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Mimetic Theories, Representation, and "Savages:" Critiques of the Enlightenment and Modernity Through the Lens of Primitive Mimesis

Abstract This essay explores the "primitive" sources of mimetic theory. With a focus on concepts of imitation and representation, it discusses how ethnographic and imaginary depictions of allegedly primitive and tribal societies influenced the theorizing of mimesis in different historical periods. The first part argues that, during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, understandings of mimesis and representation evolved that put an emphasis on their mechanical, and potentially deceptive, features. Discourses on the fetishist and imitative practices of indigenous societies were based on these assumptions, and in the course of colonial expansion, substantiated claims of civilizational superiority. With reference to late nineteenth and early twentieth-century anthropology, the following part of the essay explores James Frazer's theory of imitative magic and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's concept of mystical participation. Whereas differences regarding notions of imitation and representation here still mark the evolution from primitive to modern society, later developments turn these ideas on their heads: critiques of modernity and the Enlightenment, especially in the works of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno of the Frankfurt School of critical theory before WWII, postulate that mimesis and animist representations have been repressed. Like other accounts of primitivism, these theories suppose that they are still present in primitive societies, but that their vanishing in modernity have lead to alienation. The final part argues that claims of civilizational superiority on the one hand, and anxiety over increasing alienation on the other, have now been critically reviewed in the theorizing of mimesis and representation, but that current discussions on authenticity and originality are still marked by traces of primitivism.

Keywords Mimesis, primitivism, representation, anthropology

Introduction

> *Side by side with the view of the world as pervaded by spiritual forces, primitive man has another conception in which we may detect a germ of the modern notion of natural law [...] The germ of which I speak is involved in that sympathetic magic, as it may be called, which plays a large part in most systems of superstition. One of the principles of sympathetic magic is that any effect may be produced by imitating it. To take a few instances: If it is wished to kill a person an image of him is made and then destroyed; and it is believed that through a certain physical sympathy between the person and his image, the man feels the injuries done to the image as if they were done to his own body, and that when it is destroyed he must simultaneously perish.*[1]

When James Frazer—considered one of the founding fathers of anthropology—published *The Golden Bough* in 1890, the book became a large success and was widely read beyond purely academic circles. Intellectuals like T. S. Elliot and Sigmund Freud were inspired by the work, which surveyed a huge mass of historical and ethnographic accounts from all around the world.[2] The aim of Frazer's undertaking was to compare customs and beliefs on a global scale, and to investigate their common logics. Primarily referring to ancient societies and ethnographic reports from "primitive" and "savage" societies,[3] he presented the modern reader with an array of seemingly bizarre customs, rites, and beliefs. His account of various forms of magic also included many references to imitation that became part of his famous definition of sympathetic magic. By referring to rain-making ceremonies, voodoo dolls, the making of effigies, and so forth, he pointed to their common features and postulated that mimesis and imitation were essential for their understanding.

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1 Frazer 1894, 9.

2 I thank Corinna Forberg and Philipp Stockhammer for their invitation to Heidelberg, but especially for their patience. Christoph Brumann's final reading of the text and his funny comments helped me to correct many mistakes and unclear formulations. Many of the ideas developed in this essay are based on discussions with colleagues from the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (MPI), Halle/Saale, Germany, and the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon (ICS-UL), Portugal. The joint project 'Colonialism and Mimetic Processes in Historical and Anthropological Perspectives' was funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Portuguese Acções Integradas Luso-Alemãs (FUP/CRUP) (project reference A-07/2011). Finally, thanks to the German Agentur für Arbeit for unemployment benefits that enabled me to meander around and get lost in the writings of Lévy-Bruhl, Benjamin, Kant, Adorno, and others.

3 Throughout this essay, I will use the terms "primitive" and "savage" without quotation marks. From anthropology's beginnings as an academic subject, as well as in public discourse, this designated small-scale, mostly non-literate tribal societies that are today variously labeled as "indigenous peoples," "ethnic minorities," etc. As will become clear in the course of this essay, many of the accounts of these societies, especially in the time frame under discussion here, were products of the Western ethnographic imagination, which at times has little to do with the societies in question.

At the end of the nineteenth century, these societies were, on the one hand, deemed primitive for their practices of imitative magic and their belief in fetishes or effigies. Early anthropology, comparative religion, and scholars such as Edward Tylor and James Frazer postulated that these cultures represented mankind in its early stages, similar to European prehistoric cultures.[4] In this view, the savages had a limited capacity for logical thinking and were undeveloped types of the civilized mind. Magical thinking and its imitative rites were considered to be the lowest evolutionary stage of mankind. On the other hand, images of the noble savage had been part of the public imagination for a long time, and the numerous accounts show that the trope was essential for constituting modernity in opposition to a primitive "other."[5] Some of these accounts argued that this other was still capable of mimetic and animistic thinking, allegedly lost among civilized societies. Consequently, indigenous populations and their mimetic cultures were also used as a contrast to modern life, marked by alienation, social fragmentation, and the disappearance of mimesis.

Despite the diversity of these encounters and their distorted representations in the context of colonialism, missionary work, travel accounts, and early anthropological research, the information and imaginaries attached to the primitive also fed into Western theories of mimetic behavior. Confrontations with different systems of thinking in which mimetic processes could be observed spurred wider discussions on what imitation might mean in human culture beyond the "West." Mathew Potolsky proposes that, through this encounter, remarkable differences to the Western Enlightenment and its ideas of mimesis and representation became apparent. The mimetic behavior attributed to indigenous people was considered foreign to the scientific world-view of the Enlightenment, as in these systems of thinking "magical copies have real properties and genuine powers on their own. They belong to a network of reciprocal sympathies and material embodiments, not a hierarchical ladder of rational forms and material embodiments."[6] Like Birgit Mersmann's essay in this volume, which explores the relations of particular cultures to the concepts of copy and original in the field of art and heritage, I understand imitation and mimesis as processes that are subject to remarkable shifts under the conditions of modernity that also re-negotiate these concepts and the relationships between cultures.

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4 For the process of "othering" based on ideas of time and progress, see Fabian (1983).

5 Although the simple opposition of the "West" and the "other" is a simplification of sorts, I think it makes sense in the context I will discuss here. See Eric Wolf (1982) for a seminal account of the relationship of European expansion and primitives, and Huhndorf (2001) for the idea of the Indian "noble savage" in American culture. Numerous studies have also analyzed the impact of these images on European intellectuals and artistic culture. See Torgovnick (1991).

6 Potolsky 2006, 139.

Although mimetic theory has been a prominent topic in recent and current anthropological studies[7], this essay sets out to explore the "primitive sources" of mimetic theory and their link to early anthropological accounts of indigenous societies. Focusing on a period stretching from the Enlightenment to the critical theory of the early Frankfurt School, this essay will take a somewhat selective perspective. However, by following the thread of the two interrelated questions of mimesis and representation, I hope to show that the reflection on, and appropriation of, descriptions of primitive mimesis and representation were essential for both the constitution and later critique of the Enlightenment project. I argue that we deal here with what Christoph Wulf has called (with reference to Wittgenstein) the "family resemblance" of theories of mimesis, describing the changing understandings of mimesis in different contexts and historical eras.[8] This implies that the reception, interpretation, and subsequent theorizing of descriptions of mimetic behavior among primitives are strongly embedded into modernity's ambivalent self-reflections. On the one hand, it is a discourse of superiority and progress and, on the other hand, a melancholic self-critique circling around ideas of loss and alienation.

