‘Creating Unrealities’: Rethinking Mimesis as Production of Difference

ABSTRACT

This essay examines Costa Lima’s rehabilitation of mimesis as production of difference by locating its roots in psycho- and anthropogenesis. It traces how the mimetic cathexis of the body and of material objects as media of communicative action is gradually shifted onto language. This discussion contextualises Costa Lima’s investigations into mimesis and the control of the imaginary, and concludes by arguing that we abandon the traditional binary model of *imitatio* in favour of a triadic model. We might then conceptualize mimesis in terms of a model in which the triad *subjectivity – art – reality* corresponds, at a different level of abstraction, to the triad *the imaginary – the fictional – the real*. In such a triadic model, mimesis operates through a process of mutual differentiation: the negotiation and exchange that takes place between subjectivity and reality, or the imaginary and the real, alters both poles of the triad. In a successful literary transference art will reshape reality under the impact of subjectivity, and alter the boundaries of subjectivity in contact with reality. Mediated through the fictional, the imaginary will accordingly have a changing impact on the real and vice versa.

BIOGRAPHY

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‘CREATING UNREALITIES’: RETHINKING MIMESES AS PRODUCTION OF DIFFERENCE

Luiz Costa Lima’s project of salvaging the concept of mimesis from ‘the ash heap of history’ presents a profound challenge to notions of the literary and the fictional in a wide range of historical and contemporary theories. In “A Proscribed Concept: Mimesis and Avant-Garde Theory” Costa Lima writes: ‘Few concepts have elicited such unanimous responses from literary theorists as imitatio. Not even the most intransigent defender of realist aesthetics would dare invoke it, fearful of his professional reputation. Indeed, from the beginnings of romanticism imitatio has been relegated to the ash heap of history.’ The same chapter’s last section titled “Mimesis as Non-Imitatio” ends with an affirmation: “One must be rather brash to keep on sailing against the wind.”

In ‘sailing against the wind,’ Costa Lima has produced more than just a revisionary theory of mimesis. Recalling Norbert Elias’ The Civilizing Process in scope and ambition, Costa Lima’s work on mimesis presents a literary anthropology that combines socio- and psychohistory in order to explore literature’s impact on the cultural imaginary. At the core of this literary anthropology lies a concept of mimesis as production of difference rather than similarity. Disconnecting it from its link to the classical notion of imitatio, Costa Lima asserts its productive and potentially subversive rather than its affirmative force. From the outset, then, he places the concept of mimesis in relation to the social and to power. But rather than restaging the all too familiar assault on representation, referentiality and realism – a move that has been prominent in literary theory since modernist and avant-garde aesthetics – Costa Lima opts for reconceptualizing mimesis. Reading the literary history of mimesis according to a Foucaultian archeology of knowledge, he highlights the roads taken and not taken in the conceptualization of mimesis from the classical age to the twentieth century. Following this trajectory, he retraces the archaeological strata along which mimesis became disconnected from its ancient ties with poiesis and reduced to a concept of imitatio. Out of this archaeology of mimesis – arguably one of the most slippery but also most endurable concepts of literary studies – emerges Costa Lima’s own theory in which he proposes to reinforce the abandoned linkage of mimesis to poiesis, thus emphasizing its creative and transformative power. Embedded within a larger anthropology of literature, this theory synthesizes the role of mimesis in the genesis of the subject, the processes of socialization and acculturation, and the dynamics of cultural contact.

One of Costa Lima’s fundamental premises is that mimesis does not organize the world in terms of perception but ‘organizes it in terms of the imaginary.’ This perspective changes aesthetics ‘from a system of normative values into a branch of anthropological investigation aiming at understanding the poetic experience.’ Considering the emphasis Costa Lima places on the anthropological function of literature, aesthetics and mimesis, it may be helpful to recall the crucial role mimesis plays in anthropogenesis as well as the genesis of the subject. Anthropologists have long recognized mimesis as an integral part of anthropogenesis. Creating symbols and symbolic systems that shape and organize ‘the real’ in a meaningful and collectively accessible way, mimesis occupies a transitional position between the subject and his or her world, between inside and outside. Mimesis is the social and cultural force that operates in the creation and particular formation of ‘inner spaces,’ that is, spaces in which what is received from the outside is processed according to both cultural and personal parameters. Thus located in a transitional ‘space between,’ mimesis facilitates a kind of exchange between outside and inside, partaking in both the processing of the outer world and the projection of the inner world. Rather than producing imitations of the outer world (one of the two main archaeological strata that, according to Costa Lima, historically define the poetic), mimesis transforms the real through symbolic codes and images. The central function of mimesis in anthropogenesis is therefore not imitation, but mediation.

