Homo Mimeticus

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Published by Leuven University Press

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So far, we have seen that the ancient lesson that humans are mimetic and plastic creatures is currently returning to the forefront of aesthetic theory, but it is only recently that the non-anthropocentric insight that mimesis cuts across the human/nonhuman binary is returning to inform contemporary debates across the humanities. Recent developments in affect theory, film studies, literary theory, continental philosophy, but also sociology, anthropology, and political theory, stretching—with the discovery of mirror neurons—to include the neurosciences and the cognitive sciences, have been reconsidering the power of mirroring reflexes that, in human and nonhuman animals, individually and collectively, consciously and, more often, unconsciously, generate underlying continuities between self and others, subjects and models, citizens and leaders, including political leaders that verge on (new) fascist and authoritarian politics.

As the harrowing reality of war, doubled by the phantom of nuclear war, rages once again in Europe after over fifty years of relative peace, it is urgent to account for the will to power of tyrannical leaders that cast a shadow on the world as a whole. Different voices in the heterogeneous field of new mimetic studies agree that these leaders do so, among other means, by reloading the rhetoric of fascism and Nazi politics via new media that cast a spell on the digital age. In the process, they also trigger intersubjective fluxes of affective sameness that trouble the boundaries dividing individual differences. The number of
recent books that stress the centrality of affective contagion, involuntary mimicry, psychic influences, mirroring reflexes, the mimetic unconscious, and other contemporary manifestations of homo mimeticus we have encountered so far testifies to the liveliness, timeliness, and relevance of emerging transdisciplinary “perspectives on imitation” that took some time to be “assimilated” (Hurley and Chater 2005, 1) in the humanities but now animate the re-turn of mimesis we are promoting in this book.

Furthering this recent return of attention to the power of unconscious forms of imitation that lead the ego to mimic others via mirroring mechanisms first found in macaque monkeys in the 1990s and anticipated by Caillois’s Nietzschean realization that human and nonhuman mimicry are part of a continuum, I would like to revisit the case of the “human chameleon” dramatized by Woody Allen’s 1982 mockumentary *Zelig*. This film reflects an all-too-human drive for mimicry that allows us to reflect on the dangers of dispossessions of identity that reached massive proportions in the past century and, via new social media, continue to cast a shadow on the present century. Drawing on Nietzsche’s diagnostic of the actor in *The Gay Science* (1882), where he supplements his genealogy of the origins of consciousness (chapter 1) from a modern psychological perspective, I now argue that the cinematic case of *Zelig* remains our contemporary for a reason that is at least double, for it concerns individual psychological metamorphoses and collective political transformations still ongoing today.

On the psychological side, *Zelig* dramatizes unconscious mirroring tendencies to adapt, conform, and mirror others in terms that might be amplified by racist oppression, class disadvantage, and social discrimination, yet despite the film’s cultural specificity, cannot be restricted to Jews and other US minorities in the melting pot of the 1920s alone—if only because Zelig’s reflex to mirror other people found, like the other diagnostics we have encountered, an empirical confirmation in the discovery of “mirror neurons” in the 1990s. On the aesthetic side, the film *Zelig* provides a cinematic surface that reflects a larger moving picture of a human chameleon that may not be narrowly realistic yet provides an illuminating case study to reflect on the psychic, historical, political, and, ultimately, philosophical implications of hypnotic dispossessions of identity that deprive subjects of the ability to think in terms characteristic of what Hannah Arendt influentially called in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), the “banality of evil.”

Although the connection between the case of Zelig and the case of Eichmann, a comic fictional case and a horrifying historical case, might initially surprise, we shall see in this and in the following chapter that these two cases are not deprived of troubling mirroring effects that reach into the present. If Arendt
controversially claimed that “Eichmann constitutes a veritable gold mine for a psychologist—provided he [sic] is wise enough to understand that the horrible can be not only ludicrous but outright funny” (48), I argue that the reverse is equally true: namely, that Zelig constitutes a gold mine for psychologists, provided they consider that what is outright funny can help us seriously reflect on transformations of personality that can be truly horrifying.

Thus reframed, the case of Zelig sets up a mirroring interplay between aesthetics and politics that turns out to be more forward oriented than previously realized. It urges us to look back to mimetic drives to conform to totalitarian leaders that were becoming visible in the 1920s, generated massive dispossessions of identity that already preoccupied Caillios, and culminated in Nazi horrors in the 1930s and ‘40s. My wager is that Zelig calls attention to the contemporary danger of unconsciously conforming to (new) fascist and authoritarian leaders at the dawn of the twenty-first century, endowed with the will power to cast a hypnotic spell that is not only constitutive of the mimetic turn in theory but also induces a “collective trance” (Snyder 2017, 61) on disenfranchised subjects in practice. While the psychological case of Zelig reveals an excess of mimesis that is considered comically pathological, the film Zelig shows that this mimetic pathology is not only fictional but also historical, not simply individual but collective, not only past-oriented but present and, possibly, future-oriented. In the process, it also provides a patho-logical diagnostic that can be put to work contra the rise of (new) fascist and tyrannical phantoms that, via new and increasingly invasive social media, are currently casting a shadow on the present century.

The Case of Zelig: Reframing the Human Chameleon

Woody Allen’s Zelig (1983) is a film that dramatizes, perhaps most clearly than any other film or narrative, the ultimate manifestation of that protean creature we have been calling homo mimeticus and the film calls “human chameleon.” Located at the juncture between fiction and history, aesthetics and politics, comedy and tragedy, personal mimetic pathologies and collective social pathologies, the different faces of this mimetic animal not only face and mirror each other but also reflect on one another. A mockumentary that relies on archival footage from the 1920s and 1930s in order to dramatize a fictional Jewish character without proper identity who suffers from a pathological tendency to
“metamorphose,” chameleonlike, into any type of person he is facing, *Zelig* blurs the boundaries between past and present, fiction and reality, comedy and drama, historical truth and fictional lies, being oneself and appearing as someone else, along imitative lines that in-*form* (give aesthetic form to)—beginning, middle, and end—both the medium and the message of the film.

At the level of the medium, *Zelig* opens with a series of mock interviews that frame the film from the perspective of the 1980s in which prominent Jewish public intellectuals representing fields as diverse as philosophy/cultural studies (Susan Sontag), literary criticism (Irving Howe), creative writing (Saul Bellow), and psychology (Bruno Bettelheim) impersonate themselves—that is, play or enact their professional roles—in order to reflect on the fictional case of Zelig in an academic language that is intended to sound realistic. Obviously meant to lend historical credibility to the “bizarre” fictional story of Leonard Zelig, these framing interviews aim to reinforce viewers’ suspension of disbelief already successfully induced by the mockumentary genre. Less obvious is that the mocking side of this genre introduces a more subtle, not simply realistic, but no less mimetic principle: namely, that by playing their “real” professional roles (cultural critic, writer, historian, psychologist, etc.) to introduce a “fictional” character, these public intellectuals implicitly call attention to the performative dimension of public personalities (from Latin, *persona*, mask worn in the theater), not only on the side of fiction but also on the side of reality. Hence, the framing interviews foreground the interplay between fiction and reality, playing a role and being a role that is constitutive of the pathological case they so effectively frame. Their cinematic performance, in other words, implicitly anticipates that the case of *Zelig* might not be realistic in its representation of a real historical character, yet it reflects mimetic principles that are actually at play in real life, perhaps even stretching beyond the screen, to affect viewers as well.

This second mimetic lesson is confirmed within the diegesis, as we are first introduced to the case of Zelig “himself” played by Woody Allen. This non-descript figure is framed against the background of documentary footage that reflects an entire decade of US culture, mostly condensed in New York City but heterogeneous enough to include iconic historical events (Lindenberg’s first transatlantic flight), creative writers who influentially narrated the 1920s in exemplary fictions (F. Scott Fitzgerald), emerging and catchy fashions in the arts, from music (jazz) to dance (Charleston), not to speak of the growing power of mass media to shape public opinion, from traditional (print) to “new” media (radio, cinema). There is thus a larger background that shapes the case of the human chameleon in the foreground.
Furthermore, this cultural and historical background, in turn, reflects wider ideological and political battles at play both in the US and in Europe that pit capitalism contra communism, egalitarianism contra racism, stretching to include ominous references to the Ku Klux Klan in the US and, above all, fascism and Nazism in Europe. Zelig, then, documents a historical reality in a mocking cinematic genre that is funny and makes us laugh; and yet, the comic mimetic figure in the (fictional) foreground also encourages viewers to reflect critically on the tragic political events in the (historical) background that both form and transform him. In the process, the film reveals a human tendency to unconsciously mimic others which, as the designation of “human chameleon” suggests, finds in animal mimicry or, as Caillois called it, *mimétisme*, its clearest manifestations. To be sure, this mimetic drive is pushed to pathological extremes in the case of Zelig for comedic reasons; yet it is also shown at play in the culture at large for critical reasons. In short, the frame already makes us see that the case study in the foreground may be fictional, personal, and comic; still, the imitative powers he dramatizes cannot be easily disconnected from the historical footage in the background, which is real, collective, and goes beyond comic principles—stretching to affect real, historical, and potentially tragic principles.

