Violence and Dystopia

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*Mimesis and Sacrifice
in Contemporary Western
Dystopian Narratives*

By

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*For my daughter, and in loving memory
of my father (1949 – 1991)*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Modern Dystopia

Lyman Tower Sargent, a leading theorist in utopian studies, has remarked that the twentieth century deserves its reputation as the dystopian century.[1] The modern dystopia as a literary genre, "depicting places worse than the ones we live in"[2], with Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924) as a foundational text, has continually been fuelled by the human catastrophes of the century: "twenty-five million dead in the name of Nazism, one hundred million in that of communism", the killing fields of Cambodia and major economic depressions, to name just a few. In the genre of dystopia these catastrophes are perceived as the result of its older enemy brother: utopia. While the latter term has, ever since its inception in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), captured the human striving for the perfect society – the *eu*topia: "good place" – it also carries in its name the impossibility of ever reaching this good place – *ou*topia: literally: "not place." Utopia is thus strictly speaking ambiguous: it describes the non-existing place that can be better or worse than the existing society, but it has more commonly been identified with eutopia.

More's *Utopia* coincided with the early-modern age of discovery and it is thus not surprising that his and other early utopias, such as Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), are displaced onto distant islands. It is these roots that gave birth to the utopian sub-genres of the Gulliveriana and the Robinsonade.[3] The discovery of indigenous peoples also provided a new impetus to the utopian idea of the perfectibility of man, leading to the paradisiacal myth of the "dying and resurrected noble savage".[4]

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[1] Lyman Tower Sargent, "Utopia and the Late Twentieth Century: A View from North America", in *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*, eds. Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys, and Lyman Tower Sargent (New York, 2000), p. 334.

[2] Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, Introduction. *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York / London, 2003), p. 1.

[3] See Sargent (2000), p. 12.

[4] Ibid., p. 9.

The sources of utopian thinking, however lie further back in the history of the West: a major source is the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Utopian thought has been inspired by the Old Testament Prophets' hope of a restoration of Israel and by the Christian transformation of that hope into the expectation of the Second Coming and the establishment of the New Jerusalem on earth as described in the last chapter of Revelation. But until the Middle Ages the Kingdom of God was not of this world. According to Augustine, the City of God, in the form of the church or later Monastic intentional communities, could, despite its function as the pilgrim city leading towards the Kingdom of God, at best be a simulacrum of the Kingdom. The real Kingdom of God would be, however, "made without hands", i.e. created by God. Medieval millenarianism, which according to Danielle Lecoq and Roland Schaer shapes the coming of utopia in historical time[5], was thus clearly condemned as heresy.

It is with the rise of modernity that the Augustinian ideal was gradually abandoned and utopia's interest became firmly grounded in this world. Utopias brought about without human effort were replaced by utopias brought about with human effort, to use Sargent's way of putting it.[6] The Judaeo-Christian idea of the Kingdom of God became fused with the Hellenic ideal city, as Krishan Kumar observes: "It was of course through Plato's Republic, rediscovered along with other Greek writings in the European Renaissance, that the Hellenic ideal city most influenced Western utopia."[7] Among other sources for the strange amalgam that forms the matrix of Western utopia, Kumar lists the myth of the Golden Age and the Arcadian idyll. But whereas these *outopoi* in their original contexts lie in the past, they were appropriated by modernity to foretell the future: "'The Golden Age of the human species is not behind us, it is before us', declared Henri Saint-Simon."[8] While early post-More utopias were still explicitly Christian, dealing with the problem of how to create a better society for the fallen, they were as clearly brought about by human effort.

The idea of the Kingdom of God was thus gradually transformed to become man's perfected secular future. The age of modern science, as Jacob Bronowski explains in *Magic, Science and Civilization* (1978), does

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[5] Danielle Lecoq and Roland Schaer, "Ancient, Biblical, and Medieval Traditions", in *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*, eds. Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys, and Lyman Tower Sargent (New York, 2000), p. 58.

[6] Lyman Tower Sargent, "Utopian Traditions: Themes and Variations", in Gregory Claeys, Lyman Tower Sargent, Roland Schaer, eds., *Utopia: The Western Search for the Ideal Society* (New York, 2000), pp. 8, 10.

