Homo Mimeticus

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NOTES

Introduction: Drawing Mimetic Studies

1 Dates in parenthesis following the title refer throughout to the original date of publication, or in this case, creation.

2 Contributors to the mimetic turn include J. Hillis Miller, Jean-Luc Nancy, William Connnolly, Adriana Cavarero, Jane Bennett, Christoph Wulf, Gunter Gebauer, Katherine Hayles, among other influential figures. For a representative sample of dialogic encounters, see Miller and Lawtoo 2020, Nancy and Lawtoo 2022, Connolly and Lawtoo 2021, Cavarero and Lawtoo 2021, Bennett 2017, Hayles and Lawtoo 2022, as well as the special issue of MLN 132.5 (2017), CounterText 8:1 (2022), and Journal of Posthumanism 2:2 (2022).

3 As the classicist Gerald Else argues, mimesis was still a “rare word in the fifth century [BC]”; the “first and most obvious thing about mimeisthai, whatever its meaning, is that it is a de-nominative verb based on mîmos” (Else 1958, 74). Else specifies: “It can hardly be doubted that Aristotle [in the Poetics] is alluding to mimoi, which is “the name of a Sicilian dramatic genre” (76) and entails “a miming or mimicking of the external appearance, utterances, and/or movements of an animal or a human being by a human being.” (78) For an informed overview of the history of mimesis as a “conditio humana” that starts with mîmos and goes from Plato to poststructuralism, see Gebauer and Wulf 1995; for a recent study of the image from the angle of mimesis qua performativity, see also Wulf 2022.

4 For a special issue on the “mimetic condition” in post-literary culture, see Lawtoo 2022a.

5 Mimetic studies would include mimetic theory as defined by René Girard but will not be reduced to it, as it rests on a more dynamic conception of homo mimeticus whose general contours we sketch here. For an assimilation of mimetic theory in new mimetic studies, see Borch 2019, Lawtoo 2023a, 2023b.

6 This is the case of the present book that was written thanks to funding from the European Research Council (ERC) and benefited from a transdisciplinary seminar that cut across the philosophy/arts binary, titled Homo Mimeticus Seminar (2017–).

7 See also Lacoue-Labarthe 2012b.

8 See Lesser Hippias, Plato 1963d.

9 See Lawtoo 2023a, 149–164.

10 For his analysis of Drawing Hands, see Hofstadter, 1999, 689–692.

11 Shorter versions appeared in the following journals: chapter 1 in CounterText 8.1 (2022): 61–87; chapter 3 in Modern Language Notes 134.5 (2019): 898–909; chapter 4 in Modern Language Notes 132.5 (2017): 1201–1224; chapter 5 in Effects 3 (2022): 20–33; chapter 6 in Film-Philosophy 25.3 (2021): 272–295; chapter 7 in Political Research Quarterly 74.2 (2021): 479–490. I am very grateful to all these journals for allowing me to reproduce, revise, and expand these articles to form a perspectival whole on homo mimeticus. Other articles not included here on mimetic perspectives that go from Bataille to D.H. Lawrence, Avatar to Black Mirror, conspiracy theories to the posthuman, can be found at http://www.homomimeticus.eu/publications/


On sexual mimicry, see Irigaray 1977; on racial mimicry, see Bhabha 1994, 121–131; on gender imitation, see Butler 1991; for an overview on mimesis and subjectivity, see Potolsky, 2006, 115–135.


For an early engagement with gendered/racial mimesis, see Lawtoo 2006. My engagement with postcolonial mimesis took two major figures in modernist and postcolonial literature, respectively, as paradigmatic examples—namely, Joseph Conrad and Chinua Achebe. See Lawtoo 2016, 129–209.

For Cavarero’s feminist critique of Homo erectus, see also Cavarero 2016a. A more specific genealogy of gendered forms of mimetic inclinations focusing on Cavarero, Malabou, and Butler is currently ongoing in a project I lead, titled Gender Mimesis; it supplements a gendered perspective to voices already internal to Homo Mimeticus that deserve to be developed further.

In addition to the rich studies by Gebauer and Wulf and Potolsky already mentioned, for informed accounts of mimesis up to deconstruction, see also IJsseling 1990, Spariosu ed. 1984, and Melberg 2008.

I cannot fully address posthumanism here. For a special issue on “posthuman mimesis,” see Lawtoo 2022b.

Jacque Derrida’s insight is that, since Plato, “mimesis is lined up alongside truth,” either “it hinders the unveiling of the thing itself by substituting a copy or double for what is” or by revealing it via the logic of “resemblance (homoiōsis)” (1981a, 187). Part of a deconstruction of Plato’s vertical metaphysics that reduces writing to a copy of speech, this foundational Deirdrean move nonetheless preserves the traditional metaphysical conception of mimesis as a copy, representation, or adequation. Between the lines Derrida also points to the hypnotizing powers of “sorcerers” or “magicians (pharmakeus)” (1981b, 117–119) and to a theatrical “Mime [who] imitates nothing” (1981a, 194), which he left for others to explore further. On mimesis as mime “without proper identity,” see Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 248–266. For a discussion on the role mimesis plays in deconstruction, see also Miller and Lawtoo 2020.

I articulate the fundamental differences between my theory of homo mimeticus and Girard’s mimetic theory, including his unavowed debt to Freud in Lawtoo 2013, 281-305, and 2023a, 33–80.

For an influential account of philosophy as “creation of concepts,” see Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 8–10.

On the contagious, rather than cathartic properties of (new) media violence, see Lawtoo 2023b.

For seminal studies in media studies that resonate strongly with the oral tradition internal to mimetic studies, see McLuhan 1962, 1964; for a more recent guide to digital reason attentive to imitative processes, see Baetens, de Graef, Mandolessi 2020.
Chapter 1: Birth of Homo Mimeticus

For an informed, overarching account of the history of mimesis from Plato to Derrida, see Gebauer and Wulf 1995; for a recent post-Derridean/Girardian supplement on the "mimetic condition," see CounterText 8.1 (2022).

