Chapter III

Two Themes Surrounding Historical Mimesis: A Discussion

Curiously enough, one cannot read a book; one can only re-read it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a re-reader.

- Vladimir Nabakov

We now have a better understanding of historical mimesis from the selective overview done in Chapter II. The idea of imitation itself was explored in the previous chapter, and we saw that the Latin tradition did not see mimesis in quite the way the Greeks saw it, but gave it a newer interpretation, largely through its appearance in rhetoric. Yet, the tendency to equate mimesis with imitation has continued even into modern scholarship. Halliwell disagrees with this blanket view and suggests that rather than (mis)understanding mimesis as imitation (eg Koller 1954) with all the inherent problems of looking for an ‘original’ whether real or implied, mimesis may be more profitably understood as ‘a family of concepts’ concerning representation. This ‘family of concepts has been unpacked in Chapter II. Rather than being constrained by ‘reality’, one could also understand mimesis as ‘the use of an artistic medium to signify and communicate some hypothesized realities’ (Halliwell 2002: 16, emphasis mine). We went some distance towards understanding this in Chapter II in medieval as well as postmodern times. It is this ‘family of concepts’ that we continue to explore, develop and engage with as this dissertation unfolds.

We saw the emphasis that was historically placed on imitation in ancient and medieval Europe – in earlier times, the Romans imitated the Greeks; in later times, particularly in the Renaissance, the Romans imitated their own ancient heritage. Prominent among the rhetorical flourishes that characterized *imitatio* were the techniques of repeating the same thing but meaning quite another. Thus, rather than looking only at the surface level of appearance of similarity – either in words or in images – Roman *imitatio* brought in what we now call ‘intertextuality’ after Julia Kristeva (1986). Things which were identical could be completely different as they meant something quite different. Whither then the core of replication and
copying of reality in mimesis a la the Greeks? In fact, the idea that art was a mirror of reality continued, although the reality referred to in the rhetorical traditions could ironically be two entirely different ones, or two different hypothesized realities.

Roman *imitatio* makes us look deeper than the surface of replication of reality to enter into the domain of semantics. Even repeating the same thing could mean something quite different as rhetoric revealed. The simplest examples of this being ‘punning’ on a word, or the use of ‘irony’ in phrases: in both instances, you say one thing but mean something else or even its opposite. Such rhetorical techniques followed the notion of mimesis as imitation of reality in its gross form, but used the form to undermine its very meaning and thereby contributed to the formation of genres like parody and satire when entire stories could be imitated by saying one thing but meaning something else. Rather than looking for rationality in plot or emotions, as Aristotle had done to legitimize the place of mimesis, the Romans brought subtlety and scope to mimesis, with its sophisticated understanding of rhetorical *imitatio*.

Further, the Romans did not attempt to prove the complexity of repetition through an analysis of deeper structure, as modern theorists such as Halverson (1992) and Melberg (1995) have done in order to validate their claim that oral traditions, though repetitive, were not repetitive at a simple level. Instead, through an extraordinary grasp of language and semantics, the Romans showed us that mimesis itself could be extraordinary. To imitate, even to the point of being identical in utterance, was not to be devalued but threw up opportunities for cleverness, wit, insight and style through the use of satire and parody. Unlike mimesis-as-emulation which arose of the premise that the past was to be revered and therefore emulated, mimesis-as-*imitatio* was based on the opposite premise: that the past could equally be the source of amusement and ridicule. Rather than questioning the metaphysics of mimesis, the Romans retained the idea of the original, in fact insisted on it, because without an original, there would be no challenge, or renewal, to copying.¹ Parody, satire and other intertextual techniques could not have been born. Many things could not have been invented ‘anew’.

The question now arises as to what is ‘the original’? As we have seen, those who study oral traditions point out the concept of both ‘the’ original as well as ‘the’ song, make no sense in such traditions. Others, primarily in the arts, equally emphatically point out that until and unless

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¹ Compare this with J Hillis Miller (1985) who had to introduce the notion of time in order to make repetition renewing.
something is copied, there is no ‘original’. In the Roman times itself, apprentices worked tirelessly to emulate the style of their master artists and such work, bearing the ‘autograph’ by way of style of a master artist, was sold to great demand all across the Roman empire and beyond to what would be considered a ‘gullible’ market today. This is similar to the machine-made prints of ‘original’ art by great masters in museums which are sold to the public. Over time, other ideas arose which repeatedly brought the idea of the original into question: In contemporary art, merely changing the context of a readymade, mass-produced object like the urinal, as was done by Duchamp in Readymades, gave rise to the question of the original and equally about the nature of art itself. While such perspectives projected that it is the act of copying which makes an original an original, it also understood that this impetus gives rise to schools and lineages in the arts.

