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## The mimetic creation of the Imaginary

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**Abstract.** Young children learn to make sense of the world through mimetic processes. These processes are focused to begin with on their parents, brothers and sisters and people they know well. Young children want to become like these persons. They are driven by the desire to become like them, which will mean that they belong and are part of them and their world. Young children, and indeed humans in general are social beings. They, more than all non-human primates, are social beings who cannot survive without the Other. In mimetic processes the outside world becomes the inner world and the inner world becomes the outside world. The imaginary is developed and the imaginary develops ways of relating to the outside world. In a mimetic loop, this in turn affects the inner world of the imaginary. These processes are sensory and governed by desire. All the senses are involved which means that the imaginary has multiple layers. Since there is an intermingling of images, emotions and language, these processes are rooted in the body and at the same time transcend the body as they become part of the imaginary. Human beings create images of themselves in all cultures and historical periods. They need these images to understand themselves and their relationship to other human beings and to develop social relations and communities. Images of the human being are designs and projections of the human being and his or her relationship to other people and to the world. They are formed to visualize representations of individuals or aspects of them. They arise when we communicate about ourselves. They support us to live with diversities and to develop similarities and feelings of belonging with other people. They are the result of complex anthropological processes, in which social and cultural power structures play an important role.

**Keywords.** Imaginary, Sustainability, Mimetic processes, Image.

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### ANTHROPOLOGICAL PREREQUISITES OF MIMETIC PROCESSES

Young children learn to make sense of the world through mimetic processes. These processes are focussed to begin with on their parents, brothers and sisters and people they know well. Young children want to become like these persons. They are driven by the desire to become like them, which will mean that they belong and are part of them and their world. Young children, and indeed humans in general are social beings. They, more than all non-human primates, are social beings who cannot survive without the Other. There are several anthropological conditions behind this.

One of these is neoteny, or the fact that human beings are born at an embryonic stage in their development. In other words human beings are born unfinished or incomplete. Their development has to take place once their life has started, and for this to happen they need people who are close to them, people they desire and who they want to be like. Unlike other non-human primates and animals, children are not governed by their instincts. They are equipped only with residual instincts which are not strong enough for them to be able to survive if they are not kept alive by the people close to them.

We can see this clearly if we compare a young child to a foal. A foal is capable of living just a few hours after its birth, whereas it takes young human beings years to reach that stage. Neoteny and the decrease in the instincts are inextricably linked. As philosophical anthropology has also indicated, this explains why human beings are able to grasp the “suchness (*Sosein*)” of phenomena, in other words the world, whereas animals are only able to perceive an environment determined by their instincts (Wulf [2013a]: chap. 2).

It is through mimetic processes that children make their early discoveries of the world. It is not only that children try to become like other people whom they desire. It is also their discovery of the world that is mimetic. These early processes of perceiving the world that are of such central importance in the development of the imaginary, are frequently mimetic. In other words, at a very early stage young children develop an active relationship to the world. They adopt relationships to objects which are conveyed to them largely by the people whom they desire to emulate. For example children follow adults’ movements when adults give them a bottle filled with tea. They perceive the objects “bottle” and “tea” and the movement of the person they love giving them something to drink. As children mimetically appropriate the way the adults they love give them the tea, they feel and appropriate both the act of giving the tea and also the warmth and caring this expresses, over and above the act of tea giving. As children appropriate the action there is an interplay

between the object that quenches their thirst (the bottle) and the child’s appropriation of the emotional aspect of the action, the caring. Young children perceive these processes at an early age, and at this point it is the receptive aspect that is dominant. It is the adults who perform the actions and the children who perceive them. A few months later this changes and the active side of perception becomes more important. A child’s perception of the world is socially transmitted very early on. Since the medium for this is culture, the child becomes “encultured” while very young. This happens via the movements of persons close to the child. These movements convey meanings, even if these are not yet conveyed in words. Children understand the gesture of someone giving them tea (Wulf, Fischer-Lichte [2010]). It contains a meaning, even though this meaning is not articulated verbally. This is because gestures, as non-verbal acts, still convey meaning. What conveys the meaning here is the movement of the body, driven by the senses, which children perceive at a very early age and then repeat, also very early on, in mimetic processes (Gebauer, Wulf [2018]).

