Post Memes

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An Emoji for René Girard: Memes, Memesis, and the Apocalypse of the Eternally Irrelevant

Eric Wilson

“Of all the sorrows which afflict mankind, the bitterest is this, that one should have consciousness of much, but control over nothing.”
— Herodotus

“Men think themselves free simply because they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined.”
— Benedict de Spinoza

“I have given a name to my pain.”
— Friedrich Nietzsche

“All desire is a desire for being.”
— René Girard
“This is my first chance to do some work that actually means something.’

‘Means “something” to who? You had a career, Dad, before the third comic book movie. When people began to forget who was inside that Bird costume. You’re doing a play based on a book written sixty years ago for a thousand rich old white people whose only concern is where they’re going to go for their cake and coffee when it’s over. Nobody gives a shit but you. And...let’s...face it...Dad...you are not doing this for the sake of Art, you are doing this because you want to feel relevant again. Well, guess what? There is an entire world out there where people fight to be relevant every single day and you act like it doesn’t exist! Things are happening in a place that you ignore, a place that—by the way—has already forgotten about you. I mean, who the fuck are you? You hate bloggers, you mock Twitter, you don’t even have a Facebook page. You’re the one who doesn’t exist! You’re doing this because you’re scared to death, like the rest of us, that you don’t matter. And you know what? You’re right. It’s not important—okay? You’re not important—get used to it... ...Dad?’”

— Michael Keaton and Emma Stone discussing the problem of being relevant in Alejandro Gonzalez Inárritu, dir., Birdman, or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) (2014)

Il existe à la base de la vie humaine, un principe d’insuffisance,” as Georges Bataille would say. Living under the aegis of social media, the central question of Existenz has become: what does it mean to be “relevant”? The answer is: being relevant means Being-Model-for-Other. The underlying problem for us is that “the disappearance of the subject [is], more or less, the mirror image of the disappearance of the real.” If the real question, as Jean Baudrillard darkly hints, has never been the

nature of reality but the value of reality, then our entire historical predicament can justifiably be denoted as the post-human: the irreversible disappearance of the traditional ontological referent (the Self) into the annihilating domain of pure virtuality. We should have seen this coming.

It is not as though we hadn’t been warned. The first sign (excluding for now those prophesized by Jacques Ellul) came with the publication of Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967. Within the soulless heart of Debordian society lies the detritus of the wholesale collapse of politics into mass media, yielding us the hegemony of “spectacular power” which is subsumed within the onto-politics of the integrated spectacle, the cultural reification of media as the sole arbiter of “truth”: “the whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.”

We call these “modern conditions of production” late capitalism, under which there has been a parallel collapse within the political economy of use value into exchange value. For Baudrillard, Debord’s very approximate successor, the integrated spectacle has been superseded by integral reality, the collapse of the integrated spectacle into social media; if the Society of the Spectacle was the sign of what we call the post-modern, then integral reality is the sign of the successor state of the post-human which brings in its wake its own form of political economy, what I call post-human capitalism: the collapse of post-use exchange value into simulation, or what Baudrillard refers to as “The Code.” “Everything within production and the economy becomes commutable, reversible and exchangeable according to the same indeterminate specularity as we find in politics, fashion or the media” — which, although perfectly “real” is, paradoxically, utterly “impossible” (or un-

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bearable), for, as Baudrillard assures us, a “world of total, instantaneous, perpetual communication is unthinkable and, in any case, intolerable.” Which nonetheless happens to be exactly where we now find ourselves. Unknowingly, we, as the denizens of integral reality, are fundamentalists of a sort, the devotees of the “only true fundamentalism,” which, “giving rise to the only true terror, is the fundamentalism of a fluid, mobile technocracy, the technocracy of flows and networks, of an inexorable dissemination and mental diaspora: a fundamentalism without foundations.” We are fanatical in our commitment to the evacuation of the grounds of our being and by our fruits (signs?) the world shall know us:

— The despair of having everything
— The despair of being nothing
— The despair of being everybody
— The despair of being nobody

The orthodox left, both political and cultural, hates, and therefore fears, simulation — “the precession of models and images, the stratagem that erases the boundaries between the true and the false” — precisely because it constitutes a particularly decadent form of inauthenticity, a “flight” from the (allegedly) natural, but in fact unbearably integral world. The continuing fascination with the neo-Foucauldian model of the panoptical surveillance state (the-one-who-sees-everything) is nothing more than nostalgia, reflecting the longing for an enemy that can be identi-

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8 For René Girard, the two are identical. See Jean-Michel Oughourlian, The Mimetic Brain, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016), 68, and below.
fied and fought against — the restoration of “authentic” reality (and the reality principle) in the face of an alien domination (it also goes without saying that the One who sees everything can also be blamed for everything — a universal scapegoat. More on that below.) The hegemony of “The Code” however — the sum total of that absence of autonomy that is our “every-thing” — reduces this lingering leftist pseudo-theological piety to post-metaphysical hash: “the real itself is still what it is, but there is no longer any sense in thinking it, or in reflecting on it, as such.”

The political catastrophe here is that domination (control) has been replaced by hegemony (“The Code”) rendering all forms of social critique obsolete through the voiding of the master referent of authenticity: “contemporary hegemony […] relies on a symbolic liquidation of every possible value. The terms ‘simulacrum,’ ‘simulation’ and ‘virtual’ summarize this liquidation, in which every signification is eliminated in its own sign, and the profusion of signs parodies a by now unobtainable reality.”

We are left, in “truth,” with nothing other than the continuous and high-speed circulation of models and images — which prove to be horrifyingly reversible. Even worse — the universal and immediate circulation of the model is the only means left to us of validating the reality of the self; that is, of being “relevant.”

But in truth none of this is new. We have all been here before. We have simply chosen to forget that the post-human is directly pre-figured within the pre-human.