Another point of view on this issue was that there was no original which could be objectively construed: ‘originality was not an objective fact but a historically specific style of presentation – a recognizable roughness, spontaneity or naturalness, for example’ (Boon: 49). And lastly with reference to this idea of the original, mention must be made of the pop artists like Andy Warhol and concept artists like John Cage and the Fluxus group who thought that ‘the copy was more original than the original precisely because it made explicit its own dependence on other things, signs or matters’ (Boon: 49).

In this chapter we will flesh out two of the key issues which underlie the mimetic concepts, as well as the issues that are thrown up for discussion by our more nuanced understanding of mimesis. This discussion will further enhance our understanding of mimesis itself. The first of these arises in the specific context of theatre and is concerned with the conventions arising in the relation between theatre and its audience. The second issue concerns the relation between an art work and the world thereby problematizing the idea of ‘reality’ and again discussing it against the idea of conventions. We discuss these two issues below.

**Mimesis and Theatre**

Theatre has had a central place in mimetic theory since Greek antiquity as we have seen, through what were called the dramato-poetic arts. It is thus impossible to separate theatre from mimesis. Our understanding of mimesis may be enhanced by seeing how mimesis plays out in this artistic genre. We have seen that while granting a special place to stories on account of their useful
social function, Plato was vehemently opposed to theatre/theatricality, particularly tragedy, due to the element of disguise involved in it and the emotions it aroused in the audience. As mentioned earlier, for Plato, the mimetic poets were to be shunned and banned. Tragedy in particular, and the dramatopoetic arts in general, were to be derided for their mimetic effects on audience.

Augustine’s (354 CE-430 CE) response to theatrical mimesis was in fact similarly concerned with its effect on audience rather than whether it was a mirror of nature. He was thus close to Plato in that he was against mimesis and found no redeeming quality in it. Further, Augustine associated theatre with violence and irrational emotions rather than with rational thought (Potolsky 2006: 72). He had a problem with theatre/spectacle not only because of what is portrayed but how it was received by the audience. Thus, there is always an audience for whom theatrical mimesis is directed to; theatrical mimesis is not merely the representation of something. We have seen this idea arise in Plato as well as Aristotle. In Platonism, mimesis was dangerous precisely because of its negative effect on audience rather than because of something inherently bad in it. For Aristotle, mimesis succeeded most when it allowed the audience to reflect rationally on otherwise upsetting emotions.

Despite his overall commendation of the mimetic arts, a particular reading of Aristotle’s idea of mimesis-as-creation with its emphasis on rationality leads us to believe that he decentered theatre. This is because he believed that spectacle was unimportant as it was the plot that gave tragedy its mimetic effect. Thus, by decentering spectacle (in other words, by giving it no importance) Aristotle ‘saves’ mimetic tragedy but ironically can do this only by removing it from the theatre, in other words by removing theatricality or spectacle itself (Potolsky 2006: 73). Within this reading of Aristotle, it ought to be sufficient to read a play script for effect as its performance, per se, was unimportant.

It should be clear by now that theatrical mimesis is not directed only to the relation between an ‘original’ and a copy, as it was in both Greek as well as Roman ideas of mimesis, but between a specific action and the audience to whom it is directed. In a painting for example, mimesis could function at either or both of two levels: one as a representation of nature (nature as original, painting as copy); two as an imitation of another painting of nature (painting as original, and second painting as copy). Both kinds do not involve a viewer per se and thus, the issue of mimesis as a relation between the original and the copy can be seen to also be
independent of the viewer. Thus, mimesis arises in the visual arts in how something is represented and this gives rise to the formation of artistic styles and genres. But in theatrical mimesis, a viewer or audience needs to be actively involved in viewing. A tragedy put up for itself is mimetic only to a degree; it first and foremost needs an ‘audience’. Understood from contemporary perspective, this is laboring a point but the idea that theatre needs an audience is not as simple as it appears: the idea of a ‘viewing subject’ or ‘audience’ or ‘spectators’, and the idea of a performance as something separate from ‘normal life’ is something that had to be constituted before the idea of theatrical mimesis could be fully explored.

Conventions in Theatrical Mimesis
As the section on imitatio showed, mimesis clearly was important in the use and further development of artistic or stylistic and generic conventions through imitation. Did mimesis give rise to similar conventions surrounding theatre? We have already mentioned the need for constitution of the ‘viewing subject’, and therefore the separation of the object by creating a special viewing context. What are the conventions that needed to be established for this so that theatrical mimesis can be born?

