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## The Sameness We Cannot Accept

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the paradoxical rise in violence against transgender people amid their heightened social visibility by situating the phenomenon within Jacques Lacan's theory of the imaginary and René Girard's theory of mimetic desire. Lacan highlights how images structure ego formation through misrecognition, producing identities grounded in narcissistic illusion and envious aggressivity. Girard complements this by showing how mimetic rivalry and scapegoating stabilize fragile social orders through exclusionary violence. Reading Lacan and Girard together reveals how identifications with images of self and others bind desire to aggression, such that transgender people become targets not for their difference, but for their perceived sameness, which threatens the distinctions that sustain individual and communal identity. Clinical insights and real-world cases illustrate how gender identifications, cis and trans alike, function as psychic strategies for survival amid fragmentation, while scapegoating mechanisms expose the violent foundations of identity and social order.

**Keywords.** Populism, identification, aesthetics, psychoanalysis, queer theory.

When *Time* magazine designated 2014 the «Transgender Tipping Point» (Steinmetz [2014]) it was clear that transgender people had become more visible than ever before. Howev-

er, this heightened visibility did not correspond with a decline in violence. In 2022, hate crimes against transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals in the U.S. surged by nearly 33%, rising from 353 incidents in 2021 to 469 in 2022 (The Human Rights Campaign [2023]). In 2024, 617 anti-transgender bills were introduced across various state legislatures, marking the fifth consecutive year of record-breaking legislative activity targeting transgender rights (Factora [2023]). These increases in violence occurred while the rates of self-harm and suicide attempts among the transgender population remained alarmingly high, consistently exceeding those reported among their cisgender peers (Pampati et al. [2023]).

I turned to Jacques Lacan and René Girard to make sense of these developments, as both theorize how images – whether mirrored reflections, social representations, or psychic constructs – can become bound up with aggression. Lacan’s theory of the imaginary emphasizes the role that images play in the formation of the ego and identity, illustrating how identification with images can give rise to narcissistic dynamics that violently reject perceived differences in the self and others. In parallel, Girard’s mimetic theory highlights how the interindividual dynamics of desire shape the gender norms we inhabit. For Girard, the erosion of differences destabilizes the social order, prompting a process of scapegoating to restore arbitrary yet socially recognizable distinctions that undergird personal and collective identities.

The theories of Lacan and Girard overlap, resonate, and mutually enrich one another, particularly regarding identification, internalization, the nature and function of desire, and the influence of the Other’s gaze. Reading them together opens new avenues for understanding how identities are formed and maintained, especially when considering the roles that images and aggression play in shaping gender and gender dysphoria.

My methodological approach is to develop aspects of Lacan and Girard’s theoretical frameworks in tandem to demonstrate how the increased visibility of transgender individuals may paradoxically correlate with heightened aggression toward them. As the paper progresses, I use their insights to deepen and expand an analysis of this troubling dynamic.

### 1. *The birth of the I*

One way into Lacan’s concept of the imaginary dimension of unconscious functioning is through the experience of birth, which is sometimes described as a period of traumatic separation and loss (Rank [1924]) that is so raw and overwhelming (Bion [1962]) that unthinkable agonies result in the infant, who may feel as if its body is falling apart forever with no orientation or end (Winnicott

[1965a]). Within moments of having lost the enveloping protections of intrauterine life, the infant begins to cry, and psychic development accelerates to evolve a mind capable of enduring the world.

Sigmund Freud (1920) and Lacan (1949) both emphasize that all infants are born prematurely, with bodies as helpless as they are disorganized. At birth, their eyes barely focus, their ears cannot distinguish sounds, their hands flail, and their feet kick without purpose. Sensations pulse across their skin, muscles, and tendons as pressures and stimuli spread throughout their bodies. Freud described this as polymorphous sexuality coursing through the infant whereas Lacan emphasized the body's fragmentation, the infant's appendages so disconnected that its upper half might gaze into the caregiver's eyes while its lower half simultaneously defecates down its leg. Though the physical body's organization and its psychic capacity to intentionally orient itself does typically emerge over time, a coordinated body with integrated limbs, systems, and parts is an achievement, not a given.

At the center of Lacan's essay *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience* (1949) is the question of how a body of uncoordinated appendages becomes a coherent self. There, Lacan argues that images are crucial in initiating and shaping human maturational processes. He focuses on a pivotal moment that usually occurs between 6 and 18 months when the baby first recognizes its reflection in a mirror. Captivated by the image, the infant enters a trance-like fascination that lasts until it reaches a striking realization: «That's me!».

