

Mimeshisu to monomane-Arisutoteresu to Zeami no mohō no riron

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Mimesis and Monomane: The Theories of Imitation in Aristotle and Zeami

By

Robert G. Sewell

That art is an imitation of nature is a concept basic to many theories of artistic creation throughout the world. Certainly aestheticians have varied in their definitions of “imitation” and “nature” as well as their descriptions of the cognitive process involved in the act of imitation. One can observe, however, certain general principles that characterize classical European and East Asian discussion of imitation. Aristotle, along with his great admirer, Horace, propounded views on imitation or mimesis which influenced critical opinion for centuries in the West [It came to refer more generally to “the representation of reality” as explored in Erick Auerbach’s classic work *Mimesis*.] Some seventeen centuries later on the other side of the world, the Japanese playwright of the *no* drama Zeami (1363 – 1443) formulated his concept of *monomane*, the definitive statement on the imitation of nature in Japanese art. [*Monomane* basic meaning is mimicry of the sounds of and gestures of animals and humans, but like mimesis, has been used more generally as the representation of reality in the realm of the arts, especially theater.]

As a philosopher, Aristotle believes art is a product of man’s intellect and can be analyzed in a rational fashion. Zeami’s theories of *no* have both a more pragmatic and mystical quality to them. His critical writings were intended as practical admonitions for actors and playwrights and were primarily focused on the performance of the *no*. In accordance with Japanese tradition each generation Zeami’s manuscripts were secretly transmitted to and read by a single individual, the master of the *no* troupe following in Zeami’s line. It was not until the twentieth century that his critical works were made public. [See Zeami, *The tradition secret du No*, Rene Sieffert, Tr., (Paris, 1960), pp. 43-48 and Kiyomitsu Kanai, *No no kenkyu* (Tokyo, 1965, pp. 1093-1102.) While Aristotle embraced rational and empirical method, Zeami was schooled in Zen Buddhism, an anti-rational or trans-rational way of thought. But despite the difference in their sympathies and approaches, Aristotle and Zeami emphasize two similar elements in their theories of imitation: the relationship between the artistic process and the natural process, and the idealization of nature in art. It is these two aspects of their theories that this article is concerned.

In both the theories of mimesis and monomane a strong analogy between the artistic process and the natural process is drawn. Thus, in order to understand Aristotle’s and Zeami’s

views on art as imitation, it is necessary to comprehend first their perceptions of the workings of nature. Aristotle and Zeami agree that nature is in constant flux and that change is the most apparent feature. But they are at odds on the character and significance of change.

For Aristotle, change and motion is related to the interaction of form and matter. He believes that motion in the universe results from matter, the particular, which we perceive with our senses, seeking to realize its inherent form, the universal, which we apprehend with reason. The fundamental process of nature is progressive; ideally it is formless matter striving toward matterless form. Thus the phenomenon of change perceived in nature is a direct reflection of the underlying, natural laws of the universe.

In Zen Buddhism, the basis of much of Zeami's critical thought, the ever-changing world of nature is recognized as the most important phenomenon that can be apprehended by the senses, but such change is viewed as illusory. Events and actions do in fact "happen" in nature, but they do not change anything in a fundamental way. The life and death of a plant or person are different phases in their being and are parts of a single, universal synthesis. Thus the apprehension of change is considered false, the source of human suffering that is caused by attachment to ephemeral objects in the world. This "mistaken" view of the world and this attachment result from a rationalistic or conventional mode of thought that separates the subject from the object. Man becomes one with the world when he realizes the absurdity of this duality.

The concept of self or subject arises from a failure to perceive the relativity of phenomenal existence. A favorite Zen image that illustrates the negation of duality in actual experiences is the appearance of the moon in the water:

The phenomenon moon-in-water is likened to human experience. The water is the subject, and the moon the object. When there is no water, there is no moon-in-the-water, and likewise, there is no moon. But when the moon rises the water does not wait to receive its image, and when the even the tiniest drop of water is poured out the moon does not wait to cast its reflection, for the moon does not intend to cast its reflection, and the water does not receive its image on purpose. This event is caused as much by the water as by the moon, and as the water manifests the brightness of the moon, the moon manifests the clarity of the water. [Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York, 1964), p. 120.]