This Janus-faced point internal to the medium is subsequently reflected and redoubled at the level of the film’s message. Despite the different disciplines at play in the framing interviews, the public intellectuals tend to agree that viewers should not consider Zelig simply as an individual case—though the newspapers later claim he suffers from a “unique mental disorder”; nor is it solely a story rooted in Jewish drives toward assimilation predominant in the US melting pot of the 1920s—though Zelig certainly “reflected a lot of the Jewish experience in America.” While representing a specific psychological/cultural/ethnic case, we are also told that his story is broader in scope. Thus, he is initially introduced as “the phenomenon of the 1920s” (Sontag) and as a chameleon phenomenon that “reflected the nature of our civilization,” as well as the “character of our time” (Howe). These grand, totalizing claims about the *Zeitgeist* are, of course, ironic; they are constitutive of the genre of the *mockumentary* and, thus, should not be taken seriously.

And yet, the irony is not deprived of real documentary insights that mirror tendencies at play in the 1920s and '30s. In fact, what is “reflected” in the case of Zelig is a general mimetic drive to “conform” in the most literal sense of the term (*con*-form, form together) that was particularly intense at the dawn of the past century but continues to remain central to the formation of “character” and “civilization” in the present century as well. Defined by Bettelheim as “the
ultimate conformist,” the case of Zelig is a psychological case that urges viewers to reflect on larger social, cultural, and political tendencies to conform, thereby “touch[ing] a nerve in people, perhaps in a way in which they preferred not to be touched” (Bellow). As we shall see, this mirroring nerve continues to touch people, if not consciously at least unconsciously so. But let us take a closer look beyond the framing interviews by having a first look at the case of Zelig “himself.”

From the beginning it is clear that the stakes of Zelig cannot be dissociated from the politics foregrounded at the end. Initially noticed at a party held by socialites in Long Island, Zelig catches the attention of F. Scott Fitzgerald who, from within the diegesis, doubles the initial cinematic frame via a narrative supplement by specifically tying Zelig’s mimetic tendency to both class and politics. Fitzgerald, in fact, notes in his diary that he first hears Zelig speak “adoringly of Coolidge and of the Republican party with an upper-class Boston accent,” and then the voice-over continues, in an ominous tone: “An hour later, I was stunned to see the same man speaking with the kitchen help. Now he claimed to be a Democrat and his accent seemed coarse, as if he were one of the crowd.”

If we stop to reflect on this opening scene, this “first small notice” of Zelig already encapsulates essential questions for framing our case: for instance, does this initial transformation indicate that this strange case represents, first and foremost, a mimetic phenomenon that is triggered by class disadvantage—as Zelig’s “poor” origins and “lowbrow” tastes later suggest? Or does it rather say that everyday manifestations of imitation can first be identified in all people’s accents, cultural registers, social tastes, and political affiliations—as the “typical party” in which “socialites” representative of a dominant class and culture “rub elbows” indicates? Alternatively, does Zelig’s chameleon tendency to assimilate and conform to dominant political opinions indicate that minorities, due to their cultural disadvantage, are particularly vulnerable to ideological manipulation—as Zelig’s “immersion in the mass” of Hitler’s supporters indicates at the end of the film? Or does his ability to radically switch ideological positions to adapt to his interlocutors imply that political distinctions between Right and Left can easily be destabilized by mimetic figures who can address opposed constituencies—as the case of Hitler swaying fascist crowds across class/ethnic/religious divides later suggests? Or perhaps a mixture of all of the above? Fitzgerald does not specify it in his notes, and the voice-over has nothing to report on the matter. Still, Zelig begins to attune viewers’ nerves to these multiple interpretative possibilities at play in the film’s opening—a multilayered, pluralist opening if there ever was one that serves as a paradigmatic illustration of the entangled aesthetic, psychic, cultural, historical, and political ramification of mimesis.
What is clear at this stage is that to adequately diagnose this homo mimiticus that is not one, politics must first be framed within questions of identity politics whereby class/social disadvantage is doubled by ethnic/racial disadvantage. The protagonist is, in fact, endowed with the disconcerting capacity to cut across differences that are not only cultural or ethnic but have racial and physiological overtones. Zelig’s defining characteristic is that he becomes other in the sense that he can literally assume the phenotypical features of African Americans, Native Americans, but also Irish, Mexican, and Asian Americans he encounters.

As the framing interviews had anticipated, Zelig manifests a mimetic drive toward assimilation characteristic of the 1920s—a view echoed, at one remove, by numerous critics of the film as well. Such cultural perspectives rightly stress that Zelig’s protean transformations are “metaphorical” of the pressure for ethnic minorities to assimilate during this period. They also underscore the performative, and thus constructivist, dimension of identity formation that is reflected in the play of “citationality,” “intertextuality,” and “iteration” (Johnston 2007, 300) that deconstruct binary oppositions (copy/origin, appearance/being, truth/lies) in terms characteristic of a “poststructuralist mimesis” (Nas 1992, 95) that lends cultural specificity to the metamorphoses Zelig represents. There is thus a sense in which the case of the human chameleon not only reflects concerns with identity politics that were center stage in the 1980s; at one remove, it also provides a mirror for theoretical reflections that culminated in this period. This is a subtle indication
and warning that film criticism, and by extension all interpretative activities, might not be completely immune to the mimetic phenomenon they reflect on—a self-reflective epistemic point homo mimeticus should not lose sight of.

No matter how important these reflections were in the past century, contemporary viewers cannot fail to notice that mimesis in *Zelig* operates quite literally as a chameleon phenomenon that does not remain confined to the sphere of cultural representation; nor is he solely “metaphorical” of ethnic assimilation—though it is both. *Zelig* also, and above all, dramatizes a literal, embodied, material, perhaps protosurreal if we recall Caillois, but as we shall confirm, also real, all-too-real mimetic drive that operates on a multiplicity of different yet related planes. I summarize them as follows: first, the film stages a professional actor (Allen) who plays the role of “the son of a Yiddish actor” and dramatizes mirroring mechanisms that may have interior, psychological explanations, but above all display external, physiological manifestations; second, this mimetic drive concerns the protagonist in the foreground, but also casts light on the masses that are often in the background; third, Zelig is representative of what appears to be a positive US cultural phenomenon (assimilation), but he also moves back and forth between the US and Europe, thereby revealing that this
homo mimeticus is entangled in disquieting transatlantic political phenomena (KKK, Nazism); and fourth, the case of Zelig roots the protean metamorphoses—in terms of race, ethnicity, class, profession, appearance, nationality, and politics—in a mirroring physiological drive that concerns simultaneously all of these different yet related levels.

Despite the cultural differences at play in Zelig’s comic metamorphoses, then, what they have in common is that they ultimately find in the figure of the actor or mime their common denominator. This protean aesthetic (aisthetikos, remember, comes from aisthēsis, “sensation”) figure, then, is extremely sensitive to others. It is this disconcerting mirroring sensation that makes these transformations possible in the first place. Hence the need to come to a better understanding of the specifically dramatic origins of Zelig’s pathological chameleon drive in the first place. If we have seen that this will to mime is inscribed in the phylogenetic history of Homo sapiens, is constitutive of a vita mimetica at the margins of philosophy but at the center of the polis, and originates in animal mimicry, this is the moment to stress that this mimetic drive is most manifest in the case of the actor and is ultimately human, or as Nietzsche would put it, all too human.