In order to explore the reception of primitive mimesis, the first part of this essay will discuss some basic definitions of mimesis, especially its Platonic and Enlightenment genealogies. Here, I will show that the evolvement of the hierarchical relationship of original and copy and the negative connotations of imitation and representation are based on important epistemic shifts linked, for example, to the Reformation and the Enlightenment. I largely remain in the domain of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), but will then, in the following part, embed these views into social developments of the time, which I will approach from two angles: first, I shall start with the understanding of primitive "fetishes" in the eighteenth century, and I will then move on to early anthropological theories of magic and their reference to imitative behavior. James Frazer's notion of sympathetic magic and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's notion of mystical participation will be discussed with reference to several ethnographic examples. The final part will explore to what extent certain forms of primitivism become crucial for critiques of the Enlightenment and modernity. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's account of mimesis in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Walter Benjamin's work on the "mimetic faculty" will here serve as examples that use a specific reading of the ethnography

7 See Lempert (2014), for an excellent overview for imitation and its various uses in social anthropological theory, and Roque (2015) for a very useful overview of studies employing mimesis in a colonial context. See also the now seminal works of Michael Taussig (1992; 1987) on colonialism, mimesis, and resistance. Recent approaches have also emphasized constructions of identity via mimetic processes (Harrison 2006).

8 Information taken from the website of Christoph Wulf. Last modified July 24, 2012. Accessed February 20, 2017. http://www.christophwulf.de.

of primitive mimesis, in order to reevaluate and radically question the Enlightenment and modernity.

Mimesis, representation, and the shift toward ambivalent meaning

Mimesis has a long genealogy in theorizing art and society; several excellent studies that give an overview of the diverse histories of the concept have been published.[9] For centuries, the concept was dominant in discussions relating to art, theatre, painting, and literature.[10] The Oxford English Dictionary defines mimesis as "imitative representation of the real world in art and literature," and as "the deliberate imitation of the behavior of one group of people by another as a factor in social change." Behind these seemingly straightforward definitions lingers a history that covers an intellectual terrain reaching from classical Greek philosophy, in Plato's and Aristotle's works, to issues of copyright and originality in the contemporary digital age. But with every inclusive concept that has such a long and diverse history, its application and use have also changed considerably and are therefore subject to a certain fuzziness. According to Christoph Wulf,[11] the term mimesis has its roots in Sicily (the place of origin of the *mimos*) and only later entered Greek thought. He proposes that originally, it probably referred to burlesque and clownish performances of scenes taken from the everyday life of peasants that were performed for the entertainment of the wealthy.

If Alfred North Whitehead's exaggerated dictum that "the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to *Plato*" contains at least some truth,[12] then a critical reflection on the concept of mimesis and its various transformations has to take Plato's essentially ambivalent understanding into account. Plato's view of mimesis is manifold and not as reductionist as I might depict it here. It operates on several levels, and at times with contradictory implications.[13] Generally speaking, in Plato's *Republic* we are told that positive mimesis has educational and socializing functions.[14] However, uncontrolled and chaotic mimesis (unnecessary craft-making, imitating nature

9 Potolsky 2006; Gebauer and Wulf 1992.
10 For literature, see Erich Auerbach's (1953) classic account.
11 Wulf 2015, 15.
12 Whitehead 1979, 39.
13 See also Gebauer and Wulf (1992, 25–30) on the plurality of meanings of mimesis in Plato. They state that "in addition to imitation, representation, and expression, there is also emulation, transformation, the creation of similarity, the production of appearances, and illusion" (Gebauer and Wulf 1992, 25).
14 See Plato's *Republic* (Plato 1992), especially Books II and III on the basic and vague definition of imitation. The ban of certain forms of poetry from the polis is treated in Book III. In Book X, this ban is extended to all poetry.

sounds, etc.) is seen critically.[15] Homer's images of gods and demi-gods are seen as blasphemous, and chosen as an imitation of bad examples that have to be controlled by the guardians of the *polis*.[16] Here, the link between mimesis and ideas about representation becomes relevant: like in Plato's allegory of the cave**,** art is seen as an imitation of an imitation in the sense that art copies the world of phenomena, which in itself is already an imitation of the "real."[17] Art and its imitative representations of "original reality" are therefore subject to a double removal, and the illusion produced by art is seen as potentially deceptive and therefore inferior.[18] Hence, mimesis is understood as an act that potentially corrupts and deceives the real, and therefore has to be controlled.[19]

I think that some of Plato's "negative" features of mimesis have had a crucial influence on Enlightenment discourses, and were and still are present in modern disguise. Mathew Potolsky has detected traces of this understanding of mimesis in a variety of modern theories, and rightly points out that mimesis is, in some of these approaches, still a slave to its (at times distorted) Platonic genealogy. The implicit assumption is that mimetic behavior produces inferior copies of something else more original, and that it results in misrepresentations. In Marx's view, for example, Potolsky argues that "the accounts of social mimesis [...] remain within the Platonic tradition of treating mimesis as a source of deception and a false representation of reality."[20]

How were these Platonic features of mimesis transmitted, and in which social and philosophical context did this transmission take place? While the Aristotelian-inspired view of mimesis remained crucial until the Middle Ages,[21] traces of Plato's account of mimesis and its negative connotations resurfaced later in a variety of approaches. Especially with the coming of the Renaissance, we witness a turn to Plato and a reevaluation of mimetic behavior. The translation of mimesis into the Latin *imitatio* puts the focus on the mechanical and "fake" character of mimesis,[22] and Renaissance writers discover imitation as a central concept but not as original and creative behavior. Imitation becomes a topic of parodies of outdated, mechanical behavior such as in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. This and other works explore "the failure of imitation" in an age where old social orders—like knighthood in Cervantes's case—became destabilized and gave way

15 Plato 1992, Book II, 395c–397e; also Gebauer and Wulf 1995, 25–30.
16 Plato 1992, Book II, 377e–392c; see also Wulf 1997, 1017.
17 For the allegory of the cave, see Plato 1992, Book VII.
18 Plato 1992, Book X, 596e–602c.
19 On the corrupting features of mimesis see Plato 1992, Book X, 602c–608b.
20 Potolsky 2006, 138.
21 We find Aristotle's work on "poesies" a more positive account of mimesis. Aristotle understood mimesis as a natural behavior and considered representations as essential for processes of learning and socialization in general, as for example in the cathartic functions of theater; it is conceptualized as a natural human inclination or instinct.
22 Wulf 1997, 1020.

to new ideas and values.[23] Michel Foucault interprets Don Quixote's mad behavior in epistemic terms. In the context of the great epistemological shift of the late sixteenth century, when the interplay of resemblance and sign was redefined, "language breaks off its old kinship with things and enters into that lonely sovereignty."[24] Don Quixote still acts according to the old order of things and epistemes,[25] and therefore appears as a madman. Stephen Halliwell argues that the translation to imitation (and, one might add, its embeddedness into the ruptures of social orders and new epistemes) changed the concept to such a degree that, for several centuries, its negative connotations became emphasized: "No greater obstacle now stands in the way of a sophisticated understanding of all the varieties of mimeticism, both ancient and modern, than the negative associations that tend to colour the still regrettably standard translation of mimesis as 'imitation,' or its equivalent in any modern language."[26]

In an over-generalizing manner, one could state that, especially with the coming of Enlightenment, many of the negative features of imitation again come to the fore. The Enlightenment and modernity put emphasis on an independent, rational subject,[27] which has itself freed from superstition and the bonds of tradition. According to Immanuel Kant, who in 1784 famously defined Enlightenment as "the escape of men from their self-imposed immaturity, especially set in matters of religion,"[28] one of the main reasons for the regrettable condition of mankind is the habit of imitating the traditions of previous generations.[29]

