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## Posthuman Mimesis I: Concepts for the Mimetic Turn

Nidesh Lawtoo<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*A mimetic turn is emerging in posthuman studies. Taking as a starting point a recent re-turn to an immanent, embodied, and relational conception of mimesis constitutive of the ERC-funded project, Homo Mimeticus, this paper proposes three related conceptual foundations to further a “mimetic turn” already at play in sf simulations and now operative in embodied imitations as well. Building on pioneering work on the centrality of an “embodied” and “cognitive nonconscious” (Hayles 1999, 2017) on the one hand, and a “relational” conception of “posthuman subjectivity” (Braidotti 2019) on the other, I argue that mimesis, understood as an unconscious tendency to mimic others (be they human or nonhuman) provides a decisive and still missing link to account for the capacity of (post)humans to become other in the first place. The concepts of “mimetic pathos,” the “mimetic unconscious,” and “hypermimesis” provide three related conceptual steps toward a mimetic turn in posthuman studies, which as this special issue shows, is already underway.*

**Keywords:** Posthuman mimesis; Hypermimesis; Simulation; Posthumanism; Homo mimeticus

### Introduction

This special issue marks, perhaps, a turning point in theorizations of the posthuman. Prior to the conference that originated this mimetic turn in posthuman studies,<sup>2</sup> speaking of “posthuman mimesis” might, in fact, have appeared as a contradiction in terms. And this contradiction would then have been redoubled in the context of the broader project that framed the conference—and at one remove, the special issue as well. That is, a transdisciplinary ERC project unashamedly titled, *Homo Mimeticus*. What now? Is the posthuman turn a return to the old concept of the human? And even worse, a mimetic and thus unoriginal, uncreative human? This reaction is, of course, amply justified. After all, the ancient concept of “mimesis” and the contemporary concept of the “posthuman” have traditionally looked in two radically opposed directions: the first looks back, to the past origins of western aesthetics conventionally inscribed, since the dawn of philosophy, to humans’ exceptional ability to copy or represent the world; the second looks ahead, to future technological transformations that challenge precisely exceptionalist humanistic accounts of what the human is, or is supposed to be, at the twilight of the age of man.

<sup>1</sup> Nidesh Lawtoo, KU Leuven, Belgium. E-mail: [nidesh.lawtoo@kuleuven.be](mailto:nidesh.lawtoo@kuleuven.be).

<sup>2</sup> This special issue emerged from a transdisciplinary ERC conference titled *Posthuman Mimesis: Embodiment, Affect, Contagion*. Part of the mimetic turn, HOM joined forces with influential figures in posthuman studies including Francesca Ferrando, Ivan Callus, Stefan Herbrechter, Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, Kevin LaGrandeur, Stephen Shaviro, Roberto Marchesini, Patricia Pisters, among many others and including Kevin Warwick and Katherine Hayles as keynote speakers. See <https://hiw.kuleuven.be/ripple/events/posthuman-mimesis>. It is the first of a planned trilogy on the different facets of posthuman mimesis.



Framed within this now rather familiar narrative, the concept of “posthuman mimesis” appears to set up an agonistic tension between opposed theories with far-reaching philosophical, political, ethical, and perhaps also planetary implications. Somewhat reassuringly, theories of mimesis would continue to remain stubbornly rooted in a humanistic, traditionally Eurocentric, and certainly anthropocentric conception of imitation qua aesthetic “representation of reality” (Auerbach, 2003) constitutive of the mimetic realism that informed the age of literature, say up to the 19th century. While techniques of mechanical and now digital reproduction have long surpassed human techniques of representations internal to traditional media like painting, the theatre, or the realist novel, this definition still tends to remain traditionally restricted to a typically human—often white, western, and male—uncanny ability to mirror nature via artistic and aesthetic forms, but also mental and conceptual representations, whose aspiration is to transparently duplicate reality. On the philosophical front, the perspective changes but the picture remains essentially the same. Since the dawn of philosophy in Plato’s thought mimesis has, in fact, been conceptualized via the doubling trope of the “mirror” in order to introduce hierarchical ontological distinctions between the One and the many, intelligible ideas and material processes, and, by extension, mind and bodies, culture and nature, anthropocentric original Forms and technological copies, shadows, or “phantoms” that duplicate, or rather, re-duplicate reality (Plato, 1961, 598d, 599d). In short, the dominant history of mimesis reflects dualistic metaphysical binaries rooted in an idealizing, disembodied, and rather vertical conception of what Being is, and human beings are supposed to remain, as they are trapped in the mirroring logic of the same first spelled out in Plato’s metaphysics and subsequently reproduced via an idealist tradition that continues, under different forms, to cast a shadow on the digital age.

