

## GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

# The Mimetic Condition: Theory and Concepts

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**Abstract:**

This introductory essay articulates some of the theoretical and conceptual foundations internal to the post-literary mimetic turn. Drawing on an ERC-funded transdisciplinary project titled *Homo Mimeticus*, out of which this special issue on *The Mimetic Condition* emerged, the introduction furthers Gunther Gebauer and Christoph Wulf's account of mimesis as a 'human condition' in order to propose a new theory of *homo mimeticus* for the post-literary age. This entails a paradigm shift from dominant translations of mimesis as realistic representation toward an embodied, immanent, and relational conception of subjectivity. This mimetic subject is neither limited by the sameness of mimetic desire nor by the difference of the linguistic sign dominant in the twentieth century but, rather, is attentive to both the pathological and patho-logical re-turns to *homo mimeticus* in the twenty-first century. The concepts of 'mimetic pathos', 'pathos of distance', the 'mimetic unconscious', and hypermimesis provide theoretical steps for rethinking the mimetic condition in the age of hypermimetic reproductions.

**Keywords:** *homo mimeticus*, literary theory, mimesis, post-literary, subjectivity, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Luc Nancy.

For some time, a change of perspective on an ancient literary and philosophical concept has been urgently in order. As the post-literary turn reminds us, we now live in a digital society in which new media

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are not simply representing reality following the traditional laws of aesthetic realism; rather, in an overturing of perspectives, new image-based algorithmic media cast a material shadow on present generations and will continue to form and transform generations to come. And so, we may wonder: what form does this shadow take? And if such a form is obviously not singular but plural, not stable but fluttering, not immutable and universal but immanent and adapting to fast-changing historical conditions, which concept, then, can best capture the protean transfigurations of moving shadows that no longer seem to be narrowly confined to the specular logic of realistic representations of reality?

The general wager of this special issue is that new generations of critics and theorists attentive to emerging post-literary turns in the heterogeneous field of transdisciplinary humanities no longer need to fall under the spell of romantic ideals of absolute 'originality' – though innovative theoretical perspectives are more needed than ever. Instead, there is now value in revisiting a genealogical tradition of thinkers attentive to the ancient, but also modern, and now contemporary conceptual counterpart to autonomous notions of 'originality': namely, the protean concept of 'mimesis'. Hastily translated as imitation or representation, there is a growing awareness in different areas of inquiry that mimesis is an untranslatable concept that can no longer be restricted to aesthetic realism. Instead, it reveals the anthropological, psychological, sociological, biological, neurological, and ontological foundations of an eminently relational species that perhaps prematurely designated itself as *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

### From *Homo Sapiens* to *Homo Mimeticus*

The mimetic redoubling of '*sapiens*' already problematises this species' anxious claim to originality along lines that find support in the ancient philosophers who theorised the concept of mimesis in the first place. It is in fact useful to briefly recall that already at the dawn of aesthetic theory, in the *Republic* (ca. 375 BC) and the *Poetics* (ca. 335 BC), Plato and Aristotle disagreed radically about the value of mimesis understood as an aesthetic representation of the world: the first violently critiqued it for generating shadows far removed from reality with the power to inject an irrational *pathos* in the polis; the latter, in an agonistic move, defended mimesis for its

dramatisation of principles of necessity and causality in line with a rational philosophical *logos*. And yet, despite this philosophical quarrel on the uses and abuses of mimesis at the dawn of aesthetic theory, Plato and Aristotle fundamentally agreed that humans are mimetic animals. This classical agon, then, turns out to be a ‘mimetic agon’, if only because the opposition and overturning of perspectives presuppose a shared fundamental concern with an all too mimetic creature. Consequently, in the pages that follow, mimesis will not simply depict what Plato called ‘shadows’ or ‘phantoms’ far removed from ideal reality at the bottom of a mythic cave; rather, mimesis turns out to be animated by what modernist theorists of mimesis like Friedrich Nietzsche, in a characteristic overhauling of perspectives, called, with and contra Plato, a ‘phantom of the ego’ (see Lawtoo 2013: 1–83) constitutive of an immanent, relational, and eminently plastic species.

Drawing on this shared genealogical insight that goes back to the joint birth of philosophy and literary theory, this special issue aims to rethink mimesis by looking ahead to ‘*the post-literary*’ (Corby 2019: 33) turn *CounterText* has been advocating for some time now, generating ‘echoes’ (Callus 2015: 256) that cut across old-fashioned literary/philosophical binaries (Corby 2015). And it does so by supplementing what, in the company of J. Hillis Miller and others, we started calling a ‘mimetic turn’ (Lawtoo 2017: 1222; Lawtoo and Miller 2020: 94) that is currently already *in-forming* (forming from the inside-out) new turns in literary criticism and theory, but also in continental philosophy, political theory, gender and LGBTQ+ studies, film and new media studies, posthuman studies, among other emerging perspectives.<sup>1</sup> From the ethical turn to the affective turn, the neuro turn to the (new) materialist turn to the posthuman turn, in different areas of inquiry, there is a *re-turn* of attention to an immanent conception of ‘mimesis’ that may not be easily perceptible, or perhaps is even imperceptible; and yet, mimesis turns out to be deeply rooted in our evolutionary pre-history, traverses the entire history of culture, and is consistently at play in our embodied, relational, and increasingly precarious, but also life-affirmative and future-oriented mimetic condition.