During the Enlightenment, however, it is not the transformation of the understanding of mimesis that signals a change; the shift primarily becomes visible in new ideas about representation and perception. A self-conscious subject that surveys the outer world arises, and sets new standards for how the world as an objectified entity is perceived. Concomitantly, representation evolves as a separation of essence and external

23 Potolsky 2006, 60.
24 Foucault 1994, 49.
25 Foucault defines episteme as a priori knowledge, a matrix on which knowledge and discourses becomes possible is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of the possibility of all knowledge (Foucault 1994, 168).
26 Halliwell 2002, 13.
27 Modernity here acts as a term defining a period that, depending on one's perspective, starts with the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. In this essay, it also comes to take on meanings that delineate modernity from primitiveness and act as a specific narrative to legitimize Western domination. Similar to the idea of civilization, the term has now become pluralized in order to weaken its Eurocentric associations. See Eisenstadt (2003) for the idea of multiple modernities.
28 Kant 2013, 8. In this understanding, a large part of humanity was still marked by their "minority of age" (*Minderjährigkeit*) and "legal or civil immaturity."
29 Kant's account of innovation and genius in Western history here serves as a good example: imitation is seen as the antidote to innovation, as true innovation progresses through the genius who, in an authentic manner, advances through his own reason without imitating others. See Potolsky 2006, 67.

form, of truth and its various appearances. In Kant's philosophy,[30] the things in themselves (*Dinge an sich*) are now unknowable:

> In reinterpreting the cognitive subject, Kant extends the modern causal loop between things and ideas at the cost of introducing a distinction between what appears and what is. In calling attention to the difference between objects of experience and knowledge on the one hand, and things in themselves on the other, Kant formulates a new and very powerful version of the old Platonic dualism between objects of experience and knowledge, between the world in which we live and the world we invoke to explain the world. This results in a new conception of the subject, the object, and the relation between them.[31]

In this view, objects are basically of interest because they "materialize and express otherwise immaterial or abstract entities, organizing subjects' perpetual experiences and clarifying their cognitions. The very materiality of objects, their availability to the senses, is of interest primarily as the condition for the knowability of otherwise abstract or otherwise invisible structures."[32] This binary dimension of representation implies the division of truth and appearance.[33] Therefore, imitation is also bound up here with the question of representation, and again viewed as potentially corrupting, as it is in Plato. The anthropologist Johannes Fabian widens this focus on objects and includes a number of other points:

> Taken as a philosophical issue, the idea of representation implies the prior assumption of a difference between reality and its "doubles." Things are paired with images, concepts, or symbols, acts with rules and norms, events with structures. Traditionally, the problem with representations has been their "accuracy," the degree of fit between reality and its reproductions in the mind.[34]

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30 Philosophers and experts of Kantian and Platonic thought would probably dismiss my superficial reading here. Whether Kant returned to certain aspects of Plato's ideas (e.g. *noumenon*) has been discussed with much controversy. For a position that conforms to my understanding, see Rockmore (2011). For an opposing perspective that reads Kant in terms of his *Erkenntnistheorie* as essentially anti-Platonian, see Walter Patt (1997, 38–39).

31 Rockmore 2011, 45.

32 Keane 2006, 198.

33 Michel Foucault has traced this development and its shifts in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in terms of the relationship between signifier and signified: "This new arrangement brought about the appearance of a new problem, unknown until then: in the sixteenth century one asked oneself how it was possible to know that the sign did in fact designate what it signified; from the seventeenth century, one began to ask how a sign could be linked to what it signified. A question to which the Classical period was to reply by the analysis of representation, and to which modern thought was to reply by the analysis of meaning and signification." Foucault 1994, 43.

34 Fabian 1990, 753–754.

I think, however, that the Kantian stance described above can rather be seen as one of the endpoints of century-long problematizations that had very concrete, historical implications. Whereas my reading of the changes that mimesis and representation underwent from the perspective of Enlightenment epistemology has been rather limited and selective due its focus on philosophical questions, those previous changes were not present in discourses among philosophy experts alone. The question to what extent, if at all, images could actually represent gods, holy objects, etc. is of an earlier date. Historically speaking, the numerous theological discussions that circle around the problem of imitation and representation were part of major shifts in the understanding of religion in Europe.[35] An important point of crystallization of these questions can be located, for example, in the transformations that came with the Reformation. In some interpretations of Protestantism, the outer world, and especially its religious iconicity as in Catholicism, becomes devalued and belief is increasingly defined as an inner condition located in the subject.[36] Some Protestant movements (led by Calvin or Zwingli, for example) developed strong forms of iconoclasm. In the years following the initial Reformation (especially between 1520 and 1570), iconoclastic riots took place all over Europe.[37] Likewise, discourses for or against consubstantiation and transubstantiation in the context of the Eucharist focused the problem of representation to a specific debate and were important points of controversy in the development of Christian theologies. Are bread and wine really the body of Christ, or are they just representative and symbolic of it? Is the rite of participating in the Eucharist a mimetic act in which, through an exchange, the believer can participate?[38] As Corinna Forberg's discussion in this volume with reference to courtly representations of kings in Europe and emperors in Asia shows, art was another field in which these discussions became central.

35 Carlo Ginzburg (1991) gives a very interesting overview of the changing connotations of representation to which I will return later. On the practical level of ritual, see Ralph Giesey's (1960) excellent discussion on changes in the understanding of effigies as representing the king in the royal funeral ceremonies in France. This also relates to the discussion of the notion of the "king's two bodies" in Ernst Kantorowicz's (1997) work on representation in medieval political theology. See also Corinna Forberg's contribution in this volume on the portrait of Louis XIV and her discussion of Kantorowicz and concepts of representation.

36 See, for example, the discussions on belief and their applicability in anthropology in Needham (1972) and, more recently, in Linquist and Coleman (2008).

37 See Besançon's (2009) study on the intellectual history of iconoclasm.

38 Proponents of consubstantiation—often arguing in the context of the Reformation—advocate that, during the sacrament, the substance of the body and blood of Christ are present alongside the bread and wine, which remain present through their taste, smell, etc. Transubstantiation postulates that, through consecration by the priest, one set of substances (bread and wine) is substituted (or exchanged) for the body and blood of Christ. Positions on this concept vary among churches. See Wandel (2005) for a historical study of this controversy since the Reformation.

Although these processes were never overarching, complete, or followed a simple teleology, one could state in general terms that, at the end of these complex developments, we arrive at a rather new epistemology: after centuries of religious quarrels and wars, new ways of conceptualizing the relationship between external world and the subject evolved with the Enlightenment. The subject has to be overcome in order to free itself from the bonds of tradition and belief, and the gap between subject and object widens. Objects can still "symbolize" meanings and "stand for something."[39] However, the notion of an active presence of a living entity in, for example, an effigy gradually disappears. Concomitantly, mimesis undergoes a similar shift, namely from a term that at the beginning denoted an act of creatively forging links between subject and object, to a more reductionist, even pejorative understanding of imitation. Although this development was by no means universal, it laid the groundwork for cultural encounters with primitives that were still clinging to mimetic practices and said to believe in the living qualities of certain objects.

