

Posthumanism and Mimesis: An Introduction

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Abstract

A different, immanent, embodied, and relational conception of mimesis is currently informing the posthuman turn. Emerging from an ERC-funded project titled Homo Mimeticus, this opening essay introduces the mimetic turn in posthuman studies via three related steps: first, it differentiates aesthetic realism and the metaphysics of sameness it entails from a posthuman mimesis open to differential processes of becoming other; second it inscribes the mimetic turn in a brief genealogy of re-turns to mimesis in the history of western thought; and third, it turns to contemporary manifestations of hypermimesis—from Covid-19 to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022—to test the relevance of the mimetic turn. Together, these opening steps argue for the urgency to rethink mimesis in light of all too human, environmental, and posthuman challenges in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Posthumanism; Mimesis; Subjectivity; Hypermimesis; Simulation; Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Introduction

What if the stakes in mimetic re-creation are not only an individual's fate but the collective and perhaps even the species?

N. Katherine Hayles (2021, 778)

After the affective turn and the nonhuman turn, the neuro turn, the new materialist turn and the environmental turn, a mimetic turn, or *re*-turn to mimesis, is currently informing different areas of critical theory, now stretching to transform the posthuman turn as well. At first sight, it might seem strange to return to the ancient and apparently unoriginal concept of “mimesis” to further a burgeoning area of research oriented toward the future. Traditionally restricted to an aesthetic style (realism) and/or an anthropocentric concern (representation), mimesis seems to be more past-oriented than future-oriented, more rooted in a humanist tradition than open to posthumanist perspectives that challenge precisely western humanistic concerns with a stabilizing “representation of reality” (Auerbach, 2003). This suspicion is certainly well taken. As Katherine Hayles recently notes, the restriction of mimesis “to human art forms” (Hayles, 2021, 777) that *in-forms* (gives form to) western aesthetics “reinforces the human-centric focus of mimesis” (777, n1) that dominated over the centuries. Restricted to its dominant definition, mimesis is, thus an unlikely candidate to provide a conceptual supplement to the multiplicity of innovative perspectives already at play in posthuman studies. And yet, a genealogy of untimely thinkers that goes from Nietzsche to Roger Caillois, Jacques

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Derrida to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Rosi Braidotti to Katherine Hayles, also warns us that first impressions can be deceiving, just as appearances can be illusory, in the sense that, once reframed for the present times, mimesis can perhaps reveal perceptive insights about posthuman processes of becoming other in the future. This, at least, is what this special issue on *Posthuman Mimesis* aims to suggest.

Contrary to dominant idealist interpretations in western thought, mimesis is not simply opposed to truth, as a copy is opposed to the original, or a shadow to light, as Plato made clear at the dawn of philosophy. Rather, mimesis is also an immanent force, power, or *pathos*, that, as Nietzsche was quick to sense at the twilight of metaphysics, opens up subjectivity to external influences, material processes, and flows of becoming—be they good or bad, human or nonhuman, natural or technological. On the shoulders of an immanent tradition that furthers the Nietzschean project to root subjectivity back in the materiality of bodily affects and supplementing a series of decenterings of man already foregrounded in the past century, a mimetic turn, or *re*-turn to a different, more immanent, affective, and relational conception of mimesis has been haunting different areas of critical theory for some time²—and is now gaining traction in posthuman studies as well. It is in fact significant that in recent years, a plurality of influential contemporary voices in areas as diverse as continental philosophy, literary theory, political theory, anthropology, feminist theory, new materialism, and last but not least, posthuman studies,³ have agreed, from different perspectives, that mimesis reaches deeper into the foundations of subjectivity than previously realized and is currently contributing to inclining the posthuman subject toward human and nonhuman processes of becoming other.

Birth of posthuman mimesis: out of *homo mimeticus*

Instead of restricting mimesis to the sphere of aesthetic realism, unoriginal copies, or illusory representations of reality that, at least since Plato's *Republic*, reduce this protean and untranslatable concept to the logic of the Same, the mimetic turn suggests to *re*-turn to a different conception of mimesis that includes heterogeneous phenomena that go from mimicry to identification, mimetism to emotional contagion, influence to mirror neurons, trance to hypnosis, simulation to hypermimesis among other avatars of mimesis central to exploring the protean ramification of posthuman subjectivity in the twenty-first century. This overturning of perspectives on an ancient metaphysical concept often framed within the stabilizing trope of the mirror and the unitary image or *imago* it sets up, invites readers to go through the looking glass, so to speak, and like Alice, encounter a world of becoming animated by double identities, protean transformations, entranced states, and immanent metamorphoses that are already at play in the posthuman turn. Our general wager is that mimesis and its new conceptual avatars generate repetitions with differences in an increasingly interconnected, technologized, and precarious material world that renders *Homo sapiens* a

