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*Consequences of the Re-elaboration of Mimesis:  
The Question of Control*

Hitherto Costa Lima has defined the control of the imaginary almost exclusively as a negative operation. Here he broadens his own self-questioning and theorising – through an engagement with the work of Arnold Gehlen and the notion of man as a ‘deficient being’ – to consider the positive aspects of such control. However, this distinction, and the movement between the positive and negative forms of control, carries within in it a further problematisation: ‘there are no unequivocal, yet absolutely objective, signs to indicate passing from one to the other,’ which leads to ‘the importance of detecting the contours of control, of interpreting the moment in which it ceases responding to human frailty to become a protector of the created interests.’

Excerpt from *Vida e Mimesis* (p 290-299) © 1995 by Luiz Costa Lima, Rio de Janeiro: Editora 34. This book is not currently translated in English. This excerpt has been translated exclusively for this Special Issue of *Crossroads* by Jane Lamb-Ruiz.

## CONSEQUENCES OF THE RE-ELABORATION OF *MIMESIS*: THE QUESTION OF CONTROL

Visualization of the existence of a control exerted over the imaginary was, for this author, the immediate derivation of re-elaborating *mimesis*. *A posteriori*, the connection would even appear to have been automatic: the assumption of systematic control exerted over a work – the fictional work – by excellence of the imaginary would not have a way to be historically proven, if, before that, *mimesis* had not been domesticated, or tamed, by a category with even greater scope – the first Aristotelian notions, Hegel's teleological dialectic – or dissolved in the consequences of the centrality conferred on the individual. These consequences are quite broad. In what is known as textualism, whereby the thinking of the first romantics was kept within dominant contemporary practice, *mimesis* is seen as a spurious figure that involves the arrival on the scene of an external model that arbitrarily governs reception of the work of art. In the Hegelian view, on the contrary, *mimesis* is given a meaning different from an *imitatio*-turned banal, as it swept through moments in time in the history of the human mind. In the evolutionist or deterministic practices that govern social/historic assessment, starting with the 19th century, Hegelian speculation is laid aside to the benefit of a specific framework of arrangements resulting in the same subordination of the *mimema* to weightier factors. Although each of these directions opens up a vast field of research on the waning of *mimesis*, its shift into anthropology and its destiny in Freudian theory seem particularly interesting. Most questioning of the notion of *mimesis*, starting with the twentieth century, was concentrated in anthropological research, i.e., in its being observed in the society of the other, which is, by definition inferior, or less complex than a society of ego. In the latter, as Adorno and Horkheimer indicated, “organic adaptation to others and mimetic behavior itself” was replaced “by organized control of *mimesis*”, in such a way “self-recognition in the concept”, the absorption of the different by the same, takes the place of physical adaptation to nature.”<sup>i</sup> It therefore does not appear odd that the attention focused on *mimesis* was limited to a discipline specializing in “primitive” or illiterate societies. Nor, in this sense, does it appear fortuitous that one of the most penetrating proposals for re-reading *mimesis* come from an anthropologist: Michael Taussig.<sup>ii</sup> If I have understood Taussig's proposition properly, he proposes breaking with the idea that *mimesis* is only a valid category for societies that missed the train of history, and coming to see it as an instrument for the critical empowerment of societies. But, as this is not the place for systematizing my observations, I shall restrict myself to pointing out that the shifting of *mimesis* to anthropology was not a random happenstance and to the kind of role that we see was in store for it in Freudian theory. In both cases, the presence of *mimesis* connoted some abnormality or disturbance, whether on the order of the society or the individual.

The purpose of this retrospective was to outline the environment in which this questioning of control took shape and to attempt to approach it in another way.

This said, it will be necessary to dissect the assertion about the opening up of this issue: although the problem of control has been viewed based on the understanding of the domestication to which *mimesis* was subjected, from the advent of modern times, would it be correct to tell oneself that control over the imaginary derives from the subjection of *mimesis*? Would it not be, on the contrary, that control historically has much greater impact historically on the defined subjection? This seems plausible if we consider the extent to which *mimesis* had become, after the first romantics, contemptible in art criticism, and which not even then control could soften. Could the formula not be reversed and could it not be said that control over the imaginary has an impact independently of venerating art as mimetic discourse?

