Mimêsis and the Distillation of a Concept

Traditional art histories are generally based on a binary theory of Western vs. Non-western art in terms of an evolutionary and progressive methodology. But this approach has created divisions within the arts and art history. It has created a polemic between Western and so-called Non-Western art, with Western art describing the arts from Ancient Egypt through the modern era with European and American styles predominating. Non-Western art is the term used to describe the arts of Africa; Near, Middle and Far East Asia, Oceania, Latin America and the arts of all small tribal and island cultures. Such divisions have necessarily mandated two distinct theories to describe Western and Non-Western art. But how can something as universal and anachronistic as art be caught up in an opposing division? It seems apparent that any comprehensive theory of art must be applicable to both Eastern and Western, Ancient and Contemporary, and so-called Western and Non-western arts. We can find a resolution to this problem from the conditions and purposes of *mimêsis*. Long considered to mean the mere copying of nature, verisimilitude, and the condition of outmoded art styles antithetical to the mandates of modernism, *mimêsis* is actually the condition of art through which art itself can overcome its theoretical divisions. This paper looks at *mimêsis* as the symbolic, representative, allegorical, and ritual circumstances of art and claims that *mimêsis* is the very condition upon which a universal theory of art can depend upon to dissolve all boundaries between Western and Non-western styles. Further, in *mimêsis* art distills the concepts that condition the very styles that seemingly create these divisions. This distillation of a concept (through the practice of making art) enables art to perform its function as a qualifier and reinforcer of given cultural concepts and meanings in any age or geographical location.

Keywords: Mimêsis, Non-Western, Western, Contemporary, theory

Introduction

Technique is just a means of arriving at
a statement.
Jackson Pollock

Enigmatic and yet containing all the components of *mythos*, Jackson Pollock's drip paintings are the quintessential expressions of the American abstract expressionist movement. Pollock's drip works are characterized by his manner of dripping and casting enamel paint onto unstretched raw canvases that he would lay out on his studio floor. From his painting, *Mural*, which he painted for Peggy Guggenheim in 1943 to his black paintings made just before his death in 1956, Pollock's abstract paintings have inspired artists to embrace and express a personal inner truth. This paper considers the notion of *mimêsis* and its relations to *mythos* in terms of truth and its conveyance through representation, symbolism, allegory and ritual and how this becomes a process

for the distillation of a concept in art, in this case through examining the concept of Pollock's drip and so-called 'black' paintings.

Pollock's work is mythic, but Pollock himself is a large part of the myth. He is remembered so much for his life and personality that one can scarcely separate the artist from his artwork. But a more critical review of Pollock's work through the application of a theory of *mimêsis* and the distillation of a concept can help us dispel the myths of Pollock's life while revealing truths within his works.

Literature Review

The critical review of Pollock's work is largely comprised of two opposing critiques: the abstract modernist critique largely defined by the art critic Clement Greenberg, and the Jungian critique of the critic Harold Rosenberg. Both critiques emphasize Pollock's mental health, but to differing ends. During Pollock's time Greenberg's influential writings helped to define an American modernist aesthetic based on the European modernist values taught by Hans Hofmann ("Energy" 70).[1], This critique looks for flattening of pictorial illusion and space, structure based on the Cubist grid, abstract and non-representational form, and technical expertise. Greenberg suggested that Pollock had appropriated and expanded upon the techniques of Cubism and thereby resituated the center of the art world from Paris to New York City.

Following Greenberg's valorizing of abstract form, later theorists and critics like Michael Fried, T.J. Clark, Rosalind Kraus, William Rubin, John Golding in his book *Paths to the Absolute*, and Ellen Landau (who has written extensively on Pollock) and others who all uphold notions of pure form with its affinities to absolute order and timeless beauty. Pollock's abstract drip paintings are summarized as the spontaneous and purgative expressions of the modern existential man.

On the other hand, Rosenberg stressed the act of painting, which he termed "action painting", saying that "the big moment came when it was decided to paint ... just TO PAINT. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation" ("Action Painters" 581). Rosenberg emphasized gesture over color and space. Inherent within this critique lays an underlying awareness of Pollock's emotional states, which Rosenberg believed to be inherent in Pollock's work. Rosenberg explains that, "The tension of the private myth is the content of every painting of this vanguard" (583). Though the modernist critique focuses on the formal properties of art and the Jungian approach looks at gesture and the psyche of the artist, the mythic nature of Pollock's personality work remains a foundational factor in both critiques.

