

# Imitation And Art

G O R A N S O R B O M

As far as we know man has always danced, told and performed stories, made paintings, drawing, sculptures, songs, pieces of music and poetical manifestations and used these activities in a large variety of situations as entertainment, as political propaganda, magical rites, religious ceremonies etc. Some of these uses were of great importance both to individuals and to societies. Thus it is natural that man also reflected over the nature of these activities and the results of them. The first big and well known attempt to characterize and collect all of these activities and the results of them under one head is called the theory of imitation (mimesis). It is commonly regarded as the oldest theory of art and as such as superficial and inadequate. At a closer look it is not, however, a theory of art proper but a theory of pictorial representation which was one of the foundations from which the concept of (fine) art and theories of fine art grew in the 18th century.

## Imitation as the production of a distinct kind of mental image

The theory of imitation does not provide criteria in order to distinguish art from non-art but to distinguish imitations (mimemata) from 'real' things. A house, for instance, is a 'real' thing whereas a painting of a house is an imitation or an image of a house. Ajax's killing of the sheep was 'presumably a real act whereas Homer's account of it is an imitation. The painting and the text (heard or read are imitations in the sense that they bring forth mental images of a distinct kind in the mind of the beholders, listeners or readers.

Mental images, basically similar in that they show sensuous qualities of particulars, can occur as perceptions, illusions, hallucinations, memories,

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dreams, imaginations and daydreams. They differ from each other in vivacity, consistency and, first of all, in their judged relations to the assumed existing world. Perceptions are lively, consistent and true to the world which causes the perceptual 'imprint' (perception is very often described as the world's stamp on the mind through the senses like the impression in wax by a signet ring<sup>1</sup>). If the mental image is incorrect in relation to its origin, but is believed to be correct, it is called an illusion. If the mental image is the result of no outside perceptual 'imprint' at all but is believed to be so (maybe caused by drugs or sickness) it is named an hallucination. Dreams have regularly no perceptual counterparts in the outside world. But when asleep we believe they have. Memories, as mental images of sensuous particulars, go back to perceptions of them but they are past perceptions, or we would call them hallucinations or dreams. Daydreams and imaginations may be lively and consequential but we always know the difference to perceptions; if not they would haunt us as illusions or hallucinations.

The activity of the perceptual apparatus to produce, on its own accord, mental images of sensuous particulars, whether they are memories or new images composed out of elements the beholder has sensed before, is called imagination (fantasia). Further, man has developed skills for the communication of imaginations. It is the skill of rendering the mental image created by imagination in an outward form and this skill is sometimes called imitation<sup>2</sup> (the term "imitation" denotes both the activity to make the outward object according to the mental image and the result of this activity). The sole function of an imitation (mimema) is to create mental images in the minds of its beholders, Plato says, and he calls them dreams for those who are awake<sup>3</sup>.

Essential to the perception of an imitation is that the beholder knows that mental image caused by the imitation is just similar to perceptions of the kind of thing represented in the imitation. If not, the beholder has an illusion. He would believe that he stands in front of a house or that he sees Ajax killing the sheep. The (correct) perception of an imitation contains thus the awareness that the thing perceived is not a real thing but an imitation. Imitations can, of course, be used to cheat people. But, as a matter of fact, this is not very common. Most often, the purpose of making and using imitations includes the awareness that it is an imagination. In most cases it is important that the beholder of imitations can tell the difference between 'real things' and imitations in order to act and react properly to the imitation, i. e. according to the further purposes of the imitation.

A part of the 'non-reality' of imitations resides in the basic purpose of imitations to provide men with this distinct kind of experience and that this is their sole purpose compared to 'real' things. A painting of a house cannot be used for anything else than to call forth a mental image of a house. But in its turn, the calling forth of this mental image can be used in a large variety of situations and for many secondary purposes.

The 'non-reality' of imitations is thus related to the fact that the mental image caused by the apprehension of imitation or image is not an ordinary perception in which there is a more or less correct relation between percept and perceptual object. The imitation causes an impression in the mind of its beholder, which is similar to impressions caused by things it represents, and the beholder knows that it is nothing but similar.

