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The Insurrection Moment: Intoxication, Conspiracy, Assault

Nidesh Lawtoo

Abstract The Storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 took many by surprise, yet mimetic studies had long warned against the powers of leaders that aspire to fascism to turn a mob contra democracy. This essay draws from a genealogy of immanent thinkers of mimetic contagion—from Nietzsche to Deleuze, Foucault to Charlie Brooker—to revisit the attack on the Capitol from the perspective of simulations that are false, yet generate all-too-real intoxications in the crowd. It argues that if modernism witnessed the "decay of the mimetic faculty" (Benjamin 1986) we are now witnessing its revival in the digital age—if only because new media disseminate hypermimetic conspiracy theories that go viral online and can be turned to (new) fascist practices offline.

The storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 was a harrowing moment in US political history that cast a shadow on western democracy more generally. It confirmed what a minor tradition in political theory, continental philosophy, history, and the transdisciplinary field of mimetic studies had been warning against for some time in theory, and yet left dominant institutions surprisingly unprepared in practice. In the wake of Donald Trump's presidential election in 2016, a number of dissenting theoretical voices have consistently warned that leaders on the far-right in the US—but also Europe, South America, Asia and other parts of the world—should not simply be dismissed as populist, conservative, or right-wing, for they promote emerging forms of "tyranny," "neo-fascism," "aspirational fascism," or "cyber-fascism" whose threats to democracy are currently manifest on the political scene.[1] While not identical to the fascist leaders of the past century, these figures are currently reloading aggressive anti-democratic tactics well-known from historical fascism via new media that amplify the affective, contagious, and in this sense, mimetic powers constitutive of "(new) fascism."[2]

Long relegated to the sphere of aesthetic representation of reality (or mimetic realism), mimesis, as I have argued, animates a thoroughly imitative species prone to mimicking others' opinions, beliefs, and attitudes (or *homo mimeticus*) with wide-ranging philosophical, aesthetic,

psychological, and political implications.[3] Central to the rise of historical fascism in Europe, this mimetic (will to) power is characterized by affective contagion, unconscious mimicry, and disconcerting forms of psychic dispossession that are currently reloaded by anti-democratic leaders who rely on conspiracy theories that are epistemologically false in theory in order to trigger insurrections with all-too-real political effects in practice. It is in fact becoming increasingly clear that (new) fascist leaders in the digital age increasingly turn to new media not only to blur the distinction between truth and lies, copies and originals, facts and alternative facts (mimesis as false representation, or mimetic lie)—though they do that repeatedly and with growing efficacy. These leaders also rely on the affective, contagious, and infective powers of mimesis to operate on digital users' embodied actions and reactions, generating influences that are most manifest in violent crowds, or mobs, but are equally at play in conspiracy theories that go viral online before triggering violent insurrections offline (mimesis as affective contagion, or mimetic power).[4] The theoretical purchase of revisiting the ancient concept of mimesis to cast new light on the growing influence of conspiracy theories with the potential to culminate in (new) fascist insurrections is thus at least double: first, mimesis is currently reloaded by new digital media that do not promote realistic representations of realty but rely on algorithms to generate contagious, performative, and at times violent effects in the real world constitutive of what I call the "powers of mimesis;"[5] second, mimesis is central to the dissolution of the autonomous, rational, volitional subject qua *Homo sapiens* that, in the US and around the world more generally, is increasingly shadowed and perhaps overtaken by a suggestible, unconscious, and highly influenceable subject qua *homo mimeticus* that is easy prey to the conspiratorial beliefs that "nothing happens by accident; nothing is as its seems; everything is connected"—and is ready to act on those beliefs.[6]

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin influentially argued that the use of language and the mediation it entails induced a "decay of the mimetic faculty,"[7] but does this evaluation still hold true for the digital age? If Benjamin saw that "[c]hildren's play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behavior" that leads them to "become and behave like something [or someone] else,"[8] new generations playing with new media are now also everywhere permeated by a mimetic drive whose contagious and performative powers we still need to fully understand. In this article, I join forces with an emerging "mimetic turn, or *re*-turn" of attention to mimesis in political theory[9] to argue that the shift from a linguistic age to a digital age is currently triggering *an explosion of the mimetic faculty I call hypermimesis*, a contagious, rhizomatic, and transnational explosion in urgent need of new diagnostics for the twenty-first century.

The storming of the US Capitol is an exemplary case in point that allows us to reevaluate the powers of (hyper)mimesis in the digital age from three related perspectives. First, it made palpably visible the potential of violent, anti-democratic, and intoxicating affects to spread contagiously from leaders to crowds ready to transform linguistic suggestions into violent actions—a tendency known from a longstanding tradition in critical theory that harkens back to crowd psychology. Second, it showed how (new) fascist leaders rely on (new) algorithmic media to spread Big Lies which substitute facts for alternative facts in ways that render the distinction between truth and lies blurry at best—a strategy familiar from propaganda tactics that are now grouped under the rubric of "post-truth." Last but not least, this case study reveals the powers of new media like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube among others to generate conspiracy theories that go viral online before generating mass contagion offline.[10] I shall argue that conspiracy theories are *hypermimetically* efficacious not only because of the false reality they (mis)represent—mimesis as a false image or copy of reality. Rather, they are efficacious because they turn what Gilles Deleuze calls "the powers of the false" to contagious, intoxicating, and insurrectionist (new) fascist use.

Deleuze is a privileged figure in our genealogy of the immanent powers (hyper)mimesis not only because he foregrounds contemporary (poststructuralist) concerns with the dissolution of the subject, but also because he roots this dissolution in a much longer genealogy that harkens back to ancient (Dionysian) forms of will to power I take to be at the origins of mimetic studies.[11] My genealogical approach shall thus be Janus-faced: it looks back in order to better see ahead. Drawing on the ancient, yet also modern and contemporary, realization that humans are, for better *and* worse, imitative creatures, or *homo mimeticus*, I articulate a genealogy of the powers of the false that has intoxicating forms of (hyper)mimetic contagion as a main medium via three different but related genealogical "moments." First, I step back, via Deleuze, to what Nietzsche described in *The Birth of Tragedy* as the power of Dionysian contagion to generate "hallucinations shared by entire communities or assemblies at a cult"[12] in view of leaping ahead to contemporary manifestations of the intoxicating powers of cults to generate mob behavior (or Dionysian moment). Second, I revisit the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 on the shoulders of both Deleuze and Nietzsche to argue that the intoxicating power of Donald Trump's speech relied not only on the mimetic efficacy of his rhetoric and the suggestibility of the crowd, but also on the proliferation of hyperreal simulations internal to conspiracy theories that have nothing to do with reality, yet generate all too mimetic, or rather, hypermimetic practices that were massively at play during the storming (or the Trump moment). Lastly, given that part of Trump's success in winning the elections stemmed from his

practice as an actor hosting a TV reality show (and *mimēsis* comes from *mimos*, actor), I conclude with a mirroring fictional case study dramatized in an episode of the award-winning British TV series *Black Mirror* (Charlie Brooker, 2011-2019) titled, *The Waldo Moment* that anticipates the powers of hypermimetic simulations online to overturn democratic governments offline (or the Waldo moment). This mirroring reflection also suggests that these forms of digitally-induced insurrections are not exceptional "moments" in the rise of (new) fascist threats, but are likely to serve as models for insurrections to come. In the end, *Black Mirror* provides a dark, yet nonetheless revealing reflection that urges future-oriented political theorists to reflect critically *on* the laws of hypermimesis responsible for turning an online conspiracy theory into a most harrowing moment in contemporary US history—a (new) fascist moment that casts a shadow on world democracy *tout court*.

