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A Response to Arkady Plotnitsky

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TOWARD MINOR MIMESIS: FROM DESIRING MACHINES TO MICRO-IMITATION

Can computers think? And if they cannot as yet, does AI have the potential to approximate a type of consciousness that animates human experiences? While the leap forward in AI simulations that effectively mimic human language is generating mass enthusiasm, we should not be too quick to erase all differences between artificial and human, or even posthuman intelligence.

With his double training in mathematics and philosophy, Arkady Plotnitsky is not dogmatically dismissive of the powers of AI to set in motion “machines of thought,” if only because new technologies are already supplementing human actions and reactions characteristic of our ongoing processes of becoming posthuman in the digital age. Still, as a philosopher and theorist, Plotnitsky inverts perspectives and asks a more untimely question: namely, what kind of “machine” is actually required for the experience of “thought” to potentially emerge in AI? His answer, in a nutshell, is that a “*desiring* machine” is called for. As he puts it, summing up his main thesis via a mirroring phrase: “There is no thinking without desire any more than desire without thinking” (6). And since so far AI “is not capable of desire and thus [of] inner experience,” it is not capable of thought either, at least not the kind humans have. For Plotnitsky, then, the “inner experience” of desire—conscious but also, and perhaps above all, unconscious—is considered the condition *sine qua non* for thought to emerge in the first place.

The focus on the machinic limitations of AI is innovative and future-oriented, but as these philosophical concepts already suggest, Plotnitsky’s diagnostic is rooted in a genealogy of thought that is attentive to the immanence of bodily affects, is materialist in orientation, and can help us open up new perspectives at the crossroads of mimetic theory, continental philosophy, and posthuman studies constitutive of “new mimetic studies.”¹

More precisely, he finds his theoretical starting point in a productive conception of desire that is neither strictly Freudian nor Girardian in orientation, is anti-Oedipal

in its philosophical inspiration, and despite its critical take on mimesis, continues to have strong genealogical connections with the heterogeneous field of mimetic theory now supplemented by a mimetic turn, or re-turn to what I call, for lack of a more original term, *homo mimeticus* (Lawtoo 2022).² It is, in fact, in Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's productive, machinic, and contagious conception of desire qua "desiring machine" first articulated in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and then in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) that Plotnitsky finds his distinctive genealogical starting point to challenge transhumanist ideals of AI that tend to forget the evolutionary complexity of the human brain informing its capacity to both affect and be affected by desires and, perhaps, all affects more generally.

This is a crucial point that aligns Plotnitsky's argument with major figures in the burgeoning field of posthuman studies. As Katherine Hayles argued in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), if theorizations of AI starting with the Turing Test and cybernetics were characterized by the "erasure of embodiment," an inversion of perspective is now urgently in order since "embodiment makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it" (K. N. Hayles 1999, xiv; Hayles and Lawtoo 2022, 181–9). Plotnitsky fundamentally agrees, and so do I. His distinct attention to the evolutionary complexity of the brain concurs, in fact, with a long genealogy of immanent thinkers of mimesis—from Spinoza to Nietzsche, Bataille to Deleuze, Irigaray to Braidotti to Hayles, among others that are currently informing an emerging "mimetic turn in posthuman studies" animating "homo mimeticus 2.0" (Lawtoo 2022; Lawtoo 2014). We also agree that consciousness is an embodied, affective, and emerging property that rests on the immanence of bodily affects inscribed in the long evolutionary history of our species.

Given this fundamental agreement in our theoretical assumptions, then, the focus of my response will be partial and selective as it addresses a specific question, or problem, that is directly relevant to the mimetic turn, or re-turn. I formulate this Janus-faced question as follows. Can desire, in its Oedipal or anti-Oedipal manifestations, continue to serve as the royal road to the unconscious as we face the rising shadow of AI and the digital phantoms it generates? Or, alternatively, can the experience of contagious affect, or mimetic *pathos*, open up "hyper-mimetic" flows of communication constitutive of our process of becoming posthuman in the digital age?³ This is what we will turn to in order to discover in the heterogeneous angle of mimetic studies.