Images of the primitive: Mimetic thinking and its savage sources

Many of the discussed intellectual and religious developments were paralleled by an increasing European domination in various parts of the world. With a very selective focus on the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth century, I want to explore in this part how depictions of indigenous, allegedly primitive societies were worked into a variety of European ideas surrounding mimesis and representation. First, I shall discuss how a discourse on fetishism as a form of illogical imitation and representation evolved in the context of the Enlightenment and European expansion. Secondly, I will discuss how early anthropology as a discipline interpreted these mimetic practices in the context of James Frazer's theory of magic and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's idea of a primitive mentality.[40] Here, both by delivering ethnographic data and actively theorizing mimesis and imitation, anthropology became one of the mediators between the European Enlightenment and a primitive other.

The work of mimesis as an intercultural process itself is marked by encountering cultural "others" (in texts or in "reality"); information about them is partially appropriated and set into a new context. The other's imitative practices become part of the European way of theorizing mimesis and

39 See Ladwig (2012) for different understandings of symbols and representations in modernity.

40 I will here take a rather generalizing perspective on anthropology as a subject. What the subject had in common in its early phase was its focus on allegedly primitive societies in non-Western societies. This focus has been largely lost in contemporary anthropology and the subject has developed a multiplicity of agendas that involves work on modernity and urbanity, kinship, genetics, etc.

representation. Ideas of nineteenth and early twentieth-century anthropology entered into a range of academic disciplines and the arts. E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and Lévy-Bruhl's *How Natives Think* were widely discussed, and influenced literature, the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences.[41] The theorizing of mimesis on the basis of accounts of cultural "others" is exposed to power relations which are already visible in the production of ethnographic information itself and its reception among European thinkers and artists. The overwhelming part of the data was drawn from travel descriptions and missionary reports, and not from ethnographic fieldwork. Fritz Kramer has coined the term "imaginary ethnography" in relation to nineteenth-century accounts. He sees in them "moments of a naive metaphysics, that in some respects continue the fantasies of heaven and hell of European Christianity."[42] However, after the rise of the natural sciences and the Enlightenment he also locates in these ethnographic narratives a longing for a counterpart to the "radical rational culture of Europe."[43]

One of the best examples of establishing a distinction between enlightenment civilization and its primitive antipodes is the discourse that was constructed around "fetishes." Taken to be emblematic of the pre-logical thinking of, for example, "Africans," fetishism was, in the popular evolutionary schemes, located at the lowest level of development, with polytheism and monotheism being later stages of development. Fetishes were taken to be "false" copies of something they could not be. Objects such as stones, Voodoo dolls amulets, and so forth were, in indigenous conceptions, seen as active and living "copies" of persons. They were produced through acts of imitation, in which mimesis created a lasting link between original and copy. Often replicating not external forms but their "spiritual essence," enlightenment thinking understood them as false representations that were grounded in the illogical thinking of the natives. William Pietz has traced the genealogy of the idea of the fetish to the sixteenth and seventeenth century, in the context of Portuguese and Dutch expeditions to West Africa. He defines the fetish as "the problematic of the social value of material objects as revealed in situations formed by the encounter of radically heterogeneous social systems,"[44] but also works out a history-of-ideas approach to fetishism, and speaks of the "fetish theory of enlightenment" that evolved at the end of the eighteenth century. Interestingly, the belief in fetishes was not only attributed to primitives, but also delivered fodder for the protestant critiques of idolatry in Catholicism that I already briefly alluded to in the previous part:

41 For the status and impact of early British social anthropology, especially Tylor and Frazer, see George W. Stocking's (1992, 40–41) excellent reflection on the history of anthropology.
42 Kramer 1981, 111.
43 Kramer 1981, 111.
44 Pietz 1985, 7.

> The discourse of the fetish has always been a critical discourse about the false objective values of a culture from which the speaker is personally distanced. Such was the negative force of revaluation when Portuguese Catholics named African religious and social objects "feiticos," and such was the force when commodity-minded Dutch, French, and English Protestants identified African religious objects and Catholic sacramental objects equally as fetishes, thereby preparing the way for the general fetish theory of the enlightenment.[45]

The reports of travelers, merchants, slave traders, and missionaries also found their ways into the philosophical writings of the enlightenment, and accounts of fetishism became one of the preferred markers of distinction between civilization and primitiveness. Immanuel Kant gives an excellent example: first, he discusses the alleged lack of development among "the negroes of Africa" due to their racial inferiority. One implicit assumption here is, I think, that the reproduction of traditions through imitation produces a kind of stasis. Secondly, he postulates that the difference regarding mental capacities produces a kind of cognitive distortion in which "things" are taken for living entities (fetishes) worthy of veneration. In *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* from 1764, Kant elaborates:

> The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality [...] So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour. The religion of fetishes so widespread among them is perhaps a sort of idolatry that sinks as deeply into the trifling as appears to be possible to human nature. A bird's feather, a cow's horn, a conch shell, or any other common object, as soon as it becomes consecrated by a few words, is an object of veneration and of invocation in swearing oaths. The blacks are very vain but in the Negro's way, and so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings.[46]

In a similar way, G.W.F. Hegel proposed in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, given between 1821 and 1831, that Africans are not capable of imagining anything greater than man, and therefore concluded that

45 Pietz 1985, 14.
46 Kant 1960, 110–111.

fetish worship was the only religion they were able to develop.[47] Closely linked to the idea of the fetish, magic became another favorite topic of analysis, and also marks the beginning of the anthropological theorizing of religion under the influence of evolutionism and colonialism.[48] James Frazer surveyed a mass of ethnographic reports and mythologies from all around the world, and a great number of descriptions related to beliefs and rituals in which a created image (effigies, puppets, etc.) is thought to catch the essence of an object it represents, so that what is done to the image is thought to be done to the object. Through mimetic enactment, the object "represents" what is perceived as absent (from the perspective of the Enlightenment thinker); it gives the object a sort of life and reality, invoked through mimesis. Frazer subsumes them in his major work *The Golden Bough* under the notion of "sympathetic magic." He proposes that, in these magical practices, imitation and similarity play a key role.[49] He elaborates:

> If we analyze the principles of thought on which magic is based, they will probably be found to resolve themselves into two: first, that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause; and, second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed. The former principle may be called the Law of Similarity, the latter the Law of Contact or Contagion. From the first of these principles, namely the Law of Similarity, the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it: from the second he infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not.[50]

Frazer's work was one of the first efforts to systematize a large body of ethnographic and historical accounts, and also included an exegesis of Greek mythology. However, its perspective on magic was still close to accounts of fetishism. From the standpoint of the Enlightenment, Frazer concluded that "magic is a spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct; it is a false science as well as an abortive art."[51] He saw magic as the most basic level in the evolution of mankind. Religion was already a sign of a higher complexity of thinking, superseded by the scientific view of the world. As a "dispassionate observer" who studied these customs

47 On Hegel's images of Africa in these lectures, see Susan Buck-Moriss (2009). On Hegel's extensive treatment of fetishes, see Teshale Tibebu's study on Hegel and his role in the making of Eurocentric world history (2011, 192–193).

48 The history of social anthropology as an academic and applied subject is closely linked to the colonial project (Asad 1973; Said 1978). See also Fabian (1983, 11–12) on notions of time and evolution in early anthropology.

49 Frazer 1894, 52.

50 Frazer 1894, 48.

51 Frazer 1894, 39.

and myths, he still concluded that one "can hardly regard it otherwise than as a standing menace to civilization."[52] Sigmund Freud later used some of Frazer's ideas and descriptions, and incorporated them into his *Totem and Taboo* (1913) with the telling subtitle *Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics,* comparing the level of consciousness among primitives with that of children.

