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## Posthuman *Mimétisme*: Caillois, Adorno and an Aesthetics of Mimesis

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### Abstract

*My paper focuses on a notion of mimesis which made a lasting impression on French sociologists and surrealists of the 1930s, most notably Roger Caillois. Mimicry or mimétisme denotes an instinctive (and not always beneficial) form of assimilation to (not of) another organism or object. Interestingly enough, Caillois, was fascinated by an active “natural imagination,” diagnoses a propensity among humans to abandon themselves to the “lure” of what he calls “represented spaces”—beyond the intentional grasp of the subject. However, what mimicry “morphologically” brings about in animals may lead in humans to a “depersonalization” or loss of self. Theodor W. Adorno received Caillois’s pre-reflexive with (critical) approval, but he insisted on retaining an, albeit aesthetic, form of reflexivity, without falling back into conceptual subjectivity and categorial appropriation. Aesthetic mimesis, a willing abandonment to works of art, makes possible and actuates the experience of a material, sensuous and indeterminate Other. Indeed, in an open confrontation with art, one cannot help getting immersed, even lost, in its radiating presence. “Aesthetic rationality,” then, comes precisely down to a realization of the limits of human rationality along with a—posthuman—acknowledgment of a more-than-human world beyond instrumental reason.*

**Keywords:** *Mimesis; Mimétisme; Caillois; Adorno; Aesthetics; Posthumanism*

Roger Caillois and Theodor W. Adorno have attracted little attention from posthumanist studies.<sup>2</sup> This may be due to the fact that they both placed themselves within the humanist and rationalist paradigm, wary about the fascist naturalization or biologizing of homo sapiens as particularly Adorno was. Nevertheless, they both opened ways out of the hierarchical opposition between subject and object and insisted on the “natural” and pre-reflexive heritage of human being, which they (symbolically) wanted to do justice to. In *mimétisme*, mimicry or mimesis<sup>3</sup> they found a behavioural pattern which is evocative of “nature in the subject.” Mimesis erases the cartesian difference which anthropocentric enlightenment is predicated on; it effects a mode of experience of the force and energy of spatial materiality which forever transcends categorial interpretation. It may overpower individuals, but providing one adopts an aesthetic stance, may also offer a sustained impression of the illimitable abundance,

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<sup>2</sup> Ferrando (2020) does not mention them. In Aloi/McHugh (2021) Adorno is only referenced in passing for his changing attitude towards poetry.

<sup>3</sup> Caillois’s and Adorno’s primordial variant of mimesis should be more appropriately called (as Caillois does) *mimétisme*, in English, *mimetism* (if it means an imitation of inanimate objects) or *mimicry* (denoting the imitation of living organisms). Adorno uses the term “mimesis.” I am indebted to Peter Geble’s very useful conceptual clarifications. (Geble, 2011)



processuality, fluidity and relationality of the other-than-human. This is what links Caillois and Adorno to posthumanism.<sup>4</sup>

Caillois's *mimétisme* emerged within a cultural-pessimistic historical context which was drawn to magic in a broad sense. Indeed, thinking in analogies and similarities, the spontaneity and immediacy of mimetic acts are structural elements mimesis shares with magic. But in a stricter content-related sense the latter is characterized by the ritual imitation of natural phenomena or primal religious references. Magic mimesis is to manipulate the material given to make atonement for the exploitation of nature, to fend off fear and (re-)consolidate communities. Caillois's *mimétisme*, in contrast, has no instrumental purpose. In humans it denotes a desire to abandon themselves to "represented spaces," resulting in self-loss or psychosis.

Theodor W. Adorno (critically) welcomed Caillois's pre-reflexive notion of a mimetic immersion into a spatial-material formation, but he insisted on retaining an—aesthetic—form of reflexivity, without falling back into conceptual subjectivity. It is important to note that Adorno's aesthetics, even as an aesthetics of autonomy, marks a radical break with the anthropocentric, basically Kantian, aesthetics of subjective self-affirmation. Adorno's "aesthetics of negativity" comes precisely down to a realization of the limits of human rationality along with an acknowledgment of a more-than-human, material, sensuous and indeterminate Other beyond instrumental reason.

Before focusing on Caillois and Adorno it seems advisable to distinguish their notions of mimesis from what I call an instrumental humanist mimesis and a fundamentally anthropological or preconscious mimesis.

### **Subject-centered or instrumental mimesis**

The crucial thing about the traditional Aristotelian tradition of mimesis or *imitatio* is that it leaves enough space for a productive handling or treatment of the given human action (drama, epos, and nature), as long as it is plausible, possible and probable. Even if it allows for "wonder-inducing surprise," the qualifications already introduce normative distinctions and criteria of judgement between the "is" and the "ought" into poetics, and *mutatis mutantis* also into our relation to "nature." The functional and purposive improvement of nature in and through the imitation of nature (defined as *natura naturans*), as prefigured by Aristotle (in his *physics*), was notoriously and methodically adapted by the humanist Francis Bacon in his *Nova Atlantis* (1627). One of the roots for the capitalist imperative to growth can be traced back to this tradition which combined *imitatio* with *aemulatio*. Given the instrumental and dualistic turn which mimesis (in addition and combination with dissecting analysis) took in early modernity, (critical) posthumanism can only refer to it in the negative.