The Dionysian Moment: False Powers in the Collective Soul

Wherein lies the affective power of conspiracy theories that are obviously false in their representation of reality, yet induce truly felt intoxications that now reach massive proportions in contemporary politics? And if this (will to) power is both affective and contagious in its collective nature, introducing transformations of identity that lead a multiplicity of subjects to become other while feeling the same intoxication, could there be a genealogical link between the powers of falsities internal to conspiracy theories and what Gilles Deleuze called, the "powers of the false [*puissance du faux*]?"[13]

At first sight, the genealogical connection appears far-fetched. It is in fact well-known that in his philosophical reflection on the time-image in *Cinema 2*, Deleuze influentially argues that "the false," and the cinematic simulations it entails, is not at all a power that should be condemned for its false or illusory representation of reality. Such a critical move would be in line with the dominant metaphysical (Platonic) tradition Deleuze is up against, for it reduces artistic images to mere shadows, copies, or phantoms at two removes from reality. On the contrary, Deleuze steps back to a minor (Nietzschean) celebration of aesthetic forms of Dionysian "will to power" in order to overturn dominant metaphysical binaries that oppose truth to falsity. As Deleuze puts it at the outset of his chapter on "The Powers of the False": "it is Nietzsche, who, under the name of 'will to power,' substitutes the power of the false for the form of the true, and resolves the crisis of truth, wanting to settle it once and for all,…in favour of the false and its artistic, creative powers."[14] This philosophical affirmation of the power of cinematic simulacra has been immensely productive. It promoted an immanent aesthetics of becoming that Deleuze, drawing on a minor tradition that goes from Nietzsche to Bergson,

Spinoza to Whitehead, brought to the foreground at the twilight of the twentieth century for a number of philosophical reasons. First, it completed Nietzsche's overturning of Platonic metaphysics by celebrating the immanent powers of artistic simulations that should not be dismissed as illusory shadows or phantoms for they are not simply "copies" or "images with resemblances," but rather "simulacra" or "images without resemblance."[15] Second, these simulacra manifest what Deleuze also calls "the power of a phantom" (*puissance du phantasme*) constitutive of a "Dionysian machine" (*machine dionysiaque*) that sets in motion an ontology of becoming influential for political theory.[16] Third, Deleuze affirmed the (will to) power of moving images to generate life-affirmative processes of becoming *other* that destabilize the ontology of the self-identical subject predicated on the logic of the same—if only because it rests on the realization that the ego, or I, is "another [*Je est un autre*]."[17] And last but not least, the powers of the false raised the "metamorphic" potential of cinema beyond narrow realistic concerns with referential truth in view of generating a world of metamorphosis Deleuze, once again echoing Nietzsche, identified as "the power of the false of Dionysus itself."[18] All this is well-known; the influence of Deleuze's *Cinema* books in general and affirmation of simulacra in particular is well-attested; given the aesthetic-ontological context where this affirmation of cinema's Dionysian will to power takes place, we are far removed indeed from the political shadows cast by conspiracy theories online chaining a growing number of constituencies to false appearances they collectively mistake for reality offline.

And yet, genealogical lenses tend to avoid unilateral evaluations, especially when what's at stake are the powers of a protean god like Dionysus. The very same genealogy of cinematic simulations Deleuze relies on, in fact, calls attention to the untimely realization that the powers of the false go beyond good and evil in the sense that the liberating aesthetic power of art can be put to violent political use. Well before Deleuze, Nietzsche already diagnosed this duplicity constitutive of Dionysian forms of contagious intoxications. As a philologist trained in classics, he knew that the god Dionysus, as dramatized for instance in Euripides' *The Bacchae*, was Janus-faced: on one side, his will to power is affirmative, joyful, even feminine in his aesthetic, embodied, and immanent manifestations that, for Nietzsche, once mediated by Apollonian representations, gave birth to tragic art. On the other side, Dionysus is also genealogically connected to chthonic mystery cults that spread "epidemically," generating collective forms of "intoxication" [*Rausch*] that, as also staged in *The Bacchae*, culminated in violent sacrifices whereby bodies could be "torn to pieces."[19] It is with the second, darker side of Dionysus in mind that in his "Attempt at Self-Critique," written in 1886 to supplement his earlier diagnostic of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche reevaluates what

he now critically calls a "rhapsodic book" for the youthful celebration of Dionysian intoxication it entails.[20] Acknowledging that "the name Dionysus was added as one more question mark" in his celebration of life as an aesthetic phenomenon, Nietzsche now changes perspective from aesthetics to psychology as he defines the Dionysian as a "difficult psychological question," which he had previously failed to fully answer.[21] Writing from a clinical perspective constitutive of a self-proclaimed philosophical physician, he now convokes the pathological language of "neurosis" to account for a type of "degeneration" that is not only aesthetic but cultural, not only past-oriented but present- and future-oriented. Thus Nietzsche asks, in a diagnostic arrow that reaches into the present: "Is [Dionysian] madness perhaps not necessarily the symptom of degeneration, decline, and the final stage of culture?"[22]

What is certain is that Nietzsche's re-evaluation of Dionysian will to power shifts the focus from the aesthetics and metaphysics of his early period to the psychological and political preoccupations of his later period. His critique of the Dionysian cult as a symptom of "degeneration" or "decadence," cannot in fact be dissociated from his ambivalent relation to Wagner's romantic aesthetics in general, and the latter's will to power over the modern phenomenon of the crowd in particular. Schematically put, if in his early period Nietzsche sides *with* Wagner *contra* Plato in order to celebrate the contagious powers of Dionysian mimesis and the intoxication it entails, in his later period Nietzsche overturns this perspective to side *with* Plato *contra* Wagner, critiquing the contagious powers of mimesis internal to the collective "herd" or "crowd." In *The Case of Wagner*, for instance, Nietzsche relies again on the pathological language of "neurosis" to critique his former model while also supplementing the diagnostic language of "hypnosis" and "suggestion" to account for how Wagner "persuaded the masses" [*Massen*].[23] The latter operates by way of a tyrannical and theatrical will to power characteristic of an actor, or mime. As Nietzsche puts it: "The actor Wagner is a tyrant, his pathos topples every taste, every resistance"; speaking of his former model as a "an incomparable *histrio*, the greatest mime," he specifies that the efficacy of "Wagner's pathos" stems from a "theatrical rhetoric, a means of expression, of underscoring gestures, of suggestion."[24] In sum, Wagner, the former avatar of Dionysus, is now characterized by a mimetic power, or "pathos," which, via the medium of a theatrical rhetoric characterized by gestures and expressions, has the will to power to generate what Nietzsche calls "suggestion"—that is, what a pre-Freudian tradition of the unconscious defines as "a peculiar aptitude for transforming the idea received into an act."[25] That for Nietzsche these suggestions are not only aesthetic but have political implications is indicated between the lines. In fact, he claims that the crowd under the suggestive spell

