

## **Desire and its Mirror Effects: The Girard-Lacan Encounter**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, I intend to compare Lacan's and Girard's thoughts on the nature of desire, the structure of the unconscious, and the genesis of violence. I put forward the argument that despite the major differences between the ideas of these two thinkers, they both draw attention to the dangers of narcissism and its relationship with violence. They both also treat their work as a form of therapy, the objective of which is to develop a higher form of moral conscious, unfettered by mirror effects.

**Keywords:** desire, Girard, Lacan, mirror stage, narcissism, violence

If one were to point out the one thinker with whom René Girard most frequently conversed, the most obvious choice would be Sigmund Freud. As he observed, it was the father of psychoanalysis who came closest to discovering the mechanisms behind human desire and violence. Although Freud's description of the Oedipus complex has a clearly triangular structure, the Austrian psychologist seems not to notice it, pointing to the object, and not the mediator, as the source of desire. However, according to Girard, we should look for the structure of the most basic of human experiences in mimesis, and in the Oedipus complex. Desire is born as the subject experiences the absence of being which forms an inextricable part of his existence. By looking at the Other, he expects it to show him the objects worthy of desire. As he writes in *Violence and the Sacred*: "The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that

being. If the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being. It is not through words, therefore, but by the example of his own desire that the model conveys to the subject the supreme desirability of the object.” (Girard 1977, 146)

In contrast to Freud, Girard associates this pattern of desire not with the father, but simply with another person, someone who becomes a fascinating model worthy of admiration. He again diverges from Freud’s views in his belief that desire is not oriented towards the object, but is instead the desire to become the Other. The subject therefore desires not in order to have, and most assuredly not in order to possess the object of sexual desire, but in order to become the plenitude of being that in his eyes the Other already is.

At first glance, Girard’s reinterpretation of Freud may be similar to that of Jacques Lacan. Similarly to Lacan, when expounding on the key tenets of psychoanalysis, Girard balances on the edge of philosophical discourse, adapting multiple philosophical terms to use in his narrative and subjecting them to a thorough reinterpretation, and in some cases even challenging their original meanings. This proclivity to adopt a philosophising style of narrative is most likely the result of the “imprint” left by Kojève on the views of both Lacan and Girard. This common association was undoubtedly of consequence, although ultimately the positions of both these thinkers are quite distant from each other in many aspects, with a more detailed examination leading one to conclude that they in fact contradict each other. Eugene Webb states outright that although the Lacanian school of psychology is still the dominant trend in France, a strong competitor has emerged and is gaining increasing popularity – namely the school based on the psychological and anthropological theories of René Girard (Webb 1993, 1993a). The major differences between these schools, aside of course from being based on different categories of analysis, primarily involve the method of understanding the structure of subjectivity, as well as the nature of the subject’s relationship with the Other.

In this paper, I intend to compare Lacan's and Girard's thoughts on the nature of desire, the structure of the unconscious, and the genesis of violence. I put forward the argument that despite the major differences between the ideas of these two thinkers, they both draw attention to the dangers of narcissism and its relationship with violence. They both also treat their work as a form of therapy, the objective of which is to develop a higher form of moral conscious, unfettered by mirror effects.

### **1. Language or lynching: The structure of the unconscious**

Before we start describing the essential differences, it is worth first showing some striking analogies between the theories put forward by Girard and Lacan. The idea of the subject as a "negativity" is the starting point taken by both philosophers. By our very nature, we are a "lack of being", as evidenced by the desire that forms a constitutive part of our way of existence. One could also say that for both thinkers, desire is an expression of an absence of self-sufficiency in the subject, the weak and fragile ego, deprived of its own identity, the internal sense of plenitude of being. It is interesting that Lacan, whose psychoanalysis is decidedly anti-naturalistic or anti-biologistic, identifies this absence of self-sufficiency with a specific biological fact: prenatalism. Man is a premature being, born too soon, who came into the world not yet "adapted" to functioning independently. From the very moment of our birth, we are fully dependent on others; we all are subjects in this specific meaning referred to by the French word *sujet*, a disciple "condemned" to be subjugated by others. If I am doomed to be subjugated to another from the moment of being "thrown" into the world and in reality will never be able to escape this dependence, this means that I do not exist as an "I", but will merely exist as illusions and mirages of an individual self (*moi*).