The Case of the Actor: Nietzsche with/contra Zelig

Given the cultural frame internal to the film, the choice to reframe the case of Zelig via Friedrich Nietzsche might initially surprise. Not only is Nietzsche a nineteenth-century German philosopher with a tragic sensibility and Allen a twentieth-century Jewish filmmaker qua comic actor, but in popular culture, the name of Nietzsche is still tied to fascist and Nazi stereotypes Zelig ironically denounces. If we then recall that Nietzsche’s conceptual categories privilege a set of dichotomies that posit “masters” contra “slaves,” “activity” contra “passivity,” the original “individual” contra the mimetic “herd,” then we have ample reasons for staging an argument in which the case of Zelig could be read contra Nietzsche—a tendency reinforced by Nietzsche’s own preferences for antagonistic titles.

And yet, at a closer genealogical look, the binary dividing the philosopher and the actor might not be as stable as it appears to be, and for at least two reasons. First, as Nietzsche scholars have long noted, the German philosopher should not be quickly conflated with the anti-Semitism and German nationalism he repeatedly condemns in his writing as pathological, contra his anti-Semitic
sister. Interestingly, writing contra another figure he considers an “actor,” namely Richard Wagner, late in his career, Nietzsche goes as far as comparing this actor’s will to power to an authoritarian “leader [Führer]” who casts a hypnotic spell over the “masses [Massen]” in terms we will see dramatically re-enacted in Zelig as well. Second, and for the overarching goal of this book more important, Nietzsche establishes a specific genealogical connection between the figure of the “actor” and the mimetic “instinct” he sees at play in working-class and Jewish subjects in terms that are not simply pathological but, as we have been calling them, patho-logical in the sense that he provides an account (logos) on mimetic affect (pathos) that can productively be aligned with Zelig. Either way, Nietzsche’s reflections on the actor in general, and Jewish identity in particular, lend philosophical substance to the case at hand in a way that foregrounds both pathological and patho-logical accounts of mimesis that cut both with and contra Zelig. Let us consider both sides of the patho(-)logies in more detail.

In an (in)famous section of The Gay Science (1882) titled “On the Problem of the Actor” that follows Nietzsche’s genealogy of the birth of homo mimeticus out of nonlinguistic communication with which we started, he offers an account of mimicry that resonates strikingly with Zelig. In the process, anticipating Caillois, Nietzsche also opens up new patho-logical lines of inquiry on a mimetic power or pathos that goes beyond the logic of visual representation. Nietzsche’s diagnostic is predicated on a genealogical connection that, as we have seen in chapter 1, runs deep in the phylogenesis of the species. What is different is that he now ties the culturally specific case of the actor to an imitative drive shared among the lower classes, women, and Jews—chameleon figures who, in Nietzsche’s view, reveal a human penchant for “all kinds of adaptations,” which, he adds, “in the case of animals is called mimicry” (1974, 361:316).

Derogatory in tone and critical of these figures’ lack of an original individuality, Nietzsche writes that the lower classes “turn their coat with every wind and thus virtually […] become a coat” (316). Characteristic of his critique of mimesis, Nietzsche is here indicating a widespread tendency to let external roles (the coat being metonymic of a professional, social, or public identity) shape inner character. Similarly, and even more problematic, in the same aphorism, Nietzsche speaks of “Jews, as the people who possess the art of adaptability [Anpassungskunst] par excellence,” which, in his view, hinges on what he calls “histrionic gifts” (316). Hence, Nietzsche ironically asks: “what good actor today is not—a Jew?” And leaving women last, Nietzsche wonders whether they are not “above all else, actresses?” The ironic, misogynistic, and rather condescending patriarchal diagnostic immediately follows: “Listen to physicians who hypnotized women” (317).
These are, to be sure, embarrassing moments in the philosopher’s corpus and for a number of obvious reasons: first, this evaluation is part of widespread ethnocentric and phallocentric tendencies dominant in fin de siècle Europe to project mimetic behavior on the side of racial and gendered minorities in terms I condemned elsewhere under the rubric of “mimetic racism” and “mimetic sexism” (ethical reasons); second, the language of “instinct” coupled with the reference to “animal mimicry” to talk about human behavior indicates an essentialist bias that appears to be derivative of social Darwinism and the blatant racism that informs later nineteenth-century narratives of progress (ideological reasons); last but not least, the aggressive tonality directed contra the figure of the actor in a philosopher who consistently sides with dramatic principles at play in what he calls Dionysian “imitation” reveals not only a fundamental aporia in Nietzsche’s thought—it is also part of a confessional tendency in which the “mimetic pathologies” that are excoriated on the outside, are actually constitutive of the case of Nietzsche “himself” (philosophical reasons).

This pathological evaluation of mimesis is real, by now well attested, and should be taken seriously. At the same time, and without contradiction, it should not mask a less visible, more discerning, and insightful patho-logical perspective on mimetic behavior, which can help us cast new light on chameleon tendencies that may affect minorities more directly, but ultimately are at play in all humans. If we situate Nietzsche’s diagnostic of mimicry in its proper philosophical context, it is clear that he is not only denouncing the working class, Jews, and women for their mimetic tendencies to adapt to their surroundings as pathological—though he does that; he also develops a complex patho-logical argument that frames his diagnostic within a larger theatrical, and thus aesthetic, problematic that troubled Nietzsche for a long time.

Originating in The Birth of Tragedy (1872), this aesthetic problem concerns the relation between identity formation, acting, and mimesis and traverses his entire corpus. In many ways, this obsessive leitmotif finds a condensed expression in the aphorism “On the Problem of the Actor” under consideration. As the title already suggests, it is, in fact, from the dramatic point of view of the actor (or mimos), more than from the biological one of instinct, that Nietzsche approaches the joint problematic of the mimetic instinct. As he puts it in his opening statement: “The problem of the actor has troubled me for the longest time,” and not only for aesthetic reasons at play on theatrical stages, as Nietzsche had made clear in The Birth of Tragedy, but also, and above all, because the actor manifests “an excess of the capacity for all kinds of adaptations” (Nietzsche 1974, 361:316), which are at play in social life, as he makes clear in The Gay
Hence, as he returns to consider the figure of the actor toward the end of his career, he does so in order to evaluate “the inner craving for a role and mask” (316) he sees at play in class, ethnic, and gender minorities in order to unmask the fundamental reason (logos) that triggers this craving for mimetic affect (pathos) in social life tout court.

Thus reframed, Nietzsche’s mimetic patho-logy is more subtle than it first appears to be. For him, in fact, it is not a primary biological “instinct [Instinkt]” for adaptation essentially tied to the working class, the Jews, and women that drives their will to mime, as the term “instinct” misleadingly suggests. It is rather social disadvantage, cultural oppression, and material dependency characteristic of social groups, which, as Nietzsche specifies, “had to survive under changing pressures and coercions” (1974, 361:316) that forces these (and by extension other) minorities to adapt, chameleonlike, to the dominant culture they radically depend on for their survival. This also means that Nietzsche unmasks the mimetic instinct he sees at play in minorities as an effect rather than as a cause of cultural adaptation. The overturning of perspective is key to our diagnostic: it turns an apparently essentialist argument grounded in nature or biology into a constructivist diagnostic grounded in second nature or culture. What appears to be a past-oriented evolutionary theory turns out to be future-oriented: it goes beyond nature and culture oppositions that were still dominant in the past century yet no longer hold in the present century.

Nietzsche furthers the genealogy the “genius of the species” that gives birth to Homo sapiens out of the instinct for communication constitutive of homo mimeticus. The specific case of the working class, which frames the other cases he discusses (Jews, women, actors), sheds light on our case study (Zelig) as well. The passage is worth quoting at length:

Such an instinct will have developed most easily in families of the lower classes who had to survive under changing pressures and coercions [Druck und Zwang], in deep dependency, who had to cut their coat according to the cloth, always adapting themselves again to new circumstances, who always had to change their mien and posture, until they learned gradually to turn their coat [Mantel] with every wind and thus virtually to become a coat—and masters of the incorporated and inveterate [eingefleischten] art of eternally playing hide-and-seek, which in the case of animals is called mimicry—until eventually this capacity, accumulated from generation to generation, becomes domineering, unreasonable, and intractable. (1974, 361:316)
Nietzsche’s patho-*logical* diagnostic of the powers of mimesis has remained in the shadow of his most visibly pathological affirmations directed contra marginalized mimetic subjects. It now deserves to be foregrounded for it unmasks a psycho-social-biological dynamic responsible for a human drive to adapt that develops “most easily” among minorities, but not only—far from it. As Roberto Esposito also recognized, for Nietzsche, “the human species is not given once and for all but is susceptible, for good and evil, to be molded [plasmata] in forms of which we do not yet have the exact notion but that constitute for us both an absolute risk and an unavoidable challenge (2004, 85; my trans.). What we add is that the plasticity of homo mimeticus is not only the subject matter that can be molded by biopower; it is also responsible for the paradox of patho(-)logical practices of contagion/immunization constitutive of our chameleonlike metamorphoses.

