

The *Homo mimeticus* and the need for a mimetic turn.

Interview with Nidesh Lawtoo

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The present interview with Nidesh Lawtoo (lecturer at the University of Lausanne, Johns Hopkins University and KU Leuven and holder of the ERC project re-titled *Homo Mimeticus: Theory and Criticism* from 2017 to 2022) wants to highlight the “broad” and “complex” character of mimesis. The guiding idea is that mimesis – understood not simply as a copy or representation of reality but rather as a drive that leads humans to imitate other humans – provides us with a rich, wide-ranging, and paradoxically original perspective to knowing ourselves better. Thus, in a constant confrontation with the Greek roots of the term and the reflections of some modern and contemporary philosophers, the interview intends to clarify the scope and breadth of that mimetic turn proposed by Lawtoo in contemporary aesthetical debate.

Keywords: Mimesis, Mimetic Turn, Homo mimeticus, mimetic unconscious.

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V.M.: Professor Lawtoo, in this short interview, I would like to start with some bibliographical notes because they can provide an interesting starting point to grasp your research interests. You come from a small village in Canton Grigioni, Switzerland, and graduated from the University of Lausanne, specialising in English literature, history of religions and social sciences. You then pursued your studies in the United States, where you obtained a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Washington (Seattle) in 2009, devoting your attention to a wide range of interests, from literary disciplines to continental philosophy, from aesthetics to social psychology and film and media studies. You have also taught at the University of Lausanne, at the Johns Hopkins University (USA) and the KU Leuven (Belgium) and held an ERC research project entitled *Homo Mimeticus: Theory and Criticism* from 2017 to 2022¹. The latter is, in a way, the result of a long academic journey and, at the same time, the starting point of a transdisciplinary field of research you call mimetic studies. You are, in fact, the author of numerous scientific articles and books, including *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious*², *Conrad's Shadow: Catastrophe*,

¹ This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement n°716181: Homo Mimeticus). See also www.homomimeticus.eu.

² N. Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious*, Michigan State

*Mimesis, Theory*³, *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community*⁴, *Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation*⁵, and a diptych on *Violence and the Unconscious*⁶. I have limited myself in these few lines to some bio-bibliographical notes that show how the breadth of your theoretical interests, albeit in their diversity of languages and approaches, has always the human being as their primary focus. The range of your research can be seen, in my opinion, very well in the choice of the thematic field to which you have dedicated most of your investigations in recent years: the concept of *mimesis*. A concept that, in your work of 2022, you define as “broad”, “protean” and “complex”, in the specific sense that the French philosopher Edgar Morin gives to this term. Do you think the concept of *mimesis* can be the key to understanding the “complexity of the human”?

N.L.: Thank you for this overview of my academic journey so far. You correctly delineate the connecting thread of an academic research that took me across different countries, languages, and areas of disciplinary investigation to try to identify, not so much the essence of what makes us human but, rather, the principle or drive that renders us so plastic and changeable across cultures. *Homo Mimeticus* starts with an epigraph by Friedrich Nietzsche that says: “We remain unknown to ourselves”. My contention is that *mimesis*, understood not simply as a copy or representation of reality, but rather, as a drive that leads humans to imitate other humans, provides us with a rich, wide-ranging, and paradoxically, original perspective to knowing ourselves a bit better. In this book I also build on Gunter Gebauer’s and Christoph Wulf’s definition of *mimesis* as “*a conditio humana*” from a variety of perspectives in philosophy, aesthetics, and politics that challenge

University Press, East Lansing 2013; tr. it. di E. Cantoni, *Il Fantasma dell’Io: la massa e l’inconscio mimetico*, Mimesis, Milano – Udine 2018.

³ Id., *Conrad’s Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2016.