Part of an ERC-funded project titled *Homo Mimeticus: Theory and Criticism* (HOM), whose general aim is to develop a new theory of mimesis to face some of the main challenges of the twenty-first century, the articles assembled in this special issue emerged from an international conference titled, ‘The Mimetic Condition: A Transdisciplinary Approach’, held at

KU Leuven, Belgium, in December 2019. The historical context is not indifferent to the problematic discussed in the texts that follow. The conference, in fact, took place just a few months before it dawned upon the world that the SARS-CoV-2 virus in its original ‘alpha’ variant, which was already a reproduction of a chain of variations without a single identifiable origin, was infecting and affecting the global population. It did so with an impressive speed of contagiousness that only increased as new variants emerged from an ongoing process of viral reproduction with proliferating genetic differences. While this nonhuman mimesis is first and foremost viral, biological, and thus within the competence of virologists who, also with the support of ERC funding, were impressively quick in developing a vaccine, it soon became clear that a pandemic is a ‘total social phenomenon’ (Mauss’s term) that triggers forms of affective, behavioural, ideological, socio-political, as well as economic contagion that hit the global population in successive waves, amplifying the effects of viral contagion while introducing all too human complexities as well: from anxiety to fear, panic to depression, resentment to denial, conspiracies to fake news, antivax protests to (new) fascist insurrections, the Covid-19 pandemic revealed an all too mimetic condition vulnerable to nonhuman agents that had tended to remain in the shadows but always haunted the myth of an autonomous, self-sufficient, and purely rational *Homo sapiens sapiens*. In the process, it also uncovered broader psychological, sociological, financial, anthropological, and political implications of a viral pathology that called for a plurality of humanistic discourses (or *logoi*) to account for the proliferations of affects and suffering (*pathos*) in diagnostic terms that are not simply ‘pathological’ and life-negating, but therapeutic and ‘*patho-logical*’ instead (see Lawtoo 2013: 6–8; 2021d).

This special issue includes only a selection of the wide-ranging papers presented at the conference, but it is representative of the collaborative, communal, and transdisciplinary spirit that animated what turned out to be the last in-person conference in a while, for many of us. While the essays cover very different, wide-ranging, and far from exhaustive manifestations of our current mimetic condition in critical practice, they all share a fundamental assumption in critical theory: namely, that mimesis in the twenty-first century can no longer be restricted to the autonomous sphere of aesthetic realism constitutive of literary texts to be analysed from a stylistic distance – though those close reading skills remain vital for the

humanities and other disciplines as well; neither can it be easily dismissed as a false copy, or shadow, of ideal, transcendental, and rational Forms located in fictional afterworlds characteristic of the *vita contemplativa* – though such abstract ideals, or fables, remain proper to reflections of *Homo sapiens* in search of ideas. Rather, mimesis is first and foremost rooted in an immanent, embodied, and shared human condition on planet Earth that is constitutive of our post-literary, digitised and increasingly precarious lives, a mimetic condition which, in different ways and with widening degrees of inequality, infects and affects the embodied materiality of an eminently relational, communal, and plastic species we call, for lack of a more original term, *homo mimeticus*.

In order to rethink the mimetic condition from a transdisciplinary perspective already underway in different areas of inquiry, the mimetic turn in post-literary studies does not make grand claims of absolute originality; nor is it anxiously struggling with romantic concerns with doppelgangers predicated on binaries between the origin and the copy that have long been deconstructed in the past century. Instead, it takes the form of a *re*-turn which, from different perspectives, steps back to a longstanding genealogy of important precursors, which ultimately rest on the broad shoulders of Plato and Aristotle. And this step back allows us to better see, and perhaps even foresee, mimetic phenomena that lie up ahead. A *re*-turn assumes, in fact, the movement of repetitions with differences, which are never restricted to representation but, rather, reload mimetic questions of the past that take new forms in the present and require new diagnostic investigations for the future. In fact, the general ambition of the special issue is to cast new light on a protean phenomenon that has been known since classical antiquity, *in-forms* (gives form to), at the most fundamental level, the history of aesthetics, but also culture and society, and continues to *trans*-form, via altered states of consciousness akin to a hypnotic trance, (post)human behaviour in the age of multiple (identity, national, pandemic, financial, environmental) crises. Somewhat paradoxically, then, one of the wagers of *The Mimetic Condition* is that this all too human inclination for the multiple manifestations of mimesis (mimicry, mimetism, contagion, identification, plasticity, simulation, and more) might play a key role in the birth of an eminently ‘original’ and socially distinct species – out of pre-verbal forms of communication that remain at play in the post-literary turn and the *re*-turn to mimesis it entails.