It is in mimetic processes that children discover the sense of gestural actions, a sense that is implicit and often does not even need to be conveyed because it has already been conveyed by the body. Such gestural actions form part of our vast silent knowledge, which is very important in human life but to which is often accorded little value in comparison with scientific knowledge which society reveres (Kraus, Budde, Hietzge, Wulf [2017]). Ryle clearly identified the different nature of the knowledge that manifests itself in actions of the body in his distinction between «knowing how» and «knowing that» (Ryle [1990]). Learning to ride a bike is a good illustration of this. I can read a whole treatise about what you have to do when riding a bike, but it will be of very little help to me when learning. Learning to ride a bike does not involve «knowing that» but «knowing how». I need to be able to do it, and have to learn it practically, by using my body. There is no other way I can acquire this knowledge, that is far more an ability. Here too, learning

to ride a bike is the result of mimetic processes, processes that have to relate to other people but above all to the movements of our own bodies. This is a kind of mimesis of ourselves where we develop a mimetic relationship to our own behaviour in order to improve it.

Now let us return to the mimetic processes that take place in young children, by means of which they develop their imaginary. Even before they reach the age of one, they are able to understand the intentions of the people close to them. If someone points at something, for example, they follow the gesture of pointing, not stopping at the finger itself, but grasping that the aim of the pointing is an object and not the finger itself (Tomasello [1999]). It is already apparent in one year olds that they are beginning to use mimetic processes to make sense of the world and gradually transform it into their imaginary. Through mimetic processes the outside world becomes their inner world. As non-verbal actions addressed by subjects towards objects, gestures play an important role in conveying emotional caring and attachment. This is because they are demonstrative and at the same time directed towards the other person. In a mimetic process they convey a positive social relationship and a relationship to the objects of a cultural world. Both of these become absorbed into a child's imaginary in the mimetic process, resulting in a complex interlinking of a cultural object (a bottle), the adult's act of caring and the meaning of this interplay for the child.

In his autobiography, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Walter Benjamin (2006) illustrated how children incorporate their cultural environments in processes of assimilation. In the course of these processes, children assimilate aspects of the parental home, such as the rooms, particular corners, objects and atmospheres. They are incorporated as «imprints» of the images and stored in the child's imaginary world, where they are subsequently transformed into new images and memories that help the child gain access to other cultural worlds. Culture is handed on by means of these processes of incorporating and making sense of cultural products. The mimetic ability to transform the

external material world into images, transferring them into our internal worlds of images and making them accessible to others enables individuals to develop their imaginary and to actively shape cultural realities (Gebauer, Wulf [1998], [2018]; Wulf [2002]; Wulf, Zirfas [2014]).

Even at the age of one, children develop a considerable ability, though the fact that they are very active, to absorb the world around them in mimetic processes. The ability of a child's body to move around plays an important role in this. This physical moving enables them to alter their relationship to objects in the outside world. Their perspective on the world changes as they move. This applies to the corners where the objects are perceived and even more to the changing bodily encounters with the world. The world is touched by the child's hands and often by the child's whole body. As they gradually feel their way around the world children experience two things. One is the active child's experience of touching the objects. But it is also the discovery that, through the act of touching, the world itself replies. Children now feel the differences in material objects and at the same time experience the world outside them. This dual experience of touching objects and being touched by them is of central importance in the development of the very first elements of a sense of a child's identity. The child now has the dual experience of being active and passive at the same time, an experience which characterises mimetic processes. Children touch the world and are touched back by it. This becomes a cyclical process of mutual discovery, and I cannot overstate how important this is for the development of the child's imaginary.

In mimetic processes the outside world becomes the inner world and the inner world becomes the outside world. The imaginary is developed and the imaginary develops ways of relating to the outside world. Again in a mimetic loop, this in turn affects the inner world of the imaginary. These processes are sensory and governed by desire. All the senses are involved which means that the imaginary has multiple layers. Since there is an intermingling of images, emo-

tions and language, these processes are rooted in the body and at the same time transcend the body as they become part of the imaginary (Wulf [2014]; Hüppauf, Wulf [2009]; Paragrana [2016]).