Prior to the 1880s, in large parts of Europe, there was a fluidity of the stage. Audience members sat on it and participated in the theatre or even chatted amongst themselves and the actors (Potolsky 2006: 74-75). The idea of viewing something separately designated as a theatrical performance is not as ubiquitous as we assume it to be now. It is not even the case in contemporary Indian performances in many rural areas today where there is a great deal of conversation among the audience while the performance is going on. Comments are thrown at the performers and sometimes there will even be rejoinders from the latter. As such, a convention which strictly dictates the roles of performer and audience does not exist. At many Indian folk performances which last through the night, audience members doze off and wake up, eat or drink and feed children, unselfconsciously move in and out of the performing area. This is not considered bad manners or disturbing to the performers, as would be the case in more westernized spaces or those influenced by modern, western conventions. This is true even of some large classical Indian music performances which are held outdoors where conventions of viewing are at best considerably more fluid than the ones which follow the Western ones. Similarly, in late medieval Europe, the idea of viewing something separately as a ‘performance’
was a convention that had not yet taken root. As one commentator puts it, ‘Theatre comes into existence when a separation occurs between spectators and performers’ (Schechner 2003: 137). This involved constituting the performance as a separate category of experience and the viewer/audience as a separate category with a role to play.

The idea of silent viewing of a performance is yet another modern convention, as is the idea of a segregated space (Gran 2002: 259-260). Even the idea of watching a play at the end of the day is something that came with modernity. It was only with the birth of the ‘fourth wall’ in about the 1880s that the space became a mimetic space and the audience got segregated in the ‘house’ as viewers in darkness (Potolsky 2006: 75). Since it is conventions that make something theatre, not necessarily only something inherent in it, it has been suggested that theatrical mimesis is a way of seeing – a ‘conceptual envelope’ that surrounds and transfigures people and things rather than a specific object, event and even point of view from which to see them (Potolsky 2006: 75-76).

The power of theatrical mimesis is also seen in other ways: for instance, in its ability to reveal hidden truths about human nature. Not just does it hold a mirror to the face of the world, but on seeing one’s self reflected in it, theatre succeeds in unmasking the audience’s deceptions and disguises. Thus, inasmuch as mimesis is a reflection of the physical nature, it is also a reflection of the inner self (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 157) which is an idea established by Aristotelian mimesis. The mimetic functions of theatre exceeded this: for Augustine, theatre was violent, irrational and unethical as it legitimized watching another suffering as a source of pleasure while at the same time removing human agency; for Goethe, it was a means of self-creation and a means of social mobility in eighteenth century society; for Rousseau, Austen and others it was something to be wary about as it encouraged deception and hypocrisy. Further, the actor was someone to be feared as one never knew the Machiavellian extremities he could go to; he was also someone to be scorned as, while playing all other roles, he abandoned the one of being human (Rousseau 1960: 80). All these above people and their ideas was based on mimesis of one kind or another in their various positions on theatre.

Part of the set of conventions of theatre, such as it being performed in a formally designated space, has been challenged in contemporary times. The theatre theorist Josette Feral suggested that theatre can happen anywhere, given the right ‘perceptual dynamic’. He tried to come up with a new set of conventions of ‘invisible theatre’. According to him, in theatrical
mimesis, there is a perceptual dynamics involved, of seeing and being seen (Feral 2002: 105); it can therefore be independent even of the conventional proscenium stage. This gave rise to the ‘invisible theatre’ in which actors staged conflicts in everyday, public spaces and do not let the ‘audience’ know of the plot. Experiencing the conflict as real, the ‘audience’ unwittingly participate in the conflict and thus become ‘actors’. When the actors signal the theatrical context of the conflict, the public space gets transformed into a theatrical one (Potolsky 2006: 74). Thus, rather than conventions being set up from outside which create a separate space and activity called ‘theatre’, Feral suggests that it is the way we look at something that makes it a performance. Today’s contemporary flash performances which focus on this idea that theatrical mimesis can happen anywhere are also part of this kind of questioning.

Such thinking also gave rise to *theatrum mundi* or the world/life as theatre: ‘All the world is a stage, and we are in it but actors’ as Shakespeare told us. And specific facets of life would do well to utilize it effectively and to specific advantage. This is what the Italian political theorist Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1513) believed when he said: a king must recognize and exploit the fact that he is on stage. In saying this, he recognized the need for a separation between ethics and politics, as there are always times when the king would have to take unethical decisions based on political expediency but he must yet package himself as an ethical ruler.