² For informed accounts of mimesis from Plato to Derrida, see Gebauer and Wulf, 1995, Ijsseling 1997, Potolsky, 2006; for poststructuralist precursors who align mimesis with the figure of the mime, see Derrida 1981, Irigaray 1977, and Lacoue-Labarthe 1989; on the conceptual foundations for the mimetic turn, see Lawtoo, 2013, 2017, 2022.

³ The mimetic turn is based on interdisciplinary and dialogic foundations involving key figures in fields as diverse as: literary theory, see Miller and Lawtoo, 2020; continental philosophy, see Nancy and Lawtoo, 2022; feminist theory, see Cavarero and Lawtoo, 2021; political theory Connolly and Lawtoo (2019); posthuman studies, see Hayles and Lawtoo, 2022. See also Borch, 2019, and the special issues of *MLN* 132.5 (2017) and *CounterText* 8.1 (2022).



plastic, protean, eminently relational, but also metamorphic creature we call, for lack of a more original term, *homo mimeticus*.⁴

Part of an ERC transdisciplinary project titled, *Homo Mimeticus: Theory and Criticism*, the articles assembled in this special issue were first presented at an international conference titled, *Posthuman Mimesis: Embodiment, Affect, Contagion*, held at KU Leuven, Belgium in May 2021. Assembling over 50 speakers, the *Homo Mimeticus* project joined forces with some of the most influential theorists of the posthuman writing today. Contributors included: Ivan Callus, Francesca Ferrando, Stefan Herbrechter, Kevin LaGrandeur, Roberto Marchesini, Patricia Pisters, Steven Shaviro, Jean-Marie Schaeffer, Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, as well as Kevin Warwick and N. Katherine Hayles as keynote speakers, among numerous contributors. The essays included in this special issue, then, represent only a very small selection of the papers presented at the conference, which are scheduled to appear in a subsequent volume for which this special issue paves the way.⁵ This special issue of *Journal of Posthumanism* is thus intended as the first instalment of a trilogy whose goal is to provide new conceptual and theoretical foundations for the mimetic turn in posthuman studies—to be followed up.

Some exploratory steps for the mimetic turn in posthuman studies were already internal to the *Homo Mimeticus* project but were so far limited primarily to science fiction (sf) films attentive to the centrality of the avatars of mimesis from *The Matrix* to *Avatar*, *Her* to *Black Mirror*, among others. The conference set out to build, further, and expand the foundations of this *re*-turn to mimesis. It did so by introducing a generalized theory of *homo mimeticus* that looks back to ancient genealogical foundations (Plato and Aristotle), rests on modernist accounts of the subject (Nietzsche, Freud, Bataille, Caillois et al.) and supplements poststructuralist deconstructions of mimesis (Derrida, Irigaray, Lacoue-Labarthe, Deleuze et al.). Together, these perspectives account for the all too human and now posthuman ability to both form and be transformed by (non)human processes, hypermimetic processes we are consciously forming and at the same time and without contradiction, are unconsciously transforming us. Since at least the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2006), it is in fact becoming increasingly clear that despite the plurality of cultural differences that emerged in the long evolutionary history of *Homo sapiens* and still generate a multiplicity of discriminations (in terms of race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality and other categories), posthuman subjects have at least one characteristic in common: we are all eminently relational, embodied, and affective creatures who are wired, since birth, to imitate both human and nonhuman others with our bodies and brains, individually and collectively, via unconscious mirroring reflexes that render us radically open to forms of contagion that find in the experience of affect, or *pathos*, a privileged starting point.

