

## Mimesis as a phenomenon of semiotic communication

*Timo Maran*

Dept. of Semiotics, University of Tartu  
Tiigi 78, 50410 Tartu, Estonia  
e-mail: timo\_m@ut.ee

**Abstract.** The concept of mimesis is not very often used in the contemporary semiotic dialogue. This article introduces several views on this concept, and on the basis of these, mimesis is comprehended as a phenomenon of communication. By highlighting different semantic dimensions of the concept, mimesis is seen as being composed of phases of communication and as such, it is connected with imitation, representation, iconicity and other semiotic concepts.

The goal of this article is to introduce possibilities for understanding and using the notion of mimesis in connection with some semiotic concepts and views. In everyday use, the word 'mimesis' is mainly understood in connection with the terms 'representation' or 'imitation'. *The Concise OED* explains 'mimesis' as

1. imitative representation of the real world in art and literature;
  2. the deliberate imitation of the behaviour of one group of people by another as a factor in social change;
  3. *zoology* mimicry of another animal or plant.
- (Pearsall 2002: 905)

Under this surface of meanings there is the myriad of connections and connotations which engage 'mimesis' to many historical layers of culture, making it quite difficult to define.

As a concept, mimesis originates from Antique philosophy. Through the course of history different schools and authors have used it, thus making 'mimesis' one of the classical concepts of Western philosophy. The meanings and uses of 'mimesis' have varied remark-

ably, although ‘mimesis’ was probably not a notion with a single meaning even in the times when first mentioned in the literature. Therefore it is quite superficial to refer to it today as a single category. Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf have also accepted in their profound overview “Mimesis: culture, art, society”, that it is not possible to give a unitary definition that would cover all common uses of the notion in different traditions and fields (Gebauer, Wulf 1995: 2).

Likewise, the author of this article can not endeavour more than to offer one possible view of the range of subjects that have been described by Gebauer and Wulf almost as a cornerstone of Western thought.

What is remarkable in the history of mimesis is that it was already a theoretical problem very early on in the European tradition, that throughout the whole of its history it has always been a simultaneous object of theoretical reflection and aesthetic and social application. (Gebauer, Wulf 1995: 7)

In this article I will attempt to explain the notion of mimesis by explicating its meaning structure. Thereby I seek an answer to the question whether the notion of mimesis should be more actively engaged to the dialogues of the contemporary theory of semiotics or whether it should be abandon altogether due to its historic overuse and inconsistency.

Understanding the concept of mimesis becomes an important background for anybody who works with one of those notions with different meanings, which have directly evolved from the concept. Memetics, which describes culture as composed of multiplying units, and which has actively striven to become an independent field of study in the last decade (Blackmore 1999; cf. Deacon 1999); the notion of mimicry in its biological meaning (Wickler 1968; Maran 2000; 2001) and mimic gestures as studied in psychology (see, e.g., Zepf *et al.* 1998) are suitable examples of the magnitude of the field of meanings into which ‘mimesis’ reaches as a conceptual foundation. That field is rich with antagonistic standpoints and traditions, although there are also loans and rediscoveries that could transcend millennia. In his classification of mimicry, for instance, Georges Pasteur distinguishes Aristotelian mimicry (among other types) by referring to a passage from *Historia Animalium*, in which Aristotle describes how a brooding bird may pretend to be wounded if it encounters a dangerous creature near its nesting place (Pasteur 1982: 190).

The reasons why mimesis is not so much used in semiotics are partly historical, originating from the times of the formation of semiotics as an academic discipline. Both the understanding of Ferdinand de Saussure about the arbitrariness of the relation between signifiers and signifieds as well as the concept of the sign by Charles Sanders Peirce consisting of object, representamen and interpretant may be seen as a withdrawal from the mimetic approach to the relations between language and the world (Bogue 1991: 3). Mimetic perspective, according to which objects of nature and their representations correspond one-to-one, was especially popular in the period of the Enlightenment. At the same time, it would be wrong to exclude the concept from the semiotic dialogue solely due to its historic background, without considering and taking account our contemporary understandings about sign systems and processes of communication.

The present paper does not by any means claim to be the historical overview of the concept of mimesis, especially because the historical formation of the notion has already been analysed thoroughly by several authors (Gebauer, Wulf 1995; Melberg 1995; Halliwell 2002). I include the historical aspects of the concept as much as is necessary to understand the nature of mimesis and the possibilities for linking it with semiotic terminology and theories. In addition, I cannot analyse the works of many well-known scholars such as Gotthold E. Lessing, René Girard, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida in any great detail. These authors have fundamentally influenced our present-day understanding of the notion of 'mimesis'. However, 'mimesis' has had a structurally important place in their philosophical systems, and therefore the views of each and everyone of those need to be studied much more profoundly from the viewpoint of mimesis as would be possible in the pages of this paper.

### **Mimesis as a living concept**

As a starting point for the following argumentation, it is important to understand that mimesis has never actually been a determined and clearly definable concept. In the earliest written works of Ancient Greece that contain the notion of mimesis, it has been used in quite diverse contexts to indicate the particular characteristics of the object or the phenomenon. For instance, in the extant fragment of Aeschylus's tragedy *Edonians*, the sound of musical instruments has

been described as mimetic, resembling the voices of roaring bulls (Halliwell 2002: 17). In the time of Plato and Aristotle, ‘mimesis’ emerges at the centre of various philosophical debates concerning metaphysics, moral issues, arts and human nature, etc., and that has ensured the idea a place at the heart of Western thought for centuries. The works of Antique authorities later become a common source to refer to when using the notion of mimesis, and also today Plato’s *Cratylus*, *Republic*, *Sophist* and *Laws* or Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* have quite often been taken as the point of departure in historical overviews and even in conceptual analyses.

