# Diegesis – Mimesis

Stephen Halliwell
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# 1  Definition

*Diegesis* ("narrative," "narration") and *mimesis* ("imitation," "representation," "enactment") are a pair of Greek terms first brought together for proto-narratological purposes in a passage from Plato's *Republic* (3.392c–398b). Contrary to what has become standard modern usage (section 3 below), *diegesis* there denotes narrative in the wider generic sense of discourse that communicates information keyed to a temporal framework (events "past, present, or future," *Republic* 392d). It is subdivided at the level of discursive style or presentation (*lexis* ) into a tripartite typology: 1) *haple diegesis*, "plain" or "unmixed" *diegesis*, i.e. narrative in the voice of the poet (or other authorial "storyteller," *muthologos*, 392d); 2) *diegesis dia mimeseos*, narrative "by means of *mimesis*," i.e. direct speech (including drama, *Republic* 394b–c) in the voices of individual characters in a story; and 3) *diegesis di' amphoteron*, i.e. compound narrative which combines or mixes both the previous two types, as in Homeric epic, for example. From this Platonic beginning, the terms have had a long and sometimes tangled history of usage, right up to the present day, as a pair of critical categories.

# 2  Explication

The *diegesis/mimesis* complex is introduced by Socrates at *Republic* 392c ff. to help categorize different ways of presenting a story, especially in poetry. His aim is to sketch a basic psychology and ethics of narrative. From *Republic* 2.376c ff. Socrates has been concerned with the contribution of storytelling in general, poetry (the most powerful medium of verbal narrative in Greek culture) in particular, to the education of the "guardians" of the ideal city hypothesized in the dialogue. From the outset (377b), he makes the important assumption that stories/narratives (*muthoi*, which signifies traditional "myths" but also artfully constructed stories more broadly) can embody and convey value-laden beliefs about the world. It is clear, moreover, that before reaching the typology of Book 3, Socrates treats authors of *muthoi* as globally and supra-textually responsible for everything "said" in their works: he thus criticizes Homer, without apparent discrimination, for passages in the

voice of both the poetic narrator and individual characters (e.g. 3.386b–387b).

The distinctions drawn at 392c ff. add a new, more technical layer of analysis to the discussion of *muthoi* which has preceded. There is, for sure, some continuity between the two main phases of the argument (the analysis first of *logos*, "what is said," and then *lexis*, "how it is said": 392c) in so far as even in the second phase Socrates thinks of poets (or other author-narrators) as controlling and varying their use of "voice": hence, when characters speak (i.e. in "*diegesis* by means of *mimesis* "), Socrates formulates this in terms of the poet speaking "as (if)" the character (393a–c). However, on another level the second part of the argument involves a major shift, precisely because Socrates' main concern is now with the psychological complications of discursive multiplicity. Without leaving behind his earlier, global model of authorial responsibility, he pursues the idea that *mimesis*, whether in its own uninterrupted form (i.e. as drama, 394b–c) or as one element in compound *diegesis*, such as Homeric epic, entails a particularly intense and therefore psychically dangerous mode of narrative imagination.

The fear of narrative which powerfully foregrounds various characters' viewpoints is brought out especially clearly at the end of the analysis (397d–398b), where Socrates brands the "mimetic" poet as manipulating a kind of multiple personality and creating works which induce others (not least, *performers* of poetry) to introduce imagined multiplicity into their own souls—something which threatens the "unity" of soul that is foundational to the psychology and ethics of the entire *Republic* (see esp. 443e: "becoming one person instead of many").

The *diegesis/mimesis* terminology of *Republic* Book 3 is therefore the vehicle of an embryonic narratology which posits connections between narrative form (including narrating person, voice and viewpoint) and the psychology of both performer and (by extrapolation) audience. On this account, different narrative forms are not simply technical alternatives for the telling or presentation of stories; they have differential *expressive* capacities to communicate the points of view and mental processes of characters in a story. Notice that the basic distinction drawn by Socrates could be said to be not so much between "telling" and "showing" (Klauk & Köppe → Telling vs. Showing [1]), in the standard (if problematic) modern opposition, as between two modes of "telling" (itself not a bad translation of Greek *diegesis*: see section 3 below): telling in the voice of an authorial narrator *versus* telling in the voices of the agents. See esp. 393b: "it is *diegesis* both when the poet delivers character-speeches *and* in the sections between these speeches" (which underlines the fundamental point that mimesis is not opposed to, but is one type of, *diegesis*). Nor is the problem Socrates has with *mimesis* a matter of the quantity of information it conveys (*contra* Genette [1972] 1980: 166); his rewriting of the first

episode of the Iliad (393c–394a) preserves much the same "information" as the Homeric text. The problem, rather, with *mimesis* is what Socrates takes to be its seductively perspectival psychology and its consequent inducement to the mind to step inside, and assimilate itself to, the character's viewpoint. His anxiety is about a particularly intense way of imagining what it is like to be someone else.

