



False Variety: Plato's Fear of the Mass Media

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Abstract

Plato's criticisms of poetry in the Republic X have been compared by Alexander Nehamas to modern élitist criticisms of television in the 1970s and 80s. In his "Plato and the Mass Media" (1988), Nehamas explained that the poetry attacked by Plato —either Homer's epics or the celebrated tragedies performed in theatres— was in the form of "popular entertainment" in the cultural context of Athens in the fifth century B.C. The aim of my paper is not to endorse the élitist attitude toward popular entertainment. What I wish to argue is that the variety shown by media does not entail our free choices among the various items. One significant feature of the mass media revealed by Nehamas is that the *mimesis* (representation/imitation) in it is "transparent." The "transparent *mimesis*" is the representation which mirrors things simply according to how they appear to the audience. Due to the transparency, the work of popular entertainment "requires little or no interpretation." In this paper, I will explore the concept of the "transparent *mimesis*" in Plato and compare it with some views in contemporary aesthetics. On freedom, I will compare it with Adorno. As for the variety shown in the transparent *mimesis*, I will challenge the idea that Greek art is "realistic", by consulting the studies of aesthetics by Gombrich, Wollheim, and Halliwell. *Mimesis* resembles not simply real things, but things which appear to certain fixed points of views. In contrast with the popular impression that Plato is a variety-hater, my paper aims to show that Plato's attacks on the mimetic arts come from his defence of our free choices against the false variety. Plato's fear is not of variety, but of false variety. The false variety in media imposes simplified fixed points of view on us via "transparent *mimesis*" which constrains our perceptions. This deprives us of freedom in Plato's sense and of our perceptions of the real variety in the aesthetic sense.

Keywords: Plato, *mimesis*, perception, the *Republic*, aesthetics

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Though the concept of “mass media” did not emerge until the developments and reflections of the modernity, one may assign Plato to the array of anti-mass-media people without much hesitation.¹ He is usually regarded as the enemy of the many, of democracy, and of the variety provided in the poetry, theatre,² painting or other visual arts —whatever the medium is— as long as it is multi-coloured.³ In the book III of the *Republic*, in Plato's well-known “censorship” of poetry, Socrates⁴ convinces his interlocutors to prefer the simpler to the multi-coloured, no matter what kind of topics come to the front, either the forms of performance of imitation (397d), or musical instruments (399c-e), or the modes and rhythms in music (400a). Later in book VIII, he complains about democracy and despises its variety as “a cloak in various colours” (557c). Even though the many-coloured cloak of poetry is a feature of the democratic society, Socrates in the dialogue associates poets not with democracy, but with tyranny. He believes that the poets' colourful performance not only seduce the society into democracy, but also drive it into tyranny (568b-c). Then the democratic society in which all desires are equally respected gradually turns out to be tyranny. Book IX describes how miserable the tyrannical life is. Eventually in book X, Plato notoriously banishes poets as well as all the mimetic artists (607b-c).

Along the line of thought, Plato seems to be a variety-hater in the eyes of most people. Indeed, according to his principal definition of justice, one should not interfere in more than one task (*Republic* 433b-d). Variety

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2 In ancient Greece, theatre is a form of the performance of poetry. The “ποίησις (poetry)” in Plato's discussion contains drama and the accompanying music.

3 This view is fully elucidated in Popper (1966) where Plato was treated as the chief enemy of the “Open Society”.

4 In this paper, by “Socrates” I refer to the character in Plato's dialogues rather than the historical Socrates except otherwise mentioned.

seems to be an evil by this standard. Poetry provides variety. Seen from the angle of politics, his attacks on poetry are a political move which deprives citizens of free choices by an external control coming from the *polis* (city-state).

But it is not meaningful to label Plato as anti-mass-media. We are in a different cultural environment from where Plato stood. It is easy but futile to stick a tag on a thinker in the past from the point of view of our own time. Nowadays we are persistently exposed to the mass media. Many more people are influenced by the mass media than by Plato. Plato is not the main enemy of the openness or freedom in our cultural environment. On the contrary, the problem before us is the vast amount of information which we are fed, sometimes unwillingly, sometimes unconsciously, by the media.

The neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf has paid much attention to the problem which the media may produce. In her book on the development of our capacity of reading, *Proust and the Squid: The story and science of the reading brain*, Wolf impressively goes back to “Socrates’ protests” against written words when the reading of written words became a new medium in ancient times (Wolf, 2007a). Wolf’s idea corresponds well to Plato’s distrust of written words (compared with *Phaedrus* 274b-278b). Besides, she is right to see that Socrates (the historical figure) and Plato are worrying that people think that they know things when they read written words, but actually they do not really know (cf. *Apology* 21a-22e). She associates this with a reflection upon our dependence on internet and digital sources in another article, “Socrates’ nightmare” (Wolf, 2007b). The inference is based on a crucial discovery in her research: whenever a new medium comes into being, no matter what it is, it influences the functioning of our brain.

As Wolf observes, reflecting on Plato may break through what we have been accustomed to in our era. We are standing in the environment where new media are invented all the time. The multiplicity of media seems to imply variety. However, do we really enjoy free choices in the variety provided by the multi-coloured stuff, when we are buried by the numerous repeating messages sent by the numerous new-fangled mass

media?

In this paper, I argue that the seeming variety given by the mass media does not entail free choice among the various items. In contrast with the popular impression that Plato is a variety-hater, I will point out that Plato's attacks on poetry and the mimetic arts come from his defence of our free choices against the false variety, instead of the opposite. The underlying issue is *mimesis*⁵ and its psychological influence. To disentangle this, in section 1, I will explore the concept of "transparent *mimesis*" in Plato put forward by Alexander Nehamas in his influential paper on Plato's reflections on the mass media. Then I will compare it with some views in the contemporary aesthetics. In section 2, I will compare Plato's "freedom" with Adorno's. In section 3, I will investigate *mimesis* deeper to challenge the idea that Greek art is "realistic," by consulting the aesthetics studies in Gombrich, Wollheim, and Halliwell. *Mimesis* is resembling not simply real things, but things which appear to certain fixed points of view. Through the problematic *mimesis*, the new-fangled media do not really entail variety. They merely give seeming variety. Furthermore, the false variety in media imposes certain simplified and fixed points of view on us, by the means of the "transparent *mimesis*" which constrains our perceptions. It becomes the new external control over us. This is the issue before us.

1 Transparent *Mimesis*

In his "Plato and the Mass Media" (1988), Nehamas compared Plato's criticisms of poetry in *Republic X* to the intellectuals' criticisms of television in the 1970s and 80s. He tried to explain that the poetry attacked by Plato—either Homer's epics or the celebrated tragedies performed in theatres—was not poetry as a fine art, but in the form of "popular entertainment" in the cultural context of Athens in the fifth

5 μίμησις, representation/imitation. "Imitation" is the traditional translation. Halliwell reminded us of its narrowness (Halliwell, 2002, pp. 13-14). In the case of visual arts, "representation" seems more proper, but may lead to different discussions than that of *mimesis* (pp. 344-346). Pappas considered the etymological reason (based on the research of mimic performance and *mimesis* in Sörbom, 1966) and suggested that "imitation" "used with awareness" is a "serviceable translation" (Pappas, 2015). In this paper, I will use the Latinized form of this word in most places.

century B.C. One significant feature of this kind of medium is that the *mimesis* in it is “transparent.” That is, one can directly see through what is represented in the work without appealing to any assistance of expertise, knowledge and so on. The transparency makes the work seem to call no further interpretation, and makes us mistakenly accept that it “requires little or no interpretation” (Nehamas, 1988, pp. 225-226).

With Nehamas’ points, I partly agree and partly disagree.

The concept of “transparent *mimesis*”, as Nehamas discovered, explained the similarity between Plato’s criticisms of poetry and contemporary criticisms of popular entertainment delivered via the mass media. However, does this convince us to give up the various choices which the popular entertainment provides? Nehamas’ interpretation implies an élitist distinction between “fine art” and “popular entertainment.” The distinction is questionable in at least two aspects. First, as Halliwell notices, Nahamas’ interpretation requires “a recognition that the differences between that culture and modern democratic societies means that Athenian drama cuts across the sort of distinction between ‘highbrow’ and ‘popular’ that is now so familiar (and controversial)” (Halliwell, 2002, p. 91). “[T]he experience of tragedy affects ‘even the best of us’” (ibid.). The audience of the poetry attacked by Plato covers “τοὺς ἐπιεικεῖς (the decent people)” and “οἱ ... βέλτιστοι ἡμῶν (the best people among us)” (*Republic* 605c), namely, the cultural élitists in the Athenian society. Second, the distinction presumes an arbitrary preference of “fine art” to the “mass art” directed at the many in the democratic society. Besides, it is questionable whether the popular entertainment provided by Greek arts can be counted as mass media, given the problematic concept of the “mass” and the differences among the different forms of media.

