BAVARIAN ELITE NETWORK

MUNICH DOCTORAL PROGRAM FOR LITERATURE AND THE ARTS

MIMESIS

(Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

RESEARCH PROGRAM

1. SUMMARY

The International Doctoral Program (IDP) MIMESIS aims to provide a structure for innovative doctoral research in the fields of literature and the arts, with special emphasis on theoretical perspectives, historical dynamics and transdisciplinary studies. It will enable cooperation between research projects in literature, theatre, performance, music, film studies, architecture and the visual arts, offering both a forum and a framework in which interests drawn from any one of these areas enter into a dialogue with other areas in the wider spectrum of creative engagements. Its research program is framed by the term mimesis. A foundational term since literature and the arts first became the focus of reflection, mimesis has remained a key concept throughout the history of aesthetic work and thinking, right up to the most recent developments in critical and cultural theory. Although not all art is or purports to be mimetic, the very concept of art is inconceivable without a theory of mimesis. With its rich academic and institutional resources in literature and the arts, the LMU and its local partner institutions are ideally suited for the establishment of such a program of graduate training.

With its envisaged combination of principal investigators, international cooperation partners, research profile, curricular program, mentoring procedures, academic and vocational practices, MIMESIS will set up a conceptual architecture for wide-ranging critical exploration. This will enable graduate students, throughout their qualification period and beyond, to pursue both disciplinary and cross-disciplinary research and engage in international ventures as well as professional activities. After three years of intensive training, successful candidates will not just have completed a doctoral thesis but also gained independent experience in crucial domains of professional life inside and outside the academy. Such an integrative graduate program will be unique in the German-speaking academic world.

2. RESEARCH PROGRAM

The research program founds itself on the conviction that critical investigations in the textual, visual and performative arts will best proceed with the plurality of terms and interests and following the multiplicity of methods or approaches long established in the relevant disciplines, but that all of these will greatly profit from entering into exchange and dialogue with other disciplines involving shared concerns. No other concept exemplifies such mutual implications of transdisciplinary arts research more powerfully than the term *mimesis*. *Mimesis* is not designated as the exclusive subject of individual research projects but rather offers an integrative notion for the entire program and a conceptual challenge for the art forms, practices and areas involved. A foundational term since literature and the arts first became the focus of reflection, *mimesis* has remained a key concept throughout the history of aesthetic work and thinking, right up to the most recent developments in critical and cultural theory. With its range of possible translations – "imitation", "representation", "presentation", "exhibition", "impersonation", "simulation", "emulation", "reproduction", "repetition", "travesty", "parody", "reflection", "copy", including also abstracts terms like "realism" or "identification" – *mimesis* suggests an inclusive sphere of interests and issues, which any engagement with literature and the arts must address. These emerge from the problematic double nature of the term: a process as well as a product, a human faculty and a cultural activity, *mimesis* is a relational concept which sets an entity – often an artifact resulting from some cultural labour – in relation to some other entity, either another artifact or, more usually, an idea or proposition of "reality", the "world", of "action" or of "nature". The mimetic is perceived as being of a second order and therefore traditionally theorized as being in some way redundant and/or dangerously insufficient. Yet even such critiques of the mimetic are based on operations which principally depend on mimetic functions like comparison or correspondence and which must be communicated through mimetic techniques like illustration, modelling and showing. Thus, although not all art is or purports to be mimetic, the very concept of art is inconceivable without a theory of mimesis. And with this theory, aesthetics offers indeed a foundation for central anthropological, psychological and other cultural discourses, too.