There was another way in which theatre was considered mimetic. This is when it was considered so powerful that it served as an analogy for life itself. This view was supported by the Russian director Nicolas Evreinoff in his book *The Theatre in Life* (1922). He felt that the theatrical principle (the impulse or will to theatricality) inheres in all of life, even in plants and animals, in that there is an instinct to become someone else. Imitation is natural, he agrees with Aristotle, not only a means to other ends such as learning or pleasure but, he points out, as an inherent way human beings have to differentiate and transform themselves. Thus, society has a kind of stage manager, a wardrobe, its script governing behavior in public life. To go against these, as in the attempt to be more ‘natural’ (even as in the case of Rousseau’s fulminations against acting and artifice for society) will mean being seen either as a ‘bad’ actor or as replacing one set of (theatrical) conventions with another. These ideas were developed more fully by the proponents of the social permeation of mimesis such as Barthes, Butler and Irigaray as we see later in this chapter.
An important aspect of the conventions surrounding theatre is that they, in turn, created attitudes towards theatre, both positive and negative. An interesting observation about the genesis of many of the negative attitudes towards theatre stemming from Plato and Augustine is that they are based upon prejudices which are alive even today. At the back of this mistrust of actors as compared with other artists like painters, for instance, is part of a larger tradition in Western thought which has been called the ‘antitheatrical prejudice’ by Jonas Barish (1981: 2). In our discussion, we phrase it in the terms of mimesis: actors imitate and also have imitative effects on audience in the ways Platonic and Aristotelian mimesis alerted us. Antitheatrical prejudice, however, is a naturalization of a deep bias, the same as one which views single women, and women in general, as having negative effects in a community. This prejudice too runs deep. Similarly, performance genres from theatre to TV and the media are all viewed in a very prejudiced manner, reflecting an ontological malaise, according to Barish. As he points out, such a malaise can be seen clearly in everyday language where, for instance, metaphors about theatre are all negative: we distrust the theatrical and the staged or histrionic but praise the picturesque and the poetic (Barish 1981: 1). In addition, theatre also is associated with immortality and actors are considered seducers at best and prostitutes at worst. Even contemporary media culture makes a fetish out of actors and their lives, alternately revering or reviling them. Thus, in almost every culture, actors are at the margins of their society (Kohansky 1984: 72).

False Binary of the ‘Real’ and the ‘Artificial’: Diderot

The ideas of theatrical mimesis, theatrical convention, perceptual dynamics, the ‘conceptual envelope’ and the like were based on the fundamental binary posited between the real and the artificial. This binary in terms of the real and the artificial emotion was questioned by French philosopher Diderot (Potolsky 2006: 84). Diderot suggested that actors through training are emptied of all emotion so that they can observe and imitate and scrupulously render them perfectly. Having emotion, he points out, would interfere in this process. Similarly, although actors epitomize the skill of miming emotion, according to Diderot, they are not unique as their ability to separate genuine from performed feeling is necessary for other roles in society where genuine feeling may obstruct its performance. For instance, a king, a general, an advocate or a doctor (Potolsky 2006: 84). Lastly, Diderot points out that since there is no way by which we can
recognize any emotion except through its external signs, a real emotion and an imitated one look identical to the spectator. Crucially, this means that we are all on stage (theatrum mundi) – but only some of us realize we are performing. Thus, Diderot suggests that ‘actors ought to manipulate the conventions of emotional expression to produce mimetic effects’ (Potolsky 2006: 86).

The 18th century perception of the relation between theatre and society is referred to as theatrum mundi and this idea was extended into contemporary theory by Erving Goffman and Judith Butler, among others. They posited that the roles we play in society, including gender, are all mimetic. Goffman said that all social interactions, in Anglo Saxon cultures at least, are like performances and are premised upon a separation between actor and audience (Goffman 1959). Each person plays a role in keeping with society’s conventions and must be seen as sincere by the other(s) in her performance of that role. Breaking the social conventions will be interpreted to be a breach of decorum. Although there is no formal script, each actor plays a role and its aim is mimetic. We alter voice, tone, dress, expression depending upon who we are playing and, unlike what some psychological theorists would have us believe, there is no (private) ‘self’ outside of the various roles we play, according to Goffman. Selfhood is a product of the equation between ‘actor’ and ‘audience’ and has no autonomous existence of its own, either materially or psychologically. In this sense, ‘[t]he self is a mere ‘peg’ on which the roles of ‘collaborative manufacture’ are hung for some time’ (Goffman 1959: 253).

Goffman’s incisive analysis was taken over by feminist theorists writing on identity, such as Judith Butler, who argued that it is the performances that produce the gender, rather than a self or ‘volitional subject behind the mime who decides, as it were, which gender it will be today’ (Butler 1991: 24). Gender, she goes on to say, is ‘appropriated, theatricalized, worn and done’ (Butler 1991: 21). She gives the example of drag which highlights the performance we must involve ourselves in before we appear in front of others. Thus, gender identity is seen by her to be something that is pulled together, ‘a collection of imitated gestures and styles that come to seem natural’ (Potolsky 2006: 132). For Butler, then, gender is what she calls ‘psychic mimesis’ – ‘a melancholic introjection of norms that we come to ‘wear’ on our skin, or embody in the ‘array of corporeal theatrics’ that define gender identity’ (Butler 1991: 28).

