordinated merely to representation. The sited examples are for the most part from literature or fine arts. The reason being that such particular outcomes can be generalized. Aesthetic concepts are to be generally applicable: both painting can be dynamic, as well as a poem or a piece of music. The common argument that aesthetic concepts do not represent anything due to their necessary metaphorical character is probably false. To put it the other way around: if the following argument is sound and correct, then further considerations can be narrowed to visual arts alone without any danger of oversimplification.

1. The applicability of aesthetic terms is never restricted to a particular domain of objects.
2. The applicability of aesthetic terms is neither restricted to a particular domain of *non*visual objects.
3. All aesthetic terms are applicable to visual objects.
4. All aesthetic properties can be exemplified by visual objects.
∴ For goals of aesthetic analysis aesthetic properties applied to objects of visual arts are sufficient.[3]

Now, let us begin with a general survey.

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[2] Some for all: Beardsley (1961); Carroll (1999); Godfrey (1998); Herméren (1969); Melberg (1995); Pitkin (1967); Schier (1986).

[3] De Clercq (2002). Thanks to Roman Madzia for drawing my attention to this paper.

General Background

The first structured considerations about representation are found in the works of Plato and Aristotle. In his *Republic*, Plato describes his vision of the ideal political arrangement of human society. In the third and tenth books he notices the roles various professions play within such an optimal *polis*. From Plato's ontological view a painter is a disseminator of untruths, the essence of his activity being imitation or rather the reproduction of false exterior phenomena, the world of *doxa*, subjective opinions alone without proper knowing. A painter paints/ makes a copy not of the abstract form of a chair (as an outcome of rational activity) but rather imitates a copy of a particular chair which itself is a derivate of the only actual chair-form. In doing so a painter moves the citizens of the polis away from proper knowledge. He is, therefore, not respectable, a multiplicator of illusions, a creator of simulacra.[4] Such an argument can be transparently arranged, e.g., in the following way:

1. The essense of painting is imitation.
2. Imitation merely concerns outer shape.
3. Mere outer shape is always illusion and cannot lead to the rational truth.
4. Whatever does not lead to the truth is socially undesirable.
∴ Painting (including the agent, the painter) are socially undesirable.

There is the possibility of putting forward an argument denying the equality of essence and imitation in quite a simple way:

1. The essence of painting is imitation.
2. Imitation is merely concerned with exterior shape.
3. Every exterior shape is mutable.
4. No essence can be mutable.
∴ Essence cannot have anything in common with exterior shape.

An original text concerning this subject is too epochal not to be quoted here as a whole. Let the aforementioned arguments be

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4   Plato (2008, 598).

proved by the following. Socrates guides Glaukon by asking the following questions:

> Then about the imitator we are agreed. And what about the painter? I would like to know whether he may be thought to imitate that which originally exists in nature, or only the creations of artists?
> The latter.
> As they are or as they appear? You have still to determine this.
> What do you mean?
> I mean, that you may look at a bed from different points of view, obliquely or directly or from any other point of view, and the bed will appear different, but there is no difference in reality. And the same of all things.

Socrates here speaks about representationalism in the theory of a reception framework: a bed seen from a distance of one hundred meters appears – *doxa*! – smaller than the same bed seen from one meter away. Naturally, it does not follow from this fact that the bed is one meter and one centimeter of height at the same time. Glaukon confirms correctly that if we take for granted that art is an imitation – *the* mimesis – of reality then it is an imitation of imitation.

> I mean, that you may look at a bed from different points of view, obliquely or directly or from any other point of view, and the bed will appear different, but there is no difference in reality. And the same of all things.
> Yes, he said, the difference is only apparent.
> Now let me ask you another question: Which is the art of painting designed to be an imitation of things as they are, or as they appear of appearance or of reality?
> Of appearance.
> Then the imitator, I said, is a long way off the truth, and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image. For example: A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artist, though he knows nothing of their arts; and, if he is a good artist, he may deceive children or simple persons, when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter.[5]

A poet is not reprieved either. Plato argues that poets, dramatists especially, should be disqualified from the polis. There is Plato's concept

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[5]   Plato (2008, 598, 597e, 598a). All translations here by Benjamin Jowett.

of the essence of tragedy in the background. The essence of tragedy is equally as in the case of painting, an imitation – therefore it is pretending, a simulacrum. Tragedy, an enemy of reason, merely pretends by addressing emotions.