Conversely, on the other side of the *agon*, posthuman studies emerged at the twilight of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to challenge precisely humanistic conceptions modelled on ideal notions of autonomy, disembodied rationality, and solipsistic self-sufficiency constitutive of idealist pictures of *Homo sapiens* that reach, via new technologies, into the present. In her landmark study, *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles framed her account of the emergence of the posthuman out of cybernetic theories of information against the background of an abstract metaphysical view of human-machines analogies suggesting that “embodiment is not essential to human being” (Hayles, 1999, 4). Plato may be dead, but idealism lives on, reanimated by cybernetic, technocratic and transhumanist dreams that reload an ancient idealizing gesture by “privileging the abstract as the Real” (12-13). Following Hayles, a multiplicity of critical voices in the burgeoning field of posthuman studies have charted the protean transformations of the posthuman subject on more immanent, materialist, and down-to-earth foundations. These “metamorphoses” (Braidotti, 2001) aspire to go beyond anthropocentrism and entangle posthuman but still embodied subjects in non-dualistic processes of becoming other that increasingly erase the ontological boundaries that divide abstract ideals from material processes, technology from bodies, but also minds from brains, self from others, the human from the nonhuman, consciousness from nonconsciousness—among other anthropocentric binaries that still structure disciplinary boundaries in an increasingly specialized academic world. The opposition between mimesis and the posthuman is thus clearly set: a philosophy of sameness contra a philosophy of difference, anthropocentrism contra post-anthropocentrism, humanism contra anti-humanism, a *past*-oriented aesthetic theory contra a *future*-oriented technological theory. This could be, in a



nutshell, the fundamental agonism that opposes these competing conceptual protagonists qua antagonists.

And yet, as this title suggests and the articles in this special issue confirm from different perspectives, for future-oriented thinkers, the agon between mimesis and the posthuman may not be as clear cut as it appears to be. As often in agonistic confrontations, behind the first layers of straightforward opposition, more complex, entangled, and revealing continuities begin to emerge as these two concepts are provisionally joined, not to passively mirror each other but, rather, as an invitation to actively reflect *on* one another. I call this intellectual confrontation between seemingly opposed perspectives “mimetic agonism” (Lawtoo, in press) in order to stress the productive and creative, rather than simply rivalrous or violent, dimension of the new theory of mimesis as a *homo mimeticus* that is already posthuman.

Let us in fact recall that the protean concept of “mimesis” is not reducible to a dominant ontological trope of the mirror and the metaphysics of sameness it entails, let alone to a unitary definition that restricts it to a representation of an action. On the contrary, already Plato and Aristotle acknowledged a minor, pre-Platonic, but also post-Platonic conception of mimesis rooted in human and nonhuman forms of embodied mimicry that are immanent in nature, relational in ontological orientation, and not fully rational or conscious in its heterogeneous manifestations. Be it in mime or dance, ritual or theatre, cinema or video games, these immanent embodied activities from which mimesis derives its conceptual identity which is not one—*mimēsis*, from *mimos*, actor but also performance (Gebauer & Wulf, 1995, 27-30)—trigger processes of becoming that open up subjectivity to imitating otherness, be it human or nonhuman, individually or collectively, for both good and ill. No wonder that at the other spectrum of metaphysics, Jacques Derrida recognized that “*mimēsis* is akin to the *pharmakon*.” “Ambivalent, playing with itself by hollowing itself out, good and evil at once” (Derrida, 1981, 139). In short, far from being logocentric or anthropocentric, the *mimeticus* side of *homo mimeticus* already goes a long way in deconstructing, decentering, deterritorializing a unitary, autonomous, and fully rational conceptions of *homo sapiens* that continues to cast a shadow on disembodied ideals of posthuman subjectivity.

On the shoulders of this genealogy, and in the company of pioneering figures of posthumanism like Katherine Hayles, I now propose to go further and take a different, more relational, immanent and embodied theory of mimesis as an essential step in rethinking the processes of becoming at play in our posthuman condition. I suggest that it is because the subject, in its evolutionary prehistory, emerges from a network of communal mimetic processes that render it “relational,” “porous,” and “plastic” (Lawtoo, 2013, 2017, 2022), that she is prone to becoming posthuman in the first place. This, at least, is what a genealogy of differential anti-Platonic theories of mimesis that directly informs *homo mimeticus* and go from Friedrich Nietzsche to Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida to Luce Irigaray, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe to Jean-Baudrillard, and is currently in dialogue with key figures in literary theory (Miller & Lawtoo 2021), continental philosophy (Nancy & Lawtoo, 2021), new materialism (Bennett 2017; Connolly & Lawtoo 2019), feminist philosophy (Cavarero & Lawtoo 2021), and last but not least, posthuman studies (Hayles & Lawtoo 2022), among other emerging voices that are currently contributing to the mimetic turn or re-turn to a differential conception of mimesis in various areas of critical theory.<sup>3</sup> What follows, then, takes as a

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<sup>3</sup> For the perspectives internal to *homo mimeticus*, see [www.homomimeticus.eu](http://www.homomimeticus.eu)

starting point this recent *re*-turn to an immanent conception of mimesis attentive to the embodied, affective, relational, and metamorphic properties of imitation—or minor mimesis—that is now emerging in posthuman studies as well.<sup>4</sup>