By depicting the essential lack of self-sufficiency of human existence, Girard refers to the mimetic proclivities innate to every human being, which can be observed as facts described by natural science. Knowledge offered by the neurosciences is also of key importance in comprehending

Girard's concepts. Jean-Michel Oughourlian notes that "so-called mirror neurons, which were discovered first in monkeys but which have been identified and localised in the human brain, are anatomically part of both the rational and the emotional brains, but the relations that they make it possible to establish with the brains of other human beings have such importance and such psychological reality that this mimetic interdividuality (...) deserves (...) to be labelled as the *mimetic brain* or *third brain*" (Oughourlian 2016, xviii-xix). By their very nature human beings are mimetic and interdependent, while individuality and autonomy are merely artificial constructs of modern culture.

In the traditional dispute over whether or not the individual precedes a relation, both Girard and Lacan stand on the side of relationism versus individualism (Kowalska 2015, 167; Airaksinen 2019, 93). From the very start, a human being is a relational being. Relationality is a constitutive part of human existence, a synonym for "humanity". However, each of the thinkers has a different definition of relationality. For Lacan, man is a social being, as he cannot be what he is because of being born prematurely, he becomes or is as part of social relations. Subjectivity therefore arises when the biological human being enters into social relations, which in turn are made possible only by linguistic structures and the system of symbolic references. As Lacan writes, "it is inasmuch as he is committed to the play, to a symbolic world, that man is a decentred subject" (Lacan 1988, 47). This means that the condition for the existence of the dynamic subject – "dynamic" meaning that it is neither the individual substance of Boethius (*individua substantia*), nor Descartes' *ego cogito*, nor a sovereign individual as championed by existentialists – is being anchored within the symbolic system. In short, it is the subject who is the epiphenomenon of language structures, and not the other way round.

Similarly to Lacan, who believed that "the 'nature' of man is its relationship to man" (Lacan 2005), so did Girard in his characteristic manner refer to the "extreme openness" of the subject to the Other (Girard & Williams 1996, 64). That is why he claimed that the "individual", in the strict sense of the word,

did not exist. What we usually refer to as “individuality” is the consequence of the more primal “interdividuality”, the mimetic relationship. Whereas Lacan claims that the relationality of the subject together with its desire is structured by the symbolic order, Girard’s primary thesis posits that man’s behaviour is driven by the more fundamental dynamisms of *mimesis*. In the basic structure of mimetic desire, the Other – as the one who causes the subject’s desire – communicates the nature of its desire not through speech or language, but through the act of desiring itself. Although Girard in no way challenges the significant role of language and symbolic forms in the constitution of the subject, he believes that their role is secondary to that of the primary *mimesis*<sup>1</sup>.

Given the above, Girard’s criticism of the Lacanian system will be of no surprise. For him, Lacan’s work is a regression when compared to Freud’s writings and constitutes a significant departure from the basic intuitions of the father of psychoanalysis, who was a step away from discovering “things hidden since the foundation of the world”. Even if Lacan was right to point out the relational nature of the subject, he ultimately committed a grave error by tying this relationality to language structures, and therefore with the symbolic order. In fact, this error prevented him from successfully tackling the issue of violence, which lies at the heart of both Freudian and mimetic theory. Leaving Lacanian structuralism behind, Girard claims that only by returning to Freud and his most important conclusions made in *Totem and Taboo* (and therefore by taking note of the critical role of violence at the threshold of hominisation) will we be able to explain the constant presence of violence and transgression in human culture. As Lacan advocates for the absolute separation of the symbolic order from mimicry, his system remains completely static, devoid of any temporal dimension that would enable painting the full picture of the dynamics of the conflict between the subject and the Other (Girard, Oughourlian, & Lefort 1987, 402).

