1 Early Beginnings

The idea of a close interrelationship between a person and the things the person produces is one of the most enduring beliefs throughout the history of western culture. Accordingly, the first occurrences of the conception that a work is considered the image of its maker, that a phenomenon is similar to its cause, or that every agent performs its acts in a corresponding way, can be found in Greek philosophy. In a cultural environment where the human being was closely interconnected with the surrounding forces of nature, the presumed principles of its agency and effect were often applied to mankind itself. Conceptualized as an ongoing, mainly repetitive, and circular process, earthly matters assured the future existence of the world and included the identical self-reproduction of its different species, as well as the self-reproduction of human society and its cultural achievements. Self-similarity was therefore considered the underlying power of the whole of living nature.[1]

1.1 Automimesis in the Greek Theatre

Thus, it comes as no surprise that one of the first aesthetic theories in history, expressed by the Athenian playwright Aristophanes (c. 446–c. 386 BCE), is based on the presumption of a close resemblance between the producer and its product. Concerned with the mysterious mechanisms of poetic inspiration and authorship, Aristophanes explores this relationship extensively in his *Thesmophoriazusae,* datable to 411 BCE. This successful theatre piece recounts the story of the poet Euripides, infamous for his misogynistic plays and in danger because angry women are conspiring against him. To protect his life and reputation, Euripides compels his relative Mnesilochus to disguise himself as a woman and intervene in his favour during a meeting of the women. The comical effects of the play con-

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[1] Rosemann 1996, p. 36.

Publiziert in: Moritz Lampe, The Involuntary Self-Portrait. Automimesis and Self-Referentiality in the Art Literature of the Italian Renaissance, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net 2022, https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.923

sist mainly of mistaken gender identities, typical of early Greek comedies that often refer to social and anatomical differences between the sexes.[2] But the opening scene of the play, the earliest example of an automimetic art theory, is less ordinary and worth a closer look.[3]

Before forcing his relative to join the women's meeting, Euripides had tried to convince the beardless and good-looking poet Agathon to disguise himself as a woman. When he and Mnesilochus arrive at the poet's house, Agathon is composing a female choir for his next theatre piece. Shown as an effeminate man, dressed in beautiful long garments, and singing with a female voice, Agathon represents a passionate author who tries to capture the subject matter of his plays as closely as possible. In fact, he completely identifies with the feminine role that he is creating. Because of Agathon's appearance, Mnesilochus shows pure bewilderment and questions the sexual identity of the poet. But Agathon explains his appearance by saying that as an author he has to create female roles:

> "I choose my dress to suit my poesy.
> A poet, sir, must needs adapt his ways
> To the high thoughts which animate his soul.
> And when he sings of women, he assumes
> A woman's garb, and dons a woman's habits. […]
> But when he sings of men, his whole appearance
> Conforms to man. What nature gives us not,
> The human soul aspires to imitate [μίμησις]."[4]

Agathon's affirmations are interesting in many ways. First of all, they seem to contradict the popular beliefs about poetic inspiration in classical antiquity. Without help from the heavenly muses who animate his mind and soul, a poet was infertile and therefore unable to create works of art. Rather than the author himself, divine powers were held responsible for the form and content of a piece or poem, and only the union of female inspiration and male authorship assured the coming into being of a tragedy or comedy.[5] Plato describes this process repeatedly and speaks of the poetic furor or the madness of the muses as a necessary condition: "Poets compose their beautiful poems not by skill but because they are inspired and possessed." (*Ion,* 532a ff.) In fact, at the beginning of the scene, Euripides and Mnesilochus are told by Agathon's servant that he is composing his play in the presence of the muses[6] and the poet himself speaks of the "high thoughts which animate his soul". But rather than listening to the muses, Agathon participates in this process of creation by singing and dressing like a woman. It is the inner agency of his own body that serves as a means of his poetic production, not the power of divine inspiration. By making himself similar to the objects of his representations, Agathon is able to surpass the limits of heavenly inspiration. However, Agathon's mimetic strategy is not comparable to the modern notion of autonomous art. The rules and conventions of Greek theatre were highly codified and the characters of the plays often stereotypical. Actors had to choose from a limited set of roles and had to wear masks, the so-called *prosopa,* from which the Latin noun *persona* derives.[7] Uncontrolled artistic inventiveness was therefore neither necessary nor welcome: The poet had to stick to certain prototypes, models, and narrative patterns that were known to the public. Indeed, Agathon's model of imitation was highly limited. Mnesilochus reveals the mimetic shortcomings of this strategy when he asks Agathon to compose a drama with satyrs or deities.[8]

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[2] Stehle 2002.

