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### **Stretching the Mimesis**

In Aristophanes' comedy *Clouds*, Socrates tells Strepsiades to look "offstage," to which Strepsiades replies that he can now see the "vast drifting swarm" that he could not previously see. Strepsiades may finally "see" (understand) the metaphor that is implied by Socrates (seeing swarms of clouds that are goddesses). However, there is not only a mix of reality (searching the sky, being unable to see) with the imaginary (goddesses), but also a reference to the theatrical reality (the stage) and its limits. In this way, Aristophanes crosses several borders of the mimesis to produce a comic effect and at the same time to reinforce his attack on Socrates.

To illustrate that Strepsiades does not "see" what Socrates means, he looks around for the swarm of "ladies" which he would "LOVE to" see. The first comic effect is due to his incomprehension of the high-level words, interpreting them as very base: this dialogue parallels the earlier image of Socrates sitting above the ground, his head in the clouds. It is when Socrates plays along that an additional comic effect is rendered, since Socrates is expected to be serious. When Socrates refers to looking "offstage," he crosses the border of the diegetic space: the narrative no longer refers to objects and concepts that are in the imaginary space of the play but to a space marker in the theatre itself. Is it the actor talking to the actor, as he suddenly refers to being on stage (the actor's reality), or is

it an exasperated Socrates who needs to get down to Strepsiades' level (the character's reality)? Could it be that this level of realism would make this Socrates look like the real person as if he had come up on stage from the audience? A few lines before the "offstage" incident, Socrates says "Leave filth like that to the comic stage" as if judging the play, making him seem an outsider to the stage. Because he seems more real (stretching the mimesis), his words may also seem more real (stretching the diegesis) even though they were fabricated. Had the words been reported by another character ("Socrates says..."), they would not have had as much credibility.

This theory could be supported by the fact that before the original performance, Socrates himself had stood next to the mask used to represent him in order to show a striking resemblance (Bieber). Notice that such a mask would not exaggerate features (such as a big nose or pointy ears) as would be the case in a parody. The mask had returned to the stage looking more real in a kind of semiotic transfer: it had become Socrates, or at least it had borrowed his mind and soul. The mask had become Socrates, and the actor by wearing the mask had become his own (even unconscious) interpretation of who Socrates was. Because this Socrates, the mask, had come from the real world, he could be authorized to refer to the physical stage and to judge the level of language used in the play. After the semiotic transfer (the mask as Socrates), the mimesis became even more credible when the actor started to talk as if he were an outsider, someone who had come from offstage and who was lost. In a way we are reminded of the characters as outsiders in the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (Stoppard) as they observe what is happening on a stage on which they have no control.

The character of Socrates becomes an outsider when he says that the language belongs to the comic stage because he is on stage and does not seem to realize it. He is like those members of the audience at the circus that a clown chooses to bring to the stage and make fun of. When we watch the clown putting the innocent man through burlesque torture, we want the clown to be our agent and make even more fun of him. Semiotically, the clown is us and we want him to realize our desire to make fun of someone. Clowns in their performance often ask the audience to support their actions with shouting and clapping. Strepsiades uses similar devices later in the play to obtain the support of his audience (pp. 88, 97). But instead of an anonymous innocent bystander, or another clown, this clown makes fun of a real, well-known person with a name, a reputation and at least in the first staging, a true resemblance.

If Strepsiades does not understand what Socrates says, it no longer matters what was actually said: what matters is the incomprehension, which is what is mimicked in the play. It no longer matters that what Socrates says in the play has nothing to do with Socrates' own ideas and constitutes an exaggeration which would be funny if the audience knew about the parody. The similitude with what would happen in reality, i.e. people being unable to understand what Socrates says, was strong enough to give people the impression that here was the real Socrates, and here was the people's representative (Strepsiades), and here was their incomprehension. In a sense, that first performance of *Clouds* was a perfect mimesis and an early instance of editing in the manner that is so common nowadays with television reporting: once he has captured the images and the words, the editor can manipulate them to produce new words and new gestures. The image, seeming real, gives credibility to the words.

In this example we have seen that with careful staging it is possible to transform the perception the public has of a real person in the manner one would want to manipulate the memory of witnesses in a trial. The use of physical resemblance (the mask), symbolic resemblance (feet off the ground), dialogic resemblance (talking nonsense with Strepsiades), and “offstageness” can all contribute to building a new impression of who Socrates was in reality. It demonstrates that the mimesis can be stretched and manipulated to create new impressions in people’s minds, a potentially damaging tool when it is applied to real people.

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