Is art mimesis or creation?

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Abstract

A matter of debate for many years in art has been whether it is mimesis or creation and this issue has never reached a full conclusion. The aim of this research is to reveal artistic notion structures about art and to look into the question of whether art is mimesis or creation in Turkey. The survey method is the way to be followed in this study. The survey was prepared for artists, arts instructors, arts teachers and students who take professional art education. The results show that most people consider art as creativity but there is also place for opinions who see art as mimesis.

Keywords: Art, mimesis, creation;

1. Introduction

When art comes into question, a lot of matters of debate and differences of opinion appear. Besides such matters as “What is and is not art?”, “Who is an artist?”, “Is art for art’s sake or is it for society’s sake?”, another matter under discussion is “Is an art creation or imitation?”. Within the scope of this matter, the matters related to the density of the dimensions of creation and imitation in art education and professional art life and the balance between them should be considered.

The aim of this research is to reveal artistic notion structures in Turkey based on the ideas of artists and artist instructors in the fields of music, plastic arts, theatre, and dance, teaching staffs of music departments and conservatories, music-painting teachers, and art students who take professional art education about art and the matter art is mimesis or creation. The survey method is the way to be followed in this study. Survey was prepared including for artists, instructors, teachers, students who take professional art education. The surveys are practiced by hand and online.

Before coming to the artistic thought structure in Turkey, the question of “What is art?” should be answered in general.

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2. What is art?

According to the Turkish Language Society, art is “the whole of the methods used in the expression of an emotion, design, beauty etc. or superior creativity appearing as a result of this expression” (TLS, 2012).

According to Collingwood, “the word ‘art’ has three meanings in customary use. The first is the creation of objects called work of art or actions pursued by those who are named as artists. The second is the pursuit of the total opposite of the natural and actions called artificial or the creation of these kinds of objects…. The third is the structure of thought which we call artistic; the structure of thought with which we are aware of the beauty” (Collingwood, 2011).

The concept of beautiful and beauty in art idealized with Plato and Aristotle were explained with different thoughts of the philosophers’. For example, according to Plato, it is because the idea of beauty exists that we can mention the beauty of works of art of the objects getting share from this idea. However, Aristotle thinks that it is not that because the idea of beauty exists the work of art gains an existence thanks to the objects we find beautiful but it is that because works of art exist we can mention about the concept of beauty (Aristotle, 2011).

In order to better understand art and the root of art, philosophers have different thoughts. These thoughts are related to if art is an Imitation, a Creation or a Play.

2.1. Mimesis

Aristotle is the first philosopher maintaining the idea that art is an imitation. Although Aristotle specifically refers to the art of poetry in his work called Poetics, he emphasizes very often in his book that art is an imitation. According to Aristotle, “a large number of the arts such as epos, tragedy, comedy, dithyramb type of poetry (a poem written emotionally and irregularly in the style of encomium) and flute and kithara (guitar), all of these, are generally imitation (mimesis) (Aristotle, 2011). With the arts of flute and kithara (guitar), the thinker refers to the art of music.

Moreover, according to the German philosopher, Alexandre-Gotttle Baumgarten making aesthetics an independent branch of science, matter and spirit have become so harmoniously united and combined in the universe that the aim of art and the artist should be the imitation of the nature (Ergün, 2012).

Moreover, while mentioning about Cernisevski’s opinions in his book entitled “Art and Social Life”, Plehanov says “….. art does not only imitate life but it also explains it: most of the time art objects bear judgments about manifestations of life ……. The primary importance of art is its imitating life …..” (Plehanov, 1987).

2.2. Creation

The creative artistic imagination is an art with which autonomy and self-sufficiency are proved right and the element which is fit for nature is internalized all over again (Collingwood, 2011). According to the creative art, art is not the exact reflection of the nature but it aims at understanding living things and events and expressing them in a way which is different from science. For this reason, although artists choose different branches as means, every artist manifests his or her own technique and the creativity of his or her own soul while expressing the truth (Ergün, 2012).

Hegel distinguishes art from science on the grounds that it is not a production of thought but of inspiration. According to Hegel, art is a production of human effort and soul and differently from science it comes from a human’s soul (Dikici & Tezci, 2002). Moreover, Hegel maintains the idea that it is the artist’s soul that enters matter and compares to him/herself; this creative soul is dependent on matter very much in sculpture and architecture, has a full control over painting, but is completely free from matter in literature and music (Ergün, 2012).

Music always took a very important place in Nietzsche’s universe of thought. At the beginning of his authorship life, he took musical inspiration and musical excitement as a means of metaphysical reality. He always attached particular importance to music in the development of human mind and the formation of human soul (Laserre, 2007). Nietzsche’s thoughts on the foundation of the art of music and the superiority of this art to other arts based partly on
a theory of Schopenhauer’s (Laserre, 2007). According to Schopenhauer, only music is not an art of imitation and there is no melody in the nature.

