Homo Mimeticus
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The coronavirus, like all viruses, is mimetic in the biological sense that it reproduces itself through other living beings. But what is the link between the concept of *mimēsis*, viral contagion, and immunity? And if a link there is, as recent developments in posthuman studies suggest,¹ how can an apparently unoriginal concept often translated as “imitation,” or “representation,” help us reflect critically, philosophically, and thus diagnostically, on contagious cultural pathologies such as crowd behavior and conspiracy theories that do not simply misrepresent the truth about the virus online but also cast an affective shadow that undermines immunization and amplifies the spread of viral contagion offline?

As we bring our drawing of homo mimeticus closer to its conclusion, and thus to contemporary preoccupations, it is time to show that new mimetic studies can indeed continue to provide, if not a magical immunization, at least a long-standing genealogical perspective to reflect critically on cultural pathologies that, in times of pandemic crisis but not only, are in urgent need of transdisciplinary diagnostics attentive to the all-too-human tendency to imitate others in a plurality of ways: with their brains and bodies, gestures and expressions, individually and collectively, consciously and unconsciously, offline and online, among other variants of a type of mimesis that goes viral on a plurality of levels and concerns the humanities as well.

After the speed with which virologists produced medical vaccines, or *pharma*­*kai*, to contain and hopefully eventually immunize the world population against the coronavirus pandemic started in 2020, the problem of equal vaccine distribution in an increasingly uncertain world—plagued by social inequality, racist and sexist discrimination, (new) fascist leaders, and conspiracy theories—made clear that an epidemic may generate a contagious undifferentiation in the general sense...
that all humans are equally vulnerable to infection in theory; yet a number of differentiating factors render some humans more vulnerable than others in practice. As the SARS-CoV-2 virus keeps mutating via genetic differentiations that increase the speed of contamination at the viral level, the coronavirus pandemic made visible a plurality of cultural differences that are equally slowing down immunization in complex or interwoven ways, urging cultural theorists and philosophers to stress what should have been clear from the beginning: namely, that a pandemic belongs to the diagonal category of what Marcel Mauss called “total’ social phenomena” (1966, 76). Hence, it concerns not only virologists, immunologists, medical experts, and health care workers fighting the virus on the front lines; it also infects and affects all aspects of social life, from economy to politics, education to media communication, policies of immunization to vaccine distribution and sensibilization that are fully constitutive of a pandemic crisis. As Edgar Morin puts it in the spirit of Mauss but relying on a specific mimetic terminology, the coronavirus pandemic sets up a “magnifying glass to social inequalities” (2020, 39), a trope that will be used by Jean-Luc Nancy as well in his account of an “all too human virus” (2020).

If we then also consider that a significant segment of the population is composed of pandemic deniers, anti-lockdown protesters, and vaccine skeptics who have fallen prey to conspiracy theories that have gone viral online before retroacting on the population offline in pathological ways that amplify viral infection, we can indeed contribute to developing patho-logies relevant for a pandemic crisis for at least two reasons. First, because the ancient definition of mimesis as a false representation of reality is still relevant to account for epistemic and ontological concerns with truth and lies in an age that we were perhaps too quick to dub “post-truth.” And second, because the powers of the false also have political, ethical, pedagogical, affective, and medical consequences that are constitutive of what we have been calling the patho(-)logies of mimesis, understood as both mimetic cultural pathologies that spread by mobilizing the register of affect (pathos) and critical discourses (logoi) that give a rational account of this pathos (or patho-logy).

Since cultural forms of affective contagion are not simply added to viral contagion, but amplify the latter’s reach and power of infection, they cannot be considered as external from it, in an old-fashioned two-cultures opposition that is clearly inadequate to account for complex, transdisciplinary problems. On the contrary, a pandemic crisis calls for a plurality of patho-logical supplements to account for the joint problematic of contagion and immunization, both at the viral and affective levels, in a spirit of transdisciplinary collaboration. My hypothesis is that, to account for the complex relation between viral pathologies
and cultural pathologies, as well as their respective practices of contagion and immunization, it is useful, perhaps even urgent, to remember that it is not only the nonhuman virus that is contagious; humans’ imitative tendencies are imbued with affective properties that spread contagiously as well, from self to others—for good and ill.

Despite optimistic futuristic accounts of Homo Sapiens qua Homo Deus, arguing that “epidemics are far smaller threat to human health today than in previous millennia” (Harari 2017, 2), genealogical lenses put us in a position to see at the same time that viral contagion in an age still haunted by pandemics sets up a magnifying mirror to an all-too-human tendency to imitate characteristic of homo mimeticus. What both sapiens and mimeticus have in common is the disconcerting ability to fall under the pathological spell of emotional contagion in physical crowds offline and conspiracies theories in virtual publics online, which call for heterogeneous forms of cultural immunization in critical practice.

The Patho(-)Logies of Homo Mimeticus

While the coronavirus pandemic generated a viral contagion that was immediately placed under the lens of epidemiologists and virologists to effectively develop a plurality of vaccines, it has also made clear that a viral pandemic infects and affects the totality of human activities in complex ways that involve the humanities and social sciences as well. In particular, it made visible on a global scale what philosophers from Plato and Aristotle onward considered to be one of humans’ defining characteristics, for which there is no single effective immunization: namely, that homo sapiens is an extremely mimetic species, not only in the aesthetic sense that humans represent the world via realistic media like painting, theater, cinema, TV, and now a proliferation of new media with the potential to represent realities that are epistemically false—though in the digital age we continue to do that well and with alarming efficacy. Humans are also imitative in the psychological, sociological, anthropological, and political sense that we imitate, often unconsciously, other people, be they real or fictional, embodied or represented, including their emotions, habits, and beliefs, which go viral online and spread “contagiously,” from self to others, offline as well.

The metaphor of going viral is not accidental. Rethinking mimesis in the age of the return of viral pandemics makes us see that imitation turns out to
share some important characteristics with viruses: it is linked to a type of reproduction that is not limited to representation but affects and infects human bodies; it does so in ways that operate via microimitations that are imperceptible to the naked eye; it renders bodies vulnerable to a type of contagion that is amplified by proximity with others; and last but not least, it generates effects that go beyond clear-cut categories of good and evil, health and sickness, and cannot be contained within unilateral, universal, and transhistorical diagnostics.

