

In Search of Another Eye:
***Mimesis*, Chinese Aesthetics, Post-modern Theatre**

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Won Jung Sohn, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Abstract

Although a new tradition of non-mimetic theatre has secured a place in Western theatre history, I find that existing critical vocabularies fail to embrace various theatrical forms of today. Alternative frames of discussion are sought after, and I propose that a culturally distinct one will open up possibilities of perceiving contemporary performances in different ways. In this thesis I turn to the aesthetics of Chinese painting. The Western concept of *mimesis* in theatre is seen as being strictly related to the verbal aspects of the drama rather than the performed spectacle. Turning to paintings as a lens through which to look at theatre enables one to focus on the extra-textual aspects of performance. At the same time, looking at painting directs one to the issue of ways of seeing, which is fundamental to theatre. Looking at Chinese paintings will disclose the unique Chinese ways of seeing that affected their artistic creation and reception, as well as what different concepts of representation prevailed. In this thesis I trace the mimetic foundations of Western theatre by investigating the writings of Plato and Aristotle as well as looking at Classical Greek painting, its modern reflections and counteractions. I then propose the aesthetics of Chinese painting as an alternative lens through which to look at contemporary non-mimetic theatre. Focusing on landscape and literati paintings of the Sung era I examine how adopting this lens initiates a mode of perception that differs significantly from the Western. Finally, I explore the validity of Chinese aesthetics as a critical device with which to look at contemporary non-mimetic theatre, case-studying selected theatre performances of Tadeusz Kantor and Forced Entertainment.

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Preface

I have followed the standard page/line system based on the first manuscript or editions for the referencing of Classical Greek texts. Stephen Halliwell's translation of the *Poetics*, however, does not provide this information, and therefore I have cited the chapter and page numbers of his book. I have also cited the original chapter and book numbers of the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu*. I have additionally given the page numbers of the translation I used for *Chuang Tzu*. The Translations of *Tao Te Ching* in this thesis are mine unless stated otherwise. I have consulted a number of English translations, which are listed in the bibliography.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In a time when the makings of theatre performances are so diverse and “radical”, it may seem out of fashion to talk of *mimesis*. However, although a new tradition of non-mimetic theatre has secured a place in the history of Western theatre alongside the still dominating stage realism, I find that the frame of existing theatre spectatorship and scholarship still remains largely within the realm of mimetic traditions, and therefore lacks the capacity to embrace the various theatre genres of today which have evolved beyond the limited frame of *mimesis*. At the heart of this problem is the enduring issue of alterity, the issue of the “I” against the “Other”.

This research arises from a sense of necessity for a critical vocabulary which transcends dichotomies inherent in Western culture¹ in order to discuss theatre performances that work outside the boundaries of mimetic representation and disrupt the oppositional relationship between the “I” and the “Other”, stage and auditorium, illusion and reality. I ask whether looking at such performances via a different lens may not open up alternative ways of spectatorship and in turn give a richer meaning to the performances at hand.

A search for new frames for theatrical discussion itself is not new in theatre scholarship. Towards the latter decades of the twentieth century the limits of regarding theatre as a stage translation of the dramatic text along with the

¹ In this thesis, I refer many times to the “West”. Fully aware of the geographical, historical, cultural, and political complexities and ambiguities this term involves, I have chosen to stick with this problematic word since I have not been able to find a better alternative. I note here that by “West” I refer to cultures that are heirs to and conditioned by Classical Greece, and whose artistic traditions have been rooted in and evolved from *mimesis*.

concomitant attempt to interpret theatre performances as one would a written play were widely recognised. This led to searches for critical methodologies to incorporate the extra-dramatic and extra-representational elements of theatre into discussion, and scholars who initially strove to “read” theatre performance via the conventional frames of representation also participated in this shift. The examples that I will introduce in the following section, are but a few, albeit the most representative, of this flow.

1-1. Current Frames of Discussion

Patrice Pavis, who began and won academic acclaim as a theatre semiotician, diagnosed in his book, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance, and Film*, the current scholarly environment since the 1980s as a phase which departs from semiological segmentation which had been preconditioned on the exclusive divide between the signifier and the signified, the producer of signs and its reader, and tends toward synthesis.² Phenomenology, according to Pavis (amongst many others), is now reckoned as the most powerful or effective philosophical/theoretical frame to date which criticizes the segmentation of performance into signs and thus of its semiological function.³ Pavis offers another means to embrace the theatrical practices that semiotics fails to decode, introducing the term “vectorization,” a sort of blending of phenomenology and semiology, which is defined as a “methodological, mnemotechnical, and dramaturgical means of linking networks of signs. It consists of associating and connecting signs that form parts of networks,

² See Pavis (2003), 17.

³ Ibid., 16.

within which each sign only has meaning through the dynamic that relates to other signs.”⁴ By proposing this notion Pavis attempts to transcend the limitations of the previous binary semiotic approach, and reverses the receptive methodology from one of dissection to one of synthesis.

However, all is not successful, especially regarding dualism. Pavis still regards the theatrical elements as *signs*; the signifier and the signified still remain in their given categories, and although now a much more intensive and inclusive networking seems possible, the fundamental condition of the divide persists. Thus, although Pavis may have succeeded in expanding the scope and function of theatre semiology, he fails to perceive theatre beyond this frame.

The limits of Pavis’s “new” perceptive frame are further exposed in his succeeding discussions of various theatrical elements in the book. Instead of pursuing an alternative critical vocabulary Pavis tries to embrace aspects of theatre which do not fit into the extant frame of theatre criticism, as he endeavours to tailor them so that they may be suited to his sphere of analysis. While it is notable how he includes, for instance, the experience of the spectator which hitherto had been largely left untouched by critics and scholars of theatre, he confines the process of spectatorship to: (a) “reading” the score [text and subtext of the performance]; and (b) “living” the experience of the actor/character. The spectator

shares the same space-time, which she not only fits into but also institutes; she relives in her own body and soul the [same] torments as the actor/character, who both exists out there in front of her and dwells within her as her image and body schema.⁵

⁴Ibid., 17.

⁵ Ibid., 107.

At first reading the proposition sounds plausible; yet on a closer examination it isn't wholly convincing. This is not simply due to the fact that Pavis does not elaborate further on the thesis; beneath this formulation persists the same alterity on which semiology is based – the solid divide between “I”, the spectator, beholding the “Other”, the performers on stage, observing and reading the “signs” they construe while they (the performers) are themselves also signs. If one argues that Pavis's second process of spectatorship dissolves this dualism, I cannot but question whether this is not identical to the more familiar notion of empathy which reaches as far back as to the root of Western dramatic theory, the *Poetics*, where Aristotle talks of the *hamartia* of the tragic hero:

[W]icked men should not be shown passing from affliction to prosperity, for this is the most untragic of all possible cases and is entirely defective. (...); the extremely evil man should not fall from prosperity to affliction, for such a plot-structure might move us, but would not arouse pity and fear, since pity is felt towards one whose affliction is undeserved, fear towards one who is like ourselves (so what happens in such a case will be neither pitiful nor fearful).⁶

And, as one should be reminded, Aristotle's theory of drama affirmed the segmentation and alterity in theatre in the West.

Erika Fischer-Lichte, who also began as a renowned theatre semiologist, exhibits a much more earnest attempt to dissolve the binary frame from a critical perspective in her recent publication, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. Drawing attention to the essential shift from a focus on semiotic interpretation to materiality and experience that has taken place in theatre

⁶ *Poetics*, ch. 13 (p. 44).

scholarship towards the end of the twentieth century, the book embodies Fischer-Lichte's endeavour to collapse the theoretical dichotomy between subject and object, signifier and signified, performer and recipient in discussing contemporary theatre performances, which already have begun to disrupt such boundaries in practice. In doing so she places the experience of the participants – both performers and spectators – at the centre of the theatrical event, thus seeking an effective means to re-evaluate the aesthetics of theatre. In this respect she turns to theatre as an “event” rather than as a work of art which is “set in motion and terminated by the actions of all the subjects involved – artists and spectators.”⁷

The shift of theatre from a work of art to an event, according to Fischer-Lichte, no longer validates the semiotic view grounded on the premise that the goings-on onstage are signifiers of something else, hence referring to something other than itself. Instead she proposes the aesthetics of the performative, a notion first coined by philologist J. L. Austin who argued that performative utterances were “self-referential and constitutive in so far as they bring forth the social reality they are referring to.”⁸ Giving extra emphasis to the transformative aspect of Austin's notion of the performative, Fischer-Lichte makes clear her own premise: “Performance describes a genuine act of creation: the very process of performing involves all participants and thus generates the performance in its specific materiality.”⁹

Such an approach to theatre, however, has its limits. Because theatre as a self-referential performance event relies on the experience of the participants during the course of the performance, the notion of presence in turn becomes one of the core

⁷ Fischer-Lichte (2008), 22.

⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁹ Ibid., 36.

factors. Indeed, Fischer-Lichte devotes a considerable portion of the book to the discussion of presence (and its relation to the generation of materiality). Defining what she calls the “radical concept of presence,” by which she interprets man as “embodied mind,” Fischer-Lichte contends:

When the actor brings forth their body as energetic and thus generates presence, they appear as embodied mind. The actor exemplifies that body and mind cannot be separated from each other. Each is always already implied in the other. (...) Through the performer’s presence, the spectator experiences the performer and himself as embodied mind in a constant process of becoming – he perceives the circulating energy as a transformative and vital energy.¹⁰

Thus she succeeds in breaking down the age-old dichotomy between the body and the mind (or consciousness). Moreover, she argues that presence, still widely accepted as the opposite to the notion of representation in that it refers to the presence of the performer thereby excluding the dramatic character he is acting, cannot be set apart from representation: “(...) an absolute opposition between ‘presence’ and ‘representation’ is not sustainable. Both presence and the dramatic character are brought forth through specific processes of embodiment.”¹¹

While I find Fischer-Lichte’s contention about the collapse of the presence versus representation dichotomy in contemporary theatre performance acceptable, I am not wholly convinced by the way her claim evolves around the phenomenal body of the actor and the dramatic character, and the spectator. The problem this position engenders is simple: the notion of presence is restricted to corporeality, which attests

¹⁰ Ibid., 98-99.

¹¹ Ibid., 147.

the ephemeral quality of theatre performance. Fischer-Lichte herself does not attempt to argue against this destiny of performance; on the contrary, she affirms that it is “fleeting, transient, and exists only in the present. It is made up of the continuous becoming and passing of the autopoietic feedback loop. (...) [The] performance is irrevocably lost once it is over.”¹²

Which is quite true. However, if one agrees that performance is essentially a temporal art form, to which Fischer-Lichte also assents, it is then possible for one to question whether the experience of the performance cannot extend beyond the actual time of performance. Centring on the corporeality of the participants, Fischer-Lichte claims that the experiences “take effect but for the duration of the performance or for limited periods of time within the performance.”¹³ Binding the performative experience solely within the physical time of the performance inevitably isolates the performance event from the real world. Fischer-Lichte proposes to understand this particular experience that the theatre provides as an experience of liminality in which the perceiving subjects are caught in a state of “betwixt and between,”¹⁴ but this, too, is an exclusive approach to the theatrical event which isolates the experience as one which occurs neither in the real world nor the fictional. Though Fischer-Lichte provides us with a useful postulate of the performative to debilitate the solid dichotomy between performer and recipient, signifier and signified, she is content with the divide between reality and fiction, each of which remains fundamentally and irreconcilably “Other”.

¹² Ibid., 75.

¹³ Ibid., 179.

¹⁴ Ibid., 148.

1-2. Looking for an Alternative Frame: Chinese Aesthetics

Is, then, the exclusivity of dualism an insoluble problem in theatre criticism? For instance, following on the earlier mentioned affirmation of the performative by Fischer-Lichte, one might ask: is it not possible for one to perceive theatre as both a work of art *and* an event at the same time? Fischer-Lichte uses the term “work of art” mainly to the extent that it refers to a staged play which is traditionally assessed on how successfully one has applied theatrical means to a text excluding the intimate experience on the part of the spectator.¹⁵ However, by doing so she allows one to regard theatre performances that do not explicitly demand audience participation or those that engage elements of representation or stage illusion as works that discard with the notion of the spectator as a performative subject. One may easily cite practitioners who pursued theatre as an *art* which would involve the active and intimate experience of the spectator: even Artaud, whose doctrine of the theatre of cruelty is still accepted as revolutionary in this respect, never propagated theatre as a non-artistic form, while Tadeusz Kantor declared that the theatrical spectacle “must be ‘created’ rather than ‘take place’” and that it “must *develop* in front of the audience,”¹⁶ invariably placing the spectator at the centre of his pursuits, he also stipulated his belief that “theatre is art first of all. (...) Only when theatre is posited within the domain of ART and all its problems may he have a guarantee of theatre’s free and vibrant development.”¹⁷

Asking whether it is indeed impossible to free oneself from this exclusivity is, in fact, a question closely linked with the Western traditional notion of theatre as essentially a representation, which traces itself back to Plato and Aristotle. While the

¹⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶ Kantor (1993), 37. My emphasis.

¹⁷ Ibid., 87;88.

two philosophers had severely opposing views on drama in several ways, they shared the same preconception that drama was fundamentally a *mimesis* of an external reality.¹⁸ Therefore, while various attempts to break down the various dichotomies in theatre research have produced fruitful and effective ways to encompass performances from a non-mimetic point of view as well as re-value elements of theatre which have hitherto been neglected, immanent in these accomplishments is the same exclusiveness which makes it extremely difficult to evolve a different relationship to the notion and function of representation.

Might not, then, turning toward an aesthetics and mode of thought that is rooted in a fundamentally different culture open up a possibility of overcoming the Western alterity in discussing theatre performances? Different cultures that have established distinct relationships between art and reality, “I” and “Other”, formulate significantly different conceptions of artistic creation and reception. If there is a concept that can be compared to the Western notion of representation, its qualities might differ from those that inherit the tradition of *mimesis*. In this thesis I propose the aesthetics of Chinese paintings as an alternative frame within which to discuss theatre performances that work beyond the limits of mimetic representation. I probe especially how the notion of representation in Chinese aesthetics fundamentally differs from the Western concept of *mimesis*. I give extra focus to its function as a pathway which bridged and connected, instead of isolating, the art work and the creator as well as recipient, and to the philosophical understanding of vision that the notion was bred. I will then apply this to the works of modern and contemporary “anti-mimetic” theatre works and explore how we may locate another way of theatre

¹⁸ See *Republic* 595a and *Poetics* vi. for Plato and Aristotle’s view of drama respectively. How they differ in detail will be elaborated in the main chapters of this thesis.

perception.

1-3. Structure of the Thesis

I will begin this thesis with a discussion of the Plato's definition of *mimesis* and succeeding criticisms of paintings and poetry, the two most exemplary forms of mimetic art. Although it was Aristotle and his *Poetics* that consolidated the mimetic tradition in Western theatre, it was Plato, who, whilst not the first to mention the term, discussed its concept both in depth and breadth in his adamant negation of poetry. The main aim of this chapter is to give an overview of how the notion of *mimesis* reflected the ancient Greek mode of seeing, and how in turn it worked as a frame for perception and art practice. By examining Plato's discussions, I will try to reveal the relations that the Greeks formed with the world, and how art as *mimesis* of the world functioned in this process. For this reason, I will, in this chapter, put extra focus on the discussion of visual art. This is not to neglect the fact that much of Plato's attack on *mimesis* is targeted at "dramatized" poetry (as opposed to the epic); however, discussing the concept of *mimesis* in relation to poetry entails the danger of diverting into an investigation of the characteristics of Greek theatre, which it is not the object of this chapter. Therefore, I will instead be looking at examples of Greek painting, the genre most directly related to the faculty of sight, which I hope will highlight Plato's philosophical stance on vision. On this basis I will trace the foundations of the Western attitude of seeing which thereafter frames artistic construction and reception.

In Chapter 3 I introduce the aesthetics of Chinese paintings as an alternative

concept of representation. This rises from the initial query which prompted this research: is there not an alternative lens through which to look at and discuss contemporary theatre performance? As the examples in this chapter will show, Chinese paintings exhibit a style significantly different from Western paintings that largely adhere to the tradition of *mimesis*. Such a difference in external appearance is borne out of a much more profound difference in the two cultures' attitude to seeing. By looking at landscape and literati paintings of the Sung era, I will trace the philosophical status of vision in China. The Chinese, too, understood painting as well as other forms of art as a representation; however, they never thought that the world or Truth could be grasped by external sight or translated into art form in entirety. The relationship that they form with reality or Truth, therefore, was significantly different from Classical Greece. In this chapter I will interrogate the relationship between man, Truth and art in China, and see how this led to a unique concept of representation, and how this in turn resulted in a spectatorship different from the Western. This will serve as the aesthetic and perceptual frame for my later discussions on contemporary theatre performances. As with the preceding and succeeding chapters on Plato and Aristotle's notions of *mimesis*, this chapter is an aesthetic and philosophical enquiry into the concept of representation. Therefore, I have limited my focus to paintings so as to prevent the discussion from diverging to a comparison between the characteristics of Chinese and Western theatres.

Chapter 4 explores the concept of *mimesis* as discussed in Aristotle's *Poetics*, as well as his assertions on tragedy, and examines how this laid the theoretical foundations for the Western tradition of drama and theatre. Although Aristotle's allusion to painting is brief compared to Plato, I have chosen to develop my arguments around a replica of an exemplary Classical Greek painting. This will, in

addition to maintaining my focus on the relationship between art and ways of seeing, highlight the increasing emphasis on the verbal aspect of art, both in painting and the dramatic genre. At the same time, examining Aristotle's position on *mimesis* by applying his treatises to painting will make clear how his notion of the term differs significantly from Plato's. As will be demonstrated in the chapter, such a tendency is intrinsically related to how the Classic Greeks viewed the world. The rational and logical quality of seeing was intensified, and the continuing shift of the understanding of drama from participatory event to essentially a "text" to be read or heard, reveals how through *mimesis* the Greeks sought to mould and reframe the world to fit their understanding.

In Chapter 5 I direct my discussion to the turn of the twentieth century, namely the age of modernism. Already much has been written about almost every aspect of this unique period in Western history; nevertheless, an enquiry into this particular period is inescapable for the development of my thesis, since it was during this time that *mimesis* once again reached its prime, all the more so with its marriage with Reason in forms like naturalism, and a strong sense of uneasiness concerning the relationship between vision and reality, as well as an urge to break with existing modes of artistic creation began to emerge. In this chapter I trace the paradoxical condition of *mimesis* that both reflected and conditioned this unique era, and examine the philosophical and aesthetic challenges against mimetic art. I do not attempt to survey an anthology of modernist movements; instead, my discussions will evolve around two figures who directly influenced thinkers and artists of the first half of the twentieth century. In the first part of the chapter I will probe Bergson's concept of duration. This concept, which superficially is Bergson's proposition for a redefinition of time, offered in fact an effective means to question

the existing paradigm of thought and perception. By proposing duration as a state of heterogeneity, Bergson provides us with an alternative concept of the present which transcends the boundaries of the physical now, giving focus to the subjectivity of the individual. My discussion of Bergson will then be followed by a short study on the paintings of Matisse, widely regarded as one of the key figures who contributed to disrupting mimetic conventions in the field of painting. By looking at the works of Matisse, who was deeply influenced by the philosophy of Bergson, I will examine how the subjectivity of the artist and spectator came to occupy the central role of artistic production and reception.

The final two main chapters turn to the discussion of theatre performances that work beyond the traditional confines of *mimesis*. Chapter 6 is a study on the creative process of the theatre of Tadeusz Kantor, who inherited the vigorous modernist revolts against the tradition of representational art. At the same time, because his artistic endeavours were made after the heyday of modernism and away from the major sites of modernist movements, Kantor's attitude toward reality and the real exhibit a different turn. In this chapter I will interrogate how the theatre works of Kantor established the relationship between illusion and the real, art and reality, and how this in turn opened up a way to an alternative mode of spectatorship. Although Kantor rejected theatre as a staging of dramatic texts and professed that it must always be a creative work in process, with very few exceptions he ultimately stuck to the conventional boundaries of theatre, adhering to the physical divide between stage and auditorium, performer and recipient. For this reason an in-depth discussion of his works will reveal the fundamental shift that took place in the concept of representation in the field of theatre. Moreover, because Kantor was a painter as well as theatre director, looking into his works will also serve as an

effective bridge between my previous research on broad aesthetics with regard to paintings and its application to theatre.

It is in Chapter 7 that I fully apply my interrogational frame of Chinese aesthetics to theatre performances. After a brief survey of two influential voices regarding representation in theatre, Artaud and Derrida, I begin the chapter by returning to the question of whether existing critical vocabularies suffice in dealing with theatre performances that work beyond the sphere of mimetic representation, when they themselves are fundamentally rooted in the same tradition. By examining Hans-Thies Lehmann's acclaimed monograph *Postdramatic Theatre*, which, as the title implies, proposes a new critical frame through which to look at theatres beyond the trajectories of the "dramatic", I will try to disclose some of the limitations immanent in even the most widely accepted critical frames to date. Proposing the aesthetics of Chinese paintings with special emphasis on the notion of the void and motif of journey I will case study the theatre works of the British company Forced Entertainment and try to demonstrate how a Chinese aesthetic may serve to complement the dilemma of alterity that most Western frames of theatrical enquiry inhabit. I have intentionally refrained from discussing the devising process of the company, for which they are perhaps most famous. Instead, my discussions focus on the company's play with mimetic representation, and on how its tactics, seen from my own receptive frame, give birth to another level of spectatorship. As with the case of Kantor, I have limited my research on the company to their theatre works excluding durational performances or installations, so as to highlight how the deployment of Chinese aesthetics and its notion of representation may open up different modes of perception within the boundaries of theatre.

Chapter 2

Plato's Concept of *Mimesis*: Greek Paintings and Visual Perception

2-1. Introduction

John Berger states at the beginning of his book *Ways of Seeing*, perhaps one of the most widely read books on the relationship between vision and art, that: “It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world.”¹ Following on from his statement I wish to put forward the proposition that ways of seeing govern ways of artistic production/construction and that this has implications for the creation of theatrical spectacles. Art is, after all, an expression of how the artist sees the world in which he or she exists. Evidence for this proposition can easily be found in the simple fact that the form and content of each artwork varies according to which period in history and in which cultural environment it was produced. “Ways of seeing” also works as one criterion for the reception of the produced work. Ways of seeing are again conditioned by various factors: one’s history, socio-cultural experience and education, or with regards to the many aspects of material production and artistic skill.

The issue of seeing has been one of the most discussed and debated topics in Western thought. This is not to say that issues evolving around the problem of seeing and vision is of little concern in other cultures: one can frequently encounter Chinese writings on paintings that talk (or rather teach) of seeing, as is also the case in

¹ Berger, 7.

Japanese Noh theatre. Taoist philosophy, together with Confucianism, the greatest school of Chinese thought, teaches indirectly of the importance of “true” vision through the omni-present Tao which cannot be seen, heard or touched. The Tao is that which

is called the form of the formless,
And the image of non-existence.
(...) Meet it, you cannot see its face;
Follow it, you cannot see its back.²

However, there is a significant difference in the attitudes that the Western and Eastern cultures exhibited towards the issue of seeing: while in the West there existed a vigorous debate concerning the nature of seeing, such quarrels are seldom to be found in the history of Eastern thought. While visual perception was the centre of the debate in the West, its limits were always acknowledged in many Eastern cultures. The concept of this kind of “seeing” was “clear” for Eastern thinkers; it was there to be taught and inherited, not challenged or debated. There were numerous discussions and studies on what the essence of this teaching was, but very few argued against it and artists would endeavour to embody it in their works. Such a distinction gives rise to another important factor regarding Western ways of seeing: due to the constant conflict and debate there exists a more severe demand for a definition of the concept. As a consequence, all of the arts, including theatre, changed or evolved according to these debates.

Arguably, one of the most important and most debated terms in relation to

² *Tao Te Ching* ch. 14.

Western ways of seeing is *mimesis*. Although Plato was not the first to use the term³ he was the first major philosopher to address the concept in the process of his attack upon it, and with Aristotle's counter argument against Plato's postulation the concept of *mimesis* secured its place in Western aesthetics. This also laid a solid foundation for the Western way of seeing, and related artistic tendencies.

In this chapter I will discuss the traditions of Western ways of seeing in general aesthetics, focusing on painting, through an examination of Plato's discussions of *mimesis*. Although the definition, or modern translation, of the term *mimesis*, whether in Plato's or Aristotle's use, is still very much an ongoing process amid much debate, one very certain fact is that Western art has been governed significantly, albeit with a few exceptions, by this concept, and continues to be so through the more modern term "realism". While most scholars agree that there is no one modern word that can fully translate the Greek original meaning of *mimesis*, the common substitutes such as "imitation" and "representation" substantiate the peculiar aspect of Western art which designates its essential role as "representation of reality" rather than creation or expression of the artist's subjectivity.

Of course, with the rise of Modernism during the early twentieth-century, *mimesis* and artistic processes that inherited its tradition became the target of severe criticism and challenge; it is no new fact that the modern art shaped itself through the efforts to transgress the dominant mimetic frame. Then, while twentieth century modernists endeavoured to abandon and overcome *mimesis*, artists of the latter half of the twentieth-century – namely the postmodernists – have tended to regard the question of *mimesis* as being of little significance in relation to artistic production or

³ See Keuls, 14-22 for a detailed discussion on the use and meanings before Plato. She claims that the original meaning of *mimesis* was "the enactment of deeds and experiences, whether human or divine."

indeed reception. All this applies also to the realm of theatre and performance; perhaps much more than other fields of art, thanks to Aristotle's theorization of *mimesis* and drama. In this chapter I will examine Plato's various dialogues on *mimesis* and mimetic art focusing on vision and visual arts, and putting particular emphasis on painting. The chapter will evolve around two main questions:

- 1) What is the underlying attitude of "seeing" in Western artistic traditions, indicated by Plato's dialogues?
- 2) How has the concept of *mimesis* contributed to framing Western artistic traditions?

From Plato's discussion of *mimesis* one can gain not only an understanding of the concept but also glimpses (even if very brief ones) of how the art and theatre of his time were perceived. This is the same form of theatre that was defended and later reinforced through Aristotle's *Poetics*. Reconstructing the picture of Classical Greek theatre is not, of course, the object of my discussion. What I wish to address instead is how the Greeks' reliance on seeing and their belief in the human eye had come to dominate their artistic practices, as is reflected in their paintings. Such is the aspect that is thoroughly attacked by Plato, regarding both painting and poetry, and then defended by Aristotle's counter argument. How such transformation influenced the arts, and how this relates to Plato's account of *mimesis* will be the focal point of my discussion.

It is also valid to discuss painting prior to theatre not only because it is an artistic medium most directly related to the faculty of sight, but also because Plato's criticism of painting is not merely limited to painting itself but is at the same time a

device to assault mimetic art forms as a whole. In his criticism there also exists a philosophical discussion of vision and the eye, which gives most significance to that aspect of the body and perception while at the same time attacking its unreliability. This will also be a significant part of this chapter, for what Plato attacks is what was dominant in the arts of his time, and what he claims important is consistent with much more modern artistic standpoints.

By examining Plato's concept of *mimesis* I hope to obtain a general overview of the foundation of Western traditions of ways of seeing. At the same time I will try to find aspects that go against the tradition of realism and could possibly meet the artistic endeavours of the early twentieth-century onwards. Finally, I will try to demonstrate that although Plato's criticisms of *mimesis* and mimetic art were attacks on what was to become a very long tradition in Western art, one which includes the theatre, his theory was in fact a foundation stone for this tradition in that it provided the theoretical basis for Aristotle's *Poetics*.

2-2. Paintings and the Classical Greek Perception of the World

Book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato's most substantial and widely known discussion on *mimesis*, takes painting as its major example. Many argue that Plato's attack on paintings in relation to *mimesis* was not targeted towards painting itself. This is largely true, to judge from the simple and evident fact that Plato opens the book by showing Socrates say (with regard to founding the correct principles for the ideal *polis*) that "I'm thinking particularly of poetry" and have him argue for "the

complete refusal to admit all poetry which is mimetic.”⁴ Eva C. Keuls also discusses this matter, and her conclusion too is that the “argument is clearly designed with poetry in mind, and illustrated with analogies from painting through clever wordplay.”⁵ However, I think it is still sensible to take paintings as the starting point for this discussion. If Plato used paintings in order to develop his theory on poetry, paintings cannot be a mere device; on the other hand, one should understand it as Plato’s strategy for attacking one of many aspects of mimetic poetry and the term *mimesis* itself. In Book 3 of the *Republic*, for example, Plato puts the focus on performance-related aspects of poetry and discusses *mimesis* with regard to the poet’s rendering of his stories. Book 10, on the other hand, is a discussion of *mimesis* from a more fundamental point of view. *Mimesis* here is related to a bigger picture of the world and the philosophy of seeing and knowledge. The allusion to painting is not merely a device to comment on or attack poetry but an effective apparatus by means of which to deliberate the issue of art and reality in the light of visual perception. This becomes clear when one looks at Plato’s comparison between Archaic and Classical paintings. Here it is not only the style or techniques that have changed: man’s attitude towards the world and his art has gone through a drastic transformation, and this is what lies beneath the visible changes. For this reason I shall begin my discussion on *mimesis* by comparing paintings of these two periods with regard to Plato’s argument. This will lead the discussion naturally towards his views on performance and dramatic *mimesis*.

The scarcity of surviving paintings, with the exception of vase paintings from the Classical era, gives us little choice but to rely on Roman replicas as well as the

⁴ *Republic* 595a.

⁵ Keuls, 44.

very few surviving originals, although one must be cautious not to take the former as true likenesses of the latter. Probably the only paintings of Plato's time that we have access to are the wall paintings from the tombs at the Greek village of Vergina.⁶

From the paintings found in the royal tombs at Vergina one can get a fairly clear idea of what sort of works Plato was criticising. The painting which depicts the rape of Persephone in Tomb II (*fig. 1*) or the painted frieze depicting a hunting scene (*fig. 2*) on the exterior of Tomb I, otherwise called the Tomb of Philip, are both very good examples which reveal the traits of Classical Greek painting, and their characteristics continue to appear in the later Roman works. A wall painting from Pompeii which illustrates Achilles at Skyros (*fig. 3*) is one of many that follow this newly formed stylistic tradition.

One of the most striking aspects of these paintings is the almost perfect translocation of sculptural form into a two-dimensional space. The painted figures resemble the human in real life in greater detail – which, considering the fact that the paintings illustrate human and divine figures at once, at the same time reinforces the anthropomorphic aspect of Classical Greek culture – and the paintings as a whole have acquired a sense of depth, an aspect which is not to be found in painting of earlier periods. Not only have the facial details come to resemble a human with greater accuracy, but also the bodies of each character have gained volume, giving the painting an illusion of a three-dimensional space. This kind of naturalism does not exist in Archaic painting, and indeed creates an illusion that the content of the picture is almost real, clearly contrasting with the paintings from a couple of centuries before. By “real” I do not mean to say that the painting has come to create

⁶ The village, ancient Macedonian capital of Aigai, became famous when in 1977 archaeologist Manolis Andronikos excavated the burial site of the royal family of Macedon, including the tomb of Philip II, father of Alexander the Great.

an illusion that it is actually the real object which it depicts; I do intend to point out the effort of these paintings to capture the details of the subject and simulate a non-existent dimension – an effort towards a realism in the modern sense. There are several possible explanations for the emergence of this tendency in this period in Greece. This tendency or characteristic of Classical Greek art is closely related to the problem of ways of seeing in the West and how they differ from cultures not influenced by Greece.⁷ This is where one aspect of Plato's account of *mimesis* can be found, which will be discussed together with a closer look at the paintings.

Before examining the paintings in detail, it is worth thinking about the possible reasons for the tendency towards detailed representation of the world in visual arts. From a socio-political point of view this change may be understood in relation to the formation of the Greek identity. This claim has been notably articulated by Mark Fullerton. He gives attention to the necessity felt by the Greeks to establish what we now call the "Classical"⁸, and interprets the social aspect of Classical Greece as the major cause of the transformation in the arts. Fullerton sees the core of the Classical in the Greeks' self-definition, and argues that the effort to distinguish themselves from the "others" (specifically the Orient) was what engendered the artistic characteristics of this particular period. Probably the most characteristic factor of Greece was the *polis*, meaning the "city-state". Fullerton is not the only one to argue the interdependency of the *polis* and Greek art: Wiles, for example, analyses the political character of the Greek tragedy, whose "subject matter

⁷ For example, although painting techniques to create spatial depth and enhance 'naturalistic' effects in the Western sense of the word were also developed and applied in Chinese paintings in many other instances these were intentionally omitted. This matter is closely related to the nature of perception in Chinese art, and is discussed in more depth in Chapter 3, especially with regard to what Chinese artists regarded as 'real' and 'realistic'.

⁸ See Fullerton, 10; Spivey also provides a lucid overview of the formation of the Classical style in its cultural, historical context.

was the well being of the polis, and its performance was part of what turned a collection of men into a polis.”⁹ Fullerton also reiterates the importance of the *polis*, asserting that one must interpret Greek art “primarily in terms of its function as a public statement by and about an individual or a *polis*. Such statements have to do with identity – of the individual among peers within the *polis*, or of the *polis* among other *poleis*, or of the Greeks in the world at large.”¹⁰ This was a distinct and unique quality of Greece, compared to neighbouring cultures such as Egypt which, according to the Greeks of the time, were based on coercive domination and divinely sanctioned monarchic authority.¹¹ Such contrast and the Greeks’ endeavour to stipulate their uniqueness is reflected in the arts. Although my main focus is painting and theatre, it is worth looking at the following comparison between Egyptian and Greek *kouroi*¹²:

(...) whereas the Egyptian artist was adept at capturing the fluctuating surfaces of flesh, the Greek sculptor projected to that surface the underlying system of muscle and bone on which the physical vigour of the human figure depended. To the Egyptian, a stable resting place for an immortal soul was essential; the Greek was more concerned with creating a permanent symbol of a living principle of virile virtue.¹³

The above quotation provides two important factors for my discussion on the Greek ways of seeing and *mimesis*. First, the Greeks’ pursuit of self-definition and

⁹ Wiles (2000), 48.

¹⁰ Fullerton, 54.

¹¹ The establishment of the Greek identity is at the same time a process of solidifying the “I” versus ‘Others’ division. This aspect of Greek art is discussed in relation to Aristotle’s concept of *mimesis* in Chapter 4.

¹² These are grave reliefs or statues, most of which take the form of a standing nude young man (*kouros*) or draped young woman (*kore*). See Fullerton, 43; Osborne, 70.

¹³ Fullerton, 65-66.

the establishment of the ‘Greek’ identity not only differentiated them from the “Other” from a macroscopic standpoint, but also reinforced if not transformed their way of seeing the world. Despite their strong belief in gods and the existence of a certain hierarchy, the *polis* tradition refused to accept one governing power, and this led to a much more dynamic and participatory society. The Greek world was directed more towards the civil association/life and the Greeks themselves. This means there existed a necessity to capture and idealise the virtues of man (the body) as opposed to those of the gods (the soul). This is reflected in the artistic representation of human and divine figures, not only in sculpture but also in painting, as we shall see later on. Secondly, the desire to reproduce “their” world through artistic media was much stronger than in other cultures, and although this world was still idealised in many ways, this idealism was fused with a strong sense of what we now call realism or naturalism.

While Fullerton provides us with a socio-politically oriented discussion of the shift in Greek art, the renowned art historian and critic E. H. Gombrich approaches the Classical from a more formalist point of view. In his perhaps most widely read book *Art and Illusion* where he investigates the relationship between perception and art, illusion and reality in the process of artistic creation, he argues that the emergence of naturalistic elements in Classical Greek painting is due to a shift from schematic and conceptual art to a matching of reality, and that *mimesis* was an artistic device which grew from this change in the purpose of arts. His claim is that the artist’s foremost desire is to create, not to match. This means that the artist as creator is directed towards the abstract and the eternal, while the artist as matcher of

the world turns his eyes¹⁴ toward his worldly reality. According to Gombrich, “the conquest of naturalism may be described as the gradual accumulation of corrections due to the observation of reality.”¹⁵ Whether the naturalistic elements in Classical Greek paintings are a result of accumulated corrections is not my main concern, but it seems quite reasonable to accept his argument that during this phase the Greeks’ way of seeing had significantly changed. In this light Gombrich’s point of view meets with Fullerton’s, and both point to the change in the Greeks’ view of the world. What, then, is the detailed evidence, and how can one relate this to the concept of *mimesis*? Furthermore, what is the underlying attitude of “seeing” in Classical Greek art exemplified by Plato’s dialogues?

Returning to the genre of painting, I find three fundamental elements that contribute to its naturalistic characteristics: the emergence of volume, the focus on man, and the centrality of the narrative. Although these are characteristics of paintings, these are also central elements of traditional mimetic theatre—*mimesis* being the connecting thread. Therefore I will briefly examine these elements in relation to Plato’s discussions on *mimesis*, and trace also the mimetic aspects of performance and how these can be viewed with regard to the Classical ways of seeing.

2-2-1. Volume

Although a clear single-point perspective like that of the Renaissance had not yet been born it is possible to spot indications that the first attempts towards its

¹⁴ I have been conservative in referring to third person pronouns and used the masculine form only instead of the commonly used “his/her” mode. This does not, however, imply that I assume artists or spectators are male; I merely made this choice for convenience reasons, and I hope the reader, too, will read them as neutral designations of both male and female persons.

¹⁵ Gombrich (2003), 105.

achievement had taken place, and it is evident that Greek paintings had achieved an illusionary three-dimensional space through the discovery of various painterly techniques. Most of this has to do with the development of volume. Unlike paintings of the Archaic era (800-480 B.C.), which rely on lines and remain “flat”, the paintings of the Classical period depend increasingly on volume. It is not only the volume of the bodies depicted that has appeared. With the development of the technique of foreshortening the overall painting has achieved a spatial depth which Archaic paintings lack.

Obvious evidences for this change can be seen in the difference of bodily disposition in the two periods. In the François vase in Florence (*fig. 4*) we find depictions of men in various postures according to their supposed roles. Yet whatever the posture, the “profile face – frontal torso” formula is consistently applied, just like the paintings of ancient Egypt. There is a difference that has occurred in paintings of this era, however. Unlike ancient Egyptian paintings where the lines that depict the body are simple and straightforward, excluding the delineation of muscles, the depiction of muscles in the vase is apparent. However, it is difficult to argue that this is a major change in painting – the emergence of this new detail should rather be viewed as a process of assimilation which took place when the Greeks imported artistic styles and techniques from the Orient. The fundamental convention has not changed, and adding a line or two to the painting has done little to produce an extra dimension.

The examples from the Classical period, however, reveal a significant change in the way the human/divine figures (as well as things) are painted. While the earlier works were limited to either frontal or ninety-degree views, in the case of the Persephone mural, for instance, one can observe successful attempts at three-quarter

views. Such a technique enables the painter to depict the selected object closer to how the human eye perceives the external world, as well as obtaining the effect of spatial depth. It also gives the work a much stronger sense of movement, an important factor with which one identifies his surrounding world, which of course is a moving (and changing) entity. Let us take a closer look at the Persephone painting, in which Persephone is leaning diagonally with her hips down facing the front while her waist is twisted so that her torso leans towards the opposite direction. This creates an effect of visualizing both the frontal and profile parts of her figure without the rigidity that exists in previous paintings. The structure therefore makes the figure look much more similar to the real human body, and the overall body is guaranteed a stronger sense of flexibility and fluidity. The three-quarter view penetrates the rest of the painting, including the chariot with both wheels shown facing in the same direction as the two people onboard it.¹⁶

The paintings thus resemble a worldly reality – or, to be more precise, the appearance of the phenomenal world – much more closely than those of the earlier period. Whereas paintings had remained as static “paintings” earlier in history, they now moved a step closer to the dynamic human world. The facts that the Persephone mural depicts the move from the world of the living to the world of the dead, deities instead of mortals, or that being a tomb painting it was actually made in order to entertain the dead, do little to undermine this aspect. Osborne’s proposition that belief in life after death was not totally unknown in Greece and that the Persephone mural is good evidence of this tendency is noteworthy. Emphasising the dynamic quality of the painting, which almost leaps at the viewer, he concludes. “Whoever

¹⁶ Until then chariot wheels were always only painted from the side, making it impossible for the viewer to visualize the chariot as moving or facing forwards towards him, as can be observed in the François vase.

commissioned this painting for this tomb saw death not as a mere fading out of life, but as a violent struggle and a dramatic new beginning.”¹⁷ It can be said that vitality and mobility, which has become an immensely significant aspect of the newly formed Greek identity, has permeated into the world of gods and even the world of the unliving.

This leap from two to three dimensions in the history of Greek painting has been argued by many, as discussed briefly above, to be due not to enhancement of skills and techniques, but rather to different ways in which the artists of those times viewed painting and the world. Gombrich explains this as a move towards particularisation, and claims that this particularising is the unique element of the “Greek revolution”: “What makes it unique is precisely the directed efforts, the continued and systematic modifications of the schemata of conceptual art, till making was replaced by the matching of reality through the new skill of mimesis.”¹⁸ So, a shift from the abstract conceptual to a realism of particulars has taken place. The achievement of volume by the painter suggests the growing awareness that one is in an environment. Man is no longer in an abstract world but in a specific world, whether created by god or man. Volume is evidence of the shift of vision from the conceptual, abstract to the specific concrete world that surrounds human beings.

Such a shift is closely related to the issue of seeing, whether the painting be an artistic outcome or a reflection of what the painter sees, or a device through which the painter (or in this case the beholder) views the world. In fact, it should be said that both cases occur. “Abstraction” and “conceptualism” involve, as the words imply, the act of distancing the object from its down-to-earth reality; and, with the

¹⁷ Osborne (1998), 202.

¹⁸ Ibid., 121.

artistic work involved, the paintings acquire an idealized character. The archaic painter is closer to “a creator, a maker of things,”¹⁹ or representing an invisible conceptual world rather than imitating facets of the visual world. The opposite effort may be said to be occurring in paintings of Plato’s time. Particulars have become important to the artist, and the reality man is surrounded in is reflected in his artwork.

However, can one say for certain that the Classical Greeks’ search for closer resemblance of their worldly reality through the creation of volume means a closer approach to the real? Of course, it is very difficult to deny that they ‘look’ to us much more realistic. But this is the very point: it was an effort to reproduce what seemed closest to the *eyes* of men. Artistic techniques that were developed and applied were a device to reproduce best what was visually perceived. Richter, in her study of perspective in Greek art, claims that it was in the Classical era that anything that could be called perspective was first born, and she stresses that perspective is “a phenomenon of appearance, not of reality.”²⁰ Giving more importance to the visual reception of things suggests that the world as seen by men has become more important than the world “as it is”. There may be a slight confusion regarding this proposition, but if we remind ourselves that we are looking at this from Plato’s point of view, things should be much clearer.

Let us at this point turn to Plato’s theory of Form with regard to his views on art. For Plato the ‘real’ world meant the real nature of the world, and to this he gave the name Form. Form is “what is,”²¹ can never be seen, and can only at best be approached closest through knowledge:

¹⁹ Ibid., 83.

²⁰ Richter (1970) 2.

²¹ Janaway, 93.

Then he would reach the purest truth in this procedure who approached each thing with the intellect itself alone, not bringing in sight to aid his thinking, nor dragging in any other sense to supplement his reason: he who should try to track down each item of reality, alone by itself, in its pure essence, by using pure thought, alone by *its* self – disregarding, as far as was possible, eyes and ears, and practically all the body, on the ground that it caused confusion ...²²

It is evident that Plato's notion of "reality" does not refer to the external world which we perceive with our bodily senses, and in this respect although the tendency of Classical paintings towards the appearance of the world can technically be seen as a birth of realism, fundamentally from Plato's point of view they have moved away from reality. The discussion on *mimesis* in Book 10 of the *Republic* centres on this aspect of the term. *Mimesis*, the focal and to Plato the only work involved in painting, creates "*appearances*, but surely not ... genuine actuality."²³ For Plato "actuality" or true nature was related to knowledge and reason, while pre-Platonic art was concerned more with religion.

One must, however, bear in mind that Plato's notion of knowledge was still very much attached to the realm of the divine, and that for him the gods, who "are in every way perfect," remain "forever simply in ...[their] own form."²⁴ It is the gods that created men, and it is the gods that moulded the head and posited it on the top of the body:

(...) [the gods] bound within a sphere-shaped body, in imitation of the spherical form

²² *Phaedo* 66a. Translator's emphasis.

²³ *Republic* 596e. Translator's emphasis.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 381b-c.

of the All, which body we now call the ‘head’, it being the most divine part and reigning all the parts within us. (.....) dealing first with the vessel of the head, they set the face in the front thereof and bound within it organs for all the forethought of the Soul; and they ordained that this, which is the natural front, should be the leading part.²⁵

Knowledge, therefore, is the most important attribute of man, and at the same time it is a path that links man with the gods. In the same light reality or Truth for Plato is engaged much more with a transcendental realm. It is detached from “worldly” reality, and like the gods, is eternal and changeless. In this respect it is closer to religion and earlier paintings that had a stronger sense of prayer and ritual than those of the Classical era. The introduction of volume, which increased the mimetic aspect of Classical paintings, is thus a device that deviated the direction from the “real” to “fake”, and reflects the tendency of men of this period to turn from the invisible, abstract world of the soul to the vividly visible, concrete and physical world.

This does not mean, however, that Classical paintings were only concerned with physical reality. On the contrary, although visually they appear to be more “realistic”, in fact this is not the case. Techniques applied to produce the effect of volume were, even on the physical level, distanced from reality in the sense that, while they appeared to resemble the object, strategies to make it look more pleasant were also involved. This can be seen in the use of light and shade, through a technique called *skiagraphia*.²⁶ In the painting of Persephone, for instance, much

²⁵ *Timaeus* 44d-45b.

²⁶ Introduced by the Athenian painter Apollodorus, *skiagraphia*, literally translated as “shadow painting,” refers to the technique which consists of hatched areas that give the illusion of both shadow and volume. “Skiagraphia.”

effort has been expended to produce not merely a realistic effect, but an even stronger sense of dramatic tension and urgency. This is most obvious in the painting of Persephone's drapery, which undulates in the same direction as her arms. The remarkable point here is that the illusion of movement is reinforced by the strong contrast of the colours applied. Note that such technique is only very slightly applied in the painting of the remaining female figure to the right. The eyes are thus directed towards Persephone, the central figure and "theme" of the painting. In other words, the viewer of the painting is guided by such applications to what he "should" be seeing, as well as how he should be seeing it. With the simple use of shading the painter highlights what he wishes to impose upon the viewer. This is radically different from the case of sculpture, where carvings in the stone are made to create a similar effect. Whereas in paintings these are only an illusion of volume, the equivalent in sculpture *is* volume, and the shades are actual shades created by real light. Volume in sculpture is not a technical device as in painting but a *sine qua non*, and therefore it cannot guide or lure the viewer to any particular part which the sculptor wishes to be viewed most. One may assume this was why Plato was so eager to attack paintings while he left sculpture relatively untouched.

The issue of light and shade in relation to volume gives rise to another problem. In real life things appear to look different according to where the viewer stands. Paintings with volume, however, give only one facet of a thing seen from one fixed location. Plato criticises this aspect of *mimesis* as he points out the unreliability of sight:

If we rely on our eyesight, presumably, the same thing does not look the same size close and far off. (...) And the same things can look crooked and straight to people

looking at them first in water and then out of water. Or concave or convex, because of our eyes' variable perception of colours or shades. Our souls are clearly full of this kind of confusion. Things like shadow-painting, conjuring, and all the other arts of the same kind rely on this weakness in our nature to produce effects that fall nothing short of witchcraft.²⁷

The thing is there, unchanging; the only thing that changes is our visual perception of it. What the painter does is to capture just one instance of these capricious visions as seen from one viewpoint, and make it look as if that is the only way the thing looks. On the contrary, flat Archaic paintings lacking any of the elements of volume impose nothing on the viewer. There is no one figure to focus on nor any enforced emotional experience. They are a dry description in the form of painting. Providing the viewer with a direction to "read" the painting means that the painter's intentions are inscribed within it. How the painter wants his viewer to see the painting means it is also how he wishes to see the world.

Clearly this suggests a change of attitude in ways of seeing the world. I have already mentioned that the Classical had turned from the transcendental to the more secular, from the invisible to the more visible, but in the procedure there was added a strong desire of man. The introduction of volume enabled the painter to make his painting closer to what he envisioned, which not only means it has a stronger resemblance to "reality" but also to the painter's own ideal model. Now the world in painting is manipulated by man. If Form is eternal and unchangeable, and earlier paintings were a media through which to approach this, it is now man represented by the painter that determines form. Instead of Form, it is what man sees that is "what is". Form is now infused with the individual ideal of man, and *mimesis* is an

²⁷ Republic 602c-d.

excellent servant that materialises this new form.

2-2-2. Focus on “Man”

This kind of reflection upon the change in the ways of seeing is also to be found in the content of the paintings. The majority of Classical Greek paintings focus on man. This cannot be a characteristic unique to this era, but nonetheless it is a notable fact. There are of course in several cases backgrounds, and even landscapes that accompany the paintings, but the focal point that seems to be made is the detailed depiction of the appearance of man. In fact, the accompaniment of background or landscape in effect reinforces the spotlight on man. The faces have acquired more expression, as have the details of the body. For this reason it is much easier to distinguish one figure from the other.

This is quite a difference from how man was depicted in previous paintings, where distinguishing one figure from another is difficult, and “type” seems to dominate over detail. This is mostly due to the stylistic shift away from the profile face – frontal torso formula towards the three-quarter view which I mentioned in the previous section. Another important difference to be seen in Archaic paintings is that little detail is shown in the depiction of each character with regard to context. While, for instance, the painting in a 6th century B.C. krater (*fig. 5*) treats its characters as a general mass and gives them only a minimum of detail, just enough to indicate their basic actions, an early Classical vase painting of the destruction of Troy (*fig. 6*) depicts all of its figures in full detail, making each clearly distinct from the others.

The effect such Archaic paintings produce is close to that of ritual. Let us

look again at figure 5. The painting depicts gods who are, to the Greeks, always in the same form as human beings. However, the “re-produced” image involves little of the life-likeness that real humans possess. Here the figures are more rigid in posture, and the angles of each character’s limbs are almost identical. It is obvious that they are a procession, but to where is very difficult to tell. Moreover, with the addition of the circular structure of the vase it even gives an idea that the procession is revolving, as if in dance. Due to this effect the image conveys a stronger sense of ritual rather than real-life journey. The rigidity makes the figures lack the life-like movement, but at the same time they emit a sense of strange ecstasy. The figures seem to transcend physical reality, and at the same time demand that the spectator also see beyond what is visually presented. They do not provide themselves with elements that form a character, but instead invite the viewer to share the much stronger emotional features they produce as an almost anonymous mass. For this reason although the depicted figures are men, they convey the feeling that they have touched the numinous and that they are active in their piety towards the gods.

