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Dodo Through the Looking-Glass:
A Mirror for Modern and Contemporary Culture

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Dodo Through the Looking-Glass: A Mirror for Modern and Contemporary Culture

Inaugural Lecture by

Prof.dr. Nidesh Lawtoo

on the acceptance of his position as Professor

Modern/Contemporary European Literature and Culture

at Leiden University

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Universiteit Leiden

Madame rector magnificus, esteemed faculty board, dear colleagues, friends and family, both present and online.

An Unlikely Candidate

Let me start with a story. At the dawn of philosophy, a minor event took place on the margins of the Academy. It is actually not even a story but a playful anecdote, perhaps even a joke. And yet, it has the serious intent of defining nothing less than who we, humans, actually are, and can potentially become—a question at the center of the humanities, the Faculty where my chair is located.

The story appears in the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* written by Diogenes Laertius in the third century CE. He recounts how Plato, the founder of a school called the Academy, was applauded by his students for his succinct definition of what humans are supposed to be. Plato, Laertius tells us, defined our species as "featherless bipeds:"[1] bipeds because we are not condemned to crawl on all fours, or sit spellbound by shadows in a cave. Instead, for Plato, humans can stand up, exit the cave, and adopt the position of a *homo erectus* aspiring to reach ideal Forms located high up, in the sky of ideas. Perhaps sensing a competition with birds, Plato specified that human bipeds are *featherless*. To reach the ideal world and grasp the wisdom (*sophia*) that drives philosophy, we must rely on spiritual rather than physical wings.

Now, to this abstract, idealist and presumably universal definition, Diogenes Laertius tells us of another, lesser known, but more materialist, down-to-earth, and cynic alternative. Cynicism was, in fact, the philosophical school this second philosopher represented. He was also called Diogenes: Diogenes of Sinope, better known as Diogenes the Cynic. *Contra* Plato, Diogenes did not propose an abstract definition but a down-to-earth example. In a gesture that relied more on his body than on language, Diogenes "plucked the feathers from a cock, brought it into the lecture-room," and shouted: "'Here is Plato's man'"[2]—generating laughter within the academy.

Today, in a repetition of Diogenes's ancient gesture, I would like to update the bird in question for modern and contemporary times. Still within academic walls, I hereby proclaim the dodo as my down-to-earth alternative to Plato's man.

1. Francis Willughby, *Ornithologiæ libri tres*. London: Joannis Martyn, 1676.

To be sure, this flightless and long extinct bird from a remote island in the Indian Ocean is far from a realistic representative of what humans are; yet I suggest that if not the dodo itself, his representations or simulations in modern art, literature and culture, foreshadow all too human challenges central to both modern and contemporary times. I could not find a real dodo, alas. So, I brought along a simulacrum to make its presence felt. If Plato warned us not to confuse simulacra with reality, I argue that simulations can reveal some truths about *Homo sapiens*.

At this stage, you might wonder: a featherless biped, a plucked cock, and an extinct bird!? This sounds like a lecture in ornithology at worst and ancient philosophical gossip at best—both far removed from modern and contemporary literature and culture, the topic I am supposed to discuss. Even if you are ready to accept for less than an hour a willing suspension of disbelief that since the Romantic period defines the literary imagination, how can an extinct, flightless bird from Mauritius reveal the ongoing importance of studying European literature and culture today? That is, a period haunted by new political, environmental and technological challenges that urge scholars in the humanities to broaden our definitions of both literature and culture.

I realize my example is not ideal, but I am afraid we do not live in ideal times. As an illustrious precursor once Rector at the University of Leiden, the historian of culture Johan Huizinga famously put it at the beginning of *Homo Ludens*: "A happier age than ours once made bold to call our species by the name of *Homo Sapiens*. In the course of time we have come to realize that we are not so reasonable after all."[3] Hence the urgency for alternative, down-to-earth definitions of humans to supplement rationalist ideals, which, from *Homo sapiens* to *homo faber, homo economicus* to *homo digitalis,* stretch to include *homo academicus* as well. While the dodo simulacrum does not set up a transparent mirror to *sapiens*, I argue that it serves as a looking-glass to reflect *on* a mimetic element in culture that gives birth to modern literature and deserves new studies in contemporary media and digital culture.

A Dark Mirror

For those not familiar with this flightless bird of Mauritian origins, a brief historical reminder might help. Technically known as *Raphus Cucullatus*, representations of the dodo had already become popular as an "icon of extinction" in the nineteenth century, as Jolyon Parish writes in *The Dodo and the Solitaire*,[4] the most comprehensive natural history of the dodo to date. First discovered by the Dutch in 1598, at the dawn of the modern era, the dodo had become extinct by 1662—half a century of interaction with *sapiens* and gone was the dodo. Here are pictures of all too human gestures that, without words, say a lot about our species.

2. Johan Theodore de Bry, "The Dutch on Mauritius" in 1598, *Der Orientalischen Indien,* Wolff Richter, 1600;

3. Van West-Zanen, Killing of penguins presumably dodos, *Derde voornaemste Zee-getogt* (*Der verbondene vrye Nederlanderen*), Amsterdam: H. Soete-boom, 1648.

