Introduction

Conventional understandings of mimesis fall short of the complexity and significance of the concept. It is restricted in some cases to aesthetics, in others to imitation. These definitions reveal neither the anthropological dimension of mimesis nor the variety of meanings that can be and have been attached to the term. And this is the case even though mimesis plays a critical role in nearly all areas of human thought and action, in our ideas, speech, writing, and reading. Mimesis is a *conditio humana* at the same that it is responsible for variations among individual human beings. A spectrum of meanings of mimesis has unfolded over the course of its historical development, including the act of resembling, of presenting the self, and expression as well as mimicry, *imitatio,* representation, and nonsensuous similarity. The accent may lie on similarity in sensuous terms, on a nonsensuous correspondence, or on an intentional construction of a correlation. Some writers have emphasized the intermediary character of mimesis; they locate it in medial images, which occupy the space between the inner and the outer worlds. Depending on developments in the larger aesthetic, philosophical, or social context, the meaning of mimesis changes, betraying a hitherto scarcely noted richness in the concept.

On the basis of selected examples, we have undertaken a historical reconstruction of important phases in the development of mimesis, which has allowed us to identify continuities and breaks in the usage of the term. An effort such as ours necessarily confronts considerable difficulties. In too many cases we have not been able to consider whole spheres, like music and architecture, that are critical to a complex understanding of mimesis, and we have devoted insufficient attention to others. Nevertheless, the insights we have gained warrant, in our judgment, a view of mimesis as belonging among those

concepts that are central to the human sciences. Mimesis has fascinated such writers as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Jacques Derrida, stimulating their reflections. With these writers the vagueness of the concept, rather than interfere with its precise application, has been turned to advantage.

It is not arbitrariness that has characterized the use of the concept, but a peculiar intuition, which often appears in the form of an adaptation to broader historical changes. There is less a lack of conceptual discipline in the history of mimesis than a resistance to theory building. As a concept, mimesis betrays a distrust of the instrumentalities and procedures of theory kept "pure" of the contamination of human practice. The artificiality, precision, and immobility characteristic of conventional definitions in scientific thought are hostile to mimesis, which tends toward action and is bound to time's passage and human productive activity. It would be more accurate to say that that bond, which comes to light in the form of insufficient technical rigor, has stood in the way of a clear explication of the concept.

Mimesis is not concerned with boundaries drawn between art, science, and life. It causes accepted differentiations to lose their power to distinguish and strips definitions of their conventional meanings. New connections, distinctions, and orders of thought come into being. Hitherto overlooked mimetic processes come into view; they appear in the entanglements of art and literature, aesthetics and science. The productive side of mimesis lies in the new connections it forges among art, philosophy, and science.

Mimetic processes are not unequivocal; they are better understood as ambivalent. Mimesis leads one to adapt to destroyed environments and petrified social relations; it has a part in our symbolization of the world and in processes of simulation. The aestheticization of the world is continued in the images of the mass media, which are related mimetically to presupposed realities. They create ostensible or constructed realities, change and absorb them; images are miniaturized and accelerated in video form; they become a surrogate experience of reality. Realities are not becoming images here, but images are becoming realities; a plurality of image-realities come into being. Distinctions between realities, images, and fictions break down. The world appears subject to a making in images. Images come into mimetic relation with other images. Floods of images drown the imagination and cancel the inaccessibility and oppositionality of the Other.

Mimesis resists a clear-cut split between subject and object; it resists any unequivocal distinction between what is and what should be. While it does indeed contain rational elements, they themselves evade instrumental interventions in and approaches to the world. The individual "assimilates" himself or herself to the world via mimetic processes. Mimesis makes it possible for individuals to step out of themselves, to draw the outer world into their inner world, and to lend expression to their interiority. It produces an otherwise

unattainable proximity to objects and is thus a necessary condition of understanding.