[3] Cantarella 1967, p. 7. Raffaele Cantarella was one of the first authors to discuss Aristophanes' theory of mimesis. Further analysis is provided by Hansen 1976, Muecke 1982, Stohn 1993, and Stehle 2002.

[4] Aristophanes (1924), p. 145. For an extensive commentary and the greek original cfr. Austin/Olson 2004. Aristophanes is one of the first authors to use a verb of the mimeisthai-group in the context of poetic production. To my knowledge, the Agathon scene is thus the first case of an automimetic art theory. Cfr. Sörbom 1966, p. 41, 78.

[5] Cfr. Tigerstedt 1970.

Thus, if we want to understand Agathon's statement, we have to reconsider the witty and self-referential character of the play. Rather than presenting an elaborate theory of imitation, Aristophanes seems to make fun of a poietic theory that was introduced by the historical poet Euripides (on which the role Euripides in Aristophanes' play is based) some years before the *Thesmophoriazusae* were brought onto the stage for the first time. In the *Suppliant women,* first performed in 423 BCE, Euripides writes that there must be some sort of similarity between the mental state of the poet and the piece that he composes:

> "The speaker who wants to be persuasive must be cheerful, just as the poet must compose in joy the songs he composes. If that is not the case with him, he cannot give pleasure to others if he himself is suffering: that is not the way of things."[9]

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[6] Aristophanes (1924), p. 135: "Allow not a word from your lips to be heard. For the Muses are here, and are making their odes in my Master's abodes."

[7] Weihe 2004, pp. 27 f.

[8] Aristophanes (1924), p. 135. Mnesilochus' punchline is best rendered in the Italian translation by Dario Del Corno: "Dunque, quando fai un dramma con i satiri, chiama me: mi metto dietro di te, duro come un palo, e lavoro anch'io." A few lines later Mnesilochus repeats his critique by asking Agathon how he manages to imitate deities.

[9] Euripides (1998), p. 33–34. David Leitao's translation pays better attention to the biological analogies used by Euripides: "Whenever the composer of hymns gives birth to

Euripides' remarks show that the control of the poet's emotions was important, because they could influence the quality of his works, making them a mirror of his personality. This theory of autopoietic expression was relatively rare in the fifth century BCE, but became commonplace in later centuries.[10] As has been suggested by David Leitao,[11] Euripides' ideas might have been the actual cause for Aristophanes to write the role of Mnesilochus. By deriding Agathon's mimetic strategy, Aristophanes derides the unusual mimetic concepts of Euripides. Such a reading would not only confirm the effeminacy of the historical Agathon, who was famous for being pretentious and beautiful,[12] but also confirm the meta-discourses and cross-references that occur throughout the entire work of Aristophanes.

But Aristophanes' prologue to the *Thesmophoriazusae* is interesting in another way, too. Resuming his discussion with Mnesilochus, Agathon continues to explain the cause for his strategy of imitation:

> "Besides, a poet never should be rough,
> Or harsh, or rugged. Witness to my words
> Anacreon, Alcaeus, Ibycus,
> Who when they filtered and diluted song,
> Wore soft Ionian manners and attire.
> And Phrynichus, perhaps you have seen him, sir.
> How fair he was, and beautifully dressed;
> Therefore his plays were beautifully fair.
> For as the Worker, so the Work will be."[13]

By describing the physical qualities and moral manners of famous poets, Agathon underlines the importance that was given to the appearance of a writer. Because his exterior was interpreted as a manifestation of his interior, it could serve as an explanatory model for his plays. The legendary beauty of the tragedian Phrynichus is therefore linked to the excellence of his theatre plays.[14] The nature or

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songs, he must be in a good mood to give birth. If he does not feel this way, he would not be able to give pleasure to others, because he is suffering in his own mind."

[10] Cfr. Horace (1942), pp. 459–461: "If you would have me weep, you must first feel grief yourself"/"si vis me flere, dolendum est primum ipsi tibi." For a discussion of the impact of Horace's *Ars poetica* cfr. Rudd 1976, pp. 170–181.

[11] Leitao 2012, p. 124.

[12] Cfr. Plato, *Symposium,* 175e, 194ab.

[13] Aristophanes (1924), p. 145–147.