> Then the imitative poet who aims at being popular is not by nature made, nor is his art intended, to please or to affect the rational principle in the soul; but he will prefer the passionate and fitful temper, which is easily imitated?
> Clearly.
> And now we may fairly take him and place him by the side of the painter, for he is like him in two ways: first, inasmuch as his creations have an inferior degree of truth in this, I say, he is like him; and he is also like him in being concerned with an inferior part of the soul; and therefore we shall be right in refusing to admit him into a well-ordered State, because he awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason. As in a city when the evil are permitted to have authority and the good are put out of the way, so in the soul of man, as we maintain, the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but thinks the same thing at one time great and at another small, he is a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth.[6]

Plato's argument is analogical to his argument against painting-as-illusion and it is based again on his own ontological commitment:

1. The essence of tragedy is an imitation.
2. Any imitation is only concerned with outer shape.
3. Pure outer shape can never lead to the truth (which is always rational).
4. Pure outer shape only concerns emotions.
5. Whatever concerns emotions alone is socially undesirable.
∴ Tragedy (including its author) is socially undesirable.

An imitation "is but a sort of a plaything, not a serious work",[7] moreover it is socially dangerous. In such a state of things, citizens dragged by emotions become easy victims of various demagogues and political

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[6] Plato (2008, 598, 597e, 598a).

[7] *Ibid.*, 602b.

bluffers. Admissible are "only hymns devoted to gods as well as panegyric poems to good men",[8] genres where conformity to imitation and hence ethical evil remain, as an exception, without any proper explanation:

1. Art affects emotions, not reason.
2. The way of knowledge (to forms) = the way of reason.
3. The way of reason = the only right way.
4. The way of art ≠ the way of reason.

∴ The way of art ≠ the right way.

However, it is disputable to what extent Plato's moral cognitivism – the doctrine according to which the value of art can be alone, or mainly, true knowledge as a value of morality – is to be depleting the explication of the total value of art. It is to be naturally supposed that such total value is more complex. What is evident is this: Plato asks for art to be socially useful in the sense of participation in accessing proper knowledge, so in the representation of its outcomes. It seems, however, that Aristotle's view is rather more suitable for such a strong task.

Aristotle notices the reductive feature of Plato's ontology. Even if he agrees that tragedy as a genre involves a vague emotional engagement by the audience he does not believe that the value of tragedy is depleted by such engagement. Yes: tragedy evokes emotions in its audience and two emotions are privileged – namely pity and fear. Well, things are suddenly reversed: to evoke pity and fear *is* the proper goal of tragedy, its *raison d'être*. This key feature of tragedy is called catharsis – a purification of emotions.[9]

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8   Even our time has its own quasi-platonic critic, namely Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard criticises the visual means of mass media via platonic arguments – indirectly – and the concept of *simulacra* understood in a specific way. But an ontological base is found here to be a floor lower: for Baudrillard the particular level of the individual is the only one which is actually real. The visual messages of mass media, the goal of which is producing a ruled electorial, also come under platonic criticism of the visual on the basis of addressing pure emotions.

9   As to the meaning of the term *catharsis*, there is no general agreement. Some authors believe that its sense is put well by the concept *purification*, others suppose that more appropriate is to concede it as a kind of *clearing the proper emotions up from the just pretended*. Others are convinced that the right definition of catharsis is to be seen

But Aristotle differs from Plato on a much deeper level. Plato is convinced that tragedy in no way addresses reason. Aristotle believes that an audience *learns from* good imitations or simulations of imitation as it stands a part of human nature. Knowledge acquired by imitation is the main source of the value of tragedy as well as the spectator's delight. What kind of knowledge can be obtained from tragedy? An audience comes to know which events and behavior are probable, if certain forces are put in motion. And this is general knowledge, according to Aristotle, regarding the state of things, in all possible worlds: for all states of things this holds true if these forces are put in motion, then these events and this behavior result. This implication covers all worlds with human inhabitants and that is why it necessarily concerns (in the case of proper tragedy) the actual world including the current audience. For better comparison of both views let us state the Aristotelian argument clearly:

1. The essence of tragedy is an imitation.
2. An imitation can be good, or wrong.
3. A wrong imitation does not concern any world so not even the actual one.
4. Good imitation is general, so it does concern every state of human things.
5. Whatever is about all is about us.
6. Whatever is about us is a source of enlightenment.
7. Whatever is a source of enlightenment concerns reason.
8. Whatever concerns reason is socially desirable.
∴ Tragedy (including its author) is socially desirable.