Roland Barthes also belongs to this group which views the world as theatre as he made mimesis a foundational mechanism for the creation of conventions. Barthes says it is through the
repeated and compulsory imitation (of such gestures and styles) that something called a ‘reality effect’ is produced whereby a set of repeated conventions produce a ‘natural reality’ (Potolsky 2006: 132). Thus long hair, painted nails, lack of muscles, clothes of a certain kind may be imitated and repeated so that femininity becomes ‘naturalized’ through these codes which are actually only conventions.

**Undermining, Subverting and Subjugating through Mimesis**

The way Romans used mimesis in rhetoric, there was a critical and creative possibility that was opened up through the use of repetition and imitation. Punning, irony, satire, parody were all ways in which society could be undermined, subverted and subjugated. These were considered important ways of critiquing a society. When we come to theatre, the possibility arose that if society (or the world) is like theatre, then a change in theatre could bring about a change in society; if many things in society like art and gender are a matter of convention, then it should be possible to change the world by changing the conventions. This idea regained acceptance among writers, dramatists and artists in the 20th century. Antonin Artaud in his treatise *Theatre and its Double* (1958) argued that ‘the theatre, utilized in the most highest and most difficult sense possible, has the power to influence the aspect and formation of things’ (Artaud 1958: 79). This was also echoed by German playwright and Marxist, Bertolt Brecht, who directly challenged the Aristotellean view of theatre as being important due to plot and thus, the emotional identification with the characters. Brecht wanted to remove the aesthetic trance achieved by theatre which rendered the audience passive and uncritical, although cathartically satisfied. This catharsis, he pointed out, was only beneficial to maintain the status quo. Although Brecht questioned the validity of Aristotle’s views on theatre in contemporary times, he accepted the basic premise of the mimetic connection between theatre and life and the possibility of changing one to effect change in the other.

Brecht developed his method of effecting change through theatre based upon his position against the cathartic or ‘aesthetic trance’ induced in the audience by theatrical performances. He introduced the ‘alienation effect’ whereby all effort is made into breaking the ‘fourth wall’, making the audience continuously aware that what they were watching was a play. This went entirely against method acting where actors were encouraged to ‘live’ the characters and increase the credibility of their performance. Several techniques went into cultivating this alienation effect: imperfect acting or imperfectly getting into character, addressing the audience directly,
reading aloud stage directions, and using the ‘gest’ – a gesture which goes with each character and comes to be associated semiotically with it. Thus, while Diderot advocated the deliberate manipulation of all conventional emotional expression to produce mimetic effects, Brecht strongly put all his energy into undermining mimesis through the unmasking of conventional theatrical techniques (Potolsky 2006: 86).

Brecht understood theatre to be mimetic and trancelike, and realized that the conventions which gave rise to this also were the source of passivity among the audience. Brecht felt that the audience should not see a lifelike situation and go along with the story. He did not want the audience to see the play and feel that the situations they depicted were natural or unalterable; he wanted them to understand the contemporary as located in a historical past through the unveiling of ‘the coercive effects of social conventions’ (Potolsky 2006: 87). He intended that the audience should not feel the cathartic stupor induced by conventional theatre but recognize that the present is a result of human choice as well as historical forces and thus open to criticism and change. Brecht’s Marxist theatricality saw theatre as having the power to change the world in the best traditions of theatrum mundi. This is not meant in an instrumental or figurative sense, but as a fundamental and non-negotiable fact of human living (life as inherently theatrical itself) rather than a secondary elaboration of a non-theatrical reality. These ideas were also taken up by Augusto Boal in his adaptations of Paulo Freire’s work to theatre as a means of social change. He developed ‘theatre of the oppressed’, an important movement of using theatre in order for people to realize the nature of oppression and become agents of change.

Another prominent philosopher, feminist Luce Irigaray (1985), writing in the 1970s and 1980s, encouraged women to ‘play with mimesis’ in an effort to identify with the role of femininity without being reduced to it by others (Potolsky 2006: 130). She thus urged the conscious and deliberate use of the codes of ‘becoming a woman’ so as to make it a parody and thereby reveal its unnaturalness. For her, as for many other feminists such as the theatre theorist Elin Diamond, gender is about history, economics, politics, culture than it is about nature (Diamond 1997: 47).

There is another group of writers on race and imperialism who follow a similar line of thought, pointing out that identities of race have a mimetic basis to them; they are, in fact, effects of imitation from ‘an anonymous cultural repertoire’. These post-colonial writers look at mimesis as subjugation. Such writers as Frantz Fanon (1967/1952) and Homi Bhabha
(1994/1987) explore identity under colonialism. It was found that colonial subjects model themselves on their colonial masters to the extent that they identify themselves with them. In reading narratives of western explorations which preceded colonialism, for instance, colonized children tend to identify themselves with the white explorers rather than with the natives! The implications of such education is that racial minorities tend to have split identities due to the gap between what they have internalized and what they look like or are perceived as (natives, negroes, women etc). This can be seen in other configurations of power where the subaltern, whether woman or low caste, identifies with the center and holder of power and authority to such an extent that they lose their gender and caste identity. They begin to think like power and authority figures and in turn oppress others like themselves.

