

The Human Chameleon: *Zelig*, Nietzsche and the Banality of Evil

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Abstract:

This article revisits the case of Woody Allen's mockumentary *Zelig* (1983) via Friedrich Nietzsche's diagnostic of mimicry in *The Gay Science*. It argues that the case of the "human chameleon" remains contemporary for both philosophical and political reasons. On the philosophical side, I argue that the case of *Zelig* challenges an autonomous conception of the subject based on rational self-sufficiency (or *Homo Sapiens*) by proposing a relational conception of the subject open to mimetic influences (or *homo mimeticus*) that will have to await the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s in order to find an empirical confirmation. On the political side, I say that *Zelig* foregrounds the power of authoritarian leaders in the 1930s to cast a spell on both imitative crowds and publics in terms that provide a mimetic supplement to Hannah Arendt's account of the "banality of evil". The philosophical purchase of *Zelig's* cinematic dramatization of a mimetic subject is that it reveals how the "inability to think" (Hannah Arendt) characteristic of the case of Eichmann rests on unnoticed affective principles constitutive of the all-too-human penchant for "mimicry" (Nietzsche) the film dramatises. Thus reframed, the human chameleon reflects (on) the dangers of mimetic dispossessions that reached massive proportions in the past century and continue to cast a shadow on the present century.

Keywords: Woody Allen; Hannah Arendt; mimicry; Friedrich Nietzsche; hypnosis; crowd behavior; fascism.

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Zelig and the Banality of Evil

Almost all Europeans confound themselves with their role;
they become the victims of their own “good performance”.

–Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

EUDORA: Who are you?

ZELIG: What do you mean who am I? These are tough
questions.

–Woody Allen, *Zelig*

I did not know whether I was meeting the same man.
So terrible was the change...

–Witness in Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

The ancient lesson that humans are mimetic creatures is currently returning to the forefront of the critical, theoretical and philosophical scene. The number of recent books that stress the centrality of affective contagion, involuntary mimicry, psychic influences, mimetic desire, mirroring reflexes, and other contemporary manifestations of what the ancients called, enigmatically, *mimēsis*, testifies to the liveliness, timeliness, and relevance of emerging perspectives on imitation that are currently generating a mimetic turn, or *re*-turn of mimesis in critical theory. Often located at the crossroads where philosophy and aesthetics meet and reflect (on) each other, film provides a particularly revealing medium to account for the mirroring powers of mimesis.

Furthering this return of attention to the affective powers of mimesis, I revisit the case of the “human chameleon” dramatized in *Zelig* (Woody Allen, 1983) in order to diagnose psychic dispossessions of identity that reached massive proportions in the past century and continue to cast a shadow on the present century. Drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche’s genealogy of the mimetic actor in *The Gay Science*, I argue that the case of *Zelig* remains relevant today for reasons that are as individual and psychological as they are collective and philosophical. On the individual side, *Zelig* dramatises unconscious mirroring tendencies to adapt, conform, and mirror others in terms that might be amplified by social disadvantage and oppression as Nietzsche also notes, yet cannot be restricted to ethnic minorities in the melting pot of the 1920s alone – if only because *Zelig*’s reflex to mirror other people found an empirical confirmation in the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s. On the collective side, *Zelig* provides a diagnostic mirror that reflects a picture of a human chameleon that is not narrowly realistic yet provides an illuminating case study to reflect *on* the psychic, political, and, ultimately, philosophical implications of hypnotic dispossessions of

identity that deprive subjects of the ability to think in terms characteristic of what Hannah Arendt called the “banality of evil” (Arendt, 2006).

My overarching claim is that both at the individual and collective level, *Zelig* confirms Nietzsche’s thesis that a human, all too human drive for mimicry troubles the boundaries of individuation in more fundamental ways than dominant philosophical conceptions of the autonomous, volitional, and intentional conceptions of the subject of *Aufklärung* (or *Homo Sapiens*) suggest. What *Zelig* proposes instead is a porous, relational, and fundamentally mimetic conception of subjectivity (or *homo mimeticus*) that is currently regaining traction in continental philosophy (Hurley & Chater, 2005; Lawtoo 2013), political and social theory (Borch 2019, Lawtoo 2021), and film theory (Gallese and Guerra 2019). I develop my argument in three related steps: first, I pay close attention to the theoretical implications of *Zelig*’s cinematic aesthetics, which frames – via prominent Jewish intellectuals – the case of *Zelig* in the cultural milieu of the 1920s in ways that blur the line between fiction and history; second, I broaden the focus beyond Jewish identity via a comparative analysis with Nietzsche’s philosophical diagnostic of the mimetic actor in *The Gay Science* to show how mimesis blurs ontological binaries that divide self and others, being oneself and becoming other, human figure and social background, human and nonhuman mimicry, nature and culture, while also revealing the mimetic foundations of moral distinctions like “good” and “evil”. And third, I suggest that the psychology of conformism in *Zelig* opens up a conception of the mimetic unconscious based on mirroring hypnotic reflexes as a *via regia* that remains contemporary because it reveals how mimesis is constitutive of the “banality of evil,” as Hannah Arendt defined it in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Although the connection between the case of *Zelig* and the case of Eichmann, a comic fictional case and a horrifying historical case might initially surprise and should be treated carefully, these cases are not deprived of disconcerting mirroring effects. If Arendt controversially claimed that “Eichmann constitutes a veritable gold mine for a psychologist – provided he is wise enough to understand that the horrible can be not only ludicrous but outright funny” (2006, p. 48), I argue that the reverse is equally true: namely, that *Zelig* constitutes a goldmine for a psychologist provided she considers that what is outright funny can help us seriously reflect on transformations of personality whose political effects can be truly horrifying.