Upon identifying with the mirror image, the baby's experience of itself as an internally disorganized collection of appendages appears transformed into a unified, coordinated body. Lacan argues that the mirror's two-dimensional flat surface blurs the difference between the baby and the seemingly sufficient others in its surroundings, merging the baby with its reflection, nearby objects, and the environment into a single visual *mise-en-scène*.

As the baby gazes into the mirror, the caregiver might say, «There you are! That's you in the mirror! You are a boy». In such moments, historically and materially determined networks of signifiers are transmitted from the caregiver into the baby, which attach to the baby's emerging sense of self like filings to a magnet. These signifiers accumulate and reinforce one another, enabling the baby to identify with the mirror image, an identification further secured by the caregiver's mirroring language. The baby's emerging sense of self, clothed in narcissistic grandeur through identification with the idealized mirror image, is essentially the birth of its ego – yet by way of a backward, virtual misrepresentation it is not. For the time being, the baby remains just as lacking, vulnerable, powerless, and uncoordinated as before. In the «that's me» moment, the baby obtains a sense of wholeness precisely by identifying with, and apprehending as

its self, a backward, virtual image that is, as a re-presentation, a misrepresentation. In Lacan's mirror stage allegory, the seemingly obvious self and its identity, are, in fact, a fictional mirage, the result of a fundamental misreading of visual information. For Lacan, the ego and the «I»<sup>1</sup> it creates will always be under the sway of its own illusions, obscured by an epistemological *méconnaissance* that will forever misunderstand itself and others.

However, to dismiss transgender identifications as illusory consolations of the ego's imaginary register of unconscious functioning seems like a superficial conclusion drawn from theoretical commitments. If identities form through identifications with images that weave narcissistic and alienated desires into the self, then why shouldn't cisgender identity be seen as imaginary and compensatory as transgender identity? While some transgender identifications may arise as defensive responses to trauma, are not all gender identifications psychic strategies for surviving and making sense of early life when we are born too soon with physically and psychically discordant bodies that do not yet function as they should?

## 2. *Mechanical corpse life drive*

The seductive power of images is often overlooked. Stare into the mirror long enough, and eventually the image in the mirror looks back. Images pull us in, drag us down, trap us, and even set us free. They can stop the breath, evoke laughter or tears, and trigger orgasms. Nightmares are made of images. Images seduce us beyond our awareness, masking alienation and inner conflict. Living in the imaginary register of unconscious functioning amounts to living for an idealized «I» that replaces the struggle with incompleteness. Like the baby, we are drawn to images that channel larger intersubjective currents of flesh, desire, emotion, and disconnection into an «I» that molds both self and others into idealized images that feign security and permanence. Identities, too, are such fictions, seducing us into mistaking a dynamic, incomplete, fluid *I* for an imaginary «I» that promises more wholeness than either self or other can ever truly possess.

Reflecting on Lacan's concept of the imaginary «I» that the baby takes as itself, Malcolm Bowie (1991) emphasizes that this «I» is a kind of psychic birthing, an internal childbearing. Yet the jubilant child before the mirror is not giving birth to itself in any straightforward sense but to an internal monster, a statue, an automaton, a fabricated thing. Freud had already imagined the psyche as machin-

1 Lacan points out that the German *das ich* («I» or I-function) corresponds to two translatable words in French: *moi* and *je*. *Moi* refers to an object; *je* refers to a subject. Although in English both are translated as «I», in French a grammatical split divides the ego between the me (*moi* or «I») and the I (or *je*). In this paper «I» refers to the ego and its identity, whereas *I* is meant to refer to the subject of the unconscious.

ery assembled from conflicting electrical forces and at times theorized the ego as a defensive apparatus for self-preservation. Lacan recasts Freud's mechanical ego with distinctly gothic inflections. As Bowie (1993: 26) writes, the imaginary «I» is «composed from spare parts, an armored mechanical creature... produced within the human subject, and developing unwholesome habits and destructive appetites of its own». Freud's dream-born divisions become, for Lacan, a waking nightmare of subjectivity.