Secondly, in order to understand the nature of ‘mimesis’ and its different interpretations, it is important to emphasise the historical link between ‘mimesis’ and actual performative and artistic activities. ‘Mimesis’ has not always been a pure theoretical category. For instance, Gebauer and Wulf describe the link between mimesis and practical embodied knowledge as the first of their twelve dimensions of mimesis. They emphasise that mimesis originates from practice, and therefore it is in the nature of the mimesis to overcome any theoretical restrictions and structural frameworks. The roots of mimesis lie in the oral tradition and as such it is the essence of mimesis to be dynamic and to include body-related motions, rhythms, gestures and sounds (Gebauer, Wulf 1995: 316). The decreasing of that dynamism and the coalescence of the notion of mimesis in Western thought is primarily connected with the advancement of literary culture.<sup>1</sup>

Thus it is possible to distinguish different levels of meaning in the concept of mimesis. The notion as a theoretical category is younger and narrower than ‘mimesis’ as a word expressing the representative or artistic activity; which itself is younger and narrower than mimesis as a means of human perception and activity in the world. Mimetic perceptions and actions have been characteristic of human cultures since prehistoric times. They have, for instance, appeared in the ritual objects resembling various creatures and objects of the world and in the ways these objects have been used to influence reality through magical practices, as has been described by James C. Frazer under the name homeopathic or imitative magic (Frazer 1981). Although

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<sup>1</sup> By analysing studies of Homeric poetry, Egbert J. Bakker argues that the performative aspect of mimesis, which is directly connected to the oral presentation of poetry, is much undervalued in contemporary studies (Bakker 1999: 3).

mimesis as a word and concept originates from the Mediterranean, mimetic practices are also widespread beyond the borders of European culture. Michael Taussig describes diverse roles of mimetic practises among native American tribes, demonstrating also how mimetic loans can occur between different cultures (Taussig 1993). According to Stewart E. Guthrie, anthropomorphic imitations in material art can already be observed in Neolithic cultures (Guthrie 1993: 134–136).

One may also find approaches that link mimesis as a capability for imitation directly to the rise and growth of human culture. Michael A. Arbib, for instance, considers the capacity of imitation to be the very trait that distinguishes humans from their predecessors. At the same time, he sees that unique quality to be the major underlying force for the development of human culture. Michael A. Arbib writes: “imitation plays a crucial role in human language acquisition and performance, and [...] brain mechanisms supporting imitation were crucial to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*” (Arbib 2002: 230; see also Webb 1995). When turning back to Antique philosophy, it is worth repeating here the well-known citation from Aristotle, who formulated a similar thought in different words. “First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons [...]” (Aristotle Poet. 4.1448b5).

As mentioned before, in Antique philosophy the notion of mimesis has a relatively substantial role, although not as a singular category but rather as an open concept used to describe many different activities and phenomena. Summarising pre-Platonic literature, Stephen Halliwell distinguishes five groups of phenomena in relation with which the notion of ‘mimesis’ was used:

First, visual resemblance (including figurative works of art); second, behavioural emulation/imitation; third, impersonation, including dramatic enactment; fourth, vocal or musical production of significant or expressive structures of sound; fifth, metaphysical conformity, as in the Pythagorean belief, reported by Aristotle, that the material world is a mimesis of the immaterial domain of numbers. (Halliwell 2002: 15)

Halliwell sees an idea of correspondence or equivalence between mimetic works, activities or performances and their real-world counterparts as a common thread running through these otherwise various uses.

In works of Plato ‘mimesis’ appear in connection with issues of ethics, politics, metaphysics and human nature. Gebauer and Wulf

distinguish three basic meanings with which Plato uses the notion of mimesis in his early writings:

1. Mimesis as the imitation of a concrete action. Mimesis designates the process in which someone is imitated in regard to something [...].
  2. Mimesis as imitation or emulation. Presupposed here is that the person or object being imitated is worthy of being imitated [...].
  3. Mimesis as metaphor. Something is designated imitation which was not necessarily meant to be.
- (Gebauer, Wulf 1995: 31, 32)

Later, in the *Republic*, metaphysical and ethical considerations also become more clearly observable. Like Plato, Aristotle also uses the notion of ‘mimesis’ in quite different contexts, although for him the primary one is the role and appearance of mimesis in the various arts, especially in poetry, paintings, sculpture, music and dance (Aristotle *Poet.* 1.1447a13–28; Halliwell 2002: 152).<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of that ancient semantic diversity, the modern uses of the word ‘mimesis’ also vary to a great extent. By analysing the ideas of mimesis in the writings of Plato, Cervantes, Rousseau and Kierkegaard, Norwegian literary theorist Arne Melberg has regarded ‘mimesis’ as a moving concept. According to his view, the meaning of the original notion is broader than any possible translation could grasp, and thus various translations such as ‘imitation’, ‘mirroring’, ‘representation’ or the German versions *Nachahmung* and *Darstellung* explicit different potentials of the ‘mimesis’ (Melberg 1995: 18). Depending on the chosen narrower translation at the time, attention has been paid to some specific aspects of the concept.