2.3. Play

According to some philosophers, the origin of art is entertainment and play. According to Charles Bordele, art started like this and just as science originated from experiment thanks to reason so did arts from imagination and play (Ergün, 2012).

No one of these opinions can be said to constitute the truth on their own. For it is observed that a play starting freely undergoes a change with the passing time and is bound to some rules. A play turns into imitation in a short period of time under such factors as rhythm, music and costume. However, a play forms the origin of many kinds of arts (Ergün, 2012). The imitation stage in art - mimesis (imitating the nature) not in meaning but in a form of one-to-one imitation – appears before us in educational process very often. Students begin their artistic studies primarily by imitating their teachers and as time passes add the dimension of creativity. Especially in the art of painting, art movements having appeared before us in the last century are the abstract proofs of the creativity dimension of art.

3. Is art mimesis or creation?

The population of the questionnaire prepared with the aim of suggesting an idea for the thought about the creativity and imitation dimensions of art in Turkey is composed of students receiving vocational and amateur education, lecturers, teachers and artists in the fields of music – painting/plastic arts – theatre/drama and dance in Turkey. The sample group consists of subjects selected randomly and reached. The sample group of the research group includes 144 students, 76 teachers, 11 lecturers and 20 artists. A total of 251 people answered the questionnaire.

In the study, 144 students answered the questionnaire. Of these students, 95 were music students, 27 were painting students and 22 were drama students. 97 of the students were female and 47 of them were male. 128 of them are receiving undergraduate education, 14 of them master’s education and 2 of them doctorate education. 72.22% of the students participating in the study answered the question “Is art mimesis or creation?” by saying “It is creation” and 27.78% of them by saying “It is mimesis”.

76 music or painting teachers participated in the study by answering the questionnaire. 50% of the teachers participating in the study were music teachers, 43.42% of them were painting teachers and 6.58% of them were drama teachers. Of the teachers, 49 were female and 27 were male. 59 of the teachers received undergraduate education, 14 of them received master’s education and 3 of them received doctorate education. 58 of them answered the question “Is art mimesis or creation?” by saying “It is creation” and 18 by saying as “It is mimesis”.

Only 11 teaching elements participated in the study questionnaire. Many teaching elements did not answer the questionnaire on the grounds that they had a lot to do or without any reason. 6 of the teaching elements are giving education in the branch of music and 5 of them in the branch of drama. Of the teaching elements, 9 are female and 2 are male. The teaching elements, 6 of whom received undergraduate, 2 master’s education and 3 doctorate education, answered the question “Is art mimesis or creation?” by saying “It is creation”.

Of the artists participating in the questionnaire, 14 are working in the field of music, 5 in the field of painting/plastic arts and 1 in the field of drama. Of the artists, 12 are female and 8 are male. Of them, 16 have bachelor’s degree, 2 have master’s degree and 2 have doctoral degree. 90% of them answered the question “Is art mimesis or creation?” by saying “It is creation” 10% by saying “It is creation”.

| Table 1. Is art mimesis or creation? |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Mimesis | 60 | 23.91 |
| Creation | 191 | 76.09 |
| Total | 251 | 100 |
When the answers given by the majority of those participating in the questionnaire are examined, it is observed that 76.09% of 251 people answered the question by saying “It is creation” and 23.91% of them answered by saying “It is mimesis”. The students, teachers, teaching elements and artists did not only answer the multiple-choice type of question “Is art mimesis or creation?” by marking the alternative closest to them, but they also wrote down their opinions about the matter in the space provided for this question.

In the direction of these answers, the students’ thoughts about the mimesis and creation dimension of art are as follows: the students in the fields of music and painting think that the mimesis dimension of art cannot be ignored in the education process, a work starting with mimesis and imitation and then performed with aesthetic concerns is not imitative, there is no new idea but the nature and humans imitate the nature, mimesis and imitation can be an education to be used for transition to creation, not both dimensions but the creation dimension is more important. However, there are also students stating that art cannot definitely be mimesis or imitation. The answers of these students as follows: art is not imitation, imitation is imitation and what is imitated is not art. If imitation existed, everything would be composed of repetition and new types of music and works of art would not appear. The students receiving education in the field of drama stated that art starts especially with the mimesis of the nature, without observation and mimesis of what exists, the process of creation might not come true, and within its own logic, it provides creation with great opportunities.