### **Preconscious social mimesis**

This second concept is anthropologically so fundamental and socially pervasive that I find it hard to specify it as regards posthumanism, unless one sees in its possible, but not necessary, binding force a common momentum. Structurally, it is simply due to the fact that one can recognize oneself only in and through the other (Hegel, Lacan). This socio-psychological concept of a predominantly preconscious imitation of looks and behaviour patterns was first

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<sup>4</sup>I have in particular the posthuman materialism in the works of Jane Bennett (2010), Karen Barad (2010, 2012) and Rosi Braidotti (2013, 2019) in mind. Within the boundaries of this essay on mimesis I must confine myself to those references.



systematized by Gabriel Tarde (2001), recently corroborated by neurologists (mirror neurons) and elaborated upon by Nidesh Lawtoo in his highly illuminating book (see esp. Lawtoo, 2013, 284-305) on modernist mimesis. This mimetic predisposition can be socially benign as it can be malign. It may encourage communal empathy and solidarity (even through the “affective contagion” of laughter), but just as well processes of violent inclusion or exclusion. Still another critical point about unconscious mimesis is that it has been and is increasingly exploited by the entertainment industry. Consumption and advertising are fuelled not just by the proliferation of desire, but also by endlessly providing identificatory images for the individual. Even if no one can elude these simulacra, the capacity to second-order observation (to be able to make a difference and draw a distinction) is urgently called for.

### ***Mimétisme* and Mimicry as aesthetic praxis**

Why then should a third, Roger Caillois’s and Theodor W. Adorno’s (derivative), version of mimesis be particularly appealing to posthumanism? Caillois erases the engrained anthropocentric difference between humans as a sovereign *homo sapiens sapiens* and their environment. His research begins with observations of natural phenomena in their biosphere (insects) to then draw analogous conclusions for similar human behaviour.<sup>5</sup> He not only executes an “assault on the Cartesian subject,” as his English editor, Claudine Frank, remarks (Frank, 2003, 89), he also attributes a “vitality,” “agency”<sup>6</sup> and even immanent imagination to nature, to which humans are subject.

Adorno refers to Caillois but adheres to what I call anthro-epistemological difference. Yet he nevertheless breaks through the anthropocentric dualism of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, which was and still is to establish a (hierarchical and exploitative) ontological distinction between human ego and non-human alter. Instead, he suggests a non-instrumental and materialist aesthetics (and *aïsthetics*),<sup>7</sup> based on a mimetic assimilation into art and nature, which undercuts the intentional grasp of the subject. By not purposively stipulating the outcome of the mimetic act, the subject willingly embraces an indeterminateness of the relationality with the Other. It thereby acknowledges the “multiplicity of relations between ‘us’ and ‘not us,’” (Wolfe, 2018, 358) a “multiplicity” which has long been negated by the principle of identity.

### **Caillois’s *mimétisme*: “diagonal science” and imagination**

Caillois’s *mimétisme* emerged in the backwash of French ethnological studies (Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert) in the 1920s and 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which modified, in a way, the Eurocentric and colonial discrimination of the (enlightened) self against the “barbarian” or “savage.” The “Primitives” were no longer seen as the absolute ontological other, but as the embodiment of an antecedent stage in the evolution of the civilized white man. The “primitive” mentality was then regarded as a historically formative element modern western minds could still draw on. (Eidelpedes, 2018, 11-12) This post-romantic exoticism was prompted most of all by practices of magic (and ritual), which are characterized by analogical thinking. In magic one recognized an associative thinking which saw the world in terms of a “web of relations of similarities, contagion and kinship” in between “objects, animal and humans.” (Eidelpedes, 2018, 13) Naturally, this proved particularly appealing to Surrealists

<sup>5</sup> Caillois risks, to be sure, a naturalistic fallacy, but this is the risk one has to take if one wants to practice a “diagonal science,” as Caillois did.

<sup>6</sup> The terms are central to Bennett’s and Barad’s posthumanism.

<sup>7</sup> Adorno has, as a matter of course, also developed a pertinent epistemology (see Adorno, 1992).

and other post-Nietzschean critics of the western principle of the excluded middle as it offered an antithesis to causal reasoning and analytical dissection. Yet, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, the “organized handling (*Handhabung*) of mimesis” (Horkheimer/Adorno, 1990, 180, I have occasionally added the German original) meant already a purposive step towards an appropriation or assimilation of nature.