As regards painting, Plato and Aristotle are of one mind: a painter makes a copy of the outer shape of animals, phenomena, things or human beings by copying or imitating them. Inside the Peircean voca-

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in the removal of undesirable emotions. An interesting opinion is offered by Petr Osolsobĕ. He is convinced that *catharsis* has to be thought of only inside the whole of Aristotle's philosophy: as such the *catharsis* is incorporated into Aristotle's ethics. The audience's emotions are balanced and calibrated by a good tragedy (the recipe for making this can be found in his *Poetics*) inside the limits of naturality of the zoon politikon. Facing Plato, *good* tragedy is an irreplaceable curative service for a society. See Osolsobĕ (2008).

bulary, the painter *iconizes* his models. Both Plato and Aristotle take on a Grecian period cultural perspective. According to the legend, Zeuxid painted a bunch of grapes so accurately in the sense of imitation that birds were deceived to the extent that they started to flock together to such a banquet of fine art verism. All of the other artistic genres – dance, music, poetry – were conceived by both thinkers to be subordinate to *telos* of a dramatic whole not considering them as an autonomous artistic genre. Yes, these genres participate in various ways on the building of the dramatic whole, but even the essence of all of them rests on imitation.

It is notorious that the Greek concept of art was wider than the contemporary one. For ancient Greeks, every activity requiring a kind of skill – e.g., medicine, military, the teaching of Aesthetics – is art. In this sense, Plato and Aristotle would hardly define art as something that places pure representation or imitation as a necessary and sufficient condition. Nevertheless, it is clear that if both philosophers speak about art in the contemporary narrower sense – whose extension involves poetry, tragedy, music, fine art, literature, etc., but not crafts – then they would certainly bring representation or imitation up as a condition of necessity but not of sufficiency.

Within the permissible degree of simplification (as one would hope), the representation difference between both can be drawn as follows:

Plato: x is a work of art $=_{df}$ x is a representation of the individual;

Aristotle: x is a work of art $=_{df}$ x is a representation of a universal type.[10]

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[10] "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type on occasion speaks or acts, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages." See Aristotle: *Poetics*, Part IX, translated by S. H. Butcher. The goal of every proper drama is a moment of *catharsis*, which means a change inside a viewer´s mental state. Within this context, a remarkable attempt to explain representation can be found in Collingwood's work. We intend to return to Collingwood's concept of representation once again further. So, just in a nutshell here. For Collingwood, a measure of imitating fidelity is not sensual-iconic

In other words, nothing can become art unless it is imitation or representation. From today's vantage point the first definition is especially narrow. Why? Klein's monochromes can be – *cum grano salis* – explained as instances of Aristotle's imitation of the universal: not as platonic mimetical icons but rather as arbitrary symbols. Anyway, it seems to be slightly unnatural to incorporate much of contemporary art into the aforementioned definition. However, it is evident that an essential priority of both theories is strictly put together ancient historic milieu. Seen from such a perspective, both theories have offered the audience an intuitive, understandable, respectable, acceptable etalon measurement of a value. Such etalon can be called representing (or rather iconizing) *verisimilitude*. Not only in an ancient era, this view allowed discriminating what is essential in art from mere casual factors, having no enduring or eternal worth. Due to that particular success in aesthetical separation of the wheat from the chaff, both theories were echoed in a canonical way for many centuries in the western tradition of art valuation. They dominated even in the seventeenth century, i.e. in the time of Baumgarten's, Hume's and Kant's founding of theoreti-