⁴ Id., *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth. Breakthroughs in Mimetic Theory*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2019; tr. it. di S. Caroni, *(Neo)Fascismo: Contagio, Comunità, Mito*, Mimesis, Milano – Udine 2020

⁵ Id., *Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2022 and available Open Access here: <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/59184>. Italian translation forthcoming with Carocci Editore in 2024.

⁶ Id., *Violence and the Mimetic Unconscious. Volume 2: The Affective Hypothesis*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2023. The present text, albeit in its inherent autonomy, constitutes the continuation of Id., *Violence and the Oedipal Unconscious: vol. 1, The Catharsis Hypothesis*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2023. Both are forthcoming in Italian translation with Mimesis in 2024.

the autonomous ideal of a rationalist subject qua *Homo Sapiens*. Instead, in the company of Edgar Morin and others I propose a more complex view of humanity, in Morin's sense (from *complexus*, woven together) suggesting that the drive to imitate is the main thread that, from birth onwards, ties humans to others in the first place, for both good and ill. Hence Morin and I agreed that to the multiple and often contradictory existing definitions of humans – *sapiens and demens, economicus and religious, faber and ludens* – it was necessary to add *homo mimeticus* as well. Why? To explain how these complex chameleon-like transformations are possible in the first place.

V.M.: In your investigations into this “chameleon-like” concept, you cannot, of course, ignore the Greek meaning of the term and the controversy that saw the two most significant philosophers of the classical age, Plato, and Aristotle, contrasting each other precisely on the value of *mimesis*. In this dispute – which, however, despite the disagreement, sees the two Greek philosophers in agreement in emphasising the centrality of the concept of *mimesis* in human life – you perhaps seem to side with Aristotle, who, in the fourth chapter of his *Poetics*, states that «There is man's [*sic*] natural propensity, from childhood onwards, to engage in mimetic activity (and this distinguishes man from other creatures, that he is thoroughly mimetic and through *mimesis* takes his first steps in understanding)»⁷. In agreement with the philosopher from Stagira, is it correct to say that since man's appearance on Earth, mimetic capacity has been the distinguishing feature of humanity? The title of your ERC research project seems to be particularly evocative in this regard since, by playing on the binomial *Homo mimeticus/Homo sapiens*, it echoes a famous book by the Israeli philosopher Yuval Harari, which you have often quoted in your writings.

N.L.: Yes, any theory of *mimesis* worth its salt should start by recognizing that the philosophical foundations for a field I call “mimetic studies” were first set by Plato and Aristotle who disagreed about the value of *mimesis* as a representation of reality but agreed that humans are mimetic animals. I quote Aristotle's famous definition of humans as mimetic animals at the outset of *Homo Mimeticus*, but I

⁷ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, engl. transl. by S. Halliwell, University of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill, 1987, p. 34.

wouldn't say I side more with Aristotle than with Plato, for the Stagirite inherits those insights directly from Plato and, in an agonistic mirroring inversion – what I call, “*mimetic agon*” – inverts the evaluation and gives *mimesis* a more positive spin. Let us in fact recall that in the early books of *Republic*, Plato, as a philosophical physician, diagnoses the affective powers of *mimesis* – what I also call mimetic pathos – to trigger the irrational side of the soul generating pathological emotions that spread contagiously in the body politic. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, inverts the evaluation and argues in favour of the rational or logical potential of mimetic representations central to learning and understanding. Both the “pathological” and what I call “patho-logical” (to emphasize the logical potential of *mimesis*) animate a Janus-faced conception of *homo mimeticus* that sits on the broad shoulders of both Plato and Aristotle.

