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# THE RENAISSANCE AND MIMESIS : A NEW PARADIGM FOR PAINTING ?

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Abstract : Mimesis seems to be a paradigmatic term for western art in general, and painting in particular, since the antic period. But during the Renaissance, appears a new way of seeing, building and painting reality. More than a simple technique, invention of perspective, in my hypothesis, represents a revolutionary midterm into human perception and mimesis of reality.

Keywords : the Renaissance, Mimesis, Painting

Introduction : Mimesis seems to be a paradigmatic term for western art in general, and painting in particular, since the antic period. But during the Renaissance, appears a new way of seeing, building and painting reality. More than a simple technique, invention of perspective, in my hypothesis, represents a revolutionary midterm into human perception and mimesis of reality.

The purpose will be to examin what perspective means in an aesthetical domain. Different aspects of the questions will lead us to ask why the most current choice of monofocal perspective, that is to say, perhaps not the more logical way of seeing for a two-eyed creature. All these topics will end up in the new relation between Mimesis and painting through perspective : is perspective a new paradigm for mimesis ?

## 1. Mimesis as a paradigmatical way of painting

Since a theory of art exists, at least in the countries of Europe under ancient greek and latine influence, mimesis appears to be bound to artistical practice. In the fied of painting, for instance, to be as close as possible to appearance of things – for now, we have to accept this notion as it, without questioning his ontological frame – seems often to be, if not an objective of the painter, at least a criterion of success.

As said by André Malraux (*Le Musée imaginaire*), the conquest of a third dimension was essential for european painting, considering the mimesis as a condition and horizon of pictural expression. This union « *Voulait exprimer non seulement la forme des objets, mais encore leur matière et leur volume (indifférents à tous les armes en occidentaux), c'est-à-dire atteindre à la fois la vue et le toucher. Union qui voulait aussi, non pas suggérer l'espace comme un infini, à la manière des lavis chinois, mais le limiter par le cadre qui l'enferme [...]. Union qui impliquait souvent celle de ce que nous voyons et touchons avec ce que nous savons. D'où un détail lié à la profondeur qui ne paraît dans aucun autre art que le nôtre*<sup>1</sup>. »

But let us focus on what mimesis means for the ancient Greeks, and what it philosophically implies. The notion of mimesis appears in Plato's and Aristotle's theories<sup>2</sup>, but is an important category of greek art. It signifies not only representation, and imitation, but also creation of an apparently same object, but ontologically inferior. The story of Zeuxis' grapes, for example, is representative of demand of the painter : be as close as possible to reality.

But in fact, the translation of the word « mimesis » remains an issue – that's why we continue to use it in ancient greek. Etymologically, it comes from the substantive mimos [μιμος],

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1 *Le Musée imaginaire*, p. 55.

2 Plato, *Republic* ; Aristotle, *Aesthetics*.

that means a term designating activities expressing internal reality : mime, dance, music... Since the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, we witness a semantically change ; it begins to express the reproduction of external world. This change explains how Plato could have oriented it in opposition with diegesis [διεγεις], this way of making art being of course favored by the philosopher.

In his dialogue *The Sophist*, he differentiates two forms of mimesis : mimesis eikastike [μίμησις εικαστική], from the term eikōs, designates a perfect copy ; and mimesis phantastike [μίμησις φανταστική], is copying, not being (essence of things), but appearance. For example, architects have to deform proportions to give the illusion of straightness. Sophistry is part of this category.<sup>3</sup> He is comparing the philosophical concept of misleading appearance with a contemporary practice, skiagraphia, that means shadow-painting<sup>4</sup>.

Appreciation of Mimesis appears now in terms of knowing and truth, image and his duplicate. As a consequence, the *Republic (X)* condemns mimetic poetry (opposed to the diegetic one), in the name of principle of mimesis. The gradation is from a moral criterion to an epistemological one. For Plato, if art is (and has to be) mimetic, this means that it is a deteriorated state of being – the inferior third : idea is the ontologically perfect state, object in real life is a degraded reality, and artistic imitation of an object is even a more degraded one. So Plato gives, as a positive example, the antic Egyptian art, in which schematism and immutability are signs of representation without mimetic will<sup>5</sup>.

Within Aristotle's theories, this question of mimesis takes a new direction. In *Poetics*, the notion of mimesis is bounded to the Likely [ἐίκοϛ]; it is a « fiction of the Likely ». Accepting that the « True » is only one country of possible, we can notice that poetry, creator of representation, can't avoid to choose one of these three aspects : representing things as they were or are, as they are said or seem to be, or as they have to be. Mimesis as such can gain an epistemological value, and a shade different from Plato's : mimesis is now the copy of Potency (in the scope of distinction between Act and Potency). Concerning pictorial art, mimesis is giving pleasure through knowing, because it reveals general and necessary, hidden in the rest of time under the cloth of individual.

During the following centuries, mimesis stays as a framework of reference. But the notion is more precisely theorised in the philosophy of Renaissance, an age of new discovering of Antiquity. Mimesis stays as an horizon, all the more that, in an anthropologically centered world, the way of imitating nature is no more to pretend to do things as well as God.

## 2. The Invention of perspective and how does it combines with mimesis

The artists of the Renaissance have the idea that nature is indeed a model, but possibly to be improved. Like in the new artistical domain of drawing gardens, art is now to dominate nature. In this intellectual frame perspective appears as a way of taking Nature in hand, and to build pictures and monuments centered into human vision. With the invention, and the majoritary choice of monofocal perspective, it is the way of seeing reality that comes into question. It is not now about the way nature appears, but the way to fit on, for the subject, in the picture. Monofocal perspective means pictures made to be hung on the wall, at eye level, and picture that can be seen in one glance. The narrative way of painting, currently employed during the Middle Ages, and in other areas like Asia, is seriously defeated by this idea of building reality from one point.

Thus we assume that the relation with nature has changed with the triumph of this technical way of painting : mimesis is to imitate the heart of things, their secret perfection, their Potency. Aristotle became then the reference, and fiction, through the notion of similarity, is enhanced. As an example of the change of definition for the word, the controversy Pico-Bembo, debated to know if mimesis can be an inner one (to imitate an idea, the nature of creator), or in a global sense,

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3 235d-236c.

4 This can let us think about the Cave allegory (*Republic*, VII, 514a-517a). Shadow is linked to illusion of truth.

5 *Laws* II, 656-7.

to imitate a style.

But in a perspectival way, mimesis is to perfect, and to reveal the hidden lines into natural things. From that period to the end of XIXth century, and what we later call « modernity » composition becomes one the three important points in a picture (Alberti, *De Pictura*), with drawing, and colors. The turn of modernity, with Cezanne for instance, takes place when the Color becomes more important than Composition, until to become composition itself (Klein, Kandinsky). So another mimetical paradigm will take place.

## Conclusion

It is clear enough that the period of the Renaissance has changed the human watch through artistical, scientific, philosophical and theological issues. The invention of perspective, and the new form of mimesis bound to it, forms one part of this revolutionary vision. And even if we can consider that mimesis remains an artistical paradigm for the whole art history, the focus on one or the other aspects of its much debated definition forms a history of revolutionary moves in arts.

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