

globalisation with Helder De Schutter, which I'm very excited about because that has always been my main research focus. I'm already thoroughly enjoying my first lectures. Last but not least, I am co-teaching a research seminar in political philosophy with a focus on the normative debates on basic income; a very stimulating seminar given the topic, the insights from my co-professors and guest speakers, and the quality of the students.

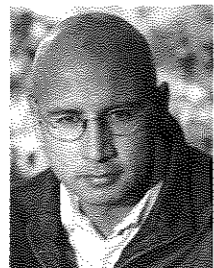
What's your first impression of life in Leuven?

It's a lovely city and the old town and the little squares are stunning. What I find particularly attractive about it is that it's really lively. Maybe not on a Sunday (laughs) but during the week

Interview with Nidesh Lawtoo

By Niki Hadikoesoemo

At the beginning of the current academic year, Nidesh Lawtoo joined the Institute of Philosophy as well as the Faculty of Arts at KU Leuven. He is the Principle Investigator of Homo Mimeticus: Theory and Criticism (HOM), a research project for which he received the ERC Starting Grant, and which is presented under the umbrella of Horizon 2020. He earned his PhD in Comparative Literature and Critical Theory from the University of Washington, Seattle, in 2009, was maître assistant in the English Department at the University of Lausanne, and Visiting Scholar in the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University.



You are in charge of the research project "Homo Mimeticus: Theory and Criticism" (HOM), which is funded by the ERC (European Research Council). Could you tell us what the project is about?

the public squares, streets and restaurants are full of people. So there's this vibrant social fabric, but at the same time it doesn't come with the noise and the environmental pollution of the metropolis. In that way it's the best of both worlds. Moreover, academically, it is nice to be around stimulating and intellectually challenging people from all over the world. The vicinity of the town to Brussels is also very exciting when you are a political philosopher. In the short time I've been here, I've already had some encounters with members of the European Parliament. You can simply hop on a train and have a coffee; that is a great opportunity. And who knows, maybe it will lead to some pathways for public engagement.

Simply put, it's about imitation. The HOM project's general hypothesis is that mimesis, understood not only as representation but as a human tendency to imitate others is, paradoxically, at the heart of what makes humans an original species. Mimesis is crucial for artistic creation, of course, but there is a growing awareness that it also plays a key role in subject formation, communication, and learning (think of sports or language, for instance); and recent discoveries in the neurosciences are currently confirming the ancient realization that we are, indeed, very mimetic creatures. To cast light on this protean phenomenon, then, the HOM project adopts a perspectival approach to mimesis located at the intersection of literary studies, continental philosophy and film studies. More specifically, it looks at modern writers who foreground theatricality and performativity such as Oscar Wilde, continental philosophers who have been attentive to the affective and behavioural side of mimesis (Nietzsche,

Georges Bataille, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, René Girard, among others), as well as contemporary science fiction films that show the impact of digital simulations on subject formation. It's a broad interdisciplinary project but, luckily, I have 5 years and a team to work with!

Interdisciplinarity seems to be a distinctive feature of your own writing as well. How do you view the interconnection between disciplines?

Interdisciplinarity and mimesis go hand in hand. It's a concept central to a number of disciplines, perhaps because humans imitate in different ways: artists are said to imitate nature, and this view of mimesis as representation is central to both literature and philosophy. But then, as psychologists point out, newborns imitate parents, students imitate teachers, and even though we might tend to downplay it, mimetic tendencies remain central for adult and social life more generally. Think of crowd behaviour, for instance, or fashion, tastes in music, food, even desires - are they really so original? And if so why do they change so radically across cultures? This is something crowd psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists work on. So, it's actually the problem I focus on that calls for an interdisciplinary approach.

But, speaking of interdisciplinarity, I should perhaps also say something about my intellectual trajectory to explain how I started working on mimesis from different perspectives. After a degree in *Lettres* at the University of Lausanne, I continued my studies with a PhD in Comparative Literature at the University of Washington, in Seattle. One of the characteristics of Comparative Literature in the US is that it has been, historically, very receptive of continental philosophy. A number of philosophers, especially French ones, in the wake of structuralism and post-structuralism in the 1970s and 1980s ended up teaching in the US. I am think-

ing of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, of course, but others followed, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, who was my advisor, for instance. Anyway, since in the US philosophy tends to be predominantly analytic, these continental philosophers found a more receptive audience in literature departments. And so, they turned Comparative Literature into a blend of philosophy and literature.