Conceived as an uncanny assemblage of spare parts, Lacan's imaginary «I» inevitably recalls technologically altered bodies. And although cisgender and transgender bodies may be surgically and mechanically through implants, prosthetics, or other interventions, Lacan's notion of the *corps morcelé* refers instead to the psyche's earliest repressed yet active memory of the terrifying experience of the pre-mirror stage body as fragmented, disintegrated, and dismembered (Lacan [1964]: 1-20; Lacan [1977]: 51-80). Whether one looks backward toward the *corps morcelé* or forward toward the imaginary «I» that covers it, Lacan insists both are fantasies. In *Family Complexes*, he describes this fantasy as a «heterogeneous mannequin, a baroque doll, a trophy of limbs» (Bowie [1993]: 27). Clinicians working with psychotic patients know of worlds populated by «bodies without necks, arms wandering without shoulders, unattached, and eyes strayed alone in need of foreheads» (Bowie [1993]: 29). And clinicians working with non-psychotics know the *corps morcelé* returns unwanted in nightmarish dreams as well as in the daytime anxieties that feel like «images of castration, emasculation, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, and bursting open of the body» (Lacan [2006a]: 85).

Cis, trans, and other gender identifications can be understood as ways humans psychically manage and bind these earliest infantile anxieties. Later in life, concentrated focus on gender identity through medical and surgical interventions can be vital for physical and psychic survival, particularly when severe regressions to the *corps morcelé* threaten psychic equilibrium. Among many other things, gender transition can function as a material suturing of psychic reality with the body, allowing the body to coincide with and represent the psychic subject, «a body that bears my internal scars and shattered fragments on its flesh», as one of my analysands expressed it. In my clinical experience, alternate-gender identifications and transitions are more often than not psychically generative acts – a re-birthing of the self undertaken when both physical and psychic survival are matters of life and death.

### 3. *Aggressivity and the other*

In his *Mirror Stage* essay, Lacan's concern is not simply that the urge to unite with the image of another reflects an epistemological illusion, a false

promise of wholeness or completeness, that exposes an intolerable lack of unity within the self. It is more that this lack becomes so unbearable that it is projected onto the other with whom one seeks to merge. The attempt to alleviate this lack by uniting with and projecting it onto another turns them into the cause of the self's fragmentation. Too often, this dynamic results in real, material violence as the longing for unity gives way to destructive attempts to annihilate the other who has come to embody what is intolerable in the self.

The psycho-logic linking images to aggression in Lacan's imaginary register of unconscious functioning emerges as paranoid introjective-projective dramas in which the other, whose image I identify with, somehow seems more than I am, and, importantly, enjoys more than I do. I, by contrast, feel alienated from my enjoyment and frustrated at work, in relationships, and with the world I inhabit. The unconscious supposition that the other enjoys sets them apart and turns them an object of idealization sought for identification. Yet, because the enjoying other is *not me*, my relationship to them is structured by a deep ambivalence. Desire becomes laced with envy and hatred. The narcissistic merger of «I am the image, and the image is me», which first promises solace and a sense of being, ultimately betrays. A *not-me* is embedded within the very mechanism that makes the self. Thus, the process that brings me into being (identification with the image) also introduces my negation. At the core of my becoming is a relationship with the image of the other that is not only foundational but also aggressive and violent, as my very selfhood is bound to both union and negation.

Paranoid knowledge, then, structures our relationships with both ourselves and others and expresses itself as violent aggressivity whenever one's identity is at stake. When my sense of self is grounded in identification with an image – my self-image, how I conceive and define myself – any threat to that image destabilizes me and must be eliminated. The attempt to destroy the other whose image I identify with is an imaginary solution to an imaginary problem that is enacted within the imaginary register of unconscious functioning. Why? Because the other whose image constitutes my identity cannot be destroyed without destroying me.

Lacan's account of the urge to unite with the image of another shows how that urge seeks to seal internal gaps of alienation and insufficiency by collapsing the separation between self and other. That urge is, according to Lacan, a manifestation of the death drive, and his assertion that there is only one drive – the death drive – becomes particularly clear in this context: the drive toward perfect union, wholeness, and completion is, at its core, a drive toward mutual annihilation, since self and other can only merge through the erasure of their distinctness. To be or possess the other entails eliminating difference, a wished-for return to

an imagined primordial unity that, he insists, never existed. This underscores the dialectical paradox at the heart of Lacan's account of subjectivity: we exist only insofar as we do not exist completely. Always split, our desire to undo the alienation that constitutes us is ultimately a desire for obliteration, a wish for a completeness only attainable through death.