This mimetic drive is constitutive of his reevaluation of the modern ego qua phantom ego; minorities only reveal this generalized principle constitutive of homo mimeticus. For Nietzsche, in fact, “changing pressures,” “coercions,” and “dependency” among constituencies deprived of power trigger a socially induced tendency to *con*-form, chameleonlike, to dominant backgrounds, which in turn, *in*-form subjectivity from the outside in terms that are not only psychological but are constitutive of what he calls “physio-psychology” (1990, 23:53). Thus, an exterior and contingent form that is initially meant to project a social identity to the outside (a coat) has the power to retroact on the subject, press in from the outside into the soul, body, and flesh, and take possession of an identity from the inside—a subject becoming a coat.

Nietzsche, then, not only agrees with *Zelig* that minorities such as the working class and the Jews—and, by extension, all oppressed subjects deprived of power and exposed to biopower—are subjected to pressures to conform to dominant others so profound and fundamental as to become other; he also urges us to consider Zelig’s chameleon tendencies literally by rooting them in animal mimicry in ways that prefigure not only Caillois’s diagnostic of mimetism but also recent empirical discoveries of mirroring reflexes that cast a new light on the contagious dynamic of the pathos of will to power, or biopower. From a Nietzschean perspective, in fact, Zelig’s chameleon metamorphoses are not simply metaphorical of a psychic or cultural tendency to conform—though they are certainly that too; they also reveal a deeper, bio-physio-psycho-socio-*logical* drive that goes beyond the nature/culture opposition in view of articulating a dynamic interplay between the physio-logical and psycho-logical manifestations of both human mimetism and animal mimicry.
That Nietzsche considers the phenomenon of animal mimicry as a relevant background to account for humans’ chameleonlike penchant for the cultural adaptations Zelig foregrounds is confirmed in a related aphorism in Daybreak (1881) titled “Animals and Morality” (1982, 26:20–21) that we have already encountered in chapters 1 and 5. It suffices to recall that foregrounding a genealogy of mimesis that is rooted in human “instincts” (nature) but trans-forms—or forms via states of trance we shall soon consider—moral norms (culture) as well, he reevaluates morality in terms that require “self-adaptation, self-deprecation, submission to orders of rank,” stressing that basic traces of such tendencies can be found “everywhere, even in the depths of the animal world” (20).

The case of the actor diagnosed by Nietzsche, then, brings us back to the case of Zelig dramatized by Allen. But Nietzsche also adds a patho-logical supplement that renders manifest a moral problem that is left in the background of the film, has tended to elude commentators, yet fundamentally informs the chameleon transformations in the foreground. Nietzsche, in fact, makes us see that this cinematic case might be representing a problem characteristic of minorities and socially disadvantaged social groups, yet he also sets up a mirror to reflect (on) a more generalized, human tendency to adapt, “out of prudence” and “security” to dominant moral as well as political principles promoted by “societies, parties, opinions” (1982, 26: 20–21) in terms characteristic not only of minorities but of “all Europeans.” Thus, he specifies: “As they attain a more advanced age, almost all Europeans confound themselves with their role: they become the victims of their own ‘good performance’ [...] the role has actually become character, and art, nature” (1974, 356:302). Thus reframed, the case of Zelig renders visible a mimetic principle that is characteristic of a thoroughly imitative species qua homo mimeticus endowed with protean capacities for plastic adaptations that, for good and ill, are still forming, transforming, and conforming humans and posthumans today, and will continue to do so in the future as well.°

So far, so good. But we might still wonder: if this process of adaptation that dispossesses the ego of its proper identity is first and foremost determined by social factors, why does Nietzsche insist on calling it an “instinct,” rooting it in nature rather than culture? While the terms may initially sound indicative of essentialist mimetic pathologies that still plagued the past century, tend to be directed against minorities in terms of class, gender, race, and sex, and are far from being dissolved, they may actually pave the way for recent empirical developments in the neurosciences that open an alternative door to the unconscious in the present century—a mimetic unconscious that, as we turn to see, accounts for Zelig’s mirroring metamorphoses.
A Mirroring Case: From Hypnosis to Mirror Neurons

When it comes to offering a medical diagnostic of the origins of Zelig’s mimetic pathology, the doctors within the diegesis open up a variety of different perspectives that are comic in their antagonistic possibilities. We are in fact told that “no two [doctors] can agree on a diagnosis”: from pathologies that are physiological and “glandular in nature” to a fear of contagion that is cultural in orientation and was “picked up from eating Mexican food,” from a “neurological” account of a “brain tumor” to a “poor alignment of the vertebrae,” the diagnostics within the film mirror, once again, the scientists’ own cultural, disciplinary, and “scientific” prejudices, stretching to ironically reflect their own pathologies as well.

Thus, in a mirroring inversion of perspectives, one of the doctors who diagnosed a “brain tumor” falls victim of the sickness he had unconsciously projected onto the mimetic case—an indication that supports the young female doctor in the background, Dr. Eudora Fletcher (Mia Farrow) who, contra the patriarchal medical orthodoxy, suggests that Zelig might not by suffering from

Figure 9: Zelig and the doctors (Zelig, USA Warner Bros, 1983)
“a physiological disorder but from a psychological one,” thereby opening a psychological door to his unconscious.

Now, given Woody Allen’s well-known predilection for Oedipal scenarios and sexual drives, often shadowed by anxieties about death drives, we could expect that psychoanalysis would provide the master key to unlock the door to Zelig’s psychic life. This suspicion is initially suggested by direct allusions to traumatic childhood experiences (childhood beatings) and is subsequently reinforced by Zelig’s explicit references to Freudian concepts (“penis envy”). Interestingly, such interpretations emerge as Zelig mimics, not without irony, the posture, professional identity, and diagnostics of psychiatrists within the film. An indication that the patient playing the role of the doctor is conforming to diagnostic scripts that were beginning to spread in the 1920s had become dominant in the 1980s—stretching to inform mainstream Hollywood clinical expectations as well.

In a comic film about mirror games, ironies can be double and may not be deprived of patho(-)logical insights that cut both ways. It is, in fact, not only Zelig’s histrionics as a patient qua psychoanalyst that is the subject of irony here; in a mirroring inversion, the irony also turns against the psychoanalytical theory the patient effectively mimics. What the therapeutic scene suggests, in fact, is that a dominant theory of the psyche can lead patients to mimaically adopt and conform to the dominant diagnostic categories, perhaps even perform the symptoms the theory expects. This is not only a fictional suggestion. As historian of psychology
and early advocate of mimetic studies, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen convincingly shows “the patients, far from simply submitting to the psychiatric categories imposed upon them, very actively conform to them” (Borch-Jacobsen 2009, 5)—a critique that, he adds, applies to psychic theories from hysteria to depression and casts a long shadow on psychoanalysis as a “chameleon” therapy in particular.8

Zelig’s ironic warning against this mimetic fallacy suggests to clinically oriented critics not to map diagnostics on the case of Zelig a posteriori in terms that risk mirroring the mimetic principles at play in the patient. If the mirroring dynamic of mimesis blurs the line between patient and doctor, the pathology and the patho-*logy* within the film, the same effects risks affecting the critic outside the film. Hence our goal is not to project a mirroring diagnostic but rather to focus on a patho-*logy* that is already internal to the aesthetics of the film itself. Within the diegesis, for instance, John Morton Blum, author of the fictitious book *Interpreting Zelig*, already tellingly discourages psychoanalytical approaches to the case as he says: “of course, the Freudians had a ball. They could interpret him in any way they pleased.” This diagnostic suspicion is even confirmed by the real psychologist that frames the case: Bruno Bettelheim. A child psychologist known for his psychoanalytical approach to autism in the 1980s, Bettelheim initially relies on psychoanalytic categories, as he says: “The question whether Zelig was a psychotic or merely extremely neurotic was a question that was endlessly discussed among us doctors.” But then, Bettelheim immediately transgresses this nosological opposition, as he evaluates Zelig as neither “psychotic” nor “neurotic” but, rather, as “normal.” As he specifies: “I myself felt that his feelings were really not all that different from the normal maybe what one would call the well-adjusted normal person only carried to an extreme degree, to an extreme extent.” Nietzsche would have added that, to some extent, all subjects confound themselves with their role. Somewhat ironically, Bettelheim posthumously attracted a number of charges (from plagiarism to fake credentials) that cast a shadow on his psychological theory, yet mirror the case of Zelig in practice—thereby lending support to the reality of the chameleon tendencies at play in the fictional case he had so effectively framed.

