To this day, the French transdisciplinary thinker Roger Caillois remains a marginalized figure in critical theory. An untimely and unclassifiable writer fascinated by sacred rituals and political rituals, play and games, Dionysian possessions and nonhuman dispossession, animal mimicry and stone writing, he developed what he called a “diagonal science” that cuts across disciplinary discourses and never conformed to the dominant schools that—from surrealism to psychoanalysis, structuralism to poststructuralism—dominated the French intellectual scene over the past century, casting a long shadow on different strands of critical theory across the world that continue to relegate Caillois to the margins of academic discourses. At best, he is considered as the negative double of his now influential counterpart Georges Bataille. Equally unread in his lifetime, Bataille was resuscitated posthumously in the 1960s by figures like Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and other thinkers at the margins of philosophy who considered him as a heterogeneous source of inspiration for the linguistic turn and, more recently, for the mimetic turn as well.¹

After a century of benign neglect, it is now time to fully recognize that Caillois’s diagonal theory of mimetism (mimétisme), which straddles discourses or logoi as diverse as aesthetics, anthropology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and biology, played not only a major role in the development of imaginary theories...
of the ego in the past century; an unacknowledged precursor, he helps us account for the dynamic interplay between human mimetism and animal mimicry that cuts across the nature/culture binary of the past and goes beyond object-oriented and subject-oriented ontological binaries in the present as well.\footnote{To gauge Caillois’s untimely contribution to new mimetic studies, let us introduce him as a thinker who did not develop his theory of mimetism in a position of epistemic isolation but in a relation of communication with other theorists of imitation he encountered.}

To gauge Caillois’s untimely contribution to new mimetic studies, let us introduce him as a thinker who did not develop his theory of mimetism in a position of epistemic isolation but in a relation of communication with other theorists of imitation he encountered.

**Mimetic Encounters: Lacan, Bataille, Caillois**

Caillois’s name tends to be entangled with Bataille due to their shared intellectual efforts to re-evaluate the power of the sacred in modern societies in the wake of surrealism in the late 1930s, a period haunted by the looming shadow of war. It might thus appear just an anecdotal coincidence that it was actually an even more influential figure associated with surrealist projects who introduced Caillois to Bataille back in 1934: namely, Jacques Lacan. As Caillois recalls in an interview: “I first met Bataille at Jacques Lacan’s home. After that we met fairly often, and together with Michel Leiris we had the idea of founding a study group, which then became the College of Sociology” (qtd. in Frank and Naish 2003, 143). Without being conscious of doing so, and thus, in our specific sense, *un*-consciously, Lacan sparked a collaboration between Caillois, Bataille, and Michel Leiris that would witness a break with surrealism via the famous jumping beans episode.

This mythic episode is worth recalling. As the story goes, Breton, Caillois, and Lacan met at a market and came across a stand with mysterious Mexican beans called “jumping beans.” To give away the secret at the outset—spoiler alert—they are inhabited by a larva that makes the seeds jump. Caillois, suspecting the presence of the larva, wanted to slice the beans open to understand the source of the movement; Breton objected that such a positivist biological understanding would destroy the mystery. To which Caillois replied: “The irrational: granted. But first and foremost it must be coherent” (qtd. in Frank 2003, 85). To know or not to know, that seems to have been the question. This escalating agon eventually led to Caillois’s break with Breton and surrealism. Lacan is said to have walked away, but not without taking Caillois’s insight into mimetism in his pocket, or rather, theory, as we shall see.
Caillois’s break with surrealism didn’t prevent the formation of other trans-disciplinary groups. Joined by Michel Leiris, and under the leadership of Bataille, Caillois became part of an elective community of heterogeneous thinkers who assembled in 1937 under the rubric of the Collège de sociologie (1937–1939) (Hollier 1998). An alternative to surrealist groups, the aim of the Collège was to account for strange, perhaps magical, but not less real phenomena of dispossession that were casting a shadow on a Europe on the brink of war at the time; under new masks, such phenomena now threaten present times haunted by the horror of war as well. Hence the urgency to look back to the Collège in the company of Caillois to prepare for new mimetic phenomena to come.

Funded on the eve of World War II by Bataille, Caillois, and Leiris, the Collège assembled heterogeneous thinkers whose interests were not restricted by disciplinary academic affiliations. Instead, they shared a concern with the value of the humanities to understand the present, paving the way for reflections on the future as well. It included figures like Walter Benjamin, Jean Wahl, Pierre Klossowski, Denis de Rougemont, Alexandre Kojève, among other participants whose shared goal was to account for disconcerting phenomena that anthropologists in the wake of Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss traditionally grouped under the rubric of the “sacred” central to so-called “primitive” societies.

Somewhat uphill, these untimely figures argued that sacred states of dispossess at play in shamanism, magic, myth, tragedy, festivity, sex, political power, among other heterogeneous phenomena that tended to be relegated to the margins of academia were resurfacing at the very heart of “modern” and supposedly “civilized” western societies as well. In the process, they put Durkheim’s and Mauss’s anthropological insights into the “sacred” and the “effervescence” it generates to contemporary critical use by uncovering affective, contagious, and in this sense, imitative principles that transgressed the individualistic problematic of the formation of an autonomous, solipsistic, and narcissistic human ego.

They also took mimesis beyond the pleasure principle by confronting reality principles like the army, war, and totalitarian leaders, most notably Hitler and Mussolini, who cast a political shadow on European democracies in the late 1930s. Despite the plurality of perspectives involved at the Collège, then, the driving undercurrent consisted in accounting for social, anthropological, aesthetic, and political phenomena of mass contagion that, most notably via fascism and Nazism, were generating intoxicating forms of hypnotic depersonalization on an unprecedented collective scale. Well before structuralism, let alone post-structuralism, these untimely thinkers were thus clearly decentering the myth of an autonomous, rational, and self-contained subject, or Homo sapiens, while
paving the way for the re-turn of attention to a relational, porous, and embodied subject open to human and environmental forces that we call homo mimeticus.

The disagreements at the heart of the Collège eventually led to a break between Caillois and Bataille as well; yet a shared consensus remained in place: participants tended to agree that modern humans are eminently vulnerable to contagious flows of intoxicating effervescences that could not simply be projected outside of “civilization” via a form of mimetic racism characteristic of ethnocentric colonial principles dominant in the modernist period. The heart of darkness, they implicitly agreed with Conrad, was not at the heart of Africa but at the heart of Europe instead. In the process, they registered that this palpitating heart tends to generate a double movement of attraction and repulsion that, Bataille and Caillois agreed, is constitutive of sacred forms of mimetic communication with spellbinding powers. If the subject of Aufklärung had relegated these double binds to the bottom of mythic caves in the philosophical past, Bataille and Caillois would have agreed that they animate the vita mimetica of their contemporary body politic nonetheless.

A Precursor of Mimetic Studies

Almost a century later, we are now well positioned to re-evaluate the validity of these heterogeneous subject matters. A lot of water has flowed under the bridge and many changes were made for the better, rendering if not the world in general, at least the West, a safer place overall in the postwar period. And yet, when it comes to the contagious flows of mimetic affects and the violent escalations that ensue as the body politic falls under the spell of (new) fascist and totalitarian leaders, we are far from having made the progress many hoped. Thanks to the recent return of interest in the theoretical relevance of the Collège in a period that does not transparently mirror the late 1930s but echoes nonetheless similar preoccupations with issues of mass contagion, neofascist charisma, hypnotic spells, magical influences, authoritarian lies, imperial wars, and violent escalations triggered by autocratic phantoms, both Bataille’s and Caillois’s accounts of fascist psychology and the workings of a communicative sym-pathos that flows like a river, for better and worse, through the pores of homo mimeticus turn out to be (un)timely contributions to face challenges of the present and future.
With few exceptions, Caillois has tended to remain in the shadow of his former friend and collaborator in the past century. Yet, as we enter deeper in the epoch of the Anthropocene characterized by an increasing realization that the powers of mimesis entangle human and nonhuman animals in planetary forces that do not fit into structuralist binaries that neatly divide nature and culture, human and nonhuman agency, it is perhaps Caillois who can best help us confront and overcome the fallacy of anthropocentrism internal to mimetic theories of the past that can no longer contain the protean manifestations of homo mimeticus in the present and future.