In the present century, posthuman theorists have furthered a decentring of man already at play in poststructuralist accounts of the subject but tended to remain too restricted to a linguistic ontology. Far from being monadic, solipsistic, and autonomous, the posthuman subject is entangled with a plurality of human and nonhuman others while also being traversed by lines of flight endowed with deterritorializing powers that open up immanent paths to becoming other. Rosi Braidotti, for instance, helpfully suggests to “approach posthuman theory as both a genealogical and a navigational tool” (Braidotti, 2013, 5) in order to “re-think

⁴ See www.homomimeticus.eu

⁵ A subsequent selection of essays will appear in a volume provisionally titled, *The Mimetic Posthuman: Art, Philosophy, Technology* (Brill, under contract).

the basic tenets of our interaction with both human and nonhuman agents on a planetary scale” (6). This creative and critical operation, the shared genealogy of *homo mimeticus* and of critical posthumanism fundamentally agrees, entails the replacement of the dominant subject of *Aufklärung* as a rational, autonomous, and universal subject with a “more complex and relational subject framed by embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy and desire as core qualities” (26). These shared qualities of *sym-pathos* are constitutive of what the feminist philosopher and political theorist Adriana Cavarero and I have started calling, “mimetic inclinations” (Cavarero & Lawtoo, 2021). That is, affective inclinations that find in mimetic pathos a relational bond that pulls the vertical subject qua *Homo erectus* toward a more horizontally inclined, embodied, and affective subject qua *homo mimeticus*.

Far from being an autonomous, sovereign, and universal subject, the traditional category of “homo” is already decentred, deterritorialized, and eventually overturned by a relational conception of affective mimesis, or *mimetic pathos*, that renders subjectivity “porous,” eminently “plastic,” and “suggestible” to external “influences,” be they good or bad (Lawtoo 2013, 2017; Bennett 2020). This genealogical perspective on posthuman subjectivity finds precursors in figures like Nietzsche, Adorno, Caillois, and other untimely thinkers who took seriously the mimetic continuities between human and nonhuman animals, as the contributions by Roberto Marchesini, Philipp Wolf, and myself make clear at the outset of this special issue. It also finds supplements in more recent philosophers like Isabelle Stengers and Karen Barad, who, as Karolina Rybačiauskaitė shows, are attentive to processes of diffractive mimesis, generating mimetic differences that are equally at play in baby mimesis and in relationship between wo/man and metal dramatized in sf film, as Maria Impedovo, Bretton Varga and Erin Adams respectively show in the essays collected in middle.

In the end, and to open up future-oriented connections for posthuman studies that speak to the present COVID-19 crisis, I join forces with Katherine Hayles, whose recent illuminating account of “microbiomimesis” already provides an important contribution to a mimetic turn that goes beyond “the human centric focus on mimesis” (Hayles, 2021, 777, n1).⁶ Furthering pioneers of the mimetic turn like Caillois, Hayles notes that it “is useful to consider what mimesis may signify in the nonhuman realm” (777; see also Marchesini 2014), which does not mean that mimesis stops operating in humans as a biological, collective, and socio-political force. Quite the contrary, as Hayles puts it: “since Aristotle, mimesis has also been associated with both distance and empathy, the former catalysing and empowering the latter as viewers, partially insulated from personal threats by the differences, are enabled to recognize similarities between themselves and represented others, thus facilitating identification and catharsis.” (778) This oscillation between “distance” and “empathy” or *sym-pathos*, as we shall see, is at the centre of the *pathos of distance* that triggers both mimetic and anti-mimetic tendencies at play in posthuman mimesis. Moreover, Hayles and I agree that mimesis is not limited to rational consciousness but operates below conscious awareness, via what Hayles calls “cognitive nonconscious” (Hayles, 2017) and I call “mimetic unconscious” (Lawtoo, 2013). In her essay on “microbiomimesis” Hayles zeroes in on gene editing technologies that do not simply reproduce but recreate DNA to develop vaccines, for instance, but also “posthuman bodies,” convincingly showing that mimesis “is not only about art but about fundamental strategies of survival for human and nonhuman alike” (Hayles, 2021, 778). Hence

⁶ Hayles presented a version of this article titled, “Survival as Mimesis: Microbiomimesis and the Production of Posthuman Bodies,” as her keynote address to the *Posthuman Mimesis* conference.



the urgency to open up this ancient anthropocentric concept to post-anthropocentric concerns in the age of rapid climate change, species extinction, global pandemics, and last but not least, escalating wars.

The theoretical and creative overlaps between mimesis and the posthuman are thus significant enough to justify the concept of “posthuman mimesis.” It also serves as a warning for transhumanist fantasies of disembodiment syntheses between humans and technology, while offering an immanent account of hypermimetic conspiracy theories that redoubled viral contagion during the COVID-19 pandemic—thereby preparing us for future crises to come.