On the other hand, neither “Destruction of Troy” nor “The Rape of Persephone” display such qualities. Even if one takes into account the fact that in the latter example there is actually a divine figure (Hades), there is very little, if any, sense of the eternal changelessness that characterizes the paintings mentioned earlier. What dominates instead is the detailed description of each figure. As with the case of volume, here also the descriptions are less an effort to deliver the precise object than render it as pleasant as possible. Fullerton also throws light on this point, when he states that it “is often argued that as the time progressed Greek portraits became more faithful depictions of their subjects, but what is actually displayed is a growing

interest in more detailed characterization.”²⁸ For this reason they become “characters” rather than one among many men, distinct from one another not only in appearance but also in the emotions that they express. One can easily read the agony in Persephone’s face, as well as that of her friend’s. What has now become more important is not the collective ritualistic atmosphere but the physical beauty of the body and the much more personal emotions of each individual character. Indeed, this is one of the major transformations that took place in Classical Greece, and as Boardman argues, “this is the most remarkable lesson of any history of art – its rapid development from strict geometry admitting hardly any figure decoration, to full realism of anatomy and expression.”²⁹ The world as seen by men inscribed with their desires has replaced the transcendental, spiritual world, and their personal emotions have gained much more significance.

This is not to say that individualism has taken over, but because figures of both man and god have obtained distinct characteristics, they opened up a stage for the *mimesis* of particulars. For according to Plato *mimesis* is inherently obsessed with particulars, not universals. It is one of the key reasons for his severe attack on *mimesis*: in his allusion to the couch, he criticises the painter as a creator of an image of only one of many couches, thus not capable of grasping *the true couch*³⁰. If we apply this to the painting of man, the painter, putting so much effort into making his characters alive as possible, blinds himself to the true nature, or Form, of man. Figures of the Archaic paintings are relatively safe from this danger, for their almost pattern-like features are repeated regardless of painting and prohibit any one particular figure from standing out from the rest.

²⁸ Fullerton, 76.

²⁹ Boardman, 18.

³⁰ See *Republic* 596b-597a.

It is a well known fact that Plato was nostalgic for the immobile schemata of Egyptian art, and that he found the art of early Greece to be close to this ideal model. In the *Laws* we find a passage in which he says regarding Egyptian art:

So they drew up the inventory of all the standard types, and consecrated specimens of them in their temples. Painters and practitioners of [all] other arts of design were forbidden to innovate on these models or entertain any but the traditional standards, and the prohibition still persists, both for these arts and for music in all its branches. If you inspect their paintings and reliefs on the spot, you will find that the work of ten thousand years ago – I mean the expression not loosely but in all precision – is neither better nor worse than that of today; both exhibit an identical artistry.³¹

What I find here to be Plato's key words are "standard types", "precision" and "identical". These three words imply a sense of eternity, something unchangeable, and in this light connects to Plato's theory of Form or Idea – the truth which transcends capricious visual appearance. Of course in the above passage Plato does not mention any connection between painting and Form. However, the fact that he does state that there existed certain "standard types" instead of the material before the eyes for the painters to work on suggests that he saw here a kind of form that governed – something that was closer to the essence of each object of artistic reproduction. Thus, by adhering to the traditional standards painters of archaic Greece would, although not altogether free from *mimesis*, be one phase closer to truth than those of Plato's Greece. It is the type of *mimesis* which Plato describes in the *Sophist* as "eicastic", one which corresponds to "the ontological fidelity to proportions"³², as

³¹ *Laws* 656-657.

³² Halliwell (2000a), 104-105.

opposed to the “phantastic”, “the adjustment of an artistic image to the perceptual point of view from which a human observer contemplates it”³³ and therefore a “distorted ‘semblance-making.’”³⁴ This would mean that the Archaic *mimesis* of man is also closer to the Form of man than that of the Classical period.

Such a shift from ideal types to the physical world, or the world of visual perception in arts, would indeed be producing “that which is bred at two removes from nature.”³⁵ The focus on man as component of such a visual world and the effort to match what the sensory eye perceived in Plato’s time opened the era of artistic *mimesis*. The beholder now has much more for his visual, sensual pleasure.

For this same reason nature in this period is also depicted as it is “seen”. This is not to say that nature, or man for this matter, is photographically recaptured. What I mean to emphasise is that the idealism which dominated the earlier paintings has significantly decreased. There does still exist an idealism but it is a humanistic idealism, one which is more directed to the surrounding world than that of the gods. One can see the desire to idealise reality, and for this reason there is embellishment rather than minimisation. Decorative elements have increased as a result, and nature too is illustrated in considerable detail (see again *fig. 2*). It is not that nature was seen as a possession of man, but at the same time it is difficult to say that it is a purely idealized world of gods. There seems to be a fusion of man and god here. Human beings and gods share the same features, and it has become hard to distinguish one from the other. Are they anthropomorphic illustrations of gods, or are they human beings in the guise of the divine? In either case the obvious fact is that these subjects possess the detailed features of man (the former case even more so, since the ideal

³³ *Sophist* 235d-236c. Qtd. in *ibid.*, 105.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁵ *Republic* 597e.

appearance of gods matches the ideal appearance of human beings), suggesting that people's consciousness was much more directed to "their" world.

The shift from the ideal to man and the growing significance of illusion in painting links to a change in the sense of time. I have already mentioned earlier that ancient Egyptian and Archaic paintings had an element of changelessness and thus bore a strong sense of eternity. Because of a much more detailed depiction of man – both in appearance and characteristics – vitality has replaced the static postures of the previous era. A simple look at two paintings explains such difference. The late seventh century B.C. painting of Perseus with a head of Medusa (*fig. 7*) exhibits a human body in the posture of running. Then we find a Roman replica of a Greek painting/fresco depicting a battle between Alexander the Great and Darius III of Persia (*fig. 15*).³⁶ Both images contain bodies in movement. However, the degree of movements portrayed differs: while the former maintains only the essential element of each part of the body so as to signify that the man in the painting is to be seen as moving, the latter, with the help of its details, creates a sense of illusion that the people involved in the painting *are* actually moving, or, if not, have frozen in the middle of vigorous movement.

How these engage with the concept of time and how they differ in this regard is connected with direction. The posture that embodies only the essential factors of movement involves no sense of illusionary time. It is an imitation of types, independent of the flow of time in itself, and therefore can transcend and extend itself from zero to infinity. On the other hand, because it seems as if it captures a moment of a continuous movement, the Alexander Mosaic, as it is commonly called,

³⁶ A detailed examination of this picture with regard to the concept of *mimesis* will be made in Chapter 4.

inevitably accompanies illusionary time. Instead of extension, in this case a limitation of time is taking place. This occurs on two levels: firstly the painting limits itself to the moment of the painting itself. Rather than extending zero time to infinity, it stops. This creates an interesting irony in that the effort to imitate vital movement in fact results in a stand-still. The other limitation lies in the painting's presentation of a unit of time cut out from transcendental and thus eternal, universal time. Separated and framed from nature's time, the picture creates a distance between itself and the world. Whilst Plato attacked these paintings as being merely a *mimesis* of inconsistent appearances, they are also simultaneously a *mimesis* of fleeting time which vanishes even before the painter finishes his work.

2-2-3. Narrative

This concept of time is closely connected to the narrative of the painting. It is easy to recognise how the majority of the paintings of Plato's time were concerned with well-known myths, as well as famous historical scenes. Narratives were evidently employed in earlier paintings too, and myths were also the governing motif, but they are much clearer and easier to recognise in the later works, due to the transformations already mentioned in the earlier sections. In the process of pictorial *mimesis* of each narrative the painting emphasises the time within the story it illustrates as well as the stories themselves, through which it produces a world of its own – or, a visual illusion of a world of its own. Terms have been coined in order to categorise the types of pictorial narratives adopted in the paintings of Classical Greece, namely monoscenic, synoptic, cyclical and continuous narratives. Shapiro

explains these as:

1. Monoscenic: a depiction of a single moment in a particular story which preserves the unity of time and space. (...)
2. Synoptic: a combination of several different moments or episodes from a story into a single picture. (...)
3. Cyclic: a series of discrete episodes from a longer story that are physically separated from one another, (...) and the figure of the protagonist is repeated in each episode.
4. Continuous: a variant of the cyclic, in which there are no physical boundaries between the individual episodes.³⁷

In this case an in-depth inspection of this aspect does not seem to be necessary. What I wish to give focus to is how almost perfect the created world in the paintings is. This is related to another aspect of the narratives employed in the paintings: whether monoscenic, synoptic or cyclical, by clarifying the narrative and relating the illustrated characters to the story-line, the paintings are no longer depictions or descriptions of this world – whether humane or divine – but of a self-contained world. If volume creates a spatial illusion, narrative produces a temporal one.

This seems to be a good time to examine the mimetic aspects of poetry and performance. Regarding pictorial narrative and dramatic narrative, I would like to compare the process of painting to that of recitation. Such an association should give us a clearer understanding of the link between painting and theatre in relation to Plato's discussion of *mimesis* and open a possibility of understanding the traditions

³⁷ Shapiro, 8-9.

of Western ways of seeing.

In Book 3 of the *Republic* we find the following dialogue between Socrates and Adeimantus:

SOCRATES. (...) when [the poet] makes a speech in the character of someone else, can we say he always makes his own style as close as possible to that of the person he tells us is speaking?

ADEIMANTUS. No question of it.

SOCRATES. But making yourself resemble someone else – either in the way you speak or in the way you look – isn't that imitating the person you make yourself resemble?³⁸

From this passage one may assume that here at least Plato is opposing not the content of a narrative but “mimetic” narrative, a specific form of performance. It is when the poet *pretends* to *be* who he is describing that *mimesis* occurs and becomes the object of Plato's disapproval. Deception on the artist's part leads to the deception of the beholder. When the poet “acts” the characters instead of simply describing, the spectator confuses the poet with the hero himself, mistakes fiction for real when in fact the narrative recounted (or performed) is only one of many inconsistent and variable versions, all of which are inappropriate to the philosopher. We now arrive at another aspect of *mimesis*. As Havelock puts it:

It is now the name of the active personal identification by which the audience sympathises with the performance. It is the name of our submission to the spell. It describes no longer the artist's imperfect vision, whatever that may be, but the

³⁸ *Republic* 393c.

identification of the audience with that vision.³⁹

We can see that it is not only the internal activity involved in the process of the artist, but also the external distances created from the point of view of the audience by mimetic outcome which leads to Plato's accusation. *Mimesis* is occurring on two levels – both within and beyond artistic production.

Interestingly, while the distance between the artwork and “truth” increases, what results is in fact a decrease of distance, a close adhesion between the artist and his object formed through the effort to resemble. Similar processes occur with the spectator, which according to Plato are all the more dangerous, for “imitation, if long continued from an early age, becomes part of a person's nature, turns into habits of body, speech and mind.”⁴⁰ The enacted narration of poetry creates a distorted character with whom the spectator empathises, and as he imitates what he sees and hears he will be embodying within himself something far removed from the truth. *Mimesis* is dangerous not only in that it produces a false illusion, but also (and more importantly) because it plants that falseness into the spectator, making him believe that is the truth and the good. It makes one deceive oneself into believing what is pleasant to one's sensory organs is goodness. This is one of the essential elements of *mimesis*, and at the same time its most serious flaw: “mimetic art,” concludes Socrates, “portrays men engaged in involuntary or voluntary actions, and as a result of their action believing that they have succeeded or failed, and either grieving or rejoicing in all their circumstances.”⁴¹

It is the same in the case of music, which in the age of Plato consisted both of

³⁹ Havelock, 26.

⁴⁰ *Republic* 395c-d.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 603c.

dance (gesture) and melody. As Stalley explains, to Plato “music is naturally associated with character and (...) in performing or taking pleasure in music we assimilate our own characters to that associated with music.”⁴² This is why Plato so strongly warns of the ‘right’ content of poetry as well as its correct form of recital, and regarding music its correct composition with regard to rhythm (“order in movement”⁴³) and pitch (“order in articulation”⁴⁴) as he claims that “universally all postures and melodies connected with goodness of soul or body (...) are good, and notes connected with badness universally the reverse.” He continues that it is “commonly said that the standard of rightness in music is its pleasure-giving effect. That, however, is an intolerable sentiment.”⁴⁵ The only pleasure that is acceptable is that of properly educated and refined music “which pleases the one man who is supreme in goodness and education.”⁴⁶ Enactment deviates from this correctness of (re)presentation, and thus deceives the senses of the spectator and drives him from truth. Moreover, this aspect of *mimesis* is all the more dangerous because a “speaker or image-maker can be credited with the authority that they do not possess.”⁴⁷

Deception also occurs around pictorial narrative. If dramatic deception is produced by means of personification, pictorial deception results from painting techniques that have emerged to increase the naturalistic effects of the Classical period. The most prominent evidence lies in relation to volume, which contributes to the production of an illusionary third-dimension within a two-dimensional space. This means that painting is no longer a descriptive illustration of the chosen object,

⁴² Stalley, 127.

⁴³ *Laws* 665

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 655.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 659.

⁴⁷ Shepherd and Wallis, 213.

like the “simple narrative”⁴⁸ in poetry, but a sort of personification – i.e. the process of painting as mimetic performance. While in Archaic paintings objects are ‘narrated’ in a crude form, in Classical paintings, by manipulating paint in order for it to appear as something which it is not, the artist deceives the eyes of the beholder. This element of deception in Plato’s discussion becomes more evident when one compares painting to sculpture, where spatial illusion does not exist.

Considering the fact that the most important objective of Plato’s discussions is the education of the citizens and their guardians, mimetic art is indeed a dangerous enemy. In the seventh Book of the *Republic*, following the allegory of the cave Socrates defines education, likening the soul to eyes which are looking in the wrong direction. The “soul,” he tells Gloucon, is

Like an eye which can only be turned away from the darkness and towards the light by turning the whole body. The entire soul has to turn with it, (...) until it is able to bear the sight of what is, and in particular the brightest part of it.⁴⁹

Thus education, he concludes, is the

art of directing this instrument [the soul], of finding the easiest and most effective way of turning it round. [Education is] Not the art of putting the power of sight into it, but the art which assumes it possesses this power – albeit incorrectly aligned, and looking in the wrong direction – and contrives to make it look in the right direction.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Republic* 492d.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 518c.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 518d.

The aim of education is to direct the soul towards Truth, and art, due to the effects of *mimesis*, betrays this crucial goal and contradicts the essence of Plato's ideal account of education. Plato's notion of vision exists on two levels – the level of physical, sensory perception, and the level of “seeing” beyond the eyes, the Truth. For this reason vision is heralded as the greatest gift of the gods as well as the most unreliable. While Plato criticises the capriciousness of visual phenomena and *mimesis* thereof in Book 10 of the *Republic*, in Book 6 he regards the eyes as “the most sun-like”⁵¹ of all perceptive organs, and in *Timaeus* declares that “God devised and bestowed upon us vision to the end that we might behold the revolutions of Reason in the Heaven and use them for the revolvings of the reasoning that is within us.”⁵² It is natural that Plato condemns painters who play with the eye and sensory perception, bewitching the beholder into thinking the shadows on the cave wall are the real and thus blinding their vision from truth.

This leads to another element of mimetic art which threatens the education of the citizens, that which is related to knowledge and distance. Knowledge in fact is the key foundation of Plato's attack for he refutes *mimesis* as “a game and no serious matter” because “the mimetic practitioner knows nothing significant on the subjects of his imitation.”⁵³ This applies to both painting and poetry. Knowledge is obtained through reason, and in order for reason to operate there needs to be a certain distance. Plato emphasises the distance between mimetic artwork and truth several times, and this distance in effect blocks all room for reason. The distance is a result of resemblance. Simple narrative in epic, the “distanced” story-telling, is closer to truth, as are the “types” in Archaic painting, and at the same time the two secure a

⁵¹ Ibid., 508b.

⁵² *Timaeus* 47a.

⁵³ Ibid., 602b.

space for reason and thought, perception beyond the eyes. In the case of Classical paintings and mimetic storytelling on the other hand, it is assimilation, not distancing, that takes place. Seeing and similar sensory perception is everything, and there is no room for reasoning to take place. Not only does the artist have no knowledge of what he is imitating – in *Ion* Plato even accuses the poet as being out of his mind and possessed⁵⁴ – but also the spectator is deprived of the opportunity to use his reason and direct himself according to the truth.

2-3. Conclusion

Plato's accusations against *mimesis* seem unjust from today's point of view, for philosophical knowledge and Truth no longer prevail as the sole criterion for judging art. However, it does indicate some important changes that occurred and influenced Western art to this day. The change from the spiritual to the physical, the abstract to the concrete by means of newly developed realistic techniques – both in painting and theatre – suggests the Greeks' growing consciousness of their environment and the desire to inscribe it in an art form. During this process the desire for beauty fuses with the existing idealism, resulting in a growing appetite for sensory pleasure. Plato was strongly opposed to pleasure in the arts for the reason that it numbed one against the "good" and distanced one from reason. The interest in the physical world led to an increasing interest in the particulars of the world, and this resulted again, through *mimesis*, in the reinforcement of the visual aspects of art. In turn, this led to a belief that all that was seen could be represented. Contrary to

⁵⁴ See *Ion* 534.

Plato's refutation, such a transformation in the way of seeing was to become a firm tradition thanks to Aristotle's defence of each supposed "crime".

What we can see in Plato's criticism of *mimesis* is a strong disbelief in visual phenomena and a still stronger belief in absolute, changeless Truth. His recognition of the limits of our eyes meets with modern doubt about reason. Of course, Plato's attack on *mimesis* is strictly based on reason and thought, but if we consider his argument about the "true" vision that goes beyond the physical eye, we can see some similarities with movements that went against illusionary realistic theatre. However, there is a basic dichotomy in Plato's theory which, from my point of view, more seriously establishes the grounds of Western thought: it is the fundamental split between the rational and the sensible, the invisible and the visible, the good and the pleasurable. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, although Aristotle defended the sensory aspects of mimetic art, because he specifically justified what Plato condemned, this split was to become all the more solid. And, as man became more and more confident in himself and his world, the belief that man could possess the world by means of "seeing" it was to dominate the art of the West.

Chapter 3

Chinese Paintings: An Alternative Concept of Representation

3-1. Introduction

I wish to begin this chapter by looking at a Chinese painting: *The Poet Li Po* (fig. 8) by Sung painter Liang K'ai.¹ This painting of a man gazing towards an unknown distant point beyond the scroll epitomises the Chinese concept of representation and the relationship between the eye and reality, Truth and art. The painting can be divided into two parts: the face and the rest of the body. The two form a vivid contrast with each other, the face being painted in relative detail whereas the body, which comprises a much larger proportion of the whole painting, is completed with only a few swift brushstrokes. Of the two, what initially catches the beholder's eyes is, perhaps quite naturally, the face. Taking a closer look at the face one soon realises that the impression of detail was illusionary. The fine brush lines applied in order to delineate the eyes, nose and beard with a darker shade of ink compared to the lighter touch with a thicker brush employed for the body has deceived the eyes into this misunderstanding. The facial elements are kept to a minimum, and if one recalls the paintings of Classical Greece taken as examples in the previous chapter where the faces were painted in remarkable detail, this painting is almost a skeletal description of a face. All there is is a few dots and lines to mark – rather than “paint” – the eye, nose, mouth and beard. There is no visible effort made

¹ Late 12th – early 13th century. Painter-in-attendance at the Painting Academy from 1201 to 1204, he painted figures and landscapes, Taoist and Buddhist subjects as well as demons and divinities. Works in this style were appreciated by Liang's fellow academy painters, but he also painted in a sketch manner with abbreviated brushwork, as the *The Poet Li Po* displays.

to elaborate and characterise the person that the painter designates as the famous poet. The bodily part in this respect is little more than a lump – one imagines that a child could easily draw a similar oval and call it a body of a man. However, there is something in this painting that grips the eyes of the beholder for a considerable amount of time, and for some reason one cannot say that a lack of technique has resulted in this outcome.

Why is this so? The attempt to answer this question directs us to the question of representation. Gombrich finds the reason for various representational outcomes in schemata. The painter is given a rigid set of artistic vocabulary and seeks for motifs that can be expressed through it. He argues that the “style, like the medium, creates a mental set which makes the artist look for certain aspects in the scene around him that he can render. Painting is an activity, and the artist will therefore tend to see what he paints rather than to paint what he sees.”² Agreeing to this, I cannot but ponder on the tradition of thought that makes each schema possible. After all, representation is a “re-presentation” of how one sees the world, and how one is to re-present – the schemata, or artistic style – is governed by the ways of seeing of each culture and era. That is to say, a different understanding of representation and the thoughts that is grounded on gives birth to a different set of styles and vocabulary. In this sense, the painting by Liang K’ai is governed by Chinese – particularly Sung – schemata, and more so by the attitudes towards representation that prevailed in the visual arts of China during this time. Comparing this painting to examples from Classical Greece, for instance, would be comparing the differences in the underlying attitudes toward seeing.

In this chapter I will trace the characterisations of the concept of

² Gombrich (2003), 73.

representation in Chinese paintings. I will focus on the Sung era, a unique period in which what one calls literati painting was established and was in full bloom, and idealistic landscape painting reached its apogee both in creative process and reception. Although in many cases the Sung literati painted landscapes and thus such a crude division is made only for convenience reasons, the two genres may easily be said to epitomize the unique Chinese way of seeing. Although a style similar to Western realism also had a firm tradition and enjoyed its heights in the history of Chinese painting,³ the deeply rooted concept of representation was in many ways different from this. This is what I will be investigating, and it is the paintings of the Sung literati and landscape paintings that visualise most prominently the unique qualities of the Chinese concept of representation. By looking at a series of examples of this period I will discuss the underlying attitude towards representation and ways of seeing in Chinese aesthetics. I will then examine how such a notion and artistic execution compare with the modernist movements against *mimesis* that began in late 19th century Europe.

The scope of Chinese painting being so vast, it is impossible to discuss it in a mere chapter.⁴ Thus, instead of summarising the long history of Chinese painting, I will use a few selected examples of paintings as touchstones for my discussion. This will also facilitate the comparison between the essence of the ways of seeing in mimetic and Chinese traditions.

In discussing Classical Greek paintings and Plato's concept of *mimesis* in the

³ It is widely considered that this sort of painting flourished most during the T'ang Dynasty when figure painting dominated; however, it is difficult to assert T'ang as the sole climactic period of 'realistic' painting, since even during the Sung Dynasty extremely eloquent naturalistic depictions of human figures continued to be pursued, albeit to a relatively lesser extent.

⁴ For a comprehensive introduction to the history of Chinese painting from antiquity to the beginning of the twentieth century, see Sirén, Osvald. *Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles*. Vols. I-VI. London: Lund, 1956-1958.

previous chapter I took three elements as the main points of investigation: volume, focus on man, and narrative. Being fully aware of its apparent inappropriateness, I will nonetheless use the same elements as points of departure for my discussion on Chinese paintings. This will disclose the limits of the *mimesis*-orientated Western lens through which to “experience” Chinese paintings, and at the same time reveal the inevitability of turning to an alternative mode of perception. In the following discussion it will become clear why I have consciously chosen the term ‘experience’ instead of the more common word “see”.

3-2. The Concept of Representation in Chinese Landscape Paintings

Issues regarding volume were an important part of Classical Greek paintings and the problems of *mimesis*, for they were key aspects in creating an illusory three-dimensional space on a flat wall; and attempts to create such a non-existing dimension later led to the birth of perspective, a key aspect in mimetic painting. It is impossible to understand volume in Chinese painting with specific regard to the creation of illusion. This does not owe to the fact that perspective was not part of Chinese painting techniques, for other devices were frequently used to create a sense of depth and volume, one that could be said to be similar to the Western foreshortening techniques, as can be seen in *Hua shan-shui hsü* [Introduction to Painting Landscape], the earliest text to be found on landscape painting by Tsung Ping (375-443):

However, the K'un-lun mountains are immense and the eyes' pupils small. If the former come within inches of the viewer, their total form will not be seen. If they are

at a distance of several miles, then they can be encompassed by inch-small pupils.

Truly, the farther off they are, the smaller they will appear. (...) A vertical stroke of three inches will equal a height of thousands of feet, and a horizontal stretch of several feet will form a distance of a hundred miles. That is why those who look at paintings are only troubled by awkwardness in the likeness and do not consider that diminution detracts from verisimilitude. This is a natural condition. In this way, the lofty elegance of the Sung and Hua mountains as well as the soul of deep valleys can all be included in one picture.⁵

This is only one of many writings on the techniques of producing the effect of distance and depth in Chinese landscape paintings, and the scope of literature on this matter alone reveals how much the Chinese were obsessed with this aspect of painting. A strong sense of depth was created not only through variations of size as instructed in the above quotation but also through the use of light and shade – conveniently called “atmospheric perspective” by Western critics, a “method of creating the illusion of space and distance by depicting objects in progressively lighter tone as they recede into depth, suggesting the intervention of atmosphere between them and the viewer.”⁶ *Tall Pines in a Level View* (fig. 9) and *A Myriad Trees on Strange Peaks* (fig. 10) vividly exemplify this technique.

One may then ask whether devices such as these were introduced in order to create a replica of the physical world that lies before the eye. The following remarks by Kuo Hsi hint that this is not so:

You may wish to make a mountain high, but if it is visible throughout its entirety it will not appear high. If mists enlock its waist, then it will seem high. You may wish

⁵ Bush and Shih, 37.

⁶ Cahill, 37.

the river to flow afar, but if it is visible throughout its entirety, then it will not appear long. If hidden sections interrupt its course, then it will appear long. If a mountain is visible in its entirety, not only will it no longer reach its height through soaring aloft, but you might as well paint a giant pestle. If a river is visible in its entirety, not only will it no longer go afar through twisting and bending, but you might as well paint an earthworm.⁷

One could take this as a technical device to enhance the realistic effect of the painting and to make the painting appear “more real” than reality. If this is the case, one could even argue that it resembles the modifications and exaggerations that were applied in, for instance, the Classical Greek paintings of the human (and divine) body, which were a strategic means to reproduce what appeared to the eyes of man as closely as possible. However, the fact that Kuo Hsi stresses the features of the height of mountains and bends of rivers to the point of willingly giving up capturing their entirety strongly suggests that a faithful visual replica was not the ultimate goal for Chinese landscape painters. This at the same time suggests that the main viewers of such landscape paintings were searching in the paintings for something other than or beyond a pseudo reality, and that such detailed technical guidelines were aimed at an effect significantly different from verisimilitude.

What is particularly interesting about the above quotation is how Kuo Hsi mentions the unnecessariness of translocating the whole landscape into the picture, a precept which not only remained in words but relates to actual practice. For instance, his own painting *Early Spring* (fig. 11) intentionally blurs the waist of the mountain as if to suggest that it is soaring through the clouds, whereas its breadth is cut off on either sides of the silk. This painting at least leaves space for some elements to

⁷ *Lin-ch'üan kao chich (chi)* [Advice on Landscape Painting]. Bush and Shih, 169.

suggest a horizontal extension of the scenery – the tiny boat floating on the water would be most evident, if one was to be sharp-eyed enough to notice it – but in other cases, such as Wang Meng's *Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains* (fig. 12), even this is not granted. The dimension of the painted space itself is remarkable, the length being three times longer than the width. The sense of height and vertical grandeur is overwhelming, and it even seems as if the breadth of the physical scenery has been placed here – elements layered on top of each other instead of being spread out as they would be in reality.

These two examples epitomise unique characteristics of representation and attitude towards seeing in Chinese landscape painting traditions. The composition particularly of *Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains* suggests that an intentional exaggeration has taken place in cutting off and translating a physical scene into the realm of art; but unlike the case of Classical Greek paintings where similar techniques were directed at a production of verisimilitude, here the effect created is vividly illusory or, perhaps a better term to deploy would be, phantasmagorical. Of course, there are certainly objects that are illustrated in the minutest detail – which, interestingly, are located in the frontal/lower part of the picture⁸ – but even these are engulfed by the much more abstract, dreamlike mass of mountains with the assistance of the brush strokes that twist and climb upwards. It almost seems that the painting guides the beholder from a tangible secular world into the mystic, unknown world of the mountains. If one had such an impression from either of the paintings one has then taken the correct path into the journey that the painting invites, for this is safely the most important aim of landscape paintings. In fact, *Early Spring* is noted

⁸ This is no coincidence and is closely linked to the concept of representation in Chinese aesthetics. A more detailed discussion on the issue of the relationship between naturalistic and abstract elements in Chinese paintings can be found in Chapter 6 (p. 223-224).

for its “powerful interweaving of natural forms so that all of nature seems to be responding to some inner, driving force,” setting up the unique tradition of landscape commonly referred to as the Li Cheng – Kuo Hsi tradition.⁹ For the Chinese, mountains were always associated with the unknown spiritual world of the wise, and this tradition was well preserved in paintings. Tsung Ping explains this in great lucidity:

Sages, possessing the Tao, respond to things. The virtuous, purifying their thoughts, savor images. As for landscape, it has physical existence, yet tends toward the spiritual. (...) Now, sages follow the Tao through their spirits, and the virtuous comprehend this. Landscapes display the beauty of the Tao through their forms, and humane men delight in this. Are these not similar?¹⁰

Here we have an important clue in understanding the core of the Chinese way of seeing in relation to arts. Landscape was, according Tsung Ping amongst many others, a visual reflection of the invisible Tao: a visible mediator of the invisible; a physical doorway into the spiritual. It is no wonder that Tuan, when discussing Nature in the minds of the Chinese, writes that “a harmonious universe emerged into Chinese eyes – grand and spectacular, fragile yet eternal – that satisfied their deepest spiritual longings. This was landscape.”¹¹

Likewise, paintings of landscape sought after the spiritual and were similarly appreciated. In his brief introduction to the relationship between Chinese painting and Taoism, Yee explains the birth of landscape in this light, as he explains how Lao Tzu, the great teacher of Taoism, “believed that in quiet reception, (...) man would

⁹ Maeda, 138.

¹⁰ *Hua shan-shui hsü* [Introduction to Painting Landscape]. Bush and Shih, 36.

¹¹ Tuan, 127.

be able to feel the workings of the Universal Spirit. Hence the rise of landscape art in China.”¹²

Although Taoism played an important role in landscape paintings – especially those of the Sung Dynasty, where the growth of mystical Taoism undoubtedly had a crucial impact on the strong tendency towards abstract stylisation – the complexity of the philosophies and religions that were fused in art in China makes it difficult to understand paintings solely through this strand. The concept of Tao itself is immensely complicated, as it was not one that was limited to Taoism; on the contrary, it was a common concept to any Chinese, which existed as an “omnipresent ubiquitous awareness grasped by even the poorest peasant,”¹³ intermingled with Confucianism and Buddhism as well as various folk beliefs. Sze’s apparently simplistic introduction to Tao as “the basic Chinese belief in an order and harmony in nature,”¹⁴ or Liu’s similarly ambiguous conveyance of the notion as a name that designates “all-ness” and his succeeding comment that “to speak of Tao (...) is to encompass the universe,”¹⁵ may perhaps be the best one can do to explain the notion.

However, it is necessary to look into this concept, even if very briefly, for it was also a key notion in the field of painting. Indeed, painting in China was considered as a means of communicating aspects of Tao, and the Chinese established disciplines by which painters were demanded to learn and abide, which were also called Tao. However, whether Tao is taken in its broadest and most complex sense or limited to the practical sphere of painting, it is difficult to compare in either case to *mimesis*. Putting aside the obvious difference in the meanings, the case of *mimesis*

¹² Yee, 73-74.

¹³ Liu (1979), 1.

¹⁴ Sze, 3.

¹⁵ Liu (1979), 2.

has been and continues to be an object of contestation, but such was not the case of Tao. Essays were continuously written on the Tao by various scholars and painters throughout the history of Chinese philosophy and art, but these were never attempts to devalue or modify the concept. As Sze explains with regard to Tao in painting:

Characteristically, their [Chinese painters'] essays on the *tao* of and the *Tao* in painting were largely quotation and paraphrase of earlier writings. Their comments, displaying occasional flashes of intuition, scrutinized and sought to clarify the various definitions. (...) And throughout the course of Chinese painting the common purpose has been to reaffirm the traditional *tao* and to transmit the ideas, principles, and methods that have been tested and developed by the masters of each period as the means of expressing the harmony of the *Tao*.¹⁶

It is, therefore, impossible to discuss any aspect of Chinese painting without referring to the notion of Tao. And because landscape and Sung literati paintings were based more on Taoism than any other religion or philosophy, it would be appropriate to take a look at how Lao Tzu, considered to be the father of Taoism, describes it.

Chapter 25 of the *Tao Te Ching* best describes the essence of Tao:

Before there was heaven and earth
There existed something that could not be known.
It has no sound, therefore cannot be heard
And has no shape thus cannot be seen,
But it leans on no other thing,

¹⁶ Sze, 4. Original emphasis.

Stands alone, and does not change.
It influences itself on everything,
Its movement is ceaseless.
Thus one may say it is the mother of all things.

One cannot give it a name,
So I merely call it “Tao”,
Or “The Great”.
It is so vast that it extends into eternity.
Extending into eternity, it stretches afar.
In the end it returns to the Origin.¹⁷

The Tao, literally translated as “the Way”, is an all-governing universal principle of things. It is unnameable and does not have form. The moment it acquires form it is no longer Tao, for, as is written at the very beginning of the *Tao Te Ching*, “Tao that is expressed in words is not Tao,” yet it is from this unnameable Tao that “heaven and earth was born, and from Tao all things with names are brought forward.”¹⁸ Giving or gaining of names and forms meant a “process of transformation into individual objects,”¹⁹ when Tao is always directed outwards, extending into infinity. To reach the Tao therefore meant to see beyond the naked eye into the invisible essence of visual, tangible forms. This way of thought was applied also to paintings. While painters inevitably worked with physical appearances they struggled to capture the Tao – the absolute principle (*li*, 理) and spirit (*chi*, 氣) of the mountains, trees, rivers – rather than their external shapes.

¹⁷ *Tao Te Ching* ch. 25.

¹⁸ *Tao Te Ching* ch. 1.

¹⁹ Fung, 180.

Bussagli calls this “pictorial Tao.”²⁰

Chinese criticism of painting was based on what is called the “Six Elements [Laws/Principles] of Painting”, first defined by Hsieh Ho (active ca. 500-535?)²¹ and thereafter constantly discussed and paraphrased. The first element is “*ch’i yün sheng tung*”; the second, bone method or brushwork; the third, correspondence to the object; fourth, suitability to type (or layering of colours); fifth, division and planning; and sixth, transmission by copying.²² While the second to sixth elements are concerned with technical aspects (although later on in this chapter it will be revealed that the second element relates also to the spiritual aspect of the painting process), the prime element puts emphasis on the spiritual aspect of painting. Literally, *ch’i* (氣) translates as spirit or vital spirit; *yün* (韻) as resonance; *sheng* (生) as life; and *tung* (動), movement. Regardless of the ceaseless debates regarding the exact translation of the combination of the four characters,²³ it is obvious that the other elements were devices to achieve *ch’i yün sheng tung*, which evidently is neither a material nor physical effect. This to many corresponds to the Tao of painting, and according to Tung Ch’i-ch’ang, a painting critic of the Ming Dynasty, it “cannot be expressed in words,” and “cannot be acquired by an act of will no matter how tenacious or enlightened. It results from a profound and complete spiritual and physical harmony with nature.”²⁴

Later, Ching Hao (ca. 870-930), one of the most renowned landscapists of the early Five Dynasties, evolved the Six Elements into Six Essentials: *chi* (氣; spirit), *yün* (韻; resonance), *ssu* (思; thought), *ching* (景; scene), *pi* (筆; brush), and *mo* (墨;

²⁰ Bussagli, 47.

²¹ From preface to his book *Gǔhuà Pīnlù* [The Record of the Classification of Old Painters].

²² See Bush and Shih, 40.

²³ For various interpretations of the First Element see Wang, 19.

²⁴ Bussagli, 47.

ink). One will easily notice how the non-material aspect has been given more emphasis compared to a few centuries before. This is remarkable especially with regard to the overall concept of representation and the notion of seeing in Chinese paintings. Borrowing the anecdote of an encounter with a hermit in the mountains, Ching Hao explains the element of the spirit and, more importantly, the essence of representation in paintings:

The old man answered: "... One examines the objects and grasps their reality. He must grasp the outward appearance from the outward appearance of the object, and the inner reality from the inner reality of the object. He must not take the outward appearance and call it the inner reality. If you do not know this method [of understanding truth], you may even get lifelikeness but never achieve reality in painting." I questioned: "What do you call lifelikeness and what do you call reality?" The old man answered: "Lifelikeness means to achieve the form of the object but to leave out its spirit. Reality means that both spirit and substance are strong. Furthermore, if spirit is conveyed only through the outward appearance and not through the image in its totality, the image is dead."²⁵

Note how Ching Hao warns about the danger of verisimilitude of external appearance. It is interesting how painting, which was attacked by Plato as an art form obsessed only with "their appearances, but surely not their genuine actuality,"²⁶ is here something whose outward appearance comprises only one facet, and that too a minor one according to the Six Essentials, and that too gaining significance only when it is pursued as a device with which to grasp the inner essence. While Plato condemned painting as being little more than a crude imitation of capricious

²⁵ *Pi-fa chi* [A Note on the Art of the Brush]. Bush and Shih, 146. Square brackets editor's original. "Reality", which appears several times in the quotation, also translates as "Truth" (眞).

²⁶ *Republic* 596e.

appearance, and even then an incomplete one,²⁷ the Chinese, by putting the spiritual element at the core of painting, lifted the fetters that confined it to external imitation, or to use the familiar Western term, *mimesis*. Plato argued that all that the painter was capable of seeing and depicting was an object twice removed from Truth; the Chinese, to whom external realities – landscape in particular – displayed the Tao through their forms, believed that great painters were able to grasp the invisible Tao and render it in visual form:

If response by the eye and accord by the mind [to nature] is considered a universal law, when similitude is skillfully achieved, eyes will also respond completely and the mind be entirely in accord. This response and accord will affect the spirit and, as the spirit soars, the truth will be attained. (...) Furthermore, the spirit, which is essentially limitless, resides in forms and stimulates all kinds of life, and truth enters into reflections and traces. One who can truly describe things skillfully will also truly achieve this.²⁸

The process of painting was therefore a search for the Tao through visual media, and although painters dealt with capricious, visible phenomena the ultimate goal was the contact with the invisible, whether called principle, spirit or Tao. It would thus be erroneous to understand the act of painting as an effort to make a life-like representation of the visually perceived phenomena. Rather, it must be seen as the visual conveyance of a space for the mind.

Let us once again return to the issue of volume. In describing the two examples of landscape painting I stated that one of the effects produced by the

²⁷ See Plato's allusion to the couch in *Republic* 596b-598d.

²⁸ Bush and Shih, 37-38.

adoption of volume was a sense of the illusory in contrast to the realistic effects brought forward by the same device in Classical Greek paintings. Here lies an interesting paradox of the two genres. I have already in the previous chapter discussed how realistic effects of mimetic paintings (and other arts, for that matter) ultimately result in a production of an *illusion* of a reality, detached and isolated from the object of representation, the “real” thing. It is fake, and volume, deployed mimetically, only helps to misguide the viewer into believing that he is looking at something which not only resembles remarkably the visually perceived reality but that through this sort of seeing and artistic representation – i.e., by being able to create an almost complete replica of the external world – one has some control over it.

The aspect of illusion found in Chinese landscape paintings is aimed at a significantly different effect. While technical elements including volume in Classical Greek paintings are directed at specific and particular aspects of visual phenomena, the same are here directed beyond the specifics of the visual world. Illusion is made not in order to create an *illusion* of an earthly reality, but rather one beyond the secular world. The clouds in *Early Spring*, for instance, have a dual function. One is that of creating an additional layer of depth so that the mountains behind them seem farther away: as a result the painting emits a sense of vastness behind the limited surface visible to the spectator, as well as producing the already mentioned extra sense of height. The other is that of deliberately blocking the unimpaired view of the whole mountain. The latter enhances the effect of the former, and the two combined together invite the beholder into the world of the unknown and the invisible. Illusion here, therefore, does not remain as an illusion: it *hints* at rather than fakes not a

concrete world that is under the control of the eyes of man but one that is beyond it;²⁹ it lures the beholder into this world and encourages him now to see not with the eye but with the mind, and partake a journey into the mysterious paths of the mountains. The partial blinding of the spectator, which, according to Ortiz, creates an awareness of atmosphere through the fragmentation of space, “not only forces the viewer to question the reality of those forms but also produces the illusion of travelling in space and time.”³⁰ Classical Greek paintings sought to provide the viewer with a complete world to be seen; Chinese landscape paintings opened the doors for the viewer to enter and wander through the spiritual world of the unseen. Volume in Classical Greek paintings contracts; in Chinese landscape paintings, it opens up and expands.

This, as in the previous chapter, directs us to the issue of man. The effort to squeeze the apparent whole reality into one painting can be seen as an effort to remould the visible world into the boundaries of man. Volume in Classical Greek paintings was thus a device to enclose nature within the limits of human understanding, and this tendency was to be continued and reinforced later on with the birth of perspective during the Renaissance and the growing faith in human reason during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For very different reasons, the discussion of volume in Chinese landscape paintings also leads us to the question of man. Unlike Classical Greece and later cultures of this root, however, it is not reason but the subjective mind of the artist and the spectator that occupies the focus of

²⁹ This characteristic is to be found in all fields of Chinese art. In poetry, for instance, *xing* was considered as the essence poetic composition. This refers to expression by allusive incitement. Jullien explains this as one of the core factors that distinguish Chinese poetry from the mimetic foundations of Greek poetics: “According to the Chinese perception of the poetic phenomenon, the poet borrows from the landscape to express his inner feelings: incited by the world outside, he in turn stirs up the reader’s emotions. In China, poetry arises from a relationship of incitement rather than from a method of *representation*; the world is not an object for consciousness in a *process* of interaction.” Jullien (2000), 142.

³⁰ Ortiz, 125.

discussion.

3-3. Painting and Subjectivity

From the Sung period onwards, the Chinese, as did Plato, identified the painter with the poet. It is here that the gap between Plato's and the Chinese understanding of painting begins, for while both equated the two artists, the fundamental attitude towards them and the appreciation of their works differ significantly. For Plato, the sole person capable of seeing beyond external reality and approaching Truth was the philosopher, who was free from unreliable senses and used intellect alone to achieve this goal.³¹ And, joining the poet and the painter under the umbrella of *mimesis* he reprehends once again the poet specifically for this inherent condition:

... the only thing he[the poet] knows anything about is imitation. The result is that what he has to say seems excellently said – whether he is using his metre, rhythm and harmony to describe shoemaking, or generalship, or anything else. Such is the power of bewitchment naturally possessed by tools he uses. And yet a poet's words, when stripped of the colours provided by his art, and taken by themselves – well I think you know what they're like.³²

As in Classical Greece, the painter and the poet in Sung China were also identified with each other. Poets were often painters and vice versa; painters often asked poets to write poems for their works; and poets enjoyed responding to

³¹ See *Phaedo* 66a.

³² *Republic* 601a-b.

paintings either in prose or poetry. Inscriptions of poems on paintings became a common practice – they were never regarded as simple commentaries but an extension of the painting; the painting, too, was regarded as an extension of the poem in visual form. Sullivan is absolutely correct in saying that “[p]ainting and poetry were two ways of saying the same thing,”³³ as a couplet by Su Shih³⁴ illuminates:

When I savour Mo chieh[Wang Wei]’s poems, I find paintings in them;

When I look at Mo-chieh’s paintings, there are poems in them.³⁵

Whereas for Plato the proprietary device to reach the Truth was the intellect, for Chinese philosophers human intellect was of little use in revealing the Tao; while, for instance, the *Tao Te Ching* not once praises intellect, it more often than not alludes to its futility, as can be seen in the twentieth chapter which begins, “Eliminate learning and you will have no distress.”³⁶ The way to approach the Tao was emptying oneself rather than accumulating knowledge, to “feel the workings of the Universal Spirit.”³⁷ It was a matter of the mind rather than reason, meditation rather than intellectual training.

Great philosophers of China including Lao Tzu, unlike Plato, very rarely spoke of aesthetics or the arts either in support or against. Nonetheless, for the above reason painters in China, like poets, were often regarded as equal to sages rather than

³³ Sullivan, 80.

³⁴ Also known as Su Tung-Po, Su Shih (1037-1101) was a writer, painter, calligrapher and statesman of the Sung Dynasty, and one of the major poets of the era. Besides his renowned poetry, his other writings including travel essays are of great value in the understanding of 11th century Chinese art and literature. One of the four great calligraphers of the Sung Dynasty, Su Shih is also famous for his paintings of bamboo.

³⁵ Sullivan, 81. Another account highlights the affinity of the two arts, when painter Song Di responded to Su Shih’s couplet by commenting, “You, Sir, are a fine painter.” See Murck, 69.

³⁶ *Tao Te Ching* ch. 20.

³⁷ Yee, 73.

mere artisans, and in the case of landscape and especially literati paintings where painters, poets and scholars were frequently acquainted with one another, this tendency was much stronger. Painting was not a process of mechanical imitation of external phenomena but, as I have continuously discussed, a physical process in search of the spiritual. Naturally, to Chinese painters this was not very different from Lao Tzu's process of quiet reception. We have already seen Tsung Ping's essay mentioning the sage, but the following lines by T'ang critic Chu Ching-hsüan (ca. 840) address much more directly the position of the painter in China:

I have heard that men of old said that a painter is a sage; doubtless because he searches out that which is beyond heaven and earth, and reveals that which is unilluminated by the sun and the moon. (...) When he displays his talent within a square inch, a thousand miles lie within his grasp. As for conveying the spiritual (*i-sheng*) while determining the material (*ting-chih*), when the light ink falls upon white silk that which has physical appearance is established, and that which is formless is created. (...) If subtleties penetrate to the spiritual, then their quintessence will arrive at the sage-like.³⁸

But the significance of identifying the painter (and the poet) with the sage is much greater, and this relates to the creative realm of the artist. That the painter is not a mere imitator means that he is much less subordinated to the objects of his painting: they are not an end but a device, a trigger to the journey into the spiritual world. Yes, there are strict guidelines by which the painter must abide, but these are technical guides, not spiritual. Yes, the painter must grasp the unchanging Tao, but

³⁸ Chu Ching-hsüan. *T'ang-ch'ao ming-hua lu* [Record of Famous Painters of the T'ang Dynasty]. Bush and Shih, 48-49.

what the Tao is will never be known as a fact, since this is the inherent essence of Tao. Therefore, attaining the Tao through the art of painting relies solely on the subjectivity of the artist, and endowed with the mental status of the sage the painter looks into his emotions and feelings through the scene in front of him and conveys his emotional response on silk. If Chinese painting is a representational art, it is less a detached representation of appearance than an intimate representation of feeling.

This is why so many landscape painters of China ceaselessly emphasised that “the value of landscape painting lay in its capacity to make the viewer *feel* as if he were really *in* the place depicted.”³⁹ This is clearly different from providing the viewer with an illusion of merely looking at the real place, for what matters here is more than the physical visual perception alone. Even when looking at an album leaf, which normally does not exceed 10 inches across, the viewer must have the same experience. The sense of presence requires more than that: within that small amount of space he experiences the same intensity of a journey through the mirage of mountains as he would in front of a huge painting covering an entire wall, as he would while in actuality taking a stroll in the woods.

This is possible due to the unique quality of empty spaces that are to be found in most landscape and literati paintings of China, which Ortiz calls poetic space. As he explains,

Obscurity and hidden meaning are an important property of poetry. In poetry and in poetic painting, the obscure is sublime, by virtue of the pain it induces by making one strain to see that which cannot be comprehended.⁴⁰

³⁹ Cahill, 35. My emphasis.

⁴⁰ Ortiz, 123.

As mentioned in the quote, Ortiz is referring specifically to poetic painting. This refers to a branch of landscape painting which arose around the early 12th century, when a group of scholar-painters sought to develop techniques that would transform painting into visual poetry through painterly construction.⁴¹ However, this commentary can be applied to most landscape and literati paintings, since the metaphors and conventions of poetry informed and influenced the art of painting particularly during the Sung era.⁴² A close look at *Strolling by a Marshy Bank* (fig. 13), an album leaf painting by Liang K'ai, will clarify what I mean.

There is not much that composes the painting: but for the bottom right and middle part of the picture where the scenery is depicted in relative detail, the overall painting is almost bare. As in the previous examples these detailed depictions refer to the “secular” elements of the work. And from these “naturalistic” representations one finds little difficulty in assuming that the rest of the painting suggests a river and a mountain. Most of the mountain is hidden behind the clouds, and not a single brushstroke is applied to even suggest the flowing waters of the river. The clouds, too, are assumed to be clouds due to one’s viewing habits – the preconception that what blocks the mountains in such paintings is normally clouds – rather than from actual visual illustrations, for unlike, for instance Kuo Hsi’s *Early Spring* where the

⁴¹ See *ibid.*, 73-91, where Ortiz analyses the structure of *The Eight Views of Xiao Xiang* by Song Di (c.1015 – c.1080), widely recognised as the epitome of poetic painting. The painting is especially remarkable in its use of titles, which, when combined together, form a complete poem on its own, fitting perfectly into the structure of regulated verse, considered to be the most sublime form of poetry in T'ang and Sung China. Also see Murck, 70-72 for a detailed account of the painting with regard to its literary aspects, due to which the work was much revered by scholars. Although Chinese literature is not the area of my discussions, it must be noted that the essence of Chinese literature was not, as with the case of painting, to describe, but to *suggest*. The suggestive element of Chinese art will be discussed in Chapter 5 (p. 226-228).

⁴² Murck, 51. Chinese poetry, especially during the Sung Dynasty, was that of contemplation under the strong influence of Ch'an – more widely known by its Japanese name Zen. Sung landscape and literati paintings were also influenced by Ch'an as well as Taoism. Poets and painters of this branch sought similar ends, and corresponded with each other in hope of enhancing the poetic quality of paintings and vice versa. For a more detailed introduction to Ch'an poetry in Sung China see Liu (1962), 80-81; Choi provides a compact yet lucid discussion on Ch'an philosophy and its relation to painting during the Sung and Ming Dynasties (최병식, 131-158).

clouds are depicted in between the mountains, here it is one mass of nothingness.