We have already seen that the mimetic faculty is rooted in mirroring, chameleonlike mechanisms of mimicry that are shared with nonhuman animals. Rooted in primordial times driven by the attempt to “elude one’s pursuers” (Nietzsche 1982, 26:20), Nietzsche was quick to sense that “mimicry” is embedded in the evolutionary history of Homo sapiens informing moral prejudices, herd behavior, and a tendency among philosophers to “hide in the general concept of ‘man’” (20). This drive to merge against social, political, moral, intellectual, as well as natural and environmental backgrounds generates a permeability to human and nonhuman influences that trouble the ontological foundations of the ego, generating what we call, echoing Nietzsche, phantom egos instead.

Given this background that informs our genealogy of homo mimeticus, a re-evaluation of mimesis beyond anthropocentrism is thus urgently in order to bring new mimetic studies up to date with contemporary developments. For a long time, in fact, philosophers have defined the genus homo as the most imitative animals par excellence. As Aristotle famously puts in the Poetics: “this distinguishes man [sic] from other creatures, that he is thoroughly mimetic and through mimesis takes his first steps in understanding” (1987, 34). This statement has not lost its interest, as we set out to re-evaluate both the logical and pathological manifestations of the all-too-human drive for imitation for the present century. And yet, this does not mean that nonhuman animals are deprived of the “natural propensity” for “mimetic activity” (34). Quite the contrary. Well before the non-human turn, Caillois’s nonanthropocentric account of both animal and human mimicry pursues the Nietzschean project of reinscribing humans in general and their mimetic drives in particular, back in nature. He does so by putting humans back in touch with an animal mimicry that, for better and worse, remains constitutive of human nature as well. If Caillois’s attention to the continuities between human and nonhuman mimicry has often been derided as vaguely surrealist, he was never under the spell of surrealist fascination with magical mysteries. On the contrary, as the jumping beans episode made clear, he wanted to understand the
mysteries in nature to better understand a human fascination for magical forces—immanent, material forces that, for the moment, still sustain us, but with our help, also threaten to dissolve us.

It is only recently that, in the wake of new materialist turns to the nonhuman, Caillois’s thought has gained greater traction in visible strands of critical theory. If the power of mimesis to open up the ego to a (non)human “process of influence that operates below consciousness” (Bennett 2020, xvii) has long been marginalized, Jane Bennett, who is well known for her groundbreaking work on the nonhuman turn and the vibrant matters it entails, is currently contributing to the mimetic re-turn as well. In a productive dialogue animated by reciprocal influences, Bennett recently recognized, for instance, that Caillois’s concern with an “automatic biomimesis working to destroy individuation” (xvii) is constitutive to her “return to the question of the I” (xii) that is prone to “altered states of mind,” “influence” and “sympathy” (xv, xi), among other affective powers animating phantom egos.

Thanks to collective efforts to promote a re-turn to a different, immanent, and relational conception of unconscious imitation, the mimetic unconscious, once neglected in the Freudian century, is now taken seriously in different strands of critical theory in the present century. Caillois occupies a key and so far largely unacknowledged role as a mediator or passeur between the nonhuman turn and the mimetic turn. In fact, his comparative, transdisciplinary, or as he called it, “diagonal” account of mimétisme relied on a materialist ontology that goes beyond human/nonhuman binaries, subject-oriented and object-oriented ontologies; it was long marginalized in an epoch dominated by structuralist oppositions between nature and culture and should be revitalized today for reasons that are entangled in the genealogy we are tracing in this book in particular and will continue to drive new mimetic studies in general. To pave the way, I take two steps in that direction.

First, it is important to recall that it was not only Lacan that did Caillois a favor by introducing him to Bataille early in his career; in a mirroring gesture, Caillois reciprocated the favor by providing Lacan with theoretical insights into mirroring processes of psychic formation and dissolution that served as a theoretical blueprint for the latter’s celebrated account of “The Mirror Stage” (Lacan 1977 [1949]). If this often-anthologized text cast such a spell on the structuralist and, later, poststructuralist generation, it has not been sufficiently stressed that Lacan’s dialectics of the “relation between the organism and its reality—or as they say, between the Innenwelt and the Umwelt”
rests on imitative principles central to the Collège in general and outlined by Caillois in particular. He did so in his often mentioned but little studied essay, titled “Mimicry [Mimétisme] and Legendary Psychasthenia” (Caillois 1938), where Caillois set materialist foundations for homo mimeticus that went beyond human and nonhuman binaries, animal mimicry and human mimetism, but also psychic *Innenwelt* and environmental *Umwelt*.

With few exceptions, the mirroring continuities between Lacan and Caillois on mimetic subject matters have tended to go unnoticed or downplayed within psychoanalytic circles, more concerned with Lacan’s original reframing of Freudian or linguistic principles. But as Matthew Potolsky recognized, “Caillois’ discussion of insect mimicry [...] was a decisive influence on Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage” (2006, 140). The Freudian and linguistic turn now behind us and the nonhuman and environmental turn ahead of us, this is indeed the moment to retrieve Caillois from the theoretical background where he has long been relegated. This also means that his influence on once dominant theories of homo mimeticus needs to be re-evaluated from a less anthropocentric perspective. If we look past the imaginary image of a narcissistic ego whose unity is reflected on the specular surface of a mirror, genealogical lenses reveal how profound Caillois’s formative impression on Lacan actually were. As we shall see, Lacan was indeed writing in the shadow of Caillois’s materialism in his mirroring, and thus reversed, account of the birth of the ego—out of an ideal image or *imago*.

Second, and perhaps more important, Caillois’s account of mimetism straddles disciplines as diverse as psychology, anthropology, aesthetics, and biology among other *logoi* to explore diagonal connections between human pathologies and nonhuman forces. In the process, he calls attention to the interplay between animal mimicry and human mimetism in ways that have been dismissed as “anthropomorphic” in the past, or have simply been ignored. Yet, among mimetic theorists of the twentieth century, it is arguably Caillois who went furthest in developing both a science and a poetics of mimesis that goes beyond what is arguably one of the greatest fallacies of the present century: namely, “anthropocentrism” and the blindness to the agentic power of nonhuman influences it entails.

Anticipating and countering the accusation of anthropomorphism redoubled by an agonistic move characteristic of untimely thinkers, Caillois offers a critique of anthropocentrism that has fallen on deaf ears in the past but that should resonate in the present: “Human are animals like others, their biology is the one of other living beings as well” (Caillois 2008, 484; my trans.). And in an arrow directed to the future, he adds: “It seems to me that if this is not anthropomorphism, it is anthropocentrism to exclude the human from the universe
and to subtract him [sic] from a common legislation” (484). This agonistic mirroring inversion of perspectives turning the critique of anthropomorphism into a countercritique of anthropocentrism is only beginning to be taken seriously today. We are in fact entering a new epoch that reframes *Homo sapiens* in a genealogy that is not only part of nature but contributes to changing the very geology on which nature lives and dies—including human nature.

As the entry into the epoch of the Anthropocene made clear, since the Great Acceleration of 1950s, whose foundations go back at least since the industrial revolution of 1750s (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), humans are exceptional not in the usual anthropocentric sense that they are separate from nature and thus above it. Rather, we are exceptional in the sense that we are and “will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years to come” (41). This also means that humans cannot be subtracted from the nonhuman influences they set in motion, and now, via spiraling feedback loops we have been drawing from the beginning, reveal a drawing hand to be a nonhuman hand, retracting on the formation and transformation of human life—with a vengeance. As William Connolly puts it, this materialist inversion of perspectives should “render us more sensitive to a variety of nonhuman force fields” (2013, 9) that are already rapidly erasing all-too-human boundaries artificially set up to distinguish human animals from the environments on which we radically depend. As human history is being reframed against the longer, deep history of life on earth, it is sobering to recall that the history of *Homo sapiens* as a species is relatively short (ca. 300,000 years). We are in fact part of an ancient genealogy of hominini that makes *Homo sapiens* “the last surviving twig on a vast and intricately branching bush” (Tattersall 2022). If we consider the even shorter history of human civilization via the development of agriculture (ca. 12,000 years) that led to organized city-states, and place it against the very recent anthropogenic assaults on the biosphere over the past fifty years, speaking of “many millennia or millions of years” to come for *Homo sapiens* smacks of unrealistic scientific optimism, to say the least. Unless we urgently change course and use the metamorphic powers of mimesis for the better, genealogists don’t see a long future ahead of us.

While the new climate sciences are providing reliable empirical information that is currently transforming the human sciences and the humanities, the collaboration would prove mutually beneficial. In fact, there could well be a chiasmatic relation between magic and science in the sense that science is also sometimes driven by magical beliefs in progress—and magic is, at times, not deprived of scientific insights. What Connolly says of the human sciences also applies to the sciences more generally: there is indeed a “need [...] to dwell creatively from
time to time in literary and artistic practices” in order to come to terms with the “fragility of things” (2013, 16). As an untimely precursor working across the science/human sciences/literature divides, Caillois is a good ally in this respect. As we sail deeper in the epoch of the Anthropocene, it seems that never have Caillois’s premonitions about end times sounded as closer to the reality principle: “Indeed, the end would appear to be assimilation to the environment [milieu]” (Caillois 1938, 108; my trans.).