When I teach my introductory course on Law, Literature, and Cinema, I offer my students the extra bonus, at no additional cost, of learning from me the secret(s) of literature. Working

10 Baudrillard, The Divine Left, 42.
11 Baudrillard, The Agony of Power, 35.
on the defensible premise that literature is any written work that inflicts a specifically aesthetic, or literary, response within the reader, I identify at least three of literature’s secrets (although I am certain that there are more than just three). Somewhat to my surprise, I came to understand that all of the three secrets were central to the literary scholarship of René Girard (1923–2015). The first secret is that literature is subversive; to paraphrase Jim Thompson, the first rule of writing is that nothing is what it seems. In Girardian terms, subversiveness is not a question of mis-perception; at issue is the nature of “commonsense” reality as a myth which is (etymologically) a “lie” that causes to remain hidden a truth that is unspeakable but capable of explaining everything — literature-as-subversion, -as-revelation. The second secret is that subversiveness of literature lies with the centrality of doubles to the narrative drama. The double may signify either the external (exoteric) relationship between the protagonist (“the self”) and one or more of the other characters (e.g., Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness; The Secret Sharer*) or the internal (esoteric) relationship among the contending parts of the sub-divided, or “split” personality of the protagonist (e.g., Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground; The Brothers Karamazov*). Here, literature is reflecting the social consciousness of early hominids:

Our hypothesis makes it logical to imagine that the rigorous symmetry between the mimetic partners[*] the living obstacle[i]* of the model that is automatically transformed into a rival[*] must bring about two things among man’s ances-

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[i] Girard uses the word “obstacle” in two different senses: (i) as shorthand for the external mediator, the person or thing that acts as a circuit-breaker of escalating mimetic rivalry; and (ii) the pathologized version (a “mimetic paroxysm”) of an “ordinary” mimetic rivalry contaminated by metaphysical desire, in which mimetic rivalry “increases to the point that the subject is no longer interested in anything but the rivalry itself” — which is psychosis. See Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire*, trans. Eugene Webb (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 12, and below. Both senses will be used in this essay.
tors, little by little: the ability to look at the other person, the mimetic double, as an alter ego and the matching capacity to establish a double inside oneself, through processes like reflection and consciousness.\textsuperscript{14}

The third secret is that the plot, or drama, of the novel is driven by an escalating rivalry over mimetic desire that eventually explodes into full-scale mimetic conflict. For Girard, the archetypal plot of all literature is that the self (protagonist) will model its relationship to the other (double) on the basis of imitation (mimetic rivalry) that will narratively culminate in the self attempting to either replace and/or destroy the double (mimetic conflict):

Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, the subject desires the object because the rival desires it. In desiring an object the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as the model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires.\textsuperscript{15}

The rivalry that mimetic desire unleashes will, in the end, assume the most extreme and grotesque form of the violent, or “monstrous” doubles who are the signifiers of the crisis of undifferentiation: as the rivals intensify their mimetic struggle they effectively become identical, triggering a pathological crisis of identity which can only be resolved through an act of extreme violence, whether physical, emotional, or symbolic.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{16} See ibid., 143–68. “Violence is the process itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire
a series of anthropological assumptions, Girard speculates that the logic of social formation is exchangeable with the logic of literary narrative. As mimetic rivalries are to be proscribed because of their ultimately violent consequences, the mimetic rivals must displace, or discharge, their common violence against a convenient surrogate victim that serves as the transference object of the violence — the scapegoat. Girard explains the “magical” efficacy of the scapegoat by identifying two variants of mimetic desire: divisive acquisitive mimesis, which leads two or more individuals to desire the exact same object at the same moment in time, and unifying conflictual mimesis, which induces all of the parties to the conflict to settle upon a common rivalry, or enemy, whom they all wish to “strike down.” Historically, the ritualistic enshrinement of the scapegoat, or sacrificial, mechanism was the domain of religion, which is anthropologically grounded upon the intermediary of the surrogate victim — the one who must die so that the community may live by being spared the apocalypse of the unlimited conflict of the monstrous doubles:

To understand human culture it is necessary to concede that only the damming of mimetic forces by means of the prohibition and the diversion of those forces in the direction of

19 See Girard, Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World, 26.
20 See ibid., 48.
ritual are capable of spreading and perpetuating the reconciliatory effect of the surrogate victim. Religion is nothing other than this immense effort to keep the peace. *The sacred is violence*, but if religious man worships violence it is only insofar as the worship of violence is supposed to bring peace; religion is entirely concerned with peace, but the means it has of bringing it about are never free of sacrificial violence.\(^{21}\)

In other words, hominization is the by-product of the scapegoat mechanism.\(^{22}\) Against Freud, we did not invent civilization in order to prevent murder — rather, we invented civilization in order to create the pre-conditions for a certain kind of murder: the sacrificial killing that postpones the apocalypse of unlimited mimetic rivalry, the ritualistic slaying that guarantees the victory of conflictual mimesis over acquisitive mimesis. Girard’s thesis is not a theory of religion but a theory of the genesis of civilization that is grounded upon ritualistic human sacrifice (or, even more subversively, the ritualistic sacrifice of “the human”); as Jean-Michel Oughourlian has observed, Girard’s “theory of religion is simply a particularly noteworthy aspect of a fundamental theory of mimetic relations,”\(^{23}\) for it is in primitive societies that “the mimetic crisis culminates in a phase of unbearable un-differentiation that is resolved by the violence of the sacrifice,”\(^{24}\) and it is religious thought that led early human-

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 32. For the integrative function of Religion, see Oliver Dietrich et al., “The Role of Cult and Feasting in the Emergence of Neolithic Communities: New Evidence from Gobekli Tepe, South-Eastern Turkey,” *Antiquity* 86 (2012): 674–95, passim.