Reframed in the philosophical company of both Nietzsche and Arendt, the cinematic case of *Zelig* turns out to be more forward oriented than previously realised. It urges critics and philosophers to look back to

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mimetic drives to conform to totalitarian leaders that were becoming visible in the 1920s and 30s and generated massive dispossessions of identity that culminated in Nazi horrors. In the process it also provides a critical diagnostic of the unconscious power of mimesis that can be put to work *contra* new fascist pathologies that continue to cast a spell on the present century.

The Case of *Zelig*: Reframing the Chameleon

Woody Allen's *Zelig* is located at the juncture where fiction and history, comedy and tragedy, personal mimetic pathologies and collective political pathologies not only face and mirror each other, but also reflect on one another. A mockumentary that relies on archival footage from the 1920s and 1930s to dramatise a fictional Jewish character without proper identity who suffers from a pathological tendency to "metamorphose," chameleon-like, into any type of person he is facing, the case of *Zelig* blurs the boundaries between past and present, fiction and reality, comedy and drama, historical truth and fictional lies, being oneself and appearing as someone else, along mimetic lines that *in-form* (give form to) both the medium and the message of the film – "beginning, middle and end," as Aristotle already stipulated at the dawn of aesthetics urging critics to pay attention to the philosophical implications of aesthetic form (Aristotle, 1987, p. 39).

At the level of the medium, *Zelig* opens with a series of mock interviews that frame the film from the perspective of the 1980s in which prominent (Jewish) public intellectuals representing fields as diverse as cultural studies (Susan Sontag), literary criticism (Irving Howe), creative writing (Saul Bellow), and psychology (Bruno Bettelheim) reflect on the fictional case of *Zelig* in an academic language that is intended to sound realistic. Obviously meant to lend historical credibility to the "bizarre" story of Leonard *Zelig*, these framing interviews reinforce the viewers' suspension of disbelief already induced by the mockumentary genre (see Nas, 1992, p. 99).

Less obvious is that the mocking side of this genre introduces a more subtle, not simply realistic, but not less mimetic principle: namely, that by playing their "real" professional roles (cultural critic, writer, historian, psychologist) to introduce a "fictional" character, these public intellectuals call attention to the performative dimension of public personalities (from Latin, *persona*, theatrical mask) not only on the side of fiction but also on the side of reality. Their cinematic performance, in other words, foregrounds that the case of *Zelig* might not be realistic in its representation as a historical character, yet it reflects mimetic principles that can be at play historically, nonetheless.

This second mimetic lesson is confirmed within the diegesis as we are first introduced to the case of Zelig “himself,” played by Woody Allen. This nondescript figure is framed against the background of documentary footage that reflects an entire decade of U.S. culture, mostly condensed in New York City and heterogeneous enough to include iconic historical events (Lindenberg’s first transatlantic flight), creative writers that narrated the 1920s (F. Scott Fitzgerald), emerging fashions in the arts, from music (Jazz) to dance (Charleston), not to speak of the power of mass media to shape public opinion, from traditional (print) media to “new” media (radio, cinema). There is thus a larger background that shapes the case of the human chameleon in the foreground, a cultural and historical background that reflects wider ideological and political battles at play both in the U.S. and in Europe, which pit capitalism contra communism, egalitarianism contra racism, stretching to include ominous references to the Ku Klux Klan in the U.S. and Nazism in Europe. *Zelig*, then, documents a historical reality in a mocking genre that makes us laugh; and yet, the comic figure in the (fictional) foreground also encourages viewers to reflect critically on the tragic political events in the (historical) background that form and transform him. In the process, it reveals an all-too-human tendency to unconsciously mimic others, which is pushed to pathological extremes in the case of Zelig. In short, the frame already makes us see that the case study in the foreground may be fictional, personal, and comic; yet the mimetic powers he dramatises cannot be disconnected from the historical footage in the background, which is real, collective, and goes beyond comic principles.

This Janus-faced point internal to the medium is subsequently reflected and redoubled at the level of the film’s message. All the framing intellectuals tend to agree that viewers should not consider Zelig simply as an individual case study – though the newspapers later claim he suffers from a “unique mental disorder;” nor is it solely a story rooted in Jewish drives toward assimilation predominant in the US melting pot of the 1920s – though Zelig certainly “reflected a lot of the Jewish experience in America” and existentialist readings of *Zelig* attentive to the issue of the authenticity of Jewish identity already exist (see Charmé, 1998). At the same time, while representing a specific psychological/cultural/ethnic case, we are also told that his story is broader in scope. Thus, he is initially introduced as “the phenomenon of the 1920s” (Sontag) that “reflected the nature of our civilization,” as well as the “character of our time” (Howe). Defined by Bettelheim as “the ultimate conformist,” the case of Zelig is thus a psychological case that urges viewers to reflect critically on larger social, cultural, and political

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Figure 1. Zelig becoming Chinese.

tendencies to conform, thereby “touch[ing] a nerve in people, perhaps in a way in which they preferred not to be touched” (Bellow).