But before we reach the end, let us start in the proximity of the beginning. This entails framing Caillois’s diagonal theory of mimetism as a precursor of a mimetic turn that, it should be clear by now, goes beyond human and nonhuman binaries and the anthropocentric fallacy they entail.

**Toward a Diagonal Science of Mimesis**

Well before the affective turn and the cognitive turn, the new materialist turn and the environmental turn, Caillois supplemented anthropocentric accounts of mimesis restricted to human techniques of representation from the more general perspective of animal mimicry based on continuities between human and nonhuman animals that go all the way to inorganic matter. He thus paved the way for a nonhuman turn that re-emerged only in recent years. In the process, he also zeroed in on mimesis as a diagonal concept that cuts across subject-oriented and object-oriented ontologies to articulate the entangled continuities between the two now central to new mimetic studies as well. He did so from the margins of academia on the critical side but also from “the edge of surrealism” (Frank 2003) on the aesthetic side, thereby opening up diagonal conversations between the objective rigor of science and the subjective intuition of arts—without setting up a binary between the two.

One of Caillois’s sharpest scientific/aesthetic wedges was, indeed, behavioral mimesis, or as he called it, “mimetism” (*mimétisme*). In fact, he foregrounded the biological fact that the human “mimetic faculty,” as Walter Benjamin called in his famous 1933 essay, should not be considered from the point of view of visual representation alone, nor was it completely overshadowed by the birth of language. On the contrary, it continues to animate, in imperceptible, often magical, yet not less immanent, material, and experiential ways heterogeneous continuities between human/animal mimicry and the natural world. As Caillois
succinctly puts it: “I will never tire of saying this: both [humans and nonhuman animals] belong to the same world” (2003a, 343). This repetition was left unheard in the past century but as anthropogenic climate change keeps devastating both human and nonhuman life on earth, there are better chances to hear it in the present century.

A metamorphosis is, indeed, urgently in order. This also means that the cultural “transformation” of the mimetic faculty we have been tracing back to prehistoric time rests on broader nonhuman foundations homo mimeticus should draw on. Recall in fact that Benjamin compared “the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else” (2007, 334), which is still at play today in children imitating living and nonliving entities—“the child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or a teacher but also a windmill and a train” (333)—to the more abstract or “nonsensous” similarity of language still audible in onomatopoeic words. What Caillois adds is that there is an underlying biological mimetic drive, or power, that cuts across not only different periods in human history but also the metaphysical divide between the human and the nonhuman. This is a decisive supplement to a genealogy of homo mimeticus for the epoch of the Anthropocene.

The recent turn to the agentic materiality of things and to processes of becoming (other) that are as human as they are nonhuman is currently contributing to a return of interest in Caillois’s pioneering efforts to move the human sciences and aesthetic theory beyond the fallacy of anthropocentrism. Jane Bennett’s already mentioned reliance on Caillois to further her new materialist approach to the mimetic vibrations that entangle matter and a porous relational self genealogically in line with homo mimeticus is a case in point that testifies to his growing influence in the anglophone world, as we shall see in more detail in chapter 8. For the moment it suffices to say that Caillois was, indeed, an untimely thinker in the Nietzschean sense that he was ahead of his time. He foresaw the delusion of positing Homo sapiens as divided from nature, thereby adding a fourth narcissistic blow to all-too-human delusions that usually start with Copernicus and Darwin and stop at the name of Sigmund Freud. The retrospective genealogy is flattering for the latter but needs to be furthered beyond anthropocentric principles in the present century. Caillois did so via what he called a “diagonal science” that paid particular attention to “latent complicities” and “neglected correlations” (Caillois 2003a, 347) between, among other things, animal and human mimetism and whose “underground correspondence” (Caillois 2008, 483) required a transdisciplinary perspective in order to be perceived in the first place.
Caillois’s first theoretical articulation of “Diagonal Science” develops methodological principles that we took seriously for the development of our theory of imitation and speak to epistemic concerns central to new mimetic studies more generally. As he puts it in Méduse et Cie (1960):

Erudite scholars who know a lot in a restricted domain rarely find themselves in a position to perceive a type of relation that only a polyvalent knowledge is apt to establish [...] It is probable that a small number of researchers spontaneously attached to the study of phenomena that cross-over [enjambent] traditional boundaries in different sciences, find themselves best placed to identify neglected correlations, and able to complete the network of established relations. (Caillois 2008, 483–484)

The poetic trope of *enjambement* is well taken, for it walks across poetic and scientific lines. Just as poetic phrases can be connected across different lines, so scientific discourses can be connected across different disciplinary lines—if only because they are both part of a continuous scientific-poetic delineation of the correlated patho-ologies of homo mimeticus. One of the underlying assumptions of the present book is, in fact, that mimesis is precisely such a diagonal bio-psycho-anthropo-politico-aesthetic phenomenon that steps over, or enjambe, disciplinary boundaries.

Caillois’s diagonal observations are particularly apt to cut across the different manifestations of mimesis we have been tracking. He also stresses the importance of overlapping perspectives on protean phenomena that may appear aberrant in isolation but reveal interconnected patho-ologies that once were in diagonal communication. As he puts it:

transversal cuts [across disciplines] play an indispensable role in illuminating phenomena that isolated may sometimes seem aberrant, but whose meaning would be better perceived if we dared aligning these exceptions and if we attempted to superpose their related mechanisms. (Caillois 2008, 482)

From animal mimicry to human mimetism, visual representations to bodily impersonations, phylogenic to ontogenic imitation, contagious affects to mirroring effects and plastic transformations, among other manifestations of mimesis, these phenomena may have seemed “aberrant” in the past century, for they transgress
dominant accounts of realism or representation, revealing porous continuities between self and others, inside and outside, consciousness and the unconscious, the human and the nonhuman. And yet, Caillois’ pledge for a diagonal science of mimesis reveals overlapping continuities indispensable to cast light on that protean natural-cultural creature that is homo mimeticus in the present century. As he succinctly puts it, in an invitational gesture we relay and echo for present generations: “It is time to try the chance of diagonal sciences” (2008, 484).

With few exceptions, this call was not heard by Caillois’s contemporaries. As Maurice Blanchot pointed out, many considered that Caillois “was interested in too many things” and therefore “did not figure in the number of those who held some form of recognized knowledge” (qtd. in Frank 2003, 1), by which Blanchot means academic, disciplinary, and thus specialized knowledge. Still, Caillois’s surrealist bio-psycho-anthro-po-aesthetic lenses on mimetism allowed him, well before the affective turn, to “envisage the social in affective and religious terms” (Hollier 1993, 56). Recent accounts of the centrality of affective, religious, and fictional forces in the history of *Homo sapiens* would not have surprised Caillois and the members of the College. On the contrary, he was already revealing a human and nonhuman vulnerability not only to mythic fictions but also to the enveloping materiality of the environment, both of which resonate with a number of transdisciplinary turns to materiality and affect today.

For instance, Caillois is attentive to what Teresa Brennan calls a “transmission of affect” that operates below conscious awareness and troubles the boundaries of a stable ego while also “undermining the dichotomy between the individual and the environment and the related opposition between the biological and the social” (Brennan 2004, 7). Brennan does not mention pioneering figures like Nietzsche, Tarde, Bataille, let alone Caillois, who went a long way in challenging the ideal of the “emotionally contained subject” (2) the affective turn is now also up against; she might also be too critical of theories of crowd psychology that, as we shall see, paved the way for mechanisms of affective communication internal to the mimetic unconscious via mirroring principles that turned out to have empirical foundations. Still, her insights into a transmission of affect not limited to desire alone but involving the sphere of pathos more generally and sensible to the patho-logic realization that “there is no secure distinction between the ‘individual’ and the ‘environment’” (6) is perfectly consistent with our theory of homo mimeticus in general and Caillois’s diagonal take on mimetism in particular.10 Given the recent turn of attention to a type of affective contagion central to the affective turn and the nonhuman turn untimely figures like Caillois anticipated in the first place, a new generation of diagonal thinkers are in a position to
overturn perspectives to push mimetic studies further. This entails, among other things, considering that the environment is radically vulnerable to anthropocentric activities as well, entangling human and nonhuman animals in a spiraling vortex of mimetic transmissions in which we are, nolens volens, already caught.