It is tempting to dismiss Lacan's account of the mirror stage as an abstract theorization on a minor developmental moment, an overdramatic speculation lacking a sufficient explanation of how identity is actually formed. Nonetheless, relations shaped by unconscious functioning within the imaginary register do manifest in direct, representational, and institutional violence against real bodies. The destructive aggressivity so often aimed at the other whose image I am unconsciously identified with is intimately bound to the envious fantasy that they possess what I do not, and that they enjoy what I was forced to renounce in becoming a "civilized" human being.

But the issue is not only that I deny myself what I imagine the other enjoys; it is also that the other, in reality, does not possess or enjoy in the ways I imagine either. Within the Lacanian system, this deceptive logic of the imaginary underpins the paranoid knowledge that fuels racism, sexism, homophobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and transphobia. The unconscious identification with an image of the other who is initially perceived as whole, sufficient, and desirable inevitably carries disavowed envy and hatred toward their imagined ability to enjoy what I have renounced. These disavowals, embedded in an unconscious fantasy system, drive the devaluation of the other and, ultimately, real material violence inflicted upon actual bodies.

The legal proceedings and obituaries of murdered transgender individuals offer stark illustrations of these dynamics. Idealized objects of fascination become the targets of envy and hatred precisely for the lives they are perceived to enjoy. Victims such as Dandara dos Santos, a Brazilian transgender woman brutally murdered in 2017, and Brianna Ghey, a British transgender teenager also brutally murdered in 2023, are killed in ways that grotesquely transform their bodies into an externalized *corps morcelé* (Billson [2023]; Jackman [2018]). It is as if the murderers create an external, embodied representation of the psychic disintegration they fear within themselves. Along the way, the murderers reclaim a perverse form of enjoyment while rationalizing their violence as securing individual, communal, or national unity, identity, and security.

Lacan's account of violence and aggression driven by the projection of unconscious envy and projection resonates deeply with René Girard's theory of how societies stabilize themselves by identifying and expelling scapegoats in their attempt to restore disintegrating social orders. It is to Girard's mimetic theory that we now turn.



#### 4. *Mimetic triangles of desire*

One of the more intuitive ways to approach Girard's theory of mimetic desire is to return to the birthing room and observe the numerous coordinated interactions that occur, including the newborn's interactions with doctors, nurses, and caregivers. Almost immediately, the infant's initial cries begin to subside as it engages with those around it. Research by scholars like Andrew Meltzoff (2011) has shown that imitation occurs astonishingly early, within just 40 minutes of birth. A doctor protrudes their tongue, and the infant imitates the doctor's gesture. But how does the infant know how to imitate or mirror others? How does such cross-modal matching occur? Like the rhythms of the heart and breath, the tendency to imitate appears to be an innate self-other organizing system that is automatic and operating well before self-reflective agency comes online. Imitation is not learned; it is involuntarily lived from the start (Meltzoff [2011]).

Scholars widely recognize mimesis as one of the oldest and most foundational concepts in Western thought, noting that its usual translation as «imitation» fails to capture its complexity. Mimesis is an exceptionally protean thematic complex extending far beyond simple notions of imitation as representation, emulation, copying, performance, or miming (Gebauer, Wulf [1995]). For Girard and those aligned with his work, mimesis refers more to an immanent, embodied, coordination of individuals through contagious inductions of shared mental, emotional, affective, somatic, and psychic states. It is not an isolated cognitive or biological function but an interindividual force that links us through imitation. Girard's first major insight is that desire itself is mimetic (1966); his second is that mimetic desire rivalries, conflicts, and violence ranging from personal disputes to international confrontations<sup>2</sup>.

Girard's theory of mimetic desire radically challenges any theory of brain, psyche, mind, body, self, identity, subjectivity, or intersubjectivity premised on a closed, self-contained subject, even those psychoanalytic frameworks that acknowledge the influence of the other and the Other. Instead, Girard posits a structurally open subject, akin to the Greek concept of the *holon*: a whole in and of itself that is simultaneously part of larger wholes. Replacing the individual as the irreducible unit of study, Girard (1987) proposes the term *interindividual* – a neologism that captures the self-as-other, or *holon*: an open system shaped and sustained through ongoing mimetic exchanges with others.

2 Although Freud encountered the nature of mimetic desire early on through his exposure to hypnotism in Paris, he ultimately disavowed its interindividual reality, opting instead to relocate desire from external models to an internal unconscious. Hypnosis and post-hypnotic suggestion had revealed how individuals unknowingly act on desires implanted by others, and that our fundamental way of being in the world is unconscious of mimetic desire.