[1] Hofmann taught at the Students Art League before opening his Hofmann School of the Arts. He taught both Greenberg and Rosenberg who attended his evening lectures. According to Friedman, it was through Hofmann's classes that Lee Krasner met both Greenberg and Rosenberg. See Friedman, 70-72, 108-109, 136-137.

Shortly before Pollock's untimely and tragic death, theorists such as Joseph Henderson, and later William Rubin, Pepe Karmel Herbert Damisch and later Michael Leja, Steven Polcari, and others began to look at Pollock's work through the lens of Jungian psychoanalysis and formulated a new criticism based on formative elements from Pollock's early childhood.[2] In this view, Pollock's artwork has more recently come to be described as a type of expression of a tortured soul seeking solace. As art historians have begun to take more notice of the American Indian influences in Pollock's early drawings and paintings, the psychoanalytic critique has developed into a belief that Pollock's drip paintings are evidence of Pollock engaging in shamanic self-healing. This more recent line of thought is proposed by Restellini et al. in the catalogue essay to the 2009 Paris exhibition of Pollock's work at the Pinacothèque de Paris, which frames Pollock's work in terms of the cycles of life, fertility, creation, transhuman transformations, and ritual healing. In the essay Restellini writes, "Seemingly following Orozco in style, Pollock nevertheless found his very subject – shamanism. Shamanism is a form of religious ecstasy in which the participant undergoes ritual alteration of his identity" (Restellini et al. 8). Despite Lee Krasner's warning against such mythmaking, the psychoanalytic critique focuses on the mythic content of Pollock's life, claiming it (as did Rosenberg) to be the content of Pollock's works as well.

Interestingly, these two divergent trains of thought (the modernist critique and the Jungian review) arrive at the same conclusion: that Pollock's drip paintings are expressions of the wounded man, evidence of his mental state or illness and his struggle with modern life and alcoholism. In these views, the art speaks of a type of universal expression of angst that is inseparable from the man. The divided critique seems to resolve this irony by dividing up Pollock's works. The modernist critique claims the abstraction in Pollock's later drip painting while the Jungian based theories of the unconscious provide clarity for Pollock's earlier works, with the more recent 'shamanic' critique serving as the motivation for his later drip work.

But this divided theoretical review is rather problematic, for although both views conclude with a focus on Pollock's personality and alternately answer to his early and later works, they do not give us a conclusive understanding of Pollock's achievements. Neither critique fully explains how or why Pollock made the jump from abstract figuration (or representation) to the abstract, non-representational drip paintings. Further, both critiques overlook the overwhelming references to Native American arts and aesthetic which are so prevalent in both his early and later works. While both critiques contribute to the mythic nature of Pollock's personality, each overlooks Pollock's great leap into his drip style, suggesting that he completely abandoned his interest in the American Indian arts to pursue either a pure expression of abstract paint applied in a new modernist technical mode, or instead a more Surrealist

[2] This point about Pollock's dysfunctional family crops up in nearly all of the biographies on Jackson Pollock.

expression of his own unconscious mind.[3] But with the help of the insights of W. Jackson Rushing, who analyzed the American Indian elements in Pollock's works, and a deeper look at *mimêsis*, we can arrive at a deeper understanding of Pollock's work.

Methodology

This paper looks beyond the myth of Pollock to the *mythos* within his works through the reinstitution of *mimêsis* as a method for critical analysis. Fortunately, there are many thinkers, particularly in the field of phenomenology, who can help us articulate a theory of *mimêsis* which helps explain the jump in Pollock's work from his primitivist references to American Indian arts, and his later abstract idealist drip work. We can glean understanding from an unexpected resource, namely Aristotle's *Poetics*, as well as a long list of thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, John Sallis, Tom Huhn, Stephen Halliwell, and others who have contributed to a broader definition of the notion of *mimêsis* and its role in art. Therefore, this paper is a means by which we can look at Pollock's work from a different perspective than what we have presently come to accept as the definitive and proper critique of Pollock's drip paintings within the Abstract Expressionism nomenclature. Through the notion of *mimêsis*, we can account for the jump between primitivist works to drip paintings, and more particularly, we can view Pollock's work as a whole and progressive inquiry into art from symbolic representation based on indigenous sources to allegorical and mimetic rituals, and the distillation of a new concept for art.