This is the directional bearing I ascribe to the commentary that Norbert Bolz introduces in his analysis of *Religion of Reason (Religion der Vernunft)* by Hermann Cohen: “The prohibition of images is . . . the basically Jewish source that fees Cohen's religion of reason.”<sup>iii</sup> By making the cult of reason derive from the prohibition of representing God in images, Bolz opens up the possibility for making a more generic assumption: in the Western tradition – known to be strongly influenced by Christianity – it is feasible to understand the *Bildenverbot* (forbidden image) of the divine as the seed for domestication of *mimesis* and the broader control of the imaginary. The Greek legacy would, through a different front, arrive at the same result based not on religious disposition but on a properly cognitive one.

But this result is not yet satisfactory as it inclines us to accept correlating the subjection of *mimesis* to assertions about a controlling network. It is correct that the latter is said to be broader than being merely rooted in restrictions against use of the image (*eikon*). But on what would this broader impact be based?

One may legitimately say: any society in which the impropriety of depicting images of some type of being (whether God or the individual subject) is asserted or some type of principle – primary notions or teleological history – is argued, legitimizes potential control of the imaginary.

This extension of the figure of control is frightening in itself. I had not the slightest notion of this when I began to research it. The very fact that *O Controle do imaginário* (1984) (*Control of the Imaginary*, 1988) eventually turned into a trilogy, while adhering to the self-imposition of dealing with only modern works, empirically showed that a monster with tentacles had been found. And the end provided in the trilogy meant nothing other than: we are facing an ever-growing snowball.

I had to make do with acknowledging that I was confronted with unraveling an endless extension chord. That's why, further on, I sought to draw nearer to it from another angle. In this, I was no longer thinking that I could still attest to its presence or whether it might be a weapon turned against the poet, because, often, the poets themselves efficaciously propagated it. But I did seek to understand the reason that moves this omnivorous force. This initial motivation was what guided *Limites da voz* (1993) (*The Limits of Voice*, 1996): the attempt to understand the modern reason for control.

The same attempt is now being re-iterated although from a different angle. Now the starting point is not so much the supposition that since the Renaissance thinking retooled instruments of control of the fictional but rather the not less plausible assertion that there is a direct articulation of the social order and updating of the control.

An almost banal observation becomes clear here: while, as of the first page of the first book of the trilogy the negative meaning of "control" was used – the establishment of limits within which the practice of this art was acceptable, valid, and even stimulated – the more usual, earlier use of the term emphasizes its positive meaning. The sentence that draws our attention in the first volume of *José e seus irmãos* (*Joseph and his brothers*), "Thus, as so many times happens in the history of the world that repression of desires and forces finds release in triumphs of the spirit" – could occur in dozens of the most diverse contexts. Oddly, a correspondence is seen to Hegel's passage that reads: "Desire is all the more brutal and domineering the more the entire man is taken over by it, such that he fails to become free of – as a general proposition – this determination. In a case such as this, a man will say, for example: the passion is stronger than I am"<sup>iv</sup>

The term "control" has a meaning that is as positive as it is negative. And, as my research will focus mainly on the second, the question arises: How is the much greater frequency of the positive meaning explained? And, from this, stems another seemingly more complicated question: Is it possible, instead of merely observing the existence of these antagonistic meanings, to think the movement from one to the other?

To put the question on track, the best context is that of an anthropology with non-substantialist roots. For this, the examination of the theses of Arnold Gehlen will serve as the ground for fertilization of the questions.

Instead of man being taken as a superior animal, he is, from a strictly biological perspective, the problematic creature. "Man is a being [*ein solches*] to whom tasks were set; tasks, which, having been given by existence itself, are not resolved by it."<sup>v</sup> Man's problematical condition arises from inadequate instruments for some specific type of life: "The lack of specialization [of man] signifies the absence of an environment (*Umwelt*) that matches him naturally, in which he might live in biological balance. Whence the necessity to ensure through self-initiative (*Selbsttätigkeit*) the survival of a creature who is totally exposed, organically defenseless and without protection."<sup>vi</sup>

It is from here that comes the constant necessity of self-interpretation and establishing a meaning for existence itself. Precisely because man is the one who suffers from reduced instincts and by prematurity (*Frühgeburt*), the exigency of interpreting oneself to oneself and to the world is not an additional or excessive task but one imposed by the precariousness of the place he occupies within the biological kingdom. It is from this initial lack, and not in spite of it, that man reaches his position.