That the critical stakes of *Zelig* cannot be dissociated from the politics foregrounded at the end is immediately confirmed at the beginning. Initially noticed at a party held by socialites in Long Island, Zelig catches the attention of Scott Fitzgerald who, from within the diegesis, doubles the initial frames by tying Zelig’s mimetic tendency to both class and politics. Fitzgerald, in fact, notes in his diary that he first hears Zelig speak “adoringly of Coolidge and of the Republican party with an upper-class Boston accent”; and then the voice-over continues, in an ominous tone: “An hour later, I was stunned to see the same man speaking with the kitchen help. Now he claimed to be a Democrat and his accent seemed coarse, as if he were one of the crowd”. This “first small notice” of Zelig, then, suggests that the politics in the background informs the mimetic transformations in the foreground.

To diagnose the case of Zelig, politics must first be framed within questions of *identity* politics whereby class/social disadvantage is doubled by ethnic/racial disadvantage. The Jewish protagonist is, in fact, endowed with the disconcerting capacity to cut across differences that are not only cultural or ethnic but have racial and physiological overtones. His defining characteristic is that he can literally assume the phenotypical features of African Americans, Native Americans, but also Irish, Mexican, and Asian Americans in ways that manifest a mimetic drive towards assimilation characteristics of the 1920s – a view echoed by the framing interviews and, at one remove, by film critics as well (see Johnston, 2007, pp. 209–306; Stratton, 2001, p. 152–154). Such cultural

perspectives rightly stress that Zelig's protean transformation are metaphorical of the pressure for Jews in particular and ethnic minorities more generally to assimilate during this period. They also underscore the performative dimension of identity formation that is reflected in the play of "citationality," "intertextuality" and "iteration", a "discursive form of chameleonism" (Johnston, 2007, p. 300) that deconstructs binary oppositions (copy/origin, appearance/being, truth/lies) in terms characteristic of a "poststructuralist mimesis" (Nas, 1992, p. 95) that lends cultural specificity to the transformations *Zelig* represents. The case of the human chameleon not only reflects concerns with identity politics that were center stage in the 1980s; at one remove, it also mirrors philosophical methods of interpretation that culminated in this period – an indication that criticism might not be completely immune to the mimetic phenomenon it reflects on.

No matter how important these evaluations were in the past century, mimesis in *Zelig* operates as a chameleon phenomenon that does not remain confined to the sphere of cultural representation; nor is solely metaphorical of ethnic assimilation – though it is both. *Zelig* dramatises above all a literal, embodied, perhaps even realistic mimetic drive that operates on a multiplicity of different, yet related planes. First, the film stages a professional actor (Allen) who plays the role of "the son of a Yiddish actor" and dramatises the powers of mimesis to generate mirroring mechanisms that may have interior, psychological explanations, but above all display external, physiological manifestations; second, this mimetic drive concerns the protagonist in the foreground, but also seems to cast light on the masses that are often in the background; third, *Zelig* is representative of what appears to be a positive U.S. cultural phenomenon (assimilation), but he also moves back and forth between the U.S. and Europe, thereby including disquieting political phenomena (KKK, Nazism); and fourth, *Zelig* roots the protean transformations – in terms of race, ethnicity, class, profession, appearance, nationality, and politics – in a mirroring physiological drive that concerns simultaneously all of these different, yet mimetically related levels.

Despite the cultural differences at play in *Zelig*'s comic metamorphoses, what they have in common is that they ultimately find in the figure of the actor (*mimēsis*, from *mimos*, actor or performance) (Gebauer & Wulf, 1995, pp. 27–36) their common denominator, a protean figure that makes these mirroring transformations possible in the first place. Hence the need to come to a better understanding of the dramatic origins of *Zelig*'s chameleon drive via a philosopher who diagnosed mimetic drives.



Figure 2. Zelig's protean transformations.

The Case of the Actor: Nietzsche with/contra Zelig

Given the critical frame internal to the film, the choice to reframe the case of *Zelig* via Friedrich Nietzsche might surprise. Not only because Nietzsche is a nineteenth-century German philosopher with a tragic sensibility, while Allen is a twentieth-century Jewish and comic filmmaker qua actor; but also because the name of Nietzsche is still tied to fascist and Nazi stereotypes *Zelig* ironically critiques. If we then recall that Nietzsche's philosophical categories privilege a set of dichotomies that posit masters contra slaves, activity contra passivity, the original individual contra the mimetic herd, then we have ample reasons for staging an argument in which the case of Zelig could be read *contra* Nietzsche – a tendency reinforced by a Nietzsche's own preferences for agonistic titles.

And yet, at a closer look, the binary dividing the philosopher and the cinematic actor might not be as stable as it appears to be, for at least two reasons. First, Nietzsche should not be quickly conflated with the anti-Semitism and German nationalism he repeatedly condemns in his writing as pathological, contra his anti-Semitic sister – as Nietzsche scholars with a Jewish background have made strikingly clear (Golomb & Wistrich, 2002). And contra Wagner, Nietzsche goes as far as diagnosing the power of the authoritarian “leader” (*Führer*) to cast a hypnotic spell over the “masses” (*Massen*) (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 167) in terms we will see reenacted in *Zelig* as well. Second, Nietzsche establishes a specific genealogical connection between the mimetic figure of the actor and the mimetic instinct he sees at play in working-class and Jewish subjects in

terms that are not simply pathological but patho-logical in the sense that he provides an account (*logos*) on mimetic affect (*pathos*) that can productively be aligned with the case Zelig. Either way, Nietzsche's reflections on the actor in general, and, more problematically, on Jewish identity in particular, lend philosophical substance to the mimetic case at hand in diagnostic terms that cut both with and contra Zelig. Let us consider both sides.