Caillois’s diagonal perspective may have been marginalized by dominant academic institutions that did not grant him the position he deserved. Still, he was recognized by influential intellectuals nonetheless. Apparently, his former teacher Georges Dumézil did not hesitate to call Caillois “the genius of our time” (qtd. in Frank 2003, 9). We should, however, specify that this “genius” was not harkening back to individualistic times driven by romantic anxieties of influence. He was thus not opposed to practices of imitation but, rather, put mimesis to re-productive theoretical use. Caillois’s agonistic attitude toward older contemporaries like André Breton and Georges Bataille is often noted, but the logic animating this agon often escapes critical attention. In her informed introduction to Caillois for the anglophone world, for instance, Claudine Frank rightly notes that his “writing is generally grappling with another body of thought” via a principle she calls “dialogical or self-reflexive” (2003, 6) that generates the following double movement: “While fending off others, though, Caillois also tends to build on, or rework, his own previous ideas” (6). This principle can be sharpened by the dia-logic of mimetic agonism in which the thoughts of an older model are incorporated to develop a thought with and against him. As Bataille, the older model in question, was quick to recognize in a letter to Caillois: “essential matters derive from the god Polemos” (qtd. in Frank 365 n. 32). And who is Polemos if not an agonistic god who is also the principle of all things according to a genealogy of philosophers of becoming that harkens back to Heraclitus?

Caillois’s mimetic agonism led to the emergence of an original and untimely thought that may have been polemic as it increased his academic marginalization in practice but allowed him to see further than most in diagonal theory. Caillois warned, for instance, that the ideal scholar risks turning into what he called, not without irony, an “efficient and myopic mole” (2003a, 344). The animal metaphor is not innocent. Caillois resorts to a nonhuman analogy, or homology, to reframe what is traditionally conceived as the culmination of human differentiation in the sky of ideas (the scholar) back to the immanence of an industrious animal laboring alone under the earth (the mole). In the process, the solipsistic animal efficacy in digging holes is revealed as lacking in sight, let alone insight and foresight (myopic). The methodological paradox Caillois is outlining is clear: the more specialized and individualist the research, the more limited the insights.
Contra this still dominant bias in favor of hyperspecialization, Caillois’s diagonal methodological hypothesis consisted in a different, perhaps more modest and imitative, but not less insightful conception of genius. Far from being possessed by a form of divine inspiration whose genealogy, as we have seen, goes back to Plato’s mimetic agonism with Homer, Caillois considers that “genius almost always involves borrowing a proven method or fruitful hypothesis and using it in a field where no one had previously imagined that it could be applied” (2003a, 343). Thus reframed, what a romantic tradition called “genius” does not stem from individual (from Latin, individuum, indivisible) originality. On the contrary, it emerges from a dialogic relation of “borrowing” from other fields, predicated on the contagious hypothesis that an invisible underlying homology often exists between phenomena that academic lenses tend to perceive as heterogeneous in nature. Thus, Caillois later speaks of his diagonal meditations as belonging to what he calls, “answers to the contagious interrogation [interrogation contagieuse] displacing from subject to subject a sensibility that is more faithful than realized to the same communicating enigmas” (2008a, 560). In this mirroring reflection, the underlying methodological assumption is that biology casts light on human psychology, just as much as psychology and related human sciences, most notably anthropology, cast new light on biology—including the biology of an eminently imitative species prone to contagious forms of communication.

The heterogeneous phenomena we have grouped in this book under the diagonal rubric of “mimesis” are thus a perfect example to put Caillois’s polyvalent diagonal science to the test. As Edgar Morin will later confirm, mimesis is a bio-psycho-socio-anthropological phenomenon that, by definition, calls for transdisciplinary perspectives in order to be properly theorized. Nietzsche called this shift of perspectives, which is not relativism for it illuminates different facets of a complex phenomenon, perspectivism. While dominant academic tendencies, especially in analytic philosophy but not only, have tended to introduce clear-cut distinctions between different manifestations of what the Greeks grouped under the rubric of mimēsis (imitation, emulation, simulation, mimeticry, mimetism, etc.) in order to stress discontinuities between the spectrum of what is traditionally conceived as an essentially human phenomenon, Caillois opted for the opposed methodological strategy: namely, he started his re-evaluation of the mimetic faculty where Benjamin had left it.

In his essay “On the Mimetic Faculty” Benjamin started with the realization that “nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry” (2007, 331). However, if Benjamin, echoing Aristotle, claimed that “the highest
capacity for producing similarities [...] is man’s” (333), Caillois set up no binary or hierarchy. Thus, instead of considering that in its “historical development” the mimetic faculty was absorbed by the “nonsensous similarity” at play in language and “liquidated [...] magic” (334, 336), Caillois took the mimetic faculty on a different, more diagonal rather than evolutionary path. In fact, he zeroed in on the sensuous continuities internal to heterogeneous phenomena of depersonalization characteristic of both human and nonhuman animals. And he did so by taking the diagonal inquiries at play at the Collège to develop his diagonal perspectivism that entangled biological, psychological, anthropological, political, and ontological discourses on the human and nonhuman patho(-)logies that go from mimicry to mimetism.

From Mimicry to Mimetism

It is true that Caillois does not often refer to the concept of “mimesis” itself, preferring the one of “mimetism” (mimétisme). And yet, this distinction is not watertight. In fact, influential critical theorists echoed Caillois’s account of mimetism, as they paved the way for interdisciplinary approaches to come by also straddling disciplines as diverse as aesthetic theory, anthropology, and philosophy among others. For genealogists, it is in fact no accident that thinkers of mimesis in the second half of the twentieth century—from Theodor Adorno to René Girard and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe—all came to rely on the concept of “mimetism” to reinscribe, from different perspectives, the aesthetic concept of mimesis traditionally confined to realism back in human and sometimes nonhuman behavior constitutive of the mimetic re-turn. On the shoulders of this genealogy that finds in Caillois an often-unacknowledged precursor, we now need to go further. And going further, as we indicated time and again, for us consists in stepping back to Caillois’s genial/mimetic insights into the subterranean continuities and correspondences between animal and human mimicry in the past century to leap ahead to nonanthropocentric accounts of mimesis that are currently reloaded in the present century.

Caillois in fact opens up less subject-oriented and more environmental-oriented perspectives by calling attention to the affective powers of the environment traditional left in the background of anthropocentric approaches to dissolve the all-too-human subject, or anthropos, narcissistically placed in the foreground. In
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a chapter titled “Mimétisme et psychasthénie légéndaire,” collected in Le Mythe et l’homme (1938). Caillois broke with what may have appeared as a taboo for scholars formed in the wake of structuralist distinctions opposing nature to culture. Still, he is in line with theories of magic that induce participatory and sympathetic continuities between humans, animals, and natural forces more generally. Furthering this anthropological tradition while focusing specifically on phenomena of physical camouflage and mimicry in the animal world of insects, Caillois set out to cast new light on phenomena of psychic depersonalization in the human world as well—and vice versa. While this essay is often aligned with a protosurrealist aesthetics presumably indebted to Breton, as the episode of the jumping beans already suggested, Caillois was up against surrealist mysteries given his reliance on empirical sciences, which does not mean he was less attentive to the aesthetic luxury of mimetism.

It is important to recall that Caillois wrote this essay when he was still collaborating with Bataille and Leiris in the antifascist activities of the Collège de Sociologie where we started. Like Leiris, and especially Bataille, Caillois was intimately aware that human behavior cannot be reduced to the rationality and utility characteristic of profane “homogeneous” activities. On the contrary, it is driven by excess, luxury, and squandering forces characteristic of sacred, transgressive, or as Bataille called them, “heterogeneous” activities predicated on the model of useless expenditure. Caillois had in fact read early Bataille’s essay, “The Notion of Expenditure” (1933), which “struck [him] as very revealing” (Caillois 2003b, 142) to account for contagious phenomena central to the Collège more generally.

The members of the group approached the contagious and, in this sense, mimetic forces of the sacred from heterogeneous perspectives. Still, they agreed that “sacred sociology,” as they practiced it, was not only antifascist but also aimed to “establish points of coincidence between the obsessive fundamental tendencies of individual psychology and the directing structures that preside social organizations and command its revolutions” (Hollier ed. 1995, 27; my trans.), as Bataille, Caillois, Klossowski, and other founding members put it in their founding declaration. In substance, Caillois agreed with Bataille on the limits of utilitarian or functionalist approaches. For both, social cohesion is based not on utility but on useless forms of luxurious, squandering, and highly contagious expenditure of Dionysian energy at the core of sacred rituals and myths. Yet he disagreed with Bataille by extending this luxury to the animal world as well. As Denis Hollier puts it, Caillois’s “monism” tends to be opposed to Bataille’s “dualism” and informs “the oblique, diagonal monism whereby the
rest of his oeuvre will serve as its most minute confirmation” (85). Caillois’s diagnostic of human and animal mimicry must thus be seen as part of his generalized insistence that in both worlds “mimetism exists incontestably and exists as an autonomous mechanism” (Caillois 2008, 522).