Discussion

Art and Mimêsis

From the Greek word *mimeisthai* (μιμεῖσθαι), *mimêsis* is 'to imitate' and has traditionally been known to be that which imitates or copies the natural world. Alternatively, *mimêsis* has been interpreted as imitation, illusionistic, verisimilitude, and the representation or copying of the natural world. When a representation is faithful to its object in verisimilitude, the representation

[3] There are many pertinent biographies which give insight into Pollock's life and the social and political context of his life. One of the earliest is B. H. Friedman's biography, Energy Made Visible. The biographies of Henry Adams, Bernard H. Friedman, Helen A. Harrison, Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, Francesca and Sylvia Winter Pollock, Jeffrey Potter, Deborah Solomon, and others are likewise helpful. Further, the critical reviews of Pollock's works by Hilton Kramer, Lawrence Alloway, Jeremy Lewison, William Rubin, Irving Sandler, Charles Stuckey, Kirk Varnedoe, Pepel Karmel and others are all vital contributions to our understanding of Pollock's work. Several key monographs, exhibition catalogues and key articles give insights to Pollock and his artworks as well, including those by Alberto Busignani, Elizabeth Frank, Ellen G. Landau, Frank O'Hara, Bryan Robertson, Daniel Abadie, Claire Stoullig, David Anfam, Susan Davidson, Margaret Ellis, Katharine Beatjer, Lisa Mintz Messinger, Nan Rosenthal, Francis V. O'Connor, Bernice Rose, and many others.

contains a relationship of truthfulness or a form of *mythos.* The faithful representation of nature in art enables viewers to recognize nature, as well as the plausibility of natural consequences in art.

Historically and originating in ancient Greece, *mimêsis* connects art with nature. Accuracy of the representation forms the merit upon which good art is based. Pliny the Elder explains this form of realistic representation in recounting an art competition (Pliny). As part of the competition, Zeuxis painted a still life of grapes which was so realistic that a flock of birds tried to eat them. After congratulating Zeuxis on his great achievement, Parrhasius took Zeuxis to his studio, to show him his own masterpiece of realism, which he kept behind a curtain. Zeuxis went to draw back the curtain only to find that the curtain was actually and indeed the painting. While Zeuxis had fooled birds, Parrhasius had fooled Zeuxis and thereby won the contest. As empirical objects and actions of the world are copied in art, the imitation enables viewers to experience these objects and actions. This relationship between likeness and the empirical appearance of that which is being imitated, between the world and its representation, is the key element of mimêsis for Aristotle (Heath xii). This view of *mimêsis* as a form of verisimilitude, was consistent throughout the classical era and early modern eras.

However, the mimetic character of art fell under derision in the late nineteenth century as artists sought for the autonomy of art, freed from its connections to verisimilitude and representation. The declining importance of mimesis began in the late eighteenth century when Alexander Baumgarten applied the term aesthetics to art and developed a science of perception. Art became a source of "immediate and particular sensory cognition, as opposed to general, abstract forms of conceptual or intellectual cognition" or recognition (Halliwell, 50) The importance of *mimêsis* waned for creativity. The importance of genius was considered all important as Kant writes, "genius is to be wholly opposed to the spirit of *mimêsis*" (Sallis, 161). *Mimêsis* in its traditional role of representing the natural world and facilitating recognition and verisimilitude was displaced for an aesthetics of perception over recognition, and creativity over verisimilitude. Art became autonomous, separated from its role of copying the natural world.

Art and the Symbol

It is easy to identify representational elements in art, for the copy or imitation of nature is given in the same way in which we see the world. But idealistic representation is a bit more difficult to recognize. *Mimêsis,* however, is a term that constitutes more than the representation of the natural world. Symbolic representation takes three forms that qualify it as representational, namely; symbolic, metaphorical, and allegorical representation, and the representation or enactment of a ritual.

Art creates symbols to represent an idea, a person or individual, or an event. It points through symbols to things missing in the painting, which the artist wishes to call into our minds. We can see symbolism as representation in