In a famous section of *The Gay Science* titled, "On the Problem of the Actor," Nietzsche offers an account of mimicry that resonates strikingly with Zelig. Nietzsche's diagnostic is predicated on a genealogical connection that ties the case of the actor to a mimetic drive shared among the lower classes, women, and Jews – chameleon figures who, in his view, reveal a human penchant for "all kinds of adaptations" that "in the case of animals is called mimicry" (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 316). Derogatory in tone and critical of these figures' lack of authentic individuality, Nietzsche writes that the lower classes "turn their coat with every wind and thus virtually...become a coat" (1974, p. 316), indicating a tendency to let external roles (the "coat" being metonymic of a professional identity) shape inner character. Similarly, and even more problematically, in the same aphorism Nietzsche speaks of the latter as "the people who possess the art of adaptability [*Anpassungskunst*] par excellence," which, in his view, hinges on what he calls "histrionic gifts" (1974, p. 316). Hence, Nietzsche ironically asks: "what good actor today is not – a Jew?" And leaving women last, Nietzsche wonders whether they are not "above all else, actresses?" The ironic, misogynistic, and sexist diagnostic immediately follows: "Listen to physicians who hypnotized women" (1974, p. 317). These are embarrassing moments in the philosopher's corpus for a number of obvious reasons: first, this evaluation is part of widespread ethnocentric and phallogocentric tendencies dominant in fin-de-siècle Europe to project mimetic behaviour on the side of racial and gendered minorities (ethical reasons); second, the language of "instinct" coupled with the reference to "animal mimicry" to define human behaviour indicates an essentialist bias that appears to be derivative of social Darwinism and the racism that informs it (ideological reasons); and third, the aggressive tonality directed contra the actor in a philosopher who consistently sides with dramatic and mimetic principles at play in what he calls Dionysian "imitation" reveals a fundamental aporia in Nietzsche's thought. As Nietzsche scholars noted, this contradiction reveals a confessional tendency in which the mimetic pathologies the philosopher "excoriates" on the outside, are actually constitutive of the case of Nietzsche himself

(philosophical reasons) (see Staten 1999, pp. 108–122; Lawtoo 2013, pp. 1–83).

This pathological evaluation of mimesis is real, well-attested, and should be taken seriously. At the same time, it should not mask a less-visible pathological perspective on mimetic behaviour that casts new light on chameleon tendencies that may be most visible in minorities, but is ultimately human, all too human. If we situate Nietzsche's diagnostic of mimicry in its proper philosophical context, it is in fact clear that he is not only denouncing the working class, Jews, and women for their mimetic tendencies as pathological – though he does that too; he also develops a complex pathological argument that frames his diagnostic within a larger theatrical problematic of “dramatic mimesis” (Parkes, 1994, p. 63) that originates in *The Birth of Tragedy*, concerns the relation between identity formation, acting, and mimesis that traverses his entire corpus, and finds a condensed expression in the aphorism of *The Gay Science* under consideration. As the title suggests, it is in fact from the dramatic point of view of the actor (or *mimos*), more than from the biological one of instinct that Nietzsche approaches the joint problematic of the mimetic instinct. As he puts it in his opening statement: “The problem of the actor has troubled me for the longest time” (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 316). Why? Because the actor manifests “an excess of the capacity for all kinds of adaptations” and “inner craving for a role and mask” (1974, p. 316) at play in modern social life.

Thus reframed, Nietzsche's diagnostic is more subtle than it appears to be. For him, in fact, it is not a primary biological “instinct [*Instinkt*]” for adaptation essentially tied to the working class, the Jews and women that drives their mimetic behaviour, as the term “instinct” misleadingly suggests. It is rather social disadvantage, cultural oppression, and material dependency characteristics of social groups which, as Nietzsche specifies, “had to survive under changing pressures and coercions” (1974, p. 316) that forces these (and by extension other) minorities to adapt, chameleon-like, to the dominant culture on which they depend for their survival. This also means that Nietzsche unmasks the mimetic instinct dramatized by minorities as an *effect* rather than a *cause* of cultural adaptation. The difference is key. It overturns an apparently essentialist argument grounded in nature or biology into a constructivist diagnostic grounded in second nature or culture in terms that ultimately go beyond the nature/culture opposition.

Nietzsche articulates a genealogy of the origins of mimetic instinct via the specific case of the working class, which frames the other cases he

discusses (Jews, women, actors), and this can shed light on *Zelig* as well. As he puts it:

Such an instinct will have developed most easily in families of the lower classes who had to survive under changing pressures and coercions [*Druck und Zwang*], in deep dependency, who had to cut their coat according to the cloth, always adapting themselves again to new circumstances, who always had to change their mien and posture, until they learned gradually to turn their coat [*Mantel*] with every wind and thus virtually to become a coat-and masters of the incorporated and inveterate [*eingefleischten*] art of eternally playing hide-and-seek, which in the case of animals is called *mimicry* (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 316)

For Nietzsche, then, “changing pressures,” “coercions,” and “dependency” among constituencies deprived of power trigger a socially induced tendency to mimetically *con*-form, chameleon-like, to dominant backgrounds, which in turn, *in-form* subjectivity from the outside-in. Thus, an exterior and contingent form (a coat) initially meant to project a social identity to the outside has the power to retroact on the subject, press in from the outside into the soul, body, and flesh, and take possession of an identity from the inside – a subject becoming a coat.

The detour via Nietzsche urges us to consider *Zelig*’s chameleon tendencies literally by rooting them in animal mimicry, but it also makes us wonder: if this process of mimetic adaptation that dispossesses the ego of its proper identity is first and foremost determined by *social* factors, why does Nietzsche insist on calling it an instinct, rooting it in nature rather than culture? While the terms sound indicative of essentialist mimetic pathologies that still plagued the past century, they may actually pave the way for recent empirical developments in the neurosciences that open an alternative door to the unconscious in the present century – a mimetic unconscious that accounts for *Zelig*’s mirroring transformations.