For instance, on the one hand, scientifically informed models of behavior based on a rational knowledge, or *logos*, can be amplified affectively by public personalities (presidents, celebrities, actors) who have the power to turn to social media to promote therapeutic or patho-*logical* forms of prevention like social distancing, mask-wearing, and vaccination; on the other hand, the proliferation of pathological cultural models among the same categories of “exemplary” personalities can also spread irrational sentiments that have nothing to do with the *logos* of science but are animated by a resentful *pathos* that promotes pandemic denial, mask protests, vaccine hesitancy, and conspiracy theories, among other cultural pathologies infecting *Homo sapiens*. The latter “go viral” in the metaphorical sense that they reproduce, like a virus, at impressive speed in the virtual world of Internet simulations. They also go viral in the sense that they retroact, via spiraling feedback loops, to affect and infect social practices offline in ways that literally disseminate viral contagion among homo mimeticus.

This structural ambivalence entails therapeutic insights that provide a humanistic supplement to the medical sciences. If the virus can, in the weakened and genetically modified form of a vaccine, provide a therapeutic immunity to the viral infection, mimesis as we have seen in part 1, is equally endowed with double pharmaceutical properties. Since classical antiquity, in fact, the all-too-human propensity to imitate others (be they real or fictional) has been considered as both pathological and therapeutic. Already Plato, in fact, considered mimesis as a “*pharmakon*,” that is, as Derrida famously noted, both “medicine and/or poison” (1981b, 70). Or, to put it in our diagnostic language, if the coronavirus generated a form of mimetic contagion that spread a multiplicity of contagious *pathologies* that affected *Homo sapiens* on a plurality of levels—biological, psychological, sociological, anthropological, political, economic, etc.—it can also serve as a therapeutic and reflective mirror that provides the necessary balancing distance to mobilize different discourses or *logoi* to account for the dynamic of mimetic affects or *pathoi*—what I called, “patho-*logies*” to emphasize the transdisciplinary discourses or *logoi* internal to a theory of homo mimeticus attentive to the contagious power of *pathos*. 
Disseminated by globalization, indifferent to national borders, favored by political inefficiency, and obsessively followed by (new) media, true and false, a pandemic is indeed a “total social fact” insofar as this heterogeneous phenomenon is at “once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on” (Mauss 1966, 76). It thus escapes cultural generalizations that aim to contain the proliferating effects of viral and affective contagion within unitary theoretical diagnostics that may still have worked in a relatively secure nation state in the postwar period but are no longer adequate for a present interconnected and increasingly precarious world. In the wake of the differentiated reality of the coronavirus pandemic and the future pandemics that will continue to haunt an increasingly interconnected world, the reality of viral contagion leads us to correct unifying theories of mimetic contagion that were still dominant in the past century in order to continue furthering a different theory of imitation for the present century.

We already encountered this precursor in part 1 in the context of structuralist controversies in theory, but it is now the moment to revisit his mimetic theory in light of the reality of contagion in practice. In the 1970s the French literary theorist René Girard rightly noticed important similarities between the viral contagion internal to epidemics and the affective contagion that follows it, shadow-like. He did so via hermeneutical analyses of renderings of “the plague in literature” that uncovered what he considered a referential “mimetic crisis” (1974, 834) hiding behind literary representations of epidemic crises—from Sophocles to Shakespeare, Dostoevsky to Thomas Mann, among others. As Girard puts it: “Between the plague and social disorder there is a reciprocal affinity” (834) based on the fact that both are “contagious” in nature; he adds: “The appropriateness of the metaphor comes, obviously, from this contagious character” (836). If the plague is contagious in the viral or literal sense, violence is indeed contagious in the affective or metaphorical sense. This remains a timely observation.

And yet it is not how Girard intends the metaphor to work. In a striking mirroring inversion of perspective, Girard overturns the relation between reality and metaphor, as he claims that the plague in literature does not literally represent the contagious reality of viral contagion. On the contrary, viral contagion, as he puts it, “becomes a transparent metaphor for a certain reciprocal violence that spreads, literally, like the plague” (836). In this metaphorical overturning, it is the contagious nature of violence, not of the plague, that should be taken literally for Girard. Put differently, the plague as represented in literature turns out to be a mere “transparent metaphor” for the mimetic violence that is the center of Girard’s own theory of violence and the sacred. Contagious violence is thus rendered literal
whereas the plague is metaphorical, which does not mean that this interpretation of the plague renders us immune to viruses.

Girard’s hermeneutical move might be in line with his mimetic theory but is invalidated by viral realities in a way that is at least double. First, writing from the position of a still relatively immune nation state, in an optimistic period of capitalist expansion, Girard downplayed the danger of viral contagion. Like Harari after him, he argues, for instance, that we “live in a world less and less threatened by real epidemics” (1974, 845). And in a striking rewriting of the historical horrors the plague and viral infections generated, from the Black Death in medieval Europe to the Spanish flu that went global 1918, Girard adds:

This fact looks less surprising now, as we come to realize that the properly medical aspects of the plague never were essential; in themselves, they always played a minor role, serving mostly as a disguise for an even more terrible threat that no science as ever been able to conquer. (845)

What applies to theories in general applies to mimetic theories as well: they may aspire to universal ideas characteristic of the *vita contemplativa*, but the historical reality of the *vita activa* now redoubled by a *vita mimetica* allows us to put the theory to the test. Unfortunately for humans, even recent history shows that Girard’s theory did not withstand the test of time: from the plague of HIV to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been living in an increasingly precarious world open to infections that are likely to literally, rather than metaphorically, plague an increasingly interconnected and interdependent humanity in the future as well. To his merit, in his last writings Girard corrected his diagnostic and recognized the danger of pandemic contagion. Still, his revisions did not go far enough. He retained the category of crisis of differences to account for the dynamic of the pandemic, encouraging theorists of imitation of the future to supplement his diagnostic to account for the differences a pandemic generates—which takes us to the next invalidation.