About the mimesis and creation dimension of art, one of the teachers thinks that performance artists imitate a precomposed work by adding interpretation. The other teachers provided answers like these: Actually, art is the combination of mimesis and creation. A non-human cannot be inspired by anything and bring up a work of art. The whole of a work of art which a human brings up is composed of a reflection, imitation of the nature. Art, like life, starts with imitation but what makes art is its originality. By imitating the nature, it is creative just like Mother Nature. Although every new state produced seems imitated, it includes the new and different in it. Art includes both dimensions but creation is more valuable. The teachers defending only the mimesis dimension provided answers like these: Art is the imitation of life and since creation is just unique to Allah, it is only imitation. The expression of “creation” amounts to creation from nothing and art is a work performed by bringing existing materials or thoughts together, that is to say by imitating them. To be able to call something a creation, it is necessary to create it from nothing completely but in art we always have a building stone in our hand and we make it our own work by interpreting. In every creation, there is an imitation; for example, impressionist painters imitated the nature. The teachers thinking that art is just creation provided answers like these: Art is definitely creation. If art were imitation, no change would be lived and we could not reach the phenomenon called freedom. If nothing is produced, we cannot mention art or artist, imitation takes human to craft. There is nothing similar to what an artist makes, even if same subject were worked up, same result could not be reached due to time, place and thinking differences.

The teaching elements’ thoughts about the imitation or creation dimension of art are as follows: Besides those thinking that art starts with the process of mimesis but this imitation must not be the reflection of “the same”, theoretically it includes both mimesis and creation and these are the dimensions which cannot be separated from one another and support each other, there are those thinking that art is just creation. There is also a teaching element stating as a criticism to works of art that today creation has almost come to an end and replaced by imitation.

The artists’ thoughts about the mimesis or creation dimension of art are as follows: through imitation of the nature, art both includes the imitation dimension due to reflection, transformation of what exists with its own perception and the creation dimension by starting with imitation, repeating previously composed works of art and it is very important to learn about artists’ styles and then develop their own styles.

Besides the other questions, the questions of “What is art?” and “Who is an artist?” were asked to the teaching elements and the artists. The teaching elements thinking that art is the life itself described art as follows: Art is composed of those which humans synthesize what they perceive through their intuitions, minds and emotions, pass them through their perception filter, give shape to them and reflect outside. Art is the effort to find the ideal in the world of reality. Moreover, the teaching elements stated that performing art becomes very important only through following it or making it reach a mass to make a judgment.

The artists’ opinions about art are these: Transfer of emotions, thoughts into life with a depth which is different from ongoing daily life requirements, visually, auditorily, intellectually, verbally or through methods and means determined by the artist himself or herself. Art is humans’ putting forward life in accordance with their own
perceptions and through certain aesthetic expressions. One of the artists thinking that art is freedom defined art as the opportunity to express oneself freely.

The teaching elements gave the following answers to the question “Who is an artist?”: An artist is a person who is creative and capable of bringing up concrete works of art in any branch of fine arts. S/he is everybody performing the life itself. S/he is a person having reached the awareness of approaching the ideal and making effort in this way. S/he is a person who realizes the creation and production process and passes this to audience.

The artists gave the following answers to the question “Who is an artist?”: An artist is a mediator. S/he is a person who has creativity, ability and intelligence to make his or her own experiences, interactions with environmental factors a concrete work of art by benefiting from visual and auditory materials and reflecting them from his or her point of view. They are beings who are in need of creating and have high aesthetic and empathy. At the same time, an artist emphasizing that an artist should be knowledgeable about movements of art in the past thinks that “An artist is a person having aesthetic ideas to present to the taste of humanity with a point of view about today and future and works of art peculiar to them”.

4. Conclusion

In the direction of the findings obtained from the study made to determine the thoughts of the students receiving professional art education in Turkey, the painting and music teachers, the teaching elements and artists giving art education about the imitation and creation dimension of art and including thinkers’ thoughts about art in the Introduction section and presented above, it can be concluded that the majority of the study group think that art is creation. Besides this, we can group the study group’s explanations and opinions under three groups. The first group thinks that the creation dimension of art is more important but the imitation dimension can not ignored. The second group thinks that art is just imitation. The third group describes art as only creation.

The people in the first group explained that art is based on imitation (mimesis) due to its beginning, the imitation dimension exists especially in the education process and works of art starting with imitation support the creation dimension but the creation dimension is more important.

According to some teachers taking the matter especially from religious point of view, creation is just unique to Allah, nothing can be created from nothing and art comes into existence from what exists through imitation. Moreover, those who defend the imitation dimension give the movement of impressionism, one of the movements of art, and state that the artists of that period produced works of art by imitating the nature.

The people in the third group think that art is definitely not imitation and anything imitated can not be described as art.

To make opinions about art in our country healthier and versatile and train specialists in this field, trainings, where the relationship between philosophy and art is emphasized more, should be given, more importance should be attached to the course of philosophy of art in departments and conservatories where professional art education is given, not only musical periods and movements but also different thoughts of thinkers’ about this matter starting from Platon until today should be learned and discussed. Moreover, to create areas of discussion and exchange of opinions, seminars, conferences on art and philosophy should be arranged and the participation of not only academicians but also students receiving art education, teachers and artists should be achieved.

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