of Wagner—whose ideology, he critically specifies, included German nationalism and anti-Semitism—capitulates to the will to power of what Nietzsche now calls, drawing on a political register, a "leader." The German term Nietzsche uses is ominous: he calls this leader a "*Führer*."[26] There is, indeed, an embryonic critique of fascism internal to Nietzsche's psychological diagnostic of the crowd's tendencies to fall under the spell of an authoritarian leader endowed with will to power that Nietzsche scholars have identified.[27] What we must add is that when Nietzsche returns to re-evaluate the false powers of Dionysus in "Attempt at Self-Critique" to generate what he calls "visions and hallucinations shared by entire communities [*Gemeinden*] or assemblies at a cult [*Kultversammlung*]," [28] he is speaking of the powers of Dionysus in classical antiquity. Yet if we consider the philological fact that *Gemeinden* in German implies a *political* assembly that, Nietzsche warns us, can turn into a *religious cult*, the intended echoes with his larger critique of modern crowd behavior and the psychic subjugation to tyrannical leaders it entails are clear. At one remove, equally clear is the untimely value of a diagnostic of hallucinatory intoxications that originate in violent cults in the classical and modern age yet, under the influence of new tyrannical leaders qua actors, continue to animate contemporary cults that spread contagiously in the digital age. I shall return to them.

For the moment, it suffices to say that Deleuze, as a careful reader of Nietzsche, was not oblivious to the dangerous powers internal to collective, life-negating, and power-driven forms of will to power that generate flows of collective sameness rather than individual difference. The political danger of fascist sameness is a case in point already addressed by conspiracy theorists. Timothy Melley, for instance, notes that "for many postwar and postmodern writers, the prospect of an 'egoless,' or 'anti-oedipal,' mode of being has hardly seemed a promising form of resistance to fascism."[29] Still, these anti-oedipal theorists themselves did not indiscriminately celebrate the dissolution of the ego. On the contrary, a genealogy of ego-loss can call attention to the spell of fascism. As Michel Foucault was quick to note in his preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, the "strategic adversary" of this book is "fascism," by which Foucault does not mean "historical fascism," but rather what he calls, in a genealogical mood, "the fascism in us all, in our heads, and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us."[30] Thus reframed fascism is not simply a danger of the past; it is above all a power that continues to exploit us in the present; mimetic dissolutions of the autonomous subject are not only cause of deterritorializing possibilities; they also call for new diagnostics of fascist contagion and the territorial phantoms it generates.

Now, this Deleuzian preoccupation with fascism, or micro-fascism, is not usually mentioned in the context of his aesthetic celebration of the powers of the false qua Dionysian becoming; nor is it centerstage in postmodern critiques of the subject. Still, Foucault is right to see that it informs Deleuze's micropolitics of mimetic forms of will to power internal to modernist prophets of Dionysus. Thus, in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, in the context of a discussion of another immanent thinker Deleuze considers "very close to Nietzsche,"[31]—namely, D.H. Lawrence—Deleuze echoes Nietzsche's suspicion of the crowd via a diagnostic of what he calls the "collective soul" [*âme collective*]. Deleuze, in fact, specifies that both Nietzsche and Lawrence share an antagonism for a type of collective sameness that cannot easily be peeled away from political power. On the contrary, it wants to take hold of Power—and more:

> What the collective soul wants is Power [*Pouvoir*]… The collective soul does not simply want to seize power or to replace the despot. On the one hand, it wants to destroy power, it hates power and strength [le *pouvoir et la puissance*]… On the other hand, however, it also wants to penetrate [*glisser*] into every pore of power, to swarm in its centers [*essaimer les foyers*], to multiply them throughout the universe. It wants a cosmopolitan power, not in full view like the Empire, but rather in every nook and cranny, in every dark corner, in every fold of the collective soul.[32]

Political power should not be confused with that Deleuze calls "*puissance*" and Nietzsche calls "will to power" (*volonté de puissance* in French translation): the former is life-negating and animated by sad passions, whereas the latter is affirmative and animated by gay passions. Or, to put it in Deleuze's Spinozist language, the former is a manifestation of *potestas,* generating "malice," whereas the latter is a manifestation of *potential,* generating "joy."[33] Yet the power which Nietzsche considered both constitutive of Wagner's theatrical-hypnotic-mimetic *pathos* in particular and of the will to power in general—"the will to power not as a Being not as a becoming but a *pathos*," he writes in a fragment of *The Will to Power*[34]—has the disconcerting ability to turn *potentia* into *potestas*, joy and affirmation into malice and resentment, will to power into political will power. A Janus-faced political leader can in fact channel the dark powers of Dionysus into the collective soul, leading a pathological contagion to slide into egos that are already predisposed to becoming other (remember Rimbaud's *Je est un autre*) and to spread rhizomatically via movements that do not affirm revolutionary becoming but are internal to becoming fascist instead.

Deleuze's dual warning against the crowd aiming to both "destroy power" and infiltrate it in order to swarm the nooks and crannies of the collective soul is a diagnostic that looks back to the fascism of

the past century to warn us against emerging forms of cosmopolitan fascism in the present century. In fact, what Deleuze says of Lawrence's take on the collective soul via his minor literature, applies equally to Nietzsche and the Dionysian soul internal to the powers of the false in cinema—stretching to inform what Foucault called the "fascism in us all." Deleuze confirms the diagnostic as follows:

> there is always the risk that a diseased state will interrupt the process of becoming; health and athleticism both confront the same ambiguity, the constant risk that a delirium of domination will be mixed with a bastard delirium, pushing literature toward a larval fascism [*fascisme larvé*], the disease against which it fights even if this means diagnosing the fascism within itself and fighting against itself.[35]

Potestas contra *potentia*, Dionysian will to power contra fascist will-power, the powers of the false contra false powers—in a nutshell, power contra power. Our Janus-faced genealogy of Dionysian moments of intoxication confirms that the opposition between these competitive powers is far from stable. It is true that figures like Nietzsche and Lawrence in their celebration of masters over slaves, the sovereign individual over the collective herd, were partially complicit with tyrannical forms of will to power they denounce in their later writings.[36] But it is equally true that their diagnostic of collective intoxications at play in modern cults sets up a diagnostic mirror to the powers of the false to infiltrate contemporary politics. On the shoulders of both Nietzsche and Deleuze we shall thus go beyond the mimetic powers of both literature and cinema to account for the false hypermimetic powers internal to social media. To be sure, collective hallucinations infected entire communities via intoxicating cults in the past century. We have sufficient evidence that such cults can also spread contagiously via new media that reload the violent powers of Dionysus online generating (new) fascist hallucinations in the present century.

The Trump Moment: Storming the Capitol

The Storming of the US Capitol in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021 provides a dark and harrowing, yet no less exemplary case study to account for anti-democratic tendencies constitutive of US politics and history.[37] My focus here is on the infectious side of Dionysian powers in the digital age reloaded via conspiracy cults that spread online, yet also generate violent political intoxications offline. The context is different but the genealogical connection with the false powers of mimesis is direct. The conspiracy theory of "election fraud" that went viral through new media asserting that Joseph R. Biden "stole the

election" was not based on the simple logic of mimesis understood as realistic "representation" or mirror of reality, as considered by a tradition that goes from Plato to Erich Auerbach.[38] Yet this conspiracy should not be dismissed as a "hyperreal simulation" having nothing to do with the logic of "imitation," as Jean Baudrillard diagnosed for the postmodern period.[39] Rather, a Nietzschean diagnostic of the powers of the false internal to conspiracy theories suggests that these powers retroact performatively on the immanent materiality political life, generating contagious, mimetic, or better, hypermimetic actions and intoxicating reactions that emerge from the interplay between hyperreal simulations online and all-too-mimetic behavior offline.