Rather than mapping pathological diagnostics on the human chameleon from the outside in, let us thus continue to treat Zelig as an aesthetic source for new mimetic studies to theorize mimesis as a normal human condition from the inside out. This entails taking seriously the young woman doctor, Dr. Fletcher (Mia Farrow) who, contra the patriarchal medical orthodoxy that proposes a cure through “experimental drugs,” tries a “new approach”: namely, “hypnosis.” A prepsychoanalytical method initially used by physicians and psychologists
like Jean-Martin Charcot, Hippolyte Bernheim, and Pierre Janet, hypnosis was applied by Freud to his first case (Anna O.) and later rejected in order to develop an interpretative method based on the “talking cure” that became known as psychoanalysis. Hence, hypnosis was far from new in the 1920s. Its “golden age,” as historians of psychology have noticed, was the 1880s (Chertok 1993, 23). Hypnosis was also internal to pre-Freudian psychologists like Nietzsche whose diagnostic of mimesis, as we saw, finds a confirmation in “physicians” who “hypnotized” (1974, 361:317) women—a clear allusion to Charcot and his legendary leçons du mardi at the Salpêtrière, where hysteric patients were staged in front of male physicians to display symptoms that mimetically conformed to the physician’s theory—that is, a theory that considered hypnosis a pathological condition restricted to hysteric patients.

Framed against this psychological background predicated on a mimetic sexism that projects mimetic behavior onto female bodies, we can safely say that Zelig is not immune from the pathologies of mimesis. The film, for instance, has been rightly critiqued for its exclusion of women as models for his chameleon-like transformations. At one remove, sexual scandals have also cast a long shadow on Allen in real life, tainting his authorial reputation in the age of #MeToo. At the same time, the film is not deprived of patho-logical supplements. It is worth noticing, for instance, that Zelig deftly subverts gender power/knowledge relations in clinical practices by inverting the stereotype of the hysteric woman in the hands of male doctors—a suggestion indicating that Zelig’s mimetic patho(-)logy cuts across the gender divide, cannot be contained within patriarchal binaries, and has both pathological implications and logical potential as well, at least if we follow the doctor’s diagnostic of the human chameleon.

After a series of hypnotic failures that only accentuate Zelig’s mirroring tendencies to play the role of the doctor, Dr. Fletcher hits on the idea of doubling the mirror game. Paradoxically, she uses a mimetic lie to reveal a mimetic truth: mimicking Zelig’s imitation of a doctor, Dr. Fletcher falsely admits that she is actually not a real doctor but only pretends to be one. Interestingly, she finds in Zelig’s mimetic sickness (or pathology) a clue to develop a therapy (or patho-logy). This mirror game, in fact, has the performative effect of putting Zelig in a double bind: faced with what he believes to be a simulation of a doctor, he is led to mirror his “true” self—that is, the “liar” that he actually is. This entails revealing the truth about who he really is—namely, that there is “nothing” or “nobody” behind the mask. At a loss with himself, Zelig falls into a state of trance (from Latin, transire, to pass) in which he is not consciously present to “himself,” and is thus, paradoxically, most “himself.”
The Human Chameleon

Under hypnosis (hypnos, sleep), Zelig not only confesses the root of his mimetic drive at the level of the message; he also renders manifest—via the medium of trance—the origin of the unconscious mimicry that plagues him in his waking life.

On the side of the message, Zelig reveals to Dr. Fletcher the psychological defense mechanism Nietzsche had already identified a century before. If the philosopher had rooted human mimicry in “prudence” (Nietzsche 1881, 26:21), Zelig admits that he mirrors others because “it’s safe to be like the others.” And again like Nietzsche, this prudence is rooted in imitative instincts Dr. Fletcher traces back to the animal mimicry. Dubbing Zelig “the human chameleon,” the female psychologist develops—in an anti-mimetic presentation that is up against an audience of skeptical male doctors—the following mimetic hypothesis: namely, that as the lizard “blends in with its immediate surrounding” in order to protect itself “Zelig protects himself by becoming whoever he is around.” Dr. Fletcher is neither Freudian nor Lacanian; she is also closer to Nietzsche than to Caillois. In fact, she considers human mimetism a defense mechanism linked to animal mimicry, which Zelig as a Jewish minority renders visually manifest. In this specific diagnostic sense, then, his mimetic pathology is restricted to a specific psychological and cultural case. And yet, what the film Zelig also shows is that the human chameleon reveals latent mirroring tendencies that are, to a
degree, “normal,” and are at play among all humans—which leads to the hypnotic aesthetic medium in question.

On the side of the medium, under hypnosis, Zelig foregrounds a paradoxical state of consciousness characteristic of a somnambulistic trance in which he is both himself and not himself, conscious of his identity, which is not one, and suggestible to others, which makes him more than one. This Janus-faced state could be dissociated as follows. On the one hand, it is during the hypnotic trance that Zelig is most “himself,” so to speak. Thus, he unashamedly confesses his fears, desires, affects, and says what he really thinks at the level of his speech, going as far as revealing his waking personality to be a coat with nobody inside—“I am nobody, I am nothing,” he says when asked who he is. On the other hand, it is during the state of hypnotic dispossession, his arm lifted at the injunction of the doctor, that the medium of cinema makes us see the physiological roots of his mimetic “instinct”—namely, that an unconscious mirroring reflex can be triggered by an external order that is not only perceived but experienced as one’s own: ordered to lift his arm, he unconsciously lifts it, as if by reflex. This state of docility that leads the hypnotized patient to follow orders sets up a mirror to the psychic condition of dispossession characteristic of Zelig’s waking state. Just as under hypnosis so in his daily life Zelig also unconsciously conforms to the expectations of others, involuntarily mimicking not only gestures but also expressions, accents, opinions, professions, and ultimately thoughts of others, so as to literally become other. In short, while Zelig’s linguistic message reveals his “true” self, the spell of the hypnotic medium reveals that his daily life is actually lived, experienced, in a quasi-somnambulistic pathological trance—something the movie within the movie, titled The Changing Man, describes, at one additional fictional remove, as a “zombielike” stare.

But Zelig is not the only person vulnerable to hypnotic suggestions. Far from it. Drawing on an established connection between cinema and hypnosis characteristic of classics of the 1920s like The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene 1920), Zelig directs the power of hypnosis outside the screen to make us not only see but also feel this mimetic power on our nerves via a visual medium that transgresses the fiction/reality opposition and affects spectators as well.

Who, then, is “the subject” that is placed under hypnosis here? Not only is our subject position conflated with the subject in question (formal reasons); we are also subjected to the same hypnotic influence that breaks the fourth wall and—if you fix your gaze on that spiraling point for a while—can induce a light psychic trance. Just try it for thirty seconds, and you will begin to feel the spell-binding force of a vita mimetica Plato was the first to fear (chapter 2). This
formal choice is, of course, not accidental. We are in fact given to feel that cinema is a medium that is mimetic not only in the visual sense that it represents images we can safely contemplate from an aesthetic distance; it is also mimetic in the affective, performative sense that it has the power to induce what Edgar Morin calls an “imitation-hypnotic state” (2005, 96) in spectators. In the darkness of the cinema but also watching a screen at home, we can easily fall under the spell of a process of becoming other via an interplay of “projection and identification” (103) that is characteristic of the vita mimetica, is constitutive of the magic of cinema, and, as we shall see, via new media reach into the present as well.

Genealogical lenses remind us that the lesson that in a hypnotic state the subject is unconsciously vulnerable to mirroring mechanisms was once well known among philosophical physicians working in fin de siècle Europe. Given their popularity, it is astonishing how quickly this mimetic condition has faded from memory. For our purpose, let us just recall that Hippolyte Bernheim, from the School of Nancy, paved the way for Dr. Fletcher’s “new approach,” as he relied on hypnosis to cure his patients of what he considered “psychological” problems. Contra his rival already alluded to by Nietzsche, Jean-Martin Charcot of the Salpêtrière, Bernheim, in fact, argued that hypnosis was not a pathological state reserved to hysterical patients—be they psychotic or neurotic, nor was it limited to women or racial minorities. Rather, Bernheim considered hypnosis a

Figure 12: Hypnotizing spectators (Zelig, USA Warner Bros, 1983)
normal psychic tendency that affected “a very large majority of people,” including, he added, “very intelligent people belonging to the higher grades of society” (1957, 5). And, significantly, he added that via hypnotic suggestion “an idea may originate in the mind through imitation and may give rise to a corresponding sensation” (132). Thus, the sight of someone’s smiling or crying not only induces an idea into the self as to why this person is happy or sad, but actually triggers, “through imitation,” an unconscious mirroring sensation of the other into the self.