It is beginning to be well known that, despite Girard's *agonistic* relation to some of his most influential predecessors who focused on the role of desire in the so-called discovery of the unconscious (most notably Freud and Lacan), important *mimetic* continuities can be traced between these respective theories of desire. Productive intersections and mirroring inversions of perspectives occur on genealogical points. These points converge around familial triangulations, double binds, ambivalent relations with models, founding murders at the origins of culture, and the logic of *méconnaissance* internal to mirroring reflections—all of which are constitutive of intellectual contests that are productive, innovative, and strictly speaking, not reducible to mimetic rivalry. I group them under the concept of "mimetic agonism"

to stress that agonistic theoretical inversions often emerge from mimetic processes of differentiation that are internal to the discovery of the unconscious.⁴ Plotnitsky is thus right to consider the “interplay” between psychoanalytically-oriented theories of desire (Freud, Lacan, Girard) and their anti-psychoanalytic counterpart (Deleuze and Guattari) in order to oppose idealist conceptions of AI, while at the same time stressing fundamental differences between these two agonistic genealogies of desire. Here is how he puts it.

There is, thus, always an *un*-fulfilment of a desire, but it operates in two different ways, defining two destinies of desire. In Freud, Lacan, or Girard (unless the Oedipal desire begins to crumble from within their texts) this un-fulfilment is defined by the infinite distance from fulfilment, imposed by the Oedipal *structure*. By contrast, in Deleuze and Guattari it is defined by the fact that a point of a fulfilment is a point of a new trajectory of desire, a new line of flight, a new desire, to be pursued by a desiring *machine*.

Plotnitsky's main theoretical beef is with theories of AI that posit the possibility of thinking without considering the evolutionary complexity of the human brain. In the process, however, he also develops a genealogy of desire that rests on two related but competing theories of the unconscious that stage the following *agon*: desire as lack contra desiring production, *manque à être* contra machinic intensity, Oedipal theaters contra rhizomatic flows, triangular structures contra lines of flight, the logic of representation (or of the Same) contra the production of difference. This is, indeed, the fundamental *agon* driving a book provocatively called *Anti-Oedipus*. That is, a book whose goal, among other things, is to break the stranglehold psychoanalysts (as “last priests”) have on the human (will to) power to desire (Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari 1977). There is thus a philosophical agonism informing Plotnitsky's account of desiring machines that should be taken seriously, if only because it directly *in-forms* (gives form to) his productive conception of affirmative desire qua “line of flight” that not only exceeds AI's capacity to think, but also supplements oppressive Oedipal structures of desire based on lack.

So far so good. This is a productive way to reframe the debate on the limitations of AI from a philosophically informed materialist perspective that is currently internal to posthuman studies as well. But this *agon* between two conceptions of desire is shadowed by a second conceptual *agon* that posits the inner experience of desire over and against mimesis. Hence, Plotnitsky counters the “liberating” side of machinic desire against what he now calls the “oppressive structure” of mimesis. This anti-mimetic genealogical gesture harkens back to the beginning of mimetic studies itself (in Aristotle) and is worth quoting.

Aristotle was mistaken in defining humans as mimetic animals, or only partially right. A mimesis, including the mimesis of (the structure of) desire is only a small part of a possible life of thought and desire, part often shaped by reductive and oppressing social mechanisms, for example, Oedipal ones. Freud, Lacan, and Girard, again, tell us as much, against their own grain. ... As desiring machines, we create new trajectories of thought, “lines of flight.”

This is not a minor claim. It casts a shadow on the ancient realizations that humans are, for better and worse, mimetic creatures. And it does so on the basis of agonistic contemporary theories of desire that may not do justice to the double-faced genealogical complexity of *homo mimeticus*. I suggest genealogical lenses call for more caution, and from at least two related philosophical perspectives, one ancient and the other contemporary.

First, a genealogical observation. In his reply to Plato's critique of mimesis as a pathological *pharmakon* that generates contagious pathos in the *Republic* (or mimetic pathology), Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, responded via a mimetic agonism that inversed the diagnostic, yet retained the Janus-faced duplicity of mimesis. Namely, he replied that mimesis is a therapeutic *pharmakon* that, in specific aesthetic contexts, can generate cathartic effects (or mimetic patho-logy). If the language of "structure" betrays the influence of linguistic/Oedipal accounts of desire dominant in the 1960s, Plotnitsky is the last to ignore that the ancient foundations of mimesis are based on a destabilizing pharmacological movement, which, as Jacques Derrida has influentially shown, is as therapeutic as it is pathological, if only because "*mimēsis* is akin to the *pharmakon*" (Derrida 1981, 139). This is indeed a shared genealogical point that Plotnitsky and I had both the occasion to stress at the fiftieth anniversary of *The Structuralist Controversy*, an event that launched—or rather, deconstructed—the concept of "structure" on the North American scene back in 1966 in the first place (Plotnitsky 2019, 953–66; Lawtoo 2019, 898–909).⁵ It also generated mimetic patho(-)logies that, to this day, continue to inform the vicissitudes of mimetic studies. In short, framed in the context of these broader genealogical traces, it is clear that we agree more than we disagree.

