

Mimesis and experimentation



Watteau- *Jupiter and Antiope*

What I mean by using the Greek word *mimesis* about painting is not pure imitation of a visible reality, but is akin to the art of the mime, the art of expressing oneself by attitudes and gestures, without words. This expression starts always from an experience of reality, whatever that reality may be, but it opens towards the “unknown”. A true mime does not copy attitudes, but having started from observations, he makes of his own attitudes a language, which is quite different.

In painting there are two actors face to face : the visible reality and the painters will ; they go into conflict with each other, and they have to find a transaction, a *modus vivendi*..

One preaches today an experimental art which one opposes to a mimetic art, considered as obsolete. This experimentation would be made preferably thanks to electronic and data-processing means, would it be for example about handling a sound material or images obtained by optical apparatus

Adorno wrote in his *Aesthetic Theory* : “An art which would not experiment is hardly any more possible” This proposition seems to authorize a dichotomy in the conception of art: on one side, an experimental art, on the other a mimetic art , i.e. an art of the imitation, or at least an art in accordance with the criteria of representation of the middle-class society. The first would find to be illustrated in the artificial music, where whole or part of the composition is entrusted to a computer. Pierre Boulez recently recommended on the waves of France Music three levels of articulation for the team work: the researcher, the engineer, the composer; he added that the researcher was not to be importuned in his work, except on precise occasions, by the requests of the composer. That implies to step aside for one moment, partially or totally, from perceived quality. It settled a kind of excitement in the use of mathematics, of the computer and the applied sciences in the artistic , musical field in particular. These means, worked out by the researcher and the engineer, would suggest to the composer something *amazing* (with the double meaning of “never heard” and “extraordinary”). Everything takes place as if it were not with the human body, the human voice and its traditional instrumental prolongations, that one asks to produce something amazing ; one will seek it *elsewhere*, in the calculating power of the data-processing machines, as well as in the mixing of various noises.

On the other side, one considers works which are satisfied with the traditional means based on the direct perception of quality, as dedicated to the academic repetition of outdated models, so that their authors would be unable to devote themselves to a fertile intellectualization of their art. As for

the painters of this species, they could not pull themselves out of the trap of *mimesis*, conceived as the copy of a pre-established nature.

Dichotomy between experimentation and *mimesis* is fallacious.

An experimentation without *mimesis*, i.e. distant to the extreme from any body and significant experiment, would amount leaving to the spectator, as well as to the listener, the whole load to carry out by himself the operation of *mimesis*, i.e. would require of him a work of invention which normally falls to the artist.

It is inevitable that the spectator or the listener puts some sense on what he sees or on what he hears. Art promises an opening, a jump into the *Unknown*, which a pure handling, however sophisticated it may be, is unable to give; on the other hand, what such a handling causes, is the feeling of a vacuum, at the same time intimidating and distressing. This vacuum, the spectator, or the listener, fills it with his personal phantasmagorias. But actually, in any contemporary work of quality, the experimentation binds closely to *mimesis*. It is enough to think of the role allotted to the voice by Boulez in *Fold according to fold*. In my opinion, voice is the basis of musical *mimesis*.

Reciprocally the stress laid on *mimesis* does not exclude experimentation

If thus an art where experimentation prevails does not exclude *mimesis*, reciprocally an art which stresses *mimesis* does not exclude experimentation. It is not the modern time which invented the latter. Now what can be its object in painting, if it is not initially what the *eye* meets, the perceived world? It is with it that the artisan of what is called wrongly "images" operates the first transactions. From its first beginning, *prospect* was an invention and a choice between several possibilities of giving a frame to represent the perceived world.

Mimesis is not unknown to the abstract painter: each touch of his brush is at the same time a *mimesis* and an experimentation : a *mimesis* because it is the outcome of an inner gesture motivated by an intuition of light, an experimentation because the produced effect can never be completely anticipated. Figurative painting far from wanting to be a simple art of imitation, always includes, in its decisive achievements, an experimental share. The speech of contemporary esthetics claims to reproduce, at accelerated intervals, the excitement of the beginnings, i.e. the ruptures. One knows the monotony which results from it. The favour given to the concept of "de-construction" threw discredit on any intuitive basis resulting from perception. But the shock caused by the cubism, by introducing new means, like do-it-yourself, did not eliminate the share from perception in *mimesis*. I spoke about "transactions", because to remove the perceived world completely, it is also to remove any elaborate figuration: in order to operate on this world, something should be conceded to it. Well the painter, or the draughtsman, *operates*, necessarily; he traces a line where nature presents a receding contour, he cuts out a portion of the visual field, and not any, but that which will correspond to the form of the support used, right-angled, circle, ellipse... Reciprocally, the selected form of the support depends on the way in which the painter wants to cover his subject.

^[1] Encyclopaedia Universalis, Flight. 11, *Artificial musics*, Paris 1973