

## The Artistic Truth in Aristotle's Criticism

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**ABSTRACT:** *The present study examines Aristotle's definition of art. This examination helps in understanding the nature of art and the artistic truth it ought to carry. Aristotle believes that there is truth in art because it is not independent from the reality from which it emerges. The study advances the thesis that all arts are mimetic; therefore, they are produced by imitation. This notion has misled many thinkers by thinking that art is three times separated from the truth, as Aristotle's teacher, Plato has demonstrated in his argument on the nature of imitative arts. However, Aristotle does not repudiate this assumption, but he tries to create a natural bond between art and the reality it produces. In short, Aristotle invites his readers to enjoy the artistic truth in art by separating it from the actual one in reality.*

**KEYWORDS:** Aristotle, artistic, truth, mimesis, reality.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Aristotle, art exists as an independent authority, governed by certain rules of its own that should not be confused with those governing reality. From this notion comes a body of belief expressed at its utmost in the theory of art for art's sake. Unlike his teacher, Plato, Aristotle sees art carrying its own truth differently from that which we identify with reality. Therefore, art and reality create two different worlds, with special laws that govern them. From this belief comes a set of questions that ask about the nature of art: how can art be independent from reality though it is an imitation of it? What are these laws that govern art? And is there any truth in art as an autonomous entity from reality?

In fact, Aristotle sets before us a complete vision of the nature of art and its truth. For him, art serves an important function as it provides penetrating insights into the real world which, without art, we cannot understand its mysteries and illuminate its darkness.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In an article, entitled "The Concept of Art in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: from Mimesis to Communication," the writer seeks "an alternative to the mimesis concept of art as a communicative practice." (89). His aim is to bring home some issues that have been long overlooked. Constantinos v. Proimos believes that the concept of mimesis in art creates a gap between art and reality and consequently makes art void of any truth. In his article, Proimos tries to change our way of seeing art. Therefore, he attempts to re-define it. In other words, the writer above wants to shift our focus on art as an imitation of reality which the concept of mimesis implies and make us see it as a "communicative practice," which the writer believes, will shed light on terms like "influence, experience and communication" that are set to have "a strategic role" in our re evaluation of this relationship between art and truth(89). Unluckily, this reading of Aristotle's definition of art as mimetic lacks solid foundations, or to put it more succinctly, involves an absolute separation between art and the reality it ought to represent. In this article, however, our attempt is to create a connection and confirm the relationship between art as a mimetic exercise in reality and the artistic truth revealed by it. In short, the present writers seek to bridge the gap and fill the void which many writers have created in their study of Aristotle's definition of art and truth.

In his article, "The Problem of Literary Truth in Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*," Paolo Pitari rightly assumes that the criticism conducted on Plato's and Aristotle's treatment of truth in art has "[adulterated] the original arguments" in which art cannot stand away from the reality it emerges from. However, the writer here seems to have fallen in the ambush of reinterpretation of the mimesis concept of art as Plato and Aristotle define it. The writer's main point in this article is again to re-interpret the concept of mimesis not as an imitation of reality. He writes, "the notion of mimesis as imitation is inadequate and moves us to misunderstand the nature of art and therefore the possibility of artistic truth." (18). In proposing an alternative to Aristotle's mimesis concept of art, writers actually overlook and contradict Aristotle's view of the theory of "representation," which he believes forms the core essence of art. In other words, any attempt meant to reinterpret the theory of mimesis in a context that goes far away from Aristotle's purport will result in a certain failure of understanding the nature of art and consequentially in misinterpretation of its truth. Aristotle points out this notion when he declares that "speaking generally, poetry seems to owe its origin to two particular causes, both natural. From childhood, men have an instinct for representation and, in this respect, they differ from other animals in that they are far more imitative and learn their first lessons by representing things." (Cited in Kivy 188).