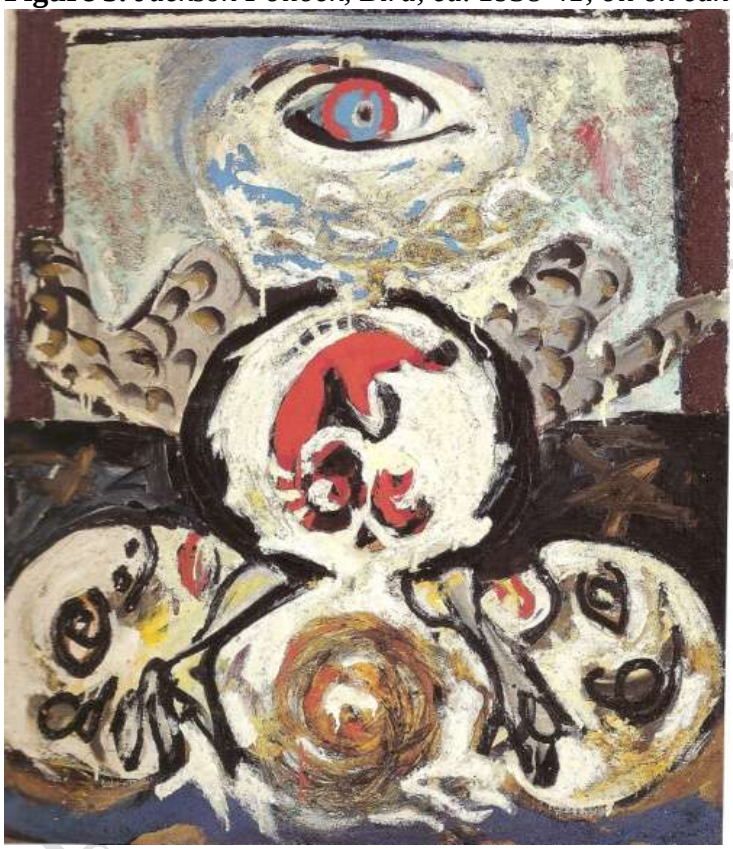
Pollock's work as he revalues *mimêsis* by pointing to Ancient American Indian arts in the form of ancient American Indian symbols such as; swastikas, cross-hatching lines, arrows, and markings similar to those inscribed on ancient rocks with figures – either as stick figures or more fully developed representations, as seen in his drawings and paintings of the late 1930s and early 40s. (Fig. 1, 2) W. Jackson Rushing has drawn clear distinctions and relations between Pollock and other artists' appropriation of such American Indian symbolic elements in art (Rushing, 14).

Figure 1. *Jackson Pollock, untitled watercolor and ink study, ca. 1939-1942 in the estate of Lee Krasner*

Figure 2. *Jackson Pollock, The Magic Mirror, 1941, Oil, granular filler, and glass fragment on canvas, 46 × 32 in., Menil Collection*

For example, Pollock's symbolic painting *Thunderbird* further reinforces the direct link between *mimêsis* as symbolic in the reiteration of Navajo arts. Translated as *Bird*, ca. 1938-41, the concordances between the symbolic Navajo thunderbird and Pollock's symbolic reiteration are direct, from the spreading wings to the spreading legs, as well as the view of tail feathers dangling behind the figure. (Fig.3) Pollock's bird is rendered in primary colors with a full feathered head in profile view. The directional energy points, which are directed downward in the Navajo thunderbird, become encased by Pollock in a block of yellow that underscores the upward thrust of energy above the bird's wings.

Figure 3. *Jackson Pollock, Bird, ca. 1938-41, oil on canvas*



What we learn from Pollock is that *mimêsis* as symbol takes many forms. Aristotle speaks of symbols as signs of identification (birth marks, tattoos, scars or other bodily marks that identify an individual), such as Odysseus' scar from which his nurse identifies him when he returns home (Gadamer, 31-32). Aristotle also mentions particular skills that symbolize an individual, such as necklaces or amulets that serve as trademark accoutrements worn by an individual. For example, we see how the symbolic identifies another, such as in Athena's shield or Poseidon's triton, or how a European coat of arms signifies a family.

Symbols as tokens also signify events. Originally the Greek word *sumbolikos* or 'symbolic' meant a sort of remembrance which came out of the

ancient Greek practice of token giving (Gadamer, 35). One would affectionately (or as an oath) give a token of a half of an object to another. Upon future meetings, both parties could produce their halves of the object. Fitting together as a complete whole, the symbol witnessed to the event or covenant. The token is symbolic of the nature of the relationship between the two parties, which is recognized in the symbol. Mimetic art works in the way of the symbolic. They re-present what is given or known. Artistic symbols fit or correspond to knowledge of a thing through recognition and thereby complete or make whole the two parts: the part which is represented and the representation itself. In Pollock's works, such symbols point to our experience with American Indian arts and artifacts while creating new associations. Whether we are discussing American Indian symbols or thunderbirds in Pollock's primitivist artworks, we recognize these as symbols that point to that which they represent.