The other historical impulse came from a heightened interest in biology after Lamarck, Darwin and the boom of natural field studies. In 1862 Henry W. Bates (and Fritz Müller in 1878) systematically described certain edible insects who mimicked the looks and behaviour of other—inedible and aggressive—insects. The specific biological term “mimicry” was coined by Bates (Geble, 2011, 186). Around 1900, in the wake of an evolutionary biologizing of *homo sapiens* and the fashionable philosophies of life, mimicry was applied to humans, denoting a spontaneous and involuntary adaptation. Nietzsche referred to human “mimicry” already in 1884 (see Cha, 2010, 13-14). With this the humanist one-way concept of mimetic agency was expanded and modified towards a posthuman concept of mimesis. Mimesis became a general anthropological faculty, which was still manifest in a pre- or subconscious ways in certain psychological states, affect, imagination and the imaginary, art and myth, or, generally, in language, into which, according to Walter Benjamin, the archaic mimetic faculty has phylogenetically “passed without residue” (Benjamin, 2019, 353).<sup>8</sup>

The idea of a holistic world interconnected through “sympathetic similarities” promised to overcome the barrier between the human and the mineral or animal world, holding out the prospect of its (albeit imaginary) re-enchantment. Accordingly, Caillois took an interest in non-human agents (such as octopuses) and objects such as stones (Caillois, 1966), and, spectacularly, in the behaviour of certain insects, which proves incompatible with Darwinian evolutionary theory and the traditional view of “mimicry as a defensive reaction.” (Caillois, 2003[1935], 96) Morphological mimicry (homomorphy or homochromy) of animals usually serves, we believe, survival. Yet there are numerous insects who take on the shape or colour of other animals or of foliage, even though the leaves are precisely the hunting ground for predators. Caillois calls this potentially self-destructive mimicry “dangerous luxury” (Caillois, 2003[1935], 97). Mimicry (or *mimétisme*) then denotes an instinctive form of assimilation to (not of) another organism or object which comes down to self-expenditure and self-effacement.<sup>9</sup> It has its causes in a “disorder of spatial perception,” (Caillois, 2003[1935], 99) meaning a discrepancy or divergence between the perceived space and a represented space in which “the organism [...] is no longer located at the origin of the coordinate system but is simply one point among many.” In other words, the insect is unable to differentiate, or vice versa, make a consistent connection, between its perceiving self and the surrounding or represented space in which it is but one changing instance. The *Phyllidae*, *Carausius morosus* or *Kallima* closely face a shrub shoot or leaf on which they have ended up. Unable to draw a distinction, they see themselves as what they see, namely a leaf. They “no longer” know “*what to do with*” themselves and “teleplastically” (99) morph into the leaf. (For the imaginary effects of “The Praying Mantis,” see also: Caillois, 2003[1934], 69-81). The image which their perceptive organs produces, creates in its turn a material shape and colours in keeping with

<sup>8</sup> In his Parisian exile Benjamin associated with the surrealist movement and attended the meetings of the influential *Collège de Sociologie* (including Bataille and Caillois). Yet, he was still very critical of the commingling of myth and science. See Cha, 2010, 83 and Eidelpedes, 2018, 91-135.

<sup>9</sup> These are already anthropological terms, but it is precisely Caillois’s and the surrealists’s intention to obliterate (or blur) the differences. Caillois evidently draws on George Bataille’s *Notion of Expenditure* here, which was published in 1933.



the image. This implies that in any organism, even in insects, some kind of imaginative or imaginary faculty must be at work. Given the zeitgeist (and Caillois's project of "diagonal science"), it comes as no surprise that Caillois draws the parallel to the "*attractio similitum*" of "primitive" magic (*Like produces like*, 97), to, accordingly, see it at work in modern—albeit psychopathological—humans. In modernity, he claims, *mimétisme* occurs in the psychological condition he calls "legendary psychasthenia," meaning bipolar disorder, or psychosis. The mental state may imply a distorted perception or processing of reality leading to a "depersonalization through assimilation into space" (100). On account of this dissociation of their selves and their position in space, persons, as other organisms, are inclined to give in to the "*lure of space*" (99). They do not wish to preserve their selves. Rather, they abandon themselves to spatial representations outside of their selves. He diagnoses a "*widespread instinct d'abandon*," which may culminate in "the inertia of the *elan vital*." Yet even if, or precisely because, one's sense of personality is undermined, one's dispersal or dissolution in space remains strongly appealing. A desire to merge with the world is therefore stronger than the "instinct of self-preservation" (102). The parallel to Sigmund Freud's "death drive" is obvious, and it is no wonder that Caillois was favourably received by Jacques Lacan in his famous essay on "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I function."