Be it under the rubric of animal societies or spiritual power, Dionysus or shamanism, hypnotic spells or totalitarian prestige, or to use Caillois’s own Nietzschean categories, “will to know [connaissance]” or “will to power [puissance]” (qtd. in Hollier ed. 1995, 301), for Caillois the line dividing animal mimicry from human mimetism was always thin and porous at best. His materialist monism, in fact, postulates physio-psychological continuities between human and animal mimicry he considers constitutive of both human and animal behavior. The overt Nietzschean overtones of Caillois’s language are often noted given his attention to what he will call, in one of his lectures at the Collège, “Dionysian Virtues.” Less noted is that the continuities with Nietzsche concern the phenomenon of human and animal mimicry as well. In a section of Daybreak titled “Animals and Morality,” Nietzsche had in fact rooted human mimetism in animal mimicry in nonanthropocentric terms Caillois will pursue as well:

one wishes to elude one’s pursuers and be favoured in the pursuit of one’s prey. For this reason the animals learn to master themselves and alter their form, so that many, for example, adapt their colouring to the colouring of their surroundings (by virtue of the so-called “chromatic function”), pretend to be dead or assume the forms and colours of another animal or of sand, leaves, lichen, fungus (what English researchers designate “mimicry”). Thus the individual hides himself in the general concept “man”, or in society, or adapts himself to princes, classes, parties, opinions of his time and place: and all the subtle ways we have of appearing fortunate, grateful, powerful, enamoured have their easily discoverable parallels in the animal world. (Nietzsche 1982, 26:20–21)

Caillois fundamentally agrees with Nietzsche that animal and human mimicry should be considered as part of a monistic continuum. There is thus much to learn from seeing correspondences between what are traditionally considered as two distinct mimetic phenomena: one moral and human, the other animal and biological. We shall see in the next chapter that Nietzsche and Caillois are here prefiguring forms of depersonalization that will render the most radical form of evil “banal.” And yet, if Nietzsche follows evolutionary principles that consider, with
English researchers, that mimicry is a strategy of survival, for animals and humans alike, Caillois posits, with Bataille, contra evolution, a squandering, luxurious principle at the origins of mimetism that counters useful evolutionary principles. For him, in fact, “mimetism is useless, even harmful” (Caillois 2008, 531)—which does not mean that this phenomenon is deprived of a patho-logy of its own.

Taking as his starting point certain “lower animals,” such as spiders and lizards but also insects and birds, Caillois observes that they are mimetic, not in the dominant anthropocentric sense that they represent or copy the external world. Rather, they are mimetic in the physical, biological sense of mimicry that allows them to visually disappear—chameleonlike—in order to blend with the homogenous background against which they are situated.

Caillois notices that in such a state, the mimetic animal in the foreground is, quite literally, indistinguishable from the background. With an aesthetic eye ready to suspend habits of perception, he wonders about the origin of this disquieting phenomenon that tends to be taken for granted. The classical biological answer is that animal mimicry is a defense mechanism perfected through evolution meant to guarantee the survival of the species. This is certainly a realistic, positivist, and evolutionary hypothesis in line with scientific and philosophical principles Caillois was well familiar with.

But Caillois has a different, more diagonal, and intuitive hypothesis in mind. His main objection to the evolutionary hypothesis is that some of these insects are actually inedible; or, alternatively and even more problematic, disappearing against a given background (such as edible plants) may actually diminish rather than increase their chances of survival—in the sense that the mimetic creature might inadvertently be swallowed by herbivorous animals. Mimicry, in numerous cases of defensive mimetism (mimétisme défensif), seems indeed a dangerous activity of dissimulation. Perhaps it is even a luxury on the side of nature that can afford to squander its excessive energy via what Caillois will later call, in characteristic Batillean language, a “luxury of precaution” or “excess of simulacrum” (Caillois 2008, 531).

There is thus a dangerous excess at the heart of mimetism that does not fit narrow utilitarian purposes internal to evolutionary hypotheses. Caillois also calls it a “dangerous luxury [luxe dangereux]” (1938, 106) that calls for a different, perhaps more aesthetic-oriented, but not necessarily representational hypothesis. In his view, in fact, what is essential about mimicry is that the blending between living organism and environmental background is not only a visual but also physiological phenomenon. As he puts it: “The important point is not the exterior appearance but immobility” (2008, 531). It is thus from the inside out
rather than from the outside in that he approaches the riddle of mimetism. For Caillois, this immobility points to what he calls a form of biological regress or “return to an inorganic state” (1938, 116). In fact, he notices that the immobile animal nested against inorganic matter is not simply invisible to the observer’s eye—a question of exterior representation. Rather, it enters in what he calls a state of “catalepsy” whereby “life,” as he says, “steps back a degree [recule d’un degré]” as in a sort of “trance” (113, 94)—a question of inner experience.

Caillois’s hypothesis is the following: rather than an evolutionary strategy for survival, this mimetic principle is associated with a drive that pulls the animate, organic, and living being toward inanimate, inorganic, and dead matter. Coming close to the Freudian conception of Thanatos but echoing philosophical principles that go back, via Bataille, to Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Spinoza, Caillois infers from these phenomena a death drive that induces a dissolution of the boundaries of individuation. As he puts it: “the being’s will to persevere in its being [la volonté de l’être de persévérer dans son être] consumes itself to excess and secretly attracts it toward the uniformity that scandalizes its imperfect autonomy” (Caillois 1938, 122). It is thus nothing less than the “autonomy” of the living organism that is scandalized by the transgressive power of animal mimicry.

There is an interesting and rarely noticed inversion of perspectives at play in Caillois’s untimely observation that goes beyond anthropocentrism or even
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biocentrism and is worth underlining. On the one hand, the exterior “scientific” observer only sees—or, if mimicry is successful, fails to see—a continuity between a living organism and the environment that is interpreted in terms of an evolutionary strategy for survival. On the other hand, Caillois overturns perspectives to consider the mimetic phenomenon from the inside of a nonhuman organism in a cataleptic state akin to trance instead. And what he senses, rather than sees, via his surrealist-diagonal antennae that blur the human/nonhuman divide, is that in this state of trance, it is the self-sufficient “autonomy” of the biological organism that is radically threatened by the inner experience of animal mimicry. In sum, for Caillois, this disquieting form of mimesis whereby a figure disappears against the environmental background that surrounds it is not simply a visual exterior phenomenon. It is rather an affective, interior, or as Bataille would say, “inner experience” that pulls a living being on the side of death, while leaving it on the side of life, or better, on the shadow-line that both connects and divides organism and environment, foreground and background, life and death. This inner experience, he adds, is not only constitutive of animal mimicry; it equally animates homo mimeticus—if only because, for Caillois, “humans and insects belong to the same nature” (1938, 70).

What then, are the human, all-too-animal implications of a squandering principle that, via an inner trance, leads the subject to blend against its surroundings, be they human or not? What does animal mimicry tell us about human mimetism and the pathologies that animate it? To answer such questions, we need to look in the mirror first. Rather than stopping at imaginary and rather anthropocentric human imagos in the foreground, let us go through the looking glass, beyond the mirror stage, to sense the nonhuman environment in the background.

Mimetic Trouble for the Ideal Mirror

Caillois’s diagonal account of mimicry changes perspectives that go from animal mimetism to primitive magic to modern politics; still, the mimetic will to power he diagnoses is essentially the same. In the process, he also supplements new disciplinary perspectives for mimetic studies in order to account for a type of depersonalization that crosses the human/animal boundary. In particular, he relies on the long-neglected French philosopher and psychologist Pierre Janet
(1859–1947), whose contribution to the history of psychology is more significant than is often acknowledged still today.