That is to say, there can be no subject without the object. So the idea that the two are separate is contrary to actual concrete experience, and an illusion created by abstract rationalistic thought. Realizing this, the Buddhist does not feel the desire to obtain an object in

the “outside world” or to achieve a distant goal because “...it becomes vividly clear that in concrete fact I have no other self than the totality of things of which I am aware.” (Watts, p. 121)

From the respective philosophical frames of reference of Aristotle and Zeami, we can comprehend their notions of the way in which the artist imitates nature. Aristotle believes that the artist does not imitate the products of nature themselves; this he contends is impossible. What the artist does is imitate the process of nature. The workings of nature and the creation of art”... are processes whereby natural materials are made by a natural agent to realize their implicit form.” [John Herman Randall, Jr., *Aristotle*, (New York, pp. 274-275)] There is, however, a difference between the natural and artistic processes. While in nature an inherent force exists in matter to realize its potential form, the human artists impose a form of which he conceives, and which he believes he can realize in some material outside himself. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says, “By art are produced the things of which the form is the soul of the maker.” [Aristotle, *On Man in the Universe*, ed. Louise Ropes Loomis, (New York, 1943), p. 28] The soul or human intellect is the quality which the artist brings to the material to be form. Aristotle tells us in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, “There is no art which is not a rationally creative state of the mind under the guidance of true reason.” [Aristotle, *On Man in the Universe*, p. 173] Thus, because art is created by intellect Aristotle believes art is capable of being understood in rational terms. The logical application of the artist’ intellect indicates that “In ‘imitation’ the artist separates some form from the material with which it is joined in nature, some sensible form, and realizes it in the materials of his art, in his medium... But the new materials or medium imposes its own conditions on that form.” [Randall, p 276]

For the poet who imitates men in action, according to Aristotle, the problem is the same. He is aware that man’s actions result from character, heritage and habits, “But the poet has to make his actions appear necessary by means of his medium – words, through developing man’s character, expressing his thoughts, narrating or depicting incidents. ‘Imitation’ is therefore the presentation of an aspect of things in a matter other than its natural matter, rendered inevitable by reasons other than natural reasons. The form ‘imitated’ in art is a natural form, a natural way of acting. But the materials and their structure belong not to nature but art.” [Randall, p. 277] Aristotle contends that while art in a sense imitate the process of nature, it actually improves on nature. Art accomplishes this by realizing the form that potentially lies within nature, thereby completing nature. The ability of the artist to improve on nature relates to Aristotle’s view of idealization which will be discussed below. But first Zeami’s view of the role of the artist within the process of nature will be investigated.

The basis of Zeami's theory of *monomane* or imitation lies in Zen views on nature and art. Of the relationship between artist and nature, Allan Watts tells us "... for Zen there is no duality, no conflict between the natural element of chance and the human element of control. The constructive powers of the human mind are more artificial than the formative action of plants action of plants or bees, so that from the standpoint of Zen it is no contradiction to say the artistic technique is discipline in spontaneity and spontaneity in discipline." [Watts, p. 169] Thus, while the Zen view arises from a completely different orientation to nature, it strongly resembles Aristotle's concept that artistic process and the natural process are fundamentally similar. The Zen artist and Aristotle, however, diverge as to the character of the artistic production. Aristotle believes the artist cannot imitate the products of nature only the process by which they are created. The artistic object is an improvement upon nature because the artist through the intervention of his intelligence can bring what is potential in material to a more complete fruition. The Zen artist does not think of the work of art as a representation of nature "...but as being itself a work of nature. For the very technique involves the art of artlessness, or what Saburo Hasegawa has called 'controlled accident.'" [Watts. p. 169]

One of the differences between Aristotle's and Zeami's approaches to the processes of art and nature derives from the fact for Aristotle these observations are detached philosophical precepts, while for Zeami they represent both an emotional involvement with the flow of nature and practical admonitions to artists. The Zen artist at the highest stage of mastery rejects the duality of subject and object and does not contrive to create. He simply defines, without premeditation, the essence of the artistic material.

Throughout Zeami's writings on *nō* he discusses the stages in the perfection of acting or the imitation of character. Discipline and conscious effort are necessary until the final state. The process has been described by Makoto Ueda: "The actor...should try to bring himself into the heart of the natural object rather than to bring them into the subjective sphere of his mind...a personal element should not enter the process through which an object in nature is transformed into its equivalent in art." [Makoto Ueda, *Zeami, Basho, Yeats, Pound: A Study in Japanese and English Poetics*. (London, 1965), p. 13.] This statement suggests the distinction between the process of imitation in the training of *nō* and method actors. The "method" actor attempts to become the object of imitation by transforming the content of his conception of self while maintaining the conception of itself. Thus, "I" the man, becomes "I" the chair. The *nō* actor, on the other hand, becomes the one with the object through a denial of the conception of self entirely, realizing the oneness he shares with the object. In *F@shi kaden* [Teaching on Style and the Flower] Zeami says, "in the art of imitation there is a stage called non-imitation: if one proceeds to the ultimate of imitation and entirely enters the thing he is imitating, he will possess no will for imitation." [Ueda, p. 13] This statement in one sense

means that when he becomes the complete master of his art, the artist becomes unconscious of it. The Buddhist would say that the imitation unites with the imitated. The actor's conception of self evaporates, the barrier between the actor's mind and the outside world vanishes, and the actor unconsciously becomes the object of imitation. When the actor achieves this state of "non-imitation" and when the poet achieves the condition of being unconscious of his mastery, they are in a position to act spontaneously and reveal the essence of their objects of imitation.