Already by the mid-nineteenth century, then, the dodo was doubly removed from Europe, both geographically and historically: a distant memory of the colonial past discovered on a remote island named in the honor of a Dutch king, Maurits van Oranje—hence Mauritius. And yet, if not the dodo itself, the phantom of the dodo continued to haunt the modern imagination. Initially, it did so via representations that set up an unflattering mirror to a violent colonial drive central not only to Dutch history but to the history of European colonization. These pictures are not realistically reflecting the dodo itself, but they urge us to reflect *on* modern European culture.

Modernist European literature plays a central role in this critical self-reflection. It is perhaps a coincidence that the modernist writer who has occupied me most over the past twenty years started his career as a sailor and visited Mauritius. He did so in 1888, when the dodo was already long gone, and wrote a novella titled, "A Smile of Fortune" (1911), involving a love affair with a Mauritian girl named Alice. Of Polish origins and writing in his third language, he would later become severely critical of the horrors of colonialism. As he put it: "They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. …The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much."[5]

My students who take the course on European Modernism will have recognized both the author and text in question. In *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Joseph Conrad, the sailor turned writer, depicts the horrors of Belgian colonialism in the Congo. His perspective is not free from ethnocentric bias, as Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe famously noted.[6] At the same time, Conrad also urges us to reflect critically on what the French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, called "*l'horreur occidentale*" or "the horror of the West."[7]

The methodological point I inherited from Lacoue-Labarthe, but also from Jean-Luc Nancy, Adriana Cavarero, and other philosophers-critics who encouraged me to continue what for a long time seemed like an improbable academic career located at the juncture of philosophy and literature, still drives my work today: literature and philosophy are not simply rival disciplines split by what Plato called an "ancient quarrel;"[8] rather, they are mirroring, disciplines that supplement each other. Once joined they provide both the experiential affect (*pathos*) and the critical discourse (*logos*) necessary for diagnosing the pathologies of culture. Thus, in a mirroring reflection that starts from Conrad's modernist tale but reaches into the present, Lacoue-Labarthe adds: "To recoil from the horror is Western *barbarity* itself."[9] We begin to see and feel that the mirror of literature captures not only horrors of the past, but also foreshadows present and future crises: these include the recoil from anthropogenic climate change responsible for what environmental scientists call a sixth species extinction, of which the dodo was an unlucky precursor.

I am aware that in very little time, with the feather of the dodo dipped into the ink of a modernist classic, I painted a rather dark picture of Europe: the dodo, in fact conjures the phantom of extinction that—in the wake of the return of nuclear threats, climate catastrophes, and what philosophers of science call the "new atom bomb,"[10] namely AI—now casts a shadow on the survival of *sapiens* as well. But of course, the point of starting with the dodo is precisely the opposite. It is a reminder that this is *not* the only possibility. Extinction is precisely the fate the dodo simulacrum urges us to avoid.

In a logical paradox constitutive of modernism, an icon of human pathologies that led to extinction in the past can become an emblem to promote survival in the future. But we will have to go through the looking glass of fiction first, a strange mirror that does not simply represent "shadows"

of reality, as Plato thought at the dawn of literary criticism.[11] Rather it sets up a transformative mirror that continues to orient critical reflections at the twilight of the age of print literature.

The Dodo's Race

Let me follow Alice's example: not the Alice Conrad depicts in Mauritius, but a more famous literary Alice. As I first read Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*[12] in a BA course in English Literature at the University of Lausanne back in the 1990s, I responded with what I now recognize as an anti-Platonic gesture: I wrote a philosophical essay about it, for I was also studying philosophy. Luckily, I was oblivious of the ancient quarrel dividing these disciplines.[13] Even before *Heart of Darkness*, then, *Alice in Wonderland* is *the* text that started my journey at the crossroads of literature and philosophy that, after many *salti mortali*, led me here today.

My examples, you will have noted, betray my academic starting point in English. But I hasten to add that my PhD is in Comparative Literature. This allowed me to include French, German, and Italian authors drawing on languages which, being Swiss-born, preceded English, my fourth language. They never felt small to me and continue to inform both European and world literature. It would thus be a real loss if new generations of PhDs in the humanities were no longer able to understand the irony of the phrase, *Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'intrate,*[14] which is inscribed on a door in this building. Multilingualism, as leading Dutch intellectuals from Erasmus to Huizinga to a long chain of my predecessors stressed, is the strongest antidote contra bigotry, intolerance and fascism—both past and present. This is not a small reason to protect both European and non-European languages already constitutive of Dutch multiculturalism.

That said, let me return to Alice. I soon found out that despite being dedicated to a real girl named Alice Liddell, with whom Charles Dodgson, the actual name of Lewis Carroll, had a strange fascination, what made the book interesting to me were its linguistic jokes, logical paradoxes, and philosophical insights about changing identities. This observation, I later realized, was not original. As Gilles Deleuze puts it in *Logique du sense* (1969)—a book that takes inspiration as much from Lewis Carroll as from ancient philosophers like stoics, epicureans and cynics, including Diogenes the Cynic—what we find in the Alice books is what Deleuze calls, "*la première grand mise en scène des paradoxes du sens*," [the first major staging of the paradoxes of meaning]:[15] that is, paradoxes that challenge stable unitary ideas based on an unchanging Being Plato posited in the sky of ideas, what Nietzsche also calls "worlds behind the world" or "*Hinterwelten*."[16] Instead, Carroll, not unlike Nietzsche, but we could also add André Gide, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, and many other modernist writers I take inspiration from, dramatize a world of constant transformation, metamorphosis, and becoming that, as Deleuze puts it, "contests Alice's personal identity."[17]

You all remember the story. After following the White Rabbit and tumbling down the rabbit-hole, Alice soon realizes that her name no longer suffices to define who she is. Her identity (form Latin, *identitas*, the same) is no longer the same: she shrinks, shoots up like a telescope, then shrinks again. She almost drowns in a pool of her own tears, anticipating a human risk that is perhaps not only fictional. After all, rising sea levels are a threat close to home. Anyway, it is in this fluid, turbulent, to her almost oceanic context that she first meets a party of strange animals. And standing above them, you will remember, is also our flightless bird: the Dodo.