Interesting in their own right, they have already received attention in the past century; see, for instance, Aarselff 1982.

For a genealogy of violence that furthers the mimetic turn and finds in Nietzsche a main representative, see Lawtoo 2023a, 2023b

References to Nietzsche's aphoristic works will give the aphorism's number followed by page number; in case of works divided into parts, references will be to part and section number, followed by page number. To minimally contextualize the phrase, it is Nietzsche's mirroring reply contra positivism, which reads as follows: "Against positivism, which halts at phenomena—'There are only facts—I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations'" (1968, 481:267). For an informed account of perspectivism, see Alloa 2020; for a contextualization of Nietzsche's take on metaphor in relation to consciousness and the body, see Emden 2005; on Nietzsche and the origins of language, see also Mangion 2012. What follows foregrounds the centrality of mimesis in Nietzsche's genealogy of logos (both reason and language) out of mimetic pathos.

I trace in detail Nietzsche's mimetic patho(–)logies at play in phantom egos in Lawtoo 2013, 27–83. This chapter extends the diagnostic back in time. For other studies attentive to mimesis in Nietzsche's corpus, see also Lacoue-Labarthe 1986; Parkes 1994; Siemens 2021.

For a penetrating analysis of the tensions internal to Nietzsche physio-psychology, see Staten 1990 and Pearson 2022; for a vitalist reading beyond nature/culture binary in Nietzsche, see Bennett and Connolly 2002; for an account of biopower attentive to Nietzsche patho(–)logical evaluation of mimetic infection and immunization, see Esposito 2004, 79–114.

This is arguably the source of inspiration for Roger Caillois's analogy between animal mimicry and a human psychopathology called "legendary psychasthenia," whereby the patient feels like "dissolving in space" (1938, 86–122). Nietzsche considers mimicry as an evolutionary mechanism for survival, whereas Caillois sees in it a loss of individuation akin to a psychic death. Still, Caillois's specific attention to the link between human mimetism, animal mimicry, and death is in line with Nietzsche's insight that via the "chromatic function" many animals "pretend to be dead or assume the forms and colours of another animal or of sand, leaves, lichen, fungus (what English researchers designate 'mimicry')" (Nietzsche 1982, 26:20). I shall return to Caillois in more detail in chapters 5, 6, and 7.

For a Girardian evolutionary supplement see Antonello and Gifford; for a genealogical reconsideration of Girard's Freudian epistemic foundations and the development of a Nietzschean alternative, see Lawtoo 2023a.

For an incisive and creative contestation of the nature/culture binary in Nietzsche, see Bennett and Connolly 2002. I will return to both Bennett's and Connolly's contribution to the mimetic turn in chapter 5 and 7 respectively.

Nicolas Lema Habash is particularly attentive to the political implications of the "language without logos" internal to this section, see Habash 211–215.

I first gave an account of the mimetic unconscious in Lawtoo 2013; see also Lawtoo 2019a, 2023b.
The passage specifies: “All that the philosopher asserts about humanity, however, is basically nothing more than testimony about the human being of a very restricted stretch of time” (Nietzsche 1997, 2:16).

12 See Lawtoo 2019a, 48–50.

13 For an initial account of maternal forms of nonlinguistic communication, see Lawtoo 2013, 40–43, 272–276, and Cavarero and Lawtoo 2021, 192–196.

14 See also Baehtens, de Graef, and Mandolessi 2020, 30–36

15 On maternal sympathetic instincts, see also Hrdy 1999.

16 See, for instance, Corballis 2002; Wulf 2004, 183–198; Armstrong and Wilcox 2007; Tomlinson 2015, 71; Staten 2019, 77–78. All these studies support Nietzsche’s mimetic hypothesis from different perspectives.

Chapter 2: Vita Mimetica in the Cave

1 Yuval Harari revitalizes an ancient idea, as he stresses “that belief in shared myths” is central to building “astounding networks of mass cooperation” (2014, 117, 115). This is a central historical insight still in need of a philosophical supplement. Unlike Plato, and later Nietzsche, Harari does not focus on myth’s primary medium of mass communication: namely, mimesis. Hence the need to complement the history of Sapiens with a genealogy of homo mimeticus.

2 I trace a genealogy of the phantom of the ego in Nietzsche’s thought in Lawtoo 2013.


4 If the vita contemplativa starting with Plato is clearly anti-mimetic in its theoretical orientation away from both sensible and aesthetic phenomena, the vita activa for Arendt is not less anti-mimetic. As she puts it, overturning Plato but echoing him as well, the vita activa is rooted in the uniqueness of plural individuals who are not “endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model whose nature or essence was the same for all” (Arendt 1998, 8).

5 In the Republic, Plato is critical of mimesis at the level of his logos, yet in Phaedrus he aligns philosophy with different forms of madness (mania) that include poetic and thus mimetic madness; see Plato 1961b, 244a–252a.

6 For a perceptive reframing of Plato’s critique of mimesis from the angle of techne or “knowledge-based action” that is “incompatible with the general idealizing trend of Platonic thought” and is sensitive to an immanent transmission of crafts via imitation of examples, see Staten 2019, 47–61.

7 Translations of Nancy’s Le Partage des voix are my own.

8 This chapter picks up a connection between Plato’s Ion and Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy I first noted in Lawtoo 2013, 64–66. For a rich and foundational oral corrective to a devo-calization of the Logos in western philosophy this chapter aims to further, see also Cavarero 2005.

9 A feminist precursor like Luce Irigaray called attention to the cave’s “theatrical artifice” shot through both vertical (phallic) symbols and a womb-like “theatrical pregnant enclosure [enceinte]” that destabilizes the metaphysics of the same via specular mirroring effects characteristic of a “topographic mime [mime topographique]” (Irigaray 1974, 302–304, my trans.). See also 301–320.
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10 See Burckhardt, 1998, 160–213. I first developed the productive, patho-logical dynamic of mimetic agonism via Nietzsche in Lawtoo 2013: 27–81 and then more systematically in Lawtoo 2023a, 45–57. For an informed study on Nietzsche’s agonistic philosophy that resonates with the study at hand, see also Siemens 2021.