As to posthumanism it is crucial to note that Caillois's overall interest was not directed towards psychopathology but to a fundamental theory of mimetic imagination. For him it is space or the object world that incites and evokes a spatial imaginary. Rather than an imitative representation of the world, the mimetic faculty is a natural continuation of auto-poietic natural-material conditions. Nature realizes diverse forms in and through mimicry, analogies and similitude (see Eidelpes, 2018, 83). What Caillois offers, then, is a biologic-material inversion of traditional subject-centred aesthetics. By making him or herself alike with the environment, humans partake in the infinite diversity of the natural world. Humans are thereby reintegrated into a relational environment taken as *natura naturans*. Caillois, one might say, delineates a transversal posthumanist theory which moves from anthropocentrism to bios and zoe.<sup>10</sup> Although Caillois does not become quite clear here, he seems to suggest an immediate and affect-driven impact on the imagination by virtue of material, empirical or biological processes, forms or *gestalts*. They come to pass straightaway (or alternatively, converge with poetic correlates in the imagination?) in the psychic human apparatus, bypassing a reflexive or apprehensive act of the faculty of imagination. (For Caillois's "Empirical Imagination" see also Eidelpedes, 2014, 2-4.) Whereas Kant in his idealist aesthetics proposes a disinterested, yet subject-fixated, free interplay, and hence reconciliation between subject and matter, humans, and nature, Caillois's natural aesthetics (*aïsthetics*) is object-oriented.

### Mimicry, Adorno (and Horkheimer)

This concept of mimesis drew not only the attention of Th. W. Adorno,<sup>11</sup> it became one of the cornerstones of his materialist aesthetic theory. Although doubtful about Caillois's mythological naturalism in a 1938 review, Adorno praised a "genuinely materialistic aspect" in Caillois's diagonal science. (Adorno, 1986, 230) In the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, Adorno gives, along with Max Horkheimer, a historical account of the civilizing impact and modification of mimicry. Genealogically, they aligned mimicry with the economic

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Rosi Braidotti's (2013 and 2019) very informative version of posthuman materialism.

<sup>11</sup> For a (still) very good and systematic study on Adorno and mimesis, see Früchtl, 1986.

objectivization of the natural space, which became evident with the emergence of sedentary, non-nomadic societies, property and trade. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1990, 14, 29-30) The original mimetic behaviour, an “organic assimilation” to (*Anschmiegung*, literally, a clinging or nestling up) the other, was replaced by an “organized handling” (*Handhabung*) of mimicry in the magic phase, and finally by the rational praxis of labour and mechanistic control. (Adorno/Horkheimer, 1990, 180-1) In this current phase, the bodily adaptation to nature is supplanted by a “recognition” in and through abstract concepts; difference and diversity are subsumed under the same, cognitive generalization or the principle of identity. Things are still made similar or identical, albeit from a third and instrumental second-order position. Rationality then becomes the modern functional equivalent of mimicry. However, the aboriginal moving cause behind mimicry is still effective, namely the extreme fear of an uncontrollable otherness. Rational and scientific conceptualization have led to mechanisms of power in modernity, but also to a reification of consciousness itself. Subject and object are no longer in a mutual or reciprocal and mediative relation: “All that remains of the adaptation to nature is the obduracy against nature.” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1990, 181)

However, a return to premodern or even pre-magic forms of mimesis would not do away with modern alienation, as Caillois had already made clear. On the contrary—and this is the point where aesthetic reflexivity, or the difference human cognition makes, comes in. “Space,” according to Adorno and Horkheimer, “is absolute alienation,” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1990, 180) or, as they put it elsewhere the other way round: “The perfect similarity is the absolute difference” (145). “But as the animate,” Adorno and Horkheimer explain,

approaches the inanimate, and the more highly-developed form of life comes closer to nature, it is alienated from it, since inanimate nature, which life in its most vigorous form aspires to become, is capable only of wholly external, spatial, relationships. [...] When men try to become like nature, they harden themselves against it. Protection as fear is a form of mimicry. [...] by adaptation to death, life pays the toll of its continued existence. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1990, 180)

The function of mimicry, the self-abandoning to imaginary spaces, even if it is to serve mere self-preservation, comes equally down to the (self-) obliteration of the subject. The subject, which here corresponds with the notion of personhood, is constituted and reaffirms itself by temporal categories, by retention, protention, and the time structure of succession or sequence, by memory, language and relationality (which in Kant or Schopenhauer means predominantly causality). Mimicry moves beyond or below (the Kantian) categories, whereby we necessarily and a priori structure and order our perception of the world, assuming we want to act sensibly and comprehensibly in this world. By abandoning those categories, which allow for memory and relationality, humans will divest themselves of the unity of their inner sense, their self-reflectiveness, and hence identity. The dissevered continuity of time will entail cognitive, moral, and social disconnectedness and disparity: “what makes itself like itself does not become truly equal.” (Adorno, 1997, 111)<sup>12</sup> His enthusiastic naturalism notwithstanding, Caillois came to the same sobered conclusion. “The assimilation into space is inevitably accompanied by a diminished sense of personality and vitality.” The “diminished existence” lacks “any degree of consciousness or feeling at all.” (Caillois, 2003 (1935), 101-102) What happens, is indeed a psycho-somatic “hardening” or “obduracy.”