In order to underline his opposition to Lacan, Girard quotes Freud’s description of the *fort/da* play, which in his opinion is one of the most important passages in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud 1961, 10). The passage relates to

Freud's observation of a child playing by throwing away any toy that was in their possession. This was accompanied by a drawn-out sound "o-o-o-o" made by the child, which the mother said meant "*fort*" ("gone"). Sometime later, the same child previously observed by Freud played with a reel with a string attached, throwing it 'away' while producing the same sound as before, only to retrieve the reel by pulling the string and enthusiastically shouting "*da*" (there). In Freud's opinion, through playing this *fort/da* game the child imitated the appearance and disappearance of his mother.

When quoting the passage from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Lacan expressed his confidence that the scene mimicked by the child was the first attempt to introduce the child into culture through observing symbolic differences. According to his interpretation, after observing the difference between the presence and absence of their mother, the child started to experience this difference as one that enables every human being to become part of a symbolic system of binary opposites, constituting the order of our ideas (Lacan 2005, 262-63).

Girard, however, disagrees with this interpretation. In his opinion, Lacan distorted Freud's original intentions. The basic insight of the Austrian psychiatrist is much more discerning than its structuralist reformulation. According to Girard, Freud presents the *fort/da* game from both the mimetic and the sacrificial perspective, which he even states outright. To substantiate his hypothesis, Girard quotes several passages which do, in fact, carry an incredibly strong mimetic and sacrificial overtone. Some of these passages include: "Throwing away the object so that it was 'gone' might satisfy an impulse of the child's, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him." (Freud 1961, 10). "We know of other children who liked to express similar hostile impulses by throwing away objects instead of persons." (Freud 1961, 10). "It is clear that in their play children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life, and that in doing so they abreact the strength of the impression and, as one might put it, make themselves master of the situation. But on the other hand it is obvious that all their

play is influenced by a wish that dominates them the whole time the wish to be grown-up and to be able to do what grown-up people do.” (Freud 1961, 10-11)

According to Girard, it is obvious at first glance that Freud believes the flinging away of the reel to be a veritable sacrificial expulsion, a form of revenge taken on the absent mother (Girard, Oughourlian, & Lefort 1987, 404). In contrast to Lacan, who considers the *fort/da* to be merely a cold logic game, Girard concurs with Freud in that he sees the child’s behaviour as an expression of their desire for revenge, and the object he or she flings far away, in the corner or under the bed, as the first sacrificial substitute (Girard, Oughourlian, & Lefort 1987, 404). Just as the *fort/da* game became the prototype of all ritual release of trauma for Freud, so Girard uses it as the matrix of all ritual forms of sacrificial substitution<sup>2</sup>.

Lacan makes no suggestions that would come close to discovering sacrificial mechanisms, not least because his “return to Freud” was in fact – as Girard suggests – a departure, a denial of Freud’s major claims and their replacement with “the all-powerful principle of a differential structural order” (Girard, Oughourlian, & Lefort 1987, 408). According to the perspective adopted by Lacan, man becomes part of culture by accepting the order of language. In other words, his existence within culture is mediated through language, which constitutes not only a tool of self-expression (human being is capable of saying “I”), but a structure which precedes the existence of a subject. Lacan’s famous quote that “the unconscious is structured like a language” (Lacan 1977) assumes the existence of a system of symbolic references that is more primal than the conscious.