Second, Girard claims that both viral and affective contagion generate a state of “undifferentiation” (2010, 24) that affects all subjects equally, generating what he often calls “mimetic crisis” or “crisis of differences.” What he suggests is that individual, social, economic, political, national, and other differences are erased by the double dynamic of mimetic contagion, be it literal or metaphorical, in transhistorical ways Girard considers constitutive of “the eternal ethos of the plague” (1974, 834). While humans are indeed all vulnerable to both forms of medical/affective contagion that erase differences in the sense that all are equally vulnerable to infection in abstract theory, the coronavirus pandemic
taught us that the opposite is true in clinical and cultural practice. In fact, both viral and social contagion generate an exacerbation of a plurality of medical, social, cultural, and political differences that need to be considered. It is not simply that certain social categories (the elderly, patients with pre-existing conditions, exposed workers) are more vulnerable than others. The toll of viral infections, in fact, manifests itself radically differently across the world, depending on age, ethnic group, class, nationality, economic status, and so on.

Differences were also radically amplified by the politics of each national countries and the social and economic inequalities that differentiated the levels of infection significantly. Countries like Brazil and India, populations like African Americans in the US, and undocumented migrants in Europe and other parts of the world made these differences strikingly visible, and the unequal rollout of vaccines across the globe subsequently confirmed it. Rather than “undifferentiation,” then, the coronavirus pandemic magnified the differentiation caused by sociopolitical pathologies like systemic racism that plague what Frantz Fanon called “the wretched of the Earth” while also revealing class inequality, systemic racism, and sexism that continues to structure white nationalist patriarchal structures, not to speak of the violent divide between the Global North and Global South that deprives silent majorities of what Achille Mbembe calls “the universal right to breathe” (2020).

From the contemporary perspective of new mimetic studies attentive to a plurality of differences, then, we can say that violence is not only physical but manifests itself in a number of structural and systemically pervasive forms of oppression; and precisely for this reason, it is crucial to account for the interplay between two different, entangled, and quite literal and all-too-real pathologies such as viral reproduction and sociopolitical mimesis. If Girard’s mimetic theory still accounts for the scapegoating mechanisms internal to ritual crises that routinely direct violence against minorities, it no longer adequately reflects the complex reality of a pandemic crisis, which now calls for patho-logical supplements. For future-oriented thinkers of mimesis concerned with the real and rather differentiated implications of a pandemic crisis, the coronavirus pandemic gives us a timely occasion to rethink mimesis and theorize contagion again to prepare for crises to come. Rather than a hermeneutic that uncovers a sameness hidden behind an epidemic plague treated metaphorically, then, genealogical lenses propose a diagnostic of the multiplicity of differences that emerge from the patho(-)logical interplay of social contagion and viral contagion, both constitutive of homo mimeticus.

A genealogy of mimesis that looks back to the past in order to cast light on the patho(-)logies of the present does not provide a unitary answer, universal
structure, or transhistorical theoretical system to frame a constantly changing phenomenon. Instead of taking its starting point in a triangulation of mimetic desire still of Oedipal inspiration, it foregrounds an all-too-human vulnerability to what I have been calling mimetic pathos (both good and bad) and the critical distance that can potentially ensue if we step further back to a longer genealogy of precursors. This paradoxical double movement between mimetic pathos and critical distance, or “pathos of distance,” is indeed the defining dynamic of our new theory of imitation. A central concept in Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality that unmask a magical faith in other worlds “behind the world [Hinterwelt]” (1996a, 5), Nietzsche informs my genealogy of viral mimesis as well, urging us to remain faithful to this world. On the shoulder of Nietzsche but also of the long chain of thinkers we have encountered so far, I take three genealogical steps in this immanent direction to outline a diagnostic of mimetic patho(-)logies in the age of pandemic contagion. I take two steps back to re-evaluate the relation between mimesis and contagion for the ancients in Plato’s philosophy and for the moderns in crowd psychology. These steps back will then allow me to leap ahead toward the challenge of immunization in an age dominated by conspiracy theories that reload the contagious powers of false shadows for a digital age constitutive of the vita mimetica.

Vita Mimetica: Ancient Shadows, New Simulations

First step. Origins, we have learned, are never simply pure and singular. Yet given the dominant translation of “mimesis” as representation or copy of an original model, it might still be useful to briefly step back to the one of the most influential thinkers who introduced this concept in western thought. According to Plato’s philosophical logos, mimesis, pathos, and cultural pathologies cannot easily be dissociated.

Let us in fact briefly recall that when the concept of mimēsis first appears on the philosophical scene in books 2 and 3 of the Republic, Plato does not introduce an ontological concept that reduces the phenomenal world to a visual copy, shadow, or “phantom [phantasma]” of transcendental ideas, turning artistic representations into phantoms of phantoms “at three removes” (1963c, 597c) from the metaphysical world of intelligible Forms. We will have to wait until book 10 for this famous critique of mimesis qua ontological mirror based on the logic
of visual likeness, adequation, and representation to appear, a metaphysical and epistemic critique Plato also theorized via the example of the painter and continues to cast a shadow on contemporary limitations of mimesis to the sphere of realistic aesthetics.

Instead, as we have insisted since the beginning, in the *Republic* mimesis is first introduced as a theatrical, dramatic concept in line with its etymological origins—from *mimos*, actor as well as performance—linked to theatrical impersonations that concern first and foremost the education (*paideia*) of youth in the Greek city (*polis*) in a period still partially dominated by an oral culture. As Eric Havelock argues in *Preface to Plato* (1963), Plato’s critique of mimesis must be understood in the context of what he calls an “oral state of mind” (1963, 41), in which the actor or reciter of poetry (rhapsode) speaks in mimetic (first-person) rather diegetic (third-person) speech, has “the power to make his audience identify almost pathologically and certainly sympathetically with the content of what he is saying” (45). Both at the level of diction (*lexis*) and content (*logos*) of mimetic spectacles, dramatic impersonations of the *Iliad*, the *Theogony*, or the tragedies and comedies, Plato says, under the mask of Socrates, have a pathological effect on the public not only because they do not represent the truth about the gods (epistemic reasons) but also because the public participates emotionally in these spectacles by symp-pathos (feeling with) endowed with contagious affective properties that, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, are currently returning to the forefront of the theoretical scene (political reasons).