<sup>12</sup>The German original is more straightforward and clearer: “*daß, was sich gleichmacht [wird] nicht gleich.*” (Adorno, 1973, 169)



## Mimesis, Aesthetics, Art

If, after all, we still want to maintain the primordial desire to merge with the Other, we have the possibility to open up to extraordinary and liminal states (trance,<sup>13</sup> distinct non-human habitats,<sup>14</sup> out-of-body experiences), and to art, on which I focus here. Even though the concept sounds bourgeois *and* humanist, art, in my view, still has or should have an autonomous ontological status, not necessarily, though, in an idealist and anthropocentric sense. According to sociologists such as Niklas Luhmann (1995) we are deeply embedded into functionally coded social systems, whose matter-of-fact rationality (of e.g., money, law, education, morality) we can hardly escape. We have internalized these codes<sup>15</sup> as they reduce the communicative complexity in modern society. Nevertheless, there are liminal states and works of art which (in spite of Luhmann) do not (recursively) reaffirm and reproduce the “ideological state apparatuses.” These states and processes naturally presuppose, force even, a mimetic self-abandonment to spaces. Neither the mimetic act is predetermined by received codes, nor are the spaces and environmental objects of mimetic experience predefined. They are literally *terrae incognitae*.

Artworks seek, according to Adorno, “the trace of memory in mimesis.” (Adorno, 1997, 131) If the latest, the modern zero grade of mimicry, is entirely governed by the controlling principle of identity or law of excluded middle/third, art counteracts this violent attitude, which transforms diversity into similarity:<sup>16</sup> “Art is a refuge of mimetic comportment. In art the subject exposes itself [...] to its other, separated from it and yet not altogether separated.” (ibid. 53) In art “the nonconceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposited other” lives on. (ibid. 54) It still embodies the residuum and effect mechanism of Caillois’s *mimétisme* and archaic magic, which is beyond our comprehension in modernity. Art, then, allows for cognition of what cognition rules out. (In this sense it is “rational.”) But at the same time, art restrains the cognition of art, ambiguous (semantically and materially irreducible) as art forever remains. For the powerful Other that appears in art we may only use substitute notions, such as the thingness-of-things, psychosomatic materiality, sensuousness, play of signifiers, imaginative excess.

It is nevertheless indispensable to be aware of what art does to us. The tentative cognition of a non-conceptual knowledge and the realization of a cognitive difference may well bring home to us that we are inexorably related to the Other of our logocentric self-understanding. We learn that subjective powers as (learnable) capacities are based on and require power as a force that unfolds beyond or below our intentional efforts—while the latter (our forces) are equally dependent on power as capacity in order to unfold. (Menke, 2021, 102-3) If we receive the beauty of art, we cannot do so without perceiving and abandoning ourselves to what comes powerfully along with it. One may perhaps compare it (Menke remains rather abstract) to the subcutaneous, unconscious and physiological drives beyond or below the goal-driven, learned and motivated capacities we acquire to perform and fulfil certain ends. Adorno calls this “somatic moment.” “The somatic moment as the not purely cognitive part of cognition is

<sup>13</sup>The release of the mimetic unconscious (in trance-like states) was a matter of fascination for many modernists. W.B. Yeats, for example, practiced automatic writing and was fond of spiritual seances.

<sup>14</sup>I am thinking here of the British naturalist Charles Foster, who virtually lived (for weeks) like a badger, an otter, a deer or fox, in their respective dirt holes etc. (See Foster, 2016.)

<sup>15</sup>In a more critical terminology this process of ideological assimilation and integration may be called “interpellation,” (Louis Althusser) the methods and agents “dispositif” (Foucault) or “culture industry” (Horkheimer/Adorno).

<sup>16</sup>“Artworks are self-likeness freed from the compulsion of identity.” (Adorno, 1997, 125)

irreducible.” (Adorno, 1992, 193) Those psycho-somatic impulses present an indispensable impact (if autopoietic *and* contingent) without which no practical aim can be achieved. At the same time, though, they turn out an unfathomable negativity, surpassing and countervailing praxis.<sup>17</sup> “The impulse, intramental and somatic in one, drives beyond the conscious sphere to which it belongs just the same.” (Adorno, 1992, 228-9, also quoted in Menke, 2021, 103) In art these elements of life come to the fore in an interplay which makes both (*psyche* and *soma*) mutually conceivable. Force co-emerges with cognition, and vice versa. In the reception of art, one mimetically gives oneself up, first to its and my force, and then to its and my complementary, but never fully adequate, capacity. Art “awaits mimetic comportment.” (Adorno, 1997, 125)