The exact meaning of the notion of mimesis also depends on the field and context of use. In oral poetry or acting, where the performing artist creates a mimetic situation by his direct activity, the connection of ‘mimesis’ with body-related motions and temporality is emphasised. In literature and paintings, on the other hand, the potential of ‘mimesis’ for representation is expressed. By understanding ‘mimesis’ more generally as the capacity of humans that makes it possible to perceive similarities in the surrounding world, as is done for instance by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1999b), the perceptual side of mimesis is accentuated. The metaphysical use of the notion will draw our

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<sup>2</sup> The Aristotelian approach to mimesis has been studied and compared with contemporary semiotic terminology by Alain Rey (1986).

attention to the possible concordances and structural analogies existing in the world.

Due to its diversity of possible uses, the ancient concept has become a point of departure for many contemporary cultural theorists. I will confine myself here only to two explicit examples. In the post-modernist tradition Jacques Derrida uses the elaborations of mimesis to describe relations between texts. The notion of *différance* embraces differences as well as similarities between the wording, style, ideas etc. of the text under observation and preceding ones, and is thus intrinsically connected with the tradition of mimesis (Derrida 1978). If Derrida in his approach seeks the liberation from strict and logical frameworks of description, then the deterministic extremity of mimesis is probably hidden into the theory of memetics arising from the positivistic tradition of biology. This approach describes culture as being composed of constant units, which multiply and compete with each other in a manner similar to genes. These units, so-called *memes*, preserve the similarity with their precursors when multiplying in the human mind, although at the same time they also change or 'mutate' to a certain extent (Dawkins 1985; Blackmore 1999). The direct connection between the concept of *meme* and the Antique root of mimesis is also announced by the author of the theory — Richard Dawkins (1989: 192).

On the basis of the above-mentioned examples of the extent of the possible field of meanings, it is probably not correct to speak of mimesis as a single concept, but rather as a constantly changing, transforming and as it were 'living' family of concepts (accordingly to Wittgenstein's definition of "family resemblance", Wittgenstein 1976: 32). Different parties, engaged by the family resemblance, cannot be clearly distinguished or defined under any single criterion, although intuitively and by different characteristics they still seem to belong together. 'Mimesis' together with its translations, the meanings of which partly cover the 'mimesis', at the same time constraining and interpreting the notion, seems to form such a family of concepts.

As members of that family of concepts I shall distinguish in this article first 'representation' and 'imitation'. As a parallel and partly overlapping notion, 'mimicry' is also used by some cultural theorists.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Graham Huggan, for instance, makes a distinction between mimesis and mimicry in the framework of anthropological and postcolonial discourse. He considers mimicry to be an aggressive or disruptive imitation that is used to disturb, ridicule or subordinate the imitated object or phenomenon (Huggan 1997: 94–95).

Emphasising the temporal dimension of the ‘mimesis’, Arne Melberg connects ‘mimesis’ with Kierkegaard’s notion of ‘repetition’ (Danish *gentagelsen*, Melberg 1995: 1, 4–5). The expressional activity in ‘mimesis’ is described by the notions of ‘depiction’ and ‘performance’. At the metalevel, the properties of ‘mimesis’ that arise from the relations between the original object and the mimetic work are indicated by the notions ‘correspondence’, ‘reference’, ‘similarity/difference’ and ‘resemblance’. In semiotics ‘mimesis’ is also often associated with the concept of ‘iconicity’.<sup>4</sup>

Belonging to the same concept family does not mean that it is not possible to distinguish different concepts therein and describe the relations between them. It does, however, mean that instead of solid definitions and logical deduction, a more intuitive and descriptive approach is necessary, just as it would be if one were describing the relations between different people and generations in a real family. Recognising the ambiguity of the concept of ‘mimesis’ and its interwovenness with the entire Western philosophical tradition, I will not attempt to define mimesis here. However, for structuring different uses and aspects of the concept I will suggest some dimensions of ‘mimesis’. In doing so, I am still aware that any such attempts cannot be absolute, that they are valid only in regard to the given point of view, and in the extent they help us to better understand the concept family of mimesis and its inner structure.

### **The semiotic dimensions of ‘mimesis’**

The presupposition and starting point of this approach is the opinion that mimesis is primarily a communicative phenomenon. That does not mean that I would altogether exclude various postmodernist approaches — for instance the social aspect of ‘mimesis’ as it is understood by René Girard (1965). He sees ‘mimetic rivalry’ as a characteristic of human nature and as a basic cause for the overwhelming competition and struggle in society, politics and economy in our modern age, which has intensified especially since the beginning of the 19th century. “If one individual imitates another when the latter appropriates some object, the result cannot fail to be rivalry or

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<sup>4</sup> Several authors have also understood biological mimicry to be an example of iconicity in living nature (Nöth 1990: 163; Sebeok 1989: 116).



conflict” (Girard 1978: vii). Mimesis as a socio-cultural phenomenon has also been analysed in the framework of postcolonial cultural studies. For instance, using the British colonial system as an example, Homi Bhabha describes how the political, religious and cultural manners of the mother country have been imitated in colonies and ex-colonies to build an identity of their own (Bhabha 1994: 85–89).

