MIMETOFOBIA

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Sympathie mimétique: On the Persistence of Resemblance in Aesthetic Modernity

The assumption that a disappearance of similarity conditions the emergence of modernity seems to be supported not only by the theorems of – among others – Michel Foucault, but also by supposedly anti-mimetic tendencies in aesthetics. However, a close look at the complex connection of mimesis and resemblance and a differentiated examination of the aesthetic avant-garde's artistic programmes – in particular those of Surrealism, which elevated an aesthetic-epistemological conception of the similar[1] to a central paradigm – allow for an emphasis of the persistence, and what is more, the resurgence of resemblance in Aesthetic Modernity, contrary to mimetophobic theses.[2]

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1 For the terms "resemblance", "similarity" and also "likeness" – all subsumed in the German "Ähnlichkeit" – a synonymous use is widespread. It is impossible to offer a valid differentiation in this article, since the theorems and programs discussed use the terms heterogeneously. Nevertheless, where it seems helpful to indicate different dimensions, 'resemblance' is the preferred term when it comes to similarities of appearance or a relational state of resembling, particularly where aesthetic programmes are discussed. In contrast, 'the similar' and 'similarity' are used in the context of epistemological concepts and figures of thought in a wider sense (including figures like analogy and correspondence).

2 The ideas presented in this paper are explored in depth author's dissertation *Entgrenzte Ähnlichkeit. Zur Konjunktur des Ähnlichen im Milieu des Surrealismus* [Universität Tübingen, 2020, unpublished manuscript], written in the context of the ongoing research on similarity based in Tübingen (cf. Bhatti, Kimmich 2015 (transl. 2018); Kimmich 2017). For revising this article, I would like to thank Anna Conant and Timo Stoesser.

The expulsion of similarity

In their frequent repetition, the general distrust of the epistemological valency of similarity, the much-cited 'crisis of representation' and the thesis of anti-mimetic tendencies in aesthetics have become commonplaces of research in which modernity's "anti-mimetic affect" (Ott 2010: 9, my transl.) is largely taken as a proven fact. Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* was particularly influential in introducing the thesis that a decline in the epistemological validity of similarity conditions the emergence of modernity.[3] He describes 'four similitudes' (*convenientia, aemulatio*, analogy and sympathy) that shape the pre-modern episteme to then give way to a representational order based on identity and difference in the age of 'classicism'. Hence, similarity, being linked to the fuzzy realms of imagination, seems to have only marginal epistemological significance and thus a residual status in modernity.[4] However, not only Foucault's neo-platonic conception of the Renaissance 'episteme' proved one-sided; his periodization of pre-modern, classical and modern epistemes has also been criticized (Otto 2007: 69; Vowinkel 2011: 247; Kimmich 2017: 55). It obscures the "persistence of the similar" (Patrut, Rössler 2019: 15, my transl.) in modernity and its upsurges in an "aesthetics of the similar" (Funk, Mattenklott, Pauen 2001a),[5] which can be traced from the Renaissance and Mannerism to Romanticism, Symbolism and Surrealism, which follows this line of tradition. This persistence of similarity not only as an aesthetic (ibidem; Patrut, Rössler 2019; Dommaschk 2019) but also as an epistemological paradigm can be observed in the sciences (Eggers 2011) as well as in cultural theory (Kimmich 2017: 45f); one can even speak of a modern "study of similarity" (Feichtinger 2018). Nevertheless, simi-

larity was largely de-thematised in the theory formation of the late 20th century, where it "had no influential lobby": "Thinking in terms of similarities is still considered a model of pre-modernity, is assigned to a homeopathic or magical approach to the world. The lack of precision seems to disqualify similarity in many fields of theoretical and scientific debate" (Kimmich 2017: 15, my transl.).

Despite all philosophical and theoretical efforts, the vagueness of similarity still stubbornly defies logical formalisation and conceptualisation. Thus, for some scholars its notion arouses the "fascination with the unclear, the impure, with that which undermines distinctions" (Winkler 2016, my transl.) while others, like Willard Van Orman Quine, are – even where they acknowledge its basal function – repelled by its dubious logical status (Kimmich 2016: 196). This is not least due to the 'slipperiness' of similarity and its deceptive character already noted in Plato's *Sophist*, wherein he addresses the eristic problem of everything being 'somehow' similar.[6] What is more, judgments of similarity are vague, perceptual and gradual. They are dependent on stance, perspective and regard, and thus cannot be resolved into the logical abstractness of identity and difference, nor do they correspond to René Descartes' demand for conceptual 'clarity and distinctness'. A long line of critics, from Plato to G. W. F. Hegel on to Quine and Nelson Goodman, continues to repeat arguments against similarity in this vein to this day.

According to Goodman, its vagueness invalidates similarity for philosophical logic and scientific use. Following the tradition of Plato's attempt to deal with the 'somehow' inherent to similarity, Goodman states that it is "notoriously slippery" (1972: 444) and does not satisfy the demands of conceptualisation. He posits the necessity of specifying similarity findings – which renders them superfluous.[7]

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3 His "theses on similarity [...] have [...] most effectively ensured that similarity and modernity are perceived as opposites" (Kimmich 2017: 54, my transl.).