Paintings and texts are, of course, real things in the sense that they are objects in the world we can hear and touch. But the point is that the mental images created in the mind of the listener, reader, spectator by the painting and the text are not perceptual images of something existing in the world of the same kind as the thing represented in the imitation. The painting of a house is perceived as a house-like thing, i. e. it creates and the beholder knows that it is just similar and that this is the basic purpose and use of it. Homer's description of Ajax killing the sheep results in a mental image of this event, a mental image the listener or reader knows is just similar to the actual perception of this kind of scene.

### Similarity, mental image and imitation

It is evident that the relation of similarity is important to the theory of imitation but it is not, as it is commonly thought, the relation of similarity between the thing imitation and particular things in the world, for instance between a painting of a house and houses in the world, which is the central one. There is a cluster of relations of similarity that not always are kept apart: 1. the epistemological similarity between percept and perceptual object, 2. the expressive similarity between the mental image (fantasia) in the mind of the imitator and the imitation, 3. the actual and representational similarity between the (thing) imitation and things in the world, 4. the memorial similarity between the mental image created by the imitation and (mental images of) things in the world stored in the memory, 5. the communicative similarity between the mental image of the maker and the beholder.

1. A basic assumption of the theory of imitation is that the perceptual knowledge of the outside world is based on a similarity between the thing perceived and the mental image which is the result of the contact between sensuous organ and objects in the world. In the perceptual process the sensuous organ adapts itself to the perceptual objects and the adaption is always in the form of an assimilation to the perceived object<sup>4</sup>. This assumption also entails a specification of the kind of knowledge characteristic of the perceptual apparatus. It gives the outward qualities of particulars; green to green, round to round etc., i. e. there is an isomorphic relation between percept and perceptual object.

2. The imagination creates, on its own accord, mental images of perceptual character that are known to be fictitious i. e. the perceiver knows that they do not have any counterparts in reality as in perception. To imitate often is the realization of this mental image in an outward form so other persons can share it. In painting, sculpture, theatre performance, dance and perhaps also in music, the making of the imitation (the outward object) is based on a similarity between mental image and imitation where the imitation is formed to be similar to the mental image. In a way, this process is the reverse of perception in which the mental image is formed by an assimilation of the sensuous organ to the outward object; in making the outward image the object is formed, by the skill (tekne) of the maker, into a similarity of the mental image. It is possible to talk about a similarity between the mental image and the imitation provided you assume the epistemological similarity between percept and perceptual object. What is in the imagination must have possible counterparts in the outside world, not necessarily whole objects but their elements.

It is also possible to imitate something by making it similar to things in the world either by using these things as models or to make casts from them. But then it is a case of representational similarity not of expressive similarity (as the terms are used in this context).

The creation of mental images by means of words is different. The text is not similar to the mental images but when heard or read the result is a mental image of perceptual character. Words, refer, it is often maintained, by means of convention. not by similarity, but they can, nevertheless, occasion mental images of perceptual character. The words (heard or read) do not resemble Ajax's killing of the sheep but they create a mental image of this situation in the mind of the listener or reader. Joseph Addison comments:

Words, when well chosen, have so great a Force in them, that a Description often gives us more lively Ideas than the Sight of Things themselves. The Reader finds a Scene drawn in Stronger Colours, and painted more to the Life in his Imagination, by the help of words. than by an actual Survey of the Scene which they describe. In this Case the Poet seems to get the better of Nature; he takes, indeed, the Landskip after her, but gives it more vigorous Touches, heightens its Beauty, and so enlivens the whole Piece, that the Images which flow from the Objects themselves appear weak and faint, in Comparison of those that come from the Expressions..<sup>5</sup>

3. Sometimes there is a similarity between the imitation and actual things in the world which it represents. This kind of similarity is not a necessary condition for something to be an imitation, i. e. a man-made object that causes distinct kind of mental image (as described above) to occur in the mind of the beholder. Sometimes, as in the case of paintings and sculptures, there are similarities between the painting of a house and houses in the world with regard to particular sensuous qualities. The imitator can use such similarities in order to reach the goals he has in mind; a portrait to remember someone's look, a map to find your way etc. But not so in the case of texts. Basically the painting and the text do the same job (ut pictura poesis) ! they stimulate a mental image, which is perceptual in character, to occur in the mind of the spectator or reader/listener. But they do so by different means.