\(^{22}\) “All systems that give structure to human society have been generated from [the scapegoat mechanism]: language, kinship systems, taboos, codes of etiquette, patterns of exchange, rites, and civil institutions. Thus a theory of sacrifice has produced a comprehensive account of human social formation, religion, and culture.” See Burton Mack, “Introduction: Religion and Ritual,” in *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. Robert G. Hammerton-Kelly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 7.

\(^{23}\) Jean-Michel Oughourlian, cited in Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 44.

\(^{24}\) Michel Treguer, cited in ibid., 68.
kind to “make the victim the vehicle and transforming agent of something sacred—mimesis—which is never conflictual or undifferentiated except in so far as it is spread throughout the community; its concentration in a victim makes it a pacifying and regulating force, the positive mimesis found in ritual.”

But this same process audaciously “doubles” as Girard’s theory of literature: every literary depiction of human drama, which is always a form of social phenomena, is ultimately about envy. As for both Georges Bataille and Jean-Paul Sartre, the essence of the human dilemma is the absence of an essential self—anthropological non-being. “The human subject does not really know what to desire, in the last resort”; thus, the human subject “desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person [the ‘model’] seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being.”

The entirety of human desire, the libidinal dimension of man’s social existence, is subsumed under mimesis—“desire itself is essentially mimetic, directed toward an object desired by the model,” from which comes rivalry, “the mimetic nature of conflict, which is to say the ultimate absence of any object proper to it.” Rivalry, therefore, is the flipside of the crisis of un-differentiation, that potentially boundless state of existential anguish in which no one is anything in particular because all inhabit the universal space of absent identity, a hellish crisis of the collective of the loss of personal differences that triggers an avalanche of reciprocal and escalating violence; “sameness is the terrible war in which twins [or ‘monstrous doubles’] are personally engaged, right up until the moment when one manages to kill the other […] When it spreads it becomes

25 Ibid., 48.
the famous war of all against all of which Hobbes spoke.” 29 The un-differentiated are devoid of relevance and the sameness of this un-differentiation reduces society to the zero condition of chaos — a “virtual” apocalypse.

Hence, Girard’s radically anti-secularist proposition that religion is the true foundation of society. 30 Much of Girard’s work constitutes a highly unorthodox form of legal anthropology, a hybridization of both Durkheim’s functionalist sociology of religion and Freud’s cultural criticism, primarily Totem and Taboo. The key marker demarcating the boundary between the modern and the pre-modern is a judicial one: the substitution (or not) of a reified and de-personalized rule of law that denies the catharsis of a direct and spontaneous communitarian will-to-revenge:

[I]f we compare societies that adhere to a judicial system with societies that practice sacrificial rites, the difference between the two is such that we can indeed consider the absence or presence of these [judicial] institutions as a basis for distinguishing primitive societies from “civilized” ones. 31

The foundational, but thoroughly repressed, continuity between the archaic and the post-archaic is a classic trope of Freudian psychoanalysis. Yet, Girard largely eschews the Freudian theory of instinct, or drive (Trieb), finding greater utility in the application of psychoanalysis to the collective (impersonal) dynamics of cultural formation; in effect, the translation of Freud’s late metapsychology into the referential terms of Durkheim’s notion of function: “the purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric. Everything else derives from that.” 32 For Girard, the “fundamental truth about violence” is that, “if left unappeased, violence will accumulate

31 Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 8–19.
32 Ibid., 8.
Post Memes

until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area. The role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into ‘proper’ channels.”³³ Key to the success of the sacrificial mechanism is its status as ritual, which is invariably a “re-enactment of a ‘prior event.””³⁴ Since every ritual is a re-enactment, its governing logic is mimesis, the ritual is both a representation of and a substitution for an earlier crisis of violence. But this governing logic is anti-representational: under the sign of substitution, all differences are abolished and any one thing can be traded for and replaced with any other thing.³⁵ In Girard’s case the vital ritualistic dimension of the sacrificial mechanism is the mimetic evocation of an earlier act of killing that was successful in resolving social crisis:

[T]he sacrificers […] are striving to produce a replica, as faithful as possible in every detail, of a previous crisis that was resolved by means of a spontaneously unanimous victimization. All the dangers, real and imaginary, that threaten the community are subsumed in the most terrible danger that can confront a society: the sacrificial crisis. The rite is therefore a repetition of the original, spontaneous ‘lynching’ that restored order in the community by reestablishing, around the figure of the surrogate victim [the scapegoat], that sentiment of social accord that had been destroyed in the onslaught of reciprocal violence […]. In the scapegoat theme we should recognize the very real metamorphosis of reciprocal violence into restraining through the agency of unanimity.³⁶

³³ Ibid., 10.
³⁵ According to Girard, “it is not possible to resolve the problem of violence with the surrogate victim without at the same time elaborating a theory of the sign and signification.” See Girard, Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World, 99.
³⁶ Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 94–95, 96.
Every ritual bears the traces of a double movement: the re-invocation of the past event and the projection of that earlier event’s cathartic effect into future time. The “prior event” that all ritual killings represent through mimetic substitution is a collective murder, an act of mob violence. “‘Sacrifice’ then becomes a term that can be used to refer to the complex phenomenon of the collective killing of a human victim, its mythic rationalization, and its ritualization.”

The necessary precondition for the historical survival of the community is the successful exorcism of the unclean spirit of revenge. This is secured through the periodic enactment of the rituals of the machinery of sacrifice, which is itself the mimetic repetition of an earlier killing of a designated victim (the scapegoat) which successfully broke the cycle of retributive violence.

To summarize: the pre-human (the hominid) became the human (in hominization) by re-directing the violence unleashed by mimetic conflict—a war of all against all over models—against a sacrificial victim who was the reified substitute of an original that is now absent.

Sounds great—but is it “true”?