A new turn, even in the form of a *re*-turn, calls for the creation of new concepts to keep up with our fast-changing transformations of our times. Within the limits of this article, I thus step back to Nietzsche's untimely genealogical insight that philosophers ought "no longer accept concepts as a gift, nor merely purify and polish them, to first to *make* and *create* them" (Nietzsche, 1968, 220) in order to further the "mimetic turn" in posthuman studies on new conceptual foundations. Building on Hayles' pioneering work on the centrality of an "embodied" and "cognitive nonconscious" on the one hand, and furthering Rosi Braidotti "relational" conception of "posthuman subjectivity" on the other, I suggest that mimesis, perhaps more than desire, accounts for the constitutive relationality of posthuman subjectivity. My wager is that if we shift perspective from the dominant conception of mimesis understood as representation (be it aesthetic or mental) toward an affective or minor mimesis understood as an unconscious tendency to mimic others (be they human or nonhuman), this ancient, yet always new concept that spans the entire history of philosophy provides a decisive and still missing relational link to account for the capacity of (post)human subjects to become other in the first place, generating mimetic metamorphoses that are constitutive of the posthuman turn. The related concepts of "mimetic pathos," the "mimetic unconscious," and "hypermimesis" provide three theoretical steps toward an immanent mimetic turn in posthuman studies which, as this issue demonstrates, is already underway.<sup>5</sup>

### **Mimetic *pathos*: or the body reloaded**

Major advocates of the posthuman turn tend to provide different narratives on how we became posthuman and can diverge on important points. Theoretical *différends* may concern the good and bad effects of technology, the adoption of contrasting terminology (transhumanism being the most contentious and problematic representative), but also more specific theoretical disagreements on the primacy between Darwinian organisms and Deleuzian flows, cognition and affectivity, among other diverging perspectives. And yet, despite important differences that divide figures like Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti—to quote just two of the most influential representatives of this rapidly growing field—they tend to agree on the centrality of embodiment to account for the protean transformations internal to posthuman subjectivity. The question is whether the little discussed problematic of mimesis, understood in its minor sense—that is, as an affective force, or mimetic *pathos*, perhaps more than the much-discussed problematic of desire—provides a connecting bridge between these two competing yet complementary perspectives on the underlying power of becoming other internal to posthuman subjectivity.

Let us recall that in her pioneering, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), Hayles takes her starting point from Alan Turing's "imitation game" to critique a general tendency in first-wave cybernetic accounts of the posthuman to "downplay" or "forget" the body. This forgetting unknowingly reloads a dualistic metaphysics that divides mind and body, forms and matter, information and materiality that runs deep in western thought. It is thus no accident that

<sup>4</sup> The Nietzschean foundations of *homo mimeticus* are outlined in Lawtoo, 2013, 1-83, 281-305; first steps in the articulation of posthuman mimesis in sf films from *The Matrix* to *Avatar*, *Her* to *Black Mirror*, can be found in Lawtoo 2015a, 2015b, 2020, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> For further transdisciplinary contributions to the mimetic turn in posthuman studies see the volume, *The Mimetic Posthuman*, forthcoming.



Hayles frames her genealogy of the posthuman rooted in different waves of cybernetics' forgetting of the body against ancient idealist dreams of a disembodied consciousness she traces all the way back to a type of "abstraction" ultimately originating in a "Platonic Form" (Hayles, 1999, 12, 13). I shall return to this Platonic genealogy in the dialogue with Hayles that concludes this special issue (Hayles & Lawtoo, 2022). For the moment suffices to say that Hayles' genealogy is Janus-faced for it looks back to the origins of western metaphysics in order to better see what lies ahead in our processes of becoming posthuman. On the one hand, the North American theorist reminds us that Plato's founding gesture at the dawn of philosophy consists in reducing the "multiplicity" of material phenomena to an "essential reality" he, under the mask of Socrates, posits as an "originary form" in the sky of intelligible ideas—Hayles, drawing on an embodied analogy, calls this well-known intellectual gesture that goes from the multiple to the simple, the many to the One, a "Platonic backhand" (12). On the other hand, and in a mirror inversion of perspectives, at the dawn of the posthuman, Hayles points out that a cybernetic view that compares human minds to computers goes from the simple to the multiple insofar as "simplified abstractions" based on binary signals of 1 and 0 generate, via algorithmic "simulation techniques," a "multiplicity sufficiently complex that it can be seen as a world of its own" (12)—Hayles calls this second move from the simple to the many, the "Platonic forehand" (12). There is thus a back-and-forth at play in this idealistic mimetic game that turns the materiality of the body into an abstract phantom.