Reframed within the political context of the city or polis, the famous Allegory of the Cave in book 7 of the *Republic* is brought closer to home in this period of seclusion within our private caves, reduced freedom of movement, and intensified mediatized exposure to (mis)representations that shadow reality and spellbind us to a plurality of screens. Remember that in the Platonic myth, the chained prisoners are spellbound by a “puppet show,” projected by carriers of simulacra walking in front of a fire generating “shadows cast from the fire on the wall that fronted them [the prisoners].” The prisoners mistake the shadows for reality because they lack the critical distance of the philosopher who, with the help of a guide, can take rational steps back from the illusory sphere of sensorial perception, break the chain that ties him to these projections, and start the steep, ascending path of thought characteristic of the *vita contemplativa*—as a metaphysical tradition that goes from Plato to Heidegger suggests. And yet, depending on how we interpret those shadows projected in the cave, we have also seen and felt that the myth is open to alternative, more immanent and embodied perspectives. In particular, it welcomes interpretations attentive to the imperceptible dynamic
of affective contagion, or pathos, within a cave haunted by the powers of phantasmal simulations that have spellbinding, hypnotic, and magnetic effects—a psychological perspective attentive to what we called *vita mimetica*.

If we now further this genealogy of mimesis from our contemporary problematic, the old myth still helps us to reflect critically on new (social) media that, perhaps more than ever, cast a magnetic, contagious, and intoxicating spell on the human imagination. As film critics from André Bazin onward routinely noted, the Allegory of the Cave anticipates the affective powers of cinema to induce spellbinding effects that magnetized human chameleons in the past century and continue to magnetize homo mimeticus in the present century. As Edgar Morin puts it: “Our needs, our aspirations, our desires, our fears, project themselves not only into the void as dreams and imaginings, but onto all things and all beings” (2005, 85). While cinema reproduces the Platonic scenario of the cave in the twentieth century, in the digital age the “imitation-hypnotic” (96) effects of moving shadows continue to operate on a variety of smaller screens, which, from TV to computers, tablets to smartphones, intensify the power of images to cast a spell generating an intoxicating psychic dispossession of the ego via black mirrors that are haunting the twenty-first century.9

What was true for the Platonic prisoners remains true for contemporary spectators and digital users: if phantoms of reality disseminated via new media online are often rightly stressed in contemporary discussions of the powers of lies in the age of “post-truth,” it is equally crucial to stress the affective (Dionysian) receptivity of the phantom of the ego that makes homo mimeticus vulnerable to (Apollonian) illusions in the first place. These contagious illusions are particularly virulent in periods of crisis, like a pandemic crisis or a war, and can lead to collective intoxications that manifest themselves in political pathologies (pandemic denial, antimask protests, conspiracy theories, etc.) that amplify exponentially the reach of the viral pathology via hypermimetic media constitutive of our process of becoming posthuman.10

Thus reframed, we are in a better position to re-evaluate the relevance of mimesis in the age of viral reproduction. Plato’s allegory reaches into the present, as it foreshadows a world of simulation that postmodern critics were perhaps too quick to disconnect from the problematic of mimesis. Contra Plato, Jean Baudrillard, for instance, diagnosed a hyperreal world of simulacra and simulation that no longer rests on the logic of “imitation” but, as he puts it, “liquidates all referents” insofar as the hyperreal, “substitutes the real with signs of the real” (1981, 11; my trans.). Influential at the twilight of the last century, this postmodern diagnostic of simulation is of loose Nietzschean inspiration. Yet it
The Age of Viral Reproduction

The inversion of perspective from mimetic phantoms to mimetic egos that already informed Nietzsche’s critique of Platonism is now redoubled by our critique of postmodernism. We have seen that in light of the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s, the neurosciences provide an empirical confirmation that visual representations, no matter how far removed or disconnected from reality, have the performative power to generate contagious reflexes; images seen from a visual distance can trigger neurological discharges that generate mimetic pathos via an immediate form of communication that is not necessarily mediated by consciousness but generated “embodied simulations” (Gallese 2005) nonetheless. In light of humans’ confirmed receptivity to mirroring reflexes caused by perception of movements (real or represented, true or false), it is thus urgent to provide a mimetic supplement to postmodern diagnostics of hyperreality prominent at the twilight of the last century that no longer account for the catastrophic realities of the present century. In fact, hyperreal simulations disconnected from the logic of representation have the performative power to retroact on the plastic brains and porous bodies of homo mimeticus via feedback loops that blur the line between truth and lies, origins and copies, facts and alternative facts, digital simulations and embodied imitations, generating shadows that are far removed from reality indeed; and yet, they can also performatively induce deeply felt, false, and intoxicating beliefs that trigger contagious actions that are socially pathological and are endowed with the immanent power to amplify viral contagion in real life. I call this looping effect whereby hyperreal simulations retroact on mirroring reflexes hypermimesis. I do so to stress that the hyperreal may no longer be subordinated to the logic of representation but continues to be rooted in the all-too-real laws of imitation to be revisited from the transdisciplinary angle of new mimetic studies.

Now that we have reloaded this ancient myth on the contagious powers of mimesis whose intention was to dispel artistic lies as shadows in the past, let us continue to uncover the truth on the contagious power of hypermimetic simulations in the present. As a significant section of the world population was holed up in private caves during multiple lockdowns in what was the first world pandemic to be simultaneously shadowed and redoubled by digital media, practices of social distancing in privileged countries protected Homo sapiens from the epidemic contagion and the viral pathology it spread. Still, homo mimeticus
was far from immune from affective contagion and the social pathologies a *vita mimetica* also entails. On the contrary, chained to the continuous flow of daily news on a plurality of digital devices that amplified the pathos—especially in its link to *penthos*, suffering—generated by the still growing number of victims, a contradictory double movement well familiar to genealogists of mimesis began to take shape.