As for the role of *mimesis* in the appearance of *Homo Sapiens*, it's an interesting question. Our history goes, of course, much further back than Plato and Aristotle as the first mimetic traces date back to over 30'000 years ago in the paintings of Chauvet and *Homo Sapiens* had been around for 150'00 or 200'000 years. The human ability to imitate must thus not be considered as an immutable principle but must be placed as part of an evolutionary process. The hypothesis I develop by drawing on evolutionary theories, philosophy and the neurosciences is indeed that a mimetic drive rooted in mirror neurons we partially share with other primates likely played a key role in the development of consciousness, language, and culture. As for the historian Yuval Harari, I agree with his emphasis on the role fictions (like religions, or nations) played in the spread of *Sapiens* as well as with the danger such fictions entail now that we play the role of *Homo Deus*. Since fictions are mimetic instruments par excellence it seemed important to diagnose more specifically the imitative principles that – from the prehistoric caves to Plato's cave to our contemporary digitized caves – cast a spell on what I call *vita mimetica*.

V.M.: In your opinion, what distinguishes human *mimesis* from the imitative practices characteristic of certain animal species (I am thinking of the imitation of the human voice by parrots and Indian grackles) or from the mimetic practices

employed by animals and plants for defence purposes or vice versa to induce a surprise effect and catch their unprepared prey (such as Batesian or cryptic mimicry)?

N.L.: Indeed, humans are far from being the only mimetic animals and the genealogy of *homo mimeticus* establishes connections with animal mimicry. That's one of the reasons for shifting the focus from the adjective "*sapiens*" and the distance from other nonhuman animals it entails, and the one of "*mimeticus*" which is partially shared with nonhuman animals. I establish this genealogical link via philosophers like Nietzsche or the French anthropologist Roger Caillois, for instance, who went beyond anthropocentric tendencies well before anthropocentrism was even considered a problem in the contemporary humanities.

The discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s in Parma also speaks to this problem. As you know, mirror neurons, which activate at the sight of movements, facial expressions and also sounds, were first discovered in macaque monkeys and in a recent discussion with Vittorio Gallese (who participated in this discovery), he informed me that since then mirror neurons have been discovered in other nonhuman animals as well, which does not mean that all animals have the same mimetic capacities as humans. I discuss the phenomenon of mimicry – the so-called chameleon effect – via a famous film by Wood Allen titled, *Zelig*, shot before the discovery of mirror neurons and in line with a psychological tradition that had hypnosis as a main door to a mimetic unconscious. In this chapter, for instance, I establish a connection between strategies of survival in animal mimicry and the all too human tendency to conform to one's surroundings, by merging in a crowd for instance – the most visible manifestation of the mimetic properties of the unconscious. These continuities between animal and human mimicry challenge the view that imitation is restricted to humans but so far it must be said that humans' capacity to use imitation consciously to learn complex tasks, from language to all manifestations of cultural learning, finds in human animals a striking manifestation, again, in both its logical and pathological manifestation. After all, global wars, consumerism, (new) fascism, and the destruction of the

environment in the epoch of the Anthropocene are all pathological manifestations of a *homo mimeticus* still in urgent need of patho-logical cures.

V.M.: Returning to the title of your recently concluded research project, *Homo mimeticus*, could we, therefore, say in summary that your investigations aim to show how the category of *mimesis* can be extended well beyond the strictly aesthetic sphere, untying it from the passive concept of “representation” (widely present in Platonic reflection) to open up instead to an active conception, in which *mimesis* has a “constructive” role and fully invests the very body of the human being, understating it above all as “body in motion”?

N.L.: Yes, that is correct. For a long time, *mimesis* has been restricted to a representation of reality that culminates in aesthetic realism, but this is not entirely Plato’s fault. What is often remembered is Plato’s metaphysical theory of *mimesis* as a degraded copy or mirror of a phantom of the idea, but he was equally sensitive to a dramatic *mimesis* of impersonation. The goal of the mimetic turn is to re-turn to the origins of *mimesis* (from *mîmos*, actor or performance) in order to bring this concept back in touch with its embodied manifestations in line with recent turns to affect, embodiment, and performativity. Actors, in fact, does not simply copy a role; they embody roles, identify with a character, traditionally in the theatre but also in the movie theatre. *Mimesis* is thus not simply passive but also active and creative. It can be used to construct realities that may be fictional, yet it also sets up models or exempla to imitate in the real world. There is enormous re-productive potential in the powers of *mimesis* that endow with the creative and perhaps even original possibilities.

