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## **The mimetic faculty reloaded: contagion, immunization, conspiracies in the age of viral reproduction**

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## 10. The Mimetic Faculty Reloaded: Contagion, Immunization, Conspiracies in the Age of Viral Reproduction\*

▼ **ABSTRACT** This chapter argues that the human, all too human vulnerability to mimesis (imitation) is a central and so far underdiagnosed element internal to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Supplementing medical accounts of viral contagion and providing an alternative to theories of mimetic desire that treated epidemics metaphorically in the past century, I develop a genealogy of the concept of mimesis — from antiquity to modernity to the present — that is attentive to both its pathological and therapeutic or patho-*logical* properties for the present century. Part of an ERC project title *Homo Mimeticus*, the chapter provides new conceptual foundations for a theory of mimesis that is vital to countering contagious crises that cast a shadow on the present and on the future as well.

The coronavirus, like all viruses, is mimetic in the biological sense that it reproduces itself through other living beings. But what is the link between the ancient concept of *mimēsis*, viral contagion, and immunity? And if there is a link, how can an apparently unoriginal concept often translated as ‘imitation’, or ‘representation’, help us reflect critically, philosophically, and thus diagnostically, on contagious cultural pathologies such as crowd behaviour and conspiracy theories that do not simply misrepresent the truth about the virus online, but also cast an affective shadow that undermines immunization and amplifies the spread of viral contagion offline? I would like to suggest that the old and protean concept of ‘mimesis’ can provide, if not a magical immunization, at least a longstanding philosophical perspective to reflect critically on

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cultural pathologies that, in times of the pandemic crisis but not only, are in urgent need of transdisciplinary diagnostics attentive to the human, all too human tendency to imitate others — what I also call, for lack of a more original term, *homo mimeticus*.<sup>1</sup>

After the speed with which virologists produced medical vaccines, or *pharmaka*, to contain and hopefully eventually immunize the world population against the COVID-19 pandemic, a plurality of broader social, political, anthropological problems — among others — amplified the pandemic crisis on a plurality of fronts. These include, for instance, the problem of equal vaccine distribution in an increasingly uncertain world plagued by social inequality, racist/sexist discrimination, (new) fascist leaders, and last but not least, conspiracy theories. These among other problems made clear that an epidemic may generate a contagious *undifferentiation* in the general sense that all humans are equally vulnerable to infection in theory; and yet, a number of *differentiating* factors render some humans more vulnerable than others in practice. As the SARS-CoV-2 virus keeps mutating via genetic differentiations that increase the speed of contamination at the viral level (omicron being the latest variant as I revised this piece in January 2022), the COVID-19 pandemic generates a plurality of cultural differences that are equally slowing down immunization in complex (from *complexus*, interwoven) ways, urging cultural theorists and philosophers to stress what should have been clear from the beginning: namely, that a pandemic is a “total” social phenomenon<sup>2</sup> that concerns not only virologists, immunologists, medical experts, and healthcare workers fighting the virus on the front lines; it also infects and affects all aspects of social life, from the economy to politics, education to communication to policies of immunization and vaccine distribution that are fully constitutive of a pandemic crisis. As the French sociologist Edgar Morin puts it, relying on a mimetic terminology, the COVID-19 pandemic sets up a ‘magnifying glass to social inequalities’.<sup>3</sup>

If we then also consider that a significant segment of the population is composed of pandemic deniers, anti-lockdown protesters, and vaccine skeptics (or antivax) who have fallen prey to conspiracy theories that have gone viral online before retroacting on the population offline in ways that amplify viral infection, a *re-turn* of attention to mimesis is in order. The ancient problematic of false representations of reality can in fact no longer be limited to epistemic and ontological concerns with truth and lies — though these perspectives remain crucial in an age we were perhaps too quick to dub in terms of ‘post-truth’. The powers of the false also have political, ethical, pedagogical, affective, and medical consequences that are constitutive of what I call the ‘patho(-)logies of mimesis’ understood as both mimetic cultural pathologies that spread by mobilizing the register of affect (*pathos*) and critical discourses (*logoi*)

1 *Homo Mimeticus* is an ERC-funded transdisciplinary project that advocates a mimetic turn, or re-turn of mimesis in continental philosophy, critical theory, political theory, literary/film studies, among other perspectives. For outputs, see <http://www.homomimeticus.eu/publications/>

2 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Cohen & West, 1966), p. 78.

3 Edgar Morin (with the collaboration of Sabah Abouessalam), *Changeons de voie: les leçons du coronavirus* (Paris: Denoël, 2020), p. 39.

that give a rational account of this pathos (or patho-logy).<sup>4</sup> Since cultural forms of affective contagion are not simply added to viral contagion, but amplify the latter's reach and power of infection, they cannot be considered as external to it, in an old-fashioned 'two-cultures' opposition that is clearly inadequate to account for complex, transdisciplinary problems. On the contrary, a pandemic crisis calls for a plurality of patho-logical supplements to account for the joint problematic of contagion and immunization, both at the viral and affective levels, in a spirit of transdisciplinary collaboration. My hypothesis is that in order to account for the complex relation between viral pathologies and cultural pathologies, as well as their respective practices of contagion and immunization, it is useful, perhaps even urgent, to remember that it is not only the nonhuman virus that is contagious; humans' imitative tendencies are imbued with contagious properties that spread contagiously, from self to others as well — for good and ill.

There are a number of symptoms that call for a mimetic turn, or *re-turn* of attention to mimesis central to an interdisciplinary field we call, "mimetic studies."<sup>5</sup> A proliferation of emerging phenomena in social and cultural life, from digital simulations to conspiracy theories, have in fact confirmed Walter Benjamin's insights into the 'significance of the mimetic faculty' to account for magical phenomena of mimicry based on 'sensuous similarities' that via an 'aestheticization of politics, as practiced by fascism', continues to cast a long shadow on the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> And yet, if Benjamin argued at the dawn of the modernist period that the invention of language may have brought about 'the increasing decay of the mimetic faculty',<sup>7</sup> I will argue that the digital age brought about an exponential growth of what I shall call the hypermimetic faculty and the magical associations it entails. My wager is that the viral contagion internal to an age haunted by pandemic, environmental and other crises sets up a magnifying mirror to *homo mimeticus*. In particular, it reveals an all too mimetic tendency to fall under the pathological spell of emotional contagion in physical crowds on one side and conspiracies theories in virtual publics on the other side. Both sides call for heterogeneous forms of cultural immunization in critical practice.

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4 Nidesh Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), pp. 6–8.

5 Nidesh Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022), pp. 9–39.

6 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty,' in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Peter Demetz, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 333–34; Id., 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (2<sup>nd</sup> version), in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings and others, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 19–55 (p. 42); Nidesh Lawtoo, *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019).

7 Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty,' p. 334.