4. Color version of John Tenniel, "Alice and the Dodo," 1865, from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

The dodo and literature are thus not as far removed as those pictures of Mauritius initially suggested. Carroll, for one, or rather Dodgson, had a personal connection to the dodo not deprived of self-irony. Despite his brilliant wit in writing, as he spoke orally, Dodgson had a stutter. He was an accomplished mathematician and a Lecturer at Oxford University not unaccustomed to formal settings like this one. Picture the scene: as he had to identify himself in front of colleagues, a disconcerting doubling not under his conscious control provided an identification with, you will have guessed: Charles Do..Do... Thus, with a good dose of humor, Dodgson, who adored doubling names—Humpty Dumpty, Tweedledum and Tweedledee immediately spring to mind—literally identified with the Dodo of his literary fiction, which does not mean he is the only dodo present today.

Now, apparently Dodgson in his academic career disliked lengthy academic meetings in committees sometimes called, caucuses. No wonder that his self-ironic identification with the Dodo turned into a satirical reflection on academic competitions dramatized in what the Dodo calls, a "Caucus-Race." Alice, you will recall, is still wet from her own tears. The Mouse had already tried to proclaim a dry boring speech in order to dry Alice up, without much success. Just as proclaiming humans *sapiens* does not make people wise, so pronouncing a *dry* speech does not make wet people dry.

Seriously, the Dodo, who like Diogenes, is not an ideal homo academicus, continues in more down-to-earth, pragmatic terms:

> 'In that case,' said the Dodo solemnly, rising to his feet, 'I move that the meeting adjourn, for the immediate adoption of more energetic remedies—'

> 'Speak English!' said the Eaglet, I don't know the meaning of half those long words, and, what's more, I don't believe you do either!...

> 'What I was going to say,' said the Dodo in an offended tone, 'was that the best thing to get us dry would be a Caucus-race' (*AW* 22)

Alice does not know what a Caucus-race is. So, the Dodo replies as a cynic philosopher: "'the best way to explain it is to do it'" (23). He draws a circle and the animals start running, from different positions, without any order. The Dodo might be mocking the confusion of caucus races, including, perhaps academic races. As my academic course took me from Europe to the U.S and back to Europe, running in circle more than once, I confess that a Caucus-race is not a bad metaphor.

And yet, the Dodo is also making a serious philosophical point. *With* Diogenes, *contra* Plato the Dodo does not teach

via a universal definition but via a practical example. What is true for Alice is true for all humans: we do not learn in isolation, driven by an abstract and autonomous reason, or *logos*, alone; rather, we start learning via physical movements, often collectively, via relations of mutual imitation that engage both reason and emotion. Both are constitutive of a playful, imitative species that, supplementing Huizinga's *homo ludens*, I call *homo mimeticus*—for lack of a more original term.

Mimetic Studies

Now that the Dodo's race has taken us to what I take to be the driving element of literature and culture, let us broaden our field of vision. The connection between literature and imitation, or to use a more ancient term, *mimesis*, is not a modern or contemporary invention, but that does not mean that the relevance of this concept has been fully explored. Quite the contrary. Since at least Plato and Aristotle, literature has been defined as a "mirror"[18] or representation of reality, be it true or false; and this restricted definition reaches up to the nineteenth century, informing the German philologist Erich Auerbach's magisterial book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Culture* (1946). This study traces the history of mimesis from Homer to Virgina Woolf via detailed analyses, or *explications de textes,* that even in age of AI, provide a distinctive methodological skill for a literary scholar worth its salt.

I regret, however, that Auerbach did not include a chapter on Carroll. It would have made clear that for both the moderns and the ancients, mimesis could never be simply reduced to a stabilizing representation or mirror of reality—what Auerbach, echoing book 10 of Plato's *Republic,* calls "mimesis ranking third after truth."[19] My view is that already for the ancients, let alone for the moderns and the contemporaries, mimesis includes much more destabilizing, embodied, yet truthful imitative realities. After all, already Aristotle argued in the *Poetics* that humans are a "thoroughly mimetic" species.[20] And in a paradoxical twist of modern inspiration, I add that we became *sapiens* only because we are first and foremost *mimeticus*.

This is the driving hypothesis that informs my entire work located at the intersection of literature and culture. In my ERC project *Homo Mimeticus* (HOM), my team and I, opened up an interdisciplinary field of study, called mimetic studies.[21] Our goal was to study the contemporary manifestations of mimesis, including mimicry, identification, influence, plasticity, performativity, simulations, including mass-identifications with authoritarian leaders.

Undisciplined by disposition, crossing artificial borders dividing literary studies, philosophy, and the social sciences came naturally, or rather culturally, to me for I was trained in all three. Moreover, I sensed early on via texts like *Alice in Wonderland* that more than on disciplinary perspective is needed to adequately understand our constantly changing identities.