*Post-Literary Turn / Re-Turn of Mimesis*

For this delicate critical and theoretical operation that, it will have been guessed, goes beyond simple ontological binaries like copy/origin, but also self/others, active/passive, repetition/difference, human/nonhuman, among others, the essays in the pages that follow step back to what is arguably still the most comprehensive and informed account of the long and complicated history of the concept of mimesis: namely, Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf's *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society* (1995 [1992]). Spanning the history of mimesis from pre-Platonic times to poststructuralism – via detailed discussions that go from Plato to Aristotle, Erasmus to Montaigne, Diderot to Rousseau, and, closest to us Adorno to Benjamin, Girard to Derrida, among many others – the general hypothesis that serves as a driving *telos* of this wide-ranging study is that mimesis was never simply synonymous with aesthetic realism and the copy or reproduction of reality it entails. On the contrary, from the beginning in classical antiquity, mimesis reveals itself as a protean concept that points to a fundamental anthropological condition constitutive of what the authors call, a '*conditio humana*' (1995: 1; emphasis in the original). Rather than attempting to define, once and for all, the 'essence' of mimesis, Gebauer and Wulf trace the transformations of mimesis understood as a 'thematic complex' that 'refuses to become a "proper" concept' but, rather, has performative qualities of its own, for it 'aims at influence, appropriation, alteration, repetition; it operates by means of new interpretations of already existing worlds' (1995: 310, 316). We argue that in the twenty-first century this complex concept *re*-turns with a vengeance animating new critical and theoretical turns at play in our existing worlds. Mimesis, while often marginalised, mistranslated, ridiculed for lack of originality, or restricted to ridiculously narrow areas of disciplinary inquiry, remains central to nothing less than the formation and transformation of culture, art, and society – from classical antiquity to modernity, from postmodernity to the present reflections 'on mimesis and society' and the 'hypermimetic contagion' it entails (Borch 2019; Lawtoo 2019a), which is already under the lens of contemporary advocates of the mimetic turn.

Despite the variety of perspectives on the mimetic condition at play in what follows, the intellectual cohesion of the special issue is guaranteed by the same but always uniquely different genealogical operation: all the

essays, in fact, start by stepping back to Gebauer and Wulf's hypothesis on mimesis qua human condition developed at the twilight of the past century as a starting point to further the mimetic turn, or *re*-turn of mimesis, at the dawn of the present century. If mimesis is a relational concept that not only adapts plastically to the historical and material conditions of each existing worlds, but also actively contributes to bringing these worlds into existence, then it naturally follows that each generation of mimetic theorists or theorists of mimesis need to rethink this complex concept for our present times. This is, I believe, the immanent reason that a thinker who plays a key role in many of the essays that follows, the French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, famously claimed in a seminal book titled *L'Imitation des modernes* that 'it is obligatory for us to think or rethink *mimesis*' (1986: 282).<sup>2</sup>

On the shoulders of this shared genealogy, then, the special issue on *The Mimetic Condition* draws on disciplines as diverse as literary criticism and literary theory, but also philosophy, anthropology, sociology, performance studies, film studies, new media studies, among other perspectives, to propose the following hypothesis: this mimetic condition remains, perhaps more than ever before, both the accursed and productive share of *homo mimeticus* in the twenty-first century. Stepping back to a longstanding genealogy of mimesis attentive to the eminently relational, embodied, and affective dimension of the all-too-human, but also nonhuman inclinations for imitation – what Adriana Cavarero and I also call 'mimetic inclinations' (Cavarero and Lawtoo 2021) – generated far-reaching insights. It allowed contributors to see, for instance, that if 'language' may have brought about what Walter Benjamin called the 'decay of the mimetic faculty' (2007: 334) in the modernist period, the post-literary turn brings about an excess of the powers of mimesis in different areas of disciplinary investigation.

The Covid-19 pandemic is, once again, revealing of these mimetic powers. It made us see and feel, among other things, the ongoing inclination of *homo mimeticus* to fall under the spell of magical associations promoted by new social media that do not rely on language or *logos* alone, but on image-based algorithms that tap into a constitutive human vulnerability to affect, or *pathos*. Be it in physical crowds or online, this pathos has a disquieting tendency to spread contagiously, generating a plurality of social pathologies that infect the body politic at large. In a mirroring inversion, the pandemic also revealed the urgency for new generations of critics

and theorists of mimesis not to passively repeat mimetic theories of the past but, rather, to actively *re*-turn to selectively reappropriating diagnostic tools from influential precursors in view of dissecting present processes of ‘dissemination’ (Derrida 1981) of such contagious *pathos*. This can be done, for instance, by promoting new disciplinary discourses that do not set up a binary between reason and affect, *logos* and *pathos*, *Homo sapiens* and *homo mimeticus* but, rather develop theoretical insights that rely on the dynamic interplay animating what I call, in a trilogy of books promoting the mimetic turn, the ‘patho-logies of mimesis’ (Lawtoo 2013; 2016; 2019a) – that is, accounts or *logoi* on human and nonhuman *pathos*; the dash in-between these two concepts signalling not so much a static opposition but a dynamic and *re*-productive movement of disjunctive-conjunction instead.