4 At the same time, the reading of Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* suggests a certain permeability of the claimed pre-modern episteme to modernity, which is evident in the scientific significance of the figure of analogy and especially in modern poetry.

5 Cf. Christopher Jenkin-Jones' translation: Meyer Stump 2018: 16.

6 Cf. on this persisting problem Spaemann (2001: 52): "Somehow everything seems to be comparable with everything else. But we do not seem to get beyond the 'somehow'" (my transl.).

7 Goodman describes this methodological problem as follows: "As it occurs in philosophy, similarity tends under analysis either to vanish entirely or to require for its explanation just what it purports to explain" (ivi: 445).

Goodman not only criticises similarity as a philosophical "impostor" (ivi: 437), but also problematises its viability for art theory, stressing "that no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference" of images that he sees as based on a system of denotation: "Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance" (1968: 5). Following this thesis, 'conventionalists' argue that "there is no special sort of similarity between a picture and its subject" (Sakamoto 1998: 144). Goodman's theses have been taken up in picture theory by researchers like Oliver Scholz (2004), who opposes naïve similarity theories.

Not only analytical philosophy, but also poststructuralist theories of difference (not least inspired by Foucault) problematise similarity, presenting numerous arguments against representation.[8] Similarity thus seems to have become supplanted by concepts of dissimilarity, difference, repetition and simulation.

> For postmodern thought, after all, similarities exist only as "distorted", as "simulacra" that "simulate the similar", and for analytical philosophy it is probably characteristic that "there is certainly nothing more fundamental than our sense of similarity", but that the "concept of similarity", despite its "metaphysical appeal", remains an "opaque notion" and only when it "disappears completely" can a "paradigm for the development from irrationality to science" be established [...] (Otto 2007: 69, my transl.).

Difference-theoretical critiques of similarity, which may be described as a second argumentative strand of an "anti-similarity-movement" (Stjernfelt 2007: 53) alongside analytical philosophy, are motivated by the traditional philosophical reduction of similarity to identity, representation and concept. The attack on mimesis as representation was also led notably by poststructuralist theory, against which it positions concepts such as repetition, trace and mimicry. Yet, this also reveals

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8 To name just two of the most influential examples: The prominent concept delineated by Jacques Derrida with the neologism *differance* (*De la grammatologie*, 1967) and Gilles Deleuze's *Difference et répétition* (1968), criticising similarity as a 'vicarious agent' of representation.

its openness to non-representational dimensions of (dis)similarity and mimesis that do not oppose difference but rather the 'logic of identity'.[9] Moreover, Foucault's and Goodman's preoccupation must be evaluated as critical, but at the same time exceptionally detailed statements on similarity which stimulated research (Decock, Douven 2011).[10] This also applies to those approaches of picture theory influenced by analytical philosophy, who allow for variants of 'limited' similarity theories (Sachs-Hombach 2000: 786). The "primacy of difference" (Winkler 2016: 5, my transl.) and the verdict against similarity – "he who speaks of similarities obviously knows nothing precise" (Funk, Mattenklott, Pauen 2001b: 7, my transl.) – were established only by subsequent generations of researchers.[11] However, both of these tendencies – as well as the "many departures from mimesis" (Ott 2010, my transl.) – have gradually found themselves under revision in recent years.

Resemblance, mimesis and the 'dis-similarity' of modernity

Despite this recent revision, the theoretical history of mimesis is also still commonly recounted as the story of its modern disappearance.

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9 This is evident, for example, in Michel Foucault's examination of René Magritte's concept of resemblance (Foucault 2010). However, this excursion into art criticism, influenced by Deleuze's critique of representation – which is informed by a critical reading of *Sophist* and the (post-)surrealist Pierre Klossowski's concept of simulacra – proves that the notion of resemblance is rejected prematurely, whilst hailing 'similitude', against Magritte's objective of redefining resemblance (as an aesthetic-epistemological mode of thought) and similarity (as a relation of pictorial representation). Thus "it becomes clear that Foucault situates the notion of resemblance in the traditional way, i.e. in the relation of image element-object, wherein the original 'dominates and hierarchizes all copies'" (Bauer 2001: 129, my transl.).

10 The potential for this stimulation inspired by Foucault's writing is evident not leastly in the sources cited in this article, for example Funk, Mattenklott, Pauen 2001a.

11 Of course, many of them rely not on poststructuralist thought but rather on the authority of a philosophical tradition most prominently represented by Descartes, which posits "qui bene distinguit, bene docet" ("he who distinguishes well teaches well); this sentence emphasizes the importance of clear and distinct terms and sharp definitions. Ulrici (1806-1884) takes distinction as the starting point for philosophizing in general" (Kirchner 1907: s.p.).

Since the beginnings of modernity, mimesis has been subject to a constant critique within aesthetic and poetic theory formation, which meets the mimetic reference to reality with demands for an autonomous and non-representational art (Iser 1991). Last but not least, the emphasis on the self-referential and reality-constituting aspects of art and theatre in the context of a performative turn in cultural studies seems to be largely driven by such an "anti-mimetic affect" (Otto 2012: s. p., my transl.).