However, if one relieves oneself from such an assumption, one is then let into another layer of meaning of these two elements, and this corresponds perfectly with Ortiz's view of poetic space. By concealing instead of straining to reveal and represent the details of the mountain and the waters, this small painting gains the same sense of magnitude as would a huge hanging scroll. It is like the effect of Su Shih's poem on Mount Lu which expresses the immensity of the mountain within the mere space of four lines:

See it stretched before you in a ridge; from the side it becomes a peak,
no matter from where I look at the mountain it is never exactly the same.
I cannot tell the true face of Lu Mountain,
which is simply because I myself am here within the mountain.⁴³

Both the painter and the poet reveal the impossibility of capturing the entirety of the mountains either through images or words, therefore easily persuading the viewer and the reader to give up the hope of gaining a picture in its apparent entirety. Through this resignation, both on the part of the artist and the viewer/reader, the presence of the mountain intensifies. As Heidegger discovered through his dialogue with Chang Tzu, the other great teacher of Taoism, "the truth of Being is at the same time a two-fold movement: Unconcealment and Concealment. That is to say, when Being reveals itself, it conceals itself. Consequently, there is in principle no total and complete disclosure of things."⁴⁴

Other than revealing the "Being" of the mountains through concealment, the

⁴³ Su Shih, 622.

⁴⁴ Chan, 10.

clouds gain another function. No longer remaining a simple imitation of the “real” clouds they are transformed into an empty space for the viewer’s mind to roam. The same applies to what would have been the river. The faint lines that divide the river from the cloud and the banks at the bottom left part of the painting blur and disappear on the other side; no longer is it possible to distinguish between the water, the cloud, the sky or the mountain, and the space becomes an infinite void.

Empty space was, for Chinese painters, always more than a simple interval between visual objects. It was a material thing, “the perception of which could enhance one’s understanding of both the outside world and the self.”⁴⁵ Landscape itself being understood as the “gateway to the Void,”⁴⁶ this additional mass of void provides the beholder with a wider access to the “principles” of each thing depicted. The viewer, therefore, is endowed with the freedom to picture in his mind as many layers of mountains and curves of the river as he wishes and wander through them to his heart’s content. Just as the Sung poet Lu You reminisced how “[a]ll day was like travelling through a painting,”⁴⁷ the viewer of *Strolling on a Marshy Bank* would, with the guidance of the solitary figure within the picture gazing out towards the void, share the experience of “strolling on a marshy bank” and much more.

The painting, therefore, is like a poem written with images. Moreover, it is a poem deliberately left incomplete, leaving space for the viewer to fill in. In order to complete the process of viewing the beholder must

reconstruct internally the ideas which the gestures of the painter had expressed. (...)

[Since] painting is not just a conglomerate of lines but a record of the movement of

⁴⁵ Ortiz, 78.

⁴⁶ Bush and Murck, 141.

⁴⁷ Ortiz, 5.

the artist's hand one could, by acting out the expression, recreate the idea and poetic emotion expressed.⁴⁸

Thus, although the painting blinds one's view of the naturalistic phenomenon of nature, precisely through this refusal the painting invites the beholder to immerse himself in the feelings that nature in reality arouses. Because of this intentional concealment the viewer is provided with a blank page on which he, now as a poet or painter in his mind, can paint or sing his own images and emotions.

Although Plato's concept of *mimesis* and his stance on the poet/painter did not allow what Chinese artists took as obligation, i.e., capturing the invisible through the visible, there was a stage in Western history when the relationship between the artist and vision was viewed in a different context. This was during the Renaissance when the status of the painter and the arts underwent a process of significant transformation. In some ways like the aesthetic tradition of China, during this era it was believed that painting and the arts could, despite the aggressive Platonic stance asserting the contrary, reveal Truth that was normally not grasped by man. This understanding led to the raising of the status of the painter similar to that of the sage-like painters and poets of China, and it was due to the Neo-Platonic view of the Universe and an altered understanding of man and the artist that such an attitude could be established.

According to Neo-Platonists the Universe was "a vast symphony of correspondences in which each level of existence points to the level above," thus "by virtue of this interrelated harmony [one] object can signify another and [by]

⁴⁸ Ibid., 129.

contemplating a visible thing we can gain insight into the invisible world.”⁴⁹ In order to understand how this works one needs also to have an understanding of the position of man in the Neo-Platonic system. According to the Neo-Platonists, just as the universe is “composed of the material world (nature) and the immaterial realm beyond the orbit of the moon,” so too is man “composed of body and soul, the body being a form inherent in matter, the soul a form only adherent to it.”⁵⁰ The soul in turn is divided into the Higher and Lower soul, the Higher comprising two faculties: Reason and Mind. While Reason is related to the bodily experiences and needs, the Mind “communicates with, or even participates in, the *intellectus divinus*.”⁵¹ The Neo-Platonic man is thus a “rational soul participating in the divine mind, employing a body,”⁵² and “the Mind, ‘seeing with an incorporeal eye,’ ‘calls itself away not only from the body but also from the senses and imagination,’ and thus transforms itself into a ‘tool of the divine.’”⁵³

Here we can see that sight is once again the issue in determining man, as it was in Plato’s discussions. I have mentioned in the previous chapter how Plato argued that the gods granted man not only the physical level of sight but also that of inner vision, allowing him access to the Truth, the Idea. It seems quite clear that the Neo-Platonists not only inherited this aspect but also reinforced it, sight becoming “by virtue of its speed and immediacy a favoured symbol of higher knowledge.”⁵⁴ This tendency was also to be seen vividly in the field of painting. While Plato detested the painter because he deemed the painter to be capable only of the physical

⁴⁹ Gombrich (1972), 152.

⁵⁰ Panofsky (1972), 136. The following description of the soul and the Neo-Platonic man is also based on this reference.

⁵¹ Ibid., 136.

⁵² Ficino, *In Platonis Alcibiadem Epitome*, Bibl.90, p.133. Qtd. in Ibid., 137.

⁵³ Ibid., 140.

⁵⁴ Gombrich (1972), 147.

realm of sight and blind to the realm of the soul, for the Neo-Platonists the painter was no longer a mere imitator but a person endowed with “prophetic powers to see beauty” who could “help the faithful to see the spiritual realm.”⁵⁵

Leonardo da Vinci was also amongst those who ceaselessly praised the painter’s vision and his superiority over any other artists in this respect. He does so especially with regard to the poet, which is probably due to the prevailing belief at the time that poetry was the sole universal art form that “knows no limits and can portray all the unseen world of man’s spirit.”⁵⁶ Heralding sight as “lord of the senses”⁵⁷ he equals painting, the art of sight, to philosophy, asserting:

If you scorn painting, which is the sole imitator of all manifest works of nature, you will certainly be scorning a subtle invention, which with philosophical and subtle speculation considers all manner of forms (...) Truly this is science, the legitimate daughter of nature, (...) to be more correct, we should say the granddaughter of nature (...) because all visible things have been brought forth by nature and it is among these that painting is born. Therefore we may justly speak of it as the granddaughter of nature and as the kin of god.⁵⁸

Not only does he identify painting with philosophy but he goes as far as to elevate it to the realm of near divinity, disclosing the “efforts of the Renaissance painters to claim for their own pursuits the same state of divine *afflatus* that antiquity had granted to the poet.”⁵⁹

However, although Neo-Platonists and painters influenced by this thread of

⁵⁵Ibid., 154.

⁵⁶Robb, 223.

⁵⁷da Vinci, 22.

⁵⁸Ibid., 13.

⁵⁹Gombrich (1972), 157.

thought sought to capture the invisible realm of the soul through vision, there is still a significant difference between the attitude of the Neo-Platonists and that of the Chinese towards vision. This difference lies in the Neo-Platonic supremacy of sight. As Gombrich explains, “in the late Renaissance the claim of a great poet to prophetic status is made in analogy to the artist, at least to the special kind of artist with whom we are concerned, the deviser of visual symbols.”⁶⁰ This attitude of the Neo-Platonists is extended to the physical realm of the senses, and da Vinci, stressing how the eye is the least delusive of the senses,⁶¹ argues for the superiority of painting over poetry for this very reason:

Painting presents its essence to you in one moment through the faculty of vision by the same means as the *impressiva*⁶² receives the objects in nature, and thus it simultaneously conveys the proportional harmony of which the parts of the whole are composed, and delights the senses. Poetry presents the same thing but by a less noble means than by the eye, conveying it more confusedly to the *impressiva* and describing the configurations of the particular objects more slowly than is accomplished by the eye. The eye is the true intermediary between the objects and the *impressiva*, which immediately transmits with the highest fidelity the true surfaces and shapes of whatever is in front of it.⁶³

Although the Chinese gave continuous emphasis to the importance of sight and the artist’s inner vision, no references to such a hierarchy of the senses can be found.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 157.

⁶¹ See da Vinci, 18-22.

⁶² According to Kemp, this is “Leonardo’s own term for a ‘receptor of impressions’ which he saw as a staging-house between the sensory nerves and the *senso comune*.” Ibid., 313.

⁶³ Ibid., 23.

Unlike Chinese landscape and literati painters, who were required to look into their minds as well as observing nature in the process of painting and therefore took painting as a process of near meditation, da Vinci, while elevating sight to the status of the divine endues it with a strong scientific quality. For him, it was through the perfection of the visible realm of painting that the invisible realm of the divine and of Truth could be approached. These two qualities fused together, and the painting thus completed provides the viewer with a glimpse into the world of Higher Truth. This differs significantly from the Chinese method of deliberately veiling the view in order to heighten the presence of Tao. This is the paradox of Neo-Platonic painting and sight. For although it was now accepted that the painter through his art could convey what Plato had declared impossible, it was still through an elaborate representation of the visible that this was achieved. The strong belief in the ‘in’ sight of the painter conversely reinforced the visual aspect of painting.

This induces two effects which are fundamentally different from Chinese paintings. One is that it preserved the mimetic tradition of Classical Greece and the formulation that to see was to understand. Which gives rise to the second effect: the finished art work was deemed to be complete, thereby leaving the viewer essentially in the same position of passive spectatorship. Thus, as in Classical Greek paintings, the element of intimate feeling both of the artist and the spectator that is so important in Chinese paintings is here largely neglected. The faculty of sight in man and particularly the vision of the painter may have gained its justice, but subjectivity had little place to lodge.

It is in this respect that I argue that Chinese paintings focus on man. While the focus on man in Classical Greek painting – as well as during the Renaissance, as we have examined – is ultimately centred on the appearance of the physical body,

the essence of Chinese paintings lies in the psychological flow of the mind. While Classical Greek paintings endeavour to present a complete model of the idealised body to be passively admired, Chinese paintings strive to create a space in which the beholder as well as the painter himself may roam freely. Focus on man in Chinese paintings refers to the special focus on the process of both artistic creation and reception; for this reason the work completed by the artist was for the viewer a beginning of another journey. Due to this aspect, paintings become a temporal art form, both for the artist and the viewer.

3-4. Painting as a Temporal Art Form

Like Classical Greek paintings, Chinese paintings also have narratives. This applies not only to what is in fact commonly called “narrative painting” by both Western and Chinese scholars,⁶⁴ but also to “non-narrative” paintings such as the examples hitherto examined in this chapter. Regardless of type, the narratives that are to be found Chinese paintings differ fundamentally from the Classical Greek paintings: rather than presenting the viewer with a complete story-line to follow, Chinese paintings instead provide him with an open passage so that he can create his own narrative as he travels through the art work. It is a narrative of intimate experience rather than a ready-made tale; one in time as well as in space.

I would first like to look into the part of the painter and examine in more

⁶⁴ This term refers to paintings which involve narratives in the familiar Western sense of the term, i.e., those that contain specific plots, characters and settings. See for instance Chen, 239. Wu, however, while also alluding to the “narrative” quality of his selected paintings, takes pain to emphasise the ongoing process of narrative creating which extends to the viewing process. See especially p. 57-61, where he describes the unique temporal aspect of handscroll paintings which were to be exposed section by section as the viewer unrolled it an arm’s length at a time.

detail how this was practised. To argue that the painter's process of painting is a temporal activity is almost self-evident as it is physically a time-taking work. However, I will try to explain why I nevertheless insist on doing so with regard to Chinese painters.

Until this stage my discussions and examples have been centred on landscape paintings, and I find it now the appropriate stage to move onto some literati traditions and examples, which were more strongly influenced by Taoist traditions of naturalness, spontaneity and meditation. Because the works of the literati were amateur and generally painted for personal pleasure within the literati circle, they were more intimate forms of painting.⁶⁵ I mentioned several times earlier on in the chapter that landscape painting was likened to meditation. This tendency is strengthened in literati paintings. The following remark by Su Shih on bamboo painting – probably the most popular of the four subjects of literati painting⁶⁶ – best reveals the core attitude of this genre:

In painting a bamboo one must first have the perfected bamboo in mind. Then, when one takes up the brush and gazes intently, one will see what one wants to paint and rise hurriedly to pursue it, wielding the brush forthwith to capture what was seen.⁶⁷

At a glance this could be reckoned as another repetition of the previous writings on the importance of inner vision. Which it is. However, one must at the same time direct one's attention to the process that the quotation describes. Note how

⁶⁵ For a more detailed discussion on literati art theory and practice see Bush and Shih, 191-196.

⁶⁶ Bamboo, plum, ground orchids and chrysanthemum, collectively called *SiJunZi*, meaning "the Four Gentlemanly Plants." Bamboo painting was considered to be closest among the four categories to calligraphy and poetry, which were the traditional concerns of scholars and gentlemen, and whose symbolism stressed moral character and ideals. For more on the significance of the bamboo and principles of bamboo painting see Wang, 361-396.

⁶⁷ "Record of Wen Tung's Painting the Bent Bamboos of Yün-tang Valley." Bush and Shih, 207.

there is no allusion to the process of external observation. Instead, Su Shih refers to the “perfected bamboo”. Of course in other literatures on bamboo painting one can easily find technical guidelines⁶⁸ as well as comprehensive instructions on observation. One example is an essay by Li K’an⁶⁹ in which he recalls how he “looked only for ‘The Gentleman’ [bamboo] and examined all its species most carefully, paying close attention to shapes and colors, conditions of growth and flourishing, age and quality.”⁷⁰ However, it is not the “objective” physical image of a bamboo that Su Shih asks the painter to picture in his mind. In fact, much more frequent than texts on the technical aspect of bamboo painting, those on the spiritual or mental process are found, and this is what I mean by literati painting resembling meditation.

Painting for the literati circle being regarded as a “mind print,”⁷¹ it is not only the process of picturing the bamboo but the overall pre-painting process that needs to be given attention. Indeed, with so many references to this aspect of painting, it would be safe to assert that for literati painters this stage of painting was the most important and pleasurable part of the whole procedure. Instead of explaining the physical process of painting, Mi Yu - jen (1072-1151) chooses to talk about his state of mind in meditation,⁷² while Tung Yu (active late 10th century) elaborates in great detail the lengthy mental procedure that Li Ch’eng went through prior to his physical contact with the brush:

He concentrated on it without relaxing, forgetting even objects themselves until an

⁶⁸ See Ibid., 272-274.

⁶⁹ 1245-1320. Yüan literati painter and an enthusiastic follower of Su Shih’s art theory. His *Chu P’u* ([Manual of Bamboo] was the basis of most subsequent books on bamboo painting in China.

⁷⁰ *Chu-p’u* [Manual of Bamboo]. Ibid. 276.

⁷¹ Ibid., 193.

⁷² See Ibid., 211.

exceptional clarity was contained within his breast, and he could preserve it without effort. Then, one day, he suddenly saw many mountains spread out before him [in his mind's eye], emerging in close and massed array. When, in a hazy glow of clearing mists, each part corresponded from below to above, he gradually released these [images], unable to hold them back. For what has been transformed by the art of the mind comes forth when it is time, making use of painting to lodge what is released.⁷³

The process of meditation as seen here is that of reception, and this differs significantly from the mimetic process involved in Classical Greek paintings: while in Classical Greek paintings the desires of man are inscribed in art works, here it is a process of reception that is happening. The painter becomes a vessel, and it is the procedure of emptying his vessel – both his inner state of mind and the paper or silk in front of him – in order to make space for nature to reside in. In some extreme cases of genius the painter would go as far as to lose himself, as can be seen in Su Shih's poem on Wen T'ung⁷⁴ painting bamboo:

Not simply unconscious of himself,
Trance-like, he left his body behind.
His body was transferred into bamboo.⁷⁵

What is interesting is the chemistry that happens during this process. Apparently, the painter is almost “reduced to the transparent receptacle for the

⁷³ *Kuang-ch'uan hua-pa* [Tung Yu's Colophons on Painting]. Ibid., 210.

⁷⁴ 1018-1079. The most famous literati painter of ink bamboo. His extensive and continued influence established him as the ideal “gentleman-painter,” a term coined by Wen's distant cousin and close friend as well as devoted admirer, Su Shih.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 212.

complex and, finally, mysterious response.”⁷⁶ Yet because the vessel – however “empty” or “transparent” it may be – is the mind of the artist, the artistic outcome is neither nature independent in itself nor the pure inner state of the painter, but an expression of the organic fusion of both. The difference this has from the fusion of the desire of man and the exterior world in Classical Greek paintings is subtle yet immense, for whereas in the case of Classical Greece the basis is a clear division between nature and man, interior and exterior, for the above process to take place no such dichotomy can exist. One pictures the object of the painting in one’s mind and at the same time becomes oneself that object. The two penetrate and permeate each other until there is no point in distinguishing one from the other, and this contact becomes the focal point of the artistic process: there no longer being this or that, the “Other” or the “I”. This in fact is the core of the time-consuming pre-painting procedure, and it is this that the literati painters took most pleasure in. Fuller makes this clear when he explains the alimentary aspect of Su Shih’s poetry:

The poet somehow consumes what he sees so that an inner version of the object in the world comes to reside in the poet’s stomach or, more commonly, in his breast. The poet stands in immediate relationship to the reconstituted object within rather than to the original object in the world itself.⁷⁷

In this respect, even the process of observation such as the account of Li K’an quoted earlier should be understood as a way of “receiving” rather than mechanical observation of external phenomena.

Su Shih lucidly visualises this aspect in *Bamboo in the Moonlight* (fig. 14).

⁷⁶ Fuller, 17.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 10.

The painting is simple, comprising only a few bold strokes of ink depicting the leaves of the bamboo against a white background, with subtle shades of light ink suggesting the bright moonlight in contrast to the darkness of the night. The very simplicity of the composition, however, highlights all the more the presence of the bamboo and the essence of the inner state of the artist embedded within.

What catches the eyes at first sight is the eminent blackness of the bamboos which is intensified by the indication of the moon in the background. It is remarkable how in a picture made up of just two colours – the black ink and the untouched white paper – such a strong sense of the feeling a scene in real life would emit is presented. The intensity could, in fact, be stronger here. Yet little effort has been made to imitate the actual bamboo – there is no sense of depth or volume; no light or shade to indicate the subtle distances between the leaves. What we have before our eyes is the “principle”, the Tao of the bamboo. It is the principle of the painting, namely pictorial Tao, but at the same time it is the principle of bamboo, and of the painter.

Traditionally the bamboo was in Chinese iconography a “symbol of the character of the sage, pliant yet unbreakable in the wind,”⁷⁸ and this, through solid, austere imprints of the brush with no trace of hesitation or wavering, is exactly what has been materialised. This is very important in understanding the painting, for it means that what Su Shih, himself regarded by many as resembling the bamboo, wished to paint was by no means the physical appearance of the bamboo, but rather the meaning it embraced and his emotional response to it. The brushwork reveals Su Shih’s desire to reach the Tao of bamboo and at the same time his yearning to become one. For him, however, the three cannot not be separated, for as Tsung Ping, among many, asserts: “The essence of spirit, being limitless, resides in forms ... and

⁷⁸ Miclat, 29.

truth enters into reflections and traces. One who can truly describe with skill will also truly achieve this.”⁷⁹ The painting is, therefore, a visual rendering of the bamboo as well as its Tao as well as the artist’s inner state, arising as “a meeting of mind and world and [partaking] of both.”⁸⁰ With no division the painting embodies all three in one. The bamboo is Su Shih, and Su Shih the bamboo; the painting as a whole is bamboo as well as the artist himself.

Here we arrive at a unique point in Chinese painting. To convey emotion and the invisible principle of the selected subject means that life-like imitation loses significance. There is nothing particularly unusual about this aspect; however, it is necessary to note how this tendency was strengthened in literati paintings, especially with the more simple ones with one or two subjects, such as the example of Su Shih. This is due naturally to the increased importance of the artist’s inner state. Tung Yu is not satisfied with simply pointing out the limits of verisimilitude when he says, “What is valued in resemblance is achieved without planning ... How can it only be resemblance that is valued?”⁸¹ Physical resemblance for Tung Yu did not offer the artist the space to lodge his ideas: “If one investigates his paintings from the point of view of forms, they are all completely what he saw. He could not paint his thoughts into them.”⁸²

Chinese painters always thought it essential that the mind be in accord with the hand in order to create a perfect painting. The hand is another name for the brush. Although it was the “spirit” that they held as the core of both landscape and literati paintings, the value of substance, with very few exceptions, was never totally neglected. If we read the above quotes bearing this in mind the importance of the

⁷⁹ *Hua shan-shui hsü* [Introduction to Painting Landscape]. Bush and Murck, 145.

⁸⁰ Fuller, 21.

⁸¹ *Kuang-ch’uan hua-pa* (Tung Yu’s Colophons on Painting). Bush and Shih, 215.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 216.

brush and brushwork is readily understandable. Never completely abandoning visual form, the literati particularly concentrated on the brushwork in order to complement its lack of “emotional space”.

Traditionally, thoughts and all emotional aspects of the artist are conveyed through the brush, and it is for this reason that brushwork has always been considered as one of the most important of the ‘technical’ aspects of painting in China. Brushwork therefore is more than a technical component of Chinese painting. It is not without reason Han Cho (active ca. 1095 – ca.1125) begins his technical guidelines for brushwork by emphasising the importance of its spiritual quality:

By all means follow rules and standards, but base your painting on spontaneous spirit resonance (*ch’i-yün*). By doing so you will certainly attain a sense of life (*sheng-i*) in the painting. (...) Generally, before you even grasp the brush, you must concentrate your spirit and clarify your thoughts, then the image will seem to be before your very eyes. Hence, the idea exists before the brush. Afterwards, if by means of standards you have carried out your ideas, then it can be said that what has been obtained from the mind has been responded to by the hand.⁸³

Brushwork was considered as the direct mediator between the painter’s emotions and the art work. In this sense it can even and rightly be called the essence of the painter’s expression of the inner state, for, as Chang explains, it is

the immediate reflection from the painter’s inmost being. Things have their reality and will participate in the subjectivity of the painter when he allows them to captivate him. The great artist’s brush stroke is nothing less than the subjective agent

⁸³ *Shan-shui Ch’un-ch’üan chi* [Ch’un-ch’üan’s Compilation on Landscape]. Ibid., 182.

for the expression of objective reality.⁸⁴

The importance of brushwork has another significance. Especially in the case of *SiJunZi* paintings where the subjects are simple, making their relationship with the painter a much more intimate one than that of landscape paintings, one may go as far as to claim that brushwork is everything. Of course there is the painted figure embedded with symbolic meaning, but it is the painter's use of the brush rather than the delineated forms that determines the essence of the conveyed subject. It is through his unique strokes of the brush and the texture thereby made in *Bamboo in the Moonlight*, for instance, that Su Shih visualises the picture he saw in his mind. It is the brushwork that makes it possible for the artist to paint his feelings and emotions, and it is the almost musical tonality and rhythm of its movements that embody this. When Miclat asserts that "bamboo painting is writing poetry in abstraction,"⁸⁵ it is because of the contact of the paper and the flow of the brush made by the painter, or rather, the painter-poet's own intimate time.

Again, this leads us to the temporal characteristics of Chinese painting. Together with the equally important process of grinding the ink block, the whole of the process of painting was obviously much more than translating an object into art: it was, on the contrary, a process of an intimate encounter between the artist and nature, of the external and internal world until the division between the two was no longer meaningful. It was a process of meditative pleasure, of which only a tip of the invisible iceberg was materialised on either paper or silk as a final work of art.

A similar experience awaits the spectator. Although physically he is not provided with paper, ink or brush, he nevertheless travels through time from the

⁸⁴ Chang, 213.

⁸⁵ Miclat, 31.

moment he stands in front of the painting and sets his eyes on the illustrated figures. It is the same for both landscape and literati paintings, and it is with clear reasons that when March describes Su Shih's act of beholding a landscape painting he asserts that in "imagination, he is moving about in time as well as in space."⁸⁶ The key word that links time and spectatorship is mentioned in the above quotation: imagination.

It is with the active involvement of the imagination of the spectator that *Bamboo in the Moonlight* gains significance. Of course, the inscriptions of the artist and the brush strokes, too, play a significant part in the spectatorship, but this alone would convey only a limited aspect of the overall painting, and the painting itself, simple as it is, encourages the beholder to look beyond what is painted. Let us once again take a look at the painting. Precisely due to the simplicity of the composition and the lack of effort to deliver a life-like representation of an actual bamboo the spectator feels no urge to observe the image in detail. The painting instead invites the beholder to another level of seeing. Looking at the painting one imagines the painter, perhaps in the middle of an evening stroll in his garden, gazing at the bamboo he admires so much. Or perhaps the painter was absorbed in meditation in his room when all of a sudden he opened his window to meet with this scene. Whatever it is the beholder imagines, it is more than what is materialised in the painting. Without the grandeur of landscape paintings *Bamboo in the Moonlight* produces the same effect of luring the beholder into the scene and opening the way to wander through the painting at his leisure via his imagination. The painting becomes an invitation for the spectator not only to see through the painter's eyes but to become the painter himself.

As in the case of landscape paintings it is largely the structural rhythm of the

⁸⁶ March, 379.

composition which leads the eyes of the beholder towards the empty space beneath the leaves and under the moonlight. In this way the painting provides the spectator with a space to reside in and unfold his emotions, and ultimately re-create the painting. Although in this painting there is no visible path, it is nonetheless worth quoting the following lines of Jacobson-Leong's discussion on passage and painting:

Within the historical continuum, the path formulates an extension in time commensurate with its extension in space. But in the context of painting – allowing as it does a rapid perception of protracted space and infinite detail – the path signifies more immediate spatial and temporal extension.⁸⁷

In the case of *Bamboo in the Moonlight* it is the viewer's imagination that acts as such a path, and as the viewer journeys through this "path" the time and space of the painting extends into infinity. The painted figure of the bamboo thus becomes a catalyst or a doorway, and by stepping inside the painting the spectator now pictures his own bamboo in his mind. Such imagination was not an option but a prerequisite for "proper" spectatorship:

Generally speaking, those who look at a painting and intuitively apprehend it (*shen-hui*) are indeed rare. But, among those who observe formal likeness (*hsing-ssu*) in painting, there may be some who penetrate to spirit resonance (*ch'i-yün*) and rise above particulars. (...) If, when looking at images one forgets about images, [attaining] the spontaneity (*tzu-jan*) that precedes conceptions, then one may begin to (...) honor the sages of painting beyond the rules. Only an imagination encompassing

⁸⁷ Jacobson-Leong, 354.

[Creation] will achieve this ...⁸⁸

Passive reception did not exist in this type of spectatorship, and through time and with imagination, seeing functioned as a creative process and essential part of painting.

3-5. Conclusion

Let us return to the beginning of this chapter and once again take a look at *The Poet Li Po*. As I stated, this painting is an embodiment of all the aspects of Chinese ways of seeing and representation in painting and the arts. No longer do we see a visual rendering of a man. No longer do we feel the necessity to scrutinize its compositional or technical details. Instead we see a poet. Looking into his eyes, we soon follow the gaze towards the infinite space that is extended beyond the limited space of the paper and search for what is not delivered here in the painting. Wandering through the invisible space we “feel” the quiet murmuring of the poet. Intermingled with our own sensations and the silent emotions of the poet the murmuring soon becomes our own. We then come back to the painting. There, covered with a vaguely visible cloak, is the inner space of the poet. It is covered, yet it is a void. It is thus also a space for our intimate feelings to reside in. Here, where the poet’s secret words are hidden, is also where the painter’s poem of feelings is lodged. It is also the space in which we inscribe our poetry. Borrowing the swift feet of the poet we take a journey from the painting into infinity and back, and with time

⁸⁸ Li T’ien. *I-chou ming-hua lu* [A Record of the Famous Painters of I-chou]. Bush and Shih, 98. Translator’s square brackets.

we bring back our receptive emotions and fill in the void. The poet, who through the process of painting has been transformed into the painter, is now myself; the painting is the reflection of my own feelings as well as that of the painter's.

I have thus discussed the concept of seeing and representation in Chinese landscape and literati paintings. Unlike under the tradition of *mimesis* there was never a belief that the world could be understood by seeing. Like Plato the Chinese were very aware of the limits of physical sight, but, while for this reason Plato condemned the painter and the poet as being obsessed with appearances, the Chinese sought ways in which to convey what could not be grasped by the naked eye via visual media. Instead of observation of the world and thus producing a division between the "I" and the "Other", they chose an organic contact in which there was no clear separation of the man from the rest of the world.

Such an attitude in ways of seeing led to significantly different ways of artistic creation and reception. Rather than straining to deliver life-like representations of the visible world, they endeavoured to deliver what they believed to be its "principles", the Truth that sight was not granted. In this process the subjectivity of the artist was actively involved, and it settled as one of the core factors of the creative part of painting. Empty spaces and intentional blurring or blinding of a clear view of the chosen subjects were thus a common element in paintings, which on the one hand revealed the impossibility of grasping Truth through sight and on the other hand created a space in which the subjectivity of the artist could reside.

The different attitude to ways of seeing and the emphasis on the element of feeling leads also to differences in the role of the spectator. Unlike the "mimetic" viewer, the viewer of Chinese landscape and literati paintings was not in the

“comfortable” position of passive reception. Just as the painter had to see beyond what is seen in order to “see” the invisible, the spectator, too, was asked to go through a process of active seeing. Just as the painter’s intimate feelings and sensations were imbued in his art work, so the spectator too was provided with a path through which to travel beyond the painted scenery and into the invisible world, and an empty space in which to paint his own emotional response. The spectator’s role was, in this sense, one of re-creating.

Chapter 4

Poetics and the Foundation of Mimetic Traditions in Western Theatre

4-1. Introduction

Although a Roman reproduction from Pompeii, the second-century B.C. mosaic depicting the battle between Alexander and Darius, commonly known as the Alexander Mosaic (*fig. 15*), is widely accepted as preserving the major aspects of the paintings of Classical Greece.¹ We have already examined the main characteristics of the paintings of this period with regard to Plato's concept of *mimesis*, and seen how the frame of ways of seeing in relation to the arts was established. We now need to look at the relationship between the concept of *mimesis* and artistic production in Greek antiquity from Aristotle's point of view, for his theory of *mimesis* and tragedy played a central role in the development of the dramatic and theatrical traditions of the West. Therefore, I propose to begin this chapter by examining the mosaic, this time focusing on aspects of Aristotle's conception of *mimesis*. Of course, there are obvious limits to this attempt since, compared to Plato, Aristotle dealt with paintings only very slightly. Ironically, however, looking at the visual arts gains significance specifically for this reason, for such an attempt will highlight the crucial differences between Plato's and Aristotle's attitudes towards the concept of *mimesis* and the

¹ There is no common agreement on the exact date of the original painting, or who the painter of the original work was, but it is widely accepted that the painting belongs to the last third of the fourth century B.C. One suggestion, referring to Pliny's *Natural History*, is that it was painted some time after 317 B.C. by Philoxenos of Eretria; but Lydakis expresses his doubts for the reason that the style to be found in the reproduction is considerably different from what is known, also referring to Pliny, as Philoxenos's. Cohen introduces other suggestions. See Lykidas 172; Cohen 84-85.

mimetic arts. It will also function as a springboard for explaining the major characteristics of the roots of Western theatre.

Although analogies to painting found in the *Poetics* are mainly designed to complement and support Aristotle's poetic (or, to evade confusion with the modern understanding of the word, dramatic) theory, as Graham Zanker rightly points out, the "use of a thing as an analogy actually depends on how its user regards the thing" and therefore, "if poetry resembles painting in certain aspects, then painting must in turn resemble poetry in those respects."² This is not to neglect what is implied in the short statements on painting, but since the objective of this discussion is less on paintings themselves than an interrogation of Aristotle's concept of *mimesis* and how his theory grounded the Western tradition of drama and theatre, the following examination of the mosaic will focus on these aspects rather than on the characteristics of Classical Greek painting techniques.

4-2. From Visual to Verbal, *Idea* to Reason

The Alexander Mosaic contains all the elements of Classical Greek paintings that have been discussed in the second chapter, and therefore one would experience little difficulty in reading it with the pictorial vocabulary that I have adopted in examining paintings in relation to Plato's theory of *mimesis*: the figures are depicted with volume; the focus is undeniably on man; and above all, it is a visual representation of a chosen moment in a continuous narrative. One should also recall how the final aspect in particular can be directly related to Plato's aggressive attacks

² Zanker, 225.

on the mimetic arts, and his treatment of them as an unreliable imitation of capricious visual phenomena. Indeed, the scene captures a fleeting moment of the great battle, and efforts made in order to create the effects of dynamic movement seem to highlight all the more the ephemeral quality of the scene. This quality would in turn add to the incompleteness and unreliability Plato claims as the traits of *mimesis*.

The same image, however, gains a startlingly contrasting value when it is looked at via the Aristotelian frame. This is due to the crucial differences in the attitudes toward *mimesis* and mimetic art that are to be found in the theories of the two philosophers. Unlike Plato, who approached the concept of *mimesis* with the criterion of Truth, Aristotle adopted a totally different criterion: understanding. He makes this point clear early in the *Poetics* when he explains *mimesis* as the prime factor that differentiates man from other animals, claiming that “through mimesis [man] takes his first steps in understanding.”³ Unlike the idealist Plato, Aristotle was strictly materialist, and unlike Plato’s religious approach his aim was “to create a systematic science of everything.”⁴ Truth, at least the Platonic concept of the term, has little authority within Aristotle’s realm of *mimesis*; it is not the invisible, unintelligible Truth that belonged solely to the gods but the rational understanding of the material world of man that is the focus of Aristotle’s interest. No longer is the individual a “shadowy appearance but the primary reality. The outward and material world, the diverse manifestations of nature’s life, (...) all gained a new importance for his philosophy.”⁵ Therefore, for Aristotle the “mimetic status of certain art objects is a matter of their having a significant content that can and, if their mimetic

³ *Poetics* iv (p.34).

⁴ Wiles (2007), 92.

⁵ Butcher, 160.

status is to be effectively realized, must be recognized and understood by their audiences.”⁶ Thus, without referring specifically to Plato’s conception, Aristotle lifts *mimesis* from the domain of Truth or Idea and places it within an autonomous territory of its own.

The mosaic, therefore, must also be viewed in this respect. It is no coincidence that Aristotle’s first detailed allusion to the visual realm of art appears in his direct statement on *mimesis*:

It is for this reason that men enjoy looking at images, because what happens is that, as they contemplate them, they apply their understanding and reasoning to each element (...) if it happens that one has no previous familiarity with the sight, then the object will not give pleasure qua mimetic object but because of its craftsmanship, or colour, or for some other such reason.⁷

Limited to this mosaic alone, Aristotle’s statement proves impressively true. This becomes more obvious if one compares the viewing of this work to the experience of viewing, for instance, Chinese paintings that we have examined in the previous chapter. The pleasure of viewing Liang Kai’s *Strolling on a Marshy Bank* is not produced from recognizing the empty space as a mountain, let alone which specific one, or from identifying the tiny figure at the bottom as a man. Reasoning and understanding play only a minor role in the spectatorship of this painting. Aristotle’s stance is therefore difficult to adopt in this case. On the other hand, the knowledge of the context and recognizing the scene as well as the characters is extremely important in the perception of the Alexander Mosaic. As is the case with

⁶ Halliwell (2002), 153.

⁷ *Poetics* iv (p.34).

most Greek paintings, such identification “involves the determination of what aspects of an image are to be privileged as significant,”⁸ the reason being that “recognising implies both a perceptual and authoritative and authorising gesture.”⁹

One of the major issues evolving around the work is the still unresolved dispute over exactly which battle the scene illustrates.¹⁰ This is an important problem for art historians as it serves as a key to answering whose painting the mosaic reproduced; but it is also a matter that would have been important to viewers of the time. Knowing which battle the painting depicted has a direct influence on its spectatorship. Likewise, knowing that the two main characters are Alexander and Darius plays a significant role in one’s appreciation of the image, and it is largely this recognition that dominates the process of seeing on the part of the viewer, as this pre-condition heightens the sense of grandeur of the overall work. This would have been the dominant guiding line, as it still is, of the narrative of the painting and the viewer would search for elements that illuminate the sense of the hero and his foe in the overall image. Certainly, other elements within the image all contribute to building this effect, but it is difficult to deny that identifying the pursuing warrior as Alexander and the fleeing one as Darius increases the sense of tension and glory the painting aims at. In fact, this is in line with the new tradition of individualisation in visual art that emerged during the seventh-century B.C. Hanfmann enumerates three devices that late Archaic and Early Classical artists employed in order to make recognisable the hitherto generalised characters of Geometric narrative: the choice of an unmistakable situation; attribute; and labelling.¹¹ With these elements granted the

⁸ Goldhill and Osborne, 1.

⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰ The widely agreed view was that it depicted the Battle of Issos, until recent studies arguing that it was the Battle of Guagamela arose, starting with Moreno. See Lydakis, 172-173.

¹¹ See Hanfmann, 72.

maximum of elaborate sophistication, the mosaic provides the viewer with almost all the information he would need in order to follow the drama it visualizes.

With the knowledge of the battle scene and the recognition of the characters, the viewer now turns to the details of the painting, to see how each element contributes to the glorification of the king. The dominance of the two characters leads the spectator to observe how they are depicted in more detail. What is most remarkable on the part of Alexander is his overall composure. This is even more striking in contrast to the dynamic posture of the horse on which he is mounted, and especially so if one follows the spear in his hands. Although the middle part of the spear is erased the viewer can easily see how its end is piercing right through the bowels of the opposing warrior. The warrior's horse is already down, and the angle that his body produces, with the waist in the direction of the spear while both the torso and legs point towards the opposite side, suggest the force and speed of Alexander's attack. Alexander, however, is not even glancing at this sight. It is almost as if he is not even conscious of this slaughter that he himself is conducting. His almost expressionless face, unlike all the others including that of Darius, is the culmination of the "austere, controlled, meditative image which the Greeks wanted to see of themselves in an age when victory and tragedy were thought to be products of their own behaviour."¹² One will notice how his eyes are much larger than others', with long lashes pointing slightly upwards, thereby enhancing the glaring effect. It is obvious that they are looking at Darius, and following his gaze the viewer, too, turns to the Persian king. His eyes contain emotion, a *pathos* of fear, and with his mouth half open in contrast to Alexander's sternly closed lips, Darius's face is evidently the one which is in fright. The faces alone tell the story of the battle, and from these two

¹² Pollitt, 39.

faces the viewer is reaffirmed in his knowledge about the glorious conclusion of this conflict, and even an ignorant viewer will learn to whom the victory will go.

I have written above that the faces tell the story. In fact, the whole of the mosaic is telling a story via images. It depicts Alexander, and the depiction is rendered in a style of glorification; however, this is not the ultimate goal of the whole image but rather a decisive element, a trigger to the narrative that the scene as a whole conveys. This directs us to another important aspect of Aristotle's concept of poetic *mimesis*. "An analogous point holds for painting: a random distribution of the most attractive colours would never yield as much pleasure as a definite image without colour."¹³ This he states in order to emphasize the importance of the structuring of the content. For Aristotle, it was always the structuring, i.e., the plot that is the primary driving force of the development of the narrative, and the five elements of the composition of tragedy – character, style, thought, spectacle and verbal style – are to be exploited only to the extent that they contribute to the primal element, the plot. Even the element of character cannot evade this rule:

The goal is a certain activity, not a qualitative state (...) It is not, therefore, the function of the agent's actions to allow the portrayal of their characters; it is, rather, for the sake of their actions that characterisation is included. So, the events and the plot-structure are the goal of tragedy, and the goal is what matters most of all.¹⁴

This argument is of course directed towards tragedy, but incidentally the composition of the mosaic serves as an effective annotation in pictorial form. The spatial composition of the work is almost like a visual translation of verbal language,

¹³ *Poetics* vi (p. 38).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xi (p. 37).

and therefore one has little difficulty in explaining the workings of the images in words.

Of the numerous details, I will enumerate just a few. We see Darius's hands, one holding tight the edge of the fleeing chariot while the other is in the air, directed towards Alexander. Such contrast and conflict of directions can be found throughout the work, the only exception being the direction of Alexander's horse which is in line with the three black horses on the right-hand side. It displays what Stansbury-O'Donnell, in analysing the narrative composition of ancient Greek paintings, terms configuration, "the arrangement of the flow of action within a composition," which he claims to be "directional, flowing from one end of the pictorial field to the other, symmetrical or centrifugal, (...) with virtually no internal movement at all and usually symmetrical."¹⁵ However, this flow is halted abruptly by the horse in the centre barging towards the chariot. Its head is turned left towards Alexander, as are the eyes of the soldier trying in vain to stop it from crushing him. Then there are the numerous Persian spears, all but a few aiming at the Greek army, but then again the first few are in direct conflict with the charioteer, who, with his flying whip, seems desperate to flee in the opposite direction. Stansbury-O'Donnell argues that the change of configuration results either in the gain or loss in drama and impact:¹⁶ in this case the former effect is achieved. There is one more thing that must be noted with respect to such a composition: that this complicated web of conflicting directions is occurring in the Persian field of the scene. This could be something hard to assert when the left part of the mosaic is largely damaged; but the fact that two-

¹⁵ Stansbury-O'Donnell, 79. In discussing pictorial narrative in ancient Greek paintings O'Donnell applies Barthes's units of narration: nuclei, catalysts, indices, and informants. Presupposing that the arrangement of these elements controls the flow of pictorial narrative he enumerates the aspects of composition as: configuration, containment, rhythm, movement, and density.

¹⁶ Ibid., 80.

thirds of the entire mosaic is devoted to the Persians, and that the upper part of the Alexandrian quarter is left untouched is sufficient to assume that the impaired images would be more or less similar to the posture of Alexander and the atmosphere it creates. It is evident that all this is planned and constructed with extreme precision. Strong narrative was always a tendency in Greek paintings, but here this characteristic has vividly intensified. The painting is more a subject of observation with specific cognitive guidelines, and, as in Aristotle's allusion, this is conducted via a structured delineation rather than through colours and other painterly devices.

This is not to argue either that optical characteristics unique to painting, or the techniques devoted to enhancing the quality of an image, were neglected in Classical Greece; I have already discussed the technical development in Chapter 2. What I am arguing, however, is that the development of such techniques is largely directed towards enhancing the narrative quality of paintings. This becomes clear if one compares it to earlier paintings. The mid sixth-century kraters examined in Chapter 2 (figures 4 and 5) set a good example. The difference in the nature of the media and the fact that vase and wall or panel paintings diverged as separate genres only after the Classical period does not prevent one from noticing a considerable transition that has happened in the later work. Like the painting in the krater, paintings before the fifth century B.C. are depicted in a linear fashion. This cannot be due to the limits of the convex condition of the medium; the later vase painting of the destruction of Troy (*fig. 6*) demonstrates an obviously more complicated composition similar to that of the Alexander Mosaic. To be sure, there is no denying that the pre-5th century images, too, are narrative depictions, but the way of 'telling' in the Alexander Mosaic is significantly more sophisticated. If one could describe the paintings in the two 6th century B.C. vases as "dry" and more or less impersonal,

the Alexander Mosaic tells the story of a battle in a much more “dramatic” fashion.

This is characteristic of Classical art, and Pollitt’s discussion of Classical statues as tending to be “dramatic, and to carry with them the impression that they represent one distinct stage in a series of events,”¹⁷ can readily be adapted to the field of painting. Taking an example from two pediments of the Temple of Aphaia, Pollitt explains the late Archaic statues as still being expressionless without emitting any sense of emotion while the early Classical ones are strong in expressing the emotions of the chosen characters in the given narrative situation. Although limited to a single sculpture rather than the overall spatial arrangement, how he describes the Classical sculpture of a fallen warrior deserves attention:

His enfeebled movements contrast poignantly with his massive physical frame in which, for practically the first time, the individual details of the musculature are fused and unified by a softening of the lines of division between them, and by increasingly subtle modulation of the surface from which one senses the presence of a unified physical force emanating from within the body.¹⁸

It is clear that this discloses the advance in artistic techniques, but ironically such “sculptural” qualities, and pictorial ones in the case of the Alexander Mosaic, contribute most to the literary and therefore para-linguistic aspect of the works.

It is exactly this that is happening in the *Poetics*: limiting the boundaries of artistic and especially poetic *mimesis* to the realm of the linguistic. The linguistic character of Aristotle’s *mimesis* is strictly related to the “understanding” that I have stated earlier, and therefore it is the logical quality of language that dominates the

¹⁷ Pollitt, 15.

¹⁸ Ibid., 20.

Poetics. As Halliwell argues, the “force of the language of ‘like’ and ‘likeness’ in Aristotle’s vocabulary is essentially logical, not pictorial.”¹⁹

Aristotle’s attitude towards *mimesis* is in direct contrast to that of Plato on two levels. Although Plato’s disdain for *mimesis* has an intrinsic relation to the faculty of sight, one cannot overlook the fact that vision for him was the closest to the attainment of knowledge. “Vision, in my view,” he says,

is the cause of the greatest benefit to us (...) But as it is, the vision of day and night and of months and circling years has created the art of number and has given us not only the notion of Time but also means of research into the nature of the Universe. From these we have procured Philosophy in all its range, than which no greater boon ever has come or will come, by divine bestowal, unto the race of mortals. This I affirm to be the greatest good of eyesight. (...) God devised and bestowed upon us vision to the end that we might behold the revolutions of Reason in the Heaven and use them for the revolvings of the reasoning that is within us.²⁰

Sight is the faculty that is in direct contact with knowledge, and it is for this reason that the creator constructed the eyes before any other facial organ within the face. However, Plato is careful to distinguish the physical process of sight from vision. He devotes a significant amount of the earlier part of *Timaeus* to lauding the eyes as the most important of all sensory organs,²¹ constructed before any other organ and placed in the face – the “natural part” as well as the “leading part” of the head which, again according to Plato, is the “imitation of the All.”²² Yet he makes it clear that physical sight is at best only among auxiliary Causes as opposed to the

¹⁹ Halliwell (1990), 492.

²⁰ *Timaeus* 47a-c.

²¹ See *ibid.*, 45a-d.

²² *Ibid.*, 44d.

First Cause which is “the Good,” which may be attained only through reason.²³ Reason exists in the Soul;²⁴ the Soul is invisible;²⁵ sight, which is concerned with visible bodies, is therefore “incapable of possessing reason and thought for any purpose.”²⁶ Vision, which unearths the revolutions of reason, therefore, belongs to the realm of the Intelligence, distinct from that of auxiliary senses.²⁷

Plato’s attack on poetry and painting as deceptions is in fact grounded in his praise for the immediacy of (in)sight and his conviction that the mimetic artist, obsessed with external appearance only, does not possess the vision that can grasp knowledge. It is on this basis that he condemns poets as “imitators who produce simulacra of excellence (...) and who have no grasp of the truth (...) whose perception depends only on the shapes and colours.”²⁸ At the same time one must note that Plato’s concept of the visual is strongly bonded to his conception of the universe itself as an imitation, a “likeness of something else”²⁹ albeit “as like as himself [the creator].”³⁰ This explains why, while he argues that poetry should be banned from his ideal republic, he is less critical about musical *mimesis*.³¹ What is denounced is how poetry, like painting, makes something *appear* to be so, while it is in fact not. While Aristotle emphasised the linguistic qualities of painting in pairing the two, thereby laying the foundations for the justification of poetic *mimesis*, Plato took the visual as the quality shared by painting and poetry and thus expressed his

²³ See *ibid.*, 29e for a detailed discussion on the Primary Cause.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30b.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 46e.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 46d.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 46e.

²⁸ *Republic* 600e.

²⁹ *Timaeus* 29a.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29b.

³¹ See *Laws* 653-668. One must note that the notion of music in Ancient Greece was broader than how we conceive it today, including gesture, dance and song as well as pure melody. Plato regards music also as “an art of producing likenesses or representations” but at the same time he acknowledges it as a nature given by the gods, and therefore limits his discussion of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ types of music.

disapproval of the consequences of this.

Plato's two-fold stance on the visual is deeply related to his vertical system of the universe, which is also deeply religious. Although in compassionate relationship, the universe forms an absolute hierarchy which cannot be subjugated. This is why the physical world can never be real, and can at best be a shadow. Aristotle's system, on the other hand, completely excludes the realm of the divine: he "has no theory to explicate religious practice within society. His scientific mind does not accommodate anything that smacks of mystification. Plato delighted in creating his own improved myths, but Aristotle stuck to facts."³² This fundamental difference is obviously registered in Aristotle's deep interest in natural, especially biological, sciences but at the same time it cannot be understood as his own *sui generis* philosophical idiosyncrasy; it is in fact an expression of the rapidly changing political, social and intellectual circumstances of Classical Greece.

The most important external factor that gave birth to what we now refer to as the Classical period was the invasion of the Persians in 480 B.C. According to Pollitt, the two most important forces of Greek thought and expression, which were also to have a dominating influence on art, were "anxiety prompted by the apparent irrationality of experience and the drive to allay this anxiety by finding an order which explains experience."³³ The Greeks, who had a "deep-seated need to discover an order in, or superimpose an order on, the flux of physical and psychological expression,"³⁴ had until the beginning of the fifth century turned to the permanent, unchanging pattern of the spiritual. It was the historical event of the year 480 B.C. that shifted such a frame of thought. The victory was more than a mere military one,

³² Wiles (2007), 102.

³³ Pollitt, 5.

³⁴ Ibid., 3.

for it served as a major catalyst in overturning this mental as well as artistic tendency. Persia was completely different from Greece in virtually every aspect of its society, and over the course of a series of conflicts between the two cultures Persia was regarded as the embodiment of everything the Greeks opposed. Therefore, the victory was to the Greeks “a triumph of order over irrationality, a divinely sanctioned justification of Greek culture.”³⁵ It gave the Greeks the confidence that their world was one of order. From then on, Persia and the Orient as the Greeks knew it would be referred to as barbarian, and portrayed as such in art works over the succeeding years. Confidence in the rationality of Greece reached its heights during the ascendancy of Pericles. By the mid-fifth century the belief that “man can shape the world to his own vision of it, that an ideal pattern can be made manifest in this world by human action, and that the irrational and the chaotic can be overcome by conscious effort,”³⁶ was intensified and firmly settled as the Classical mentality.