Following Donald Trump's electoral defeat and refusal to concede to Joseph Biden as the 46th president-elect of the United States, the mob assault on the U. S. Capitol concluded four years of Trump's catastrophic presidency amplified by a global pandemic with a theoretically all-too-foreseeable, yet practically unforeseen insurrection qua domestic terrorist attack that led to at least seven casualties. In terms of the number of casualties, this insurrection cannot be compared to other anti-democratic actions such as the invasion of Iraq for instance (with estimates of causalities ranging from a hundred and fifty thousand to over a million deaths). Still, the insurrection was a domestic symptom that made all-too-visible (new) fascist forces emerging from within US politics itself. The assault was consciously triggered by a chameleon figure, or *histrio*, endowed with the theatrical ability to generate hypnotizing mass-identifications via a reality TV show (*The Apprentice,* 2004-2017) in the sphere of aesthetic fiction, before changing scene and playing the role of an "apprentice president" who effectively turned politics itself into a fiction. A narcissistic authoritarian leader unable to face the reality of a democratic political defeat, the case of Trump confirms Nietzsche's untimely insight that one day, "'actors,' *all kinds* of actors will be the real masters."[40] In the process, this "master of hypnotic tricks" (Nietzsche's phrase) also provided a striking example of the powers of hyperreal simulations online having nothing to do with faithful (Apollonian) representation of reality, yet having the ability to induce truly felt, contagious, and violent (Dionysian) hallucinations offline, triggering the hypermimetic intoxications Trump put to political use and abuse on January 6, 2021.[41]

Unexpected by politicians and police alike who left the Capitol disarmingly open to the assault, the insurrection should not have surprised political theorists attentive to the powers of mimesis. As a dark moment in the history of US politics, it brings together the main features of emerging diagnostics of the "first Twitter President" that take seriously his use of rhetoric as a "contagious force."[42] Genealogical lenses also call for a theoretical supplement attentive to the intoxicating powers of collective intoxications that can be channeled into anti-

democratic insurrections constitutive of (new) fascist cults. The contagious efficacy of these false powers at play in a collective (Dionysian) soul that, as Deleuze puts it, "does not simply want to seize power (*pouvoir*)" but, rather, "wants to destroy power and strength (*puissance*),"[43] can be schematically diagnosed via a Janus-faced genealogy of Dionysian intoxications that looks back to the past to look ahead to the present—warning the future as well.

The affective and infective contagion internal to the insurrection that marked the culmination of the Trump moment could be summarized as follows. First, it required the organized assemblage of a crowd of supporters at a rally composed primarily of white supremacists and right-wing extremists whose unconditional adherence to the outgoing president and refusal to accept the nominated president-elect provided a shared consensus (*con-sensus*, feeling with) injected with violent anti-democratic potential. It was in fact conducive to spreading an intoxicating mass-contagion characteristic of a collective soul that not only wants power but wants to destroy democratic power *tout court*. Promoted under the hypernationalist banner of a "Save America March" with the explicit intent of assembling a highly mimetic, suggestible, and potentially violent crowd that could be put to (new) fascist use contra the Capitol and the democratic process it symbolizes at least in theory, if not always in practice, the organizers of the rally demonstrated good insight into the contagious dynamic of what Deleuze called "collective soul," Nietzsche called "*Masse*," and a marginalized tradition in critical theory called "crowd psychology" (*Massenpsychologie* or *Psychologie des foules* to quote two famous titles).[44] Despite their differences, figures like Sigmund Freud, Gustave Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde, and Elias Canetti agreed that people behave radically differently in a crowd than individually. In particular, they are prone to fall under the irrational spell or suggestive authority of a charismatic leader (*meneur* is Le Bon's term, which Freud translates as *Führer*) who can use a theatrical rhetoric to trigger contagious and violent emotions that spread unconsciously from self to others, turning the I or ego into another, more powerful and collective phantom ego. Echoing Nietzsche and paving the way for Freud, Le Bon diagnoses the man of the crowd in unflattering terms that received little attention at the twilight of the twentieth century and should be denounced for their racism and sexism. Still Le Bon's diagnostic can also be revisited for its clinical and critical potential at the dawn of the twenty-first century:

> He [the man of the crowd] possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings, whom he further tends to resemble by the facility with which he allows himself to be impressed by words and images—which would be entirely without action on each of the isolated

> individuals composing the crowd—and to be induced to commit acts contrary to his most obvious interests and his best-known habits.[45]

Crowds under the spell of fascist leaders have indeed been known to commit violent acts contrary to their interests in the past century; there is no reason to believe that such spells are not effective for (new) fascist leaders in the present century. Trump's insurrection speech made clear that such an irrational violence characteristic of mob behavior can indeed be directed against innocent victims, or scapegoats, such as ethnic minorities, immigrants, and other nations; it can also be turned against one's own political party ("weak Republicans") and, last but actually mentioned first in his speech, against official news ("the Fake News"). And yet, mob violence in the tradition of crowd psychology is not itself the product of a rivalry over a contested object generated by "mimetic desire," as René Girard's mimetic theory indicated—though contested objects of desire are certainly at play, too.[46] Violent affects are first and foremost suggested directly by the leader's inflammatory rhetoric itself that operates vertically, from the top down, and whose mimetic efficacy is amplified horizontally, from within the crowd as the violent, intoxicating pathos becomes a shared pathos. Tied both horizontally and vertically by this suggestive double bind, the man of the crowd no longer feels lonely and isolated but heroic and empowered, delegates responsibility to the leader, and is ready to commit irresponsible actions against his/her own "obvious interests." This also means that such a "collective soul" is vulnerable to "suggestion," that is, to turning an idea into an action. Historical examples of successful political suggestions are not lacking. Le Bon's manual to induce crowd behavior was not left unused. It found in fascist leaders like Mussolini and Hitler careful readers who put crowd theory to horrifying, contagious practices that, to this day, remain constitutive of (new) fascist rhetoric.

Second, the insurrection was catalyzed by the presence of a presidential leader who relied on what Nietzsche called theatrical strategies characteristic of the "actor" or "mime" in order to cast a suggestive spell on the crowd. The crowd's affective identification—or hypnotic *rapport*—with the *meneur* was already secured by Trump's double role as media personality and political leader who, throughout his presidency, consistently relied on a violent rhetoric to continuously generate mass contagion in the collective soul of his base. This rhetoric should not be derided for its linguistic simplicity, but rather studied for its contagious efficacy. Its distinctive characteristics are well-known to crowd psychology, including aggressive affirmations rather than rational explanations, repetitions rather than arguments, use of images rather than thought, and a general awareness that violent emotions (anger, fear, resentment, etc.) work best to galvanize a crowd.