When talking about mimesis in the narrow, aesthetic sense, repeated claims of an end of mimesis and a transition from the "Platonic philosophy of similarity" to modern philosophies of difference have been made: "[T]he modern development of mimesis results paradoxically in its fulfilment and disappearance, meaning that similarity gives way to difference" (Melberg 1995: 1).[12] This assessment seems to be based not only on the primacy of difference and a theoretical prejudice against similarity, but also on a "misconception of mimesis" (Kimmich 2016, my transl.).

The affiliation of resemblance and mimesis can be traced back to Plato (2004), whose conceptualisation classifies various dimensions of mimesis and links it to image-making: In *Sophist*, he differentiates between the making of 'truly' similar images (*eikastike*) and of deceptive illusions (*phantastike*) that undermine the order of representation. The latter is just as important to curb philosophically as the dangerous, contagious, 'low' mimesis beyond "political, educational and social usefulness" (Kimmich 2016: 198), such as the theatrical representation of animals. One could rightly claim that this repression – despite the dazzling, ambivalent status of mimesis in the Platonic dialogues – was successful in aesthetic theory: put briefly, the identification of mimesis and resemblance goes back to a "half-reading of Plato according to the usual prejudice" (Recki 1991: 116, my transl.), i.e. to a reception of the concept of mimesis as a

12 The departure from mimesis is referred to by titles such as *Von der Mimesis zur Simulation* (Jung 1995), or, for example, Melberg's *Theories of Mimesis* that are introduced as tracing "the movement of mimesis from the Platonic philosophy of similarity to modern ideas of difference" and "repetition" (1995: 1).

copy of the real – a momentous reduction to (and of, as Freedberg (1992) emphasises) the aspect of imitation.

> In art theory, it was taught in countless treatises for many centuries that art was an imitation (*mimesis*, *imitatio*) of nature [...]. The concept of imitation [...] was [...] explained [...] with reference to the concepts of participation (*methexis*, *participio*) and similarity (*homoiosis*, *similitudo*). More recently, numerous art theorists [...] have tried to explain the concept of the image directly through similarity (Scholz 2004: 17, my transl.).

The above-cited criticism of such theories discounts the intuition that resemblance conditions pictorial signification – more precisely, its identification with the pictorial relation advocated by theories such as the "copy theory of representation", which takes "resemblance [...] as natural relation" (Sakamoto 1998: 143).[13] In the theoretical debate of the 20th century, this view has increasingly been criticised (ivi: 144).[14] Thus, not only the question answered in the negative by Goodman, whether "resemblance could be sufficient for representation", is anything but new, having already been critically negotiated by Plato (Goldman 1998: 137). Furthermore, a long series of theoretical objections against mimesis as copy are described as *anti*-mimetic: in these cases, mimesis (as imitation or *Nachahmung*) is often dichotomously opposed to terms and concepts such as creation, creativity, autonomy, imagination and invention, mostly in order to delimit hallmarks of the modern from a supposedly

13 Cf. ibidem: "In the so-called copy theory of representation, one of the least complicated models adopting this ontological approach, resemblance is taken as natural relation between a picture and referent where the referent is 'reality' or 'the way things are' or 'the way things look'. A belief in these privileged relation accounts for the way many art historians and theorists explain elements of realistic depiction. Pictures can be said to be more 'realistic' in proportion to the completeness of the resemblance relation".

14 This is not only due to aesthetic considerations, but also "the result of increasing interest in both philosophy and psychology with understanding the formal nature of the relation and the nature of similarity judgements. Also, during this time, there is growing scepticism of the ontological and epistemological assumptions inherent in naturalism that there is one way that the world is given to us" (ibidem).

ancient, heteronomous mimesis. However, the theoretical replacement of the concept of mimesis by the hardly less problematic concept of representation seems to be accompanied, especially in the context of the "crisis of representation" (Freudenberger, Sandkühler 2003, my transl.), with an even more comprehensive denigration of similarity which goes beyond aesthetics – even if its critique could in some cases be called a straw man argument.

Nevertheless, it can be ascertained that modernity's mimetophobic tendency is not simply a mere theoretical postulation, but is derived from aesthetics, particularly from the supposedly anti-mimetic programmes of modernism and the avant-garde, from whose creative-autonomous verbal and visual imagery[15] mimetic similarity seemingly disappeared. Considering that avant-garde art programmatically rejects the traditional ideal of imitation, the thesis of a resurgence of similarity in Aesthetic Modernity may indeed seem questionable. Most early 20th century art movements are characterised by a critical "reference to the category of imitation" (Peres 1990: VII, my transl.), which can be understood as a work on the concept of mimesis. In particular, tendencies towards abstraction are setting themselves apart from imitation, not least in contrast to the supposedly perfect mimesis "revived in modernity by mimetic machines" (Taussig 1993: 70). This departure from a naïve understanding of mimetic resemblance as a copy of the externally visible addresses the representational function to which mimesis is reduced in a simplifying way. A persistent prejudice thus sees the anti-mimetic turn as indisputable; it does so with good reason only in a particular sense, given the hypothesis "that the 'imitation of nature' is to be counted among the non-sellers of artistic self-understanding" (Recki 1991: 116).