11 For a selection of his writings on mimesis, see Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 1986, and chapter 4 in this volume.

12 On mimesis and methexis, see also Nancy 2016.

13 The full passage establishes a link between hermeneutics and rhapsody via the link of a “knowledgeable’ [savante] mimesis” (Nancy 1982, 78) and reads as follows: “Hermeneia is mimesis, but an active mimesis, creative or re-creative, or again it is a mimetic creation, but effectuated by a mimesis that proceeds from methexis, of a participation itself due to enthusiasm—unless mimesis is not the condition of this participation” (71). Cavarero’s avowed proximity to Nancy on the partage des voix is thus also implicitly a proximity to Lacoue-Labarthe, which is redoubled by their shared attention to “echoes” and the “song of the muses.” See Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 139–207, and 2005. For Nancy’s reflections on his shared thought and life with Lacoue-Labarthe, see Girard and Nancy 2015, 12–64, and Nancy and Lawtoo 2021, 151–157. I shall return to the Nancy-Lacoue shared interest in mimesis in more detail elsewhere.

14 Registering the hypnotic spell of the “contagious delirium, descending from the Muse to the audience” (2002, 51) in magnetic terms that recall the chain in the “Allegory of the Cave,” Cavarero’s interpretation struggles with this specific central question: “why do the poets-charlatans in Plato’s depiction of the cave use artifices involving sight rather than the sweet sound of verse?” (2002) Our answers share a focus on orality, embodiment, and affect. A minor difference, as I see it, is that Plato’s emphasis on vision is not only a philosophical trick to displace orality—though it is that, and the trope of the mirror in book 10 will eventually succeed in tricking metaphysically inclined minds for millennia. Vision, in fact, is also part of artistic powers that resound with the oral tradition of mimos qua performance. If I stress this, it is less for philological reasons that are past oriented and more for theoretical concerns with the amplifying effects of both visual/oral mimetic powers in urgent need of diagnostics in a present and future oriented digital age.

15 In their dialogue on the Aristotelian concept of scene (opsis), Nancy reminds us that the “dialogue is the matrix form [forme matricielle] of philosophy” (2013, 73), and Lacoue-Labarthe follows up with a detailed account of the “sharing of voices [partage des voix]” (76) generated by the lexis mimētikē of the dialogue—yet another confirmation that Nancy’s account of the sharing of voices cannot be disentangled from the problematic of mimesis as Lacoue-Labarthe understands it. On their voices in common, see also Lawtoo and Nancy 2021, 151–158.

16 Nancy confirms this point even with respect to Ion: “It is in Ion’s enthusiasm that Homer’s enthusiasm is interpreted, staged and not only to hear but also to see [à voir]” (1982, 74).


18 Even a sophisticated phenomenological interpreter of mimesis like Samuel IJsseling falls into this epistemological trap, as he writes, commenting on the same lines: “The biggest problem here is that the actors do not speak in their own name, do not mean what they say and therefore do not consider themselves responsible for what they say” (1997, 12). Thus, the “how” is subordinated by the “what.” But actors are not philosophers; they do not go onstage to mean what they say and be responsible for a logos; they go onstage to reanimate
ancient myths via the power of pathos—as Plato was the first to know, yet a chain of philosophers seems to have forgotten. For an important exception, see Havelock 1963.

I discuss the hypnotic effects of new media via the TV series Black Mirror in Lawtoo 2021.

Chapter 3: Sameness and Difference Replayed

From 2013 to 2016, I held a position as visiting scholar at the Humanities Center, where I decided to apply for an ERC grant on homo mimeticus, out of which this book was born. I thank Paola Marrati and Hent de Vries for inviting me back in 2017 for a symposium titled The Structuralist Controversy and Its Legacy 50 Years Later; William (Bill) Connolly and Jane Bennett for numerous conversations on and around mimesis; and Richard (Dick) Macksey for sharing stories about the original symposium in his mythic home library. I could not have hoped for a more inspiring genealogical context for this chapter.

For an informed deconstructive account of Girard’s theory that establishes genealogical connections—via Heidegger and Nietzsche—that go back to Plato’s Republic, see Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 102–121.


For a discussion with J. Hillis Miller on the role mimesis plays in “Mimique” and deconstruction more generally, see Lawtoo and Miller 2020.

McKenna sets out to “explicate Derrida and Girard via each other” in view of offering an anthropological supplement to deconstruction by “grounding” (1992, 24) the latter’s (linguistic) concerns with signifiers in referential (sacrificial) practices. I suggest that the agon cuts both ways, for Girard is also indebted to Derrida, though more than one influence is at play. What Girard says of Derrida’s take on Socrates’s rivalrous relation to the sophists is not deprived of strangely revealing mirroring effects that cast a shadow on Girard and Derrida as well: “he [Derrida] demonstrates that between Socrates and the Sophists, the structure of the opposition belies not the difference that Plato would like to establish but rather the reciprocity that is suggested by the recourse to one and the same word. All difference in doctrines and attitudes is dissolved in violent reciprocity, is secretly undermined by the symmetry of the facts and by the strangely revealing, even somewhat naïve use of pharmakon. This use polarizes the maleficent violence on a double, who is arbitrarily expelled from the philosophic community. From Plato right down to Nietzsche [and, we should add, Derrida and Girard] [...] the philosophical tradition has piously reaffirmed this absolute difference” (Girard 1977, 296). Perhaps. Mimetic agonism, in any case, breaks with this violent tradition of expulsion, as it underscores both similarities and differences, or better, traces the emergence of sameness and difference.

I discuss romantic agonism in more detail in Lawtoo 2023a, 54–57.

I cannot address the mimetic relation between Bataille and Girard here. For starting points see Lawtoo 2013, 284–394, and Lawtoo 2019b.

I develop a genealogy of the Oedipal unconscious in Lawtoo 2023a.