Girard’s approach is in opposition to structuralism, according to which – as aptly stated by Phillippe Sollers in his paraphrase of Lacan – “the unconscious is structured like a lynching” (Sollers 1986, 192). One might add: like a “founding lynching”, as the key to comprehending the primary qualities of human nature. Based on an a priori system of language categories, as devised by de Saussure (or Jakobson), Lacan challenges Freud’s most significant discoveries. Despite his negative attitude towards Lacanian psychoanalysis, Girard

does not dismiss it completely. Moreover, to a certain extent his criticism of Freudianism aligns with the critique expressed by Lacan. Both thinkers speak in negative terms of the neo-Freudian concept of *ego*, which in their opinion was the product of individualistic fanaticism, incompatible with the basic truth of the relational “nature” of human existence. According to Lacan, the cause for the representation of *ego* as the autonomous “I” – a “windowless monad” egocentrically orientated towards the self – particularly dominant in modern culture – is a narcissistic illusion constituted as part of the order most removed from reality in which the human *psyche* operates, i.e. the “imaginary order”.

## 2. Narcissism, mirror effects and violence

In his first book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard describes the individual’s ideas of the uniqueness and singularity of their own existence as a romantic lie, the most popular myth of modernity (Girard 1965). By contesting the beliefs of those who put their trust in the myths of individualism and romanticism, together with Lacan, going against the ubiquitous trend for individualism, they demonstrate that in today’s world, the “mirror effects” multiply with such intensity that they, paradoxically, almost go unnoticed.

For both Lacan and Girard, the category of the “mirror” is a response to the hypertrophy of egocentrism, which was the mainstay of post-revolutionary Europe. There are of course considerable differences between these concepts, even on the most general level. First of all, Lacan refers to the “mirror stage”, a certain phase in human development, whereas Girard uses the concept of the “mirror effect” to describe a certain point in the rivalry between two individuals. The effect occurs when the two opponents become mimetic doubles by mimicking their mutual hostility. It is worth mentioning that in terms of selected concepts and issues, the analogies between these two concepts are particularly interesting, and they even complement each other.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the “mirror stage” is a revolutionary event in a child’s development, to which the

author of *Seminars* ascribed an important role in the shaping of the subjectivity of the *ego*. This event takes place in early childhood, when the child experiences itself as a fragmented body (*le corps morcélé*), an assortment of various body parts that create no coherent whole but merely exist as a chaotic net of scattered objects. During the stage, the child does not experience itself as a being that is whole and formed around some sense of “self”, it has no sense of its distinctness. Only when it catches a glimpse of its reflection in a mirror does it become capable of perceiving its body as a coherent whole. It is then able to recognise that its mirror reflection is both the child itself and somebody else (its own representation that Lacan refers to as the “little other”).

Based on this experience, which we might call primal identification, the child creates a mental image of itself. Fascinated with its own perfect image (the imagined other), completely different to the earlier experience of “fragmentation”, it becomes narcissistic. It frequently observes its own reflection in the mirror and cements an idealised image in its *psyche*, which initially seemed to be completely external towards it, but gradually became synonymous with it. Identification with the mirror image is therefore an infatuation: the child subject becomes entangled in the fascination with its own reflection to such an extent that the other it perceives in the mirror will from now become its own “I”, whilst the original “subjectivity” becomes alienated. This is the most primal form of illusion, which drives the individual to become locked inside the immanence of their own imagination, “forgetting” that in reality the individual is a structurally “torn” being, or even, as Lacan puts it, “absolutely nothing” (Lacan 2005, 708).

When analysing the mirror stage, Lacan pointed to the dangers of narcissism and its association with violence, which is caused by viewing others as a potential threat to the integrated self. The subject is fascinated by itself as the object it perceives in the mirror and sees other subjects as rivals in the sense that it believes them to be subjects that objectify it in a way that the subject cannot control. That is why the relation between subjects fascinated by their own objectivity takes on the form of a “permanent ‘it’s you or me’ war in which the existence of one

or the other of the two notaries in each of the subjects is at stake” (Lacan 2005, 356). This struggle resembles Hegel’s struggle for recognition, except that its ultimate goal is to impose the idealised image of my own “I” on other subjects. As Lacan puts it, “man’s desire finds its meaning in the other’s desire, not so much because the other holds the keys to the desired object, as because his first object(ive) is to be recognized by the other” (Lacan 2005, 222).

