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Ambivalence of the Notion of “Mimesis”: Between the Opening towards the Other and the Repetition of the Same

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Abstract. One of the main characteristics of the contemporary aesthetic debate is the recovery of the concept of mimesis, as a dimension that is originally involved in the foundation of human culture and the processes of cultural learning. This is evident in the aesthetic reflection developed by Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf. For these two authors, mimesis is never a mere reproduction of the given reality, but always implies the production of the New, of the Other, of the different with respect to the empirical world, i.e. to the existing categorical order of the world. In particular, Gebauer and Wulf underline the constitutive ambivalence of the notion of mimesis: on the one hand, it favors the processes of reification fueled by capitalist society and, on the other hand, it contributes to the affirmation of a critical and “utopian” instance that can counter “instrumental reason” and the primacy of identity.

Keywords. Mimesis, identity, otherness, work of art, critical-utopian function.

1. MIMESIS IN ANTHROPOGENESIS: CULTURE, GAMES, RITUAL

In a world characterised by the dissolution of all traditionally normative aesthetic paradigms, and by the tendential juxtaposition or overlapping of new heterogeneous and mutually conflictual paradigms, the philosophical research of Christoph Wulf and Gunter Gebauer, through its original historical-anthropological approach, can be credited with having reaffirmed the crucial importance of the concept of *mimesis*, mostly over the past thirty years, by supplying the investigation about it with fertile new trans-disciplinary theoretical foundations. This has allowed the notion of *mimesis*, which has always constituted one of the cornerstones of Western culture¹, to undergo a profound conceptual redefinition that is both theoretical and historical².

¹ See Mattioli [1993]; Halliwell [2002]; Desideri, Talon-Hugon [2017].

² See Fischer, Perret [1998]; Jeffrey [2011].

Wulf and Gebauer argue that *mimesis* «plays a role in nearly all domains of human action, representation, speech and thought», as it is «an essential condition of social life» (Wulf [1995]: 9): every possible act of writing or reading – every linguistic act or intellectual process – is founded on a mimetic practice. Their starting point is that, taken alone, the empirical world is nothing, that is to say, nothing that is “already-given”. To understand the world means establishing relationships between different worlds that are primarily mimetic. Thus our understanding of the world is always an understanding of multiple relationships, both of a theoretical and a practical order, that are established between heterogeneous worlds, each of which acquires meaning and clarity only in relation to the others.

Mimesis presents itself to us as the foundation of processes of socialisation, civilisation and the construction of thought. It appears as a decisive instance capable of rendering an account of modes and forms in which our collective life is historically realised, but also of all of those actions, practices, and symbolic-cognitive strategies through which the processes of the elaboration and intersubjective organisation of sense are always and again renewed. Thus *mimesis* is to be understood as an original principle capable of in some way rendering an account, in historical-anthropological terms, of the very genesis of culture, as well as of the various modes of its effective transmission, reception, and dissemination (cf. Jeffrey [2011]).

Wulf and Gebauer start from the assumption that *mimesis* cannot be reduced in any way to a mere practice that reproduces what exists. The idea of *mimesis*, that is, cannot be naively and banally reduced to *Nachahmung*, which holds that the imitative act consists in the pure and simple repetition of a pre-existing model, whether external or internal to the mind of the subject that imitates. On the contrary, the notion of *mimesis* simultaneously holds in itself a vast multiplicity of meanings, valences, and semantic connotations. Upon the idea of imitation as *nachahmen* (as production of an image-copy or *Abbild*) are superimposed ideas such as «bringing to representation»

(*Darstellung*), «emulation», «becoming similar», «miming» in the sense of bodily-performance and gesture, «simulating», «expressing» and «mimetically anticipating» (*vor-ahmen*).

Far from supplying a definition that is meta-historical and normative, Wulf and Gebauer emphasise that the concept of *mimesis* cannot be determined once and for all, since it escapes any systematic, totalizing and all-encompassing effort. For them, *mimesis* is not an univocal and homogeneous notion, but is one that, in Aristotelian terms, *pollachòs lèghetai*, «can be said in many different ways». Moreover, one of the distinctive features of the notion of *mimesis* advanced by Wulf and Gebauer is the fact that it never results in a simple reference to something that is already-given and already-structured, that is, to something whose mimetic image would constitute a simple doubling or mirroring (according to a semiotic and denotative paradigm). Rather *mimesis* creates the qualitatively “new”, in the sense that it produces difference, alterity, and the non-identical with respect to the existing categorical order of the world, and therefore with respect to the forms that already effectively obtain within a given empirical reality.