With some critical distance, increased by the growing number of theoretical reflections on the systemic and highly differentiated implications of the pandemic crisis, this double movement allows us to return to our driving question whereby we started in more specific diagnostic terms. I reframe it as follows: in the case of the coronavirus pandemic, we are indeed facing a hybrid viral/virtual phenomenon in which the viral pandemic is shadowed by an obsessive media focus on the spread of the virus that not only generates pathos for the real victims; the pandemic also generates a multiplicity of conspiracies theories that challenge the logos of science and disseminate magical causal explanations that reload the mimetic faculty in the age of the Internet. It does so by directing responsibility for complex systemic problems toward simple imaginary scapegoats (from Bill Gates and 5G to Corona beer) that made a significant part of *sapiens* lose the sense of the reality of the pandemic itself.

Given the systemic complexity of the pandemic, even among philosophically informed perspectives, some wondered: did rational *Homo sapiens* driven by the pathos of homo mimeticus lose sight of the proportions between the mass-mediatised phenomenon and the pandemic itself—as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben controversially claimed at the outset of the pandemic, as he compared COVID-19 to a “normal flu” and condemned the Italian government’s “disproportionate response” qua “state of exception” (2020) from a philosophical distance? Alternatively, and considered from the other end of the spectrum, is the coronavirus pandemic a symptom that humanity has reached a tipping point and that we are now facing an epochal transformation that is likely to generate even more catastrophes—as Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek writes with pathos in *Pandemic!,* when he claims that the virus will “destroy the foundations of our lives” (2020). Or should we rather forge a complex middle path between pathos and distance, as our genealogical lenses have encouraged us to do, beginning, middle, and end?

Before finding this middle path, the patho(-)logies of contagion remind us that the (new) media are certainly not a transparent window onto the world but should be framed within the long history of mimesis, which I schematically and partially reconstruct as follows:
1) at the dawn of philosophy, Plato (in)famously introduced the trope of the “mirror” to account for different ontological degrees of reality predicated on a philosophical logos that denounces mimesis as a phantasm of a phantom;

2) at the twilight of metaphysics, writing with and contra Plato, Nietzsche overturned the diagnostic by relying on the logic of pathos, or patho-logy, to unmask the power of phantoms to take possession of the modern ego;

3) jump-starting mimetic theory from a romantic source of inspiration, Girard diagnosed mimesis as a state of undifferentiation predicated on the Dionysian logic of violent pathos (with Nietzsche), while framing this logic in an ideal triangular form that culminates in a scapegoating mechanism that (with Plato) operates as a pharmakos;

4) at the end of metaphysical spectrum, Baudrillard, with Nietzsche, contra Plato, rejected the doubling logic of the mirror at the twilight of realism by introducing a hyperreal world of simulation that has nothing to do with imitation.

This is a schematic and rather partial genealogical account that does not do justice to the complex genealogy of homo mimeticus we selectively reconstructed in this book. Still, it allows us to see some of the shoulders on which we provisionally stand to look further ahead.

Now, pushing with and against this genealogy, I convoked the trope of the magnifying glass we have seen both Morin and Nancy also use to diagnose pathological phenomena rooted in material process of viral and affective reproduction infecting homo mimeticus in differentiated ways. Once doubled by a heterogeneous media landscape, attention to the duplicity of mimetic patho(-)logies reveals how new media, while not having access to a stabilizing essence of truth can nonetheless either faithfully reproduce a scientific logos to inform the population or, alternatively, spread pathological lies via the power of mimetic pathos to deform and, in the case of conspiracy theories, dissolve the contours of reality. Both true and false forms of communication can in turn generate hypermimetic processes that do not simply mirror an ideal immutable theory—for the logos on the virus evolves as scientific knowledge does; nor do they reveal a metaphorical truth hidden at the foundation of the world—for viral and affective contagion operate on two different but related and equally real levels of contamination. Rather, they generate spiraling feedback loops between the pathology of viral contagion and affective contagion whereby the latter is not simply an effect of
viral contagion but also a cause of it. This dynamic looping effect can in turn lead to pathological effects (as in the case of pandemic denial) and patho-logical affects (as in the case of legitimate fear), depending on the message communicated to human faculties that are as sapient as they are mimetic faculties.

Narratives of linear progress based on the logos of science give us hope that the vaccine rollout will eventually put this pandemic to a global stop, though a complete elimination of a protean virus seems increasingly unlikely. At the same time, this logos should not underestimate the looping effects of false accounts of reality that convince by drawing on the intoxicating pathos of contagion to work contra immunization in insidious ways critical theorists can analyze from a patho-logical distance. At its very minimum, a critical logos on mimetic pathos can be put to use to dispel one of the greatest myths that should have been unmasked by the horrors of the twentieth century but still informs “scientific” approaches to the human in the twenty-first century: namely, the ideal of a fully rational, autonomous, and self-sufficient creature characteristic of the subject of Aufklärung fails to account for a vita mimetica that was already at play in the classical period, makes a massive comeback in the modern period, and is now casting a long shadow on the present and future as well.

Modern Contagion: Microbes, Crowds, Publics

Second step. The connection between mimesis and affective contagion became central to sociological reflections in the last decades of nineteenth century, which saw unprecedented numbers of people assembled in cities. The phenomenon of the “crowd” (foule, Masse, folla) gave rise to transnational theories of crowd behavior that after a period of massive implementation in the 1920s and 30s, were somewhat neglected in the second half of the twentieth century yet are currently returning to the forefront of critical attention in the present century in the context of political crises. This mimetic, or rather, hypermimetic phenomenon deserves to be revisited in the context of pandemic crises as well.