However, Nehamas’ interpretation is contributory. It reveals something common to the Greek arts in Plato’s mind and the mass media. The real issue here probably does not lie in the concept of mass media confined by its modern sense, but the psychological influence of the “transparent *mimesis*” involved. What psychological power common to

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the digital media, TV and Greek arts, is Plato's real fear? Neuroscience has provided a description of the phenomena of the influences on the brain by the changes of medium (Wolf, 2007a and 2007b). What would be the philosophical explanation for these phenomena?

According to Nehamas' explanation, the "transparent *mimesis*" is defined by "the features that make it the particular representation it is, solely from the object it represents, and which we can see directly through its representation" (Nehamas, 1988, p. 219). In other words, the products or artworks of *mimesis* which are transparent would be as identical in appearance as possible to what they are representing or imitating.

"Art is *mimesis*" is commonly attributed to Plato. The main textual source lies in *Republic X*, where Plato expounds the mimetic aspect of painting, and then applies it to poetry. We are told in *Republic X* that painting is "mirroring" things. It is *mimesis*, not real things, and thus far from true knowledge (*Republic* 596d-e). So is poetry (598d-601b). The *mimesis* targeted by Plato, according to the metaphor of mirror, fits what Nehamas calls "transparent *mimesis*." Nehamas then appeals to passages where Plato emphasizes that the mimetic arts copy only objects' apparent appearances (598b4, 600e7-601a7, 600e3-601b1). The transparent *mimesis* catches only the surface, but leaves the physical or psychological "depth" untouched (Nehamas, 1988, pp. 219-220).

This is very different from what we thought about Greek arts. Copying the appearances, being as most identical in appearances as possible, "mirroring" things —is it art? This is the contribution of Nehamas' paper. He clarified that our concept of the fine art came very lately (compared with Plato's time) in the eighteenth century (Nehamas, 1988, p. 216). We cannot apply our concept of fine art to the arts criticized by Plato.⁶ There was no distinct category for art in the cultural context of

6 Thus Nehamas could reply to Halliwell's comment cited above (2002, p. 91) that he has made the clarification, though the rest of Nehamas' discussion appears to presume the distinction between "fine art" and the popular entertainment for the masses. I am not getting into an ideological debate on high art and mass art. The point is how the artworks for the mass affect us. And "the best people among us" (*Republic* 605c, cited above) can be reasonably included in us (the mass).

Plato's criticisms. Plato's criticisms, according to his worries about "the direct connection between our reactions to poetry and our reactions to life" (Nehamas, 1988, p. 218), are not directed at the inspiring Greek tragedies and fine arts in our eyes, but to the transparent *mimesis* in popular entertainment. Nehamas believes that the performance of tragic poetry in the fifth century B.C. was extremely "realistic". In what sense would Greek art be realistic? The tragic actors on stage wore masks, were speaking a poetic language not used by any actual speaker of the language in real life. What made these representations appear "real" to Athenians? They appear "real" only if the many accept them to be like the real. The speedy growth of the size of audience helped in forming the "realistic" appearance.⁷ The audience was more like the audience of mass entertainment (Nehamas, 1988, p.223).

Let us turn our attention to the term "mass." Nehamas (following Peter Walcot) applies the term "mass" to the large audience of Attic drama. Strictly speaking, the large audience in the ancient Athenian theatre is not a "mass." The concept of "mass" is tightly linked to the mass technology in the modern industry. Automation in the modern industry, including the cultural industry, makes it possible to produce and deliver the products, either of art or of popular entertainment, to the "mass" in its strict sense. Here is the definition of the "mass artwork" by Carroll (1997, p. 190):

x is a mass artwork if and only if 1) x is a multiple instance or type artwork 2) produced and distributed by a mass technology, 3) which artwork is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (e.g. its narrative forms, symbolism, intended affect, and even its content) toward those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort, virtually on first contact, for