By reducing mimesis to a communicative phenomenon I see a possibility of finding the conceptual clarity from which it would further be possible to comprehend more specific uses of the concept in literary theory and philosophy. My starting point is thus a conscious return to the basic connection between the notion of mimesis and poetry, painting and stagecraft, where mimesis as practise is concrete and processual phenomena by its nature. The framework of description that comprehends mimesis as composed of phases subsequent to each other may prove to be the right tool for organising and analysing this rather complex family of concepts.

I hereby distinguish the creation of mimesis as the first phase and the receiving of the outcome of this mimetic creation as the second phase. The latter, which consists of the perception and apprehension of the outcome of that creation (hereinafter *mimic*), as mimetic also presumes the participation of the second partaker — the *receiver*. The first phase is further divided into the recognition of the mimetic potential of the perceived *object*, situation, event, phenomenon or person by the *creative subject* and secondly, into the activity of expressing, revealing or performing this potential mimetically.

For instance, when one observes how it is possible to imitate birdsong in human language, one may distinguish several phases: (1) recognition arising in the hearer of the birdsong that it is possible to express this sound mimetically by means of human language; (2) actual verbalised expression of the bird song in human language; (3) reaction of the hearer of the mimetic expression and his/her comprehension of the relation of the verbal imitation to the original birdsong. Those phases may be clearly distinguishable from one another and also have a distinct temporal nature, although they may also be bound by interconnections and feedback cycles.

Such a view is somewhat similar to the ideas of Paul Ricoeur, who, in his analysis of the relations between time and narrative, understands mimesis as consisting of three features. Ricoeur distinguishes pre-understandings as *mimesis*<sub>1</sub>, which makes it possible to elicit activity, its structure, symbolic sources and temporal nature; practical creation

of the organisation of events as mimesis<sub>2</sub>, which by containing fiction, conventions and rules, controls and makes representation possible; and mimesis<sub>3</sub>, as connection between the mimetic world of text and the world of the reader by which the temporal nature of mimesis appears and is realised (Ricoeur 1984: 53–55; see also Flood 2000).

In my opinion the precondition for mimesis is the recognition arising in the creative subject that there is potential for mimetic expression in the object. This is the cognitive dimension of mimesis, which is directly connected with the attentiveness, perceptual structure and orientation of the creative subject in its surrounding environment. As a philosophical category, Wittgenstein has expressed this feature as ‘seeing as’, the capacity of humans that presupposes the involvement of perception as well as cognition, i.e. rational substance (Wittgenstein 1976: 197). Walter Benjamin has also written in greater depth about the perceptual preconditions of mimesis. He considers hidden correspondences in Nature, which are partly conceived by humans and partly unconceived, as a cause that motivates and awakens the mimetic capacities in humans (Benjamin 1999a; 1999b; see also Bracken 2002).

According to Benjamin, in our contemporary logo-centric culture such correspondences are mostly withdrawn, but they are still observable in children’s games or in the deeper layers of language, where they connect meanings with words and written language with speech, thus making the entire language onomatopoeic by nature. In particular, many magical and mystical doctrines of language have endeavoured to comprehend such *nonsensuous similarities* concealed in human language (Benjamin 1999a: 696). In Benjamin’s opinion those natural similarities and correspondences still form the basis of the worldview of many traditional cultures, where different elements and creatures of the world are described through magical relations. Mimetic perceptions and typologies of the world also appear in the strangest traditional folk classifications, as they are often described by structural anthropology (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1990; Berlin 1992).

In the cognitive dimension I would also include mimesis as a metaphysical category, as it is understood for instance by Plato in describing the relationship between man’s comprehension of reality and reality (*ta onta*) itself. I would also, however, include here searches in medieval philosophy for appearances in physical nature that would correspond and therefore be connected with the divine source (Nöth 1998: 334–336). The peculiar absoluteness of the

mimetic worldview is hidden in the biblical comprehension of the creation of man: “so God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him” (*Genesis* 1: 27). That sentence could also be interpreted in the sense that man acts and looks as if he has emerged through the imitation of something external; that he does not belong or fit into the flow of natural phenomena. To put it in other words, perceiving the world or some of its elements as embodying a particular inherent structure or regularity and seeing that that regularity is somewhat similar to the outcome of human mimetic activities, it is easy to reach the conclusion that the world or its elements as we perceive them are imitations of something that lies beyond the reach of our senses. Here I would like once again to refer to Stewart E. Guthrie, who emphasises that it is in the nature of humans to presume that in the case of certain type of similarities there should also be a creator. If there is no perceptible source of the similarities, the origin of those will be assigned to a divine, supra-natural or otherwise extraordinary creator. For instance, there are plenty of creation myths in many cultures about the forms of land relief with strange shapes resembling various living creatures (Guthrie 1993: 83, 117–118).

Thus in the cognitive dimension of mimesis, the potential for mimetic expression is detected on the basis of the symbolic world of the creative subject. Perceived objects find their places, properties and connections in the Umwelt of the creative subject, and it is precisely here that the inspiration to create mimetic performance can occur. The emergence of that inspiration, however, is the essential for triggering the creation of mimetic performance. Mimesis is the outcome of the human’s creative activity and cannot occur without the recognition by the creative subject that it is possible and worth to express the perceived object mimetically.

The cognitive dimension of the mimesis is followed and contrasted by the performative dimension, where mimesis becomes recognisable, operative and thus functional. In the performative dimension, mimesis enters into an act of communication, and will be enriched there by the artistic and communicative aspiration of the creative subject. Here the intents of the creative subject to forward information, influence the reader, hearer or viewer and his/her attitude about the mimic or the original will be expressed. Some authors, for instance theatre theorist and semiotician Tadeusz Kowzan, consider that intentionality to be a criterion distinguishing mimesis from all natural similarities and correspondences (Kowzan 1992: 70; Rozik 1996: 191).

