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### *Social Representation and Mimesis*

Having extracted mimesis – as the production of difference within a horizon of similarity – from representation – as *imitatio* or imitation of reality – Costa Lima proceeds by examining how this horizon is variable, dependent on the cultural and social conditions under which it is enacted. This is a necessary, and innovative, move, which establishes the modern efficacy of mimesis, unencumbered by its Aristotelian origins. Here the interest of mimesis to the fields of sociology, linguistics and philosophy is acutely observed.

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## SOCIAL REPRESENTATION AND MIMESIS

### I

Mimesis and representation have been so closely associated that one may question the need to dedicate yet another essay to the relationship between them. In fact, this association dates from ancient thought, and it has served the purpose both of dismissing art as a representation of no more than a world of appearances and opinions (Plato)<sup>i</sup> and of extolling it as the artist's means of representing his "inner light," which corrects nature itself (Plotinus).<sup>ii</sup> Since, however, in spite of their opposing positions both Plato and Plotinus ended up by condemning art,<sup>iii</sup> it might seem as if this were due to the association between art and the idea of representation. In other words, art is devalued whenever its expression is subordinate to that which it represents. But this contention is not justified. In Plato and Plotinus, the inferiority of the mimetic product did not result from its association with representation, but rather from the fact that this association took place within a metaphysical conception of the world in which the Idea or Archetype is a nodal point that cannot be reached by the mimetic object. Thus we can correct the above statement and say instead that the metaphysical conception, to the extent that it reflects an essentialistic interpretation of the world, does not do justice to the mimetic object. Let us use this statement as a starting point for the analysis of the relationship between mimesis and representation. The statement implies that the basic problem does not consist in trying, under the pretense of searching for an idea of mimesis that does not depreciate its production, to dissociate mimesis from representation, but rather in grasping the world view which makes this association possible.

We need not dwell upon any individual thinker or bother to establish whether or not he produced a metaphysics in order to assert that Western thought presents a curious convergence in its handling of the relation between art and representation. It does so by means of the notion of figure: "Literature is considered to be representational when it produces a *figure* of either a particular and recognizable historical, social or psychological reality or, in a more abstract manner, a *figure* of an ideal, mythical, metaphysical 'reality'—when it presents or makes visible the 'essential' or 'characteristic' traits of some 'outside,' of a space or context other than the 'strictly literary.' The 'outside' is assumed to exist before its representation and thus to be the origin of representational literature, to be present in itself before it is represented in literature."<sup>iv</sup>

This notion applies equally to notions as wide apart as Plato's and Plotinus's: whether we have a figure of the existing social or psychological reality or of an ideal reality, art is considered representational in that it manifests the "truth" or "essence" of an outside held up as the core of the world. We have automatized this way of thinking to such a degree that we feel there is no alternative to it—a feeling heightened by the wide range of currents of thought which, despite their differences, have a common starting point: "All idealisms and materialisms seem to share in common this definition of the relationship of literature (of all 'art') with this 'outside'; it is simply over the nature of the 'truth' contained in the 'outside' and the way this truth is made 'present' in literature that they differ."<sup>v</sup> For a mimetic product to have a value, it must *represent* some *Weltbild*; that is to say, it can be valued only if it serves as an illustration of a certain world view. As a result, insofar as the various theories about the mimetic product derive from or are contained in these systems of thought, the only right way to react to its "illustrativeness" would seem to require either a refusal of any theories whatsoever or the sole acceptance of one which, denying all representational assumptions, might postulate, as in the case of the expressive theory, that the artist's effort is designed "to express and order his feelings in poetic form,"<sup>vi</sup> a restatement of the Romantic ideal which, in practice, would lead to the endorsement of Fenollosa's view: "In Fenollosa's terms, what a poem means is what it does."<sup>vii</sup> Thus the antitheoreticism of many a contemporary artist and author, as well as of critics influenced by the late Barthes, could not be explained simply as a reaction to professorial and academic complications; it would rather be a response to the illustrativism of mimetic (or representational) theories (Balzac as illustrator of class struggle, Joyce and Kafka of capitalist decadence, Sophocles of the Oedipus complex).

In fact, it is the very nature of the traditional connection between representation and mimesis to turn the latter into an illustrative example of a system of thought that assigns a proper place to it, while mimesis "testifies" to the system's "truth." To bear this out, if somewhat superficially, one need only observe that even such polar opposites as reflex theory and stylistics share a common approach to the relationship between work and reality. Let *S* stand for the properties of the source (that is, the conditioning social reality) and *GP* for the properties of the generated products (stylistic characteristics). The practice of the reflex theory consists in finding *S* in *GP* by way of a mechanical or sophisticated causality through which *GP* is "forgotten," dismissed as a mere epiphenomenon of *S*. Stylistics, on the other hand, considers the same components, with two differences in treatment: (a) the conditioning reality is now either the author's psychological background (early Spitzer) or a social background idealistically interpreted as the nation (early Vossler); (b) by focusing on *GP*, perceived as

figures of style, *S* is either "forgotten" or taken as a mere "pre-text." Although distinct as to the poles they favor, both reflex theory and stylistics belong to a single view of literature, one that postulates a transparency between the conditioning order and the conditioned effect. In both cases the mimetic product is an illustration, either of conditioning society or of creative individuality. (The same is true of classical Brazilian criticism: whereas in Sylvio Romero the guideline for judgment is nationality, for José Veríssimo it is the "brilliance," "forcefulness," and "purity" of language.)