Founding figures of crowd psychology—like Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde in France, Wilfred Trotter and William McDougall in England, and, later, Sigmund Freud and Elias Canetti in Austria—noted that when people are assembled in a physical crowd or, at one remove, become part of a virtual public, while reading newspapers for instance—and today, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube,
etc.—emotions are transmitted from self to other in an irrational, unconscious, and as they would say, “contagious” way. As Le Bon puts it in his widely popular *The Crowd* (1895): “In a crowd every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest” (2002, 7). Already prior to Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde had expanded the diagnostic from the crowd to account for the social bond tout court by considering society in terms of flows of imitation. Thus, he asks in *The Laws of Imitation* (1890): “And this similitude [in opinions and emotions] is it not due to a flow of imitation which can be accounted for by needs and ideas disseminated by previous imitative contagions [contagions imitatives]?” (2001, 50; my trans.).13

Well before Girard, then, both Le Bon and Tarde paved the way for mimetic studies by using the term “contagion” metaphorically to indicate an invisible transmission of emotions that spread, viruslike, from self to others, blurring the porous line between inside and outside while generating an affective contagion that, we should add, has spiraling systemic implications for viral contagion as well.

Despite the numerous and still underexplored analogies between crowd psychology and mimetic theory, it is important to stress that the metaphorical use of *contagion* in crowd psychology differs significantly from Girard’s theory—and in this difference lie additional foundations for furthering a new theory of homo mimeticus. If Girard interpreted the plague in literature as a metaphor for a more fundamental dynamic of contagious violence, crowd psychologists invert the perspective and draw inspiration from the reality of medical contagion to metaphorically account for the psychosocial dynamic of affective contagion. The benefits of this inversion are plural: first, the metaphorical use of the term “contagion” does not dispute the danger or reality of bacterial or viral contagion; on the contrary, it draws on the language of medical contagion to account for the disconcerting capacity of emotions in a crowd to spread invisibly, from self to others, like a microbe or virus. Writing in fin de siècle France, both Le Bon and Tarde borrowed the concept of *la contagion* directly from Louis Pasteur’s then relatively new discovery of microbes to account for diseases like cholera and rabies.

Second, confronted with the disconcerting emotional suggestibility of urban crowds, social theorists applied the concept of contagion to the collective psyche to account for the unconscious relation, or hypnotic rapport, between self and others, a mirroring relation that leads the ego to reproduce the affects of others in potentially exponential ways that go beyond familial triangles and provide alternative theoretical foundations. Crowd psychology, in fact, proposes a dyadic/rhizomatic rather triangular/familial structure at the origins of a type of contagion that resembled much more the dynamic of viral infection. In fact, a
subject driven not only by mimetic desire but by a mimetic pathos that includes desire and other affects as well, good and bad, has the power to contaminate others with the same pathos in ways that can expand exponentially to affect and infect the entire mass or crowd. The metaphor of contagion is thus well chosen to account for a dynamic of transmission that operates not only at the intersubjective level but also at the broader social and collective level. Last but not least, this metaphorical use is relevant for our diagnostic, for it shows that the social logos on affective contagion and the scientific logos on viral contagion are genealogically linked, encouraging contemporary theorists to think more about the spiraling interplay between viral and social pathologies.

How does affective contagion operate? Via a mirroring principle that belongs to a pre-Freudian tradition of the unconscious that was marginalized in the past century; yet, as we have had numerous occasions to see, genealogical lenses are bringing this tradition back to account for contagious phenomena for the present century. Both Le Bon and Tarde, in fact, like Nietzsche before them, relied on the model of hypnosis or hypnotic suggestion to account for the contagious dynamic of emotions. For Le Bon, contagion and suggestion are two sides of the same mimetic phenomenon. As he put it:

> When defining crowds, we said that one of their general characteristics was an excessive suggestibility, and we have shown to what an extent suggestions are contagious in every human agglomeration; a fact which explains the rapid turning of the sentiments of a crowd in a definite direction. (2002, 14)

It is because subjects who are part of a crowd are in a psychic state of light hypnosis, or suggestion, that they are prone to mirroring the emotions of others, going potentially as far as turning the idea of others into an action, which is the very definition of suggestion. Tarde confirms this point, as hezooms in on the neuronal mimetic principles that account for this contagious process: “the action at a distance from brain to brain that I call imitation, is assimilable to hypnotic suggestion [suggestion hypnotique]” (2001, 257 n. 1); he specifies that this mirroring/contagious mechanism via theories of hypnotic suggestion that already in the late nineteenth century assume (rightly, we now know) that in humans “nerves imitate nerves, brains imitate brains” (264). If this mirroring principle was discovered in the 1990s and attributed to “mirror neurons,” genealogical lenses confirm once again that it is more accurate to speak of a re-discovery of unconscious mirroring mechanisms already advocated by untimely figures in mimetic studies in the 1890s.
The Age of Viral Reproduction

What we must add is that this psychological tradition of the mimetic unconscious, which is attentive to mirroring reflexes, intersubjective bonds, altered states of consciousness, porous selves, psychic influences, and contagious emotional dynamics, provides a sociopolitical supplement to account for the interplay between viral and affective contagion. After all, leaders like Mussolini and Hitler were quick to put Le Bon’s lessons on how to cast a hypnotic spell on the crowd to fascist use. There is little evidence that authoritarian leaders in periods of pandemic, economic, or national crisis do not use the same affective strategies to come to power, remain in power, and in certain cases, downplay the pandemic crisis, thereby undermining immunization and amplifying its power of infection. The dynamic interplay between viral contagion and affective contagion in an age haunted by the shadow of what we called “(new) fascism” amplify the viral pathology via pathological political responses. Antidemocratic leaders like Donald Trump in the US and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, for example, revealed the plurality of ways in which a pathological politics based on antimask stance and pandemic denialism that follows conspiracy theories rather than scientific facts aggravated the viral pathology in these countries. They contributed to amplifying the number of casualties in criminal ways that, along with climate change denial, should be considered as constitutive of the politics of (new) fascism in the twenty-first century.

And yet, at the same time, pathological political responses to the epidemic also had the paradoxical effect to generate liberating and positive pathological forms of antifascist contagion. The pathos generated by systemic racial oppression, for instance, ignited antiracist protests that, under the banner of “Black Lives Matter,” also spread contagiously during periods of confinement, this time generating life-affirmative, nonviolent sympathy not only in the US but across the world. Similarly, in the UK protests against systemic violence directed against women sparked solidarity across nations to oppose sexist patriarchal societies, which, as recent studies show, render women’s lives, just like minorities and illegal immigrants, much more vulnerable and precarious in periods of pandemic crisis.