Against this background, it seems to be a signum of modernity to discard mimetic resemblance in favour of concepts of dissimilarity, difference, repetition and simulation. And yet, the aesthetic 'depar-

15 For the field of metaphor and metaphor theory, see Stefan Willers description of the Surrealistic metaphor as a "comparison without similarity" (2005: 127, my transl.).

ture from mimesis' has neither led to its demise nor to an exorcism of resemblance, but to its re-conceptualisation in less anti-mimetic than non-imitative concepts, such as the "hyper-resemblance" (*archi-ressemblance*) described by Jacques Rancière (2007: 8).[16] Despite such nuanced conceptualizations, the conflation of mimesis and resemblance and the conception, which sets resemblance as the standard for models of realism and copy theories (Sakamoto 1998: 145), impede differentiated assessments of resemblance – and mimesis – even today. However, the resulting theoretical prejudices have been challenged with good cause and not only in recent times. Birgit Recki, for example, warns against the simplistic assumption of an anti-mimetic Aesthetic Modernity, whose objection in fact "is directed solely against the superficial mimetism of a quasi-mirror image" (Recki 1991: 120):

> Modern art, at least with its classical representatives, is by no means anti-mimetic. It would, however, be important to free oneself, as Plato did, from an all too limited conception of mimesis or imitation of nature, which right from the outset would be confined to naturalism in the narrower sense, to the exact reproduction of the "face of things" (ivi: 118).

Modernity is thus *anti*-mimetic solely in regard to its critical stance towards those traditional concepts of imitation that turn the relation of resemblance between representation and (externally manifest) reality into a normative topos. Accordingly, in order to question mimetophobic tendencies, a "complex evaluation of mimesis"

16 For Rancières informative conceptualization of 'hyper-resemblance' cf. ivi: 7: "In our day, not to resemble is taken for the imperative of art [...]. But this formal imperative of nonresemblance is itself caught up in a singular dialectic [...]. The artistic image separates its operations from the technique that produces resemblances. But it does so in order to discover a different resemblance en route – a resemblance that defines the relation of a being to its provenance and destination, one that rejects the mirror in favour of the immediate relationship between progenitor and engendered: direct vision, glorious body of the community, or stamp of the thing itself. Let us call it hyper-resemblance. Hyper-resemblance is the original resemblance, the resemblance that does not provide the replica of a reality but attests directly to the elsewhere whence it derives".

is required, which refrains from a "blanket juxtaposition of *autonomy* and imitation" (ibidem) – an evaluation that takes into account the historical and conceptual variability[17] of the relation between mimesis and resemblance and investigates its productivity for a critical reflection of naïve understandings of mimesis, as it is emphasised for modern philosophy of art by Funk, Mattenklott and Pauen (2001b: 30). Of central importance here is the insight into the interplay of an epistemological and a constructive moment, of discovery and invention, perception and creation in the finding of similarity, which "therefore not only implies an effort of recognizing reality, but is also connected with the formation of reality – a consequence that is essentially responsible for the prominence of similarity in aesthetic discourse" (Endres 2012: 33, my transl.).

To conclude, the misconception of an anti-mimetic modernity is based on the fact that

> in the modern era, "mimesis" has been increasingly interpreted as a model of representation, bound to a relation of self-identical model and imitative image. It is only in recent theoretical history that the complexity of the concept of mimesis has been rediscovered (Becker, Doll, Wiemer, Zechner 2008: 12, my transl.).

For Plato's iridescent concept of mimesis already encompasses more levels of meaning than just the relationship of representation. Mimesis as a "*practice* of imitation" (Kimmich 2016: 194), as Recki (1991: 124) underlines, is not fixed on a representational relationship between model and artwork, original and copy. On the contrary: It is precisely the originally broad, anthropological concept of mimesis that is rediscovered in modernity and reflected in various disciplines, such as psychology, sociology and ethnology, in addition to art and

17 According to Rancière, "the anti-mimetic revolution never signified renunciation of resemblance. *Mimesis* was the principle not of resemblance, but of a certain codification and distribution of resemblances" (Rancière 2007: 104). The complexity of the concept of mimesis and the historically variable conceptions of imitation are explored enlighteningly by Blumenberg 1957, Peres 1990 and Gebauer, Wulf 1992, among others.

cultural theory – for example, by theoreticians such as Walter Benjamin, who speaks of a "mimetic faculty" and of language as an archive of "non-sensuous similarity" (Benjamin 1986: 336).[18] However, the aesthetic avant-gardes are particularly concerned with mimetic practices as well as concepts of similarity and resemblance beyond representation. The diagnosis of an 'anti-mimetic affect' of modernity has thus to be relativised from a perspective that reflects these productive re-conceptualisations: in this respect, Rosa Eidelpes (2018) has convincingly spoken of a "de-limitation" ("Entgrenzung") of mimesis, as explicitly undertaken by Surrealism.