Re-turn to mimesis: Theory & concepts

This preliminary overview should suffice to make clear that if our genealogy of posthuman mimesis looks back to the origins of an eminently relational, affective, and embodied species qua *homo mimeticus* it does so in order to leap ahead to contemporary and future-oriented processes of becoming posthuman that are already underway. In the process, it also proposes new concepts to give philosophical substance to the mimetic turn, or *re*-turn to mimesis in posthuman studies. As an introductory gesture, I signal three concepts constitutive of the theory of *homo mimeticus* out of which the concept of posthuman mimesis emerges.

First, posthuman mimesis is attentive but not restricted to “mimetic desire” as a privileged door to opening up subjectivity to rivalries and violence—a move still in line with Oedipal tendencies at play in mimetic theorists like René Girard (1977), for instance.⁷ Instead, it expands the spectrum of analysis by taking the more generalized concept of “mimetic pathos” (Lawtoo 2013) as a starting point to open up posthuman processes of becoming to intersubjective, social, political, technological, and environmental processes that operate not only on desire but on *all* affects, for good and ill. I shall thus turn to Nietzsche’s conception of “will to power” defined as a “*pathos*” (Nietzsche, 1968, 339) in order to provide the first conceptual step for a theory of posthuman mimesis that cannot be framed in a visual mirror or *imago* to be contemplated from a distance; nor can be it stabilized in a triangular structure predicated on an Oedipal myth. Rather, mimetic pathos opens up the posthuman subject to a double movement, or oscillation, that reflects the contradictory feelings of “terror” and “pleasure” the posthuman now generates in present theories (Hayles, 1999, 283), not unlike mimesis generated in past theories.

Second, the Nietzschean concept of “*pathos of distance* [Pathos der Distanz]” (Nietzsche, 1996, 12), I argue, accounts for the immanent attraction toward the pleasurable possibilities opened up by mimetic pathos in its multiple posthuman manifestations on one side, and the critical distance from excessive faith in technocratic ideals predicated on a forgetting of the body constitutive of the genealogy of posthumanism as well, on the other. Thus framed, then, posthuman mimesis tends to go beyond good and evil, in the sense that it can be put to both life-affirmative and life-negating, sympathetic and violent, logical and pathological use and abuse. What emerges from this double movement is that a theoretical insight considered from a critical distance remains nonetheless connected to an experiential pathos felt in bodily impressions. If I have argued elsewhere that this perspectival lesson was central to Nietzsche’s genealogy of the mimetic subject (see Lawtoo, 2013, 3-83), the essays in this special issue show that it continues to be central to a genealogy of posthuman mimesis as well. The historical

⁷ For an agonistic confrontation between Girard’s mimetic theory and my theory of *homo mimeticus* theory, see Lawtoo (in print).

context and technological media already at play during the conference, for instance, made clear that the pathos of distance the concept of the posthuman tends to generate is mirrored by the duplicity of mimesis, which, since Plato and Aristotle, has generated conflicting evaluations. This mirroring indicates that, perhaps, mimesis and the posthuman are two sides of the same Janus-faced concept we grouped under the heading of “posthuman mimesis.”

There is indeed an experiential pathos informing this logical point, which leads me to the third and last concept. Over one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, as contributors delivered their papers on line, it was in fact already clear that the Zoom simulations on our screens we had quickly become accustomed to did not simply realistically represent or reflect the unique individuality of the speakers—though they did that with astonishing efficacy; they also set up a posthuman mirror that redoubled our physical presence online, generating phantom images or avatar simulations endowed with the performative power to retroact, via a spiralling feedback loop, on our “original” bodies offline and urging us, in different ways, to reflect *on* what I call the “patho(-)logies” of posthuman mimesis.⁸

The technological medium was not simply reflecting but actually mediating our messages. In the process, it was also making clear that posthuman mimesis escapes unilateral evaluations generating a reflection that was at least double. On one side, the increasing time spent online was taking a toll on our bodies and minds; it made palpably clear that zoom fatigue, isolation, addictions to technology we, along with our children were developing during the lockdown, not to speak of the massive spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories, among other symptoms, are part of a growing network of hypermimetic pathologies that are, *nolens volens*, constitutive of the posthuman age. On the other side, it was equally clear that the medium of posthuman mimesis was not only allowing a significant but nonetheless privileged segment of the world population to continue working during the lockdown, receive essential information, and remain connected with relatives, friends and colleagues at a time physical distancing was the best way to show affective care for others. In the process, this complex back and forth oscillation or tension between pathos and distance also put us in a position to develop critical discourses (*logoi*) to account for the contagious affects (*pathoi*) from anxiety to fear, panic to sorrow, solidarity to empathy to other forms of shared affects or *sym*-pathos, that benefited from the development of patho-*logies* developed from a safe distance from the viral pathology.