Janet, it should be recalled, invented the term “subconscious” to account for phenomena of automatism, hypnotic dissociation, trauma, and double personality, among other mimetic pathologies. Professor of experimental and comparative psychology at the Collège de France, where he was appointed with the support of Henry Bergson, Janet was a major source of inspiration for the surrealist generation in general and for members of the Collège de Sociologie like Bataille and Caillois in particular.16 Above all, Janet paved the way for a Freudian discovery of the unconscious, which contrary to received knowledge was not a Freudian individual discovery, after all. In _The Discovery of the Unconscious_ (1970), the historian of psychology Henri Ellenberger convincingly shows how Janet’s psychological analysis of subconscious states, dissociation of personality, fixed ideas, trauma, cathartic cures of neuroses where unduly appropriated by his “great rival, Sigmund Freud” (1970, 409), including the very concept of Psychoanalyse itself, which is but Freud’s translated inversion of Janet’s analyse psychologique.17 Caillois had thus an original psychologist to draw from directly to further his patho-logy of depersonalization.

As the title of his essay makes clear, in “Mimetism and Legendary Psychasthenia,” Caillois establishes a connection between animal mimicry and human mimicry via a psychic pathology of depersonalization central to Janet’s psychological analysis. In a book titled _Les Obsessions et la psychasthénie_ (1903), Janet had in fact devoted a lengthy study to a mysterious psychic pathology or “psycho-névrose” called “psychasthenia.” He defined it as a personality disorder (trouble de la personnalité) that affects people’s relation to their environment, generates a lowering of psychic energy or tension, a loss of identity, “depersonalization” (Janet 1903, vii; my trans.), all of which blur the boundaries between self and other, and generally induce a “weakening of their psychological functions” (vii).18 Building on Janet’s case studies, Caillois adds a patho-logical supplement of his own. In particular, he explains:

> for these dispossessed spirits, space seems to be endowed with a devouring capacity [...] The body, then, dissociates itself from thought so that the individual crosses the frontier of its skin and lives on the other side of its senses. (Caillois 1938, 111; my trans.)

The psychic boundaries of the subject, for Caillois, are indeed porous, open to the outside, and prone to suggestive influences that cross the thin skin of
individuation, generating shadows or phantoms of egos instead. This personality trouble is thus a mimetic trouble in the sense that it is the experience of mimetism human animals partially share with nonhuman animals that is responsible for this affect of depersonalization.

Well before poststructuralism and posthumanism, the affective turn and the nonhuman turn, Caillois was already troubling the stability of the metaphysical category of the subject as unitary, autonomous, and self-contained. Instead, he painted a blurry picture of homo mimeticus as traversed by heterogeneous continuities that blur the line between the inside and outside, the human ego and the nonhuman space, generating processes of becoming lost in space. This is why he concludes: “The subject itself feels that it is becoming space, black space” (Caillois 1938, 111). Once again, what applies to animal mimicry equally applies to human mimetism: Caillois is not simply describing individuals who are physically invisible in the darkness from the outside. Rather, he is accounting for a mimetic drive that is much more disquieting and fundamental, for it operates from the inside. Mimetism, in other words, is not only something seen, or a mimetic representation; it is above all something felt, or a mimetic pathos.

Based on a Dionysian affect more than on Apollonian vision, mimetism points to an animal, all-too-human permeability to space in general and darkness in particular that blurs the boundaries of individuation. Hence, following the phenomenological and psychological work of Eugène Minkowski, Caillois explains that “the ego is permeable to obscurity whereas it is not so to light” (1938, 112). Does this inner/outer experience sound too surreal? Let us try a little subjective experiment: go back in time and think of that all-too-real fear of the dark you experienced as a child at night. Why were you afraid? After all, as we now say in our role as parents, there is nothing to be afraid of. But the child in us might still reply: it is precisely this nothing that is so frightening!

This is, in a sense, also Caillois’s reply. For him, children fear the dark because their egos are still permeable to the outside, for they are not yet fully formed inside. He specifies that they do not fear darkness as such. Rather, what they fear is a loss of selfhood generated by the dissolution of boundaries between the figure and the background, the human organism and the nonhuman environment: “The magical hold [...] of night and obscurity, the fear of the dark [la peur dans le noir], has unquestionably its roots in the threat it generates with respect to the opposition between the organism and the environment” (Caillois 1938, 112). If a visual, rational, and Apollonian mimesis represents reassuring forms that are visible at daylight from a distance, Caillois is still in touch with
the magical hold of an embodied, affective, or Dionysian mimesis haunting the *vita mimetica* and generating a fear of the dark that reaches into the present.

This fear is indeed familiar since childhood. If its source might not be visible, it can be intimately felt nonetheless. If you can’t see this fear clearly represented, you can hear it—even on popular culture since the 1990s you can hear echoes on the radio: As homo mimeticus walks alone...

> When the light begins to change  
> I sometimes feel a little strange  
> A little anxious when it’s dark  
> Fear of the dark  
> Fear of the dark [...] (Harris 1992)

Caillios could not have put it more lyrically. The *patho*-logical lesson of Iron Maiden’s “Fear of the Dark” (1992) is clear and in line with Caillios’s diagonal diagnostic: not only patients suffering from psychasthenia, but all humans have, to different degrees, experienced this fear of the dark. No wonder the phrase speaks to new generations as well.

In light of this detour via the enveloping power of dark space, this is the moment to recognize that Caillios was not alone in suggesting this mimetic hypothesis at the foundation of psychic development. That other theoretical chameleon of surrealist inspiration par excellence we already mentioned, Jacques Lacan, will also claim that children fear darkness for its affective power to dissolve the boundaries of the ego. Conversely, they jubilate to see their own mirror image for its power to delineate and give form to the ego—via a mimetic experience we can now revisit from the angle of our genealogy of mimetism.

Lacan, just like Freud, has received much critical attention in the past century, whereas other figures like Janet and Caillios have not. It has thus often gone unnoticed that Cailliois’s Janetian psychological analysis of mimetism and psychasthenia, quite literally in-*forms* (gives form to) Lacan’s celebrated “mirror stage.” At a first reading, Cailliois’s opening claim that the “ultimate problem” of mimetism consists in the “distinction between the real and the imaginary” (1938, 86) may appear coincidental, for “the Real” and “the imaginary” are also concepts central to Lacan’s structuralist theory. Still, at a second, more attentive reading, there is a specific genealogical sense in which Caillios provides Lacan with a model, or form, for his influential account of ego formation. Janet’s influence on Lacan’s “analysis of the ego” has been characteristically erased, but the
theoretical shadow Caillois casts is still clearly visible if we take a look at “The Mirror Stage” essay itself.

The myth of origin is now familiar: it tells the experience of the pre-Oedipal child who, by the age of six months, still wobbly on its feet, with the help of a support, or trotte-bébé, erects itself to face this double in the mirror and falls under the spell of an “illuminative mimicry of the Aha-Erlebnis” (Lacan 1977, 1). The child, the story continues, recognizes the reflected image, and via an imaginary “identification” misrecognizes the “ideal unity” (unité idéale) of that static image with its own ego. This phantom ego is thus not simply represented in a static mirror but is given form in a turbulent body. In Lacan’s formulation, the subject is transformed by this impressive imago aspiring to the status of an ontological structure of the human world (2). The philosophical foundations of Lacan’s theory of identification have long been recognized—precisely by philosophers like Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, and Borch-Jacobsen informed by the role the mirror has played in erecting western speculative ontologies that, at least since Plato, privilege visual distance over bodily pathos and divide ideal forms from the turbulence of the sensible.

Furthering this genealogy from the angle of a diagonal science of mimesis, it is important to note that, after erecting a binary between baby Homo sapiens and the monkey that, in Lacan’s anthropocentric account, considers the reflection “empty,” he nonetheless reveals that this narcissistic all-too-human identification has deeper mimetic origins, as he writes: “But the facts of mimicry [mimétisme] are no less instructive when conceived as cases of heteromorphic identification, in as much as they raise the problem of the significance of space for the living organism” (Lacan 1977, 3). The language of “living organism,” you will have recognized, is less vertical than before, and the “facts of mimetism” reveal the figure in the background who is calling Lacan’s attention to nonhuman mimicry as well. In fact, Lacan specifies:

We have only to recall how Roger Caillois (still young, his thought still fresh from his break with the sociological school in which he was trained) illuminated the subject by using the term “legendary psychasthenia” to classify morphological mimicry [mimétisme morphologique] as an obsession with space in its derealizing effects. (3)

This is a revealing genealogical connection to rediscover in the twenty-first century. If you put on Caillois’s diagonal lenses that call attention to the relation between form and background, organism and environment, Innenwelt and Umwelt, we should be in a position to see what has remained mimetically
dissimulated so far: namely, that the mythical “mirror stage,” with its celebrated account of the birth of the ego out of the subject’s identification with a bright, imaginary, and ideal form (or Gestalt), entails nothing less and nothing more than a mirroring inversion of what Caillois, following Janet, called “legendary psychasthenia.”