It is important to distinguish our understanding of art from idealist and modernist notions. Art does not serve (as in Kant) the affirmation of bourgeois (universal) subjectivity, his or her enlivened and enlivening faculties (*Gemütskräfte*).<sup>18</sup> Nor lies its beauty in the eye of the beholder. The perceiving subject and the object are situated, after all, in the same physical space. Even if we allow for transcendental a priori categories, the recipient cannot transcend the affective neural effects of the perceived object present, which, moreover, has and shares a privileged ontological status.<sup>19</sup> If we “were not essentially tied to its presence in electromagnetic fields, we could literally not perceive anything at all.” (Gabriel, 2020, 24) We engage into a relationality with the object; and the sensory, physical form of this relationality marks a third dimension, that “is really there.” (Gabriel, 2020, 41). We sample the “field-radiated” (visual, auditive, olfactory, tactile) stimuli from the work of art (which is yet never reducible to sensory data) to *cognitively* perform the work. We are necessarily “integrated into the constitution of the artwork itself.” (ibid. 44) This is inevitable since each work of art comes to us as an event, a singular composition.

In Don DeLillo’s *Zero K* we are drawn into the restricted monologue of a cryonified body in a pod: “But am I who I was.” (DeLillo, 2016, 157) We are “sucked into” (Gabriel, 2020, 72) the scene by virtue of the exceedingly strong and indeed singular imaginative or sensory incitements we sample from certain words in a certain order (or disorder) and cannot help the work of art to “perform itself on the stage of” of our mind. (ibid. 73) We turn into the head in the pod. Haunted by the expressive surplus, we resonate with the sensuous-sensible experience—to realize perhaps how vitally important a body in a lively environment is. The sensory force is something that befalls us, and since it is not bound to the above named (economic, logical, moral, legal, instrumentally rational) “media of communication” (Luhmann), we consistently fail to control the artistic event, even if, as a matter of course, we subsequently unify (contextualize) the experience more or less meaningfully. Art, consequently, transforms us since it—*nolens volens*—makes us assimilate into its Other. As in Caillois’s *mimétisme* (or natural imagination), we are imaginatively drawn into the imagination of the work of art.

In as much as there is the psycho-somatic constitution of the recipient and, respectively, a relationality on grounds of the radiation and ontological status of the artwork, one should expressly stress its materiality (as Adorno does against German Idealism, see e.g., 1992, 192

<sup>17</sup> Related forces may be Schopenhauer’s “Will,” Nietzsche’s “Life-force, or Body” (*Leib*), Henri Bergson’s *Élan Vital*.

<sup>18</sup> By virtue of the pleasurable and purposive purposelessness in our subjective reception of art, some general objectivity in our aesthetic judgement comes nevertheless about.

<sup>19</sup> Transcendental idealism, bluntly put, may well be interpreted as an attempt at immunization against the mimetic and physical magic, art can exert. For a pertinent criticism of Kant see Adorno, 1992, 211-299.





ff.; for materiality in art see also Bertram, 2016, 262-295). Once we have decided to experience art, we must give in to the “lure” of its material layer, precognitive as it is. Works of art are compositions that are always in a dialectic or differential tension with their materiality. The material-sensuous heterogeneity of a work of art (and of nature conceived of as art) does not immediately, and never entirely, disclose itself. It confounds our accustomed ways of understanding and thus opens *ex negativo* alternative perspectives and ways of (utopian) being. The materiality of the material always holds an excess, a surplus, which may not be integrated into the process of understanding. The non-identity of the material, inorganic and organic world, beyond use-value, scientific classification and taxonomy, flares up within an artistic composition, even if, in an insufficient way, it is caught up again by reason. Yet precisely since works of art form a space of their own, a “microcosm” (Bertram, 2016, 216), or a “monad” (Adorno, 1997 180), we must, if we want to perceive and receive art, open up and surrender to the power of the material sensuousness of the space. As in a trance-like or mystic state we may get lost in it for the time being, and subsequently track and reenact the materiality and material composition of the work of art. This means that we mimetically assimilate to the very own space and existence of artworks, abandoning ourselves to the primordial impulse of mimicry as the appearance of alterity. “Assimilation to” here means to give up, for the time being, the accustomed categorial determinants that underpin my subjectivity—succeeded by an accompanying “I” that makes possible a reflexive reenactment, relation to and comprehension of the given space. Only on account of the interplay of the capacity and the force of materiality, we can sense the effect of the “shudder” (Adorno, 1997, 331; *Schauer, Erschauern*) that may return to us the affectivity mimicry once may have produced: “Ultimately, aesthetic comportment is to be defined as the capacity to shudder, as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic image.” (ibid.) The reflexive reenactment will then enable us to establish a relation to this very shuddering, unless we want the depersonalization Caillois warned about in his essay.