The cases of reflex theory and stylistics are, we feel, apt examples of the traditional connection between representation and mimetic work inasmuch as they always derive the properties of the latter from something prior to it—even when this is not stressed, as in a purely descriptive stylistics—taken to be its center or essence. In order to identify the workings of this theoretical approach, one must refrain from adopting its practice. But as we have just as little sympathy for contemporary neo-impressionism, which contends that literary criticism is just another literary genre, we are forced to rethink the relationship between representation and mimesis more drastically. This is what we are going to do, considering them separately at first.

## II

What is the phenomenon of representation if we do not see it as a bridge which links reality and the mimetic text? Let us begin with a text which is by no means recent. The authors of "De quelques formes primitives de classification" begin their essay with a criticism of the idea of datum (*donnée*) used as a foundation for the psychological faculties of defining, deducing, and inducing, since they are "generally considered to be immediately given in the constitution of individual understanding."<sup>viii</sup> Rather than having universal and natural roots, the forms of understanding derive from and presuppose classifications whose comprehensiveness is only sociocultural: "Every classification implies a hierarchical order whose model is offered neither by the sensible world nor by our conscience."<sup>ix</sup> The hierarchical order, which constitutes classification, is therefore a naturally unmotivated principle through which a culture, society, class, or group establishes and differentiates values, conceives criteria of social identification, individual identity, and socioindividual distinction. Representation is a product of classifications. In other words, each member of a society represents himself based on the classificatory criteria available to him. Consequently, classifications are the means by which we can assign meanings to the world of things and beings. Through them the world becomes meaningful. And the shock of meanings results immediately from the shock of representations. For instance, to anyone who has internalized the representation that goes with the title of "Herr Professor" in Germany, it cannot but seem incomprehensible that a patron in a Rio café should address a waiter lightheartedly as "ô professor!" The shock, however, is not restricted to representations among foreigners; it can also occur within the borders of one country. In Brazil, the restraint and wariness of *Mineiros*—natives of the state of Minas Gerais—are well known. On this score, I can remember the embarrassment of a friend of mine, a foreign psychoanalyst who, practicing once a week in Belo Horizonte (the capital of Minas Gerais), only after some time realized that he was not to take his clients' complaints of pecuniary difficulties too literally. Even in a psychoanalyst's office, the rule of absolute candor has to be taken in a *Mineiro* sense. It is perhaps no overstatement to say that among *Mineiros* antiphrasis is more than a rhetorical figure: it is the very spring that sets the discourse going. One's interlocutor is to be handled with such caution and suspicion that the speaker risks being taken in by his own ruse. Our most famous political columnist has lately recalled a remarkable scene: "Pushing me aside to a window, the former Deputy cried out, 'Castello, how we [*Mineiros*] hate each other! And not even this is true. It's a game.'"<sup>x</sup> The afterthought "not even this is true" was made as much for the benefit of the listener as for the speaker, as though he ran the risk of persuading himself of a hatred that was in fact only a put-on.

The examples above are meant to suggest that there is no clearly delimited reality prior to the act of representation. Between the latter and the former, there is a net of classifications that makes the real discrete and utterable through the hierarchical principle underlying the classification. We do not look at reality and translate it into a classificatory form. On the contrary, it is the classificatory form which informs us of reality, making some portions of it meaningful. Due to this conversion, things lose their neutral opacity and are no longer just there: they are invested with significance. This is the case, first of all, with the body itself, which is transformed into an axis of semantic investments: "My body is far from being a fragment of space for me; there would not be space for me if I had not a body."<sup>xi</sup>

If, however, classifications work as a sort of grid which orients us in the world and in relation to ourselves, what is the need that generates them? And why are they actualized through representations? If no natural reason, biological or other, determines them, their motives can only be found in the social world. But then we are caught in a vicious circle: the social world is "seen" from classifications, and these, in turn, are motivated by the social

world. To escape from this vicious circle we must take a new step and define just what in the social world requires those classifications and their precipitate, representations.

Classifications and the way they are actualized ensue from the way human interactions take place. Before the *you* it converses with, the *I* does not find an open, transitive, and channeled space along which it could detect how the *you* behaves and really responds to what is said to it. This barrier remains even if the interlocutors, as it happens ordinarily, master equally well the verbal code used. For if the word is to be effective, it must not only be uttered (its locutionary aspect) but also cause the same illocutionary layer to arise in the interlocutors.<sup>xii</sup> In other words, if communication is to take place, the utterance must be accompanied by a certain "social ceremonial" which allows the recipient to understand the specific value attached to the utterance. In Brazil, for instance, the affectionate use of swearwords has been popularized by young people. One can tell whether an obscene term like *filho da puta* (son of a bitch) is being used aggressively or affectionately only if one grasps the "social ceremonial" involved—that is, the illocutionary aspect suited to the occasion. But why does the meaning leak out of the word, why can it only be deciphered in this infraworld of its own? Because even in the most intimate relationship the speaker cannot know what is going on in the listener's mind—is it listening to him?—and vice versa:

If you don't tell me just now again and again  
I lovelovelovelove you—  
a fulminating truth that you've just eviscerated,  
I'll plunge into chaos,  
that clutter of non-love objects.<sup>xiii</sup>