To move toward our last step, what we must add is that the same (new) fascist rhetoric that privileges use of images rather than thoughts, emotion, or pathos, rather than reason, or logos, is effective in spreading illusory legends among a suggestible crowd, which reach unprecedented proportions in the digital age. As Le Bon had already warned in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

The creation of the legends which so easily obtain circulation in crowds is not solely the consequence of their extreme credulity. It is also the result of the prodigious perversions [déformations] that events
undergo in the imagination of a throng. The simplest event that comes under the observation of a crowd is soon totally transformed [défigurer]. A crowd thinks in images, and the image itself immediately calls up a series of other images, having no logical connection with the first. We can easily conceive this state by thinking of the fantastic succession of ideas to which we are sometimes led by calling up in our minds any fact. Our reason shows us the incoherence there is in these images, but a crowd is almost blind to this truth, and confuses with the real event what the deforming action of its imagination has superimposed thereon. A crowd scarcely distinguishes between the subjective and the objective. It accepts as real the images evoked in its mind, though they most often have only a very distant relation with the observed fact. (2002, 15)

Credulity, disregard of contradictions, blind belief in false images, fantastic succession of ideas, suggestibility to repetitions, among other tendencies at play in the vita mimetica, have, indeed, the magnetic power to render a crowd dangerously vulnerable to legends. Fictions not only drive the coordinating abilities of Homo sapiens for the better; they also cast a magnetic spell on homo mimeticus for the worse. This is, after all, an old story. If we already saw it at play in Zelig (chapter 6) it harkens back to the origins of philosophy (chapter 2).

Yet the diagnostic gains new traction in a modern age (dis)informed by hypermimetic media that are mechanically reproduced on a massive scale and generate what Tarde calls a “public.” What Le Bon says of the “era of crowds [ère des foules]” is, in fact, amplified in what Tarde calls the “era of the public [ère du public]” (1901, 11; my trans.): that is, a “virtual crowd [foule virtuelle]” he considers already in 1901 the “social group of the future” (13). The public is in fact physically dispersed yet mentally connected by a simultaneous exposure to media that generates a “suggestion at a distance” (5). Taking the readership of newspapers as a paradigmatic example of a public, Tarde speaks of a mutual suggestion between readers at a distance that generates the “unconscious illusion that our sentiment was commonly shared with a great number of others” (4). Furthering this diagnostic of contagion on the shoulders of Tarde for the digital age, we might add that this suggestibility is aggravated by conspiracy theories that have no relation to facts whatsoever. And yet they operate on the mimetic unconscious nonetheless by going viral online and generating contagious behavior offline, posing a serious hypermimetic threat via cultural pathologies that still require diagnostic investigations and with which I would like to conclude.
Conspiracy Theories: The Patho-logies of Immunization

Two steps back to the ancient and modern foundations of philosophy allow us to make a last step—or maybe jump—ahead to present conspiracy theories that cast a shadow on the future of new mimetic studies as well. Isolated by lockdowns, exposed to a plurality of new media that rely on algorithms to amplify already held beliefs, *homo sapiens* can easily let go of a tenuous grip on rational *logos* to be driven by an irrational *pathos*, shot through by anxiety, fear, and resentment, but also poverty, dispossession, and lack of education. Overwhelmed by conflicting (dis)information, a growing number of the world population is increasingly threatened by the spread of conspiracy theories that go viral online, and, in a spiraling hypermimetic loop, generate contagious pathological effects offline, contaminating a phantom subject chained to a multiplicity of new media programmed to amplify exponentially the mimetic faculty in the digital age.

Conspiracy theories provide a new name for an ancient mimetic phenomenon. As Karl Popper made clear in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), they can be traced back to a collectivist, magical, or as he calls it, “tribal” or “closed society,” animated by the mimetic faculty and dominated by poetic figures that already worried Plato at the dawn of western civilization. Of course, Popper considers Plato’s theory of justice to be tyrannical and antithetical to what he calls the “open society;” and for good reason, given the explicit antidemocratic stance of the author of the *Republic*. Thus, Popper spends considerable energy in critiquing “the spell of Plato” in the first part of his Magnus opus of political theory predicated on the thesis that “totalitarianism belongs to a tradition which is just as old or just as young as our civilization itself” (Popper 2020, xlii). Plato’s political solution to posit a philosopher-king who imposes the *techne* of the *logos* from the top down to censor the *pathos* of poets is indeed complicit with mimetic pathologies that will be put to devastating fascist practice in the twentieth century. That is, the century from which Popper’s critique of the close society in general and magical or mimetic thinking in particular is launched, since he wrote the book during World War II.

And yet, with respect to Popper’s specific diagnostic of the contagious powers of mimesis, this agonistic relation with Plato might not be as clear cut as it first appears to be. Popper, in fact, acknowledges Plato’s “overwhelming intellectual achievement” (xli) in terms that convey admiration for what he calls “Plato’s power of diagnosis” (2020, 163). As in the case of Nietzsche but for different reasons, Popper’s oppositions to Plato may be yet another instance of *mimetic*
agonism, for he fights his exemplary opponent with some of Plato’s diagnostic moves. Taking the paradigmatic example from Plato’s critique of mimesis in book 3 of Republic with which we started, Popper notes that in Homer’s Iliad the human vicissitudes during the Trojan war were seen as “enforced by a supernatural will,” driven by the god’s decisions located in an Olympic and magical afterworld, to use Nietzsche’s phrase. As Popper puts it: “The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War is gone. The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups” (306) that, to this day, continue to cast a spell on homo mimeticus in this world. The mimetic faculty, as we have seen, is open to influences for the best but also tends to presuppose a magical individual intention to account for big systemic events for the worse. As Popper specifies: “whatever happens in society—especially happenings such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages, which people as a rule dislike—is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups” (306). Tribalism, magic, and irrational associations between great historical events in this world and great transcendental causes animated by powerful forces in other worlds are characteristic of a closed society, which as Plato foresaw, is under the magnetic spell of powerful myths.