As we read works of literature, it is mimetic processes that bring to life an assemblage of non-sensory words into sensory ideas and emotions and give them meaning (Benjamin [1980a], [1980b]). It is the same with other products of culture that also require mimetic processes for them to come alive. Such processes are particularly important in the transfer of the cultural imaginary from one generation to the next, since these processes require a metamorphosis to keep forms of living, knowledge, art or technology alive. As mimetic processes are not simply methods of copying or producing worlds that have already been symbolically interpreted but also consist in our taking and then incorporating “impressions” of these worlds, these mimetic relationships always contain creative aspects which alter the original worlds. This creates a cultural dynamism between generations and cultures which constantly gives rise to new things.

#### IMAGES OF THE HUMAN BEING: THE VISUALISATION OF THE INVISIBLE

It is in mimetic processes that images of the outside world are transferred to our imaginary. Our imaginary constructs images which shape the outside world (Wulf [2018]). These images also include those we make of ourselves, images in which and by means of which we try to make sense of ourselves. People create images of themselves in all cultures and historical periods. They need these images to communicate about themselves and to understand themselves. Images of the human being are designs and projections of the human being. They are formed in order to visualise representations of the human being or individual aspects of a person. These representations are simplifications of human diversity and complexity in illustrations. A “productive moment” is portrayed here in these representations, as

the discussion about the Laocoon statue shows. Historical developments and interpretative variants are not displayed in such iconic “productive moments”. The special nature of an image lies in the concentration on one moment and in the suggested evidence, but the limits of the iconic representation are also revealed therein. Human images are always simplifications, which, despite their simplifying character, are extremely effective. The power structures of a society which are often difficult to see are incorporated in the construction of the human images. Human images are the result of differentiated inclusion and exclusion processes. Desires, norms and values are conveyed in human images. Human images are aimed at the normalisation of people. Social and cultural institutions, as well as religions, utopias and world views, use human images to portray their conceptions of humans and to embed their ideas in the imaginary and in the actions of humans.

Such human images are clearly expressed, for example in the sculptures of Ancient Greece, in which the ideal of the good and beautiful, the *Kolokagathia*, the unit of physical beauty and spiritual quality, is expressed. Also in the Christian Middle Ages there are human images in which the devout, godly person is represented. The *biblia pauperum* in the churches of the Middle Ages show this clearly. We find representations of godly people subdivided according to status into monks, nobles and peasants, in which the hierarchical structures of the society are also reflected. Nationalism in the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century highlighted numerous idealising images of, for example, the “Germans” and the “French”, which became role models for education and an honourable life. Socialism in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe also tried to embed a certain human image in the imagination of the young generation. Today the European Union also endeavours to achieve the human image of a free, independent democratic citizen as a model of human development and education in Europe (Wulf [1995], [1998]).

## THE IMAGE OF A SUSTAINABLE HUMAN BEING

After the period for the realisation of the millennium objectives set for the developing countries expires in 2015 and succeeds in reducing poverty and illiteracy in many parts of the world, the community of nations is currently working intensively on developing sustainability goals. In this process there are philosophical and anthropological analyses of the ethical questions associated with sustainability, the development and discussion of the feasibility of the sustainability goals, the clarification of the concepts and the consistency of the argumentation and the methodical and argumentative approach. Development is sustainable when it «secures the quality of life of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to shape their life» (DUK 2014). The sustainability objectives arising from this definition are interrelated with a culture of peace and human rights, cultural diversity and democratic participation and the rule of law. A culture of sustainable development is necessary for the transformation of the economy and society. Future-oriented models, ideas, norms and forms of knowledge are required for its development. These should be supplemented by the development of sustainability values and corresponding attitudes and ways of life. The education for sustainable development also plays an important role here. Without it the initiation of independent action is not possible. The international community of states is looking for a human image, on which representatives from all societies and cultures can agree and which can span the cultural differences as a role model. It is currently not clear whether such a human image is possible and whether such an image would destroy the cultural diversity between the parts of the world. There is also reasonable doubt as to whether and to what extent such images can be used to level cultural differences between the geographical regions of the world without cultivating tension between them.