Oughourlian, a psychoanalyst and a self-proclaimed devotee of Girard, has done the most to translate Girardian theory into the terms of meta-psychology; the result is interindividual psychology, a post-Freudian innovation that owes as much to Marcel Proust as it does Girard. To summarize: mimetic rivalry “is always rooted in one of the two following claims: the claim of the self for the ownership of its own desire; and the claim of desire for its anteriority, its seniority over the other’s desire, the other desire that has generated it, on which it is modelled.”

The failure of either claim reduces the self to no-one; in truth, we are

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all “legion.” Crucial is the temporal dimension of mimesis: mimetic rivalry, in both its latent and manifest form, is embedded within the structural parameters of psychological time, which is incommensurable with linear (non-reversible) physical time. In Oughourlian’s notation, conflict follows a strict pattern of migration from two nodal points, $N$ and $N'$:

The constitution of the self in physical time can be summed up by a linear vector going from the past toward the future. Desire $D$ [the model] mimetically elicits the birth of desire $d$ [the subject], which, in turn, brings self $s$ [the “habitual self”; *habitus*] into existence. Such is the real sequence of events that unfold in physical time going from the past to the future. But this sequence has no meaning on the psychological level, for it unfolds completely without the knowledge of all the protagonists.\(^{39}\)

The signature feature of nodal point $N$ is “the self’s claim to the ownership of its desires” — which is, of course, an illusion:\(^{40}\)

The self, at point $N$, in the most banal and normal case, cannot survive unless it is persuaded that it is the owner of its desire. The simplest solution for the self consists in forgetting the otherness of the desire that constituted it and in considering that this desire truly belongs to it. In reality, it is not a matter of mere forgetting because if one forgets something, this implies that one once knew it. It is in fact a matter of active mis-recognition, though at this stage remaining peaceful and non-adversarial.\(^{41}\)


\(^{41}\) Oughourlian, *The Mimetic Brain*, 39.
Amnesia is our truth. “Forgetting preserves harmony in the self and keeps it in existence […]. Forgetting presides over the constitution of the self at the moment of its creation”; the new self is always “built on the overlooking of the otherness of desire.” In a perfect inversion of Sartre, it is not the case that man is condemned to be free—it is ten times worse than that. Man is condemned to eternally “forget” (mis-recognize) that he is a slave (unconditionally un-free) precisely because the phenomenological basis of his sense of Being—his Self—is the by-product of a set of processes, psychical and social, which are intrinsically mimetic in nature. “This otherness with which we are saturated and that constitutes us is the human condition; but it is very difficult to accept. Its mis-recognition is initial and necessary to the maintenance of the self in its existence.” Paradoxically, to the extent that we are real (or relevant) we are false, not truly of ourselves—which takes us directly into the domain of Saint Augustine and the true meaning of “original sin”; that we are depraved not because we are positively evil but because we are unable to (self-)author the good. And, just to turn the screw one more time, the logic of mimetic relationships must necessarily lead to mimetic conflict—or violence, physical and/or symbolic. “What is the clinical expression of mimetic desire? Rivalry. What I see every day in my practice is not mimicking, nor copying, nor learning; it is rivalry.” Why? When viewed in

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42 See Ibid., 74, 76.
43 For “mimesis to function in the constitution of the self in desire, it is essential that the desire gradually forget its mimetic origin, forget even as it comes from the other [Desire D] that it belongs to the other, in order, precisely, to feel itself autonomous, to exist as such, to constitute a self. Desire, as Hegel said, negates the desire of the other.” Oughourlian, The Puppet of Desire, 232–33.
44 Oughourlian, The Mimetic Brain, 45. Oughourlian follows Girard in illustrating N with the Teacher/Pupil relation; I would replace this with the Celebrity/Nobody. “While the model becomes circumfused with divine light, his follower sees himself relegated to the shadows, a mediocrity, abandoned and non-existent”—that is, a Nobody. We might call this “The Day of the Locust” syndrome.
meta-psychological terms, the relationship between model and subject is fraught with peril. Firstly, just as with language, desire is never private or personal, it is always public and collective: both language and desire partake, in equal degree, in “otherness.”\textsuperscript{46} The mis-named “self” is, in truth, the “collective self of a collective desire, which is to say of a purely mimetic, contagious, irresistibly attractive, violent, labile desire; plural somnambulism […] [a] merging of desires, mimetic hypertrophying, dissolution of each person’s self—such is the crowd.”\textsuperscript{47} (Here we are not far from a wholly phenomenological rendition of Marx’s fetish of the commodity). Secondly, the model actively “wishes to be copied” for a model with no imitators fails to qualify as a “model” (just as the master “needs” slaves); for the hierarchically subordinate subject, “identifying with a model is consolation for not possessing all his or her belongings, since one [thereby] becomes that model.”\textsuperscript{48} But then so does everyone else—“imitative desire is always a desire to be Another”—which is both intolerable and unsustainable, rendering every social relation inherently unstable.\textsuperscript{49} Compounding that toxic brew which is community is our own private “hermeneutic of suspicion”: at all times we are dimly aware that the model, vampire-like, establishes her relevance through the semi-voluntary alienation of our own—“the imitator often […] envies the model because the model is […] seeing his [the model’s] role as a possession to be jealously guarded.”\textsuperscript{50} In other words, the Girardian constant of inter-individual relations is an \textit{a-symmetrical reciprocity} with the result that the subject “is torn between two opposite feelings toward his model— the most submissive reverence and the

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\textsuperscript{46} See Oughourlian, \textit{The Genesis of Desire}, 14. The other of this other-ness is nothing other than the archaic victim: “human consciousness takes shape as attention is fixed on the other and particularly that special Other who is the scape-goat victim, the fountainhead of all signifiers, the transcendental signifier.” Oughourlian, \textit{The Puppet of Desire}, 39.