In the speech that incited the crowd to storm the Capitol, Trump's implementation of the strategies of crowd psychology were obvious and manifold. In particular, he relied on the repetition of the Big Lie constitutive of his conspiracy theory ("rigged election"), an unproven and hyperbolic affirmation of victory ("we won by a landslide"), an emotional appeal to patriotism and love ("American patriots"), the direction of violence against scapegoats (the "China Virus," "the weak Republicans," the "fake media"), and a stubborn refusal of facts ("we will never concede"), among other strategies. Strong with this affective support, Trump and his closest associates whipped up the crowd's resentment to the culminating point of suggesting a violent (new) fascist action contra the US Capitol. They did so explicitly by inciting the mob not to be "zeros but heroes" (Donald Trump Jr.), promising "trial by combat" (Rudolph Giuliani), and suggesting a violent insurrection that had performative effects: "We fight like hell, and if you don't fight like hell you're not going to have a country anymore" (Donald Trump).[47]

The crowd of white supremacists driven by real material deprivations, grievances, and resentment amplified by an ongoing pandemic crisis was at this point galvanized and ready to turn the suggestion into an action. It not only paradoxically voiced support for the very figure who actively promoted the anti-democratic policies responsible for their grievances, responding enthusiastically to Trump's rhetoric by chanting in a collective chorus worthy of a cult: "stop the steal," "we love Trump," "fight for Trump" etc. But it also made members of the mob—which included far-right extremists (Proud Boys), followers of online cults (QAnon), and last but not least, armed veterans including former federal agents (FBI)—ready to put themselves on the line by physically fighting for Trump, against themselves.

Third, as the familiar image of the intoxicated crowd suggests,[48] this paradoxical turn of events cannot be dissociated from the handheld recording devices that redoubled the event online, where the galvanization had initially started in the first place. Trump's speech, rally, and subsequent insurrection was in fact planned and announced well in advance via social media like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, which effectively disseminated the conspiracy theory about "election fraud" by relying on what "conspiracism" does best: namely, promoting the idea that especially when it comes to big but not only historical events (say, an election), official explanations inevitably hide a more occult, false, yet truly-believed plot positing the conspiracy believer as a victim of an evil plan. In their informed overview of this growing heterogeneous phenomenon, Michael Butter and Peter Knight confirm historically what we all saw on January 6, 2021: namely, that "the leaders of populist parties and movements frequently draw on conspiracy tropes, and their followers appear to be particularly receptive to them," specifying that "extremist violence"

often ensues.[49] Equally well-known is that "conspiracy theories can serve as a way to 'save-face' for those on the losing end of a situation, such as elections."[50] Gaining new momentum via the proliferation of new platforms of dissemination online, conspiracy theories can no longer be considered a marginal phenomenon confined to few pathological cases. Disseminated by algorithms that amplify the hypermimetic faculty in the digital age by tapping into online users' pre-existing believes and ideologies, conspiracy theories play an increasingly important role in influencing public opinion in the digital age and call for new investigations.[51] To put it in our Nietzschean language, conspiracy theories turn the powers of the false to *patho*-logical use by generating a plurality of accounts that rest on the logic of affect, or *pathos,* which is crucial to dissolving not only the distinction between the real world and the illusory world, but also life-affirmative power (*volonté de puissance*) and life-negating power (*volonté de pouvoir*)—or to put it in Spinozist language, *potentia* and *potestas*.

The powers of conspiracy theories to erode the epistemic foundations of longstanding democratic practices are complex and manifold, but the assault on the Capitol could not have succeeded without a simpler, yet not less violent, racist supplement. While the US police force is traditionally overprepared to violently counter peaceful protests by ethnic minorities (from Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter), in a mirroring inversion of perspectives it underestimated an announced violent insurrection by white majorities (from white supremacists to far-right extremists). For reasons that are still emerging and are currently revealing Republican officials' complicity with the assault,[52] although the Capitol police force was warned of the danger of insurrection in advance, it remained understaffed, unprepared, and left the door practically open to an intoxicated mob, allowing them to invade the Capitol, loot parts of the building, and take possession of the Senate chamber. In an eerie confirmation of the Dionysian genealogy we have been tracing, a figure dressed as a shaman and member of the far-right white supremacist conspiracy cult QAnon[53] made the underlying link between ancient cults and contemporary conspiracy cults visible for all too see. In sum, the enthusiastic readiness to turn a violent linguistic suggestion ("fight like hell") into violent physical aggression was already generated online via the conspiracy theory of "election fraud" before spilling—via the amplification of Trump's incendiary speech to the crowd—offline, generating violent insurrectionist practices contra democracy.

Importantly, the feedback loop between online and offline violence continued during the storming of the Capitol itself as the insurrectionists not only filmed Trump's speech but also their own terrorist attack, re-doubling the event in the digital world. This digitized recording of a (new) fascist suggestion turned into terrorist action generated a parallel reality which, once again, did not simply represent reality according

to the traditional laws of imitation, but also generated performative hypermimetic effects that cut both ways, both with and contra democracy. On the democratic side, the online recordings were instrumental in helping the police identify insurrectionists, track them down, and inflict severe penalties; on the insurrectionist side, these videos went viral and contributed to disseminating violent anti-democratic feelings that are not limited to the US but are operative transnationally via a growing cosmopolitan network connecting (new) fascist movements across the world. To be sure, the insurrection eventually failed, and a lawful democratic election ensued. And yet, the example of how conspiracy theories can easily lead to violent insurrections reveals the fragility of democratic institutions. Conspiracy theories also reveal anti-democratic tendencies that have been haunting and continue to haunt US politics in general and the Republican party in particular, leaving lasting traces in the history of democracy. Last but not least, the hypermimetic efficacy of conspiracy theories also left lasting traces online that can serve as possible models for future insurrections offline to imitate, in an hypermimetic spiral of endless regress. [54]

In the end, the assault on the Capitol left many politicians shocked, caught security forces unprepared, and was considered unprecedented within the sphere of US politics. And yet, a minor tradition in mimetic theory consistently showed that its contagious dynamic has a long genealogy warning against the violent powers of mimesis. Interestingly, even the hypermimetic dynamic linking digital simulations online to bodily intoxications offline was anticipated—if not by political science, at least by science fiction. Critics already addressed how Trump's success during his presidential election benefited from the hypermimetic strategies of identification he mastered in his reality TV show, before putting them to violent political ends.[55] What we must add is a third, future-oriented step or moment in our genealogy: namely, that one of the clearest mirroring diagnostics of the contagious powers of hypermimesis stems from an original sci-fi TV show, or rather TV series. Having traced the genealogical sources of mimetic contagion intoxications back to its Dionysian origins, let me now look ahead to a future-oriented reflection on the Dionysian powers of digital simulations that set up an hypermimetic anticipatory mirror to political insurrections.

The Waldo Moment: A *Black Mirror* for Political Theory

The award-winning British TV series, *Black Mirror* (created by Charlie Brooker) offers a warning against the hypermimetic powers of TV personalities to generate political insurrections in political life. A sci-fi, dystopic, and future-oriented series on the performative powers of new digital technologies to affect human behavior, *Black Mirror* already received a number of philosophical commentaries that recognized its

relevance for the present moment.[56] Initially aired on Channel 4 in 2011, running for five seasons until 2019, and now available on Netflix, *Black Mirror* not only perceptively represents the contagious effects of new digital technologies—from smart-phone addiction to cyberattacks, videogames addiction to digital totalitarianism—but also anticipates historical events yet to come. The series thus has philosophical potential, at least if we follow Michel Serres's view that the primary vocation of philosophy is to anticipate, for as he puts it, "*philosopher c'est anticiper.*"[57] With respect to political contagion and the hypermimetic violence it generates, *Black's Mirror*'s philosophical/anticipatory value is strikingly apparent in an episode titled *The Waldo Moment,* which received poor reviews when it was first aired in 2013, yet should be re-viewed in 2021—if only because it anticipates in the sphere of fiction what few could imagine in the sphere of theory, let alone politics.