For the experience of the vulnerability of each partner as regards the other is basic in any human relationship: "It is easy to appreciate that one person's expression of feeling about another is vulnerable to all the doubts and suspicions and misframings to which isolated, single events are subject."<sup>xiv</sup> That is why even the most innocuous conversation stages a little theatrical scene: "Often what talkers undertake to do is not to provide information to a recipient but to present dramas to an audience. Indeed, it seems that we spend most of our time not in giving information but in giving shows."<sup>xv</sup> What is one to do, then, about the other's invisible mentation, whence derives the vulnerability in interhuman relations? Because of and against them we build up "frames" (Goffman) in order to offer the participants in each act of communication a sort of proper space, an autonomous body of conventions, seemingly objective and ineluctable—in actual fact, automatically interpretable—which allows the interlocutors to *regulate* their verbal comings and goings. Representations are these multiple frames we fall into without staying in them, most of which come to our notice through intercourse with other members of our own group. Thus the theater of the world has nearly ceased to be a metaphor; it takes place where no idea of theater exists, for its space begins before there is a specific place for staging. So the difference between the anonymous theater whose stage is the world and an actual playhouse is that in the former we enact unknowingly, whereas in the latter we do not know what we enact. Thus we could hardly say, as Donne did in "The Extasie": "Wee see, we saw not what did move." It is only out of ignorance that the representations enacted in the theater of the world can delude us anonymous actors into believing they are as undivided as the individuality from which they supposedly derive. The very delusion about them derives from the delusion that we are this undivided individuality. "We all are patches of such an amorphous and diverse fabric that each piece plays its game every moment. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and the others."<sup>xvi</sup> The less we know about the roles we play, the more undivided we are. For fear of the inauthenticity of roles, we start playing the tragicomic role of "the honest soul." As idolizers of individuality, we imagine that to play a role is to feign to be what we are not; once again, we stick to the preconception of essence. Thus we are unaware that the one is patterned after the internalized image of the other, whatever the evaluative nature of the internalized other: "The hypocrite who always plays the same role ends by being a hypocrite. . . . When, for a long time and obstinately, one is willing to *affect* [*scheinen*] something, one finally sees how difficult it is to be something else."<sup>xvii</sup> And as we are unaware of it, it is not only the other who eludes us; we also endlessly elude ourselves.

We play a part, not because we want to, nor when we want to, but because this is the way we become *visible* and make the other *visible* too. That is why Schütz said some decades ago that human relations were governed by *types*: a type is a sort of average with which we can frame the others so as to orient our relations. Thus we have, roughly, the three modes of orientation (*Einstellung*) described by Schütz— they-orientation, you-orientation, and we-orientation. By means of these three types one moves from the most anonymous relationship, the they-orientation—the one I have, for instance, with the official who is preparing my passport—through the one-sidedly personalized you-orientation to the mutually personalized we-orientation. As a relationship advances along this scale, progressing from anonymity to personalization, the dominance of the *typical* reaction decreases accordingly. This assertion is indirectly apprehended from Schütz himself: "The reference point of the they-

orientation is inferred from my knowledge and from the social world in general, and is necessarily in an objective meaning-context. Only *post hoc* can I add interpretations referring to the subjective meaning-contexts of an individual."<sup>xviii</sup> It would surely be a romantic mistake to assume that the greatest personalization would abolish *typical* reactions, that is, a form of representation, because the other's intimacy would then be penetrated. We can see it in the reflections of an author who is less concerned with such theoretical postulations than with the problem of how a love affair can be made to last: "The only practical chance of salvation is the kind of love that is devoted either to a very personal human being so that, in spite of a ceaseless approximation, the limit will never be reached of the knowledge you may have of him or her, or to one endowed with enough instinctive coquetry so that he or she, however deeply in love with you, seems to be about to flee all the time."<sup>xix</sup> Amorous closeness can only last if the personalness of the beloved is so extreme that his or her multiplicity (of representations) will never wear out with the typical reactions I expect of him or her, or if, "endowed with enough instinctive coquetry," that person chooses a representation that allows him or her never to wear out what I can anticipate. So even before modern poetry learned how to explore the abyss of language—the language *en abime*—language had long been an abyss, its stabilization resulting only from the regularity of the frames we enclose it in. In other words, verbal language would not be the means of communication par excellence if its dispersion were not interrupted by the representation grid. For although neither Schütz nor Goffman mentions representations, they are in fact the object of their typical orientations and frames, antidotes against the other's invisibility—or rather, screens against which our mutual invisibility clashes, thus allowing us to suppose we understand each other. Again, if the ability to name pertains to the world, this naming would be either too poor—when confined to pointing to what is already seen—or too ambiguous and complex for the ordinary process of communication if, at the same time, its semantic charge were not frozen by the frames binding it. But our description would be incomplete if it ended here.

From what has been said so far, one can infer that the real is not to be confused with reality. If the latter, understood as nature, is prior to and independent from man, its conversion into the real is made through a double, parallel but distinct process, namely, through its naming—which is not restricted to the giving of names to parts of reality—and through the development of frames determining the decodifying situation of the word. The phenomenon of forerunners who were neglected in their time presents the typical case of a naming unaccompanied by the requisite frames. The phenomenon of former superstars who have been forgotten by posterity is the opposite case: their naming was so predictable under the prevailing frames that a change (however relative) in those frames threw the naming into the dustbin. Nevertheless, as we have said, this formulation is defective, for it leads one to suppose that frames are autonomous in relation to each other and are atomistically arranged, which would imply the idea that the individual is inevitably tied up to a multiplicity of grids. We must then add that such frames also display a constant flexibility. According to Goffman, frames are made flexible in two ways, through fabrication and through keying. The former describes the process of fraud—one suggests that one does, or is, something when one does or is quite another. Here we are not interested in the plurality of fabrications, whether benign or exploitative, whether other-induced or self-imposed. We need only point out the variety of their occasions: "Thus a motive can be made to deceive, as can an intent, a gesture, a show of resolve or a show of lack of it, a statement, an artifact, a personal identity, a setting and its gathering, a conversation, an extensive physical plant, a gust of wind, an accident, a happenstance, a company of Israeli commandos dressed as Arab prisoners and airline mechanics to surprise skyjackers, a Trojan horse."<sup>xx</sup>