Acting on Aristotle's advice above, in this article, the present writers will take art as a mimetic practice, having its own sovereignty and enjoying its unique truth. The article purports to treat art as a sovereign entity, governed by laws of its own.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study will be mainly theoretical. The analysis and the argument will be theory-restricted. Mostly, the study will draw heavily on Aristotle's insights and arguments as they are penned in his book the *Poetics*. In some cases, which are very rare in this article, there will be a comparison between the way Aristotle views art and the way Plato does. The aim is to show the meeting points between these great theorists and not to shift the focus away from the main argument of this article.

Plato and Aristotle agree that art is mimetic. Here, they refer to the formative process which art is produced by. Given this fact, one should always remember that art has a foundation from which it emerges and evolves. Any assumption short of that is void and meaningless. This certainty makes us always believe that art carries truth. In this article, we will shed greater light on this truth and expound its nature and remove the mysteries engulfing it.

## DISCUSSION

In his theory of art, Aristotle attributes the truth in art to creativity and imagination. On the contrary, Plato "denies the representational arts of his day any capacity to carry truth" (Zuidervaart 2). To Aristotle and Plato perhaps more than to any other thinkers are to be traced the debate carried out in Western civilization about art and its nature. There are two different attitudes that are adopted towards the nature of art. One is philosophical; the other artistic. As Lambert Zuidervaart has mildly put it, "these two cultural conditions, the one philosophical, the other artistic, provide the broad context in which 'artistic truth' is to be reconsidered" (ibid).

Aristotle's notions come as a reaction against the critics who seek to establish a set of presumptions and rules by which they judge the work of art. He rejects any criteria in criticism that are not purely artistic. Therefore, he comes to defy Plato's philosophical notions and theories, concerning art because he considers them to be not artistic as such per se. Aristotle, however, believes that in order for art to perform its function and achieve its goal, it should be free from philosophy and any other limitations. "According to Aristotle," J.J.Kockelmons sums up, "the arts in general, and the imitating arts in particular, are autonomous and should not be reduced to philosophy, religion, or even the moral order" (12). Taking this into consideration, one can assume that art has its own artistic truth that is not to be confused with the scientific one. Kockelmons convincingly argues that "if the arts are autonomous, then they must also have a 'good' and a 'truth' of their own. It is not impossible that Aristotle held the view that one must make a distinction between scientific and artistic truth" (ibid).

As far as truth in art is concerned, Aristotle identifies two types of truth in art. One is artistic; the other is cognitive. Similarly, there are two types of error in art in general, and the art of poetry in particular. There are the artistic errors coming from the essence of art, and there are the technical, inartistic ones coming from the artist's lack of complete knowledge about the subjects he imitates. For this reason, Aristotle argues that we cannot criticize artists for committing errors that have nothing to do with the essence of art, such as choosing "to imitate and write about impossible things" (Gilbert 108). Whereas, Aristotle continues, "if the poet chooses to imitate something and fails because of lack of imitative ability," the poet should be criticized and punished (ibid). In the same way we treat these errors, we should treat art for representing the truth. Aristotle claims that "the poet who is criticized for presenting something not in accordance with the truth may reply that nevertheless he represented it in proper manner" (qtd. in Tatarkiewicz 148).

The main function of art, as Aristotle sees it, is to create a clear vision and set a vivid picture of human reality. He agreed that art is an imitation of reality, but, by imitation, he does not mean the idea of giving an exact image or mirroring reality as it is. The point of it is "merely to imitate human reality" according to necessity and probability (Rochmore 67). Aristotle argues that "from what we have said it will be seen that the poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen; i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary" (9).

On the other hand, Aristotle considers art to have more truth than history. For him, the difference between art and history lies in the fact that while history deals with things for themselves in a particular way, art deals with things in a more universal way. In addition, history is confined and governed by particularities, while art is not. As Walter Watson has suggested, "poetry is more philosophic than history, which is to say that it contains more of truth than history, and it contains none of truth because it speaks more of universals" (127).