See the sibling project to Homo Mimeticus titled Gendered Mimesis, http://www.homomimeticus.eu/gendered-mimesis-c1/

For important precursors, see Salomé 2001 and Irigaray 1991.
In addition to furthering chapter 1, this section deepens a genealogy of the mimetic unconscious started in Lawtoo 2013, and 2019a.

As Roberto Esposito rightly recognizes, “birth, procreation, pregnancy constitute perhaps the most symbolically charged figure of Nietzschian philosophy—itself qualified by the author as a painful childbirth” (Esposito 2004, 113; my trans.).

See, for instance, Borch 2019, Lawtoo 2023ab.


See Garrels 2011.

Culturally informed neuroscientists are careful to inscribe their discovery in a longer genealogy of mimetic insights in the humanities they treat with respect. Thus, Rizzolatti and Sinagaglia open *Mirrors in the Brain* with a reference to the theatrical director Peter Brook, who quipped that “with the discovery of mirror neurons, neuroscience had finally started to understand what has long been common knowledge in the theater” (2008, ix). Similarly, Gallese in an interview quotes Dante to show how “art can anticipate science” and goes as far as positing “the superiority of art with respect to science” (Wojciechowski, 2011) when it comes to insights into interpersonal mimetic relations. On the relation between mirror neurons and violence see also Iacoboni 2008 and Lawtoo 2023b; on mirror neurons and cultural evolution see Ramachandran 2011 and chapter 1. Nietzsche and the genealogy of mimetic thinkers I convoke fundamentally agree with these insights.

I borrow the concept of *socius* from the French psychologist and philosopher Pierre Janet, whose intersubjective psychology is constitutive of my theory of mimesis. See Lawtoo 2013, 266–280.

As the neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran puts it, commenting on Meltzoff’s work: “It has not been proven whether mirror neurons are responsible for these earliest imitative behaviors, but it’s a fair bet. The ability would depend on mapping the visual appearance of the mother’s protruding tongue or smile onto the child’s own motor maps, controlling a finely adjusted sequence of facial muscle twitches” (2011, 127).

Chapter 4: The Plasticity of Mimesis

Derrida’s essay is, to my knowledge, still the most penetrating introduction to Lacoue-Labarthe’s theory of mimesis. For book-length introductions to his thought in general, see Martis 2006 and McKeane 2015; for special issues that foreground mimesis in particular, see *MLN* 132.5 (2017), where a first version of this chapter appeared, as well as *L’Esprit Créateur* 57.4 (2017) and *CounterText* 8.1 (2022).

Malabou delineates the “double meaning” this “speculative word” has for Hegel in Malabou 1996, 19–27.


This collective volume played a key role, at least in France, in shifting mimesis from an ontology of sameness to one of difference. Lacoue-Labarthe’s intervention in particular (the longest in the volume) started a focus on mimetic subjectivity the *Homo Mimeticus* project aimed to further almost half a century later.

Lacoue-Labarthe’s agonistic relation with Heidegger, especially the latter’s refusal to engage with the question of mimesis and Nazism, looms large in his mimetology. Yet, as Derrida
also recognized, “what he [Lacoue-Labarthe] does remains entirely different [from Heidegger]” (Derrida 1989, 28). It is this difference I find productive to further a theory of homo mimeticus in the twenty-first century.


The conference was hosted by The Humanities Center on February 18–19, 2016.

For Lacoue-Labarthe’s critique of Nazi mimetology see Lacoue-Labarthe 1987, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990; I further this critique of fascist psychology for the mimetic turn in Lawtoo 2013 and 2019b.

In the context of a discussion of “the fabulous plasticity of humans,” the ethologist Boris Cyrulnik gives a definition of culture that echoes Lacoue-Labarthe’s definition of mimesis, as he states: “As for culture, its plasticity is so great that we could say that its only permanent trait is change!” (Cyrulnik 2010, 198; my trans.)

_L’Imitation des modernes_, in my opinion Lacoue-Labarthe’s best book on the subject of mimesis, has regrettably still not been translated into English in its complete form. Selected chapters, including the essay on Diderot, have been translated and included in Lacoue-Labarthe 1989. When available, I will refer to Christopher Fynsk’s English translation; otherwise, I will quote and translate from Lacoue-Labarthe 1986.

I discuss the mimetic agon between Plato and Aristotle via the catharsis and contagion hypothesis in Lawtoo 2023a, 2023b.

Compare Derrida’s claim that the _pharmakon_ of writing has “no ‘proper’ characteristics” (1981b, 125) or that “The Mime imitates nothing” (1981a 194); see also chapter 3.

On mimesis as an improper “supplement” that serves as structural inspiration for Lacoue-Labarthe’s “mimetology,” see Derrida 1967, 289–297 and 1981ab. While this dangerous supplement goes from the moderns all the way back to the ancients, the structural matrix of this paradox emerges at the juncture of “savage” and “structuralist” thought and can be traced further back to Lévi-Strauss’s account of the Polynesian _mana_. As Lévi-Strauss puts it, outlining the “symbolic content _supplementarity_ _mana_ is a “simple form” with “zero symbolic value [valeur symbolique zéro]” “capable of becoming charged with any sort of symbolic content whatever” (qtd. in Derrida 1972, 261; Derrida’s emphasis). Once again, the traces lead us back to the 1966 Structuralist Controversy conferences discussed in chapter 3.

I am thankful to Jane for accepting my invitation to engage Lacoue-Labarthe’s thought back at Johns Hopkins in 2016, for numerous friendly conversations, and for joining forces in entangling the new materialist turn with the mimetic turn I shall discuss in chapter 8.

Despite its inversion of Platonism, Diderot’s mimetology remains of Platonic inspiration. Thus, he compares the mimetic actor to the Platonic trope of the “looking-glass” that represents a “perfect type” or “vast specter [grand fantôme]” the actor “copies,” or “imagines,” as an “unmoved disinterested onlooker” (Diderot 1992, 366). Plato’s Ion would not have disagreed (see chapter 2).