Whereas parts of the British school of social anthropology still adhered to an evolutionary paradigm, the French philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1859-1939) had a somewhat different agenda. Trained as a philosopher, but also active in French sociology and anthropology, he is mainly known for his works on the "primitive mentality" and concepts such as "mystical participation." His major publications such as *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (1910) and *La mentalité primitive* (1922) seem to suggest a strong evolutionary bias, which later anthropologists described as "a horrific example for the miscomprehension of a scientific discourse."[53] As an armchair anthropologist, he assembled (similar to Frazer) a huge mass of ethnographic reports and tried to explore the mental functions at the base of a wide range of phenomena such as totemism, magic and magically-loaded objects, shamanism, belief in ghosts and effigies, and the return of the dead. He understood his work not as an effort to classify primitives into an evolutionary scheme like Frazer, but as an attempt to compare modern ways of thinking about the world with primitive ones. The latter also included references to Chinese, ancient Greek, and Hindu traditions. Postulating a great gap between primitive and scientific thinking, he especially referred to phenomena of non-distinction and suggested that primitive man lives in a non-dual, animistic universe in which matter and mind are not divided—a standpoint which has been heavily criticized due to its generality and exoticizing effects.[54] These "pre-logical" systems of thinking, as he labeled them, constitute the "collective representations of the primitive" that "differ profoundly from our ideas or concepts; nor are they the equivalent of them."[55] Unlike in societies where scientific thinking has become the dominant way of seeing the world, these collective representations are based on animistic principles, and do not distinguish between dream and reality, subject and object, and mind and matter. Although missionaries, travelers, and anthropologists had crafted reports on these beliefs from all around the world, Lévy-Bruhl's starting point is that the facts described mostly remain alien to *our* form of thinking:

52 Frazer 1894, 53.
53 Muenzel 2001, 250–251. Lévy-Bruhl proclaimed at other occasions: "Let us abandon the attempt to refer their mental activity to an inferior variety of our own" (1985, 76). See also the account of Edward Evans Pritchard (1971) for a more balanced view of Lévy-Bruhl's works.
54 For an overview of critiques of Lévy-Bruhl and re-interpretations, see Mousalimas (1990, 40–41).
55 Lévy-Bruhl 1923, 7.

> In the collective representations of primitive mentality, objects, beings, phenomena can be, though in a way incomprehensible to us, both themselves and something other than themselves. In a fashion no less incomprehensible, they give forth and they receive mystic powers, virtues, qualities, influences, which make themselves felt outside, without ceasing to remain where they are.[56]

As in Frazer's account, things can become "doubled" via imitation, and mimetic behavior and representation play an important role in Lévy-Bruhl's theorizing.[57] I will here discuss two sets of examples analyzed by Lévy-Bruhl: The first relates to his extensive treatment of ritual and religious dance performances that imitate ancestors and the departed. The second group of examples discusses the use of objects such as amulets that imitate the qualities of other objects or persons. Both discussions also relate to the concept of "representation" and ideas about fetishes.

In his chapters "Ceremonies and Dances" and "The Worship of Ancestors and the Dead,"[58] Lévy-Bruhl focuses on a notion of mimesis that today would be labeled "performative."[59] As an example, he takes an annual festival performed by the Kiwai (of Papua New Guinea), in which the masked males dress up as animals. Lévy-Bruhl cites the ethnography by Gunnar Landtman, who states that, among the Kiwai, "nearly all the outdoor dances can be called mimetic, inasmuch as they imitate actions from real life" and they display "great ingenuity, for the dancers do not just copy the various movements in a mechanical way."[60] In opposition to Frazer and other accounts of mimesis, imitation is not seen as mechanical here but as a kind of aesthetic expression. Lévy-Bruhl then explores another example of a dance ritual in more detail, taken from Theodor Koch-Grunberg's study of the Baniwa in Northwest Brazil:

> The idea of magic influence is at the basis of all these mimetic representations. They are destined to bring to the village and its inhabitants, their plantations, and to all the surrounding nature, blessing and fertility. From the circumstance that the dancer in his movements and gestures imitates, as faithfully as it is in his power to do, the being whom he endeavors to represent, he identifies himself with him. The magic power dwelling in the mask is transferred to the dancer, makes him a masterful "demon," capable of subduing "demons" or making them favorable to him.[61]

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56 Lévy-Bruhl 1984, 76–77.
57 In his posthumously-published notebooks, Lévy-Bruhl also makes more explicit references to Greek philosophic notions such as mimesis (Lévy-Bruhl 1975).
58 Lévy-Bruhl 1935, 113–114 and 134–135, respectively.
59 Gebauer and Wulf (1995, 316) have linked performativity to mimesis and focus on body-related motions, rhythms, gestures, and sounds.
60 Lévy-Bruhl 1935, 122.
61 Lévy-Bruhl 1935, 127.

The performance of the rite demands an effort to copy the movements of other beings, and the mask worn during the rite gives the dancer a new identity via mimetic transfer. Moving on to his analysis of this and similar rites, Lévy-Bruhl states that "by imitating what their mythical ancestors have done in certain circumstances, and reproducing their gestures and their acts, these natives are in communion with them and actually participating in their substance."[62] He elaborates further:

> Is it possible to penetrate yet further into the significance of these ceremonies and these magico-propitiatory dances? For there seems to be no doubt that in nearly all such dances the wearers of these masks represent "ghosts," that is, save in exceptional cases, the dead or the ancestral spirits. Now the word "represent" must be understood here in its literal etymological sense—that in which the primitives would take it if they used it: to re-present, to cause to reappear that which has disappeared. As long as the actors and dancers wear these masks, and from the mere fact that they cover their faces, they are not only the representatives of the dead and the ancestors whom these masks portray: for the time being, they actually become these dead and these ancestors. To primitives, as we know, bi-presence is not an inconceivable, or even unnatural idea.[63]

Here, imitating the moves of ancestors is not just a mere representation or performance but a kind of immersion into a role that does not allow for any distance between past and present, self and other, the living and the dead. Mimesis here mediates between these (at least to our perception) separate domains. In the quote above, Lévy-Bruhl alludes to the fact that representation has, etymologically speaking, an interesting double meaning, which Carlo Ginzburg and Raymond Williams refer to as well: on the one hand, it describes in an older translation "the efficacious presence of something," and on the other hand its "standing for something that is actually not present."[64] Lévy-Bruhl deems the first meaning as more suited to his case. Then, *pace* the concept of representation that evolved during the enlightenment and the reformation,[65] imitative acts as ritual performances have an efficacious character according to Lévy-Bruhl, and are not mechanical acts that produce inferior copies of originals.