In this perspective, the surprising cognitive and inventive power of *mimesis* consists in its capacity to *create* something «original» (Wulf [1995]: 11), that is, something that «cannot be explained with reference to something given» (*ibid.*). What is produced is an unexpected and nondeterminate horizon of possible meanings that was not there *before*. Understood in this way, *mimesis* is always the carrier of a «surplus of sense» (cf. Wulf [2014]) that cannot be precisely foreseen, and that attests to the lack of rigidity of the life of culture: the non-calculability of its incessant transformations. Thus the surplus of sense that qualifies every mimetic practice can be understood as an «anthropological constant» and it is exemplary of the «eccentric» character of the human condition, i.e. of its constitutive incompleteness, and therefore of the possibility of continually renegotiating its relationship with the world in new ways.

From the historical-anthropological perspective of Gebauer and Wulf, *mimesis* and rituality are intimately connected dimensions (cf. Wulf [2003]; [2004], [2005], [2014b]). Every symbolic and cognitive practice takes on a ritual form, which always implies processes of inclusion and exclusion, i.e. acts of differentiation. And at the base of this ritual a mimetic process is always discernable. *Mimesis* is involved in every process concerned with the formation of our social identity, every process concerning self-representation or self-presentation that is carried out within a social and communitarian horizon, and every process of sense production and of the shared participation of such sense.

From this point of view, *mimesis* can be understood as a partial exemption (*Entlastung*) from an otherwise pervasive sense of fragility and insufficiency, i.e. as a compensatory and adaptive strategy able to defend and protect us from the non-sense of reality. In other words, *mimesis* constitutes a necessary but always contingent and revocable remedy against the sense of finitude and narrowness that weighs upon us. Hence Gebauer and Wulf’s claim that «*mimesis* is an integral and constitutive part of anthropogenesis» (Gebauer, Wulf [2003]: 29): «it is a *conditio humana*; without mimetic capabilities, man could not become what he has over the long history of phylogenesis» (Gebauer, Wulf [2003]: 31). Unsurprisingly, «at the beginning of ontogenesis, the first images, sounds, and bodily reactions are adopted and re-elaborated mimetically through instincts, without being channeled through a controlled conduit» (Gebauer, Wulf [2003]: 31).

Thus, prompted by feelings of terror and anxiety in the face of the «absolutism of reality» (Blumenberg), it is precisely to guarantee their survival in a hostile natural environment that primitive humans initially attempted to escape this fear by carrying out procedures of a mimetic nature. This consisted in their adaptation to, and assimilation with, the external environment, with the aim of rendering themselves indistinguishable from, and on a par with, plants and animals. In this sense, *mimesis* (understood as *mimicry*) constitutes a

strategy for self-preservation, but one that results in the rigidity and alienation of the human being. At work here is what Freud called the «death drive», understood as a drive to restore a previous state, «repeating it» (and this occurs *mimetically*), with the goal of re-establishing a tensionless condition that – precisely in its lack of tension – is experienced by the subject as «pleasing».

Nonetheless, even at this level *mimesis* puts into play an element of difference, even as it produces assimilation (and therefore identification) with something outside the self. *Mimesis* means that the human being does not dissolve without residuals in nature, but that it has set itself up alongside nature as something different, as a Self that attempts to assert and legitimate itself. Hence in the “pre-civilised” phase of human evolution, human beings “formed” themselves by giving themselves over to the external environment and subjecting themselves in some way to its unspeakable and threatening power, perceived by humans as an expression of unassimilable otherness, of unsettling strangeness. This implies, however, the permanent risk of self-dissolution and of collapse into the heterogeneous.

In a later stage, a mimetic practice is established that is based on the use of rationality. Here reason figures as a faculty oriented towards the pursuit of control – its primary adaptive scope – and dominion, which is exercised by the subject over nature. In this phase, now fully “historical”, the subject is no longer placed in a relation of equivalence to the object (to external nature), i.e. in a relation of “organic” and “sympathetic” attachment to the Other, but tends to exercise its own power over the world. As is already the case in the mythical-prehistoric phase, *mimesis* here is inextricably related to an instance of domination: a dominion which, in an earlier historical-cultural phase, already manifested itself in the emergence of magical thought, and in its attempt to “influence” nature through effective representations, symbolic practices and mimetic anticipations (i.e. through practices capable of producing “effects” on things by grasping the relationships of contiguity, similarity and contrast between them).

Nevertheless, the archaic subjection of the subject to nature is now replaced by the subject's submission to the "new" mythical power of instrumental reason that is busy in its "enlightened" work of building civilization: what becomes theoretically essential to the subject is its attempt to reduce the chaotic multiplicity of the empirical world to the abstract unity of the concept.

Thus the supremacy of the abstract over the concrete in human life replaced the dominion that nature had held over human beings, implying the dominion of the human as a *subject* over the human now reduced to an *object*. And so abstraction exercises its identitarian coercion on empirical experience. All of this entailed a "sacrifice", not the sacrifice demanded by ancient magical practices, but rather the sacrifice of sensibility, that vital dimension of the subject that is one with corporeality. What is sacrificed is the "vital" affinity between man and nature i.e. the fluidity and indeterminacy of our original "commerce" with the world. Thus the dominion of the Self over nature translates into a repression of the sensible by the intelligible, of the concrete by the abstract, of the intuition by the concept.