## 1. The Patho(-)Logies of *Homo Mimeticus*

While the COVID-19 pandemic generated a viral contagion that was effectively placed under the lens of epidemiologists and virologists to effectively develop a plurality of vaccines, it has also made clear that a viral pandemic infects and affects the totality of human activities in complex ways that involve the humanities and social sciences as well. In particular, it made visible on a global scale what philosophers from Plato and Aristotle onward considered to be one of humans' defining characteristics, for which there is no single effective immunization: namely, that *homo sapiens* is an extremely mimetic species, not only in the aesthetic sense that humans represent the world via realistic media like painting, theatre, cinema, TV, and now a proliferation of new media with the potential to represent realities that are epistemically false — though in the digital age, in the wake of AI revolutions, we continue to do that well and with alarming efficacy.<sup>8</sup> Humans are also mimetic in the psychological, sociological, anthropological, and political sense that we imitate, often unconsciously, other people, be they real or fictional, embodied or represented, including their emotions, habits, and beliefs, which go viral online and spread 'contagiously', from self to others, offline as well.<sup>9</sup>

The metaphor of 'going viral' is not accidental. Rethinking mimesis in the age of COVID-19 makes us see that imitation turns out to share some important characteristics with viruses: it is linked to a type of reproduction that is not limited to representation but affects and infects human bodies; it does so in ways that operate via microimitations that are imperceptible to the naked eye; it renders bodies vulnerable to a type of contagion that is amplified by proximity with others; and last but not least, it generates effects that go beyond clear-cut categories of good and evil, health and sickness, and cannot be contained within unilateral, universal, and trans-historical diagnostics. For instance, on the one hand, scientifically informed models of behaviour based on a rational knowledge, or *logos*, can be amplified affectively by public personalities (presidents, celebrities, actors) who have the power to turn to (social) media to promote therapeutic or patho-*logical* forms of prevention like social distancing, mask-wearing, and vaccination; on the other hand, the proliferation of pathological cultural models among the same categories of 'exemplary' personalities can also spread irrational sentiments that have nothing to do with the *logos* of science. On the contrary, they are animated by a resentful *pathos* that promotes pandemic-denial, mask-protests, antivax movements, and conspiracy theories that 'go viral' in both the metaphorical sense that they spread, like a virus, in the virtual world of internet simulations, but also in the sense that they retroact, via spiraling feedback

<sup>8</sup> See Nidesh Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus 2.0: Posthuman Mimesis in Art, Philosophy and Technics* (Leiden: Brill, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> As Christoph Wulf and Gunter Gebauer put it, 'the relevance of mimesis is not restricted to the aesthetic [...] its effects press outward into the social world, taking root, as Plato saw it, in individual behavior like a contagion'. Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture-Art-Society*, trans. by Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 309. See also the special issue on *The Mimetic Condition*, ed. Nidesh Lawtoo, *CounterText*, 1. 8 (2022).

loops, to affect and infect social practices offline in ways that literally disseminate viral contagion in human bodies.

This structural ambivalence entails therapeutic insights that provide a humanistic supplement to the medical sciences. If the vaccine mimics the virus to provide a therapeutic immunity to the infection, leading Judith Butler to rightly note that “both analogy and mimicry are crucial to strengthen the immune system,”<sup>10</sup> this also means mimesis is equally endowed with double pharmaceutical properties. Since classical antiquity, in fact, the all-too-human propensity to imitate others (be they real or fictional) has been considered as both pathological and therapeutic. Already Plato, in fact, considered mimesis as a *pharmakon*, that is, as both ‘medicine and/or poison’.<sup>11</sup> Or, to put it in our diagnostic language, the effects are at least double: on one side, the coronavirus generated a form of mimetic contagion that triggered a multiplicity of *pathologies* that affected *homo sapiens* on a multiplicity of levels — biological, psychological, sociological, anthropological, political, economic, etc.; on the other side, it can also serve as a therapeutic and reflective mirror that provides the necessary distance to mobilize different discourses or *logoi* to account for the dynamic of mimetic affects or *pathoi*, including viro-logoi on vaccines that mimic viruses to therapeutic ends — what I call, ‘patho-logies’. I do so to emphasize the transdisciplinary discourses or *logoi* internal to recent mimetic studies attentive to the contagious power of *pathos*.

Disseminated by globalization, indifferent to national borders, favoured by political inefficiency, and obsessively followed by (new) media, true and false, a pandemic is what Marcel Mauss calls a ‘total social fact’ [*fait social total*] insofar as this heterogeneous phenomenon is at ‘once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on’.<sup>12</sup> It thus escapes cultural generalizations that aim to contain the proliferating effects of viral and affective contagion within unitary theoretical diagnostics that may still have worked in a relatively secure nation state in the post-war period, but no longer work to ensure immunity in a present interconnected and increasingly precarious world.<sup>13</sup> In the wake of the differentiated reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and the future pandemics that will continue to haunt an increasingly connected body politic, the reality of viral contagion leads us to correct unifying theories of mimetic contagion that were still dominant in the past century.

In the 1970s the French literary theorist René Girard rightly noticed important similarities between the viral contagion internal to epidemics and the affective contagion that follows it, shadow-like. He did so via hermeneutical analyses of renderings

10 Judith Butler, *What World Is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), p. 10.

11 Jacques Derrida, ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 70, p. 139.

12 Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 76.

13 For a rich philosophical account of “immunity” as a biopolitical category of protection and negation of life, see Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: protezione e negazione della vita* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002) and *Immunità comune. Biopolitica all’epoca della pandemia* (Einaudi, Torino 2022). As Esposito’s thought on immunity rests on a biopolitical rethinking of community that presupposes minimally an engagement with Foucault, Bataille and Nietzsche to be properly framed, I refer readers to *Roberto Esposito: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, ed. by Inna Viriasova and Antonio Calcagno (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2018).

of 'the plague in literature' that uncovered what he considered a referential 'mimetic crisis' behind literary representations of pandemic crises — from Sophocles to Shakespeare, Dostoevsky to Thomas Mann, among others.<sup>14</sup> As Girard puts it: 'Between the plague and social disorder there is a reciprocal affinity' based on the fact that both are 'contagious' in nature; and he adds: 'The appropriateness of the metaphor comes, obviously, from this contagious character'.<sup>15</sup> If the plague is contagious in the viral or literal sense, violence is indeed contagious in the affective, or metaphorical sense. This remains a timely observation. And yet, it is not the direction Girard considers this metaphorical connection. In a striking mirroring inversion of perspective, Girard inverts the relation between reality and metaphor as he claims that the plague in literature does not literally represent the contagious reality of viral contagion. On the contrary, viral contagion 'becomes a transparent metaphor for a certain reciprocal violence that spreads literally like the plague'.<sup>16</sup> According to Girard's metaphorical overturning, it is the contagious nature of violence, not of the plague, that should be taken literally. The plague is a metaphor for social violence. More precisely, the plague as represented in literature turns out to be a mere 'transparent metaphor' for the mimetic violence that is the centre of Girard's theory of violence and the sacred — which does not mean that this metaphorical account of the plague renders us immune from viruses. Metaphorical plague, real violence: this is the decision on which Girard's hermeneutics of contagion stands — or, rather, falls.

Girard's hermeneutical move might be in line with his mimetic theory but is invalidated by viral realities in a way that is at least double. First, writing from the position of a still relatively immune nation state, Girard argues in the 1970s that we 'live in a world less and less threatened by real epidemics', and he adds: 'This fact looks less surprising now, as we come to realize that the properly medical aspects of the plague never were essential; in themselves they always played a minor role, serving mostly as a disguise for an even more terrible threat that no science has ever been able to conquer'.<sup>17</sup> History unfortunately taught us otherwise. From the plague of HIV to the COVID-19 pandemic we have been living in an increasingly precarious world open to infections that are likely to plague an interconnected and interdependent humanity in the future as well. In his last writings, Girard recognized this danger but retained the category of 'undifferentiation' to account for the dynamic of the pandemic,<sup>18</sup> encouraging mimetic studies of the future to supplement his diagnostic — which takes us to the next invalidation.

14 René Girard, 'The Plague in Literature and Myth', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 15. 5 (1974), pp. 833–50 (p. 834).