Such was the political and cultural situation Aristotle inherited, and given this context it is not difficult to understand his philosophical focus on logic and the natural sciences. His emphasis on the narrative and linguistic aspect of *mimesis* must therefore be understood from this point of view. Aristotle’s most significant achievement (or to many contemporary theatre practitioners and academics, a serious error or even crime) lay not only in shifting the concept of *mimesis*, but in shifting the terrain of drama from the performative to the literary. Wiles explains the reason for this with regard to the cosmopolitan nature of Hellenistic Greece during the reign of Alexander to whom Aristotle was tutor:

Theatre had become the property of the Greek-speaking world rather than the

³⁵ Ibid., 14.

³⁶ Ibid., 68.

Athenian city-state. This left Aristotle with a dilemma as to how far the leisured citizen should participate in the arts in the old collective spirit of the city-state, and how far one should simply appreciate what expert touring professionals had to offer. The translation of Athenian performances into texts that could be read, adapted and interpreted across the expanding Greek world meant that the script was the thing for Aristotle to consider, not the performance.³⁷

Such historical conditions may well have impelled Aristotle to direct his focus to the written text, but there is also a more conceptual significance that lies behind this shift. The transition from the performative to the literary, especially from the oral form of speech to written composition gave birth to a new form of thought which demanded “a more rigorous and a stricter ordering of the conceptual material.”³⁸ Through the establishment of the written literature, *logos*, which until then had meant speech in general, came to imply demonstrative rationality;³⁹ Aristotle was amongst the various contributors to this transition, applying the term to “reasoned discourse” in the field of rhetoric.⁴⁰ Vernant argues that to put a text in writing is:

to place it openly at the disposal of the group as a whole. By being written down, the *logos* is brought into the public square (...). It is no longer a matter of overcoming one’s opponent by spell-binding, or fascinating him with one’s own superior power over the spoken word. It is now a matter of convincing of the truth by gradually inducing his own internal discourse to fall into agreement, according to his logic and criteria, with the reasons put forward in the text presented to him. Seen in this

³⁷ Wiles (2007), 94-95.

³⁸ Vernant (1980), 188.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Rahe, 21.

perspective, everything that had hitherto given speech the power to impress and convince its audience is now reduced to the level of *muthos*, that is to say, the stuff of the fabulous, the marvellous. It is as if discourse could only win in the sphere of truth and intelligibility by simultaneously losing out in the sphere of what is pleasurable, moving, and dramatic.⁴¹

It may seem ironic at first reading that Vernant should claim *muthos* to be a property of the fabulous and the marvellous, when Aristotle ceaselessly emphasised that the primal compositional element of tragedy was plot-structure, i.e., *muthos*. However, as Vernant himself explains, the meaning of *muthos*, like the case of *logos*, went through significant transformation during the course of the history of ancient Greece;⁴² one must also bear in mind that by *muthos* Vernant refers specifically to the narrative of the mythical story, after the divorce of the term from other forms of narrative took place in Classical Greece. Seen from this aspect, then, one soon comes to realise that the apparent contradiction is in fact not at all contradictory in essence.

Aristotle distinguishes elements which until then, according to Vernant, were an integral part of *muthos*, and declares that “tragedy does not depend upon public performance and actors.”⁴³ By claiming over and over that tragedy is a *mimesis* of action, Aristotle transposes the realm of *muthos* to that of *logos* which must develop according to its internal logic, i.e., probability and necessity, regardless of the inessential assistance of extra-narrative factors. Aristotle thus extinguishes the

⁴¹ Vernant (1992), 35-36.

⁴² He claims that *muthos*, meaning formulated speech, be it story, dialogue or enunciation of a plan, originally belonged to the domain of *legein* (“to deliberate”) and did not stand in direct contrast to *logoi*, a word concerned with different forms of what is said. A series of inter-related conditions between the eighth and fourth centuries B.C. caused breaks and internal tensions within the mental universe of the Greeks, and propelled the distinction of the domain of myth from other domains, and it was during classical antiquity that the concept of myth was clearly defined through the setting up of an opposition between *muthos* and *logos*, henceforth seen as separate and contrasting terms. See Vernant (1980), 186-188.

⁴³ *Poetics* vi (p.39).

sensory factors of tragic *mimesis* and puts it on a level of the rational and the cognitive.

4-3. “Tragedy is a *Mimesis* of Action”: Selectivity in Aristotle’s Concept of *Mimesis*

It is now necessary to interrogate a little further the political and cultural context behind Aristotle’s theory of *mimesis*. Let us once again look at the Alexander Mosaic. I have already mentioned that the picture is less a portrait of Alexander than a narrative representation of an action, and that the action represented directs the viewer to the victory of the Greeks. However, it is difficult to ignore the evident fact that the greater part of the picture is dedicated to the depiction of the Persians. It is not only a matter of proportion: not only do the Persians occupy two-thirds of the mosaic but Darius, disregarding for the time being the narrative context, overwhelms Alexander in location. Although he is not placed at the centre, with the aid of the prominent horse he is the first point of attention on the part of the viewer. In fact, with the curious black tree functioning as a partition, it is almost possible to see this as a separate piece of work, whereas the other part with Alexander would, even taking into account the damaged parts, be less likely to suffice as an independent work of art.

One could then argue that the motif of the mosaic is the tragedy of Darius and the Persians rather than the glorious and forceful pursuit of Alexander and the Greek army. Indeed, Cohen presents both historical references and pictorial elements

that give rise to such a reading of the work.⁴⁴ However, these are isolated factors that fail to converge into one coherent narrative. Despite some views that the mosaic conveys “sympathy for the Persians and their king,”⁴⁵ as Cohen also concludes, “the *plot* dominates the scene too much for such intricate subplots to be plausible. And the plot the picture is resolute upon affirming is Alexander’s [deadly] march forward, unhesitating despite his troubled look, and the resulting Persian retreat.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the Persian side of the mosaic needs to be scrutinized, and at this time I see fit to adopt the binary frame of both Aristotle and the Classical Greeks’ conception of the Persians.

4-3-1. Polarization in the Classical Greek Mind

Whether the Persians are depicted with sympathy or as cowardly in the mosaic, one thing is certain: they are clearly depicted as “Others”. One of the grounds proposed by those who argue that the mosaic focuses on Darius and the Persians is Kassander’s alleged dislike and fear of Alexander⁴⁷ – presuming of course that he was the commissioner of the original painting. The historical details of and disputes around the relationship between the two are irrelevant here, but it is worth noting Kassander’s disapproval of Alexander’s concession to the Persian ways and adherence to certain Persian court ceremonial practices,⁴⁸ for “[t]his type of disagreement between Alexander and individual Macedonians set upon their old

⁴⁴ See Cohen, 86-93.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 93. Original emphasis.

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*, 114-115.

⁴⁸ See *ibid.*, 122.

ways is almost a topos in the historical accounts.”⁴⁹ The Greeks identified themselves as Greeks by defining and distinguishing the “Other”; for the Greeks the “Other”, i.e., the non-Greeks, were barbarians, and “whereas Greeks were ideally seen as not-barbarians, barbarians were equally envisaged as being precisely what Greeks were not.”⁵⁰ As Cartledge explains, with the victory over the Persians in 480 B.C. the “process of ‘othering’ and indeed inventing ‘the barbarian’ as a homogenized stereotype was well underway in Greece, in an early version of the specific form of derogatory stereotyping now known as ‘orientalism’.”⁵¹

Such a polarity is evident in the Alexander Mosaic. However faithful a replica may be of the original, it cannot be totally independent of the social, political and cultural conditions of the period it belongs to. And, it is clear from the mosaic that after almost 300 years since the historic event and more than a century since the completion of the original image, the fundamental attitude had not faded. Again, what forms the most vivid contrast is the depiction of the two kings. It is not only the facial expressions or the blatant pursuer-fugitive relationship that exposes this; in fact, almost all details of the painting contribute to the exhibition of their oppositional characters. Cohen argues that the mosaic cannot be appreciated either as simply heralding the victorious Alexander or sympathising with the tragic defeat of Darius, and that the

Mosaic encourages one to adopt inconsistent points of view simultaneously, experiencing both Alexander’s statement and Darius’s counterstatement and invites

⁴⁹ Ibid., 114.

⁵⁰ Cartledge, 11.

⁵¹ Ibid., 39. See also Hall, 59, where she summarises the significance of the event as follows: “(...) the defeat of the Persians in 480-79 was conceptualized at Athens not only as a triumphant affirmation of Greek culture and collectivity over alien invaders, but over the demon of tyranny. The ‘barbarian’ in the most complete sense, the despotic adversary of free Hellenes everywhere, had well and truly been invented.”

one to reflect on the inconsistency and thus achieve the distance called for by ancient tragedians.⁵²

One of the examples she provides as evidence of Darius's counterstatement is the way his arm is depicted. Claiming that it is extended towards the falling soldier rather than Alexander, she sees it as a sign of the king's reluctance to flee and at the same time an expression of anguish and despair at the sight of the death of his own man, a "formal pleading toward Alexander and a reflexive form of wonder-struck pain and concern for his soldier."⁵³ However, this does not weaken the fact that Darius and his troupe are portrayed as "Others". He may be in agony, and he may be running against his will, but nonetheless he *is* in flight. His nobleness as king does not equal the composed magnitude of Alexander. Hall reminds us that "'barbarianism' coexists with the narration of a genuinely tragic *pathos*"⁵⁴ and there is no reason to see this case as an exception.

The contrast between the postures of Alexander and Darius only heightens this sense of hierarchical division. The dramatic situation does not force Alexander's face to be exposed in profile nor Darius's in full-view. It can only be that these were intentional "frameworks within which an artist can reinforce a particular quality of the figure through associated features, while exploiting an effect latent in that view."⁵⁵ Schapiro asserts that the coupling of profile and frontal dispositions conveys opposed qualities, one being "the vehicle of the higher value" while the other "marks the lesser. (...) The duality of the frontal and profile can signify then the distinction

⁵² Cohen, 118.

⁵³ Ibid., 91.

⁵⁴ Hall, 100.

⁵⁵ Schapiro, 45.

between (...) the ruler and the ruled, and noble and the plebeian.”⁵⁶ If this was the norm in Greek painting, it can only be that the profile of Alexander is painted so as to heighten the aspect of the righteous victor, whereas the full-view of Darius – not completely frontal, but nonetheless exposing the full details of his face – is done so in order to stigmatise him once again as the underdog.

One can find a similar description of a losing king in Aeschylus’s *Persians*. Reproach overwhelms compassion regarding the defeated king Xerxes. He is a loser in two aspects: one as the loser of the battle and the other, more importantly, as a coward who left his men to die to save himself. The chorus, full of emotion, deploras the fact that:

Xerxes led them away,

Xerxes destroyed them,

Xerxes wrong-headedly drove everything on in seafaring ships⁵⁷

only then to sing:

We hear that the King himself only just escaped

To the bleak plains

And pathways of Thrace.⁵⁸

Furthermore, the ghost of Darius I, Xerxes’s own father, laments the loss of the Persian army and cries out in anger, “O miserable wretch, the allies he lost were

⁵⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁷ Aeschylus, 71.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 72.

in their youthful prime” before asking about the safety of his son.⁵⁹

The Greeks, on the other hand, are depicted in a significantly different manner. Although they are evidently the ones directly responsible for the devastation of Persia, it is confirmed by the messenger from the battlefield that the victory of the Greeks was inevitable, declaring that “it was some god who destroyed us by loading the scales with an unequal weight of fate. The gods protect the city of the goddess Pallas.”⁶⁰ In stark contrast to Xerxes, continues the messenger, “it was not in flight that the Greeks were then singing the sacred paeon, but rushing into battle with courage and confidence.”⁶¹ Although the play – first performed in 472 B.C. – was written well over a century before the making of the original painting of the Alexander Mosaic, the depictions of the Greeks and Persian kings significantly overlap. An account of the Greeks who, “rushing at a single cry against them [Persian soldiers], butchered the poor men’s limbs until they had all been deprived of life,”⁶² does little to impair the justification of their victory: it only increases the sense of the Persian’s total defeat, just as the soldier dying in the hands of Alexander does in the mosaic.

Such a polarity between “Same” and “Other” does not only apply to the Greek-barbarian division, where the polarity was an “ideological habit” and a “hallmark of their [the Greeks’] mentality and culture.”⁶³ It is at the same time a particular trait of Aristotle’s philosophy, and it is through his writings that such a tendency is theorized. For Aristotle, just as nature distinguished male from female, this cultural polarity is a natural tendency. On this basis Aristotle asserts that

⁵⁹ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 59.

⁶¹ Ibid., 62-63.

⁶² Ibid., 65.

⁶³ Cartledge, 11.

barbarians are barbarians precisely due to the fact that they fail to recognize natural distinctions altogether:

(...) among barbarians no distinction is made between women and slaves, because there is no natural ruler among them: they are a community of slaves, male and female. That is why the poets say, -

It is meet that Hellenes should rule over barbarians;

as if they thought that the barbarian and the slave were by nature one.⁶⁴

Besides Aristotle's obvious bigotry in regards to the barbarian, one which is ultimately taken to sanction and legitimize Greek dominance, there are also two very important aspects in the above citation: one is Aristotle's conception of nature, and the other is the politics of polarity. Nature, for Aristotle, is less a vague, ideal entity than a logical process developing towards a clear goal. "For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature," says Aristotle and he continues, "the final cause and end of a thing is the best, and to be self-sufficing is the end and the best."⁶⁵ Nature is therefore "clearly, repeatedly and explicitly a *telos*, end, goal, the *hou heneka*, that for the sake of which (in the sense of end or goal)."⁶⁶ Polarity or distinction for Aristotle is *natural*, and "natural" being a tendency towards the "end and the best," makes this a virtue. Greece, a culture composed of polarity, is therefore superior to one that does not possess such a political concept. Lloyd's commentary on the Greek master-slave relationship deserves attention in this respect:

⁶⁴ *Politics* 1252b5-9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1252b33-1253a1.

⁶⁶ Lloyd, 198.

Because that which possesses the *logos* and the form, namely the moving cause, is *better* than the matter, (...) it is *better* that the superior should be separated from the inferior. By parity of reasoning, therefore, he [Aristotle] could claim that the slave/master distinction is a mark of human superiority.⁶⁷

The distinction between nobility and baseness has thus been granted a rational justification, and class distinction now exists for the better good for all. Thus is secure a system that “the rulers are superior people who deserve their elite status.”⁶⁸ Not only is such a polarity good for the master but also for the slave, since they “have the same interest.”⁶⁹

Such an attitude does not remain solely within the socio-political frame but is also extended and reflected in the arts. In fact, the whole of the *Poetics* is firmly rooted in this thought: it is a systematic categorisation of different types of *mimesis*, and again a categorisation of the elements of tragedy. Aristotle distinguishes tragedy from comedy according to the criterion that the former should be a representation of people better than ourselves: not only does this reflect the hierarchical polarity examined above (for it is apparent now that “better” people indicate the ruling class), but the production of *katharsis*, the ultimate aim of tragedy, also reflects such an attitude extending to the field of emotion and pleasure, as can be seen in the *Politics* where he writes that “the pleasure of the best man is the best, and springs from the noblest sources.”⁷⁰ The basis of his refutation of the charge that “epic is for good spectators who require no gestures, while tragedy is for vulgar spectators” is

⁶⁷ Ibid., 190-191. Original emphasis.

⁶⁸ Wiles (2007), 93.

⁶⁹ *Politics* 1252b1.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 1338a6.

paradoxically his positive acknowledgement of the distinction between such types of spectators, and he supports his claims that the problems of spectators cannot be the defect of tragedy by arguing that this belongs not to poetry but acting. Tragedy, he argues, “like epic, achieves its aim even without enactment: for its qualities become apparent through reading.”⁷¹

At the same time, although Lloyd emphasises the adjective “better”, no less important is the term *logos*. That the teleological aspect of Aristotle’s concept of nature is tightly related to *logos* means that it belongs to the rational realm. Such an intricate relationship between Aristotle’s teleological conception of nature and *logos* cannot be divorced from the consciousness of the Greek mind that the world can be rationally understood, and the later classically-rooted confidence in reason in the Renaissance and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

At this point it is hard not to recall the Chinese attitude towards nature which, as we have already seen, differs significantly. One might recall how the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu conversely asserts the insufficiency of the intellect in achieving the Tao. Although this is not directly the counterpart of the *logos*-nature relationship, the fact that Tao was the basis of the Chinese understanding of the world, not to speak of nature, itself makes it a sufficient point of comparison: for as discussed in Chapter 3, Tao is inherently unintelligible,⁷² and nowhere in the *Tao Te Ching* is there the slightest implication of teleology. If Aristotle’s concept of nature is “guided, and in one sense determined, by the ends and purposes towards whose fulfilment they move” and effects “the finest or most successful organisation of [its]

⁷¹ *Poetics* xxvi (p.64).

⁷² “Before there was heaven and earth / There existed something that could not be known. / It has no sound, therefore cannot be heard / And has no shape thus cannot be seen, / But it leans on no other thing, / Stands alone, and does not change.” *Tao Te Ching* ch. 24.

material,”⁷³ Tao or Taoist nature is absolute, unchanging from start to finish. Aristotelian nature tends towards a goal; Tao extends into eternity ultimately returning to its Origin.⁷⁴

One cannot stipulate this as a contrast between the mobile and the static, for in fact the essence of the Tao is, ironically incomprehensible to the “rational” mind, always in ceaseless motion. The contrast lies rather in the direction: whereas Aristotelian nature, due to its inherent teleological characteristic, heads continuously in one direction towards its goal, Taoist nature expands through an incessant, ongoing relationship between things. It is significant that such a contrast is in direct accord with what Classical Greece and Imperial China deemed the essence of art to be.

Aristotle’s teleological approach also applies to art (*technē*), which directly challenged Plato’s understanding, including it as one of the five truth-attaining qualities together with scientific knowledge, prudence, wisdom and intelligence.⁷⁵ On this basis he defines art, or *technē*, as “a rational quality, concerned with making, that reasons truly.”⁷⁶ *Technē* has been elevated by Aristotle from mere mechanical craft to a truth-attaining quality; moreover, it has been endowed with *logos*. Yet associating *technē* with *logos* is not Aristotle’s contribution to elevating its status; I have already shown in Chapter 2 that it was Plato’s. Sharing Plato’s criterion in classifying types of *technē*, what Aristotle does is to shift the types. While Plato distinguishes the *technē* of the user from that of the maker and the imitator, thereby criticising the imitator for not possessing the knowledge of the object he is

⁷³ Halliwell (2000b), 48.

⁷⁴ See *Tao Te Ching* ch. 24.

⁷⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* VI. iii. 1.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, VI. iv. 6.

imitating,⁷⁷ Aristotle associates knowledge to all kinds of *technē* and instead divides types of knowledge into the productive and speculative, obviously the latter a higher form of knowledge than the former.⁷⁸ It is on these grounds that he distinguishes master craftsmen from simple artisans, the reason being that while the latter are “like inanimate things that produce without knowing what they produce,” the former “are wiser than others not because they are better in practice, but because they have a rational account and know the causes.”⁷⁹ Even more noteworthy are his conclusive words on art: “All art deals with bringing something into existence; and to pursue an art means to study how to bring into existence a thing which may either exist or not, and the efficient cause of which lies in the maker and not in the thing made”⁸⁰ The creation of painting and tragedy, genres belonging to mimetic *technē*, as it were, thus becomes a rational process with a definite end of bringing into existence. The result is a detachment of the artist and the artwork.

Neither is the case in Chinese paintings. In China the aim of art was to capture the Tao, and this meant that it dealt explicitly with the invisible and the unintelligible. Thus the core of Chinese art was not a “bringing into existence” but, on the contrary, the revelation that such an act is impossible. The issue is less about “making” a “product”, as the origin of the term “art” or *technē* implies, than suggesting or implying. Such a difference in the foundations necessarily makes the process of artistic creation internal rather than external, even when dealing with the visual phenomena via physical means.

A simple comparison between the Alexander Mosaic and the painting *The Poet Li Po* from the previous chapter makes this evident, for it takes a mere glance at

⁷⁷ See *Republic* 601d.

⁷⁸ See Cuomo, 13.

⁷⁹ *Metaphysics* 981b.

⁸⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics* VI. iv. 4.

the two pictures to notice the difference in the ways of thinking that governs the methods of artistic production. The former is complete in itself, self-sufficient and independent of the artist the moment it is finished – it is there ready for the spectator to observe. The latter, on the other hand, is attached to the artist even after the brush has been put down. It is finished yet continuously in the process of creation every time a viewer stands in front of it. The spectator, instead of observing the details in search of logical hints that would guide him into understanding, embosses his feelings on the painting. Because a clear dividing line does not exist in this case, the relationships become much more intricate, and the element of feeling rather than reason which dominates the productive and receptive aspects of the painting only intensifies this. The external direction of the Greek example is strengthened and embodied, on the other hand, by its mimetic quality. As Halliwell rightly points out, “mimesis makes art outward-facing, and locates its subject in general human reality, not in the privileged inner experiences of the artist.”⁸¹

However, what makes art art is *mimesis*; this is what distinguishes art from the broader field of *technē*, and the “combination of both *technē* and *mimesis* is therefore required to give us the core of Aristotle’s concept of poetry, painting, music and the rest – a concept of *art*, in other words, in the fuller sense.”⁸² I have already discussed how deeply Aristotle’s concept of *mimesis* was bound to the aspect of understanding and *logos*; *logos* being an attribute of the teleological aspect of nature, one can easily infer that *mimesis*, too, is thoroughly teleological. Aristotle’s theory of tragedy is almost wholly composed in a teleological chain: the end of every element of tragic composition is the contribution to plot-structure; the end of plot-

⁸¹ Halliwell (2000b), 61.

⁸² Ibid., 51.

structure is *mimesis*; the object of *mimesis* is action, and the end of *mimesis* of action, the ultimate goal of tragedy, is the production of *katharsis* through the arousal of pity and fear.⁸³ Any component that lacks the ability to fulfil this role is to be omitted.

4-3-2. Form Matters: Polarization in Aristotle's Theory of Tragic *Mimesis*

The earlier quotation from Lloyd regarding Aristotle's idea of nature, in fact, discloses another significant characteristic of Classical Greek thought which the Chinese do not possess: the division between matter and form. Once again, such a difference arises from the fundamental difference in the attitudes towards art: one as a rational product, and the other as a vessel for the inner feelings of both the artist and the viewer. Rancière argues that a medium is

a surface of conversion: a surface of equivalence between the different arts' ways of making; a conceptual space of articulation between these ways of making and forms of visibility and intelligibility determining the way in which they can be viewed and conceived.⁸⁴

In the case of the Alexander Mosaic, the conversion is from the pictorial to the verbal. This fits perfectly with Rancière's contention that painting under the mimetic tradition, or to use his own term, regime,⁸⁵ relies on the unique relationship between image and words, for painting "had to demonstrate its capacity for poetry –

⁸³ *Poetics* xi (p.37).

⁸⁴ Rancière (2007), 75-76.

⁸⁵ As the deliberate choice of the term 'regime' suggests, Rancière interrogates the political aspect of art. He distinguishes three regimes in the history of Western art: the ethical regime of Plato; the poetic or representational regime formed first by Aristotle; and the aesthetic, which is at the opposite pole of the representative regime. See Rancière (2004), 20-23.

its ability to tell stories, to represent speaking, acting bodies.”⁸⁶ In Chinese paintings, however, the transition is not as apparent. Expressing poetic qualities was also essential in Chinese paintings; however, unlike the artistic strand under the tradition of *mimesis*, this rarely meant that the image should equate with the verbal. One could of course assert that a transition from the pictorial to the emotional as well as to the obviously verbal (if signifying the bamboo can be argued to be a verbal quality) occurs in, for instance, the case of *Bamboo in the Moonlight* or, in *Early Spring*, in the transition from the pictorial to the atmospheric. The reason for this ambiguity lies in the fact that division in order to exclude one category from another was not a part of Chinese thought or aesthetics, where in its theorization of art or reality it took a holistic approach; defining opposites, on the other hand, was done only so as to create harmony and highlight their intrinsic inter-connectedness.

The emphasis on the verbal in Greek art can be found not only in painted works themselves but also in criticism written about them. The lengthy description by Pausanias of Polygnotos’s now lost paintings *The Sack of Troy* and *Underworld* in the Lesche of the Knidians in Delphi is exemplary in this respect. His verbal depictions of the paintings⁸⁷ are extremely specific, not merely identifying the figures but also dedicating much of the text to the details of postures⁸⁸ and even to

⁸⁶ Rancière (2007), 75.

⁸⁷ The collective term that refers to genres that convey visual art in verbal language is *ekphrasis*. The ancient notion of the term included any verbal description of verbal phenomena, from depictions of battles to artefacts (See Klarer, 133.). Francis argues that there is a gap between the modern and ancient understanding of the term, saying that while the modern concept is defined as the literary description of a work of visual art, in antiquity *ekphrasis* was “a rather uncommon and late-developing term defined, not as a description of art, but as evocative description pure and simple, ‘laying out the subject before the eyes,’” concerned less with literature than rhetoric. (See Francis, 1; 2; 4-5). However, the alleged difference does little to undermine the intense relationship between the visual and the verbal, and only reveals how this tradition, in the process of trying to define and redefine the concept, has held strong in Western aesthetics to the present day.

⁸⁸ For instance, Antilochos is described as being “one foot on a rock and with his face and his head resting in his two hands,” and Hector as “clasping his left knee with both hands, and represented in the attitude with the one who grieves.” Pollitt, 138; 139.

the spatial dispositions (compositional indicators such as “higher up” and “above” are frequently to be found), so much so that one is easily tempted to translate his words into images.

This simple effect of Pausanias’s writing, however, raises a complex problem concerning the relationship between the painted image and the written word.

Inscribed in Pausanias’s description is the solid belief that the image can be transferred into words. This becomes more apparent when one compares it with the Chinese painting criticism where it is the *chi*, i.e., the spirit and, of course, the Tao that is the issue, not the description of every detail in the painting. One could of course, and rightly, argue that this was due to the difference in genres, but such a dispute in fact touches precisely the core of the problem that is at hand here: word and image in the former case are not merely closely bound but form a hierarchical relationship. It is the painting’s role to tell a story: elements unique to painting are appreciated as another language, and the ultimate goal of this language is little different from that of the one we write. If narrative painting in the Western sense of the term had little place in China, it was because such a concept could not exist.

This leads us back to the problem of the division of matter and form. If the narrated story is considered the most important part of a painting, this means that the painterly qualities matter relatively little in the overall work: few question the possible essential differences that the Alexander Mosaic produces as a result of different materials being used in its construction. It is the shape, the composition, and how this is arranged into a narrative that is the focus of one’s attention, seldom the substance itself. One may defend this approach by pointing out that mosaic was only conceived of as a distinctive art form from Byzantine and Early Christian times

onwards, and thus that a “classical mosaic is formally a painted picture,”⁸⁹ but from a Chinese perspective this seems an insufficient reason for overlooking the qualitative differences that the differences in the physical matter of a medium naturally entail. Greek paintings were composed according to a way of seeing that privileged narrative over materiality, and subsequent critical traditions have abrogated and ignored any alternative concern for the qualitative differences engendered by variations in physical mediums.

We know that this was not the case for Chinese paintings. The few swift, light strokes of *The Poet Li Po* convey much more than a representation of the physical body of the poet, and the dark, bold dabs of ink employed to paint bamboo are so done not simply to highlight the bright moon in *Bamboo in the Moonlight*. The different shades and brushwork themselves are as crucial in the painting as the represented figures, and other ways of deployment would result in a totally different work. While in Greek painting *skiagraphia*⁹⁰ was employed in order to enhance the mimetic quality, where neither lightness nor darkness in themselves had much meaning, its Chinese counterpart was not detached from uniquely painterly attributes, and the ink and brushwork was always considered as the essence of painting. Here the difference in matter is more than difference in language: it is a fundamental difference in that matter *is* form.

On the contrary, there was a clear dividing line between matter and form in Classical Greece, and Aristotle devotes a significant proportion of the *Metaphysics* and the *Physics* to the discussion of the issue. And, as I have shown, the former is

⁸⁹ Carpenter, 165.

⁹⁰ Introduced by the Athenian painter Apollodorus, *skiagraphia*, literally translated as “shadow painting,” refers to the technique which consists of hatched areas that give the illusion of both shadow and volume. This technique is vividly applied in the wall paintings in the tombs of Vergina, such as the one depicting the rape of Persephone that has been examined in Chapter 2. “Skiagraphia.”

thoroughly subordinated to the latter, with the latter in its turn construed towards a definite end. The issue, therefore, is the construction of form. It is no coincidence that Aristotle's definition of plot-structure is the "organisation of the events."⁹¹ His claim that tragedy should arouse pity and fear not through spectacle but only through "the intrinsic structure of events (...) which matters more and is the task of the superior poet,"⁹² is only one of many instances of his binary attitude towards theatrical matter and form.

Such a division is based on its rational and teleological foundations, just as the lack of this tendency in Chinese paintings results from the opposite. Although the debate surrounding Aristotle's theory of matter and form, namely hylomorphism,⁹³ is much too complicated and problematic to discuss in depth here, it is inescapable to mention one essential aspect: that Aristotle's conception of matter and form is grounded in an account of motion and *change*.

In fact, it is on this conception that his ideas are developed. "Wisdom," in Aristotle's definition, "is knowledge, of certain sorts of principles and causes."⁹⁴ Of these "certain sorts" of causes,⁹⁵ two grasp our attention: the efficient cause and the ultimate cause. The ultimate cause, or "what something is for, i.e., the good (...) the end of all coming to be and motion"⁹⁶ leads one directly to the teleological foundation of Aristotle's philosophy. Aristotle's basis for distinguishing "superior" science (or knowledge: *epistēmē*) lies in the fact that it not only "knows the end for

⁹¹ *Poetics* xi (p.37).

⁹² *Ibid.*, xiv (p.45).

⁹³ "The doctrine first taught by Aristotle that concrete substance consists of form in matter." Woodruff, 352. Panaccio further explains: "Each singular composite corporeal substance is endowed with a variety of internal parts without which it would not be itself: a certain parcel of prime matter on the one hand, and one or more substantial forms on the other hand." Panaccio, 736.

⁹⁴ *Metaphysics* 982a.

⁹⁵ Aristotle categorizes these as: (i) being and essence, i.e., the primary cause; (ii) matter and subject; (iii) source of the principle of motion, namely moving or efficient cause; and (iv) the ultimate cause. See *Ibid.*, 983a25-32.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 983a31-32.

which a given thing should be done” but that “this end is something’s good, and in general the end is what is best in every sort of nature,”⁹⁷ which vividly reveals his teleological tendency. What brings forth such an end is the opposite cause, namely the efficient or moving cause.

For Aristotle, form is “that whose presence makes the matter what it is,” while matter is defined as “that which persists through change and underlies the form.”⁹⁸ Shields explains Aristotle’s base argument for matter and form as:

1. There is change.
2. A necessary condition of there being change is the existence of matter and form.
3. So, there are matter and form.⁹⁹

The moving cause, the inherent tendency to change, is intrinsically interwoven with the ultimate cause. And change is for Aristotle “fundamentally directional” which in its entirety will “be directed toward its fulfillment.”¹⁰⁰

4-3-3. Universals versus Truth

It is then necessary to question where such directionality heads towards in the case of *mimesis*. Concerning tragic *mimesis* it is obvious that the fulfilment is the production of a *katharsis* of emotions on the part of the audience. And, as already

⁹⁷ Ibid., 982b5-8.

⁹⁸ Shields, 58.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 56. Aristotle himself gives a much clearer analogy to this complex relationship between change, matter and form in *Metaphysics* 984a20-25 where he explicates: “[F]or instance, neither the wood nor the bronze causes itself to change, nor does the wood itself produce a bed or the bronze a statue, but something else causes the change.

¹⁰⁰ Lear, 61.

discussed, the whole of the tragedy is so composed as to efficiently achieve this goal. Incidentally, the Alexander Mosaic, too, exhibits this aspect. The frame and particularly the extra dark border below the “main scene” have a striking resemblance to a theatre stage. Due to these devices the work as a whole seems like a moment in the middle of a staged performance. There is, however, a critical difference that sets this picture apart from a merely frozen moment in motion: it is contained, both physically (a “framed picture”) and dramatically. The former is a plain fact, but the latter needs a more detailed discussion.

Earlier in the chapter I mentioned how the picture as a whole was a representation of an action rather than a portrait of historical figures, and how it is composed in a clearly narrative fashion. The concept of narrative inevitably entails the concept of time: it is, in any instance, a form of story-telling. Therefore, when one argues that a selected painting is a visual form of narrative, one is implying that the picture is doing more than visualising just one moment of a consecutive story. Apparently it is so, but such a moment infers the “whole” story in order to complete the narrative. This is possible due to the different grammar visual form has from the written. The very fact that it is of their essence impossible for paintings to adopt the linear way of story-telling opens up other ways of achieving the same goal. This can be the application of what Small calls “hierarchical time”, the non-chronological organisation of events according to the decision of the artist,¹⁰¹ applied commonly to “synoptic” narratives as mentioned in Chapter 2. In this case the location of figures within the picture as well as the relative sizes would guide the viewer into following the pictorial narrative created by the painter.

This is significant in two aspects. In the first instance it again reveals the

¹⁰¹ See Small, 563-564.

painterly efforts to fulfil its linguistic task by translating the verbal stories into images. Secondly, and more importantly, it paradoxically exposes in visual form what Aristotle emphasised with regard to dramatic composition: that “the poet’s task is to speak not of events which have occurred, but of the kinds of events which could occur.”¹⁰² Aristotle’s thesis that “poetry is both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars”¹⁰³ rests on this conceptual foundation. In fact, according to Hanfmann, Aristotle’s remarks are only a simple rationalisation and codification of the essential attitude of the Classical era.¹⁰⁴ Because it is the possible rather than the actual event that is at the core, the issue is the artist’s ability to make the “possible” event as plausible as can be.¹⁰⁵

At the beginning of this chapter I argued that understanding was the priority in Aristotle’s theory of *mimesis*; it is now clear that understanding concerns not so much the “real” world as a plausible one. This is Aristotle’s concept of universality: it is not necessarily what everyone knows, but what they are ready to believe in. Thus, *mimesis* is no longer tied to the concept of Truth, and is therefore liberated from Plato’s suspicion that it can only be fake. At the same time this is significantly different from the Chinese artist’s intentional exaggerations and curtailments of external phenomena when materialising the images on paper or silk: we know that such devices were not aimed towards human understanding or a means to make the visual representation more believable or “plausible”, but were instead vigorous attempts to suggest the Tao outside the realm of human intellect. If we take in

¹⁰² *Poetics* ix (p.40).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* (p.41).

¹⁰⁴ Hanfmann, 75.

¹⁰⁵ Belfiore gives a comprehensive discussion on the issue of the translation of the original term *eikos*: whether it should be translated as probability meaning what happens always or for the most part; or plausibility referring to what is apparently true for the most part, synonymous to ‘believable’ (*pithanon*). See Belfiore, 119-120. Although Halliwell uses ‘probability’ in his English translation of the *Poetics*, I prefer the term ‘plausibility’ since I believe it relates more directly to the internal organisation of tragedy.

Halliwell's interpretation of plausibility as "general human realities and conditions of existence,"¹⁰⁶ what matters in Aristotle's universals is "not their truth-value" but their "evocative function, their value in arousing attitudes of fear and pity, surprise and admiration, amusement and indignation."¹⁰⁷ It is fake, but precisely because it is fake it secures the space to encompass general or universal qualities of reality which much historical narrative lacks, and for this reason attains to the level of philosophy, the only field Plato deemed capable of attaining Truth.

Because tragedy deals with universals, to make the spectator or reader believe, what is important is the cohesive logic of the development of the narrative. Aristotle, after his laudation of the universality of tragedy, proceeds to treat the technical devices that make this possible: namely necessity and plausibility, which naturally contribute towards the unity of the drama. This is what I referred to when I stated earlier that the Alexander Mosaic is dramatically contained. In pictorial form it displays how a narrative can achieve this unity, using similar, albeit technically different, devices.

But first let us examine how the picture is physically (visually) contained, continuing for the time being to focus on the issue of consecutive time and the frozen moment represented. The Alexander Mosaic, although clearly "monoscopic" as opposed to synoptic in narrative form, deploys methods which may not necessarily be related to "hierarchical time" yet nevertheless extend a frozen moment into apparent continuity, in a continuous flow of motion. A concept that arose during the Early Classical period regarding the representation of motion, *rhythmos*, derived from dance, is vivid in this case. Pollitt explains the concept in more detail:

¹⁰⁶ Halliwell (1987), 107.

¹⁰⁷ Gulley, 171.

Between each step [of the dance sequence] there were momentary ‘stops’ (called *erèmiai*) in which the body was held for an instant in characteristic positions. The positions were called *rhythmoi*, ‘patterns’ isolated within continual movement. A single, well-chosen *rhythmos* could, in fact, convey the whole nature of a movement.¹⁰⁸

Such assets are explicit in the mosaic, the more prominent examples being the two soldiers at the fore. The dynamic posture of the soldier with Alexander’s spear piercing his bowels does not simply suggest but makes it extremely difficult for the viewer not to picture his movements before and after the grasped moment. It is a depiction of only one chosen moment, but the choice and the way in which it is depicted prevent the image from being arbitrary, and at the same time, with each figure represented in the same manner, the overall picture acquires a unity. Motion, which in archaic Greece was regarded in relation to change and therefore as an aspect of the ephemeral, has now become something that not only can be safely represented free of its charges but also gains rational order.¹⁰⁹

It is here that we arrive at an interesting point in *mimesis*. This is the relationship its logical and rational quality has with reality. One does not have to reach as far out as Plato’s abstract concept of Truth or the Chinese notion of the Tao in order to clarify this. The first and foremost condition of *mimesis* is that there be an

¹⁰⁸ Pollitt, 56-57. *Rhythmos* in Classical Greek painting was essentially a concept which was thoroughly visual-oriented, aiming at creating an image that would best represent the object at hand. Aspects of musicality associated with *rhythmos* was, therefore, also visual-oriented. This differs from the modern understanding of rhythm in painting which is usually associated with the expression of the intimate feeling of the artist (see my discussion of the paintings of Matisse in Chapter 5, for instance); it is also different from the rhythm of brushwork in Chinese painting, through which the painter conveyed his emotions. In both the paintings of Matisse and Sung China the musical aspects of rhythm were in direct contact with the artist’s emotional states.

¹⁰⁹ See *ibid.*, 58.

“original”. It is a relational concept which needs both the original and the imitated product. However, Aristotle’s theory which interlocks *mimesis* with universality and a definite goal of emotional effect shifts it from the Platonic original-copy relationship. Because the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* aims to elicit universals from particulars of external reality, the intervention of distortion is not only sanctioned but inevitable. Elements of necessity and plausibility secure this aspect. Therefore, as Halliwell points out, Aristotle’s stance on *mimesis* “diverges sharply (...) from the influential Platonic idea of artistic representation as a *mirroring* of the world.”¹¹⁰

There is, for example, no reason to accept the mirrored face in the shield in the Alexander Mosaic as a “realistic” reflection of the “original” facial expression of the soldier: the angles in the first instance make such a relationship difficult to accept. The facial expression is even more problematic, as it is far from what one would expect to see from a person in such a traumatic situation. It is more like a face of an “other” gazing at the suffering. In this sense it is no coincidence that it corresponds to Alexander’s composed, tragic mask-like figure. Alexander, or the ideal Greek *ethos*, is presented on the shield once again to highlight the *pathos* of the Persians. This not only enhances the tragic effect of the Persian part of the picture, but also at the same time contributes to the solidification of Greek nobility. It is almost as if the artist is playing with *mimesis*, using it effectively to manipulate rather than faithfully convey the situation according to his intentions.

We see here the relationship between universality and intentionality embedded in Aristotle’s concept of *mimesis*: universality in relation to the concept of *mimesis* is inseparable from the artist’s intention. What is interesting is that each

¹¹⁰ Halliwell (1990), 493. Original emphasis.

restrains, and is restrained by, the other: universality is the artist's intention embodied logically, while the artist's intention should not go beyond the principle of universality. What this means is that mimetic art is strictly framed by the Greek mentality and attitude towards the world. Furthermore, one must not overlook the hierarchical aspect of the Greek mind that I have earlier examined. With these elements put together, we arrive at an idealisation presented in rational form via the principle of universality. And this idealised picture, of course, belongs to the ruling class of "better" people.

I have already discussed the aspect of idealisation in the previous chapter. And, this becomes one of the core points where Aristotle's attitude diverges from Plato's. While Plato saw this aspect of *mimesis* as a serious distortion of the original and therefore harmful to the receiver, largely negating the idea of universal reception on the part of the audience,¹¹¹ Aristotle's basis for arguing that tragedy is more philosophical than history is not only that tragedy itself deals with the universals, but also that the audience's reception is universal. Of course, such a difference stems from the two different approaches to theatre. We already know that Plato regarded theatre essentially as a form of festive performance while Aristotle saw performance as an ancillary element of the drama. While Plato's concern regarding the audience was founded on the premise that "our young folk are eager to dance and sing themselves,"¹¹² therefore that performative *mimesis* relatively lacks reasoning, Aristotle understood the act of the audience as essentially reading or listening to the plot, detached from the spectacle. This of course does not mean that Aristotle deemed the audience to be the absolute judge of tragedy like the wise elders that

¹¹¹ See *Laws* 655.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 657.

Plato mentions. He too expresses concern regarding the “weakness of audiences” regarding plot-structure which can influence the poets.¹¹³ What he means, on the contrary, is that the drama itself must be judged by satisfying the criteria that are specified in the *Poetics*. Confronted with a “good” tragedy that meets all these requirements, the audience need do nothing other than submit itself to what is provided.

Aristotle’s account of the “development” of Greek theatre must be understood in this respect. Already during the mid-fifth century B.C. the shift from the choric to speech was well under way, and this trend was accompanied by the separation of tragedy from the branches of satyr-play and dance by adopting the norm of iambic metre.¹¹⁴ There are many debates that surround the form of ancient Greek theatre and performance, but it seems clear that, despite Plato’s nostalgia for the festive, the flow was certainly towards the stationary, which relied more and more upon the word. The effect of this has already been discussed at length; the reason I bring it up again is because the increasing emphasis on the verbal aspect of theatre, theorized by Aristotle, significantly alters the way of seeing a theatre performance: the audience takes the performance less as a participatory event than the staged version of a text, and moreover, a text that has within itself a concrete guideline that the viewer is to follow.

The advent of *skēnographia* can be understood in this respect. Although no Greek originals survive to this day, Roman wall paintings give us a clear idea that *skēnographia* was contrived in the effort to transfer three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional plane. While its painterly counterpart *skiagraphia* is concerned

¹¹³ See *Poetics* xiii (p. 45).

¹¹⁴ See *ibid.*, iv (p.35).

with individual figures – one could recall the shades of Persephone in the Vergina Tomb painting –, *skēnographia* is concerned with the architectural aspect.

Skēnographia, which Vitruvius defines as “the sketching of the front and of the retreating sides and the correspondence (convergence) of all the lines to the point of the compass (centre of a circle)” of which “it is necessary that, a fixed centre being established, the lines correspond (exactly) by natural law to the sight of the eyes (...),”¹¹⁵ is the first hint of the long Western tradition of perspective. Relating this to Aristotle’s theory of tragic composition marks a significant change in the attitude towards *mimesis*. In the seventh book of the *Republic* Plato attacks the faculty of sight’s lack of ability to understand by alluding to the relationship between distance and sense perception. Taking fingers as examples, he demonstrates the lack of intelligibility of the faculty of sight: when seen from close by it is faulty because it fails to “make the soul of an ordinary person feel impelled to ask the understanding of what a finger is;”¹¹⁶ when looked at from a distance it fails to distinguish size as well as one from the other, perceiving them “rather as some sort of mixture.”¹¹⁷ In relation to this Plato provides us with two notable points. One is that on this premise he puts sight on the opposite pole of understanding, and the other is that he offers arithmetic and geometry as the appropriate substitutes: “Clearly,” claims Socrates, “the study of number is conducive to truth,”¹¹⁸ and he goes on to affirm that “[g]eometrical knowledge is knowledge of what always is.”¹¹⁹

Skēnographia solves, or claims to solve, this dilemma in the field of theatre.

“In *skēnographia*,” Trimpi asserts, “it is no longer simply a matter of remoteness or

¹¹⁵ Vitruvius, *De Architectura* Bk I, Ch. II, 2. Cited in White, 51.

¹¹⁶ *Republic* 523d. Translator’s emphasis.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 524c.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 525b.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 527b.

proximity but of precisely the correct distance, neither too far not too near.”¹²⁰ And, taking Vitruvius’s definition, fixing a centre and composing space accordingly presupposes the ideally exact location on the part of the spectator. Let us look at a wall fresco in the House of Augustus (*fig. 16*) which evokes a theatre stage. Martin Blazeby gives a detailed perspectival analysis of the fresco (*fig. 17*), but even without the help of his diagram and only with the aid of the symmetrical layout of the columns and planes the viewer instantly knows that in order to see the fresco “properly” (or to paraphrase Plato: as it “always is”) one should place oneself in front of the central figure at a certain location. It is the ‘geometrical’ configuration that initiates this. Such a position gives the viewer the confidence that he is in control of the object before his eyes (The experience significantly differs when he is “out of position”, as in the case the case of *fig. 18*, a de-centred version of a *skēnographic* painting: the viewer feels a strong sense of displacement since he is not in the “correct” location to fully see and therefore examine the scene.). The paradox of (skēnographic) perspective is that a feeling of control is strongly intermingled with passive spectatorship, and if one examines Blazeby’s analysis in more detail one will soon realise that the picture is a self-contained geometric structure that excludes the spectator. In wall paintings like the fresco from the House of Augustus, the viewer is in apparent control of the object, but in effect he is in the ideal position to receive what the painting (or work of art) has to offer.

However, the essence of *skēnographia* does not escape Plato’s attack on the deceptiveness of sight. On the contrary, *skēnographia* takes full advantage of the element of deception: instead of attempting to “copy” the seen object as it is, it manipulates and transforms it into something that seems more in proportion and

¹²⁰ Trimpi, 407.

therefore more “proper”, aiming “not at balance or shapeliness based on truth [or reality] but at these as they appear to the vision.”¹²¹ In this regard, it can be argued that *skēnographia* reflects a significant shift in the ways of seeing in Classical Greece: rather than vainly trying to see and understand the world as it is, the Greeks moulded the world in such a way that it could be seen and understood. This echoes Aristotle’s only remark concerning beauty in the *Poetics*, which is tightly bound with size and order: “Just (...) as a beautiful body or creature must have some size, but one which allows it to be perceived all together, so plot-structures should be of a length which can be easily held in the memory.”¹²² The key to length is, he continues, coherence. Both place the selected object within the realm of rational understanding, thereby eliminating factors that hinder rational scrutiny or understanding of the object at hand. Spivey sees this as central to the production of tragic *katharsis* when he states that “to achieve the ‘cleansing’ or purging effect (*katharsis*) of a proper tragedy, the viewer has to know what will happen. Then, rather than be distracted by twists of plot, the viewer can concentrate on how the story unfolds.”¹²³

The following statement by Rudolph Arnheim – theorist of visual perception and author of *Art and Visual Perception*, arguably one of the most influential art books of the twentieth century – regarding vision during the age of Aristotle sums up the central paradox of *mimesis*:

An object existed only to the extent of its essence since the being of the object was nothing but what had been impressed upon the amorphous raw material by its form-giving genus. The object’s accidental properties were mere impurities, the inevitable contribution of the raw material. The form lost some of its purity by embodying itself;

¹²¹ Heron, *Definitions* CXXXV.13. Cited in Fowler, 176. Original brackets.

¹²² *Poetics* vii (p.39-40).

¹²³ Spivey, 279-280.

but the resulting impurities did not belong to the being of the object. They did not matter.¹²⁴

4-4. Conclusion

Seeing, both in the case of paintings and dramaturgy, became a rational practice. In the process of such a transformation, from vulnerable and erroneous perception of the world to the confident practice of reason, the principle of universality played an essential role. At the heart of universality was selection and exclusion. “Active selectivity is a basic trait of vision, as it is a trait of any other intelligent concern,”¹²⁵ Arnheim argues. His contention is especially significant, not only because it provides a lucid explanation of the essence of the relationship between seeing and universality in Aristotle’s dramatic theory and Greek art, but also – and perhaps more importantly – because it serves as an excellent example of how even the most innovative art theorists of even today are bound to the Western tradition of *mimesis*. I have no intention of undermining the voices of scholars including Arnheim, who sought for modes of artistic perception beyond the mimetic frame; yet it is at the same time difficult to overlook the fact that most of these endeavours are firmly grounded on the hierarchical understanding of intellectual cognition and sensory perception, be they for or against the Aristotelian model. Arnheim’s argument that visual perception is visual thinking¹²⁶ is, for instance, revolutionary as it may sound, in fact a sophisticated repetition of Aristotle’s position on seeing as a rational practice and it also serves once more as a riposte to Plato.

¹²⁴ Arnheim, 12.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 14.

Chapter 5

In Search of Alternative Frames: Bergson and Matisse

5-1. Introduction

The period from the end of the 19th century to the early 20th century, namely the era of modernism, is especially important in Western arts because it marked a significant and most radical crisis of the tradition of *mimesis*. Because *mimesis* was the principle that had framed the Western way of seeing since Classical antiquity and especially the Renaissance, the modernist struggle to overthrow the concept and its mechanisms of art practice meant that a new way of seeing was urgently sought after. Distrust in external and rational reality prevailed, and the silent consensus that seeing is the act of empowerment (hence the importance of perspective in fine arts, importance of where one is seated in a traditional auditorium etc.) could no longer be sustained. This crisis also led to revolutionary changes in artistic styles, where representation of an external reality was no longer considered the vocation of the artist. The modern artist instead endeavoured to see(k) inwards, to discover, capture and express what could not be seen by the naked eye and to re-present via mimetic strategies.

It is then no coincidence that a more serious interest towards the Far East in the West occurred at the height of modernism, when a total distrust and despair in the culture and values which they inhabited prevailed as never before, and during which the Western mode of seeing changed radically. This is no coincidence, not only because of the very obvious reason that this part of the world was “discovered”

during this period, but also because what the West deemed to be the idealistic alternative seemed to be the norm in the East. Indeed, many of the main characteristics of modernism coincide with features of Eastern thought. Such was applied in the arts, and theatre was no exception. In this section I will examine the features of modernism with particular regard to its break from *mimesis*, focusing on the visual aspect of art. While the discussion may not be specifically related to theatre, it will nonetheless serve as a basis for my discussions on anti-mimetic or post-mimetic theatre in the following chapters.