2.1   AREA A: THEORIES OF THE MIMETIC

This research area grounds the entire program on a sound basis of theoretical work, familiarizing doctoral candidates with the current state of research and enabling them to map the broader field in which their own projects will be positioned. The theory of mimesis in fact begins with its outspoken condemnation. In this respect, Plato's *Politeia* does not just open a wide field for re-conceiving and re-evaluating the production of poets, singers, players, painters or other agents of the mimetic, as with the reappraisal of the concept in Aristotle's *Poetics*; it also establishes a frequently repeated pattern: negative assessments of its work and power closely accompany mimesis in the form of an uncanny shadow known as "mimicry" or "aping", which registers a general unease about something that seems the same but is not quite what it appears to be. Theoretical discourses have often highlighted this functional ambivalence and principally recognized that mimesis always comes in doubles. In fact, its double nature can never be abandoned and often haunts the very act by which it should be banned. Plato's own account, presented in a dialogic format and thus involving impersonation and imitative rendering, is far from doing what it says and must crucially acknowledge the serious, far-reaching force wielded by and through mimetic acts – which is the reason why, in the ideal state, they must be tightly censored and controlled. In fact, the argument against mimesis rests on a powerful anthropological premise: the malleability of human nature, not just in infancy as the pre-eminent mimetic period, demands constant supervision and protection against detrimental influence. By the same token, all processes of individual or social learning, comprehending, or of modelling an understanding of the self as of the world have been described as fundamentally mimetic, i.e. imitative processes attending to the fundaments of the symbolic order by which subjectivity must be constructed through misrecognition in the so-called "mirror stage" (Lacan). Such pedagogy has therefore generated the critical energy for theorizing the mimetic.

Beginning with classic philosophers, through early modern debates on the validity of cultural production just as through modernist attempts to rethink the workings of the arts in the age of mechanical reproduction and, even more so, in an age of digital proliferation and remixing, right up to poststructuralist and contemporary interventions in the field of theory, the concept of mimesis has continuously been reformulated in processes of self-positioning. It formulates a particular relation to the systems in which subjects find themselves. Both presuming and resisting notions of a principal split between subject and object, mimesis attempts to mediate between these poles and reduce the sense of distance by working towards likeness and creating similarities – attempts which sometimes culminate in fantasies of merger and identification. Likeness, however, is not just a promise but a problem because similarity produces rivalry which must, in

turn, increase the mimetic desire to be like the antagonist so as to finally outdo him (Girard). For this reason, the history of mimetic engagements, in theory and practice, is a history of rivalling engagements with powers of world making and their manifestation in symbolic form throughout the public sphere. Any rejection of mimesis is thus tantamount to "the resistance to theory" (de Man), and theories of the mimetic crucially involve, and work across, political domains.

In a traditional understanding, mimesis relates literature and the arts to an agenda of "realism", *imitatio naturae*, *imitatio veterum* or to particular enquiries into the means for offering "representations of reality" (Auerbach). As evidenced by Auerbach's magisterial study, however, such projects are best understood as responses to a crisis of belonging that prompts a self-conscious redrawing of the cultural paradigms which used to provide stable points of reference but which, under conditions of displacement and diaspora, lose much of their explanatory value and affiliative power (Said). In this way, theories of the mimetic address and redress an experience of traumatic loss. Their recent rise to prominence, therefore, after centuries of disavowal, has resulted from the concept's new career in poststructuralist thinking and concomitant developments in media, gender, queer or postcolonial theory, with their argument on claims about representation. Where former theories of language tried to ground speech in some primary act of imitation, such as onomatopoeia, deconstructive rereadings of this tradition have turned against such myths of origin and instead sought to stake out a sphere of signs resisting reference, insisting on their irreducible figurality. For this project, significantly, the mimetic lends itself again to critical revaluation as a figure of the third, which goes under various names like *hymen*, *pharmakos* or *différance* (Derrida), and which has been inserted between given binaries.

In mystic and religious discourse, too, theories of the mimetic are quite indispensable; as *mimesis theou* or *imitatio dei* they comprise Christian economies of salvation between the incarnation of god and the deification of man – processes of mutually transformed identities which figure in ritual experience and which demand specific means of mediation and manifestation such as icons, hosts or sacred words with their ambiguous status between real presence and present reality. Not only for this reason, the mimetic has a very different use and status in other cultural or religious fields such as in Islamic worlds where distinctly different modes of representation prevail and may well challenge Western research to rethink its fundamental concepts and the regime of mimesis (Shalem).

In addition, theories of the mimetic have been instigated and inscribed by critical engagements with the performative and with hyperreality in the new media, suggesting different orders of the simulacrum in different socio-historical environments, ranging from early modern "counterfeit"

to late-capitalist "simulation" (Baudrillard). Recent theories of intermedia relations also draw on the mimetic, such as the concept of "remediation" (Bolter/Grusin), developed to explain how newly developed visual media achieve their cultural significance and social status by refashioning and reconfiguring earlier media; similarly, the concept of "digital mimicry" is used to describe the facsimile of traditional media surfaces, with their characteristically fuzzy features, in digitally produced images. As all these iterations demonstrate, mimesis has long proved to be absolutely indispensable. If theory, according to the root meaning of this word, is about making visible and bringing to appearance, the theoretical is indeed akin to the mimetic.