15 Girard, 'The Plague in Literature', p. 836.

16 Girard, 'The Plague in Literature', p. 836.

17 Girard, 'The Plague in Literature', p. 845.

18 Correcting his diagnostic, the late Girard, confronted with the H5N1 pandemic acknowledged that it is a 'pandemic that could cause hundreds of deaths in a few days and is a phenomenon typical of the undifferentiation now coursing across the planet'. René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, trans. by Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), p. 24. For an initial supplement to Girard, see Nidesh Lawtoo, 'The Cooperative Community: Surviving Epidemics in *The Shadow-Line*', in *Conrad's Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory*, (East Lansing: Michigan State

Second, Girard claims that both viral and affective contagions cause a state of 'undifferentiation' that affects all subjects, equally generating what he calls a 'crisis of differences'. What he suggests is that individual, social, economic, political, national, and other differences are erased by the double dynamic of mimetic contagion, be it literal or metaphorical, in transhistorical ways Girard considers constitutive of 'the eternal ethos of the plague'.<sup>19</sup> Humans are indeed all vulnerable to both forms of medical/affective contagion that erase differences in the sense that all are equally vulnerable to infection in theory; yet the COVID-19 pandemic taught us that the opposite is true in practice. In fact, both viral and social contagion generate an exacerbation of a plurality of medical, social, cultural, economic, and political differences that need to be reconsidered. Contrary to an 'eternal ethos' internal to metaphorical interpretations of the Plague, the type of medical-psychological-social-systemic, etc., violence it causes are different enough. The toll of viral infections, in fact, manifested itself radically differently across the world, depending on age, ethnic group, class, nationality, etc. It was also radically inflected by the politics of each country and the social/economic inequalities that differentiated the levels of infections significantly, as countries like Brazil and India, African Americans in the US, and undocumented migrants in Europe and other parts of the world made strikingly clear, and the unequal rollout of vaccines across the globe confirmed. Rather than 'undifferentiation', then, the COVID-19 pandemic magnified the differential plurality of social pathologies like systemic racism that plague what Frantz Fanon called, 'the wretched of the Earth', while also revealing class inequality, sexism, exclusionary practices that continue to structure patriarchal/racist ideologies, and the violent divide between North and South that deprives silent majorities of what Achille Mbembe calls 'the universal right to breathe'.<sup>20</sup>

From a contemporary perspective, then, we can thus say that violence, which is not only physical, but manifests itself in a number of structural forms of oppression, is visibly at play; and precisely for this reason it is crucial to account for the interplay between two different, entangled, and quite literal and real pathologies such as viral and social pathologies. If Girard's mimetic theory still accounts for the scapegoating mechanisms internal to social crises that routinely direct violence against minorities, it no longer reflects the complex reality of a pandemic crisis, which calls for patho-logical supplements. For new voices in mimetic studies concerned with the real and rather heterogeneous implications of a pandemic crisis, COVID-19 gives

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University Press, 2016), pp. 91–125. If it is easy to critique Girard's metaphorical blunder in 2021, I note that my first concerns with the 'contemporary pandemics that, every year, threaten to contaminate an increasingly globalized, permeable, and precarious world' led me to state, in 2016, that 'the shadow of epidemics looms large on the horizon' (p. 92).

<sup>19</sup> Girard, 'The Plague in Literature,' p. 834.

<sup>20</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'The Universal Right to Breathe,' trans. by Carolyn Shread, *Critical Inquiry*, 47. 52 (2020), *In the Moment* (blog) <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-universal-right-to-breathe/> (last accessed 16/01/2021). On gender inequality and the pandemic see, Kecia Ali, Julia-Watts Belser, Grace Y. Kao, Shiverly T. J. Smith, 'Living It Out: Feminism During Covid 19', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 36. 2 (2020), pp. 107–16.



us an occasion to rethink mimesis for the twenty-first century and theorize contagion again to prepare for crises to come. Rather than a hermeneutic that uncovers a mimetic sameness hidden behind an epidemic plague treated metaphorically, then, genealogical lenses propose a diagnostic of the multiplicity of differences that emerge from the patho(-)logical interplay of social contagion and viral contagion treated quite literally.

A genealogy of mimesis that looks back to the past in order to cast light on the patho(-)logies of the present does not provide a unitary answer, universal structure, or theoretical system to frame a constantly changing phenomenon. Instead of taking its starting point in a triangulation of mimetic desire still of Oedipal inspiration,<sup>21</sup> it foregrounds an all too human vulnerability to what I call mimetic *pathos* (good and evil) and the critical *distance* that can potentially ensue if we step further back to precursors of the mimetic turn. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche calls this paradoxical double movement between mimetic pathos and critical distance, 'pathos of distance'.<sup>22</sup> A central concept in his genealogy of morality that unmasks a magical faith in other worlds 'behind the world [*Hinterwelt*]',<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche informs my genealogy of contagion and immunity, urging us to remain faithful to this world. On his shoulders, I take three genealogical steps in this immanent direction to outline a diagnostic of mimetic patho(-)logies in the age of COVID-19. I take two steps back to reevaluate the relation between mimesis and contagion for the ancients in Plato's philosophy and for the moderns in crowd psychology. These steps back will allow me to leap ahead toward the challenge of immunization in an age dominated by conspiracy theories that reload the contagious powers of false shadows for a digital age constitutive of the *vita mimetica*.

## 2. *Vita Mimetica*: Ancient Shadows, New Simulations

First step. Origins are never simply pure and singular but given the dominant translation of 'mimesis' as representation or copy of an original model it might be useful to step back to the one of the most influential thinkers who introduced this concept in western thought. According to Plato's philosophical *logos*, mimesis, *pathos*, and cultural pathologies cannot easily be dissociated. Let us in fact recall that when the concept of *mimēsis* first appears on the philosophical scene in Books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*, Plato does not introduce an ontological concept that reduces the phenomenal world to a visual copy, shadow, or 'phantom [*phantasma*]' of transcendental ideas, turning artistic representations into phantoms of phantoms 'at three removes' from

21 See Nidesh Lawtoo, 'Violence and the Mimetic Unconscious (Part I), The Catharsis Hypothesis: Aristotle, Girard, Freud', *Contagion*, 25 (2018): pp. 159–92.

22 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 12.

23 Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, p. 5.

the metaphysical world of intelligible Forms.<sup>24</sup> We will have to wait until Book 10 for this famous critique of mimesis qua ontological mirror based on the logic of visual likeness, adequation, and representation to appear, a metaphysical and epistemic critique Plato also theorized via the example of the painter and continues to cast a shadow on contemporary limitations of mimesis to the sphere of realistic aesthetics. Instead, in the *Republic* mimesis is first introduced as a theatrical, dramatic concept in line with its etymological origins — from *mimos*, ‘actor’ as well as ‘performance’ — linked to mimetic impersonations that concern first and foremost the education (*paideia*) of youth in the Greek city (*polis*) in a period still partially dominated by an oral culture. As Eric Havelock argues in *Preface to Plato*, Plato’s critique of mimesis must be understood in the context of what he calls an ‘oral state of mind’ in which the actor or reciter of poetry (*rhapsode*) who speaks in mimetic (first person) rather than diegetic (third person) speech has ‘the power to make his audience identify almost pathologically and certainly sympathetically with the content of what he is saying’.<sup>25</sup> Both at the level of form (*lexis*) and content (*logos*) of mimetic spectacles, dramatic impersonations of the *Iliad*, the *Theogony*, or the tragedies and comedies, says in substance Plato, under the mask of Socrates, have a pathological effect on the public not only because they do not represent the truth about the gods (epistemic reasons), but also because the public participates emotionally in these spectacles by sym-pathos (feeling with) endowed with contagious affective properties (psychological reasons). Crucially, according to Plato’s patho-logy, it is this affective force that endows mimesis with a contagious, irrational, and magnetic power. Thus, in a related dialogue titled *Ion*, Plato compares the mimetic force of poetry, understood in the broad sense of literature and myth, to a ‘magnet’ that transmits the property of magnetism to ‘iron rings’ generating a long ‘chain’ that goes from the Muses to the poet to the reciter of poetry to the audience that is contagiously and pathologically magnetized by such a mimetic spectacle.<sup>26</sup>

Reframed within this theatrical context, the famous Allegory of the Cave in Book 7 of *Republic* is brought closer to home in this period of seclusion within our private caves, reduced freedom of movement, and intensified mediatized exposure to (mis)representations that shadow reality. Let us thus recall that in the Platonic myth, the chained prisoners are spellbound by a ‘puppet show’ projected by carriers of simulacra walking in front of a fire and projecting ‘shadows cast from the fire on the wall that fronted them [the prisoners]’.<sup>27</sup> The prisoners mistake the shadows for reality because they lack the critical distance of the philosopher who, with the help of a guide, can take rational steps back from the illusory sphere of sensorial perception, break the chain that ties him to these projections, and start the steep, ascending path of philosophical thought. That is a rational, dialectical, and rather vertical *logos*

24 Plato, *Republic* 597e, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), pp. 575–844 (p. 822).

25 Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 41, p. 45.