Both symbolic representation and copies of nature are forms of *mimêsis,* or utterances which point to something else outside of the forms themselves. They direct our attention to that which is signified; either the object or the concept being represented. Barnette Newman interpreted this function of art as a type of hieroglyphic or sign system. Newman describes American Primitivism as an art that is "ideographic" and "hieroglyphic" pointing to the nature of art as a symbolic system like unto language (Newman, 565). Art as an ideograph or hieroglyph retains a certain correspondence between the symbolic image and the natural world. In this light, the progression of Pollock's work, rather than becoming increasingly abstract, demonstrates a commitment to the renewal of art as symbolic representation.

Art and Allegory

Figure 4. *Jackson Pollock, Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle, 1943*

Symbolic representation can also take the form of allegories, which we have seen in Renaissance and Baroque art, in paintings and sculptures such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and his *Primavera*, Caravaggio's *Judith and Holofernes*, Bernini's *Pluto and Persephone*. Pollock also painted many allegorical works such as his *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle*. As with many of Pollock's paintings, the interpretation of *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle* is divided. Some look to Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* and Joan Miro's *Person Throwing a Stone Bird* as the main influential sources for the painting (Landau, 116). (Fig. 4)

Some see the "elaborate headdress on the woman's head as possible precedents in certain other portrait compositions by Picasso" (Landau, 116). But upon closer inspection we see that it is a running man that wears an Indian headdress. This man looks behind himself at the Moon Woman. It is likely that the *Man* is an adaptation of Umberto Boccioni's *Futurist Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, a reference emphasizing velocity, but this connection has been entirely overlooked by the modernist interpretation. Further, Pollock adopted embryonic Haida motifs in making his Woman in order to emphasize and symbolize the notion of birth and creation. He would have appropriated this motif from MOMA's "Indian Art of the United States" exhibit which he saw in 1941.

Combining several symbolic representations, the overall painting is a direct allegory. In *Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle*, Pollock interprets a Navajo myth wherein the First Woman creates the moon and sun by cutting out two circles and having them placed in the sky to provide warmth and light. The Woman on the left of the painting has a train of energy in the form of symbolic Navajo stars that iterate her movements. She yields a sharp knife prominently placed in the center top of the painting. The discs which she has just cut are placed in the exact center of the painting. These discs will be hurled up into the sky, transformed as the Sun and Moon. On the right, First Man has brought the discs to the top of a mountain and he has hurled them into the sky. He turns to look to the Woman as he begins his swift descent homeward. Pollock focuses the action on the moment just before the discs separate and become heavenly lights. The Woman has just carved out the discs with her sharp knife, and the First Man has just thrown them into the sky. Image and text reiterate and redefine the mythic Indian allegory. In this way, the title is not read as, *Moon-Woman* in identifying the figure, but rather *Moon*, (hyphen) *Woman cuts the Circle*. So, the *Moon* is the subject, which is created by the *Woman*.

In re-conveying the myth of the *Moon*, Pollock acted on what Craig Owens terms a "fundamental impulse" to redeem allegory from a remote past (Owens, 1052). Owens in *The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism* defines the allegorical as that which is a repetition. Whether in attitude, technique, procedure, or perception, the allegorical is the repetition or reiteration from a primary instance into a related or different form. In reiterating and altering symbols, Pollock envisioned an ancient myth in terms of momentum and birth. Pollock's work appropriates American Indian symbols

and myths, combining and re-envisioning these as direct allegories. Rather than increasing towards non-representational abstraction, the fundamental impulse of Pollock's work is to reaffirm the mimetic character of art through symbol and allegory.

Mimesis as Reiteration, Imitation of Action

Recognizing signs and allegories in art as idealistic representation is aided by the pointing action of art. Signs and allegories point to the objects which they reference, even in their abstracted forms (as in Pollock's early works). We see this in a long list of Pollock's paintings that contain similar overt associations and reiterations of indigenous Indian art and *mimêsis*. Beyond the few works analyzed here the list includes various drawings and studies, *Red-on Buff Plate, Mural*, 1943 *and Guardians of the Secret*, 1943 as well as many others. But Pollock's uncovering and reclaiming the mimetic goes beyond the plastic surface of canvas. A close look at Pollock's *Full Fathom Five* reveals the depth of Pollock's allegorical impulse as reiteration or ritual. (Fig.5)

Figure 5. *Jackson Pollock, Full Fathom Five, 1947*

One of Pollock's first all over drip paintings, *Full Fathom Five* is a flurry of encrusted paint applied in layers of poured, dripped and spotted paint in black, white, sea green, rust and ochre colors. Beneath masses of swirls lies a figure, hidden and buried within the depths a mythic sea. While being restored by MOMA before 1998, an X-ray analysis revealed the figure of a man lying on his back with his left arm raised (Adams, 319-321). The figure is part of a new mode of representational allegory that still retains close associations between Navajo ritual art.