Clearly, waves after waves of multiple contagious crises reveal that new theoretical foundations are urgently needed to rethink the mimetic faculty for a period in which print literature, while still a vital source of inspiration, is no longer the main medium in town that forms and transforms present and future generations. If mimetic theories in the past century had turned to literary representations of the plague to diagnose social processes of contagion, a theoretical correction and alternative can now no longer be postponed. René Girard, for instance, in his wide-ranging theory of mimetic desire that goes from the mythic origins of culture to its apocalyptic destinations, relied on the lens of his theory to proclaim, in the 1970s, that we live in a world ‘less and less threatened by real bacterial epidemics’ (1974: 845). In fact, Girard considered representations of the plague in myth and literature as a ‘disguise’ or ‘metaphor’ for a hermeneutically deeper mimetic truth that interested him more directly (845) – namely, the truth of mimetic desire and the contagious violence it triggers. Informed by all the insights Girardian theory can still offer us, already in the 2010s it seemed clear that the complex interplay between viral and affective contagion urges new generations of mimetic theorists to consider pandemics as a literal rather than metaphorical threat in the present century. Thus, as early as in 2016, I argued contra Girard that in an ‘increasingly globalized, permeable and precarious world, the shadow of epidemics looms large on the horizon’ (Lawtoo 2016: 92). In the company of a modernist transnational writer like Joseph Conrad, who experienced epidemics on board ship first-hand as a captain in his youth, and with a genealogy of mimetic contagion informed by Plato, Nietzsche, and Nancy,



I thus set out to articulate the dynamic interplay of viral and affective processes internal to the ‘literal effects of pathological contagion’ that threaten the ‘survival of communities’ (2016: 92, 92–125).

There is, of course, no relief for mimetic theorists in seeing their *logos* ahead of the times; mimetic pathologies are now raging in mimetic practice with devastating consequences. Still, these are not the times for the humanities to be coy or timid about their diagnostic insights; nor, as the essays that follow make clear, is this the moment to retreat in the safe routines of literary analyses disconnected from the materiality of external referents. On the contrary, in a period of increasing marginalisation of the humanities – let alone transdisciplinary theoretical approaches in the post-literary humanities – we should take untimely anticipations constitutive of the genealogical method as an occasion to ask what is now a timely question: namely, how can stepping back to the ancient realisation that humans are mimetic creatures, for better but also for worse, help develop new critical *patho-logies* with the power to anticipate future crises to come?

One of the fundamental assumptions of the perspectives on the mimetic condition proposed in this special issue, and in the *Homo Mimeticus* project more generally, is that theories of mimesis (or any theory for that matter) should not be mechanically applied to literary and post-literary texts from the outside-in – no matter how reassuring and stabilising those applications can sometimes appear to be.<sup>3</sup> Nor should we relish the never-ending play of deconstructive analyses of texts, be they literary or post-literary, that turn destabilisation, loss of identity, and nihilistic reproductions of phantoms into a sublime ideal – no matter how popular those destabilisations can seem in fiction. Instead, the genealogical *re*-turn orienting the mimetic turn points to a type of repetition with a difference that does not simply reproduce the logic of the same or celebrate differences as such, including theoretical ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ about mimesis (Lawtoo 2019c). Rather, it turns to reading (post-)literary texts themselves from the *inside*-out in view of developing a new mimetic theory that aspires to do justice to both aesthetic texts and referential contexts in view of confronting the immanent, material, and all too real challenges of *homo mimeticus* in the present and future. This also means that for this genealogical operation, past theories of mimesis should not be passively accepted and reproduced. Instead, new concepts for mimetic theory should be created, or produced – for philosophers, as Nietzsche put it, anticipating definitions to come,

‘must no longer accept concepts as a gift, not merely purify and polish them, but first *make* and *create* them’ (1968 [1901]: §409, 220; emphasis in the original).

### *New Concepts for the Mimetic Condition*

I now propose four concepts constitutive of the mimetic turn in (post-)literary studies which entail fundamental moves, sometimes explicitly, at other times implicitly, at play in the essays that follow. If these new concepts and the theory of mimesis that supports them originate in literary and philosophical modernism (Lawtoo 2013: 1–19, 281–305), and are developed as an alternative to romantic theories of desire, it is increasingly clear that they not only remain valid for our post-literary culture but are radically amplified in our current mimetic, or hypermimetic condition. Let us take a closer look.

First, rather than starting from mimetic desire as a *via regia* to subject formation and the Oedipal triangulations of ambivalent rivalries with models it entails, the theory of *homo mimeticus* starts from the fundamental assumption that not only desire, but *all affects* are mimetic and thus contagious. Desire was, of course, *the* fashionable concept in the 1950s and 1960s when not only an engagement with psychoanalysis was *de rigueur* among structuralist and poststructuralist returns to Freud. These returns, especially in France but not only, were driven by philosophical concerns with desire as the essence of subjectivity that find in a master-slave Hegelian dialectic of recognition (mediated by Alexandre Kojève) its primary source of inspiration (Borch-Jacobsen 1991, 1993) – an inspiration that reached and informed Girard’s mimetic theory as well (Lawtoo 2018b).<sup>4</sup> Still, in the wake of anti-Oedipal genealogical critiques of the repressive hypothesis, familial and somewhat bourgeois triangulations of ‘desire’ have lost a good deal of their sexy theoretical traction in the twentieth century.