Transgressive resemblances and de-limitation of mimesis

As André Breton's invectives against literary realism (2004: 12f) and against mimesis as a programme of pictorial representation (1967: 9) show, the Surrealists criticise the normative effects of the mimesis-theoretical heritage – but they do so without abandoning mimesis or resemblance. Rather, their relation to each other is re-conceptualized in Surrealist art practice which develops a complex, meta-reflexive nexus between resemblance and mimesis, realism and representation and elevates similarity to a central aesthetic-epistemological concept.[19] Herein, surrealism follows a multiform 'aesthetics of the similar', which latently runs through European aesthetics as a tradition extending from antiquity to modernity. This already was postulated by the anthology titled Ästhetik *des Ähnlichen* (Funk, Mattenklott, Pauen 2001a) and especially in Markus Bauer's article "Ähnlichkeit als Provokation" ("Resemblance as provocation",

18 Benjamin's mimological and linguistic-magical considerations, for which similarity plays a central role, are formulated in the short but programmatic texts "On the Mimetic Faculty" ("Über das mimetische Vermögen") and "Doctrine of the Similar" ("Lehre vom Ähnlichen"). Another much-cited example is Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, whose pictorial panels explore not only formal similarities but also affective effects and the 'magic' of the images to be captured apotropaically (cf. Bangert 2019: 63, note 3).

19 A vivid example is Magritte's critical reflection on representation, based on his own conceptualisation of resemblance and similarity (cf. note 5), whose images exhibit a meta-realistic outperformance of realism.

Bauer 2001, my transl.): In the context of the "question of identity and representation" addressed "methodically" by the Surrealists, "a concept of similarity gains [...] an important function [...], implicitly laying the comprehensive claim of a method to fathom the 'secrets of life' as well as becoming the driving force maintaining a permanent exchange between genres in all Surrealist art production" (ivi: 112). This mode of "anti-mimetic similarity", according to Bauer, follows the tradition of a "pre-idealistic understanding of art" (ivi: 113) that explores the powers of the imagination.[20]

Besides écriture *automatique*, in which the "connection, indeed the very identity, of language, perception and thought in the written word is to be shown as a methodical and imaginative release of the similarity inherent in language" (Bauer 2001: 114), the means of choice for this exploration are metaphor and analogy – whose central position is programmatically championed by Breton – and its pictorial equivalent, montage – advanced foremost by Max Ernst – which find new references to be (re-)invented in the "process of approximation of the dissimilar" (Bangert 2019: 60, my transl.). Therein they follow the discovery and/or invention of "distant similarities" ("entfernte Ähnlichkeiten", Knörer 2007, my transl.), such as the combinatorial method with its Lullist influence (Holländer 1982), the hypertrophic production of resemblances that Baroque poetry arrayed in poetic rules and the way in which the joke (*Witz, esprit*) and the 'magic wand of analogy' (Novalis) fostered resemblances in Romanticism (Bangert 2018: 196, my transl.). Succeeding

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20 This is a recourse not least to the "attacks on the epistemological consensus of the separation of the pre-rational production of inner images and generally accepted discourse procedures", which "are usually attributed to the Romantic heritage of Surrealism": "However, this overlooks the fact that Romanticism itself inherited a tradition of thought that also aroused the Surrealists' interest in the involvement with the topic of similarity" (Bauer 2001: 131). Bauer refers to this historically asynchronous perspective at the end of his article as an explanation – albeit "too brief" – of the Surrealist recourse to the aesthetic-epistemological tradition of Foucault's episteme of similarity" (ivi: 135). In this connection to the aesthetic tradition, "the Surrealists' look into the past revealed a physiognomy of art forms whose family resemblance was not only a bold metaphor" (ibidem, my transl.), but rather could be described typologically as a "function of similarity" (ivi: note 74). Cf. also Bangert 2018.

Symbolism, Surrealism carries this line of tradition into modernity, resurrecting the analogies and correspondences in the '(dis)similarity' of the metaphor, which no longer operates according to the model of comparison (Strub 1991: 480)[21] but to that of a 'similarity of the dissimilar', thus opening up the search for possible points of comparison and creating "new realities within the 'living metaphor', which does not only imitate according to the criterion of mimetic similarity" (Bauer 2001: 177). The re-framings initiated by the "Surrealist word- and image-copulations" (ivi: 127) also extend both to the modern object and living world, whose hidden correspondences they detect and/or establish. According to Bauer, they continue from an "iconography of metamorphosis that was already evident in the Renaissance and Baroque periods" (ivi: 133): "André Breton, Magritte, Dalí, Ernst and others used the iconography of aspect change to establish the coincidence and surprise of montage as a mode of reception of anti-mimetic similarity" (ivi: 135).

Even though these quotations show that Bauer's discussion of "non-mimetic similarity in Surrealism" (ivi: 121) is based on a reductive concept of mimesis, he – in concurrence with the editors of the volume – rightly sees the possibility of bringing certain aspects of the 'aesthetics of the similar' "into play against the principle of imitation", "especially against the monistic relationship of image and object that results from a realistic aesthetic" (Funk, Mattenklott, Pauen, 2001b: 30). This is not only derived from the epistemological characteristics of a thinking in similarities (in whose description the authors owe much to Foucault); also, the overcoming of naïve concepts of comparison, depiction or imitation by resorting to *distant, dissimilar similarities* is not an exclusively modern aesthetic strategy, but serves as a playing field for the imagination – as Magritte (1979: 518) puts it, "*L'inspiration est l'événement où surgit la resemblance*" – already in Baroque and Romantic concepts. Surrealism, however, exploits this