But it is the second transformation which concerns us most. Rather than quote Goffman in full,<sup>xxi</sup> let us simply say that keying is a device by means of which an agent carries out a series of actions that, from the standpoint of the primary frame, would convey a specific meaning that in fact does not apply. The most common modality of keying is found in the information "this is play." Given this comment, not always verbally uttered, the addressee reacts differently from what would normally be expected of him. A basic resource for making a primary frame flexible, play, nonetheless, preexists the human making of frames. Thus in a 1954 essay Gregory Bateson saw play as one of the means through which communication evolves toward the domain of denotativeness. Elaborating a notion which can be traced back to Vico—poetry as the primeval language—and to Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues*—the figurative sense as preceding the proper sense—Bateson, on the one hand, depoeticizes the statement and, on the other, provides us with some useful insights on the poetic phenomenon: "Denotative communication as it occurs at the human level is only possible *after* the evolution of a complex set of metalinguistic (but not verbalized) rules which govern how words and sentences shall be related to objects and events. It is therefore appropriate to look for the evolution of such metalinguistic and/or metacommunicative rules at a prehuman and preverbal level."<sup>xxii</sup> Now even at this level play is present—not to be misunderstood as a gratuitous expense of energy. Among animals, play is not restricted to denying the seriousness of usual behaviors; quite the contrary, in doing so play presents us a different scene: "Not only do the playing animals not quite mean what they are saying but, also, they are usually communicating about something which does not exist."<sup>xxiii</sup> On the other hand, from the fact that play is learned before language, it

cannot be inferred that, when it reaches the human scale, it belongs to the primary process that would seem the most "primitive": "It therefore follows that the play frame as here used as an explanatory principle implies a special combination of primary and secondary processes. . . . In primary process, map and territory are equated; in secondary process they can be discriminated. In play, they are both equated and discriminated."<sup>xxiv</sup>

These results bring out the similarity and difference between the dream discourse and any discourse based on the play principle: the former is directly related to the human primary process, whereas the latter, though also one modality of the discourse of the unconscious, differs from the dream modality by being a combination of both processes.

The reader may have already perceived that when we spoke of a discursive modality set up on the play principle, we were alluding to the discourse of mimesis. But there is a leap in this reasoning that will only be acceptable when the reason for it is evinced. Before attempting this, let us demonstrate the usefulness of this leap.

We shall use the ideas developed by Schütz, Bateson, and Goffman for a purpose not originally intended for them. Our aim is to take apart the traditional idea of representation, emphasizing the rejection of an essentialistic world view and the adoption of a course leading to the abolition of the traditional idea of mimesis. A rather tiring course, perhaps, which promises a new defense of poetry based on the *interest* it responds to. (A course opposite, therefore, to that which had led to the stressing of its "endless purpose.") What we are committed to, in short, is a view of the product of mimesis as one of the cases of *keying of primary and habitual frames*. (Although in a different way, this course has already been announced by Altieri.)<sup>xxv</sup> In order to do so, we will follow a development parallel to the one followed hitherto: first we shall present briefly the standardized view of mimesis, then we will take it apart as a preparatory step to confronting it with a reformulated idea of representation.

### III

The standardized vision of mimesis is correlative to the traditional conception of representation. Let us take, for example, the "neutral," that is, descriptive usage, without claims to originality, of a well-known specialist in aesthetics, Harold Osborne. "In the realm of theory," he says, "the concept which seems most closely to express the idea of naturalism was *mimesis*."<sup>xxvi</sup> And although he hastens to add that the concept of mimesis in antiquity was not identical with our concept of naturalism, he notes: "None the less *mimesis* and naturalism have fairly close links and from one point of view it would not be wrong to regard *mimesis* as the first and still rather vaguely articulated precursor of the emerging concept of naturalism."<sup>xxvii</sup>

The dilemma that Osborne must face is the standard dilemma in most of the literature on this subject: mimesis is not imitation in the sense of a photographic copy; its Greek value has no exact counterpart in our languages, but, after all, it resembles an imitation. In sum, mimesis calls up the idea of verisimilitude. That is, a homogeneity is supposed to exist between the represented (the referent) and the representant (the object of mimesis), the job of the artist being to correct, adjust, modify the represented source, in relative terms, without changing it to the extent that it becomes naturalistically unrecognizable.

We can easily see how this standardized conception is consistent with the application of an essentialistic view to art: by means of his correction, the artist would remove that which is impure and contingent so that the forms of truth might glow. This is not the time or place to show how this conception distorts what both accuser (Plato) and advocate (Aristotle) said concerning mimesis. Suffice it to point out that a well-known passage of the *Poetics*—"There are things we see with pain so far as they themselves are concerned but whose images, even when executed in very great detail, we view with pleasure. Such is the case for example with renderings of the least favored animals, or of cadavers"<sup>xxviii</sup>—established not an idea of correspondence but, instead, an absolute dissimilarity between the horror of the real thing and the pleasure aroused by the mimetic image.<sup>xxix</sup> Yet the reason for the misinterpretation of Aristotelian mimesis is to be found in the philosopher himself, who—in his known works, at any rate—never explained whence derived the pleasurable interest roused by mimesis. Hence the alternative represented by the standardized view: it either overlooks or merely glosses over the Aristotelian explanation, thus considering that all is settled: "When the object represented in poetry or painting is such as we could have no desire of seeing it in reality, then I may be sure that its power in poetry or painting is owing to the power of imitation, and to no cause operating in the thing itself."<sup>xxx</sup>