There would be more to say, but this outline of three concepts already at play in a number of critical and theoretical fields, should suffice to get the mimetic turn in posthuman studies rolling. In a nutshell: *mimetic pathos* indicates that all affects are mimetic and part of the process of becoming posthuman; *pathos of distance* suggests a certain ambivalence, oscillation, or tension both the concepts of mimesis and of the posthuman tend to generate; and *patho(-)logies* reveal a fundamental diagnostic duplicity whereby a loss of embodiment, individual disconnection, and collective tribalization constitutive of posthuman pathologies can, at the same time, be put to productive use for emerging technologies to generate new connections, human/nonhuman collaborations, and vital new patho-*logies* whose functions can be at least double: if they caution against the “disastrous unintended consequences” (Hayles, 2021, 786) of new technologies—from gene editing to nuclear escalation—they also invite us “to empathize with, conserve, and consider the value of all species” (787).

⁸ I understand “patho(-)logies” both in terms of sickness or pathology and as a critical discourse or logos in mimetic pathos (Lawtoo, 2013, 6-8).



What we can add is that the development of new critical discourses, or *logoi*, to evaluate the power of mimetic *pathos* internal to human and nonhuman transformations currently in progress benefit from being inscribed in a longer genealogy of mimetic turns and *re*-turns that looks back in order to better see what potentially lies ahead.

Brief genealogy of mimetic turns and *re*-turns

One of the numerous advantages of introducing a mimetic perspective to posthuman studies consists in giving a longer genealogical account of what is a relatively recent concept. Posthuman mimesis is, in fact, the latest conceptual avatar in a genealogy that is ancient in origins, traverses the entire history of western metaphysics, art, religion, and politics, generates virulent quarrels between philosophers and poets, the ancients and the moderns, and via forceful overturning of perspectives in the modernist period reaches into the postmodern era transforming our process of becoming posthuman as well. The genealogy of mimesis could be schematically, selectively, and brutally summarized via the following steps, or leaps, in mimetic turns and *re*-turns that from classical antiquity reach into the present:

1. Mimesis both *mirrors* and *de-forms* a true, ideal world.
2. Mimesis *re-presents* a true, rational world.
3. Mimesis *imitates* artistic models worthy of emulation.
4. Mimesis entails the *imitatio* of exemplary religious figures believed to be in a true world.
5. Mimesis *unmasks* the “true,” ideal world to be an illusory world.
6. Mimesis is *banned* as there is no relation between hyperreal simulations and the real world.
7. Mimesis *re-turns* to diagnose the real, hypermimetic symptoms of posthuman simulations.

This genealogy is of course selective but retraces familiar steps in the history of western thought. It goes from Plato’s exclusion of mimesis as an illusory appearance animated by an irrational pathos, or pathology (1), to Aristotle’s defence of mimesis as a rational representation of an action with cathartic properties, or *patho-logy* (2); it continues with classical imitations of aesthetic models that will later generate, virulent quarrels between the ancients and the moderns, *les anciens et les modernes* (3); in a different religious or moral form it *in-forms* (gives form to) the imitation of spiritual models based on the imitation of Christ, or *imitatio Christi* that, paradoxically, generated religious that have cast a long shadow on western history (4). *Contra* this idealist and moralist tradition in western thought, masters of suspicion in the modernist period unmasked the so called “true” ideal world to be nothing but a “fable” thereby overturning the metaphysical binary that subordinates the copy to the original, shadows to light, material phantoms to abstract forms (5). Furthering this perspective, postmodern theorists posited a “hyperreal” world of “simulation” that has nothing to do with the logic of the “mirror” or “imitation,” for it “substitutes signs of the real for the real itself” (Baudrillard, 1981, 11). Hence, at the moment of the briefest shadow, postmodernism felt

liberated by the weight of metaphysical binaries (origin/copy; model/simulacrum; idea/phantom etc.) in the sphere of high theory, casting a spell on popular culture as well (6).