To present generations no longer under the spell of Hegel, Freud, and Lacan it should be obvious that it is not only desire that is mimetic; all affects – from sympathy to grief, jealousy to resentment, disgust to fear, panic to trust, happiness to joy – tend to generate mimetic effects, for both good and ill, triggering both sad and joyful affects, as figures like Spinoza and Nietzsche were quick to sense and theorise. Given the genealogical sources of my theory of mimesis, I did not opt for the contemporary concept

of ‘affect’, though those ‘powers of mimesis’ join forces with both affect and new materialist theories (Lawtoo 2019d). Instead, I privileged a more ancient, perhaps enigmatic, but far-reaching concept: I drew on the classical pre-literary notion of ‘*pathos*’ from ancient oral rhetoric and proposed the concept ‘mimetic *pathos*’ to indicate an impersonal, relational, and affective force, or power. It is in fact no accident that Nietzsche calls ‘the will to power not a being, not a becoming, but a *pathos*’ (Nietzsche 1968 [1901]: §635, 339). The defining characteristic of mimetic *pathos* as I theorise it is that it spreads contagiously, from self to others, for both good and ill, operating below the register of consciousness, taking possession of the ego but also generating plastic metamorphoses in *homo mimeticus*. This mimetic *pathos* or power of mimesis is, in fact, at the foundations of a chameleon subject characterised by affectivity, relationality, and plastic transformations that do not fit unilateral theorisations. I thus agree with Gebauer and Wulf that ‘mimesis eludes theory formation’ (1995: 316), especially since such speculative formations in Western theories tend to privilege specular forms that are out of touch with immanent processes of becoming. And yet, as Gebauer and Wulf’s own contributions to the special issue also show, alternative theories of mimesis can and should be developed to trace the processes of becoming other of *homo mimeticus* in the twenty-first century. This process-oriented approach leads me to the second concept, or rather, movement.

Secondly, mimetic *pathos* cannot be easily stabilised within a triangular structure, or any form for that matter, for it is a relational, dynamic concept that not only goes beyond good and evil manifestations but is relational in nature and changes color and identity – chameleon-like – to adapt to a plurality of different contexts. And yet, this mimetic animal is driven by a specific logic that orients its movement. In fact, mimetic *pathos* has the power to generate a double movement of ‘attraction and repulsion’, constitutive of what Georges Bataille called ‘heterology’ and the ‘homology’ it entails in the past century and which remains our ‘accursed share’ (*part maudite*) in the present century (Lawtoo 2018a). Or, to use another Nietzschean concept, the inclining powers of mimesis trigger a ‘*pathos of distance*’ that renders subjects both open and vulnerable to the inner experience of *pathos* and – simultaneously, and without any contradiction or *aporia* – puts us in a position to set up a critical distance from such *pathos*. There are thus both mimetic and anti-mimetic tendencies

at play in *homo mimeticus* – a fundamental insight that is already shared and put to use across the humanities and social sciences (see Lawtoo 2013; Borch 2020). This also means that the distinctive logic of mimetic pathos, or ‘patho-logy’, operates at different levels of conscious awareness. This is, once again, not an original insight but it leads to the next concept, which is also located at the crossroads between two cultures that have been divided in the past century but should be joined in the present century.

Third, after a long period of neglect, unconscious forms of imitation are now back on the theoretical scene. It is in fact well-known that this constitutive vulnerability to unconsciously reproduce the affects of others returned to the forefront of discussions thanks to the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s. First discovered in monkeys and now found in humans as well – why should they not be present if *Homo sapiens/mimeticus* is the product of biological evolution rather than the original product of a divine creation? – mirror neurons are motor neurons that are activated not only by movement but also by the sight of movement, specifically goal-oriented gestures, and facial expressions (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008). This mirroring mechanism connecting people has theoretical implications directly relevant for mimesis, if only because it challenges the myth of the rational and autonomous subject of *Aufklärung* and promotes a relational, intersubjective, and embodied subject in line with *homo mimeticus*. Neuroscientists with a philosophical inclination like Vittorio Gallese, for instance, argue that the mirror neuron system generates an ‘embodied simulation’ or ‘automatic, unconscious, and pre-reflexive’ mirroring mechanism in the same areas of the observer’s brain and this ‘shared manifold’ intersubjective condition plays a key role in action understanding, empathy, and imitation (Gallese 2005: 41). If we needed an empirical confirmation that we are mimetic creatures, now we have one. And yet, this does not mean that the humanities should stop reflecting on the mimetic condition. Quite the contrary, reflections on the mimetic unconscious have barely begun.

What we should add, in fact, is that this discovery is a *re*-discovery constitutive of the mimetic turn which benefits from a supplement from the humanities. If the discovery of mirror neurons is now well known, less known, in fact – perhaps due to the dominance of the psychoanalytical unconscious on the literary side and absolute faith in rational consciousness on the philosophical side – is that an entire tradition of the unconscious

that precedes the so-called Freudian discovery was very attentive to mirroring ‘physio-psychological’ reflexes that find in embodied forms of ‘involuntary imitation’ a *via regia* to the psyche (Lawtoo 2019b: 38–44). I call this unconscious, the ‘mimetic unconscious’: to signal the centrality of both imitation and related psychic states (hypnosis, suggestion, influence, contagion etc.) that emerge from intersubjective conditions characteristic of a post-literary social, cultural, and political life in the digital age. The mimetic unconscious not only accounts for a non-mediated understanding of the emotions of others via a mirroring *patho*-logy whereby the *pathos* of the other is felt immediately by the subject via a form of non-linguistic communication we shall trace back to the birth of *Homo sapiens*; it also allows us to come to grips with a disquieting phenomenon of affective contagion that is characteristic of modernity and is most manifest as subjects assemble in what was once called a crowd. The extreme suggestibility, emotional instability, vulnerability to spells and influence finds in the mimetic crowd and its linguistic avatars (*foule, folla, Masse, etc.*) the most manifest symptom of the mimetic unconscious (Borch 2012, 2019; Lawtoo 2013, 2019a; Gebauer and Rücker 2019). Thus, if fin-de-siècle crowd psychologists like Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde were attentive to the contagious dynamic of the ‘laws of imitation’ predicated on the untimely insight that an ‘unconscious imitation’ accounts for ‘the action at a distance from brain to brain’ (Tarde 2001: 135, 257, n. 1; my translation), the mimetic turn is now focusing on a crowd psychology reloaded in digital media as well, endowed with a growing power of affection and infection – which leads us to the last concept for the mimetic condition I would like to outline.