How does this mirroring principle operate? As Bernheim puts it; “The phenomena of automatic activity of the nervous centers may be *instinctive*. Acts occur naturally, without ever having been acquired, by means of the spontaneous, unconscious initiative of the brain,” by which he means “imitative acts” (127). For Bernheim, then, just as for Nietzsche before him and Caillois after him, there is a mirroring physio-psychological mechanism in the brain that “may be instinctive” and leads subjects to unconsciously imitate others so profoundly as to feel what the others feel, as if one were other.

We now know why this mirroring mechanism looks familiar. On the shoulders of the same tradition of the mimetic unconscious we have been unearthing and is only now returning to the foreground of the theoretical scene,10 Dr. Fletcher paves the way for a scientific discovery that accounts for her subject’s tendency to mirror others in the first place. Though we shall be careful not to mimic doctors within the film and call it “the scientific medical phenomenon of the age,” doctors in real life have not hesitated to call this mirroring reflex “the single most important ‘unreported’ (or at least unpublicized) story of the decade” (Ramachandran 2000).

The story is now well known, and we have already encountered it, but the case of Zelig allows us to broaden the implications of the discovery of mirror neurons from a perspective that is already double for it is as attentive to aesthetics as it is to politics. On the aesthetic side, Allen’s cinematic dramatization of the human chameleon offers an additional confirmation that this discovery is actually a re-discovery of a hypnotic principle that was well known in the pre-Freudian period attentive to the physiological fact that humans are wired for imitation. As a consequence, imitation has been returning to the center of a number of studies that cross the boundaries between the sciences and the humanities, stretching to provide new experimental foundations to film studies as well, which have recently being grouped under the rubric of “experimental aesthetics” (Gallese and Guerra 2015, 13).11 Considering aesthetics in its etymological sense of *aisthēsis*, that is, as a “multimodal perception of the world through the body” (13; my trans.), these emerging perspectives on mimetic forms of corporal cognition, or “embodied
The Human Chameleon simulation” (15) find a paradigmatic dramatization in the case of Zelig. If the medical diagnostics within the film are off mark, the film Zelig dramatizes embodied, intersubjective, and affective mechanisms that blur the opposition between self and other, the mind and the body, physiology and psychology, but also protagonist and spectators, action seen on the screen and reflex simulated in the body. The lesson is clear: to different degrees, we might all be human chameleons after all.

A key measure of the relevance of the discovery of mirror neurons for our specific case study is the following one. Even skeptics of mirror neurons in theory could not resist the impulse of considering Zelig as a dramatic manifestation of the mirror neuron system in practice. As the neuroscientist Gregory Hickok puts it: “You may have noticed that in some social situations people tend to mimic each other’s postures and gestures” (2014, 202). Yes, we did. Lest we are ourselves busy mimicking others, it’s hard to miss. And then he adds: “Woody Allen turned the phenomenon into his 1983 film, Zelig, a mockumentary about a fairly nondescript man who takes on the appearance and characteristics of those who surround him—a kind of human chameleon” (202). This is an interesting avowal for a book titled The Myth of Mirror Neurons (2014). As often, mythic fictions are not deprived of theoretical insights on mimesis. Hickok even sets up a mirror to the pathologies that inform our diagnostic. When Bellow says in his framing comments that Zelig “touched a nerve in people,” or when Bettelheim says that this case is not that different from the “well-adjusted normal person,” they are quite literally (not metaphorically) right.

A decade before the discovery of mirror neurons, Zelig had already dramatized the powers of an embodied, relational, and affective mimesis. How? By making manifest at the physiological level a normal mirroring principle invisibly at play at the neurological level. Zelig’s mirroring transformations, in other words, register and render visible a mimetic principle that leads humans to unconsciously mirror the movements, gestures, expressions, of others. In so doing, what is mirrored is not only the exterior physical appearance but also an inner psychic pathos: the MNS in humans, in fact, allows for an immediate form of prelinguistic communication that mediates affects, states of mind, but also ideas, opinions, values, and ideologies that may originally belong to the other; yet, via unconscious mirroring reflexes that transgress the self/other opposition, they can be perceived, or rather experienced, as one’s own. Hence neuroscientists claim that the “primary role” of mirror neurons concerns “understanding the meaning of the actions of others” (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008, 124).

What Zelig adds is that such unconscious mirroring actions do not only generate an understanding of others based on a patho-logy that works for the
better; they can also generate mirroring reactions that, as Nietzsche was quick to point out and Allen to dramatize, are not deprived of sociocultural pathologies that operate for the worse. Just as the genealogy of homo mimeticus we explored in part 1 paved the way for the aesthetic side of a vita mimetica we covered in part 2, so aesthetics begins to take us to the political pathologies of mimesis we will discuss in more detail in part 3, yet Zelig allows us to foreground.

The Politics of Mimesis: From Public Opinion to Fascist Contagion

We have seen that Zelig remains our contemporary because it anticipates a scientific discovery that roots mimetic instincts in our brain. This is an important point but an entire modernist tradition of the mimetic unconscious that had hypnosis as a via regia had already paved the way. What we must add is that it also urges critics and theorists to reflect on the broader social and, above all, political implications of collective movements of unconscious imitation that cannot be analyzed within the confines of the lab, yet are at play in social life, have a long history in the twentieth century, and continue to cast a shadow on the present century as well.

Zelig’s politics of mimesis is at play at the level of the intersubjective relations the film foregrounds but is equally manifest at the level of the collective behavior that is constantly in the background. Just as Zelig’s hypnotic trance reveals, in an exaggerated form, the state of psychic dispossession characteristic of his waking life more generally, so his individual case finds a collective counterpart in the mass behavior that is under the spell of the Zelig phenomenon: from the press to the radio, fashion to public opinion, publicity to propaganda, Zelig consistently suggests that the case of the human chameleon is not that exceptional after all. On the contrary, it mirrors wider hypnotic and imitative tendencies that are massively shared in modern social life, if only because they are constitutive of the age of the crowd—which is also an age of the public.

The changing fashions, the sudden shifts in public opinion, the presence of streaming crowds thronging the streets and subjected to the daily flow of newspapers, and the radio broadcasting that radically amplifies mass opinions are not simply background; they mirror, on a larger social scale, the Zelig phenomenon in social life, revealing his mimetic condition as a shared condition, while also
contributing to disseminating the mimetic behavior they presume to simply represent. Framed against such backgrounds, it is clear that the human chameleon sets up an unrealistic mirror that exaggerates imitative tendencies at play in the *vita mimetica* of modern social behavior tout court.

That unconscious forms of imitation are central to social life is, of course, not an original idea. In many ways, *Zelig* offers a cinematic dramatization of a psycho-sociological principle that was well known in the 1920s—and once again, it’s astonishing how quickly it faded from memory. *Zelig*, in fact, dramatizes a thesis articulated by the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde in his classic *The Laws of Imitation* (1890). Drawing on Bernheim’s psychological theory of hypnotic suggestion as well as on the untimely physiological realization that “there is in the human brain an innate tendency to imitate” (Tarde 2001, 148), now timely confirmed by the neurosciences, Tarde argued that an “unconscious imitation” (138) is constitutive of social life and generates states of hypnotic/mirroring dispossession he summarized as follows: “to have only suggested ideas and to believe them to be spontaneous: this is the illusion characteristic of the somnambulist and of social beings” (137). Read against the background of crowd psychology, Zelig’s somnambulistic state of trance is thus not only pathological at the individual level; it also reveals a path-o-logy, or law of imitation, that Tarde considers constitutive of social life tout court.