While easier said than done, I am convinced interdisciplinarity is a vital methodological principle to pass on to our students who are confronting a fast-changing culture. This is one of the reasons I am so honored to have finished my Caucus-race at the Leiden Center for the Arts in Society (LUCAS), which is unique in Europe in promoting interdisciplinarity as a key principle to understand the changing relations between the arts and society. Mimesis is another term to designate precisely that relation. If it is often restricted to the aesthetic genre of realism, the mimetic turn we have been promoting re-turns to the ancient realization that mimesis derives from *mîmos*, which means actor or performance.[22] It is thus embodied and affective—if only because we are relational creatures who mirror each other, often unconsciously, not only on the side of art but also on the side of life.With characteristic succinctness, another philosopher-poet, or rather, dramatist, Oscar Wilde summed up this principle in his dictum: "Life imitates art more than Art imitates life."[23]

Let me give you an example that includes academic lives: a ritual like this, for instance, provides a good illustration of how deep mimetic instincts go: you can see it; feel it; you can even

hear mimesis all around us:….Silence is, in fact, automatically shared due to social conventions we learn since childhood via disciplinary forms of imitation; bodies adopt neatly aligned postures for the same reason; this ritual is ancient and has been faithfully reproduced through the ages—and reproduction is a facet of mimesis; our clothing marks individual differences, but fashion is an eminently mimetic phenomenon. And even if I am dressed differently today, there is a striking mimetic continuity with my colleagues and predecessors. In short, this very ritual is a *mimetic rite de passage* I have the honor of partaking in.

It's as if this imposing setting that brings back distant memories from my Catholic upbringing were designed to illustrate the power of mimesis, mimetic powers that from religion to culture, antiquity to modernity, continue to inform what Pierre Bourdieu calls the habitus of *homo academicus*.[24] In short, even in academia, there is no "cultural production"[25] outside of mimesis. Or if you prefer a *bon mot*, since so many of the theorists of mimesis I further are French, *il n'y a pas d'hors-mimèsis*—which does not mean, we have to passively repeat what others have said. On the contrary, repetitions are generative of both sameness and difference, as Tweedledee and Tweedledum make us hear, on the side of literature.

A Mime Through the Looking-Glass

Let me thus return to the text that set my career in motion. The sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published six years later in 1871, is titled *Through the Looking-Glass*. Dodgson not only continues Alice's adventures in a world of metamorphosis; he also reframes the ancient Platonic trope of the mirror by challenging stabilizing representations and foregrounding fluid transformations of a homo mimeticus to come. Far from reflecting a stabile fictional image, or *imago*, which as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argued, gives unity to the ego,[26] Carroll uses the mirror to introduce mimetic continuities between life and art, self and others, human and nonhuman animals. It is a mirror that does not simply represent the same reality from a visual distance, as a tradition from Plato to Auerbach suggests; rather, it is a looking-glass that allows Alice to magically go through it with her body—without clarifying if it is the mirror that is permeable or Alice's body, or both—as a tradition that goes from Carroll to Deleuze and beyond, indicates.

5 & 6. John Tenniel, "Alice Climbing Through the Looking-Glass," 1871, from *Through the Looking-Glass,* by Lewis Carroll.

The fundamental drive that opens *Through the Looking-Glass* is thus no longer the Platonic question of how literature can represent the world via a realistic mirror, however imperfectly; rather, Carroll-Dodgson, the self-identified Dodo, alternates between first person direct speech (or *mimesis*) and third-person indirect diegetic speech (or *diegesis*). And he does so to open up a metamorphosis of identity via the medium of a mimetic affect, or as I call it, *pathos*. Here is how Alice puts it to her kitten:

'Kitty dear, let's pretend—'And here I wish I could tell you half the things Alice used to say, beginning with her favorite phrase 'Let's pretend' (*TLG* 110).

Notice that Alice is not simply telling her cat to pretend to *be* someone else; as a mime herself, Alice is already caught up in a game of pretense that attributes both language and human features to Kitty. How does this magical transformation happen? The literary text itself provides the philosophical answer: by imitating a fictional character with pathos, rather than by simply representing that character from a visual distance. Thus, as Alice wants Kitty to become the Red Queen, the narrator specifies: "Alice got the Red Queen off the table, and set it up before the kitten *as a model to imitate*" (110; my italics). Clearly, the drive animating this game of pretense that starts the whole adventure is a mimetic drive. Mimesis, then, does not entail a representation of the same. On the contrary, it entails an imitation of a model to become different.

Pace Auerbach, this *is* the mimetic drive that brings fiction into being, via a mimetic becoming. Imitation animates not only Alice's playful imagination within the tale; it is also at play in Dodgson's dramatization as he speaks mimetically under the mask of fictional models. By extension, a lot of what goes under the rubric of modern and contemporary literature is born out of mimesis, thus reframed. Going beyond the narrow confines of mimetic realism in which identities remain the same, Carroll opens up alternative worlds where it is possible to become other. Thus, to the objection of Alice's sister who, the narrator says, does not find it realistic to pretend they are "kings and queens" (110) for "there were only two of them," Alice replies, with and enthusiastic mimetic excess: "Well, you will be one of them and then I will be *all the rest*" (110; my italics). Who said that mimesis is limited to playing only one role?