A second genealogical observation. The dominant conception of mimesis as an oppressive or pathological structure, generative of Oedipal rivalries that to this day, still tend to overshadow mimetic theory, does not do full justice to a minor patho-logical conception of mimesis that is currently emerging in mimetic studies. On this point, Plotnitsky is absolutely correct. A minor, protean, and increasingly heterogeneous conception of mimesis is productive, affirmative, liberating, and above all perfectly in line with the anti-Oedipal foundations of Deleuze's and Guattari's productive conception of machinic desire.

As is well known, the latter are, in fact, generally opposed to mimesis understood as a structure predicated on a theater of representation that rests on the logic of the self-same. Less known is that these two are also willing to follow the trajectory of a minor conception of mimesis (or imitation) that is of immanent, vitalist, and liberating inspiration for it is predicated on the differentiating movement of repetition and difference constitutive of *homo mimeticus*.

Deleuze and Guattari may celebrate desire in their anti-Oedipal theory, but that does not mean that they are oblivious to the affirmative powers of mimesis in immanent social practices. On the contrary, drawing upon Gabriel Tarde's *The Laws of Imitation*, for instance, they focus on what they call molecular flows of "micro-imitation" that are constitutive of their productive, yet still mimetic conception of the unconscious. As they write, "In homage to Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904):"

Tarde countered that collective representations presuppose exactly what needs explaining, namely, “the similarity of millions of people.” [And they add...] a micro-imitation does seem to occur between two individuals. But at the same time, and at a deeper level, it has to do not with an individual but with a flow or a wave. *Imitation is the propagation of a flow...* (Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari 2004, 240–1)⁶

Even for Deleuze and Guattari, then—or especially for them—mimesis is not structurally opposed to desire, if only because affective processes of micro-imitation already flow between linguistic structural oppositions. Rather than unilaterally opposing a dominant conception of mimesis for its oppressive structure, a genealogy of *homo mimeticus* that goes, via Tarde, Bataille, Nietzsche, and other modernist theories of mimesis, back to the ancients, calls attention to the Dionysian, intoxicating, and rather contagious powers of minor mimesis in its Janus-faced, protean manifestations (Lawtoo 2023a). Thus reframed, Deleuze and Guattari belong to this emerging tradition of minor mimesis constitutive of the mimetic turn, or re-turn in continental philosophy, literary theory, posthuman studies, film studies, and political theory. Be it under the rubric of “micro-imitation” or “simulacra,” “affective contagion” or the “powers of the false,” their work channels molecular flows of micro-imitation that are not predicated on the logic of representation (the Same). Rather, these mimetic flows possess an immanent power to generate movements of repetition and difference, attraction and repulsion, pathos and distance. They are constitutive of the concept of the mimetic unconscious, and are currently revitalizing the heterogeneous landscape of mimetic studies, and are also generating a mimetic turn within posthuman studies, as well.

In the end then, as Plotnitsky convincingly suggests, the potential of AI to approximate human thinking and consciousness via the traditional logic of mimetic representation remains highly questionable, if not philosophically suspect, for it rests on the simple idealist logic of adequation that was already transgressed by what Bataille called “inner experience.” And yet, this does not mean that AI will not continue to be part of our “accursed share.” As the powers of algorithmic-based simulations will continue to form, transform, and deform a highly plastic posthuman subject, *homo mimeticus* will remain increasingly caught in the hypermimetic processes of becoming other, one that operates in both oppressive and liberating ways. The contagious powers of increasingly effective simulacra may thus be hyperreal and no longer based on the logic of representation, yet they will continue to generate material, embodied, and highly contagious hypermimetic effects. How? Via increasingly effective spiraling feedback loops that, as a growing number of scholars is beginning to recognize, increasingly blur the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, imitation and simulation, inner experience, and digital experience, generating hypermimetic processes of becoming other with both pathological and patho-logical potential.

While the future of *homo mimeticus* remains highly uncertain, perhaps one certainty remains: be prepared. There will be posthuman transformations for you to reevaluate mimetic theorists of the future!