4. It is a prerequisite that both the makers and beholders or readers of imitations are acquainted with the things represented, although not necessarily the actual things themselves: "It is sufficient, that we have seen Places, Persons, or Actions in general, which bear a Resemblance, or at least some remote Analogy with what we find represented. Since it is in the Power of the Imagination, when it is once Stocked with particular Ideas, to enlarge, compound, and vary them at her own Pleasure."<sup>6</sup>

A perceptual experience is necessary, stored in the memory, and the power of imagination to "enlarge, compound and vary" according to resemblance or analogy. This is neither a recognition of similarity between particular things nor a seeing something as something else but an apprehension that something is like something else but is not of its kind; a painting of a house is 'nothing but' a house-like thing. The beholder knows that it is not a house but that it is a house-like thing and he knows this because of his earlier experiences.<sup>7</sup>

5. The essential relation of similarity for the theory of imitation is, then, not the one between the material thing imitation and other existing things but the one between the particular kind of mental image produced both in the mind of the maker and in the mind of the spectator. No distinction between them are made because they are supposed to be basically similar provided both maker and beholder have normal perceptual apparatuses and similar background knowledge in order to make the mental image to occur. The essential thing is that man has the ability to imagine, that some persons have learnt and developed the skill to express these imaginations in an outward form so they are communication means that the perception of the imitation in all essential respects is similar to the imagination of its creator.

### The causes of imitations

A sculpture which is a kind of imitation has, according to Seneca who attributes this view to Plato and Aristotle, five 'causes' for its existence: "the material, the agent, the makeup, the model and the end in view... The material is the bronze, the agent is the artist, the make-up is the form which is adapted to the material, the model is the pattern imitated by the agent, the end in view is the purpose in the maker's mind, and, finally, the result of all these is the statue itself."<sup>8</sup>

The material has qualities of its own. Bronze is different from marble and an aulos has another sound than a kbitara. The material has inherent limitations and virtues which have to be respected and used. It is a part of what we see and experience when we look at a sculpture and the material in itself can give rise to pleasure.

This materiality is also important for another reason. It helps us to see that it is imitation, not a 'real' thing. When we look at a sculpture we normally see that it is made of bronze, for instance, and thus we see the difference to the 'real' things it represents. It is one of many indicators to distinguish it as an imitation, i. e. that it is a man-made thing purposely made to be just similar to something but not to be of its kind.

The material is the formless stuff from which the imitation is made. When the imitator makes the imitation he forms the material in to its actual shape. He makes it in to a whole with all its interrelated parts. Material and form constitute the (thing) imitation which is perceived by the beholder. The material and form can be given measures, i. e. the rhythm and harmonia of man-made things which are experienced as pleasurable. This also holds for

the cases in which the mental image is occasioned by words. The text (heard or read) has its own sensuous qualities and proportions which participate in the apprehension of the text.

The agent (the maker of the imitations) is equipped with knowledge and skill which also contributes to the final result, the imitation, the bronze sculpture in Seneca's example. These preconditions are partly innate partly acquired in the maker's learning of the trade. The skills are gained by practice sometimes aided by teaching or by reading handbooks (*teknaí* and *artes*) in which the making of paintings, poems, tragedies etc. is described and regulated.

An important innate precondition of the maker is that he has a vivid and lively imagination and that he can conceive 'great thoughts'. This has to do with the model used in making the imitation. "It dose not matter," Seneca says "whether the maker has the model within or without." But it is obvious, if you look at paintings, sculptures, read poetical texts etc. that the important models are within the artist. There is no point in making a bad copy of some real, existing thing. "Art is not a copy of the real world. One of the damn things is enough"<sup>9</sup> was true also in antiquity<sup>10</sup>. The imitator learns from a study of nature but he does not copy nature very often. He can do so for certain purposes but these are mostly of small interest to art history. In most cases the maker creates a mental image in his mind and it belongs to his trade to transform it into an outward object, an imitation, which can communicate his inner vision to other persons. Let us call this the internal purpose of making imitation: the creation of mental images of a distinct kind in the minds of the beholders. Whether this chain of communication is successful or not depends also on the skill of the imitator to 'squeeze out' (*exprimere*) the mental image in an outward form and on the possibility and limitations of the material (*matter*) to 'carry' such forms.