Either way the ball is hit from the opposite ends of the historical spectrum, the simplicity of abstraction is privileged over the complexity embodiment; Platonic Forms cast a shadow on cybernetic minds that dream of erasing phenomenal matter. Furthering this Janus-faced genealogy, we should add that this back-and-forth imitation game goes from the origins of metaphysics to its posthuman destinations, and back, via amplifying feedback loops that *inform* discourses on the posthuman, transhumanism, mimesis and its contemporary avatar, simulation. Although it has rarely been foregrounded so far, mimesis occupies perhaps *the* central mediating role in this conceptual polarity between abstract forms and material bodies. It is not simply that mimesis is, from Plato onward, the paradigmatic concept philosophers convoke to reduce the concrete to the abstract, multiple shadows to unitary Forms, matter to concepts; nor solely that simulation is the contemporary concept that, in a mirroring overturning of perspectives, turns simplicity into simulacra of multiplicity—though it is both. What is crucial to note is that *both* mimesis *and* simulation are part of a Janus-faced concept on which discourses of the posthuman implicitly hinge, and the posthuman turn, begins to pivot. It does so via imperceptible flows that are not reducible to the logic of representation but concern the embodied nature of *homo mimeticus*—which leads me to a second immanent perspective on the posthuman that continues to pave the way for the mimetic turn.

On the other side of the Atlantic, writing from the perspective of a more continental philosophical tradition, the feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti has furthered an immanent line of inquiry in posthuman studies under the rubric of "critical posthumanism" (Braidotti, 2013, 2019; see also Ferrando 2020). Her starting point is different from Hayles, as Braidotti is more explicitly inscribed in a materialist tradition in continental philosophy and feminist theory that finds in figures like Deleuze and Irigaray key representatives. But precisely for this reason, Braidotti fundamentally agrees with Hayles that "bodies are both embedded and embodied and have relational and affective powers" (Braidotti, 2019, 42). That is, transversal immanent powers, or forces, that are constitutive of the processes of becoming other animating what she calls, in a Nietzschean phrase, a "posthuman, all-too-human" subject who

is “materially embodied and embedded, with the power to affect and be affected” (5). It is this capacity to be affected by human and nonhuman forces that is at the origins of the flows of posthuman becoming that are carrying us into an uncertain future and that require closer scrutiny today. To that end, if Braidotti, on the shoulders of Deleuze and Guattari, and the Nietzschean/Spinozist genealogy that informs them, fosters an affirmative conception of “desire as plenitude” as the key to human “relationality” (64), I foreground a *mimetic* supplement to the posthuman subject that is incipient, but not explicitly spelled out as yet, in the same genealogy she draws from.

It is well known that a productive conception of desire is central to the relational ontology Deleuze and Guattari foreground contra psychoanalytical accounts that reduce desire to lack, or *manque à être*. Less known is that in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), they equally point to a minor tradition of mimesis that finds in social theorists like the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde key precursors who affirm mimetic, all-too-mimetic forms of becoming other. On the shoulders of Trade, for instance, Deleuze and Guattari foreground what they call flows of “microimitation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, 241) that are not organized on a vertical, arboreal, and abstract principle in line with the Platonic metaphysics critical posthumanism is up against. On the contrary, they write that this “little *imitations*” entail what they call “*the propagation of a flow*” (241) that spreads rhizomatically, imperceptibly, and on a horizontal plane of immanence, generating an “affective contagion” that is as interindividual as it is social. It is precisely this bodily receptivity to affect and be affected by “the laws of imitation” (Tarde, 2001) that I group under the rubric of affective or *minor mimesis*. This minor tradition, then, finds in the concept of mimetic affect or, to use a more backward-looking term, mimetic *pathos* a supplementary starting point to account for the forward-looking metamorphic relationality constitutive of posthuman subjects.

I say mimetic *pathos* rather than mimetic desire, for it is not only desire that is driven by imitation as previous mimetic theorists like René Girard influentially argued in an inversion of the Freudian triangle; nor is mimesis only restricted to a mirror image, or *imago*, predicated on the logic of misrecognition, or *méconnaissance*, as Jacques Lacan argued in a creative inversion of Roger Caillois’ account of “animal mimicry.” Rather, the impersonal and indeterminate Greek concept of “*pathos*” (from *pathein*, to suffer but also affect or power) is meant to indicate that all affects—be they good or bad, active or reactive, individual or collective, joyful or sad, therapeutic or pathological—are inherently mimetic in the sense that they have the power, or as Nietzsche says, the “will to power” to take possession of the ego and trouble the boundaries of individuation of an identity (from *identitas*, the same) that is precisely *not* the same but open to becoming different. This is perhaps why Nietzsche, in a posthumous fragment of 1888, defines the will to power as “the most primitive form of affect [of which] all other affects are only developments” (Nietzsche, 1968, 366). This affect or *pathos* also drives his non-dualistic, immanent and relational ontology driven by the much misunderstood concept of the will to power. That is, a concept Nietzsche defines as follows: “The will to power not a being, not a becoming, but a *pathos* (339). Without entering into the complex mimetology internal to Nietzsche’s theory of “will to power” here, I showed elsewhere that if Nietzsche tends to set up a critical distance—what he also calls “*pathos of distance*”—from mimetic affects like sympathy or compassion (*Mitleid*) he generally condemns, he also repeatedly acknowledges the contagious power of Dionysian *pathos* based on an intoxicating contagion that blurs the boundaries of individuation, establishing continuities between animal and human mimicry that are non-anthropocentric in nature and are