In a mirroring inversion of the original/copy opposition that would have pleased a deconstructive critic, *The Waldo Moment* provides what Deleuze would call "clinical and critical" insights into the dynamic of hypermimesis that are most valuable for future-oriented political/mimetic theorists. It tells the story of Jamie (Daniel Rigby), a frustrated comedian who impersonates a digital cartoon of an animated blue bear named, "Waldo." Originally modelled on Boris Johnson before he was elected Prime Minister of the UK, Waldo relies on new media strategies that will be successfully used by Donald Trump to win the US presidency in 2016. Thanks to Jamie's effective impersonation, which relies on tonality of voice, facial expressions and gestures rendered via remote-controlled performance caption, as well as other simulated effects, Waldo moves beyond the fictional sphere of his comedy TV show to become an unpredictably competitive political candidate, getting support from voters disillusioned with politics and in search for "comic relief."

Comic Politics in *The Waldo Moment.* Video still, *Black Mirror*, Charlie Brooker, 2013.

That this relief has contagious, performative, and violent properties is soon made clear. Waldo draws on a Dionysian rhetoric of accusations, vulgar sexualized gestures (erections), obscene sounds (farts), and above all, a general aggressive attitude toward traditional political candidates who represent the status quo. Waldo operates in the hyperreal sphere of animation characteristic of a cartoon simulation; yet from the opening of the episode, it is clear that he has the hypermimetic power to affect the immanent world of politics as well—if only because the latter is increasingly modeled on the sphere of entertainment that operates on the sensations of physical crowds, television publics, and internet users.

The Waldo Moment calls attention to the role of linguistic disrespect and abuse that is at play in contemporary politics. As critics have recognized, in the wake of Trump's 2016 presidential election, Waldo's strategies have become a staple of political rhetoric, generating a contagious, reciprocal dynamic of violent "discursive abuse" that is constitutive—but not limited to—alt-right populism.[58] Waldo's blend of comedy and politics animates in fact both sides of the political spectrum: it equally informs satirical TV shows on the left that are critical of fascist policies, yet profits from the comic potential of (new) fascism via a structural ambivalence constitutive of what I also call, "comic fascism."[59] What still needs to be recognized is that Waldo's rhetoric is not limited to linguistic accusations that can be critiqued, or unmasked, from a safe hermeneutical distance; it also generates an affective and infective register that slides, hypermimetically, into the collective soul of digital users and physical crowds, leading from a rhetoric of *linguistic* violence online to actions of *physical* violence offline.[60] What Waldo's "crowd-pleasing" performance revealed, well before the storming of the Capitol, is how thin and porous the boundary dividing fiction and reality, entertainment and politics—but also, conspiracy theories and violent practices, verbal abuse and physical abuse—can be in the digital age.

The powers of hypermimesis require future-oriented diagnostics but in order to look ahead to violent insurrections to come, it is wise not to forget the ancient and modern lessons we learned from our genealogy of the powers of the false. Both illusory (Apollonian) images and embodied (Dionysian) affects are, in fact, at play in the logic of hypermimetic contagion *The Waldo Moment* foresaw in fiction and the Trump moment actualized in politics. On the Apollonian side, the figure of the animated bear points to the irrelevance of a real referent for the simulation to operate affectively, grab public attention, and take hold in the sphere of a mass-mediatized politics already modelled on entertainment. In fact, what gives momentum to the Waldo moment is not a political program, or idea. Jamie readily admits that he is "not a politi-

cian," "can't answer serious questions," and that Waldo "doesn't stand for anything." Rather, what matters is what a producer says early on: "Twitter can't get enough of Waldo, loves him."

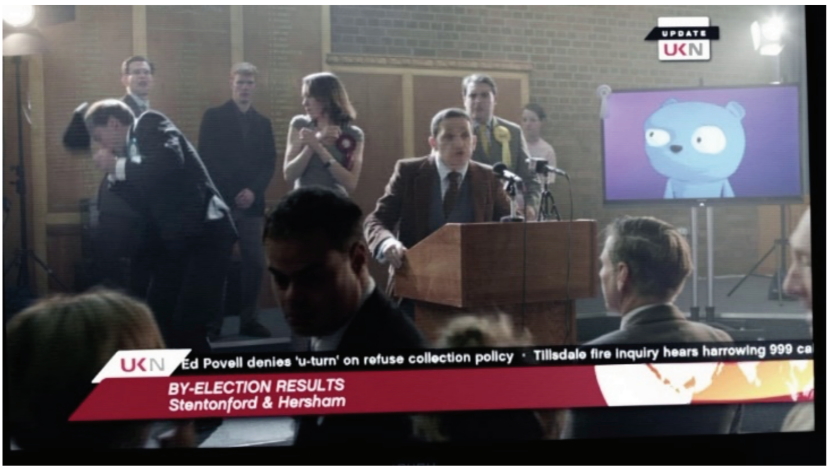
Needless to say, this diagnostic perfectly applies to the Trump moment as well, and so does what follows. *The Waldo Moment* suggests that liking, retweeting, posting short comic/hateful messages via social media whose format privileges comic/vulgar characters online, can induce an emotional contagion that takes root offline. In fact, Waldo's popularity grows further as a YouTube video of an aggressive debate on a talk show in which the blue bear attacks his political opponents goes viral, providing the necessary supporters that allow Waldo to become a "serious" political contender.

Waldo stealing the show in *The Waldo Moment*. Video still, *Black Mirror*, Charlie Brooker, 2013.

There is an ancient and modern lesson reloaded here for present times: in the digital age, the efficacy of any message, including a political message, does not stem primarily from its content, idea, or *logos*. As an American agent is quick to realize, there is a power (*potestas*) internal to this comic figure that can destroy political power (*potentia*) altogether, for Waldo, he says, "could deliver any brand of political content." The efficacy of the message stems from the medium in general and from the number of views it attracts online, generating a shared pathos of aggression with the hypermimetic power to infect the body politic, cast a spell on public opinion, and erode political power. As a TV journalist puts it, "Cartoons don't play by the rules and Waldo's open disdain for his opponents has clearly struck a chord." Conversely—and for us, revealingly—on the related Dionysian side of power, the presence of a physical crowd or public responsive to a rhetoric based on vulgarity and accusations punctuates the episode beginning-middle-and-end,

staging an escalation that progressively turns from linguistic abuse to physical abuse, rhetorical violence to embodied violence. Thus, if Waldo initially relies on the crowd of spectators to mediate and amplify his insults directed against his main rival, the Conservative MP Liam Monroe (Tobias Menzies), the episode turns physically violent as Jamie quits his position as operator only to be replaced by his producer who manipulates the Waldo simulation to turn the crowd against the original voice of Waldo by shouting: "Five hundred quid to the first man to hit him"—triggering a real beating.