26 Plato, *Ion* 533d–e, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, pp. 215–28 (pp. 219–20).

27 Plato, *Republic* 514b–515a, p. 747.

that eventually leads, according to the myth, to the real source of light outside the cave: the sun that stands for the idea of the Good and to the unconcealment of truth via the contemplation of the intelligible and transcendental Forms, or ideas, characteristic of the *vita contemplativa* — as a metaphysical tradition that goes from Plato to Heidegger suggests.<sup>28</sup> And yet, depending on how we interpret those mimetic shadows projected in the cave, the myth is also open to alternative, more immanent and embodied perspectives. In particular it welcomes interpretations attentive to the imperceptible dynamic of affective contagion, or pathos, within a cave haunted by the powers of phantasmal simulations that have spellbinding, hypnotic, and magnetic effects — a psychological perspective attentive to what I call *vita mimetica*.<sup>29</sup>

Considered from the immanent, embodied, and experiential condition of the chained prisoners, we should wonder about the type of force, or power, that metaphorically chains and inclines spectators toward those shady projections on the wall. Plato, as the fine dramatist that he is, specifies that due to an ‘echo’ in the cave, the voices of the carriers of simulacra behind the prisoners generate the impressions that the shadows themselves speak in the first person, via mimetic lexis: ‘if their prison had an echo from the wall opposite them, when one of the passers-by uttered a sound, do you think that they would suppose anything else than the passing shadow to be the speaker?’<sup>30</sup> Who, indeed is the speaker? This is not only a narratological question or a metaphysical question — it is, first and foremost, a patho-logical question. Could it be, in fact, that the prisoners remain chained, magnetized, pathologically spellbound by, or bound to, those projections mistaken for true realities, precisely because the spectacle of moving shadows is animated? Thus reframed, the speaking and moving shadows generate a mimetic sym-pathos or affective identification that is magnetic, contagious, and has an immanent psychological power that is at least double: first, the shadows chain spectators to appearances that are far removed indeed from reality; and second, they cast an intoxicating spell on the prisoners generating a contagious pathology. This is, indeed, what Plato ‘himself’, always under the mask of Socrates, suggests in *Ion* when he specifies that the effect of the magnetic/mimetic chain that goes from the poet to the audience is to generate a state of Dionysian intoxication in spectators who are dispossessed by this magnetic and contagious power. Thus, he compares theatrical spectators to the ‘Corybantes’ who are ‘sized with Bacchic transport’ and are ‘bereft of their senses’.<sup>31</sup> Dionysian rituals, for Plato, are dramatically entangled with the intoxicating power of poetry.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, trans. by Ted Sadler (New York: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Informed by Arendt’s account of the *vita activa*, a first step in this direction while not focused directly on mimesis can be found in Adriana Cavarero, *Platone* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2018), pp. 129–47. Joining perspectives, Cavarero and I stretched this mimetic connection in Adriana Cavarero and Nidesh Lawtoo, ‘Mimetic Inclinations: A Dialogue with Adriana Cavarero’, in *Contemporary Italian Women Philosophers: Stretching the Art of Thinking*, ed. by Silvia Benso and Elvira Roncalli (New York: SUNY Press, 2021), pp. 183–99, as well as in *Homo Mimeticus*, 69–91.

<sup>30</sup> Plato, *Republic* 515b, pp. 747–48.

<sup>31</sup> Plato, *Ion* 534 a–c, p. 220.

Among the moderns, Nietzsche is often remembered as an anti-Platonic thinker with respect to his critique of idealist metaphysics, but his opposition to Plato is not as clear-cut as the dominant commentaries make him appear to be. On the contrary, when it comes to mimesis, Nietzsche writes contra/with Plato in the spirit of a Homeric contest I call 'mimetic agonism'.<sup>32</sup> As Nietzsche will make clear at the twilight of metaphysics in *The Birth of Tragedy*, there is a contagious (Dionysian) mimesis that is not confined within the wall of visual (Apollonian) representation. Rather, it transgresses the boundaries between self and other, generating a mimetic pathos that can have intoxicating effects on spectators, depriving them not only of true representations of reality but also of their rational control over their ego. In sum, as a psychological tradition that goes from Plato to Nietzsche indicates, this mimetic pathos has the (will to) power to take possession of spectators, dispossess them of their rational faculty, or logos, and generate mimetic pathologies that are constitutive of the *vita mimetica*.

If we now further our genealogy of mimesis from a more contemporary perspective, this mimetic tradition still helps us to reflect critically on new (social) media that, perhaps more than ever, cast a magnetic, contagious, and intoxicating spell on the human imagination. As film critics from André Bazin onward routinely noted, the Allegory of the Cave anticipates the mimetic powers of cinema to induce what Edgar Morin calls an 'imitation-hypnotic state' in spectators who are emotionally tied to cinematic images via mechanism of 'projection and identification'.<sup>33</sup> As Morin puts it: 'Our needs, our aspirations, our desires, our obsessions, our fears, project themselves not only into the void as dreams and imaginings, but onto all things and all beings'.<sup>34</sup> While cinema reproduces the Platonic scenario of the cave in the twentieth century, in the digital age the mimetic-hypnotic effects of moving shadows continues to operate on a variety of smaller screens, which, from TV to computers to smartphones, intensify the power of Apollonian images to cast a Dionysian spell with the power to generate an intoxicating psychic dispossession of the ego still constitutive of the twenty-first century.

What was true for the Platonic prisoners remains true for contemporary spectators and digital users: mimetic media do not only represent what Plato calls 'phantoms' far removed from reality — that is, copies that are epistemologically false; they also turn the ego into what Nietzsche already called a 'phantom of the ego'<sup>35</sup> — that is, a subject who is psychologically affected by the contagious powers of mimesis. If phantoms of reality disseminated via new media online are often rightly stressed in contemporary discussions of the powers of lies in the age of 'post-truth', it is equally crucial to stress the affective (Dionysian) receptivity of the phantom of the ego that

32 On Nietzsche's mimetic agonism with Plato and his ambivalent evaluation of mimetic intoxication (celebratory at first, critical later) see Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego*, pp. 52–83.

33 Edgar Morin, *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man*, trans. by Lorraine Mortimer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 96, p. 91.

34 Morin, *The Cinema*, p. 85.

35 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak* trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 61.

makes *homo mimeticus* vulnerable to (Apollonian) illusions in the first place. These contagious illusions are particularly virulent in periods of crisis, like a pandemic crisis, and can lead to collective intoxications that manifest themselves in social pathologies (pandemic denial, anti-mask/antivax protests, conspiracy theories, etc.) that double and redouble the reach of the viral pathology.

