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Mimesis: The Natural World in an Artistic Medium

It is a long analysis that leads to defining what is to be considered art. This involves discussing how art was categorized throughout history and the theories that were developed over time. Along that journey, there are several theories that are proven right, proven wrong, and sometimes both. In the contemporary introduction by Noël Carrol, *Philosophy of Art*, he addresses these theories which are analyzed and discussed in great detail. The first section of this book explains the representation theory. Within this theory is the concept of mimesis which I will explain in several parts. After an explanation of mimesis, I will discuss Aristotle’s and Plato’s views on this theory. The next part is an example of mimesis in today’s world with children’s toys and Plato’s and Aristotle’s conceptions of toys. In the last part I will explain the ways in that mimesis is represented in Michelangelo’s work, *David*. Combining all of the parts above gives a general overview of the theory of mimesis.

The concept of mimesis in art is part of the larger topic known as representation. Representation is art that “is intended to stand for something else and is recognized by audiences as such” (Carroll 25). In order to be classified as mimesis, it must imitate the real world. For example, if a painter sits outside and paints a tree as he sees it exactly, that is a form of mimesis. The artist is painting something in real life and his final piece imitates a real tree. Many Greek philosophers agree that art is representation, and that most art is considered mimesis, but they have differing opinions on how this sort of drama effects civilization.

Greek philosophers, Aristotle and Plato, concern themselves with drama and how this should be represented in a utopia. In Plato’s utopia, dramatics are outlawed. According to him, drama is imitation, and this creates a false sense of appearance. These appearances appeal to people’s emotions, and the expression of emotion is socially dangerous. In *The Philosophy of Art*, Carrol relates this to today’s political campaigns. Plato would disagree with how political advertisements are run in this modern era. He would censor these political ads because they appeal to people’s emotions and cause them to think with these emotions, rather than to think with logic (Carroll 19). Aristotle takes the opposite stance on this topic. He believes that drama is a good thing and serves the purpose of catharsis (Carroll 21). Catharsis functions as a social pressure valve that allows society to purge their emotions. This helps society to release emotion in an artistic manner, rather than a violent one. Aristotle also believed that people can learn from imitations. While these two disagreed on who should and should not be allowed in their utopia, they did agree that art is representation and imitation is a large factor in art as well as in everyday life.

When it comes to a real-world example, Aristotle and Plato agree on the bigger picture, but this time about toys being pleasure objects that mirror objects within the real world; say a child playing with a toy shovel. A toy is mimetic based on how and why a child plays with the toy. According to Plato’s Laws, a child should play with toys that they “engage seriously with.” This means a child should be given a shovel to play with if when they are older, they are to become a farmer. According to Aristotle, a child should play with a toy that gives them pleasure and stop when it is no longer pleasurable. This is where mimesis comes in. There is play-digging with a shovel and there is actual digging. Actual digging “defers immediate pleasure for some future goal.” Play-digging is pleasurable and imitates the act of actual digging (Kidd). No matter what the reasoning behind why the child is playing with the shovel, either for future goals or for pleasure, the simple act of playing with the shovel displays mimesis. In both instances, the child is not actually digging, but imitating the action of it. This is an example as to how the theory of mimesis can be a part of daily life, not just in art.

Most pieces of art can be classified as being representational. Mimesis is a more specific part of the theory of representation. One example includes the work of Michelangelo’s *David.* This is a statue that was created in the Renaissance era in the early 1500s. He created this piece at the young age of 26. The statue is of an unclothed man holding a sling over his shoulder. This statue is meant to represent David from the Biblical story of *David and Goliath*. To create this, Michelangelo had to have used a male model for reference (Michelangelo's). It could be argued that this is not an example of mimesis because it represents a Biblical person that Michelangelo did not specifically look at to create this. As a counter argument, while it may not have been sculpted while looking exactly at “David,” this statue was sculpted to from observing real men. The specifics of whom this statue is a replica of are not necessary for this to be considered mimesis. It simply qualifies as mimesis for that fact that it a replica of a man, which is an object found in nature. The specifics can make an argument against this being mimesis but stepping back and looking at this statue as for what it is, a man, portrays is a great example of mimesis.

Mimesis is a concept within the theory of representation that was developed many years ago and was discussed by philosophers such as Plato and his student Aristotle. This theory is still relevant today. Through the understanding of mimesis, clarification is provided to the discovery of more accurate ways to classifying art. While Aristotle and Plato disagreed on the purpose of drama, imitation, and the use of toys for children, they did agree that art is representational and that children playing with toys is a form of mimesis. Lastly, there are endless pieces of art that directly represent mimesis, such as the statue of *David* by Michelangelo.

Works Cited

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