## DEVELOPMENT AND POWER OF IMAGES OF THE HUMAN BEING

Why do we assume that images of the human being and images produced by the human being are so effective? Why do they have such an influence on the development of societies, communities and individuals? I believe three reasons are of particular importance here:

1) Cultural learning takes place using mimetic processes, i.e. processes of creative imitation (Wulf [2013a]; Gebauer, Wulf [2018], [1998]). Images play an important role here. This includes images of other people, images of the living environment and human images occurring gradually in synthetic processes. Human images give orientation and meaning. They are shared with other people and create feelings of belonging and togetherness. Herein lies the sustainability of their effect. Images are not easily adopted, but lived and internalised with other people and their interpretations. They occur in action and language games. In contrast to the instincts of animals, they are historically and culturally determined and can be changed.

2) Human images have profound effects because they occur at least partly in childhood and create a sense of being part of a community. They occupy the imaginary and become part of the imagination. They influence our perception of the world, culture and other people and our own self-perception. Human images become part of the person and his imagination and have an influence on his emotions. They are repeated and consolidated by the rhythms and rites of life. Like plants with extended roots, particular and universal human images are fixed in the imagination and gain effect from the connection with already existing ideas and images (Hüppauf, Wulf [2009]).

3) As images of the imagination and the imaginary, human images become part of the body (Wulf 2018; Pragrana 2016). They are inherent and therefore can be difficult to change. Often they consist not only of individual images, but of

picture sequences, even of picture networks, with which heterogeneous, sometimes even paradoxical images are “captured”. As a result, existing human images are repeatedly confirmed and their importance is reinforced (Wulf [2014]).

#### THE WORLD BECOMES AN IMAGE

A characteristic of modernity is the fact that the world is opposite to man and is perceived as an object and an image. In ancient times, people, animals and the environment were part of living nature, the *Physis*. They were generally perceived as similar to each other. They were stimulated by the power, the dynamis of nature, the *Physis*. This relationship of people to the world was retained in the Middle Ages. Animals, people and world are created by God and have a common creatureliness. In the modern era this relationship of the (Western) human being to the world, to other people and to themselves changes. Nature is no longer experienced as animated. It becomes the object. Human beings are no longer part of nature or the world created by God, but are opposite to it; they measure it and register it as “object”. In this process the world becomes an image. With the development of new media this trend increases. Not only the world and other people are perceived as images, we ourselves are also increasingly perceiving ourselves in the mode of images. The widespread use of digital photography in everyday life and especially the selfies are proof of this (Kontopodis, Varvantakis, Wulf [2017]). Using electronic photos or films we create all important events, and ultimately create an image of ourselves (Wulf [2013a], [2013b]).

Human images show the central role images play, and with them the imagination and the imaginary world, for the constitution of the person and his education. They also make it clear how strongly the images are defined by their respective historical and cultural character and how important their research is within the framework of anthropology. Human images are images which the person creates of himself, and whose

significance must be understood for his perception of the world, his memories and his future projections. They are generated by social and cultural practices of everyday life and by the arts. Human images become part of the collective and individual social and cultural imaginary world and thus play a part in shaping human activities. The creation of images is a feature, which we share as human beings, whose form, however, is very different in history and in different cultures. As the images and the imaginary world visualise something, which would otherwise remain invisible, their research is an important area of anthropology.