This is the productive, more Aristotelian side of *homo mimeticus* that can also be found in French philosophers like Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, on which I draw, and I supplement. What I add to it is the embodied side of *mimesis* that was left perhaps a bit in the margins during the linguist turn central to poststructuralism but should be centre stage in the mimetic re-turn advocated by mimetic studies. This is, again, nothing news. Mimetic impersonations in “bodies and gestures,” says already Plato have the power to cast a spell on the audience, or better, to spell-bind them. Given the hypnotic-mesmerizing or as Plato says, “magnetizing”

properties of mimetic actors, no wonder that the prisoners in the famous cave are in chains. The chains are metaphorical of an all too real mimetic power or pathos.

Closer to us, but like Plato before him, the French literary critic René Girard developed a mimetic theory structured around triangles of mimetic desire, rivalry/violence, and scapegoating. If Plato already stages the sacrificial exclusion of the poet as a scapegoat in the *Republic*, Girard also draws on Freud to posit a founding murder at the origins of culture (we might return to this since in many ways, mimetic studies provide an alternative to Girard's mimetic theory). To sum up for the moment, I would simply say that *mimesis* goes beyond binaries that simply oppose good to bad imitation, passivity to activity, constructive to destructive behaviour, pathologies to patho-logies. Instead, it generates what I call "patho(-)logies" that are always in need of careful diagnostics from a variety of perspectives on mimetic pathos, from psycho-logy to anthropo-logy, neuro-logy to onto-logy, but also aesthetics, politics, ethics and other logoi vital to account for a complex and plastic species qua *homo mimeticus*.

V.M.: In the broad meaning of the concept (as you indicate), *mimesis* becomes a key term for understanding the malleability of the human being, both on a bodily level and on an identity level. It is no coincidence that there seem to be many points of contact – highlighted in numerous articles and chapter 4 of your 2022 volume⁸ – between the concept of *mimesis* and that principle of plasticity elaborated by the French thinker Catherine Malabou. Can the two terms be considered synonymous? If the answer is yes, in what sense? If not, why?

N.L.: This connection is one of the effects of the mimetic turn or re-turn. Opening up the protean meanings of *mimesis* beyond representation to include the multiple masks of mimetic subjectivity allows to establish productive continuities with concepts that are not exactly synonymous but share a number of genealogical connections. This is indeed the case of what I call, in dialogue with Catherine Malabou, the "plasticity of mimesis." We have already seen that *mimesis* is a plastic concept in the sense that it can be translated as imitation, mimicry, impersonation, dramatization, identification, mirror neurons, etc. depending on

⁸ N. Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation*, cit., p. 129 ss.

the logoi we adopt. What we must add is that Malabou's recent concept of plasticity, which she also develops in dialogue with the neurosciences, understood in its double capacity to both "receive form and give form" finds a mirroring counterpart in the passive and active conceptions of *mimesis* I have just discussed. If Malabou derives the concept from Hegel, I trace the plasticity of the mimetic subject back to Plato's diagnostic of the plasticity of the soul that is shaped by mythic models, for good and ill, but the pharmacological point is, if not the same, genealogically very close. This is perhaps not surprising since we are both sensitive to what Jacques Derrida, also on the shoulders of Plato, called the paradoxical logic of the *pharmakon* (both poison and cure). Since writing *Homo Mimeticus* I have continued the dialogue with Catherine Malabou to affirm plastic-mimetic metamorphoses that need to be rethought in the age of AI. The results should appear in a sequel titled, *Homo Mimeticus III: The Metamorphoses of Mimesis*.