Fourth, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore that the hyperconnected subject of the digital age falls easy prey to irrational beliefs that have always been constitutive of *Homo sapiens* but have reached new proportions in the present century. It is in fact easy for otherwise rational subjects to fall under the spell of digital simulations that have the affective power, or *pathos*, to dispossess the ego and its ability to think. New social media, in fact, generate ‘phantoms’ that are not simply visual and seen on our screens outside; they are affective and experienced inside, both individually and collectively. We have seen that this process of manipulation and dispossession generates an oscillation between a mimetic vulnerability to *pathos* on one side, and an anti-mimetic distance on the other. This ‘*pathos of distance*’, I have equally stressed, emerged from close readings

of literary and philosophical modernism. But it is now crucial to add that it is constitutive of an ‘inability to think’ Hannah Arendt considered characteristic of ‘the banality of evil’, which, I have suggested, is rooted in the hypnotic powers of the mimetic unconscious (Lawtoo 2021ab). This banality now remains fully at play in the post-literary age with different degrees of severity. (Post)human subjects are, in fact, increasingly immersed in a world of ‘hyperreal simulations’ (Baudrillard 1981) that are not simply distant or disconnected from reality – though they replace basic facts with a disquieting efficacy. These simulations also have the material power to retroact on the embodied, affective, and relational *pathos* of *homo mimeticus* via a spiraling hypnotic process I call ‘hypermimesis’ (Lawtoo 2021c) – for simulations are not disconnected from the laws of imitation, as Jean-Baudrillard argued at the twilight of the past century. On the contrary, they retroact with a spiraling feedback loop on the plastic neurology and unconscious suggestibility of *homo mimeticus*. Driven by nonhuman algorithms that tap into the magical potential of the mimetic faculty by feeding users the information they are already predisposed to hypnotically believe, hypermimesis radically amplifies the credulity, suggestibility, and magical forms of affective participation massively at play in the mimetic unconscious reloaded since at least the dawn of the present century.

So, four new concepts: mimetic pathos, pathos of distance, mimetic unconscious, hypermimesis. There would be many others, for a plurality of areas of inquiry are now constitutive of the mimetic turn,<sup>5</sup> but these should suffice to indicate that new theoretical steps for a mimetic theory are well underway in the post-literary turn. Unsurprisingly, the shared agonistic logic of *CounterText* and *Homo Mimeticus* oblige, developing a new theory of mimesis also involves countering, in a respectful spirit of fair-play constitutive of mimetic agonism, previous theories that restricted mimesis perhaps too much to aesthetic realism or mimetic desire, linguistic repetitions or posthuman simulations dominant in the past century, while also affirmatively, rigorously, and sometimes creatively reloading processes of becoming other constitutive of our mimetic condition in the present century. It is in this spirit of re-productive affirmation of a new theory of *homo mimeticus* that a step back to important precursors remains vital to leap further ahead to the still largely uncharted and unexplored territory of the mimetic condition. The mimetic turn, then, re-turns to rethinking mimesis on the double shoulders of Gebauer and Wulf’s *Mimesis* on one side and

*Homo Mimeticus* on the other, as well as the shared genealogy of thinkers of mimesis briefly convoked here and discussed in more detail in the pages that follow – from Plato to Aristotle, Nietzsche to Leroi-Gourhan, Derrida to Girard, Lacoue-Labarthe to Nancy, Malabou to Cavarero, to many others.<sup>6</sup> It does so in order to look ahead to emerging (hyper)mimetic problematics that were not yet present or fully visible in the 1990s – from the discovery of mirror neurons to financial crises, (new) fascist threats to global pandemics to anthropogenic climate change in the age of the Anthropocene – but that now cast a long post-literary and rather material shadow on the present and future. These are indeed times that will continue to form, inform, and transform the mimetic turn, or *re*-turn to mimesis in the twenty-first century.

### *Mimetic Contents*

Given this Janus-faced genealogical approach that looks back in order to better see what lies ahead, the orientation of the special issue naturally falls in place. Christoph Wulf's overarching articulation of the anthropological foundations of mimesis (in rituals, arts, and education) central to processes of 'repetition' that, he argues, drawing on a career-long engagement with mimetic cultural phenomena, are not opposed to 'innovation'; on the contrary, they are the very condition for the innovative transmission of cultural processes constitutive of memory, learning, as well as cultural and artistic production. I follow up with a (Nietzschean) genealogical account of the birth of *homo mimeticus* out of the deep evolutionary history of non-linguistic forms of mimetic communication that anticipate recent developments in evolutionary psychology and the neurosciences. Gunter Gebauer's account of viral contagion in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* brings us into the present of our current mimetic condition by both furthering and complicating previous (Girardian) accounts of the plague in literature from a (Foucauldian) perspective attentive to both medical contagion and the inequalities of power relations internal to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis (currently in its fifth wave, as I finalise this introduction in the last days of December 2021 under tightening lockdown restrictions).