In what contexts does mimesis appear? It is felt in discussions of how others are to be described physically, in statements about dance, music, and theater; it stimulates the imagination through writing and artistic representation. The often unconscious blend of doing and knowing found in mimesis designates a particular type of thinking or a faculty, which fuses the practical and technical skills we gain through experience and our theoretical abilities to recognize and evaluate. In this interpretation, mimesis characterizes the act of producing a symbolic world, which encompasses both practical and theoretical elements. The capacity and the procedure of representing on stage a person whose role is laid down in a text is a characteristic example of this. The concept of mimesis implies a resistance to splitting the human spheres of experience, action, and symbolic production into two parts, one practical and the other theoretical; it opposes analysis so definitive as to render mediation senseless. The history of mimesis as a whole makes reference to the mutual interpenetration of spheres, to a nonrecognition of the split, to symbolically constituted worlds.

Characterized in this way, it becomes evident that the concept of mimesis necessarily loses its intellectual centrality with the rise of rational thought. The field of art, which comes to be regarded in the process as autonomous, undergoes a complete and fundamental restructuring. The change itself allows us to recognize a second characteristic of mimesis: while modern rational thought refers to the single isolated cognitive subject, mimesis is always concerned with a relational network of more than one person; the mimetic production of a symbolic world refers to other worlds and to their creators and draws other persons into one's own world. As is apparent in this constellation, mimesis implies the recognition of mediation between worlds and people; it does not designate a subjection to received models, but rather an acceptance of traditions and the work of predecessors. It also implies a recognition of power: the inclusion of others introduces power, if only in symbolic terms, into one's own personal world, into the interpretive and perspectival modes developed there. The history of mimesis is a history of disputes over the power to make symbolic worlds, that is, the power to represent the self and others and interpret the world. To this extent mimesis possesses a political dimension and is part of the history of power relations.

An "impure" concept in the sense of rational thought, a concept immersed in practice and shot with traces of tradition and power, a variable of history and social relations and therefore not subject to formalization (thus compromised in modern terms), the rediscovery of mimesis takes place in a time in which the ideal of solipsistic cognition, a sharp distinction between theory and practice, and the ideology of the autonomous self, glorified as a creative ego, are all losing their universally obligatory character for scientific thought. Reference

to others, the practice of thinking in terms of context and established customs and games, the turn toward action, the externalization of the self—all of these represent aspects of various endeavors to complete modernity in the sense of improving or, as the case may be, overcoming it.

Erich Auerbach, a German romance scholar living between cultures in exile in Istanbul when he wrote his major work on mimesis as a central element in the history of European ideas, began the contemporary retrieval of the concept of mimesis. We shall therefore begin with Auerbach and, through a discussion of the manner of his investigations, develop a terminology for our observations that is as adaptable and as flexible as possible. That our aim is not theory formation, with exact definitions, explications, and allegedly faithful reconstructions, should be evident by now. Just as little can it be disputed that our intention is a theoretical one. Our object requires us to confront processes of historical transformation; it calls for a specific kind of intellectual recapitulation of historical movement. But our undertaking only makes sense given a minimum degree of comparability among the various usages of the concept; we will introduce frame concepts to this end. The only concepts suitable for such a purpose are ones that have themselves been part of the historical processes, as the intellectual product of the persons involved. We shall develop our frame of conceptual reference out of the history of mimesis, which means precisely that historical reflection serves to establish the frame of reference without which the reflections would not be possible.

Mimesis in reference to others represents a productive intervention into modes of thinking and speaking that are other than one's own. An important question is whether this process gives rise to new modes of thinking and speaking, or whether all that results are variations of old ones. For us, however, it is a matter of gradual movement along a continuum; it is not here that the question of whether an author acquires the quality of an autonomous voice is decided. The influence of the ideology of original genius is evident here, but the more important question is the extent to which an author is able to resist social pressure, able to produce a counterpressure of his or her own, whether, that is, a particular strategy adopted in relation to the medium of expression generates a system of codification through which an author gains symbolic power.