Most man-made things and actions have a purpose. They are made in a context of a given sort to be used instrumentally to reach given goals. "Now what is this purpose?" Seneca asks with regard to sculpture (but the question is applicable to all kinds of imitations) and he answers: "It is that which attracted the artist, which he followed when he made the statue. It may have been money, if he has made it for sale; or renown, if he has worked for reputation; or religion, if he has wrought it as a gift for a temple.."<sup>11</sup> Beside the internal purpose of communicating the mental image created in the mind of the agent there are a number of external purposes: fame money, religious service etc.

Aristotle makes a distinction between things that are instrumentally good and such that are good or ends in themselves. In the *Politics*<sup>12</sup> he mentions music and drawing as two kinds of activity that under certain circumstances could be regarded as ends in themselves; they are both included in leisure (skole), the activity of the free individual as the end of human existence. An institutional confirmation of this outlook is the fact that poetry and drawing as well as music were included in the education of the free born.

In most cases, however, imitations were tied to social or cultural purposes; religion, politics, entertainment and relaxation for instance. A question often discussed is whether it is possible to teach people useful things by means of imitations, particularly poetry. The 'utile dulce' of Horace<sup>13</sup> is imitations' ability to teach lessons in a sweet manner. But what can we learn from imitations ?

Plato was partly very severe in this matter. Imitations (first of all poetry and music) are very useful because they can create habits in people who cannot acquire the right kind of behaviour through a knowledge of what is right and wrong. We can learn to behave rightly or wrongly through imitations but we cannot learn what is right and wrong from them. This is so because the very nature of imitations as perceptual images ties them to the world of multipliciteies and particularity. Imitations must show individual things and actions, not universalities. And true knowledge resides in the latter.

Aristotle maintained that we can learn some universal truths through imitations. We can learn what is typical and universal through concrete examples presented to us in imitations<sup>14</sup> and, Aristotle says, men enjoy to learn things<sup>15</sup>. Further, the fact that the beholder or listener knows that it is just an imitation and not a real thing makes it possible for him to learn and enjoy it the more since the situation does not call for action, only contemplation.

## Art as imitations for its own sake

Even if Aristotle maintained that the apprehension of some imitations under certain circumstances was an end in itself as a part of leisure (skole) it is not, however, until the 18th century that a group of imitations was separated from the rest of imitations because the apprehension of them was seen as different and was regarded as an end in itself. Of course, many

imitations continued to be used in human contexts of different kinds, to earn money, to reach fame, religious purposes, for entertainment and sexual excitement etc. But the important thing is that some imitations were pointed out as ends in themselves and that a realm or 'world' of its own was established in order to manifest this distinction and what it implied. They came to be set off from all other kinds of imitation, those that served other and given purposes. The ones separated began to be called works of art and the activity to make them as fine art as separated from the useful arts. The fine arts were described as such human skills and activities that produced objects for disinterested perceptual pleasure for its own sake.

Why this distinction between some imitations as instrumental and some as ends in themselves? There is, of course, a myriad of factors contributing to the establishment of such a distinction: social factors like the rise of the bourgeoisie and its need of an identity of its own to be articulated in different ways, economic factors as new forms of producing and selling imitations, the development in philosophy and psychology, the new institutions to support the new and autonomous art as museums, concert halls, theatres, the book market and public libraries and many other things which all participated in the establishment of these new ways of making and using imitations. But here only the reassessment of human emotions pleasure and perceptual knowledge will be hinted at.

In the philosophical tradition from Plato and Aristotle the knowledge we find in universals was considered to be far better than the knowledge we get from the perceptual intercourse with particulars. The world of particulars is eternally changing, is never complete, appears differently from time to time, from place to place and from person to person. It consists of the contingent qualities of things whereas the world of universals is unchanging, complete and not dependent on time, place and circumstances and contains the essence of things. In the 18th century a reassessment of the role in human life of the 'lower faculty of knowledge' takes place. It is now treated as an independent and important part of human existence. To exercise the lower faculty of knowledge, to meet the world of senses in all its variety and concreteness, was now seen as an activity in its own right and not only as the first steps towards more secure and universal knowledge.