5-2. *Mimesis* and the Condition of Modernity

The tendency to move away from the tradition of *mimesis* since the latter half of the 19th century has not only an aesthetic but also a social, cultural significance. The notion of the term *mimesis* involves within it the mechanism of the spectator: one sees and one imitates what one sees. It is an “educational” as well as expressive device. Plato was well aware of this aspect when he asserted that “imitations, whether of bodily gestures, tones of voice, or modes of thought, if they be preserved from early age, are apt to grow into habits and a second nature,”¹ and recognised the effectiveness if not importance of mimetic art as one of the major tools for the education of the young guardians of his ideal city. Also well known, as has been mentioned in the previous chapter, is Aristotle’s emphasis on the educational aspect of *mimesis*, which was a significant basis of his counterargument against Plato’s charge against dramatic poetry. These could, in other words, be understood as one’s

¹ *Republic* 395.

identity being constructed through the process of *mimesis*. This is why the object of *mimesis*, that it should be of a “good” kind, was so important to both Plato and Aristotle.

On the other hand, that both philosophers were so wary of what to imitate indicates the fact that *mimesis* was not only a device for artistic production but also a cognitive as well as perceptive frame that conditioned not merely one’s way of seeing but the construction of a whole culture. This becomes clearer if one recalls the discussion of *skēnographia*,² the first hint of perspective in Western painting, by means of which the spectator was given a certain location to see what was to be seen, and was provided with specific guidelines for seeing and understanding the given painting. The invention of single-point perspective during the Renaissance by Alberti in 1435 consolidated such a relationship between the painting and the beholder, as well as contributing to “the development of the modern scientific world view and the constitution of the modern scopic regime.”³ Bleeker, who has recently researched extensively on the relationship between the narrative structure of Aristotelian drama and the mechanism of perspective, also focuses on this aspect of *mimesis* when she observes that the function of perspective “is not specular or passive, but constitutive within the register of representation, of the order and meaning of things.”⁴ It is not so different in theatre. Perspective can be safely translated into the Aristotelian dramatic structure, through which the overall storyline converges into one theme, and the audience of a theatrical performance can hear and see little more than what the plot reveals. If perspective is a visual frame, drama is the logical frame of theatre.⁵

What we have here is a process of *mimesis* in relation to the construction of a

² See ch.4 (p. 143-146).

³ Bleeker (2008), 12.

⁴ Bleeker (2004), 30.

⁵ Ibid., 31-32.

culture, and to an underlying but prominent existence of an exteriority, which is also an inherent characteristic of *mimesis*. The aim of *mimesis* is to achieve the closest resemblance of the original model, but its outcome is inevitably a different entity, a wholly different world complete and independent of “this” world. The outcome is also embedded within the values and desires of its culture, as has been examined in depth in the previous chapter. Artistic *mimesis* reflects a strong belief in the world constructed by the culture at hand and in its continuity. In this respect it is not surprising that the tendency toward mimetic art construction was strongest when Western self-confidence was at its highest. It first emerged in Classical Greece together with the formation of the Greek identity and was fully established during the Renaissance through the invention of perspective. It is almost inevitable that *mimesis* flourished again during the 18th and 19th centuries, namely the “age of reason” and when Western imperialism was without equal. At the same time, that *mimesis* was wholly rejected in the discourse of modernism is significant in that it was a rejection of the values of modernity and reveals desperation of Western humanity amongst artists, regardless of the political and economical expansion during the same era.

Of course, there are factors other than the sovereignty of external humanity that constituted the conditions of such artistic revolution. Bernard Smith, for instance, in discussing the problem of defining the period of modernity and modernism, puts particular emphasis on the rise of bourgeois culture based on capitalist enterprise during the 18th century as one of the most decisive historical events that solidified the traits of modernity in relation to art. Drawing attention to the growing reliance on science, technology and the market, he argues how significant a role these elements played in shifting the status of art into a commodity:

Science began to utilise art for its own needs; technology developed new graphic means of reproducing representations that greatly spread the use and influence of art; the market transformed art increasingly into a product to be sold rather than used directly or commissioned.⁶

The relationship between mass (re)production and arts in a time where capital dominates continues, as one well knows, to this very day, and has provided modern artists, especially of the theatre, with a strong impetus to challenge mimetic art production for the recovery of art in “its presence in time and space, its unique presence at the place where it happens to be.”⁷

However, what I find more important is how all of these elements comprised an environment unique to that period in that culture, which redefined the status of man in the world. Fischer-Lichte, who describes the history of European theatre in terms of formation, transformation and crisis of identity, explains that it was during the 18th century that the concept of identity as unchangeable had developed and begun to dominate European discourse. Fischer-Lichte’s main reference point for this thesis is *Letter to Monsieur d’Alembert on the Theatre* (1758), Rousseau’s response to d’Alembert’s proposal to establish a theatre in Geneva. Rousseau argued that theatre would threaten and even destroy the identity of Geneva’s inhabitants altogether. Fischer-Lichte explains that Rousseau’s concept of identity was static in nature:

[Identity] is understood as something which is either given by Nature or dictated by

⁶ Smith, 19.

⁷ Benjamin (1999), 214.

society for now and ever more, as something which must be maintained in the individual and social life at whatever cost. It is this which forms the basis of the difference between individuals, between the sexes, between cultures. It is this concept of identity which guarantees such differences and makes any shift from one category to another impossible. (...) A change to identity is out of the question; change can only be experienced and lamented as a falsification of that which is authentic, as the loss of identity.⁸

This continued until the early 20th century with the advent of modernism, when such a notion of identity was severely challenged and could no longer be conserved. No longer could man identify himself through himself, and it was only through others that he could establish his sense of self. The “human condition” changed: self was distanced from the self, and from then on man was to find himself via “the detour of another,” by confronting “his self/the other in order to form an image of his self as an other, which he reflects through the eyes of another, or sees reflected in the eyes of another.”⁹ This suggests that an identity or society, whatever it may be called, necessarily had to have an object other than itself to recognise itself, and the proof of improvement or goodness could only be achieved through an external entity.¹⁰

Peter Nicholls also explains the characteristics of modernity in this aspect. He sees the 19th century bourgeois society as “a culture in which moral continuity was ensured by institutionalised habits of imitation,”¹¹ and goes on to say that bourgeois identity could not sustain itself of itself, but only by imitating others:

⁸ Fischer-Lichte (2002), 1.

⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰ But this “new” tradition is not as novel as Fischer-Lichte states it to be; a similar tendency is to be found as early as the formation of the Greek identity, as has been discussed in Chapters 2 and 4.

¹¹ Nicholls, 13.

Bourgeois culture thus seemed to ground itself in the awkward paradox that we become truly ourselves only by copying others (...) that our words, our actions, our most intimate desires always seem to bear the trace of an other who was first on the scene and whom we unwittingly copy.¹²

Mimesis in 19th century Western Europe had expanded its influence to the broader facets of culture and society. *Mimesis* was the condition of modernity: it was the driving force of the bourgeois society.

Maintaining the basic premise that *mimesis* was the cultural and social condition of the late 19th century, it is also necessary to remind oneself of a more fundamental aspect of *mimesis* in the Western tradition of thought and perception. As has been discussed extensively in the previous chapter, this is one of alterity – the strict division of “I” and the “Other(s)”. It would be safe to argue that the history of this tendency is at least as old as the concept of *mimesis* itself – even Plato’s criticism of mimetic arts is founded on such a precondition. What this engendered in the realm of perception is the virtually insoluble paradox of seeing. One either sees or is seen – in other words, the subject and the object of seeing are isolated from each other. The act of seeing itself presupposes the division of these two.

This again gives rise to another problem: that of eliminating the existence of the beholder in the act of seeing. Not only does the beholder lose his presence during which he engages himself in the act of seeing himself, but also it is impossible to see himself seeing. For I cannot see myself as myself but only by making myself an “other.” In his essay on the body with regard to painting, David Green develops a

¹² Ibid.

notable argument on the “my-own-ness” of sight. Setting the premise that the body is “one’s original relation to the world,” he postulates the inevitable loss of one’s “my-own-ness” of sight in the divided condition of “I” from the “Other”:

(...) when I fix my attention on my body or my sensations they become precisely what they are for others – objects, and not the subject of thinking, seeing or doing. When I look at my seeing, I am seeing myself as an Other – in the same way I see others and they me. (...) I cannot concretely see my having a point of view, even though I cannot see without having one.¹³

This again bears an extremely close relationship to 19th century mimetic habits. The division of the role of the seer and the seen makes it impossible for one to see (or, to be more precise, *perceive*) oneself *by* oneself. At the same time, Green’s claim accords with Nicholls’s previously mentioned assertion that “copying” was the only way one could identify oneself under the condition of modernism. The perceptive foundation established as such denies the existence of self-inherence in oneself; it is only the exterior factors that verify and secure the existence and presence of a being. Instead of establishing a ground for the self (i.e. interior), *mimesis* reinforces the power and value of the exterior.

It is then no surprise that the triumph and climax of the age of reason coincided with the urgently growing sense of apprehension about the mimetic conditions that dominated the culture and aesthetics of the era. Reason, the governing lens through which the 19th century West ‘saw’ the world, was like a magic wand: the more one whirls it around and exercises the act of seeing, the more powerful one becomes in relation to the observed world. On the other hand, to follow

¹³ Green, 375.

Green's proposition, the more one sees the more detached one becomes from one's original self. Thus, empowerment through seeing within the boundaries of reason is little more than a quantitative expansion, which evokes in my mind an image of a huge doughnut with an even larger hole in the centre, ultimately losing more than one gains. Under such condition men were little more than puppets, albeit immense in size.

Would it be too much to recall at this stage Edward Gordon Craig's notion of the *Über-marionette*? In proclaiming the substitution of the actor for the marionette, in his famous essay *The Art of the Theatre*, Craig makes it clear that his idea of the marionette is, contrary to the majority's misunderstanding of the proposition, far from being a mere superior doll or further still, far from the symbol of man.¹⁴ "This is incorrect. He [the *Über-marionette*] is a descendant of the stone images of the old temples – he is today a rather degenerate form of a god," containing the "gravity of face and calmness of body", which people mistake for "blank stupidity and angular deformity."¹⁵ Referring to the marionette as "the last echo of some noble and beautiful art of a past civilization"¹⁶ Craig declares the rebirth of the "original" notion of the term.

However, what we must give attention to at this stage of the discussion is the strong sense of dissatisfaction with the condition of man being represented on stage. It is well known that Craig was one of the first advocates of the liberation of the theatre from literature. The urge to "de-literarise" or "re-theatricalise" the theatre was, in turn, the beginning of a full-scale rejection of stage realism, which imitates

¹⁴ Craig, 26.

¹⁵ Ibid, 86.

¹⁶ Ibid., 86.

individual personalities.¹⁷ As Fischer-Lichte elaborates, Craig's theatrical interest did not lie in representing "human beings on the stage either as individuals or as representatives of a species ruled by fate, but only in the extent to which they are part of a transindividual power which manifests itself through them."¹⁸ Evoking "most beautiful and most living ways" of Nature,¹⁹ which Craig believed to be the sole object of the theatre, could not be achieved by reproducing external realities and the individuals that they inhabit. His call for the replacement of human actors with the marionette was the result of his disappointment over the frail and incomplete personalities that he deemed the actors to be imitating:

Today the actor impersonates a certain being. He cries to the audience: 'Watch me; I am now pretending to be so and so, and I am now pretending to do so and so;' and then he proceeds to *imitate* as exactly as possibly [*sic*], that which he has announced he will *indicate*. (...) Why – why, that is just as if a painter were to draw upon the wall a picture of an animal with long ears and then write under it 'This is a donkey.'²⁰

There is no doubt that behind Craig's criticisms of his contemporary actors lies his strong belief in theatre as the director's art,²¹ but this does not undermine the significance of his conception of the *Über-marionette*, which he proclaimed would assist the great artist to create the impression of "the *spirit* of the thing"²² in the place of the actor. The *Über-marionette* for Craig is none other than the single medium by

¹⁷ Fischer-Lichte (2002), 286.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹⁹ Craig, 62.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 84. Original emphasis.

²¹ See "The First Dialogue" of *The Art of the Theatre*, where Craig likens the theatre director to the captain of a ship. To the playgoer who asks if no one other than the stage manager, who obviously refers to the director, is to be allowed to rule on stage, the stage director answers in certainty: "The nature of the work permits nothing else." *Ibid.*, 68.

²² *Ibid.*, 84. Original emphasis.

which humanity may regain its contact with the forgotten gods. It is the only entity that possesses the soul of the dramatic poet and retains the image “in the likeness of God,”²³ which “readjusts the injustice of justice, the illegality of the law, the tragic face of ‘religions’, the broken pieces of philosophies, and the trembling ignorance of politics.”²⁴ Fischer-Lichte explains Craig’s proposal for the *Über-marionette* as both a repudiation of middle-class theatre of illusion and annihilation of the middle-class concept of personality, which “had increasingly spread in modern Western culture since the Renaissance, and manifested itself on all European stages.”²⁵ Like a puppet with its wires tightly binding his limbs cut off, such was the condition of modern man.

In Bradbury’s diagnosis, modernism was “a crisis of culture: it often involves a pessimistic view of history – so that the modernist writer is not simply the artist set free, but the artist under specific, apparently historical strain.”²⁶ It is then very understandable why modernist artists strove so hard to break away from the deeply embedded roots of *mimesis* – *mimesis* was, as already stated, *the* condition of modernity. The effort to break from the deeply embedded traditions has a two-fold but tightly interwoven significance: one is that it was an urge for freedom, to cut the invisible yet powerful strings attached to the puppet-man, and the other is a desire to refill what reason drained from the mind of the modern man.

²³ Ibid., 87.

²⁴ Ibid., 25.

²⁵ Fischer-Lichte (2002), 287.

²⁶ Bradbury, 26.

5-3. Henri Bergson and the Concept of Duration

Such reservations about the 19th century mimetic conditions led to radical changes in modes of thought and perception, and practical efforts from creative artists soon followed. The spectrum of the efforts involved was vast. It was at the start of the 20th century that such artistic endeavours were visibly active, but the philosophical foundations were already being laid during the late 19th century. One of the most influential theorists was the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941), most famous perhaps for arguing for the superiority of intuition over the intellect. His popularity faded during the 1920's, but his persistence in wholly reshaping and restructuring the existing frame of Western thought continued to serve as a basis of modernist thinking. Although Bergson mentioned little that was specifically directed to arts, the field was heavily influenced by him, especially with regard to the anti-mimetic frameworks these artists sought after. For this reason, examining Bergson's ideas is an effective way in which to grasp the conditions of the early 20th century.

The vast range of topics and philosophical areas Bergson discussed, from mathematics to science to life philosophy, makes it virtually impossible to cover his overall philosophy in this short amount of space. It is also unnecessary, since most aspects are not relevant to the aesthetic and artistic discussions that I intend to develop. What is necessary, however, is to examine in detail a limited part of his philosophy that has particular links to the foundations of 20th century artistic movements. I propose to examine the problem of Bergson's idea of duration, which is discussed in depth in his first major work, *Time and Free Will*.

Bergson's discussion of duration, which is the key focus of *Time and Free Will*, is virtually inseparable from the question of time. Since my discussion of theatre is concerned primarily with the visual elements within the performance space, this may not seem an appropriate starting point. Moreover, as will be elaborated, Bergson never hesitates to attack the concept of time as "simply a medium in which our consciousness states are strung out as a discrete series that can be counted,"²⁷ and one which is basically equivalent to space, and he argues the need to depart from such a concept and restore the true concept of time, irrelevant to space. However, one soon realises that, as he calls for a redefinition of time, he is, at the same time, challenging the traditional concept of space. And in the process he questions the existing paradigm of thought and perception. Thus, duration, remote as it may seem at first glance from the problems of modernity and the break from it, will in effect serve as a shortcut to those very matters.

"Has true duration anything to do with space?"²⁸ asks Bergson. In this case I must ask, "Has duration anything to do with *mimesis*?" I pose this question because he does not once mention the term or the concept in his work. Is it feasible to discuss the condition of *mimesis* and the movements against it when Bergson's concept of duration apparently has no reference to it? My answer is yes, and it is so for a number of reasons. Most important of all is the fact that Bergson puts as much emphasis on criticising the conditions of his time as he does on developing his thesis on duration, as I shall show.

Firstly, the discussion on duration develops towards a revaluing of the notion of presence and the present. Bergson clearly opposes the manner of traditional

²⁷ Pearson and Mullarkey, 2.

²⁸ Bergson (2002), 55.

aesthetics that has its roots in the concept of *mimesis*, which by its nature transforms the original into a product of the past – in other words, historicises them.

Historicising inevitably separates the two, creating a crack in which the observer and his observation are separated. What happens then is a situation where the observed is reduced to a stagnant object with little meaning in itself, and the value is almost completely left for the observer to establish. The interesting point lies here.

According to Bergson, the traditional observer made all objects essentially alike, overlooking the various different qualities that make each object a unique existence in itself. This stance is significantly different from the practice of seeing that takes place in today's art – both visual and theatrical – where an active interrelationship between the seer and the seen is involved and where meaning and value stems from the chemistry between the two, especially according to the aggressive part played by the observer. The whole key to this gap lies in the attitude one has when one perceives the world: under the condition of modernity, i.e. the habits of *mimesis*, “we are not dealing with moments themselves, since they have vanished forever, but with lasting traces which they seem to have left in space on their passage through it.”²⁹ Bergson's discussion of duration involves an urge to turn our attention to the present and to communicate directly with the thing and the moments themselves.

Bergson begins his chapter on duration with an analysis of numbers. This fact in itself is very important, for according to him numbers serve not merely as numbers but extend to an analogy of the very essence of some of the major tendencies of modernity. As Bergson rightly reveals, when one counts, the object becomes alike – or at least it is assumed as such –, as each of their characteristics is sacrificed to the efficient identification of “objective” numberings. Following his

²⁹ Ibid., 50.

examples, each individual quality of a mass of sheep that differentiates one from the rest evaporates as they are subordinated to the effective unit of numbers. He argues that “the idea of number implies the simple intuition of a multiplicity of parts or units, which are absolutely alike.”³⁰ Multiplicity is, in this case, little more than a synonym of uniformity. It is how the number 1 differs from 2, 3, and the rest – the minimum unit for distinguishing an object. What is implied in this is, as in the attitude embedded in the concept of *mimesis*, a belief that one is able to control things. Numbers are a useful device to cut, sum up and manipulate according to one’s intentions under the umbrella of reason. In fact, in the age of science, number can easily be interpreted as another name for reason. It is an imposition of external order on things, a controlling mechanism. Therefore, Bergson’s deliberation on numbers is an analogy of the condition of conceiving and understanding the world in the age of late modernism. It is his knife to cut open the abdomen of logocentrism.

The criticism of modernity and mimetic conditions is further developed as Bergson expands his focus from number itself to the environment that it is situated in. Curiously, this environment is space. Space is undeniably one of the most significant concepts in Bergson’s thesis, and it is a strictly negative one. In fact, the question that I have quoted earlier on – does duration have anything to do with space? – already bears its answer: a definitive “no”. Bergson’s strong disregard for space rises from the essential quality that he finds in the concept, and this leads to the second element that links duration to *mimesis*, or anti-*mimesis*.

That element is homogeneity. Bergson understands the traditional notion of space as a homogeneous medium where things are enumerated externally. It is a closed concept of space, where the principle of division and stagnancy dominates. It

³⁰ Ibid., 49.

is a space which, like all homogenous entities, lends itself to calculation. As he explains in *Matter and Memory*, homogeneous space is an “inert space,” “a space which we divide indefinitely, out of which we carve figures arbitrarily, and in which movement itself, (...) can only appear as a multiplicity of instantaneous positions, since nothing there can ensure the coherence of past with present.”³¹

This is all very well, when applied to objective things such as numbers. However, it lacks the capacity to embrace the subjective, the reality that cannot be seen or organised according to reason. The limits of space engender a division in our reality: one that of “sensible qualities” and the other “conceived by the human intellect, [which] enables us to use clean-cut distinctions, to count, to abstract, and perhaps also to speak.”³² Bergson argues that space is “a reality with no quality,”³³ and calls for the recognition of another reality that firmly exists, yet which has failed to be noticed by the eyes of intellect and reason. Bergson’s criticism of space should therefore be understood in terms of liberating and expanding the realm of reality that modernity limited with reason, rather than merely attacking reason itself. This reality is the “heterogeneous, that of sensible qualities.”³⁴ Being heterogeneous in character it is one that cannot be cherished within homogeneous space or analysed with the tools that space provides.

This is where the concept of duration enters. Duration is a state of pure consciousness. It is a state of heterogeneity, a “succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalise themselves in relation to one another.”³⁵ Deleuze takes one

³¹ Bergson (2004), 244-245.

³² Bergson (2002), 58.

³³ Ibid., 57.

³⁴ Ibid., 58.

³⁵ Ibid., 61.

step further in this discussion and argues that heterogeneity, or, to follow his own terminology, difference, is directed not only towards external objects but also and more importantly towards the internal self: “In short, duration is what differs, and what differs is no longer what differs from something else, but what differs from itself.”³⁶ For this reason, Deleuze emphasises the fact that duration cannot be a stationary state. One cannot discuss duration in terms of things, states of things which differ in nature, nor characters.³⁷ The notion of duration must, on the contrary, be understood as tendencies, and Deleuze stipulates that one must pay attention not to the presence of characters but to their “tendency to develop themselves.”³⁸

This then is another expression for progress. If duration is progress, what does it have to do with space? Space has to do with objects, which are separate from one another, and according to Bergson so long as one thinks in terms of space, even when one considers the moving body “we shall only get a position.”³⁹ There is no continuity or motion in this respect. On the other hand, duration is a state of continuous process, motion and mental synthesis. And because it is a continuous flow, the past cannot be separated from the present as one numeric unit is from the others, but synthesised and perceived as a whole, just as one perceives a whole melody and not each note separately when listening to a piece of music.

Earlier, I stated that duration tends towards the present, and at this stage of my discussion I feel an elaboration on this formulation is needed. For, in a sense, this could be misleading, especially if the term “present” is perceived as a timeline divorced from the past. This would be going exactly against Bergson’s theory, and the result would be reducing it to the homogeneous realm of space. In fact, to locate

³⁶ Deleuze, 48.

³⁷ Ibid, 44.

³⁸ Ibid., 45.

³⁹ Bergson (2002), 64.

Bergson's idea of the present within the traditional frame of time is erroneous. The concept of the present transcends the limits and boundaries of time: it is an organic conscious state that bears all the traces of the former states that form the present, and which is at the same time a process of flow into the future. Thus, it is more of a condition of continuous change, a state of heterogeneity, rather than a point in time, ready to be severed and dislocated from its "past". It is in this respect that duration, "the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states,"⁴⁰ tends towards the present. The following remark by Bergson perhaps best describes not only the definition of duration but also his concept of the present:

In a word, pure duration might well be nothing but a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalise themselves in relation to one another, without any affiliation with number: it would be pure heterogeneity.⁴¹

If duration is deemed measurable, it is only because it has been represented through spatial means, thus is no longer purely durational. Bergson's thesis on duration is therefore a demand for a shift in the frame of thought – an urge for a "durational" way of seeing in order not to omit the "other side" of reality – heterogeneous in essence – that the frame of reason fails to grasp. To borrow Barasch's words: "Without denying the existence of an outside world, Bergson in fact concentrated on what we perceive in our experience as the contents of our

⁴⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁴¹ Ibid., 61.

consciousness.”⁴²

Bergson’s argument features three major points: first, concern with the external ways of seeing and thinking that were dominant at the time; second, placing the individual consciousness at the core of the problem of perception; and third, which is at the same time an extension of the first two points, a fundamental doubt about the society that constructs spatial and thus external ways of seeing. Bergson concludes his chapter on duration by saying with irony and resignation, “An inner life with well distinguished moments with clearly characterised states will answer better the requirements of social life.”⁴³ His final arrows are aimed at society. A society is in effect the most significant and vivid model of homogeneous space, and the qualities that Bergson described as aspects of homogeneous space were also characteristics of the turn-of-the-century Western society. His claim for duration is in essence a desire for heterogeneity: for the recovery and liberation of individuality. The details of the theory of duration were subversions of the existing ways of thinking, but this, if seen “organically” and/or qualitatively, was a philosophical attack on the rigid, hierarchical, and mechanical social system of the modern West.

Although I have discussed the problem of space with regard to duration, I find it necessary to linger a little more on the matter. It is not just the concept of space but the process of spatialising that needs to be given attention. Spatialising is a process of objectifying and locating things so that they may be seen from a certain distance. It is also a logical process, giving a certain order, perceiving them in chains, successions, or simultaneously, which means that one can distinguish one from the other at a glance. If one thinks the conscious state is a spatial one, it is only

⁴² Barasch, 25.

⁴³ Bergson (2002), 76.

because it is represented in that manner.⁴⁴ It would be incorrect to equate Bergson's use of the term "represent" with *mimesis*; for *mimesis* is concerned with external objects in the first place whereas Bergson's duration belongs to the realm of the inner state, but nevertheless the two have clear similarities in that they both result in things that are essentially different from the original. Due to this tendency, what happens in both cases is that the results are categorised as products of the past distinct from the time "now". They are separated both in time and (more so in mimetic products) space.

Moving away from this traditional way of thinking and constructing thought and perception, Bergson turns to subjectivity. In saying that even bodily movement – which we normally deem to take place in space – is duration, he argues that the process that occupies the duration of the movement "has no reality except for a conscious spectator," who "eludes space."⁴⁵ In fact, the overall theory of duration is less about the "what" than the "how": the inner process of one's consciousness. To bring this to the forefront of philosophical debate is significant in that the active role of perception becomes more and more important than the traditional receiving role of the individual. If the tradition of *mimesis* constructed individual seeing, it is now the individual subjectivity, its consciousness, which constitutes meaning. The subject's seeing, i.e. experience of the process and the "now-ness", is Bergson's alternative to the traditions of reason and *mimesis*, and in this sense duration explains very well the modern artistic efforts to move away from mimetic conventions towards the inner states of the artist and the spectator.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 60-61.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 64.

5-4. Challenge against Perspective: Henri Matisse

It is now the stage where we must turn our attention to the more specific movements in art. Turning their attention away from mimetic conventions and towards the artist and the spectator's subjectivity meant the beginning of the departure from life-like imitation and the traditional artistic principles that technically supported it. It was now a matter of expressing the artist's feelings and inviting the spectator to also "express" through the act of looking that concerned the field of art. In order to examine this tendency I shall look at selected paintings by Henri Matisse (1869-1954), one of the first post-Impressionist painters and, for that reason, one of the first artists to aggressively disrupt the mimetic conventions in painting. It is well known that Matisse was deeply influenced by Bergson's philosophy, and in this respect this short study on his paintings will serve as an effective device to look at how the shift of the philosophical frame represented by Bergson was extended to practical movements in the arts.

In the earlier part of this chapter I asked whether Bergson's conception of duration had any relevance to space. I concluded that the answer to this question was a definite "yes", but this positive response was directed at broader issues of modernity, and the explanation of its relevance to a more specific notion of space has not been adequate. Thus, I shall ask the same question once again, but with a slight twist: "How does Bergson's concept of duration relate to Matisse's idea of space?" Painting is, after all, ultimately an interplay with the two-dimensional space of the canvas and paint. I have no intention of undermining the creative process on the part of the artist or the active process of seeing on the part of the spectator: on the contrary, I will be showing later how these processes became the object of particular

emphasis in 20th century painting. However, it is difficult to deny that this “paint on canvas” is the only visible outcome and link to the other very important components of the overall work. Looking at the problem of space in relation to painting will also serve as a stepping stone to examining how the issues that arose in painting related to similar matters in performing arts.

As Mark Antliff lucidly summarises, Matisse’s Bergsonism was “a disavowal of Euclidian space in favour of a Bergsonian notion of extensity; and absorption of the frame within the ‘organic’ parameters of the painting itself; and the rhythmic structuring of the canvas with a view to initiating a reopening of aesthetic closure.”⁴⁶ We can see from here that it is not the concept of duration itself but the notions that derive from it that bear closer significance for Matisse and his works. And, interestingly, Antliff turns to the issue of space rather than time in relation to the concept of duration, not only because he is trying to find a link between the philosopher and the painter. As I have already argued, duration is not a temporal concept but a qualitative state of or tendency towards expansive heterogeneity. This state relates to the sensible side of human perception rather than the reasonable; experience and intuition rather than the intellect. If we translate this to the field of art, it is the personal and creative part of the artist that gains greater significance over the technical perfection of life-like imitation of the given object. It is clear that this was the core concern of Matisse’s work. He himself emphasises how his aim in painting is, more than anything else, expression,⁴⁷ and stresses that:

The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive: the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, all of that has its share.

⁴⁶ Antliff, 186.

⁴⁷ Matisse (1995), 37.

Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter's command to express his feelings.⁴⁸

It is important to understand Antliff's focus on space in this respect. His argument that Matisse adopted Bergson's notion of extensity in preference to Euclidian space means that he substituted the limited notion of the canvas as a closed frame in which to transpose an imitation of an external object with an expanding space for the visual expression of the internal sensations of the painter. Antliff gives a clear explanation on this matter:

The *durée* that gave birth to a canvas meant that its form could not be subjected to rational measurement, nor could its content be modified without affecting its form, for a painting's spatial dimensions cannot exist separately from its contents. There is no *a priori*, mathematical grid that would exist separately from the 'expressive' composition of Matisse's canvases.⁴⁹

This shift results in some very significant characteristics of Matisse's works, both in artistic process and outcome. Firstly, the "eye" of the painter is directed towards the inner state of the artist rather than the exterior objects that surround him. The feeling that Matisse so emphasises is different from the reactions one has to external stimuli, particularly the "fleeting impressions" of the impressionists, which "is not an appropriate designation for certain more recent painters who avoid the first impression, and consider it almost dishonest."⁵⁰ It is a "feeling I have about life,"⁵¹ and in this respect he also criticises neo-Impressionism as "an often mechanical

⁴⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁹ Antliff, 189-190.

⁵⁰ Matisse (1995), 39.

⁵¹ Ibid., 37.

means of corresponding only to a physical emotion.”⁵² What Matisse wants is a reaction to himself, to his own personal feelings. It is also a lasting and stable feeling. Thus, the process of painting itself achieves greater value than before. In “Statements to Tériade” (1936) he explains this in detail:

The reaction of each stage is as important as the subject. For this reaction comes from me and not from the subject. It is from the basis of my interpretation that I continually react until my work comes into harmony with me. (...) At the final stage the painter finds himself freed and his emotion exists complete in his work. He himself, in any case, is relieved of it.⁵³

Here one can see that the act of painting is almost like an act of meditation. Painting is expression, but it is also a course of searching for his emotions through paint. This process is strikingly similar to the Chinese traditions of Taoist painting, which is in fact a thread of meditation through the medium of ink and brush.⁵⁴ Moreover, such a process does not begin from the point when the painter actually picks up his brush but when he first looks at a chosen subject:

I have to learn, patiently, how the mass of the tree is made, then the tree itself (...) The tree is also the sum total of its effects upon me. (...) I have before me an object that affects my mind not only as a tree but also in relation to all sorts of other feelings ... I shan't get free of my emotion by copying the tree faithfully, or by drawing its leaves one by one in the common language ... But only after identifying myself with it.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid., 84.

⁵³ Matisse (1992), 364.

⁵⁴ See ch. 3 (p. 90-92).

⁵⁵ Matisse (1995), 149.

Putting aside the fact that Chinese painters believed there to be an absolute truth and a perfect model for each object of nature – which Matisse understood as “signs” –, and that the artist must transform himself into an empty vessel in order to grasp and receive that true model known as the Tao, the way in which Matisse absorbs his subjects before he begins the physical stage of painting is startlingly similar to the Chinese belief that creativity is achieved through the process of “becoming” that object. And, in continuous flow, this is extended to what we call painting. The outcome therefore is much less a two-dimensional rendering of a given subject than a visual embodiment of the artist’s profound feelings. Matisse was not an abstract painter, and the subjects of his paintings are easily recognisable. However, those subjects are not the key to appreciating his paintings; they are technical devices, like paint, brush and canvas that deliver the painter’s inner, durational, state. This is now the true subject of the painter and, naturally, this leads to various changes in the principles of painting.

The concept of duration applies also to the beholder and the process of viewing art works. One principle Matisse particularly stressed with regard to painting was harmony, and he was anxious that his spectators would fail to realise this. For instance, regarding the Moscow murals *Dance* (1909-1910), he expresses his concern about the architectural aspect of the work and the spectator’s appreciation of it:

The expression of this painting should be associated with the severity of a volume of whitewashed stone, and an equally white, bare vault. Further, the spectator should not be arrested by this human character with which he would identify, and which by

stopping him there would keep him apart from the great, harmonious, living and animated association of the architecture and the painting.⁵⁶

This remark being on murals rather than canvas paintings, Matisse's demand that the spectator should be able to take in not merely the painted details but the whole "set" including the surroundings might appear to be specifically directed at such "architectural" paintings. However, this is not so. The focus should be on the phrase "apart from." It is evident from this quotation that Matisse is wary that his work may be appreciated regardless of the environment that it is located in. In fact, the environment too is part of his overall work, and his "painted" work is part of the overall architecture. Neither can be separated and be taken as independent of the other: in order to absorb the organic art work, the perceptive mechanism too must be organic. Deepak Ananth clearly points out this fact with special regard to museums and painting as she defines the frame as "a physical supplement itself metaphysically supplanted by the master framework of the museum."⁵⁷ From Matisse's remarks, one can infer that this now simple fact was not widely appreciated during his time.

The issue of framing and division is not only valid in the creative process; on the contrary, it may well hold more significance in the field of perception, as it denies also a divisional way of seeing. This is far from traditional mimetic conventions. It is not a matter of identifying anymore: rather than isolating the content of the painting within a frame the entire environment including the painting acts as a catalyst and stimulant that evokes the beholder's senses and feelings – although a visible frame does not exist in murals the painted subjects themselves act as "frames" in mimetic spectatorship in that they blind the rest of the setting from the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁷ Ananth, 154.

beholder. It is not only the eye but also the whole sensory organism that is needed to take in the artwork. Matisse goes so far as to say that in case of murals the spectator “becomes the human element of the work,”⁵⁸ and thereby proposes an idea of spectatorship in the widest and most active sense. Matisse’s demand for a holistic spectatorship thus implicates two critical factors: the urge to do away with the divisional framing – both material and psychological –, and the liberation of the limited mechanism of art perception for a lasting, durational psychological act. Matisse’s later emphasis on colour, too, was set in this regard.

But the most prominent change that has occurred is the challenge to perspective. Perspective being the major expressive device for mimetic arts, this bears more significance than on a technical level. It is visual evidence of the anti-mimetic movements that happened around Matisse and his contemporaries. Perspective on the beholder’s part was a guideline for seeing: how one should look at and appreciate a given work of art. Thus, the crisis of perspective meant an inevitable change in the ways of artistic reception. For this reason, I shall briefly focus on how perspective was challenged, and how such efforts resulted in alternative ways of artistic creation/reception as well as the change in the attitude of Western seeing that can be inferred from these examples. Two paintings by Matisse seem to be a good starting point.

The Dinner Table (fig. 19), one of Matisse’s earliest works before he took to more radical innovations and experiments in painting, and *Harmony in Red* (fig. 20), an abstracted reworking of *The Dinner Table*, would be an ideal point of comparison. The most prominent difference that can be seen from these two works is that the former gives a sense of depth while this is not to be seen at all in the latter.

⁵⁸ Matisse (1995), 116.

The Dinner Table invites the beholder, together with the slightly tilted direction of the table, to posit himself in the place where the painter would have stood and see what he would have seen. It thus remains a scene to be seen, as in traditional Western perspectival paintings.

The later version of the painting, on the other hand, is an example of an almost completely perspectiveless painting. It reflects the decorative stage of Matisse's career and, as the adjective "decorative" suggests, the painting is far from a mimetic representation of a chosen subject. One of the reasons Matisse became interested in decorative motifs was because of their flat and repetitive character.⁵⁹ Indeed, here one can find no sense of depth whatsoever. Although a thin line marks the division between what would be the wall and the table respectively, there is no indication of a distance between the two. The decorative patterns of the wall are used also for the table cloth, as are the colours. For this reason the "objectness" of the represented objects is significantly blurred, and what stands out instead of a realistic picture of some "real" scene from life is a collaboration of the formative elements of painting. One may suggest that the top left part of the painting, which is seemingly an outside view from the window, has elements of perspectival painting, with the house acting as the vanishing point. However, this is very unlikely, since there is no other corresponding factor to be found; to see it as a playful challenge to Renaissance perspective would be much more convincing. Even the house is hardly sufficient to serve as evidence, for it is merely the relative size that acts as an unconvincing perspectival device. It creates no sense of depth, and looks more as if it is piled on top of a lump of green. Overall the painting is flat as the canvas itself, creating no illusion of a three-dimensional volume.

⁵⁹ Faerna, 21.

What, then, does this reveal in relation to seeing in twentieth-century arts? In order to answer this question I find it necessary to go back to the concept of perspective and the ideas that are embedded in the notion.

In discussing perspective Panofsky sets the precondition that perspective transforms the *ousia* (reality) into the *phainomenon* (appearance).⁶⁰ This implies two points: one that reality is what is seen by the human eye; the other that reality is in the first instance associated with visual dimensions. When the human eye becomes the criterion of reality, even the realm of the divine becomes the domain of man. Panofsky continues that in transforming the *ousia* into *phainomenon* perspective “seems to reduce the divine to a mere subject matter for human consciousness; but for that very reason, conversely, it expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine.”⁶¹ Wiles explains that, in Christianity-dominated medieval art, truth was not something that could be seen by the human eye, and the closest one could approach truth was through the recognition of the impossibility of vision. Seeing was an empowered act, and “[d]etached viewing belonged only to God.”⁶² With the introduction of perspective, man was now able to take over that absolute power and authority. The vanishing point of perspectival painting conversely designates the location of the beholder, and it was now the viewing *man* who determined the organisation of the painting: “Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world. Everything converges on to the eye as to the vanishing point of infinity. The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe once thought to be arranged for God.”⁶³

Another significance this implies in relation to seeing is that perspective

⁶⁰ Panofsky (1991), 72.

⁶¹ Ibid., 72.

⁶² Wiles (2003), 214.

⁶³ Berger, 16.

creates a distance between the object and the viewer. As it was with God in the above quotation, man's viewing through perspective allows (and simultaneously forces) that beholder to be located outside of the picture. As with God, he sees but cannot be seen. He is totally detached from the world he has visually reorganised. Of course, the age of Renaissance was still very much associated with religion, and the blurred vanishing point suggested the enigmatic spiritual world beyond the visual, material realm of man: however, in the age of Realism, perspective was divorced from any kind of religious fetters and instead was used as an utterly scientific device. Even from the Renaissance, the birth of perspective was always associated with rational distancing and taking control of visual reality: "Thus the history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real (...) it is as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self."⁶⁴ As a result, the painter's emotional relationship with the objects he painted was withdrawn, and the "participatory involvement of more absorptive visual modes was diminished if not entirely suppressed, as the gap between spectator and spectacle widened."⁶⁵

Such a tendency is vividly exhibited in the two paintings of Matisse mentioned earlier on in this section. *The Dinner Table* in most aspects remains within the historical tradition of "distancing" and "objectifying" perspectival painting. It is a scene that depicts the visual reception of the painter, and thus the viewer still retains the position of secretive observation. The significance of other elements of painting is largely reduced to implements that serve to materialise this aspect. *Harmony in Red*, on the other hand, has little likeness to the visually

⁶⁴ Panofsky (1991) , 67-68.

⁶⁵ Martin, 8.

conceived reality. Figurative elements that are clearly representations of the visual phenomena continue to exist but, without the perspectival view frame, the painted object is no longer a piece of “seen” or visually ordered reality. No presence of an objective, distanced, scrutinising viewer is suggested by the overall composition of the work. The absence of the traditional perspective has disposed of the earlier commanding artist who organises his reality via *mimesis*. Or, the artist himself has abandoned such a role as well as the whole system by rejecting the conventional device.

Now, without perspective and therefore without a “reliable” “lens” through which to view external reality, the significance of painting and the role of the artist fall under severe doubt. The philosophical and aesthetic attitude underlying this change is inevitably related to the shift in the artist’s attitude towards vision and reality. The perspectiveless painting reveals that the painter is determined not to see as his predecessors have for centuries: in fact, if seeing had until then been associated with exteriority, then the modern painter has discarded it almost all together. Instead of putting his artistic efforts towards reproducing a visual phenomenon the painter now uses his canvas and paint for other ends.

Let us once again return to *Harmony in Red*, which in various aspects clearly exposes the artist’s strong distrust in external reality as his subject matter. I wish to concentrate in the first instance on the patterns that highlight the painting. The most prominent of these are the dominating patterns on the wallpaper and tablecloth. I have already mentioned that these contribute towards the decrease in the volume of the painting and the “objectness” of (represented) objects, and have flattened the surface into its original form. This is an extremely important point, for what this means is that the patterns have not only taken over the mimetic aspect of the painting

visually, but also structurally. By bringing the background into the foreground, there is no single focal object, and the background now has the same value as what the few objects in focus in perspectival compositions once monopolised. Or, in other words, the foreground has been deprived of its authority as the key element of the painting. In a zero-value situation, what matters is not the “what”, but the “how”. And, naturally, the “how” of a painting is inevitably deeply associated with spatial organisation. In the case of *Harmony in Red* it is the patterns and colour that control such fields. Looking at the painting from this aspect, Matisse’s own comments on patterns come as no surprise:

For me, the subject of a picture and its background have the same value, or, to put it more clearly, there is no principal feature, only the pattern is important. The picture is formed by the combination of surfaces, differently coloured, which results in the creation of our ‘expression’.⁶⁶

At this stage one must ask the significance of the pattern in Matisse’s work. It is well known that Matisse was immersed in Oriental decoration and particularly Islamic tapestries. *Interior with Aubergines* (fig. 21) is perhaps the best example,⁶⁷ where in both versions patterns overwhelm the contextual details and dominate the overall painting. It is almost as if the conventional subjects of the painting have become a part of the tapestry-like patterns, and these patterns themselves have become the subject of the painting. Is this then what Matisse is alluding to in the above quotation and other writings? This question is firmly denied by Jack Flam in

⁶⁶ Matisse (1995), 120.

⁶⁷ There are two versions of this painting – the initial preliminary version painted in watercolour and the final work on canvas. It is notable that these were painted less than a year after Matisse travelled to Munich to see the great exhibition of Islamic art, which suggest all the more the strong influence of the Eastern artistic tendencies on these works.

his preface to “Notes of a Painter” when he affirms that “Matisse is not advocating an art of superficial decoration or entertainment, but stating his belief in art as a medium for the revelation of the spirit above and beyond.”⁶⁸

Discussing the Oriental influence on Matisse’s works, Ananth interprets the floral frame of the watercolour version as “a cultural metonymy, poised at the interface of two visual traditions – the Western and the Islamic – whose vivid encounter it served to enframe.”⁶⁹ However, it is difficult to agree with her view that it was the decorative patterns themselves or the cultural aspect of the Orient alone that Matisse dwelt on. It is, rather, the artistic mode of the Orient, the way of seeing and expressing that impressed the artist. Almost thirty years after his visit to the Munich exhibition he recalls, “I found in them [Oriental art] a new confirmation. Persian miniatures, for example, showed me the full possibility of my sensations.”⁷⁰ We can see here that what struck Matisse was less the external shapes of the patterns themselves than the attitude imbedded in them. Patterns for Matisse were at the same time an artistic device with which to render the artist’s feelings, and its outcome. This corresponds with his continuous stance that the painting should be composed via a “perspective of feeling,” which works as “a means of expressing intimate feelings and descriptions of states of being.”⁷¹ It is no coincidence that he confesses how he “had to get away from imitation, even of light”⁷² right after his recollection of the Munich exhibition in the same essay. The spatial composition depended strictly on the subjective inner-vision of the artist, and it was now the rhythms of one’s emotions, not proportions of external objects, that he had to focus his senses

⁶⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁹ Ananth, 158.

⁷⁰ Matisse (1995), 178.

⁷¹ Ibid., 131.

⁷² Ibid., 178.

on.

It is in this respect that Matisse and his contemporaries were particularly fascinated by and immersed in colour. Matisse explains that in his paintings colours were deployed “as a means of expressing [his] emotion and not as a transcription of nature;”⁷³ Gauguin, regarded by many as Matisse’s chief inspiration, believed that colours “held an exact counterpart for every emotion, every nuance of feeling;”⁷⁴ and Kandinsky argued that they “produce a corresponding spiritual vibration.”⁷⁵ These artists saw colour as one of the two pure components of painting – the other being form –, and the combination of these two elements was the only narrative, if any, in the paintings of Matisse. It is the chemistry between the colour and form that determines the structure of Matisse’s later works, and through this the emotional intensity of the artist is condensed in the final outcome.

The principle of this construction is musical. The musical quality of colour arrangement is especially prominent in Kandinsky’s works, and it is well known that he titled his paintings “Compositions” in order to highlight this aspect. Matisse, who even named one of his paintings “Music,” emphasised this quality on several occasions, and the following remark is especially noteworthy in that it elucidates the relationship of colour and musicality in his works:

In the same way that in a musical harmony each note is a part of the whole, so I wished each colour to have a contributory value. A picture is the co-ordination of controlled rhythms, and it is thus that one can change a surface which appears red-green-blue-black for one which appears white-blue-red-green; it is the same picture,

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Hughes, 129.

⁷⁵ Kandinsky, 24.

the same feeling presented differently, but the rhythms are changed.⁷⁶

From this one can conclude that what Matisse wanted to accomplish was, above all, the visual rendering of emotional rhythms. If one recalls the earlier discussion on Bergson, this fits perfectly with the qualitative, heterogeneous character of duration. That having been said, one must also note the processual quality of music. Unlike painting, which traditionally stops at one point – the moment the painter puts down his brush and awaits the eyes of the beholder –, music commences and ends together with the performer and listener. The durational quality of music lies not only in its rhythm and composition, but also in its performative process. Matisse adapted this principle to his paintings, and arranged his canvases in such a way that the beholder too could participate in the “symphony of colour.”⁷⁷ That way the work is only half completed, the other half awaiting to be filled in by “the subjective vision of the beholder that endowed the observer with a new perceptual autonomy and productivity.”⁷⁸ Like the viewer of a Chinese landscape or literati painting, the beholder of the paintings of Matisse is invited to embark on a journey through time, filling in the rest of the half-filled vessel. Like the brushworks of Chinese paintings, the colours of a work by Matisse ushers its viewers through its rhythmical deployment.

Painting being visual, the adoption of musical duration extended the field to a much more complex form of art, and although at this stage it still remained largely within the traditional conventions in that the paintings did not totally let go of the figures of the chosen subjects unlike, for instance, Kandinsky’s compositions,

⁷⁶ Matisse (1995), 121.

⁷⁷ Faerna, 24. Faerna used this phrase to describe *Music and Dance II*, but it can easily refer to the overall works of Matisse.

⁷⁸ Crary, 35.

Matisse opened the field to a different dimension of artistic creation and reception. The gallery is a stage, the painting the performer, and the beholder becomes a spectator in this theatre of colour. In this respect Matisse played his part as a painter in founding the environment that gave birth to Dada, which amongst many of its bold experiments pushed this aspect of art to its extreme.

Indeed, the 1918 Dada Manifesto, which declared the beginning of arguably the fiercest and most radical movement in art history, has a striking resemblance in its stance on painting:

The new painter creates a world, the elements of which are also its implements, a sober, definite work without argument. The new artist protests: he no longer paints (symbolic and illusionist reproduction) but creates (...) locomotive organisms capable of being turned in all directions by the limpid wind of momentary sensation. (...)

Painting is the art of making two lines geometrically established as parallel meet on a canvas before our eyes in a reality, which transposes other conditions and possibilities into a world. This world is not specified or defined in the work, it belongs in its innumerable variations to the spectator.⁷⁹

Unlike Matisse, the Dadaists refuted the whole concept of the artist and creativity, but the fact that they advocated the processual aspect of art production and the importance of the active role of the subjective spectator is sufficient to act here as a compass to show the direction that the later anti-mimetic art movements would pursue.

⁷⁹ Tzara, 78.

5-5. Conclusion

I have thus discussed the artistic movements that forced a redefinition of seeing in the early 20th century. The modern climax of *mimesis* was at the same time the most severe crisis it had faced in its very long history. *Mimesis*, bound up with logocentrism, was a confident frame of control; it was clear that the new century was not one that could be leashed by such a limiting device. The realisation that mimetic traditions could only barely survey the surface of things, the growing distrust in that apparent knowledge, and a corresponding growing desire to penetrate the solid shell and reach the inner facets of the world and man, gave birth to various efforts to establish alternative models and frames of perception and thought, Bergson's concept of duration being one of them.

In the field of arts, in painting in particular, this appeared in the technical abolition of the traditional perspective. As we have seen through the painted and written works of Matisse, this created a way for the creative, emotional part of the artist to blossom and render to his works. In fact, the word "render" may not be an appropriate word, for now the creative process itself became as important as the finished work itself. Just as Matisse pressed the seemingly three-dimensional space of the perspectival canvas flat into its original two-dimensional surface, thereby pushing the elements that until then served as a mere background to the fore, the artist no longer remained hidden "behind" his canvas as a copier but instead stepped forward and claimed himself to be the centre of the artistic creation. It was he who determined the contents of the work, not objects "out there", "waiting" to be copied. Moreover, the procedure of artistic production gained a much greater significance than before, and the completed work came to be an extension of the creative process.

The same was applied to the spectator. The work before his eyes was less a product for consumption than a stimulant, and for this reason the spectator had both the freedom and an increasing amount of obligation to expand his role as an active participant of the overall artistic process. Little was there to be simply “seen” and consumed, and the viewer’s senses as a whole were encouraged to act as an eye that would not just see but discover and create meaning.

Chapter 6

Tadeusz Kantor: Representation, Re-presentation and the Search for “Now” in Contemporary Theatre

6-1. Introduction: Splitting Perspective

In the previous chapter I discussed the ways in which aspects of *mimesis* were challenged in the field of painting. What relation, one may ask, does it have to the field of theatre and performance art? In order to answer this question I propose to look at another painting. *I Have Had Enough! I am Stepping Out of the Painting* by Tadeusz Kantor (fig. 22) raises some questions that relate directly to my discussion of ways of seeing and the question of representation. And, although a painting, my investigation into the work will serve as a stepping stone to discussion of the ways of seeing outside the boundaries of the tradition of *mimesis* in theatre.