From the Buddhist point of view the artistic product – the actor's performance or the poet's poem – are considered a natural product since the artist has joined the forces of nature. The penetration into the essence of the object of imitation by the imitator leads us to a consideration of the Aristotlean and Zen notions of the idealization of nature in art.

In the theories of imitation of both Aristotle and Zeami there is the element of idealization or universalization. Aristotle explicitly elaborates upon this aspect of his theory. In Zeami the nature of idealization in the theatre and in art in general is implicit in his conception of *hong'i* (true intention) and *y@gen* (profound beauty).

In Aristotle's writings imitation in art has two meanings – imitation of nature as it is and imitation as an idealization of art. Idealization for Aristotle is selection of materials in order to present universals. The high regard he had for universals in art reflects his predilection for the intellectual. Katherine Gilbert has said, "He likens the imitative to the intellectual process both in its instinctive origin and its full flowering, and one is justified in believing that progress in universality is the sign of excellence in fine arts as it explicitly stated to be in intellection." [Katherine Gilbert, "Aesthetic Imitation and Imitators in Aristotle," *The Philosophical Review*, XLX (1936), p. 563] Aristotle pays his highest compliment to poetry when he says in *Poetics* "... poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history, for poetry deals more with things in a universal way, but history with each thing for itself. To deal with them universally is to say that according to probability or necessity it happens that a certain sort of man does or says certain things, and poetry aims at this when it gives names to the characters." Thus in order to construct a good plot, one should develop it within a rational framework in which events occur in accordance with the necessity of their internal logic, rather than by an exact imitation of actual events. Art which simply deals with particulars or direct imitation is, therefore, a lower level than art which is an idealization of nature.

Zeami believes that art does not gain artistic effect or improve on nature through altering the objects which are imitated. He says in the *F@shi kaden* "The basic rule is to imitate things as they are, whatever they may be." [Ueda, p. 12] "Things as they are," however, are not necessarily what we immediately perceive through our senses. In the early stages of acting the

actor tries to imitate the character as he appears. In the highest state of imitation, the actor penetrates the essence of the character and realizes it as an aspect of this own being: "The man and the object of imitation become as one in the essence they share with each other." [Ueda, p. 14] The essence of a character is *hongji*, "the inmost nature that constitutes the core of his person." [Ueda, p. 15] Zeami says, for the benefit of both the actor and the playwright, that in represent a mad person, one must represent the specific and underlying obsession or cause of madness rather than the realistic details of his madness. [Ueda, 15] The goal of the artist is to express the essence of the object of imitation. Its achievement is the realization of *y@gen* or profound beauty. *Y@gen* is inner beauty outwardly expressed by means of art. It is the manifestation of the 'true intent," *hongji*, which lies in the depth of things." [Ueda, p.17] Zeami believes that the *hongji* or innermost core of all people has beauty and should be expressed in each portrayal. He says in *Hana no kagami [Mirror of the Flower]* that no matter what character an actor imitates, "...he should never depart from the principle of *y@gen*. This will be like seeing a noble princess, a court lady a man, a woman, a monk, a peasant, a humble man, a beggar, an outcast, all standing in a line with a spray of blossoms. Although they differ in social status and outward appearance, they are equally beautiful blossoms insofar as they feel the effect of their beauty." [Ueda, p.16]

Thus idealization is strongly implied in Zeami's view of art and depends on an intuitive apprehension of the essence of the object of imitation. This apprehension is realized and communicated simultaneously in the work of art. For Aristotle, idealization of nature as it relates to the creation of poetry is the arrangement of artistic materials within a rational framework that enables the artist to present his work as logically consistent or probable.

In summary, two aspects of the theories of imitation in Aristotle and Zeami have been considered, the relationship between the artistic and natural processes, and the idealization of nature. Aristotle's view of art is colored by his detached philosophic viewpoint and his emphasis on reason. Zeami is an anti-rationalist, reflecting his Zen training as well as the fact that he was a practicing artist. Both Aristotle and Zeami believe that the artistic process imitates the natural process. But Aristotle contends that the artist improves on nature because he can more completely realize the form inherent in matter. Zeami view the art object as the product of nature. In Zen, art is considered one with the object of imitation.

Neither one represent all Western or Eastern theories of art as imitation of nature since their writings are in many ways highly idiosyncratic. Their views, however, are characteristic of two basic approaches to art: the empirical and logical on the one hand, and the intuitive and emotive on the other. This is not to say controlled as opposed to unrestrained modes of thoughts. Aristotle's and Zeami's theories reveal a grounding in differing but equally disciplined

ways of thought. The Greek philosopher seeks logicity and consistency to explain nature and intellectual phenomena involved in artistic presentation. The Japanese playwright verifies truth through performances that are emotionally convincing. But both agree that in the creation of art, the artist mirrors the natural process and represents nature in its quintessential form.