

# Reforming Representation from Plato to Godard

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**Abstract:** Plato's attack on poetry in *Republic X* has often been painted in an unflattering light. In this paper, I draw from modern criticisms of representative art such as Adorno and Brecht's to vindicate the import of Plato's concerns with imitation, and show how they might help understand its impact on society. Plato criticises representation, not when it imitates reality, but when it imitates appearances. This, however, need not depend on his ontological commitments. The criteria that culture must meet in the *Kallipolis* align with those that artists such as Brecht and Godard require for art to capture the ethical and political dimensions of reality.

*Keywords:* Republic, poetry, representation, Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Luc Godard

In *Republic X*, Plato famously bans “imitative” poetry from the ideal city (595a). This restriction is grounded on a twofold charge: a metaphysical concern about the status of poetry, among other crafts, as an imitation of sensible things, and a related claim about its psychological effects on its audience. Depending on the role ascribed to imitation, this might strike us as incompatible with Plato's own use of fictional and figurative elements to accompany philosophical argument. I suggest two ways in which this apparent incompatibility can be avoided, drawing from Plato's constraints on poetry and his own use of narrative and figurative elements. To complement his proposal, I include important counterparts in modern criticisms of art and culture. On one hand, this will suggest a way in which Plato's criticism can be reformulated without relying on metaphysical presuppositions. On the other, it will show how his antidotes against the dangerous effects of art on society apply beyond the medium of poetry itself.

## 1. Poetry, Craft and Metaphysics

I have mentioned that Plato's attack on poetry seems to rely quite heavily on his metaphysical framework. In Book X, Socrates' use of the term *paradeigmata* refers to single “ideas or forms”, which are “posited in the case of the various multiplicities to which we give the same name” (594a). For now, let us pass over how these ideas are “posited” over the many, and focus on how they are employed by craftsmen. When making a couch or a chair, both of which are “multiplicities”, craftsmen look to their corresponding ideas as models on which to fashion their products.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, a particular couch is not “the real couch, the couch in itself” (*ibid*) but only a likeness of its idea. Socrates then compares the process by which the craftsman imitates the real couch to that by which a painter copies the particular couch created by the craftsman. The painter is ranked among a class of producers who are “at a third remove from the truth” (597e), producing likenesses of other likenesses. Poets are subsequently included in this category at 598d. Their products are placed at the bottom of a hierarchical scale corresponding to three ontological removes:

- R1: Chair itself
- R2: Particular chair
- R3: Appearance of a chair

In turn, this scale gives rise to an epistemic charge concerning the reception of poetry by the audience. For, like shadows, or like reflections in a mirror, R3 objects may be mistaken for those in R2. The deceitful potential of these products is described in the following passage:

a painter, we say, will paint us a cobbler, a carpenter, and other craftsmen, though he himself has no expertness in any of these arts, but nevertheless if he were a good painter, by exhibiting at a distance his picture of a carpenter he would deceive children and foolish men, and make them believe it to be a real carpenter (598b-c)

It is unclear whether children and foolish people mistake the carpenter for a real person, or whether they think the appearance captures how carpenters really are. At any rate, some aspect of the painter's representation is mistaken for reality, suggesting that the more skilful the imitator is, the more the public will conflate them. The trouble with this reading is that, from a metaphysical perspective, this renders Plato's dialogues no different from the imitations<sup>2</sup> he condemns. For they, too, are representations, and in this regard they belong in R3. We don't know, for instance, whether Plato's Socrates is meant to be the historical Socrates, or how closely the images of the democratic, just, and tyrannical cities resemble real-world – or realistic – counterparts. His fictional characters, colourful myths, and vivid imagery belong to R3 insofar as they resemble objects in R2, and would be in some sense subject to the confusion that Plato condemns. Though I retain the metaphysical schema in R1-R3, as well as his dialogues' status in R3, I will suggest ways of navigating these difficulties, drawing from Plato's psychology and his proposals for a successful education.