Once these theoretical foundations for the mimetic *re*-turn in the twenty-first century are in place, the issue turns to supplement the following post-literary perspectives: Fabrizio Deriu ties mimesis to performance

studies and the theatrical/ritual tradition from which the mimetic qua performative turn attentive to how ‘restored behaviour’ emerges via a genealogy that, once again, traces mimesis back to the evolutionary origins of *Homo sapiens/mimeticus*; Daniel Villegas Vélez follows up on mimesis as performance by providing a musical supplement to the mimetic turn via a ‘mimetology’ that goes from Plato’s critique of mimesis *qua mousikē* to Renaissance opera to colonial exploitation via practices of musical indoctrination in South America; Sara Belo brings this performative focus into the aesthetic-political ‘horrors’ of World War II by revisiting Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s genealogy of Nazism as a problem of ‘loss of identity’ via an analysis of the ‘paradox of the actor’ (Diderot’s phrase) at play in Robert Schwentke’s film, *Der Hauptmann* (2017); Hannes Opelz furthers a mimetic turn underway in SF film studies by drawing on Catherine Malabou’s account of the ‘plasticity of the living’ and the ‘plasticity of mimesis’ it entails to propose a deconstruction of the subject inscribed in a ‘*conditio biologica*’ re-presented in Alex Garland’s SF film, *Annihilation* (2018); Christian Borch brings us back to the present Covid-19 crisis from a sociological perspective that looks back, genealogically, to a marginalised tradition in crowd psychology attentive to affective contagion in humans that remains illuminating to account for nonhuman, processes of financial contagion at play during financial crises and the market panic that ensues. And lastly, Carrie Giunta looks ahead to the uncertain future of our planet by drawing on Nancy’s account of mimetic participation, or ‘*methexis*’, revisited for the age of the Anthropocene in light of McKenzie Wark’s timely reminder that ‘there is no Planet B’.

From different perspectives, these contributions to the mimetic turn, or *re*-turn to a different, more embodied, relational, and patho(-)logical mimesis, remind us of the urgent need to resist the temptation of nihilism and the resentful death drives that already cast a long shadow on human and nonhuman life on Earth. In the process, they encourage us to put our plastic communal brains – and thus bodies and souls – to work in view to promoting life-affirmative metamorphoses for future generations to come.

In that spirit, the special issue begins with an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy that appears for the first time in English.<sup>7</sup> Conducted during Nancy’s last visit to KU Leuven and crafted in the mimetic genre of the dialogue, this opening contribution reframes mimesis as a ‘singular-plural concept’



that informs, in different ways, all the essays included in this special issue. This is a special contribution both for the post-literary turn internal to *CounterText* and for the mimetic turn affirmed by *Homo Mimeticus* – two perspectives now joined in this issue on *The Mimetic Condition*. Nancy was among the very last – perhaps the last – of a generation of influential French philosophers that marked an entire epoch in literary theory and criticism as well. Their names include Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Sarah Kofman, François Lyotard, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, among others who, with significant differences, played such a decisive role in affirming the linguistic turn that, from the 1960s to the 1990s, marked the structuralist and poststructuralist generation. In the process, they set in motion a decentering of ‘man’ that, despite the fashionable proclamations of the death of theory, continues to *in-form* from the inside-out more recent deterritorialising turns – from the ethical turn to the new materialist turn, the neuro turn to the environmental turn – including, as we shall have ample occasions to confirm, the post-literary mimetic turn, or *re-turn*. While not obviously apparent, this dialogue makes clear that mimesis played a decisive role in a number of fundamental philosophical moves, including the deconstruction of metaphysical conceptions of ‘presence’, the decentering of the categories of ‘man’ and the ‘subject’, the rethinking of the ‘political’, the affirmation of anti-totalitarian forms of ‘community’ and being ‘in-common’, among other influential concepts Nancy encourages us to rethink in his company.

One of the very last words Jean-Luc Nancy will share on concepts that go to the heart of his thought and life, this *CounterText* interview takes readers on a singular philosophical itinerary in which concepts and affects, genealogies and memories, the linguistic turn and the mimetic turn, turn out to be intimately *partagés* by a thought that is both singular and in-common. In particular, I invite Nancy to take the protean concept of ‘mimesis’ and its affective counterpart, ‘*methexis*’, as an occasion to inject an immanent experiential *pathos* in the ancient practice of dialogos. This entails engaging in a reflection on the life in common with Nancy’s lifelong friend and colleague at the University of Strasbourg, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. A philosophical friendship unique in the history of philosophy which still needs to be narrated in detail, the dialogue touches on what Bataille would call the ‘inner experience’ at the heart of Nancy’s thought and life. As it turns out, Lacoue-Labarthe’s injunction to

‘think or rethink *mimesis*’ I mentioned above in-*forms*, perhaps more deeply than is often realised, Nancy’s impressive philosophical corpus, located at the juncture of philosophy, art, and politics. Mimesis is indeed part of what, in another ‘dialogue on dialogue’, the two philosophers-friends liked to call a theatrical/theoretical ‘scene’ (*scène*) (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 2013). The ‘sharing of voices [*partage de voix*]’ (Nancy 1982) that emerges as the double dialogue is now redoubled in a present that is already past, affirming the *re*-turn of mimesis on the theoretical scene for future generations of readers located at the productive juncture of philosophy and the arts.