\textsuperscript{47} Oughourlian, \textit{The Mimetic Brain}, 75.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 47.

\textsuperscript{49} Girard, \textit{Desire, Deceit and the Novel}, 83.

most intense malice. This is the passion we call hatred [...]. Only someone who prevents us from satisfying a desire that he himself has inspired in us is truly an object of hatred.”

The raw core of interindividual psychology is phenomenology (“it is desire that gradually brings the self into existence by constituting it as a self-of-desire”) and the critical factor is the subject’s varying experiences of the incompatible modalities of Time: the irreparable dis-junction between the psychological time of forgetting and the physical time of “irrelevance,” for it is within psychological time that “self s declares itself the bearer and owner of desire d at nodal point N and desire d is [only later] scandalized to discover a desire D identical to itself and bearing on the same object, whose belatedness it will assert at nodal point N’.” (Note how this temporal dis-junction replicates perfectly the quantum-like temporality of the Internet, which is global instantaneity.) Conversely, nodal point N’, “representing the self’s claim to anteriority over the other’s desire, which was responsible for inspiring and generating it” is the spawning ground of both neurosis and psychosis, which for Oughourlian are quintessentially mimetic in nature. “At nodal point N’ […] desire d will assert its anteriority [coming earlier in time] with respect to desire D. Such that self s, which

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51 Girard, Desire, Deceit and the Novel, 10–11. Naturally, this mimetic a-symmetry of relevance reflects an ontological a-symmetry: the model (desire D) is more “real,” more replete with Being, in a manner in which self s (desire d) never is.
52 See Oughourlian, The Puppet of Desire.
53 Oughourlian, The Genesis of Desire, 98. This might be re-phrased as: “I desire; therefore, I AM [THAT AM].” The vital nexus of mimesis with psychosis lies with metaphysical desire; see above, n. 13. “The focus [of metaphysical rivalry] becomes the business itself of the rivalry and antagonism between individuals vying for the unlimited good of more-potent-being or identity.” Reeve, “Mechanisms of Internal Cohesion,” 163.
54 Oughourlian, The Mimetic Brain, 39.
55 Somewhat unhelpfully, Oughourlian writes: “it seems to me that memory […] obeys the laws of quantum physics.” See ibid., 41. He would perhaps have been more convincing if he had said that memory obeys the laws of Proustian narrative.
56 Ibid., 38.
is in [physical] reality the self-of-desire \(d\), will lay claim loud and clear to the possession of the object of the two desires \(d\) and \(D\).”\(^{57}\) In the final analysis, our mimetic “illness of desire”\(^{58}\) is not orientated towards “power” (\textit{pace} Nietzsche) but towards Being (“psychological subjectivity”\(^{59}\)) along with its necessary attribute, autonomy (“self-grounding”). The neurotic/psychotic root of mimetic crisis, the ultimate ground of mimetic rivalry and violence, is the subjective awareness of self \(s\) that it is phenomenologically “un-real,” that it does not really exist.\(^{50}\) Clinically, this uncannily resembles the classic definition of (what used to be known as) \textit{hysteria} and which presents us with an unsolvable double-bind.\(^{61}\) Without exception, self \(s\) is alienated within psychological time: “the whole psychological sequence will constitute a new time—psychological time, the time of memory, the only time that has any meaning for the subjectivity of human beings, the only one that appears true and in accord with

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57 Ibid., 39–40. See also ibid., 107: “all normal, neurotic, and psychotic phenomena exist in a continuum due to the gradual exacerbation of the mimetic mechanism […] Neurotic phenomena are essentially due to a claim at nodal point \(N\) and psychotic phenomena to a claim at nodal point \(N'\), the two claims always being present.”


59 Ibid., 101.

60 “If one accepts the hypothesis of mimetic desire, it becomes clear that we must abandon the idea that the self is the source of desire. Rather, it is the movement of desire that gradually engenders in a subject a dynamic structure that is both changing and persisting and that can be designated as the ‘self.” Ibid., 98. And, because of the intolerable nature of its phenomenological “prison” self \(s\) will have to rebel in order to establish the truthfulness of its sense of “being a being”: “self-individuation is a process originating from the necessity of disentangling the Self from the [Otherness] dimension in which it is originally and constitutively embedded.” Gallese, “The Two Sides of Mimesis,” 102.

61 “When the classical [19th-century] studies of hysteria said that the hysterical ‘suffers from memories,’ it was only the plural that was incorrect: it is a single, unique memory, always the same one essentially—the memory that brings back to the subject an awareness of the otherness of ‘his own’ desire” — or lack of relevance. See Oughourlian, \textit{The Genesis of Desire}, 108.
reality.”

Psychological time, within the unstable dynamics of mimetic relationships, operates as a kind of mystification:

The physical time has no psychological reality although it is accessible to intelligence and therefore cognitive reality, but only when the first step toward wisdom is taken, that first step being the questioning or the recognition or the beginning of the recognition of the precedence [in physical time] of the other’s desire, its priority over my desire, and therefore the non-ownership of “my” desire.