Thus reframed, we are in a better position to reevaluate the relevance of mimesis in the age of viral reproduction. Plato's Allegory reaches in the present as it foreshadows a world of simulation which postmodern critics were perhaps too quick to disconnect from the problematic of mimesis. Contra Plato, Jean Baudrillard, for instance, diagnosed a hyperreal world of simulacra and simulation that no longer rests on 'imitation' but 'liquidates all referents' insofar as the hyperreal 'substitutes the real with signs of the real'.<sup>36</sup> Influential at the twilight of the last century, this postmodern diagnostic of simulation is of loose Nietzschean inspiration. Yet, it does not account for the human, all too human effects generated by a hyperreal world of simulacra, which, while no longer resting on the logic of mimesis as representations, continues to cast a material (Dionysian) shadow on this world, generating not only phantoms of reality but phantoms of egos in the twenty-first century.<sup>37</sup>

The inversion of perspective from mimetic phantoms to mimetic egos that already informed Nietzsche's critique of Platonism is now redoubled by our critique of postmodernism. In light of the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s, the neurosciences provide an empirical confirmation that visual representations, no matter how far removed or disconnected from reality, have indeed the mimetic power to generate contagious reflexes; images seen from a visual distance can trigger neurological discharges that generate mimetic pathos via an immediate form of affective communication that is not necessarily mediated by consciousness but generates 'embodied simulations' nonetheless.<sup>38</sup> In light of humans's confirmed receptivity to mirroring reflexes caused by perception of movements (real or represented, true or false), it is thus urgent to provide a mimetic supplement to a postmodern diagnostic of hyperreality prominent at the twilight of the last century that no longer accounts for the catastrophic realities of the present century. In fact, hyperreal simulations disconnected from the logic of mimetic representation have the power to retroact on *homo mimeticus* via feedback loops that blur the line between truth and lies, originals and copies, facts and alternative facts, digital simulations and embodied imitations, generating shadows that are far removed from reality, indeed; and yet, they can also induce deeply-felt, false, and intoxicating beliefs. The latter trigger contagious actions that are socially pathological endowed with the immanent power to amplify viral contagions in real life. I call this looping effect whereby hyperreal simulations retroact on mimetic reflexes, hypermimesis; and I do so, to stress that the hyperreal may no

<sup>36</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> See Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego*, Chapter 1.

<sup>38</sup> Vittorio, Gallese, 'Embodied Simulation: From Neurons to Phenomenal Experience,' *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 4 (2005), pp. 23–48.

longer be subordinated to the logic of representation but continues to be rooted in the all too real laws of imitation.

Now that we have reloaded this ancient myth on the contagious powers of mimesis whose intention was to dispel artistic lies as shadows in the past, let us continue to uncover the mimetic truth on the contagious power of simulations in the present. As a significant section of the world population was holed up in private caves during multiple COVID-19 lockdowns in what was the first world pandemic to be shadowed and redoubled by digital media, practices of social distancing in privileged countries protected *homo sapiens* from the epidemic contagion and the viral pathology it entails. Still, *homo mimeticus* was far from immune from affective contagion and the social pathologies a *vita mimetica* also entails. On the contrary, chained to the continuous flow of daily news on a plurality of digital devices that amplified the pathos (from *penthos*, suffering) generated by the increasing number of victims, a contradictory double movement familiar to genealogists of mimesis began to take shape.

With some critical distance increased by the growing number of theoretical reflections on the systemic and highly differentiated implications of the pandemic crisis, this double movement allows us to return to our driving question whereby we started in more specific diagnostic terms. I reframe it as follows. In the case of the COVID-19 epidemic, we are indeed facing a hybrid viral/virtual phenomenon in which the viral pandemic is shadowed by an obsessive media focus on the spread of the virus and its proliferating mutations that not only generates sym-pathos for the real victims; the pandemic also generates a multiplicity of conspiracies theories that question the logos of science and disseminate magical causal explanations that reloaded the mimetic faculty in the age of the Internet. It did so, for instance, by directing responsibility of complex problems toward simple imaginary scapegoats (from Bill Gates to 5G to Corona beer) that made and continue to make a significant part of the population lose the sense of the reality of the pandemic itself.

Given the systemic complexity of the pandemic, even among philosophically-informed perspectives, some wondered: did rational *homo sapiens* driven by the pathos of *homo mimeticus* lose sight of the proportions between the mass-mediatized phenomenon and the pandemic itself — as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben controversially claimed when, at the outset of the pandemic, he compared COVID-19 to a ‘normal flu’ and condemned the Italian government’s disproportionate response qua ‘state of exception’ from a philosophical distance that condemned what he called a ‘religion of health’?<sup>39</sup> Alternatively, and considered from the other end of the spectrum, is COVID-19 a sign that humanity has reached a tipping point and that we are now facing an epochal transformation that is likely to generate even more catastrophes — as Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek writes with pathos in *Pandemic!* when he claims that the virus *will ‘destroy the foundations of our lives’*.<sup>40</sup> Or should we rather forge a complex middle path between pathos and distance, as Nietzschean genealogical lenses indicate?

39 Giorgio Agamben, *A che punto siamo? L'epidemia come politica* (Macerata: Quodlibet 2020), 13.

40 Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York: Polity Press, 2020).

The patho(-)logies of contagion remind us that the (new) media are certainly not a transparent window onto the world but should be framed within the long history of mimesis which I schematically reconstruct as follows: 1) at the dawn of philosophy, Plato (in)famously introduced the trope of the 'mirror' to account for different ontological degrees of reality predicated on a philosophical *logos* that denounces mimesis as a phantom of a phantom; 2) at the twilight of metaphysics, writing with and contra Plato, Nietzsche overturned the diagnostic by relying on the logic of pathos, or patho-*logy* to unmask the power of phantoms to take possession of the modern ego; 3) jumpstarting mimetic theory from a romantic source of inspiration, Girard diagnosed mimesis as a state of undifferentiation predicated on the Dionysian logic of violent pathos (with Nietzsche), while framing this logic in an ideal triangular form that culminates in a scapegoating mechanism that (with Plato) operates as a *pharmakon*; 4) at the end of the metaphysical spectrum, Baudrillard, with Nietzsche, contra Plato, rejected the doubling logic of the mirror at the twilight of mimetic realism by introducing a hyperreal world of simulation that has nothing to do with imitation. This history of mimesis reaches until the twilight of the twentieth century, and it now needs to be updated for the present century.

Building on, while pushing against, this genealogy, I convoke the trope of the magnifying glass to diagnose pathological mimetic phenomena that remain rooted in material process of viral and affective reproduction that infect *homo mimeticus* in differentiated ways. Once doubled by a heterogeneous media landscape, attention to the duplicity of mimetic patho(-)logies reveals how the media, while not having access to a stabilizing essence of truth, can faithfully reproduce a scientific *logos* to inform the population; alternatively they can also spread pathological lies via the power of mimetic *pathos* to deform, and in the case of conspiracy theories, dissolve the contours of reality. Both true and false forms of patho(-)logical communication can in turn generate hypermimetic processes that do not simply mirror an ideal, stable, and immutable reality. After all, the scientific patho-*logy* on the virus must continue to evolve to keep up with a mutating virus. Nor do they reveal a metaphorical truth hidden at the foundation of the world, for both viral and affective pathologies operate on two different but related and equally real levels of contamination. Rather, conspiracies generate spiraling feedback loops between the pathology of viral contagion and affective contagion whereby the latter is not simply an effect of viral contagion but also a cause of it. This dynamic looping effect can in turn lead to pathological effects (as in the case of pandemic denial) and patho-*logical* effects (as in the case of legitimate fear). Everything hinges on the message communicated to human faculties that are as rational as they are mimetic faculties.