For Lacoue-Labarthe’s full commentary of this passage and its relation to Nietzsche’s account of history, see Lacoue-Labarthe 1986, 97–101; see also Didi-Huberman 2000, 59–64.

On the relation between eroticism, transgression, and mimesis in Bataille, see Lawtoo 2018a. The mimetic language of “impression” and “figure” is central to “Typography” but also to Lacoue-Labarthe’s critique of Nazism and Heidegger; see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990 and Lacoue-Labarthe 1987; on mimesis as rhythm, see “The Echo of the Subject” in Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 139–207.
“[W]e are today on the eve of Platonism,” writes Derrida, and he adds: “Which can also, naturally, be thought of as the morning after Hegelianism” (1981b, 107–108).

Chapter 5: On Animal and Human Mimicry

For an informed collection on Bataille’s influence on the linguistic turn that barely mentions Caillois, see Botting and Wilson 1997; on Bataille’s contribution to the mimetic turn making preliminary connections with Caillois, see Lawtoo 2013, 209–280, and 2018a.

For a good selection of English translations of Caillois’s work, see Frank 2003; for French readers a comprehensive selection can be found in Caillois 2008. What follows refers to both while including other books as well.

On the relevance of Bataille’s critique of (new) fascism at the College, see Lawtoo 2019, 53–128. On Caillois’s ambivalent evaluation of the sacred and the hierarchy it entails, see Hollier 1993, 56–59. As I finalize this book in the spring of 2022 Russia is currently invading Ukraine, resuscitating the horror of war in Europe and the threat of nuclear escalation globally.

For an informed introduction to Caillois see Frank 2003, 1–53; see also Hollier 1993, 55–71.

For a journal special issue on Mimicries devoted to Caillois where an abridged version of this chapter was published, see Stuker and Tumlir 2022; for an informed discussion of Caillois in the context of posthuman mimesis, see Wolf 2022.

On new materialism and mimesis, see Bennett 2017; on the recuperation of Caillois’s materialist theory of mimetism for democratic pluralism, see Bennett 2020, 74–78, 86–88. These genealogical entanglements are rooted in real encounters that took place during my appointment at Johns Hopkins from 2013 to 2016: if I invited Jane to engage Lacoue-Labarthe’s work, she reciprocated by inviting me to introduce Caillois’s work. Our exchange, as chapter 8 makes clear, is ongoing.

In what follows I translate Caillois’s mimétisme as “mimetism” and will retain “mimicry” for the instances in which Caillois uses the English term and for animal mimicry.

On his brief but informed discussion of Caillois’s theory of mimetism, see Potolsky 2006, 142–143.

As Caillois also puts it in a related essay on the praying mantis that sets up continuities between sexuality and death in the world of insects and humans: “from insect behavior to human consciousness, in this homogeneous universe, the path is continuous” (1938, 72; my trans.).

I share with Brennan not only the insight that the ego is porous to affect and thus prone to becoming a phantom ego but also that judgment is internal to unconscious transmissions of pathos from a distance, or pathos of distance. I thank Stephanie Erev for calling my attention to Brennan’s work.

Caillois was a competitive candidate for the prestigious Collège de France, but the position went to Claude Lévi-Strauss. He eventually settled for an administrative position at UNESCO that allowed him to continue writing. He was elected to the Académie Française in 1971.

The two sections that follow significantly expand an embryonic account of Caillois first initiated in Lawtoo 2016, 223–227 and subsequently expanded in the journal Effects, Stuker and Tumlir 2022, 20–35.
For an English translation I follow, unless indicated otherwise, see Caillois 1984.

For precursors on sympathetic magic, see Frazer 1952, chapter 3; Mauss 1995, chapter 1; and Lévy-Bruhl 2010.

As Frank notes, important agonistic differences will later emerge between Bataille and Caillois; on the notion of expenditure, however, Caillois stresses mirroring continuities in line with the logic of mimetic agonism: “Between Bataille and myself there was a very unusual communion of minds, a kind of osmosis with respect to basic issues—so much so that our respective contributions were often difficult to tell apart” (Caillois 2003b, 144).

On Janet’s influence on the Collège, especially on Bataille, see Lawtoo 2013, 260–282.

For a historical re-evaluation of the role of Janet in the discovery of the unconscious, see Ellenberger 1970, 331–418. Furthering Ellenberger, more recent historians of psychoanalysis re-evaluate this mimetic and agonistic relations as follows: “What was good in psychoanalysis was not new, and stemmed from Janet’s work. What was new was not good and could be safely left to Freud” (Borch-Jacobsen and Shamdasani 2012, 75).

For Janet’s detailed account of over three hundred case studies of psychasthenic patients whose symptoms range from obsessive ideas to indecision, intimidation to fatigue, amnesia to indifference, to other symptoms indicative of a loss of psychic tension, see Janet 1903, 260–397.

For the first philosophical commentary of Lacan’s psychic theory, see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1992; for an incisive account of Lacan’s complex relation with mimesis in the mirror stage in particular, see Borch-Jacobsen 1991, 43–71.

Primatologists have since shown that chimpanzees recognize their image in the mirror.

In a review of Minkowsky’s Le Temps vécu, Lacan will once again stress the importance of Caillois’s diagnostic, albeit indirectly, as he states that “the most original form of intuition of this book, although it is barely broached, at the end, [is] that of another space besides geometrical space, namely, the dark space of groping, hallucination and music, which is the opposite of clear space, the framework of objectivity. We think that we can safely say that this takes us into the ‘night of the senses,’ that is, the ‘obscure night’ of the mystic” (qtd. in Frank 2003, 90).

Before Girard, Caillois, Bataille, and the members of the Collège were indeed concerned with the power of mimesis to induce a crisis of difference. As Denis Hollier points out: due to mimetism an organism “renounces to this distinction, gives up on difference” (1993, 67), which in the context of the rise of fascism, led Caillois and the members of the Collège to “revitalize difference between difference and indifference” (68).

