

The Beauty in Art and the Notion of Proportion

"The good, of course, is always beautiful, and the beautiful never lacks proportion." Plato

In the western world, contemplation on art began with the philosophers of ancient Greece. Plato discussed portion as the source of beauty, and imitation as the primary mode of art.

Plato's influence on western culture generally is a very strong one, and this includes a strong influence on the arts, and on theories of art. In the case of the arts and aesthetic theory that influence is mostly indirect, and is best understood if one knows a little bit about his philosophy.

"Artists should... fix their eyes on perfect truth as a perpetual standard of reference, to be contemplated with the minutest care, before they proceed to deal with earthly canons about things beautiful." -- Plato

Plato's perspective and vision in art consisted that Art is imitation. This is a feature of both of Plato's theories. Indeed he was the first to establish this philosophy of art in western history, he established this philosophy that affected many artists later in the Renaissance. In Plato's view, the art imitates reality, so was the idea very strong in the Renaissance, when Vasari, in his Lives of the Painters, said that "painting is just the imitation of all the living things of nature with their colors and designs just as they are in nature."

It may still be the most commonly held theory. Most people still think that a picture must be a picture of something, and that an artist is someone who can make a picture that "looks just like the real thing". It wasn't until late in the nineteenth century that the idea of art as imitation began to fade from western aesthetics, to be replaced by theories about art as expression, art

as communication, art as pure form, art as whatever elicits an "aesthetic" response, and a number of other theories.

So if art is imitation, what does it imitate? Here is where Plato's two theories come in. In the Republic, Plato says that art imitates the objects and events of ordinary life. In other words, a work of art is a copy of a copy of a Form. It is even more of an illusion than is ordinary experience. On this theory, works of art are at best entertainment and at worst a dangerous delusion.

The view of the artist as inspired revealer of ideal essences fits well with the spirit of Plato's Symposium, a dialogue full of speeches in praise of Love, in which Socrates gives a compelling picture of the ascent from sexual love, to the aesthetic appreciation of beautiful bodies, to the love of beautiful souls, and finally to the contemplation of the ideal Form of Beauty itself. The same spirit fills much classic Greek art. Late classical sculpture presents gods and heroes as ideal bodies, built in perfect proportions, and filled with a cool repose, as if they inhabited a perfect and changeless divine world. The classical ideal of the artist as capturing an essence has continued to exert great power, from the Renaissance rediscovery of the Greek canons of proportion to the twentieth century sculptures of Constantin Brancusi, the paintings of Piet Mondrian, and the color theories of Vasily Kandinsky and the Blue Rider (der Blaue Reiter) group.

Aristotle identified different kinds of imitation, and Xenocrates wrote technical dissertations on painting and sculpture that examined the ideal synthesis of proportion and imitation in terms of the lives of classical Greek artists.

1. Aesthetic harmony in Aristotle

This juxtaposition does not seem that arbitrary if we take into account the fact that Aristotle's doctrine on music harmony is included in his

Politics. The harmony in art could be used as an example of what the citizens of a society should aim at and what kind of form and content could social and political actions have, in order to assure social harmony.

Umberto Eco (1993: 149) in his research on the archaeology of aesthetic theories, refers to the eighth book of

Politics, where Aristotle classifies melodies into three categories, ethical melodies, melodies of action, and passionate or inspiring melodies, the first ones being useful for pedagogical purposes and the others for theatrical spectacle. The educational dimension of art in

Politics, as it is explored regarding the music harmonies, is not entirely distinct from pleasure: the melody represents the composer's state of mind and transmits aesthetic values through the mediation of senses to the spectator and thus modifies the state of mind of the later. However, music does not only contribute to the education of human beings, but also provides enjoyment and satisfies the spirit (1340a 38 ff.).

Aristotle describes in Poetics how both goals of art, education and satisfaction can be accomplished. It is not only the content (myth) of the tragedy that is important but also the configuration of external elements, such as extension and language (1451a 21-29). The symmetry of the parts of a play presupposes an exterior (lexical items) as well as interior (plot) coherence. These norms ensure the organic balance, the harmony and the aesthetic

quality of the tragedy. Eco is right when he remarks that there is a quantitative conception of aesthetics in Aristotle: the right proportion among the parts of the tragedy (episodes and chorals) is a sine qua non rule for the construction of a well-structured and homogeneous play. The beauty in ancient

Greek philosophical tradition, not only the Aristotelian one, is strongly associated with proportion (Eco, 1993: 90). This principle of symmetry is generalizable; forasmuch as it is used as a normative rule in figurative arts. Nonetheless, the proportion for Ancient Greeks does not only describe a mathematical relation, but also represents a metaphysical principle. Thus, beauty is the measurement of the elements of the external form (in the case of tragedy, the meter, the symmetry of the parts, the number of syllables, the number of verses) as well as the aesthetic harmony which the play transmits as total to the spectators (in the same case, the content must be neither superior nor inferior to the chosen form; otherwise the form would give the impression of grotesque or inadequate).

Eco in his research on ancient aesthetics (1993: 109) cites the comment of Thomas Aquinas on Aristotle's *On the Soul* (426a), where the Greek philosopher seems to identify the voice and the sense of hearing. The conclusion is that both philosophers agree on the fact that harmony is a certain proportion. We will proceed now to explore the application of this principle to the concept of social harmony.