Mimesis operates initially as a form of corporeal knowledge, a digital speech intimately tied to the body. As such it also manifests itself as performative knowledge and action. In an essay on “Mimesis in Anthropogenesis” anthropologists Gebauer und Wulf write:

The infant’s relationship to his own body, to other human beings, to the environment and to language develops through mimetic processes. These constitute the first forms of interaction with others, the world and the self in the course of which the child makes itself similar to its opposite. These early mimetic processes already reveal an active relationship to the world in which there is at the same time a high degree of openness and receptivity.

In a similar vein, in Control of the Imaginary, Costa Lima quotes psychoanalytic critic Sergio Paulo Rouanet: ‘The theory of identification is literally a theory of mimesis – a making-oneself-like through appropriation, be it partial or total, of the model.’

In a similar vein, in Control of the Imaginary, Costa Lima quotes psychoanalytic critic Sergio Paulo Rouanet: ‘The theory of identification is literally a theory of mimesis – a making-oneself-like through appropriation, be it partial or total, of the model.’
Psychoanalytic notions of mimesis play an important role in the construction of Costa Lima’s own model because in psychoanalytic theories of subject genesis, the central function of mimesis is not derived from *imitatio*. Instead, imitation and similarity are important only within a much broader concept of mimesis as a process of transformation. Costa Lima interprets Rouanet’s passage as follows: ‘Even when similarity to the model is visual, it is not that visuality that is its basis; what is essential is not its nature as copy or substantive trace but the process of transformation that is in operation.’ And he concludes: ‘What is decisive in the constitution of mimesis, then, is the creation of a staging, which is not so much the repetition of a model as the organization of a response to that model carried out at the level of the sensorial.’ In this vein, Costa Lima combines and elaborates both the performative role mimesis plays in anthropogenesis and the transformational role it plays in the genesis of the subject. The function of mimesis as performative action and knowledge, as well as its role as a transformational agent in the cultural production of difference, are retained as the most fundamental mimetic operations.

Within psychogenesis, mimesis is crucial in the so-called mirror-phase most thoroughly theorized by D. W. Winnicott. In this phase, the infant’s whole environment of care with its particular rhythms and aesthetics functions as a mirroring device. Thus being ‘mirrored’ by a yet undifferentiated flow of first received sensations – sounds, forms and colours, touches and smells – the infant mimetically processes them. Traces of these undifferentiated sensations form part of an early memory, a first mode of ‘unthought knowledge’ that operates in later life as an organizing matrix or – as Christopher Bollas calls it – a ‘grammar of being.’ Even at this early stage, mimesis functions less through imitation than through creation. Being much more important as a performative than as a reflective agency, the mirror produces difference in the sense that it helps to create a *gestalt* for hitherto undifferentiated sensations. We may also recall here Lacan’s emphasis on the anticipatory and performative role of the image as an agency of *gestaltung* in the mirror phase. Instead of functioning as the infant’s mere double, the mirror image projects a gestalt that, in turn, anticipates a development and thus becomes an important agent of transformation. There is, in other words, a certain anticipatory, if not Utopian, element operative in mimesis that propels change rather than stability and therefore lends itself to the potentially disruptive and subversive power of mimesis.

We also find evidence of this anticipatory function in anthropogenesis, namely in the use of mimesis in magic practices and rituals. In the magic relation to the world and to nature, humans mimetically anticipate an effect they aim to create, hoping to transfer the power of their anticipatory mimetic act onto the object they desire to affect. Again, the emphasis lies on action, intervention and the production of difference rather than on a mere imitation of nature. In a magic world, mimetic functions are usually tied to the body and its forms of expression, or to material objects that serve as symbols or extensions of the body. These roots of mimetic functions in a performative language of the body help fully to understand the formative role mimesis plays in the production of culture more generally. When, during the mirror phase, the body serves as a medium of communicative action, corporeal utterances already tacitly transmit cultural meanings before the infant’s acquisition of language proper. It is in this sense that we could say with Walter Benjamin, whom Costa Lima quotes, that language ‘has precedence. Not just in relation to meaning. Also in relation to the self.’

Language, we may conclude, operates long before the infant’s entry into the symbolic order and its active use of words as carriers of meaning. Like corporeal rhythms, the rhythms of language are also used mimetically to structure spaces and times of communicative action. At a more intimate level, these utterances also convey to the child an early sense of becoming: the ways in which it is held, looked at, talked to, are formative as mimetic devices that establish the earliest modes and moods of a self in formation. The body is used, as Gebauer and Wulf demonstrate, like a musical instrument able to touch by generating vibrations, rhythms and sounds, thus creating resonances in the receiver that will eventually translate into a structure of anticipation and response. Already in anthropogenesis mimesis then operates, as Costa Lima claims for mimesis in general, as performative utterance and communicative action.