Due to this difficulty in the Aristotelian source, the naturalistic temptation becomes imminent. In order to shun it, antiquity rectified the concept of mimesis by that of the potentiality of the artist's inner vision, as can be seen

in this passage from Cicero: "That artist, in executing the figure of Zeus or Athena, would gaze at nobody from whom he could take a resemblance, but in his own mind he would find a sublime ideal of beauty."<sup>xxxii</sup> This task was explicitly undertaken by Flavius Philostratus in the late second century A.D.: "It is the imagination that produces these works, she is a wiser demiurge than mimesis; mimesis will fabricate nothing but that which it has seen, whereas imagination will also do what she has not seen, for she will surmise it, in reference to reality; and frequently fear drives away mimesis, whereas nothing can stop imagination, for she heads imperturbably towards what she alone conceived."<sup>xxxiii</sup>

This passage shows clearly enough how antiquity understood the concept of mimesis and resolved the difficulty involved in it by resorting to *phantasia*. Since this understanding was not ruled out by the rediscovery of the *Poetics* in the Italian Renaissance, it appears now as a forerunner of the attack on mimesis launched by the Romantics. To rethink mimesis now sounds like resuming a long-ceased squabble. Why not give it up, then? Because the opposite principle, stressing the artist's corrective imagination, leads us to another version of the same essentialism upon which standardized interpretation of mimesis had drawn. The latter, in the attempt to distinguish mimesis from the false idea of duplication of the referent, had eventually understood it as an expression which captured the *essential* (hence the role that the Hegelian category of *particularity* was to play in Lukács's aesthetics). In contrast, the substantial role assigned to the artist's imagination (*phantasia*), a source of the expressive theories, has in the end helped individual ability to attain an essence, which is thus *unconcealed* by the creator and *recognized* by the interpreter for the sake of the community. Although the distinction between these two versions seems to lie in the fact that the former stresses the sociable—since the referent is visible for all—whereas the latter emphasizes a select individual, both of them eliminate the mediation of the social. Through this elimination, both reach the same result: the object of mimesis, the *mimema*, is of importance to the extent that it illustrates a certain world view; philosopher and interpreter alike rejoice in art because it substantiates the correctness of their ideas. So the misunderstanding of mimesis corresponded to an implicit hierarchy; in the foreground was conceptual discourse—that which says what *is* and separates truth from opinions—be it identified with philosophy or science. It had been to discipline the lower discourses, whose value or worthlessness depended upon its incidence. The fact that the weakness of this hierarchy grows increasingly obvious explains the growing number of independent speculations that, in recent decades, have aimed at rethinking mimesis.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Nor is it accidental that the aesthetics of reception and of response should take the rejection of the immanentistic characterization of the poetic as a principle. In other words, when both Jauss and Iser consider that all poetic theories which try to define literariness by specifying its discursive configuration are bound to fail, and when they see literature as the product of a double action—that of the poet and that of the recipient or the effect caused upon him—they are automatically burying the essentialistic interpretations and emphasizing the primary need for poetics to work with the confrontation of two variables, the social expectations—that is, that which they do or do not take to be mimetic, poetic, fictional—and the scheme contained in the work itself.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Such contributions notwithstanding, we cannot say that we have reached a stage which allows a new homogenization of the concept of mimesis, one that could provide the foundations for a new historiography of literature. I must say that I do not know of any texts in the aesthetic theories of reception and response which attempt to rethink mimesis in their own terms.<sup>xxxv</sup> On the other hand, the above mentioned authors who have rethought this question have started out from theoretical assumptions different and independent from this German trend. I say this merely in order to show that we are just beginning to resume the issue. Let us see then, at least, how the theory of representation extracted from Schütz's, Bateson's, and Goffman's contributions can serve us as a guiding prism in this exploratory essay.

#### IV

The effort to redefine mimesis, avoiding an essentialistic theory of the world and the *mimema*, has led us directly to Schütz and Goffman, and indirectly to Bateson and Austin, with his distinction between the locutionary and the illocutionary. The reader might then think that the strategy of this essay is to "destroy" the traditional view that links representation and mimesis in order to establish a view that combines Austin's linguistic considerations with Schütz's, Bateson's, and Goffman's socio-anthropological speculations. This might in fact be the case, had not the use of their chosen concepts led these authors to discrepant rather than convergent positions. Austin himself would reject any attempt to approximate his theory to a kind of discourse which, taking in plays and poems, appeared to him as a "hollow or void" form: "A performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. . . . Language in such circumstance is . . . used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use."<sup>xxxvi</sup>

This same idea reappears in the work of his colleague John R. Searle. In a 1975 essay, Searle sets out to show that (a) one cannot theorize about literature because it has no inherent defining traits; (b) a plausible theory should deal with fictional discourse, including both literary and nonliterary works; and (c) fictional discourse is characterized by an intentional feigning. "An author of fiction pretends to perform illocutionary acts which he is not in fact performing,"<sup>xxxvii</sup> and thus infringes the "vertical rules" which, in a *serious* utterance, relate the enunciation to the real. The fictionist substitutes for these rules "a set of extralinguistic, nonsemantic conventions that break the connections between words and the world."<sup>xxxviii</sup> To the philosopher of language, then, fictional discourse is defined by its nonseriousness, that is, its feigning to perform utterances which, as they do not relate to the world, are in fact parasitic. Consequently, if such discourses nevertheless do have a communicative function, this is due to extra-linguistic and extrasemantic conventions. In short, the emptiness of these discourses is confirmed.