Bhabha (1994) develops Fanon’s analysis further: in colonialism, the natives must seem similar enough to their colonial masters (through English education in case of Indians) but different enough to justify their subordination. They may be encouraged to identify with the colonizers’ culture through dress, habits, language and customs; yet this identification can never be complete: ‘in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference’ (Bhabha 1994: 86). Thus, the colonized are cast as a poor imitation of the original (the colonizers).

Although appearing to have similarities between them yet there is a crucial difference between the feminists and the postcolonialists, as Fuss (1995) notes: for feminists, mimesis is the naturalized belief of the majority which gives rise to gender identity and they urge women to consciously and deliberately manipulate its performance in order to subvert it; for post-colonial theorists, mimesis is an order given by colonial authority to the subjugated, a red herring dangled before them, forcing them to identify with the culture of the colonizers while never allowing them to exactly replicate it. In the latter instance, ‘[t]he subversive and subjugating effects of mimesis are a matter of context and interpretation, not something inherent to the performance itself’ (Potolsky 2006: 134).

The above discussion thus points to an important quality about mimesis when we look at how it has played out in theatre. Rather than seeing something intrinsically evil about acting and theatre arts, the discussion showed that the negative attitudes stem from a deeper prejudice about theatre and acting. In addition, mimesis cannot simply play out in theatre in the simple fashion that Plato and others implied; it had to get constructed alongside the constitution of theatre as a
conventional space, and ways of viewing it too demanded the establishment of conventions. These ideas of theatre were challenged by those like Feral and Brecht, as well as extended to politics and society by those like Barthes and Bhabha. Mimesis was also challenged in fundamentally different ways by feminists like Butler as we have seen. No matter what the response, it is germane to note that theatrical mimesis became a co-constituent of being human itself.

The Question of the ‘Real’
Our second theme for discussion in this chapter involves the relationship of the art work to reality as one of the strongest ideas driving art in the west. In the western tradition, the idea that art is about the world has a major influence captured by the notion of mimesis itself. It originated in Plato’s view that art was an imitation of nature and slowly became a discourse about the world. Thus, artistic mimesis depends upon the existence of ‘some thing’ to imitate in the ‘real’ world. It also implies the idea of the ‘original’, a ‘viewing subject’ and a ‘performing object’ or an object to be viewed, as we saw in the previous sections. We now explore the relationship between mimesis and the ‘real’ in this section.

As we have seen, the constant artistic and technological search for improved ways to represent reality in the west is strangely fixated on Platonic ideas of mimesis (Potolsky 2006: 93). Art as mere reproduction of reality is not as universal as Western aesthetics would like us to believe, as we saw in the previous chapter in the section on Indian views of mimesis. Other cultures do not see art in the same way as does the west. For instance, Islamic cultures deliberately choose not to represent the human and animal forms in art, Oriental cultures have a highly conventionalized grammar of depicting nature in the form of landscapes, and Indian culture makes no separation between art and ritual, seamlessly integrating them into each other. In Western history itself, (early) medieval art itself rejected the mimetic ideal handed down from antiquity (Potolsky 2006: 94).

From antiquity onwards in the Greek tradition, art has always been defined in relation to the degree to which it imitates reality, nature or the world, however defined. Thus, western aesthetic theory has always legitimized art with relation to reality. This includes all the major movements including the introduction and legitimization of perspective on painting, the invention of photography, cinema and so on. It, of course, also includes all the art forms from
painting and theatre to literature. Each ‘wave’ legitimized itself in terms of telling the truth about reality as an advance over previous time periods.

Regardless of its appearance and domination over the imagination of western art forms, the question of what is reality has changed over time as we have also indicated earlier. Raymond Williams (1983) points out that the real or reality can be understood in at least two ways: as something different from or opposed to the false or the imaginary which can be grasped by the senses; or as something deeper and less easily perceived by the senses, as in truths not apparent in everyday life (Williams 1983: 258). In addition, the real may be understood in a third, political, sense of real where it indicates a willingness to engage with things as they are, rather than being unrealistic. This is the way it is used in the word realpolitik for instance. The fourth way in which it is used is in terms of realism which is a specific movement of artists and writers in the 19th century, as opposed to only the broader philosophical problems of art stemming from Platonic mimesis. Realism that adheres to art works can thus be seen as owing to four major reasons: its content, its way of presentation, artistic intention and the expectation of the audience or viewer (Potolsky 2006: 95-97). In addition, it can apply to different genres from artistic to literary to cinematic. If we go back to Plato, we can summarize his views in the words ‘realism as reflection’, so deep was his understanding that art was to mirror reality. For him there was an intrinsic connection between artwork and the world. That he criticized this is another matter altogether for he felt that owing to this strong mimetic connection, art did not allow people to reason.