constitutive of a mimetic ego he calls, not without an ironic wink to Plato, “phantom of the ego [*Phantom von Ego*]” (Nietzsche, 1982, 61; Lawtoo 2013, 1-83). The concept of mimetic pathos is thus at the foundation of an immanent, porous, embodied, and relational conception of phantom egos that are radically open to the flows of becoming in immanent ways that prefigure our current processes of becoming posthuman.

What the mimetic turn or *re*-turn suggests, then, on the shoulders of Nietzsche, Tarde, Deleuze, and other immanent thinkers of mimesis, is that in addition to desire, a mimetic pathos constitutive of a minor genealogical tradition sensitive to an embodied and affective mimesis that has so far remained mostly in the shadow of realistic or mental representations, provides a more ancient, perhaps not always fully “original,” but certainly future-oriented starting point to answer a fundamental question in posthuman studies: namely, why is relationality constitutive of all too human, posthuman subjects in the first place? As Braidotti puts it: “most posthumanists would agree that we currently need an enlarged, distributed, and transversal concept of what a subject is and of how it deploys its relational capacities” (Braidotti, 2019, 40). My suggestion is that it is through a constitutive affective, intersubjective, and embodied mimesis, or mimetic pathos, out of which all other affects (desire included) develop, that the newborn comes into being as a relational creature, part of a plastic, protean, and metamorphic species. A genealogy of *homo mimeticus* shows, in fact, that from birth onward, humans are prone to mirroring imitations that allow for a pre-linguistic “net of communication [*Verbindungsnetz*] between human beings” (Nietzsche, 1974, 298; Lawtoo, 2022) out of which the technology of language as well as consciousness is born, according to genealogists of minor, or affective mimesis.

This genealogical reframing is significant for posthuman studies because it provides an alternative starting point to second wave cybernetics based on “autopoiesis” by opening up the subject to its relational human and nonhuman outside. Key figures who reintroduced embodiment in cybernetics like the biologist Humberto Maturana, along with Francisco Varela, posited the emergence of a self-consciousness that presupposes linguistic perception as a source of “communicative descriptions that orient him [the observer] toward his description of this self-orientation” generating what Hayles calls a view of “self-consciousness” in which the observer “endlessly describes himself describing himself” (Hayles, 1999, 144-145). For Nietzsche, on the other hand, the emergence of self-consciousness does not stem from a detached “observer” describing reality in a mirroring reproduction of a scientist in the lab. Consciousness emerges, rather, from an intimate feeling of precarity characteristic of what he calls “a most endangered animal” (Nietzsche, 1974, 298) who, in its evolutionary development—both phylogenetically and ontogenetically—is vulnerable, fragile, and radically depended on others in order to have a chance for survival. Nietzsche’s mimetic hypothesis in a nutshell is that “*consciousness has developed only under the pressure of the need for communication*” (298) with others, a communication that was originally non-linguistic, for it was based on gestures and bodily mimicry instead. This also means that the ego is from the very beginning open to a network of communication, or “*Verbindungsnetz*” (298), that is communal and social, rather than solipsistic and individual in nature and finds in affective mimesis a pre-linguistic medium of communication (Lawtoo, 2022). According to this evolutionary hypothesis, then, it is this communicative network that brings both language and consciousness into being, which also means that *homo mimeticus* is a constitutively relational, eminently social, and intersubjective species radically open to others’ *sym-pathos* (feeling with).

Such an all-too-mimetic affective openness to the outside has tremendous logical potential for social coordination, scientific development, and planetary expansion as human history clearly demonstrates. And yet, in the digital age, the posthuman subject is not so much exposed to a communal network of embodied face to face communications to be experienced mimetically with one's body. Rather, she is prematurely plugged into a widening network of technological simulations—tablets, computer screens, smartphones—that may at first sight appear to be simply seen from a representational distance outside, perhaps even from the perspective of an autonomous and rational ego that approximates the position of the detached scientific observer in abstract theory. And yet, due to the pro-social genealogy of *homo mimeticus*, these simulations are actually felt, viscerally, from childhood onward, with the immediate power of *pathos* inside a porous, embodied, and highly plastic phantom ego vulnerable to a plurality of techno-pathologies in embodied practices. Thus reframed, *mimesis* is not so much a *techné* controlled by sovereign posthuman subjectivity. On the contrary, it is part of a technology of immanent, molecular, affective processes of mimetic communication whereby the posthuman subject is formed, informed and, above all, *trans*-formed—that is formed by a technological network driven by “avatar simulations” (Lawtoo 2015) with the power to induce altered states of consciousness or hypnotic trance that is, perhaps more than ever, casting a spell on *homo mimeticus*.