This view of the subject distinguishes Girard's understanding of desire from Freud's, whose psychoanalytic system retains the Romantic assumption that desire arises spontaneously within the individual and is directed toward intrinsically desirable objects. By contrast, Girard's theory of mimetic desire holds that individuals do not desire spontaneously, nor are objects inherently desirable. Instead, desire takes a triangular form wherein a prestigious model of desire residing at the apex of the structure mediates the individual's desire in the lower left corner for an object in the lower right corner. The individual unconsciously imitates the model's desire for the object because the contagious nature of desire makes the object glow with an illusory, enchanted value (Girard [1966]).

If mimetic desire and its triangular structure seem doubtful, consider our world of "influencers", where economists and marketers understand that commodities appeal through models of desire, and recall Michael Jordan's promotion of Hanes underwear. Despite having no direct connection to the product, Jordan, as the model of desire, makes Hanes more desirable than, say, Fruit of the Loom. His mediating influence casts the mimetic spell of enchantment that manifests as a fantasy that moves consumers: «I will be like Mike».

The relevance of Girard's mimetic theory lies in showing that the attractive force of mimetic desire simultaneously drives rivalry, conflict, and violence (Girard [1966]; [1977]; [1987]). Resource-based theories claiming that fulfilling everyone's needs will eliminate conflict overlook what every parent knows from experience: in a room of thirty identical toys, if René becomes Jacques' model of desire, Jacques will only want the toy René holds. As both reach for the same object, conflict will ensue. Mimetic desire becomes mimetic rivalry.

Lacan and Girard's accounts of desire diverge on this point. For Lacan, the symbolic order creates a gap where a once real or fantasized object is missing, and the opaque sense of lack that Lacan equates with desire emerges in this gap. For Girard, desire is an immanent, embodied, process-oriented, interindividual dynamic that is becoming and propagates. Whereas Freud said libido is sticky, Girard says desire is contagious. It is infraconscious, self-organizing, and spreads through mechanisms that induce feedback loops that circulate around a model of desire whose prestige bestows illusory value upon objects that promise an enhancement of being through their possession.

What makes mimetic rivalry so insidious is that each participant remains unaware they are imitating the other. Underneath the seemingly straightforward pursuit of an object is an unconscious exchange of desire. As model and imitator converge on the same object, their reciprocal imitation deepens as each are unwittingly shaped by the other's desire.

Their rivalry for the object intensifies. The model of desire becomes the obstacle to the object, just as the imitator becomes the rival to the model. The object fades in importance, and attention shifts to the rivalry. Each have become each

other's source of desire and its obstruction. Their mutual fascination is their mutual frustration, and the destruction of the rival rather than the acquisition of the object, becomes the ultimate aim.

Those caught in mimetic rivalry cannot see the spiral they are in. Each mirrors the other yet remains convinced their hostility is justified, their defensive retributions right and necessary. But they are caught in feedback loops of mimetic desire that has transformed into mimetic rivalry and escalated to mutual annihilation. As Paul Dumouchel (2015) shows, Girard's mimetic theory explains the mechanisms and processes driving murderous violence, from family feuds like the Capulets and the Montagues to international conflict, nuclear escalation, and genocide ([Girard]: 2010). Global politics is, as Jean-Michel Oughourlian (2012) observes, mimetic rivalry on an international stage.

### *5. Norms, habits, and socially discursive practices*

Girard (1987) also identifies the power of mimetic desire and rivalry as deeply embedded within communal, institutional, and political structures, where groups form around shared aspirations for certain goods, ideals, or virtues. Psychoanalytic institutes and discourse, for instance, often center on a psychoanalyst whose perceived prestige elevates them as an idealized figure who appears to embody the self-sufficiency candidates feel they lack. Freud, Lacan, and their respective circles provide prominent illustrations of this dynamic, as the communities around them embody and transmit the values, behaviors, and frameworks they promoted. Although such analysts are often regarded as inimitable, their status depends on their followers' imitation. Their prestige is continually reaffirmed through their disciples' repetition of their theories, clinical styles, and institutional models. In this way, mimesis and mimetic desire not only establish and sustain the model psychoanalyst but also underwrites psychoanalytic institutions, communities, ethics, theories, traditions, and practices (Borch-Jacobsen [1988]). Mimesis thus operates as the silent but enduring force of psychoanalytic transmission, preserving and reproducing its distinct world.