With regard to Matisse’s paintings in relation to mimetic representation, I discussed how they disrupted traditional perspective, and a similar, yet more intense, process is at work in *I Have Had Enough*. The work is, in a word, a mockery of mimetic representation. With this painting Kantor plays with perspective and the proportional habits of seeing precisely in order to rebuke and subvert them. Although the work employs no perspective in the traditional sense, the geometric composition of the work operates in a similar manner. It is obvious from the facial position and direction of the painted figure’s eyes that the focal point of the painting is the chair. The problem arises here. What one sees is an image of a chair, but cut off by the edge of the canvas so that the image is not complete. This forces the viewer to think

about the painting in relation to what is not painted. One would have little difficulty in imagining the rest of the chair, but the intentional abruptness of the composition hinders one from doing so.

Cutting off an image within a painting and deliberately veiling an object from its entirety is in itself not a novel attempt in the Western history of painting.

Poussin's *Self-Portrait* (fig. 23), for instance, is well-known for a similar tactic. With representations of frames within the work and the actual frame working together, the beholder is denied the overall picture that surrounds the female figure at the far side. The enigmatic eye painted on the female figure's crown, as well as the arms embracing her stretched from an invisible realm outside the painting, intensify the viewer's curiosity about what is not seen on the canvas.

Like *I Have Had Enough*, this part of the painting visualises the interplay between the visible and the invisible, and the viewing process becomes one that is much more complicated than simple observation. However, while in the case of Poussin the cut-off object is a secondary matter within the whole of the picture, acting more as an annotation and realised only after a close observation of the work, the chair in *I Have Had Enough* is the main focus of attention. With the male figure also only partly painted, it is only too obvious that the core of viewing this painting lies in the "cut".

What first grabs one's attention when one encounters this painting is the "non-painterly" aspect, that is, the figure of a leg hanging on the left-hand side of the canvas. However, for the time being I would like to put this figure aside from the discussion and focus on where it is hanging, that is, the canvas edge. Interestingly enough, the main contents of the painting are composed around the edges, i.e., the frame of the painting rather than within. The frame therefore becomes one of the

core aspects of viewing this work. Of course, there is no frame *per se* in this work, but this fact in itself serves to enhance the significance of the issue of the frame regarding this painting. Before enquiring any further, let us take a look at the explanation of the English term “frame” by the eminent philosopher and critic Louis Marin:

In English, ‘frame’ signifies rather a structural element of the picture’s construction, where picture is understood more as canvas than as representation or image. In English, frame can be something upon which the canvas is stretched in order to make it ready to receive pigments. Rather than an edge or border, rather than an edging ornament, it supports the substructure and the surface of representation.¹

Although in this definition Marin refers to the material object “frame”, i.e., the visual, separate border which divides the art work from the world of reality, by emphasising its structural significance he extends the definition to the conceptual aspect of the word. “The frame,” he continues, “renders the work autonomous in visible space; it puts representation into a state of exclusive presence; it faithfully defines the conditions of visual reception and of the contemplation of representation as such.”² The frame, then, as much as perspective, comprises the core of the issue of representation in Western art. Like perspective, it locates the beholder at a certain view point and puts him in a secure position of viewing. (It is no coincidence that discussing perspective almost always entails a discussion of the frame or vice versa.) Manipulating or disrupting the frame therefore unsettles one’s normal way of viewing.

¹ Marin, 82.

² Ibid.

And this is precisely what Kantor's painting is doing. By not only eliminating the traditional perspective, but also the shifting of the hierarchy of the canvas and the frame (centre and periphery of the painting plane) it demands that the viewer alter his viewing habits and extend his attention also to the realm of the unseen.

Such an aspect of painting in many ways resembles the Chinese painting *Poet Strolling on a Marshy Bank*. One should recall how the painting, precisely by blinding the viewer, enabled the work to extend the space to another dimension outside of the paper, and invited him to linger on in meditation. *I Have Had Enough*, too, via the impaired view of the images extends the viewing area outside of the canvas, particularly with the acrylic leg hanging on one side. It is true that the work does not share the same meditative qualities that the Chinese examples have, but this simple device of the leg gives the painting a durational quality – a spectatorial experience that exists in time – that traditionally perspectival paintings contained safely within a frame do not possess by luring the spectator's eyes towards an unspecific space beyond the canvas.

However, whereas Chinese paintings work as intermediary spaces, a threshold which invites the viewer to step *into* the world of subjective imagination, Kantor's painting asks him to step out from the world of illusion and into the real world. What is interesting is that Kantor's world of the real, like the world of subjective meditation in Chinese painting, is left invisible. The acrylic leg, which according to the logic of the composition acts as a pointer to the real world, hangs in a void. As much as the painted contents that are contained within the canvas, this undefined void is a major constituent of the overall work. And, because of such a void, the viewer, albeit in different ways, goes through an experience which is durational when he looks at this painting.

Such a quality, as I have discussed, results from the *relationship* between the work of art and the beholder. Bryson explains this characteristic of traditional Western painting with the useful concept of *deixis*,³ when he says, “Western painting is predicated on the disavowal of *deictic reference*, on the disappearance of the body as site of the image; and this twice over: for the painter, and for the viewing subject.”⁴

Perspectival painting, therefore, is produced so that it exists to be complete in its own space, independent of the situation and the viewer, and “the only position for the viewing subject proposed and assumed by the image will be that of the Gaze, the transcendent point of vision that has discarded the body of labour and exists only as a disembodied *punctum*.”⁵ Hence, removing perspective and disrupting the frame is at the same time a gesture of readmitting the exiled viewer back into the scene of the art. The viewer is no longer an invisible, isolated and virtually non-existent entity but a core participant of the art *in* work, which now becomes a durational performance.

This directs us to the question I posed at the very beginning of this chapter. What does this have to do with theatre? Michael Fried provides us with a straightforward answer. At the heart of Fried’s (in)famous criticism of minimalist art – which he terms “literalist” – in his much debated essay “Art and Objecthood” is his contention that it is inherently theatrical. “*Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater*,”⁶ he complains. However, disturbing as it may sound, Fried’s criticism in fact offers the most lucid explanation of the bridge between pictorial

³ Bryson highlights the self-reflexive, relational characteristic of the deictic, a category of utterances that contain information concerning the locus of utterance, as opposed to the disengaged aoristic tense in English grammar in order to discuss how Western painting negated the durational viewing process. See Bryson (1983), 87-88.

⁴ Ibid., 89.

⁵ Ibid., 107.

⁶ Fried, 141. Original emphasis.

challenges to the tradition of *mimesis* and theatre:

... the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theater, and theater is now the negation of art. Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work. Morris makes this explicit. Whereas in previous art ‘what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it],’ the experience of literalist art is an object *in a situation* – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*.⁷

For Fried, “theatricality” depends on the presence of a spectator and is more than any other artistic genre preoccupied with “time – more precisely, with the *duration of the experience*.”⁸ It is ironic that under the tradition of *mimesis*, like “art proper” as Fried understands it, Western theatre had persistently neglected if not negated one of its most unique qualities, that of the spectator. With the Aristotelian dramatic structure performing the role of perspective, theatre excluded the inherent condition of the theatre and the existence of the audience. Looking at a well-made theatre piece was thus similar to the distanced viewing of a perspectival painting: theatre existed on its own, framed both physically via the stage and dramatically, and despite its inherent condition of being performed in time, the spectator’s process of viewing apparently played no part in the overall performance. Bryson’s assertion that the temporal process “which would only apply to a performing art” is rarely to be found in Western representational painting since “time is usurped and cancelled by

⁷ Ibid., 125. Original brackets and emphasis.

⁸ Ibid., 145. Original emphasis.

the aoristic time of the event,”⁹ in fact applied to the very genre of theatre.

Like *I Have Had Enough*, Kantor had “had enough” of such theatre.

Although his theatrical pursuits varied in different stages of his long career, the fight against the confinements of *mimesis* and illusionism in theatre was always his major concern. And, in his theatrical pursuits he sought ways in which to initiate a different kind of spectatorship. “Credo”, one of Kantor’s earliest published writings, sums up the core of his theatrical endeavours:

A theatre piece should not be ‘*looked at!*’

The spectator must take full responsibility for his entrance to the theatre. He must not leave unexpectedly. He must experience all that awaits him there.

Theatre should not create the illusion of reality that is contained in the drama. This reality of drama must become the reality on stage.

(...)

The creation of reality, which is as concrete as the auditorium, rather than the creation of illusion, which makes the audience feel safe, should be the ultimate goal on stage. The drama on stage must be ‘*created*’ rather than ‘*take place*.’ It must *develop* in front of the audience.¹⁰

However, just as he ultimately did not totally dispose of the convention of the frame in *I Have Had Enough* and remained largely within the traditional boundaries of the genre of painting, he worked – with the short, exceptional period of the Happenings during the mid-60’s – within the field of theatre (as opposed to performance art) in order to challenge its form:

⁹ Bryson (1983), 92.

¹⁰ Kantor (1993), 37. Original emphasis.

I know only too well that theatre cannot exist
without illusion.
I accept illusion
because by accepting its existence,
I can keep destroying it interminably.¹¹

In this chapter, therefore, I will discuss the experiments of Kantor to disrupt the mimetic frames of theatre within the boundaries of theatre, and examine how this in its turn challenged the existing passive ways of theatre spectatorship. I will trace Kantor's attitude towards illusion and reality, and interrogate how this was materialised in the spatial and narrative organization of his works.

6-2. Between Illusion and the Real: Conflict or Reconciliation

“The evolution of Cricot [sic] 2 is marked not by a succession of first-night performances, but by s t a g e s.”¹² An on-going creative process, as this statement shows, was the major principle of Kantor's artistic endeavours. The works that materialised this notion were most prominent in the early stages of his career, from the various stagings of *The Return of Odysseus* (first staged in 1944), to the series of happenings between 1965 and 1969. Of these, *Popular Exhibition*, also called *Anti-Exhibition* (1963), is by far the most remarkable, where Kantor displayed remnants of the artist's creative process – drawings, newspapers, calendars, notes and the like – rather than the finished products. In the field of theatre Kantor adopted this method in the 1973 production of *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes, or The Green Pill*, also

¹¹ Ibid., 192.

¹² *Cricot 2* pamphlet.

known as *Lovelies and Dowdies*, where he reversed the traditional notions of the stage, backstage and the auditorium. The audience were forced to pass through a cloakroom and had to sit in the narrow space between the cloakroom and the theatre entrance, and were asked occasionally to play parts of the characters or participate in physical and linguistic exercises during the performance.¹³

Kantor's emphasis on process grew out of his frustration with the experience of creation being isolated from the audience in the present time, during the moments of encounter. Decades later in recollection of *Popular Exhibition* he explains:

The act of writing a book, composing a symphony, painting a picture, is recognised as a creative process, an exceptional revelation of the power of the human spirit. So it is surprising that the apprehension of this exceptional phenomenon comes about only *after* it has been extinguished. (...) [T]he creative process itself remains completely inaccessible. To express this more vividly, we might say that in the reception of the work of art, paradoxically, the most inspiring, the most spiritual moment has been expunged.¹⁴

However, in the same dialogue he also admits the limits of his early attempts, saying: "the first night [of a performance] marks the end of my creative involvement."¹⁵ This statement, which is directed not only at his earlier works but at the later ones as well, including *The Dead Class* where he was present onstage in every performance, is all the more significant especially *because* of his presence on stage. Embedded here is his belief that the goings-on onstage during the performance, including the live acting of the performers – obviously including

¹³ Kobialka (1993b), 302.

¹⁴ Miklazewski, 69. Original emphasis.

¹⁵ Ibid.

himself, regardless of the ambiguous character of him watching or occasionally interfering and interacting with the actors – loses its fundamental creative quality. Despite being performed live in the present time, Kantor sees it essentially as an end product.

This does not mean that Kantor abandoned the concept: the aim was never the process itself but “to reject the idea of a COMPLETE and FINISHED WORK OF ART, to discard the feeling of satisfaction derived from the DENOUEMENT.”¹⁶ Seen from this perspective, both *Popular Exhibition* and *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* are more ambitious attempts to open up and expand the dimension of art into the realm of the spectator so that the experiences of both the artist and spectator may coexist.

The biggest barrier that separated the artist and his work from its audience was the creative structure that governed Western art. In fact Kantor stipulates that “the act of creation, which is defined by its inner s t r u c t u r e , which does not e n d / and cannot end / with the final touch of a brush.”¹⁷ In the field of painting he disrupted the traditional notion of the frame; in theatre it was the dramatic structure, the traditional dramatic text that was the main object of his series of severe challenges. His manifestos on Autonomous Theatre and Zero Theatre are declarations of independence from literature:

The theatre that I call **autonomous**
is the theatre that is not
a reproductive mechanism,
i.e., a mechanism whose aim is to

¹⁶ Kantor (1993), 127.

¹⁷ Ibid., 93.

present an interpretation of a piece of literature
on stage,
but a mechanism that
has its own **independent**
existence.¹⁸

Independent more than anything of the traditional drama. Instead of a theatre that explained the dramatic text and translated it into the language of the stage, he sought for one that would

have neither
logical,
analogical,
parallel,
nor **juxtaposed**
relationship with the drama.¹⁹

Under this principle he conducted a series of experiments that would defy any element associated with dramatic meaning, probably the most provocative being *The Madman and the Nun*, where he sought for a state of non-acting and anti-activity with the introduction of a moving device made of folding chairs.²⁰

Kantor's distrust of the dramatic text is strongly related to his attitude towards reality. The traditional plot development "made use of human life as a

¹⁸ Ibid., 42.

¹⁹ Ibid., 43. Original emphasis.

²⁰ The device was intended to prevent the actors from 'acting' out the text. Kobialka lucidly describes its function: "When the machine was operating, its robotlike movements destroyed any dramatic action on stage. The actors were pushed aside, had to fight for acting space, and had to struggle not to be thrown out of the stage. The presentation of the text was thus dismembered by the actions of the machine and the actors." Kobialka (1993b), 290.

springboard for movement upwards.”²¹ Reality, for an artist who was right in the middle of the Second World War, did not move according to the laws of progression, and the dominant dramatic plot did little to represent it. Not only did it fail to represent reality but it distorted reality, creating nothing but artificial illusion. Under this condition, all that was permitted to the audience was “mirages of landscapes, streets, houses, and interiors.”²² His early fascination with constructivism was due to the fact that it exposed the process of artificial creation by bringing the backstage and its mechanism to the fore²³ with the hope of creating “a world in which the perfect integration of life and art could take place,”²⁴ although later on he criticised the movement as being little more than a naïve, “false” avant-garde which, along with other apparently radical movements, recognised only the physical presence of an art work.²⁵

Many aspects of Kantor’s earlier works resemble the experiments of the Dadaists. Indeed, Kantor himself acknowledges that he was without realising it “dada’s descendent,”²⁶ and his efforts to divorce reality from illusionist art share the Dadaist spirit in its negation of and revolt against the authority of art. The Dadaist challenge against illusionism and particularly the authority of mimetic art, is displayed nowhere more prominently than in the all too famous *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp (*fig. 24*).

The ninety-degree-rotated urinal, labelled by the artist as a fountain, ridicules the existing notions of art in several ways. The most obvious aspect is the playful reversal of the hierarchy of things. What until then had been deemed vulgar and

²¹ Kantor (1993), 59.

²² Ibid., 221.

²³ Ibid., 222.

²⁴ Ibid., 139.

²⁵ Ibid., 108.

²⁶ Ibid., 260.

irrelevant to art becomes, through the simple act of designation, an art piece fit for exhibition.²⁷ The act of designating is conducted via a fundamental transition in the attitude of seeing. The artist has completely liberated himself from mimetic, passive modes of artistic perception, and seeing now becomes one of the most aggressive actions the artist can take. It is now the individual vision of the artist that creates the artistic meaning of any given object.

Of course, a change in the attitude to viewing was always a major issue in modernist arts, but no other movement or artistic circle challenged the existing habits as radically as the Dadaists. In fact, this attitude is one of the most important factors that define Dadaists, who “wanted no more masterpieces and no more unquestioned allegiance to the state, for they were both as deadly to the survival of artistic and social life.”²⁸ Duchamp’s displacement of the urinal suffices as the ultimate example of the physical rendering of the dislocation of the traditional Western eye. Art exists not as a stagnant object to be seen and received, but a motive for the eye to create and make meaning.

This indicates a significant shift in the role of the artist: what becomes important is less his sense of creativity and artistic techniques, more his individual choice. If an artist takes a urinal and chooses to see it as a fountain and juxtapose it with such a label, it becomes one. What one chooses to see and how one chooses to see it becomes the definitive factor of art. The anonymous editorial of the second and last issue of the New York Dada journal *The Blind Man* entitled “The Richard Mutt Case” implies the critical transition which has taken place in the arts through

Fountain:

²⁷ *Fountain*, submitted under the name “R. Mutt”, actually failed to reach the art gallery as it was refused entry to an art show supposedly open to all – the Society of Independent Artists’ 1917 exhibit, of which Duchamp was a board member – which made the event all the more controversial.

²⁸ Bigsby, 25.

Whether Mr Mutt made the fountain with his own hands or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.²⁹

Such a transition in the ways of viewing objects, along with the upheaval of existing values, also targets the spectator. Without the equally active participation of the spectator, no Dada art can have any meaning or value. Duchamp's *Fountain* will sustain its newly constructed value as an art work only if the spectator chooses to see it as such. The whole series of conflicts and disputes over *Fountain* was in fact a web of different and confused ways of seeing. Other Dadaist explorations (or rather, manipulations) of existing art forms also comply with this. This is the modernist revolt against representation in its most radical form.

Kantor's poetics of theatre is also based on such a principle. His repeated statements on the pretentiousness of representation, on the "necessity of questioning art's sacred dictum of being allowed to present in a work of art only a fictitious reality, a reflection of reality, a r e p r e s e n t a t i o n of reality, (simply, a 'false pretence'),"³⁰ is also a definite rejection of the existing habits of seeing as well as the relationship between art, artist and spectator. Although Kantor does not talk about vision or the act of seeing directly, his numerous writings on the necessity of a new audience as well as his construction of theatre indicate that art is not just an end product to be passively consumed.

Duchamp's *Fountain* is also an epitome of the Dadaists' demand for no more

²⁹ Harrison and Wood, 252.

³⁰ Kantor (1993), 71.

masterpieces. “Masterpiece”, in the Dadaist sense of the word, implies a hierarchy of aesthetic values imbedded in the West, including – from the Dadaists’ point of view – the various modernist artistic endeavours that occurred around the early 20th century. This is again related to the problem of *mimesis*, especially since in the 19th century it was particularly associated with meaning. Dada totally rejected meaning, arguing that it contaminated art, and most of all deprived people of creative possibility and an immediate experience from art. For this reason they expressed a strong suspicion of music, in particular with its “ordered form, its harmony”³¹ that restricted the freedom of the audience, not to mention literature and language, going as far as to abandon words altogether.³² By rejecting masterpieces and meaning-orientated art, the Dadaists strived to introduce alternative values in art which they believed to be more essential:

The word Dada symbolizes the most primitive relation to the reality of the environment; with Dadaism a new reality comes into its own. Life appears as a simultaneous muddle of noises, colors and spiritual rhythms, which are taken unmodified into Dadaist art, with all the sensational screams and fevers of its reckless everyday psyche and with all its brutal reality.³³

Hugo Ball, for example, believed that sound, intonation and rhythm were the essence of language and introduced phonetic or “bruitist” poems at the Cabaret Voltaire soirées, which obliterated all other literary aspects of language:

gadji beri bimba

³¹ Bigsby, 29.

³² Ibid., 27.

³³ Huelsenbeck, 258.

glandridi lauli lonni cadori
gadjama bim beri glassala
glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim
blassa galassasa tuffm i zimbrabim ...³⁴

This rhythmical enumeration of nonsensical sounds, according to Ball, was just one of many attempts to “renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted” and “return to the innermost alchemy of the word.”³⁵ More important, however, is the fundamental distrust of Dadaists and their performances in both the dominant arts of the time which had “nothing to do with the feelings of the times”³⁶ and the epoch that gave birth to such arts:

Our cabaret is a gesture. Every word that is spoken and sung here says at least one thing: that this humiliating age has not succeeded in winning our respect. What could be respectable and impressive about it? Its cannons? Our big drum drowns them. Its idealism? That has long been a laughing stock, in its popular and its academic edition. The grandiose slaughters and cannibalistic exploits? Our spontaneous foolishness and our enthusiasm for illusion will destroy them.³⁷

Fountain, too, is in this light one of the strongest statements against masterpieces and the quest for external meaning in art.

This relates to Kantor’s notion of poor reality, and his discovery of “matter” or “object.” Particularly, the fact that Duchamp’s negation of masterpieces was materialised by the introduction of ready-mades – *Fountain* being the most

³⁴ Ball, 70.

³⁵ Ibid., 71.

³⁶ Ibid., 59.

³⁷ Ibid., 61.

prominent of these works – is especially relevant to this. I began this discussion by introducing Kantor’s concern for illusion and reality. In his 1963 essay “Annexed Reality” Kantor specifically uses the same term “ready-made.” However, if the Dadaist position concerning ready-mades was that there could not be a higher art, Kantor’s stance is more intricately related to his concern for “true realness”, and his disdain for illusion along with his faith that reality cannot be reproduced:

(...) the artist is left with R e a l i t y,
and R e a l n e s s,
which cannot be moulded
because they
a r e
R e a d y – m a d e,
And consequently the concepts of imitation,
Representation, and illusion
lose their meaning (...) ³⁸

This is not to say that Kantor was against the Dadaist anti-art position, for he too proclaims:

THERE IS NO WORK OF ART
(...)
THERE IS NO ‘HOLY’ ILLUSION.
THERE IS NO ‘HOLY’ PERFORMANCE.
THERE IS ONLY AN OBJECT THAT IS TORN OUT OF LIFE AND REALITY. ³⁹

³⁸ Kantor (1993), 95.

³⁹ Ibid., 255.

But there is a more desperate concern for the real in Kantor's denial of art, and it is at this subtle point that he diverges. Kantor was against "holy" illusion, but he was aware that illusion, or fiction, was an inevitable element in theatre. He therefore fought over these two conflicting concepts, and in the end concluded that he would use fiction in order to reveal the crude reality, to transform fiction into reality. The theatre of Kantor was a fissure between the illusory and the real, and Kantor's goal was to capture the sense of the real, the durational "now" within this space called the stage, rather than totally discarding it. He makes this clear in a rehearsal session of *Let the Artist Die* when he says:

It's no room at all. Even if we furnish it, it won't be a room yet. Likewise the graveyard. The graves don't make it a grave yet. This is all set decoration. The real place we desire to make is all but unattainable. (...) But we have the Circus Tent. (...) Everything will be artificial but real ... you see? And then we can do everything to our heart's desire on condition that we retain the Reality of the Circus Tent.⁴⁰

Such an attitude of Kantor cannot be divorced from his experience of the war, which also explains how he differs from the Dadaists in his stance on the relationship between illusion and reality, and his practical endeavours. While Dada events took place in relatively safe locations, largely unexposed to the violence of the war, and for that reason the chaos was deemed more or less a detached object of discussion regardless of the Dadaists' efforts to erase the distance, Kantor was right in the centre of the actual condition. One must also bear in mind the differences in the point of history that the two were situated in – one was at its peak during or straight after

⁴⁰ *Nigdy tu nie Powrócę.*

the first World War while the other's artistic tendency was being shaped during the second.⁴¹ The unique condition that Kantor was situated in made it virtually impossible for him to regard the aspects of art in the same manner as his predecessors in Western Europe.

Naturally, the concept of modernism for Kantor was quite a different matter; the concept of reality even more so. Dadaists were against bourgeois realism; for Kantor, such realism did not exist. Kantor's reality during the war was a "*tabula rasa*," in which the "world stood near death and, by association, near poetry ... Anything could happen. The borders of time were erased. Time seemed to stop."⁴² Dadaists strove to strip the false, arrogant fetters that veiled reality, thus stripping down the falseness of realism. For Kantor, reality was already a degraded, skeletal figure, and the only thing to do as an artist was to "be" it. In a way, such a condition led Kantor towards another kind of realism, and his artistic, philosophical opposition to "holy illusion" and "holy performance" must be understood in this respect.

It seems in retrospect that he took what was almost an obvious step during the first production of *The Return of Odysseus* when he turned to real, degraded spaces devastated by war instead of the traditional stage, and to real objects such as a muddied wheel, a rotten board, a Nazi loudspeaker lifted from the streets.⁴³ Borowski, too, sees this work as a landmark of Kantor's earlier artistic experiments, through which he "wanted to identify his protest against conventional art with Dada, but also to show the differences between himself and Dada."⁴⁴ The stage and theatre

⁴¹ See Plesńiarowicz, 32-46 for a discussion of the influence of the Nazi occupation on Kantor's artistic foundation.

⁴² Plesńiarowicz, 35.

⁴³ Initially the work was staged largely according to the traditional theatre conventions of the time, in a traditional theatre on Skawińska street. "We still prized aesthetics, and struggled for an artistically contrived image" but "it was wrong so we dropped it," Kantor recalls in *Kantor*.

⁴⁴ Borowski, 327.

space for Kantor was not “a set decoration but a place that a given time, location, and circumstances have produced.”⁴⁵

And, in such a space, a theatre performance could not be divorced from the reality of the audience. For very specific reasons, Kantor, from the very beginning of his career, put the spectator at the centre of his practice. After decades of vigorous debates on the essence of theatre, this is now widely confirmed to be “fundamental to the definition of theatricality, since the theatrical phenomenon is acknowledged and rendered operational by the spectator’s presence alone.”⁴⁶

However, it is less by the use of real objects in real spaces than the way it is moulded into a theatrical event that is of importance in Kantor’s theatre. One must not forget that despite Kantor’s ceaseless criticisms of illusion he always borrowed his dramatic narratives from fictive works. However, pre-existing texts were an object for Kantor, a device “to bring out the tension between theatrical reality and some other factitious reality.”⁴⁷ *The Return of Odysseus*, based on the motifs of the Greek epic and Stanisław Wispiański’s play by the same title, was no exception.

“The point,” he says on the production of *The Return of Odysseus*, “is to create an ambiance and circumstances in which the illusory reality of the drama becomes believable, to have the homecoming of Odysseus exist within the dimensions of our reality rather than within those of illusion.”⁴⁸ This stems from Kantor’s belief that instead of a total denial of illusion, his theatre should strategically accommodate illusion which comes

from reality. In other words, as a result of *manipulation* of reality. (...) Illusion

⁴⁵ From an interview in *Kantor*.

⁴⁶ Féral, 3.

⁴⁷ Kiklaszewski, 34.

⁴⁸ *Powrót Odysa*.

resulting from acting, expressing emotional and psychological states, psychic processes, moods, psychoses, obsessions, (...) to me, is a crude, unbearable make-believe. Here we replace it with manipulations of objects and reality.⁴⁹

At this point I would like to further examine the meanings as opposed to the actual manipulative practices embedded in Kantor's use of the word "manipulation". Although this refers to the creative rather than receptive part of the work, since the creative process of any art work necessarily aims at, if not directly determines, a certain way of perception, looking at this will open up a discussion about the function of the spectator. It may seem ironic at first that Kantor's prescription for illusory art is not raw reality but manipulated reality which, when it enters the space of the theatre, inevitably transforms itself due to its inherent condition into a "representation", and therefore contains an element of fiction.

The use of a dramatic, albeit unconventional narrative, only helps to heighten this sense. Féral, despite her emphasis on the spectator's act of recognition in defining the theatrical, makes it clear that it is her stance that the foundation of theatricality is a series of "cleavages," both between the stage and the auditorium, and especially between the real and fictive worlds, which ultimately locates the spectator in the realm of the latter:

The first cleavage effected by the spectator's gaze cuts the observed event or objects away from its everyday surroundings. Thus he isolates the event from his environment, and in doing so, makes it into a representation. (...) Through this initial operation, the spectator not only perceives that the event he is witnessing belongs to a space other than the everyday, but he becomes aware that in this space, signs signify

⁴⁹ Ibid. My emphasis.

differently, being part of this secondary structure, the fiction that is being built.⁵⁰

Kantor aims at precisely the opposite. This is not to argue that Kantor dismissed such a split; on the contrary, he was always very conscious of this feature of theatre, and with very few exceptions maintained a physical divide between the performance space and the auditorium, most prominently in the case of *The Dead Class* in which a rope vividly separated the performance area from the rest and thus prohibited the spectators from trespassing on the actors' territory. But whether such physical devices actually produced the effects that Féral claims is another question, and an extremely important one as well.

6-2-1. Limits of Dichotomy

At the heart of the diverse debates around the essence of theatricality is the Western obsession with representation (or *mimesis*), whether in support of it or against. Davis and Postlewait's assertion that "theatre is only acceptable if it acknowledges and strives to overcome its own confinement within the mimetic traditions of performance, be they antiquarianism, pictorialism, naturalism, or realism,"⁵¹ is noteworthy in this respect. Not only does it make clear once again how crucial the concept of representation or *mimesis* is in theatre to this day, but it also exposes another characteristic inherent in Western theatrical debate: the "I" against the "Other" formulation. "Binary awareness is crucial to theatricality,"⁵² Féral asserts, but such an alterity in fact applies to a more fundamental Western frame of

⁵⁰ Féral (a), 10.

⁵¹ Davis and Postlewait, 14.

⁵² Féral (b), 97.

thought.

In fact, it almost seems that Western criticism is unable to talk about theatre and performance – indeed all aspects of art, for that matter – without touching on this aspect. I have no intention of devaluing the rich scholarly achievements that have benefited from this approach; however, I cannot but question whether such a frame can encompass the various theatrical practices. The case of Kantor's theatre is no exception. The main titles of the two essays by the renowned Kantor scholar Michal Kobińska included in *A Journey through Other Spaces*, "The Quest for the Self" and "The Quest for the Other," respectively, are exemplary.

In the latter essay in particular, Kobińska makes a clear distinction between the Self as "the three-dimensional body" and the "multidimensional memory" which he determines as the Other,⁵³ and this binary perspective is extended to other categories such as "here" and "there", the exterior and the interior, the visible and the invisible which form the basis of his discussion.

Also noteworthy is Kobińska's analysis of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (fig. 25). As Kobińska himself emphasises, for him the painting is "a summary par excellence of the relationship between art and its spectators, between Kantor and the audience, and finally, between the Self and the Other."⁵⁴ Through a brief reading of the painting Kobińska traces how the complex interrelationship of gazes and images meticulously structured into the work plays with the psyche of the spectator. While Velázquez puts the spectator at the centre of the discourse, according to Kobińska, the

[n]arcissistic pleasure dissolves because the spectator becomes aware that she or he

⁵³ Kobińska (1993a), 312.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 350.

is dismissed or, to be more precise, has always been dismissed by the gaze of the painter and the other onlookers and has been replaced by the model who, though invisible, has always been in the space.⁵⁵

In many ways this echoes Foucault's essay on the same painting. Initially discussing the relationship between the painter (in the painting), the representation of his canvas (of which only its back is visible), and the beholder, Foucault writes:

We, the spectators, are an additional factor. Though greeted by that gaze, we are also dismissed by it, replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model itself. But, inversely, the painter's gaze, addressed to the void confronting him outside the picture, accepts as many models as there are spectators; in this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange. No gaze is stable, or rather, in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas, subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity.⁵⁶

The complication of the gazes complicates the question of the Self, for the uncertainty of the content of the canvas within the painting makes us certain of only one thing: that "we do not know who we are, or what we are doing." "Seen or seeing?"⁵⁷ asks Foucault, but this question, through the course of the discussion, evolves into a much more fundamental one. And this is the question of representation. The final paragraph of his essay is of particular importance:

Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velázquez, the representation as it were, of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 351-352.

⁵⁶ Foucault (2002), 5.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 5.

Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us. And, indeed, representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation – of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject – which is the same – has been elided. And representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form.⁵⁸

Implied here is Foucault's position that in essence there exists *either* representation *or* pure form; *either* mimetic art *or* non-mimetic art but none in-between, and in order for art to exist as art in its pure form the subject of representation must be dismissed. Kobińska, undoubtedly influenced by Foucault, inherits this perceptive frame when he discusses Kantor's stage.

Kobińska's binary frame of discussion is undeniably effective in looking at the theatre of Kantor, and to a considerable extent was initiated by Kantor himself through his written and practical works. However, it is at the same time limiting. The following passage on *Wielopole, Wielopole*, for instance, vividly exposes how exclusive Kobińska's views can be, regardless of his efforts to highlight the encounter between the two parties:

The room created by Kantor on stage should not (...) be treated as a real space for two reasons. First, 'if we [took] the audience into consideration, the room could not possibly be perceived as an intimate room of childhood, but rather as a public forum.'

⁵⁸ Ibid., 17-18.

Second, ‘the room [could not] be real, i.e., exist in our time; this room is in our MEMORY, in our RECOLLECTION OF THE PAST.’ Indeed, Kantor’s room was a heterotopia, a space that was a countersite to physical and visible reality and that simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted the laws of the real site.⁵⁹

Kobialka’s reference to “real” in this quote deserves extra attention. Using Kantor’s own words, Kobialka excludes the theatrical reality of the performance event: with the first quote he distinguishes “public forum” from the theatrical participation of the audience, and with the second he draws a line between the reality of the world from the reality on stage. Such a conflict becomes more explicit towards the end, as the words “contested” and “inverted” suggest, with “represented” placed so that it at the same time emphasises and again conflicts with the two former words.

Actually the final sentence, including the term heterotopia, is specifically Foucault’s, as Kobialka himself clarifies in his notes. One may thus assume that Kobialka’s reading of Kantor’s theatre is highly Foucauldian. If one is to appreciate Kobialka’s argument, therefore, one must first understand Foucault’s conception of the heterotopia.

In order to explain the complexities of site and space in the present era, Foucault presents the concepts of utopia and heterotopia. While utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces, sites that “have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society,” heterotopias, in Foucault’s definition, are real, external places which “are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within

⁵⁹ Kobialka (1993a), 334. Original square brackets.

the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.”⁶⁰ The cemetery is a heterotopia; the theatre, too, is set as an example of heterotopias. Foucault then provides us with an enticing proposition that the mirror endows one with a joint experience of both the utopia and the heterotopia:

In the mirror, I see myself where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface. I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteractions on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there (.....) [The mirror] makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.⁶¹

This sounds familiar. Strongly evoking his essay on *Las Meninas*, the passage repeats the same question. Seen or seeing? The mirror is at the same time the utopia and the heterotopia, but while they are the dual sites of one subject, they never meet let alone permeate each other. Alterity, once again, is inescapable.

I cannot but doubt how much justice such a binary attitude does to Kantor’s theatre. Does the theatre of Kantor operate through contestation and conflict between extremes alone? Let us look at some examples from *Wielopole, Wielopole*, which apparently seem to be good evidence in favour of Kobialka’s stance.

⁶⁰ Foucault (1986), 24.

⁶¹ Ibid., 24.

6-2-2. Beyond Conflict: *Wielopole, Wielopole*

A door set at the back of the stage in *Wielopole, Wielopole* plays a central role in dividing the spaces within the performance. The stage, which is a reconstruction of the room of Kantor's childhood, is inhabited by the members of his family continuously repeating banal, elementary, and aimless activities.⁶² It is where the

DEAD FAÇADES

come to life, become real and important

through this stubborn REPETITION OF ACTION.⁶³

Beyond the door, the ante-room as Kantor calls it, is a different space "that exists in a different dimension."⁶⁴ The room is a space where memory is reconstructed; the ante-room is "the open interior of our imagination." Physically and metaphorically a clear division exists, with the door functioning as "the threshold of eternity and death."⁶⁵

Or does it? Which is the space that is inhabited by eternity and which by death? The room, which is a space of memory, is, according to one of Kantor's rehearsal notes, a "DEAD ROOM / inhabited by the Dead."⁶⁶ In another note he describes the room as a space "where life goes on, with its impossible yet sanctioned vacuity."⁶⁷ Yet in one of his manifestos he stipulates that if "the system of death

⁶² Kantor (1993), 142.

⁶³ Ibid., 143.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Kantor (1990). 113.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 115.

(eternity) is absolute and pure, the sphere of life – reality – is of a lower rank.”⁶⁸ All this is contradictory, and if one is to follow his directions literally there is no way that a clear categorising of his concepts can be made.

In order to understand Kantor’s stance on these ideas, therefore, one must look at it from a more fundamental perspective. In his 1975 manifesto “The Theatre of Death,” Kantor declares that “it is possible to express *life* in art only through *the absence of life*.”⁶⁹ The condition of death in his theatre is directly related to the condition of life; it is not a relationship of irreconcilable confrontation but one where one is directed at the other. “THE CONDITION OF DEATH,” writes Kantor, “represents the most extreme point of reference, and is no longer threatened by conformity.”⁷⁰ Death was a condition, or a device with which to instigate the audience into immunity from the condition of mimetic representation to its own state of life. The contradiction between death and life for Kantor corresponded perfectly to the opposition between fiction and reality,⁷¹ and the following lines make this point clear:

And now suddenly
on the other side
opposite,
they [the dead] astound us
as though we
were seeing them for the first time
set on display
in an ambiguous ceremony:

⁶⁸ Kantor (1993), 146.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 112. Original emphasis.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 114.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, 145.

pointless
and at the same time repudiated,
irrevocably different
and infinitely foreign (...) ⁷²

Thus, in order to fully appreciate Kantor's concept of death, one must first turn to his attitude towards the living. And of course, this is directly linked with his views on reality, and the relationship art forms with it.

Again, this is related to his dissatisfaction with the prevailing dominance of the mimetic conditions in art. As examined in the previous chapters, the two most prominent characteristics of *mimesis* are distance and conformity,⁷³ and these are incidentally also the main objects of Kantor's criticism. Kantor's claim that the centuries-old inclination to isolate the so-called artistic values from "the reality of life, enclosing them within the boundaries of the so-called work of art, was outdated, scholastic, and unjustified in its privileging and cultivating of only certain practices,"⁷⁴ is similar to Plato's assertion that *mimesis* increases the distance between the art work and Truth.⁷⁵ Such a distance produced through the practice of mimetic art in turn gives way to the obliteration of the sense of the present, particularly on the part of the viewer. Lawson rightly points this out as he diagnoses modernism as a rage against the bourgeois order during the course of which it "developed a rhetoric of immediacy, eschewing not only the mimetic tradition of Western art, but also the aesthetic distance implied by the structure of

⁷² Ibid., 115. Original emphasis.

⁷³ The problem of distance in relation to *mimesis* has been discussed in Chapters 2 (with particular regard to Plato) and 5 (concerning the paintings of Matisse). I have examined in detail the conformative aspect of *mimesis* in Chapter 4 focusing on Aristotle's *Poetics* and teleology.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 91.

⁷⁵ See *Republic* 597e.

representation.”⁷⁶ What Kantor finds characteristic of the living is its lack of differentiation, indistinguishability and universal similarity, “mercilessly abolishing all other opposing delusions, / common, / consistent, / all-binding.”⁷⁷ The condition of the living that Kantor so despises is the lethargic attitude which neglects the sense of the present, and this attitude towards the world and reality, seen from his series of essays and manifestos, is closely linked to the tradition of *mimesis*.

Interestingly, Kantor’s view on the condition of the living echoes Bergson’s criticism of the homogeneous condition of modernity in his argument for duration. One would recall Bergson’s analogy to numbers, where the unique characteristics that differentiate one from another are effaced for the sake of effective uniformity.⁷⁸ Numbers, like Kantor’s condition of life, are “common,” “consistent,” and “all-binding,” which again is intrinsically related to the inherent condition of *mimesis* that “draws all the heterogeneous elements – the goals, means, and circumstances of the action – together.”⁷⁹ Death, for Kantor, is what the concept of duration was for Bergson: it was his key strategy to restore the unique qualities of each object and each situation by liberating them from the confines of the homogeneous mimetic frame.

If one is to look at Kantor’s concept of death from this perspective, it becomes evident that Kantor’s theatre cannot be interpreted via a strictly binary point of view such as Kobińska’s. Rather than trying to understand Kantor’s concepts of life and death separately, one must direct one’s attention to the complex web of *relations* that these form. This is even more so when one begins to look into his productions in detail. Already the seemingly opposing concepts overlap and

⁷⁶ Lawson, 154.

⁷⁷ Kantor (1993), 115.

⁷⁸ See ch. 5 (p. 161-162).

⁷⁹ Gebauer and Wulf, 58.

intermingle with one another; and such inclinations are intensified to the extreme on his stage.

With Kantor's hand-signal the performance of *Wielopole, Wielopole* begins, and from the doors at the far end of the stage the actors enter. They are divided into two groups: one embodying the family members, and the other representing a platoon. They occupy different spaces, and for a considerable amount of time do not express any intention of intruding into the domain of one another. The platoon, which appears "to have stepped out of a souvenir photograph,"⁸⁰ is totally neglected by Uncle Karol and Uncle Olek as they try in vain to reconstruct the room of memories. Kantor specifies that these soldiers,

Just like *the dead*, after all,

(...) do not enter into any living association with the 'live' tenants of the ROOM.

They slip into this room

as if in a dream

like those long dead.⁸¹

However, it is not long before "the dead" start to make contact with the "living". With the shooting of the camera which is instantly transformed into a machine gun, the platoon is frozen into an eternal state of death as they are framed into a picture by the sounds of gunfire. This is all very strange, since they were in the first instance from the realm of the "dead", stagnant as figures in a photograph. They are dead again, mutilated twice again. But it is only after this ritual that the platoon begins to move and roam freely around the room. With the summoning of the priest,

⁸⁰ Kantor (1990), 104.

⁸¹ Ibid., 106. Original emphasis.

who has himself risen from his deathbed after the photographer washed his (apparently dead) mannequin-double, the Father arises from the platoon and begins to move, although in a manner which hardly resembles that of a live human being.

The only logical explanation for this is that the ritual of death is at the same time the ritual of birth, and an invitation to the living. In fact, one witnesses how deeply practices of death, often exhibited in biblical form, are interlocked with the motif of resurrection that occurs throughout the performance: the crucifixion of Adás after which he is sent to the battle field which is again a definite dimension of death, and the repetitive deaths and resuscitations of the Priest and Aunt Manka are but a few examples. The condition of death is permeating the realm of life, and the room becomes a space where the distinction of time and levels of consciousness are no longer valid. Despite Kobińska's claim, the Self and the Other, life and death, the dimensions of memory and reality which assume a split between the times past and present, or likewise the levels of illusion and reality isolated in their own rights, are not valid concepts in Kantor's theatre.

Earlier on in this section I discussed how the relationship between life and death for Kantor was analogous to his attitude towards the relationship between fiction and reality. The permeation of different dimensions in his stage can, therefore, be applied to the aspects of representation. Probably the most gripping object in the whole of *Wielopole, Wielopole* is the above mentioned camera-gun. Other than the visual shock it generates, the camera-gun is particularly significant due to the inherent and inevitable distance it creates, both as a camera and a killing machine. In fact, the significance grows because of the way the two articles are materialised into one. "Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph

someone is a sublimated murder.”⁸² According to Sontag, Kantor has stripped away the metaphor by visualising the hidden aspect of the camera. Physically there is an evident distance between life and death (although, as we have seen, this is a severely questionable one); aesthetically, the distance is one between the performance and the spectator. The latter, although not as visibly apparent as the distance created by the physical divide of performance and viewing areas in *The Dead Class*, is no less powerful. While eloquently unearthing the differences between painting and photography, Sontag also points out a few factors shared by the two genres. Like painting, especially perspectival, photography demands a distance between the camera and its subject;⁸³ as perspectival painting effects a sense of control and possession over the object represented, regardless of the fact that the visualised outcome is an illusion, so photographs, again according to Sontag, “give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal.”⁸⁴

Kantor’s camera-gun goes precisely against this claim. The mutilation signals the beginning of action rather than the termination. It triggers an expansion of the realm of the photograph beyond its invisible yet definite confines, and thus violates the comfortable and orderly viewing on the part of the spectator. Counter to mimetic dramaturgy “through which its products detach themselves from reality and achieve autonomy,”⁸⁵ the actions that unfold here undo the “fourth wall” and turn “to meet the spectator, and even [become] a sort of assault on his susceptibilities.”⁸⁶ The presence of Kantor onstage, watching and steering the overall production as he signals the beginning of an actor’s action or the exit of another, is, however visually

⁸² Sontag (1979), 14-15.

⁸³ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁵ Gebauer and Wulf, 55.

⁸⁶ Kantor (1990), 145.

prominent, only one of the many elements that debilitates the autonomous illusion – or illusionary autonomy – of the spectacle. *Wielopole, Wielopole* does not physically trespass the borders of the stage, but within it such transgressions of boundaries are continuously practised.

But again it needs to be emphasised that these practices of transgression are practices of fusion. That the sliding doors at the rear side of the stage are opened more frequently as the performance develops and are then left completely open towards the end of the event should not be dismissed in this respect. At first, one is given intermittent glimpses of the “other” space, as doors open and close during Mad Manka’s recitation of the Gospel; one then sees this ante-room transformed into a train-heading-to-the-battlefield which is at once a collective grave and Inferno; finally, one is left with a void, an extension of the “room”, through which both the dead and the living (who are at this stage indistinguishable from each other) busily enter and exit. In the end, everyone and everything that supposedly “belonged” to the other realm sit themselves at the front of the stage, facing the audience.

“The thing is to discover this OTHER SPACE,” the “secret place of imagination”⁸⁷ behind the door, says Kantor, and this is, through the course of the performance, what has been done. Corners and neglected spaces were always important to Kantor: for him it was “the furthest point a stage could physically occupy in relation to what he called the ‘unreal auditorium.’”⁸⁸ Opening the doors to this space means that the distinction between “here” and “there” is obliterated. Moreover, due to the first disruptive use of the camera-gun, the second practice of the machine, which takes place near the end of the performance, gives the audience a

⁸⁷ Ibid., 122.

⁸⁸ Golub, 44.

strong impression that the event will continue after the show has ended.

Indeed they rise, and all of them, including Kantor himself, make their way through the door, towards “there” over the other side. Kobińska argues that the barrier between the space of the performance and the space of the auditorium is erased only in *Today Is My Birthday* through an empty chair and the recorded voice of Kantor,⁸⁹ but the extension and expansion of the spaces in *Wielopole, Wielopole* are perceptively directed at the spectator, and this significantly blurs the divide, even if it does not completely eliminate it. The audience know that what they have seen is a play – a fiction and an illusion: not once does the performance pretend that it is a “real” event. Yet, because of the meltdown of the aesthetic borders which are crucial in sustaining the condition of representational theatre, the audience, whilst seated in the auditorium and physically detached from the stage, are no longer guaranteed the safe position of the passive observer.

The pleasure, which in traditional representational theatre arises due to the knowledge that the spectator himself is not entirely subject to what happens on stage,⁹⁰ is granted no more. Fischer-Lichte argues that the aesthetic experience engendered by theatres which blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional is

a liminal experience, as an experience of being “betwixt and between”, as Victor Turner put it, an experience of crisis. It is, above all, the collapse of the opposition between “real” and “fictional” which induces the crisis. What in everyday life is neatly separated into two different worlds to be fully grasped by a dichotomous pair

⁸⁹ Kobińska (1993c), 376. Originally the chair was to be occupied by Kantor himself, but was left empty due to his death before the intended premier, which did not take place. The production which Kobińska is referring to was performed a month after Kantor died, and was described by the actors as “the last rehearsal.”

⁹⁰ Gebauer and Wulf, 56.

of concepts, becomes blurred (...) so that all certainty on whether to place oneself in a real or a fictional world is lost. By such an experience the dichotomy itself is undermined.⁹¹

Indeed, the transgression of borders which is repeated throughout the performance of *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* pushes the audience into a state of crisis. However, I would like to suggest that the initial “liminal”, “in-between” experience which is very much governed by a strong sense of uneasiness is transformed into an experience of meditation, similar to that of the Chinese paintings discussed earlier. Pleasure exists; it is just another kind. Just as the eyes of the poet served as a path connecting the world of the viewer and the invisible world beyond the painting *The Poet Li Po*, so too *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* invites its audience into a world beyond the stage. The empty stage that the spectator is left with strangely evokes the void that composes and surrounds the poet.

Thus it seems appropriate at this stage to return to some of the Chinese paintings discussed in Chapter 3. One would recall how the attitude towards reality and illusion embedded in them differed significantly from that of Classical Greece and the tradition of *mimesis*; and only a brief look at contemporary Western debates on theatricality, which commonly manifest an antithetical stance towards *mimesis*, makes it clear that they too are in polar opposition to the Chinese way of seeing the world and art. The most prominent of these differences is the fact that in Chinese paintings there is no clear division between the real, material world and illusion.

It is difficult to find a conflict between the “two” worlds, which according to the Chinese mind are fundamentally one: the paintings do not strive to faithfully

⁹¹ Fischer-Lichte (2007), 27.

represent the material reality; nor do they discard representation. Instead of conflict, they choose *reconciliation*. Both naturalistic representation *and* intentional exaggerations and abstractions exist: the delicately depicted head of the poet with a few brushes of ink suggesting the body in *The Poet Li Po*, and the likewise meticulously painted trees leading to mystically abstracted mountains in *Secluded Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains*, are just a few examples. What is noteworthy here is not so much the simple coexistence of the “conflicting” representational styles as it is *how* they coexist. In Chapter 3, I briefly mentioned how the composition of these paintings guided the viewer from a scene of a secular world into a mystic world of the unknown.⁹² It is necessary to examine how this works in more detail.

As much as the invisible realm was important in Chinese paintings, ‘naturalistic’ representations also played a crucial part. One can see how these parts are accentuated with an extra dark use of brush, thereby initially grasping the attention of the beholder. These therefore become the focal points of the relative pictures. What is important is where these focal points are located and what sort of relationships they form with the other components. While the vanishing point in Western perspectival paintings is where all other elements of the picture converge and therefore become the final point of the viewing process, the focal area in Chinese paintings is where the receptive journey begins.

In the case of *Secluded Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains*, it is placed at the bottom. The trunks of the trees, which are in parallel with the vertical borders of the picture, guide the viewer upwards without any trace of an attempt at breaking from verisimilitude. What awaits the viewer is a much more stylized depiction of a

⁹² See p. 67.

mountain which gradually loses traits of naturalistic representation save a few trees, and such a tendency becomes stronger as it reaches the summit. The top and bottom parts of the painting, when looked at separately, are almost like two different pictures framed in one.