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21 Cf. on this in more detail Bangert 2019: 64, note 9: "Like the 'bold' Mannerist metaphors [...] or the metaphors of Jean Paul, the Surrealist metaphor counteracts the rhetorical demand, ratione translata, to be dissolved into a statement of truth by reformulation into a comparison".

tradition for a specifically modern, transversal aesthetics and episte-mology of the similar, which, sometimes maliciously, undermines distinctions, produces ambiguity, creates associations and inaugurates transformations. To put it succinctly, "instead of constructing identities, differences, boundaries and dichotomies to create homogeneity", Surrealism conceives "concepts of analogy, continuity, elective affinity and interweaving, which oppose the 'purification work of modernity' (cf. Ghanbari, Hahn 2013)" (Bangert 2019: 49). In light of these considerations, however, it is necessary to correct Bauer's understanding of an anti-mimetic use of similarity: The Surrealist experiments can be described more accurately with the findings of a non-imitative or anti-representational, meta- or *sur*realistic mimesis as well as an unbounded, transgressive or de-limited use of resemblance and similarity.

Sympathie mimetique, or: Who's afraid of resemblance?

The Surrealists not only draw on latent currents from within the Western aesthetic and epistemological tradition. They also explicitly turn to the 'other', which they primarily seek in the other of an enlightened, rational, utilitarian industrial modernity: In childhood and in dreams, in pre-modernity and in the 'primitive'. Surrealist imagery and exhibition practices thus not only create correspondences between modernity and primeval times (such as, for example, in Brassaï's photographs of Parisian graffiti)[22] and draw parallels between natural and cultural history (such as in Max Ernst's *Histoire naturelle*).[23] They also discover "analogies between Surrealist objects and 'wild' objects [...], thereby conferring them with a poetry that is considered Surrealistic" (Leclercq 2014: 31, my transl.). For Breton, this synchronous 'elective affinity' not only establishes a formal similarity between art and cult objects of divergent historical and cultural provenance, but also a "horizontal relationship"[24] that

seeks to meet the contemporary, colonial other on an equal footing. It not only serves an exclusively aesthetic purpose of an analogy of form, as often staged by primitivist art discourse, but "aims at an alienation of the 'self', which opens up spaces for a similarity with the 'other'" (Bangert 2019: 52) – a "similarity with the 'savages'", which appears uncanny to the 'civilised', "dangerous and attractive at the same time" or, as Kimmich (2017: 71, my transl.) describes it, referring to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: a "'horrible' similarity" (ivi: 72). Surrealism does not approach the other on the basis of a "*hermeneutics under the sign of difference*" (Stoellger 2016: 181, my transl.),[25] but of an *anti-hermeneutics under the sign of similarity* – or rather, "under the sign of the dissimilar similarity of the Other" (Bangert 2019: 60): For the Surrealists, analogies of childhood, pre-modernity and the 'primitive'[26] reveal this 'dissimilar similarity' of the other, its proximity to or its containment in modernity, which is interspersed with non-modern remnants – like, for example, thinking in similarities. Similarity or "an alternative model of rationality based on similarity" (ivi: 53) can be described in this context as the sign not only of pre-modern modes of thought, but at the same time of an other 'primitive', 'wild', mythical, magical and *mimetic* thinking.

This thesis is informed by the ethnological research of, among others, E. B. Tylor, James Frazer, Henri Hubert, Marcel Mauss and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl,[27] who investigates the "*mimetic* character of the

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22 Cf. Brassaï's essay "Du mur des cavernes au mur d'usine" (1933) published in the Surrealist magazine *Minotaure*; cf. Böhme 2016.

23 Cf. the instructive essays in Orchard, Zimmermann 1994.

24 Cf. Leclercq 2014: 29, 31, 33, on the foundation of this 'horizontal' level. Similar

hypotheses can be found in the context of contemporary cultural relativistic considerations. Warburg's lecture published under the title "Schlangenritual" ("A Lecture on Serpent Ritual"), for example, emphasises the similarity of 'primitive' and 'modern' magic (Warburg 1988; cf. Kimmich 2017: 50f, 102f).

25 Stoellger (ibidem) speaks of a "*Hermeneutik im Zeichen der Differenz*".

26 Cf. the exhibition catalogue *Neolithische Kindheit. Kunst in einer falschen Gegenwart, ca. 1930*, ed. by Anselm Franke and Tom Holert, Diaphanes, Zurich 2018; cf. also Werkmeister 2012: 52, note 77 (my transl.): "Primitivism in this sense is more akin to a thinking of similarity, as Michel Foucault described it for the time before the classical episteme of representation".

27 Lévy-Bruhl's theory of "'primitive mentality'" describes a "'pre-modern', 'pre-logical' relationship to the world" in which "the subject-object boundaries are suspended in favour of the idea of a 'mystical participation'" (ivi: 14, my transl.).

[...] 'primitive' *modes of thought*'', which

> have been described as opposed to modern rationality and have been understood as modes of perception that grasp the world not as an ensemble of distinct subjects and objects, but as a web of references of similarities, contagion and relationship (Eidelpes 2018: 12f, my transl.).