This genealogy of mimesis reaches indeed into the present pointing to the need to supplement a posthuman mimesis for the future as well. Cinematic blockbusters like *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999), for instance, already make clear that in the transition to the digital age, as the Internet cast a web of Maya on the world, the metaphysical relation between the origin and the copy, the true world and the apparent one, fiction and reality no longer holds. In the mirroring interplay between “simulation” and “hypermimesis” (Lawtoo 2015a), it is in fact no longer clear who is imitating who, via what means, and to what ends.

Figure 1. Morpheus, *The Matrix* (1999)



Image: Warner Bros Pictures

Figure 2. Baudrillard, deepfake



Image: Medium.com

To be sure, new technologies of posthuman simulation like deepfakes make it increasingly difficult to spot the difference between the original and the copy in fiction—with comic effects on the side of fiction. And yet, on the side of reality, hyperreal simulations have the power to retroact on the material life of *homo mimeticus*—with potential tragic effects as well.

This is where posthuman mimesis enters, or re-enters the theoretical scene, which, as its long genealogy suggests, it had actually never fully left. It does so to address all too mimetic, or better, hypermimetic problems that cast a long material shadow on the present and future. It is in fact clear that hyperreal simulations are not disconnected from the logic of imitation, after all—if only because posthuman subjects increasingly exposed to a plurality of



simulations online continue to remain vulnerable, perhaps more than ever, to the spellbinding powers of unconscious forms of imitation offline. Hypermimesis considers the affective power of hyperreal simulacra that have nothing to do with reality (digital simulation, video games, avatars, but also online conspiracies, fake news, big political lies, deepfakes etc.) to retroact, via spiraling patho-logical feedback loops, on the material psychic and embodied lives of posthuman subjects that may be living second lives online and may aspire to become transhuman one day, yet for the moment, continue to remain radically dependent on their all too human bodies on Earth. I call this spiraling loop in which a hyperreal simulation retroacts on the reality of mimetic bodies and minds, *hypermimesis*; and I do so to call attention to the dynamic interplay of hyperreality and mimetic behavior constitutive of posthuman mimesis (6).

Hypermimetic crises tend to hit in successive and interconnected waves: as global pandemic redoubled by an equally global environmental crisis is now overshadowed by the re-emerging phantom of a world war, it is now urgent to turn our attention to an increasingly precarious posthuman world by taking into consideration the power of hyperreal simulations to retroact on the material bodies and minds of *homo mimeticus* generating patho(-)logical symptoms that are not only mimetic but hypermimetic instead and radically threaten the stability of the Planet as a whole.

Hypermimetic patho(-)logies: From COVID-19 back to world war?

If a genealogy of *homo mimeticus* looks back to the origins of an ancient concept, it does so in order to look ahead to the processes of becoming hypermimetically posthuman that are already underway. This point, was, once again, already clear during the *Posthuman Mimesis* conference. The COVID-19 pandemic was, in fact, prompting contributors' reflections on contagious affects from a digital distance that were no longer based on digital simulations simply disconnected from the reality of material life—though the proliferation of conspiracy theories online were certainly far removed indeed from the realities offline. Instead, digital simulations spread via increasingly effective algorithms that exploit and radically amplify the tendency of the mimetic unconscious to fall under the spell of simulations that reinforce pre-existing beliefs, in a widening spiral of hypermimetic contagion that materially contributed to the spread of the viral pathology qua “viral mimesis” (Lawtoo, 2021). For as Hayles also noted, what is viral reproduction if not a form of mimetic repetition with a difference that is not limited to human life and triggers a plurality of identificatory, contagious, and hypermimetic phenomena in posthuman life: from contagious pathos (fear, anxiety, panic but also hope, solidarity, joy) to collective movements (anti-mask protests and anti-vax but also BLM and anti-war protests), conspiracy theories that went viral online before retroacting hypermimetically offline (January 6, 2021), among other manifestations of the patho(-)logies of mimesis. It is thus becoming increasingly clear that in an age of global pandemics haunted by the material shadow of (new) fascist movement, rapid climate change, and the threat of nuclear wars that risk escalating out of control, it is urgent to take seriously the patho(-)logies of hypermimesis to inform, disinform, and transform posthuman subjects.