Mimetic aesthetic comportment may take on diverse forms, from mystic immersion to outright consternation, from trance to striking bewilderment. The crucial thing is an all-embracing, affective experience by virtue of the sensuous-material “addendum” of the artwork. The subject grows into something else beyond its primary physical situatedness. He or she resonates with and becomes the perceptive (visual, auditive, tactile) irradiation they are exposed to. This occurs in states of deep contemplation of visual arts objects, in which colour and form and their inner process carry you away often synaesthetically. So, it happens in a theatre or a concert hall in which the sound enwraps you and leaves you besides yourself.

My artistic examples are predominantly taken from “high” western art. Yet the decisive factor about posthuman art does not reside in representation, in what it shows us more or less figuratively on the surface. The crux is material involvement and as a result “the decomposition [...] of ‘something on the order of a subject.’” (Wolfe, 2021, 326, Wolfe quotes Foucault here) This “decomposition” presupposes an aesthetic stance in order to become enmeshed into the clangour, colour particles, radiance, motions of the artwork. And this, in its turn, requires the institutional space (in a broad sense) or performative framing which marks off art from daily life governed by mechanisms of utilization. Framing naturally encourages the inclination to give oneself to the performance. This holds no less for explicitly posthuman and non-western art. Lois Weinberger’s installation of wild-growing plants in fallow landscapes (as with “Ruderal Society: Excavating a Garden, 2017”) needs institutional frames such as the *documenta 14* to become at all visible. Doo-Sung Yoo’s “Vishtaubourg

Version 3.1: Incompatibility” (2012) combines the human body, robotic devices, cow tongues, and refers to Donna Haraway as the source of inspiration. He stages a spectacular show to create an outstanding “atmospherics of performance.” (Parker-Starbuck, 2021, 260) Posthuman aesthetic mimesis works across cultures.

If you spend some time in the Rothko Room in the Tate Modern in London (or more impressively, the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas) and focus on the paintings, you will be unable to resist being mystically and mimetically absorbed by the surrounding monochrome spaces. The chromatic surfaces not only appear to oscillate in different shades of red, black or grey, the surfaces also seem variously deep, unclosing other spaces to enter. The paintings develop a third dimension into which you cannot resist to merge.

It is also in Rothko’s paintings, as in the “Red and Orange” series from the 60s, that the materiality of art comes unintentionally-intentionally<sup>20</sup> to the fore. Also, the figurative paintings of Francis Bacon come to my mind, namely the “Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion” or his “Triptych” from 1973. In either painting you will find dabs of paint, lines of (white) colour that seemingly don’t belong there, that make no sense, yet they point to the material and, for that matter, cognitive—and captivating—excess of art. You could just as well concentrate on Renaissance sacral art as on Matthias Grünewald’s Isenheim Altar (1512-1516),<sup>21</sup> or his Stuppach Madonna. In both paintings (crucifixion scenes) Maria has got hair, which is virtually infinite, falling almost to the floor. This aspect does not contribute to the assumed religious message, it is materiality in excess—and more fascinating than the religious message.

More effective may be a *Metallica* concert, a ballet performance choreographed by William Forsythe, Japanese Noh or Kabuki, sculpture, film, video, and performance as Bruce Nauman’s “Anthro Socio”<sup>22</sup> or videogames, a genre which will more decisively appeal to the transformative *instinct d’abandon*. In Beethoven’s “Violin Concerto” (in the interpretation of Yehudi Menuhin, e.g.), even in the repetition of the main theme, additional tunes, scratches, sounds resonate which are excessive, disclosing the materiality of tonal art. If you do not let yourself, be assimilated into Wagner’s cycle “The Ring of the Nibelung,” the “The Valkyrie” will simply overwhelm you. The possible resonances of an iridescent and three-dimensional bronze sculpture are obvious enough,<sup>23</sup> so are the radiating effects from a (cinemascope) movie screen such as Hitchcock’s “Psycho,”<sup>24</sup> not to mention the “Matrix” series. Yet finally, the (always) un-heard-of experience of a transformation, even transmutation, into the resonant atmosphere of a Wagnerian or *Metallica*-concert *Gesamtkunstwerk* will urge us to a response. The response will be never definite, though. This certainly also pertains in a most intimate way to Marina Abramović’s performances “The Artist is Present” or “Confession.”

As far as the new media are concerned, it was Caillois himself, who, as early as 1935, referred to an increasing number of alluringly “represented spaces” due to “modern science,” such as “hyperspace, abstract spaces, generalized spaces,” which he thought would undermine “the awareness of the distinction between organism and environment and of the connection

<sup>20</sup> The painter lets it happen and does not repaint the canvas, hence the paradox.

<sup>21</sup> I owe this reference to Bertram, 2016, 267.

<sup>22</sup> Who could, once in the same space, escape Bruce Nauman’s “Anthro Socio”- video performance?