⁷ In his discussion, Nehamas used the term "realistic" in its commonest sense. That is, to resemble its subject-matter in the physical world as best as possible. But the details of the physical subject-matter cannot be exhausted. What the supposed "reality" represented in the *mimesis* is controversial (cf. Gombrich, 1977; Wollheim, 1998; Halliwell, 2002). One may ponder on a more recent account of Greek realism: "by realism I mean the choice of specific, historic or everyday life scenes that are familiar to the artists and their patrons and treated in such a way as to offer the impression of the familiarity of lived experience" (Csapo, 2010, p. 2). There must be some choices of scenes by the artists. The impression of the familiarity is dependent on the viewpoints shared by the artists and their audience. The issue will be discussed further in section 3 below.

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the largest number of relatively untutored audiences.

Although the Attic drama was available to a large audience, free and slave, old and young, it was still a limited number of people compared with the “mass” after the mass technology of modern industry appeared. We can hardly consider each performance in the ancient Athenian theatres simply as an instance or token of a Greek tragic poem, even when the performance is a realistic representation. However, the phenomenon of tragic reperformance in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. largely increased the size of the audience exposed to popular plays.⁸ Theatre became a sort of industry. One could pay the *polis* for a franchise of the theatre and profit from the collection of admission fees (Csapo, 2010, p. 83). The spread of reperformances also influenced the production of drama-related vase-paintings (ibid. pp. 1-37; Finglass, 2015, pp. 219-221). Theatre “had at least an impulse to expand into the mass-entertainment industry we know it to have been by the end of the Classical period” (Csapo, 2010, p. 83).

Furthermore, if we compare Carroll’s definition with Nehamas’ interpretation, one thing is common between the contemporary mass art on the one side, and the Greek arts attacked by Plato on the other side. In Carroll’s words, it is the “accessibility with minimum effort, virtually on first contact, for the largest number of relatively untutored audiences.” In Nehamas’ discussion, in front of the very broad audience of Greek drama, the transparent *mimesis*, in the form of popular entertainment, is “inherently realistic.” That is, it is intended “to represent reality without artifice, without mediation and convention” (Nehamas, 1988, p. 223). It represents a seeming “reality” to the popular audience and seems to require no further interpretation. Although mediation and convention are still within the representations, the transparent *mimesis* prevents the audience from being aware of it (p. 224). Routine makes the audience swallow the representations even more easily, “in the absence of criticism

⁸ During the last decades, the dogma that Greek plays were written for single performances has been challenged and gradually outweighed by the discussion of reperformances (Lamari, 2015a, pp.181-182). Both tragedies and comedies were re-performed in Plato’s time. The institutionalization of dramatic reperformances is in fourth century, but reperformances might begin to occur during Aeschylus’ lifetime and increasingly become popular in the fifth century (Lamari, 2015b, pp. 189-206; Finglass, 2015, pp.211, 217-218).

and interpretation” (pp. 229-230). We may synthesize this with Carroll’s definition. The transparent *mimesis* requires minimum effort from the side of audience. It makes the artwork accessible by the unqualified mass, but at the same time, deprives the mass of the opportunity to see into the surface of the work and think. The mass is fed with stuff not by choice, but by its accessibility. What results from the low requirement of effort is the loss of our capacity to make free choices.

2 The Loss of Freedom

Nehamas is original in interpreting the similarity between Plato’s aesthetics and the twentieth century’s reflections on the mass media by the “transparent *mimesis*.” But “transparency” in representation is not a new term in twentieth-century aesthetics, particularly when we take the “mass” in modernity into consideration. Adorno has criticized the transparent representation in films. For him, fiction always leaves distance from the physical presence of things and people in the empirical world; while “a film is realistic, the semblance of immediacy cannot be avoided” (Adorno, 1967, p. 200). Adorno is a philosopher who argues for autonomous art against the decline of taste in the time of mass reproduction. He inspiringly pointed out, in the decline of musical taste, that “[r]esponsible art adjusts itself to criteria... But otherwise, no more choices are made; the question is no longer put, and no one demands the subjective justification of the conventions.” The human right to a “freedom of choice” has been sacrificed for the commercial sake (Adorno, 2001, pp. 29-30). In his remarks on the loss of free choices due to the culture industry, Adorno rightly recalled Plato’s attitude toward poetry in the *Republic*. He considered Plato’s censorship of poetry in book III of the *Republic* as a complaint about “declining taste” (Adorno, 2001, p. 31).