We must now, however, add two important (and related) points. The first is that the proto-narratology of this well-known Platonic text is driven by *normative*, not purely descriptive, concerns. Socrates is not attempting to explore questions of narrative or poetic technique for their own sake, but to draw attention to what he sees as the vital implications of certain storytelling techniques for the larger ethical psychology which he outlines in the *Republic*. The second point, usually overlooked altogether by modern scholars, is that the typology presented by Socrates is not only incomplete: it actually ignores a number of discursive and narrative practices found in Plato's own work. This applies above all to types of narrators. Socrates operates exclusively with the idea of the heterodiegetic, author-as-narrator type (which, ironically, is never used by Plato himself: contrast the Socratic works of Xenophon) and paradoxically ignores homo- and intra-diegetic narrators of the kinds which *do* occur in Plato, including Socrates himself in the *Republic*! This cannot be explained away by Socrates' focus on Homeric epic, since it is equally true that he takes no account of complications brought about by the role of a secondary narrator such as Odysseus in *Odyssey* Books 9 through 12, where several levels of embedded narrative come into play.

It is imperative, finally, to note that the formal *diegesis/mimesis* typology of *Republic* Book 3 is not itself repeated anywhere else in Plato's writings. It should not, therefore, be converted into a fixed Platonic orthodoxy. On the rare occasions when similar distinctions are mentioned elsewhere, the terminology varies: at *Theaetetus* 143b–c, for example, a contrast is drawn between *diegesis* as third-person narrative and *dialogos* (with the verb *dialegesthai*) as the speech of characters. Furthermore, *mimesis* is used in many Platonic passages, including *Republic* 2.373b (see below), in a broader sense of poetic/literary representation which is not tied to direct character-speech.

# 3  History of the Terms

*Diegesis* is derived from a Greek verb *diegeisthai*, which means literally "to lead/guide through" and which came to mean "give an account of," "expound," "explain", and "narrate." Together with the verb, the noun *diegesis* itself became established in the 5th century BC as a common term for acts of verbal narration. It could apply, for instance, to the section(s) of a courtroom speech in which a litigant

provided a version of events relevant to the case: a reference in Plato's *Phaedrus*, 266e, shows that *diegesis* was codified in this sense in some of the first rhetorical handbooks (cf. Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1.1, 1354b18; 3.13, 1414a37–b15). It also seems that in the early forms of Greek linguistics associated with thinkers such as Protagoras, *diegesis* was adopted as a term for one of the basic modes or functions of discourse (cf. Aristotle *Poetics* 19.1456b8–19, where diegesis might mean either "statement" or "narration"). Such usage helps to explain why Plato chose *diegesis* to denote the genus "narrative" in *Republic* Book 3.

The term *mimesis* has a more complex and less easily reconstructed early history (Halliwell 2002: 15–22). Before Socrates employs it at *Republic* 392d, he has already used the cognate noun *mimetes* (producer/practitioner of *mimesis*) at *Republic* 2.373b for all those engaged in visual arts, poetry, drama, and music (and seemingly more besides) in the imaginary "city of luxury." So *mimesis* there designates (artistic/cultural) "representation" in a broader sense than in Book 3, and indeed Book 10 of the *Republic* itself will return to that wider perspective (595c, "*mimesis* as a whole"). From around the late 6th century BC, in fact, the vocabulary of *mimesis* had been applied in both wider and narrower senses: in the former, to representation, depiction, expression in various media (visual and musical as well as poetic); in the latter, to "dramatic enactment" (cf. esp. Aristophanes *T hesmophoriazusae* 156, where *mimesis* refers to the imaginative-cum-theatrical process of creating/playing a dramatic role). The category of "*diegesis* by means of *mimesis*" in *Republic* Book 3, therefore, does not depend on anything like a comprehensive Platonic theory of *mimesis*.