Coming back to the discussion of the fetish as a living object, we can note that a similar conclusion is drawn by Lévy-Bruhl in relation to magically charged objects and the principle of what he (somewhat misleadingly) labels mystical participation. Imitation here is not necessarily a copy

62 Lévy-Bruhl 1935, 115.
63 Lévy-Bruhl 1935, 123–124.
64 Ginzburg 1991, 1219–1220; see also William 1983, 267.
65 Carlo Ginzburg (1991, 1226–1227) has argued that the evolvement of the second meaning (absence) can, in general, be attributed to the Jewish-Christian vision of icons even before the Reformation.

of another object's exterior form, but the act of copying aims at the force inherent to that object. Giving the example of the production of amulets among the Eskimos of Greenland,[66] in which certain qualities of animals are copied into an object, he notes,

> The amulet does more than merely represent the animal or human being which it imitates or by which it is made. The amulet is alive, because it has been made during the recitation of a charm or spell, when the dominating qualities of the animal or the part of the body have been invoked; the power of these qualities is at any rate potentially present in the animal. It evidently makes no great difference whether it is the thing (animal) itself or an imitation which is used as an amulet; it has the same power.[67]

Lévy-Bruhl gives numerous other examples which are comparable to the relationship between an "original" human being and its effigy-copy. He understands them as expressions of the *mentalité primitive* in which "the reality of the similitude is of the same kind as the original—that is, essentially mystic."[68] Christopher Bracken refines the explanation given by Lévy-Bruhl and states: "The likeness does not stand in for what it imitates, it participates in what it imitates. The thing contains its likeness, and the likeness, the thing for both contain a force communicated along the pathway of mimesis."[69] Significant here is that Lévy-Bruhl did not consider imitative representations as mere "symbols" that "stand for something"—an approach that was dominant in anthropology for several decades.[70]

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66 Lévy-Bruhl here cites the ethnography of William Thalbitzer, who spent two years in an isolated Inuit settlement around 1900. Like in the previous case, Lévy-Bruhl in my opinion actually draws on ethnographies that expose a much higher level of refinement than those of Frazer some decades earlier. This might be based in the fact that he—as an armchair anthropologist—seems to have had a different agenda than Frazer and puts more emphasis on detail. Frazer was, however, a better storyteller. The second explanation might be that, in the course of two decades, the amount of reliable ethnographic material had increased tremendously.

67 Lévy-Bruhl 1935, 339–340.

68 Lévy-Bruhl 1935, 52.

69 Bracken 2002, 335.

70 I have outlined in another paper (Ladwig 2012, 429–430) that the anthropologists of different generations have usually followed one of the following methods for understanding these representations: Either there is a purpose connected to these transformations (functionalism), they show how the brain works (cognitivism), they have to be interpreted (interpretivism); or these transformations are of a metaphorical nature (symbolism). Recent approaches see this as a way of domesticating "otherness" into our frameworks of analysis, and advance a reading of representation that is actually very close to that of Lévy-Bruhl. See Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell (2007) for a call to rethink the position of objects and representation.

Despite the evolutionary tendencies of his theory, and the overstretched, generalizing distinction between the modern mind and primitiveness,[71] Lévy-Bruhl can be credited for pointing out that Western ideas about "rationality," and certain divides that were emerging in the context of the Enlightenment and Reformation, are far from general. Lévy-Bruhl understands his own modern and scientific culture and its understandings of imitation and representation as being culturally specific, and not, like Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers, as epistemological universals. This theme was picked up by one of his pupils and actually has regained importance in recent discussion in anthropology.[72] Although Lévy-Bruhl does not theorize mimesis explicitly, his concept of participation shows that he understood these practices of imitation and representation as a challenge to, and extension of, Western mimetic theory. In opposition to Enlightenment discourses on fetishism and to Frazer's pejorative account of imitative magic as a "false science as well as an abortive art," Lévy-Bruhl implicitly recognized that the negative connotations of mimesis and representation were only of limited value when trying to understand systems of thinking positioned outside the context of modernity.

Primitive mimesis: The Frankfurt School's critique of the Enlightenment

It is rather easy to detect in Lévy-Bruhls' notions of the primitive mentality and mystical participation, with their non-dualistic features, a form of extreme primitivism. Do such theories, in the end, tell us more about "our" desires than explain the logics of other cultures? It is rather obvious that the contrast between the rationality of modernity, and that of true representation and mimetic thinking, can easily become a sort of lament about what has been lost through the enlightenment and modernity. As I will outline in this part, the enlightenment and its move to an objectified world surveyed by an interior subject, have indeed been critiqued by several theorists from the perspective of mimetic theory. Some Neo-Marxist propagators of the Frankfurt School have suggested that we witness a

71 Lévy-Bruhl, however, saw the primitive mentality also at work in our own culture. The British social anthropologist Evans-Pritchard writes: "For him, Christianity and Judaism were also superstitions, indicative of pre-logical and mystical mentality ('primitive mentality'), and on his definitions necessarily so. But, I think in order not to cause offence, he made no allusion to them" Evans-Pritchard (1965, 90).

72 Maurice Leenhardt (1979) continued some of these themes in his anthropological accounts of Melanesia, in which the socio-cosmic principles animating the body are described as an essential part of the concept of the person. This principle makes it possible to transform the body and actually become another being, as is, for example, often encountered in shamanism.

decrease of mimetic practices in modern, industrial society, and that that one consequence of this process is increasing alienation.[73]

It is this kind of reverse perspective that Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer suggest in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Written during World War II and originally published in 1947, the work can be seen as an effort of critical theory trying to come to terms with high modernity's inherent barbaric and exploitative dimensions, exemplified by Nazi Germany and the Holocaust one the one hand, and by mass production and the cultural industry on the other. Adorno and Horkheimer undertake a polemical reading of the Enlightenment and argue that we witness a decline of mimesis in modernity. In a world in which the self becomes more and more an inner property of the individual, and in which the outer world and nature are reduced to the analytical reason of modernity, mimesis, animistic, and magical beliefs become repressed. In their account, "the disenchantment of the world means the extirpation of animism,"[74] and "for civilization, purely natural existence, both animal and vegetative, was the absolute danger. Mimetic, mythical, and metaphysical forms of behavior were successively regarded as stages of world history which had been left behind."[75] They argue that the Enlightenment and the spread of scientific worldviews "flatten" the world, thereby disenchanting it:

> The whole ambiguous profusion of mythical demons was intellectualized to become the pure form of ontological entities. Even the patriarchal gods of Olympus were finally assimilated by the philosophical logos as the Platonic Forms. But the Enlightenment discerned the old powers in the Platonic and Aristotelian heritage of metaphysics and suppressed the universal categories' claims to truth as superstition. In the authority of universal concepts the Enlightenment detected a fear of the demons through whose effigies human beings had tried to influence nature in magic rituals. From now on matter was finally to be controlled without the illusion of immanent powers or hidden properties. For Enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion.[76]

However, in their view, modernity does not progress towards greater freedom, but to a pure immanence-based rationality, paving the way for domination and totalitarian rule. Magic is linked to deeper truth, but it is not a universal and dominant truth.[77] Mimesis becomes controlled and bureau-

73 For the wider context of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, see the seminal work of Rolf Wiggershaus (2010) and Jay Bernstein (1994).
74 Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 2.
75 Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 24.
76 Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 3.
77 Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 7) state that "magic is bloody untruth, but in it domination is not yet disclaimed by transforming itself into a pure truth

cratic, cutting off the subject from objects under the pretext of rationality.[78] In order to contrast this disenchanted world of "fake Enlightenment" with that of magic and animism among primitives, Adorno and Horkheimer do not discuss ethnographic examples but make several references to the anthropological research of, for example, Robert H. Lowie, Marcel Mauss, Emile Durkheim, and Edvard Westermarck. As I outlined before with reference to theoreticians of mimesis, the question of representation also takes a central position in these arguments. With reference to language, they state:

> The manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object, between rational significance and its accidental bearer. On the magical plane, dream and image were not mere signs for the thing in question, but were bound up with it by similarity or names. The relation is one not of intention but of relatedness. Like science, magic pursues aims, but seeks to achieve them by mimesis—not by progressively distancing itself from the object.[79]

When mimesis is understood as a process of appropriation and as an exchange, as it is here, it has the capacity to bridge the gap between world and consciousness, between subject and object. The loss of mimesis therefore implies a larger distance between these dualities. Consequently, a hierarchy of rationalities, in which cultures that still believe in mimesis supposedly occupy a lower position in the civilizational scale, is introduced:

> The superseding of the old diffuse notions of the magical heritage by conceptual unity expresses a condition of life defined by the freeborn citizen and articulated by command [...] long with mimetic magic it tabooed the knowledge which really apprehends the object. Its hatred is directed at the image of the vanquished primeval world and its imaginary happiness. The dark, chthonic gods of the original inhabitants are banished to the hell into which the earth is transformed.[80]

Although mimesis and imitation are conceptualized as positive features, Adorno's and Horkheimer's image of pre-modern societies still follows a similar trope as that of other evolutionists. Their concept of natural or animistic mimesis is embedded into a "schematic version of the history of modern consciousness" in which "human understanding progresses

underlying the world which it enslaves."