2.2   AREA B: INTERART RELATIONS — TRANSMEDIAL PERSPECTIVES

This research area explores and opens up the wider spectrum of the art forms and thus enables doctoral candidates to enter into the dialogic and collaborative interactions with their peers from other disciplines that form the multivalent research network of the proposed IDP. This proceeds on the assumption that every proposition about "art" occurs in a specific context and bears the marks of its particular historical, cultural and social determinants. The idea that all the various modes of human creative engagement – like miming, singing, dancing, playing, performing, narrating, composing, picturing, projecting, building or inventing – could or should be comprehensively referred to with one over-arching concept is certainly much younger than theoretical reflections about them, just as all of these activities have always taken place in close association and mutual exchange with one another. Interart productions, blurring boundaries between the separate spheres and hybridizing media and codes of ongoing artistic work, have never been unusual. Yet before *art* became available as an integrative term, aesthetic speculation and discussion could only take place through a mediating principle, a third term such as *mimesis* to negotiate these various engagements. Conversely, the mimetic mode, at any given time and place, may well be placed in telling tension or even opposition to actual artistic practices. Especially since the decline of the *imitatio*-paradigm with the advent of modernity, *mimesis* seems to stand for everything from which art frequently seeks liberation. Much of modern art production has been claimed to leave behind mimetic notions, no longer binding itself to a heteronomous regime of representation with given models, precepts, rules and norms. Critiques of the mimetic also inform contemporary art forms, such as installations, happenings, social performances, ready-mades or concept art, determined to separate art from the aesthetic, turning from appearance to conception.

And yet, even though much modern art may be "ashamed of apparition" (Adorno), it can never fully shed appearance nor can it dismiss mimesis as its own productive principle. Even in abstract, conceptual and non-representational art, the very act of forming or perceiving patterns, of producing or detecting structure by means of recurrent elements takes place through repetition, i.e. by means of an internal or auto-mimesis that attends not to some given model elsewhere, but to its own material, modelling itself on itself. Beyond any idea of art as in some way reflecting given worlds, this sets up the artwork as a "heterocosm" (Baumgarten), a self-contained, self-regulating entity which engages the spectator, which might simulate relations with and in a world beyond, but which is primarily concerned with its own generative principles.

With regard to interart relations and transmedial perspectives throughout Western cultural history, two contrary ideas prevail. The various forms and disciplines of art activity are either placed in

the antagonistic pattern of a paragone or in the relational pattern of a family resemblance that is said to connect them, most famously in the notion of the "sister arts" which links poetry and painting. Yet even such a family paradigm does not rule out friction and sibling rivalry, for sisters do not always live in peace. Their constant sense of competition derives especially from the competing notions about certain art forms being able to stand in for others (e.g. poetry as "speaking pictures", in Simonides' formula), thus claiming a superior position over art forms with less articulate or powerful advocates – a paragone which translates directly into the social hierarchy with regard to the esteem or status of particular arts and artists in the public sphere. Such rivalry, based on mimetic principles, has generally become relevant when interart relations are at stake, as in the rhetoric of ekphrasis. Since Homer's description of Achilles' shield, this has been a foundational device for the epic tradition; it operates as the mimesis of mimesis, i.e. a process of double representation, whose argument involves a contest over the position of the maker and the art, or merely craft, he masters (e.g. the smith who makes the shield versus the epic poet who remakes it). All subsequent attempts to specify and separate the domain of single arts on grounds of their specific media, their material and/or the fundamental categories of perception and experience – time versus space – must equally address the politics of the mimetic and contend with the power of semiotic claims, as in Lessing's Laokoon and its arbitration of this border conflict. *Laokoon* has since become a password for all subsequent attempts, especially in modernism, to defy "confusion" of aesthetic spheres (Babbitt) and to "restore the identity of an art" by emphasizing "the opacity of its medium" (Greenberg). Yet whatever may be held, among the languages of art, to be specific, singular or typical for any one of them, can in fact only be established in transmedial perspectives.