Now, in an essay published before Searle's, Richard Ohmann had tried to rethink mimesis starting precisely from the illocutionary. To sum up his reasoning: the correctness of illocutionary utterances depends on social conventions. Literature "imitates" the illocutionary and, by virtue of this, suspends the latter's normative force, thereby allowing the recipient to see from afar the relationship between the enunciation and its social context.<sup>xxxix</sup> In his later article, Searle, without explicitly referring to Ohmann, adopts a nearly disdainful attitude: "Anyone therefore who wishes to claim that fiction contains different illocutionary acts from nonfiction is committed to the view that words do not have their normal meanings in works of fiction."<sup>xl</sup> Yet Searle's reply does not sound convincing, for he reasons as if semantic properties could be fulfilled only within "serious" discourses. The illocutionary would simply not exist outside them; it would require another language to frame it. Searle's antimetaphysical training as a practitioner of a positive discipline has given him a neo-positivistic bias (propositions are either true or false).

If Ohmann's hypothesis has passed the first test, it is nonetheless subject to a different kind of criticism. Paradoxically, its effectiveness increases due to the sympathetic treatment it receives from a third author. Indeed, as Altieri sees it, the objection to the idea of mimesis as an "imitation" of illocutionary acts issues from the fact that it does not account for an important part of the literary domain. Let us point out his first objection only: "Poems, at least, often do not imitate any kind of illocutionary act and do not call attention to social structures invoked by the forms of expression."<sup>xli</sup> It is not, in this author's view, a matter of returning to assertions about the void or the parasitic character of literature or fiction, nor is it a question of resuming the thesis, supported for instance by Käthe Hamburger, that lyricism falls outside the scope of mimesis; on the contrary, it is a question of taking a step forward: "The concept of illocutionary acts can be subsumed as a subcategory of the larger framework for describing human actions presented by Erving Goffman as the process of 'keying.'"<sup>xlii</sup> In fact we can say that, from the producer's viewpoint, it is a peculiarity of mimesis to make a special use of language so as to pretend to be another, to experience itself as another, or even to use language not as a means of information but as a space for transformations, which are not performed in terms of a described referent but are made possible by the very ideation as it is verbally expressed: "Come, holy tortoise shell, / my lyre, and become a poem" (Sappho, "The Lyric Poem"). This opening out to otherness through the feigned "I" of a character, and/or through the transformation of language, requires on the part of the recipient a *keying* of frames he is familiar with. (Fiction is not realized if the recipient is ignorant of this flexibility.) The keying required by mimesis presupposes my knowledge that this is a particular form of play where pleasure is not to be confined to the very object of play. A particularized form of play, mimesis can be distinguished from other forms by the fact that its playfulness is only a starting point that soon changes into a seriousness of its own: the serious request that one think about what one is playing. And thus we pick up one of Ohmann's strands of thought, since to think about the game one is playing implies that the social conventions present in the "game" must be pinpointed.

Everything that we have said, though not explicitly put forth by Altieri, is made possible by his pioneering application of the concept of keying. This essay, then, would have no grounds for proceeding if the trail could no longer be expanded.

Through the practice of mimesis, language loses its usual identity— something is said that has no immediate implications for the world— just as the producer divests himself of it—he speaks or writes to enliven ghosts which are not reducible to mere projections of his empirical self. But what necessity governs this language that seems to be no more than playful? Aristotle had already said that man becomes differentiated through his ability to imitate and thereby to acquire his earliest knowledge.<sup>xliii</sup> Leiris has recently resumed the same assertion: "Not to content oneself with being what one is seems to be the privilege of our own species. From time immemorial, members of our species have behaved as though they were driven by the necessity to modify their external aspect, so as somehow to disguise what they had from birth."<sup>xliiv</sup> Thus concerning what takes place both in prose

and poetry we can say that mimesis presupposes in action a pragmatic estrangement from itself and an identification with the otherness grasped through this estrangement. Identification and estrangement—identification through estrangement—these constitute the basic and contradictory terms of the phenomenon of mimesis. When we think of it in relation to social representations, we can say that mimesis is a particular case on its own, distinct from other modalities because it operates *the representation of representations*. In this formula we find again its paradoxical property. A representation of representations, mimesis presupposes between representations and its own scene a separation that makes it possible to appreciate, know, and/or question representations. Therefore, this separation, while precluding any practical action upon the world, permits one to think of it, to experience oneself in it. But if the separation regarding representations were enough to characterize mimesis, the latter would be mistaken for the effort to interpret the world analytically. Yet the distance the *mimema* is kept at keeps it always close to that from which it is separated. With the *mimema*, the separation from its nourishing source is as important as the nearness to the sensible world lying on its horizon. And this nearness is relevant both to the producer's and the recipient's interest. In other words, its interest is assured by this nearness. Thus, correcting Kant, we must say, after Giesz, that mimesis implies an interest in my own disinterest.<sup>xlv</sup> It is true that here we seem to have made an illicit exchange of subjects, for Kant's and Giesz's assertions have the aesthetic experience as their subject. But if the mimetic product also demands identification and estrangement, the exchange of subjects we have made is justified with the qualification that aesthetic experience has a scope we do not assign to mimesis, limited as it is, in this essay, to its actualization in verbal fictions.

To be interested in my own disinterest means to say that the *mimema* is not, but rather becomes pragmatic. In other words, it does not a priori aim at a pragmatic goal—by operating it I do not become more dexterous or more familiar with anything—but the interest it arouses is linked to divergent motivations which I am not aware of myself. Now for something to arouse interest without displaying the pragmatic target aimed at, an identification must be created so strong that nothing can be said of it but that it gives pleasure. This pleasure is not likely to emerge if it does not present a sensible world that may be recognized by this recipient. In other words, the necessary identification of the recipient with the *mimema* is attained through the recognition by the recipient of the social representations that nurture mimesis: "The significance of the work, then, does not lie in the meaning sealed within the text, but in the fact that that meaning brings out what had previously been sealed within us."<sup>xlvi</sup> It is, therefore, the *similarity* between the mimetic representation and the reader's representations that presides over their identification.