And thus the constitutive ambivalence of *mimesis* comes into view: on the one hand, it constitutes the initial moment of the process whereby instrumental rationality is asserted, which leads man to achieve full dominion over nature (with all of the consequences mentioned above); on the other hand, as an expression of an ineradicable relationship with the sphere of corporeality and the vitality of nature, it appears as a productive and creative dimension that is capable of resisting the triumph of instrumental rationality, and therefore the triumph of abstraction and reification. Indeed, *mimesis* originally holds this capacity to refer to the indeterminateness, non-definability, and non-explicability of nature, which, as Wulf writes, «offers to man the possibility of a vital experience» (Wulf [1998]: 162). *Mimesis* is therefore capable of certifying the need for a reference to something that *transcends* the identical, the "given". It is, in other words, an affirmation of the possible existence of an "other" dimension, i.e.

of an ulteriority (an "excess"), that the subject cannot control and that escapes their logical-rational dominion. In so far as it is an expression of empathetic behavior – a tendency to valorize the otherness of the object, for the object to assimilate the subject – *mimesis* enters into a dynamic and tensional relation with the violence of demonstrative thought that is founded on the rigid opposition between subject and object, and which then tends to integrate every difference into its own categorical order.

2. BETWEEN REPETITION AND DIFFERENCE, RULES AND INNOVATION, GIVENNESS AND POSSIBILITY

Gebauer and Wulf state that *mimesis* implies an instance *together* assimilative and differentiating. On the one hand, it mirrors and repeats pre-existing socio-cultural models, an action that gives rise to a tendential identification with the already-given. On the other hand, it implies a space for freedom, creativity, and innovation, to which is owed the virtually unlimited expansion of our perceptive, imaginative, symbolic and cognitive horizon. While a given community establishes and perpetuates itself through the mimetic dimension of ritual action, securing for itself continuity over time, the very same mimetic action simultaneously produces an experience of discontinuity, consisting in the creation of the new. Thus it might be said that *mimesis* takes part in both «the improvement and the "non-improvability" of man» (Gebauer, Wulf [2003]: 35).

Moreover, if mimetic and ritual processes of social construction are always the expression of the grammar of the "interactive" and dynamic body – a grammar in movement – there is the continual implementation, absorption and transmission of an eminently *practical* and *performative* knowledge at the root of such rituals³. This knowl-

³ On the centrality of the «performative dimension» for understanding the ritual processes underlying the «genesis of the social», see in particular Gebauer, Wulf [1998] and Wulf, Zirfas (ed.) [2004]: 7-45.

edge can be understood as a complex network of similarities and differences – in Wittgensteinian sense of «family similarities», according to Wulf’s interpretation of the «genesis of the social» (Wulf [2005]: 9; 74) –, a network in which the repetition of the “same” is always productively connected to the creation of the “new”. The manifestation of this knowledge takes the form of a “staging” or “game”, understood – again in a Wittgensteinian sense – as the indissoluble union (a short-circuit) between “rules” and “innovation”, between necessity and freedom, between necessity and contingency. The very notion of a “game” implies a practice that is structured by rules, but which cannot be reduced entirely to those rules in a deterministic way. This is because the application of the “general” rule to the “particular” case is not itself structured by rules – something that would require an infinite regress – but requires a creative, constructive, and “meta-operative” capacity, and as such one that is not determined by the valid *a priori* “legality” of concepts (cf. Garroni [2010]).

The learning expressed by *mimesis* is elastic and flexible, and as such is infinitely malleable. It is historically conditioned, and precisely as such, is always open to additions, re-elaborations and transformations that can be mutually contradictory and conflictual. This guarantees the continual emergence of *difference* within the very *identity* of the symbolic-operative model that is repeated and reproduced through learning and memorisation. Thus, it is through the inseparable connection of repetition and difference – of stability and modification – that the processes of the acquisition and renewal of our cultural inheritance, understood as an intangible patrimony of forms and learnings, can develop concretely. And this allows for the enrichment and expansion of our imagination, and with it our vision of the world, which becomes increasingly complex, dense and articulated. Thus a close connection between *mimesis* and imagination is established: in virtue of its character as *both* reproductive and productive, imagination is able to institute new «relations of sense» between things, on the base of a «ludic» and «associative» dynamic able to connect pres-

ence and absence, visible and invisible, past and future (cf. Wulf [2014]: 10-14).