While this example drawn from psychoanalysis is heuristic, the mimetic process it reveals applies broadly across historical and cultural contexts. Every person is born into pre-existing social formations that are composed of dense, dynamic networks. Within these relational networks, who we take as models matters less than the fact that these models are themselves shaped by unconscious imitation. Models of desire do not stand outside the norms and practices but mediate them precisely because they are already mediated through mimetic repetition. Lacan's focus on symbolic mediation leaves unanswered the more foundational question of *how* we come to desire according to the Other's desire. It is the involuntary, embodied, affective, and contagious nature of mimesis that

explains how subjects are interpellated into the social order and how that order reproduces itself through the protean iterations of mimesis (Garrels [2011]).

Although the desire of the other in the mirror stage is thought to shape the self, and the desire of the Other expressed through language or the signifier is thought to structure the subject in the Symbolic, both the mirror and the symbolic are forms of mimesis. Mimesis is the condition of possibility for the imaginary relation; without it, the mirror stage collapses. Likewise, the symbolic order is not the origin of mimesis but its effect (Derrida [1988]). The chain of signifiers, the field of representation, and the symbolic order all emerge from, are sustained by, and operate through mimesis. Lacan conceives the unconscious as a repository of the Other's representations, but mimesis operates more broadly – within, without, and beyond symbolic mediation. To say the unconscious is structured as a language presupposes language as a ground when in fact language and the unconscious are a mimesis: systems of deferrals, repetitions, and representations sustained by unconscious imitation. Mimesis is the deeper mechanism that precedes and generates all the Lacanian structures: the self, language, the unconscious, the real, imaginary, and symbolic orders. It isn't a feature of these; it is their condition of possibility *and* their mode of operating. The Lacanian system does not ground mimesis; mimesis grounds the Lacanian system.

In her essay examining Girard, Freud, Judith Butler, and Lacan, feminist theorist Iwona Janicka (2015) refers to gender as a privileged illustration of how mimesis generates a range of seemingly natural effects. Through acts continuously imitated and reiterated, cultural and social layers accumulate, congealing into what appears as innate or self-evident truths. Such ongoing repetitions, observable across all societies and historical moments, produces the illusion of fixed entities such as sexual drive, masculinity, and femininity. Even *Being*, Janicka contends, is not inherent but formed through continual repetitions, becoming a mimetic sedimentation that gives the impression of essence. Her point is not so much that individuals actively choose to adopt the norms, behaviors, and discursive frameworks that constitute the unconscious and the social order, but that these patterns persist through unwitting imitation. Gender norms exemplify this process as embodied patterns repeating across time and space. The more frequently a particular gendered style repeats, the more natural, inevitable, or essential it seems. Thus, whether one identifies as cisgender or transgender, gender performance is less a matter of choice than of embodying the cumulative effects of repeated mimetic practices<sup>3</sup>.

- 3 Judith Butler's theory of performativity emphasizes the reiterative and citational nature of gender norms, whereas (in my opinion) Girard's theory of mimetic desire provides a deeper account of why individuals are drawn to particular gendered performances in the first place. Gender is not only constructed through repeated performances; it is also the object of mimetic desire, mediated through models whose gestures, attributes, and recognizability confer social value.

## 6. *The policing I*

If this is so, what kind of identity are we really referring to? What can gender identity mean if a social order has been forming us since before birth and regulating us through norms, disciplining us with routines, and policing us through institutional practices? French Structuralism taught that the basic element of identity is difference. Coke is Coke because it is not Pepsi. Psychoanalysts are defined against psychotherapists. And men are men because they are not women. Identities and the communities we affiliate with rely on recognizable differences that are stable enough to maintain their coherence. For Girard, however, the organizing principle is not difference but mimesis: the individual subject and its identity are ultimately inseparable from the models of desire that shape them. To claims of originality or meaningful difference, Girard seems to shrug: we are all ants in a pile, and our differences are not truly meaningful. And to declarations of radical alienation or separation along the lines of «there is no sexual relationship», Girard replies, «to choose to be oneself is to choose to be the Other» (Girard, Anspach [2004]: 28).

Our unconscious imitation of others is so pervasive that we never truly encounter ourselves as the evanescent reference states that we are, continually reconstituted through mimetic repetitions. Even the deeply felt experience of becoming what Winnicott (1965b) calls a *true self* is not a spontaneous emergence from within but the result of repeatedly aligning with another's desire for non-compliant spontaneity. Likewise, the process of becoming a "real" gendered self is inseparable from the unconscious imitation of the gendered behaviors, gestures, desires, and expressions of others. The individual subject is internally shaped – psychically and affectively – by the internalization of multiple gendered others such that no gender identity is ever fully self-contained or identical to itself.