The term “declining taste” sounds a complaint from cultural élitists. Both Plato and Adorno may attract this kind of criticism. However, Adorno will not accept the label of élitist, for his concern is humanity

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rather than élitism. What is more worthy of investigating is the freedom⁹ which Plato and Adorno are trying to defend, the freedom which every human being equally has the right to earn. It is not limited to the selected élitists. When we turn to the books IX and X in the *Republic*, it will be shown that Plato's complaint of multi-coloured representations is also related to the loss of free choices, in terms of his psychology.

In *Republic* IX, the elements of the soul¹⁰ are described as three creatures enclosed in a human being: a many-headed beast, a lion, and a person (588b-e). They stand for the appetitive element, the spirited element and the reasoning respectively (cf. *Republic* IV, 436a-441c). If one fattens up the many-headed beast, but starves the inner person, the inner person will be drawn by the other two creatures, and they will fight among themselves (589a). Then the inner person will be unable to be in control, but become a slave of the other creatures (590c). It means that the agent—the whole person—has incapacitated the divine ruler within herself (590d). Plato implicitly identifies the inner person, representing the reasoning element in the soul, as our true self. The metaphor explains the slavery in the tyrannical person analysed a bit earlier in the book IX. This slavery is developed from the freedom in democracy. Plato does not admit of the freedom in democracy as freedom, either. As mentioned in the introductory section, Plato despises the variety in democracy as “a cloak in various colours” (cf. *Republic* VIII, 557c). It does not entail freedom. Quite the reverse: when the reasoning element which can really make the choice has been enslaved, the whole person is enslaved. The soul in this kind of situation is not free (578c-d) because it is unable to do what it really wants to (578e).

In *Republic* X, Plato compares *mimesis* with the real thing: we may look

9 Plato is concerned about “freedom,” but not in the sense developed in the modern political thoughts like that in Rousseau, Locke or Mill. “Freedom” in Plato is not based on individuals’ rights, but more related to “self-mastery.” This can be clearly seen in the progressive discussion on freedom in *Republic* VIII to IX (562e ff.). The strong connection between freedom and self-mastery is highlighted in the final pages of book IX. Only when one has her/his own inner ruler (ἄρχοντα ἐν αὐτῷ), we may let her/him “free” (ἐλευθέρων, 591a3). A similar line of thought can be found in Plato's earlier dialogue *Gorgias* (see Socrates' argument against Callicles, esp. at 491d-e). In his final work *Laws*, he notes that Athenians are good “not because of compulsion” (642c8), and considers the *polis* with inner harmony as “free” (ἐλευθέρων, 693b4), in contrast with Persian monarchy or Athenian democracy which is spoiled by questionable freedom (694a-702b). These reflect the same concern. The “inner” ruling or self-mastery needs to be understood in the context of Plato's psychology. More discussion below.

10 ψυχή (*psychē*). In Plato, it may refer to the soul, the mind or the psychological entity.

at an object from the side or the front, or from anywhere else; it looks different, but stays the same (598a-b). The passage points out the main difference between the product of *mimesis* and the real object. In other words, the real thing has different appearances to its viewers, while the painter's "mirroring" of things is a single appearance without depth. On the other hand, Plato mentions that multiple appearances of the real thing require our capacity of reasoning, calculating and measuring, which is the only rational element in the soul (602d-e). Therefore, the rational element is by definition the capacity which helps the agent to make a choice among the appearances. In this context, the evil in *mimesis* is its corrupting effects on the inner state of the soul. It fattens the non-rational elements and weakens the capacity of making choices.

One may argue that non-rational choices are still choices made by the person. Is it legitimate to identify the agent by the inner person which is merely the rational part of the entire person? Why should we define the freedom of the agent by the freedom of the rational element in the soul?