In Navajo rituals, sand paintings are made by the shaman and his assistants. Whether for fertility, healing, to bring peace of mind or banish evil spirits, the paintings are temporary tools for harnessing and distributing psychic forces of shamanic power. During the ritual, clients sit or lie upon the paintings. The shaman takes colored sand from the symbols in the painting and pours this sand on his clients for healing. This act disturbs, distorts and displaces the original forms and symbols. In the case of animal fertility sand paintings, the paintings are made just outside of the herd's pens. After the paintings are complete, the herds (such as sheep) are allowed to run over and spread the colored sand of a painting. This obliteration of the painting and the spreading of the sands insures the fertility of the flock. In other fertility paintings, the symbols are disrupted as the shaman casts the sand from the painting into the fields. The powers of ritual sand paintings lie in the distribution and spreading of the colored sand. Power is transferred from image to recipient. After the colored sand is re-distributed any remainder of the paintings' edges and symbols are then blurred. The shaman circulates about the painting in blurring out of figures and symbols, ritually destroying them with a feather-tipped stick. Smudging and blurring as he moves about the painting in a type of cleansing dance, the shaman performs a covering and veiling of magic power. (Fig. 6, 7)

Figure 6. *American Sand Painters, Sand Painting, MOMA, 1931*

Figure 7. *Jackson Pollock, Painting*

In *Full Fathom Five*, Pollock deliberately mixed sand in enamel paint, creating paint with a heavy viscosity in order to do his own version of sand-painting. He also changed the orientation of the canvas, from the vertical easel to the horizontal ground. Without brush, Pollock used a shamanic-like stick, pouring, dripping, spotting and splattering his sand-paint, carefully moving around the canvas to cover up the symbolic representations and associations. Like the shaman, Pollock was not creating but destroying art. The art is in what Heidegger calls the truth unconcealed or the "event" or "happening" of art (Heidegger, 62). *Full Fathom Five* combines symbolic representation in the form of the hidden figure, and allegorical tendencies in the forms of reinterpreting and reiterating, the horizontality of sand paintings, the media of sand, glass, and bits of string, cigarette butts, and other found objects in the paint, as well as Pollock's application of paint with a stick. All these elements reiterate the ritual of sand painting and the shaman's obliteration of the sand paintings with his shaman stick. But rather than executing a direct ritual or performing a ritual dance as some suggest, Pollock's drip paintings function as reiterations or allegories of the American Navajo sand paintings.[4] Drip paintings are allegorical, reiterations and reinterpretations of an ancient form of performance art. This is not to say that Pollock performs a ritual, but rather that he ritually or re-iteratively recreates the ritual paintings. Symbolic of both art making and its destruction, and the reiteration of concealing, the drip paintings

[4] Soussloff and Polcari, to name a few have suggested that Pollock's work is a direct ritual performance. However, we can modify this interpretation through the terms and functions of *mimêsis* bypassing interpretations for a critique on modern and postmodern art and criticism.

illustrate the metaphorical reiteration performance of the ritual as a signifying idealistic representation.

Ritual typically has associations with spiritual practices and anthropology, particularly in the analysis of Non-Western art. But at its core we can define ritual as a mode of idealistic representation that is based upon a foundation of the repetition or reiteration of an allegory. Whether in Pythagorean rituals surrounding death or rituals based on mythic heroic journeys as found in Homeric tales, in ancient Greek tragic poetry, in the fertility rituals of ancient Navajo peoples, or in medieval Gawain poems, or medieval plays and theater or enactments of the Passion, all ritual ceremonies are based on allegories and myths that form the basis of a ritual performance or enactment. The mode of ritual can thus be defined as the reiteration of allegory in theatrical performance or mimetic dance. This symbolic mode of representation, more than any other mode, is at length a subject that crosses a variety of boundaries in anthropology, religious, and postmodern studies. For example, Gadamer believes that life is based upon a hidden series of rituals that preclude "human understanding, acting, feeling, and loving..[that] have less to do with planning, control and being consciously aware, and much more to do with a subcutaneous fitting into the rituality of life, in forms of tradition, in an event that encompasses us and that we can grasp only stutteringly" (Grondin 49). But for our purposes, we are less concerned with the purposes of ritual than with the reiteration of allegory constituting the ritual as a form of idealistic representation.