**Visual Mimesis**

In the previous section, we saw how theatrical mimesis was related to the conventions of theatre. We now examine another trend of thought summarized by the phrase ‘mimesis as realism’ whereby art occurred in the interaction between the artwork and the viewer, and therefore was also a matter of the matching of conventions. The latter perspective gave rise to the idea of verisimilitude (how true it is to life, how credible) by which an art work depicted life, rather than being a replication of it. Thus, it was important that an art work did not go against the existing conventions of the ‘authentic’.

Not surprisingly, realism was projected as being a-stylistic, or as a rejection of style (Potolsky 2006: 98). This was in consonance with the reflection theory of realism. Yet, it was at
odds with itself and this view could not be fully justified, even by its proponents. For example, a film which is supposed to be highly realistic can be analyzed to show that it uses a variety of techniques very self-consciously to project reality, namely black and white footage, graininess, poor lighting, shaky cameras, hand-held sound etc (Potolsky 2006: 98). These techniques are themselves conventions which are read correctly by viewers in order to enhance the realistic aspect of film.

Thus, ironically, film relinquished its extreme fidelity in order to use truth-signifying technical conventions. Despite realism’s self-avowed deploration of style, there arose something which could be recognized as ‘realistic style’, full of details and descriptions (Potolsky 2006: 98-99). Influenced by scientific methods, realistic details are recorded with great fidelity. According to Jakobson, realistic details are based on a figure of speech called metonymy which pulls two associated things together and substituted them. A crown substituting for a king, for example. More importantly, this metonymical device helped one evoke and represent not just a particular character but also an entire social or historical context within which it may have had significance. Barthes pushed this line of thinking even further suggesting that unlike symbols which are arbitrary in meaning, realistic details seem innocuous, almost meaningless in themselves and are therefore realistic.

Thus, in every epoch, while there is an emphasis on the direct reproduction of reality, there is an equal awareness about the skillful use of convention in this reproductive act. For example, the introduction of perspective in painting was a result of new theories of optics and geometry (Potolsky 2006: 100). Starting from the 15th century, it allowed painters to transform their paintings into 3-dimensional space and thus made them more ‘realistic’. Art mimicked the perspective of the eye and presented the viewer with nature as it appeared to the eye. Although there are strong counters to this sometimes naïve view of optical principles, based as it is on two flawed assumptions – that we see with a single and immobile eye; and that a cross section of the visual pyramid reproduces the optical image – it has proved to dominate both the understanding of art and realism even today (Panofsky 1997: 42).

**Mimesis in Literature**

In literature, the theories of reflection and convention take a different form. Frequently, realism in writing is about the sincerity of the author and her aims, rather than any correspondence to
reality. Plato’s mirror becomes for writers a metaphor for truth, not lies and artifice. Even when there are distortions in the portrayal of reality, it is the author’s intentions which make it truthful.

According to Potolsky (2006: 103-107), two writers followed Aristotle’s model in their studies of literary realism in the 20th century: George Lukacs in his *Studies in European Realism* (1950) and Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* (1953/46). Both believe that realism is ‘the most accurate and truthful depiction of the world as it is. But both also highlight the conventional methods that realist writers rely upon to achieve this aim’ (Potolsky 2006: 104). Lukacs (2002) situates the realist novel in the birth of capitalism and he uses Balzac and Tolstoy as examples of writers who, despite their own reactionary political beliefs, took cognizance of the changes going on around them and documented them. They recognized the historical significance of their times. Thus, their aims and objectives were emblematic of realism, according to Lukacs. However, they were not documenting their times in a pedestrian fashion; rather they depended on what is called ‘types’ or prototypes. The actions of characters are recognized by readers as individual and personal but also social and economic. Speaking from within, they wrote about the changes that they were witness to.

Other writers, on the other hand, wrote as if observing the changes from the outside, witnessing change that was a *fait accompli*. Naturalist writers, for instance Zola and Flaubert, according to Lukacs (2002), found themselves living in a time when capitalism was dominant and the bourgeoisie an uncontested political force. Whereas selective and representative characters, plot and incidents gave rise to realism in Tolstoy and Balzac, a mass of unconnected details and description was emblematic of the naturalists work.