Stalley appeals to the famous distinction of two orders of desires drawn by Frankfurt, to explain the freedom in Plato's sense. The second order desires refer to the desires of desires. For example, drug-addicts seem to do what they want. But there are "unwilling addicts" who desire the drugs with the first order desire, but detest their addiction to drugs with their second order desire (Stalley, 1998, p. 151; cf. Frankfurt, 1971, pp. 9-10 and 12). The unwilling addicts are not "free" even if they successfully obtain the desired drugs. On the contrary, they are not free because they are controlled externally by the drugs. Freedom in Plato's sense is not the realisation of all desires. His freedom means to be free from the control of non-rational desires which are unable to deny external attractions. The capacity of making choices lies in the rational element in the soul. A weak reasoning element will lose its capacity to choose, and thus be incapacitated to make a free choice, even if there are various appearances in front of it.

For Plato, the loss of freedom is not a deprivation from without. It happens in the soul. It is caused by the loss of our psychological capacities which are influenced by the dubious information from without, including the

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mimetic arts. Plato's fiercest attacks against poetry are in *Republic X*, where he attacks poetry not only because it is *mimesis*, but also because of its corrupting psychological effects (605b, c). According to Plato, the "mirroring" of things, namely the Nahamas-called "transparent *mimesis*," corrupt our souls by weakening the psychological capacity of making free choices.

The "transparency" in mimetic art, either in the form of popular entertainment in our time or in the form of popular tragedies in ancient Athens, has its psychological effects. It fattens the irrational elements and weakens the reasoning element which originally has the chance to help us to be free. As Adorno has noticed, it is indeed questionable whether there is a freedom of choice when one likes a commercial piece (Adorno, 2001, p. 30). For example, in front of us, there may be colourful items, say, mobile phones of a new colour and a new shape, and even with a label of being "unique." We swallow the message of "being unique" even though thousands or millions of phones are of the same colour and shape, produced by mass technology in the age of the industrial automation. The few giant companies are in control. All choices we may have are restricted by the commercial mechanism. We accept the message that my phone is "unique" or the belief that it will make me "unique." "Being unique" —such an opposite idea to routinization— has become a routine, and in "absence of criticism and interpretation", in Nehamas' words.

3 The False Variety

How actually does the transparency in *mimesis* corrupt our psychological capacity of making free choice in this way? We simply see and hear and perceive the various products of *mimesis*. Since it is transparent, we can see things behind it. If the transparency leads us to see the variety in the real world, why can't it enrich our perceptions and become a good training of our capacities?

The problem is that the variety in it is false.

The false variety is prompted by the transparent *mimesis* in the media. The “transparency,” as it seems, is created by the realistic representation as mentioned in section 1 above. But what is the “reality” the realistic Greek artworks represent? It is widely admitted that Greek arts are realistic *mimesis*. But to represent the real things is not as apparent as at the first look.

In the *Cambridge Introduction to the History of Art*, the author tells us that since the seventh century B.C., representing stories as lively as possible had become what the painters are concerned with (Woodford, 1982, pp. 41-43). Down to the fifth century, the technique of red-figure vase-painting allowed painters to depict their subject-matters in more detail. Furthermore, the painters started to create the illusion of three-dimensional objects on the two-dimensional flat surface. Thus they could represent the figures realistically in space (Woodford, 1982, pp. 48-50). This matches Plato’s distinction between the product of *mimesis* and the physical object at *Republic* 602d-e: the painter is “mirroring” things in appearance seen from a single point of view, while the multiple appearances of the real thing are calling for our capacity of reasoning which is attributed to the rational element in the soul in Plato. However, the main part of the extant Greek paintings is vase-painting. Vase-painting is not on a flat surface. The shape of a vase is sometimes a tool to express the different views or stages of the scene which the painter aims to depict. Probably it is not the case that “Plato *ever* has vases in mind when he refers to painting” (Halliwell, 2002, p. 135 n.47, italic original). Still, the connection of vase-painting and the stages of the theatrical scene should be taken into consideration. It leads the *mimesis* in vase-painting back to the theatrical performance of poetry which is Plato’s main target in *Republic X*.

Zeuxis is typically taken as the representative painter of Greek “realistic” art (cf. Moss, 2007, p. 422 n. 13). The story of the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius is legendary, but still conveys the idea that Greek art is realistic. In the legend, Zeuxis’ painting of grapes deceives the birds and Parrhasius’ painting of curtains deceives Zeuxis the artist (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 35.36). The paintings in this story seem to be

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painted on the flat surface. Both their works represented physical things in a vivid way, by illustrating the three-dimensional object on the two-dimensional flat surface. Both looked as close to real things as possible. Both were works of transparent mimesis.