Certainly, we see how in Pollock's *Blue Poles,* simultaneously disclosed and hidden totems bracket a never-ending dance of what appear to be Indian war lances decorated with various elements (Fig. 8). The pointing function in the painting's articulation of paint, back and forth and round-about is formed through the ritual dance, a reiteration of allegory and symbolic representation. Within the paint is the trace of the ephemerality of the dance captured in the form of pulsing and swaying paint. Motion is held within stasis, the material properties of paint witnessing to a repetitious pattern of actions, an endless reiterating *mimêsis*. The painting points to the dance as a ritual of reiterating *ad infinitum*, again and again, perpetually in the same way forever.

Figure 8. *Jackson Pollock, Blue Poles (original title: Number 11), 1952, Enamel and aluminum paint with glass on canvas, 212.1 cm × 488.9 cm (83.5 in × 192.5 in), National Gallery of Australia, Canberra*

Whether in an early overall painting such as *Gothic*, 1944 with its juxtaposition of small and grand figures and body parts or in *Full Fatthom* or late works such as *White Light*, 1954, presence is hidden but felt and revealed in paint that serves as a trace of the dance. Symbolic and hidden figures point to meanings inherent in the signs, the dance reiterating the ideals hidden within the allegory. Each painting is nothing short of a cosmic and eternal repetition and reiteration of the ritual dance. If there is any question of formalism one need remember that the paint witnesses to the dance, it being the trace of the enacted and reiterated ritual which makes the drip paintings idealist in structure.

In this way, just as Pollock's drip paintings allegorize American Indian sand painters and ritual, Hans Namuth's 1950 preparatory black and white films for the documentary *Jackson Pollock* are also allegories based on Pollock's reiteration of the sand painting ritual. The films point to, designate, and determine what we have come to know as a unity of time and space in an ephemeral artistic performance. Namuth's raw preparatory footage consisted of lengthy takes that focused on Pollock silently moving about the canvas – in a sort of dance. In the films Pollock focuses on the act of painting, reiterating the movements and gestures of the Indian shaman applying sand and brushing it away. The original raw footage lacked rhetorical intervention and narration. It focused on Pollock engrossed in his silent performance. However, as Catherine Sousloff notes, the final colored version that was shot over a two-week period in November 1951 contains Namuth's interpretive (or allegorical) narration (Soussloff 62). For the film, Namuth created a pit in the ground and covered the pit with a sheet of glass and then stood in the pit under the glass, while Pollock painted on the glass above. Namuth found the perfect vantage point from which to shoot Pollock in the act of painting and this glass painting became his work *Number 29.* Shot from the vantage point of being below the glass, Namuth's camera recorded Pollock throwing, splattering, and dripping

paint onto the glass in short colorful clips that he edited into narrated vignettes. Namuth's final film focused on the gestures of painting and on the materials of form without regard to the source of the allegory. The film marked the final form of what had been a tracing of a conscious mimetic act in the making. The allegory became, in its reiteration by Namuth, a narrative about an unconscious splattering of paint across a wide expanse of glass. But as Namuth shot Pollock at work above the glass, the layer of splattered paint increasingly obscures our view of Pollock painting and focuses our attention on the paint itself. From this vantage point and in a strange and tragic irony, *Full Fathom Five* was recreated on film. Pollock became both the maker casting paint and the figure obscured behind the paint. In a sort of strange loop, Pollock became his own allegorized subject. The day Namuth finished filming Pollock making *Number 29* is the day that Pollock, having been sober for four years, began an alcohol binge that lasted nearly five years until his death on August 11, 1956. *Number 29* illustrates the irony of *mimêsis* as allegory, metaphor, and ritual as reiteration and action painting in the making between Pollock's original work and its reiteration in Namuth's accounting of that work.

That the original work of art was Pollock's allegorical dance is reiterated in Benjamin's tenet that, "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens." Because Pollock's works are re-presentations and not reproductions (as in photocopies or photographs and prints of the original paintings) they retain the "aura" of ritual art in the making because they function as unique works that retain and double that upon which they are based (Benjamin, "Work" 513). As Benjamin explains, "The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition" (514). In Pollock's work, we see the original idea and its conveyance through symbolic representation and allegorical re-presentation into reiteration as a type of performance. This transition from the symbolic to allegory via the performance as a mythic recreation was missed by Pollock's critics. As trace, Pollock's drip paintings are allegorical works based on both symbolic and metaphoric elements.

