# Mimesis and Composition: Introduction

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**Abstract**
A brief overview is offered of a special issue of papers associated with the Padova Summer School on Philosophy and Cultural Studies of Technology. The two key concepts of mimesis and composition are presented in relation to the various themes in the collection. It is shown how mimetic protocols of repetition and reproduction are linked to the inexhaustible multiplicity of compositional patterns in all domains of human activity. There are two thematic poles investigated by the different contributions: science and technology on the one hand, and on the other hand enchantment and magic. These two domains, for a long time opposed, appear as different imitative ways of composing the world within a horizon of meaning. In this perspective, phenomena such as play or experiences such as sound or smell, take on a driving theoretical role. Viewed as a whole, they constitute the lemmata of a new and more comprehensive fundamental anthropology.

**Keywords:** Cultural Studies of Technology; Play; Mimesis and Composition; Technology and Magic; Experiment and Enchantment; Sound and Smell; Form and Function

# Мимесис и композиция: Введение

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**Аннотация**
Предлагается краткий обзор специального выпуска статей, связанных с Летней школой по философии и культурологии в Падуе. Две ключевые концепции мимесиса и композиции представлены в связи с различными темами выпуска. Показано, как миметические приемы повторения и воспроизведения связаны с неисчерпаемым разнообразием композиционных схем во всех областях человеческой деятельности. Есть два тематических полюса, исследуемых в разных статьях: наука и техника, с одной стороны, и колдовство и магия, с другой стороны. Эти две давно противопоставленные области предстают как разные подражательные способы компоновки мира в пределах смыслового горизонта. С этой точки зрения такие явления, как игра, или такой опыт, как звук или запах, приобретают ведущую теоретическую роль. В целом они составляют леммы новой и более всеобъемлющей фундаментальной антропологии.

**Ключевые слова:** Культурологические исследования технологии; Игра; Мимесис и композиция; Технологии и магия; Эксперимент и очарование; Звук и запах; Форма и функция

This special issue brings together the results of an intensive research effort undertaken from 2019 to 2022 in Germany, Italy and Russia.[1] In addition to frequent meetings and exchanges between researchers involved in seminars, conferences, and workshops, an important part of the debate was conducted at two summer schools collaboratively organized at the University of Padova, one in September 2019 (Playgrounds – Technology, Art and the Socialization of People and Things ), the other - after a "pandemic-induced pause" - in September 2022 (*Technology and Magic*). Aside from the Padova Summer Schools on Philosophy and Cultural Studies of Technology, there was a workshop in April 2022 on *Mimesis and Composition – Anthropological Perspectives on Technology and Art*.[2]

A small selection of contributions that emerged from these activities are here collected under the heading *Mimesis and Composition*. This title was chosen not merely to capture attention, but because the group of researchers felt that these two lemmata indicate a whole array of topics, all tied to the view of human "technicism" as a core issue in an anthropology envisaged as a fundamental philosophical discipline. Movements and repetitions, games and manipulations, cognitive practices and systems of rules are just a few of the ways in which *homo faber* has adapted himself and the things around him with a view to shaping living worlds that are never "natural", but always manufactured to suit multiple needs. Mimesis and composition form part of a constellation of attitudes and dispositions that our species has always possessed.

It is always worth stressing that "mimesis" does not merely mean "imitation", nor should it ever be confused with the image or representation of something. An act of mimesis always involves "repeating" and "reshaping" something out of another material: what counts is not a capacity to adapt to a model, but a potential for difference that is released during the mimetic transposition process. If this were not the case, it would have been hard for the concept of mimesis to be applied to such diverse practices as social behavior, theatre, the plastic and pictorial arts, the novel, and latest technological and scientific advances. In actual fact, if we look at all these aspects, mimesis may no longer even exist as an idea. It seems to take action like a machine capable of producing new orders of sense starting from any kind of material, a machine capable of making structures fixed, and habits and action protocols stable.

Mimesis also works by means of a compositional effect, which explains the choice of the second term. "Composition" has two closely-linked meanings: the act, operation, or work of composing, i.e. of combining things together in an orderly and organic manner; and also the result of this process. It is impossible to circumscribe the vast number of settings to which the logic of composition applies: from our use of language, for a start, to the ways in which different figurative elements are distributed, organized and emphasized in the figurative arts and photography, especially for the purposes of stylistic unity; or in architecture, in the methods and criteria used to arrange and organize various parts of a building or sets of living units. But compositional rules also affect every domain

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[1] To date, the core group of discussants included Natascha Adamowsky, Fabio Grigenti, Natalia Nikiforova, Alfred Nordmann, Oliver Schlaudt, Astrid Schwarz, and Cheryce von Xylander, with contributions also by Pelle Ehn, Tim Ingold, and Maria Muhle.

[2] The series continues with a September 2023 summer-school on *Animal Technologies*.

in which there is a question of the relationship between a part and the whole, or of combinations of elements based on their qualities or differences. The structure of digital multiverses is compositional too, and the succession of rules that apply in games has more or less clearly defined purposes in every actions circuit.

Mimesis and Composition ultimately reveal a technicism that questions every dualism, and especially the one between nature and culture. Things belonging to the natural and behavioral worlds of the living become less foreign when seen from the mimetic and compositional standpoint because they are permeated by the same logic. As we shall see later, this logic can be transposed, as is, to the human world without posing the problem of making us think of some unassailable principle of otherness. We will find the above-outlined aspects explained, in different settings and different ways, in the contributions that follow.