The performative dimension of mimesis is also emphasised by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who in his classic work *Laocoön* sees mimesis as a possibility for artistic creation, and describes thoroughly the differences between the possibilities of sculptors and poets in representing their objects. After cognising the possibilities concealed in an object and the means of expression offered by the specific branch of art, the artist then has the opportunity for and freedom of self-realisation. To fulfil this freedom, he or she maximises the artistic potential of the object and materials used by making the right creative choices (Lessing 1874: 143; Gebauer, Wulf 1995: 187). The techniques with which sculptors and poets present their object are, however, quite different, even in the event the object is one and the same; because figurative art and poetry offer fundamentally different possibilities for creative expression.

The second axis of the conceptual family of mimesis is, in my view, constituted by the notions ‘imitation’ and ‘representation’ (Fig. 1). Stephen Halliwell regards the period when ‘mimesis’ was translated into Latin and ‘*imitatio*’ was chosen as an equivalent to be the decisive turning point in the history of the concept. Later on, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, ‘imitation’ and its parallels in other languages were used to indicate the concept. Halliwell argues that translation changed the nature of the concept considerably, reducing it for centuries to mere imitation with negative connotations. He writes:

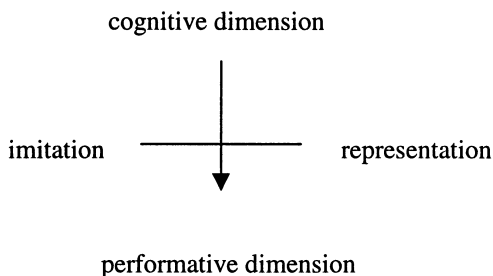
No greater obstacle now stands in the way of a sophisticated understanding of all the varieties of mimeticism, both ancient and modern, than the negative associations that tend to colour the still regrettably standard translation of mimesis as “imitation”, or its equivalent in any modern language [...]. Although it cannot be denied that the greater part of the history of mimeticism has been conducted in Latinized form (i.e., through the vocabulary of *imitatio*, *imitari*, and their derivatives and equivalents), it is now hazardous to use “imitation” and its relatives as the standard label for the family of concepts [...]. (Halliwell 2002: 13)<sup>5</sup>

The most extreme removal from the classical meaning of ‘mimesis’ is probably the way in which the notion of ‘imitation’ is used in contemporary cybernetics and electronics when discussing robots that are capable of imitating (Breazeal, Scassellati 2002). Here the repre-

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<sup>5</sup> Here Halliwell refers mainly to the narrow definition of the mimesis as it is understood in the aesthetics of art under the slogan “the imitation of Nature”.

sentative or signifying participation of the creative subject is completely absent, and thus we are dealing with so-called “pure imitation”.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1.** Basic dimensions of mimesis.

The representative aspect of mimesis is especially noticeable in the Auerbachian approach to the topic (Auerbach 1988). By concentrating in his journey through Western literature on the stylistic features of different works and their connections to the wider historical and social background, Auerbach shows how in different ages reality is manifested by the written word. Even the title of his book “*Mimesis: dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*” demonstrates Auerbach’s endeavour to connect mimesis directly with representation (see also Blanchard 1997). The Auerbachian approach to the concept of mimesis is often intrinsically used as an allusion to the mimetic or referential function of the texts (see, for instance, Walsh 2003).

Depending on the context of usage, mimesis may thus tend to be more imitation or representation, with the difference lying in the nature of the relation between the mimic and the original. In representation, the relation between the mimic and the original is primarily meaning-relation and the creation of the mimesis here basically means the interpretation or reconstruction of some aspect of the original

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of mimesis has been also used in the natural sciences to describe biological adaptation in which an organism resembles a nonliving element in the surrounding environment (Pasteur 1982: 183). Such an approach appears to differ remarkably from the use of the notion in the humanities, especially in cases where the resemblance occurs in the innate physical structure of the organism and the organism does not show any individual activity in the appearance of the adaptation.

using similarity and difference as tools of sign relation.<sup>7</sup> ‘Imitation’, on the other hand, refers more to the superficial reproduction of the original, where the creative subject does not express a semantic relation, but resemblance on the basis of the perceptible characteristics. Thus ‘representation’ relates more to the interpretation made by the creative subject, whereas the result of the ‘imitation’ is rather copying or duplication. In the case of ‘imitation’ it is not necessary to understand the object and thereby position it in the existing structures of one’s *Umwelt*. It is just enough to perceive and to transfer exact characteristics of the original, which makes imitation quite close to biological mimicry.<sup>8</sup>

A similar understanding has been expressed by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who distinguishes so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ mimesis. Lessing writes:

Bei der ersten Nachahmung ist der Dichter Original, bei der andern ist er Kopist. Jene ist ein Teil der allgemeinen Nachahmung, welche das Wesen seiner Kunst ausmacht, und er arbeitet als Genie, sein Vorwurf mag ein Werk anderer Künste, oder der Natur sein. Diese hingegen setzt ihn gänzlich von seiner Würde herab; anstatt der Dinge selbst ahmet er ihre Nachahmungen nach, und gibt uns kalte Erinnerungen von Zügen eines fremden Genies, für ursprüngliche Züge seines eigenen. (Lessing 1874: 143)

At the same time, imitation and representation should not be considered as opposing phenomena that exclude each other, but rather as edges of the sphere in which the construction of the mimesis becomes possible. Imitation and representation can combine with each other in many ways, as there are also numerous possibilities for expressing the similarities and differences between the original and the mimic. Through interaction between similarities and differences it is also

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<sup>7</sup> I understand the term ‘representation’ in a more narrow sense than usual, defining it as the referential presentation in the course of which the creative subject expresses the sign relation (cf. Nöth 1990: 94).