But to attain this wisdom the first thing that self’s must do is to admit her total and complete irrelevance — which is tantamount to committing phenomenological “suicide.” A no-thing cannot become a some-thing by renouncing its nothingness which is its being. Or, as the saying goes: Everybody wants to go to Heaven, but nobody wants to die. Hence:

Rivalry is recurrent, it repeats itself. The repetition syndrome identified by psycho-analysis is mimetic for two reasons: 1) because it is always the clinical expression of a rivalry and that rivalry is always mimetic; 2) because it reproduces itself,

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63 Ibid. Again, note the family resemblance to hysteria: “hysteria is one particular mode of [the] misunderstanding of interindividual relation and of the mimetic nature of desire.” Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire*, 109. For Oughourlian, hysteria is not an illness: rather “it is a particular form of misunderstanding of the interindividual relation, a certain type of reaction to mimetic conflict. It is a phenomenologically varied manifestation of a certain dialectic of desire, a multiform expression of desire’s pretension to its own priority and anteriority.” Oughourlian, *The Puppet of Desire*, 183.
64 Self-awareness of our mimetic condition “requires us to re-think in the most fundamental way the notions of the subject and of desire and, despite all our shared beliefs, to renounce the glorious but mythic autonomy with which we have adorned humanity—to renounce, too, the pleasure we experience through being the playthings of those hidden mechanisms.” Ibid. 20.
65 “The vanishing of self’s, the ‘habitual self,’ is equivalent to a ‘ritual death.’” Oughourlian, *The Mimetic Brain*, 196.
duplicates itself, imitating the circumstances of the first rivalry and always looking for an impossible victory. That victory is impossible, since it stems from a situation which mimics the circumstances of defeat. But those circumstances are the only ones of interest, since the only battle worth winning is the one that has every chance to be lost.  

Sisyphus had it easy. We have it much worse, as there are no gods to impose the limit of the absolute upon us and to maintain the “natural” relationship between Self and model. The fatal logic of substitution condemns us to eternal frustration.

But it was not always so. Girard argues that, historically, there are two ways to mediate mimetic rivalry: external and internal. Historically, external mediation corresponds to class-based societies; as Wolfgang Palaver explains, “as long as social difference or any other form of differentiation is present to channel mimetic desire, its conflictual dimension remains contained.”

When external mediation prevails, the model can operate as an effective obstacle to the proliferating mimetic desires of the subject by precluding the possibility of true rivalry—a serf can never be “like” a knight (that is, Don Quixote can imitate the model of Amadis of Gaul, but not Sancho Panza). Internal mediation,

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68 Similarly, Quixote can never enter into mimetic rivalry with Amadis (as opposed to mere imitation) because the latter’s insurmountable status as the “ideal” enables “him” to act as an external mediator: Amadis is the supreme “real” although he is totally un-real. See Oughourlian, The Genesis of Desire, 20–21. Cervantes brilliantly demonstrates that the affective power of the mediator stands in an inverted relationship to his ontological status—the less real it is as the “Ideal” the more powerful he becomes. What Cervantes presents us with is a double-edged Girardian practical joke: in a manner that prefigures the drama of the enactment of his dis-order (the “quest”), Quixote’s original error lies in his mis-taking (or, even better, re-naming) the false for the real: he “reads” (interprets) the chivalric romances of Amadis as historical accounts. Ergo, when he imitates (“actualizes”) the un-real Ideal, he does not technically suffer a delusion. Rather, he substitutes the world-view of the un-real but
by contrast, is a sign of the egalitarian society (i.e. the abolition of obstacles) in which mimetic conflict is resolved through the direct competition between the model and the imitating/envi-
rous subject, spawning interminable violence, physical and sym-
olic. Crucially, the efficacy of external mediation rests upon
the absence of direct and immediate communication (both spa-
tial and temporal) between social actors. The true catastrophe is
when rigid social hierarchies begin to break down and give way
to proliferating “democratic” choices: as “the metaphysical dis-
tance between desiring subject and model diminishes—the key
component of internal mediation—the potential for rivalry and
violence increases. The more negligible this distance becomes,
the more probable it is that mimesis will end in rivalry and
violence.”

Commenting on Girard, Stefano Tomelleri writes
that it is “where social differentiation has practically disap-
peared [that] the power of mimesis is most destructive.” Hence:

While the social distance between individuals gradually de-
creases, the mutual imitation of individual desires grows. In
contemporary society, the transition from external media-
tion to internal mediation increases the person’s illusion that

all-powerful mediator for the perceptual consensus of the everyday and
then behaves accordingly (“they might be giants”), indicating that he has
entered into the realm of simulation: “generalized imitation has the power
to create worlds that are perfectly disconnected from reality; at once
orderly, stable, and totally illusory.” See Jean-Pierre Dupuy, “Naturalizing
Mimetic Theory,” in Mimesis and Science, 209. Quixoté’s problem is not

numerical but libidinal; with Quixoté/Amadis, we are moving away from
“ordinary” mimesis to a state more akin to possession, which Girard
understands as “an extreme form of alienation in which the subject totally
absorbs the desires of another.” Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 165. What
social media presents us with, in stark contrast, is the Girardian dilemma
of hyper-potent electronic models whose mimetic affectivity is in direct
relationship to their lack of “reality”: the more un-real it is, the more
mimetically powerful it becomes. The digitalized models of social media
can never act as mediators precisely because they can never be mis-taken
for the real. See below, n. 88.

69 Palaver, René Girard’s Mimetic Theory, 25.
70 Ibid., 61.
he or she has a unique, autonomous, and individual desire, whereas actually differences among people are progressively disappearing. Everyone feels legitimated to compare him- or herself to others and to desire what the other has, independently of any distinction in terms of social role, job or group of reference.\footnote{Stefano Tomelleri, \textit{Ressentiment: Reflections on Mimetic Desire and Society} (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 92–93.}

The scapegoat mechanism is Girard’s own onto-political “remedy” for the eternal failure of the community to restrain the paroxysms of mimetic crisis and the epistemological key to the scapegoat is the logic of substitution: a new victim can be sacrificed as one member of an un-broken series of replicants of the original. But this same process of substitution — that which reintroduces the “breaking effect” of objective difference into the community through the binary opposition between society and scapegoat — is the same mechanism of political economy that drives \textit{ressentiment}, the onto-phenomenological foundation of “bourgeois morality” and, therefore, of the politics of modernity. The “secret” of consumerism is that we can all replace each other through the accumulation of the external accrue-ments of the Other. Tragically for the fetishizing consumer, “ressentiment is a symptom of internal mediation. It arises from the illusion of infinite freedom within a mimetic context. It is an invasive emotion that does not just affect private life, but also dominates the public sphere.”\footnote{Ibid., 94.} Just as there is a disjunction between physical (objective) and psychological (objective) time, so there is an equally powerful and parallel disjunction between private and public desires: “society seems increasingly individualistic, but an analysis of mimetic \textit{ressentiment} shows that an individualist mentality also arises from the logic that leads to \textit{ressentiment}.”\footnote{Ibid., 93.}