This view is based on the thesis put forward by Tylor and taken up by Frazer, stating that magic is "based on the Association of Ideas" (Taussig 1993: 49), i.e. "that magical practices presuppose a 'primitive thinking' in similarities and chains of contact and association": "Thinking in associative proximity relationships or 'sympathetic similarities' (*sympathie mimétique*) between objects, animals and people is, according to Mauss and Hubert, the basic principle of magic" (Eidelpes 2018: 13). The adaptation of these theorems is related to an affiliation of the Surrealist milieu with contemporary ethnology, predominant particularly in the journal *Documents* (Clifford 1988; Hollier 1991): It is ethnology into which "'mimesis' and the exploration of its meaning and function" 'emigrates' during modernity, as, according to Kimmich (2016: 197), "a concept that deconstructs the dilemma of self-observation and observation of others".[28]

For the Surrealists, the reference to the magical mimesis of 'sympathetic similarities' or *sympathie mimétique* fulfils a function that plays at the interface of mimesis – as mimetic capacity and practice with the performative aspect of the production of similarities by a mimetic subject – and metamorphosis[29] as a self-alienating process

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28 An instance of a successful theoretical disentanglement of mimesis and representation in reprocessing a research context investigating magical practices of "primitive imitation" (Kimmich 2016: 197) can be found in Michael Taussig *Mimesis and Alterity* (Taussig 1993), where the concept of mimesis is opened up to the aspect of alterity, inspired by Benjamin. Taussig analyses modern ethnology's dealing with mimesis and similarity in the service of "sympathetic magic" (ivi: 47) – not without polemicising against the mimetophobic tendency: "Today it is common to lambast mimesis as a naive form or symptom of Realism. It is said to pertain to forced ideologies of representation crippled by illusions pumped into our nervous systems by social constructions of Naturalism and Essentialism" (ivi: 44).

29 Cf. fundamental to this: Lichtenstern 1992.

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of making oneself similar to the other. This 'de-limitation of mimesis', which is reminiscent of Plato's 'low', power-threatening, subversive, amoral form of mimesis, becomes one of their core themes. For "[m]imetic similarity can both mark dangerous loss of self and the dissolution of identity, as well as suggest possibilities for unexpected self-expansion" (Kimmich 2016: 197). Surrealists and Post-Surrealists like Michel Leiris, Georges Bataille or Roger Caillois[30] thematize this ambivalent charge – as well as the ambivalence of mimesis itself as "a terrifically ambiguous power [...] to represent the world, yet that same power is a power to falsify, mask, and pose" (Taussig 1993: 42) – in many different ways: In addition to imageries and pictorial techniques of metamorphosis – iconic and poetological concepts that conjure not only grotesque mythopoetic hybrid beings and monstrous mixtures of older 'iconographies of metamorphosis', but also refer to a world in transition that cannot be immobilised in fixed identities – there are also testimonies to totemism, like in Ernst's work, whose anthropomorphic bird creature 'Loplop' represents an alter ego for his mutable artist persona (Lichtenstern 1992). Practices of "'metamorphotic identification'" (ivi: 129, my transl.) are also the subject of Carl Einstein's articles on Masson, Klee and Picasso published in *Documents*, exploring "pictorial phenomena of metamorphosis" (ivi: 127). In Masson's drawings, which he regards not as guided by visual perception, but rather "as symptoms or parts of psychological processes", in which "the distance between subject and object is diminished", Einstein observes a "totemistic identification which can be interpreted as magical or psychological archaism. [...] We arrive at a dissolution of objects in favour of independent psychological analogies" (Einstein 1994: 492, my transl.).[31]

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30 According to Eidelpes (2018: 30), "Bataille's, Caillois' and Leiris' texts of the 1920s and early 1930s also revolved around the motif of metamorphosis, figures of transformation and states of alterity. In contrast to the Surrealists, however, they understood their works not as artistic but as a scientific or theoretical examination of ethnology. At their core were considerations on the theory and practice of mimesis" or "'mimetic metamorphosis'".

31 "Masson's pictures provoke", he concludes, "a mythical reaction by contagion. […] Consider the importance of transformations in primitive times and the exogamous needs to expand identity. [...] Metamorphosis is the classical drama of

Examining the aesthetic productivity of the phenomenon of resembling as becoming another, Leiris (2005: 39) chooses the subheading "*hors de soi*" for his contribution to the lemma "metamorphosis" in *Documents*'"Critical Dictionary". Praising the poetic quality of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses or The Golden Ass*, he states:

> I pity those who have not dreamed, at least once in their lives, of transforming themselves into any of the various objects with which they are surrounded: A table, chair, animal, tree trunk, sheet of paper [...]. [N]othing counts except what is capable of bringing man to be truly beside himself (my transl.).

What Leiris calls *hors de soi* and Einstein (1994: 494) 'totemistic identification' is radicalised in Bataille's contribution to the lemma "metamorphosis", speaking of a "compulsion to metamorphose as a violent need, which, incidentally, mixes with all our animal needs and which incites man to suddenly abandon the gestures and poses required of the human being": "[T]he human being then suddenly dies for the time being, and the animal behaves like an animal" (Bataille 2005: 39, my transl.). This anti-idealistic vision of mimetic metamorphosis[32] is symptomatic also of the 'bas matérialisme' characterising Bataille's concept of a "*ressemblance informe*" (Didi-Huberman 1995), which shapes the orientation of *Documents* as a whole.