Because the mimetic mechanism operates across all individual and social systems, no person, practice, or structure exists outside its reach. Embodying and channeling social norms, including those tied to gender, is less a matter of choice than a compulsory process of production. Yet, as Janicka ([2015]: 48) notes, this compulsion is not absolute. The force of mimesis shapes the individual, but does not fully determine it.

Each of my transgender analysands share a common experience. Conforming to the gender identity assigned at birth – by parents, doctors, and other early models – eventually became unlivable. At some point, that identity could no longer be sustained. Yet, this is not a uniquely transgender experience. Both cisgender and transgender individuals live with the fact that external models have shaped their innermost desires. To varying degrees, we are all subject to the gaze of those we imitate, a gaze internalized that becomes a policing eye

that, in extreme cases, demands conformity, sameness, and equivalence while condemning queerness and expressions of gender and sexuality deemed deviant and therefore contemptible.

The internalized gaze of cisgender heteronormativity sustains its dominance by installing fear and threatening punishment for anyone who dares to dis-identify or transgress the arbitrarily constructed laws of sex, gender, and desire. And there is no absolute escape from this predicament. We perceive the model and its images look back, often without our conscious awareness. They observe, judge, and condemn even as they form us through those judgments. We are made in the image of our gods, and those gods, however invisible, police us from within.

Consequently, one way to understand the alarming rates of self-harm and suicide in the transgender population is to see the extreme physical and psychic distress that manifests as gender dysphoria, as a breakdown in the primary model – self relationship. In my clinical experience, each transgender analysand I have worked with has had to transform the internalized, policing gaze of the model that once governed their identification with an assigned gender. From this perspective, the severe depression, anxiety, and self-harm that often accompany the pre-transition body can be understood as the psychic and somatic consequences of disintegrating identifications, especially with models who refuse to recognize, let alone affirm, the multiplicity of desires that constitute transgender desires and bodies. These divergent desires disrupt the model's narcissistic grip. The term "gender dysphoria" barely captures the gravity of this experience: a gravitational pull toward subjective collapse as the psyche and body severs ties to the primary model's gaze, which until then had regulated and coordinated the individual's sense of self.

### 7. Repetitions breaking beyond

If, as Girard contends, we are thoroughly mediated by mimesis, mimetic desire, and mimetic rivalry, then how is it possible to break from the pervasive norms, habits, and practices that constitute the social order? How can we disentangle from the models of desire that shape and mediate who we are to create something genuinely new? Strangely, or perhaps inevitably, the answer lies in mimesis itself. Janicka observes that every act of mimesis is inherently asymptotic. Each imitation or repetition is marked by structural failure. Perfect imitation is impossible because mimetic acts unfold in time and across space. «Gaps and fissures», she writes,

inevitably arise between socially prescribed sexual and gender norms of identity and the actual, lived *approximations* to those norms. It is within this space, between the standard and its embodied performance, that possibilities for gender variation and transformation

emerge. This gap reveals a constitutive but productive failure at the heart of all gender identity. (Janicka [2015]: 49)<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the same mimetic repetitions that produce and stabilize gender norms, habits, and practices also destabilize them. Because mimesis is not closed or static but marked by an internal discontinuity that simultaneously generates sameness and difference, it is an engine of variation. Mimetic repetition ensures that the norms of the social order can always be disrupted, refused, and reconfigured – within gender and beyond it.

### 8. *Communal and individual identity: the scapegoat*

If the ubiquity of mimesis means identity is neither fixed nor self-originating but is always mediated through models of desire, then how does the social order, which depends on stable enough differences to sustain recognition, keep from unravelling? Our identities and communities rely on recognition<sup>5</sup>, and without recognizable differences, identities, collectives, and group affiliations collapse into indistinction. Again, what is Coke once it cannot be distinguished from Pepsi? What are psychoanalysts if their difference from psychotherapists disappears? What remains of Israelis if they are no longer defined against Palestinians? And what becomes of cisgender identity if it is no longer legible as distinct from – or opposed to – transgender identity?