Like Pollock's critics, Namuth focused on the sensational gesture and material form and completely missed the nuanced allegorical event. These nuances had been established in *Full Fathom Five* and earlier drip paintings. Thus, Pollock no longer needed to reiterate the exact re-presentation, for the form of Pollock's allegorical painting evolved into a focus on the concept of an allegorical re-presentation of the painting and obliteration of the sand paintings carried out by the American Indian shaman. This concept was infused into each successive painting. The subject of Indian pictograms and the sick man on ground having been established in earlier works were no longer needed elements because each of Pollock's successive works became the "interminable reinterpretations", of the concept (Merleau-Ponty 62). Successive works, *Comet 1947*, *Reflection of the Big Dipper, 1947*, *Number 1A, Out of the Web: Number 7, Autumn Rhythm: Number 30, Number 32* and even his last works,

the so-called *black paintings*, retain this synthesis of form and content, time and space in an allegorical performance.

Mimesis as Act

Hubert Damisch claims that Pollock's drip paintings as "the Indian example" had less to do with "iconic resonances" or the actual appearance of pictograms (or Indian sand painting), than it did with a "laying out" or "marking out" in actions that equate with the trance used in shamanistic ritual (Damisch, 30). But we must not take this suggestion literally to say that Pollock was painting as a shaman in trance, but rather that Pollock enacted an allegory and imitated a ritual, in order to arrive at new artistic meanings for the modern world. Harold Rosenberg identified this emphasis on imitative action in Pollock's work, and the broader phenomenon of action painting at large. He writes, "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" (Rosenberg, 50). In reiterating American Indian arts and myths through symbolic and allegorical representation, Pollock enacted and reiterated the myth and *mythos*, by creating a new mode of artistic representation through a fuller application of *mimêsis*. Rather than being the iconic Abstract Expressionist, Pollock returns *mimêsis* as symbolic, allegorical and imitative performance to art, thereby transgressing modernisms claim to autonomy and pure form.

As well, this is not to say that a Jungian critique of finding archetypal symbolism drawn from Pollock's psyche and childhood explains his mimetic turn. Rather, this is to say that Pollock deliberately worked out a means by which he could return *mimêsis* to art through a veiled visual field that owes more to the nature of art and reiteration in the making of a concept than to subscribing to the properties of pure form. While many concepts may be at play in Pollock's work, we see most clearly the reinstitution of *mimêsis* through ideal or symbolic representation and reiteration in its enactment, and through art's pointing function that directs the work of art back to the acts, events, and objects from which it represents and refers to.

Conclusion

We have seen that there are several primary modes of mimetic representation that constitute naturalistic and idealistic representation. While these modes are attributes of both forms of representation the symbolic or ideal is primarily constituted by symbolic, metaphorical, allegorical, and ritual modes. It is largely through these modes of idealism that we can see there is a specific and tangible content in Pollock's primitivist and later drip paintings that returns *mimêsis* to art. This return has come about through the

recuperation of the indigenous, its symbols, allegories, and rituals that evoke indigenous myths.

Observing this recuperation firsthand, Newman underscores the primary nature of art as mimetic, declaring that "Undoubtedly the first man was an artist" (Newman, "First" 568). Perhaps then it is no small coincidence that Pollock sought indigenous symbols, pictographs and hieroglyphs to convey the role of *mimêsis* in art and continued to explore *mimêsis* in his drip paintings. Figuration and representation, and American Indian symbols are so predominant in Pollock's work that it is important that we account for their existence. Newman emphatically identified and qualified the American Primitivist movement as being, "spontaneous, and emerging from several points" and as "a new force in American painting that is the modern counterpart of the primitive art impulse" (Newman, "Ideographic" 566). If American painting is the "modern counterpart of the primitive" then it behooves us to establish more fully that this "primitive art impulse" is first and foremost mimetic.

Second, we can claim the re-enactment of a ritual as another mode of symbolic representation in that ritual is functionally and formally the repetition of the reiteration of the allegory. We have seen that *mimêsis,* particularly in this broader definition beyond mere representation and imitation, qualifies Pollock's works as particularly unique, falling outside European formalism with its emphasis on abstract forms or "significant form". With an emphasis on symbolic representation, narrative, and metaphorical, allegorical and reiterative ritual *mimêsis*, Pollock's paintings also lie beyond Jungian interpretations with emphasis on idealized archetypes. Instead, Pollock's work reiterates and recreates indigenous forms through the primary modes of *mimêsis,* through symbols, metaphors, allegories, and rituals, thereby arriving at a concept of art through *mimêsis* in its broader definition.

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