It is a question of illusion again:

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\footnotesize 72 Ibid., 94. \\
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People [imagine] realizing an individualist and authentic desire when in reality everything needs a mediator in order to find a new desire, a need that is increasingly exaggerated by the paradoxical combination between growing competition among equals and an equally arising social inequality. All are thus condemned to a fundamental dissatisfaction that leads to a desire that finds no rest.74

Receiving its classic contemporary expression in the eponymous work published by Max Scheler in 1912, *ressentiment* is “a self-poisoning of the mind,” the result of the long-term repression of otherwise normal emotional faculties whose denial lead to the obsessive (mimetic?) indulgence of “certain kinds of value delusions and corresponding value judgments” which, like the Tenth Commandment, include but are not limited to “revenge, hatred, malice, envy, the impulse to detract, and spite.”75 Broadly following Nietzsche (and Moses), Scheler views *ressentiment* as seeking natural expression through the antithesis of public reason, the “spirit of revenge,” the thing “most suitable source for the formation of *ressentiment*. The nuances of language are precise. There is a progression of feeling which starts with revenge and runs via rancor, envy, and impulse to detract all the way to spite, coming close to *ressentiment*.76 In our era of Post-Human Capitalism and the abolition of all traditional (and presumably legitimate) forms of relationships of external mediation, the specific form that revenge is most likely to assume will be envy; “while each has the ‘right’ to compare himself with everyone else, he cannot do so in fact. Quite independently of the character and

74 Ibid., 93–94.
76 Ibid., 25. The Mosaic linking of envy with both resentment and violence runs like a vein through Girardian scholarship. Compare Gil Bailie on this point: “when I speak of [...] mimetic desire[,] the word ‘desire’ means the influence of others.” [...] The mimetic passions include jealousy, envy, covetousness, resentment, rivalry, contempt, and hatred.” Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 112.
experiences of individuals, a potent charge of reßentiment is here accumulated by the very structure of society” — the “system of free competition,” as Scheler calls it is but in fact a phenomenological version of Marx’s notion of capitalism as the substitution of contractual relationships for natural ones.77 Important to note here is that Scheler does not restrict envy to the frustrated coveting of “objects” (fetishized commodities) alone but extends it equally to the unbridled competition for social capital (“values”) now wholly unregulated by external mediation, yielding the ultra-toxin of existential envy. Paradoxically, envy, owing to its existential rather than materialistic nature, operates to reduce the acquisitive impulse rather than to strengthen it. The outcome, however, is lethal: envy “leads to reßentiment when the coveted values are such as cannot be acquired and lie in the sphere in which we compare ourselves to others. The most powerless envy is also the most terrible. Therefore, existential envy, which is directed against the other person’s very nature, is the strongest source of reßentiment.”78 Even worse, existential envy operates in a wholly mimetic fashion, a near-exact parallel of Girard’s concept of violence-as-contagion.

Through its very origin, reßentiment is therefore chiefly confined to those who serve and are dominated at the moment, who fruitlessly resent the sting of authority. When it occurs elsewhere, it is either due to psychological contagion — and the spiritual venom of reßentiment is extremely contagious — or to the violent suppression of an impulse which subsequently revolts by “embittering” and “poisoning” the personality.79

77 Scheler, Ressentiment, 28. Emphases in the original.
78 Ibid., 29, 30.
79 Ibid., 27. This is wholly consistent with Girard’s notion of Modernity as “the universalization of internal mediation”; we collectively lack social domains of existential privacy resulting in the construction of “beliefs and identities [that] cannot but have strong mimetic components.” See René Girard, Pierpaolo Antonello, and Joao Cezar de Castro Rocha, Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture (New York: Continuum, 2008), 240.
Which sounds like a “troll.” Girard’s relationship with Scheler is complex; although he critiques the latter for his failure to situate the elements of ressentiment into a social dynamic, he concedes that “everything becomes clear, everything fits into a coherent structure if, in order to explain envy, we abandon the object of rivalry as a starting point and choose instead the rival himself, i.e., the mediator, as both a point of departure for our analysis and its conclusion.”

Why, then, is the will-to-revenge so central to human affairs? The answer, according to Girard, is that the sheer ferocity of violence, both physical and symbolic, is structurally embedded within the form of its transmission, which is best understood as a form of contagion:

Why does the spirit of revenge, wherever it breaks out, constitute such an intolerable menace? Perhaps because the only satisfactory revenge for spilt blood is spilling the blood of the killer; and in the blood feud there is no clear distinction between the act for which the killer is being punished and the punishment itself. Vengeance professes to be an act of reprisal, and every reprisal calls for another reprisal. The crime to which the act of vengeance addresses itself is almost never an unprecedented offense; in almost every case it has been committed in revenge for some prior crime.

But what, precisely, is this “prior crime”? It is nothing other than mimesis itself; the very thing that creates us (or, through which we are created) is, in a cosmically paradoxical fashion, the very thing that prevents us from ever becoming real—or relevant. The loss of amnesia, the recovery of the memory of insufficiency, calls forth the demand for vengeance against the reality that condemns us to irrelevance. “The infinite or absolute outcome of desire is tragic: to recognize that one can never fill in the gap between oneself [the irrelevant] and the model-rival [the rele-

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vant] is to realize that the model can never be reached; thus does it become an obstacle. Historically, however, there has been a catch: a mimetic-rival is not the same as a mimetic-obstacle, for the latter is governed by external mediation:

Faced with the obstacle, which is to say the rival who is always already there, who is so to speak insurmountable, the “normal” attitude consists in renouncing competition with the other and in re-directing one’s desire in a more constructive [agonistic?] direction, in accepting one’s own limits as well as those imposed by social structure (for example, by the law). Renunciation is at the foundation of all hierarchical societies. This is because renunciation shows desire its impossibility. The obstacle is there, absolute. The mediator [of desire] is always external, even if he is right in front of you.