This process of mimetic trans-formation, it should be clear by now, does not operate on a fully rational, solipsistic, and disembodied conception of subjectivity we inherited from the tradition of *Aufklärung*. Rather, it operates on a bodily unconscious that is relational in nature, open to environmental influences, be they human or nonhuman, and has involuntary forms of embodied imitation as a *via regia*. I call this unconscious the mimetic unconscious—which leads us to the second concept animating the mimetic turn in posthuman studies.

### **The mimetic unconscious: a mirroring network**

Theories of the posthuman often stress the importance of going beyond the ideal of a rational, autonomous, (neo)liberal subject in full control of his consciousness in order to account for phenomena that operate below conscious awareness and are, in this specific sense, *un*-conscious. Given the so-called Freudian “discovery” of the unconscious and Freud's own self-proclaimed genealogical alignment with influential scientific decentrings of man by Copernicus and Darwin, not to speak of the influence of psychoanalysis in different schools of critical theory, it is understandable that, to these days, the unconscious is often still synonymous with an Oedipal, repressive, or linguistic hypothesis. And this despite the numerous genealogical critiques such hypotheses have received by philosophers like Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze who inform theories of the posthuman as well—a paradox for future theorists to meditate in order to overcome it.

A genealogical supplement on the unconscious is still in order to account for the constitutive relationality of the posthuman subject that goes beyond what may be still idealist *meta*-psychologies of the ego. This does not mean that alternative, perhaps marginalized, but certainly forward-looking doors to the unconscious do not already exist. As the historian of psychology Henri Ellenberger has shown in his monumental, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970), a long genealogy of philosophical physicians prior to Freud—from Jean-Martin Charcot to Hippolyte Bernheim, William James to Pierre Janet, among others—were attentive to a physio-psychological unconscious that was embodied, relational, and open to automatic





processes of imitation characteristic of hypnotic states that introduce different degrees of cognitive awareness and tend to go unthought, unnoticed, and thus untheorized—at least in the last Freudian century dominated by repressive and linguistic hypothesis to the unconscious. Not anymore in the present century. This marginalized tradition of “philosophical physicians” (Nietzsche’s term) was not only attentive to unconscious mirroring reflexes that have been re-discovered in the neurosciences in the 1990s; they can also be genealogically aligned with the mimetic turn in posthuman studies that emphasizes the power or pathos of unthought processes in more recent years. Hayles, for one, in a pioneering book titled, *Unthought* (2017), groups this tradition under the concept of “cognitive nonconscious.” Schematically put, both the pre-Freudian unconscious and the cognitive nonconscious, do not posit a clear-cut split between consciousness and the unconscious but are attentive to different degrees of awareness; both find in habitual actions operative automatically in daily life, more than in the interpretations of dreams, important manifestations; and both account for a type of embodied cognition that is not limited to humans, is distinct from rational thinking used for abstract reasoning, yet is vital to processing information, making rapid intuitive decisions, often via automatic mental simulations that operate below conscious awareness, and are in this neurological rather than repressive sense, un- or non-conscious.<sup>6</sup>

Drawing on the neurosciences, Hayles calls it the “cognitive nonconscious” to indicate a fundamental type of neuronal cognition that is not accessible to conscious awareness; the philosopher Marcel Gauchet, drawing on a tradition of philosophical physicians of which Nietzsche is the most important representative, calls it “cerebral unconscious” (Gauchet 1992) to indicate that it is rooted in the physiology of our nervous system rather than elevated to an ideal topography of the mind, or, alternatively, structured like a language. Given the centrality of mirroring forms of involuntary imitation in this unconscious or nonconscious processes, I called it, “the mimetic unconscious” (Lawtoo, 2013, 2019a) —to differentiate it from the Oedipal variant, but also to indicate the role of aesthetics, relationality, and contagious *pathos* or affect as its *via regia*. The names differ, and so do the sciences that supposedly discovered it, but the mimetic phenomenon they designate is both biologically the same. Still, the mimetic unconscious also differs for it adapts, chameleon-like, to the new natural-social-technological environments that surround it. Given the relatively minor attention given to unconscious cognition in the humanities and, especially, the social sciences, and in light of the centrality unconscious processes play in our processes of becoming posthuman, there is a rich opportunity for posthuman studies in establishing a genealogical connection with the tradition of the mimetic unconscious which, thanks to recent developments in the neurosciences, is now returning to the forefront of the theoretical and scientific scene.

