

Critically assess Plato's objections to mimetic paintings

(1500 words)

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The term mimetic paintings comes from 'mimesis' meaning to imitate or attempt to represent. So mimetic paintings to Plato would be a form of art that imitates, recreates or represents something. I will be aiming to give a critical assessment on Plato's rejections to art and mimetic paintings by assessing his theory of art in detail, using other ideas to argue against his theory such as my own and using Frederick Copleston's work. I will also aim to explore his reasons for his rejection towards mimetic art and also come to my own conclusion about whether I believe his theory is plausible or not.

Plato argues that all forms of art should be excluded from his republic and society as it is his belief that the way art is portrayed harms the minds of those who look at them, read the poetry or listen to the poets, unless they are part of a minority who have become inoculated to the harmfulness of these forms of art as they have sought the truth and therefore know they're true natures which was just to imitate and not be original in idea (Plato, 375BC, 395b *The Republic*). However, Plato also saw the poet Homer as a great mind and refers to him as the great master of tragic poetry, but also says that while Homer should be respected highly in such a way, we also can not respect Homer or any other art creator more than we must respect the truth and knowledge, which to Plato, was the forms (Plato, 375BC, 395c *The Republic*). But Plato further rejects art and mimetic art due to his theory of the forms as he believes any creation of art is a copy of a copy of a form. The example given in *The Republic* which illustrates this point is, an artist makes a painting of a bed, the bed was crafted by a craftsman who has his eye on the form of the bed which therefore makes the artists painting a copy of a copy of a form and also third removed from reality (Plato, 375BC, 396e *The Republic*). Also in *The Republic*, Plato raises a point about the disillusion that art as poetry has when it is written. He says that even if a poet writes well about a topic, such as Homer speaking of government and law for example, then that poet must be a master of that topic and have much knowledge on the topic in order to write about it. He believes that for the majority of poets, this is not the case and that is where the delusion from poetry comes from (Plato, 375BC, 398e-399a *The Republic*). Plato gives an example in his book, he says that we would not expect a doctor of medicine who claims to be a true doctor of medicine to explain a poet who claims to have cured people, like Aesculapius claims to, as that poet would more than likely not have the knowledge about medicine and a true doctor should focus on the true medicine of his practise rather than a copy or imitation of medicine like the poets do according to Plato (Plato, 375BC, 399c *The Republic*). When comparing other authors' work to Plato's argument, we can further assess his claims. A key author to look at is Frederick Copleston in his book *History & Philosophy* where he explains Plato's views in a wider sense while also

embedding his opinion in many aspects. He first looks at Plato's theory of art as a whole where he comes to an interesting thought of it. Copleston says that despite Plato's rejection of art, he did in fact have an appreciation for human beauty but not artistic beauty and that the interpretations seen in Plato's writings are misinterpreted to mean he disliked all art and beauty which is not the case in Copleston's view (Frederick Copleston, 1946, Page 253). Copleston further explains what he means by this by making the point that his criticisms may not have come from a lack of love for beauty in writings as many of Plato's own works were viewed as beautiful such as *Phaedo*. To Copleston, this view does not come from a view of disliking beauty in writing, but instead coming from a moral and philosophical view to poetry rather than an artistic one (Copleston, 1946, Page 254). Copleston goes on to explain in the book Plato's view on the theatre. He notes that Plato believes that the theatre and tragedy poems encourage uncontrollable emotions which are viewed as irrational while also weakening rational thinking and lowering the discipline of people. So it overall encourages a lack of control in emotions which is seen as harmful and damaging to the morals of humanity (Copleston, 1946, Pages 255-256). Copleston is however sceptical towards some aspects of Plato's theory, mostly his idea of art as a copy of a copy of a form. Copleston labels this part as 'comical' from Plato as an idea and that Plato takes the theory too far here (Copleston, 1946, Page 255). So overall, while Copleston is sympathetic in some aspects towards Plato's theory as he thinks his views are philosophically important and that his theory of art has been misinterpreted in a way that he does not like art at all. He is also not fully convinced as he says Plato's criticisms can sometimes go too far and that much of the censorship also goes too far.

However, I have personal critiques towards this theory of Plato's. The first being modern analogies with one being that music as a form of art could and should be allowed as not all forms of art are imitations or copies, but are rather expressions of emotions in some cases. To my understanding, Plato would likely argue against this point by saying that music is not an art form he is talking about limiting and that music is not a form of art, but is rather talking about art as poetry and paintings, to which I would argue back against his argument by saying that music in many cases could be a form of poetry, so if he was to allow music as it isn't a form of art, then he must then consider that poetry could also be allowed if the two are similar. A second modern analogy would be modern films as a form of art that could be allowed. Films and tv shows are the modern advertisements if comparing them to the time of Plato but are still different in some aspects. I would argue that modern films could be allowed to some capacity in Plato's republic as many are seen as a form of entertainment, much like the theatre, with no hidden message. But much like his view on the theatre, I would expect Plato to argue against my claim by saying that films would have dangerous and immoral meanings behind them which would pollute the minds of the viewers in many cases while also saying that creating a film would be an imitation of the form of the films. And while I understand his argument, I would reinforce my initial claim that modern films are seen as entertainment, by further

explaining that while some films may portray dangerous or immoral messages which I would accept would not be allowed in his republic, but there are also modern films and tv shows that aim to provide positive messages which Plato would agree with such as truth and knowledge which are two things Plato aims to achieve for all. But to analyse Plato's theory of mimetic paintings and art further, he rejects art as he believes that the truth and the forms are above all and all attempts to recreate the forms are useless and imitations only. And to make a piece of art, or for art to even exist, then they would just be a copy of a copy of the form of art which Plato would see as dangerous and just an imitation but more importantly, were deceptions of the truth to those who saw it.

So to conclude, Plato's reasons to want to limit and censor mimetic paintings and art are clear through his belief that they are harmful to people who encounter them as art such as theatres encourage weakened rational, uncontrollable emotions and a lack of rationale. It can also be seen that Plato has a strong emphasis on the forms as he says mimetic art is harmful and irrational as they are simply just copies of a copy of the form. It can not be understated that Copleston has an important say on this topic as he starts to rethink Plato's writing and interpret it in another way as he thinks that much of Plato's theory, namely his view on beauty in poetry, is misinterpreted and that he did not in fact hate poetry as others may think. And to finally conclude, I believe that my points that modern film tv shows, along with music should all be allowed within Plato's republic, along with the counter arguments given to Plato's expected replies, are both strong in supporting my belief that not all forms of art should be censored from his republic and therefore his argument to me is not strong enough.

Bibliography:

Plato, *The Republic*, 375Bc, Edited By Desmond Lee 1955

Frederick Copleston, *History & Philosophy*, 1946