For Caillois, and Janet before him, in fact, the inner experience of mimetism threatens to dissolve the unity of the ego against the material background, generating a feeling of depersonalization. Conversely, for Lacan, an identification with an ideal image in the foreground gives form and unity to a formless ego. The telos of Caillois’s diagnostic of mimetism goes from the discontinuity of the human ego to a continuity with the nonhuman background; Lacan’s mirroring telos is the mirroring opposite: it goes from a state of formless undifferentiation to the unitary formation of the ego. Mimetism is the inner/outer experience that mediates between these two states. The Lacanian ego, in other words, is the positive imprint of Caillois’s negative mimetic configuration. The exterior and ideal form of the ego is what appears in the foreground once the bodily experience of formless dissolution is left in the background. Given the primacy of ideal images and forms in western thought based on the vita contemplativa, this is perhaps part of the reason the mirror stage became a legend, while psychasthenia and the mimetism that animates a vita mimetica was theoretically dissolved.

Still, a genealogical lesson remains visible nonetheless: seemingly “original” theories, we should not be surprised by now, have “mimetic” origins, which does not mean that the pathology can easily be cured. Caillois is, in fact, careful not to dismiss this personality trouble as an anomalous, mimetic pathology that affects only children or neurotic cases. Rather, as we have seen, he considers both the animal (physical) mimicry and the human (psychic) pathology as revealing of a more generalized (metaphysical) anxiety of dissolution of the boundaries of individuation in “black space” that affects humanity in general. Moreover, his hypothesis has nothing to do with a fully visible, mirrorlike representation of the self. Instead, it designates an intimately felt, yet truly invisible psychic dissolution of the boundaries of selfhood in spatial darkness, a dissolution that is most intimately and obscurely connected to the horror of death.

In sum, there are numerous mirroring similarities between Lacan’s (Freudian) mirror stage and Caillois (Janetian) mimetism that reveal the imitative foundations of what I call, following Nietzsche, a phantom ego. Still, unlike Lacan and closer to Nietzsche, Caillois stresses the importance of affect over vision, turbulent bodily senses over unitary images, material dissolution over ideal formation, becoming space rather than being an ideal imago. The focus
on an imaginary ideal image at the source of misrecognitions is not innocent. This is perhaps the reason psychoanalytic theorists with a philosophical background have recognized in Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage a “twentieth-century Platonism” (Borch-Jacobsen 1991, 64). What we can add is that an idealist theory of narcissistic subject formation in the foreground reveals a materialist theory of nonanthropocentric dissolution in the background. And if the former spoke to the structuralist generation under the spell of the linguistic sign, the latter addresses future generations increasingly under the spell of mimetic drives that threaten the boundaries of individuation, both individually and collectively.

In this overturning of perspectives constitutive of his diagonal account of mimetism, lies, perhaps, Caillois’s original contribution to new mimetic studies.

Through the Looking Glass: Mimetism Now and Then

As an anthropologist with protosurrealist inclinations, Caillois draws inspiration from the animal world but remains fundamentally interested in reframing dominant conceptions of what the human is—or can potentially become. If he focuses on the natural phenomenon of animal mimicry, it is because, in his view, this disconcerting biological mechanism reveals a fundamental psychic principle at the heart of humans as well. Let us thus not forget the point with which we started: Caillois’s diagnostic of mimetism and psychic depersonalization coincides with his rising preoccupations with fascist psychology in the later 1930s and the massive forms of contagious trance it generated in heterogeneous crowds—a phenomenon that almost a century later we are far from having overcome. Quite the contrary; it is still at the palpitating heart of (new) fascist movements that—via new media—generate massive phenomena of uniformization constitutive of what I call, echoing both Caillois and Bataille, “mimetic contagion” (Lawtoo 2019b).

If we adopt Caillois’s diagonal lenses that do not simply take phenomena of mass contagion and the hypnotic trance that characterizes them for granted, we should wonder: what is the mysterious force that troubles the boundaries of individuation, introducing affective continuities in place of discontinuities that reached massive proportions in the 1930s but continue to resurface in the present as well? And what is the psychology that drives human forms of mimicry and the loss of “distinction” (Caillois 1938, 86) it entails? Caillois’s hypothesis
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rests on the “psychological analysis” of Janet, but despite his reference to Freud’s death drive and anticipation of Lacan’s imaginary identification, we should not hasten to align him with psychoanalysis. If only because Caillois tends to be critical of Sigmund Freud whose “error,” as he puts it, consists in reducing all phenomena to his “schema” (84). Rather, as he relies on Janet, one of the main advocates of hypnosis and suggestion, Caillois is attentive to a pre-Freudian tradition of the unconscious I call mimetic because it finds in hypnotic spells, possession trances, and massive forms of affective contagion its most manifest symptoms.

The states of “trance” Caillois identified in animal mimicry will continue to remain internal to his diagnostic of human mimicry, in both traditional, modern, and contemporary societies. Thus, furthering Huizinga’s account of *homo ludens* from the angle of homo mimeticus, Caillois’s account of the spells of games is very much an offshoot of his diagnostic of animal mimicry. As he puts it, in *Man, Play and Games* (1958): “it seems legitimate to me at this point to take account of mimetic phenomena of which insects provide most perplexing examples” (Caillois 1961, 20). And Caillois specifies:

> The inexplicable mimetism of insects immediately affords an extraordinary parallel to man’s [*sic*] penchant for disguising himself, wearing a mask, or *playing a part* [...] Among vertebrates, the tendency to imitate first appears as an entirely physical, quasi-irresistible contagion, analogous to the contagion of yawning, running limping, smiling, or almost any movement. (20)

In line with the tradition of the mimetic unconscious, then, Caillois relies on a motor hypothesis to account for mirroring physio-psychological reflexes that are
not under the control of consciousness and are thus \textit{un}-conscious. From yawning to smiling, wearing a mask to playing a role, homo mimeticus is a relational, embodied, and social creature that finds in unconscious mirroring reflexes the physiological drive not only to feel the pathos of the other but also to become other via theatrical practices that find in mime and performance paradigmatic aesthetic starting points.

We can thus add Caillois’s name to a genealogy of modernist philosophical physicians who—from Nietzsche to Tarde, Janet to Bataille—paved the way for the discovery of mirroring mechanisms whose existence is now confirmed empirically. Non unlike Nietzsche’s hypothesis on the origins of consciousness, Caillois’s hypothesis may have sounded extravagantly surreal to the dominant sciences of his time, yet it points to an all-too-real phenomenon. Without the mediation of a mirror stage, unconscious mimetism lends empirical credibility to the diagonal hypothesis that, from birth onward, a movement seen triggers an affect felt, opening the channels of communication for a thoroughly relational species.

At the same time, as the examples internal to Caillois’s diagonal patho-\textit{logies} of mimesis already suggest, he expands the implication of physiological mirroring reflexes to the broader sphere of aesthetics, culture, religion, and politics along diagonal lines constitutive of new mimetic studies as well. Thus, elaborating on the entrancing effect of masks as an “instrument of metamorphosis” in primitive societies, Caillois notices that via such “phantoms” the individual “mimics, and identifies with these frightening powers and soon, maddened and delirious, really believes that he is the god” (1961, 88) that casts a spell on the ritual participants. Thus, he adds:

They conform because they are required to by society and, as do the performers themselves, because they believe that the actors have become transformed, possessed, and prey to the powers animating them [...]. Suggestion and simulation increases one’s susceptibility and stimulate the trance. The loss of consciousness, exaltation, and oblivion that they cause are favorable to the true trance, i.e., possession by the god. (88, 94)

Conformity is not only a physiological reflex; it is also supplemented by cultural expectations that have a suggestive power over participants and performers alike. Borrowing the psychological concept of “suggestion” from Hippolyte Bernheim and coupling it with the aesthetic and playful notions of “simulation,” Caillois’s diagonal science of mimesis accounts for a type of “trance” that is traditionally
restricted to religious phenomena of dispossession in archaic societies, but he considers at play in modern societies as well, for both good and ill.

It is thus no accident that the language of play and games finds a pathological counterpart in the language of power and politics. Thus, taking a paradigmatic example that casts a long shadow on the history of western civilization, Caillous, in an essay titled “Le pouvoir charismatique: Adolf Hitler comme idole” (1951), refers to the same language of trance, magic, and mimicry in order to account for the magnetic will to power the Führer used to magnetize the spellbound masses. Quoting Alfred Rosenberg’s claim that “the people [peuple] is to the leader [chef] what lack of conscience [inconscience] is to conscience” (in Caillous 2008, 324; my trans.), he adds in his proper voice: “the charismatic leader is not opposed to the crowd. It is precisely because he shares [partage] in its passions and feels them with a contagious intensity that the crowd makes him its leader” (323). We have seen the efficacy of these passions in the past; we have felt them in the present, which does not mean that this sharing or partage of pathos cannot set up a distance from affective contagion and the communal fusion it entails.