The kind of learning and knowledge connected with *mimesis*, being necessarily conditioned by the variability and irreducible singularity of the ways in which it is enacted, escapes any definition that claims to be exhaustive, univocal, and totalising. This means that the practical knowledge set in motion by *mimesis* exceeds the sphere of *theorèin*, thereby eluding any possible attempt to render an account of such knowledge in analytical terms through classifications and logical-conceptual explanations. And so *mimesis*, play and ritual exclude any determinism and any hermeneutical reductionism. Ritual and mimetic practices, while necessarily presupposing a system of pre-structured rules, codes, and conventions, are never conceivable as the mere reproduction of schemas that are immutable and so not subject to temporality. On the contrary, it is always and only through time, and thus in the horizon of becoming, that we *mimetically* learn and apply the rules of various games – games in which we are immersed and involved chiefly on an emotive and affective level. We perform these rules time and again, ceaselessly modifying and modeling them.

Hence *mimesis*’ capacity to expand and restructure our concept of reality, as well as that of experience – understood as the mobile and variable horizon of our understanding, i.e. of the way in which we represent the world to ourselves – that is, time and again, dominant. This is due to the fact that «in the mimetic appropriation of the given, the imaginative faculty of the recipient informs the imitative process such that the given acquires a new quality for the person who imitates» (Wulf [1995]: 11). This production of the “qualitatively new” is a consequence of the fact that the mimetic act always implies the enactment of procedures that transform the given, through integrations and omissions, additions, accumulations, and subtractions. These are all elements that make *mimesis* something far from obvious and simple, both from an aesthetic and an epistemological point of view.

Mimesis proceeds by way of exclusions and inclusions, assimilations, incorporations and read-

justments, simultaneously: in imitating, the subject adds something to the imitated object that is irreducibly their own. This takes place within a very complex dynamic that is marked by – and productively permeated by – tensions, distortions, errors, partial misunderstandings, inaccuracies and imprecisions. To imitate is therefore to attempt to render *one's own* something that is *extraneous*, but without ever succeeding in this attempt. In fact, what is imitated is never something perfectly transparent, but is instead complex and irretrievably “opaque”.

From this point of view, the mimetic act appears as something eminently *hermeneutic*, inasmuch as it is the expression of an interpretive process that puts into play an indefinite multiplicity of meanings and historical-cultural contents, as well as emotions, moods, sensations, hopes, desires, promises, expectations and intentions, more or less hidden and more or less capable of being made explicit. What is exhibited and produced by mimetic practices is therefore a type of knowledge founded in the first instance on *aisthesis*, on the pragmatic and performative concreteness of experience, i.e. on the “aesthetic” dimension of *feeling* as a dimension that precedes the “logical-conceptual” instance of *intellection*. As Wulf affirms: «Mimetic learning is a sensory, body-based form of learning in which images, schemas and movements needed to perform actions are learned» (Wulf [2017]: 8). *Mimesis* therefore is to be understood as a process of incorporating “imprints” and “frames” – social, cultural, historical and symbolic materials, as well as behavioral patterns – that the subject “recipient” transforms through the transcending and innovative power of their imagination. It is a process of *making sense* that expands and renews our life-worlds in order to create new ways of experiencing and acting.

The notion of *mimesis* contains within it both the imitated object and the subject that imitates, both the final result of the imitative process and the imitative process as such, together with all the possibilities of change and re-configuration of the imitated reality that it implies. Thus *mimesis* «is

not» only «oriented towards what is behind» it, not only aimed at the pre-constituted givenness of the model that it is called to represent, but «looks ahead», pointing towards the «not-yet-created» (Wulf [1995]: 11-12). It aims at the “non-existent”, at the *other of the given*, i.e. the “possible” that is not yet realised but which has only been imagined or is only imaginable in the concrete changes of the effective situations in which the subject is engaged.

In this perspective, the mimetic act can be well understood only if it is seen in light of the complexity and richness of its implications. More in detail, the two authors explain the mimetic act by connecting it to some essential anthropological and evolutionary characteristics of humanity: their constitutive dependence upon learning; their residual instinctual endowments; their adaptive nature; and the hiatus that always exists between the perceptive stimulus and the subject's response. In the explication of the mimetic function, it is therefore necessary to consider the close interconnection between imagination, language, and corporality, as well as between theory and praxis, and thus between subject and object or ego and world. In this sense, as much as the human aspires to identify an original model to employ as *prius* (i.e. as a foundation of mimetic representation), *mimesis* always reflects a reality that is already *constructed*, or rather already symbolically *mediated*, and not something that is originally pure and ontologically neutral.

3. BETWEEN REIFICATION AND OPPOSITION, BETWEEN IMPLOSION OF DIFFERENCE AND UTOPIA

It is in light of these preliminary considerations that in particular Wulf reconstructs the historical development of the idea of *mimesis*. In his volume *Mimesis* (Wulf [1995]), which could be understood as a synthetic review of his more extensive research project on this topic carried out with Gebauer (cf. Gebauer, Wulf [1992]), he shows the various changes of paradigm that characterised this notion: from the ancient poetics to

the Critical Theory of Theodor W. Adorno; from Plato and Aristotle to the reflection on the nexus between *mimesis* and violence proposed by René Girard; and from the mythical-archaic forms of “magical thought” to the modern “civilisation of simulacra” theorised by Baudrillard. His enlightening analysis confirms at every step the idea of a constitutive plurivocity of the notion being examined, underscoring its always historically conditioned character.