Lastly, Caillois' study on mimicry, *Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire*, published in 1935 in the Surrealist magazine *Minotaure,* is centred around "la question générale de la *ressemblance*" (Caillois 1938: 107). According to Caillois, mimicry and masquerade as mimesis to the inanimate and undifferentiated results in a deperson-

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totemism and as such probably one of the oldest dramatic motifs (animal pantomimes, mask dances). In these dramas, the incorporation of new magical powers is celebrated and the animal dies in place of the human being" (ivi: 494).

32 Derrida's essay "Economimesis" criticises the logocentric, 'anthropo-theological' dimension of Immanuel Kant's concept of mimesis inherent in the emphasis on the human ("l'homme-dieu"), which is constituted in demarcation from an undifferentiated animalistic – "pour éviter la contamination par le 'bas'" (Derrida 1975: 67).

alising assimilation to the 'other', thus thematising the fear "of losing oneself in that Other, as when Benjamin writes of mimesis as a rudiment of a former compulsion to be another, and Caillois toys with the scary idea of becoming similar, not similar to something, just similar" (Taussig 1993: 66; cf. Cheng 2009). This uncanny excess of mimetic resemblance, which threatens the self with dissolution where it *resembles too much*, is associated with the deceptive resemblance of mimicry, but also with magical practises of mimetic metamorphosis; it creates an indistinguishability that undermines the differentiating gaze and is characterised by a simulacral aspect acquiring a ghostly quality.

In Surrealist concepts of de-limited mimesis, not only regressive desires or a nostalgic longing for the 'primitive', archaic and archetypal are evident, but also the attempt to counter rationalist modernity with alternative forms of rationality based on the imaginative power of the metaphor, the transversal order of analogy and a mimetic relationship to the other: It is the recourse to concepts of similarity that allows a critique of the foreshortening not only of representation but also of modern rationality and the logic of identity, demonstrating the permeability of the boundaries between human and non-human, nature and culture, pre-modernity and modernity.

In praise of similarity and (mimetic) resemblance

It seems as though the time has come for an extensive re-evaluation of mimetophobic tendencies and theoretical reservations against resemblance and similarity; regarding the re-conceptualization of mimesis such a revision has already been observable for several years.[33] At the same time, the "scientific interest in 'similarity' and 'thinking in similarities' has recently increased significantly" (Bhatti

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33 This upswing is reflected in numerous publications, conferences and research programmes (cf. representatively Engelberg-Dockal, Krajewski, Lausch (2017), the events organised by the international doctoral colloquium 'Mimesis' at the LMU Munich, and the research group 'Media and Mimesis' (Medien und Mimesis, https://www.fg-mimesis.de/).

2019: 7, my transl.). Similarity has not only increasingly come into the focus of art theory and aesthetics (Gaier, Kohl, Saviello 2012; Dommaschk 2019); it is also currently experiencing a considerable boom in literary and media theory (Kimmich 2017; Winkler 2016; Patrut, Rössler 2019) and is being examined as a 'paradigm' of culture theory (Bhatti, Kimmich 2015; 2018).[34]

The challenge of dealing with similarity lies in its vagueness and indeterminability which make it hard to handle methodologically, but at the same time contribute to its productivity in aesthetic discourse. Thus, the relevance of engaging with it is evident: A more comprehensive approach to similarity allows for a departure from an understanding of similarity as a representational relation and for a theoretical disjuncture of resemblance from imitation and copy theories of representation. The detachment of resemblance from a simplifying identification with mimesis – or its mimetic codification, according to Rancière –, at the same time benefits the description of mimesis in adequately complex terms. Furthermore, the study of similarity can inform culture theory research and its approach to the 'other' – as a relational paradigm establishing a logic of "both and" and as a "figure of the third, representing the transitory instead of oppositions and dichotomies" (Kimmich 2017: 140).[35]

Both dimensions of mimesis and resemblance and of their complex connection were preconceived in Surrealism, which plays a key role in conveying the similarity paradigm into the 20th century both aesthetically and epistemologically. The theoretical banishment of similarity on grounds of its vagueness and conformity to the system of representation and the 'logic of identity' fails to keep up with the aesthetic avant-garde, which explored its subversive and productive potentials of working on identity, form and representation. The Surrealist mimetic practices and methods of transversal relation in concepts of metaphor and analogy, metamorphosis, mimicry and simulacrum show in an exemplary manner: Those who think in terms of identity and difference, who rely on separation and purification, who lament the vagueness of the similar and suppress the resemblance of the other – it is they who are afraid of similarity.

34 This allows not only for comprehensive case studies, but also for general methodological considerations: According to Kimmich (2016: 195), "[t]he question of the function of 'similarities' and mimetic behaviour does not only concern the formation of philosophical concepts, but also the setting of theories in cultural studies and their nomenclature".

35 In this sense, an "ethnoepistemology of similarity" (ivi: 135) is being put to the test by anthropologists like Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.

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