A Mirroring Case: From Hypnosis to Mirror Neurons

When it comes to offering a medical diagnostic of the origin of *Zelig*’s mimetic pathology, the doctors within the diegesis open up a variety of different hypotheses that are comic in their antagonistic possibilities. We are in fact told that “no two [doctors] can agree on a diagnosis”: from a physiological disorder “glandular in nature” to a fear of contagion that is cultural in orientation and was “picked up from eating Mexican food,” from a “neurological” account of a “brain tumor” to a “poor alignment of the vertebrae”, the diagnostics within the film mirror the scientists’ own cultural, disciplinary, and “scientific” prejudices, stretching to ironically reflect their pathologies as well.

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Figure 3. The patient and the doctors.

Thus, in a mirroring inversion of perspective, one of the doctors who diagnosed a “brain tumor” falls victim of the sickness he had unconsciously projected onto the mimetic case – an indication that supports the female doctor in the background, Dr. Eudora Fletcher (Mia Farrow) who, *contra* the patriarchal orthodoxy, suggests that Zelig might not be suffering from “a physiological disorder but from a psychological one”, thereby opening a psychological door to his mimetic unconscious.

Given Woody Allen’s well-known predilection for Oedipal scenarios and sexual drives shadowed by death drives, we could expect that psychoanalysis would provide the key to unlocking the door of Zelig’s psychic life. This suspicion is initially suggested by direct allusions to traumatic childhood experiences (beatings) and is subsequently reinforced by Zelig’s explicit references to Freudian concepts (“penis envy”).¹ Such interpretations emerge as Zelig ironically mimics the posture, identity, and jargon of psychiatrists within the film. An indication that the patient playing the role of the doctor conforms to diagnostic scripts that were beginning to spread in the 1920s, and had become

1 Given the film’s release in the 1980s, psychoanalytical approaches to the film were initially informed by structuralist/linguistic recuperations of Freud, most notably Lacan’s, psychic “*méconnaissance*” responsible for the “dissolution of personality” (Feldstein, 1985, pp. 155–160). For an alternative genealogy of the chameleon symptoms Zelig manifests, which is also a source of inspiration for Lacan’s “mirror stage” and furthers Nietzsche’s connection between human and animal mimicry we are pursuing, see Caillois, 1984.



Figure 4. “I am a doctor”.

dominant in the 1980s – stretching to inform mainstream Hollywood clinical expectations as well.

Yet, in a comic film about mirror games, ironies can be double and may not be deprived of diagnostic insights that cut both ways. It is, in fact, not only Zelig’s histrionics as a patient qua psychoanalyst that is the subject of irony; in a mirroring inversion, the irony also turns against the psychoanalytical theory the patient appears to mimic. What the therapeutic scene suggests, in fact, is that a dominant theory of the psyche can lead patients to mimetically adopt and conform to the dominant diagnostic categories – perhaps even perform the symptoms the theory expects (see Borch-Jacobsen, 2009, pp. 173–182).

Rather than mapping pathological diagnostics on the human chameleon from the outside-in, let us thus continue to treat *Zelig* as a cinematic/philosophical case study that allows us to theorize mimesis as a normal human condition from the inside-out. This entails listening to the young female doctor, Dr. Fletcher who, contra the medical orthodoxy tries a “new approach”: namely, hypnosis. A pre-psychoanalytical method initially used by Freud with his first case (Anna O.) and later rejected in order to develop the interpretative method based on the talking cure, hypnosis was far from new in the 1920s: Its golden age, as historians of psychology notice, was the 1880s, when it served as the “via regia to the unconscious” (Ellenberger, 1994, p. 111). This unconscious has important “philosophical *physician[s]*” (Nietzsche, 1974, p.35) as main advocates. Nietzsche, we have seen, finds a confirmation of the human tendency to imitate in “physicians” who “hypnotized” women (1974, p. 317) – a clear allusion to the French physician Jean-Martin’s Charcot.

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Figure 5. Hypnotic trance.

Zelig has been rightly critiqued for its exclusion of women as models for the protagonist's mimetic transformations (Stam & Shohat, 1987, p. 185); at one remove, sexual scandals have also cast a shadow on Allen in real life. Within the film's diagnostic, it is however worth noticing that the plot subverts gender power relations by inverting the stereotype of the hysteric woman in the hands of male doctors – a suggestion indicating that Zelig's mimetic patho-logy cuts across the gender divide, cannot be contained within patriarchal binaries, and has logical subversive potential, as we shall confirm.

After a series of hypnotic failures that only accentuate Zelig's mirroring tendencies to play the role of the doctor, Dr. Fletcher hits on the mimetic idea of doubling the mirror game. Thus, she uses a mimetic lie to reveal a mimetic truth as she admits that she is not a doctor but only pretends to be one, thereby finding in Zelig's mimetic sickness (or pathology) a clue to develop a therapy (or patho-logy). This mirror game, in fact, puts Zelig in a double bind in which he is led to mirror his "true" self – that is, the "liar" that he actually is revealing the truth about himself, namely that there is "nothing" or "nobody" behind the mask. At a loss with himself he falls into a state of trance (from Latin, *transire*, to pass) in which he is not consciously present to "himself," and is thus, paradoxically most "himself".