Narratives of linear progress based on the *logos* of science affirmed that the vaccine rollout will eventually put this pandemic to a global stop, though we now have sufficient evidence to realize that the agentic properties of the virus should not be underestimated for it can always return in a mutated form. Moreover, this *logos* should not underestimate the looping effects of false accounts of reality that convince by drawing on the intoxicating *pathos* of mimetic contagion to work counter to immunization and preventive measures in insidious ways critical theorists can

analyse from a patho-logical distance. At its very minimum, a critical *logos* on mimetic *pathos* can be put to use to dispel one of the greatest myths about *homo sapiens* that should have been unmasked by the horrors of the twentieth century but still informs 'scientific' approaches to the human in the twenty-first century: namely, the ideal of a fully rational, autonomous, and self-sufficient creature characteristic of the subject of the *Aufklärung* alias *homo sapiens*. This ideal fails to account for a *vita mimetica* that was already at play in the classical period and makes a massive come-back in the modern period, casting a shadow on the present as well.

### 3. Modern Contagion: Microbes, Crowds, Publics

Second step. The connection between mimesis and affective contagion became central to sociological reflections in the last decades of nineteenth century, which saw unprecedented numbers of people assembled in cities. The phenomenon of the 'crowd' (*foule*, *Masse*, *folla*) gave rise to transnational theories of crowd behaviour that were neglected in the second half of the twentieth century, yet are currently returning to the forefront of critical attention in the present century in the context of political crises.<sup>41</sup> This mimetic, or rather, hypermimetic phenomenon deserves to be revisited in the context of pandemic crises as well. Founding figures of crowd psychology like Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde in France, Wilfred Trotter and William McDougall in England and, later, Sigmund Freud in Austria, noted that when people are assembled in a physical crowd or, at one remove, become part of a virtual public, while reading newspapers for instance — and today Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, etc. — emotions are transmitted from self to other in an irrational, unconscious, and as they would all say, 'contagious' way.<sup>42</sup> As Le Bon puts it in his widely popular, *The Crowd*: 'In a crowd every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest'.<sup>43</sup> Already prior to Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde had expanded the diagnostic from the crowd to account for the social bond *tout court* by considering society in terms of flows of imitation. Thus, he asks in *The Laws of Imitation*: 'And this similitude [in opinions and emotions] is it not due to a flow of imitation which can be accounted for by needs and ideas disseminated by previous imitative contagions [*contagions imitatives*]?'<sup>44</sup> Well before Girard, then, both Le Bon and Tarde use the concept of 'contagion' metaphorically to indicate an invisible transmission of

41 For this recent revival of interest, see Christian Borch, *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Gunter Gebauer and Sven Rucker, *Vom Sog der Massen und der neuen Macht der Einzelnen* (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2019); Lawtoo, (New) Fascism.

42 For Henri Bergson's thoughts on 'contagion' in this same context, see especially section 4 of chapter 7 in this volume.

43 Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002), p. 7.

44 Gabriel Tarde, *Les Lois de l'imitation* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), p. 50. On the contemporary relevance of Tarde's theory of imitation see also, Andrea Mubi Brighenti, 'Tarde, Canetti, and Deleuze on Crowds and Packs', *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 10. 4 (2010), pp. 291–314.



emotions that spread, virus-like, from self to others generating an affective contagion that, we should add, has systemic implications for viral contagion as well.

Despite the numerous and still unexplored analogies between crowd psychology and mimetic theory, it is important to stress that the metaphorical use of contagion in crowd psychology differs significantly from Girard's mimetic theory — and in this difference lies the foundation for an alternative theory of homo mimeticus. If Girard read the plague in literature as a metaphor for a more fundamental dynamic of contagious violence, crowd psychologists invert the perspective and draw inspiration from the medical reality of medical contagion to metaphorically account for the psycho-social dynamic of mimetic, or affective contagion. For crowd psychologists, it is not that viral contagion is metaphorical of affective contagion; on the contrary, affective contagion can be metaphorically compared to an all too real viral contagion.

The advantages of this inversion are plural: first, the metaphorical use of the term 'contagion' does not dispute the danger or reality of viral contagion; rather, it draws on the language of medical contagion to account for the disconcerting capacity of emotions in a crowd to spread invisibly, from self to others, like a microbe or virus. Writing in fin-de-siècle France, both Le Bon and Tarde borrowed the concept of 'contagion' (*la contagion*) directly from Louis Pasteur's then relatively new discovery of microbes to account for diseases like cholera and rabies. Second, confronted with the disconcerting emotional suggestibility of urban crowds, social theorists applied the concept of contagion to the collective psyche to account for the unconscious relation, or hypnotic rapport between self and other, a mirroring relation that leads the ego to mimetically reproduce the affects of others in potentially exponential ways that provide an alternative foundation for mimetic studies. Crowd psychology, in fact, proposes a dyadic/rhizomatic rather than triangular/familial structure at the origins of a type of contagion that resembled much more the dynamic of viral infection. In fact, a subject driven not only by mimetic desire but by a mimetic pathos that includes desire and other affects as well, both good and bad, has the power to contaminate others with the same pathos in ways that can expand exponentially to affect and infect the entire mass or crowd. The medical language of contagion is thus well-chosen to account for a dynamic of transmission that operates not only at the intersubjective level but also at the broader social and collective level. Finally, this metaphorical use is relevant for our diagnostic for it shows that the social *logos* on affective contagion and the medical *logos* on viral contagion are genealogically linked, encouraging contemporary theorists to think about the spiraling interplay between viral and social pathologies.

How does *affective* contagion operate? Via a mirroring, mimetic principle that belongs to a pre-Freudian tradition of the unconscious that was marginalized in the past century, yet genealogical lenses are bringing back to account for contagious phenomena for the present century. Both Le Bon and Tarde, in fact, like Nietzsche before them, relied on the model of hypnosis or hypnotic suggestion to account for the contagious dynamic of emotions. For Le Bon, contagion and suggestion are two sides of the same mimetic phenomenon: 'When defining crowds, we said that one of their general characteristics was an excessive suggestibility, and we have

shown to what an extent suggestions are contagious in every human agglomeration; a fact which explains the rapid turning of the sentiments of a crowd in a definite direction'.<sup>45</sup> It is because subjects who are part of a crowd are in a psychic state of light hypnosis, or suggestion, that they are prone to mirroring the emotions of others, going potentially as far as turning the idea of others into an action, which is the very definition of suggestion. Gabriel Tarde confirms this point as he zooms in on the neuronal mimetic principles that account for this contagious process as he writes: 'the action at a distance from brain to brain that I call imitation, is assimilable to hypnotic suggestion [*suggestion hypnotique*]'; and he specifies that this mirroring/contagious mechanism via theories of hypnotic suggestion that assume (rightly we know now) that in humans 'nerves imitate nerves, brains imitate brains'.<sup>46</sup> As I have shown elsewhere, for a pre-Freudian psychological tradition, reflex forms of mirroring imitation, much more than dreams, served as a *via regia* to a relational, social, and immanent unconscious I call the 'mimetic unconscious'.<sup>47</sup> If this mirroring principle was discovered in the 1990s and attributed to 'mirror neurons', genealogical lenses reveal that it is more genealogically accurate to speak of a *re-discovery* of unconscious mimetic mechanisms already advocated in the 1890s.

What we must add is that this psychological tradition of the mimetic unconscious, which is attentive to mirroring reflexes, intersubjective bonds, altered states of consciousness, and contagious emotional dynamics, provides a socio-political supplement to account for the interplay between viral and affective contagion. After all, leaders like Mussolini and Hitler were quick to put Le Bon's lessons on how to cast a hypnotic spell on the crowd to fascist use; and there is little evidence that contemporary authoritarian leaders presiding over periods of pandemic crisis do not use the same affective strategies to come to power, remain in power, and in certain cases, downplay pandemic or other crises, thereby undermining immunization and amplifying its power of infection.