78 See Potolsky (2006, 144) on the notion of mimesis in this work. For further explorations of Adorno's and Horkheimer's notion of mimesis, see Michael Cahn (1984).

79 Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 7.

80 Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 10.

in three stages, from magical to mythic/epic to modern/scientific."[81] By depicting modernity, similar to Max Weber, as an iron cage (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*) in which formal-procedural rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) and efficacy progress,[82] it seems that Adorno and Horkheimer were in need of a counter-image. They found this in allegedly pre-modern, non-capitalist societies that had not yet undergone Enlightenment and rationalization. One the one hand, this view might be seen as having rather romantic undertones that postulate a non-alienated form of existence, in which mimesis can give access to authentic experience. Ernesto Verdeja thinks that "Adorno's idea of mimesis [...] relies on a problematic, unmediated conception of authenticity."[83] On the other hand, recent discussions in philosophy and anthropology have raised similar topics with reference to ontology. Bruno Latour's idea of purification and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's emphasis on ontologies are not that far away from Adorno's reasoning.[84]

The understanding of mimesis in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* partially also resonates with the thoughts of another member of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin. Benjamin has a less coherent account of mimesis and actually changes his definition according to the context of its application. This tendency reflects his methods of working and thinking, which are marked by fragments, collage, and the simultaneity of past and present.[85] In his 1933 essay "On the Mimetic Faculty" (a revised version of the "Doctrine of the Similar"), Benjamin defines language in terms of mimesis, but already sees language as evolving from another stage of development, that of non-sensuous similarity: "Language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of non-sensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic."[86] Benjamin postulates that, in pre-historic times and among "druids, brahmins and shamans,"[87] words and names did not refer to things (as in Saussurian linguistics), but magically participated through sound in things, a capacity that is inevitably lost. But for

81 Miller 2011, 24.
82 Weber 1992, 123.
83 See Verdeja 2009, 494.
84 Bruno Latour's work takes a central role in these discussions about the value of ontology for understanding not only science and technology, but also primitive societies. Latour (1993, 11) suggests that modernity enforces a distinction of various ontological spheres "Purification creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of non-humans on the other." The anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro adds, in a tone that is close to that of Adorno's analysis of the disappearance of mimesis, "Modernity started with it: with the massive conversion of ontological into epistemological questions—that is, questions of representation [...] After objects or things were pacified, retreating to an exterior, silent and uniform world of 'nature' subjects began to proliferate and to chatter endlessly" (Viveiros de Castro 2012, 152).
85 On Benjamin's notion of mimesis and its contextualization in his working methods and development of ideas, see Taussig 1993, 19–32.
86 Benjamin (1933) 1999, 722.
87 Benjamin 1996, 274.

Benjamin, this is a process that has been at work for ages, not only since the encroachment of modernity. Generally speaking, through any expression in a language, an original state of total immersion into nature becomes fragmented. It is not the unity of word and thing, of subject and object that is at the center of his interest in language, but the process of becoming the subject in the course of acquiring a language. What we are left with today is the gift of seeing resemblances, only a "rudiment of a powerful compulsion in former times to behave and become like something else."[88] In Benjamin's other works we find examples where the mimetic and magic capacities of the primitives are equated with that of children. In *Berlin Childhood Around 1900,* the child mixes dream, fantasy, and reality, and the differentiation of self and external world is not yet accomplished.[89] He also refers to primitive forms of play, ritual, and dance.[90] Children and primitives still have a sense for magical correspondence. Benjamin sees—like Adorno—a decline of mimesis: "The perceptual world of modern human beings seems to contain far fewer of those magical correspondences than did that of the ancients or even that of primitive peoples. The question is simply: Are we dealing with a dying out of the mimetic faculty, or rather perhaps with a transformation that has taken place within it?"[91]

How can we contextualize Benjamin's use of the primitive in his philosophy of language and his account of mimesis? In 1915, Benjamin had already attended the lectures of Walter Lehmann on ancient Peruvian art in Munich. Lehmann presented clay heads that resembled decapitated heads. He interpreted them as trophies from headhunting; it was not an exact likeness that was crucial, but the strength of the victim that one could absorb while holding the head imitation.[92] So it was not only representation, but the belief in efficacy that Lehmann emphasized. Another speculative hint might be that some of Benjamin's best friends (like Siegfried Kracauer) employed ethnographic methods,[93] and his work at times has ethnographic features, too. Benjamin's interest in anthropological accounts and his primitivism surfaced again, according to Gershom Sholem, in the summer of 1918, when he immersed himself in history and anthropological accounts that later formed the groundwork for his essay on the mimetic faculty. Nicola Gess has argued that Benjamin's ideas on language are little, if at all, influenced by Lévy-Bruhl's notion of primitive or mystic participation.[94] In contrast, Christopher Bracken explicitly links Benjamin's philosophy of language to Lévy-Bruhl without, however, delivering

88 Benjamin (1933) 1999, 720.
89 See Gess (2007) on Benjamin's primitivism and the context of its time.
90 Benjamin 1990.
91 Benjamin (1933) 1999, 721.
92 Brodersen 1996, 81.
93 Perhaps Benjamin was also inspired by his good friend Sigfried Kracauer, who studied white-collar workers in 1920s Berlin with ethnographic methods learnt under his studies with Georg Simmel. Benjamin used ethnographic approaches in several of his writings, but they were rarely made explicit, as in Kracauer's work.
94 Gess 2009, 308.

direct proof. Benjamin was well aware of the works of Lévy-Bruhl, and a review of the sociology of language discusses the concept of mystic participation at length.[95] One finds in Benjamin's idea that the process of *naming* things once contained the magical capacity of language, a strong parallel to Lévy-Bruhl's extensive treatment of this question. Paolo Gabrielli mentions that one of Benjamin's central ideas, namely "non-sensuous similarity" had already been used by Lévy-Bruhl in 1927.[96]

Although primitivism was widespread in intellectual circles in Benjamin's times,[97] I think that his version is rather complex. In 1917, Benjamin wrote *On the Program of the Coming Philosophy*, in which he attacks Kant's theory of knowledge. Referring to Kant's subject-object distinction, he picks up a thread that was already discussed in a previous part of this essay and lists "examples" that contradict Kant's thesis:

> We know that primitive peoples, at the stage of so-called pre-animism, identify themselves with animals and plants, and take their name from them; we know that madmen at times identify themselves in part with objects of their perception, which are thus no longer "objects" standing before them; we know of sick persons who attribute the sensations of their bodies to beings other than themselves; and of visionaries who at least claim to be able to feel the perception of others as their own.[98]

Although his analogies between primitive people, madmen, and visionaries might be disturbing, Benjamin wants to develop a form of "magical critique" from these cases. Countering Kant, Benjamin sees in ritual, madness, drug-induced states of mind, and in surrealist art possibilities for a return of mimetic capacities.[99] He "conjures up the specter of the primitive neither to condemn it, nor to advise those whose job is to civilize it, but to imitate it. He develops the term magical critique for his thinking."[100] In opposition to Adorno and Horkheimer, he does not only lament the disappearance of mimesis in modernity, but also sees opportunities for its return. His work therefore "celebrates and mourns [...] the liquidation of tradition"[101] at the same time.