Under hypnosis (*hypnos*, sleep), Zelig not only confesses the root of his mimetic drive at the level of the message, but also renders manifest – via the medium of trance – the root of the unconscious mimicry that plagues him in his waking life. If Nietzsche had rooted human mimicry in "prudence" (1982, p. 27) on the side of the message, Zelig confirms

that he mirrors others because “it’s safe to be like the others”; and again, like Nietzsche, this prudence is rooted in mimetic instincts Dr. Fletcher traces back to the animal mimicry. Dubbing Zelig “the human chameleon,” the female psychologist develops the following mimetic hypothesis: namely, that as the lizard “blends in with its immediate surrounding” in order to protect itself, “Zelig protects himself by becoming whoever he is around”. In this specific diagnostic sense, then, his mimetic pathology is restricted to a specific psychological and cultural case.

And yet, what the film *Zelig* also shows is that the human chameleon reveals latent mirroring tendencies that are, to a degree, “normal,” and might be at play amongst all humans – which leads me to the hypnotic medium in question. Under hypnosis, *Zelig* foregrounds a paradoxical state of consciousness characteristic of a somnambulistic trance in which the protagonist is both himself and not himself, conscious of his identity, which is not one, and suggestible to others, which makes him more than one. This Janus-faced state can be dissociated as follows. On the one hand, it is during the hypnotic trance that Zelig is most “himself“. Thus, he unashamedly confesses his fears, desires, affects, and says what he really thinks at the level of his speech, going as far as revealing his waking personality to be an empty “coat,” as Nietzsche would say, with nobody inside – “I am nobody, I am nothing,” he says when asked who he is. On the other hand, it is during this state of hypnotic dispossession, his arm lifted at the injunction of the doctor, that we see how an unconscious mimetic reflex can be triggered by an external order that is not only perceived but experienced as one’s own: ordered to lift his arm, he unconsciously lifts it, as if by reflex. This mimetic docility that leads the hypnotised patient to follow orders sets up a mirror to the psychic condition of dispossession characteristic of Zelig’s waking state in which he also unconsciously conforms to the expectations of others, involuntarily mimicking not only gestures, but also expressions, accents, opinions, professions, and ultimately thoughts and actions, so as to *become* other. In short, while Zelig’s language reveals his true self, the spell of the medium reveals that his daily life is actually lived, experienced, in a quasi-somnambulistic trance – something the film within the film, titled “The Changing Man” describes, at one additional fictional remove, as a “zombie-like” stare.

But Zelig is not the only person vulnerable to hypnotic suggestions. Drawing on an established connection between cinema and hypnosis characteristics of classics of the 1920s like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), *Zelig* directs the power of hypnosis outside to make viewers not only see but actually feel this mimetic power on our nerves via

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Figure 6. Hypnotizing spectators.

a visual medium that transgresses the fiction/reality opposition and affects spectators as well.

Who is the subject that is placed under hypnosis here? Not only is our subject position conflated with the subject in question (formal reasons), but we are also subjected to the same hypnotic influence that breaks the fourth wall and – if we fix our gaze on that spiraling point – can induce a light psychic trance. This formal choice is not accidental. We are in fact given to feel that cinema is a medium that is mimetic not only in the visual sense that it represents images we can safely contemplate from an aesthetic distance; it is also mimetic in the affective sense that it has the power to induce what Edgar Morin calls an “imitation-hypnotic state” (Morin, 2005, p. 96).

On the shoulders of a tradition of the unconscious that had hypnosis, perhaps more than dreams, as a *via regia*, Dr. Fletcher paves the way for a scientific discovery that accounts for her subject’s tendency to mirror others in the first place. Though we shall be careful not to mimic doctors within the film and call it “the scientific medical phenomenon of the age”, doctors in real life have not hesitated to call this mirroring reflex “the single most important ‘unreported’ (or at least unpublicized) story of the decade” (Ramachandran, 2000; see also 2011, pp. 117–135). In the mid-1990s, a team of Italian neuroscientists discovered a new set of motor neurons they called mirror neurons, for their role in generating mirroring reflexes. Mirror neurons are neurons responsible for movement that are activated (or “fire”) not only as the subject moves but as they see someone else move, generating an identification that blurs the line between self and other. As one of the discoverers describes this mirror

mechanism: “the human brain is also endowed with a mechanism that directly maps the observed actions of others on the same neurons controlling their execution in the observer’s brain” (Gallese, 2017, p. 28). The case of *Zelig* helps us see that this discovery is actually a *re*-discovery of a hypnotic-mirroring-mimetic principle that was still well-known by pre-Freudian philosophers attentive to unconscious mimicry like Nietzsche: namely, that humans seem wired for imitation.² Due to this rediscovery, imitation has been returning at the center of a number of studies, including film studies, which have recently been grouped under the rubric of “*experimental aesthetics*” (Gallese & Guerra, 2019, p. 13). These emerging perspectives cast new light on the case of *Zelig* in mirroring terms that blur the opposition between self and other, the mind and the body, physiology and psychology, but also protagonist and spectator, mimetic image and mimetic reflex, which the aesthetics of the film itself had stressed all along.