This mimetic cathexis of the body and of material objects as media of communicative action is gradually shifted onto language. With the advent of print culture, the sensory elements of mimesis are sublimated in multiple codifications as writing, disrupting the intimate, unmediated connection of mimesis to the corporeal, to sounds, rhythms, gestures. However, cultural objects – and among them especially the aesthetic objects of literature and the arts – continue to reactivate these ties to the performative utterances of the body, thus asserting the productive, transformative, performative and communicative dimensions of mimesis. The shift of mimetic functions from the body onto language foregrounds how mimesis operates through resonance and attunement. We could say that the mimetic functions of language that recall the traces of early corporeal sensations and experiences – the whole sphere that Kristeva calls the ‘semiotic’ – facilitate those aspects of communication that include affect and emotion, desire and pleasure. Most importantly, perhaps, they may convey certain moods in language that resonate with our earliest modes of being.
the infant’s needs she repeats what she sees the child express by transposing it into language. Even though one could argue that she ‘imitates’ the infant’s needs in a different medium of expression, the main goal of this repetition is transformation because it initiates the long process of a ‘word-forming experience.’ It is in this process that the sensory elements of mimesis are displaced from the body onto language. Language, however, is endowed with an ability to retain and even codify the sensory traces of, for example, the sounds of a voice and the rhythms of a body. This is why language is also able to create a space of resonance for sensory experience. Throughout history, poetry has used its mimetic functions in order to foreground the sensory dimensions of language. Even the magic cathexis of material objects can be transferred to language so that, in their mimetic use, words may assume a magic power.

The mimetic use of language as a space of resonance and attunement, however, returns us to a problem that has been at the heart of numerous controversies among competing theories of mimesis, namely the problem of similarity and difference. Similarity is the most crucial condition for creating resonance between objects, persons or cultures that are brought into contact. Without resonance we would not live in a world of difference but on the contrary, in a world of absolute indifference. How then can resonance and similarity be conceived in a theory in which mimesis does not figure as imitation but as production of difference? This question is central to Costa Lima’s reflections on mimesis in contemporary literature, art, philosophy and theory. Ultimately it is the problem of resonance that motivates him to shift his understanding of mimesis and similarity from a model of perception to a model of communication. Reader response and reception theories, as well as theories of communicative action and discourse analysis, allow him to disconnect the notions of mimesis and similarity from imitation and to reconnect it with poiesis. Similarity is accordingly perceived as a communicative device designed to create resonance with objects outside language and thus to act as a medium of connection. It is certainly no coincidence that Costa Lima frames these reflections by defining the role of mimesis in socialization and subject genesis:

I have said that apparently every phenomenon is received by a human agent according to a set of expectations, based on the specific culture of which the agent is part. That is, in the subject-object relation, the object is captured by means of a net that is not the invention of an individual, but that imposes itself on all as a condition for their socialization. (Of course, this is not to deny that there are individual variants within the common net.) However great the variability of each individual response or internalization, each member of a culture – and, within a culture, of each of its segments – is recognized in opposition to the “foreigner,” that is, the one who has been given a different form of socialization.

This statement may help to clarify why Costa Lima synthesizes subject genesis, acculturation, and cultural contact in his anthropological model of literary mimesis. The very use of mimesis in the genesis of the subject is, as Costa Lima suggests, already pervaded by the relations of value and power that mark every process of acculturation.

The infant’s early environment conveys both a practice of care pervaded by values and taboos, power and control, as well as a more personal aesthetics of care through which ‘individual variants’ enter the common net. The earliest cultural structuring of object relations is thus both deeply cultural and highly personal. Relations of power are defined by the relationship of infant and adult, by the mother’s socio-cultural position, the family structure and whole set of cultural values, expectations and practices that enter the early environment of care. Even patterns of cultural contact are relevant in this process since, as Costa Lima rightly points out, ‘each member of a culture is recognized in opposition to the ‘foreigner.’’ We may therefore assume that during the mirror phase, the infant also acquires the earliest patterns of cultural contact prevalent in the culture into which it is born. Mimesis is crucial to understand these early processes of subject formation because it relies on similarity as a device of recognition and selection. ‘Similarity – that is, the actualization of an internalized stock of expectations – acts as a selector,’ writes Costa Lima, ‘sometimes more flexible, sometimes less, that enables us to convert experiences into representations. Similarity allows us to find echoes in the world, the basis of that redundancy without which everything would seem strange to us.’ As we have seen, during the mirror phase mimesis operates largely through attunement and resonance. Later in life, we may use the mimetic power of cultural objects such as literature and the arts to ‘find echoes in the world.’