Starting from the ancient quarrel between philosophy and art in Plato’s thought, Nancy takes the literary-philosophical thread of mimesis to retrace some of the main steps in his impressive philosophical career. The thread, or *fil*, doubled by Philippe’s absent presence takes numerous twists and turns: starting in 1970s, it passes from Nancy’s engagement in the linguistic turn in the company of Jacques Derrida to a shared deconstruction of the category of the subject in the 1970s and 90s, from communal preoccupations with the political in the 1980s to his influential work on the concept of inoperative community – and the extension of Bataille’s thought it entails – that spans over three decades from the 1980s to the 2010. Finally, this heterogeneous thread reaches well into present concerns with (new) fascist contagion and, more recently, the viral contagion of an ‘all too human virus’ (Nancy 2020) – all of which remain constitutive, in different ways, of our mimetic, all too mimetic condition.

Jean-Luc sadly could not see this issue in print; he passed away in August 2021 at the age of 81. The ‘stranger’ he called the ‘intruder’ (*l’intrus*) (Nancy 2002) designated that palpitating organ Nancy received from the outside. Yet it was constitutive of an inner experience driven by an excess of intellectual-creative-affective energy, till the very end; it also exposed him to the experience of ‘finitude’ he had so rigorously thought from the beginning. He will be missed; his disappearance touched us. Still, his exemplary traces furthering the mimetic turn in his singularly plural spirit of *partage* remain to be shared. How? Via a ‘circulation’ of sense that, as he put it in his final words, ‘in the end, is never accomplished’ (*n’a pas d’accomplissement, finalement*). And thus, we may echo, this shared circulation calls for the *re*-turn of communal, life-affirmative efforts – to be followed up.

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### Notes

1. Over the past years, in addition to Gunter Gebauer, Christoph Wulf, Jean-Luc Nancy and other voices included in this issue, allies of *Homo Mimeticus* who are currently promoting a mimetic turn in different areas of critical theory include influential figures in the following areas: literary theory (J. Hillis Miller), political theory (William E. Connolly), complexity theory (Edgar Morin), new materialism (Jane Bennett), feminist philosophy (Adriana Cavarero), posthuman studies (Katherine Hayles), among other perspectives constitutive of the *re*-turn to mimesis. For more information, see [www.homomimeticus.eu](http://www.homomimeticus.eu).
2. It is regrettable that this important book is not fully available in English translation as yet. For a collection including a selection of chapters as well as an introduction by Jacques Derrida, see Lacoue-Labarthe 1998.
3. Despite the merits of Girard's mimetic theory, the application of his own mimetic theory to literature is arguably responsible for his blindness to the real threat of epidemics, leading him to assert that 'the properly medical aspects of the plague [in literature] never were essential' (Girard 1974: 845). I provide an alternative to Girard's diagnostic that takes seriously the medical danger of Covid-19 in Lawtoo 2021d; for a discussion of Girard that also considers the medical aspect essential, see Gunter Gebauer's contribution in this special issue.
4. After a career spent disavowing this Hegelian genealogy, Girard admitted in his last book: 'when *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* was first published in French in 1961, . . . it was often said that mimetic desire was only a reformulation of the desire for recognition in Hegel's theory. . . . Naturally I fought back like a demon, but I cannot deny that Hegel's theory was in the background'. (Girard 2010: 30) Perhaps this theory was already in the foreground, given the anxious need to fight like a demon to keep it hidden in the background.

5. For a representative sample on the *re*-turn of mimesis from a post-literary perspective in literary theory, see Corby 2019, Lawtoo 2016; Lawtoo and Miller 2020; in continental philosophy, see Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, Borch-Jacobsen 2009; Lawtoo 2013; Nancy 2016, Kaftanski 2022; in analytic philosophy, see Hurley and Chater 2005; in film studies, see Gallese and Guerra 2019; Lawtoo 2020, 2021a; in musicology, see Villegas Vélez, forthcoming; in anthropology, see Wulf 2013; in sociology, see Borch 2012, 2019, 2020, Gebauer and Rücker 2019; in political theory, see Connolly 2017, Lawtoo 2019a, 2019d; in feminist philosophy, see Cavarero and Lawtoo 2021; among other new emerging perspectives on (hyper)mimesis.
6. For a gendered supplement to the mimetic turn focusing on Butler, Cavarero, Malabou, and other feminist/LGBTQ+ philosophers, see the 'Gendered Mimesis' project, <http://www.homomimeticus.eu/gendered-mimesis-c1/>
7. Originally published in French in *L'Esprit Créateur*; see Nancy and Lawtoo 2021. The video version of the interview, titled *Philosophy and Mimesis: Jean-Luc Nancy*, is available here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7je\\_FSOQDYU&t=2922s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7je_FSOQDYU&t=2922s).

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