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## Foreword

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Starting from the ancient Greece, from Pindar and Plato, to mention but a few examples, the notion of *mimesis* – “imitation”, “representation”, “emulation” – has been playing a crucial role in the history of aesthetics and in the theory of arts. The question posed by the platonic Socrates in the tenth book of the Republic, “Can you tell me what imitation is? (For I really do not know)” does not stop to stimulate philosophical discussions in the field of the arts and aesthetics. But *mimetic processes* apply not only to the arts: as is today widely accepted by anthropologists and as Aristotle himself had already claimed in his *Poetics*, to imitate is an anthropological constant, instinctive to humans from childhood onward; furthermore, mimetic processes (in the form of “mimicry” and “camouflage”) are common among nonhuman animals, to escape predators by resembling the environment or individuals belonging to other species.

The main aim of the various and multifaceted papers collected in this issue was to revive and renew the international debate around the notion of “mimesis” adopting a strong *interdisciplinary* approach. The essays all stem from talks delivered at the International Conference *Ways of Imitation* organised in November 2015 at the University of Florence by *Aisthesis* in cooperation with the *Nouvelle Revue d'esthétique*. The title of the Conference, *Ways of Imitation*, aimed to point to the diversity of ways in which the notion of *mimesis* can be declined: the dynamics of the cognitive processes, the question of the origin of art and of the paradoxical ontology that characterizes its works and, more in general, the models of learning and transmitting knowledge.

Almost all the fundamental issues and questions connected with the notion of *mimesis* are covered in the present issue: from the questions concerning the notion of *mimesis* in classical studies to the anthropological value of the mimetic processes for the founda-

tion of our identity as cultural animals; from the relevance of the mimetic contagion in the phenomenology of the aesthetic experience (including *pathosformel*) to the strategic role of mimetic desire in the relationship between the sphere of passions and the sphere of art, and finally to the neural roots of the mimetic impulse.

Among the papers included in the present issue of "Aisthesis", the contributions by Andrea Capra (*Seeing through Plato's Looking Glass. Mythos and Mimesis from Republic to Poetics*), Ferenc Hörcher (*Dramatic Mimesis and Civic Education in Aristotle, Cicero and Renaissance Humanism*), Stephen Kidd (*Toys as Mimetic Objects: A Problem from Plato's Laws*) and María Ortega Máñez (*Ideality in Theatre, or a reverse evolution of mimesis from Plato to Diderot*) explore the notion of *mimesis* mainly in the context of ancient classical philosophy, focusing on Plato, Aristotle and the tradition of thought that relies on their views. Much cutting-edge research in neuroscience and neurobiology, with which Vittorio Gallese deals in his paper (*Visions of the body. Embodied simulation and aesthetic experience*), in particular the research concerning the mimetic basis of cognitive and emotional processes, stresses the role of *mimesis* for the foundation of human culture, while the new field of biomimetics is at the heart of Andrea Borsari's paper (*Human mimicry and Imitation: the case of Biomimetics*), which discusses mimetic processes at the intersection between human and (non-human) animal fields. In her paper, Lidia Gasperoni tries to draw a connection between Gallese's neuroscientific views on mimetic processes and mirror neurons and the perspective of transcendental philosophy. Christoph Wulf's contribution (*Production of Body Knowledge in Mimetic Processes*) explores the same issues - the role of *mimesis* and mimetic processes for the foundation of human culture and the processes of cultural learning -, but from a different perspective, namely the perspective of philosophical anthropology and historical anthropology. More focused on twentieth century's philosophical perspectives on *mimesis* are the contributions by Andrew Benjamin (*Two Forms of Gesture: Notes*

*on Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin*) dealing with Benjamin's understanding of *mimesis*, and by Claudio Rozzoni (*From Abbild to Bild? Depiction and Resemblance in Husserl's Phenomenology*) adopting a phenomenological viewpoint on *mimesis*.

Together with the interdisciplinary approach and the variety of perspectives adopted to investigate the notion of *mimesis*, the conference *Ways of imitation* also aimed to stress that this plurality of meanings of the term always relies on a unified, single question or fundamental issue. In *mimesis*, in the different processes and practices of imitation which are intrinsic to our human identity and, more generally, to the nature of the living beings, we recognize the self-expression of the original character of the *relationship*. The constitutive unity of *mimesis*, the unity of its problem, consists, indeed, in the duality that it necessarily implies and connects. Perhaps, exactly in the intuition of this radical challenge - that of intending the primary character of *mimesis* without drawing, nevertheless, a dualistic consequence from it - lies the extreme difficulty for Plato to define the true nature of *mimesis*, a question that has been too easily declassified, in the histories of philosophy and aesthetics, as a "condemnation of the art".

Among the philosophers of the twentieth century, Benjamin is definitely the one who, in the most faithful and most innovative way, has resumed the Platonic question about the nature of *mimesis*, which he defines the *Urphänomen* of all artistic activities. Benjamin, in the short text on "the mimetic faculty", written in 1933 under the sun of Ibiza, went back to the classic concept of *mimesis*, but starting from the fact that nature itself "produces similarities" and represents, therefore, the *unproducible* origin of the mimetic attitude, which finds in humans its most complete and developed expression. Consequently, - Benjamin observes - "there is perhaps not a single one of man's [his] higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role". But Benjamin understands in the most perfect and clear way also the non-static character, the transformative potential of the mimetic faculty. This faculty, in fact, has a history "in both the phylo-

genetic and the ontogenetic sense". A history, with its sequence of transformations, from the mimetic modes of behaviour that permeate children's play to the mimetic gestures and rhythms that give life to dance (with its dialectic between assimilation and distance). The constant of this history, however, is given by the "fusion of the semiotic and the mimetic in the sphere of language" as an archive of "nonsensuous similarities". Even before, this constant of the mimetic faculty was given by the act of reading. "To read what was never written," - so Benjamin concludes his essay - "such reading is the most ancient: reading prior to all languag-

es, from entrails, the star or dances". Mimesis as reading, therefore, precedes the language as verbal communication. Mimesis as reading, thus, is nothing more than a perceptual response, full of emotional resonance. In conclusion, Mimesis, perhaps, is nothing more than Aisthesis.

The Issue is completed with a section "Varia" that comprises the contributions by Ricardo Ibarlucía, *The Organization of Pessimism: Profane Illumination and Anthropological Materialism in Walter Benjamin*, and by Luca Taddio, *Osservazioni sull'indipendenza dell'esperienza immediata: da Frege alla «fenomenologia sperimentale» di Paolo Bozzi*.

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