But Popper goes further. He foresees that these mimetic powers can resurface with a vengeance in what he calls an “abstract society.” That is, a technology-mediated, (new) media-dependent, modern society in which people “have no, or extremely few, intimate personal contacts, who live in anonymity and isolation, and consequently in unhappiness” (2020, 166). Popper’s avowedly exaggerated thought experiment in the 1940s became a reality in the 2020s and should now ring a bell:

We could conceive of a society in which men [sic] practically never meet face to face—in which all business is conducted by individuals in isolation who communicate by typed letters or by telegrams, and who go about in closed motor-cars. (166)

Needless to say, this has been the very condition of good part of the world population during the first global lockdown in the digital age during the COVID-19 pandemic. The abstract society is now our actual, individualistic, atomistic and hypermediated society. Given the complexity of an event such as a pandemic, simple intentional explanations have gone viral online: from considering the virus as a biological weapon to linking the vaccine to microchip implants, from blaming 5G technology to scapegoating Bill Gates and considering the
pandemic a hoax, the conspiracies are many in what has been called “an ocean of misinformation” (Stein et al. 2021, 1). And given the lonely, isolated, and suggestible status of homo mimeticus whose genealogy we have traced, no wonder that the mimetic faculty predicated on the pathos of magical thinking was reloaded in a period of crisis—with a vengeance.

What defines conspiracy theories from antiquity to the present is that they provide a simple, unifying, direct, and often grand causal explanation for complex systemic problems that defy singular explanations. As Umberto Eco notes, commenting on Popper, conspiracy theories “purport to offer explanations in ways that appeal to people who feel they’ve been denied important information” (Eco 2014). More recently, in an authoritative collection on the subject, Michael Butter and Pieter Knight group conspiracy theories under the heading of “nothing happens by accident; nothing is at it seems; and everything is connected” (2020, 1). They then summarize the main characteristics of conspiracy theories as follows:

they assume that everything has been planned and nothing happens by coincidence; they divide the world strictly into the evil conspirators and the innocent victims of their plot; and they claim that the conspiracy works in secret and does not reveal itself even after it has reached its goals. (Butter and Knight 2020, 1) 

Paradoxically, then, as conspiracy theories proliferate online, the public is encouraged to play the role of “master of suspicion” (Ricoeur’s phrase), supplementing Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in uncovering latent truths behind manifest scientific contents that are, for an increasing number of believers in conspiracies, deemed too factual to be true. No training in hermeneutics is of course presupposed. Consequently, the “master of suspicion” quickly turns into the slave of conspiracies that appeal to an all-too-human, and now posthuman, suggestibility to a will to mime whose magical-magnetic-mirroring-unconscious powers our genealogy of homo mimeticus has been urging to take seriously for some time.

In theory, unmasking the falsity of conspiracies is not difficult for researchers given the former’s lack of empirical foundations. And yet, since they generate a magical hypermimetic pathos that operates on the mimetic faculty in practice, effectively countering them via a rational logos alone is not sufficient—for the power of logos is precisely what the pathos of conspiracies defy altogether. If we agree with Popper that conspiracy theories are as old as Homer at the level of the message, we should add that (new) media rely on algorithms that amplify
the powers of the mimetic unconscious by feeding users’ misinformation that reinforces already held beliefs (or confirmation bias), generating bubbles that create, via social media and Internet channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube...), alternative or parallel worlds that can all-too-easily be mistaken for the “real” world. This challenge is especially visible with respect to the plurality of conspiracies that deny the danger of a pandemic (or the reality of a war for that matter) in a period of general crisis, isolation, and hyperconnectivity to a multiplicity of contradictory information, both true and false.

Conspiracies not only generate false theories but also pathological practices. They lead homo mimeticus to deny the danger of the pandemic, counter safety measures, and spread vaccine hesitancy during an already complex and bumpy vaccine rollout that, in addition to medical, political, and economic hurdles, finds it is undermined by conspiracies about vaccines. As Butter and Knight confirm: “psychologists have shown that belief in conspiracy theories about vaccines or global warming leads to a refusal to vaccinate oneself or one’s children, or an unwillingness to reduce one’s carbon dioxide footprint” (2020, 6). The proliferation of conspiracies on social media supplemented by increasingly professional-looking documentaries to spread them, have performative hypermimetic effects that reach massive proportions in periods of crisis, like a pandemic crisis, in which everyone is susceptible to pathos.

This is not a minor problem that can be solved from the angle of a scientific logos alone, for rational knowledge and empirical methods are precisely what are undermined by conspiracy theories, nor can conspiracies easily be censored. Although some prohibitions are in place (with respect to Holocaust denial, for instance), the right to free speech in an open, hyperconnected, and abstract society escapes censoring mechanisms that, already at the time of Plato’s relatively closed society, could only be imagined in theory. As my genealogy of mimesis from antiquity to modernity, now reaching into the present, tried to show from different perspectives, conspiracy theories call for balancing diagnostic operations that accounts for the role of pathos in reloading the mimetic faculty in the digital age. Conversely, it turns the mimetic faculty to patho-logical use by relying on the power of positive models or examples to promote the importance of vaccination via both logical and affective means.

In the end, an awareness of the complex interplay of reason and emotions, pathos and distance, in the digital age is not only essential to viral immunization during a pandemic crisis. It is equally vital to confront crises to come, including the return of wars that put the loop of hypermimesis to devastating political use. This includes the shadow of nuclear threats that many thought relegated
to the past and now turns out to be a still possible destination for the future—or lack thereof. If we then also consider that conspiracy theories contribute to spreading climate change denial in the epoch of the Anthropocene while also promoting imaginary migrations to other planets beyond our planet, then we have no choice but to heed Zarathustra’s warning: “stay true to the Earth and do not believe those who talk of over-earthly hopes!” (2005, 12)

For all humans, be they sapiens or faber, economicus or deus, ludens or mimeticus, there is no alternative choice. Hence the urgency to join the powers of logos and pathos to affirm a metamorphosis of the spirit vital for facing crises of the future that already cast a long shadow on the present.