However, there is no conflict: the flow is so natural that unless closely examined such a transformation is difficult to realise. The painting does not aim to play with the relationship between the real and illusion, which is the normal case in many “participatory” Western paintings; neither does it erase the presence of the beholder, as Fried demanded, in order for the viewer to be absorbed in the work. What the painting does instead is to invite the viewer into the painting and, without losing himself and without obliterating the fact that this is a painting (rather than a representation), to be absorbed. Because the beholder is conscious of his own presence, the absorption is not directed at the work but at the viewer himself: his subjective response.

Interestingly, it is the naturalistic elements that initiate this. They are not mere representations of some external scene; they should, rather, be understood as a threshold. I have already argued that landscape and literati paintings in Sung China were a threshold, an opening of a path into the invisible, spiritual world of Tao. Naturalistic areas – which, as mentioned, are also the initial focal points – are then thresholds within a larger threshold. It is notable that these, which represent the secular world, are normally located at the fore, close to the eye-level of the viewer. This is also to be found in many Western perspectival paintings, but the functions differ significantly.

Let us look at Raphael’s *Marriage of the Virgin* (fig. 26), for example. As in the case of Chinese paintings the naturalistic elements are situated at the fore,

depicting in detail the marriage of Virgin Mary and Joseph. Behind the scene there is a piazza, with patterns geometrically arranged so that the viewer's eyes are guided towards the vanishing point, the door of a temple. The door is open not to reveal the interior of the architecture but the vague landscape of the other side, an invisible and thus unintelligible spiritual world. Such a description of the work may sound similar to the structure of many Chinese paintings that visualise journeys from naturalistic, material scenes into the mystic and unknown, but this is not so.

Although structurally the piazza forms a bridge between the two realms, this bridge is not crossable. Unlike the trees of *Secluded Dwelling*, which constitute an organic part of the overall mountain and thus become a natural path for the viewer to follow, the main figures of *Marriage of the Virgin*, with their backs turned away from the temple, almost protruding out of the picture, function as a barricade. They sever the continuity of the patterned ground of the piazza from extending beyond the painting towards the viewer, and as a result the viewer is not allowed the journey towards and through the temple. The spiritual world beyond the open door is not for the viewer to see or experience, and the seemingly inviting structure of the painting is in fact one that thoroughly excludes the viewing subject and exists as an unreachable Other. Bryson points out this irreconcilable relationship between the vanishing point and the viewing subject:

[The] architecture of the piazza turns towards a place where the viewer does not and cannot exist. (...) All of the orthogonal lines across windows, doors, pavements converge there at the vanishing point where, *par excellence*, the viewer is not. The lines of the piazza race away towards this drain or black hole of otherness placed at

the horizon, in a decentering that destroys the subject's unitary self-possession.⁹³

The composition of Chinese paintings expands its dimensions beyond the painted surface, both towards the realm of the viewer, (in that it propels participation), and the invisible realm of the spiritual. Renaissance perspective, on the other hand, while confirming the control of the human eye over the visual and material world through geometric perfection, also confirms the impossibility of the viewer's contact with the world beyond the eye.

The expansive character of Chinese paintings is possible due to a concept shared in all aspects of Chinese art, *anshi* (暗示; aesthetic suggestiveness), a concept which, according to Gu, "comes very close to the postmodern conceptions of unlimited semiosis and 'openness.'"⁹⁴ *Anshi* evokes but does not define a specific imagery.⁹⁵ Focusing on poetry, Gu describes how the essential point in suggestiveness is that "it must have the potential of leading the imagination to go from small to large, from things near at hand to things afar, from conciseness to complexity, from limited categories to unlimited implications."⁹⁶

Suggestiveness, therefore, is inherently expansive in character. This has two significances, particularly with regard to artistic representation. First, the concept of representation in Chinese aesthetics acknowledges from the very beginning its limitations; and precisely because of this recognition it becomes possible for representation to function as a bridge between what can be represented and what cannot, the physical world and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible. Due to this attitude towards representation, in Chinese art, unlike that of the West, the

⁹³ Bryson (1988), 89.

⁹⁴ Gu, 491.

⁹⁵ Edwards, 405.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 492.

distinction between illusion and reality was of little concern.

One can in fact trace the roots of such an attitude in the fundamental way of thinking, which “foregrounds the element of time as now.”⁹⁷ It may seem abrupt that the notion of time should come into the discussion at this stage, but in Chinese thought the notions of time, space and the human experience are inseparable,⁹⁸ and thus are directly connected to the discussion on the relationship between the world and representation. Time, which in Chinese thought is essentially subjective, “‘spreads out’ to more than one possible world. (...) The moments in subjective time (...) can exist in different possible worlds simultaneously.”⁹⁹ If one considers the experience of looking at the paintings, this is hardly difficult to understand.

Furthermore, such an expansive concept of the subjective, present time points to a more immanent attitude towards truth, which differs significantly from the Western tradition. Yuan summarises this lucidly when he writes:

The aim of Chinese logical reasoning is not to represent any universal truth, but to point out (*zhi*, 指) a particular-world-related truth, or, in other words, the harmony of relations among particulars in a particular field at a single moment.¹⁰⁰

This line of thought is evident in Chinese paintings. One must then place a particular focus on the fact that what is important in Chinese thought and aesthetics is less representing the universal truth *per se*, (at this point it is necessary to recall how the Tao was always regarded as formless and unintelligible), than *relations*. This then leads to the second significance: the expansive characteristic necessarily

⁹⁷ Yuan, 136.

⁹⁸ See *ibid.*, 137-138 for a detailed analysis on various Chinese characters related to the concept of time.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

implies that the work in itself is incomplete. Be it painting or poetry, the suggestiveness of representation is ultimately directed at the receiver, and it is only with the full participation of the receiver that the work becomes complete. Participation is, of course, the active relationship between the work and the perceiving subject. Representation in Chinese art, therefore, does what anti-mimetic art in the West strived to do, by contributing to the participatory aspect of the perceptive process.

Although the productions of Kantor are significantly different in appearance from Chinese art – be it painting, poetry or theatre – they seem to share a similar fundamental. This becomes clear if one recalls the workings of *I Have Had Enough*, with which I began this chapter. Instead of totally disposing of representational factors, Kantor manipulates these in a manner that evokes the expansive structure of Chinese paintings. Like the trees in *Secluded Dwelling*, the chair and the human figure, i.e., the “illusionary” elements, suggest and point towards a dimension outside of the painting and towards the real world of the beholder.

And this is what he does in *Wielopole, Wielopole*. The distinction between reality and illusion is, therefore, no longer of importance. What he writes referring to *I Am Carrying the Picture in which I Am Shown Carrying a Picture* (fig. 27), a painting composed in a similar style to *I Have Had Enough*, manifests this all too clearly:

While starting his work,
the author [Kantor] has undeniably had
an ambitious plan
to erase the binary opposition

between realness
and illusion.¹⁰¹

What is painted therefore points to a space beyond the canvas, as it asks the viewer to not simply “see”, but also to participate in the work. The theatre of Kantor, too, whilst not taking the ultimate step outside the borderline of theatre, points at the reality of the beholder. Although his concepts regarding theatre have been altered and revised during the course of his long career, the fundamental has not changed. *The Return of Odysseus*, his first significant production, where he strived to reject any element of fiction by using real objects in real space, must therefore also be understood in this context. Despite his emphasis on the rawness of the stage,¹⁰² it is nonetheless a stage, moreover, a theatrical one as well, and this condition itself prohibits it from being purely “raw”. What comprises it therefore cannot be purely “real”, free of its illusionary or representational characteristics. In fact, that Kantor brought real objects to the stage and consequently transformed them into art, rather than leaving them in their raw state, deserves particular attention. It was Kantor’s belief that if “theatre renounces aesthetic-plastic values, it is forced to turn its attention away from the basic functions of the work of art, and theatre is or should be, a work of art.”¹⁰³

This is much more than Duchamp’s locating of a urinal in a gallery. If Duchamp challenged the existing ways of seeing in art, Kantor made a much more assertive use of the characteristics and logic of the theatre. What Kantor has done is to summon facets of the real world into a world of illusion and use the suggestive

¹⁰¹ Kantor (1994), 32.

¹⁰² Kantor (1993), 40.

¹⁰³ Miklaszewski, 9.

power of illusion, like the artists of China, in order to maximize the effect of the real.

As Kantor proclaims:

there is no realness
without illusion,
(...)
Realness has grounded itself
in illusion. For good.¹⁰⁴

Kantor's theatre is, therefore, a time and space of the real *and* the illusory, and it is precisely this that makes one's experience much more participatory. The following lines from his notes during the rehearsals of *Today is My Birthday* deserve particular attention in this respect:

The so called 'stage' behind me. Replaced by the words illusion and fiction in my vocabulary. I hasten to add that I do not go beyond this border, neither in one nor the other direction. Everything I do, and which is generally called theatre, takes place here. It [the theatre] looks and peeks anxiously at you, then at this stage, once at reality, another time at fiction and illusion. A wonderful summary of my theory and method. You may not like it, but this is so.¹⁰⁵

As the last lines of the above quotation imply, the theatre of Kantor proposes a dialogue between the stage and the audience. This is a subtle yet significant difference from the incisive challenge of the Dadaists. Kantor's theatre may have provoked the existing spectator, but its ultimate goal was to share the experience of

¹⁰⁴ Kantor (1994), 31-32.

¹⁰⁵ *Today is Your Birthday Again*.

the event.

6-3. Conclusion: Invitation to a Dialogue

“And what to do with reality, the Reality with a capital R?”¹⁰⁶ Kantor’s answer to his own question was the acceptance of illusion. Even as he emphasised his “illegal” role of provocateur with his presence on stage,¹⁰⁷ he was fully aware that all of his attempts to transgress the illusionary aspect of theatre were fundamentally just a pretence:

When I was to be a child, someone else was put in my place. Likewise someone else playacted me dying. When I wistfully kept thinking of returning to the school desk, other actors did it to play and to pretend. My presence on stage was to conceal the defeat of my impossible idea of non-acting, to rescue its last *raison d’être* – make-believe.¹⁰⁸

Thus, with one foot stepping out (*I Have Had Enough*) he embraced the boundaries of theatre with both of his arms (*I am Carrying the Picture*). It is noteworthy that Kantor’s last production staged a multitude of picture frames. Again Kantor was on stage, sitting on a chair facing the stage, but this time due to this device his presence was central to the performance, whereas in other works he, according to himself at least, remained “a spectator and not an actor.”¹⁰⁹ *Today Is My Birthday* is a materialisation of the relationship between an artist and his work, and

¹⁰⁶ Kantor (1993), 191.

¹⁰⁷ Klossowicz, 112.

¹⁰⁸ *Powrót Odysa*.

¹⁰⁹ Klossowicz, 111.

his process of creation. The stage becomes his canvas, and where in previous works he concealed the process of “make-believe” here he fully exposes the procedure.

“If I create a picture, starting from its frames, I sit in front of it and, by means of a brush or a stick, I manage the characters I arrange in this picture.”¹¹⁰ Of course, all this is fiction, construed beforehand and repeating itself as in his previous works. However, by structuring the dramaturgy so that the characters “live on their own account”¹¹¹ contrary to the creator’s intentions, he creates – or rather, makes explicit – the split between the artist and his art work. At the same time, due to his position at the front end of the stage facing the scene he also maintains his role of spectator. From the loudspeaker flows the voice of Kantor, intermittently repeating the lines:

“Again, I am on stage. (...) To be precise, I am not on stage but at the threshold.”¹¹² Kantor is not merely at the threshold but becomes one himself; the auditorium is extended to his seat on stage and the stage in its turn extends itself to the verge of the auditorium: “a threshold between / the world of ILLUSION / and our world of REALITY / is crossed over.”¹¹³ The split is blurred, and isolation is transformed into an invitation to participation.

¹¹⁰ *Today is Your Birthday Again*.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Kantor. *Today Is My Birthday*. Unpublished manuscript. Qtd. in Kobialka (1993c), 366.

¹¹³ Kantor (1993), 198.

Chapter 7

Looking at “Post-modern” Theatre through an Eastern Lens

7-1. Introduction: Against Representation or Another Representation

At the heart of Western debates around the issue of theatricality and searches for vocabularies with which to better describe – if not explain – contemporary theatre performance lies the enduring tradition of mimetic representation. The problem of representation in turn reaches back to the age-old question regarding the origin and the copy. Artaud, in the early 1930’s, declared the end of representation through his manifestos on the Theatre of Cruelty. Almost forty years later, in his seminal essay “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” Derrida diagnoses the theatre of Artaud as “repetition of that which does not repeat itself, theater as the original repetition of difference” and affirms the endless “fate of representation.”¹

Artaud dreamed of a theatre which would be “life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable”² and which, “far from imitating life, communicates wherever it can with pure forces”³ and therefore will be in direct contact with the origin itself; Derrida asserted that Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, which seeks for pure presence through an elimination of any element of repetition, was “already within representation, in the ‘second time of Creation,’ in the conflict of forces which could

¹ Derrida (1997b), 250.

² Ibid., 234.

³ Artaud (1999), 62.

not be that of a simple origin.”⁴ Demanding a break from literary theatre and reverting to a theatre as the site of pure presence, Artaud negated representation. In his dissection of Artaud’s manifestos, Derrida discloses the essence – a term towards which Derrida expresses severe scepticism – of his concept of presence. Artaud’s demand for pure presence in theatre is expressed never more clearly than in the following lines:

Let us leave textual criticism to teachers and formal criticism to aesthetes, and acknowledge that what has already been said no longer needs saying; that an expression twice used is of no value since it does not have two lives. Once spoken, all speech is dead and is only active as it is spoken. Once a form is used it has no more use, bidding man find another form, and theatre is the only place in the world where a gesture, once made, is never repeated in the same way.⁵

For Artaud, theatre relying on the authority of the text meant little more than a repetition of dead words – twice dead since they were by their nature a repetition of the already dead speech. Artaud’s notion of theatrical representation therefore, according to Derrida, “leaves behind it, behind its actual presence, no trace, no object to carry off.”⁶ The pure presence of Artaud, Derrida continues to assert, is that of which its act must be actively forgotten. The moment presence endures, continues to *be*, it no longer suffices as a presence. Thus, by its own logic the very notion of presence is always penetrated, and gives way to endless representation:

Presence, in order to be presence and self-presence, has always already begun to

⁴ Derrida (1997b), 248.

⁵ Artaud (1999), 56.

⁶ Derrida (1997b), 247.

represent itself, has always already been penetrated. Affirmation itself must be penetrated in repeating itself. Which means that the murder of the father which opens the history of representation (...) is endless and is repeated indefinitely. It begins by penetrating its own commentary and is accompanied by its own representation. In which it erases itself and confirms the transgressed law. To do so, it suffices that there be a sign, that is to say, a repetition.⁷

The problem of the relationship between the original and the copy, presence and representation has, in Western theatrical enquires, always been epitomised in or condensed to the relationship between the written text and staged performance. Indeed, from Aristotle through to modernity, the written text was largely believed to be the “original”, while the stage was considered as a locus of either its “illustration” or “translation.”⁸

Whether negation of representation or of the original in theatre, the voices that derive from either Artaud or Derrida hold strong in theatre scholarship to this day, with terms such as postmodernism and modernism, text and performance substituting for “original” and “representation” (copy) according to different scholars. Of these, perhaps the most troubling couple is that of the written text and the staged performance, which goes as far back as Artaud himself, who was perhaps not the first to voice the rejection of the text but arguably the most influential:

Dialogue – something written and spoken – does not specifically belong to the stage but to books. The proof is that there is a special section in literary history textbooks on drama as a subordinate branch in the history of spoken language.

I maintain the stage is a tangible, physical place that needs to be filled and it ought

⁷ Ibid., 249.

⁸ See Carlson (1985), 6-8.

to be allowed to speak its concrete language.

I maintain that this physical language, aimed at the senses and independent of speech, must first satisfy the senses. There must be poetry for the senses just as there is for speech, but this physical, tangible language I am referring to is really only theatrical in as far as the thoughts it expresses escape spoken language.⁹

Artaud announced the death of masterpieces and end of literary theatre in which “all the pictorial, musical and even gesticular forms introduced into Western theatre can only, in the best of cases, illustrate, accompany, serve, or decorate a text, a verbal fabric, a logos which is said in the beginning.”¹⁰ Extra-textual elements of theatre, however numerous and actively applied, would only serve as subsidiaries if the fundamental notion and status of theatre was not subverted. He therefore proposed to return to the “origin” of theatre which had been “lifted against the abusive wielder of the logos.”¹¹

Derrida is dubious about the concept of the origin. He accepts Artaud’s notion of the stage as a non-representational medium which refrains from repeating presence only on the condition that one fundamentally reconsiders the notion of the origin, or in this case, presence. For, in the eyes of Derrida, a present which is absolute, self-contained, and isolating to its subject does not suffice, and if a theatre is to be a representation of such a present and be put on display “*in front of me*,”¹² then, like Artaud, he too is content to discard the idea. But in the writings of Artaud, Derrida finds a different notion of both concepts. “Cruel” representation ceases to be “there” outside of me, suspending the notion of (theatrical) representation as an

⁹ Artaud (1999), 27.

¹⁰ Derrida (1997b), 236.

¹¹ Ibid., 239.

¹² Ibid., 237. Original emphasis.

addition – a surface of a spectacle on display for spectators; and he stipulates that it must “permeate me”; likewise, pure presence is presence only when it is a “perversion.”¹³ Notions of both the original (presence) and representation are subverted, and in this subversion the two pervade each other. Hence Derrida’s assertion: “And nonrepresentation is, thus, original representation.”¹⁴

The renouncement of the existing concept of the origin, which according to Derrida is the heritage of the three-millennia-old history of Western logocentric metaphysics,¹⁵ is deliberated in numerous writings of the philosopher. Through a close reading of the structure of Kant’s discourse of the first part of the *Critique of Judgement* in “The Parergon,” Derrida adopts his signature methodology of investigation, deconstruction, in order to question the unity of Kant’s logic and the conceptual frames that Kant presupposes in his account of the judgement of beauty. Derrida’s concern in this essay is the frame itself, the interior and exterior of an aesthetic judgment:

We must know of what we speak, what concerns the value of beauty *intrinsically* and what remains external to our immanent sense of it. This permanent demand – to distinguish between the internal or proper meaning and the circumstances of the object in question – organizes every philosophic discourse on art, the meaning of art and meaning itself, from Plato to Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. It presupposes a discourse on the limit between the inside and the outside of the art object, in this case a discourse on the frame.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Derrida (1997a), 8. And it was under this hierarchical system that writing was debased as “mediation of mediation and as a fall into the exteriority of meaning.” 13.

¹⁶ Derrida (1979), 12. Original emphasis.

Derrida questions whether distinction is indeed possible, using the concept of *parergon*, which he takes from Kant's own writing. *Parergon*, the supplement, ornamentation or adornment of the *ergon* (the work itself; the centre; the essence *within* the "frame") is, according to Kant, "what is only an adjunct, and not an intrinsic constituent in the complete representation of an object."¹⁷ Derrida does not attempt to argue against Kant's proposition; what he does instead is to illuminate the internal and intrinsic relationship between the two concepts – the *ergon* and the *parergon*. Initially agreeing to Kant's own example of the drapery as being a *parergon* of a statue, the represented whole, Derrida asks if other *parerga* are indeed secondary to the representational essence.¹⁸

By focusing on the *parergon* instead of the *ergon*, and by meticulously enquiring about the assumed peripheral status of the former, Derrida opens up some very important questions regarding the hierarchical mode of Western thought. What is essence? Is there indeed an origin which exists as an absolute entity, independent of its exterior additions? Is the distinction really possible? Shedding light on the ambiguous status of the *parergon* Derrida exposes the extreme difficulty of discerning the inside from the outside, the *ergon* from the *parergon*, the essence from the supplement. This question answered, Derrida asks another, this time about the validity of the hierarchical way of thought that is borne out of the authority of the centre. The *pareregon* is added, he asserts, "only because of a lack within the system it augments."¹⁹

The notion of the *parergon* was in fact elucidated in an earlier publication, *Of Grammatology*, through the discussion of Rousseau's concept of the supplement.

¹⁷ Qtd. in *ibid.*, 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

This time, deconstructing Rousseau's affirmation that writing gains significance only when speech fails to protect presence, Derrida questions whether the supplement – in this case writing – is indeed worthy, or only filling in the deficiency. As with the notion of the drapery – the *parergon* –, deliberation of writing, or the supplement, demands a need to seriously reconsider the nature of the essence, the spoken speech, the state of pure presence.

Here, Derrida points out the dual aspect of the supplement. In the first instance the supplement is “a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence.”²⁰ Then, as he illuminated in “The Parergon,” he describes how (Rousseau's notion of) the supplement fills in the immanent lack of the origin:

But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. (...) As substitutes, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness.²¹

Like the notion of the *parergon*, the status of the supplement fits into no category of the well-ordered Western way of thought. Being neither inside nor outside, or both inside and outside at the same time, it “forms part without being part, it belongs without belonging.”²² Royle uses the word “crazy” in his effort to explain the logic behind this uncanny concept,²³ and Derrida himself acknowledges

²⁰ Derrida (1997a), 144.

²¹ Ibid., 145.

²² Royle, 49.

²³ Ibid.

that the “supplement is maddening, because it is neither presence nor absence.”²⁴

But before hastily concluding that the supplement is a notion which one will never really grasp, there is one more thing to consider. I have, until now, concentrated on the absence of absolute *presence* found in the writings of Derrida. I now propose to briefly look at Derrida’s approach to *absence* which, at a glance, is as mystifying as his attitude towards presence. Absence, as quoted earlier, is marked in every presence; the supplement elucidates this aspect which hitherto had been veiled. The more one contemplates the notion of the supplement, the more one becomes aware of the inherent lack of presence. This lack, or absence, however, is not to be accepted as a fatal deficiency of its counterpart.

True, Derrida also writes that “the enjoyment of *the thing itself* is undermined, in its act and in its essence, by frustration.”²⁵ Due to its fatal shadow which is absence, presence, strictly speaking, “cannot even be called presence.”²⁶ Yet if one reverses this proposition, the same can be claimed of absence: that is, due to its inseparable partner named presence, absence cannot strictly be called absence. This is all the more true because of the supplement, which continuously fills. And precisely because the supplement supplements itself as it fills, the absence becomes limitless. The “void” that it fills²⁷ is not a finite one. Swaying back and forth between the two notions of which the boundaries are barely possible to discern, the supplement expands both presence and absence while it constantly frustrates their no longer solid limits – if one still persists in calling the evaporating notions by these names – infinitely.

Such is the “fate of representation.” This fate, however, need not be

²⁴ Derrida (1997a), 154.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 145.

understood as one of total negativity. On the contrary, it gives one an expectation of representation as ever-evolving, on a constant move, both inwards (by filling in the absence of presence) and outwards (supplementing itself). There is, therefore, no end to representation. And this representation is no longer identified with simple repetition. By questioning the self-sufficiency of the origin, Derrida opens up a way for a limitless possibility of representation, and it is in this sense that one must appreciate his affirmation that representation is for a second time “Creation.”

Such was Derrida’s response to Artaud and his call for pure theatre free of any kind of representation. The essence of the essence, in other words, is its inherent void (lack). The origin of theatre cannot, therefore, be determined. Expanded to the metaphysical realm, this becomes a serious undermining of Western logocentrism and its cause-and-effect formulation. As Culler explains:

[Derrida’s] deconstruction reverses the hierarchical opposition of the causal scheme. The distinction between cause and effect makes the cause an origin, logically and temporarily prior. (...) [Deconstruction] upsets the hierarchy by producing an exchange of properties. If the effect is what causes the cause to become a cause, then the effect, not the cause, should be treated as the origin. By showing that the argument which elevates cause can be used to favor effect, one uncovers and undoes the rhetorical operation responsible for the hierarchization and one produces a significant displacement. If either cause or effect can occupy the position of the origin, then origin is no longer originary; it loses its metaphysical privilege. A nonoriginary origin is a ‘concept’ that cannot be comprehended by the former system and thus disrupts it.²⁸

²⁸ Culler (1982), 88.

In his prophecy of the era of the theatre of cruelty, Artaud proclaimed that theatre as it was in his time must sever its compliant relationship with the written text and recover its own original language:

That is, instead of harking back to texts regarded as sacred and definitive, we must first break theatre's subjugation to the text and rediscover the idea of a kind of unique language somewhere in between gesture and thought. (.....) Theatre can still derive possibilities for extension from speech outside words, the development in space of its dissociatory, vibratory action on our sensibility.²⁹

For Derrida writing, which is the supplement, no longer indicates the exterior surface. The written word – or the “written signifier” as he puts it – is no longer technical or representative; no longer is there a distinction between the signifier and the signified, and no longer is one in an epoch where logocentrism holds – where *logos* signifies truth.³⁰ In this origin-less era, Derrida emphasises the need to shed a different light on writing:

For some time now, (...) one says ‘language’ for action, movement, thought, reflection, consciousness, unconsciousness, experience, affectivity, etc. Now we tend to say ‘writing’ for all that and more: to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified itself. And thus we say ‘writing’ for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of voice: cinematography,

²⁹ Artaud (1999), 68.

³⁰ Derrida (1997a), 11.

choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural ‘writing.’³¹

Thus, Derrida liberates writing from its confines of the linguistic, expanding it to the realms of the pictorial, aural, gestural, and physical, including even athletic as well as political activities in this domain.

Does, then, Derrida’s proposition for writing provide room for the spiritual? Surely various inscriptions of spiritual and emotional activities in any visual form would suffice as writing, but what about those activities themselves, which are kept silent and out of sight? For instance, would the experience of viewing a Chinese painting find a place in Derrida’s broad category of writing? Or what about the meditative process of the Chinese painter? These are real, lived experiences, but they not “inscribed” in any shape. On the other hand, if one is to understand the empirical aspects of art as “writing” in Derrida’s sense of the term, then is one not falling into the danger of limiting them to the paralinguistic sphere of investigation in its broadest sense? Derrida emphasises that by writing he means not only the secondary system of notation but also the “essence and the content of these activities themselves.”³² In this respect he reminds us how the biologist today refers to writing in relation to the informational processes within the living cell. However, it is difficult to deny that if one is to adopt this lens through which to look at the spiritual activities of the artist and recipient, one would be overlooking the unique and essential *experience* this sort of practice embraces. For Derrida himself notes that this new field of writing must “conserve the notion of writing, trace, grammè [written mark],” and that it is an element “of what consequently one should not even

³¹ Ibid., 9.

³² Ibid.

call *experience* in general.”³³

Although Derrida has largely succeeded in collapsing the hierarchical dichotomy between origin and representation inherent in Western thought, he is not as successful in providing us with a means to embrace elements which no longer fall into either category. It is difficult to deny his contribution in shedding a creative light on the notion of representation and elements which had hitherto been considered to fall under this category; however, it is also hard to deny that he elaborates little on this creative aspect of representation. If indeed there is no alternative beyond Derrida’s ingenious demolition of dichotomies, his endeavours may well be argued, regardless of his contribution to the reshaping of contemporary modes of thinking, to be futile. In the later parts of this chapter I will attempt to position aspects of Chinese aesthetics to fill in this “lack”, as Derrida might put it, applying the Chinese concept of the void in discussing a performance of a theatre company whose works frequently exhibit aspects which for many could evoke Derrida.

7-2. “Post-” Theatres: Simon McBurney and Robert Lepage

Whether to adhere and return to an origin, or to accept the new epoch of representation, voices which echo Artaud and Derrida have dominated the scholarly debates in the West. It can be said that the same has been the case in practice. Yet it is difficult to affirm that the communication between the fields of scholarship and art practice are in agreement. As the postmodernist scholar Nick Kaye’s interview with postmodern artist Elizabeth LeCompte exhibits, misunderstanding or lack of understanding – whether intentional or not – is still common between academia and

³³ Ibid. Original square brackets and emphasis.

art practice. One cannot blame this on the intrinsic differences in the mindsets of the members of each group, especially today when conversations between the two groups are more frequent and intimate than ever.

A better explanation, in my opinion, would be that the vocabulary and interrogational frame that currently dominates does not suffice. Kaye asks LeCompte about the creative process of *Brace Up!* (1991), which brought together Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and the conventions of Noh theatre as well as Japanese popular television and film,³⁴ focusing on the various meanings he finds in the deployment of Japanese theatre traditions in staging a Western naturalistic play.

Leaving aside Kaye's questionable view on the nature of Chekhov's plays, the dialogue between the scholar and the artist proves extremely significant:

KAYE. Were you interested in any way in the association between Chekhov's work and naturalism? Perhaps in opposition to the Japanese material?

LECOMPTE. You see, I don't know the history of the Chekhov. I hadn't, before I'd done this, seen a Chekhov play except in Dutch. I couldn't really tell what the psychology was. And the naturalism – well, I don't speak the language. I don't know the history of that, I don't know what that is.³⁵

LeCompte ceaselessly emphasises how she is less interested in the deeper significances of the artistic styles she borrows from different cultures than she is in how they function as materials for her artistic endeavours, of which their formal qualities are of utmost importance, while Kaye continues to seek the historical and cultural values of LeCompte's appropriations of them. It is little surprise how the

³⁴ See Kaye, 253.

³⁵ Ibid., 254-255.

only full agreement Kaye and LeCompte manage to arrive at after a rather perplexing dialogue is that they do not have the right means to communicate:

KAYE. It might be that we don't have a language to talk with.

LECOMPTE. It's possible.³⁶

The assumed agreement on concepts related to the postmodern is in effect not fully shared as one would like to think, which reconfirms the fragility of the vocabulary that we are presented with.

But there is another issue that arises due to this incomplete vocabulary, and this involves the creative process of the artist. Robert Lepage and Simon McBurney, whose theatrical works are largely considered to disrupt traditional dramaturgy and resist the authority of the written text, epitomise this problem. Both are renowned particularly for their creative procedure where the overall dramatic narrative is born out of long periods of devising, and for the dominance of extra-textual elements – the emphasis on vivid visual imagery, extensive use of high-tech media, and a special focus on the physicality of the performer's body.

A recent production of *Complicité*, of which McBurney is artistic director, *A Disappearing Number*,³⁷ is the outcome of lengthy devising processes in rehearsal rooms, as are recent productions of Lepage's *Ex Machina* including *Lipsynch*³⁸ and *The Andersen Project*.³⁹ "The theme of a new show may have been decided before rehearsals begin," Edwardes writes of *Complicité*'s working methods, "but its

³⁶ Ibid., 256-257.

³⁷ Premiered in March 2007 at Theatre Royal, Plymouth.

³⁸ Premiered in February 2007 at Northern Stage, Newcastle upon Tyne.

³⁹ Premiered in French in February 2005, Théâtre du Trident, Quebec City. English premiere at Royal Danish Theatre, Copenhagen, May 2005.

development and shape depends on what happens in the rehearsal room.”⁴⁰ More or less the same is said of Ex Machina’s creative methodology.⁴¹ This reversed way of making theatre results in a varied series of what the company prefers to call “public rehearsals,” as opposed to complete productions where often one differs considerably from the next.⁴² Each production, therefore, is deemed to be one of many stages in a continuous process rather than an end product shown in repetition.

Which presumably produces a reception that is quite different from other productions that are made according to more traditional conventions. Indeed, McBurney emphasises in several interviews the importance of the name of his company and how the word “complicity” implies not only a shared understanding “between the actors onstage but also between actors and the audience.”⁴³ Yet, whether these works are really beyond the traditional conventions of the theatre, and more importantly, whether they do indeed open up or require alternative ways of spectatorship is still to be questioned.

Let us take the narrative structure of *A Disappearing Number* for example. Inspired by Cambridge mathematician G. H. Hardy’s book *The Mathematician’s Apology* and the mathematical idea of infinity, *A Disappearing Number* incorporates three stories in three different time zones. The drama does not unfold according to the familiar Aristotelian principle of cause and effect; what dominates the structure is more like a collage of different fragments of different stories.

To apply the traditional mode of spectatorship therefore is almost impossible.

⁴⁰ Edwardes (1996), 213.

⁴¹ See Dundjerović, 62; Knowles (2004), 42-43. Knowles, however, contends that the dominance of Lepage himself over the overall aspects of the company’s projects makes it difficult to see the working process of Ex Machina as wholly collaborative.

⁴² For instance, Fricker gives a detailed account of the differences of the productions of *The Andersen Project* according to location and time. Fricker, 131-140.

⁴³ Knowles (2004), 49. Originally quoted in Vit Wagner, “Earthy Sage of Past and Peasant,” *The Toronto Star*, 12 September 1998. G3. See also Wolf, 25.

Almost, but not completely. The performance begins with a woman giving a lecture on the Riemann zeta function, proving that the sum of natural numbers from one to infinity equals minus one-twelfth. This formula, which strikes an audience mostly ignorant of mathematics as little less than absurd, is the thematic and dramaturgical key of the production. It foreshadows the overall narrative of the work in which seemingly disjointed lives and times converge into one, thereby forming an unintelligible yet contingent relationship.

Introducing this formula, the work sets down from the very beginning that the dramaturgical strategy is to be one that is very different from the familiar plot-structure. At the same time, the work employs a meta-theatrical element, creating a distance between the stage and the audience from the very beginning, and thereby making sure that the viewers are conscious of the fictional quality of the performance. As the woman continues to scribble down numbers and symbols on the lecture board, tirelessly explaining the logic behind the theorem, a man enters, faces the audience and says:

(In an Indian accent) You're probably wondering at this point if this is the entire show. I'm Aninda, this is Al and this is Ruth. *(Pause. His accent changes.)* Actually, that's a lie. I'm an actor playing Aninda, he's an actor playing Al and she's an actress playing Ruth. But the mathematics is real. It's terrifying, but it's real.⁴⁴

He then exposes the theatrical tricks the production uses and reiterates how everything except for the theorem is fake, before "beginning" the "actual"

⁴⁴ Complicite, 23.

performance. Such an opening, typical of *Complicité*,⁴⁵ has two very important functions. By calling the audience's attention to the fact that the space in which the event is taking place is "the imaginary world of the theatre,"⁴⁶ the work frees itself from possible accusations that the dramatic structure lacks coherence: because it is theatre, anything can happen in any way, and in this particular performance, this "way" is to be analogous to the mystical yet mathematically logical theorem. The opening is also important in that it is directed at the audience. McBurney's belief that "the space of the audience is in the minds of the audience"⁴⁷ is reinstated here, and when the man says, "And what I like about the theatre is that we are all able to imagine the same thing at the same time,"⁴⁸ he is in effect stating that it is the active participation of the audience members – their being the accomplices of the show – that completes the performance.

As mentioned, the structure is similar to that of the equation. One is presented with scenes which are added onto the previous ones without any apparent logical reason. Not only the fragmentary means of construction but also the immense scale, both in time and space of the drama, are worthy of severe criticism from Aristotle's point of view. Yet regardless of the apparent violation (or transcendence) of the Aristotelian dramaturgical principle, the narrative as a whole is hardly difficult to follow.

It is at this point that one wonders whether the performance really does work beyond traditional conventions. For, although each episode may not directly

⁴⁵ In the opening of *Mnemonic* (premiered 1999), for instance, McBurney addresses the audience as himself as he introduces the context of the performance that is to unfold, reminding the audience where they are as he says in his concluding words that "you are related to everyone sitting in this theatre." A similar tactic is used in *The Elephant Vanishes* (premiered 2003) where a stage manager (who is in fact one of the actors) apologizes to the audience for the delay due to technical problems and gives a short speech "while the problems are fixed."

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Qtd. in Hemming.

⁴⁸ *Complicite*, 25.

influence the others, the overall plot is carefully directed towards the denouement, and the initially independent stories converge like numbers of the equation, accumulating towards the finale. The final scene in particular highlights this aspect, for it embraces everything one would expect from a traditional ending. What is more striking in this ending scene is the dialogue between Al and Aninda:

AL. (...) Are you saying that this math is helping to form a unified vision of the universe?

ANINDA. Yes, it is the holy grail of physics to find a single coherent explanation for the biggest and smallest elements of our universe.⁴⁹

The whole of the performance, therefore, is developed towards a coherent understanding. This sounds familiar. The scale of *A Disappearing Number* also belies its initial extravagance. Temporally spanning almost a century and geographically covering nearly half of the globe, the production is, to borrow Aristotle's analogy, not only a "creature" excessive in size but a hybrid of different smaller ones.

However, if one recalls that Aristotle's regulation of scale is aimed at a unified understanding of the plot, then it becomes a rather different matter. It is less a question of external scale but one intrinsically related to the overall unity of the structure. As discussed in earlier chapters, this is the essence of the *Poetics*: beauty is unity. While apparently contradicting the rules of the Aristotelian way of dramatic construction, the very aspects that engender the contradiction in effect serve as a means of conformity. Furthermore, the very manner of the arrangement of events

⁴⁹ Ibid., 86-87.

itself contributes directly to the major theme of the performance. It is noteworthy that the performance repeats through the voices of different characters the lines from Hardy's *A Mathematician's Apology*, which strikingly resemble Aristotle's stance on tragedy:

The mathematician's patterns, like the painter's or the poet's, must be beautiful; the ideas, like the colours or the words, must fit together in a harmonious way. Beauty is the first test: there is no permanent place in the world for ugly mathematics.⁵⁰

It is, in this respect, no wonder that some reviewers easily liken the production to "a conventional play."⁵¹ And because it can be read as a conventional play, criticisms such as the following can be written: "The show is best when it forgets the annoying theatrics and concentrates on the relationship between the two mighty boffins;"⁵² "The piece could make more of the relationship between the atheist Cambridge don and devout Brahmin."⁵³

Although I do not agree that the theatrical aspects of *A Disappearing Number* are "annoying" or subsidiary – on the contrary, I find them essential to the dramaturgical construction – I do find that the composition of the performance not only allows conventional spectatorship but to some degree requires it. Complicité has certainly displaced the authority of the written text, but as we have examined, it very much conforms to the traditional mode of story-telling. Play writing has been replaced by "stage writing," and "the spectator, like the reader, remains subject to logocentric premises regulating the relationship of this fateful and very Western

⁵⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁵¹ Irvine (2007).

⁵² Ibid. (2007).

⁵³ Spencer (2007).

couple, text-performance.”⁵⁴

Recently, a new vocabulary has been proposed in order to better discuss contemporary theatre. This is Lehmann’s concept of the “postdramatic” which, barely a decade after the publication of *Postdramatic Theatre*, has been widely accepted as the new receptive frame. Lehmann does not give a clear-cut definition of the postdramatic, but the following lines give us a good idea of the boundary of theatre that he is referring to:

By alluding to the literary genre of the drama, the title ‘Postdramatic Theatre’ signals the continuing association and exchange between theatre and text. Nevertheless, the discourse of *theatre* is at the centre of this book and the text therefore is considered only as one element, one layer, or as a ‘material’ of the scenic creation, not as its master.⁵⁵

The term is efficient yet confusing, especially in relation to the existing concept of the “postmodern”; Lehmann, too, is fully aware of this and explains how his concept differs from the postmodern as he highlights the limits of the latter concept. One of the major dissatisfactions that Lehmann expresses towards the notion of postmodernism is shared by many: its ambiguous relationship to modernism. While stating that the so-called postmodern theatre practices “by no means demonstrate a renunciation of modernity on principle,” he argues that they “show a renunciation of the traditions of dramatic form.”⁵⁶

However, regardless of his claim that “the newer theatre aesthetics practise a consistent renunciation of one plot and the perfection of the drama – without this

⁵⁴ Pavis (2008), 122.

⁵⁵ Lehmann (2006), 17. Original emphasis.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 26.

implying a renunciation of modernity *per se*,⁵⁷ the words that he uses to describe the key features of postmodern theatre, such as “ambiguity,” “celebrating theatre as process,” “text as basic material only,” “anti-mimetic,” “resisting interpretation” to name but a few, overlap significantly with the traits of postdramatic theatre which he later explains.⁵⁸ Moreover, Karen Jürs-Munby writes in her introduction to the English translation of the book that Lehmann’s theory clearly resonates with several aspects of postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking.⁵⁹ The dense list of artists and companies that can be categorised within the field of the postdramatic, including both Lepage and Complicité as well as Forced Entertainment which will be discussed in depth later on in this chapter, only adds to the confusion between the two frames.

This raises some critical questions. Is postdramatic theatre a category designed to group modern and contemporary theatre practices according to an alternative criterion, or is it a new way of looking at these “new” theatres? If the former is Lehmann’s main concern, does this new category fundamentally differ from the existing ones, including (or especially) postmodernism? Certainly, setting the dramatic as the distinguishing point does help to better define theatres of today than principles that are intrinsically outside the limits of the theatrical genre do, but does the perspective of the postdramatic essentially group theatres differently? On the other hand, if the latter is the case, then what different reception can be sought from this frame? Lehmann writes that one of the theatrical situations that triggered his study was the lack of conceptual tools to articulate the spectator’s perception.⁶⁰ And indeed, he offers a vocabulary with which to interrogate facets of postdramatic

⁵⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 19.

theatre.

However, while fully appreciating that they are mostly shared characteristics of contemporary theatre – call it experimental, avant-garde, postmodern or postdramatic – I cannot but question whether they are not in fact limiting the sphere of contemporary performance rather than opening up ways of looking at each performance. Acknowledging the limits of the concept of the *mise-en-scène*, and proposing, though not without reserve, to replace it with a new figure which he terms *mise en perf* or *performise*, Pavis claims that the “desire for coherence, for verification, validation and fidelity, [still] runs very deep.”⁶¹ Lehmann’s discussion of postdramatic theatre also seems to exhibit the urge for a coherent generalisation of different theatre productions from different practitioners: just as debates continue regarding whether a certain performance or artist is postmodern or not, debates on what is postdramatic or not may very well arise.

One need not go far to predict such a situation if one recalls the structure of *A Disappearing Number*. Diagnosing the cancellation of synthesis as one of the main traits of postdramatic theatre, Lehmann asserts:

Synthesis is sacrificed in order to gain, in its place, the density of intensive moments. If the partial structures nevertheless develop into something like a whole, this is no longer organized according to prescribed models of dramatic coherence or comprehensive symbolic references and does not realize synthesis.⁶²

It almost seems as if these lines are describing the structure of *A Disappearing Number*. However, to read the production according to such a

⁶¹ Pavis (2008), 124.

⁶² Lehmann (2006), 83.

perspective would be to overlook a fundamental aspect of the work – an apparent non-traditional narrative composition which builds up towards an experience of synthesis – in order to include it within the realm of the postdramatic. I am fully aware that no one theoretical frame can encompass all aspects of its object of enquiry; however, this does not alleviate the danger of the theoretician moulding art works in ways that can be understood rather than looking at them in their entirety. It is largely within this line of doubt that Fuchs also questions the validity of Lehmann’s categorising the works of Robert Wilson as postdramatic, arguing that Lehmann’s theoretical practice is “a symptom of the general problem of staking out grand theories on the moving ground of contemporary phenomena.”⁶³

At the same time, the term exposes yet again the Western obsession with the text-performance dichotomy. This fateful dichotomy, of course, traces itself back to the tradition of *mimesis*, the foundation of the concept of representation in the West. Although Lehmann prefers to use “drama” rather than “text”, it is evident that by drama he is alluding to the written dramatic play with the plot at the centre, which “founds the logos of a totality, in which beauty is intrinsically conceived of as mastery of the temporal progress.”⁶⁴ It is on this premise that he finds the current environment to be, one that has “*mutually estranged theatre and drama and has distanced them ever further from each other.*”⁶⁵ At the same time, the fact that Lehmann first used the term in his effort to “speak about ancient tragedy as ‘pre-dramatic’” and replace the term “drama” with “the scene” or “the situation”⁶⁶ makes it clear that he is fundamentally rooted in the Classical thinking about theatre. For this reason he is cautious to clarify that postdramatic theatre does not completely

⁶³ Fuchs, 180.

⁶⁴ Lehmann (2006), 40.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 30. Original emphasis.

⁶⁶ Barnett et al., 483.

estrangle itself from the traditional sense of the dramatic:

(...) the limbs or branches of a dramatic organism, even if they are withered material, are still present and form the space of a memory that is ‘bursting open’ in a double sense. (...) Postdramatic theatre thus includes the presence or resumption or continued working of older aesthetics, including those that took leave of the dramatic idea in earlier times, be it on the level of text or theatre.⁶⁷

That Lehmann is searching for ways to interrogate contemporary theatre performances via their anti or post dramatic features means that it is extremely difficult to transcend the paradigm of Western representation. Barnett argues that postdramatic theatre “proposes a theatre beyond representation, in which the limitations of representation are held in check by dramaturgies that seek to *present* material rather than to posit a direct, representational relationship between the stage and the outside world.”⁶⁸ This is true. Yet, because Lehmann’s concept of the postdramatic essentially reacts against Aristotle’s law of representation, specifically from a “‘European’ point of view,”⁶⁹ it becomes extremely difficult to transcend that frame. One needs a frame in order to react against it; but when a “new” frame is formed through a reaction against an existing one – particularly one that has been the target of criticism and a hurdle to be overcome for so many generations – it does become extremely difficult for it to fully transcend the logics of its predecessor.

When this frame is a receptive and interpretive tool, then such limits become more vivid than ever. The way the main body of *Postdramatic Theatre* is designed

⁶⁷ Lehmann (2006), 27.

⁶⁸ Barnett (2008), 15.

⁶⁹ Lehmann (2008), 15. This remark was made in answer to Fuchs’ expression of severe scepticism over Lehmann’s criteria of postdramatic theatre and the alleged European defensiveness against performance studies from “an American perspective.” See Fuchs, 180-181.

and structured makes this aspect all the more explicit: starting with an introduction to the Aristotelian tradition of the relationship between drama and theatre, Lehmann then provides a brief overview of the theatrical resistance against the dramatic text from the late nineteenth century modernist theatres, to the neo-avant-garde of the 1950's and 1960's, before discussing some of the most prominent facets of what he categorises as the postdramatic. Included in these facets are ceremony, synaesthesia, simultaneity, visual dramaturgy, irruption of the real, and physicality. As can be seen from these examples, "postdramatic" features are precisely extra-dramatic – the little or less significant elements of "drama" that Aristotle specifies in the *Poetics*, if they are included in Aristotle's notion of drama at all. Lehmann is careful to exclude any aspect of theatre that can be included in the conventional category of "dramatic" theatre. Analysis or interpretation of postdramatic theatre is virtually impossible without its dramatic counterpart.

And thus I arrive at my question: is it not possible to discover ways of looking at contemporary theatre beyond the binary representational frame of the West? In order to answer to this question I shall apply the aesthetics of Chinese paintings that I have discussed throughout the previous chapters to the works of Forced Entertainment. Putting particular focus on the concept of the void and motif of journey, I will examine the strategies used by Forced Entertainment to meet with the audience.

7-3. Looking at Theatre through an Eastern Lens: Forced Entertainment

Before investigating the works of Forced Entertainment via my proposed frame, there are a few questions that need to be answered. Perhaps the most important question concerning the company in relation to my discussion would be whether its works aim to challenge the existing Western frame of representation as well as the traditional confines of mimetic theatre. This question is particularly significant, since I have been asking whether other “cutting-edge” theatre companies are really working against traditional Western theatre conventions or transcend them. Moreover, it is important because such an enquiry itself is a mode of talking about contemporary performance art: defining or categorizing a performance exposes the receptive frame one is adopting, and in my effort to answer this question I hope to reveal the complex problems in both the practices of contemporary theatre, and more particularly the critical practice concerning them.

In an essay written after the German publication of *Postdramatic Theatre*, Lehmann, while admiringly comparing Forced Entertainment’s theatrical works to Shakespeare, unhesitatingly defines them as “postdramatic;”⁷⁰ Kalb, too, while revealing his long-term scepticism about the term, is eager to recognise the postdramatic qualities of the company’s works, which are exemplary of theatres and artists “whose work really is driven by a loss of patience with drama *per se*.”⁷¹

But one need not look for scholarly commentaries such as these in order to judge whether or not Forced Entertainment works within the Aristotelian mode of dramatic construction, for it is all too obvious that drama *per se*, as Kalb says, is not in any way the object of interest for the company. Unlike the works of *Complicité* or

⁷⁰ Lehmann (2004), 103.

⁷¹ Kalb, 1.

Ex Machina, Forced Entertainment rarely tells a coherent story – be it via words or images. However, when it comes to the relationship its works form with reality, the fictive, and the audience, more caution is necessary.

7-3-1. Fiction or Real? Or Fiction and Real?

Forced Entertainment's almost excessive play with or against the conventions of traditional theatre tempts one to view their works as a direct challenge to Western representational theatre. It is easy to identify *Spectacular* (2008) and *First Night* (2001), for example, as a deliberate and immediate mockery of both spectatorship and the dramaturgic patterns of conventional theatre. The performers of *First Night* stand on front stage, facing the audience, each with a piece of cardboard in their hands, on which are inscribed letters that collectively form the word "WELCOME!". With a forced, artificial smile on their faces, they then take turns in giving a long speech about what the audience will not see or experience in their show.

Likewise in *Spectacular*, a man in a shabby skeleton costume enters the bare stage and apologises to the audience for the exceptional situation of the evening and takes the time to describe what is normally supposed to happen:

Normally, a warm-up guy comes on. He tells a few jokes and that sort of 'warms up' the atmosphere. And then I come on and obviously (*referring to his costume*) that's a bit of a shock, isn't it? Um ... and yeah ... that hasn't happened tonight.⁷²

These are just a few of the many strategies used by the company to mock and

⁷² *Spectacular* transcript .

evade the representational characteristic of theatre and step over the borderline that separates the world of the theatre from the world of reality. The case of *Spectacular* is particularly noteworthy, for in its explicit reliance on “tonight” as an exception, there lies its inevitable contradiction. The narrative structure of the performance is fixed: the exceptional situation of “tonight” is to be repeated night after night, and contrary to what the performance apparently suggests, in reality it is unable to react to real exceptions which occur outside of the stage.

Two episodes highlight this paradox. A performance during the 2008 London tour of the work at the Riverside Studios coincided with a rock concert of the Stereophonics. The two events took place simultaneously in studios adjacent to each other, and the frail walls of Studio 2 in which *Spectacular* was being performed were helpless against the overwhelming noise of both the musicians and their enthusiastic fans. While the unlucky audience members looked at the stage expecting a remark or two from the performers on the intrusive noise, the performers themselves seemed immune to what was happening and went on as if everything was well. Naturally, much the post-show talk was devoted to the incident and many questioned why the performers didn’t react to the “real” exception of the evening. The performers admitted the inevitable contradiction which was highlighted due to the unfortunate circumstances, saying that improvisation and spontaneity was not an option for them outside the rehearsal room. Total control of the performance at hand was prioritized over the liveness of the event.