Truth in art, as Aristotle sees it, relies heavily on imagination. He established a close relationship between the artist's capacity for imagining the world outside and the reality he represents. For him, therefore, art is not a direct imitation of reality. The artist's capacity for imagining reality and imitating it participates in the process of comprehension and "any act of human knowing." In his book *Imagining, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, Michelle Karnes assumes that Aristotle "assigns imagination functions pertaining not only to sensation but also to intellectual apprehension, making imagination a sense faculty that participates in admittedly obscure but nonetheless crucial ways" (32). For this reason, Aristotle sees the artist's use of imagination not as a tool of various symbols used to obscure and distort, but as a medium through which we reveal truth. In other words, he associates imagination not with symbols but with truth.

According to Aristotle, objective truth content is given in art through the images that the artist uses to imitate reality. "In the Aristotelian tradition," Karnes convincingly

argues, "objective truth content is exactly what imagination's images possess, even though that content cannot be accessed without the aid of the agent intellect" (31). This notion comes as a reaction against the Platonic definition of art as an imitation of reality being devoid of creativity or any other artistic value. Aristotle, therefore, considers art as a process of active images creating a powerful picture of human reality.

In his definition of art, however, Aristotle does not separate between form and content, as does Plato, who sees the work of art as carrying no truth and having no real significance. In contrast, Aristotle sees the work of art as a mixture of form and content, reflecting reality. In other words, Aristotle has established a strong relationship between the form and the content. This relationship makes the artistic truth in the work of art conspicuous to the beholder. Had Aristotle separated the form from the content, he would have seen no truth being carried and would have considered art as an historical document devoid of any artistic element. He, therefore, suggests that "art is not a counterfeit removed from the pure forms, but something that is both thingly and cognitive, physical and metaphysical, substantial and insubstantial, concrete and intellectual" (Rapaport 2). For truth to be carried out in the work of art, Aristotle suggests that the form should be true to its idea or content. For Aristotle, then, Rapaport rightly assumes, "the form of the work, if it is to be good, true, and beautiful, ought to reflect mimetically the ethical principle of the intermediate, because in that way both form and idea are wedded" (3).

Aristotle sees truth in the work of art as "human moderation and temperance." This is why he defines art as an autonomous activity of man. As Rapaport has succinctly put it, "whereas Aristotle's understanding of art was molded on an ethics that was existential (human), Plotinus based his understanding of art on an ethics that was ontological (nonhuman)." (5) The work of art, for this reason, cannot be truthful and good without providing "the soul insights into the truth." In Aristotle's view, art exists to serve humanity as it provides penetrating insights into dark nature of human beings. This idea is emphasized by Rapaport as stating that "only by way of the balanced or ethical form of existential being-that which makes us stand out as most human-does the mimetic nature of the work of art accede to the truth of being" (ibid).

The truth which Aristotle ascribes to the work of art should not be confused with propositional truth, or what is called truth of statements and beliefs. By artistic truth, Aristotle means the extent to which the work of art is true to life and characters. The artistic truth, to use S.H. Butcher's words, "is not propositional truth; i.e. it is not true about someone or something. Rather, it is true to someone or something, for example, true to life" (qtd. in Joby 48). Aristotle, however, rejects relating the truth of beliefs or statements to the work of art, believing it to be irrelevant and inartistic. He considers truth of this sort to be a matter of correspondence which is not found in art. He writes:

Any impossibilities there may be in his [a poet's] descriptions of things are faults. But from another point of view ,they are justifiable, if they

serve the end of poetry itself-it is a lesser error in an artist not to know-that the hind has no horns, than to produce an unrecognizable picture of one. (qtd. in Deutsch 71).

## CONCLUSION

The present writers conclude that the body of research conducted on the notion of truth in art is based on, except for some cases, a rudimentary understanding of Aristotle's concept of mimesis. This word has left void before critics and researchers which leaves the door open for different readings and interpretations. The conclusion one may draw from this study is that art has a truth of its own. It has its own sovereignty. It has its own being. Although it is a product/imitation of a reality, truth in art is and must be artistic, which runs counter to the actual truth there is in reality. We cannot appreciate this truth if we treat art in the same way we treat reality.

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