The dynamic interplay between viral contagion and affective contagion in an age haunted by the shadow of what I call '(new) fascism' amplifies the viral pathology via pathological political responses. (New) fascist leaders like Donald Trump in the US, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, for example, revealed the plurality of ways in which a pathological politics based on pandemic-denialism that follows conspiracy theories rather than scientific facts aggravated the viral pathology in these countries, amplifying the number of casualties in criminal ways that, along with climate-change denial,

45 Le Bon, *The Crowd*, p. 14. On the role of hypnosis and suggestion in the discovery of the unconscious, see Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books Inc. Publishers, 1970).

46 Tarde, *Lois de l'imitation*, p. 257 n. 1, p. 264.

47 Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego*, and 'The Mimetic Unconscious: A Mirror for Genealogical Reflections' in *Imitation, Contagion, Suggestion: On Mimesis and Society*, ed. by Christian Borch (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 37–53.

should be considered as constitutive of (new) fascism in the twenty-first century.<sup>48</sup> And yet, at the same time, the pathological dimension of a (new) fascist response to the epidemic also had the paradoxical effect to generate liberating and positive patho-logical forms of anti-fascist contagion. The *pathos* generated by systemic police racism and systemic racial oppression, for instance, ignited anti-racist protests that, under the banner of 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM), also spread contagiously, but via a life-affirmative, non-violent sympathy in the United States and across the world. Similarly, in the UK, protests about systemic violence directed against women sparked solidarity across nations to oppose sexist patriarchal societies which, as recent studies show, render women's lives, just like minorities and illegal immigrants, much more vulnerable and precarious in periods of pandemic crisis.<sup>49</sup>

To move toward our last step, what we must add is that the same (new) fascist rhetoric that privileges the use of images rather than thoughts, emotion or *pathos* rather than reason or *logos*, is very effective in spreading illusory legends among a suggestible crowd, which reach unprecedented proportions in the digital age. As Le Bon already warned:

The creation of the legends which so easily obtain circulation in crowds is not solely the consequence of their extreme credulity. It is also the result of the prodigious perversions [*déformations*] that events undergo in the imagination of a throng. The simplest event that comes under the observation of a crowd is soon totally transformed [*défiguré*]. A crowd thinks in images, and the image itself immediately calls up a series of other images, having no logical connection with the first. We can easily conceive this state by thinking of the fantastic succession of ideas to which we are sometimes led by calling up in our minds any fact. Our reason shows us the incoherence there is in these images, but a crowd is almost blind to this truth, and confuses with the real event what the deforming action of its imagination has superimposed thereon. A crowd scarcely distinguishes between the subjective and the objective. It accepts as real the images evoked in its mind, though they most often have only a very distant relation with the observed fact.<sup>50</sup>

Credulity, disregard of contradictions, and blind belief in false images, among other tendencies at play in the *vita mimetica*, have, indeed, the magnetic power to render a crowd dangerously vulnerable to legends. This is, after all, an old story. Yet this diagnostic gains new traction in a modern age (dis)informed by hypermimetic media that are mechanically reproduced on a massive scale and generate what Gabriel Tarde calls a 'public'. What Le Bon says of the 'era of crowds' (*ère des foules*) is in fact amplified in what Tarde calls the 'era of the public' (*ère du public*); that is,

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48 See Lawtoo, (*New*) *Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth*. As countries like India are hit by a devastating second wave as I write (April 2021), the criminal implications of downplaying the pandemic, not implementing security measures, and leaving the country disastrously unprepared, also applies to leaders like Narendra Modi, leading the population to call for his resignation.

49 Ali and others, 'Living it Out'.

50 Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 15.

a ‘virtual crowd’ (*foule virtuelle*) he considers already in 1901 the ‘social group of the future’ for it is physically dispersed yet mentally connected by a simultaneous exposure to media that generate a ‘suggestion at a distance’.<sup>51</sup> Taking the readership of newspapers as a paradigmatic example of a public, Tarde speaks of a mutual suggestion between readers at a distance responsible for the ‘unconscious illusion that our sentiment was commonly shared with a great number of others’.<sup>52</sup> Furthering this diagnostic of contagion on the shoulders of Tarde for the digital age, we might add that this suggestibility is aggravated by conspiracy theories that have no relation to facts whatsoever. And yet, they operate on the mimetic unconscious nonetheless by going viral online and generating contagious behaviour offline. In the process, they pose a serious hypermimetic threat to immunization in pathological ways that still require diagnostic investigations and with which I would like to conclude.

#### 4. Conspiracy Theories: The Patho-logies of Immunization

Two steps back to the ancient and modern foundations of mimetic studies allow us to make a last step — or jump — ahead to present conspiracy theories about a pandemic that cast a shadow on future crises as well. Isolated by lockdowns, exposed to a plurality of (new) media that rely on algorithms to amplify already held beliefs, *homo sapiens* can easily let go of a rational *logos* to be driven by an irrational *pathos*, shot through by anxiety, fear, and resentment, but also poverty and lack of education. Overwhelmed by conflicting (dis)information, a growing number of the world population is increasingly threatened by the spread of conspiracy theories that go viral online, can now be mass-produced by A.I. chatbots in urgent need of regulations, and, in a spiraling hypermimetic loop, generate contagious pathological effects offline, contaminating a *homo mimeticus 2.0* chained to a multiplicity of new media programmed to amplify exponentially the mimetic faculty in the digital age.

Conspiracy theories provide a new name for an ancient mimetic phenomenon. As Karl Popper made clear in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, they can be traced back to a collectivist, magical, or as he calls it, ‘tribal’ or ‘closed society’ animated by the mimetic faculty and dominated by poetic figures that already worried Plato at the dawn of western civilization. Of course, Popper considers Plato’s theory of justice to be tyrannical and antithetical to what he calls the ‘open society’. Thus, he spends considerable energy in violently critiquing ‘the spell of Plato’ in the first part of his *magnum opus* of political theory predicated on the thesis that ‘totalitarianism belongs to a tradition which is just as old or just as young as our civilization itself’.<sup>53</sup> Plato’s political solution to posit a philosopher king who imposes the *techne* of the *logos* from the top down to censor the *pathos* of mimetic poets is indeed complicit with mimetic pathologies that will be put to devastating fascist practice in the twentieth century.

<sup>51</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *L’Opinion et la foule* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1901), p. 11. p. 13. p. 5 (my transl.)

<sup>52</sup> Tarde, *L’Opinion et la foule*, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. XLII.

That is, the century from which Popper's critique of the closed society in general and magical or mimetic thinking in particular is launched, since he wrote the book during World War II.

And yet, with respect to Popper's specific diagnostic of the contagious powers of mimesis, this agonistic relation with Plato might not be as clear-cut as it first appears to be. Popper, in fact, acknowledges Plato's 'overwhelming intellectual achievement' in terms that convey admiration for what he calls 'Plato's power of diagnosis'.<sup>54</sup> As in the case of Nietzsche but for different reasons, Popper's opposition to Plato should be qualified in terms of *mimetic agonism*, for he fights the exemplary opponent with some of his diagnostic moves.<sup>55</sup> Taking the paradigmatic example from Plato's critique of mimesis in Book 3 of *Republic* with which we started, Popper notes that in Homer's *Iliad* the human vicissitudes during the Trojan War were seen as 'enforced by a supernatural will' driven by the gods' decisions located in an Olympic and magical afterworld, or *Hinterwelt*, to use Nietzsche's phrase. As Popper puts it: 'The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War is gone. The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups',<sup>56</sup> that, we should add, exploit the mimetic faculty in *this* world. *Homo mimeticus* tends to presuppose a magical individual intention to account for big systemic events. As Popper specifies: 'whatever happens in society — especially happenings such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages, which people as a rule dislike — is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups'.<sup>57</sup> Tribalism, magic, and irrational mimetic associations between great historical events in this world and great transcendental causes animated by powerful forces in other worlds are characteristic of a closed society, which as Plato foresaw, is under the magnetic spell of powerful myths.