Closer to home, applying the insights of crowd psychology to the rise of “public relations” in the US in the 1920s, Edward Bernays went as far as claiming in his widely popular *Propaganda* (1928) that “the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in a democratic society” (2005, 37) and finds in man’s “gregarious” or “herd” nature a vulnerability to “influences which unconsciously control his [sic] thoughts” (73). These are uncomfortable reflections on homo mimeticus that are not easy to hear and assimilate. They offer a serious challenge to still
dominant conceptions of rational subjectivity qua *Homo sapiens* based on autonomy, self-sufficiency, free will, and conscious presence to selfhood that (mis) informs dominant strands in social theory. Hence, with few exceptions, historically, it has been easier to project mimesis onto gendered, sexual, religious, and colonial minorities, or simply erase it from memory and make a tabula rasa of mimetic drives. Contrary to these rationalist tendencies, this book suggests that we should treat mimesis as a mirror to reflect critically on the aesthetic, and by extension, psychic, social, and political life of homo mimeticus.

The case of *Zelig* provides such an aesthetic mirror. It reveals that humans are endowed with a tendency to unconsciously imitate the dominant models that surround them, especially if these models address individuals in a crowd, or turn to media that have the power to cast a spell on personal opinions, turning them into shared public opinions. Hence, as the roaring twenties led to the darkening '30s, *Zelig* makes us see that humans’ imitative tendencies can no longer be projected onto marginalized others, nor contained solely within the walls of psychiatric institutions. If only because the powers of mimesis were all too visibly exploited by authoritarian leaders who relied on the same hypnotic techniques in order to cast a spell on the masses. Despite its cultural specificity rooted in the US of the 1920s, or rather because of it, as the film speeds to an end, it moves from the US to Europe and back, making clear that the nature of “civilization” *Zelig* reflects is imitative in nature, departs from grand fictional

![Figure 14: The spell of Nazism (*Zelig*, USA Warner Bros, 1983)]
narratives of historical progress, and generates fluxes of affective contagion that infect entire crowds at the heart of western democracies.

After his loss of favor with US public opinion and a period of absence, Zelig is, in fact, identified in Germany. The country and ideology changed, but the mimetic phenomenon is fundamentally the same. Zelig is in fact found among a crowd of supporters that is under the spell of a hypnotizing Nazi leader who casts a long shadow on the history of western “civilization.”

The archival image provides a historical confirmation that Zelig’s tendency to lift his arm in a state of hypnotic trance to conform to an external order was not only a bizarre individual pathology, after all. As the history of the 1930s teaches us, and the archival footage Zelig relies on makes visible, this hypnotic state was massively reproduced by entire crowds as they fell, in a period of economic crisis and generalized discontent, under the spell of a charismatic leader who consciously relied on hypnotic means in order to induce massive outbreaks of dispossessions. As crowd psychologist Gustave Le Bon, on the shoulders of Bernheim and Tarde, was quick to point out in *The Crowd* (1895):

> an individual immersed for some length of time in a crowd in action soon finds himself [sic] [...] in a special state, which much resembles the state of fascination in which the hypnotized individual finds himself in the hands of the hypnotizer (2002, 7).

Hitler was a reader of Le Bon; he relied on the notion of hypnotic “suggestion” to account for his mesmerizing (will to) power over the crowd: he was also quick to turn this mimetic insight to political abuse.13

In the end, the fact that Zelig shifts from being a representative of a newly found American individualism to a deplorable assimilation with the fascist and Nazi masses is significant. Within the film, it ultimately allows the framing commentators to “make sense” of this psychic case. Thus, commenting on Zelig’s appearance in a Nazi crowd, Saul Bellow has the following diagnostic to offer:

> Then it made all the sense in the world because although he wanted to be loved, craved to be loved, there was also something in him that desired immersion in the mass and anonymity. And Fascism offered Zelig that kind of opportunity, so that he could make something anonymous of himself by belonging to this vast movement.
This diagnostic is certainly in line with the mimetic principles that animate the case of Zelig (the patient). Still, it does not fully unpack the disturbing political implications of the powers of mimesis the case of Zelig (the movie) dramatizes. If only because “anonymity,” as the film repeatedly suggests, is not a unique property of fascism alone; it is constantly at play in the anonymous and ubiquitous crowds that constitute a silent and largely unnoticed leitmotif in the film. At one remove, commentators in the past century have tended to interpret the protagonist’s capitulation to the Führer in light of the comic scene that follows, as Zelig wakes up from his trance and interrupts Hitler’s 1933 Munich speech in what has been called “one of the most hilarious scenes of the movie” (Nas 1992, 98).

The scene is certainly funny, and the transatlantic flight back to the US neatly conforms to Hollywood standards of closure culminating with a romantic happy ending we have, in a spiraling loop, become mimetically accustomed to in the past century. And yet, at the same time, the comic image of Zelig under the spell of the totalitarian leader is not deprived of patho-logical insights into tragic horrors the film urges us to take seriously in the present century. It is, in fact, the ultimate consequence of the process of adaptation to dominant models the film had been warning us against from the very beginning—for politics, as we have seen, provides both the alpha and the omega of the film and, at one remove, of this chapter as well.

From beginning to middle to end, we have repeatedly seen and felt that the theoretical potential internal to this aesthetic case study far exceeds the framing interpretations within the film. Zelig’s message is much more radical than any of the public intellectuals interviewed is willing to acknowledge. It suggests that a mimetic immersion in fascist and Nazi movements and the hypnotic dispossessions it entails casts a shadow not only on the historical peoples and governments that officially espoused fascism and Nazism in the 1930s and ’40s, most notably Italy and Germany—though “mass anonymity” is certainly a characteristic of fascism (from fascio, bundle). It also suggests that the hypnotic drive to dissolve in mass anonymity had been constantly in the background as a shadow cast on the crowds whose opinions could so easily be manipulated throughout the movie. It is thus politically significant that the film initially alludes to racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan that, as recent theorists of fascism have shown, find striking continuities with Nazi ideology (Stanley 2018, 129–130), a racist ideology that, the same theorists argue, should be taken seriously in light of the recent returns of totalitarian leaders who rely on affectively “contagious” forms of “hypnotic” or “mimetic communication” (Connolly 2017b, 37) in order to aspire to fascism, neofascism, or “(new) fascism” (Lawtoo 2019b).
As historian Timothy Snyder also puts it, in terms that confirm the timeliness of our aesthetic case study, these new fascist leaders have the power to draw constituencies into what he calls a “trance by the hypnotic power of its own propaganda,” rendering them “zombified” (2018, 264). This is exactly the same diagnostic of the *vita mimetica* that *Zelig* attempts to make us see and feel. It is also a diagnostic that goes as far back as Plato and orients recent historical accounts that resuscitate “prison walls” that go from *Homo Sapiens* to *Homo Deus*. Our supplement is that *Homo Mimeticus* is central to taking hold of these hypnotic powers, if only because mimesis is the affective force that spellbinds individuals in prison walls that can easily turn into totalitarian walls. Finally, and even more problematic, Zelig’s capitulation to Hitler suggests that even the distinction between victim and oppressor, a US subject and a German leader, a Jewish victim and Nazi *Führer* is far from stable in the 1930s. In fact, the film suggests that a culturally oppressed chameleon character can go as far in its dispossession as identifying with the very figure that is responsible for his oppression, mindlessly becoming part of a movement whose deliberate intention is the brutal extermination of the Jewish people.

None of the commentators in the framing interviews venture into this dangerous political territory. Perhaps because they are framing a comedy that is intended to make us laugh, after all (aesthetic reasons). But perhaps also because *Zelig* comes awfully close to what was still a controversial thesis in the 1980s.
(political reasons): that is, an untimely philosophical thesis concerning the power of totalitarian movements to generate a new type of evil that was unprecedented in its horrific effects; yet it may not have been carried out by monstrous criminals but by seemingly normal, dispossessed, and perhaps “banal” figures responsible for what Hannah Arendt grouped under the controversial rubric of “the banality of evil” (2006). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) is, in fact, a book attentive to the psychology of a nondescript figure without proper identity who can express himself only in “clichés that the psychiatrists thought so ‘normal’” (48–49). As a Jewish intellectual living in New York, Hannah Arendt would thus have provided an interesting political supplement that was missing to the introductory frames of *Zelig*. Since she died in 1975, prior to the making of the film, she was likely on Allen’s mind when he looked for Jewish public intellectuals to frame the film, but unfortunately could not contribute her perspective herself.

I thus take the risk, and thus the responsibility, to add this missing frame along lines inspired by Arendt but in my own name. I place this frame in guise of conclusion, but as I noted at the beginning, it is Arendt that encouraged me to re-evaluate the *vita mimetica* of the film from the beginning.