V.M.: Plato, Aristotle, Morin, and Malabou, undoubtedly represent significant interlocutors for constructing your reflection. But also, other thinkers – such as Nietzsche, Bataille, Freud, Nancy, and Hannah Arendt – have contributed to the development of your thinking on *mimesis*. In what way?

N.L.: Yes, mimetic studies adopt an open, pluralist approach in dialogue with a number of thinkers. You mention Nietzsche first, and rightly so. The book not only starts with a chapter on Nietzsche but he is arguably the most influential figure behind mimetic studies given that I adopt his immanent, genealogical method to diagnose patho(-)logies of *homo mimeticus* I first started diagnosing in *The Phantom of the Ego*. Schematically put, Nietzsche is important not only because he roots *mimesis* back into both human and animal mimicry but also because as a philologist by training, he is very sensitive to the dramatic powers of *mimesis* that were not limited to representational (or Apollonian) *mimesis*, and he often grouped under the rubric of a theatrical (Dionysian) *mimesis*. Georges Bataille, as is well-known, was very much inspired by Nietzsche as he developed a notion of "expenditure" rooted in Dionysian forms of effervescence that cannot be restricted to so called "primitive" societies but are at play in modern societies as well. What is less

known is that the central concept of Bataille's heterogeneous thought, namely, "sovereign communication" rests on a non-linguistic form of affective and contagious communication with patho(-)logical effects that can lead to fascist fusion with a leader on the one hand, or to communal sympathy and partage, on the other. Last, but not least, if Arendt's contested notion of the "banality of evil" in the case of Eichmann benefits from being considered from the angle of Eichmann's abilities as a mimetic actor, the recent discussions around "community" initiated by Jean-Luc Nancy are directly indebted to Bataille and are now internal to mimetic studies as well.

I believe a pluralist mimetic turn calls for a collaborative effort. As part of the ERC project, I thus organized a series of workshop and interviews with influential contemporary figures. For instance, I invited Jean-Luc Nancy to engage in a dialogue titled "Mimesis: A Singular Plural-Concept," where his lifelong collaborator, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, is also identified as a precursor of mimetic studies. Another important figure is Adriana Cavarero, whose continuities with the thought of Arendt are well-known but who has also joined forces in several articles to promote what we call "mimetic inclinations" that can lead to (new) fascism but also democratic pluralism. And many others who contributed to writing as well as via accessible video-interviews part of HOM Videos⁹.

V.M.: Indeed, the reflections of these authors and, in particular, of Nietzsche and Arendt, constituted a starting point for analysing how the "mimetic unconscious" can have a negative counterpart, determining the emergence of imitative political/social phenomena that can generate spirals of hate, violence, and intolerance – themes at the centre, as we have seen, of some of your works. Can we, therefore, define *mimesis* as a "two-faced Janus"?

N.L.: Yes, indeed a two-faced Janus with the disconcerting ability to rotate from one face to the other in unpredictable ways, depending on the mimetic influences that make it turn or re-turn. Hence the need to always be sensitive to the movement of

⁹ See HOM Videos, <https://www.youtube.com/@homvideosercprojecthomomim971>

mimetic patho(-)logies that cannot be framed in universal structures or forms. When it comes to the unconscious and violence the name of two thinkers of *mimesis* cannot be avoided: namely Freud, who is often said to have discovered the unconscious and Girard, who developed a mimetic theory. I pay a lot of attention to both in the books on violence and the unconscious – unsurprisingly so given the topic. And yet, we should be careful not to conflate what I call the mimetic unconscious with the Oedipal unconscious, nor to confuse mimetic studies with mimetic theory. Let me briefly explain why.