In Costa Lima’s model, literature and aesthetic objects in general facilitate a communication that operates through similarity, resonance, and the production of difference. It is this production of difference that protects one from mere negativity in response to cultural alterity. Costa Lima identifies two forms of responding negatively to alterity and cultural difference – one is to reduce alterity to the already expected, thus producing an unending series of identical responses; the other is aggressively to reduce alterity to entropic noise beyond any possibility of connection. Mimesis counteracts this negativity by facilitating the organization of the world in terms of the imaginary. The partners in ‘poetic communication,’ Costa Lima insists, ‘must be equally active –
that is, both must activate the imaginary."** Seen in this way, the activation of the imaginary is used as a devise to cope productively with alterity and cultural difference. ‘Activating the imaginary’ means responding to a resonance between otherwise heterogeneous if not alien worlds, objects or experiences. It also means to process alterity without succumbing to paranoia or aggressive indifference.

But what exactly does Costa Lima mean when he says that mimesis organizes the world in terms of the imaginary? This formulation bears further examination because it locates Costa Lima’s particular notion of similarity and difference within his critical exchange with other theories. His remark that mimesis is able to provide a productive way of coping with alterity already suggests the trajectory for a possible answer. The two negative reactions Costa Lima highlights are, as it turns out, identical with the most extreme manifestations of similarity and difference: alterity is either reduced to the already known, the identical, or it is reduced to utter, irreducible difference. The productive relation to alterity and, by extension, cultural difference depends, in other words, on a particular space and mode of mediation. Literature and its use of mimesis, Costa Lima suggests, function to provide such a space.

The concept of mediation suggests a topography of inside and outside, subject and world, thought and expression – vexed notions, in other words, that have been discarded for similar reasons as the notion of mimesis. Furthermore, if mediation is what makes difference accessible, it is also linked to representation as yet another vexed notion. The touchstone for Costa Lima’s revision of these concepts is his critique of Deleuze’s *Repetition and Difference*. Instead of following Deleuze in rejecting representation as stasis, Costa Lima argues it must be rethought as a process of vital production. ‘The prohibition of representation ends up compromising the very existence of the subject, making him unable to elaborate alterity.’** To elaborate alterity, Costa Lima further concludes, the subject needs to form an interior space for the incorporation of others, ‘a solitary space, that is, a space inhabited by his thoughts and representations.’** Intimately connected to, but at the same time separate and protected from the outside, such a space operates as a precondition for communication and cultural contact. Or, as Costa Lima writes: ‘And without solitude no contact with the other is possible. Empty inside, unable – as in the Amazonian myth analyzed by Levi-Strauss – to have a “stomach” in which the “food” ingested could be stored, he is unable to participate in situations of communication.’**

Recalling the attack on representation in French theory, Costa Lima shows that, for Deleuze, representation remains subordinate to ‘the form of identity’ and is therefore seen as an operation that stiffens movement and transforms ‘flight’ into a fixed portrait. Repetition, on the other hand, is seen as conforming to the motion that takes place between phenomenon and subject. Against this overly static notion of representation, Costa Lima takes recourse to Andre Green’s psychoanalytic model in which representation figures as a dynamic process. ‘Representation, to the extent that it is not a perception passively received but rather a created form, is a product of the transformation of perception, the result of a psychic elaboration of thought.’** The inability to elaborate the real through its transformation into a symbolic structure would, by contrast, lead to a psychotic paralysis of thought. Costa Lima evaluates Green’s position in light of his own theory:

> In short, the representations subsumed into the self – into the cleft self – are multiple and conflicting, and every organization they submit to in a self is, in principle provisional. But to discard them categorically, for the sake of the exclusiveness of repetition and difference, would lead, as in the exemplary case analyzed by Green, to the paralysis of thought – or, what is even more serious, to providing arguments in favor of a society in which the absence of the individualized self would only correspond to an amorphous mass of catalogued sets, masses of electronically stimulated voices.**

Cast as a particular mode of processing or elaborating the real, mimesis produces difference within an horizon of similarity. Representation then becomes a dynamic category, just as ‘the real’ itself is a sliding ground of difference rather than a clearly delineated static territory. Rather than imitating the real through fictional doubles, the elaboration of the real through symbolic representation produces alterity and difference. A subject unable to elaborate alterity remains psychotically disconnected from the social world; a society that precludes the provisional stabilization of flexible unities and individuals reduces its modes of communication to ‘a passage among shadows.’**

The space in which mimesis operates is thus intimately connected to the space of ‘interior’ representations and incorporations or, as Costa Lima calls it, the ‘solitary space’ of the subject. Due to its intermediate position between the outer and the inner world, mimesis represents the real as a ‘created form’ – a form that facilitates the processing of the real as difference. Seen in this way, literature opens up a space in which the images, moods, thoughts, phantasms and incorporations created in the solitary inner space can be brought back into an exchange or communication with the social world. In order to be accessible and made communicable within the
symbolic order, these inner representations need to be shaped according to shared symbols, forms and codifications.