How does this partage of pathos operate? Convoking motifs that are central to Nietzsche, but as we know, are as old as Plato, Caillous relies on the trope of the Dionysian “drum” and the “magnetic stone” to account for the “magical” power of the “inspired meneur” to generate a state of trance in the crowd. He notices, for instance, that Hitler shifted his speeches late in the evening so as to facilitate the crowd’s capitulation to the “dominating force of a most powerful will” (325), or that he staged a spectacle in which drums accompany the illumination of the leader alone in view of generating “hypnosis” (325). Both vision and hearing are once again central to this spell-binding operation. And Caillous adds: “soon the contact is established between him and the room of which he captures the excitation. Now he hammers long and violent phrases, pronounced as if in a trance” (326), generating a “mystical union” in which subjects admit being “entirely lost in the Führer” (328). And drawing on the tradition of crowd psychology we shall encounter in later chapters, Caillous specifies that Hitler’s will to power stems from an “inspired meneur” whose “somnambulistic certainty” (319) is in tune with the crowd. There is thus a spiraling mimetic loop at play here with amplifying properties in which the leader and the mass work hand in hand, so to speak, to amplify fascist mass contagion. For Caillous, then, as for the tradition of crowd psychology before him, fascist will to power is mimetic willpower insofar, as it is based on a contagious, hypnotic, and depersonalizing form of sovereign communication that troubles the boundaries of individuation and turns the egos of homo mimeticus into phantom egos.
In guise of conclusion, let me flesh out some perspectives internal to Caillois’s account of diagonal mimicry that go beyond anthropocentrism to address anthropogenic challenges new mimetic studies will have to face in the epoch of the Anthropocene.

**Diagonal Mimicry: Perspectives for the Anthropocene**

In light of this genealogy of Caillois’s diagnostic of animal and human mimicry that paved the way for what is arguably one of the most influential theories of the subject in the twentieth century, we might still wonder: what, then, is the theoretical and artistic purchase of revisiting Caillois’s take on mimicry in the twenty-first century? I schematically outline four entangled perspectives that were untimely when Caillois first developed his diagonal account of mimicry qua mimetism but are now timely and urgent to pursue in the age of environmental transformation constitutive of the Anthropocene.

First, “diagonal science,” as Caillois theorized and practiced it, was not based on a nature/culture binary opposition that, under the aegis of structuralism, dominated good part of the past century. On the contrary, he went beyond “two-cultures” oppositions to account for a transdisciplinary, (non)human phenomenon like mimicry that has biological, psychological, social, philosophical, and aesthetic manifestations, all of which escape the “increasing specialization” (Caillois 2003a, 343) of academic knowledge. As he puts it: “What we need are relay stations at every level: anastomosis and coordination points, not only for assembling the spoils but above all for comparing different processes” (344). *Homo Mimeticus* aims to further this diagonal, comparative, and transdisciplinary approach. And he concludes: “A network of shortcuts seems ever more indispensable today among the many, isolated outposts spread out along the periphery, without internal lines of communication—which is the site of fruitful research” (347). The human and nonhuman tendency to imitate at different levels of behavior—biological, psychic, aesthetic, social, political, etc.—is a case in point. Caillois’s plea for a diagonal science of mimesis provides important transdisciplinary steps the mimetic turn intends to fruitfully explore via networks of collaboration.

Second, Caillois’s attention to animal mimicry challenged anthropocentric tendencies that go back to the dawn of philosophy and traverse western
humanistic thought and aesthetic practices, which consider humans as the most imitative animals. If humans remain indeed thoroughly imitative, other animals are not foreign to mimicry. Quite the contrary, the human mimetic faculty is an extension of animal mimicry, which allows for fruitful communications between the two. As he puts it, addressing the specifically human sphere of aesthetics: “Aesthetics studies the harmony of lines and colors. Could it not conceivably compare paintings with butterfly wings?” (Caillois 2003a, 345) And Caillois continues, anticipating the objection that was routinely addressed to him in the past century but might no longer work today: “Anthropomorphism!” people will say, but it is exactly the opposite” (345). As his account of mimicry makes strikingly clear:

the point is not to explain certain puzzling facts observed in nature in terms of man [sic]. On the contrary, the goal is to explain man (governed by the laws of this same nature to which he belongs in almost every respect) in terms of the more general behavioral forms found widespread in nature throughout most species (345–346).

While the human animal remains thoroughly mimetic in its ability to represent the world, Caillois rooted the foundations of mimetism in an animal, all-too-animal tendency to merge against dominant backgrounds, be they natural (mimicry) or cultural (mimetism)—a tendency that is now radically amplified by new media and the enveloping technological environment in which homo mimeticus is immersed and that urgently deserves new studies of what I call, “hypermimesis.”

Third, Caillois’s diagnostic of the power of the natural environment to form, transform, and dissolve the autonomy of human and nonhuman animals entails an overturing of perspectives that we should take to heart in the age of rapid climate change characteristic of the Anthropocene. Caillois was ahead of his time in stressing that (non)human animals are not the “autonomous” creatures they appear to be and are radically open, entangled, and vulnerable to the “enveloping” powers of the environment. What we must add is that humans are now caught in a spiraling vortex in which their influence on the environment generates complex feedback loops that retroact on human and animal behavior alike, entangling humans in what is already recognized as a sixth extinction. Well before the environmental turn, Caillois teaches us that the environment is never simply background; it is the very ground from which human and nonhuman life emerges and to which it is bound return. As he puts it in a phrase that served as
the epigraph for this essay: “Indeed, the end would appear to be *assimilation to the environment*” (Caillois 1938, 108).

Last but not least, Caillois’s diagnostic of mimicry/mimetism as a “dangerous luxury” locates a squandering excess, or expenditure, at the heart of human and nonhuman life, which figures like Nietzsche and Bataille already placed at the heart of aesthetic experience. If, since its dawn in romanticism, aesthetics was traditionally considered without instrumental purpose, or use—Bataille would later say, *sans emploi*—surrealist writers like Caillois insisted that it remains the palpitating heart of inner experiences that do not simply aim to realistically represent the world. Rather than being without purpose as an aesthetic tradition that goes from Kant to Bataille suggests, Caillois reminds us that the aesthetic drive is rooted in purposive yet not necessarily utilitarian drives that are rooted within a human, and thus animal body (from *aisthetikos*, “sensitive, pertaining to sense perception,” derived from *aisthanomai*, “I perceive, feel, sensation”). It entails, among other things, the ability to step into others’ shoes via a form of empathy, or better, *Einfühlung*, that entails the “feeling into” the inner affects others. Caillois took this aesthetic principle by stepping beyond anthropocentric shoes so as to consider the mimetic drive from the perspective of nonhuman animals who, like homo mimeticus, are part of nature. As he puts it: “nature (which is no miser) pursues pleasure, luxury, exuberance, and vertigo just as much as survival” (Caillois 2003a, 346).

The pleasure, luxury, and exuberance of mimicry is constitutive of this vertigo. If humans had their share—a “share [*part*]” Bataille would call “accursed [*maudite*]”—driven by excessive consumption and pollution in the last century, it is perhaps time to put the mimetic faculty to aesthetic, cognitive, and ethical use to affirm metamorphoses of the spirit necessary for survival in this century as well—for humans and nonhumans. In the midst of an environmental catastrophe that is currently causing a sixth extinction, this mimetic tendency might have a purpose after all, albeit this purpose will not be singular for its manifestations will have to be plural. One of them could entail a (will to) power to animate and perhaps reanimate life on earth via nonanthropocentric principles that trace the dynamic interplay between (non)human life and the environment that envelops us and—for the moment, but for how long?—still sustains us.

New generations of artists are already going beyond mimesis restricted to anthropocentric forms of realistic representation. The fragility of the earth should not only be seen from the outside; it should also be felt from the inside. If the environment continues to envelop us, we should not forget that we are also enveloping the earth, generating geological changes in the *Umwelt* that will
radically affect the *Innenwelt* as well. Hence the urgency of giving new aesthetic expressions to chameleonlike metamorphoses that operated for the worse in the past century, yet are vital to the survival of (non)human animals in the epoch of the Anthropocene that cast a shadow on the present and future centuries.