What we describe as an “image” is different, meaning that the spectrum of the term is broad and requires a range of further clarification. Sometimes we mean the result of visual perception processes. Under the influence of neuroscience and its visualisation strategies, the results of the perception with other senses are often even described as “images”. We then speak about mental or “inner” images, which bring to mind something which is not actually present. These include, for example, souvenir pictures, which differ to the perceptions due to their vagueness. The same applies to sketches or drafts of future situations, to dreams, hallucinations or visions. Many aesthetic products also take the form of images. They are products of a process aimed at the creation of an image. As metaphors, they are ultimately a constitutive element of language. Creating images, recognising images as images, dealing with images using one’s imagination, is a universal capability of humans (Wulf [2014], [2018]). However, it varies depending on the historical period and culture. Because which images we see and how we see images is determined by complex historical and cultural processes. How we perceive images and deal with them is also influenced by the unique nature of our life history and subjectivity.

Like all images, human images are the result of energetic processes. They transform the world of objects, actions and other people into images. Using the imagination they are imagined and become part of the collective and individual imag-

inary world. Many of these processes are mimetic and result in an assimilation to other people, environments, ideas and images. In mimetic processes the outer world becomes the “inner world”, which is a world of images (Gebauer, Wulf [2018], [1998]). This world of imaginary images plays a part in shaping the outer world. As these images are performative, they contribute to the emergence of actions and to the production and performance of our relationship to other people and to our surrounding world. The imaginary world is the place of the images as such, the destination of the imagination process generating the images. At the same time, it is the starting point of the mimetic and performative energies of the images.

#### IMAGE AND IMAGINATION

Not unlike language is imagination a *conditio humana*, a human condition, whose foundations lie in the constitution of the human body (Adorno [1984]; Belting [2001]; Hüppauf, Wulf [2009]; Wulf [2013b], [2018]). The performativity, i.e. the orchestrated character of human action, is a consequence of the principle openness and role which the imagination plays in the form of this openness. With its help the past, present and future are interwoven. Imagination creates the world of the person, the social and cultural, the symbolic and the imaginary. It creates human images. It makes possible history and culture and thus historic and cultural diversity. It creates the world of images and the imaginary and is involved in the creation of the practices with the body. Not only is an awareness of these practices required for their production and performance. In reality, they must be incorporated and be part of a practical, body-based, implicit knowledge, whose dynamic character makes possible social and cultural changes and designs. Here mimetic processes based on the imagination are of central importance. Cultural learning takes place in these processes, which creates a social and cultural identity that is a central prerequisite for well-being and happiness.

Imagination plays a central role for all forms of social and cultural action and its concentration in human and world images. Using images, diagrams, models, etc., it controls the human behaviour and action. Images are defining moments of the action, whose significance is constantly increasing. This leads to the question what makes an image and what types of images can be distinguished. For example, mental images can be distinguished from manually and technically generated images, as well as moving and non-moving images.

Imagination is of fundamental importance not only in global art. It plays an important role in the genesis of the *Homo sapiens sapiens* and its cultures. References to the aesthetic design of bone scrapers can be traced back several hundred thousand years (Wulf [2014]). People’s access to the world and the world’s access to the “inner” person takes place using the imagination in the form of images.

A distinction can be made between magical images, representative images and simulated images. Magical images have no reference connection; they *are* what they portray. The statue of the “Golden Calf” is the holy thing; with a relic the body part of the holy thing is the holy thing. The situation is different for representative images which are often based on mimetic processes. They refer to something which they portray themselves or are not. Photos are included here which show situations which are the past and not the present. Simulated images are images which have become possible with the new processes of electronic media and are playing an increasing role in the lives of people. The difference between the perceived and the mental images is important. Each presentation is an expression of the fact that an object is missing. This is obvious for souvenir pictures and future projections. The perceived images based on existing objects have an influence on both.

Pathological images, visions and dreams also differ to perceived and souvenir pictures. In all cases the imagination is involved in the creation of the images. With help of the imagination men-

tal or “inner” worlds of images emerge, in which emotions are crystallised. The dynamics of the imagination combines people and creates a sense of community. Its ludic character creates connections between images and new images can emerge.