For a long time, historians of psychology have been arguing, convincingly in my view, that Freud is far from having discovered the unconscious. He developed an Oedipal theory of the unconscious that both drew and departed from a pre-Freudian tradition that had hypnosis as a *via regia* to the psyche. At the centre of quarrels between the school of the Salpêtrière led by Jean-Martin Charcot and the school of Nancy led by Hippolyte Bernheim was the pathological or non-pathological status of hypnosis. Freud was familiar with both theories, as he translated both Charcot and Bernheim. The psychoanalytical concepts of identification and transference are Freud's translation of concepts like hypnosis and suggestion. Despite his official break with hypnosis, then, as Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen has shown in a series of books in line with mimetic studies, Freud never fully resolved his debt to the hypnotic tradition. Both at the level of individual and group psychology, what Gabriel Tarde called "the laws of imitation" continue to haunt psychoanalysis. The re-turn to *mimesis* is thus also a return to a pre-Freudian tradition of the unconscious that, along with Bernheim, Tarde, Pierre Janet, Nietzsche was sensitive to mirroring reflexes as a gateway to the unconscious. Mimetic studies tap in this long-forgotten door from a genealogical perspective that is Janus-faced for it is as past oriented as it is present oriented. The recent discovery of mirror neurons, in fact, entails in a way a re-discovery of mirroring physio-psychological principles that were well known by the pre-Freudian tradition of the unconscious. Given the centrality of imitation I called this embodied, intersubjective unconscious, the mimetic unconscious.

On the side of mimetic theory, genealogical lenses reveal that Girard inverts the Freudian Oedipal triangle by positing the primacy of *mimesis* over desire (or object cathexis). Thus, we are said to desire what our models desire. This is an original inversion but his entire mimetic theory of violence remains nonetheless overdetermined by Freud's theory of the unconscious, including his emphasis on triangular structures, a relation with a model that turns rivalrous, the ambivalence towards the model that ensues, the reliance on a cathartic approach to violence, and the positing of a sacrificial murder at the origins of culture, among other elements that he, Girard, shares with the father of psychoanalysis. After having traced in detail the mimetic agon that ties Girard to Freud via the hypothesis of catharsis at the centre of their theories of violence and the Oedipal unconscious (the focus of vol. 1), I propose an alternative based on affective contagion that re-opens the door to rethink the relation of "violence and the mimetic unconscious" (vol. 2).

V.M.: Thus, to grasp the multiple nuances, positive and negative, of this "mimetic phantom"¹⁰, you propose to inaugurate a new field of study: *mimetic studies*. What is, in your opinion, the space for the action of such a discipline or group of discipline, and how does it fit into the current system of disciplines (considering that the "compartmentalisation" of knowledge is more an "academic necessity" than an operational mode of our thought)?

N.L.: Specialization is indeed an academic necessity, but we should be careful not to fall into the trap of what Edgar Morin calls "hyper specialization". Over the last decades, the tendency in the humanities to mimic the hard sciences and adopt an increasingly reductionist approach that compartmentalizes knowledge not only to one discipline but also to a period, school of thought, genre, and sometimes even down to an author or text, is indeed detrimental to approach a complex phenomenon like *mimesis* that, as I tried to show, by its very definition transgresses binaries that divide not only authors and periods but also disciplines, including the humanities/hard-sciences binary. While trained in specific disciplines and methods, I find it important that the most influential funding

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 11.

scheme in Europe, namely the European Research Council (ERC) that funded the *Homo Mimeticus* project emphasizes a problem oriented rather than a discipline-oriented approach in order to face contemporary challenges that do not remain confined within disciplinary niches.

We have seen for instance how a pandemic crisis generates a type of viral reproduction that concerns not only virologists and doctors but generates a trigger a plurality of contagious mechanisms that require a plurality of logoi to be properly addressed: from conspiracy theories to anti-vax movements an idealist view of *Homo sapiens* thought we had long left behind but are now animating *homo mimeticus* in the digital age. Mimetic studies are intended as a transdisciplinary field in which scholars working on the different manifestations of the protean concept of *mimesis* can work “diagonally” (Caillois’s term) exchanging information and perspectives that cast a kaleidoscopic light on the chameleon concept of *homo mimeticus*.