For a productive recuperation of both Caillois and Huizinga in the context of “Homo ludens 2.0” that resonates with homo mimeticus in its diagonal attention to aesthetics, games, and politics and the mimetization qua “ludification of contemporary culture it entails,” see Frissen et al. 2015, 15.

Chapter 6: The Human Chameleon

As critics pointed out, this formal device led initial viewers to believe in the historical existence of Zelig. See Stam and Shoat 1987, 192 n. 7, and Nas 1992, 99.

On Zelig as a “metaphor for ethnic assimilation,” see Johnston 2007; on Zelig as a “metaphor for intertextuality” predicated on “postructuralist mimesis,” which reproduces other
cinematic texts, see Nas 1992, 95; on Zelig as representative of the performative dimension of Jewish identity in the 1980s, see Stratton, 2001, 152–154.

3 See Golomb and Wistrich 2002.

4 See Lawtoo 2013, 76–83.

5 On Nietzsche’s vulnerability to affect in general, see Staten 1990; on Nietzsche’s mimetic relation to Wagner, see Girard 1978, 61–83. More recently Roberto Esposito also recognizes that “the more Nietzsche multiplies efforts to fight the immunity syndrome” characteristic of what he condemns as slaves or the herd, “the more he falls back on the semantic of infection and contamination” (2004, 100; my trans.). This paradox goes to the heart of Nietzsche’s diagnostic of modernity. My supplement is that the problematic of mimesis is at the center of this paradox in Nietzsche’s thought and modernism more generally. On the paradoxical mimetic logic that turns Nietzsche’s contagious pathology into an immunizing patho-logy, and vice versa, see Lawtoo 2013, 45–83.

6 First steps for a theory of posthuman mimesis can be found in Lawtoo ed. 2022b.

7 Given the film’s release in the 1980s psychoanalytical approaches to Zelig were informed by structuralist/linguistic recuperations of Freud. On Zelig as a case of psychic “méconnaissance” responsible for the “dissolution of personality,” see Feldstein 1985. Given the influence of Roger Caillois on Lacan’s “mirror stage” and his focus on the continuities between animal and human mimicry, it is surprising Caillois is not usually mentioned in discussions of Zelig in particular and mimetic aesthetic phenomena in general. The diagnostic that follows both benefits from and furthers Caillois’s (Nietzschean) account of mimetism we considered in chapter 5.

8 For an incisive critique of Freud that paints a “portrait of the psychoanalyst as a chameleon,” see Borch-Jacobsen 2006, 173–182. For a recent reevaluation of hysteria as a mimetic performance at play in discourses on contemporary movements, from Black Lives Matter to COVID-19, see Braun ed. 2020.

9 For an informed historical account of the role of “hypnosis” in the discovery of the unconscious, see Ellenberger 1970.

10 On the return of hypnosis in critical and social theory, see Borch ed. 2019; on the centrality of the “Bernheim effect” for psychic theories, see Borch-Jacobsen 2009, 109–125.

11 On the role of embodiment in cinema that confirms the importance of the MNS system, see also Coëgnarts and Kravanja 2015.

12 In addition to Nietzsche and Caillois, this modernist aesthetic tradition includes figures like Oscar Wilde, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, Georges Bataille, among others. See Lawtoo 2013, 2016.

13 For recent returns of attention to crowd psychology and its politics, see Borch 2012; Connolly 2017b; Lawtoo 2013, 2019b.


15 As Arendt puts it: “Without Jewish help in administrative and police work […] there would have been either complete chaos or an impossibly sever drain on German manpower.” She adds: “To a Jew this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story” (2006, 117).

Chapter 7: Banality of Evil/Mimetic Complexity

1 See Snyder 2017; Stanley 2018; Albright 2018; Connolly 2017b.

2 See Lawtoo 2019b.
As I finalize the manuscript, Russia has attacked Ukraine in a horrific war that is currently still ongoing, displacing populations (over six million so far), and brutally exterminating civilians, including women and children. The type of evil I explore in this chapter finds in a Nazi figure its most extreme paradigmatic case study, but the psychology of evil is widespread and reaches into the present. For an informed historical starting point on this “road to unfreedom” specifically attentive to the case of Russia, see Snyder 2018.

Elsewhere, Arendt also spoke of bureaucracy as a form of “domination” characterized by the “rule of Nobody” in which it is “impossible to localize responsibility and identify the enemy” (1970, 38–39).

As William Connolly notes, Arendt’s thought involved a “depreciation of the body in ethics and politics” (Connolly 1997, 15), a depreciation that affected her evaluation of the mimetic side of the banality of evil, as we shall see.

For a recent documentary not yet available as I write (except for the trailer) that integrates the Argentina Papers and Tapes to make the case, with Stangneth, contra Arendt, that Eichmann was a Nazi “devil” rather than a “banal” bureaucrat, see Mozer 2022.

On the classical sources of the *vita mimetica* see chapter 2.


As Richard Bernstein also puts it: “We still have not fully appreciated or assimilated Arendt’s insights about the banality of evil. There is an enormous temptation to think about good and evil in the most simplistic and crass ways [...] We need to understand how ordinary people can be complicit with evil deeds, including genocide” (2010, 135).

In a chapter of *The Life of the Mind* (1977) that picks up the relation “between evil and lack of thought,” Arendt clarifies that the origins of her conception of thinking are modeled on the example of Socrates, as she states: “It is this duality of myself with myself that makes thinking a true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers” (2000b, 408). And she specifies: “In brief, the specifically human actualization of consciousness in the thinking dialogue between me and myself suggests that difference and otherness [...] are the very conditions for the existence of man’s mental ego as well, for this ego actually exist only in duality” (409). I shall reframe this rational Socratic ideal in the context of an ego who is but a phantom of the ego in dialogue not with herself only but with others below.

Arendt puts here the Kantian aesthetic notion of “imagination” to use to mediate between the particular and the universal in the context of ethics. This focus on a Romantic anti-mimetic concept might have contributed to overshadow the mimetic side of Eichmann I aim to uncover.

See especially Stangneth’s account of the so-called “Sassen Interview” for historical support (Stangneth 2014, 183–310).