If in the previous paragraph we located pleasure, identity, and similarity between the mimetic representation and those experienced by the reader, we can also locate the terms that are likely to originate from another vector indispensable to the experience of mimesis, namely, estrangement. Thus we have: separation, possibility of questioning, difference (between the mimetic representation and the reader's representations). Through these two chains, it seems possible to understand the variability of receptions of mimetic experience. The recipient "discovers" in it a similarity (with his representations) that does not belong immanently to the work. A mimetic work, therefore, is necessarily a discourse with gaps (Lser), a discourse of a wandering signifier in search of the signifieds the reader will bring to it. The signifieds then allocated will be always transient, and their mutability related to the recipient's historical time. Because of this necessary agency of the other (the recipient), the mimetic product is always a scheme, something unfinished, which survives as long as it admits the allocation of an interest other than that which originally produced it.

Let us return, for the last time, to the formula "representation of representations." We have seen how it puts to work the paradoxical characteristics of identity and estrangement, with their contrasting and *synchronically indispensable* chains. We must then ask what happens when this synchronicity is broken off. In this case, either only the identity or the critical distance comes into force. When only the former remains, the recipient turns the object into kitsch. For those who uphold the immanence of art and its radical separation from kitsch, this statement probably sounds annoying. Yet Hermann Broch once said that there is no art "without a dash of kitsch."<sup>xlvii</sup> To convert the mimetic experience into a kitsch experience means to subdue the paradox of mimesis—a paradox of all aesthetic experience, not only of the mimetic kind—in favor of the reader's own experience: "The ingenuity of the kitsch-eye consists in disclosing emotional aspects and at the same time camouflaging all the opposite channels."<sup>xlviii</sup>

If, instead, a sheer critical estrangement prevails, the mimetic experience changes into a theoretical experience. In the previous case, the mimesis had been converted into a compensating phenomenon (I am touched by my own tears). In the present case, the mimetic scene is changed into food for the conceptual. The difficulty in theorizing about mimesis results, then, from the fundamental antithesis that is imposed by its experience. This is observed in Aristotle, who did not hand down to us an explicit treatment of this key concept of his, but clearly

expressed the reason for the interest aroused by tragic mimesis—the feeling of cathartic relief. Modern poetics has somehow reversed the factors—catharsis is contemptible, estrangement desirable. Perhaps the various aesthetic theories can only legalize the privilege granted to one of these two poles: cathartic identification, critical estrangement. A problem arises, however, when this legalization appears in the guise of universality. Thus unless we are being too hasty, the only thing that can be said about the universality of the products of mimesis is that they are not universal due to some essential quality but rather become so for communities, and, within these, for those recipients who are able to carry out a peculiar keying, the one that discloses to them a kind of play which is not merely playful, a play that involves both pleasure and estrangement, a play in which pleasure prompts estrangement and the latter demands a return to the former. If this conclusion sounds plausible, its first practical consequence will be an approach in which the analyst does not privilege some aesthetic quality but rather studies how, in a particular historical period, the idea of mimesis is updated in relation to the prevalent forms of social representations.<sup>xlix</sup> Thus the risk of aesthetic normativeness, which is always abusive, might be reduced, as well as the prevalence of absenteeist purism, that is, the tendency to approach art for itself, regardless of its original context or that into which it has expanded.

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## REFERENCES

- <sup>i</sup> "Of *doxa* we say that it is, contrarily to science, a simple 'opinion,' as uncertain and fluctuating as the object on which it rests. But the connection of *doxa* with the universe of image is diversely intimate and direct. *Doxa* comes from *dokein*, which means 'to seem, to show off.' The field of *doxa* is that of the showing off, the field of those similarities of which the image is the privileged expression." J.-P. Vernant, "Image et apparence dans la théorie platonicienne de la 'mimesis,'" *Journal de psychologie* (1975), rpt. in his *Religion, histories, raisons* under the title "Naissance d'images" (Paris, 1979), p. 28. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
- <sup>ii</sup> "Phidias produced his Zeus according to nothing visible, but he made him such as Zeus himself would appear should he wish to reveal himself to our eyes." Plotinus *Enneads* 5.1.
- <sup>iii</sup> "Plotinus's essentially 'poietic' or 'heuristic' view of the pictorial arts . . . was just as much of a threat to the position of art as the essentially 'mimetic' view stressed by Plato—only that the lines of attack came from opposite directions: according to the mimetic view, art is merely imitation of sensory objects, and its right to existence is denied because its goals are not worth striving for; according to the heuristic view, art has the sublime task of 'injecting' an *eidōs* into resistant matter, and the possibility of its success is disputed because the goal is unattainable." Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*, tr. Joseph J. S. Peake (Columbia, S.C., 1968), pp. 29-30.
- <sup>iv</sup> David Carroll, "Representation of the End(s) of History: Dialectics and Fiction," *Yale French Studies*, No. 59 (1980), p. 201.
- <sup>v</sup> Carroll, pp. 201-2.
- <sup>vi</sup> See Charles Altieri, "The Poem as Act: A Way to Reconcile Presentational and Mimetic Theories," *Iowa Review*, 6 (1975), 108.
- <sup>vii</sup> Altieri, p. 109.
- <sup>viii</sup> Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, "De quelques formes primitives de classification" (1903), in Mauss, *Oeuvres*, II (Paris, 1969), 13.
- <sup>ix</sup> Durkheim and Mauss, II, 18.
- <sup>x</sup> Carlos Castello Branco, "Do estilo mineiro," *Jornal do Brasil*, 9 Nov. 1980, p. 2.
- <sup>xi</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris, 1945), p. 119.
- <sup>xii</sup> See J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (London, Oxford, and New York, 1976). For the purposes of our discussion, we dispense with the third component aspect of the speech act, the perlocutory.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Carlos Drummond de Andrade, "Quero," in *As impurezas do branco* (Rio de Janeiro, 1973).
- <sup>xiv</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 457.
- <sup>xv</sup> Goffman, p. 508.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Albert Thibaudet (Paris, 1933), Bk. II, ch. 1, p. 324.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches. Ein Buch für freie Geister*. The quotation is from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, and Vienna, 1977), Vol. I, par. 57, p. 487.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World* (London, 1974), p. 75.