## 2. The Psychology of Imitation

In the craft analogy, the status of products in R2 and R3 as likenesses of higher ontological removes leads to a charge about the cognitive states they may induce, but one that stems from a more nuanced psychological picture than we may think. This motif is anticipated in Book V. Here, Plato discusses the epistemic status of “lovers of spectacles”, who

delight in beautiful tones and colours and shapes and in everything that art fashions out of these, but their thought is incapable of apprehending and taking delight in the nature of the beautiful in itself (476b)

He then describes this status as “opinion”, in contrast with the “knowledge” of those who are able to distinguish the many beautifuls from the Beautiful itself (*ibid*). While the latter recognise that the many beautifuls are an appearance, belonging to R3, the former mistake resemblance for identity (*ibid*). Plato's basis for this cognitive difference lies in the notion that, while knowledge is of “what is” unqualifiedly, opinion is of that which “both is and is not”. Thus, the things that are fine for lovers of spectacles “sometimes appear ugly and base” (*ibid*) and “both beautiful in a way and ugly” – for instance, beautiful or just for one person, but not for another. This helps us connect R1-R3 to the psychological charge against the imitative poet, who

sets up in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality, and by currying favour with the senseless element that cannot distinguish the greater from the less, but calls the same thing now one, now the other (605b-c)

The part or element of the soul to which poetry appeals, then, is the same that fails to distinguish the greater from the less, and the one that is solely capable of opinion and perception. At 523e, this is applied to the failure of vision alone to calculate the size of fingers, perceiving in them “no more one thing than its contrary” and making “no difference to it whether one of them is situated outside or in the middle” (523c). Just like the many beautifuls are beautiful in a way (at a certain time or for a certain person) and base in another, particular fingers are large in some ways and smaller in others.

As noted by Jessica Moss, the nonrational soul doesn't just fail to discern real life from its representation, but also holds mistaken perceptions about *value* (Moss 423). This relates to the idea that elements in R2 and R3 involve conflicting qualities, both evaluative and otherwise: justice and injustice; beauty and ugliness; largeness and smallness. When imitated by the painter

and the poet, representations are not just imitations of real-life people, but also of human excellence (Moss 430), whose contrary ethical qualities the public fails to distinguish. The difference between genuine goodness and apparent value is manifest in Plato's description of the democratic city, which appears

as a garment of many colours, embroidered with all kinds of hues, so this, decked and diversified with every type of character, would appear the most beautiful. And perhaps... many would judge it to be the most beautiful, like boys and women when they see bright-coloured things (557d).

Trying to lure in the audience, representations appeal to the sensory part of the soul – for instance, through colour and ornament – which mistakenly judges them to be good or beautiful. Rachana Kamtekar efficiently expresses this idea when she claims that human beings have a “permanently truth-indifferent belief-forming mechanism, and it is this that is vulnerable to the values represented in poetry” (Kamtekar 13). This same mechanism accounts for the misplaced praise of “multi-coloured” characters whose behaviour we would condemn in real life: grieving excessively, performing buffooneries, and giving in to our passions (606b–c).

The foregoing psychological picture seems to suggest that what makes poetry different from, and worse than, philosophy is that the latter engages *only* the rational soul, and the former, *only* the nonrational. Together with the metaphysical charge, it raises the following question: why would Plato choose to use images at all to carry his philosophical message across? The figure of Plato as an enemy of art in general is too crude: the dialogues themselves belong to R3, insofar as they represent Socratic conversations. A glance at Plato's prescriptive curriculum in the *Kallipolis* suggests that, in fact, intellectual ascent is made possible by studying objects in R2, if, and when, they are correctly used. For example, the stars are like “sparks that paint the sky, since they are decorations on a visible surface” (529c). But if astronomy is to be taught in a way that diverts the soul away from opinion,

we must use the blazonry of the heavens as patterns to aid in the study of those realities, just as one would do who chanced upon diagrams drawn with special care and elaboration by Daedalus or some other craftsman or painter (529d–e).