A year later, the Seoul tour of the performance exhibited an extra element to the performance. The audience, most of whom were non-English speakers, had to rely on surtitles which had been prepared beforehand. Normally surtitles would not be a problem for audiences who are used to seeing foreign productions; in this case,

however, the device which was intended to assist the audience's understanding of the show turned out to be a serious obstacle.⁷³ Due to the surtitles the fact that the supposedly "exceptional evening" was all pre-planned was overtly exposed; in other words, the fact that the whole of the performance was, like most plays, an end product, being repeated regardless of the unique situations of each performance milieu, was known to the audience before the show had even begun.

Is, then, Forced Entertainment's mockery of representational theatre a pretence, or if not, a failure? Or is the performance heading in a different direction? Etchells provides a hint to the answer when he talks about "non-acting" on stage:

... we know that this is illusion, don't we? We know that the ones at the back of the stage, sat chatting, or the ones who speak when they 'should not' (or who don't speak when they should) are still part of a representational mechanism, still part of a machine that makes meaning. Still foot-soldiers in an army of meaning. It's not real life back there; those asides, those upstagings, those wanderings off from the point are all planned, those cracks in the surface aren't fundamental.⁷⁴

The aim of the works of Forced Entertainment, therefore, is not to wage war against representational theatre. They do not attempt to banish illusion from their stage. They know that when an actor plays dead onstage "no-one's fooled. No-one's taken in. Doesn't matter how much fake blood, how much yelling, how much sobbing, how much stillness. No one thinks this is real."⁷⁵ Fully aware of the fate of representation and of illusion in theatre, Forced Entertainment readily takes them as

⁷³ An audience member who understood the language asked during the post-show talk whether the occasional mis-timings of the translations were intentional, which discloses one of the instances of unnecessary confusions in the spectatorial experience.

⁷⁴ Etchells (2009a), 73.

⁷⁵ Etchells (2008).

the prime basis of their performance and rule of their game. The theatre works of the company evolve as they do because, (or even though), the audience knows the fictive quality of the performances' condition. It is noteworthy how Etchells explains that while the performers are talking to the audience the performers are *personas*, not themselves.⁷⁶

The significance of Forced Entertainment's attitude towards the real and fictional in theatre is far greater and much more complicated than it appears. The performers in Forced Entertainment play no other character than themselves who are, due to the inherent characteristics of the theatre, not themselves. It is, as Etchells elucidates, playing with different levels of the status of the performer: "We often work with the idea of levels – a baseline of performers-as-performers and above that levels of pretences, assumptions of character or whatever. We like the effect of a kind of slipping between these layers or levels."⁷⁷ This applies not only to the performers, but due to the nature of the narratives, the performances themselves as well. The frequent meta-theatrical references spoken by these performers who are themselves-yet-not-themselves increase the audience's awareness of the environment they are surrounded in, while retaining at the same time the fictional quality of the performance. The space of the theatre becomes one where the real blends into the world of fiction and where fiction extends to reality.

This is different from Féral's position discussed in the previous chapter, where she sets a series of cleavages between the real and fictive worlds, ultimately locating the audience in the field of the latter, as the foundation of theatricality. It is neither split nor erasure that occurs in Forced Entertainment, but inter-penetration

⁷⁶ Heathfield (2004), 86.

⁷⁷ Svich (2003), 34.

and inter-permeation. The dichotomy between the real world and the fictional world which has been sustained throughout the history of mimetic theatre is dissolved. It disrupts both the traditional semiotic view that the actors on stage “cease to exist for themselves, and become instead the stand-in for an absent and perhaps nonexistent other,”⁷⁸ and the more recent views inheriting the voice of Artaud which put emphasis on the presence of the actor, or the more radical perspectives that focus on the performative quality of the event, or which evolve around the realm of performance art.⁷⁹ The prevailing exclusive “either or” frame of thought needs to be replaced by an inclusive alternative mode of reception.

Returning then to the question at hand: are the theatre works of Forced Entertainment a challenge against representation? My own answer to this question is that they are not, and in the discussions to follow I will try to demonstrate how the company establishes a different relationship between reality and fiction, and how this in turn involves a different relationship with the audience. I will look in particular at the narrative structure of the company’s works and their use of language. While Forced Entertainment is also renowned for its extensive deployment of (low-tech) visual media into their works, it is difficult not to notice how heavily reliant their works are on verbal language. This is particularly remarkable when in the West the word has historically been conceived as the product and representative of logocentrism, which in turn has been at the heart of its “drama”.

Handke provides a succinct explanation, when he talks about the creation of *Offending the Audience*, of how words can become the most effective device with which to challenge dramatic narrative:

⁷⁸ Saltz (2009), 204.

⁷⁹ See Fischer-Lichte (2008), 18-19.

My point was to use words to encircle the audience so they'd want to free themselves by heckling; they might feel naked and get involved. What is said doesn't really matter. I reduced the play to words because my words are not descriptions, only quotations, and because the only possibility they point to is the one that happens while the words are spoken on the stage.⁸⁰

Forced Entertainment's heavy reliance on words can also be understood in this vein. In his attempt to "open the door to a broad, adventurous description of what writing for performance might mean – beyond ideas of playwriting,"⁸¹ Etchells makes one thing clear: writing for him is no authoritative practice, nor inscription of knowledge:

Working in performance they were always tempted to think about writing (or even speaking) as a kind of trying on of other peoples [*sic*] clothes – a borrowing of power. I speak for a moment like my father. I assume the language of a teacher. I speak for a moment like they do in some movie. I borrow the phrase from a friend, a sentence construction from a lover. A writing that's more like sampling. Mixing, matching, cutting, pasting. Conscious, strategic and sometimes unconscious, out of control. I'm quoting and I don't even know it.⁸²

Etchells' putting down the authority of the word through the use of words may, particularly having read the above quotation, seem to echo Derrida, and it is indeed very likely that he read the works of the philosopher. Yet, regardless of Etchells' own position on writing, the theatre performances that Forced

⁸⁰ Joseph (1970), 57.

⁸¹ Etchells (1999b), 98.

⁸² Ibid., 101.

Entertainment present go much further than playing with the question of authority. The next section will examine this aspect, and explore the dimensions created through the apparent process of demolition that is to be found in most of the company's works.

7-3-2. Word, Image, and the Aesthetics of Erasure: *The World in Pictures*

While it is difficult to argue that such a thing as scenography in the traditional sense of the word exists in the works of Forced Entertainment, various visual devices are employed in many of their works, be they simple props or larger stage sets. And, while scenography in most "postdramatic" theatres is tightly interwoven into the overall dramaturgy of the performance, often replacing the textual dramaturgy or even words themselves, it is difficult to assert that the scenography in Forced Entertainment's productions operates in this manner. Although there is no single established definition of scenography, as can be found in the various quotes in Pamela Howard's insightful book *What is Scenography?*,⁸³ it would be safe to say that Lehmann's position that the term refers to a visual dramaturgy which "is not subordinated to the text and can therefore freely develop its own logic,"⁸⁴ is shared by many.

Adopting this position, and expanding the boundary of "scenography" to its broadest limits – all physical tactics of scene-making excluding the verbal text and

⁸³ The book introduces some interesting definitions by various theatre practitioners from all over the world, from the more narrow and traditional view of scenography as the "visualization of the dramatic text" (Iago Pericot) or the "visible design for the stage: set, costume and lighting" (Maija Pekkanen), to broader definitions such as those of Josef Svoboda ("The interplay of space, time, movement and light on stage") and Josef Ciller ("Materialisation of the imagination"). See Howard, xiii-xvi.

⁸⁴ Lehmann (2006), 93.

including the acting of the performer – I shall examine how the scenographic aspect of *The World in Pictures* (2006) interacts with verbal language (dramatic narrative).

Hi. My name is Terry, and I'm going to be doing the talking bit tonight. I'm going to be talking you through the story of mankind, and everybody else here, as you've probably already gathered, everybody else here is going to be physically bringing the story to life. Bringing the story to life before your very eyes.⁸⁵

Without further delay, Terry, standing in the front corner of the stage behind a standing microphone, begins to tell the audience of the earliest stages of the history of man, as the rest of the performers attempt to visualise her story on centre stage. The “main” body of the *The World in Pictures*, as the performer Terry O'Connor introduces it, develops through the verbal description of a narrator (telling), accompanied by the other performers' visual enactment of her words (showing). The attempts, both by Terry to deliver her speech, and the performers to “bring the story to life,” however, results in a failure. Failure, as Heathfield observes, has always been a large part of Forced Entertainment's aesthetics,⁸⁶ and has in many cases been one of the core tactics in their games with conventional representational strategies. This is also the case in the failure that the audience witness in *The World in Pictures*.

In the first instance it is the showing part that fails. With Terry's words acting as stage directions, the performers attempt to re-enact the historical scenes that Terry talks of: they mimic the early man wearing cavemen costumes and cheap wigs; they represent the arrival of fire with an electric heater; they become ancient Greeks and Romans by covering their half-naked bodies with white sheets; they visualise the

⁸⁵ *The World in Pictures* transcript.

⁸⁶ Heathfield (2004), 88.

snow by throwing white tissue from the top of a huge movable ladder; and cross the stage with a wheelbarrow and insist that it is the 'Black Death'. With the help of the performers' inability to act or exaggerated acting, the scenographic attempt to show the story becomes a failure. As Etchells says, it is a statement about "the inherent failure in the system of representation."⁸⁷ This becomes obvious from the very beginning, as the performers, while doing their acting, casually interrupt Terry and comment on her story, trying to amend the main narrative according to each one's desires, or ignore her story altogether and become immersed in their own game of pretending. The "talking bit" is halted by the "showing bit", and the failure of the visual engenders the failure of words. It is not long before the coherence of the stage and the story collapses. One could easily locate this in the line of contemporary anti-mimetic theatre's reactions against representation. The hierarchy of language and spectacle has been reversed, and the dramatic *logos* is dissolved.

But is this all? Is the disruption of conventional theatre logic and the mocking visualisation of the limits of representation the end of the work? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to look at the relationship between language and spectacle in more detail. One of the few instances when the stage fittingly represents Terry's words is when she announces the "last days of chaos and decadence that mark the end of the Roman Empire." While the spoken words have struggled to describe the early history of the world, the stage is now swept with shouting and screaming, jumping and running, and is smothered with a sofa, a TV set and a laptop with no particular reason, overwhelmed by the original soundtrack of the film *10,000 B.C.*

The chaos is then slowly silenced as the lights fade out.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 98.

What is left on stage is the trace: it is as if the stage has been painted with a physical and aural paint. It is almost as if the performers have brushed the canvas called the stage with their bodies. A transition takes place, and the unsuccessful attempt to translate words into theatrical language is transformed into something like a picture. The construction of this picture, while visually completely different, can be likened to the painting of Li Po that was discussed several times in earlier chapters. The excess of the visual erases the spoken language, thereby creating a textual as well as an overall sense of void. The chaotic accumulation of scenography can, in this respect, be perceived as a visualisation of the process of emptying, of “hollowing out spaces inside the spectacle.”⁸⁸ However, one cannot totally neglect the words that have hitherto filled the time and space of the performance. It cannot simply be understood that they were spoken only so as to be erased. The relationship between text and scenography, and the attempt to represent and its denial (or failure) is much more complicated than it appears.

In order to examine these complexities I propose to look at a painting by a contemporary visual artist called Julião Sarmento, who frequently engages verbal text with the visual and many of whose works are constructed through processes of effacement.⁸⁹ *Forget Me* (fig. 28), which features a headless female figure stood next to a blank-screened television set, quotes a section from Foucault’s “A Preface to Transgression”:

In a language stripped of dialectics, at the heart of what it says but also at the root of

⁸⁸ Svich (2003), 34.

⁸⁹ Born in Lisbon (1948). Julião Sarmento began exhibiting film, video, sound, painting, sculpture, installation and multimedia in the seventies, but also developed several significant site-specific projects. He has exhibited his work extensively in one-man and group shows. Sarmento represented Portugal at the Venice Biennial in 1997. His work is currently on exhibition at the Tate Modern (2010). www.juliosarmento.com.

its possibilities, the philosopher is aware that ‘we are not everything’; he learns as well that even the philosopher does not inhabit the whole of his language like a secret and perfectly fluent god.⁹⁰

This silk-screened text, which instances the post-structural awareness of the limits of language, acts as a guide to the overall work. Bordered and placed near where the non-existing head would have been, it allows the viewer to see the text as perhaps the thoughts of this half-painted figure, or as the painter’s commentary on his own painting.

However, more important than what is read is what cannot be read, for instead of omitting the next line, Sarmiento chooses to add it into his work only to erase it. Calirman explains that the erased lines in Sarmiento’s works are “traces that evoke a limit to be crossed or a boundary to be transported or transgressed;”⁹¹ not only do they evoke the limit but they also invite and encourage the viewer to take that step over to the other side of the boundary.

One must then ask how the crossing or transportation takes place, and into what dimension. One may recall the strategies used in Chinese landscape paintings in order to block the unimpaired view of the whole scenery, and there is little difficulty in understanding the vivid marks of erasure in this vein. The traces of erasure, which are carefully made so as to provide partial glimpses of what is inscribed underneath, invite the viewer into a game. It asks the viewer if he can read what is not to be read. The viewer who decides to participate in this game becomes contemplative, trying to figure out what the hidden words are. But the task is not

⁹⁰ Transcript from the painting. Original quote in English can be found in Faubion, J, ed. *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*. New York: New Press, 1998. 69-87.

⁹¹ Calirman, 144.

easy; in hope of obtaining some hints the viewer's eyes return to the visible.

What at the first reading escaped the eyes of the viewer now comes into sight, the meaning and intensity magnified. One reads the words enclosed in quotation marks, "we are not everything," and realises that these are not just Foucault's but the painting's message to the viewer. With this message the viewer again turns towards the lines which hide the words, resigning from the game, knowing now that it is no longer important what the marks are hiding, realising that they are in fact a void, waiting to be filled with another language created by the onlooker. The traces of the process of erasure are therefore not a gesture of total denial. The space (textual vacuum) created through negation exists because of the subject of negation. The existing words form a basis of, or a threshold to the space of the unspoken, and the space of the visible points towards the space of the unseen. The painting therefore achieves a durational quality, which invites the viewer to step from the realm of seeing to that of feeling, from cognition to experience. At the same time, the space of the void marked in this painting by the lines that feign to efface language, visually forms a frame for the remaining text, in turn becoming a vessel that reshapes the meaning of the text.

The relationship between language and its apparent negation can thus be understood as a mutual dialogue, and the traces of erasure may be perceived as a marking of space which the viewer can walk into.⁹² Thus, the painting achieves another dimension: one of time. Such a dimension of time in painting becomes a passage which bridges the dimension of the work (and the creator) to the experience of the spectator; the temporal dimension of the painting, therefore, is similar to

⁹² Cited from Tim Etchells' recollection of his experience of looking at a painting by American artist Cy Twombly. Etchells (2009b).

Bergson's heterogeneous notion of duration, and is always directed to the continuous present. At the same time, it is similar to the structure of Chinese paintings, where painted figures guide the viewer into an invisible space left unpainted on the picture plane, inviting him to a journey into his own inner state.

The relationship between text and image that informs Sarmiento's work can be applied to *The World in Pictures*. The performers' inability to re-enact Terry's words as well as their frequent interruptions to her talk are like the black lines which erase parts of Foucault's lines; like these lines, this process is simultaneously one of creation as well as of erasure. As the traces of erasure in the painting are not mere marks, but an opening up of a space for an unknown language of the viewer, so too is the textual void created by the group of performers, who are either incapable of re-enacting or unwilling to re-enact the creation of a (mental) space, inviting the audience to fill in. Like the painting, such a space in *The World in Pictures* is produced due to its peculiar aesthetics of time. As Lehmann observes, "utilizing the specificity of theatre as a mode of presentation to turn *time as such* into an object of the aesthetic experience"⁹³ is a vivid tendency in what he categorises as postdramatic theatre, and although the temporal dimension of the performance is not put to the extreme fore (as in the theatre of Robert Wilson, for example,) the "durational aesthetic" is most central to the development of the performance.

In order to better understand this aspect, one only needs to observe the inter-relationship of the temporal layers of the past and present that form the basis of the performance at hand. Another way of looking at the relationship between Terry's attempt to tell and the rest of the performers' process of effacement is to see it as a collision between past history and the present "now". But this collision is no simple

⁹³ Lehmann (2006), 156. Original emphasis.

matter. Despite the chaotic gestures of the performers that interfere with and fragment Terry's story, the story never totally disintegrates; on the contrary, the "history of the world" continues, slowly and at times abruptly nearing the audience's own present time. The dramatic narrative of the work – if one could actually speak of its existence – is anything but teleological; the temporal dramaturgy, however, has a definite goal, and this goal is the present, "real time" of the audience. As Lehmann points out, the crisis of drama around the turn of the century was essentially a crisis of time,⁹⁴ and instead of an enclosed fictional time, the "idea of time as an experience shared by all constitutes the centre of the new dramaturgies of time."⁹⁵ This is also true of *The World in Pictures*, but whereas Lehmann, when speaking of shared time, suggests the external time of the performance, the present-ness in Forced Entertainment's work is directed at the internal experience of the audience. The present, "real" time in this case is difficult to distinguish from an empty space.

The scene following "The Black Death" makes this clear. Amidst the silent mess, a man from the performers' group approaches the deserted laptop and starts projecting images unto a screen. These images are anonymous photographs of our own time, objects and sceneries so familiar to us that we would not normally care to give them a second glance. The man then begins to add commentaries on each of the images. His words, however, are seldom "objective" descriptions of the images, and are mostly left as one of many possible subjective responses. Looking at a picture of a pair of pink shoes, for instance, he says, "This is a present that you might have bought for someone," and regarding a picture filled with green grass he says it is "a summer afternoon." As the scene continues, his words are reduced to short,

⁹⁴ Ibid., 154.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 155.

unconfident descriptions, and then to confessions of ignorance, ultimately overtaken by silence interrupted only by the quaking sounds of the mouse clicking as the images change from one to the next:

A hammer. (*A building*) This is ... a building that you might have seen. (*An island*) I don't know. I think it's an island. (*An iron bar*) Uh... I don't know what that is. (*Elevator*) I don't know. (*A pair of glasses*) Don't know. (*A book*) Don't know. (...) (*A hand holding a glass*) I don't know. (*A man's shirt*) This is a shirt. Maybe you wore it. (*A cassette tape*) A blank tape. (*A car*) These are just some of the things that might go through your mind when you're falling.⁹⁶

Again, verbal language is taken over by images. If, in the "talking bit" by Terry, words give way to the spectacle through collision, here words fail to be spoken via the speaker's resignation from speaking. But what is more important is the change of tense from past to present, from the macro history of the world to the trivial images that surround "you," the audience. The details of the projected pictures and the man's comments thereupon have little significance in themselves; they only gain significance when they are perceived as devices to switch the dimension of the performance from a detached spectacle to an intimate experience of the spectator.

In this respect the way in which the man talks about the images is particularly noteworthy. Playing with personal pronouns is not a novel strategy for Forced Entertainment. One of the most remarkable aspects of the dramaturgy of another work by the company, *A Decade of Forced Entertainment* (1994), a documentary performance made to mark their tenth anniversary, is the way it fuses the more intimate first person "we" with the distanced third person "they," making way for

⁹⁶ *The World in Pictures* transcript.

semi-fictitious alter egos to gradually overlap and coexist with the performers who began the show by more or less being themselves. As Etchells explains, this device “allowed us some distance from the narrative and opened up the possibilities of fiction within the essentially documentary form.”⁹⁷ The relationship between the first person “I” and the second person “you” in *The World in Pictures* constitutes the core of the dramatic structure of this scene. Here, too, a distance is created between the object and the subject. But this is not a mere act of detachment, for by relating the images to possible moments of the audience (“you”), the man onstage is handing over the status of the talking (and contemplating) subject to the audience members. The sense of ambiguity produced by the repetitive “might”s and “maybe”s allow the audience to replace the talker’s comments with their own memories or imaginations. The man’s increasing “I don’t know”s are not simply confessions of ignorance, but another gesture of creating a gap or a space to be filled in by the audience.

Like the traces of erasure in *Forget Me*, this scene, through negation, forms a frame which encloses, or rather opens up, a void waiting to be painted with the experiences of each individual in the auditorium. The continuous motif of un-telling stories and un-doing scenography which occurs throughout the performance “makes dramaturges of all of us,”⁹⁸ inviting the audience member to tell his own story and construct his own imagery. The scene, therefore, provides the audience with a temporal space where time and space are indistinguishable, expanding beyond the “real time” of the performance and “real space” of the theatre building.

This aspect intensifies towards the end of the performance, where the man is left alone once again, facing the audience, talking about what the world may look

⁹⁷ Etchells (2006), 109.

⁹⁸ Turner (2009), 106.

like in a week to ten thousand years time. While some insightful reviews focus on how the scene takes the audience on “a journey into the future”⁹⁹ where “everybody who knows you will be dead, their extinguished memories extinguishing you,”¹⁰⁰ few, if any, seem to take much notice of its present-ness.¹⁰¹ Little is mentioned about the almost seamless flow of time from the end of the “history” part to the final monologue: about how as history nears the present Terry only barely manages to speak, repeating the words of another performer, and on how the monologue begins as it takes over from Terry’s narration.

“Obviously we left one or two things out. But ... but that is what people call the main thrust of history. Up till now. Up till the present ... now.”¹⁰² Such are Terry’s final words. And “now” is where the monologue picks up. The man asks the audience to “think about now, about the seat you’re sitting in, the people next to you, this room that we’re all in, and what you can see.”¹⁰³ The two parts, which until this point appeared independent of each other, finally converge. There is no “dramatic” or “narrative” relation between the two, but the temporal dimension bridges the two parts and unifies them into one whole performance. This is more important that it seems. The flow from history to the present “now” is at the same time transference from the world of representation (unsuccessful as it may have been) to the world of

⁹⁹ Lathan, n.pag.

¹⁰⁰ Gardner (2006), 38. Other reviews including that of Hutera focus more or less on the signature chaotic aspect of Forced Entertainment. On the other hand, Edwardes’s short review (2006) on the performance very briefly mentions the prologue and epilogue made by the man mentioned in my discussion; while she finds no link between these parts and the “main body” of the performance, she finds the final part discussed above “startlingly similar” to the opening talk by Simon McBurney in *Mnemonic* about the genealogy of human beings which spreads like the veins of a tree leaf. This is an extremely interesting observation, especially when in various articles Etchells refers to Complicité as a company whose theatrical pursuits are on the opposite pole of Forced Entertainment’s. This review also exposes how the crucial difference between the directions of the two companies’ aesthetic pursuits is overlooked – the former of convergence into the world of fiction on stage and the latter an expansion of the fictive world of theatre into the world beyond it.

¹⁰¹ The closest article I found which mentions anything related to present-ness is a review according to which the message of the performance is “Make the most of the time we have.” See *Variety*.

¹⁰² *World in Pictures* transcript.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

the real, from the stage to the auditorium. From “now” the spectator looks back at himself an hour before the commencing of the performance and looks into the future shape of the world when he will long be forgotten. Again, as in the laptop scene the “real space” and “real time” expands, but this time the “here and now” does not isolate the fictive world of theatre nor the historical past. Like landscape paintings of Imperial China, the fiction and reality exist together as the historical ushers the audience, in the present, towards the futural.

7-4. Conclusion: Shaping the Void

The following words perhaps best describe the theatre of Forced Entertainment:

The fictional and the real.

The desire to strip away positions and to be here with you now,
‘naked’, as it were.

And, at the same time, the desire to build fictions, to surround my presence with
stories or attitudes or costumes that conceal.¹⁰⁴

The desire to be in direct contact with the audience while remaining within the fictional boundaries of the theatre is what is at the heart of their attitude towards representation.

In the earlier chapter on Chinese paintings I discussed how the painted

¹⁰⁴ Etchells (2004), 217.

figures were perceived as a gateway to a void.¹⁰⁵ The concept of representation, the relationship between the fictional and the real in the works of Forced Entertainment may be understood in a similar manner. In Chinese landscape, and more especially literati paintings, not only the shape of the visible but also the way in which the void was created was a hugely important aspect of the process of painting. Painting figures was at the same time a visualisation of the void. They were, to borrow the famous words of Lao Tzu, a vessel to hold the emptiness – emptiness only through which alone the vessel attains value.¹⁰⁶

The continuous failure to represent which is to be found in the works of Forced Entertainment, when looked at from this perspective, achieves a theatrical void. The motifs of failure and erasure are not a negative gesture, but work as a positive and active device through which to create a temporal, spatial void. A void thus produced has a creative and expansive quality. It is a nothingness, but this nothingness is different from a vacuum. It is a nothingness that is produced through the accumulation of time. Even the erased leaves its traces. And in this void the fictional world of the stage meets and fuses with the real world beyond it. Due to this void the physical divide between the stage and the auditorium, and the world outside the theatre entrance blurs. In this void the represented time of the performance meets with the real time experienced by the audience. Without dispensing with the fateful representation, the theatre achieves a present-ness.

This present-ness is, however, different from the temporal (physical) “now”

¹⁰⁵ See ch. 3 (p. 83).

¹⁰⁶ Chapter 4 of the *Tao Te Ching* defines Tao as an empty vessel which is used but never filled; Chapter 11, particularly significant in that it emphasizes the importance of empty space, is worth full quotation: “Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub; It is the centre hole that makes it useful. Shape clay into a vessel; It is the space within that makes it useful. Cut doors and windows for a room; It is the holes which make it useful. Therefore benefit comes from what is there; Usefulness from what is not there.”

which isolates both the past and the future. One might recall how in the previous chapter I discussed the peculiar characteristic of the Chinese concept of time which, essentially subjective, spreads out and points to a multiplicity of different worlds. The present-ness in the works of Forced Entertainment is perhaps best understood in this way. They do not merely remind the audience of the physical process that is at work in the “real” time and space of the performance, but use it as a platform. The “here and now” as one normally understands it is not where the performances end, but where they begin. What *The World in Pictures* asks of the audience is to think about and imagine unspecific moments, a process which due to its ambiguity necessarily involves an element of fiction. And, due to this aspect, the audience takes over the role of the creator. The process of creation is transferred from the stage to the subjectivity of the individual audience members, and as long as they participate in this process the “present” continues. The present-ness thus achieved is a state of subjective participation, transcending the physical condition of the theatrical event.

Chapter 8

Conclusion: Touching the Invisible

The great square has no corners,
the great work avoids coming about,
the great tone has only a limited sound,
The great image has no form.
(...)
Great completion is seemingly lacking,
but its use is never used up.¹

I began this thesis by questioning the limits of current critical vocabulary used to look at and discuss contemporary theatre performance. I questioned whether the prevailing vocabulary and critical frames sufficed to embrace theatre practices which evade the traditional confines of mimetic representation, when they themselves are rooted in Western traditions of *mimesis*. The main chapters have been an effort to answer this question, and during the course of my discussions I proposed an alternative frame of critical investigation based on the aesthetics of Chinese landscape and literati paintings, and the philosophical soil it rested upon.

In the final chapter of this thesis I briefly discussed Derrida's notion of absence, and how his notion of representation with no absolute origin was one of continuous motion, at once filling in the absence of presence and accumulating itself.

¹ *Tao Te Ching* ch. 41 and 45.

To conclude my work I propose to return to this point and look a little further into the relationship between the origin and the copy, between absence and presence, and of course the “I” and the “Other” which shadows almost all debates concerning the notion of representation in theatre practice.

Pondering over Derrida’s articulation of absence inherent in any presence or the “thing itself”, one may notice its curious resemblance to the Chinese understanding of the void. Throughout this thesis I have continually emphasised how the Chinese notions of being and absence always interpermeated and mutually complemented each other: absence is proof of being, and being exists only because of absence. To a Western-conditioned mind this may be difficult to understand, or if not, appear little different from the Western alterity of the “I” and the “Other”. Indeed, one may very well recall how the Greeks identified themselves because there existed the “barbarians”: they were Greeks precisely because they were not *them*.² Like the Chinese mode of thought, the “Other” made it possible for the Greeks to establish themselves as Greeks. As we have seen during the course of this discussion, this tendency has not dissolved up until the present, especially with regard to theatre criticism.

However, there is a critical difference between Classical Greek-oriented and Chinese minds in how one perceives the “Other”. While the principle of “not” governed the Western view of the relationship between the “I” and the “Other”, what prevailed in Chinese thinking is the principle of “because of” or “owing to”, which emphasises the intimate and inseparable relationship between the two. In order to clarify this aspect once more let us again turn to Lao Tzu:

² See ch. 4 (p. 121).

The there-is and the there-is-not engender each other.³

While the Western tradition of thought puts emphasis on the irreconcilable difference between the “I” and its polar counterpart, the *Tao Te Ching* sheds light on their mutual transfusion, on how one permeates the other and vice versa until it becomes no longer meaningful to distinguish one from the other. The “Other” does not stand apart from “I” but extends from it, while simultaneously generating the “I”. This is explained in great lucidity by Jullien in his commentary on Chinese painting:

Emptiness proceeds by hollowing out fullness, just as fullness, in turn, is opened wide by the void. Far from forming two opposing and separate qualities or states, emptiness and fullness are structurally correlated; each exists only by virtue of the other.⁴

He continues, quoting from a Chinese art critic: “One needs both ‘to seek fullness within emptiness’ and ‘to put to work emptiness within fullness.’”⁵ Due to such an understanding of absence and emptiness the void becomes one of abundance, enriching itself continuously as it permeates and is permeated by being.

Theatre as a Site of *Shū-tōng* (疏通)

One may then ask how this permeation works, how absence and being

³ *Tao Te Ching* ch. 2 Translation by Jane Marie Todd from François Jullien’s French version of the text. Qtd. in Jullien (2009), 84. Although I will continue to use the more commonly accepted words “being” and “absence” I have quoted Jullien’s translation here to highlight the different attitudes toward the notions embedded in the two cultures.

⁴ Jullien (2009), 84.

⁵ Ibid.

contact each other. In discussing the notion of the void in Chinese aesthetics I mentioned only Lao Tzu; to conclude this thesis I must turn to the other great Teacher of Taoism, Chuang Tzu. Chuang Tzu's approach to the Tao is centred precisely on this point: on the intimate relationship between myself and the Other. It is also in this respect that his philosophy extends and differentiates from Lao Tzu's thought.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Chuang Tzu's philosophy is the concept of what can only partially be translated into English as communication, *shū-tōng* (疏通), which explains the subtle but immense difference between the Western and Chinese understanding of the "Other" and the position of the "I". Through this concept Chuang Tzu deliberates on the very notion and (in)significance of the boundary while never totally neglecting the differences each thing bears within itself. "The sage, too," he pronounces in the second book of the *Chuang Tzu*, "recognizes a 'this,' but a 'this' which is also 'that,' a 'that' which is also 'this.' (...) A state in which 'this' and 'that' no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way."⁶ Thus far one may find little difference between Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu's philosophies. Yet it is not so. In the same chapter the philosopher provides us with an enticing account of the wind:

The Great Clod belches out breath [*chi*] and its name is wind. So long as it doesn't come forth, nothing happens. But when it does, then ten thousand hollows begin crying wildly. Can't you hear them, long drawn out? In the mountain forests that lash and sway, there are huge trees a hundred spans around with hollows and openings like noses, like mouths, like ears, like jugs, like cups, like mortars, like rifts, like ruts. They roar like waves, whistle like arrows, screech, gasp, cry, wail, moan, and howl, those in

⁶ *Chuang Tzu* bk. 2 (p. 40).

the lead calling out *yeee!*, those behind calling out *yyyy!* In a gentle breeze they answer faintly, but in full gale the chorus is gigantic. And when the fierce wind has passed on, then all the hollows are empty again. Have you never seen the tossing and trembling that goes on?⁷

Who or what possesses the sound of wind thus produced? Is it inherent in the wind itself? Or does it belong to the hollows and cavities? Renowned Chuang Tzu scholar Shinju Kang emphasises how the sound belongs neither to the wind nor the cavities:

The sounds of the winds are created from the unpredicted encounter between the wind and hollows – in other words, through the unforeseen meeting of the unnumbered intensities and directions of the wind and the myriad of shapes and depths created by the hollow.⁸

Only when the wind penetrates the skin of the crevice does it produce sound; only when it brushes past the hollow of another entity does it reveal its otherwise hidden self. It is the encounter and intimate touch of two invisible and formless entities which create and mould sounds into a thousand shapes.

And this is the essence of *shū-tong*. The literal translation of *shū* (疏) is “to open” and “to empty” while *tōng* (通) translates as “to connect”. One must first open and empty in order to connect with the other; likewise, without the connection of the other, opening and emptying gains no meaning. *Shū-tōng*, therefore, not only enables but demands the “I” and the “Other” to meet and fuse in an osmotic manner. This

⁷ Ibid. (p. 36-37). Translator’s emphasis.

⁸ 강신주, 17. My translation.

notion is, of course, deeply embedded in the arts: it is through *shū-tong* that the viewer of *The Poet Li Po* can step into the unpainted landscape by simply looking into the gaze of the poet, and it is because of the *shū-tong* between the viewer and the painted and unpainted images that the void clothed in the transparent cloak may breathe itself into the void surrounding the poet, who is now myself.

The concept and deployment of representation in contemporary non-mimetic theatre performances may also be understood in this context. To represent is no longer a process of objectifying and imitating an “Other” existing outside oneself, but of opening and emptying a space through which the other and myself, or/and the worlds that each inhabit, may connect and touch. The result of such a kind of representation is not a solid double of the real world complete in itself – or any other world for that matter – but formless pictures and silent sounds that merge and submerge according to the various encounters of the stage and the spectator.

Representation, in this respect, is like the delicate brushstrokes of a Chinese painting. It paints the subtle boundaries that divide the visible and the invisible; the surface of the hollow through which wind may pass. But like the brushstrokes of Chinese paintings, the frail frame of representation itself is made up of an infinite number of voids, expanding and accumulating themselves, waiting for the wind to smear and pass through them. The stage left empty after the performance of Kantor’s *Wielopole, Wielopole* is the silence in the aftermath of the process of creating hollows to let in the wind. So too is the play with representation in the theatre performances of Forced Entertainment, as well as the fissures and incessant moments of delay and failure in their theatrical itinerary.

As I have continuously emphasised, the hollowed space itself is in ceaseless motion, opening itself up to connect. It expands itself until it reaches the surface of

another: the audience. The spectator may not be aware of this at the initial encounter, but during the process of the performance he will gradually begin to perceive it hollowing itself out and expanding as he senses the gentle breeze or violent shrieking of the wind that the stage generates, as it brushes past and through the sensory skin of the perceiver. As soon as the spectator becomes aware of the wind, the minute he touches the invisible substance, he realises that he himself has become the surface of that hollow, the vulnerable frame embracing the moving void. As soon as he becomes this frame, he becomes the performance itself, which evolves not only in front of but also with and inside him. The boundary between the spectacle on stage and the spectacle inside the minds of the spectator blurs until distinguishing the two has little meaning. Through this experience, the spectator, who now is the performance, connects the “now” inside the theatre building with numerous “now”s outside; the “here” inside and numberless “here”s beyond the walls that surround him. These walls become the only delicate line between fiction and reality, but this line connects instead of divides the two worlds which are no longer exclusive to each other.

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Figures



1. "The Rape of Persephone"



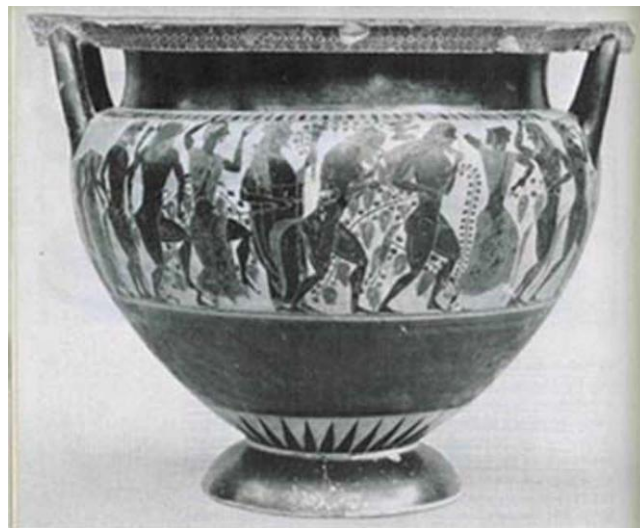
2. "The Hunting Scene"



3. "Achilles at Skyros"



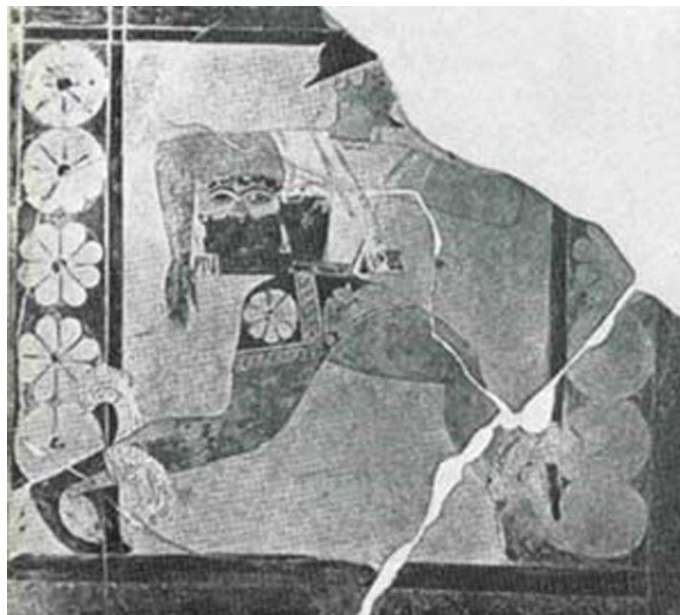
4. François Vase



5. "Hephaistos returning to Olympus"



6. "Destruction of Troy"



7. "Perseus with the head of Medusa"



8. *The Poet Li Po*



9. Tall Pines in a Level View



10. *A Myriad Trees on Strange Peaks*



11. *Early Spring*



13. *Strolling on a Marshy Bank*



14. *Bamboo in the Moonlight*



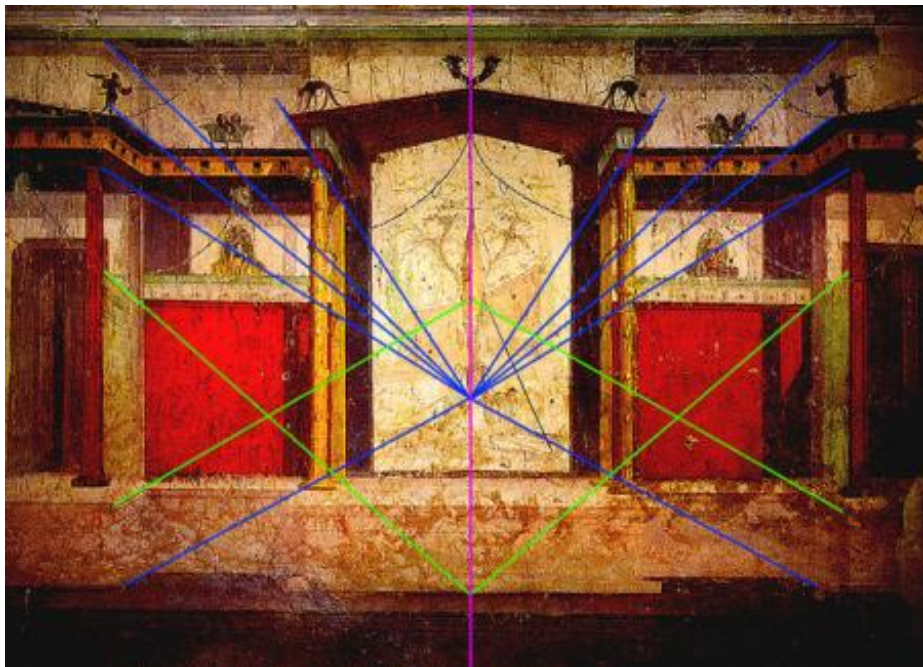
15. "Alexander Mosaic"



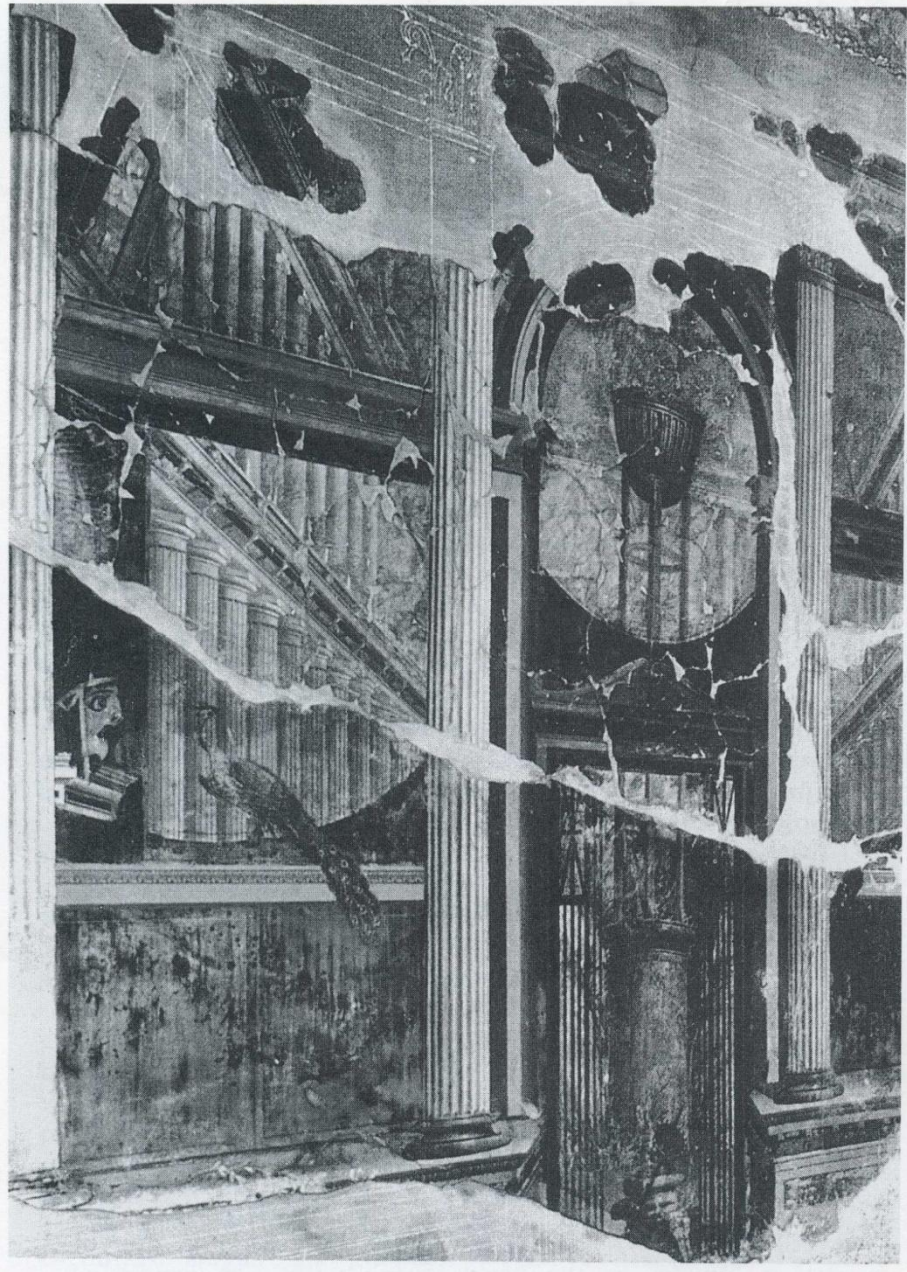
Detail of shield in 15



16. South Wall, Room of Masks, House of Augustus



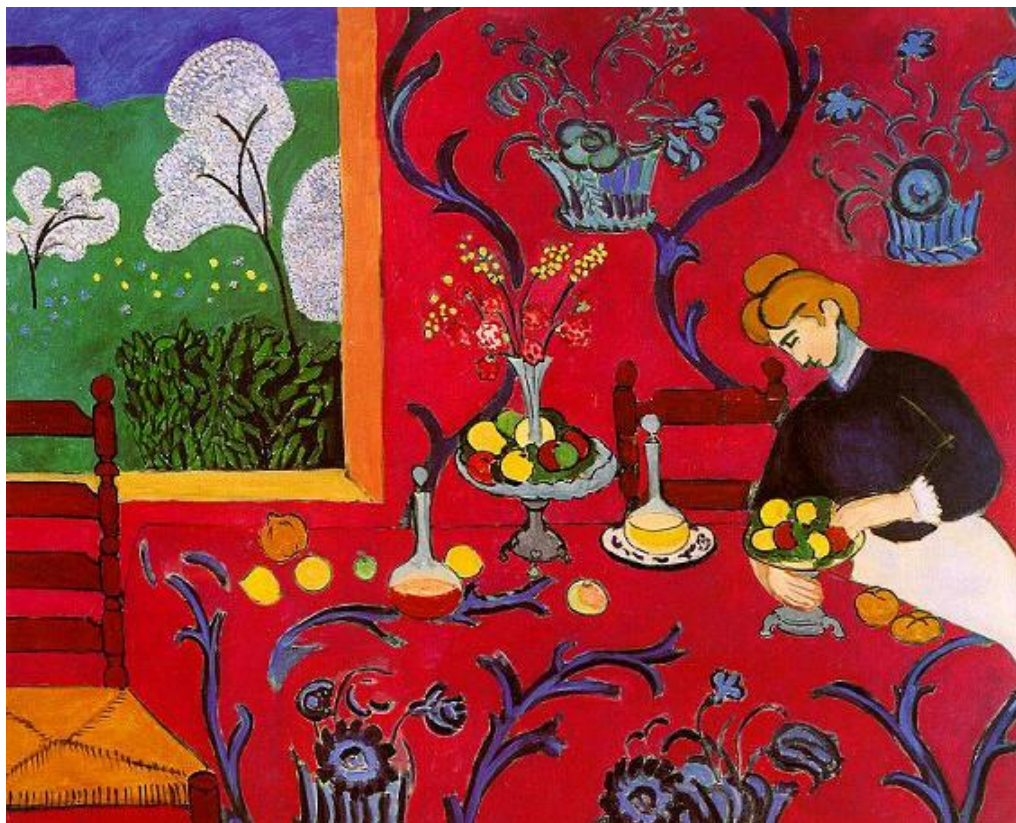
17. Perspectival analysis of 16.



18. A painting in the Villa of Oplontis.



19. *The Dinner Table (La Desserte)*



20. *Harmony in Red (La Desserte)*



21. *Interior with Aubergines*



22. I Have Had Enough! I am Stepping Out of the Painting



23. Poussin's *Self-Portrait*



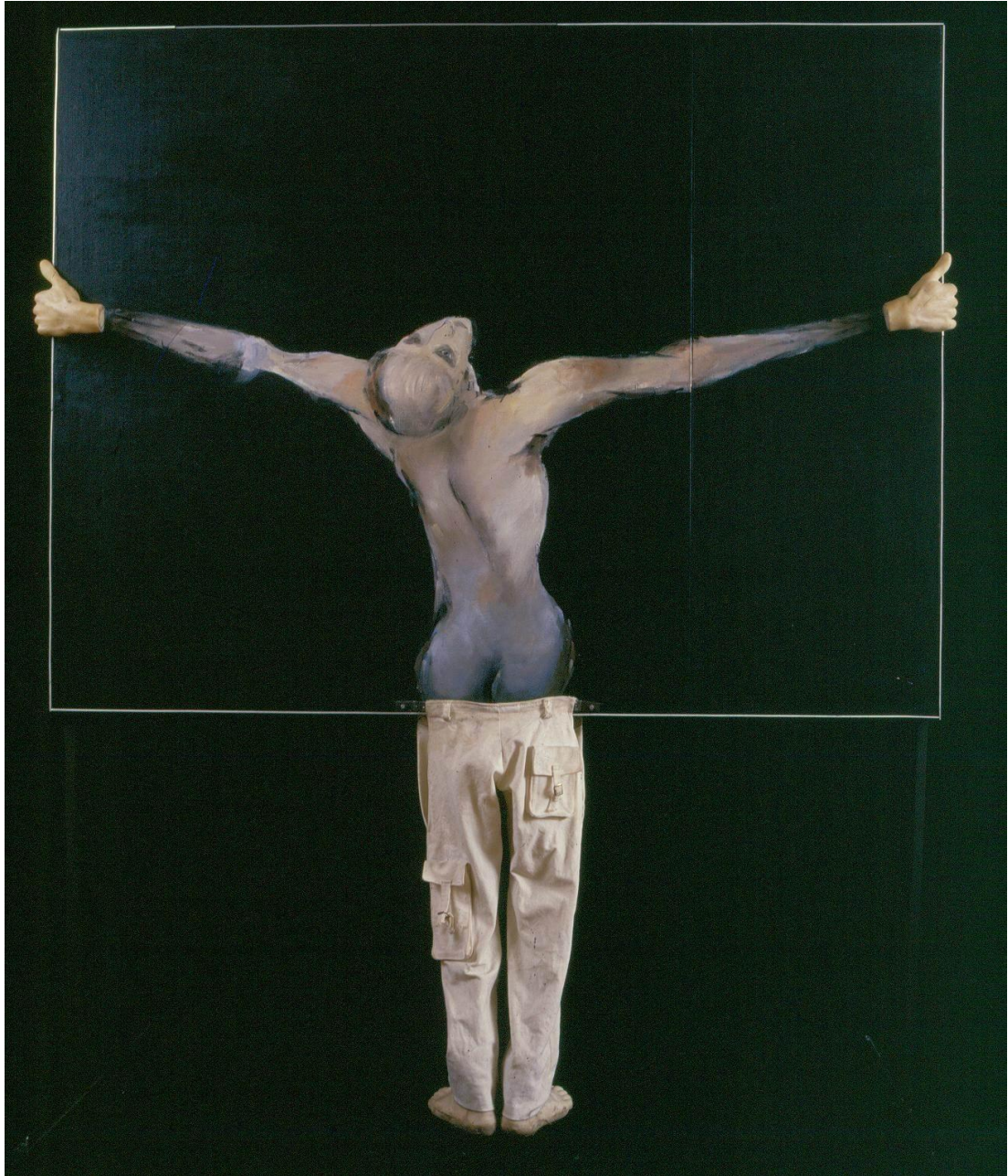
24. *Fountain*



25. *Las Meninas*



26. *The Marriage of the Virgin*



27. I Am Carrying the Picture in which I Am Shown Carrying a Picture



28. *Forget Me*