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- <sup>xix</sup> Michel Leiris, *L'Age d'homme*, preceded by *De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie* (Paris, 1979), p. 177.
- <sup>xx</sup> Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, p. 86.
- <sup>xxi</sup> See Goffman, p. 45.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Phantasy" (1954), rpt. in his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York, 1976), p. 180.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Bateson, p. 182.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Bateson, p. 185.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Altieri, "The Poem as Act," p. 114.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Harold Osborne, *Aesthetics and Art Theory: An Historical Introduction* (London, 1968), p. 44.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Osborne, p. 44.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Aristotle *Poetics* 1448b9 ff.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Emmanuel Martineau, "Mimèsis dans la 'Poétique': pour une solution phénoménologique (A propos d'un livre récent)," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 81, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1976), 444 ff.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1751), ed. and introd. James T. Boulton (Notre Dame, 1968), p. 49.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Cicero *Orator* 2.7 ff.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> As quoted by Vernant, "Naissance d'images," p. 37.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Such as, for example, Hermann Roller, *Die Mimesis in der Antike. Nachahmung, Darstellung, Ausdruck* (Berne, 1954); Goran Sorbom, *Mimesis and Art* (Bonniers, 1966); Richard Ohmann, "Speech Acts and the Definition of Literature," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 4 (1971), 1-19; Martineau, "Mimèsis dans la 'Poétique' "; Altieri, "The Poem as Act."
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> The scheme is "a filter which has the function of enabling us to collect perception data." Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens* (Munich, 1976), p. 51.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Supporters of the aesthetic theories of reception and response are likely to think that the role ascribed to the reader, to the analysis of his horizon of expectations, and to the antagonism provoked by aesthetic experience regarding such a horizon make it useless to propose once again the question of mimesis. In this respect, they must agree with the position held by Jonathan Culler, who, though independent from the Konstanz school, would agree with it: "Instead of novel as mimesis, we have novel as a structure that works with different modes of organization and enables the reader to understand how to give a meaning to the world." Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London, 1975), p. 238.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, p. 22.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> John R. Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," *New Literary History*, 7 (Winter 1975), 325.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Searle, p. 326.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> See Richard Ohmann, "Speech Acts and the Definition of Literature."
- <sup>xl</sup> Searle, p. 324.
- <sup>xli</sup> Altieri, "The Poem as Act," p. 112.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Altieri, p. 114.
- <sup>xliii</sup> Aristotle *Poetics* 1448b6-8.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Michel Leiris, "Preface" to Gilbert Rouget's *La Musique et la transe* (Paris, 1980), p. 7. This statement raises an important question, that of the metahistoricity ascribed to the idea of fiction. It is indeed inherent to postmedieval reflection on art "to place fiction consciousness as a presupposition of all communicational situations in which— as in the courtly romance—we can expect the recipients to go beyond a natural orientation" (Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Wie fiktional war der hüfische Roman?" [mimeo, 1980], p. 4). As Gumbrecht notes: "With that a question is naturally posed on whether the concept of literature should be applied to medieval texts that fall short of this borderline" (p. 3). This question, to be sure, can be answered only by medievalists. In any case, a provisional answer can be attempted on the basis of the following passage: "The earliest texts of the 'courtly romance' genre, we can now summarize, do not perform a new communicational situation through a reference to the fictional characteristics of the fable but through a repertory of signals that suggest to the recipient a distancing from procedures that the utilitarian arts, written in vulgar language, depended upon. These multishaded signals are hard to understand today without the aid of the horizon of expectation of the *chansons de geste* and religious literature. Concerning the status of fictionality of the narrations, the action as 'unreal,' to speak in the manner of J.-P. Sartre, does not creep into it; instead, its target seems to have been the 'neutralization' of the question as a product of reality" (p. 6). For an opposite view of the

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*roman courtois*, see Rainer Warning, "Pour une pragmatique du discours fictionnel," *Poétique*, 39 (Sept. 1979), 321-37, esp. pp. 329-30.

<sup>xlv</sup> Ludwig Giesz, *Phänomenologie des Kitsches—Ein Beitrag zur anthropologischen Ästhetik* (Munich, 1971). Quotations are from the Spanish translation, *Fenomenologia del kitsch* (Barcelona, 1973). See also Hans Robert Jauss, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (Munich, 1977), pp. 57 ff.

<sup>xlvi</sup> The passage quoted does not appear in the original 1976 edition, but only in its English translation: Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore and London, 1978).

<sup>xlvii</sup> Hermann Broch, *Dichten und Erkennen*. The quotations are from the French translation, *Création littéraire et connaissance*, ed. and introd. Hannah Arendt, tr. Albert Kohn (Paris, 1966), p. 223.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Giesz, *Fenomenologia del kitsch*, p. 53.

<sup>xlix</sup> This essay had already been written when I learned of the publication of *Erzählen im Alltag*, ed. Konrad Ehrlich (Frankfurt am Main, 1980), which therefore could not be used.