**The Banality of Mimesis: The Missing Frame**

Given the misunderstandings caused by Hannah Arendt’s report on the case of Eichmann, it is crucial to stress at the outset that the phrase “the banality of evil” does not apply to the horror of the Holocaust, which Arendt uncompromisingly condemned but to the psychology of Eichmann, a figure that, not unlike Zelig under the spell of Hitler, seemed unable to have thoughts of his own—in ways representative of a mass of Nazi supporters as well. I shall return to Arendt’s specific account of Eichmann as a “banal” bureaucrat in more detail in the next chapter for her thesis requires closer attention in light of more recent historical facts that have since come to the foreground. For the moment, let us use her re-evaluation of evil to bring our diagnostic of the human chameleon in *Zelig* to an end, while also using the film to supplement a mimetic perspective embryonic in Arendt’s account but not fully spelled out in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

At the most general level, Arendt’s argument was that the type of evil embodied by the case of Eichmann, a SS bureaucrat responsible for organizing the
deportation to concentration camps that led to the extermination of millions of Jews, was not characterized by a radical evil that could be restricted to a few monstrous cases—no matter how unprecedented the horror was. Rather, she considered Eichmann “banal” in the sense that he passively conformed to his bureaucratic role so completely that he could express himself only in clichés, had no opinions of his own, and when confronted with the horror of the Final Solution he so effectively implemented, he was characterized by what appeared during the trial as a total lack of guilt or bad conscience.

Why? How is such a lack of human sym-pathos, which we have traced back to the very origins of the birth of consciousness, possible in the first place? The reasons, for Arendt, rest on the details of Eichmann’s specific life story, which include a struggle to adapt, conform, and ascend the social ladder in a period of economic crisis Arendt takes the trouble to narrate. As she puts it after a detailed chapter recounting his biography, Eichmann “gave the impression of a typical member of the lower middle classes” but was actually “the déclassé son of a solid middle-class family” (2006, 31). Not unlike Zelig, all his life Eichmann struggled to fit in. Yet Arendt also specifies that the decisive element in Eichmann’s psychological transformation—one of the witnesses’ comments on a “personality change” (65) as Eichmann was put in charge of implementing the Final Solution—was that he adapted, chameleonlike, to what was at the time a dominant and massively shared view by millions of people. As Arendt puts it: “German society of eighty million people had been shielded against reality and factuality by exactly the same means, the same self-deception, lies, and stupidity, that had now become engrained in Eichmann’s mentality” (52). Eichmann, not unlike Zelig, is not the only subject living a vita mimetica.

The link between the banality of evil and a drive to “conform” in terms that rendered Eichmann “in tune with the milieu in which he operated” (Backer 2010, 142) has been noticed before. Still, the specifically mimetic psychology responsible for this attunement to the milieu has not been in the foreground of theoretical discussions about the banality of evil so far. This is surprising, for Eichmann comes close to offering a diagnostic of the mimetic nature of his banality himself. As Arendt reports, Eichmann admitted to being “swallowed up by the Party against all expectations and without previous decision” (2006, 33). This avowal seems to suggest that the affective force of the Party that swallowed him up by affective contagion, rather than a deliberate ideology or political program (a point we shall have to reconsider), led him to join the Nazi movement. And as the war was lost, Eichmann realized to his dismay that an individual life would prove much more difficult than the imitative life he had been living so
far: “I would have to live a leaderless and difficult individual life, I would receive no directives from anybody, no orders and commands [...] in brief a life never known before lay before me” (32). One who leads a mimetic life, in other words, can easily follow the orders of a leader that can lead to the banality of evil and unspeakable horrors, but will have difficulties leading an individual life of one’s own—if only because it is precisely the experience of individuality that the psychology of mimesis calls fundamentally into question.

What the case of Zelig revisited in the company of Nietzsche makes us see, then, is that mimesis and the hypnotic dispossession of a proper individual identity it entails is constitutive of the banality of evil as Arendt understands it. It also allows us to provide a mimetic supplement to her patho-logical diagnostic. It is not simply that Eichmann was driven by an “inability to think” (2006, 49)—an enigmatic and misleading phrase we shall have to unpack in more detail in the following chapter. It is rather that he was unable to resist the collective power of a *pathos* constitutive of the long genealogy of homo mimeticus.

The case of Zelig sets up a mirror to the case of Eichmann. And what this mirror reveals is the power of mimetic-hypnotic dispossession to trigger, in specific sociopolitical circumstances, a type of embodied “thoughtlessness” that is difficult to account for in the rational terms of a philosophical *logos* alone. And yet, this banality of thought becomes understandable if we frame it against the patho-logical background attentive to the power of affect or pathos to inform an idea, logos, or ideology the final scenes of *Zelig* render manifest via aesthetic means. Could it be, then, that a vulnerability to mimetic *pathos* is the primary—I don’t what to say reason but—affect in generating the banality of evil as Arendt tried to articulate it?

Perhaps. We shall explore this hypothesis on a type of evil that might be complex in its “banality” in more detail soon. What seems certain for the moment is that for Arendt, just as for Nietzsche, Bernheim, Tarde, Bernays, and, later, Allen, far from being confined to exceptional cases, this suggestibility to the pathos of totalitarian leaders can, under specific historical circumstances in which evil becomes the dominant norm, threaten to affect *all* subjects, rendering an entire social body under the spell of a tyrannical head or ideology unable not only to think but also to feel the suffering of the other via a sym-pathos that is equally constitutive of homo mimeticus. Put differently, the patho-logy internal to the case of Zelig makes us suspect that the affect (*pathos*) of dispossession may be the cause of the loss of thought (*logos*) that defines the banality of evil. What is most disconcerting is that this mimetic banality, Allen and Arendt seem to agree, again in specific historical milieus, can stretch to cast a spell on
The Human Chameleon

the very victims these leaders set out to exterminate. For Arendt, in fact, one of
the most harrowing realizations of witnessing the Eichmann trial was that even
Jewish organizations turned out to be more complicit with the Nazi horrors
than they were ready to acknowledge, thereby adding a still controversial mir-
roring twist to her account of the case.15

At the end of this comic movie, then, as we see Zelig in a hypnotic state
of dispossession during Hitler’s Munich speech in 1933, we are left to wonder:
could it be that underneath the mask of a comic mockumentary, Zelig is, among
other things, also offering a cinematic dramatization of what was arguably the
most controversial aspect of Arendt’s thesis about the case of Eichmann? Was
he relying on the powers of comedy to cast light on the seemingly incompre-
hensible and tragic dynamic that can lead victims to fall under the spell of their
oppressors? This is indeed what our reading of the human chameleon suggests.

If the case of Zelig remains our contemporary in an age still under the spell
of (new) fascist and totalitarian leaders, it is not only because it reveals an all-too-
human tendency, amplified by social disadvantage and oppression, to conform
to dominant models; nor solely because it recuperates a psychological tradition
that had hypnosis, suggestion, and mirroring reflexes as a via regia to a mimetic
unconscious the neurosciences are only now beginning to rediscover—though
these are amply sufficient reasons for reopening the case. Zelig remains our con-
temporary also because it puts the aesthetic genre of the mockumentary to criti-
cal use to make us see and feel how mirroring tendencies can take possession not
only of marginalized individuals but of entire crowds and publics that, under
the spell of increasingly effective (new) media of (dis)information that spread
propaganda and big lies in massive, algorithmic doses, can easily be rendered
suggestible, deprived of the ability to think, or better, rendered thoughtless and
thus mindlessly ready to commit horrific actions.

In the wake of the totalitarianism of the past century, Arendt warned future
centuries as well. She stresses that “highly cultured people were particularly at-
tracted to mass movements and that, generally, highly differentiated individualism
and sophistication did not prevent, indeed sometimes encouraged, the self-aban-
donment into the mass for which mass movement provided” (1976, 316). Zelig
not only agrees with this diagnostic. It also makes us see that, since an uncon-
scious will to conform triggers this psychic self-abandonment, the banality of evil
should, perhaps, be reframed within a genealogical tradition attentive to what I
called here the banality of mimesis. On further thought, this so-called banality
might turn out to reveal a plurality of mimetic complexities that rest as much on
pathos as on logos and whose patho-logic we set out to diagnose in the next chapter.
Although the case of Zelig concludes with a fictional happy ending, then, his story touched a real nerve in people in the end, perhaps in ways in which people preferred not to be touched. It remains to be seen whether Zelig’s diagnostic reflections on the mirroring powers of dispossession can still reach beyond the looking glass, wake up spectators, and contribute to breaking the spell of contemporary thoughtlessness generated via increasingly hypnotizing media back in the hands of (new) fascist and totalitarian leaders.