In this regard, the stars in R2 can point the soul in the direction of R1 – the truthful designs after which they are fashioned. I take this proposal as evidence for a more general reformist agenda: just as R2 objects can be used for good or for ill, so can representations be crafted “as diagrams with special care and elaboration” to summon the intellect. At 509a, for instance, the image of the sun is invoked to represent the Form of the Good, and at 510a, the image of the Divided Line illustrates the philosopher's ascent from the sensible realm to the intelligible. As Christopher Janaway notes, the clearest evidence for the fact that Plato allows for *some* representational elements in the *Kallipolis* is precisely the role that they play in his own argumentative strategy: “because each of us is a *plurality*, to address *the logistikon alone* would fail to persuade us” (Janaway 3, my emphasis). But just as astronomy must be taught differently, so must poetry, or those elements of poetry that Plato evidently uses, be reformed. In what follows, I offer two requirements to be met by any representational medium – including the dialogues, but spanning beyond them – that are sensitive to this point, drawing from Plato's few recommendations in this respect.

### 3. The Transparency Requirement

To substantiate the reformist agenda, I now provide the first of two requirements that can be applied to R3 to aid in the study of reality. In doing so, I draw from modern counterparts of Plato's overall concern, showing that it doesn't rely on such unpalatable metaphysical and psychological assumptions as the preceding discussion suggests. In *Transparencies on Film*, for instance, Adorno suggests that the way in which representation figures in a medium affects the way in which we receive it nonrationally:

Even when dialogue is used in a novel, the word is not directly spoken but is rather distanced by the act of narration – perhaps even by the typography – and thereby abstracted from the physical presence of living persons. Thus, fictional characters never resemble empirical counterparts no matter how minutely they are described. In fact, it may be due to the very precision of their presentation that they are removed even further from empirical reality... Such distance is abolished in film: to the extent that a film is realist semblance of immediacy cannot be avoided (Adorno 200).

Adorno's attack on film thus targets the same effect as Plato's: the possibility of mistaking R3 for R2, or the realist semblance of immediacy. This mirrors the dangerous resemblance of paintings to reality at 529d, and Socrates' contention that the imitative effect of poetry is produced when "one removes the words of the poet between and leaves the alternation of speeches" (394c). Though one may realise, upon reflection, that one is witnessing a representation (one does not *believe*, at any rate, that one is in the "physical presence of living persons", or of a real carpenter) there remains a subconscious level on which the distinction between reality and the medium representing it is blurred. It shows, moreover, that the charge is more serious than it seems: even when we are aware that a film is a mere projection, opacity impairs proper cognition of the image *as* an image, and may awaken – here, too, he agrees with Plato – certain irrational features of the psyche. I henceforth refer to this as the problem of *transparency*, which is that the appearance of a representation *as* reality is unavoidable: "its elements, however abstract, always retain something representational" (Adorno 202).

Another example from critical theory may serve to justify Plato's recipe for countering the semblance of transparency. Had Plato excluded all representation from the *Kallipolis*, his position would mirror Adorno's all-encompassing criticism. However, neither Plato nor Adorno's colleagues take this approach. For instance, Plato recommends that the poet make himself apparent to the audience as a producer of representations: "if the poet should conceal himself nowhere, then his entire poetizing and narration would have been accomplished without imitation" (393c). While the poet is allowed to represent objects from R3, he should do so in a way that they are manifest to the audience *as* appearances, just as the poet must show himself *as* a producer of such images, rather than assimilating himself "to another speech or bodily bearing an imitation of him" (393c1).<sup>3</sup> My boldest proposal in the present discussion is that, just as Plato's criticism applies across different artforms, so can his solutions be read independently of specific representational media. A remarkable example of this is Godard's struggle to undo what Jennifer Fay calls the "dishonesty of the camera's concealment" in his 1968 film *La Chinoise*:

Jean-Pierre Léaud's character, concerned that his political speech and posturing may appear to be insincere, addresses an offscreen director by looking into the camera. The reverse shot shows us the camera apparently filming him as if to assure the spectator that Jean-Pierre Léaud is indeed performing for a camera (Fay 117)