Zeuxis was Plato's contemporary. His name is mentioned by Plato as the representative of the painter (*Gorgias* 453c-d).¹¹ According to Pliny and Quintilian, Zeuxis stole Apollodorus' technique of representing light and shade, namely *skiagraphia* (σκιαγραφία, shadow-painting).¹² *Skiagraphia* is probably also applied on scene-paintings and perspective paintings.¹³ Plato adopts this technical term to equip his argument on banishing the poetry (*Republic* 602d). The advantage of this skill is its power of *mimesis*. "Besides this accuracy of imitation, many of the works of Zeuxis displayed great dramatic power" (Smith, 1873). Once again painting is connected to the theatre. The dramatic power is what Plato is concerned with.

An interesting comment on *mimesis* comes from the art historian Gombrich. "[A]t the time he [Plato] wrote, *mimesis* was a recent invention" (Gombrich, 1977, p. 99). Gombrich as an art historian was attempting to establish a coherent explanation for the process of forming schemata and corrections in the whole history of art. He agreed that the *mimesis* which looked identical to the object in appearance was what Plato argues against. But he challenged the idea of "realistic" Greek art. "To create that realm of *mimesis* to which Plato objected, the Greek artists, like any artists, needed a vocabulary which could only be articulated in a gradual learning process" (Gombrich, 1977, p. 114). Gombrich agreed that "Plato was right... that something had been sacrificed," because in the *mimesis* of Greek painting, it is a "reduction to one moment" and "one angle of view" (p. 118). In other words, *mimesis* in Greek art could

¹¹ Zeuxippus of Heraclea at *Protagoras* 318b-c probably refers to the same painter.

¹² Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 35.36 and Quintilian 12.10 §4. For a further description of the technique, see Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 35.11.

¹³ Cf. Liddell, Scott & Jones, 1940, pp. 1609-1610. The perspective is usually taken as a way of representing things most objectively. But the perspective in Greco-Roman paintings is different from what we are familiar with after Renaissance. For example, a bowl's upper rim is usually depicted by a curve projecting further from the horizontal axis than its lower rim (Newall, 2010, p. 94). This means that the "realistic" effect even in the perspective is intertwined with a certain convention.

not simply copy real things. They were creating the things which looked “real” only if the audience (and Plato) share the same vocabulary with the *mimesis*-makers.

Consider this within the discussion of the transparent *mimesis*. Halliwell applied Nehamas’ term “transparency” in his re-evaluation of Aristotle’s *mimesis* (Halliwell, 1990, p. 327). By his assessment, Aristotle’s view of *mimesis* involves “as much a sense of artistic media and their properties, as of art’s imaginative contents.” This is different from the “Platonic transparency” (ibid.). In his more recent work, Halliwell still maintains that the contrast between Plato’s approach to *mimesis* and Aristotle’s is “the radical difference between a dominant belief in the ‘transparency’ of *mimesis* and Aristotle’s dual-aspect conception of artistic representation” (Halliwell, 2002, pp. 175-176). However, surely Plato is “not simply blind” to the creative artistic aspect of *mimesis* (Halliwell, 1990, pp. 328). When Plato says painting is “mirroring” things (*Republic* 596d-e), is it simply “mirroring” things? The craftsman of *mimesis* produces all living things, the sky and the earth, and the gods and everything in the sky, and also the things under the earth in Hades (596c). The gods and the things in Hades are not what can be seen. How can a painter produce them, even merely in appearance, simply by “mirroring” them?

How can a painter produce *mimesis* of invisible things? Due to the limits of visibility in the surface, Wollheim argued from the side of the spectator, that the perception of representation is a “seeing-in” with the “permeability to thought” (Wollheim, 1998, p. 224). For him, there is no problem to represent invisible things. But he insisted that *trompe l’oeil* paintings are not representations (Wollheim, 1998, p. 217). This is consistent with his “two-foldness” account of our perceptions of artworks (Wollheim, 1998, p. 221). By the two-foldness, the subject-matter is different from the colours and shapes on the surface of artwork. *Trompe l’oeil* painting is the perfect example of “transparent *mimesis*.” It is too transparent to form the two-foldness which invites effort of seeing-in in Wollheim’s context, or of giving interpretations as

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Nehamas said.¹⁴ Actually no *mimesis* is simply “mirroring” things. The perfect transparent *mimesis* may impose a certain fixed point of view on us without being aware of. Then we are fed with a chosen seeming “reality.” The “transparency” is a misleading medium which seems to lead us to see the subject-matter in the mimetic works; however, it holds us on the surface.