Now, if cognitive studies have tended to pursue a forgetting of the body that often leads to comparing the mind to computer simulations, theorists of the posthuman attentive to the body tend to side with neurological accounts of embodied simulation, which found in the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s an empirical confirmation. Mirror neurons, as is by now well-known, are motor neurons that fire not only as we perform gestures but also at the sight of gestures as well as facial expressions and sounds, leading the observer to activate the

<sup>6</sup> Hayles distinguishes the nonconscious from the unconscious on the basis that the former is not accessible to consciousness. As the pre-Freudian tradition of the mimetic unconscious is physiological rather than psychological in nature the similarities with the cognitive nonconscious are so numerous as to not enforce a distinction. Hayles and I shall return to this conjunction in the concluding dialogue (Hayles and Lawtoo 2022).

side of the brain used to perform that activity in mirroring terms that arguably play a role in “empathy” and “understanding” (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2008, 97, 99). Among other properties, mirror neurons confirm an ancient insight into the mimetic foundations of behaviour in terms that are not anthropocentric but evolutionary: they were first found accidentally in macaque monkeys; they stress the centrality of unconscious cognitive processes that transgress mind/body, self/other binaries; and they confirm the constitutive relationality of subjectivity in ways that are not limited to human interactions but include animal and, above all, technological interactions as well. All these points, you will have noticed, are also central to posthumanism, perhaps because mirroring continuities already exist between the posthuman turn and the mimetic turn, or *re-turn*.

What the tradition of the mimetic unconscious adds is that this discovery is actually a *re-discovery*. Pioneering figures like Tarde and Nietzsche, in fact, had already identified a psychophysiological “involuntary tendency in the nervous system to imitate” whereby “nerves imitate nerves, brains imitate brains” (Tarde, 2001, 148, 264; my transl.). They did so in the 1880s, paving the way for a mirroring principle that will be rediscovered in the 1990s. The value of this untimely genealogical insight for posthuman studies is clear: advocates of the mimetic unconscious already go beyond Cartesian mind/body dualism, transgressing binaries like self/other, inside/outside, nature/culture, good/bad imitation, pathology/patho-*logies*. They do so via mimetic principles that account for the ambivalences generated by the unconscious process of posthuman transformations that tend to be double. On the one hand, a long tradition in mimetic theory that goes, once again, back to Plato stresses that mimetic processes tend to generate irrational, noncognitive and potentially violent and destructive power, or *pathos*, that blocks thinking, casts a spell on rational faculties, and is generative of contagious and highly mimetic pathologies, as the proliferation of (new) fascist movements and escalation of wars amplified via new media and conspiracy theories that go viral in the digital age clearly indicates (Lawtoo, 2019b). On the other hand, and without contradiction, these unconscious processes, are also central to a distributive cognition that operates on a continuous yet differentiated spectrum of awareness, opening up the posthuman subject to feedback loops that entangle the nonconscious with animal, technological, and environmental assemblages that are not deprived of cognitive power (or *logos*) to account for mimetic pathos, or “techno-patho-*logies*” (Lawtoo, 2021, 528). Mimesis is thus always Janus-faced, operating simultaneously on both the side of reason and unreason, *logos* and *pathos*, pathologies and patho-*logies*—that is, critical discourses *on* mimetic pathos.

In sum, Nietzsche’s diagnostic *logos* posits a mimetic *pathos* at the origins of human communication; Hayles expands the “nonconscious” to account for animal and technological processes constitutive of our posthuman destinations. On their shoulders, we can look ahead to how the mimetic unconscious entangles posthuman processes of becomings in digital simulations that retroact, via patho(-)logical feedback loops that are as logical as pathological on hyperconnected bodies and minds in ways that are neither mimetic or hyperreal but hypermimetic instead—which leads us to our third and, for the moment, last concept for the mimetic turn in posthuman studies.

### **Hypermimesis: technopatho-logies for the future**

If metaphysical idealism restricted mimesis to the doubling logic of the mirror and the generation of phantoms twice from reality (Plato), and realism confined the logic of mimesis



within the artistic sphere of “representation” (Auerbach, 2003), hyperrealism appears located at the neither-nor juncture of these metaphysical/aesthetic polarities. As Jean Baudrillard famously put it, hyperreal simulacra break entirely with the laws of imitation by generating an “abstraction that is no longer the one of the map, the double, or the mirror” (Baudrillard, 1981, 10), as he says in an anti-Platonic backhand. And following up with a postmodern forehand, he specifies that what is at play in simulacra is “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: hyperrealism” (10). This postmodern “liquidation of all referents” (11) was fashionable at the twilight of the twentieth century. Based on a loose and rather questionable interpretation of Nietzsche’s overturning of metaphysics, it accounts for the production of simulations that no longer rest on the simple laws of realistic representation and are currently proliferating faster than ever in the virtual interfaces of the digital age. And yet, Baudrillard did not pay sufficient attention to the material fact that posthumans remain still radically dependent on all-too-human bodies in order to upload avatars in more exiting, idealized, and artificial second lives. They also keep responding to mirroring—and in this sense mimetic—reflections as brains and minds are exposed to anti-mimetic hyperrealities designed specifically to cast a spell on the ego generating phantoms animating the posthuman age. The COVID-19 pandemic has simply unmasked what had been true for a long time: posthuman bodies and souls have, in fact, never been more under the hypnotic spell of simulations online that may have nothing to do with reality (conspiracy theories, fake news, alternative facts etc.), yet produce all too real material and often pathological effects offline, nonetheless.