But beyond the remarkable observations that Wulf makes regarding the history of the idea of *mimesis* in Western culture, he also makes a noteworthy contribution concerning the convergence between social *mimesis* and aesthetic *mimesis*, which has profound relevance to current philosophical debates. It is in his discussion of this subject, in the third chapter, that Wulf offers a renewed understanding of the concept of *mimesis* in light of some of the most urgent problems in the contemporary debate concerning image and representation. These include: the relationship between art and reality, or art and life; the theme of the reification of experience and of the homologation of sense within the modern “society of the spectacle” (a society of triumphant globalisation in which the characteristics of the “culture industry”, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s sense, are radicalised); and the question of the *political* nature of the image, with reference to the possible utopian and critical function – i.e. the function of “resistance” – that it might perform within postmodern and post-industrial civilisation.

The central point raised by Wulf is that in the contemporary world *mimesis* is characterised first and foremost by its structural ambiguity and ambivalence. If, on the one hand, it seems complicit in the processes of the homogenisation of sense, that is, of its contraction, leveling and canalisation, processes which are typical of the globalized world, on the other hand, it contains within itself the capacity to present an alternative to these very same processes, and thereby to offer an instance that is at once critical and utopian. Let us analyse the first of these two possible dimensions implicit in the idea of *mimesis*.

The “reifying” feature of *mimesis* is a consequence of the eminently adaptive nature of the mimetic act. In this way, Wulf argues, *mimesis* «contributes, through adaptation to the devastated environment, to the hardened social structures and relationships of domination, to the coercion of chronocracy and the mechanical logic of self-referential processes, to reification and estrangement» (Wulf [1995]: 70). Wulf’s conclusion here is clear: in a constitutive sense *mimesis* contains instances both of passive adaptation and assimilation to the dominant factual order existing in the world. If this order happens to be founded – à la Adorno – on the incontestable primacy that instrumental reason assigns to the “principle of identity”, and if such primacy carries with it the tendential exclusion and removal of the non-identical (the Other, the different, the heterogeneous), then what *mimesis* implies, at least from a certain standpoint, is precisely a confirmation of this dynamic. It implies a ratification of those processes of negation and assimilation of alterity that are always operative within capitalist society.

In this sense, *mimesis* simply reproduces the structures of domination: the imperialist and totalitarian logics immanent in instrumental reason. The consequence is the triumph of an “autoreferentiality” – the autoreferentiality of calculative and objectifying thought – that ends up flattening all difference, thereby suppressing any possible tension towards alterity and any possible creative and innovative instance. Hence the triumph of reification and estrangement, i.e. the triumph of “dead objectivity”, that is of “nature” (which is always identical to itself) with respect to the historicity of “culture” (which is always potentially creative and capable of producing novelty).

From this point of view, the industrial capitalist world unilaterally imposes a notion of time that is essentially empty and abstract. It is an idea of temporality irretrievably deprived of its original multidimensionality, its intrinsic dynamism and polymorphism, the product of the many different ways in which past, present, and future can be woven, layered, articulated and short-circuited. To speak of «chronocracy» here means to speak of

the triumph of a homogeneous, linear, and cumulative time – a time that is serial, automatic, and mechanical. Wulf observes: «*Chronocracy* entails the reduction of different actions, interactions, and lived experiences to the quantity of time they require time and again. Events are transformed into temporal offices (*Zeitposten*) that must be carried out. Their qualitative difference is disregarded». And again: «chronology homogenises, synchronises, and functionalises the vital time of man from the point of view of the growth of rationality and effectiveness» (Wulf [1995]: 73-74). It is precisely this kind of time that *mimesis*, understood as a reproduction of the existent, helps to feed. This is a devitalised time, lacking any concrete qualitative dimension, a time that is essentially uniform and irreversible, based on the eternal return of the same, of the indefinite repetition of a deterministic logic. And this logic is that of the production of profit, of mere revenue-generating that subordinates all other values to it: the logic of consumption and the unconditional commercialisation of every aspect of existence.

Therefore it is precisely in this way – within the horizon of the mercantile-capitalist world – that *mimesis*, always understood in its complicity/affinity with the strategies of domination implemented by instrumental reason, «contributes to the transformation into image (*Verbildlichung*) of the world and to the processes of simulation» (Wulf [1995]: 70). Wulf is clearly referring here to Baudrillard and his key notion of “simulacrum”. From this point of view, what *mimesis* fosters and promotes is a process of the “aestheticisation” of the world: images, far from referring to an external reality, end up enclosing and rigidifying themselves in absolute self-referentiality, in their intransitivity. Thus the simulacrum-image tends to absorb all of reality, creating a world entirely separate from the real one, and against which reality itself – as the “other of the image” – dissolves and vanishes.