For Costa Lima, mimesis operates as such a shaping force. In order to elaborate this notion of the transformative power of mimesis, he draws on Paul Klee’s theory of art. Art, Klee believes, must explore the unconscious through a ‘deliberate mediation of formativeness (Gestaltung).’ This is why he pursues the goal to free art from forms commanded by ‘representational’ figuration. Understood in experimental, non-figurative terms, ‘formativeness’ bestows meaning on the unconscious that would otherwise remain too private or undifferentiated. While Klee rejects representation because he ties it to conscious figuration, Costa Lima uses Green’s dynamic model to show that representation may after all be linked to the ‘mediation of formativeness’ required to explore the unconscious in art or literature. Elaborating the unconscious through ‘formativeness,’ however, means to transform it. This transformational function of mimesis, Costa Lima argues, can only be described in an interactive model. Both the producer (writer) and the recipient (reader) must activate the imaginary in order to use the potential of literary or artistic ‘form’ to engender a transformational process.

The activation of the imaginary and the exploration of the unconscious through art occurs, I would argue, within a process of literary transference. If mimesis uses similarity in processing the real, it is in order to retain a resonance between outer and inner worlds rather than to subsume one to an imitation of the other. Transference means precisely this: forms are processed according to a resonance they may produce consciously or unconsciously. Transference, in turn, may assume different directions in relation to the resonating object. Literary objects may draw their effects from such diverse uses of similarity as a familiar or disturbing resonance, a resonance that works according to subliminal recognition, and yet another that works through the mind games of literary self-reflexivity. In engaging literary forms, the reader, on the other hand, may simply enforce such resonance or else work it through, transform it, and shape its cultural ramifications along different parameters. It is through such processes of exchange and transference that mimesis engages in reshaping the cultural imaginary. Klee’s insistence that, in art, the exploration of the unconscious will not be fruitful if there is no deliberate ‘mediation of formativeness’ must be supplemented by the observation that the fruitful exploration of the unconscious equally depends on the recipient’s processing of such ‘formativeness.’ If literary form thus operates at the very centre of mimesis and literary transference, it is the response to form that determines how fruitful the exploration of the formed material will become.

As we have seen, Costa Lima’s concept of mimesis and representation is directed against their conventional categorization in literary theory and aesthetics. Arguing that this categorization emerges from a reductive reading, Costa Lima reintroduces mimesis and representation as dynamic categories in order to demonstrate their usefulness in a postmodern frame of thought. Representation then assumes a much larger meaning than the ‘representational figuration’ rejected by modernism and the avant-garde. Even the strangest and least ‘representational’ objects gain meaning in relation to a ‘stock of cultural expectations’ and thus become represented as objects:

Indeed, it is by means of this stock of expectations that we approach natural and cultural phenomena and select them so that we can evaluate them. The internalization of this stock, then, is not an individual “option,” but a consequence of the fact that the individual is part of the group in which he is socialized. . . . Depending on our expectations, the object or phenomenon is perceived as identical when nothing in it diverges from the organizing expectation; as similar when it more or less allows an analogy with our expectations; as different when the discrepancy outweighs the expectations; and as hostile when the structure of what stands before us cannot be codified by our expectations. Perhaps every contact between a human being and what is found around him or her – “phantom” things or other beings – takes place within these parameters.

Literary transference, I would argue, does not simply fall within these parameters; it elaborates them in turn, thus reshaping our patterns of cultural contact along with our relation to ‘phantom things’ and to the cultural imaginary. In Control of the Imaginary, Costa Lima writes:

It is possible, then, to enter into communication with the fictional only when one learns to see it as a whole that one’s imagination invokes. Or, rather, when one receives messages structured less through utterances than through images. . . . While the imaginary presupposes the destruction of reality – that is, abandonment of the thematization of perception grounded in that concept – creating a diffuse magma in which anything can signify anything, aesthetic experience involves the negation of the negation of the imaginary: my interpretation of the poetry that I read cannot be strictly my own but must be formulated on the basis of the potential created by the schema contained in what I read.
Once again we encounter the notion that reworking the imaginary requires a transposition into literary form. In order to become effective, this form may use mimesis to produce a resonance in the reader. One could argue that literary transference uses mimesis as an aesthetic equivalent to the blank screen. Yet, while in the psychoanalytic encounter the blank screen invites unconscious projection and transference, the ‘screen of mimesis’ does more: it provides a *gestalt* that resonates with a cultural memory based on corporeal traces and sensations, as well as more conscious cultural images and codes. Since even the traces of the corporeal are marked by the symbolic order and thus culturally coded, the resonating screen of mimesis also reflects the earliest marks of culture along with later cultural codifications.