<sup>8</sup> I have defined the term ‘mimicry’ as the similarity between the original and the mimic, which continues throughout the generations, not as much due to the activity of the creative subject but due to the choices of the receiver. By its selection, the receiver eliminates imitations, which it will recognise as imitations and only those that are exact enough to delude the receiver will remain and carry on to the next generations. Mimicry is miscommunication where constant feedback mechanisms are involved in the metalevel, and as such it is an example of the processes in which semiotic activity can partake of the evolutionary processes of nature (Maran 2001).

possible to convey many symbolic meanings, as is done for instance in caricatures or cartoons. Furthermore, the meaning assigned to the mimic may arise from its relations to the context, from connotative references, from the intentions of the creative subject concealed in the mimesis or some other semiotic aspect.

The position of the particular case of mimesis on the axis between imitation and representation depends also on the relation between mimesis and the sign system in which mimesis occurs. In principle, the original and mimic may appear in one and the same as well as in different sign systems or mediums. If the original and the mimic share the same sign system, mimesis may appear either in the form of the imitation or representation as described above. In cases, however, where the original and the mimic exist in different sign systems, i.e. where the mimetic activity is inevitably connected with the translation process from one language to another, the similarity will give way to correspondence, and the imitation tends to be replaced by representation.

### **Mimesis, communication, and iconicity**

As a result of the performative dimension the mimic is created, and by being perceptible and interpretable by the receiver it can then be matched and compared with the original or the 'real world'. Gebauer and Wulf write:

In mimetic reference, an interpretation is made from the perspective of a symbolically produced world of a prior (but not necessary existing) world, which itself has already been subjected to interpretation. Mimesis construes anew already construed worlds [...] Mimetic action involves the intention of displaying a symbolically produced world in such a way that it will be perceived as a specific world. (Gebauer, Wulf 1995: 317)

As such, mimesis is by nature communicative, i.e. it has been created with the intention of participating in the communication. Many features characteristic to mimesis appearing only in the course of that communication, through the interpretation and feedback of the receiver. Only here the intention, aspiration and purpose of the creative subject, as well as the interpretation of the receiver could become embodied and thereby influence the particular communicative situation as well as the sign system being used for the communication.

In mimesis the position of the receiver is in some respects opposite to the position of the creative subject. The role of the receiver is to (re)establish the correspondence between the mimic and the original, to (re)create the meaning relation between those in the terms of ‘similarity’, ‘difference’, ‘resemblance’ — an activity that quite closely corresponds to the definition of semiosis.<sup>9</sup> In the earlier phase of the creation, characteristics of the original are selected by the creative subject and conveyed through the different measure of rendering (from imitation to representation), and therefore the mimic shares many perceptible features with the original. Thus the receiver could establish the sign relation between the mimic and the original on the bases of their similarity or difference. Such a sign relation meets the requirements for being an iconic sign according to the typology of Ch. S. Peirce.

At the same time, the receiver is independent enough to interpret mimetic performance according to his/her own previous knowledge, convictions and aesthetic preferences, and thus mimetic representation, like every other communicative act, may acquire quite a different meaning to the receiver than the creative subject had intended. Mimetic presentation could be interpreted as a symbolic semantic relation, just as a receiver has the freedom to interpret iconically every sign regarded to be conventional by the sender.<sup>10</sup> By analysing different views of the relations between iconic and conventional signs, Jerzy Pelc has suggested iconicity, indexiality and symbolicity not be spoken of as absolute sign categories excluding each-other but rather as different uses of signs (Pelc 1986).

On the basis of cybernetics, Myrdene Anderson has described deception as sender-receiver relation by distinguishing three phases: coding, decoding and feedback; and different possibilities for interaction according to the type of deception — intentionality, truthfulness and believability (Anderson 1986: 327). In the case of mimesis the number of different possibilities appears to be much larger,

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<sup>9</sup> The reaction of the receiver probably cannot be described as semiosis in cases of perfect deception, where the receiver believes that the mimic is the original. Such a situation may also occur in cases where the competence of the receiver to distinguish mimic and original is very low.

<sup>10</sup> The most beautiful example of such a misinterpretation that I know is the true story about the Englishman who interpreted the Estonian word ‘öö’ (night) figuratively, as an icon of two children who have their mouths open from surprise while looking at the stars in the night sky high above their heads.