This stance is also deducible from his account of mimesis that is implicitly contained in one of his more famous essays, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* originally published in 1936. He proposes that modern technologies such as film and photography change the way we

95 Benjamin 1991.
96 Gabrielli 2004, 323.
97 On Walter Benjamin's use of certain images of the primitive, see the excellent analysis of Gess (2013).
98 Benjamin 1989, 2.
99 See Cheng (2009) on Benjamin's relation to surrealism.
100 Bracken 2002, 344.
101 McCole 1993, 8.

perceive the world: While a painting as an original has, according to Benjamin, an "aura" (substituting the "magic" of his language philosophy), modern techniques of reproduction (the capacity to produce infinite copies) and mass consumption are not able to incorporate this aura. However, Benjamin here exposes not a simple melancholia for older times and other cultures, but also sees opportunities opening up through this concept. The cinema itself, with its fast-moving images and overstimulation, can, first, create a shock that frees the subject from its routines. Secondly, Benjamin proposes that, through these technologies, the masses develop a greater desire to get closer to the image, and to annihilate the uniqueness of the object by mimetically appropriating it.[102] I agree with Taussig, who proposes that it is not only melancholia and loss that surround Benjamin's notion of mimesis, but "instead, modernity provides the cause, context, means, and needs for the resurgence—not the continuity—of the mimetic faculty."[103] This differentiates Benjamin's idea of mimesis from Adorno's account, which simply sees its decline in modernity.

Conclusion

I began this essay with an overview of the genealogies and transformations of concepts of mimesis and representation. By postulating a close link between mimesis and representation, I argued that, with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the negative connotations of mimesis (first pronounced in Plato's philosophy) became dominant. These also laid the groundwork for understanding the reception of descriptions of mimetic practices of primitive societies. Theories of fetishism and Frazer's notion of primitive imitative magic were interpreted as proof of the illogical thinking of the natives, of their lack of rationality. This understanding also provided substance for the evolutionary theories of the nineteenth century, and, moreover, a legitimation for colonial expansion through civilizational superiority. The alleged barbarism of the primitives was conceptualized as "'the reversal of what we may call the project of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, namely the establishment of a universal system of such rules and standards of moral behaviour, embodied in the institutions of states dedicated to the national progress of humanity."[104]

With Lévy-Bruhl's theories, I outlined an approach that exoticizes the mimetic and representational thinking of primitives, and draws a dividing line between modernity and primitiveness, but nevertheless seriously tries to understand the difference between systems of thinking. With an emphasis on the capacity of objects and rituals to make "something present anew" through mystical participation, Lévy-Bruhl actually employs a

102 Benjamin (1936) 2002, 105.
103 Taussig 1993, 20.
104 Hobsbawm 1994, 46.

notion of representation that has been attested to have parallels with Western concepts before the Enlightenment. Due to the apparent but exaggerated contrast between mimesis and representation in primitive and scientific thinking, Lévy-Bruhl's ideas also appealed to theorists that formulated critiques of modernity. With Adorno and Horkhheimer, and finally Walter Benjamin, primitive mimesis is transformed into a counter-image of the Enlightenment and modernity. The objectification of nature, the increased bureaucratization of society, and the repression and disappearance of mimesis in modernity was made visible by pointing to societies in which mimesis was still alive. Whereas Adorno and Horkheimer mainly accused modernity and Enlightenment thinking of oppressing mimesis, I argue that Benjamin has a somewhat less pessimistic perspective. In both approaches, however, "Mimesis sounds a muted and half-forgotten, but still optimistic tone in that it signals a force both primitive and irrational, prior to and resistant to the encroachment of full-on modernity."[105]

The encounters between Western theories of mimetic behavior and more or less fictional ethnographies of primitives can in this sense be understood as an appropriation of a cultural "other," as a process of mimesis itself. Depending on a multiplicity of factors such as reception, power constellations, and so forth, I argue that these appropriations create discourses that move between two poles: one the one side, a strengthening of European superiority and hegemony, and on the other side a critique of modernity and rationality.

It is rather obvious that, in the case of critiques of modernity and the Enlightenment, we deal with a form of primitivism expressed as a lack of real mimesis and representation. Primitivism was a popular trope of the nineteenth and twentieth century, and has been well documented in art history and literature. This is even more valid for Orientalism.[106] It is interesting to note that, between 1900 and World War I, primitivism was frequently used without reference to tribal societies, but could contain a plethora of figures that stood outside or at the periphery of society such as madmen, children, or the uneducated peasants. Here, "the myth of the artist expressed kinship with marginal groups in his own society."[107] In this light, the associations made between primitive mimesis and the mimetic capacities of children and madmen, in, for example, Walter Benjamin's thinking comes as no surprise. Here, in a somewhat romantic approach to art and artists, the outside of society can be occupied as a position that allows for a de-centering of perspectives.

The question, however, why certain accounts of primitive mimesis held such an attraction for Adorno, Benjamin, and others probably has many answers. There was need for a counter-image, but to be more specific, one

105 Miller 2011, 23.
106 See Flam and Deutch (2003) for a history of primitivism in twentieth-century art. The classical reference to Orientalism is Said (1978).
107 Grijp 2012, 134.

could argue that this image had to embody a certain kind of authenticity. Charles Lindholm suggests that the "pervasive desire for authenticity is a consequence of a modern loss of faith and meaning," a proposition that resonates very well with critical stances on the Enlightenment and modernity.[108] Another anthropologist, Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, states that there is often a "presupposition that authenticity lies at an inaccessible level below the surface of social life, deep within oneself or among societies 'uncontaminated' by modernity."[109] Moreover, he argues that "authenticity encodes the expectation of truthful representation."[110] With a return to an older notion of mimetic representation in Lévy-Bruhl, Adorno, and Benjamin, a return to something more "real" and original was imagined. However, according to Gustave Ribeiro, this longing for authenticity is in the current age again exposed to shifts. Living an in age where the original is increasingly disappearing, he imagines two outcomes of this process:

> The first could be called "hyperfetishism," meaning the hyper efficacy of fetishism in a world completely colonized by copies without originals, and by their central role in accumulation within the cutting-edge sectors of electronic and computer capitalism. In such a realm, no one would really care about alienation. The current almost complete disappearance of this term is an indication of what I just said. The other outcome is what I would call "hyperanimism," or a return to the metaphysics of animism among the moderns. One expression of hyperanimism is the prestige currently enjoyed by some theories that attribute agency to things. Perhaps it is a reaction to a world where copies have no originals but algorithms, a reaction to the possibility of a shallow world, finally and completely disenchanted, in which human clones may exist.[111]

So, in the end, the same things are still with us: the fetish, the magical agency of objects, animism, and the disenchanted world haven't left us, despite all our mimetic appropriations of the primitive.

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108 Lindholm 2008, 3.
109 Theodossopoulos 2013, 338.
110 Theodossopoulos 2013, 339.
111 See Ribeiro, in this volume.

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