For a diagnostic of the mimetic pathologies at play in *Heart of Darkness* that prefigure Nazi horrors, see Lawtoo 2010, 2016, 129–171, and Lacoue-Labarthe 2012a. For an Arendtian essay on *Heart of Darkness* and the horror of the Holocaust, see Cavarero 2016b.


For an account of Eichmann’s trial that stresses Arendt’s appreciation for “storytelling as a way of combating the violence theory does to human experience” and for the theater as a “guide in her effort to understand what meaningful action might be like,” see also Swift
2009, 38, 41, 74–85. What follows supplements a mimetic perspective to Arendt’s narrative dramatization of the trial.

Commenting on the Poetics, Arendt specifies that “the specific revelatory quality of action and speech [...] can be represented and ‘reified’ only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or mimēsis, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate only to the drama, whose very name (from the Greek verb δραν, ‘to act’) indicates that play-acting actually is an imitation of acting” (1998, 187).

I reframe Aristotle’s theory of catharsis and Plato’s theory of contagion in relation to media violence for new mimetic studies in Lawtoo 2023a, 2023b.

Elon’s source is likely a June 9, 1971 letter Mary McCarthy wrote to Arendt in response to the lecture, “Thinking and Moral Considerations.” McCarthy writes: “I have one objection to your vocabulary here. ‘Thoughtlessness.’ It doesn’t mean what you want it to mean in English, not any more [...] My suggestion would be to find [...] substitutes. E.g., in one instance you yourself, page 2, come up with a synonym, which to me is preferable, ‘inability to think’” (Arendt and McCarthy 1995, 296). I am grateful to PRQ’s external reader for this philological insight.

On Arendt and Heidegger, see Wolin 2014; on Arendt and Kant, see Benhabib 2014. It is true that Kant’s “reflective judgment” is the major philosophical frame for Arendt’s conception of thinking from the point of view of the other; equally true is that Arendt is inspired by Heidegger’s claim that “thoughtlessness [Gedankenlosigkeit]” is characteristic of a technocratic “calculative thinking” that “goes everywhere in today’s world” (Heidegger 1966, 45). The prolonged exchange between Benhabib and Wolin (five articles in total), two established Arendt scholars, dramatizes the all-too-human difficulties in adopting the perspective of the other in such a politicized debate—but they both have a point: both Kant and Heidegger inform Arendt’s take on Gedankenlosigkeit. My genealogical supplement consists in reframing this concept in the specific conceptual and narrative context of Arendt’s own diagnostically Eichmann, a political diagnostic predicated on a Socratic conception of dia-logic thinking, which cannot be detached from the problematic of dramatic mimesis. That is, a problematic that neither Kant nor Heidegger, and perhaps not even Arendt herself, fully thought through—yet haunts the case of Eichmann nonetheless, rendering the banality of evil mimetically complex.

For a recent rehabilitation of “suggestion” as a key category for social thought, see Borch ed. 2019; on the mimetic unconscious, see Lawtoo 2013, 2019a, 2023b.

As noted, as I write the full documentary is not yet available. For an informed radio interview with both Mozer and Stangneth that includes excerpts, see Kotsonis and Chakrabarty 2022.

This is the thesis both Lacoue-Labarthe and I develop in Lawtoo 2010, and Lacoue-Labarthe 2012a.

Arendt adds: “Prosecution and judges were in agreement that Eichmann underwent a genuine and lasting personality change when he was promoted to a post with executive powers” (2006, 64–65).

The classical text on the psychology of the actor deprived of sensibility who can impersonate all roles without emotion and affect the public is Denis Diderot, “The Paradox of Acting”; see Diderot 1992 and chapter 4. Furthering Lacoue-Labarthe from a psychological perspective, this view is recently supported by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen who, in a detailed re-evaluation of Bernheim’s theory of suggestion, also argues that the suggestible subject “observes
the scene that one has him play, he reflects upon his state" (2009, 113). If this insight already applies to Ion, the discovery of the Eichmann tapes based on the Sassen interview in Argentina indicates that it applies to Eichmann as well; see Mozer 2022.

For an emerging mimetic turn—or re-turn of mimesis—in contemporary political theory that, in current dialogue with homo mimeticus, emphasizes the democratic/pluralist potential of the powers of mimesis under the different rubrics of the “politics of swarming,” “influx and efflux,” and “surging democracy” see, respectively, Connolly 2017a; Bennett 2020; and Cavarero 2020.

Chapter 8: Vibrant Mimesis

1 This encounter, I should specify, took place in the material world, as I held a visiting appointment at Johns Hopkins University from 2013 to 2016. It started informally in conversations that took place in a vibrant reading group, and materialized in publications that now entangle new materialism and mimetic studies in friendly collaborations.

2 For a sample of written traces of such encounters already partially registered in chapters 5 and 7, see Lawtoo (ed.) 2017, Bennett 2017, Connolly 2017b, Lawtoo 2019c, and now Bennett 2020.

3 On sympathy qua shared pathos from a distance in both Lawrence and Nietzsche, see Lawtoo 2013, 3–6, 30–45, 150–162, and Lawtoo 2020.

4 If Abrams uses the mirror/lamp distinction to indicate a shift from realism (mirror) to romanticism (lamp) (Abrams 1953), I overturn the image to indicate a re-turn to mimesis via mirroring reflexes that are not confined to a realistic mirror but affect the poetic I instead.

5 As both the notion of “repression” Bloom convokes and the triangulation with paternal figures and desires internal to both Bloom and Girard confirms, both models remain indebted to a Freudian tradition of the unconscious they attempt overturn via a romantic agonism that erases traces of influences—a romantic move at odds with a modernist genealogy based on mimetic agonism (see Lawtoo 2023a, 45–57).