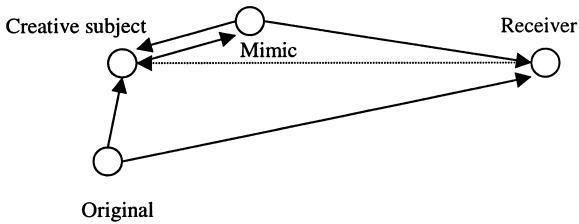


because the scale of intentions and interpretations may vary from purposeful deception to straightforward message and from absolute sameness to conventional symbolicity. For instance, nearly perfect imitation created to deceive may for the receiver turn out to be just an apparent resemblance, if its competence to distinguish originals and mimics is high enough. Therefore the mimetic act of communication should instead be understood as a plausible and adjusting process of communication. Such a frame for description has been suggested by psychologists Luigi Anolli, Michela Balconi and Rita Ciceri (2001), who understand imitation, deception, informational manipulation, non- and misunderstanding and all other non-direct acts of communication in terms of communicative freedom, chance and probability.

One reason to consider the creation of mimesis and the perception of the mimetic performance as two different phases lies also in their temporal independence. The creation of the mimic and its perception may be two sides of the same activity, as is the case for instance in the theatre or in performed music. However, the temporal distance between the creation and perception of the mimic may also extend back hundreds of years, as is the case for instance in classical literature or paintings. Whereas the essence of mimesis is the specially established relationship between the mimic and the original, the interpretation of the mimesis by the receiver may also change considerably if either the properties of the original or the mimic alter over time. As a hypothetical example, an age-old theatrical performance that has been created as a conscious imitation or farce may forfeit its mimeticity in the eyes of the contemporary audience, because the original from which the imitation is derived has been forgotten over times. More than anywhere, such alteration of mimeticity into documentality seems to take place in photography.

Thus we can conclude that the balance between similarity and difference, which has been considered by Arne Melberg (1995: 1) to be a substantive feature for mimesis, can appear only if interpretation of the mimic has been carried out by the receiver (Fig 2). In other words, mimesis cannot acquire its full mimeticity before being perceived as such by the receiver. This viewpoint is also shared by Gebauer and Wulf, who exclude similarity as the criterion for defining mimesis when describing relations between the mimic and the original, but say at the same time that similarity is the result of the mimetic reference. "Only once reference has been established between a mimetic and another world is it possible to make a comparison of

the two worlds and identify the *tertium comparationis*” (Gebauer, Wulf 1995: 317).



**Figure 2.** Mimesis as an act of communication.

The question whether or not ‘similarity’ and ‘resemblance’ could be taken as a criterion of the mimetic relationship is thoroughly argued in art theory in describing the relationship between object and artwork. Nelson Goodman, one well-known critics of that view, claims that it is not possible to demonstrate universal similarity proceeding from the features of an object or from an artwork itself and whether the relation is established or not, is always up to the viewer and depends on his/her experiences and preferences. Therefore, according to Goodman, it is naïve to describe the relation of the artwork and its object in terms of similarity. “Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance”, he writes (Goodman 1985: 5).<sup>11</sup>

In this paper I tend to share the position of Stefan Morawski, who has studied the mimetic relations between artwork and its object from the semiotic point of view. According to his approach, the grounds for searching for similarities should not be any abstract physical features of the objects but rather ‘our own’ perceptual and conventional reality. That reality is both stable and changing at the same time: it is fixed to the many perceptual constants but will also change when constructed by different individuals, social groups, races and historical epochs. This common reality partly given and partly constructed is, however, solid enough to form a basis for similarities, resemblances and all mimetic phenomena. Morawski writes: “Mimesis is predicated on a constancy of perception anchored to anthropological principles, to a

<sup>11</sup> For reflections of the Nelson Goodman’s views, see for instance David Blinder (1986) and Göran Rossholm (1995).

treatment, that is, of the objective world angled to the recurrent modalities whereby people enter into active intercourse with the world” (Morawski 1970: 47).

Probably the clearest distinction between the creation and perception of mimesis is made by theatre semiotician and theorist Tadeusz Kowzan. He calls the first phase of the process ‘mimesis’, considering the actor’s intentional performance as its criterion, and the second phase ‘iconicity’. Iconicity, according to Kowzan, appears when a spectator draws the connection between the mimic and the original. The iconic aspect of the signs may also emerge in the cases of natural signs, although mimesis is inevitably connected with artistic signs.

Le caractère iconique d'un signe se manifeste à l'étape de la réception et de l'interprétation [...]. Le caractère mimétique d'un signe se détermine à l'étape de la création et de l'émission, seuls les signes créés et émis volontairement, ayant un sujet producteur conscient, donc seuls les signes artificiels sont susceptibles d'être mimétiques. Le même signe, à condition qu'il soit artificiel, peut donc avoir un aspect mimétique et un aspect iconique, et cela dépend de sa position dans le processus de sémiologie [...] il peut avoir ces deux aspects simultanément, les deux — aspect mimétique à la création, aspect iconique à la réception — sont parfaitement compatibles. (Kowzan 1992: 71)

Such an interpretation seems to correspond to Ch S. Peirce’s definition of the iconic sign. Peirce writes of the relations between an icon and its object as follows: “The Icon has no dynamical connection with the object it represents; it simply so happens that its qualities resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness. But it really stands unconnected with them” (CP 2.299). The term ‘likeness’ used here seems to me more closely connected with the ‘mimesis’ than the latter substitution ‘icon’. The ‘iconicity’ is understood by Peirce primarily as the property of the sign, whether the ‘likeness’ could also indicate a certain kind of cognitive involvement. For instance, Peirce argues that an artist may use ‘likeness’ in its creation: “another example of the use of a likeness is the design an artist draws of a statue, pictorial composition, architectural elevation, or piece of decoration, by the contemplation of which he can ascertain whether what he proposes will be beautiful and satisfactory” (CP 2.281). Thus Peirce’s ‘likeness’ seems to be quite a dynamic category that could be involved in various processes where correspondences are created on the basis of resemblance.