Further, it is a pleasure in its own right to perceive the world in all its concretion and to react emotionally to it. The soul needs exercise as well as the body, abby Dubos writes<sup>16</sup>, and to him any pleasure was preferable

to no pleasure at all but it was common to distinguish between different kinds of pleasure and to value them differently. Sight is, Addison says, "the most perfect and most delightful of all our Senses" and what he calls the pleasures of Imagination are "such as arise from visual Objects, either when we have them actually in our View, or when we call up their Ides into our Minds by Paintings, Statues, Descriptions, or any the like Occasion". The pleasures of imagination, Addison writes, "are not so gross as those of Sense, nor so refined as those of the Understanding. The last are, indeed, more preferable, because they are founded on some new knowledge or Improvement in the Mind of Man; yet it must be confessed, that those of the Imagination are as great and as transporting as the other."<sup>17</sup> To discriminate between the better and worse pleasures of imagination a special faculty was needed. Taste, both as a concept and as a praxis, was developed.

It is also possible to claim that pleasure can rise because you are interested in the thing you behold. It is, for instance, a pleasure to look at a maturing corn field which is your own, because it will secure the life of your family for the coming season. But this is not the pleasure of imagination, that Addison has in mind. You have to put such considerations into the background and promote the pleasure that arises from the mere sight of the corn field apart from any personal interests.

Pleasure is often mentioned in connection with imitations in antiquity. It is pleasurable to learn something, the beauty of the material can give pleasure as well as the rhythm and harmony of the shape of imitations. But these pleasures do not rise from the mere exercise of the lower faculties of knowledge within a disinterested mental attitude and are not as such regarded as ends in themselves; they attend other goals of the imitations.

Imitations are particularly well suited for the stimulation of our lower faculties of cognition partly because their detachment from contexts in which you are involved and expected to act. We know, says Fontenelle according to Hume<sup>18</sup>, that the play (imitation) is not real and thus we can enjoy the thing represented even if it is awful. We know that the mental image is just imaginary or fictitious and has no counterpart in reality to which we are invited or forced to react by action. In reality we act some imitations we contemplate in order to maximize our perceptual, disinterested pleasure.

You can, of course, get the same pleasure from other things than imitations, views and sounds for instance, but imitations, compared to other kinds of things are particularly well suited for the arousal of such perceptual pleasures not least because of the possibilities of the free play of the

imagination. The imagination is not tied to limitations of the existing world. It is free to compose within the range of perception anything it wants. Horace claimed that propriety (*decorum*) was a necessary regulating principle in the work of the imagination<sup>19</sup>. You cannot compose whatever turns up in your mind into a unit. But this regulating principle is not the same as taste as a faculty for the discernment and judgment of differences in the disinterested pleasures of imagination.

It is not necessary that objects that are suited for aesthetic experiences of the kind just described, i. e. works of art, have to be imitations although they historically were so. But during the 19th century these ties started to loosen up and in our own century not very much remains of it. The theory of imitation has lost most of its power and influence as perhaps also the 18th century idea that the ability of a man-made object to arouse an aesthetic experience is a good reason to call it a work of art.

The emergence and growth of the art world as a detached area of human activity and the reassessment of the 'world of particularities' as something important in human life is, probably, also connected with the process of secularization. It has to do with the practised and conceptualized ultimate goals of human life. Grossly simplified, for a Christian every thing and every action is but means and preparations for the eternal life beyond. When this extraterrestrial goal for human existence is criticized, doubted and, for many persons, dissolved something has to be put in its place in order to avoid personal collapse. Art in the new sense of sensuous objects for contemplation for its own sake, i. e. for the sake of the experience it gives, became one of the fundamental intrinsic goals of human life. In this way art could complement religion or replace it, which is far from being its servant.