True, Plato said precisely that, but he is not our model today. Carroll, for one, sets up more than one model to imitate in the first place. Crucially, it is this magical world of mimetic pretense that is not only central to characters on the side of fiction; it is also central to the formation of characters on the side of life. This is, in a nutshell, the main insight the mimetic turn, or re-turn to an affective, embodied, and relational mimesis emphasizes: it reloads what the German literary critic Walter Benjamin, half a century after Carroll, called "the mimetic faculty" or "*das Mimetische Vermögen.*"[27] Rooting this mimetic drive in the phylogenetic development of human behavior more generally, Benjamin traces it back to "the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else"[28], which, via mimesis, still animates both children play and artistic play. *Homo ludens* mirrors *homo mimeticus*, and vice versa. In other words, Alice's mimetic faculty, which allows her to go through the looking-glass is not simply a childish game: it goes to the origins of an all too mimetic species that, via this compulsion to become other, gave birth to literature and culture.

We are now in a position to see, or rather feel, that there is an important lesson at play in the mimetic element that allows Alice to go through the looking-glass. An affective mimesis based on pretense, or if you prefer, suspension of disbelief, is the aesthetic medium that allows Alice's identity to become porous, so to speak, traverse the mirror, and enter wonderland. At one further remove, as readers following Carroll's linguistic traces, we identify with Alice and go *Through the Looking-Glass* as well. Mimesis in other words, is not only part of the

message of this mirroring scene; it is also the very medium that makes this magical experience possible. Which also means that mimesis is both the medium and the message at play in the magic of literature and art in general.

Revisited from the angle of mimesis, literature is of course not limited to modern novels. Far from it. From oral cultures under the spell of magical rituals to dramatic performances from which mimesis derives its name, from epic narratives with exemplary models to imitate to novels of maturation or *Bildungsroman*, from cinematic shadows that reproduce Plato's cave to the rise of TV series that catch viewers in a game of repetitions with differences, stretching to new social media that inform digital culture and are now reloaded via Artificial Intelligence (AI), it is the mimetic faculty that, in its plastic adaptations, brings new fictional worlds into being through the ages.

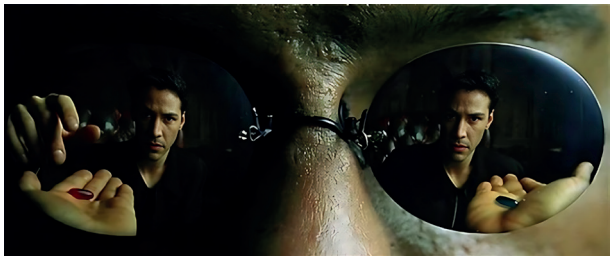
And yet, we should not forget the lesson the Dodo embodies: mimesis goes beyond good and evil, depending on the models we imitate from childhood onwards. The case of Alice encountering the Queen of Hearts on the other side of the mirror, for instance, reminds contemporary readers of the danger to capitulate, via the same mimetic faculty, to the magic of fascist leaders who put mimetic pathos to authoritarian use. The Queen shouts, "off with its head;" other fictional Kings shout, "you're fired"—if you are lucky. If you aren't, you are deported to a prison in El Salvador. Hence my early warning against realty-TV actors, or mimes, who rely on the contagious powers of mimesis reloaded by new media to turn politics itself into a dangerous fiction.

To come closer to our contemporary preoccupations before concluding, let us acknowledge that Benjamin was right in connecting aesthetics and politics via the magical power of the mimetic faculty. However, he was perhaps overly optimistic as he predicted the "decay of the mimetic faculty"[29] in the contemporary period. Exactly the opposite has happened. We are all going through the looking-glass of simulations that are no longer mechanical and analogic, but digital and artificial. Welcome to AI!

The Hypermimetic Mirror of AI

To recapitulate: Carroll's looking-glass made us see and feel that mimesis is an affective, magical medium that is central to entering fictional worlds from antiquity to the nineteenth century. A century later, it is a different medium, namely cinema, that provides the most revealing mirroring surface to reflect critically on contemporary culture. Please rest assured: literature does not simply vanish; it is just reloaded in a different medium that broadens the lens of literary study to include my second affiliation: namely, film and media studies.

My welcome might have generated a sense of déjà-vu. You remember that in the Wachowskis' sci-fi blockbuster, *The Matrix* (1999),[30] Neo (Keanu Reeves) also follows the white rabbit. This leads him to the threshold of his known world where he meets a mysterious character named Morpheus. He also likes doubling mirrors, as you can see.



7. Morpheus and Neo, *The Matrix*, dir. Lana and Lilly Wachowski, Warner Bros, 1999.

Unsurprisingly so. As Ovid had already put it in the *Metamorphoses* (8 CE), Morpheus is "the skillful artificer and imitator of shape [*simulatoremque figurae*]."[31] Mimesis, as those glasses suggest, is once again the medium of transformation.

Since Neo followed the white rabbit, I shall follow Alice's advice *à la lettre*: let me pretend to be Morpheus, just for a minute. It's a dream come true: "I imagine that now you feel a bit like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit-hole, mm?... "This is your last chance.... you take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe what you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes." Let's take a look at the mirroring scene that follows.