It's in this context, then, at the University of Washington, while moving back and forth between literary and philosophical texts that I realised there were continuities between the psychoanalytic notion of identification and the ancient philosophical concept of *mimêsis*. Working with Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, a specialist of psychoanalysis trained as a philosopher in France, I realized I could develop a project on mimesis located between literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, which then eventually became *The Phantom of the Ego (The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013). That was actually the starting point for my interests in interdisciplinarity that still inform the *Homo Mimeticus* project.

What do you think the different disciplines you mentioned can learn from each other? Is there something specific about the method of philosophy and about the method of comparative literature that you find particularly fruitful regarding the problematic of mimesis?

Yes, each discipline casts a different light on this chameleon concept. I work within an interdisciplinary frame, but I do respect disciplinary traditions. Philosophy is actually crucial because mimesis was first defined by Plato and Aristotle - they provide a conceptual frame that traverses the history of philosophy and reaches into the present. But since their competing accounts of mimesis concern primarily poetry,

mimesis is also central to literature, and more generally, the arts. Since it's a concept that emerges from the encounter between these two disciplines, my sense is that there is something to learn from both perspectives.

As for the specificity of each method, perhaps the arts tend to emphasize the aesthetic and affective component of mimesis, while philosophy often stresses its conceptual and ontological implications, but the distinction is far from clear-cut and depending on the author, there are significant points of encounter. D. H. Lawrence, for instance, one of writers that interests me, says somewhere that philosophy without literature is just dry concepts, and if you read literature without philosophy you only have hysterical emotions. He exaggerates, but his point that we have to "marry" the two is well-taken. And with the birth of the social sciences in the 19th century, disciplines like psychology, sociology, and anthropology can help us foreground mimetic tendencies that operate at the individual, intersubjective, and collective level. My inclination, then, is to adopt a perspectival approach to mimesis and use different disciplines to supplement each other. And so, to come back to your question, it's again the problem of mimesis and the authors I work on that encourage this kind of interdisciplinary dialogue.

You also mentioned that you would like to invite the neurosciences into the conversation as well. How do you see that scientific domain being incorporated into the dialogue you briefly sketched out?

When I started working on mimesis I wasn't all that interested in the neurosciences. It's only relatively late, while working on *The Phantom of the Ego*, that I realized that authors like Nietzsche and Joseph Conrad, Gabriel Tarde, Georges Bataille and others were very attentive to mirroring bodily reactions like yawning, laughter, or mimicry which happen automatically, below

the threshold of consciousness, and were in this sense un-conscious. I called this the "mimetic unconscious." It's only when I was wrapping up the book that I realized that neuroscientists in the 1990s discovered motor neurons (neurons responsible for movement) in the brain of monkeys first and then humans as well, which are actually activated not only when we ourselves move but also when we see a movement, say a gesture or a facial expression.

Have you ever noticed an unconscious tendency to yawn, smile, or laugh at the sight of someone else doing so? There you go - your mirror neurons are firing. It's that kind of parallel with the authors I was studying that led me to engage with the neurosciences. It's not that the neurosciences came first, and then I decided to map a neurological or cognitive theory onto literary and philosophical texts. I was interested in mimetic phenomena described in literary and philosophical texts that happened to anticipate what is now discussed under the rubric of mirror neurons. Sometimes the humanities come first...

Are there any phenomena in contemporary culture that could exemplify this 'unconscious mimicry'? It seems that this inclination is not only constitutive of the formation of the self but also of a community as a whole. Is this something you register around you?