Plato treats Greek arts as *trompe l’oeil* paintings. In our eyes, it seems unfair. But in his time, the development of new techniques and media of *mimesis* might play the same role as *trompe l’oeil* works. It is just like magic (*Republic* 602c-d, where Plato uses the technical term *skiagraphia* in the Greek text). The *mimesis* in epic and tragic poetry affects us when we see and hear (603b). The psychological effects come to us through perceptions, while the perceptions come from multiple appearances. The phenomenon of dramatic reperformances started in the fifth century B.C. created more multiple appearances. They repeated and strengthened the perceptual impressions which were familiar to audiences.¹⁵ Reperformances of tragedies and comedies did not only occur in theatres, but also in visual arts. Finglass (2015, pp. 219-221) points out the contributions to reperformances made by vase-paintings in the fourth century, including vases from south Italy and Sicily. Some reflect reperformances of Sophocles. Csapo (2010, pp. 7-8) notes the “unusual” and “unnatural” hair-lines, faces, heads depicted on an Attic red-figured column krater in Basel dated around 500–490 B.C. The unusual and unnatural details show that the painting was depicting not mythical imagination, but actors and dramatic performance which were familiar to ancient Greeks. In addition to vase-paintings, Csapo (2010, pp. 13-15) also analysed two relief-fragments as examples of reperformances. The valuable researches on reperformances provide a more coherent story about Greek mimetic arts and its contemporary

¹⁴ The difference is that Wollheim emphasized “[r]epresentation is perceptual” (1998, p. 226), while Nehamas did not. But the perceptions are permeated by thought in Wollheim (p. 224). They also do so in Plato. Plato draws perceptions into the side of δόξα (belief, opinion or judgement). The psychological power comes through visual perception, and then the irrational element “forms belief” (δοξάζον) (*Republic* 602c8, 603a1-2; cf. *Theaetetus* 151d-187a, esp.152b). There are beliefs mixed in our perceptions of *mimesis*.

¹⁵ Also see notes 7 and 8 above.

critics like Plato and Aristotle.¹⁶

Plato is watchful of the multiple appearances reproduced by these mimetic arts. The same things appear different from different point of views. It is the time to call for the rational element of the soul (*Republic* 602e). However, the transparent *mimesis* calls for no further interpretation, because it only copies the surface-appearance from one single point of view (cf. 598a-b). The multiple appearances of the real thing have been fixed into a single point of view of the poet or painter or any *mimesis*-maker.

The “realistic” representation has always enclosed some opinions within it. Besides, to make the work popular to the mass, understandable with minimum effort, the opinions enclosed usually only repeat the given conventions, based on the impressions of familiarity. The single point of view may be dressed in colourful variety. But the variety is false. It has limited our freedom of choice via the perceptions perceived in certain limited ways. Our perceptions are constrained to see the seeming reality of a certain conventional point of view. Because of the transparency, we take the simplified reality as real, without waking our soul to make a real choice.

Therefore I call for reconsideration of the kind of comment that “in contrast to Plato’s constriction of artistic imagination in the interests of the supreme values of the soul and the State, the Aristotelian conception of *mimesis* is inherently liberal” (Halliwell, 1990, p. 331). Plato argues in favour of liberty. But for Plato, liberty cannot be given. As Stalley noted, in the analogy of the Cave, the education is “a process of liberation” (Stalley, 1998, p. 147; cf. *Republic* 514a-519d). Liberation for Plato needs to be free from the fixed conventional views and the given prejudices. It is to liberate our psychological capacity of making choice. The seeming variety of appearances provided in the transparent *mimesis* narrows our perceptions and separates us from real variety. We do not choose, but seem to choose when we are given the simplified, limited and narrowed

¹⁶ A reference particular to Plato’s *Republic* in Finglass, 2015, p. 209. References to Aristotle and Plato in Csapo, 2010, pp. 118-119 and 128.

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choices. Plato's fear is not of variety, but of false variety. As we lose the real variety, we lose freedom. This, I believe to be what concerns us, as well as Plato.

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