

Living in Two Mimetic Worlds

Imagine that you are strolling through the *Marché aux Fleurs*, on the edge of the Ile de la Cite: your eyes take in the vibrant rainbow of colors displayed in the flowers, your nose breathes in the aromatic scents, your finger feels the sharp prick of a thorn as you reach to pluck a rose, and your ears listen to the happy chattering of birds. This may seem like a peaceful stroll but your brain is busy at work, transducing the signals from your surrounding environment, and turning them into action potentials that will be relayed to your brain. Everything you sense around you is your brain's interpretation of what you actually experience. This is because before you see the colors, smell the flowers, feel the thorn's prick, or hear the birds, neurons in your central nervous system are coding them. Somebody else walking through the *Marché* may experience the same things but their body will present them differently. Perhaps their olfactory bulb lacks a certain receptor protein that keeps them from smelling the violets; your two representations of the *Marché* are thus, different. Everything you sense is your brain's own mimetic interpretation thanks to the firing of thousands of little neurons.

However, this neurological interpretation is just half the story. The firing is your body's automatic mimesis; you don't consciously depolarize cells. The other half of the story is your *conscious, imaginative* interpretation of the moment. Anything that happens in life will be a combination of these two mimetic elements: the neurological and the imaginative. The humanities have recognized imaginative mimesis in the art forms since the ancient Greeks, but only recently have they begun

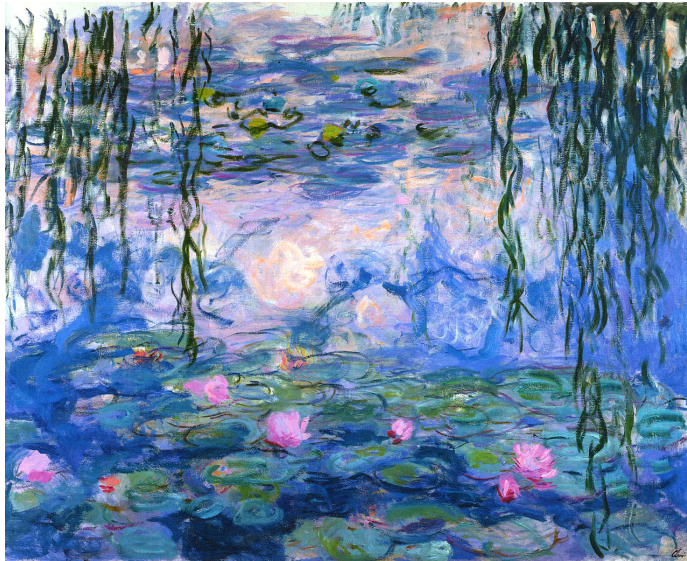
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to comprehend the immense role neuroscience plays in mimesis. This comprehension is crucial because everything we do is governed by the brain: the machine-like actions of our bodies *and* our purposeful, artistic interpretations. As Gebauer and Wulf wrote: “Mimesis includes both an *active* and a *cognitive* component. The two cannot be sharply distinguished” (5). Hence, we live in the fusion of our two mimetic worlds: one created by action potentials and the other by imagination.

Plato wrote his *Allegory of the Cave* to warn against the danger of mimesis because he believed it brought disillusionment and falsification. Yet, this famous story was mimetic; it was a reinterpretation of Plato’s late teacher Socrates’ outlook on mimesis. This is a prime example of how mimesis cannot be avoided because it is: “A *condition humana* at the same time that it is responsible for variations among individual human beings” (Gebauer & Wulf 2). Mimesis is *in* every person but it *varies* from person to person. Baudelaire beautifully described the way a painter translates what *he specifically* sees onto a canvas for the rest of the world to enjoy: “The external world is reborn upon his paper...endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of its creator...All the raw materials with which the memory has loaded itself are put in order, ranged and harmonized, and undergo that forced idealization which is the result of a childlike perceptiveness—that is to say a perceptiveness acute and magical by reason of its innocence” (12). Baudelaire shows us that the world is “reborn” in an artist’s work---it has become the artist’s interpretation of what he sees. The automatic vision the artist got from the firing of his rods and cones in the back of his retinas combined with his creative interpretation of the scene blend to

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form a painting which showcases his two mimetic worlds. For example, Claude Monet placed his easel by a lily pond, perceived his surroundings, sending action potentials up his visual pathway and combined *this* view with his conscious decisions of what watercolors to mix and how to use his brushstrokes in order to create his own waterlily scenes. Take a look at this painting done by Monet in 1919:



Now that you've looked, your visual pathway has rapidly emitted signals to your visual cortex, allowing you to perceive the image. The more you admire the work, the more you interpret it. If you look away and conjure the image, it will be different; your imagination and memory will change its appearance. Both of your mimetic worlds have intertwined with Monet's mimetic worlds in the painting and together, you've created an entirely new representation of the artwork. Essentially, your memory of the work is something you created *with* Monet. Isn't that magical? And each time you revisit the memory of the painting it is recoded in the brain. Therefore, every time you picture the painting it will be a new interpretation of the

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last-an infinite mimesis-like a kaleidoscope, the beads are the same but the more you look, the more the pattern changes.

Sources:

Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*

Gebauer and Wulf, "Introduction," *Mimesis Culture-Art Society*

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<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html>