Aristotle follows Plato *Republic* Book 3 in seeing a distinction between first- and third-person modes of storytelling as important to poetics. He does not, however, follow either Plato's precise terminology or his ethico-psychological priorities. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle uses *mimesis* as the master-concept of representational art-forms (this is arguably in line with Book 10 rather than Book 3 of the *Republic*). He then categorizes different art-forms according to the media, objects, and "modes" of representation. Where poetic *mimesis* is concerned, Aristotle's typology of modes—that is, of "how" the poet represents actions and events (*Poetics* 3.1448a19–24)—is obscured by some knotty syntax and textual corruption. Two main construals of the typology are possible: 1) a *binary* distinction between (third-person) "narrative" and fully dramatic representation (of the characters "all in action," as he puts it), with a further subdivision of narrative into (a) the Homeric kind where the narrator's voice is interrupted by passages of character-speech (the author "becoming a different person," as Aristotle puts it in quasi-Platonic fashion, 3.1448a21–2; but cf. section 5 below) and (b) continuous third-person narrative; or 2) an explicitly *tripartite* scheme comprising the mixed Homeric mode of third-

person narration alternating with direct character-speech; unbroken third- person narrative; and fully dramatic representation.

The second of those interpretations aligns Aristotle with the tripartite typology in Plato *Republic* Book 3, though Aristotle curiously does not here use the terminology of *diegesis* at all (a fact obscured by e.g. Genette 1969: 52) but denotes narrative by the verb *apangellein*, "to relate/report" (cf. the noun *apangelia* at *Poetics* 5.1449b11, 6.1449b26–7; Plato uses the same terms of both the author-narrator and the characters, *Republic* 3.394c2, 396c7). In addition, as mentioned, he makes *mimesis*, in a broader sense of representation, the genus of which the narrative and dramatic modes are species. But the first interpretation, by contrast, makes Aristotle insist on a fundamental distinction, of the kind favored by some modern narratologists, between narrative and drama: on this view, even though he knows that each mode can be used "inside" the other, he draws a sharp line between their status as frames of representation in particular works. On either interpretation, however, Aristotle strips his categories of the normative judgments made by Socrates in the *Republic*. He shows no sign of taking dramatic representation to be intrinsically more powerful, or less psychologically "distanced," than narrative; nor, accordingly, does he think that the one raises greater ethical concerns than the other.

Aristotle's position is complicated, however, by his later treatment of epic poetry in *Poetics* Chapters 23 and 24. Here, in the first place, he introduces the vocabulary of *diegesis* which he had not used earlier (for the different case of *Poetics* 19.1456b8–19, see above). Epic is now classed as *diegesis* (24.1459b26), where before it was *apangelia*, and three times it is called "diegematic *mimesis*" (23.1459a17, 24.1459b33, 36). Moreover, he proceeds to single out Homer as the only epic poet who understands that he should say very little "in his own person/voice" and who accordingly builds his work around richly presented characters; other epic poets, by contrast, engage only a little in *mimesis* (1460a5–11). Aristotle clearly thinks of Homer as a strongly dramatic poet (cf. the explicit praise of him as "dramatic" and as a proto-dramatist at 4.1448b34–49a2). But the puzzle is that the present passage appears to treat plain third-person narrative, contrary to Chapter 3 and indeed to the preceding references to "diegematic *mimesis*," as *non*-mimetic (see e.g. Halliwell [1986] 1998: 126–27). It is as though Aristotle were momentarily slipping back into the terminology of Plato *Republic* 3.392c–398b. But the difficulties of that reading make it attractive to follow the alternative of taking Aristotle to be decrying the tendency of epic poets other than Homer to include in their work many self-referential remarks on themselves and their poetry. This would leave intact the status of all epic narrative as, in Aristotle's terms, mimetic, and would also emphasize a conception of the

Homeric narrator as an "impersonal" voice (see de Jong 2005).

After Aristotle, most ancient critics take a narratological line which broadly follows the tripartite typology of Plato's *Republic* Book 3, but with a terminological adjustment: *diegesis* ceases to be a genus with "plain *diegesis*" and "*diegesis* by means of *mimesis*" as its species and instead is equated with "plain *diegesis*," i.e. third-person narrative in a narrator's voice (as in Chapters 23 and 24 of Aristotle's *Poetics*). The resulting scheme distinguishes, then, between *diegesis*, *mimesis* and a "mixed" mode which combines the first two. Somewhat ironically, given what was said in section 2 above about the discrepancies between the typology in *Republic* Book 3 and Plato's own practices as writer, a *diegesis/mimesis* distinction came to be used in antiquity to classify the discursive forms of the Platonic dialogues themselves. There was more than one version, however, of such a classification. In Plutarch *Moralia* 711b–c, for instance, we find a bipartite scheme of "diegematic" (*diegematikos*, i.e. introduced/framed by third-person narrative) and "dramatic": the *Republic* itself would be an example of the first kind, *Crito* of the second. In Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Philosophers* 3.50, on the other hand, the classification is tripartite—"dramatic," "diegematic," and mixed"—but without discussion of any of the ramifications of the "mixed" form (see above). Proclus' *Commentary on the Republic* 1.14–15 (Kroll 1899–1901) also has a tripartite typology but with further and more complex terminology: "dramatic/mimetic," "non-mimetic" (also *aphegematikos*, a term akin to *diegematikos*), "mixed." (For these and other variants of classification/terminology, see Haslam 1972: 20–1; Janko 1984: 126–33; Nünlist 2009: 94–115. On the tripartite schema in Diomedes' *Ars grammatica*, which proved especially influential in the Middle Ages, cf. Curtius 1953: 440–41).