6 For instance, Schopenhauer’s mediated theory of sympathy is indebted to Smith but also paves the way for a more immediate theory of Mitleid Nietzsche will echo (see Lawtoo 2013, 40–45), which is in line with Whitman too. Interestingly, even Smith leaves open a more direct mimetic possibility as he writes: “Upon some occasions sympathy may seem to arise merely from a view of a certain emotion in another person. The passions, upon some occasions, may seem to be transfused from one man to another, instantaneously, and antecedent to any knowledge of what excited them in the person principally concerned. Grief and joy, for example, strongly expressed in the look and gestures of any one, at once affect the spectator with some degree of a like painful or agreeable emotion. A smiling face is, to every body that sees it, a cheerful object; as a sorrowful countenance, on the other hand, is a melancholy one” (2002, 13).


8 See Bennett and Connolly 2020.

9 E. R. Dodds specifies: “Aristotle compares the man [sic] in a state of passion to men asleep, insane or drunk: his reason, like theirs, is in suspense” (1973, 185). Before Aristotle, Plato had already specified that this suspension of reason, whereby the subject is possessed, is not deprived of enthusiastic, magnetic, and electrifying properties characteristic of a type of po-
etc.

Notes

etic inspiration akin to intoxication, eroticism, and madness or mania, which Nietzsche will later group under the rubric of Dionysian mimesis. See chapter 2.

The encounter that sealed this additional genealogical connection can be traced back to Bennett 2017 and Lawtoo 2017.

Chapter 9: The Age of Viral Reproduction

In her contribution to the mimetic turn in posthuman studies, Katherine Hayles relies on her biological training “to consider what mimesis may signify in the nonhuman realm” (2021, 777) by zooming in on processes of “microbiomimesis” that allows bacteria to “defend themselves against viral attacks” (778). Taking mimesis beyond the humans in ways that recognize “the mimetic theories of Roger Caillois” (777) we have already considered as constitutive of homo mimeticus, Hayles uses nonhuman mimesis as a mirror to expand “sympathy” beyond the human realm. Given the slow progress on sympathy when it comes to human “others,” I still focus on this all-too-human problem here. On posthuman mimesis, see Hayles and Lawtoo 2022.

As we saw, Yuval Harari has perceptive insights on the contemporary dangers haunting Sapiens—from climate change to AI—that resonate with Homo Mimeticus, but history corrected him on pandemics seen from the fictional point of view of Homo Deus. New mimetic studies does not claim prophetic powers on the history of the future but noted early on that in an “increasingly globalized, permeable, and precarious world, the shadow of epidemics looms large on the horizon” (Lawtoo 2016, 92).

As Christoph Wulf and Gunter Gebauer put it, “the relevance of mimesis is not restricted to the aesthetic […] its effects press outward into the social world, taking root, as Plato saw it, in individual behavior like a contagion.” (1995, 309).

Correcting his diagnostic, the late Girard, confronted with the reality of the H5N1 influenza, acknowledged that it is a “pandemic that could cause hundreds of deaths in a few days and is a phenomenon typical of the undifferentiation now coursing across the planet” (2010, 24). It is of course easy to critique Girard’s youthful metaphorical blunder in 2022. I thus note that my first concerns with the “contemporary pandemics that, every year, threaten to contaminate an increasingly globalized, permeable, and precarious world” led me to state, in 2016, that “the shadow of epidemics looms large on the horizon” (Lawtoo 2016, 92; see also 91–125). For an account of the coronavirus from the angle of mimesis that is less critical of Girard but also emphasizes social differences and power relations in pandemics, see Gebauer 2022.

For a more detailed discussion of Plato, see chapter 2.
Plato, Republic, 514b–515a, 747.
For the hypnotic effects of new media via the TV series Black Mirror, see Lawtoo 2021.
On posthuman (hyper)mimesis and hypermimesis see Lawtoo 2022b.
See also Agamben 2021
For this recent revival of interest, see Borch 2012, 2020; Gebauer and Rücker 2019; Lawtoo 2013, 2019b.
On the contemporary relevance of Tarde’s theory of imitation, see Brighenti 2010, and Borch 2020.
As Popper says in a precise definition of mimetic agonism: “it is obvious that we must try to appreciate the strength of an opponent if we wish to fight him successfully” (xlii).

This is a rich, transdisciplinary collection that opens up multiple perspectives to conspiracy theories—from historical to psychological, semiotic to political, literary to philosophical, among others—and to which this chapter supplements a mimetic perspective.

For an historical genealogy of “antivax” conspiracies in relation to the Internet, see also Stano 2020.

In addition to scientists and politicians, actors and celebrities play a key mimetic role in pro-vaccination campaigns, as an identification with them is already in place.

See Lawtoo 2022b.

Coda: The Complexity of Mimesis: A Dialogue with Edgar Morin

Recordings of these voices are available via video interviews or HOM Videos: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJQy0y0qCxzP4QlmG2YWqw.

On the limits of hyperspecialization to account for homo mimeticus, among other subjects, see Lawtoo 2023a, 149–163.

If I first identified this patho(-)logical paradox via Nietzsche’s perspectivism (see Lawtoo 2013, 3–8, 27–83), I’m delighted to see it confirmed by Morin’s complexity theory.

For the English translations available, good places to start are Morin 2008; Morin and Kern 1999; Morin 2001.


All translations from French are the mine.

For a bibliography, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Morin.

This dialogue was recorded at Morin’s home in Montpellier in the fall of 2018. I am grateful to Daniel Villegas Vélez for translating the oral version on which the written version is based. I warmly thank Edgar Morin for his friendly exchange during my memorable visit, his inspiring example, and for continuing to discuss plans for metamorphoses of the future.

Elsewhere Morin, speaking of his drive to imitate his teacher and friend the sociologist Georges Friedmann, who had invited him to work at the CNRS, specifies: “in imitating his voice I would think like him, I was him, while barely remaining myself” (2017, 136; see also 1986, 146).

See Lawtoo 2023a and 2023b.

If Morin has been attentive to the discovery of mirror neurons, conversely, neuroscientists developing an experimental aesthetics, like Vittorio Gallese, have been drawing a genealogical connection with Morin’s work on the mimetic “symbiosis” at play in cinema (see Gallese and Guerra 2015, 119–121).