Natascha's Adamowsky (2022) study *Productive Indeterminacy: On the Relationship between Play and Science*, undertakes a fundamental theoretical task: to give a unified vision of play, understanding it as a constitutive factor of culture, both in the formation of the culture itself and in the results that the practice of playing produces. Adamowsky's approach - seeing play as a special combination of movement and encounter and the player as someone who participates in his surroundings in a mode of productive indeterminacy - is very promising because it leads to seeing play phenomena in a plural perspective, but at the same time as unifying fields (art, language, science) that otherwise would be separate. The question Benedetta Milani (2022) starts from in her is *On the Mythical Atmosphere of the Digital World*: Can the digital world be put in analogy to the mythical world? In the contribution, an affirmative answer is given on the basis of the mimetic/constructive characteristics of the digital: the absence of contingency (determinism) and the immersive character of digital practices. Based on these elements, Milani goes so far as to argue that the process of digitization of our contemporary form of life brings with it the assumption of a new paradigm of rationality that is no longer centered on the notion of the subject as this is thought of by modernity. In his contribution, *The Pledge, the Turn, the Prestige:The Border Between Magic and Technology as Practice,* Federico Monaro addresses the classic topic of the relationship between magic and technology. In particular, he seeks to show how - in the most recent era - technology tends to invade the field of "magic" creating a new form of relationship between the two orders. Relevant are the ethical consequences that Monaro draws from this new epistemic situation.

In her study, *Enchanting Narratives: A Historical Ethnography of Contemplative Science,* Mareike Smolka (2022) deals with so-called "contemplative science". This term refers to an interdisciplinary field of research that primarily uses neuroscientific, psychological, and clinical approaches to study the biochemical, psychophysiological, behavioral, and subjective changes that occur during and as a result of contemplative practices. The problem that guides Smolka in her essay is the following: how does the contemplative science community tell the story by operating a kind of re-enchantment on the epistemic set-up of the brain sciences? Combining quasi-anthropological observations and document analysis, Smolka examines how scientists and scholars involved in contemplative science narrate the history of their field as a project of re-enchantment. An

unexpected but convincing picture emerges: the re-enchantment is the effect of the narrative composition of incommensurable world narratives, encompassing Eastern contemplation and Western science, ethical meaning and materialist brain research, charismatic and rational authority.

Especially intriguing is the paper of Daria Bylieva and Anton Zamorev, *Father Christmas: Magic and Technology*, dedicated to Santa Claus. As the authors describe, Santa Claus is today the last figure who bears witness to the belief in miracles. He collects wishes and delivers his gifts using tricks and technologies, certainly outdated today. The study examines hundreds of examples (postcards, films, stories, toys, games, etc.) demonstrating the use of new technologies by Santa Claus and clearly identifies a new tendency to attribute the magical powers of Santa Claus to the use of ultra-complex technologies, a tendency that perhaps also in this case indicates the emergence of a "post-logical" thought incapable of drawing meaning from a magical story (Bylieva and Zamorev, 2022).

In his contribution, *Language in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Sven Thomas (2022) leads us to reflect on the case of machine translation. He wants to explore the effects that language composition processing systems might have on our languages. Building on the authority of Walter Benjamin, Sven Thomas argues in favor of the thesis that machine translation can be seen as a technology that reproduces the language itself. This sort of strange conservative mimesis of the words would produce important effects: especially as regards the interactive function of speech.

In *Magic Materialism: From Atmospheric Technologies to Sonic Possible worlds. Towards Architecture of Affect*, Irina Oznobikhina (2022) focuses on the philosophical concept of the atmosphere. Her focus is on the spatial arts, especially the use of sound and light, and asks about the connection between material and affective qualities. Particularly significant in this contribution is the idea of an atmospheric ontology, whose magical composition appears to depend on multiple factors: sound imagination, a certain modality of belief and state of mind *(Stimmung)*. Equally relevant is the non-rational and non-invasively masculine meaning attributed to the experience of atmosphere. In *The Composition of Saint Petersburg Scents: Smellwalks for Urban Exploration,* Elizaveta Solomatova and Maria Bogatryrenko focus on the sense of smell and reconstruct an unexpected image of the city of St. Petersburg through the composition of smells. Starting from the testimonies of people engaged in an olfactory tour of the city, they build a series of different compositions of smells - which, based on facts such as the smells themselves, emotions and places - return as many olfactory maps of the city. Evident appears here the power of composition, which by using the same elements, but varying them as a whole, always produces new horizons of meaning and alternative images of the world.

Particularly focused on mimesis is the contribution of Marco Tamborini (2022): *Philosophy of Biorobotics: Translating and Composing Bio-hybrid forms*. The thesis advanced by the author is the following: the combinatorial practice of bionics, biomimetics, biorobotics and all the design strategies inspired by nature is not based on a biomimetic inspiration (that is, on a sort of imitation of nature) but on a translation practice. The case examined to develop this hypothesis is the practice of contemporary bio-robotics. Three theoretical elements should be highlighted around this paper: the

reference to the "constructive/copositive" value of mimesis, the notion of "form" that emerges from this and the reflection on the role played by philosophy. *In Composing and combining: Opposing constructive principles?* Astrid Schwarz deals directly with the theme of composition starting from the relevant problem of whether it is possible to distinguish between principles of composition and principles of combination. In a provocative but theoretically convincing way, Schwarz demonstrates that - starting from the case of the gardenworks – composition and combination can be characterized by a complementary heuristic of collecting and connecting things, and also that different practices are used in the creation of the work. This approach appears particularly relevant for its consequences: on the one hand it indicates a scene of thought where art and technology are no longer opposite domains on the other hand it allows us to glimpse the possibility of a renewed techno-politics not based on the domination of nature. Finally, the reader will find the discussion between Marco Tamborini and Astrid Schwarz on their respective visions of mimetic and compositional processes. Thanks also to the commentary by Alfred Nordmann, the two figures of the *homo translator* and *homo hortensis* emerge as a heuristically valuable conclusion of this special issue.

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