As I write this introduction not the shadow, but the reality of war is back in Europe after 70 years of relative stability and peace. While Russian tanks close in on Ukrainian cities and shelling fall onto an innocent civilian population, a ruthless totalitarian leader is also putting the mechanisms of propaganda disseminated by state media to hypermimetic work. The

strategy is not new. It consists in veiling the reality of a horrific invasion under the fake simulacrum of a “special military operation” directed against so-called “neo-Nazi” “genocidal” people—fake accusations that have nothing to do with the reality of the Ukrainian people but set up simulated phantoms to justify military atrocities to a dispossessed Russian population. If “(new) fascist” leaders already exploited the hypermimetic powers of “(new) media” (Lawtoo, 2019) to cast a hypnotic spell on western democracies vulnerable to “cyberwars,” most visibly with the election of Donald Trump in the US, autocratic leaders deprived of a democratic opposition like Vladimir Putin in Russia can bring this tyrannical logic to extremes in oligarchic countries. What Timothy Snyder says with respect to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 is all the more visible in the aftermath of the invasion of 2022: “it was not about what was happening to Ukrainians, but about what the Russian president chose to say about Ukraine. A real war became reality television” (Snyder, 2018, 164).

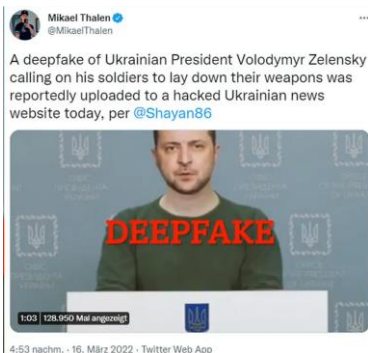
Doubling the bloody reality of a merciless war that has already displaced over 3 million people on the ground as I write, there is thus a second, (new) media war on (mis)information that redoubles the conflict online revealing the material danger of hypermimesis co-opted as a military offensive weapon with all too real effects. Putin was likely surprised by the heroic resistance led by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy who managed to inspire the Ukrainian army, his people, and the democratic world as a whole, both on the ground and online. Interestingly and worrisomely, one of the latest Russian attacks that redoubles the war consisted in a video simulation of Zelenskyy in which the hypermimetic technology of deepfake was put to military use to declare a simulated surrender intended to facilitate the invasion on the ground.

Figure 3. Volodymyr Zelenskyy deepfake



Image: nypost.com

Figure 4. Deepfake unmasked on Twitter



4:53 nachm. · 16. März 2022 · Twitter Web App



Image: mimikama.at

The simulation was quickly unmasked on Twitter, but it strikingly proves the all too real dangers of hypermimesis: hyperreal simulations are indeed no longer based on the logic of realistic representation for they replace reality with simulacra that replace the map for the territory. And yet, the territory below the map, while bombed and under siege, is not vanished. On the contrary, people resist the procession of simulacra that threaten to annihilate their territory, both on the ground and online. In fact, the logic, or patho-*logy*, of hypermimesis can be turned into an effective counter-weapon in defence of the territory *contra* the hypermimetic pathologies of propaganda it is up against. If the postmodern slogan indicated that there is nothing outside the text, we shall redouble it by saying that in the posthuman age, there is nothing outside (hyper)mimesis—which also means that the pathologies of media wars need to be fought patho-*logically* via hypermimetic means as well.

The agon on that front is already staged. Perhaps because the world is already turned into a stage for both the mimetic escalation of war and the hypermimetic communication of (mis)information. Putin's big lies of his authoritarian propaganda machine is up against a Ukrainian leader who may have had his training in the sphere of fiction more than politics; yet, for this reason, Zelenskyy is effectively turning the powers of hypermimesis to patho-*logical* use *contra* the Russian totalitarian lies. An actor trained in the powers of mime, Zelenskyy is in many ways the positive, life-affirmative, and heroic counterpart of pathological figures like Donald Trump who turned politics into a fiction (Lawtoo, 2019, 38-51). It is true that Zelenskyy managed to turn a fictional role in which he played the Ukrainian president on a popular TV series titled *Servant of the People* (2015-2019) to hypermimetic political use, as he successfully ran for office as the leader of a real political party with the same name as the televised fiction. The effects of this hypermimetic loop were at least double: he not only managed play his fictional persona to be elected President in reality, as western predecessors from Reagan to Trump had done before. He is also going well beyond his fictional model in his leadership skills. Zelenskyy is, in fact, effectively and heroically living up to the historical challenge of the Russian invasion by not only playing but embodying the lead role of a charismatic democratic leader. He does so by combing military, diplomatic, and hypermimetic strategies put to use to unite the Ukrainian population *contra* the Russian invasion, challenge Putin's propaganda machine, while effectively asking for the support on the international stage of world politics—in a hypermimetic way.