Kowzan's approach does not mean, however, that mimesis and iconicity should always inevitably appear together. It is possible for either phase to occur separately, as it is possible that different mimeses follow each other such that the performative dimension of the one mimesis becomes the perceptual dimension of the other, thus constituting a chain of mimetic occurrences. In this case we can speak of mimesis as cyclical communication that brings us closer to post-modernist approaches to mimesis. An example of the applications of the infinite mimesis in postmodernist thought is Jean Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum. According to his views, in our time representational signs are substituted by successive simulations that do not have any connection whatsoever with reality. The existence of those simulations, on the other hand, is enough to conceal the loss of the connection with reality (Baudrillard 1988).

The approach offered here, which focuses on communication and the role of the creative subject, is universal in the sense that it allows us to study either mimesis in the form of single representations of reality or as a cyclical phenomenon where different imitations follow each other. I believe that like semiosis mimesis is also a universal phenomenon that could occur in the case of very different mediums, sign systems and participants, at the same time remaining dependent on them by representing the characteristic features of the situation it emerges from. As Gebauer and Wulf write: "In each case the mimetic world is possessed of its own particular right in relation to the one to which it refers; by virtue of its characteristic, mimesis is fundamentally distinct from theories, models, plans and reconstructions" (Gebauer, Wulf 1995: 315).

However, I would like to emphasise the role of the creative subject in mimesis much more than is usually done, e.g., by Gebauer and Wulf. Whether the creative subject participate in the mimesis as an active interpreter or just as a copier of the perceptible features of the original also determines the possibilities for the uniqueness or repetitiousness of the mimesis. Imitation, where the creative participation of the subject is small or absent, may easily become cyclical repetition.

By altering the locations of the creative subject and receiver in the mimesis, one could also derive some special types of mimesis. For instance the schema, where the creative subject imitates the properties that belong to the receiver and constitute part of its identity, corresponds to the process of identity formation in social and cultural

groups. Automimesis could also be considered a special type of mimesis. In that case the creative subject and the receiver of the mimesis is one and the same. Such a situation has been described in postcolonial cultures, where certain features of the culture of the colonists' motherland is imitated in order to see oneself as a subject and to build one's own identity (Bhabha 1994: 85–92).

### **Conclusion: Mimesis and semiosis**

Although an ambiguous and dispersed notion, mimesis has played an important role in European cultural tradition since Antiquity. Nowadays mimesis as a concept has more often been used in literary theory, philosophy, psychology and postmodernist studies. According to the approach proposed in this article, mimesis lies in the region between imitation, representation, perception and performance. Binding the perception of an object with conscious performance, mimesis inevitably presupposes the existence and participation of human creative forces. Mimesis is an active process in which something new is created, even if it is based on what is previously known, and thus mimesis and creativity are very closely connected.

The aspiration to understand mimesis from the viewpoint of semiotics thus inevitably directs our attention to the concept of creativity in semiotics; to the views of how sign systems arise and change in the course of semiotic processes (see Mikita 2000). The scarcity of such approaches in semiotics and the overall importance of the subject to literary and art theory is in my mind the main reason why the notion of mimesis has so far generally been dealt with by the latter. For semiotics the problem of mimesis raises questions about the formation of new structures by semiosis as well as the development and changeability of semiotic systems.

Furthermore, it seems that there is a certain parallelism that can be perceived between the notions 'semiosis' and 'mimesis'. Charles Morris defines semiosis as a sign process consisting of three basic components: "that which acts as a sign, that which the sign refers to, and that effect on some interpreter in virtue of which the thing in question is a sign to that interpreter" (Morris 1970: 3). Could we not then summarise this paper by claiming, like Morris, that mimesis is a kind of intentional process of sign creation, where something new is created on the bases of the perceptual properties of the existing object

or phenomena in such a way that the outcome acts as a sign for the interpreter. As shown above, the mimic is usually created for communicative purposes, and therefore mimesis can be considered the process of giving semiotic output to the cognitive category perceived by the creative subject. But if so, then whether or not the notion of mimesis finds use in contemporary semiotics, the theoretical problem indicated by the longevity and diversity of the concept family of mimesis should be also under the continuous attention of semiotics.

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### **Мимесис как явление семиотической коммуникации**

Понятие “мимесис” не столь часто используется в современном семиотическом диалоге. Настоящая статья ознакомит с разными интерпретациями этого понятия и, исходя из них, мимесис рассматривается как явление коммуникации. При выделении разных измерений значения мимесис понимается как состоящий из этапов коммуникации и соотносится с понятиями имитации, репрезентации, иконичности и др концептами семиотики.

### **Mimeesi kui semiootilise kommunikatsiooni nähtus**

Mimeesi mõistet ei kasutata tänases semiootilises dialoogis kuigi sageli. Artiklis kirjeldatakse erinevaid vaateid mimeesi mõistele ning lähtuvalt neist vaadeldakse mimeesi kui kommunikatsiooninähtust. Erinevaid tähendusdimensioone esile tuues mõistetakse mimeesi kommunikatsioonietappidest koosnevana ning säärasena seostatakse ta imitatsiooni, representatsiooni, ikoonilisuse jt semiootika mõistetega.