With his concept of mimesis, Plato forged the intellectual tool that would introduce the decisive turn into the history of mimesis. His concept unifies certain linguistic customs while excluding others; he constructs wholly abstract typologies, applying the linguistic label "mimesis" to specific extracts of social, artistic, and practical action. He makes of a vague, nonspecific expression with diffuse usages a verbal label, one that is clearly determined by broader theoretical interests, which he then uses to characterize a specific subject matter. In our attempt to do justice to the breadth of the concept, we shall begin by pursuing the opposite approach; by considering all of the most important

qualities attributed to mimesis over the course of its history, we shall attempt to restore to the concept the full spectrum of its meanings.

1. In many usages mimesis entails an *identification* of one person with another. People identify themselves by means of their mimetic abilities when they see themselves in the Other and perceive a state of mutual equality. In this sense mimesis is distinct from mimicry, which implies only a physical and no mental relation. There is a complementarity of perspectives in mimesis: a person regards the Other as equal and assumes the Other to be doing the same in reverse. Such an act of complementary seeing produces a correspondence between people. Complementarity is manifest in physical form when one person clings to another; it is a sensuous, bodily act, but it is already penetrated by order; the Other is assimilated to the world of the person who is clinging. An affective moment, which is inherent in mimesis, is also expressed in this metaphor.
2. Mimesis includes both an *active* and a *cognitive* component. The two cannot be sharply distinguished. Pierre Bourdieu, with the term *sens pratique,* designates this particular type of knowledge of practical action.
3. Mimesis originally denoted a *physical action* and developed first in oral cultures. It has an indicative character, with attention turning repeatedly to the gestural over the history of the concept. Even as purely linguistic mimesis, it remains an "indicative speaking." The pointing is perceived by the recipient such that he or she is called on to see certain things or procedures as something. In this reciprocity lies one component of mimesis, one that renders into a spectacle that which is indicated or represented.
4. Associated with the physical aspect of mimesis is its *performative* aspect, as an actualization, a presentation of what has been mimetically indicated. Thus is mimesis often combined with an action-oriented speaking. The action character of mimesis is even taken over into its written form. In other modes mimesis tends toward condensed symbols, for example, toward rituals and images.

We use the term "mimesis" as a verbal label for manifold social processes summarized conceptually. But here another problem arises: we have access to the original mimetic processes of practice only as verbal constructs and usually in written form. But mimesis moves with history, coming to expression in forms appropriate to respective historical periods. Our method is also constructive; it is designed to serve the purpose of introducing into thought an order that encompasses as much about what we know about mimetic processes as

possible. By reconstructing variations on the concept of mimesis in historical context, we attempt to transcend the kind of thought that deals excessively in conceptual labels. Admittedly, the question remains unanswerable as to whether our way of ordering the world corresponds to this or that historical figure, or is even appropriate to his or her time. Yet this problem is not that of historical representation alone but one of intersubjectivity as such.

We have no language with which to illustrate original mimetic processes. Other aspects as well, however, of historical changes in mimesis can be understood only by means of subsequent construction. Alongside the concept of the individual, the way in which others enter into mimetic processes and what references are made to them also change. The involvement of an individual's interiority, the role of inner images, and the imagination itself change over time. Of critical significance to us are the historical transformations of literary genres, thus the relationship of epic, novel, and story to each other and their relationships to drama; the epic represents differently than the novel, which was able to distance itself from mimesis. A negative view of mimesis runs all the way through the history of the concept. Certain writers distance themselves from its various components: the role of the body, reference to others, practical action, the affective content of mimesis, the influence of the medial.