I should also note that mimetic theories of the past, while interdisciplinary and far-reaching in nature, tended to emphasize a universal model or structure to be mapped across cultures and periods. Mimetic studies share this transdisciplinary reach but is much more sensitive to the necessity to develop specific situational diagnostics of case studies that are sensitive to differences in terms of media, genre, and disciplines by drawing on a plurality of logoi that do not form a close system but an open network instead. At the same time, to facilitate conversations across fields and perspectives, the theory of *homo mimeticus* also created a plurality of new concepts that are both genealogically specific and flexible enough to further the movement of a field that is already on the move. From mimetic pathos to patho(-)logies, pathos of distance to mimetic unconscious, mimetic agonism to hypermimesis to *vita mimetica* these concepts are not meant as ready-made solutions to freeze the becoming of *homo mimeticus* in a structure of form. On the contrary they serve as diagnostic tools to keep up with its chameleon transformations.

V.M.: To close our interview, I would like to quote a short extract from the first chapter of *Homo Mimeticus. A New Theory of Imitation*. In the opening of your text, you

state that «as we enter deeper into the twenty-first century, the ancient concept of *mimēsis* can no longer be confined to realistic representations of reality to be seen from a safe aesthetic distance. Rather, *mimesis* should be considered as an all-too-human and perhaps also nonhuman and posthuman condition that animates anthropological, aesthetic, social, and political phenomena constitutive of the history of western civilization – and, perhaps, of *Homo sapiens* tout court»¹¹. What might the non-human and post-human aspects that mimetic studies must investigate in the future be?

N.L.: We started our discussion by focusing on humans as mimetic animals only to point out that *mimesis* transgresses the binary between human and animal mimicry. It is thus no accident that the recent turn to non-human forces in new materialist thinkers like North American political theorists Jane Bennett and William Connolly, is genealogically entangled with mimetic studies. Both are sensitive to the dynamic of affective contagion central to what Connolly calls *Aspirational Fascism* and I call *(New) Fascism*. And both are sensitive to the interplay between what Bennett calls “vibrant matter” but I call “vibrant mimesis”. Our collaboration started at Johns Hopkins University and has led to several productive exchanges that go beyond the human/non-human turn that are still ongoing and will be part of *Homo Mimeticus II: The Re-Turn of Mimesis*.

On the side of the posthuman, there is no doubt that one of the most recent metamorphoses of *mimesis* is at play in the digital age and is now radically amplified by the AI revolution. In the wake of chatGPT, but already prior to it, I have been attentive to the powers of digital simulations in new media to retroact on the embodied nature of *homo mimeticus* in a spiralling loop I call hypermimesis. A use of social media to disseminate false information, or conspiracy theories, we have learned during the pandemic crisis, can have all too real effects. It might even make the difference between life and death; or a peaceful transition of power and a slide into a (new) fascist regime. That AI chatbots like GPT-4 (the latest version as I write) now has the capacity to mimic what used to be considered humans’ distinctive capacity (namely language)

¹¹ Ivi, p. 43.

exponentially increases the patho(-)logies of hypermimesis, calling for new generations of scholars in mimetic studies to develop new diagnostics of *homo mimeticus* with a 2.0 supplement. First steps in this direction are already underway in a volume titled *Homo Mimeticus 2.0: Posthuman Mimesis in Arts, Philosophy, and Technics*.

I could only begin to sketch the moving contours of the emerging new field of mimetic studies, which is already forming an international network that covers different masks of the same protean phenomenon. Still, despite its ancient genealogy the field is still in its infancy. More perspectives are indeed needed to face the protean masks of *mimesis*. If this interview allowed me to look back to map the ground covered so far, let us know forget that mimetic studies is Janus-faced. In many ways, it's an invitation to new generations of scholars to join perspectives to keep looking ahead to the transformations of *homo mimeticus* in the future.

V.M.: Thank you for your availability and your accurate answers.