Fortunately for us, mass media has changed all of that. Under the shadow of consumption, freedom has been reduced to “choice.” From a Girardian perspective, the illusory “trick” of consumerism (a.k.a. “advertising”) is not to mimetically seduce us into all wanting the same thing; rather, it is to collectively hypnotize all of us into believing that we are radically individualistic, while desiring exactly the same thing. It is by this means that post-human capitalism is able to indefinitely postpone a fatal crisis of un-differentiation within technological society: the mirage of freedom-through-consumption imposes a deadly veil of ignorance over the abject reality of our total lack of authenticity. Unfortunately for us, there is a fatal flaw—as always.

82 Oughourlian, The Mimetic Brain, 84.
83 Ibid., 84–85.
85 Predictably it was the Pied Piper of Pop Art, Andy Warhol, who expressed it best: “What’s great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same thing as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get
The crucial weakness lies within the Derridean-style “pun” (via iterability) that links Baudrillard’s integral reality with Girard’s mimetic rivalry: the reversibility between “model” and “image,” both of which are signified within social media by the *meme*. For Baudrillard, the master-sign of the transition from capitalism to late capitalism (and onward to post-human capitalism) is the replacement of the “serial” (the hall-mark of industrial production) with the “model” (the signifier of the hegemony of the “The Code”). For Girard, the “model” is the libidinal object of desire that is, weirdly, always absent because never original: our desires are fake because they are really someone else’s. The meme encapsulates both meanings perfectly: as an electronic image that is endlessly circulated, it qualifies as a “model” (Baudrillard); as an image that is endlessly circulated, it establishes both itself and its author as a “model” (Girard). After Facebook, the only way to prove our being-relevant is not by claiming the anteriority of our desire (which is now not merely impossible but objectively inconceivable); rather, it is to use the seemingly “democratic” platform of social media as a template through which to self-author *ourselves* as models by circulating images—electronic pictographs. Even better (worse?) is that we are no longer confined to the limits of the traditional (“natural”?) community; thanks to the global absence of external mediation we are now directly integrated into a universal community that creates an unbridled domain of unstable mimetic relationships.86 To the best of my knowledge, neither Girard or Oughoularian contemplate the mimetic dilemma that presents itself to

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86 Oughoularian expresses this in Dostoevskyan terms: “if nothing is forbidden, everything is thus permitted and this leads to a transformation of the world: everyone can take anyone whatsoever for a model and thus immediately for a rival.” Jean-Michel Oughoularian, *Psychopolitics: Conversations with Trevor Cribben Merrill*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 54.
us: the need for the model (Desire D) rather than self s (desire d) to claim possession of the anteriority of his/her/its desire, to prove that he or she is the “real” model.\textsuperscript{87} We post ourselves as the model to prove our relevance and in so doing de-personalize ourselves through the annihilating integration into the nameless community; as we know by now, the “claim to originality […] prepares the way for resentment.”\textsuperscript{88} The more that the model is circulated through unmediated communication the more unreal the model/image becomes, precisely because the meme belongs to no one — exclusivity of both possession and originality has been abolished in advance. The cosmic-level horror of social media is that it electronically imitates the primitive, which is the anteriority of the modern, and that the meme is the perfect simulation of the scapegoat mechanism as pure symbolic violence. The Girardian will-to-revenge is the mimetic equivalent of Nietzsche's eternal return of the same: the “same” that returns eternally is nothing other than the imitation of an archaic “lost” time now re-enacted in the present through a purely digitalized scapegoat mechanism.\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{87} The closest example that I can think of is Girard’s nomination of anorexia as an outstanding example of how self s, via external mediation, enters into a direct competition with the model with the pre-meditated intent of replacing her. Once victory is attained, the starving imitator “becomes” the new model who must then continuously prove her model status through un-ending performances of self-mortification — until the true end is reached. See René Girard, \textit{Anorexia and Mimetic Desire}, trans. Mark R. Anspach (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

\textsuperscript{88} Oughourlian, \textit{The Mimetic Brain}, 81.

\textsuperscript{89} For Nietzsche as himself the ultimate victim of psychotic mimetic rivalry (“metaphysical desire”) and, therefore, of ressentiment, see Fornari, \textit{A God Torn to Pieces}. The artfully concealed truth of the grandiosely self-proclaimed Truth-Sayer was the metaphysical desire to-be (\textit{zu sein}) the anti-Wagner. See above, n. 13. The “case of Nietzsche” revolves around Richard Wagner's embodiment of the \textit{dual} nature of the obstacle: his elevated cultural status should have operated as a form of external mediation with the young Nietzsche (as Amadis the Gaul did with Don Quixote) but instead, the composer was reconstituted by the philosopher as an object of metaphysical desire, unconsciously revealing the psychotic nature of Dionysus-Zagreus re-born (it should not be forgotten that
The meme: the neo-primitive pictograph that overcomes all obstacles.
The killing joke of René Girard: “Let’s all come together in order to make a… difference!”
The mimetic psychosis: an egalitarian community of models.
Diagnosis?
The apocalypse of the eternally irrelevant.
Prognosis?
Unlimited.

the “pet” name of Cosima Wagner, Richard’s spouse, was Ariadne/ Arianna — the bride of Dionysus).
Bibliography