The result is the production of a “hyperreality” – spawned by the *media* and new technologies – that presupposes not only the liquidation of every possible referent of the image, and the sub-

stitution of signs of the real for the real itself, but also the nullification of any possible manifestation and utopian function attributable to the image itself. Instead of revealing the Other, the simulacrum-image neutralises it, thereby negating with itself the idea of culture, making it implode just as the dimension of the “social” implodes. In bringing about the extermination of the real the simulacrum destroys any alterity, any illusion, since illusion always entails the dimension of absence, of non-existent, of non-identity. Simulacrum, in other words, is to be understood as absolute presence, as pure surface that does not refer to any *depth* of implicit sense, and therefore as appearance without *apparition* (in Adorno’s sense) and as form without *content* (if by “content” we mean the “beyond” to which the sensible givenness of the image refers: the “aura” of the image itself, in Benjamin’s terms, i.e. the “other of the given”)⁴.

What is accomplished, then, is what Baudrillard termed the «perfect crime», alluding to the ability that simulacral images have of killing reality – the “off-camera” of the image. Hence the dissolution of any distinction between reality and fiction, between image and reality, between what represents (the sign) and what is represented (the signified), and thus between *fictum* and *factum*. Images no longer “represent” the world but *are* the world, the only world possible, which does not tolerate alternatives. Thus, in giving space to the simulated world – virtual and hyper-real – *mimesis* becomes totalising and all-encompassing; it no longer represents a world that is *different* from the image, but results in a sort of self-illustration and self-presentation.

What prevails is a hypertrophic flow of images – principally, media images, and in particular “advertising” images – that prove to be empty of any “truth content” (in the sense that Adorno defines the notion in *Aesthetic Theory*). These are images that are incapable of referring to the outside world, and precisely because of this are no longer able to critically question it by taking a conscious and responsible position with regard to

⁴ See Di Giacomo, Marchetti [2013]; Di Giacomo [2013].

it. This is what happens in the case of the simulacrum-image, which is characterised by the fact that, rather than “inaugurating a world”, it blocks the world in the univocity of a coercive message that is fixed once and for all. Thus the image is no longer able to refer to a “horizon of sense” that is open to indeterminacy and the transcendence of the possible. It is no longer able to elicit and mobilize the symbolic and productive resources of the imagination. On the horizon of simulation, the violence of an assimilation is unleashed that does not allow remainders, scraps, or leftovers that could evade the vertigo of mimetic appropriation.

From this point of view, the triumph of simulation and of simulacra is the triumph of an idea of *mimesis* that is essentially idolatrous, fetishistic and apologetic with regard to the effective order of the world. It is apologetic with regard to what Adorno called the «administered world», the world dominated by the principle of identity. Thus Wulf can claim that simulacral images «suffocate the imagination and nullify the unavailability of the Other and the resistance of the Extraneous» (Wulf [1995]: 71). They dissolve the very possibility of thinking the indeterminacy of the possible, i.e. the “more” that exceeds the given. What simulacra destroy, in other words, is precisely the transcendence incorporated in the immanence of the given: the difference that the identical keeps within itself and that makes it always transformable.

But the analysis up to this point is of only one of the possible dynamics attributable to *mimesis* within contemporary society. «On the other hand», Wulf notes, «connected with *mimesis* is also the hope of a new form of opposition against the processes just described, since *mimesis* makes it possible for man to get outside himself and to approach objects and men». From this point of view, it is undeniable that *mimesis* «contains a possibility of opposition to abstraction, reification, and the transformation into image of the world: *mimesis* opposes itself to inclusive logic and it perseveres in its theoretical unavailability» (Wulf [1995]: 71-72). Understood in this way, *mimesis* qualifies itself as the expression of an inexhaustible critical and utopian potential immanent within

it: a potential waiting to be reawakened and activated.

Mimesis holds an authentically revolutionary force within itself, and as such is potentially subversive of the existing order. It counters the logical-conceptual, inferential, deductive, and demonstrative way that instrumental reason puts in place – presupposing the dualism between subject and object, their separation and “head-on” opposition – with a modality of thought that is fundamentally *other* and *ulterior*. From this point of view, *mimesis* entails the capacity to critically question the dominant and ossified structures of sense, the categorical determinations that are held to be incontestable and the configurations of experience that *logos* assumes as something unchangeable and intranscendable. This is due to the fact that *mimesis*, by allowing the subject to get outside of themselves, and by simultaneously determining the mutual reversibility of interiority and exteriority (of subject and object), tends to divest the subject of their power, escaping their cognitive control, which instead postulates the unity of consciousness. This is what Wulf calls the «empathetic behavior» of *mimesis* (Wulf [1995]: 75).