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but *mental* similarity in such a sense that *the* feeling evoked by representing artefact is to be similar to *the* feeling evoked by a represented counterpart. Relation of representation appears in three overlapping levels. The first one is a level of nonarranged photography or *trompe-l'oeil* veristic paintings. The second level is to be such representation by means of which a given author omits some things and adjusts others, next ones which are missing at the portrayed are suppelemented by him and the like. In extreme case an artist makes pure patterns, dance without dancers, film without action. This Collingwood's second level can be interpreted as Clive Bell's significant form (as to this subject, see further parts of this series). The third level is an *emotional representation*, that of inner aspect of emotion is to be represented. According to the last level of some types of music represent human mind including all or some of its experience. If a given author is an owner of an exact concept of the represented then its art is but a craft, not art in a proper (modern) sense. Collingwood here introduces the concept *expressive content* of the represented: it is *a way* by which certain emotion comes into being by an author. Expressive content of a work cannot be a priori known to its author. Expressive content of the representing is naturally *individual*, represented contents are *general*: different works as to the individual expression can represent the same thing. Iconic, veristic, nonexpressive representation cannot be art but just a craft. Why? Since success would be always anticipated at the output before realization itself. Hence sensual similarity cannot be the standard of fidelity but rather a mental one, namely a degree of similarity not a thing, but rather experience of the thing and its successive depiction. Collingwood (1963, 46 – 56).

cal deeds which naturally incorporated both Plato's and Aristotle's thoughts about representation into modern Aesthetics: they still sounded natural, intuitive, proven by the test of time. The audience clearly knew what was to be found in given works of art, what was to be valued in it. Dance, poetry, literature, fine arts: all genres were united by one strong valuing principle, namely imitation or representation. The authority of that principle remained unshaken during the first half of the nineteenth century. Again: at that time, the principle met artistic practices, valuing intuition in all respects, serving well as a value explication, as clear, generally accepted criterion: all genres were – in this or that sense – imitations.[11]

This imitative/representative peace and quiet has changed since the discovery of photography. If an imitative function can be managed by a photopraph – inside the predominating theory of imitation as an art value measure (the more accurate to a model the better) – then what exactly is the role of painting next to precisely imitating photography?

One of the possible answers to the imitating crisis that photography caused is that photopraphy was the doctrine of expressivism according to which a value of a work of art consists in representation, of course, but in a shifted sense – a given work imitates or represents not a fragment of the outer world, but a fragment of the inner one. The way from imitative naturalism to painting as a language of its own, the language signs of which are not one-to-one mapped icons but arbitrary symbols, can be demonstrated well in, e.g., M.C. Escher's graphic work or the work of Piet Mondrian. In the case of the last mentioned Dutchman, the change inside of representation (from imitation to abstraction) stood for in the most comprehensible way. Im-

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[11] Especially in music theory counterexamples appeared. The most famous one is probably Hanslick's. According to Hanslick there is no iconic or indexic or symbolic outer counterpart in music. If music imitates or represents something then only itself: as to the relation to the world, music is to be asymetric and intransitive; it follows its own structures, it is closed, normatively autonomous, understanding music does not contribute in any way to an understanding of the world. Proper comprehension to music does not require any emotional engagement. Music is absolute, completely self-sufficient, resembling Plotin's god: even if self-containing, for all that emanating.

presionism, cubism, symbolism, futurism, constructivism, suprematism, all these isms including the others can be naturally displayed as essentially the only answer to the theory of imitation crisis as necessary condition of artistic value. Since the twentieth century works whose iconic connection to the outer reality is not naturally explicable have come into being, despite this fact they have become members of the class of works of art. It has been thought generally that definitions of art based on the concept of imitation were destroyed by that, that such a definition is false as being too narrow. The imitative definition of art seems to be narrow even if we have a look to the deep past: look at Alhambra, its bewitching visual patterns, enigmatic decorative constituents arthood of which as well as their *non*iconicity can be hardly questioned. A similar devaluation process of imitation theory understood as an explanation of value can be seen in music. Consider symphonic music of the nineteenth century: is it reasonable to defend that theory naturally without any concessions? To be sure: some subgenres as vocal music (opera, various religious pieces etc.) can state a definite link to the outer world but it seems that imitation theory collapses in trying to explain an artistic value as a whole. Similary for other genres. As if artistic genres have then begun to put their own rules without a clear link to the outer world, without an evidently manifested relationship of the imitating of anything outside of art. Well, just here there is the source of artistic autonomism and the source of many misapprehensions and audience alienations at the same time.