Even this firmly coordinated and species-specific reduction of instinct and absence of means of discharge (*Auslösenwerte*) now show themselves from another angle to be chronic pressure. . . . There is a direct correlation between the existential conditions constituting man and his chronic lack"<sup>vii</sup>

This picture already allows us to foresee the importance of the praxis of control. But Gehlen doesn't leave it between the lines, either:

The "incompleteness" belongs to his physical conditions, to his nature. In this sense, he is a being of discipline (*ein Wesen der Zucht*); self-discipline, education, and achievement of skills to attain and remain in a certain state (*In-Form-Kommen und in-Form-Bleiben*) belong to the conditions of existence of a being who is not determined."<sup>viii</sup>

Within this self-disciplinary and skill-learning apparatus, Gehlen emphasizes the “capacity to inhibit (*Hemmbarkeit*) and to defer (*Verschiebbarkeit*) necessities and interests”<sup>xix</sup>. And, as this is the author’s very method of argumentation, his lengthy book insists on and, repeatedly reiterates, the connection between man’s problematical condition and the process of self-control, as a manner of escaping his precariousness. A new angle, however, appears in the final third of *Der Mensch*. Let’s look more closely at this paradigmatic passage.

As human impulses are flexible, excessive and differed, the actions that match them are not exactly discharges to stimuli from the environment, but, indirect actions, increasingly indirect actions. They reach their target by efficient and careful planning. Or, that is, they again are related to the world, but in such a manner as to not be depleted by a situation in the present. A situation in the present is taken only as a starting point for various circumstances of time and space.<sup>x</sup> That is, indirect action itself inherent to human action implies self-perception of its mode of proceeding and not its mere relationship to the world, regardless of the extent of its deferral. Therein, Gehlen continues, lays a great risk, “the constitutional risk” that man’s “actions and impulses” no longer refer to the world but, rather, become infinitely re-attuned and pursue themselves.<sup>xii</sup> Expressed more straightforwardly, the risk lays in the impulses removing themselves from their possible effect on the world. There is only one remedy for this danger: “the open social contact (*Verfassung*)” that the social system should promote and even impose.”<sup>xii</sup>

This sentence seems intriguing: how could an *open* contact be socially imposed? Overall, the next part clarifies this. “Discipline as education and self-discipline, subordination and direction (*Führung*), activity and work directed away from oneself are the skeleton that shapes impulses”, thus becoming the necessary condition for impulses – that continue to respond to “vital necessities” – to be detoured away from the threats surrounding them.<sup>xiii</sup>

In short: since man does not have a biologically delimited boundary, by not being an animal that survives within a stimulus-response scheme, etc, he is forced to rely on his own impulse modeling (*Antriebe*), to learn to inhibit them, and to postpone the moment of satisfying them. This is, one could say, the constitutionally positive aspect of control. However, the solution of inhibiting and deferring impulses creates another problem. As man uses this solution to plan his contact with the world, this governed impulse is no longer a mere springboard to make his agent reencounter the world; rather, it does enable him to learn to please himself. In terms recently used by Niklas Luhmann, taking the social system as being auto-poietic, each one of its areas, i.e., each different area of society, tends to produce its auto-poieticism, becoming autonomous from the obligations with the whole, or, as Gehlen would rather say, in the re-encounter with the world. This state of being autonomous, as Gehlen would say, thus occurs to the detriment of society. *It is precisely here that the passage to what we would call negative control would be located.* It should, however, be stressed: within Gehlen’s thinking there is no such difference. *Rather, to Gehlen, the two modalities of control – the self-modeling of impulses and the vigilance in avoiding autonomously shaped modeling – would be equally necessary and positive.*

Then, why do I take the second modality of control as negative? Because, on the basis of the justification that the “social system” protects itself with this modality of control, the autonomization of a subsystem is opposed, based on the interests of another subsystem, i.e., in the interests of mastery over society being maintained by a certain portion of that society. We accept that there has never been any human society that did not practice social asymmetry. However, to infer from this that inequality is a natural fact is to go a long way. That’s why not emphasizing the difference between the positive and the negative modalities of control, at least from the moment when we become aware of it, would be equal to postulating the natural conditions of forms of control.