By the same token, any synaesthetic practice that involves more than one or indeed all the media and modes of art production, suggesting notions of a Gesamtkunstwerk and phantasms of totality, must negotiate its claim vis-à-vis the multiple domains on which it draws, sometimes promoting bonds with one of them at the expense of others. Theatre is such an institution that has always integrated corporeal, visual, verbal, musical and other practices but has often been theorized in ways that occlude this plurimediality by privileging, for example, the verbal basis in concepts such as "dramatic poetry". This may derive from the intense social suspicions traditionally surrounding the theatrical as the art of deception, associating it with all the fearful features of bad mimesis. Not least because competing approaches have instead emphasized the productive powers of performance, the paradox of acting (Diderot) has since become an influential mimetic model to describe "the presentation of self in everyday life" (Goffman), i.e. to analyse the field of social interaction. Music, however, remains a special case and challenge for mimesis, because since the romantic age referential functions have often been denied for it. In

classical antiquity, however, just as in the medieval and the early modern period, mimetic concepts were unquestionably constitutitve for the discipline of music, too, as part of the quadrivium of liberal arts, dedicated to an imitation of cosmic proportions and celestial harmony or, in later centuries, of the rhetorics of human affects and emotions. In specific cultural periods like romanticism, however, music has been seen as purely formal and thus claimed as a remedy, or indeed redeeming principle, in crises of verbal representation. By contrast, in the visual domain modern technological developments towards media innovations or inventions of mimetic machines like the camera have opened previously undiscovered territories for paradigmatically mimetic practices. The twentieth-century rise of film allows again for broadly synaesthetic, integrative projects while broaching new issues of the status of the artwork in an age of mechanical reproduction, commercial markets, mass audiences and popular culture – issues which have long provoked aesthetic debates especially in their concern to define an exclusive sphere of "fine arts".

2.3 AREA C.1: MIMESIS AND ALTERITY

Mimesis is predicated and proceeds on difference. Without some notion of a gap between the self and the other, alter and ego, mimetic operations would neither work nor make much sense. But whenever such a gap is felt or noted to exist, the mimetic faculties serve as basic ways to address alterity, striving to approach or grasp, behold or ban it by symbolic means. In this view, the mimetic suggests an understanding of the human as a sign-using, indeed sign-producing animal, an artificer, maker, forger, faker whose cultural work "sutures the real to the really made up" (Taussig). At the same time, such activities stake out the fields of difference set aside for game and play, rule-making and rule-breaking, with the field of fiction emerging from them as a major site of and for the arts. Mimesis and alterity are just as crucial, however, in the continual reconstitution of the natural. If nature is regarded as primary and given, then all mimetic engagements with it must be considered secondary and non-natural. For this reason, however, they are the crucial condition to determine, distinguish and define what should be seen as 'nature' in the first place. This distinction is central in sex/gender theories where critical accounts of "the second sex" (de Beauvoir), or "the sex that is not one" (Irigaray) have radically re-evaluated the mimetic to account for the formation of sexed bodies through travesty and imitative iteration (Butler). In related terms, a similar scenario has been played out in the history of wonder and travel, with its phantasm of first encounter and the primitive, in some cases (such as America) promoting visions of perennial paradise where everything is always new and at the same time echoed and where bourgeois fables of original self-creation (such as Robinson Crusoe's) are given local habitation and a name as mimetic makings.

2.4   AREA C.2: MIMESIS AND AUTHORITY

Mimesis is an act that matters. Even though the so-called 'copy' has routinely been regarded as an epiphenomenon without proper value of its own, the theory and practice of mimetic engagements amply show how such copies may not only draw on, but actually take on the power of the copied, thereby rendering mimesis a form of possession. Issues of authority are therefore central in this field, connecting ethics and aesthetics. The current proliferation of digital copy/paste mechanisms now exert increasing pressure not just on copyright debates but also on the cultural discourses of creativity. Clearly, all notions of originality depend on practices of replicating, representing and repeating what is posited as such, so as to demonstrate singularity by means of doubling its features. Mimetic acts both forge and exert this kind of agency by which authority establishes itself and has its own position at the same time undermined, when imitative affiliations and peripheries continue to haunt the centre. In this sense, all history may perhaps be seen as a history of mimetic struggle. For imitation, emulation and succession also involve acute possibilities to de-authorize any given model through acts of mimicry and parody. Conversely, moments of historic ruptures and revolutionary self-authorization have resorted to the figure of *translatio* by regularly imitating an established model while attempting new beginnings. Therefore the *imitatio* paradigm, which dominated centuries of European intellectual and artistic work, is the enabling principle not just to invent cultural traditions and "imagined communities" (Anderson) but also to produce the pastness of a past that can no longer be retrieved but must be in single parts recuperated. The oft-repeated formula of "dwarfs on the shoulders of giants" (Pierre de Blois) articulates both reverence to the ancients and its clear reverse. Memoria and its social manifestations have been described as the enabling function of generational affiliation and defined as the prime condition of cultural continuity (Assmann). However, all acts of cultural memory, steeped as they are in the mimetic, must necessarily be accompanied by programmatic acts of cultural erasure and oblivion, otherwise mimesis may become delirious and imitation go awry (as shown and parodied in Don Quixote). In such crises of authority, cultural modes of reinventing order such as narrative may provide the functional strategies to deal with contingency. Another but much less well understood aspect of the authoritative power of mimesis concerns its normative force in the history of cross-cultural contacts, where the attribution or non-attribution of mimetic functions has frequently contributed to a marginalization of non-European arts forms and practices.