The framework of mimesis as a formational and transformational operation points to a dimension in Costa Lima’s theory that may well be his foremost concern: a defence of fiction and its anthropological as well as cultural function. Creating a space within the symbolic order of language for the mediation of the subject’s relationship to its outer and inner spaces, mimesis is intimately tied to tradition and power. Power and control shape the different uses of the imaginary and the fictional throughout history, pervading every exchange between the subject and the world, including all mediation of alterity and cultural difference. Costa Lima opens his analysis of power in *Control of the Imaginary* with a spectacular discovery that ultimately shapes his theory of mimesis as a defence of fiction. It is the discovery that, paradoxically, at the heart of many theories of the poetic lies ‘a scandalous prohibition: a prohibition of fiction itself.’

Tracing its roots back to the Middle Ages, Costa Lima pursues the trajectory of this prohibition to the very present. To a certain extent, both *The Dark Side of Reason* and *Limits of the Voice* are still concerned with providing an answer to the question first posed in *Control of the Imaginary*: ‘with what interests did this supposed prohibition correlate?’ The answer is that fiction is linked to the formation of subjectivity and the threat posed by fiction lies in the very recognition of subjectivity. Accordingly, the control of the imaginary translates into a control of subjectivity. Costa Lima demonstrates in detail for every major period in literary history that the control of the imaginary, as well as the power of and over literature, have always been linked to subjectivity. Manifesting itself in complex processes of exchange between subjects, worlds, cultures and politics, this dynamic of power and control also seeps into theories of the poetic. There it can either simply be reproduced or, if made the object of investigation, opened to a challenge that may ultimately lead to a different cultural use of the imaginary. Drawing on Howard Bloch’s *Medieval French Literature and Law*, Costa Lima traces the ‘prohibition of fiction’ back to the Middle Ages where, as Bloch demonstrates, the recognition of subjectivity begins in the twelfth century. Literature supports this recognition with the appearance of the singular hero in late epic and lyrical forms, as well as with the valorisation of the individual within the courtly novel and lyric. The advent of print culture only enforces this increasingly flexible recognition of subjectivity: ‘the flexibilizing strategies then introduced, all of which revolved around the issue of subjectivity, were favored by the subsequent development and expansion of the printing press.’

We find a curious contradiction here. If Bloch is right, the Middle Ages were obviously in need of ‘flexibilizing strategies’ and hence a recognition of subjectivity. That very recognition, however, seems to pose a threat of a different kind that is, in turn, translated into a need to control the imaginary by placing a tacit prohibition on fiction. It is this contradiction that begins to manifest itself in the poetic theories of the time. The assumption of a contradiction may further explain why, if fiction supports cultural flexibility, it is nonetheless perceived as posing a threat that must be answered by its prohibition. If all strategies that retain cultural flexibility are tied to the vexing issue of the recognition of subjectivity, then the threat results from fiction’s negotiation of the boundaries between subjectivity and culture. Operating in this space of negotiation, power manifests itself in a struggle over the boundaries that differentiate subjects from cultures. Yet, it is absolutely crucial here to notice that the recognition of subjectivity can only pose a threat within a culture that already figures subjectivity as its other. The prohibition of fiction furthermore reveals that, even if used for purposes of acculturation, fiction is already tacitly linked to subjectivity, and that, accordingly, its recognition through fiction is perceived as culturally subversive. Ultimately, I think, Costa Lima’s recuperation of mimesis can also be read as an attempt to show that the threat perceived in the recognition of subjectivity is related to a misreading similar to the one that led to the conventional reductive theories of mimesis. In both cases, the reductive conceptualization stems from an agonistic polarization of subjectivity, politics and culture.

Historicizing the prohibition of fiction in Western poetics and aesthetic theories, Costa Lima establishes a link to a cultural need for strategies that help to mediate the recognition of subjectivity in times of crisis. If the latter occur whenever a culture’s social order and mental structures threaten to rigidify, the prohibition appears as a symptom of a deep cultural ambivalence, if not a cultural paradox of sorts. Mediating strategies – among which Costa Lima singles out literary mimesis as the most crucial – help to retain or restore the cultural flexibility necessary for a dynamic culture. But they do this only if they produce difference instead of identity, sameness,
and imitation. By contrast, theories that harbour a prohibition of the poetic try to shackle it to notions of reality, identity and imitation. Their ‘misreading’ lies in the fact that they tie identity and imitatio to cultural stability. Costa Lima’s historical readings rather suggest the opposite. It is true that, in supporting cultural change, mimesis as a production of difference undermines the status quo. This is how mimesis unfolds its subversive potential. Ultimately, however, this very process will contribute to cultural stability precisely because it increases the flexibility of cultural boundaries. Literary mimesis appears here as a mediating strategy that negotiates cultural boundaries and creates cultural stability by maintaining flexibility and change. Such a reading relies on a rather contemporary systemic notion of culture that could be embraced in a wide range of theories from systems theory and cybernetics to an ‘ecology of mind.’ At the same time, this structural conceptualization places literary mimesis in a highly ambivalent relation to power: precisely by challenging the status quo, mimesis may paradoxically enhance a culture’s ability to avert crisis. That cultures nonetheless perceive the fictional as a threat can only happen within a history in which subjectivity and culture have become polarized, if not antagonistic. Theories that reproduce this rigid polarization of subjectivity and culture in their understanding of mimetic processes tend to ontologize an agonistic relationship that has developed historically—presumably even for good reasons—but can therefore not automatically claim universal validity.