Auerbach in his tome on mimesis believed that mimesis is a ‘perennial possibility in Western literature’ (Potolsky 2006: 105) which reached its zenith or complete realization in the 19th century novel. Interestingly, given our discussion on Homer in the context of oral traditions and repetition in Chapter II, we now re-view him in the literary tradition when Auerbach compared Homer’s *Odyssey* and the story of Abraham in the book of *Genesis* in the *Bible*. The former he considered full ‘foreground’, with all representations fully externalized and completely visible and palpable. But the story of Abraham, according to Auerbach, is filled with hidden complexities as there are no descriptions or psychological details. This leads to an uncertainty of meaning and the need for interpretation. Furthermore, according to Auerbach’s analysis, the characters of Homer are ‘noble, powerful and mythical’ (Potolsky 2006: 106), whereas those in
the Bible are the poor and the downtrodden. This gave rise to a difference of styles where the latter are portrayed only in comic or pastoral styles whereas the former are retained in serious and tragic literature. It is with modern novels that these two styles are joined together and characters ‘are embedded in a total reality, political, social and economic, which is concrete and constantly evolving’ (Auerbach 1953: 463). Thus, according to Potolsky, ‘they come close to the lived experience of their readers’ and comprised literary mimesis through the portrayal of reality, experienced as a lived one.

**Critiquing Art as a ‘Mirror’ of Reality**

The entire discussion above began with the premise that in the west, art was what ‘imitated reality’. Not only was the idea if imitation problematized, as in the differences in the ways Plato and Aristotle conceived it, we have also problematized reality and shown how in different periods, there were differing conceptions of it. However, throughout history, there has also been a group of writers, artists and thinkers who believed that art is what is beautiful and the proper aim of art is not to mimic reality (no matter how both terms are understood) but to ‘create beauty’. Baudelaire and Wilde in the latter half of the 19th century were proponents of this view and strongly believed that artists should focus on what they dreamed, not what they saw. Rather than reproducing the world as it is, they said, art must transform it according to the ideals of beauty. Unlike writers before him who used the Platonic idea of mirror as a positive metaphor, Wilde aligned with Plato about the artifice of art, but ironically insists on the positive qualities of its insincerity (Potolsky 2006: 109).

Like Brecht before him, another great writer Roland Barthes saw realism, as Brecht saw traditional theatre, as a means to preserve the status quo. Introducing and developing his understanding and critique of realism on the notion of codes, he disagreed strongly with Auerbach, Stendhal, Lukacs and Eliot about the positive and ethical values of realism. He claimed that literature is made out of codes which only appear to represent reality but this is because we don’t recognize their conventionality. Language, for Barthes, never mirrors the world; it is the shared expectation of writer and reader based on common codes, which believed it did mirror reality. He went as far as to say that the classical realist artist knew more about this code than about the world. Since this code is shared, the viewers see the art work as realistic simply because it meets their expectations. Thus, realism for Barthes was only a particular arrangement of codes which is tied to a particular referent, with far reaching, negative
consequences because ‘[r]ealism gives the public what it wants, flatters its narcissism by mirroring a familiar world, but thereby impoverishes its understanding of society and renders it insensible to manipulation by the powers that be’ (Potolsky 2006: 110). Barthes was caustic about the role of description in realist writing, the listing of details and their placement, which he said produced deception. He went on to insightfully say, ‘It is the realistic aspiration to mimesis, and not art itself, that produces the deception’.

From the above, it may appear that Barthes has more in common with Aristotle in his understanding of mimesis. Yet he was caustic about the Aristotelian claim that the realism of mimesis resided in its correspondence to rational thought. He thought the stranglehold of narrative was so complete that many times in order to ensure the continuity of the narrative, (based as it is on conventions or codes) the organic unity of the plot is sacrificed.

**Summary**

In this chapter, we have explored two interesting themes surrounding mimesis, namely, the place of conventions in the formation of the arts and the notion of the real in the arts and how this too invoked ideas of conventions. This discussion may be understood as exploring the implications of mimesis, and even as the foundational concerns of understanding the importance of mimesis. Thus we see that the debate begun long ago by Plato and Aristotle on the concept of mimesis continues to have a hold on western art theory. Artists even today struggle to take positions either for their views of art as reflection of the world or as convention. Contestations over realism are alive even today proving the existence of the long arm of mimesis, resulting in the fact that realism remains the most important tenet of mimesis even for contemporary western culture and aesthetics.

We have now understood the various formulations of historical mimesis across the ages and we have also discussed two of its implications in the larger arena of ideas and the arts. The question arises as to why we are discussing these ideas of mimesis in art when our ultimate aim is to understand mimesis in education. This is because education is as much a product of culture as is art, and so is also deeply influenced by existing cultural conventions. To understand the role of mimesis in education today, it is therefore necessary to unpack all the notions of mimesis as well as their embodiment in cultural practices.

But philosophical concepts do not live only in esoteric places such as the minds of philosophers and the hearts of artists; if this were true, they would die out more easily. In the
next chapter, we will explore some of the ways in which mimesis manifests itself in an entire range of spaces and cultural practices and see how the concept can be recognized anew, when seen from the more mundane perspectives of contemporary culture.