This repetition with a difference reflects mimetic themes we are by now familiar with: Neo looks at the looking-glass, and what he sees is not a stabilizing reflection, or *imago,* which provides "the One" with one stable *identitas*. On the contrary, the looking-glass is liquid and can be traversed; or rather, it is the mimetic digital self that is liquifying. And what Neo finds, on the other side of the mirror, is what Morpheus, echoing media theorist Jean Baudrillard, calls "the desert of the real." As he explains to Neo: "at some point in the early twenty-first century all of mankind…marveled at our own magnificence as we gave birth to AI". He then tells Neo that AI is using humans as a source of energy to power a "neural interactive simulation" qua matrix that is metaphorical of the Internet and the AI revolution. As I already mentioned, "the Matrix is everywhere—it is all around us, even now, in this very room."

The film appeared in 1999, well before ChatGPT and other large language models (LLMs) that simulate what we thought makes us original, namely language, *logos*. And yet it anticipates what the godfather of AI, Nobel Prize winner, Gregory Hinton, now considers a real possibility: AI taking over.[32] As the term science-fiction indicates, the boundaries between science and fiction are porous—like the looking-glass.

Not only are literature and culture changing via mimetic, or rather hypermimetic, media; we are also changing as we interact with these media. When I went down the academic rabbit-hole over twenty years ago, mimesis was considered an unoriginal topic restricted to a *passé* literary genre. AI simulations encourage new generations of scholars in the humanities to think again: From algorithmic media that reinforce pre-existing beliefs to deepfakes, AI companions to LLMs that produce passing simulations of academic papers, mimesis is, indeed, everywhere! Perhaps AI generated this very lecture! Honestly, I didn't even think about it until I typed this sentence, and that's the reason I keep typing myself: writing is the womb of thought.

In any case, the digital age has taken homo digitalis to a wonderland of simulations that are far removed from reality indeed. And yet, this does not mean that it's "no longer a question of imitation," as Baudrillard claims.[33] On the contrary, AI simulations retroact on all too human bodies and mimetic brains influencing our beliefs, thoughts, and actions in unprecedented ways. Hence the urgency of developing new mimetic studies to face phantoms that have already taken possession of more than one ego. Welcome to the reality of hypermimesis!

Going through the looking-glass of art allows us to return back to life and answer this cultural question: why is *Homo sapiens* so prone to believing fictions, be they good or bad, true or false? For many reasons, or rather affects, but also because humans are relational, affective, and mimetic creatures who easily identify with others, be they human or nonhuman—call it the Dodo or Dogson, the Queen of Hearts or Trump, Morpheus or Alexa, ChatGPT, Gemini, Grok, or whatnot.

Finally, the paradox *Alice in Wonderland* make us see and feel takes the following circular form: Our mimetic faculty has the power to animate fictional simulations, which, once affectively loaded, have the hypermimetic power to influence us in return. If we go through this paradoxical loop, we can begin to understand why scenarios that were considered science fiction only a decade ago—falling in love with chatbots, believing to be trapped in the matrix, realty-TV hosts becoming presidents,

among other hypermimetic phenomena—are now a reality. If fiction takes us through the looking-glass, criticism should give us a wake-up call.

At the end of the journey, if we wondered why the study of literature in the broadest sense is still relevant to contemporary culture, the answer is now in sight: literature and its new media avatars provide a self-reflecting mirror that reloads the untimely philosophical question of self-knowledge. Asking this ancient, yet still modern and strikingly contemporary question, I have claimed, is vital to reflect critically on who we are—and can possibly become.

Thanking the Race Supporters

Thank you all who contributed to my appointment, especially the Executive Board, the Faculty of the Humanities, and LUCAS's Management Team. While I cannot mention everyone by name, it is a pleasure to thank both LUCAS's former and current Scientific Directors, Prof. Sybille Lammes and Prof. Stijn Bussels, as well as the hiring commission, which responded gamely to my jokes: *homo ludens* has indeed mirroring affinities with *homo mimeticus*.

I am thrilled to have a double affiliation in both Literary Studies and Film and Media Studies with fantastic colleagues with whom I enjoy co-teaching courses on European Modernism, Crisis, World Literature and many others. On the side of philosophy, I warmly thank Herman Siemens for bringing me to Leiden already twenty years ago, the participants in the Nietzsche seminar for keeping me sharp today, as well as Prof. Susanna Lindberg, a strong ally in mimetic studies. As a teacher, I draw daily inspiration from my students from BA to MA up to PhD candidates. You remind me every day of the importance of being adventurous.

And over the years, I myself benefited from a long chain of exemplary teachers. At the University of Lausanne I was first introduced to Alice by *Maestro* Roelof Overmeer, whose dramatization of the Caterpillar's untimely question I will never forget: "Who are *you*?" I was then given brilliant introductions to theory by Prof. Peter Halter, to anthropology by Prof. Mondher Kilani and philosophy by Prof. Raphael Célis. At the University of York Prof. Jonathan Dollimore showed me it's possible, actually necessary, to combine literature and philosophy; his dissident letter was a strong wind that pushed me till the University of Cambridge, where I spent a memorable year at Pembroke College.

And at the University of Washington, I followed two philosopher-critics down the mimetic rabbit-hole: Professor Staten, dear Henry, your critical standards were so high that when I started publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals, they were accepted without critiques—it didn't last, so the merit was all yours. Professor Borch-Jacobsen, *cher* Mikkel, you introduced me to a long chain of mimetic thinkers—from Plato to Lacoue-Labarthe—in the most inspiring of theoretical settings: Paris in the fall. Those iron rings still magnetize my work, generating *un enthousiasme fou*. Professor Handwerk, dear Gary, you provided the ethical irony that kept me going through financial crises. The debt to my editor at Michigan State University Press, *Hooggeleerde* Johnsen, is unparalleled: dear Bill, I simply owe you the existence of most of my books—and thus of mimetic studies.