We can partly conclude here that imitation as a necessary condition of arthood is too narrow. So, is it not possible that the translation of the Greek term "mimesis" as "imitation" is inadequate? Some proposals appeared that the term *representation* for *mimesis* is in much felicitous. Much can be gained from this, for imitation and representation clearly are not synonymous. They have different logical properties so they cannot be substituted by each other *salva veritate*. Whether an imitation is a relation (x, y are any objects, M is a relation imitation in an iconic sense)

reflexictive	xMx,
symmetric	$xMy \Rightarrow yMx$,
transitive	$(xMy \land yMz) \Rightarrow xMz$,

the concept of representation is a relationship with completely different properties, namely it is

*i*reflexive	$\sim(xMx),$
*a*symetric	$xMy \Rightarrow \sim(yMx),$
*in*transitive	$(xMy \wedge \sim(yMz)) \Rightarrow \sim(xMz).$[12]

Rembrandt's self-portrait imitates itself; if this self-portrait imitates Rembrandt then Rembrandt imitates the self-portrait. If this self-portrait imitates Rembrandt and Rembrandt imitates his imaginary twin then the self-portrait imitates Rembrandt's twin. On the other hand Rembrandt's self-portrait does not represent itself; if the self-portrait represents Rembrandt, then Rembrandt does not represent his self-portrait; and if the self-portrait represents Rembrandt and Rembrandt represents his twin then the self-portrait does not represent Rembrandt's twin. Imitation wants to be an iconic mirror of the world (remember Hamlet's renaissance speech to actors), a symbol is much modest. What is necessary alone is a denotation introduced by a convention. Let us examine here a reductio ad absurdum on the behalf of the fact that an imitation is not a necessary condition of representation.

1. *x* represents *y* ≡ *x* denotes *y*.
2. If (*x* denotes *y*) then (*x* need not imitate *y*).
3. *x* represents *y*.   (from 1.)
4. *x* denotes *y*.   (from 1.)
5. *x* need not imitate *y*.   (MP, 4., 2.)
6. (*x* denotes *y*) & (*x* need not imitate *y*).   (4. & 5.)
7. If (*x* denotes *y*) then (*x* has to imitate *y*).   (reductio)
8. If (*x* has to imitate) then is not possible (*x* denotes *y*)
   & (*x* need not imitate *y*).   (contra to 6.)
9. It is not the case that if (*x* denotes *y*) then (*x* has to imitate *y*).
       (not 7.)
∴ It is not the case that if (*x* represents *y*) then (*x* has to imitate *y*).
       (9., 1.)[13]

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[12]   What is put here is a formalisation of Goodman's argument. This argument opens his book. See Goodman (1988).

[13]   Carroll (1999, 46 – 7).

The concept of representation has certainly more extension than that of imitation. From the semiotic point of view this concept is a shift from an icon, i.e. a kind of sign whose signifying is linked to its referent on the base of similarity, to an index, i.e. such a kind of sign whose signifying is linked to its referent on the basis of (mostly) causal nexus, and to symbol, a kind of sign whose signifying is linked to its referent only arbitrarily. Under such a shift the concept of imitation has become a subconcept of the one of representation: an imitation is a special case of representation now. But the introduction of representation instead of imitation can appear untimely. Only little effort is enough to find counterexamples to such a concept of representation, for example from the field of architecture. Many cathedrals or churches definitely have aesthetic/artistic value, they *are* works of art. But due to what do they have such value? Due to representation? What do they *represent*? Sites of God? No, they seem to *be* such sites not *representing* them. Hanslick's concept of music as something made of sound patterns, something selfish rolled up in itself remains untouched by the aforementioned argument. Klee's or Rothko's abstract paintings, say, the value of which is certainly artistically undoubted is also left aside by that argument. Alhambra has already been mentioned. What about abstract photography, expressional dance, contemporary visual (fine) art? They do not imitate and it cannot be undoubtedly believed that they represent. In spite of that they do have artistic value. Well again, even after our corrective enlargement of representation, it still seems to be too narrow to serve as a necessary condition of arthood, of artistic value. Problems wherever you look.

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