At such moments, Fay notes, characters are presented as conscious of the role that they are embodying, glancing into the camera, striking an "eyes-on" pose. Similar techniques throughout the film enable the medium to show itself as an image-producing mechanism, which, as Stanley Cavell notes, have made critics refer to Godard's films as "a cinematic equivalent to Brecht's call for a new theatre, in which the actor forces and maintains psychological and interpretive distance between himself and his role, and between stage and audience, thereby preventing a *sentimental* reabsorption of *the intelligence art secretes*" (Cavell 97, my italics). The careful positioning of the camera and the actorial techniques borrowed from Brecht seem to me, therefore, to play sobering role analogous to that of the poet's connections in dispelling the effects of representational immediacy, as when the poet leaves in his own words between dialogues. The aim is that the audience should not be so absorbed in the dramatic representation that they be vulnerable to the "truth-indifference" of values in R3. Instead, they should reflect on the features of R1 that the

poet – or the teacher of philosophy – is trying to highlight, if any. How this is achieved will be addressed in the ensuing section, which draws from Plato’s own narrative elements and its echoes in Godard’s adaptation of Brechtian theatre.

#### 4. The Dialectic Requirement

To prevent the nonrational soul from becoming absorbed in the lure of appearances, Plato prescribes a kind of ‘non-imitative’ narration that puts distance between R3 objects and the spectators, opening a space for critical distance. This, however, does not yet show that representations can promote the active involvement of the rational soul in reflecting on *value*, which was also misrepresented in R3. In any narration, places and characters will inevitably belong in R3. The question is whether the reform of poetry can avoid the confusion of values in the characters represented, as well as discern the medium of representation by means of the elements above.

Now, Plato includes non-virtuous characters – sophists, rhetoricians, and poets – in his work. But unlike Homeric heroes, they do not come through as instances of human excellence, but as mouthpieces for different viewpoints around the values brought into discussion. At 532a, the passage from perception to the intelligible realm is achieved through dialectics, which in turn becomes the last stage of Platonic education before the grasp of what is knowable (508d–e). In the *Cratylus*, Socrates describes the dialectician as “the man who knows how to ask and answer questions” (390c) – and this is precisely how Socrates addresses his interlocutors, the whole *Republic* being an instance of the question “What is X?” applied to justice, and investigated through the speakers’ interactions. Eric Havelock describes dialectic more generally as

a weapon we suspect to have been employed in this form by a whole group of intellectuals in the last half of the fifth century... for arousing the consciousness from its dream language and stimulating it to think abstractly. As it did this, the conception of “me thinking about Achilles” rather than “me identifying with Achilles” was born (Havelock 209).

In this way, characters may serve to attract the audiences’ attention and provide deficient, provisional accounts of the values they incarnate. But once they are recognised *as* likenesses, the audience can engage with the questions about virtue, justice, and knowledge that Socrates wants them to think about, engaging the rational soul.

A similar analysis may apply to beautiful imagery, which Socrates uses in a way that parallels the use “the blazonry of the heavens” to “arouse” the intellect. Contrast, for instance, the ornamental appeal of the ‘multicoloured city’ at 557d with that of the city envisaged throughout the interactions between Socrates and Glaucon. As Stephen Halliwell writes,

(Socrates and Glaucon) end the book by agreeing that such a person will engage in politics only ‘in the city of himself’, ‘the city in words’ which has been constructed in the course of the dialogue, a city which may exist only as an ideal ‘model’ but which is nonetheless a compelling standard by which the individual must ‘found his own city’ or ‘make a new city of himself’ (Halliwell 250)

This suggests a parallel between (i) the way the image of the city in the *Republic* is fashioned after Justice (ii) the way in which craftsmen fashion their objects with a corresponding idea in mind, and (iii) the way in which the audience is supposed to think *about* R3 objects (the values of characters or, in this case, political structures) in a way that leads to ethical and intellectual improvement.

In line with my parallel assessment of film and theatre, I believe transparent and dialectical elements work in tandem when deliberately applied to Godard’s explicitly political oeuvre, and to any representational artform that shares Plato’s concerns. Firstly, the former devices give away the status of characters in *La Chinoise* as “insincere”: the nature of the medium shines through as fiction, and their ethical viewpoints are revealed as mere fancy. Cavell extends this idea to the role of colour, which instead of serving as embellishment or, as he puts it, “the necessity of luxury

or amusement” (Cavell 86), reveals that the whole political project is make-believe, mere child’s play (Cavell 101). Notoriously, the film is interspersed with images of communist figures, pop songs (including the refrain “Mao Mao”), shots from Soviet documentaries and propaganda, catchy slogans written on the wall and grandiloquent speeches which can only be described as sophistry: pure R3 appearance, but readily posing as such, and placed under dialectical scrutiny.