But Popper goes further. He foresees that these mimetic powers can resurface with a vengeance in what he calls an 'abstract society'. That is, a technology-mediated, (new) media-dependent, modern society in which people 'have no, or extremely few, intimate personal contacts, [...] live in anonymity and isolation, and consequently in unhappiness'.<sup>58</sup> Popper's avowedly exaggerated thought experiment in the 1940s became a reality in the 2020s and should now ring a bell: 'We could conceive of a society in which men practically never meet face to face — in which all business is conducted by individuals in isolation who communicate by typed letters or by telegrams, and who go about in closed motor-cars'.<sup>59</sup> Needless to say, this has been the very condition of the world population during the first global lockdown in the

<sup>54</sup> Popper, *The Open Society*, p. xli, p. 163.

<sup>55</sup> Thus, Popper says in a precise definition of mimetic agonism: 'it is obvious that we must try to appreciate the strength of an opponent if we wish to fight him successfully'. Popper, *The Open Society*, p. xlii.

<sup>56</sup> Popper, *The Open Society*, p. 306.

<sup>57</sup> Popper, *The Open Society*, p. 306.

<sup>58</sup> Popper, *The Open Society*, p. 166.

<sup>59</sup> Popper, *The Open Society*, p. 166.

digital age during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>60</sup> Given the complexity of an event such as a pandemic, simple intentional explanations have gone viral online: from considering the virus as a biological weapon to linking the vaccine to microchip implants, from blaming 5G technology to scapegoating Bill Gates to considering the pandemic a hoax, the conspiracies are many in what has been called ‘an ocean of misinformation’.<sup>61</sup> And given the suggestible status of *homo mimeticus* whose genealogy we have traced, no wonder that the mimetic faculty predicated on the *pathos* of magical thinking was reloaded in a period of crisis — with a vengeance.

What defines conspiracy theories from antiquity to the present is that they provide a simple, unifying, direct, and often grand causal explanation for complex systemic problems that defy singular explanations. As Umberto Eco notes, commenting on Popper, conspiracy theories ‘purport to offer explanations in ways that appeal to people who feel they’ve been denied important information’.<sup>62</sup> More recently, in an informed and heterogeneous collection, Michael Butter and Pieter Knight group conspiracy theories under the heading of ‘nothing happens by accident; nothing is at it seems; and everything is connected’, and 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’.<sup>63</sup> Paradoxically, then, as conspiracy theories proliferate online, the public is encouraged to play the role of ‘master of suspicion’ (Ricoeur’s phrase) supplementing Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in uncovering latent truths behind manifest scientific contents that are, for an increasing number of believers in conspiracies, deemed too factual to be true. No training in hermeneutics is of course presupposed. Consequently, the ‘master of suspicion’ quickly turns into the slave of conspiracies that appeal to human, all too human suggestibility to a mimetic pathos whose magical-magnetic-mirroring-unconscious powers our genealogy urges to take seriously.

In theory, unmasking the falsity of conspiracy theories should not be a problem for researchers given the former’s lack of empirical foundations; and yet since they generate a magical hypermimetic pathos that operates on the mimetic faculty in practice, effectively countering them via a rational *logos* alone is not sufficient — for the power of *logos* is precisely what the *pathos* of conspiracies defies. If we agree with

60 On new, mediated forms of communication that have gained prominence during the pandemic, see chapter 11 of this volume.

61 Richard A. Stein and others, ‘Conspiracy Theories in the Era of Covid-19: A Tale of Two Pandemics’, *The International Journal of Clinical Practice*, 75 (2021), pp. 1–5 (p. 1).

62 Umberto Eco, ‘A Theory of Conspiracies’, *Mint*, (2014), available at <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/5lhODHqqZHUCqwOZcw2liL/Umberto-Eco--A-theory-of-conspiracies.html> (last accessed 16/01/2022).

63 Michael Butter and Pieter Knight, ‘General Introduction’, in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. by Michael Butter and Pieter Knight (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1–8 (p. 1). This is a rich, transdisciplinary collection that opens up multiple perspectives to conspiracy theories, from historical to psychological, semiotic to political, literary to philosophical, among others. This chapter supplements to it a mimetic perspective.

Popper that conspiracy theories are as old as Homer at the level of the message, we should add that (new) media rely on algorithms that amplify the powers of the mimetic unconscious by feeding users' misinformation that reinforces already held beliefs (or confirmation bias), generating bubbles that create, via social media and Internet channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok etc.), alternative or parallel worlds that can all-too-easily be mistaken for the 'real' world. This challenge is especially visible with respect to the plurality of conspiracies that deny the danger of the pandemic in a period of general crisis, isolation, and hyperconnectivity to a multiplicity of contradictory information, true and false.

Conspiracies not only generate false theories but also pathological practices. They lead *homo mimeticus* to deny the danger of the pandemic, counter safety measures, and spread vaccine hesitancy during an already complex, bumpy, and unequal vaccine rollout. In addition to medical, political, and economic hurdles, not to speak of the virus's multiple mutations, scientific discourse (or *logos*) find itself undermined by conspiracy-driven affects (or *pathos*) about vaccines. As Butter and Knight confirm: 'psychologists have shown that belief in conspiracy theories about vaccines or global warming leads to a refusal to vaccinate oneself or one's children, or an unwillingness to reduce one's carbon dioxide footprint'.<sup>64</sup> The proliferation of conspiracies on social media, supplemented by increasingly professional-looking documentaries to spread conspiracies, have hypermimetic effects that reach massive proportions in periods of crisis like a pandemic crisis in which everyone is susceptible to *pathos*.

This is not a minor problem that can be solved from the angle of a scientific *logos* alone, for rational knowledge and empirical methods are precisely what are undermined by conspiracy theories; nor can conspiracies easily be censored, for although some prohibitions are in place (with respect to Holocaust denial, for instance) the right to free speech in an open hyperconnected society escapes censoring mechanisms that already at the time of Plato's relatively closed society could only be imagined in theory. As my genealogy of mimesis from antiquity to modernity tried to show, in broad brush strokes, conspiracy theories call for balancing diagnostic operations that account for the role of *pathos* in reloading the mimetic faculty in the digital age — and perhaps turn the mimetic faculty to patho-logical use by relying on the power of positive models or examples to promote the importance of vaccination and preventive measures more generally via both logical and affective means.<sup>65</sup>

In the end, an awareness of the interplay of reason and emotions, *logos* and *pathos*, in the digital age is not only essential to immunization during a pandemic crisis. It is equally vital to confront crises to come. If we consider that conspiracy theories contribute to spreading climate change denial in the epoch of the Anthropocene while also promoting imaginary migrations to other planets behind our own, then

64 Butter and Knight, 'General Introduction', p. 6. For an historical genealogy of 'anti-vax' conspiracies in relation to the Internet, see also Simona Stano, 'The Internet and the Spread of Conspiracies' in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, pp. 483–96 (pp. 487–93).

65 In addition to scientist and politicians, actors and celebrities play a key mimetic role in pro-vaccination campaigns as an identification with them is already in place.

we have no choice but to heed Zarathustra's warning: '*stay true to the Earth* and do not believe those who talk of over-earthly hopes!'<sup>66</sup> For all humans, be they *sapiens* or *mimeticus*, or an untidy mixture of both, there is no alternative choice. Hence the urgency to join the powers of *logos* and *pathos* to affirm patho-*logical* solutions for the crises of the present that already cast a long shadow on the future.

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<sup>66</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 12.



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