According to Girard, this type of division between the imagined “I” and the true structure of human subjectivity is primarily reflected in the *psyche* of the romantic. The romantic maintains the illusion of a “subjectivity almost divine in its autonomy” (Girard 1965, 28). In order for this illusion to continue, the romantic must focus everything in his “I” and perceive the other as the enemy who constantly threatens their imagined image. Competition is therefore inevitable. He must struggle to maintain his sense of autonomy, though it will never succeed, and that is why it “always suffers from a ‘flight’ toward the Other through which the substance of his being flows away” (Girard 1965, 64).

However, both thinkers ascribe a different meaning to the concept of “rivalry” itself. For Lacan, rivalry is synonymous with the struggle for recognition, a variant of Hegel’s dialectics, the purpose of which is to ensure that other subjects recognise in the “I” this special image that I have of myself. Ultimately, this rivalry takes place in the order of images and ties in with the theory of narcissism, that is of desire that constantly seeks its perfect reflection. Girard meanwhile believes that mirror effects multiply where two competing desires intersect, and the rivalry that arises as a result of their collision constitutes an actual struggle for the subject.

Given the above differences, the notion of the “Other” is also defined differently by Lacan and Girard. According to Lacan, the other (written with a lowercase letter) is created when a subject (child) fascinated by its mirror reflection perceives its image, which initially appears to it as something external, this “other”. The capitalised “Other”, meanwhile, is something indefinite and unnameable, something which the human being lacks. It therefore does not constitute another

person, but a correlate of “the lack of being”, irreconcilable with anything else (Kowalska 2015, 177). For Girard, the Other is equivalent to another person, a mediator of desire, someone who awakens desire in the subject through their own desire, whilst simultaneously inducing them to mimic and engage in a struggle for the subject. The other person becomes the Other when the subject’s desire transforms them into an example to be followed, a model that the subject wishes to imitate.

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The two separate concepts of the mirror image discussed above, despite their many differences, are closely related to the vision of antagonistic relations between people, the development of narcissism and the genesis of violence. However, both Girard and Lacan were apparently certain that uncovering this aspect of human nature that makes us ‘mirror images’ can in fact have beneficial consequences.

According to Małgorzata Kowalska, “the positive outcome of psychoanalytic therapy – is the liberation of the subject from its defensive and reflexive self-enclosure. a liberation, which opens the subject to the infinity of interpersonal communication and to the infinity of desire. (...) On the one hand, Lacan insists on authenticity understood in terms of a non-reflexive embracing of desire for the Other. On the other hand, he believes that it is important that we do not reify others, that we do not treat them as our mirrors or slaves, and that we recognize their desire, which is the same as that which constitutes ourselves” (Kowalska 2015, 170-71).

It would appear that these objectives coincide with Girard’s. The idea is that a person should not close themselves off in their vanity and self-love, but learn to understand the forces of mimesis that control them and suppress the urge for wrongdoing stemming from their desire so that they never again pose a danger to themselves and their fellow people. In both cases, however, this requires the application of certain hermeneutics of the subject, aimed at uncovering the structure of subjectivity hidden under a layer of cultural and symbolic constructs.

It is therefore not without reason that both theories have been and still are applied in psychology and psychiatry. They are a particular method of therapy, defined as a way of transforming or converting human existence. One might also mention that both Lacanian psychoanalysis and mimetic anthropology offer a certain proposition towards the development of a higher moral consciousness, unfettered by mirror effects that turn us into opponents who struggle against each other and rejecting the objectification of the Other as a rival for our narcissism.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This has consequences in the theory of the origin of language. For Lacan, and for many structuralists, grand theories which search for the genesis are baseless, as all attempts to describe the genesis of language take place within the framework of that language.

<sup>2</sup> Martha J. Reineke notes the analogies between Julia Kristeva's and Girard's criticisms of the Lacanian interpretation of the *fort/da* game (Reineke 1997, 74-76).

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