And in my Caucus-race, I was blessed with a multitude of guardian angels across disciplines who joined mimetic studies and became friends. Some, sadly passed; others, I know are following online: Professor Connolly, Professor Bennett, dear Bill and Jane, you made my stay at Johns Hopkins so rich and our reading group remains memorable; *Hooggeleerde* de Vries, *Professoressa* Marrati, *beste* Hent, *cara* Paola, you and the Humanities Center kept the theorist in me strong; *Professoressa* Cavarero, *carissima* Adriana, *grazie mille* for being so sympathetically inclined toward mimesis; *Madame la Professeur* Malabou, *chère* Catherine, thanks for being game in joining imitation and plasticity with the Gendered Mimesis

team—and thank you all, who joined the adventure of HOM. The mimetic re-turn worked in my homecoming, or *nostos*.

Lastly, you might still wonder why I brought along this Dodo, which has been patiently sitting here. Mimesis has no single origins; in my case they are at least double. I have known this dodo since I was a child as it stood in my bedroom. Many ask me where my name comes from; you should not be surprised to hear that it comes straight out of Mauritius. Dodgson was not the only one identifying with the Dodo, after all.

I would like to thank my father who is watching online: your Mauritian heritage, I came to realize, gave me the strength to swim against strong academic currents. My race was privileged compared to the journey that took my ancestors from India to Mauritius, slavery to freedom. I am proud today that the Mauritian side of my family—my brothers and sister, cousins, aunts and uncles—can participate online in this event watching from London, Beau-Bassin and Moka.

And then there is the second, maternal side; the one that brought back the Dodo from wonderland. My mother is sitting in the front row today with a broken arm but, ho boy, what an adventurous spirit! Dear mom, fifty years ago you embarked on a magical adventure: it led you from a small village in the Swiss Alps to London, tumbling all the way down to Mauritius. When you returned you brought back the Dodo and, well…me. Had it not been for your heoric efforts, redoubled by my grandparents up in Prepiantoo, where I still meet my closest friends, I would not be here today. *Grazie per porta sto Dodo, mam!*

Last but not least, I would have stopped the Caucus-race long ago, had I not been blessed with a magical partner who ran more vigorously than I ever could to make it work in the long run—that is, for over twenty years. *Meine* Michi, you fought the hard battles in the real world while I was stuck in wonderland: every day, you bring the perfect mix of beauty, intelligence, and comedy in my life. *Danke Michi, du hast alles gezaubert*. My wonderful children, Kim and Nia, you make me proud every day as you shoot up like telescopes: this Dodo, of course, is already yours!

Every tale needs an ending. I'll leave the last words to the Dodo who, seeing everyone was out of breath, solemnly proclaimed: "'the race is over!'" All the other animals "crowded round it, panting, and asking 'But who has won?' This question the Dodo could not answer without a great deal of thought, and it stood for a long time with one finger pressed upon its forehead (the position in which you usually see Shakespeare, in the pictures of him)—if you doubted the Dodo is a mimetic double of the writer, there you have it! At last, the Dodo said "*Everybody* has won, and *all* must have prizes" (23).

After such a long-winding speech, we should all be quite dry. Let's wet our throats together, with some drinks.

Ik heb gezegd.

8. "The Dodo and Its Shadow," 2025, Nidesh Lawtoo.

Notes

1 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers vol. II*, trans. R.D. Hicks (London: William Heinemann, 1925), VI.40 (trans. modified).

2 Ibid. VI.40 (trans. modified).

3 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Angelico Press, 2016), 1. The original opening sentence is more compressed in Dutch and reads differently: "Toen wij mensen niet zo verstanding bleken als een blijer eeuw in haar verering van de Rede ons gewaand had, heeft men als benaming van onze soort naast *homo sapiens* die van *homo faber*, de mensmaker, gesteld." Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens: Proeve ener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur* (Amsterdam: Querido Facto, 2024), 11. In the lecture Huizinga gave at Leiden University for Dies Natalis in 1933 and later in Zurich, Switzerland, which he then developed in *Homo Ludens*, he stressed the connection between play and imitation or *nabootsen* as he stated: "een belangrijke plaats ook dit laatste begrip in de psychologie van het spel in het algemeen moge innemen." Johan Huizinga, "Over de grenzen van spel en ernst in de cultuur." (Haarlem: H. D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon N.V, 1933), 6. In a mirroring move, my trajectory brought me from Switzerland—via more than one *salto mortale*—to Leiden, in order to provide a new theory of imitation and further Huizinga's mimetic insight.

4 Jolyon C. Parish, *The Dodo and the Solitaire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), n.p. I am very grateful to Joe for an impressive book that introduced me to dodology, the study of the dodo, and for sending me links to an archive of images, some of which are reproduced here. All images used are in the Open Domain.

5 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* eds. Owen Knowles and Allan H. Simmons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 6. Conradians on both sides of the Atlantic have played a big role in keeping me afloat during narrow passages. Special thanks to Anne Luyat, Richard Ruppel, Paul B. Armstrong, Chris GoGwilt, and John (Jack) Peters.