If you start paying attention it's difficult not to notice unconscious mimicry in everyday life, both individually and collectively. I mentioned yawning, facial expressions, emotions, but maybe the clearest manifestation of the mimetic unconscious can be seen in children. I'm a father of two, 5 and 7 years-old, and like all children they are master imitators! That's how they learn. To give you a concrete example, since we have moved repeatedly - from Switzerland, to the US, to Germany - I saw how impressive their mimetic faculty is with respect to language acquisition, for instance.

After a few months in an African-American school in Baltimore, my son picked up not only English but a specific African-American cadence, slang, and tonality! And he did so to fit into a new community. We all did that at some point. But language is only one example. The stories children read, the movies they watch, the stars or heroes they identify with, the video-games they play, etc. have an enormous impact on subject formation and in generating individual and communal patterns of behaviour. This is something which Plato was already attentive to. He worried about the kind of stories we tell children because he was aware that models shape the character not only of children but also of adults and the entire community - perhaps now he'd be worrying less about Homer and more about movies, videogames, and the Internet!

The examples you give suggest that there is a positive but also a potentially negative side to mimicry. Are there certain tendencies today, politically or culturally, that you find specifically troubling?

That's a very good question. The concept of mimesis is double-faced in the sense that it triggers both positive and negative effects depending on the models we imitate. As Plato was the first to notice mimesis works both as a poison and as a remedy, what he calls a *pharmakon* - Derrida wrote brilliantly about it.

The poisonous, or as I call it, pathological side is particularly troublesome for political reasons. Let me give you a concrete example. When I was preparing the ERC application, I was based in the US, and I was following quite closely Donald Trump at a time when people were not yet taking him seriously. I was attentive to him because I had studied crowd phenomena in the context of fascism before. I had read figures like Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde who, at the turn of the century, noticed that people in the crowd are mimetic in the

sense that they tend to copy or to be affected by, as if by contagion, each other's emotions, which, in turn, are modelled on the emotions triggered by prestigious leaders. Authoritarian leaders, as we saw in the 1920s and 30s, worked on this mimetic register to arouse the crowds. I was worried about Trump's mimetic rhetoric because he reminded me of those leaders. This is true for the content of his speeches (his racism, nationalism, etc.) but also for his impersonations, body language, mimicry, shouts, and repetitions, which indeed spread contagiously, and thus mimetically, through the crowd of supporters - something we're witnessing in Europe as well. I am not saying that this unconscious mimesis always works for everybody; I am just saying that it's tremendously effective and needs to be taken seriously. That's something I am working on at the moment.

You initiated, together with Roland Breeur and Julia Jansen, a so-called 'trans-centre', an interdisciplinary seminar where you invite researchers, PhD students, and professors with a variety of backgrounds to discuss the problem of mimesis. Are there any other activities that you would like to organize in the coming years?

I'm grateful to Roland and Julia, as well as to Ortwin de Graef and Tom Toremans from Arts, for joining me in this collaborative adventure. It's a pleasure to see students and colleagues from different disciplines working together, talking across boundaries. I see the HOM project as a kind of link that allows these transdisciplinary communications to take place. New ideas often emerge when people with different backgrounds sit in the same room, read the same texts and discuss them from different angles. The HOM seminar is off to a good start; we intend to continue it for the duration of the grant, and to use it as a platform to invite guest speakers from other universities as well. Meanwhile, I have also been assembling my research team, which includes

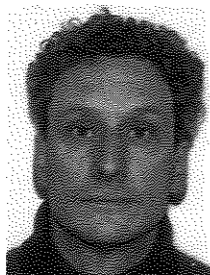
you, and Dr. Daniel Velez, a postdoc working at the crossroads of musicology and philosophy who will be joining us in September 2018, from Rutgers University. And a number of excellent candidates I couldn't include are currently applying for FWO fellowships to work on mimesis as well. In addition to teaching courses related to mimesis, inviting speakers and organizing workshops, at the end of the project, we'll plan an interdisciplinary confer-

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Interview with Ernst Wolff

By Broos Delanote

Leaving one university for another is obviously not an easy decision. You leave an (intellectual) environment that is familiar for one that is (more or less) unknown. When this change implies moving to another country or even, as was the case for you, to another continent, no doubt this adjustment is even bigger. I guess you were prepared for some of the differences you would encounter (I hope, for instance, that you were prepared for less beautiful weather), but there must be differences that surprised you or that you did not anticipate. Could you give an example of such an unforeseen difference?