Secondly, that this reflects Godard’s criticism of his characters’ values is revealed in a long conversation between an older socialist professor and Véronique, one of the revolutionaries. Véronique discloses her plans to organise a terrorist attack, and the professor asks – in the fashion of the dialectician – whether she thinks her cause requires knowledge (*connaissance*) of the situation. Véronique replies that she does in fact *know* that “the situation” is wrong, and that her knowledge comes from “immediate experiences”, which she has been “studying” for years. On the screen flashes the slogan *Cette situation doit changer*, expressing the prevalent revolutionary dilemma in Godard’s context. Here, Godard can be seen as explicitly condemning this doctrine, and trying to distance the audience from the otherwise opaque representation. When the professor insists on the insufficiency of Véronique’s epistemic grounds for her ethical standpoint, the entire apparatus of the film is revealed as an appearance. According to Norman Silverstein, Godard’s success lies “less in his arguments than in his *mise en scène*”:

In staging the confrontation on a train that starts and stops, picks up speed and slows into a station, the scenery in the background reflects the passions of the debaters. As the philosopher and the young girl reach an impasse in their debate over gratuitous violence, the train stalls and the scenery behind them that has rushed by when they were most heated comes into clear focus. When the debaters are arguing most clearly and reaching toward final arguments, the background countryside is a blur of road, land, trees, and sky (Silverstein 53).

The distancing element, meant to emphasize the gap between reality and fiction in R2–R3, now becomes a way of forcing the audience away from direct identification with the speakers and into a critical attitude towards the views they have been seen to reflect. And this mirrors moments in which, throughout Plato’s dialogues, characters confront Socrates directly, only to see their world views dialectically downplayed. Lastly, this image provides a continuum between the previous values, whose status is now downplayed to a “blur,” and the increasing clarity they approach once they leave behind their colourful, make-believe world. One is even tempted to compare this scene to Plato’s Cave parable, where the philosopher looks back at appearances “with his eyes full of darkness”, having known the clarity of the sun through dialectics (516e). Unequivocally, then, Godard has not included his characters – nor their artificial communist society – as deceitful representations of excellence. Instead, he has shown how their values are deficient, and hinted towards the clearer horizon that Socrates envisages by the end of the *Republic*. At least in theory, the audience is supposed to pick up on these features of the film and revise previous intuitions on the objects of R1: justice and piety in Socrates’ dialogues; justice and revolution for Godard. Whether or not they succeed continues to be a matter of controversy, for students of film and philosophy alike.

## 5. Conclusion

At first blush, Plato’s attacks on poetry in the *Republic* seem both to undermine his own narrative methods and to rely on strong metaphysical and psychological presuppositions. While I accepted the threefold metaphysical schema (R1–R3), I rendered Plato’s concerns more plausible by comparing them to modern counterparts. Although the elements in Plato’s dialogues belong to R3, they are suited to his reformist agenda by dint of transparent and dialectical devices. So with Brecht and Godard’s approaches to theatre and film, which demand that artistic representations be made apparent as such by their conscientious producers. This shows that not only Plato’s

concern, but also his proposed solutions, are independent of poetry as a medium of representation. In this way, as in the study of astronomy, poetic images can find a way of attracting the nonrational soul, while simultaneously displaying appearances *as* appearances to reflect on philosophically.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It is hard to determine whether craftsmen “see” the Forms themselves (Griswold 145). For my purposes, what matters is that they and their products are closer to reality than artists’.
- <sup>2</sup> Plato is often taken to speak of “imitation” in two ways: as dramatic enactment, and as representation or depiction (Lear 195). Whether or not these different applications of the concept are justified, here I use it in the latter sense.
- <sup>3</sup> Here I refer to the second sense of “imitation” described by Lear. Again, whether Plato conflates the two is controversial.

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