[14] It was also common practice to base an author's biography on events that took place in his fictitious plays. For some examples of the interchangeability of poetry and poet regarding Aristophanes and others see Lefkowitz 1978, p. 464 and Chapter 4.1.

physis of the poet determined the character of his plays: "For as the Worker, so the Work will be." Mnesilochus, who is following Agathon's monologue attentively, acknowledges this law of similarity by giving other examples: "Then that is why harsh Philocles writes harshly, And that is why vile Xenocles writes vilely, And cold Theognis writes such frigid plays."[15] As has been rightly observed by modern commentators of Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae,* Agathon is referring to two different models of imitation in his statements, seemingly without noting their contradictions.[16] On the one hand, we have Agathon's strategy for writing female roles by dressing like a woman. He tries to make himself womanlike by copying the formal habit and appearance of a female; he uses the technique of *mimesis* to imitate something that is alien to his own nature. On the other hand, Agathon argues that a poet can not escape his own nature. If Phrynichus had to write a disappointing piece, he would not be able to do so because of the dominant predisposition of his nature; he cannot help but write beautiful plays, just as cold Theognis writes frigid plays. These contradictions can be explained by the nature of Aristophanes' work. Rather than producing a systematic treatise on poetics, he was probably more concerned with the entertainment of his audience and thus draws on ideas that were fashionable during his time.[17]

1.2 *A Man's Speech is Just Like his Life*

The idea of a close interrelationship between a person and the things the person produces, as expressed in Aristophanes' automimetic theory, was not limited just to the world of the classical theatre. It conditioned the use and understanding of ancient rhetoric in later centuries as well. Even though rhetoric were considered an art form which allowed the speaker to adapt his speeches according to his persuasive aims,[18] the personality of famous rhetors was often classified according to the quality and nature of their speeches. Regardless of the actual function of a delivered speech, its content was frequently associated with the speaking person and led to the notion that a man's speech resembled his character – whether the decorum or appropriateness of a situation suggested a certain kind of speech or not.

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[15] Aristophanes (1924), p. 147..

[16] Cfr. Stohn 1993, p. 199–200, Stehle 2002, p. 381, n. 42.

[17] Austin/Olson 2004, p. 105.

[18] Norden 1898, vol. 1, p. 12.

Echoing Plato's observation on the relationship between speech and soul,[19] Isocrates is one of the many authors who discuss the connection between moral virtues and manners of speaking, claiming that the better the technical qualities of a speech, the better the ethical qualities of the speaker. Although he was aware of an abuse of rhetoric means and methods, he considered eloquence to be a picture of the person's soul. Several collections of proverbs seem to confirm that this interrelatedness was common opinion. Menander's mottoes include the notion, "The speech represents the character of the speaker". In another collection we can read, "As the character is, such is the speech", and Dionysius of Halicarnassus states in a similar way that, "It is a true and general opinion that words are the images of the soul."[20]

The Roman orators did not hesitate to integrate these notions into their own writings. Aelius Aristides[21] and Cicero[22] confide in the authority of the ancient authors when they cite the Greek proverb or refer to the above cited example of Socrates. In his *De oratore* Cicero goes so far as to suggest some sort of mimicking: Because the audience is more likely to be convinced if the character of a speaker is similar to his speech, it might prove useful to imitate the features of a good and eloquent orator.[23] Quintilian associated good manners and oratory skills so profoundly that he identified an orator as *vir bonus* and believed in a similarity of life and speech: "For a man's character is generally revealed and the secrets of his heart are laid bare by his manner of speaking, and there is good ground for the Greek aphorism that "as a man lives, so will he speak."[24]

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[19] Plato (1914–1935), vol 5, p. 255: "'And what of the manner of the diction, and the speech?' said I. 'Do they not follow and conform to the disposition of the soul?' 'Of course.' 'And all the rest to the diction?' 'Yes.' 'Good speech, then, good accord, and good grace, and good rhythm wait upon good disposition, not that weakness of head which we euphemistically style goodness of heart, but the truly good and fair disposition of the character and the mind.' 'By all means,' he said." (*Republic,* 400d–e).

[20] For these and several other examples see Müller 1981, p. 11 ff.

[21] Aristides (1973), vol. 1, p. 518: "The product of oratory is the correct use of the mind, and not only the presentation of oneself doing what is necessary, but also persuading others to do what is necessary, and in sum it is a royal thing. No different from this argument is the proverb which says: 'As the character is, such is the speech.' And the reverse is also true. Thus truth is on our side through our arguments, moreover through the reasoning which prompts them, and through the evidence of the facts and of the most distinguished poets, and through the proof of proverbial wisdom." (*In Defence of Oratory,* II, 133d).

[22] Cicero (1971), p. 472: "Sic enim princeps ille philosophiae disserebat, qualis cuiusque animi adfectus esset, talem esse hominem, qualis autem homo ipse esset, talem esse orationem; orationi autem facta similia, factis vitam. Adfectus autem animi in bono viro laudabilis." (*Tusculanarum Disputationum,* V, XVI, 47).

[23] Cfr. Lee 1940, p. 218.