I moved to Leuven with my wife, the French-speaking writer Luce Thoumin, and our two children in August. One of the first things that always strikes me when I come to Europe, is the incredible stability and the slowness with which changes take place here. Don't forget that South Africa is a country in which it is difficult to really feel at home. It is a country that is con-

tinuously changing. Since I was born, there has been a constant revolution going on, that still hasn't come to an end. However, I see advantages in both the European stability and the South African alteration. The situation in South Africa offers an intellectual environment that is both stimulating and emotionally demanding. In Europe, on the other hand, I find the tranquility that is needed for theoretical philosophy. Here, you don't have to give immediate answers to every little crisis. I also find it striking that Flanders is quite homogeneous. It sometimes reminds me of South Africa when I was young. It is a one-language environment, where it is clear who belongs, and who doesn't. There is a muting homogeneity, in spite of the many foreigners. At least, that's my first impression.

Regarding teaching, there are also large differences. Historically, one of the major problems in South Africa is that students come to university unprepared. The apartheid state was not capable of giving education to black students, and neither has the new democratic



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government. As a professor in South Africa, I felt the pedagogical duty to smooth away this injustice as much as I could. Being a critic of culture, you can criticize the situation in my country, but once you're confronted with students, it is your responsibility to make a difference. I started to consider my teaching more and more as a political act. This is different in Flanders. I'm still searching for the proper relation to students, but the level at which you can start is incomparable.

When did you decide to study philosophy? What was the immediate cause, or what led you to it? Was it a well-considered choice?

I studied engineering sciences first, for about half a year. Then I switched to the Faculty of Arts, where I was first confronted with philosophy. I was convinced very quickly that this was something for me.

After your training at the University of Pretoria and the Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit (now the University of Johannesburg), you obtained a PhD at the Sorbonne on the topic of politics and language in the philosophy of Levinas. To what extent did the context in which you grew up have an impact on your philosophical thinking and on your interest in philosophy?

I was lucky to have had a good training at the University of Johannesburg. I wrote my master's thesis under the supervision of Johan Snyman, a specialist of the *Frankfurter Schule*. It was there that I came into contact with the social-critical capacity of philosophy. My plan was to continue my education in France and to broaden my philosophical background. I obtained an advanced masters' degree there, with a thesis on Levinas and Nietzsche called 'Vie quotidienne et vie ordinaire' ('Daily life and ordinary life'). After that, I wrote a PhD proposal on Levinas and Adorno. The idea was that these philosophers would give me the tools needed to criticize our 'Western philosophy'

and the cultural background of metaphysics. In the end, I dropped Adorno and my PhD became a PhD on Levinas. When I look back at it, Levinas was in fact not the best choice, since the philosophical register he uses to treat his problems is different from my own philosophical register. What remains from my study of Levinas is a bunch of nasty questions about the relation between ethics and politics. These are the questions I've elaborated in my second book 'Political Responsibility for a Globalised World'. I consider that book as the closure of my study of Levinas. Once I was appointed at The University of Pretoria, I focused – almost as an act of resistance against the philosophy of being and the other than being – on the philosophy of technology. Slowly I came to realize that I wanted to write a philosophy in the service of cultural diversity. I combined these two problems in a philosophical-anthropological study of the technicity of human action. This is the issue I'm still concerned with today.

Is this what brought you to the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur?

First, I don't consider myself as a Ricoeurian. But the philosophy of Ricoeur, for me, is the framework within which I can focus on the questions we just spoke about. When I first started my research on the relationship between man and technics, I wanted to use Ricoeur's textual hermeneutics to interpret this relationship. But, slowly, I realized that this project of the hermeneutics of technics wasn't the right approach. So my research started to concentrate more and more on a social theory of the technical dimension of action. So my research got a social-philosophical orientation, with a strong political dimension. It is an anthropological project that is inextricably bound up with the ethical question of the good life. Ethics and technics, for me, stand in a dialectical relationship. My interest does not lie in the