### MIMESIS AND IMAGINARY

With help of mimetic processes individuals, communities and cultures create the imaginary. This can be understood as a materialised world of images, sounds, touch, smell and taste. It is the precondition that people perceive the world in a historically and culturally influenced manner. The imagination remembers and creates, combines and projects images. It creates reality. At the same time, the reality helps the imagination to create images. The images of the imagination have a dynamic character structuring the perception, memory and future. The networking of the images follows the dialectic and rhythmical movements of the imagination. Not only everyday life, but also literature, art and performing arts, obtain an inexhaustible memory of images. Some appear to be stable and hardly changeable. In contrast, others are subject to the historic and cultural change. Imagination has a symbolising dynamic, which continuously creates new meanings and uses images for this purpose. Interpretations of the world are developed using these images created by the imagination (Hüppauf, Wulf [2009]; Wulf [2018]).

In contrast to the general use of the concept of the imaginary, Jacques Lacan primarily emphasises the delusional character of the imaginary. Desires, wishes and passion play a central role here in that people cannot escape from the imaginary. For them there is no direct relationship to the real world. As a speaking entity, people can only develop a fractured relationship with the real world via the symbolic order and the imagination. With its help they can try to hold their own ground against the forces of the imaginary. «The socially effective imaginary is an internal world which has a strong tendency to shut itself off and

develop to some extent an infinite immanence; in contrast, the human fantasy, imagination, is the only power capable of forcing open the enclosed spaces and can temporarily exceed it, because it is identical to the discontinuous phenomenon of time» (Kamper [1986]: 32-33). This compulsive character of the imaginary creates the limits of human life and development opportunities. This clarification of the compulsive character of the imaginary is so important, it only makes up one part of the range of meanings, which describes the diversity and ambivalence of cultural visual knowledge according to the opinion expressed here.

Imagination has a strong performative power, which produces and performs social and cultural actions. Imagination helps create the imaginary world, which includes images stored in memory, images of the past and the future. Using mimetic movements the iconic character of the images can be captured. In the reproduction of its image character the images are incorporated in the imaginary. As part of the mental world they are references of the outer world. Which images, structures and models become part of the imaginary depends on many factors. In these images the presence and absence of the outer world is inextricably interwoven. Images emerging from the imaginary are transferred from the imagination to new contexts. Image networks develop, with which we transform the world and which determine our view of the world.

The performative character of the imagination ensures the images of the social field make up a central part of the imaginary (Wulf, Zirfas [2007]). The power structures of the social relationships and social structures are represented therein. Many of these processes have their roots in people’s childhoods and take place to a large extent unconsciously. The perception of social constellations and arrangements is already learned during this time. These earlier visual experiences and the resulting images play an important, irreplaceable role in the visual understanding of the world. A comprehending viewing of social actions arises through the fact that biographically influ-



enced historical and cultural diagrams and mental images play a part in every perception. We see social actions and relate to them in their perception. As a result, these actions become more important for us. If the actions of other people are directed at us, the impulse to link a relationship originates from these; a response on our part is expected. In each case a relationship is formed, for whose inception the images of our imagination form an important precondition. We enter an action and do not act according to the expectations in this social arrangement, be it that we respond to them, modify them or act contrary to them. Our action is mimetic to a lesser extent because of similarity, but more because of the generated correspondences. Embedded in an action, we perceive the actions of the other and act mimetically.

#### OUTLOOK

Our imaginary is created essentially through mimetic processes which also use the images of the imaginary to shape the outside world. Images of the human being are key to our understanding of ourselves. They are irreducible. They arise because we communicate about ourselves and must develop similarities and feelings of belonging with other people. They are the result of complex anthropological processes, in which social and cultural power structures play an important role. Owing to their iconic character, they reduce the complexity of the person and his being-in-the-world to select features and do not create a complete view of the person. There are approximations to the *homo absconditus*, the human being who cannot fully understand himself (Wulf [2013b]). In the *Ten Commandments* there is therefore talk that the human should not create an image of God and by analogy – today we would say – no image should be made from another human being. Images and mimetic processes are important for our relationship with the world, with other people and with ourselves. Image critic is required in order to escape the power of interpretation of

images and in particular images of the human being. The same applies to a critical view of the ideas and images created in the discourses on the human being. We must recognise the importance of images, mimesis and imagination for the development of the imaginary and for the understanding of the human being.

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