The relationship between control of the imaginary and the system of power becomes very clear by the research that shapes the Control trilogy. The controlling subsystems constituted by the religious-philosophical subsystem, from the XVI to the XVIII centuries, and later on, and the scientific subsystem, correlated respectively to sectors of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, tamed the practice of arts (and to stay within my area: the art of the verb) in the name of a truth, that was formulated by a certain type of discourse – the one guided by theology and by the practice of natural sciences, respectively – a truth which was considered violated by artistic manifestations, which, Gehlen would say, did not lead back to the world. Or, bluntly stated, ones that questioned the existing order.

I could be happy taking for granted having used the intelligence of the thinker for the benefit of a proposition not his own. But the result I achieved does not allow satisfaction. In accordance with Gehlen’s formulation, the imposition of both sides of control is inherent to human society as a whole, and not to any particular one or any particular period of time.

The reader might say to him or herself that the observation is less terrible if – in contradistinction to Gehlen’s original proposition – we make a distinction between the positive and the negative side of control. It is here, however, that what is terrifying arises: there are no unequivocal, yet absolutely objective, signs to indicate passing from one to the other. The qualifications of control are effects of interpretation; and, as such, depend on a pre-existing vision of how human society should be. If, therefore, we use the principle scientific knowledge preaches about keeping away from the aporia of value, so that research does not become biased, we should have go back to not making a distinction between the two sides of control. The aporia I uphold is not so much one of defending poetry than one about the importance of detecting the contours of control, of interpreting the moment in which it ceases responding to human frailty to become a protector of the created interests.

The reflection above results in: (a) the two modalities of control acting on and being inherent to the very society formed by such a precarious animal as man. This assertion is not only valid for what we call positive control but also extends to negative control; by virtue of there not being any society which, as a result of social asymmetry, i.e., power being exercised by one part of a society (social estate or class), does not select some form of discourse with which it states the truth and which other forms of discourse must adhere to and not transgress; (b) saying that the two modalities of control do not have “natural” distinctive traits and thus are the results of interpretation, which means that, in “scientific” practice, the conditions for observing a difference between them today are not present. Rather, the tendency would be to consider this difference “romantic”, excessive, and unrealistic, etc. Let us think about this.

One way of removing emotionality from this issue might be to go along with Luhmann in his conception of society as a self-poietic system.

Yet they are closed self-referential systems or, more precisely, systems which articulate their relations with the environs based on closed, looping operational interrelations closed. . . . Everything functioning within the system as a unit acquires its unity through the system itself. This applies not only to structures and processes, but also to each and every element, which may no longer be broken down in the system itself<sup>xiv</sup>

Based on the principle of systemic self-production, Luhmann argues that the structure of modern society “enables the formation of functionally related partial auto-poietic systems,” a formation is conditioned “by the functional differentiation of the social system.”<sup>xv</sup> Since this is evident in the case of legal and economic subsystems, it would be even more plausible in the case of the arts.<sup>xvi</sup>

What is the price to be paid for achieving de-emotionalizing in this manner? I suspect that a theory which explains everything results in our missing the possibility of punctuating particular issues. In other words, bringing social functionality up to date once again in the manner of Luhmann justifies not emphasizing tensions – removing the histrionics – from human history since, in the end, they may be brought into equilibrium once again. These tensions would be part of the *petite histoire*, somehow touching in themselves but irrelevant. The question, however, is not limited to the choice of which *a priori* we would prefer to use in analyzing human society – the *a priori* of self-producer engenderment or that of constitutive contradiction. In these terms, this question could not be decided. The issue to think is which aporia promises greater analytical fecundity. It seems more valid to consider as does Castoriadis that both functionalism – taken by the author in what today is its classical version – and the Hegelian-Marxist tradition start from what he calls “identity logic”: everything in the natural world and human society may be placed in a set that is in the end measurable, in which each part gains meaning, where, thus, the human being is defined as full determinability. Based on this premise, “creation . . . is impossible”<sup>xvii</sup>, because it is always predictable. Luhmann’s autopoiesis does not seem to escape from this situation: as an organism, society secretes functions that increasingly expand and become ever more complex, making creation predictable, which is the same as saying, that focusing on creation critically and analytically is unnecessary.