To account for the immanent powers of hyperreal simulations to retroact on *homo mimeticus*, I propose the new concept of “hypermimesis.” I do so in view of opening up intellectual space to sail past the Scylla of mimetic realism that remains in line with idealist mirrors, and the Charybdis of hyperreal anti-mimesis that, in its dissolution of reality, continues to share some of the idealist presuppositions it is up against. Going beyond the logic of either-or, hypermimesis joins avatar simulations with mimetic bodies along the logic of the both-and it inherits from genealogical precursors. Nietzsche, for one, never let go of the immanence of bodily affects; nor did he ever proclaim the victory of artificial worlds “*behind* the world” (*Hintervelt*) (Nietzsche, 1996, 5). On the contrary, he considered the body the “great reason” (Nietzsche 2008, 30) and urged future-oriented philosophers to remain true to the Earth. As he puts it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “A new pride my I taught me, which I now teach to human beings: no longer to bury one’s head in the sand of heavenly things, but to carry it freely, and earthen head [*Erden-Kopf*] that creates a sense for the earth [*Erde Sinn*]!” (28). Hence his passionate appeal at the outset his philosophical poem, which despite its misinterpretations, is based on a clear, immanent *telos*: “I beseech you, my brothers *stay true* [*treu*] *to the Earth* and do not believe those who talk of over-earthly hopes! They are poison mixers, whether they know it or not” (12). This affirmation has not lost any of its relevance today, if only because over-earthly hopes are currently reloaded by digital phantom that increasingly posit “true” being in imaginary after-worlds that provide exiting second lives in theory but remain radically dependent on the immanence of a bodily pathos, or will to power, attached to the Earth. The Janus-faced realization that mimetic *pathos* makes humans relational creatures and that the mimetic unconscious leads posthumans to respond involuntarily to perceptions of movements, be they real or fictional, is truly Nietzschean. It also calls for the creation of a liminal, in-between concept that articulates the power of hyperreal simulations online to retroact on posthuman subjects in the materiality of their bodies, affects, and actions offline.

I call this spiralling feedback loop *hypermimesis* to indicate a torsion within hyperreal simulations that do not remain in the sky of digital second lives behind this world but, rather, retroact on an embodied, relational, and porous all too human, posthuman subject in this world.

We are only beginning to realize that what is true for *homo mimeticus* is even truer for posthuman subjects. Far from approximating the Enlightened ideal of disembodied abstraction and universal rationality, we remain radically vulnerable to digitized, algorithmic based manipulations that tap into the all too human tendency to unconsciously mimic others be they human, nonhuman or antihuman. Once AI is programmed via increasingly sophisticated algorithms to feed individual users with their posthuman preferences online, powerful bubbles are generated that not only create alternative worlds behind this world that render truth already post; they also generate affective reactions and bodily actions that determine, in very practical, material, and potentially devastating terms, the all-too-human behaviour of *homo mimeticus* offline. Unprecedented forms of algorithm-generated polarization that feeds on the nihilistic side of mimetic pathos (fear, resentment, violence etc.) can, in fact, spin out of control once posthumans are caught in the spiralling spell of hypermimesis: from new fascist insurrections to conspiracy theories, anti-vaccine movements to pandemic denials, idealist dreams of disembodied second lives on line or on Mars to climate-change denial in the age of catastrophic anthropogenic climate change, it is becoming increasingly clear that posthuman subjectivity cannot live up to transhumanist fantasies of humanistic progress based on a technocratic reason characteristic of *Homo sapiens*. On the contrary, the mimetic unconscious subjugates posthumans to both thoughts and affects, *pathos* and *logos*, generating phantom egos instead on an unprecedented scale. In the process, it also disseminates new pathologies of *homo mimeticus* in need of, if not magical technological cures, at least accurate diagnostics of the pathos of techne, or technopatho-*logies*, that open up new alternatives to affirm life-promoting metamorphoses in the age of the Anthropocene.

In the end, it is thus perhaps no accident that the ambivalence mimesis tended to generate over the centuries, leading to critical rejections and enthusiastic defences, finds a mirroring counterpart in the ambivalences the concept of the posthuman now reloads for the digital age. If mimesis once inspire pity and fear in tragic plays, the posthuman now triggers fear and awe via hypermimetic simulations that are *tremendum et fascinans*. As the mimetic turn internal to “posthuman mimesis” is beginning to show, both mimesis and the posthuman are, indeed, mirroring concepts. If they encourage Janus-faced reflections that look back to the relational foundations of *homo mimeticus*, it is above all to chart possible destinations for posthuman transformations, which, as this special issue clearly shows, are already underway.

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