Our investigation begins with Greek antiquity, where the concept arose and where its first meanings evolved. Here a distinction is to be made between a pre-Platonic usage of the term oriented toward everyday meanings and Plato's "discovery" of mimesis and Aristotle's condensed use of the concept in his aesthetics. In Plato, mimesis is bound to the transition from oral to literary culture. His assessment, in that context, is ambivalent: on the one hand, he recognizes its significance; on the other, he fears its power, which is difficult to calculate. In any case, the widespread notion that Plato developed only a critical view of mimesis attends too narrowly to the facts. In his conception, mimesis is also the force that creates images and therefore underlies aesthetics. Plato sometimes designates even the works of philosophers as mimetic and calls for the creation of a society related mimetically to the eternal world of the Ideas. Even his relation to Socrates and the representation of Socratic philosophy in dialogues is mimetic. The prevailing view into the present, however, derives from the subsequent Aristotelian restriction of mimesis to aesthetics.

There has been no truly stationary period in the history of the concept of mimesis. New usages produce new contexts in which the concept—sometimes nearly imperceptibly—is changed. Mimesis is deeply entangled in society. Its respective historical positions are defined by authors, painters, musicians, architects, historians, and philosophers; they offer designs of how it might be possible, under the conditions of their time, to make artistic and other worlds. How can one create other worlds supplemental to the existing one? With what intention? What relationships should these other worlds have to the one that is taken at the time as the prior one?

The historical succession of such positions is most often conceived in terms of a model, as the progressive approximation of an empirically given social world, for example, or as growth or a collection of historical deposits around a conceptual core, as a dialectical ascendance or a spiral. There is no essential core of mimesis removed from history. Where would any such thing be located? Considering only antiquity, would it be in the pre-Platonic conception of musical theory? In the third or tenth book of the *Republic?* In Aristotle's *Poetics?* Or in Horace's conception of imitatio? To the notion of an augmentation of a conceptual core we can oppose the complex and multilayered meanings of mimesis in Plato, whereby it is difficult to imagine the concept being rendered any more complex later in its history. It is not possible to discern a general dialectic in the history of mimesis. Nor is a continuous ascendancy, also expressed in the image of the spiral, an appropriate metaphor, because a conceptual level once attained (as in Greek antiquity or in the eighteenth century) can be lost once again in a subsequent period.

Concepts cannot be referred back onto essences, and, in our view, the imposition of a specific course on history by means of structural theories is not tenable. Nevertheless, there are links among the various historical positions of mimesis, so that it is finally possible to conceive them as related to each other: later positions derive from earlier ones and are similar to them, just as they are related among themselves on the basis of a common derivation. Overlapping and crosscutting similarities are to be found among variations on the concept, without this meaning that they all share any one characteristic in common. The red thread we attempt to follow in this work is woven of such "family resemblances" (Wittgenstein). To this extent, our study has no central thesis to be imposed on the body of texts under consideration. Our intention, expressed in our recapitulation of the historical changes mimesis has undergone, is to expose the buried dimensions of the term and to correct and move beyond reductions, beyond the kind of unwarranted precision that results in an impoverishment of the concept.

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 the simultaneous object of theoretical reflection and aesthetic and social application. Mimesis as a concept of practice has prompted theorization in every epoch since its initial formulation. Rather than being accepted simply as representation, imitation, or whatever else it might be taken to mean, it has always been understood as a problem; mimesis, by virtue of the changes it effects, makes of one thing something Other. It is and has been regarded as an anthropological, epistemological, social, and political problem that demands reflection. Various solutions to the problem have been offered in the various historical epochs since antiquity; they are to be found not only in theoretical texts but also, in explicit or implicit form, in literature. We shall therefore include literary as well as theoretical texts in our

investigation, concentrating primarily on explicit theory only in epochs in which mimesis became an explicit object of lasting theoretical treatment. It is important for our purpose that we convey an impression of the sheer multitude of reflective approaches to mimesis. We have therefore found it necessary, even at the risk of occasional cursory treatment, to provide an overview of entire epochs. Since mimesis is more than a procedure by which works of art are produced, it has been equally necessary for us to expand our field of vision beyond art and to introduce into the discussion a number of nonaesthetic aspects.