Thus, one of the most important innovations of the 18th century is the establishment of art as a 'world' of its own with its newly created role as an end in itself, as a part of man's ultimate goals of existence. This new area of human activity was institutionalized and given a central position in the lives of many persons, groups, and societies. In the heart of this institution is the aesthetic experience as an intrinsic goal for human existence.

Of course, not all imitations were regarded as works of art in this sense, i. e. as sensuous objects recommended for aesthetic contemplation as an important end in itself; just some of them were made, used and named for this new purpose. Most of them were continuously made for other purposes and the contemplation of these imitations was not regarded as an end in

itself. Further, also other things than imitations could be made and used for sensuous contemplation as an end in itself and the use of the term "work of art" was extended to include other things than this new and particular kind of imitation. In this century the art family has proliferated enormously by the acceptance into the family of, as it seems, many other kinds of things and experiences than the traditional ones just hinted at. Often this extension was made in opposition to and defiance of the traditional outlook.

Among other thing the institution is founded on the fact that, although the aesthetic experience is particular and not the same from time to time or from person to person it is to some extent at least permanent and possible to communicate, influence and share. It became a social concern that the aesthetic experience was not regarded and treated as totally subjective and private but shared along certain lines agreed upon or practised. It is not only a basic, intrinsic value to have aesthetic experiences; it is also a basic intrinsic value to share them with other persons. The art community became an important part of the cultural heritage, in fact an important part of the intrinsic goals of human life.

A traditional role (and goal) of criticism in its many forms is to participate in the establishment of this community of aesthetic experiences and to prepare its members for the (correct) personal aesthetic experience of work of art in the individual cases. Since the aesthetic experience of particular and subjective. It is not possible to communicate it directly by means of conceptual language. You cannot describe the aesthetic experience but you can influence it by means of what you say and do. You can point out situations in which it is likely that aesthetic experiences occur, i.e you can exemplify the aesthetic experiences; you can compare things and experiences and by so doing you build up a resource of experiences to be used in future aesthetic situations; and you can describe and refer to circumstances around the making and beholding of the work of art. These are basic forms of critical approach in its traditional form and they are all directed towards the (true or correct) communication of the aesthetic experience.

It is also important in many situations that you make as clear as possible that you do share the aesthetic experience. Tolstoy, for instance, regarded it as a basic and intrinsic value that the artist was sincere in his expression of the aesthetic experience and certainly the same was demanded of the beholder. True communication implies sincerity from all its participants. This is also

true over time. When we communicate with past individuals, groups and generations we often think it important that true communication is established and the rules of (traditional) criticism are intended to secure the true communication.

## Notes and References

1. Aristotle, *On the Soul* 424 a 17–25.
2. This skill has got many names through the ages but the thought is essentially the same from Plato to Batteux and Sulzer.
3. Plato, *The Sophist* 239 D–240 B and 266 C.
4. Aristotle, *On the Soul* 417 a 20 21 and 418 a 3–6.
5. *Spectator* no. 416.
6. Ibid.
7. Cf Flavius Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* II. 22.
8. *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* 65 8–9. Transl. by R.M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library, London, Cambridge, Mass. 1965
9. Attribute to Virginia Woolf in Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* London: Oxford Univ. Press 1969. P. 3.
10. Cicero comments (*Orator* II 9) on Phidias' work in the following manner: "Surely that great sculptor, while making the image of Jupiter or Minerva, did not look at any person whom he was using as a model, but in his own mind there dwelt a surpassing vision of beauty; at this he gazed and all intent on this he guided his artist's hands to produce the likeness of the god "Transl. by H.M. Hubbell in Loeb Classical Library, London, Cambridge, Mass. 1960
11. Seneca op. cit. 65. 8–9
12. VIII. 3.
13. *Ars poetica*. 343.
14. *The poetics* ch. IX.
15. Ibid. ch. IV. (1448 b 8–9)
16. *Reflexions critiques sur la Poesie et sur la Peinture*. (1719) I. 1. Nouvelle ed, 1760, p. 6.
17. Op. cit. no. 411.
18. *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*. Vol. III, "Of Tragedy", Edinburgh 1826, pp, 247–48.
19. *Ars. poetica* 1–39.