Should this remark relieve our anxiety, by the same token, it dumps a hot potato into our hands: how are we to sleep soundly if the dual aspect of control, reveals itself to be a meta-historical trait? Let’s try another path.

While Luhmann’s hypothesis enable de-emotionalization of the problem, it does take on Wagnerian pathos in the fact of René Girard’s interpretation of it. According to the thesis of the *La Violence et le sacré* (1972), the desire to imitate the other, to appropriate the other, enclose man in a circle of violence. As had been said since Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde, imitation is contagious, and this contagion, according to Girard, always provokes violence. Whence the role of the expiating victim. Focusing society’s violence on him or herself, the expiating victim neutralizes the risk of self-destruction of the community and inaugurates the circle of culture.

The violence against the expiating victim could be radically foundational in the sense that by putting an end of the vicious circle of violence, he or she at the same time sketch out another vicious circle, that of the sacrificial rite, which might very well be that of culture in its entirety.<sup>xviii</sup>

With no claim – much less at this moment – of doing justice to Girard’s book, suffice it to be pointed out here that with him we move to the antipodes of Luhmann. Imitation is negative auto-poesis. And, since it becomes confounded with violence, control over it is legitimized. Whence the indignation with which a Hayden White described *La Violence et le sacré*<sup>xix</sup>

In both these theories, the desire to explain provokes a unitary response: society is auto-poesis, *mimesis* is violence. Although they arrive at opposite results, in both cases, the same temptation of unity that Bolz saw as the consequence of Nietzsche’s criticism of contemporary mastery of the scientist: “The perversely unknowable process of knowing should be refocused, the wild desire of a compartmentalized science should be tamed into – by means of art – in unity.”<sup>xx</sup>

No unanimist proposition satisfies the question deriving from the meta-historicity of control. Luhmann’s proposition dissolves it into irrelevance, Girard’s justifies it, and Nietzsche’s defends its endurance, with a significant change of emphasis: control now comes to be carried out from the place of art and not over art.

A satisfactory path, on the contrary, may be inferred from Max Weber’s considerations on the destiny of values. In *Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions* (1915), he noted the inevitability of conflicts between communities that are oriented (guided) by different value criteria. Mostly concentrating his observations on the modern world, he pointed out the conflict of economically-marked orientation with regard to religious orientation and how the latter, for its part, rejects artistic and erotic orientation. Each value orientation implies a differentiated selection of the appeals coming from the world, which is bound to conflict with others. The solution taken by modernity – to take science “in the name of intellectual integrity”, insofar as it does not appear to offer a complete explanation of its assumptions, as the “only possible form of a convincing vision of the world”<sup>xxi</sup> – today no longer enjoys the unanimity it once did just a few decades ago. Maybe that’s why it had become possible to relate the destiny of *mimesis* in modern times and modernity to the control of the imaginary. In the modern world, control (in its negative meaning) reached full legitimacy with the recognition of science as the subsystem that, in unseating theology, became taken for truth speaker.

What then does it mean to say that we are living at a moment in time in which the most recent controller is being questioned? Is the duration of control’s being in force disturbed here perhaps? No, the answer is not a calm-inspiring one. Control, in the full negative meaning of the term, is only suspended and put off when no instance of value dominates the others outright. Why this outright mastery enters a crisis mode, and, above all, because we are thinking from a marginalized area, we have the opportunity to topicalize the question. The backside of the coin of the somewhat greater intellectual liberty that is possible there is the low credit that the peripheral persons grant each other, low credit that the metropolitan persons naturally reiterate.

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<sup>ii</sup> So I don't digress from the nucleus that propels me to explore, I could not deter myself from the important *Mimesis and alterity*, by Michael Taussig (see Taussig, M. *Mimesis and alterity: a particular history of the senses*, New York : Routledge, 1993)

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<sup>v</sup> Gehlen, A. *Der Mensch. Seine Natur and seine Stellung in der Welt* (1950), Athenäum Verlag, Frankfurt a. M., 1966, 10.

<sup>vi</sup> *ibid*, 131.

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid*, 357.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid*, 314-5.

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- <sup>xi</sup> Ibid, 315.  
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