Costa Lima traces this polarization all the way to the surrealists’ rejection of the cultural status quo. Their turn against the ‘invisible but effective wall of good sense, the prejudices of factualism, the middle ground that was the aim of realism,’ can then also be read as a response to the prohibition of fiction. However, their respective desire to ‘attack, by every possible means, the ‘civilized’ taming of mind and life,‘ maintains, and perhaps even enforces, the very polarization on which the prohibition was based in the first place. Due to its mistaken equation with imitatio, mimesis appears to the proponents of avant-garde aesthetics as too compromised by its ties to the real. Imitatio, however, had long become inadequate in relation to the institutions of modern life and therefore needed to be replaced by a more adequate and complex notion of mimetic processes. As valid as the surrealist revolt was historically, it fails to provide a productive model to theorize the relationship between a culture and its aesthetic practices. A theory that locates these practices ‘outside’ of culture ignores the processes of exchange that take place between the cultural and the aesthetic, thereby denying the effects of aesthetic practices within culture.

From this perspective, the anti-mimetic affect of avant-garde aesthetics appears as the result of an overly rigid separation of culture and aesthetics. Costa Lima points out that, while avant-garde theories, and twentieth century aesthetics more generally, simply abandoned the concern with mimesis, this concern was taken up by psychoanalysis. ‘Psychoanalysis, one might say, is born of the horizon of inquiry opened up by the romantics. That inquiry was decisive in demonstrating that reason, as it was conceived in classical thought and classical poetics, could not serve as an explanatory criterion for art. Reason sets up conscious models to be internalized through either direct or sublimate action. It therefore confuses them with the reality to be imitated.”

Ironically, psychoanalysis develops the framework that avant-garde aesthetics would have needed for their interest in aesthetically exploring the unconscious. It is in psychoanalytic theories that mimesis is opened up for a use that engages not only reason but ‘the dark side of reason’ as well. No longer shackled to the province of ‘everyday reality,’ it is freed to access and mediate the ‘provinces of dream, of art, of religion.’ Costa Lima interprets this revision of mimesis in terms of the previously mentioned shift from perception to imagination. While in everyday reality, he argues, perception operates as the dominant principle for the organization of experience, the ‘sub-provinces’ of dream, art and religion invert this dominance and privilege imagination over perception. This view is consistent with Freud’s notion of reality testing and Winnicott’s notion that one may not challenge what is produced or experienced in the transitional space. Accordingly, mimesis has a different status in everyday life than it has in literature. Costa Lima argues for a specific definition of literary mimesis as an operation within ‘the province of art’: ‘day-to-day mimesis operates within the province of everyday reality, thus obeying laws necessarily different from those governing artistic experience.”

In God of Many Names, Mihai Spariosu reminds us that already Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of mimesis: ‘mimesis as learning and poetic mimesis. There is the pleasure of mimesis as cognition, employed in the process of learning and reserved for the useful arts and philosophy; and there is the pleasure of mimesis as recognition, which comes the closest to the pleasure of poetic mimesis. The first derives from learning about the model, the second from having previous knowledge about it.”

The transitional space in which literary mimesis operates may, however, use and engage mimesis both as cognition and recognition. Using resonance, literary mimesis may mobilize a previous knowledge and transform it according to laws specific to the poetic. It is in this sense that we can speak of a particular literary knowledge. Literary knowledge hardly ever functions directly as a transmission of information; it rather works by detour, indirection, and multiple mediation. In other words, literary knowledge constitutes itself in relation to the everyday, or to the reader’s subjectivity, via the
detour of multiple references to previous literary and cultural knowledge. Moreover, it constitutes itself via the indirection proper to literary form.

Granting to literary mimesis a ‘specific definition,’ requires that we abandon the traditional binary model of imitatio in favour of a triadic model. We might then conceptualize mimesis in terms of a model in which the triad subjectivity – art – reality corresponds, at a different level of abstraction, to the triad the imaginary – the fictional – the real. In such a triadic model, mimesis operates through a process of mutual differentiation: the negotiation and exchange that takes place between subjectivity and reality, or the imaginary and the real, alters both poles of the triad. In a successful literary transference art will reshape reality under the impact of subjectivity and alter the boundaries of subjectivity in contact with reality. Mediated through the fictional, the imaginary will accordingly have a changing impact on the real and vice versa.\textsuperscript{xxxvii}