6 Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in *Heart of Darkness*," in *Heart of Darkness*, 5th ed., ed. Paul B. Armstrong (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 306–19.

7 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "The Horror of the West" trans. Nidesh Lawtoo and Hannes Opelz in *Conrad's* Heart of Darkness *and Contemporary Thought: Revisiting the Horror with Lacoue-Labarthe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 111-22.

8 Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairnes (Pantheon Books, 1963), 575-843, 832, 607b (trans. modified).

9 Lacoue-Labarthe, "Horror of the West," 118.

10 Lode Lauwaert, *AI: wat niemand ons verteld* (Prometheus Uitgeverij, 2025).

11 Plato, *Republic*, 514c.

12 Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, 2nd ed. ed. Donald J. Gray (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992). Hereafter *AW*. The edition of *Through the Looking-Glass* included in this volume, is hereafter abbreviated as *TLG*.

13 Alice is also the protagonist of an excellent introduction to philosophy that takes direct inspiration from Carroll. See Roger-Pol Droit, *Alice au pays des idées* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2025).

14 Dante Alighieri, *La Divina commedia: Inferno*, a cura di Natalino Sapegno (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1985), III.9, 30. I thank my Italian high-school teacher, Giovanni Croce, for opening the doors of literature, forcefully deviating my *cammin* from the hard sciences to the humanities.

15 Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969), 7 (my trans.).

16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra, Kritische Studienausgabe Band 4*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Guyter, 1980), 35-38.

17 Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, 11.

18 Plato, *Republic*, 596d.

19 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 554.

20 Aristotle, *The Poetics* of Aristotle, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 34.

21 We did so in collaboration with internationally renowned thinkers, such as J. Hillis Miller, Jean-Luc Nancy and Catherine Malabou in literary theory and philosophy, William Connolly, Jane Bennett and Adriana Cavarero in political theory, Judith Butler in gender studies, Kathrine Hayles in posthuman studies, Vittorio Gallese in the neurosciences, among many other stellar allies who contributed to HOM Videos. See https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJQy0y0qCxzP4QImG2YWqpw

22 See Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 27-30. See also Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 2006). I am grateful to Gunter, Christoph and Matt for joining forces with the mimetic turn, among many other contributors to special issues and to the *Homo Mimeticus* trilogy. While mimetic studies should not be confused with René Girard's mimetic theory, Girard is an important precursor I engage with elsewhere. I am grateful to many Girardians who are already contributing to mimetic studies, my Dutch translators, Berry Vorstenbosch, Daan Savert in primis, as well my editor at Noordboek, Erno Eskens, for suggesting the translations in the first place.

23 Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, vol. 4*, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press),72-103, 90.

24 Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo academicus* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1984).

25 Ibid. 299.

26 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytical Experience," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 2. For an incisive critique of Lacan's theory of mimesis that invokes the "through the looking-glass" motif, see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 43-73.

27 For both Carroll and Benjamin, mimesis is not restricted to a "reproduction" of reality, which in the modern period had acquired a mechanical and alienating dimension leading to the loss of the "aura." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 217-51. Rather, critic and artist agree that children reveal the mimetic drive to become other on which both child play and the literary imagination rest. As Benjamin puts it: "Children's play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behavior, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train." Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 333-336, 333.

28 Benjamin, "Mimetic Faculty," 333.

29 Benjamin, "Mimetic Faculty," 334. To be fair to Benjamin, he later wonders "whether we are concerned with the decay of this faculty or with its transformation" (334). Carroll would have answered, the latter.

30 *The Matrix*, directed by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 1999), DVD.

31 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), XI, ll.633-635.

32 Geoffrey Hinton, *Nobel Prize*. https://www.youtube.com/shorts/odUjxJy0YMo, 2025 (accessed 25.10.2025).

33 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris : Galilée, 1981), 11 (my trans.).

Prof.dr. Nidesh Lawtoo

Prof. dr. Nidesh Lawtoo studied Letters at the University of Lausanne and holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Washington, Seattle. After a research fellowship at the University of Cambridge, Pembroke College (2007-2008), he taught as *maître-assistant* (Lecturer) in the English Department at the University of Lausanne (2009-2013). He was then SNSF Visiting Scholar at the Humanities Center, Johns Hopkins University (2013-2016) and subsequently led the ERC project, *Homo Mimeticus: Theory and Criticism* at the Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven (2016-2022).

Located at the juncture of literary studies, philosophy, media studies and political theory, Lawtoo's interdisciplinary work rethinks the ancient concept of mimesis in light of the plural forms of imitation—from identification to emotional contagion, performativity to simulation—that haunt the modern and contemporary period. He articulated the first steps of this mimetic turn in a trilogy on literary and philosophical modernism: *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (2013), *Conrad's Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory* (2016), for which he won the Adam Gillon Award in 2018, and *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth* (2019). He then developed the field of mimetic studies via another trilogy including, *Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation* (2022) and a diptych on *Violence and the Unconscious* (2023), volume 1 on catharsis and 2 on contagion. To further broaden mimetic studies, he edited a volume on *Mimetic Posthumanism* (2024) and he is currently finalizing a trilogy on *Homo Mimeticus* with Leuven University Press. In 2023 Nidesh Lawtoo was appointed Professor of Modern and Contemporary European Literature and Culture at Leiden University.