In this perspective, *mimesis* implies first and foremost an opening to the “possibility of the possible”. It has the capacity to bring out from the given the “other of the given”, i.e. that “excess” of the non-identical that identitarian coercion tends to suffocate, remove and neutralise. This is one of the most significant theoretical features of Wulf’s analysis on the concept of *mimesis*. Mimetic practice contains within itself the capacity to resist the oppressive domination of the identical, having the power to upend its primacy. In this way, the revolutionary force of *mimesis* consists in its capacity to disclose new possibilities and imaginative configurations of the existent – configurations that are never entirely predictable, and so are always surprising.

Here, Wulf’s theoretical debt to Adorno’s aesthetics is clear. To speak of the critical function of *mimesis* means bringing the dimension of artistic experience to the forefront, together with Adorno’s idea of the work of art as an expres-

sion of a “determined negation” of the existent, a determinate negation of that “which merely is”. It is not surprising then that Wulf highlights how «for Adorno, aesthetic theory and *mimesis* at the center of it» constitute «a response to the *crisis of critique*» (Wulf [1995]: 76). From Adorno’s point of view, it is art – and only art – that can counter the domination of the identical with the unhinging and overturning power of utopia.

This is due to the fact that art is, of course, *mimesis*, but it is a *mimesis* not of the “given” – of *natura naturata* (the world *as it is* in its mere facticity) – but rather of *natura naturans*. It is, in other words, an imitation of that very same creative and productive power intrinsic to nature (an instance expressed, in an exemplary way, in the poetics of the artist Paul Klee). In this way, it is precisely in virtue of the fact that art is *mimesis* of the unlimited creative force of nature – of its *dynamis* – that it is for Adorno characterised by “truth content”, i.e. capable of speaking to us about the world. In imitating the productivity of *physis*, art points to reality, giving voice thereby to the tensions, dissonances, and contradictions that inhabit it.

Therefore, Wulf observes, if «imitation of nature means» for Adorno «imitation of natural beauty» (Wulf [1995]: 76), then the point that must be underscored here is the fact that the distinctive trait of such beauty is its “non-objectivity”, its indefinability and indeterminacy, its escaping of any possibility of explanation in logical-conceptual terms. This is what artistic *mimesis* brings to light: the indefinable-indeterminate that the phenomenal given keeps within itself, the unrepresentable that representation always presupposes, the invisible that the visible preserves within itself, that invisible without which the visible itself would lose its immanent force, its vital energy, its capacity to be interpreted in multiple different ways. This dimension that is never entirely representable, and not completely visible, which artistic *mimesis* is tasked with bringing to light, coincides with what Adorno defines as the “more” of the work of art (*Mehr*) or its “spirit”. In fact, “spirit” for Adorno is the transcendence with which the

image is brimming, and which should be understood as its inexhaustible semantic productivity (see Adorno’s illuminating and decisive definition of the artistic form as «sedimented content»: Adorno [2009]: 8).

Thus it is precisely in virtue of the fact that it is already loaded with a *pluristratified* semantic content that a work of art is *mimesis of itself*: «*mimesis* of works of art», writes Adorno, «is similarity with themselves» (Adorno [2009]: 140). The work of art does not reproduce the world outside in a naturalistic way, but generates *from within itself* a new world that is unexpected – a world that was not there before. The work of art, thus, is «self-referential without thereby resting on the coercion to the identity of the identitarian logic» (Wulf [1995]: 76-77). Therefore, if art is characterised, as Adorno holds, by “mimetic impulses”, this means that it is capable of critically referring to reality, in the sense that it is capable of calling into question its presumed incontestability. But to be able to refer to the outside world, art must be “self-equivalent” and “self-sufficient” in the first place. It must above all “show itself”, in the sense that it must recall our attention to its own sensible configuration, i.e. to the physical and material elements that comprise it (its “lines and colours” in figurative art, or its “words” in the case of a literary work). «As a model of art», Wulf explains, «what is required is *l’art pour l’art*, in which the reference point of art is art itself» (Wulf [1995]: 77).

This clearly does not mean claiming that the work of art is *exclusively* self-referential (this would result in an empty tautology, lacking in any authentic cognitive function). Rather, it means understanding that it is precisely because it is self-referential – and thus precisely in virtue of its autonomy and independence from external reality – that the work of art can refer to what is beyond it, that is, to the (heterogeneous) world, contributing thereby to the critical re-comprehension of empirical reality. This is made possible by the fact that history’s unresolved antagonisms, its tensions and contradictions, are already incorporated and coagulated in the very physical-material structure

of the work. Thus the work offers itself to us as the always renewed and never exactly predictable production-representation of its own «sedimented content» (cf. Di Giacomo [2009]; Di Giacomo [2015]).

It is in light of this eminently Adornian perspective that Wulf claims that *mimesis* «can do without univocity, can give life to movements without finality and can open space to the non-identical, and can plead the rights of the moment in the face of chronocracy». This is because *mimesis* implies the capacity of giving voice to the Other – the other of the given, the other of the real – establishing a relationship with the world that is no longer «instrumental» and objectifying, i.e. calculative and manipulative, but rather authentically «critical». This is a relationship in which «the particular is defended against the universal and shown respect for the things and human beings» (Wulf [1995]: 85-86).