<sup>23</sup> In Zürich I got so much under the spell of a Giacometti sculpture that I fell just short of touching and grabbing it in order to break the spell.

<sup>24</sup> In Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* an anonymous man actually desires to merge with Douglas Gordon’s 24-Hour version of the film, performed in the MOMA in New York



between mind and a specific point in space.” (Caillois, 1935, 100) Modern media, especially computer games (employing 3D graphics), are surely paramount to the permanent reformation of the intuitive forms of space and, by implication, time. The ongoing shifting and succession of spatio-temporal experience and ever faster alteration of perspectival scenes will exacerbate the ability to situate oneself, to form an identity of and thereby a coherent image of one’s self. Psychologically vulnerable person might then be susceptible or “lured” to not only obliterate the boundaries between inside and outside space, but they might also lose and even wish to lose themselves in external objects. If so, the power or force of the *aesthetic*-sensuous and affect effectively supersedes human capacity, that is the ability to dissociate and subsequently reflect upon the first, without which the latter would not be either, though. To be sure, video games, (television and perhaps even Wagner) may well involve the above-mentioned risk of mental dispossession, cultural alienation, and economic exploitation.

Does *mimétisme*, the archaic disposition to mimicry, also work with the beauty, or rather, materiality of nature? It is doubtful. There are hardly any natural *terrae incognitae* left in the age of the Anthropocene. On television, natural landscapes or the “animal kingdom” have long served as mild forms of sedative entertainment. Yet, one may still adopt the phenomenological and mimetic openness which art has called for and, indeed, has required since Romanticism. Nature, even the now touristic Mount Everest, hardly challenges us anymore, but you may still turn to the forest behind your back garden with an aesthetic comportment, as delineated above. Art, to be sure, does not imitate nature, but the beauty of nature *per se* can strike us as an appearance (apparition and phenomenon). Art is construction, but proceeds like *natura naturans*, the being *of* itself of nature. If you really engage in nature and lend yourself to the phenomenological manifestation (by “bracketing” particular preferences), you will perceive a “being-in-itself” (“An-Sich-Sein”) of nature. Nature follows autopoietic processes of becoming and passing away, growth and decay that ever so often escape our understanding. The “Beauty of Nature” is indeterminate, in watching a mixed woodland, just as in listening to the music of Miles Davis or Shostakovich, something may flare up unexpectedly, to disappear at once before we might have captured and identified it. It is both fascinating and disconcerting when up in the sky a formation of cranes screechingly migrates to the south. A thrill befalls you which will remind you of what it could be to be in an immediate relationality with nature. The space of nature “lures” you into its own world. As with art you have to (temporarily) leave behind your subjective categories and mimetically abandon yourself to become engrossed in the other-than-human, the multi-coloured lush green of vegetation and staggering variety of wildlife. Once again you may realize your distance (or alienation) from nature, but at the same time and inevitably the *sine qua no* of non-human nature for a felicitous human existence.

Mimesis, as an aesthetic practice, may well serve the concern of posthumanist approaches to environment, or, the more-of-human, the other-of-human. It brings home to us that *homo sapiens* is contingent on material—organic and inorganic—processes that precede *and* are foundational to his or her very intelligible being. Aesthetic mimesis does so in a sensuous-sensible way and thereby undermines and de-centres the assumedly exclusive human “view from nowhere” (Thomas Nagel) on which the special consciousness status appears to rest. Traditional humanist and anthropocentric ideas, based on a dualistic hierarchy between mind and matter, human and non-human, animate and inanimate, are relativized and called into

question. The practice,<sup>25</sup> nonetheless, necessitates a (mimetic) reflexive self-inquiry, without which the project of a non-anthropocentric, post-human and post-dualistic epistemology and ontology cannot be achieved.<sup>26</sup> Who, after all, is to perform the project, if not someone who, owing to self-recognition and rational purposive thought, is exclusively in a position to do so? As far as I can see, there are no super-intelligent machines (robots, cyborgs etc.) to supersede humans. No doubt, there are good reasons to critically refute the received and harmful dichotomies between the transcendental I and the physical world, ego and alter. Eventually *homo sapiens* is bound to abdicate. Yet in order to initiate and drive forth a non-exploitative, symbiotic relationality with the world, we have to maintain for a while a dualistic interaction with the world. To be sure, the interaction must be cognitively open, even permeable, generating alienation neither in the object nor the subject. Caillois's *mimétisme* and Adorno's mimetic-rational aesthetics may well show us the way.

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<sup>25</sup> There are three things I still find missing in posthumanist theories: human consciousness, a theory of action and deliberations on praxis.

<sup>26</sup> For a very good overview of *Philosophical Posthumanism* see Francesca Ferrando (2020). I rely here on her terminology and account of Posthumanism, see particularly pp. 54-59.



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