Even skeptics of mirror neurons in theory could not resist the impulse to consider *Zelig* as a dramatic manifestation of the mirror neurons system in practice. As the neuroscientist Gregory Hickok puts it: “You may have noticed that in some social situations people tend to mimic each other’s postures and gestures” (Hickok, 2014, p. 202). And then he adds: “Woody Allen turned the phenomenon into his 1983 film, *Zelig*, a mockumentary about a fairly nondescript man who takes on the appearance and characteristics of those who surround him – a kind of human chameleon” (2014, p. 202). When Saul Bellow says that *Zelig* “touched a nerve in people,” or when Bettelheim claims that this mimetic case is not that different from the “well-adjusted normal person,” they are quite literally (not metaphorically) right. A decade before the discovery of mirror neurons *Zelig* – in line with a long tradition of theories of hypnosis – had already dramatized their power by making manifest at the physiological level, a normal mirroring principle invisibly at play at the neurological level. This mirroring mechanism generates an immediate form of pre-linguistic communication that mediates affects and states of mind, but as Nietzsche stressed and *Zelig* confirmed also ideas, opinions, values and ideologies that may originally belong to the other, yet can be perceived as one’s own. Hence neuroscientists claim that the “*primary role*” of the MNS concerns “understanding the meaning of the actions of others” (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2008, p. 124). What *Zelig* adds is that

2 On Nietzsche’s anticipation of mirroring reflexes now explained via mirror neurons, see Lawtoo 2019.

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such unconscious mirroring actions can also generate mimetic reactions that, as Nietzsche was quick to point out and Allen to dramatize, can trigger massive forms of political misunderstandings.

The Politics of Mimesis: From Public Opinion to Fascist Contagion

Zelig remains our contemporary not only because it anticipates a scientific discovery that roots mimetic instincts in our brain; it also urges film critics and philosophers to reflect on the broader political implications of involuntarily mimicking others in terms that cannot be analyzed within the confines of the lab, yet are at play in the film and in reality, nonetheless. This is true at the level of the intersubjective relations the film foregrounds but is equally true at the level of the collective behaviour that is constantly in the background: from the press to the radio, fashion to public opinion, publicity to propaganda, *Zelig* consistently suggests that the case of the human chameleon mirrors wider imitative tendencies which are massively at play in social life.

These mass-phenomena mirror the *Zelig* phenomenon on a larger social scale and contribute to disseminating the mimetic behaviour they presume to simply represent. Framed against such backgrounds, the human chameleon sets up a non-realistic mirror that foregrounds mimetic drives at play in social behaviour in terms that had been foregrounded by social theorists like Gabriel Tarde.³ Well before Tarde and the dawn of crowd psychology, Nietzsche had paved the way as he critiqued the “levelling magic of the great number” whereby “the neighbor reins, one become a mere neighbor” via the mimetic principle he so discerningly diagnosed (1974, p. 326)

Zelig's somnambulistic state is thus not only pathological at the individual level; it reveals laws of imitation constitutive of social life. It also reveals that humans are endowed with a tendency to unconsciously imitate hegemonic models, especially if these models address individuals in a crowd, or turn to mass media that have the power to cast a spell on personal opinions, turning them into shared public opinions. Hence, as the roaring 20s lead to the 1930s, *Zelig* makes us see that humans' imitative tendencies can no longer be projected onto minorities alone, nor contained solely within psychiatric institutions. Rather, they are all too visibly exploited by authoritarian leaders who relied on hypnotic techniques in order to cast a magical spell on the masses. After his loss

3 As Tarde noted “to have only suggested ideas and to believe them to be spontaneous: this is the illusion characteristic of the somnambulist and of social beings” (2001, p. 137).



Figure 7a, 7b, 7c. Mimetic Dissemination.



Figure 8. The Spell of Nazism.

of favour with U.S. public opinion and a period of absence, Zelig is, in fact, identified in Germany as part of the crowd of supporters that is under the spell of a Nazi leader.

Perhaps Zelig's tendency to lift his arm in a state of hypnotic trance in order to conform to an external order was not only an individual pathology after all. This semi-hypnotic state was massively reproduced by entire crowds as they fell under the spell of a charismatic leader who consciously relied on hypnotic means in order to induce massive outbreaks of mimetic dispossessions.

In the end, then, Zelig shifts from being a representative of a newly found American individualism to an assimilation with the fascist and Nazi masses, allowing commentators within the film to finally "make sense" of this psychic case. Saul Bellow offers the following diagnostic: "there was also something in him that desired immersion in the mass and anonymity. And Fascism offered Zelig that kind of opportunity, so that he could make something anonymous of himself by belonging to this vast movement". This diagnostic is in line with the mimetic principles that

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animate the case of Zelig (the patient), but it does not fully unpack the disturbing political implications of the powers of mimesis the case of *Zelig* (the film) dramatises. “Anonymity”, as the film repeatedly suggests, is not a unique property of fascism alone and is constantly at play in the anonymous crowds that constitute a silent leitmotif in the film. At one remove, commentators have tended to reframe the protagonist’s capitulation to the *Führer* in light of the comic scene that follows as Zelig wakes up from his trance and interrupts Hitler’s 1933 Munich speech in what has been called “one of the most hilarious scenes of the movie” (Nas, 1992, p. 98).

The scene is certainly funny and the transatlantic flight back to the U.S. fits Hollywood standards of closure culminating with romantic happy endings we have become mimetically accustomed to in the past century. And yet, the comic image of Zelig under the spell of the totalitarian leader is not deprived of psychological insights on tragic horrors the film urges us to take seriously in the present century. It is, in fact, the ultimate theoretical consequence of the process of mimetic adaptation to dominant models the film had been warning against from the very beginning.