The Waldo Moment teaches us that in an in increasingly digitized and polarized world the boundary dividing virtual actions and physical reactions no longer holds; the step between verbal violence online from physical violence in reality is but a very short one. This is especially true if the crowd has already been attuned to following the suggestions of virtual simulations, which it can then turn into physical actions. This hypermimetic performative principle is confirmed one last time at the end of the episode. After losing the election to Monroe and coming in second—I told you this was a future-oriented mirror of reality—Waldo gives the following order to the crowd of his frustrated followers assembled to hear the results of the election: "Hey, hey! Everyone! Five hundred quid to anyone who can lob a shoe!" And the hyperreal simulation produces the expected hypermimetic result as the insurrectionist crowd starts throwing shoes at the democratically-elected prime minister.



(New) fascist insurrection in *The Waldo Moment*. Video still, *Black Mirror*, Charlie Brooker, 2013.

To be sure, the blue bear may be a false image, but its political powers are real—all too real. As the American agent who had foreseen the disruptive political potential of this comic figure puts it—sensing

what Deleuze had called the power of the "collective soul" not only to "want Power [*Pouvoir*]" but "destroy politics"—Waldo is the "perfect assassin."

This is, indeed, what happens in the end. While Waldo lost that particular election at the local level, he wins in the long-term by overturning democratic politics at the global level. As Deleuze had also warned, the "larval fascism" internal to the "collective soul" "wants to penetrate [*glisser*] into every pore of power, to swarming its centers [*essaimer les foyers*], to multiply them throughout the universe. It wants a cosmopolitan power."[61] The episode ends with a cinematic dramatization of the (new) fascist powers of hypermimesis swarming transnationally. Ominously set in a not-distant, dystopian, totalitarian and digitally-connected future based in an Asian country, the Waldo moment is no longer simply a "moment." On the contrary, it has infiltrated every nook and cranny of cosmopolitan power: it is now adopted transnationally, across the globe, as a totalitarian figure used to manipulate, influence, and control the world population. How was such a totalitarian regime implemented? As the American agent had prophetically anticipated: by channeling into the Waldo simulation a "targeted hopeful message, energizing the disenfranchised without spooking the middle via a new platform" that relies on Twitter, among other new media constitutive of (new) fascist power. As the concluding shot suggests, the result is indeed a transnational, cosmopolitan, and totalitarian regime that promises empty rhetorical slogans like "hope," "change," and "belief." Mediated by simulations projected on ubiquitous screens that have nothing to do with referential facts, the ramified network of power animating Waldo has the hypermimetic (will to) power to generate subjugations fully operative in violent policing practices.

Hypermimetic totalitarian power in *The Waldo Moment*. Video still, *Black Mirror*, Charlie Brooker, 2013.

The Waldo Moment aired in 2013. Compared to other episodes, it received little initial attention—until the Trump moment, which lasted from 2016 to 2021, at least for the moment. Revisited in the wake of the theoretically predictable, yet practically unexpected storming of the US Capitol and the increasing spread of (new) fascist sentiments across the world, it both anticipates and confirms, via a science fiction, what we saw happening in political reality: a last chain in a series of insurrectionist "moments" that new generations of political theorists are called to anticipate in the future.

The mirroring interplay between the Trump moment and the Waldo moment is, indeed, striking; it is theoretically revealing of the hypermimetic laws of contagion in the digital age. Not concerned with the referential laws of representation but animated by the powers of the false reloaded via new media, we are indeed witnessing an explosion of the mimetic faculty in the digital age. Whether new generations of theorists (from *theōrein*, to see) furthering the transdisciplinary field of mimetic studies will continue to be in a position to look back to a minor genealogy of thinkers of (hyper)mimesis in order foresee (new) fascist insurrections that loom large on the horizon, remains to be virtually seen.

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Notes

1. For early warnings see Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017); William E. Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy Under Trump* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Radom House, 2018); Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: A Warning* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018); Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (London: The Bodley Head, 2018). This article was written prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which would require another essay or special issue, yet the studies above and the insights that follow on the manipulation of public opinion via hypermimetic media applies to the case of Russia as well.
2. Nidesh Lawtoo, *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2019).

3. On the shoulders of Nietzsche, I reframe mimesis as an unconscious mirroring process of imitation endowed with the affective power to dispossess the subject of its proper identity, turning the ego into a "phantom of the ego." See Nidesh Lawtoo, *Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013). More recently I developed new transdisciplinary theory of mimesis that joins philosophical, aesthetic, and political perspectives to open up the new field of mimetic studies in Nidesh Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation* (Leuven, BE: Leuven University Press, 2022). See also http://www.homomimeticus.eu/ (last accessed 1 August 2021).
4. Conspiracy theories have long been recognized as constitutive of US politics. Peter Knight, for instance, introduces a volume on this subject with an historical account of the US as a "Nation of Conspiracy Theorists" that taps into "the traditional American obsessions with rugged individual agency." *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight (New York: New York Press, 2002), 7. Similarly, Timothy Melley articulates a genealogy of conspiracy and paranoia in postwar America that focuses on anxieties about the loss of agency, or "agency panic," triggered by the "the postmodern movement away from a centered, autonomous subject." Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: A Theory of the Tragic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 185-86. On conspiracy theories as popular political interpretations that are vulnerable to fascism and scapegoating mechanisms see also Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). For an informed critical review of these and other studies, see Jodi Dean, "Theorizing Conspiracy Theory," *Theory & Event* 4, no. 3 (2000). What follows supplements a mimetic perspective to these pioneering studies in order to account for the power of conspiracy theories to generate violent effects in political practices.
5. Nidesh Lawtoo, "The Powers of Mimesis: Simulation, Encounters, Comic Fascism," *Theory & Event* 22, no. 3 (2019): 722-46.
6. Michael Butter and Peter Knight, "General Introduction," in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, eds. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1-8, 1.
7. Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, tr. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 331-336, 334.
8. Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," 333.
9. On the "mimetic turn," see Nidesh Lawtoo, "The Plasticity of Mimesis," *MLN* 132, no. 5 (2017): 1201-1224; on fascist mimesis, see Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism*, esp. chap. 2, and Lawtoo, *(New) Fascism*, esp. chap. 1; on mimetic contagion, see Christian Borch, *Imitation, Contagion, Suggestion: On Imitation and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2019); on fascist psychology, see Nidesh Lawtoo, "The Case of Eichmann Restaged: Arendt, Eichmann, and the Complexity of Mimesis" *Political Research Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2021): 479-90 ; on democratic mimesis, see Jane Bennett, "Mimesis: Paradox or Encounter," *MLN* 132, no. 5 (2017): 1186-1200, and Adriana Cavarero, *Surging Democracy: Notes on Hannah Arendt's Political Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).

10. While there are obvious analogies between conspiracy theories and the Big Lies constitutive of fake news, the two should not be conflated. Focusing on the role of Donald Trump's "Birther" conspiracy theory (i.e., that Barack Obama was not born in the U.S.) that "kick-started" the former's path toward election, Michael Butter and Peter Knight summarize the main characteristics of conspiracy theories as follows: "they assume that everything has been planned and nothing happens by coincidence; they divide the world strictly into the evil conspirators and the innocent victims of their plot; and they claim that the conspiracy works in secret and does not reveal itself even after it has reached its goals." Michael Butter and Peter Knight, "General Introduction," in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, eds. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1-8, 1.
11. See Nidesh Lawtoo, *Violence and the Mimetic Unconscious: vol. 2, The Affective Hypothesis* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2023).
12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, ed. tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 21.
13. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 127-55.
14. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 132.
15. Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969), 297 (my trans.).
16. Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, 301, 303. For the relevance of this "minor" ontology of becoming for political theory, see William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
17. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 153.
18. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 152.
19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, ed. tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 64. For a dramatic representation of these powers see Euripides, *The Bacchae*, tr. William Arrowsmith, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies, vol. IV Euripides*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 543-608, 592, ll. 1124-1137.
20. Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 19.
21. Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 20.
22. Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 21.
23. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner,* in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, ed. tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 154-192, 172, 171.
24. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, 172.
25. Hippolyte Bernheim, *Suggestive Therapeutics: A Treatise on the Nature and the Uses of Hypnotism*, tr. Christian A. Herter (Westport, CT: Associated Booksellers, 1957), 137. For a recent return of attention to "suggestion" in social theory, see Borch ed., *Imitation, Contagion, Suggestion*.

26. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, 156.
27. *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism? On the Uses and Abuses of a Philosophy*, eds. Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrisch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Nidesh Lawtoo, "Prophet of Nazism?," in *The Phantom of the Ego,* 76-83.
28. Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 21.
29. Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, 186.
30. Michel Foucault, "Preface" in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Robert Hurley et al. (London: Continuum, 2008), xiv-xv. On Deleuze and Foucault contra fascism, see also William E. Connolly, *Climate Machines, Fascist Drives and Truth* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
31. Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* tr. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 39.
32. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 39.
33. As Deleuze explains in the *Abécédaire*: "There is no bad power (*puissance*), instead we should say that what is bad is the lowest degree of power (*puissance*). And the lowest degree of power (*puissance*), is power (*pouvoir*)." If the former implies relations of domination characterized by "malice" the latter implies relations of intensity that affirm "joy." *Deleuze*, ed. Léopold Lambert (New York: Punctum Books, 2013), 70.
34. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, tr. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 339.
35. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 4.
36. For a more detailed analysis, see Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego*, 27-84, 143-208; and "Lawrence *Contra* (New) Fascism," *College Literature* 47, no. 2 (2020): 287-317.
37. The Capitol was built in great part by African American slaves and anti-democratic/racist policies continue to cast a shadow on the present. These include but are not limited to structures like the Electoral College, the filibuster, and the two-parties system that proved historically inadequate to effectively counter a series of anti-democratic actions most visible in US foreign policy (from the Vietnam War to the War in Iraq). Anti-democracy in America also continues to be visible in racist oppression, gendered and sexual discrimination, deep-seated class inequality, unequal access to basic human rights such as accessible health care and education, not to speak of anti-environmental policies, among other tendencies. For an informed wide-ranging collection of essays that inscribes the Trump Administration in the longer history of anti-democracy in the U.S., see *Anti-Democracy in America: Truth, Power, and the Republic at Risk*, eds. Eric Klinenberg, Caitlin Zaloom, Sharon Marcus (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
38. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. Willard R. Task (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 554.
39. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), 10-11.
40. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* tr. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 303.

41. Jodi Dean already noted that personal/therapeutic use of hypnosis is central to conspiracy theories about aliens and UFOs with no connection to reality. Jodi Dean, "If Anything is Possible," in *Conspiracy Nation,* ed. Peter Knight, 85-106, 85-88. What the case of Trump reveals is the collective/political power of hypnosis to spread conspiracy theories with all-too-real anti-democratic effects in political practices.
42. On digital violence or "online vitriol" and "affective politics" internal to Trump's Tweets and rhetoric prior to his election, see Sara Polak, "'#Unpresidented': The Making of the First Twitter President," and Greta Olson, "Love and Hate Online: Affective Politics in the Era of Trump," in *Violence and Trolling on Social Media*, eds. Sara Polak and Daniel Trotter (Amsterdam, NL: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 65-85, 153-77. I provide a more detailed genealogy of media violence in light of theories of contagion, catharsis, and the unconscious in Nidesh Lawtoo, *Violence and the Unconscious: Catharsis to Contagion* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press,2023).
43. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 39.
44. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology* [Massenpsychologie] *and Analysis of the Ego*, ed. and tr. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959); Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* [La Psychologie des foules] (New York: Dover Publications Inc.). For an informed reevaluation of crowd psychology for political theory, see Christian Borch, *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
45. Le Bon, *The Crowd,* 8.
46. For Girard's most explicit engagement with crowd psychology see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press,1977), 169-192. Peter Thiel who was part of Trump's transition team was a student of Girard at Stanford: if he put the insights of mimetic theory to use as the first investor of Facebook, he is also likely to have shared his knowledge of crowd behavior for Trump's political abuse. See Kieran Keohane, "La Liberté contre la Démocratie," *Le Grand Continent*, 16.02.2019, https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2019/02/16/par-dela-la-democratie/ (last accessed 12 March 2021).
47. For the full speech see "What Trump Said before His Supporters Stormed the Capitol, Annotated," https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interactive/2021/annotated-trump-speech-jan-6-capitol/ (last accessed 11 January 2021).
48. The pictures of January 6 I had originally planned, which are freely available online, proved to be too expensive to be included here for academic and educational in this article. They have by now been massively reproduced on other platforms and are thus familiar. For a selection, see https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2022/01/06/1070610129/photos-one-year-later-a-look-back-on-the-jan-6-insurrection (Accessed 1 December 2022)
49. Butter and Knight, *Routledge Handbook*, 1-8, 2.
50. Hulda Thórisdóttir, Silvia Mari and André Krouwel, "Conspiracy Theories, Political Ideology and Political Behavior," in *Routledge Handbook*, 304-16, 305.

51. On the role of new media to disseminate conspiracies see Simona Stano, "The Internet and the Spread of Conspiracy Content," in *Routledge Handbook*, 483-96.
52. See "Capitol Police Detail Failure during Pro-Trump Assault." https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/26/us/politics/capitol-riot-police.html (Accessed 27 January 2021)
53. QAnon is notorious as a far-right conspiracy theory that alleges, among other things, sex-trafficking and Satan-worshiping by Democratic leaders.
54. As I revise this piece on 16 August 2021, the Taliban have just taken control of Afghanistan after 20 years of US military presence in the country; they occupied the Presidential Palace in Kabul to the surprise of the U.S., the NATO, and the EU. From the pictures of the occupied Palace the analogies with the Storming of the Capitol are ominous. They provide an additional hypermimetic irony to a tragic insurrection.
55. See Snyder, *Road to Unfreedom*, 222; and Lawtoo, *(New) Fascism*, 38-51.
56. See the essays collected in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, ed. David Kyle Johnson (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2020); Nidesh Lawtoo, "Black Mirrors: Reflecting (on) Hypermimesis," *Philosophy Today* 65, no. 3 (2021): 534-47.
57. Michel Serres, "Philosopher c'est anticiper," *Philosophie Magazine,* 4 July 2007, https://www.philomag.com/articles/michel-serres-philosopher-cest-anticiper (last accessed 3 June 2021).
58. See Greg Littmann, "The Waldo Moment and Political Discourse: What's Wrong with Disrespect in Politics?", in *Black Mirror and Philosophy*, 59-68.
59. See Lawtoo, "The Powers of Mimesis," 722-746.
60. Sara Polak and Daniel Trottier note: "While online and offline worlds seem separated, the consequences of online media expressions also occur offline, and many online dynamics have offline equivalents in past and present." Polak and Trottier, "Introducing Online Vitriol," in *Violence and Trolling on Social Media*, 1-21, 10.
61. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 39.