For identity and recognition to function within the symbolic system, there must be clear enough distinctions between what is real and unreal, imaginary and symbolic, original and copy, and natural and artificial. Without these differentiations, the binary system collapses. Within this logic, accepting the cisgender body as natural, original, and normal positions the transgender body as mere imitation, as fake, phony, or copy. The transgender body is thus devalued as a replica of the assumed “real” cisgender body and identity, which is cast as authentic and original – a non-imitation. But is it? Models are always representations, and cisgender bodies and identities are no exception. The “natural” cisgendered body is already a replica, a duplicate, a copy, an imitation. And the reproductive realities of birth affirm as much. It is the mimic, its supposed authenticity nothing more than a manufactured construct, reproduced – quite literally – by a (m)Other.

- 4 Girard’s mimetic theory also emphasizes that the same mimetic tendencies and processes that generate variation also give rise to rivalry and conflict. Gender norms are not only repeated, they are enforced and policed through antagonistic responses to perceived threats, deviations, or failures in imitation.
- 5 This is one reason why subversion, though possible, is not welcomed by the social order. It exposes the fragility of the distinctions that uphold identity and invites mimetic crisis.

Against this backdrop, René Girard's mimetic theory helps explain the disproportionately high violence faced by transgender individuals, as some see transgender people as erasing the very distinctions on which the cisgendered social order relies on. Natural/unnatural, real/fake, male/female, masculine/feminine, biology/gender, true/false, essence/appearance, natural/imitation – the transgender person's apparent *indifference to such differences* becomes the marker that some groups find threatening and fear-inducing. Those who transition genders are accused precisely for embodying a disregard for the differences deemed necessary for the conservation of the social order.

Girard's insight, then, is that hostility arises less from a difficulty with difference and more from an unconscious mimetic identification. Transgender people become targets precisely because they are too close, too similar, too much alike their cisgender counterparts. The transgender body exposes that even cisgender identity, with its supposed difference to transgender identity, is constructed and dissolving. In other words, what is "wrong" with transgender individuals is precisely that there is nothing wrong. They are a mimesis of cisgender life.

If anything, transgender individuals are made to signify an ambiguity that marks them as a pharmakon: both a remedy and threat, scapegoat and sacrifice (Girard [1977]; [1986]; [1987]). Throughout human history, images, imitations, mirrors, twins, ghosts, *Doppelgänger*, and other doubles that disrupt fixed identity by blurring or collapsing distinctions have been feared and cast out. More recently, homosexuals and cross-dressers occupied this role. Today, transgender people are similarly positioned as «monstrous doubles». What designates them as such is not any inherent trait but the indifference to difference they are said to embody, a quality recalling the timeless figures central to archaic sacrificial rituals who were accused of dissolving boundaries and thus made the target of collective fear and sacrificial violence (Girard [1977]; [1987]).

When undifferentiation threatens to disintegrate the recognizable differences between male and female, right from wrong, and inside and outside that are said to uphold and stabilize the social order, it is believed that those differences must be reconstructed to ward off the looming disintegration of the social order. According to Girard, this process involves selecting and marking one element within an undifferentiated space, assigning it an arbitrarily fabricated difference, and expelling it. The expulsion, or even murder, of bodies embodying indifference to socially enforced distinctions re-establishes the first opposition on which the community regenerates itself: difference as such in the form of us versus them. The sacrificed victim lying dead on the outside also reasserts the boundary between inside and outside. The violent marking and killing of transgender people reinforces spatial divisions while also securing temporality: a before and after marked by the event of their death, and a here distinguished from there, where the body lies. Whatever accusation is attributed to the victim becomes the



foundation for renewed laws, prohibitions, and the system of morals and ethics that will guide future behaviors and communal norms.

At the heart of being human lies a fundamental madness: expelling and destroying those who, in truth, are not meaningfully different to fabricate the illusions of difference that sustain identity and community. Girard's mimetic theory reveals this sacrificial process as the foundation of every identity and society, a process in which something is cast out from within an undifferentiated field to generate a differential order. Girard's account of this mechanism at the social level finds its parallel at the individual level in Freud's account of the psyche's formation through primal repression. Unlike Lacan, who locates identity within the subject's misrecognition in the mirror stage and its submission to the symbolic order, Girard emphasizes the externalized, communal violence that generates identity through collective violence vented on a scapegoat. Where Lacan emphasizes psychic structure, Girard exposes the social mechanisms by which communities forge difference through violence to give birth to structure – both psychic and otherwise. That order, in turn, misrecognizes both itself and what it has expelled. When identities depend on the negation of another, they are ultimately as imaginary as they are lethal. And still, the real traumatic kernel is that even as we cling to the differences that define us, it is the unbearable sameness that we cannot accept.

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