It is thus not accident that Zelenskyy relies on both theatrical messages and cinematic media put to hypermimetic use to defend his country from a horrific invasion. For instance, as he addressed the British Parliament on 8 March 2022, 13 days into the conflict, Zelenskyy demonstrated to the British *in primis* and to the world in general, that he has arguably a most credible answer to the dilemma of modern consciousness. Convoking one of the most-often quoted, but also dreaded line on the theatrical stage, Hamlet's famous lines were rarely as deftly dramatized on the political stage: "The question for us now is to be or not to be," said Zelenskyy to his British audience. Strong of his actions in real life facing the horror of death alongside his people, Zelenskyy's unwavering claim has the ring of authenticity: "For 13 days this question could have been asked but now I can give you a definitive answer. It's definitely yes, to be." An affirmation "to be" stated in the midst of a confrontation with death, and the all too real danger no longer to be it entails, amplifies the pathos and thus power of these dramatic lines beyond the confines of fiction. It turns a mimetic repetition of a much-quoted

play into an original hypermimetic affirmation that reveals Zelenskyy (and the people he represents) as a tragic model or hero to sympathise with from a distance, and for Ukrainians to imitate in real life. What Zelenskyy is suggesting, between the lines, is that Great Britain's Shakespearean question is now, first and foremost, a Ukrainian question. But it also sets up a mirror to Great Britain and the western world to live up to their historical role in countering dictators of the past, as Zelenskyy's subsequent echoes of Winston Churchill's famous 1941 speech against Nazism ("We shall fight him by land; we shall fight him in the sea...") suggests.

Thus, in his subsequent addresses to western democracies, Zelenskyy took the occasion to restage Hamlet's untimely question via a different, more contemporary and posthuman medium that reveals the powers of posthuman mimesis now at play on the world stage. Addressing a cinematic perhaps more than theatrical culture, he did so by dramatically putting a sf film classic on simulation to hypermimetic political use.

Figure 5. Morpheus addressing Neo, *The Matrix*



Image: Warner Bros Pictures

Figure 6. Real Zelenskyy addressing US Congress



Image: euronews.com

Hypermimesis, it should be clear by now, does not dissolve reality in hyperreal simulations that have nothing to do with the logic of imitation. On the contrary, as these mirroring images suggest, cinematic allusions and citations can be put to creative use to make serious political points. The reference to *The Matrix* is, of course, not accidental. It dramatizes the powers of simulations in the digital age to generate a matrix of lies that risk blinding people to the truth. Zelenskyy's political message to the west, is thus redoubled by the medium in question: he asks political leaders to make a choice with serious material consequences. If Putin is currently using state media to spread a web of lies characteristic of the matrix within Russia, the rest of



the world is reminded that such simulations are part of a real, all too real war that is calling for material international support.

This is not an easy call. It generates the pathos of distance we noted in theory in the sphere of political practice. While the *sym-pathos* with the suffering of the Ukrainian people generated support and solidarity in Europe and around the world, the diplomatic distance from military intervention equally revealed an awareness of the risks of mimetic escalation—including nuclear escalation. As the phantom of a World War reappears on the political scene and war threatens to “escalate to extremes” (Girard, 2010, xiv), as Girard’s foresaw in his apocalyptic reading of Clausewitz, this does not mean that there are no patho-*logical* solutions “to put an end to the duel” (Lawtoo, 2015b) from a diplomatic and strategic distance. There are, of course, no unilateral solutions to this double bind, for the line dividing pathos from distance, pathology from patho-logy is thin, fragile, and precarious at best. In the end, then, with different degrees of distance we seem to be once again face to face with the pathos generated by the untimely question, “to be or not to be.”

Whether *Homo sapiens* will live up to its fictional designation to continue promoting a life-affirmative, *sym-pathos* for the Ukrainian people in particular and for posthuman generations to come, remains to be seen. What is certain is that the patho(-)logies of posthuman mimesis, in both good and evil manifestations, are now already at play on the world stage revealing different faces of a protean creature we call *homo mimeticus*. The stakes of posthuman mimesis are indeed not only aesthetics or individual; they are collective, political, and ultimately concern the fate of the species. Hence the urgent need to develop new theoretical steps for a mimetic turn in posthuman studies that, *no lens volens*, is already underway.

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