Seneca the Younger gives the topos a certain twist when he discusses the supposed identity of moral excellence and eloquence in his *Epistulae morales.* Whereas the previous sources discussed the connection between eloquence and ethical virtues, Seneca is mainly interested in the correlation of lack of eloquence and bad habits:

> "'Man's speech is just like his life.' Exactly as each individual man's actions seem to speak, so people's style of speaking often reproduces the general character of the time, if the morale of the public has relaxed and has given itself over to effeminacy. […] A man's ability [*ingenio*] cannot possibly be of one sort and his soul [*animo*] of another. If his soul be wholesome, well-ordered, serious, and restrained, his ability also is sound and sober. Conversely, when the one degenerates, the other is also contaminated."[25]

Senecas's telling example is that of Maecenas, the Roman tycoon and famous patron of the arts. His decadent style of life, his sloppy dress, and the flagrancy of his entourage are not only believed to be a reflection of his soul, but also understood as a sign of the missing morals of his time. Maecenas thus represents the exact opposite of Quintilian's model of the perfect orator. Just as eloquence is an indicator for ethical virtues, lack of eloquence is a sign for the *vir malus.* By citing lengthy passages from Maecenas' discourses, Seneca is therefore able to evoke a physical and moral pen portrait of Maecenas.[26]

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[24] Quintilian (1920–1922), vol. 4, p. 173: "Profert enim mores plerumque oratio et animi secreta detegit. Nec sine causa Graeci prodiderunt, ut vivat, quemque etiam dicere." (*Institutio oratoria,* XI, I, 30).

[25] Seneca (1917–1925), vol. 3, p. 305. The Latin expression which turned into a proverb goes, "Talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita." (*Epistulae morales,* CXIV). For a discussion of Seneca's notion in art history see also Gombrich 1999, pp. 242–243 and Kemp 1992a, p. 18.

[26] Seneca (1917–1925), vol. 3, p. 305: "Can you not at once imagine, on reading through these words, that this was the man who always paraded through the city with a flowing tunic? […] These words of his, put together so faultily, thrown off so carelessly, and arranged in such marked contrast to the usual practice, declare that the character of their writer was equally unusual, unsound, and eccentric. […] For it is evident that he was not really gentle, but effeminate, as is proved by his misleading word-order, his inverted expressions, and the surprising thoughts which frequently contain something great, but in finding expression have become nerveless. One would say that his head was turned by too great success. This fault is due sometimes to the man, and sometimes to his epoch." (*Epistulae morales,* CXIV). It is interesting to note that Seneca uses the same technique as Aristophanes to discredit an author by describing him as effeminate. Just as Agathon's female garments are used to allude to his character, the descrip-

The same methods of character recognition seem to have been applied to the visual arts. When the stoic Chrysippus of Soli saw a beautiful statue, he immediately became interested in the sculptor as a person as well: "[…] when beholding a beautiful statue made of bronze, we suddenly wish to know the name of the artist, because matter does not forge into form by its own."[27] A similar view was expressed by the Hellenistic philosopher Philo of Alexandria. Highly influenced by the writings of Plato and critically concerned with the use of images, he admired the beauty of a statue not so much because it might represent a divinity, but because it reflected the qualities of the artist.[28] He states that every creation bears a resemblance to its creator. Just as the earth with its different forms of animals, plants, and landscapes can be seen as a manifestation of God, the work of a carpenter or a painter mirrors the character of the artisan:

> "It has invariably happened that the works which they have made have been, in some degree, the proofs of the character of the workmen; for who is there who, when he looks upon statues or pictures, does not at once form an idea of the statuary or painter himself? And who, when he beholds a garment, or a ship, or a house, does not in a moment conceive a notion of the weaver, or shipbuilder, or architect, who has made them?"[29]

Even though the example of the artist is merely used as a *tertium comparationis* to illustrate the ubiquitous presence of God, Philos's critical concerns about religious idolatry tell us something about the appreciation of artworks. Rather than containing something of the nature of the represented figure, a statue or painting contains something of the nature of the craftsman – who, of course, can be admired. In another interesting passage contained in *On Drunkenness,* he writes that the statues of the sculptor Phidias were always recognizable, regardless of the material of his works or the knowledge of the beholder:

> "They say that Phidias, the celebrated statuary, made statues of brass, and of ivory, and of gold, and of other different materials, and that in all these works he displayed one and the same art, so that not only good judges, but even those who had no pretensions to the title, recognized the artist from his works."[30]

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tion of Maecenas's robe is used to point to his moral vices. For the dress as a metaphor for style in ancient rhetorics cfr. Müller 1981, p. 52–84.

[27] For this example see also Pekáry 2002, p. 63.

[28] Pekáry 2002, p. 162.

[29] Philo of Alexandria (1993), vol. 3, p. 112 (*De specialibus legibus,* IV).

[30] Philo of Alexandria (1993), vol. 1, p. 283 (*On Drunkenness,* XXII).