2.5   AREA C.3: MIMESIS AND PRODUCTION

The challenge is to think mimesis not just as a reproductive but as a productive principle. Just as translation – a thoroughly mimetic venture – cannot simply be described as derivation, mimetic acts must be acknowledged in their proactive, projective and productive power. This holds especially in periods and places where literature and the arts are proclaimed to emancipate themselves from policies of mirroring or rule-abiding copying in favour of alternative agendas such as, in the romantic age, "expression". Here the persistence of mimesis results from the difficulty to maintain leading oppositions such as the one between "the mirror" versus "the lamp" (Abrams citing Yeats), based as it is on a shared system of specularity. Generally, all sense of formalization in verbal, visual or other codes stems from the observation of recurring elements, what has been called the "projection of equivalence onto a syntagmatic axis" (Jakobson). Yet, in the last analysis, the production of artworks, their enigmatic point or process of originating and of bringing forth a thing that has not been in the world before, has eluded observation and is, instead, accounted for by a telling repertoire of metaphors: 'gestation', 'growth' and other notions drawn from nature or, alternatively, 'inspiration', god-like 'creation' and such notions drawn from metaphysics, and many others. What they all share is the attempt to imagine the opaque act of art production and, in the absence of viable conceptual structures, provisionally make it part of a discursive domain. In this process, it may well turn out that such mimetic models of production come to function with great force in other social domains, too, offering ways to account not just for the aesthetic but for cultural work in general, as when terms like *genius* and *engineer* mutually open up to one another. In this sense, our research area C.3 is complementary to the emphasis on cultural memory placed in area C.2 with the self-fashioning of collective identities through the *cadres sociaux* (Halbwachs) or *lieux de mémoire* (Nora). By contrast, mimetic models of production open up towards the future, because they suggest some ways for cultures, not just to imagine their own genesis, but also their regeneration and renewal.

3. AREA P: PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES

If the central question is not *what* but *when* is art (Goodman), then the material and institutional conditions by which this question can be answered must be key concerns for anyone undertaking work and education in this field. This is why the professional practices of performing, publishing, displaying, mediating, collecting or archiving artistic products are to be crucially acknowledged and explored in a special research area. For all these are also profoundly mimetic practices. This even pertains to such actions like collecting, storing and exhibiting which are sometimes fashioned to be neutral means to higher ends but which, in actual fact, are highly meaningful and powerful in and by themselves. The poetics and politics of exhibiting regularly subject artefacts to an "art/culture system" as a "machine for making authenticity" (Clifford), which ultimately renders objects significant for social discourse. In the same way, many of the cultural categories by which critical work in literature and the arts would generally proceed, are in fact products of specific institutional or industrial making, above all the figure of the author, having historically been formed on the book market as the combined result of printing, publishing and policing. For this reason, the IDP will set up a network of partnerships with institutions in the cultural sector. The idea is that all doctoral students shall graduate with optimal qualifications as preparation for a deliberately broad spectrum of professional careers. One path will certainly lead to academia, research and/or higher education, but other career options are clearly just as eligible and important: they include publishing, theatres, festivals, museums, galleries, libraries or archives, the film or music industries and related sectors. First-hand experience and some initial training in at least one of these professional fields will therefore be an integral part of the curricular program and a key component of the research profile, giving graduate students not just the opportunity, but the obligation, to extend their sphere of interests as well as to reflect on their existing interests by putting them to the test in a professional environment.