The distinctions of literary mode first drawn by Plato and Aristotle were often picked up and adapted by Renaissance critics. Castelvetro, for instance, in his commentary on the *Poetics* (1571), produced a critical analysis of Chapter 3 which allowed him to work towards the "unity of time," thought by him to be intrinsic to the dramatic mode (Bongiorno ed. 1984: 27–35). Just one year later, in his treatise in defense of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Jacopo Mazzoni combined the *Poetics* with elements from Plato's *Sophist* (the distinction between "phantastic" and "eicastic" *mimesis*), as well as from the *Republic*, to produce his own elaborate typology of narrative and dramatic forms of "imitation" (Gilbert ed. 1962: 361–64).

It was not, however, until the 20th century, with the development of modern narratology, that the vocabulary of *diegesis/mimesis* was given a new currency. That currency has brought with it some complications. In the most widely adopted usage, Plato's terminology has been simplified in such a way as to equate *diegesis* exclusively with third-person narrative, whereas the *Republic*, as explained above,

treats *diegesis* as an overarching category which is then split into the two main types of "plain" (or, in a sense, "single-voiced") *diegesis* and "*diegesis* by means of *mimesis*." (Examples of this near-universal simplification are Genette 1969: 50, [1972] 1980: 162–64, [1983] 1988: 18; Rimmon-Kenan [1983] 2002: 107.) The theoretical consequence of this simplification is to foist onto the Platonic argument, which might be said to be concerned with different kinds of narrativity, a strict division between modes conceived of as respectively narrative and non-narrative. (For one discussion of this issue see Chatman 1990: 109–18.)

In addition, some modern theorists have converted *diegesis* into a narratological category denoting the imagined story-universe as opposed to the discursive or textual constituents of a narration. The closest we come to this distinction in ancient criticism is in Aristotle's pair of terms *praxis*, "action" *qua* events depicted, and *muthos*, the structuring of depicted action into a dramatic/narrative representation (see esp. *Poetics* 6.1450a3–5). In French, this other sense of *diegesis* is denoted by "diégèse" (Genette [1972] 1980: 27, 280, [1983] 1988: 17–8), while "diégésis" is reserved for the narrative mode contrasted with *mimesis*. This further terminological splitting has led to a somewhat confusing variation in the sense of the adjective "diegetic"/"diégétique," together with related compounds, in the hands of different theorists. One reason for this state of affairs is the fact that the earliest modern usage of French "diégèse" originates in film theory, where diegesis designates everything which constitutes or belongs to the world projected, and not only visually, by a film (Metz [1971] 1974: 97–8; Pier [1986] 2009: 217–18).

# 4  Topics for Further Investigation

Book 3 of Plato's *Republic* apparently draws no distinction between heterodiegetic narrators and the authors of the works in which those narrators are found. Nünlist ( 2009: 132–33) claims that such a distinction was simply unknown in antiquity. Lattmann (2005: 39–40), however, attempts to locate a concept of the fictive narrator lurking in Chapter 3 of Aristotle's *Poetics*: this is Lattmann's unorthodox interpretation of the description of Homer as "becoming a different person" ( *Poetics* 3.1448a21–2; cf. section 3 above). More work would be justified on the pre-modern history of critical assumptions about the relationship between authors and narrators.

How far can a version of the *diegesis/mimesis* schema be applied beyond literary art-forms? In Plato's *Republic* Socrates appears at one point, if rather mysteriously, to imply that *all* discourse involves diegetic variations of "voice," above all in the extent to which the *mimesis* of direct speech is employed (397c). But he nowhere hints that his terms of reference extend beyond the verbal. Aristotle, however,

introduces his typology of "modes" in *Poetics* Chapter 3 as part of a classification of mimetic art in general: does he therefore believe that there are equivalent modes in visual or musical art? He never provides the answer to this question, but Berger ( 1994: 415–33) offers some independent reflections in this direction. More might be done to explore how far the issues of *diegesis/mimesis* can be extrapolated/adapted from verbal to other media.

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