In this perspective, the truly utopian function that *mimesis* acquires on the horizon of aesthetic experience testifies to its irreducibility in the sphere of discursive and predicative knowledge, i.e. its irreducibility to that knowledge that entails theoretical and intellectual domination by the subject over the object. Aesthetic experience is instead characterised by the suspension of the primacy that scientific knowledge attributes to rational-objectifying thought. This is a suspension (at least provisional and temporary) of the separation between subject and object that is the unavoidable presupposition of all of our cognitive strategies. Thus artistic *mimesis* suspends the *principle of reality* itself. In the case of aesthetic experience, *mimesis* expresses the renewed primacy of the object, the primacy of the Other and the non-identical, the primacy, in other words, of that which escapes the subject’s *epistemological* and *intellectual* control.

As we have already noted, aesthetic experience above all implies the establishment of an emotive and affective affinity between the work of art and the subject that experiences it. What Wulf calls an «active passivity that allows people to be made “similar” to the work of art» (Wulf [1998]: 166) is

established. The artist themselves, in producing their work, does not reproduce an external model, but rather *gives voice* to objects, and to the unexpressed and inexpressible depth that they hold within themselves. In its experience of the work of art, the subject “recipient”, productively stimulated and solicited at a pulsional-pathemic level as well as at a cognitive one, opens itself up to exploring new possibilities, ways and patterns of articulating experience (a process made possible by the inextinguishable “anticipating function” of the “aesthetic” as a “meta-functional” dimension: See Desideri [2009]; Desideri [2011]). As a consequence there is a re-configuration of the same relationship that unites ego and world, ego and non-ego, subject and object. It is precisely thanks to artistic *mimesis*, then, that the subject ends up “surrendering” to the sudden irruption of the Other, opening itself up to the possibility of seeing the world *otherwise*. What’s more, this experience leads to a radical re-definition of the relationship that connects rationality and sensibility, i.e. *logos* and *pathos*. A passage from the “realm of necessity” to the “realm of freedom” is opened up. Thus art gives voice again to everything that the primacy of *logos* had repressed, removed, or hidden. It gives voice to the dimension of particularity and singularity, in its irreducibility to normative and classificatory schemas.

Wulf is extremely clear on this point: in its experience of the work of art «the subject becomes ‘opened by force’ and expanded. Its shaking leads to its partial suspension» (Wulf [1998]: 170). In its reception of the work of art, and thus by *participating* in a «sympathetic» way in its internal dynamic, the subject becomes «subjugated» by the non-conceptual element that the work makes visible (in virtue of the fact that the work of art is an «insoluble enigma»). What prevails is the instance of involvement and sharing: shared participation in *pathos*, beyond any Cartesian dualism between subject and object. This has to do with a «lightning contact» (Wulf [1998]: 167), which, in its suddenness and immediacy, is not susceptible to explanation in logical terms (just as it is, for Wittgenstein, in the case of «perspicuous vision»). The result, Wulf observes, is that «in the condensation

of a moment, there is an 'aesthetic shaking' that makes the ego tremble at its very foundations» (Wulf [1998]: 167). According to Nietzsche in the *Birth of Tragedy*, this happens thanks to the presence of the Dionysian dimension (the "intoxication") within the aesthetic experience, presence implying the dissolution of the *principium individuationis* and thus the rupture of the continuity of the subject with itself, its "dis-identification". Through the aesthetic experience, in other words, what prevails is a dimension in which, as Rimbaud famously remarked, «*Je est un autre*».

In Wulf's view, then, to emphasise the historical-cultural complexity and the non-obviousness of the notion of *mimesis* means to highlight the need to safeguard and defend the individuality and singularity of the human being, within a world where *mimesis* itself is employed in an increasingly aberrant and destructive way. This perverted and simulacral use of *mimesis* seems not to concede any space to the development of critique, to the mobilisation of imagination, and to the subsequent manifestation of the unrealised utopian promise, since "utopia" means the announcement of a *possible* and never apodictically guaranteed re-conciliation between life and sense, between ideal and real. To rethink *mimesis* means, therefore, radically rethinking *human's nature as human*: today more than ever, it means championing the need for our liberation from homologating structures of power that, in the name of the identical, and in a globalized world dominated by processes that are increasingly permeated by the anestetisation and devitalisation of sense, tends to oppress and violently quash the "different". Thus, according to Wulf's reading, if at the base of *mimesis* there is always an attention to difference, the idea of *mimesis* itself implies the possibility of developing a «heterological thought» (cf. Wulf [2016]: 11-15) able to think *from the perspective of the Other*, and to recognise in the Other a dimension to be respected and saved, precisely in its being non-assimilable to the identical.

* *The English translation of the passages quoted from Italian editions of non-Italian works are mine.*

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