

The philosophy of imitation in focus



We might not notice it, but a lot of human behaviour is acquired through imitation: from language, to cultural habits, to aesthetic and political tastes. This human propensity to imitate is central to the arts but also shapes subjectivity, culture and politics, as **Dr Nidesh Lawtoo**, Principal Investigator of the ERC-funded project, *Homo Mimeticus* (HOM), explains.

The concept of 'mimesis' emerged at the dawn of philosophy with Plato and Aristotle, yet it escapes unitary definitions. "The dominant tendency has been to translate it in terms of visual or aesthetic representation," says Dr. Lawtoo. "So, for example, we can think of a realist painting or novel or a photograph that represents or copies reality, as a mirror does. However, there is much more to say about the human tendency to imitate, mimic and identify with others."

Based at the University of Leuven in Belgium, Dr. Lawtoo and his team in the HOM project are working to explore the contemporary relevance of mimesis thanks to funding from the European Research Council. This work brings together researchers from disciplines as diverse as philosophy, literary theory, musicology and film studies, as Dr. Lawtoo and his colleagues aim to study *Homo mimeticus* from multiple perspectives.

Mimesis

The HOM project shifts thinking about the concept of mimesis toward more embodied,

HOM

Homo Mimeticus: Theory and Criticism

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement n°716181)

Nidesh Lawtoo, Assistant Professor
Institute of Philosophy / Faculty of Arts
KU Leuven, Kardinaal Mercierplein 2-box 3200
3000 Leuven, Belgium
E: nidesh.lawtoo@kuleuven.be
W: <http://www.homomimeticus.eu/>
T: https://twitter.com/HOM_Project?lang=en
F: <https://www.facebook.com/HOMprojectERC/>



Nidesh Lawtoo is currently Assistant Professor of Philosophy and English at KU Leuven and adjunct director of the MDRN research center. Prior to joining KU Leuven, he held positions at the University of Lausanne, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Bern. He is the author of *The Phantom of the Ego* (2013), *Conrad's Shadow* (2016), and *(New) Fascism* (2019).



KU LEUVEN



erc
European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

performative, and behavioural forms of imitation. "The models that surround us, be they real or fictional, true or simulated, good or bad, have formative and performative effects that inform what we think, how we act, and ultimately transform who we are. This is not only a scholarly problem; it's an all too human problem that the humanities should urgently address," says Dr Lawtoo.

Crowd behaviour offers a clear example of the urgent political implications of imitation. A leader's slogan can be repeated by a crowd of supporters, indicating that a form of imitation or reproduction is taking place. But Dr. Lawtoo adds that "the power of mimesis goes much deeper – it's not simply the slogan that is

The models that surround us, be they real or fictional, true or simulated, good or bad, have **formative**, and **performative** effects that inform what we think, how we act, and ultimately, transform who we are. This is not only a scholarly problem; it's an all too human problem.

reproduced; it's the idea behind it and the emotions it expresses – from fear to anger – that spread contagiously." New media like Twitter and Facebook play a key role in generating phenomena of mimetic contagion, something Lawtoo addresses in *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community Myth* (Michigan State UP, 2019).

But the focus of the project is not only political. This diagnostic of *Homo mimeticus* has deep philosophical implications, for it invites academics and citizens to reassess the ideal that we are primarily rational creatures, or *Homo sapiens*. "As humans we have knowledge, reasoning and rationality, for sure, but we should not forget that we are also irrational, embodied and emotionally volatile creatures," Dr. Lawtoo stresses.

This is again an ancient philosophical lesson, but each generation has to rethink the problem in the light of contemporary challenges. The proliferation of violence via (new) media like film, the Internet and computer games, for instance, calls for new diagnostic investigations that revisit the ancient debate between katharsis and contagion in a contemporary key.

Alongside looking at the political and philosophical implications of imitation, HOM team members also pay attention to forms of affective participation in the theatre (Niki Hadikoesoemo), opera (Dr. Daniel Villegas Velez) and film (Dr. Lawtoo). "The arts have a lot to teach us about imitation," says Dr. Lawtoo. "And since mimesis manifests itself via different aesthetic media, within the HOM team we adopt a trans-disciplinary approach," a method in line with both the ERC mission and KU Leuven's promotion of cross-disciplinary collaborations to address contemporary problems that do not fit within neat disciplinary boundaries.

By considering different perspectives on mimesis, Nidesh Lawtoo and his team members

contribute to the contemporary revival of interest in mimetic behaviour with a series of articles and monographs on topics that go from (new) fascism to violence, (neo)baroque opera to theatricality, mirror neurons to science fiction films, available at www.homomimeticus.eu. To make research on mimesis accessible to a broader public, the project has also started a series of video-interviews with influential international thinkers on mimesis, in fields like political theory, literary theory, anthropology, and philosophy, among others. (see https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJQy0qCxP4QImG2YWqpw?view_as=subscriber)

Humans imitate in different ways, consciously and unconsciously, actively and passively, and the effects can be good and bad. Dr Lawtoo and his team are building on a long tradition in philosophy and the arts to sketch a double-faced picture. "It's a question of discerning between different forms of mimesis and developing what I call a diagnostic or genealogical approach. In the way that a doctor cures the body, philosophers and critics can help diagnose the good and bad forms of imitation that we see massively at play today," he says.