I will end with a short speculation that takes up the contemporary assault on representation, referentiality and realism mentioned at the beginning. Costa Lima’s insistence that mimesis is inextricably tied to something traditionally called ‘reality’ is grounded in a mobilization of both categories. In reconceptualizing mimesis, he has inevitably also changed the traditional connotations of the term ‘reality.’ If he at times seems to prefer ‘the real’ – perhaps in reference to Lacan and Althusser – it is probably because this term is less prone to the essentialisms traditionally attached to ‘reality.’ Alluding to the fact that we can never access the real without symbolic mediations, Althusser defines it as an absent cause. In the same vein, Costa Lima casts the real as a sliding ground of difference. He reconceptualizes the relationship between mimesis and reality in light of the current crisis of immanentist poetics. Following his trajectory, we might ask whether the fashionable prohibition of the real and referentiality in postmodern thought might not be yet another version of the prohibition of fiction. While it appears to grant exclusive priority to the fictional, the dictum that literature only refers to itself in endless spirals of self-referentiality and intertextuality ultimately obliterates its ties to the culture in which it is produced, or the cultures in which it is received. Would it not be possible then to ask if, accordingly, the current obsession with self-referentiality is not perhaps a postmodern version of an inverse ‘control of the imaginary’? Does the exclusive attention to self-referentiality and intertextual play not divert any attention possibly directed toward the ‘process of exchange’ facilitated by the fictional, thus eclipsing its production of alterity and difference within culture? Contemporary literature’s flourishing display of self-reflexive mind games and intertextual play must not mean that it has given up its ties to the real. Rather it seems to respond to a cultural need to explore the status of referentiality in a media culture that has dramatically changed the conditions under which it is produced. Certainly, the current implosion of the cultural imaginary and the respective difficulties in distinguishing the real from its various modes of simulation warrants a reconceptualization of referentiality and, more generally, of literature’s relation to the real. But instead of placing a prohibition on the category of the real – an inverse mirror image of the prohibition of fiction – it might be more productive to insist on the ‘particular definition’ of the literary and recognize its organization according to laws different from those that govern the real.

We might conclude then that neither the conflation of the fictional with the real, nor the complete severance of the two, are viable options for a vital relationship between a culture and its aesthetic practices. Placing a prohibition on the real within a theory of the poetic is as reductive as placing a prohibition on fiction. If, by introducing difference, fiction mobilizes the imaginary and thereby negotiates the boundaries between subjectivity and culture, we may understand why certain cultures display a strong interest to control the imaginary. But to control it completely – a control that would amount to a successful prohibition of fiction – would lead to the complete obliteration of subjectivity and, by extension, the entropic death of culture.

\textbf{REFERENCES}

\textsuperscript{ii} Ibid., 309.
\textsuperscript{iii} Ibid., 306.
\textsuperscript{iv} Ibid.
I have developed the implications of Winnicott’s theory for a theory of poetic language in detail in Subjects without Selves. Transitional Texts in Modern Fiction, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994). I therefore concentrate here only on those aspects that are relevant in relation to a theory of mimesis. I think, however, that it is interesting to see that Winnicott’s theory supports precisely the anthropological approach to mimesis as a production of difference that Costa Lima develops from a different vantage point. Due to his focus on psychogenetic development, Winnicott emphasizes one aspect of mimesis much more strongly than Costa Lima, namely play and its relation to creative processes. In this context, it would be interesting to bring Costa Lima’s theory in contact with Mihai Spariosu’s theory of play and mimesis as developed most thoroughly in Literature. Mimesis, and Play. Essays in Literary Theory, (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1982); in God of Many Names (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); and in Wreath of Wild Olive. Essays on Play. Literature, and Culture (New York: SUNY Press, 1997).


I have analysed this literary transference of moods in more detail in “Words and Moods: Literary Transference of Unthought Knowledge” SubStance. Fall (1997):

This is one of the terms used by Christopher Bollas in The Shadow of the Object.

Costa Lima, The Dark Side of Reason, 305.

Cf. Ibid., 305.


Quoted in Costa Lima, The Dark Side of Reason, 301.

Ibid., 303

Ibid.

Costa Lima, The Dark Side of Reason, 284.

Ibid., 284f.

Costa Lima, Control of the Imaginary, 47.

Ibid., 4.

Ibid., 9.


Costa Lima, The Dark Side of Reason, 290.

Costa Lima, Control of the Imaginary, 50.

Ibid., 51.


We may note that Costa Lima’s triadic model retains the traditional distinction between inside and outside, subject and object, the real and the imaginary, while avoiding the binarism if not antagonistic polarization that has traditionally organized the relationship between those categories. Taken seriously, the mediating function of mimesis as production of difference precludes a conception of subjectivity as mere reflection of or, on the contrary, antagonistic other of the real. The imaginary, the real, and subjectivity define and reshape each other in continual processes of exchange. Their mimetic mediation through art and fiction neither conflates them nor casts them as irreducibly different.