From beginning to middle to end, the philosophical potential internal to the film far exceeds the frame, for Zelig’s message is much more radical than any of the public intellectuals interviewed is willing to directly acknowledge. It suggests that a mimetic immersion in fascist and Nazi movements casts a shadow not only on the historical peoples and governments that officially espoused fascism and Nazism, most notably Italy and Germany – though mass anonymity is certainly a characteristic of fascism (from *fascio*, bundle). It also suggests that the hypnotic drive to dissolve in mass anonymity had been constantly in the background as a shadow cast on the mimetic crowds whose opinions could so easily be manipulated throughout the film. It is thus politically significant that the film alludes to organizations like the Ku Klux Klan that, contemporary philosophers argue, find striking continuities with Nazi ideology (Stanley, 2018, pp. 129–130). That is, racist ideological discrimination that should be taken seriously in light of the recent returns of totalitarian leaders that cast a shadow on democracy. As Timothy Snyder puts it, a tyrannical leader has the power to draw the public in a “trance by the hypnotic power of its own propaganda,” rendering them “zombified” (2018, p. 264). Finally, Zelig’s capitulation to Hitler suggests that even the distinction between victim and oppressor, a U.S. subject and a German leader, a Jewish victim and a Nazi *Führer* is far from stable in the 1930s. A culturally oppressed subject can go as far in its mimetic dispossession as identifying with the very figure that is responsible for their oppression,

becoming part of a movement whose deliberate intention is the extermination of the Jewish people.

None of the framing intellectuals explore this explosive hypothesis on the banal nature of evil, but *Zelig's* evaluation is not without philosophical precedents. It calls to mind a thesis also developed in New York in the 1960s by a Jewish political philosopher who died too early to be included in the framing interviews and with which I would like to conclude.

The Banality of Mimesis

Given the misunderstandings caused by Hannah Arendt's report on the case of Adolf Eichmann, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, let us recall that the phrase "banality of evil" did not apply to the horror of the Holocaust, which Arendt uncompromisingly condemned, but to the psychology of Eichmann, which she tried to understand. Not unlike *Zelig*, Arendt noted that Eichmann could express himself only in "clichés that the psychiatrists thought so 'normal'" and was driven by a "ruthless desire for conformity at any price" (Arendt, 2006, pp. 48–49, p.175). The reasons behind this will to conform rest on the details of Eichmann's specific biography, which include a struggle to adapt, succeed and ascend the social ladder in a period of economic crisis Arendt narrates in detail.⁴ Yet, she also specifies that the decisive element in Eichmann's psychological transformation – one of the witnesses in Jerusalem comments on his "personality change" (2006, p. 65) – was that he adapted, chameleon-like, to a dominant and, at the time, massively shared view by millions of people. As Arendt puts it: "the most potent faction in the soothing of his own conscience was the simple fact that he could see no one, no one at all, who actually was against the Final Solution" (2006, p. 116). Although Arendt mentions elsewhere that "unthinking men are like sleepwalkers", relying on the hypnotic tradition of the unconscious that is also internal to the case of *Zelig*, the specifically "mimetic psychology" (Arendt, 2000, p. 413) responsible for this hypnotic sleep is only beginning to be addressed in the wake of a "mimetic turn in political theory" (Lawtoo, 2021, p. 480).⁵

4 Arendt writes that Eichmann "gave the impression of a typical member of the lower middle classes" but was actually "declassé son of a solid middle-class family" who struggled to adapt and fit in (2006, p. 31, pp. 27–35).

5 Recent historians who revisited the Argentina Papers like Bettina Stangneth stressed, *contra* Arendt, the centrality of Eichmann's play-acting as a strategy whereby like a "mirror he reflect people's fears and expectations" (2014, p. 367). For a more recent essay that articulates the centrality of mimesis in *both* Stangneth's *and* Arendt's diagnostic of Eichmann and directly informs my comparison with *Zelig*, see Lawtoo

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On the shoulders of Nietzsche, the psychology internal to the case of *Zelig* puts us in a position to supplement this diagnostic. If Eichmann admitted to being “swallowed up by the Party...without previous decision” (Arendt, 2006, p. 33) it was not only because he was “unable to think” as Arendt suggested but because he was unable to resist a mimetic impulse. After the war, Eichmann diagnosed his mimetic pathology as follows: “I would have to live a leaderless and difficult individual life, I would receive no directives from anybody” (2006, p. 31). A mimetic life, in other words, can easily follow orders that can lead to the banality of evil, but will have difficulties leading an individual life – if only because, as Nietzsche demonstrated philosophically and *Zelig* brilliantly dramatised cinematically, it is precisely the experience of individuality that the psychology of mimesis calls into question.

In the end, the case of *Zelig* reveals that mimesis is not only constitutive of the banality of evil, as Arendt understands it. It also operates a mirroring inversion of perspective that makes us see that mimesis is responsible for Eichmann’s banality. Or better, a mimetic-hypnotic-entranced dispossession is responsible for a disconcerting type of thoughtlessness that is difficult to account for in rationalist terms characteristic of the subject of the *Aufklärung*, but becomes understandable if we frame it against the subject of *mimesis*. The Case of *Zelig*, reframed in the company of Nietzsche and Arendt, makes us see that a mimetic suggestibility to the *pathos* of totalitarian leaders can, under specific historical circumstances in which evil becomes the dominant norm, threaten to affect all subjects, including the very minorities these leaders set out to subjugate.

Although the case of *Zelig* concludes with a fictional happy ending, his story touched a real nerve in people in the end. Whether *Zelig*’s diagnostic reflections on the mirroring powers of mimetic dispossession can still reach beyond screen, wake spectators up, and contribute to breaking the spell of the contemporary manifestation of thoughtlessness, remains to be seen.

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2021. The present essay is the first step of a two-folded aesthetic-philosophical argument on mimesis articulated in much more detail with respect to Arendt in the latter essay.

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