[7] Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford, 1985), p. 5.

[8] Ibid., p. 4.

no longer suppose the existence of two separate logics of the natural and the supernatural but is trying to form a single picture of the whole of nature including man.[9] Here lies modern utopia's continuity with the Judeo-Christian Kingdom of God, as Roland Schaer makes clear through the example of Francis Bacon: the latter explicitly saw the idea of the Kingdom of God, as propagated in the Jewish prophetic tradition and medieval millenarianism, resuscitated through the agency of advancement of human knowledge. Thus the ground was laid for later utopias, such as socialism – the prime nineteenth-century utopia. Socialism was not only propagated by its most famous advocates Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, but also in the form of Edward Bellamy's Christian socialism, as proposed in his *Looking Backward: 2000 – 1887* (1888). Both the Marxist salvific narrative and Bellamy's vision depend not only on a total reorganisation of the whole of society but also on the modern belief in technological progress. In *News From Nowhere* (1891) on the other hand William Morris proposed an atavistic return to localised, agrarian communities and the rejection of technology and progress. This particular utopia is more akin to the anarchist vision of a decentralisation of society, which survives to the present day in various forms of intentional communities.

The bright light of human-made utopias has blinded utopians to the cost involved, so much so that any price seems justified. Frédéric Rouvillois cites the example of the French revolutionary and Deputy of the National Convention of 1792, Jean-Baptiste Carrier: "I am ready to sacrifice all mankind to my beloved Republic."[10] Sometimes the cost is altogether repressed, as is the case with twentieth century modernist architecture. Ruth Eaton comments on Le Corbusier: "For the Swiss theoretician, the first global conflict had created a tabula rasa as for a great new age that would be classical and orderly in accordance with scientifically established rules of harmony in tune with the universe."[11] John Carey has pointed out that "the aim of all utopias, to a greater or lesser extent, is to eliminate real people."[12] This, as he continues to explain, might not necessarily be a bad thing, when one considers the atrocities that real people have committed. But one can also already see

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[9] Jacob Bronowski, *Magic, Science, and Civilization* (New York, 1978), p. 39.

[10] Frédéric Rouvillois, "Utopia and Totalitarianism", in Gregory Claeys, Lyman Tower Sargent, Roland Schaer, eds., *Utopia: The Western Search for the Ideal Society* (New York, 2000), p. 317.

[11] Ruth Eaton, "Architecture and Urbanism: the Faces of Utopia", in Gregory Claeys, Lyman Tower Sargent, Roland Schaer, eds., *Utopia: The Western Search for the Ideal Society* (New York, 2000), p. 304.

[12] John Carey, Introduction. *The Faber Book of Utopias* (London, 1999), p. xii.

how the attempt at a transformation of real human beings into perfect utopians can turn into hell on earth. As Rouvillois points out, utopia can emerge

> as the site of perpetual inversion: unanimity becomes isolation, freedom alienation, and transparency emptiness. Totalitarianism, like utopia, purports to have triumphed over the anguish of time and the accidents of history. The new era it announces will be everlasting, and the new self can confidently expect a smooth and reassuring future wherein his supremacy will only be confirmed.[13]

While, as Sargent further observes, the prophets and most apocalypses – portraying utopias made without hands – stress the troubles to come, with only a brief description of a better society[14], the inverse seems to be true for utopias brought about by human effort. The troubles to come are justified and marginalized, eclipsed by the promises of utopia. The troubles can thus assume the function of redemptive violence. This accounts for the fact that despite the horrors of the twentieth century, the utopian imagination survives, for example in the novels of H.G. Wells, to form a dialectic with the dystopian impulse.[15] It is in that sense that "utopia and anti-utopia support each other, forming two sides of the same literary genre." With the foundation of the UN out of World War II, the pattern of Wells' narratives was realised in history: out of the destruction of an old world order emerges a (supposedly) lasting new world order.

The belief in redemptive violence is a belief in war as the only hygiene, as Roland Schaer has pointed out[16], a hygiene reminiscent of violent, medieval millenarianism. It is also the dilemma, as Carey has argued, that confronts all utopian projects: they aim at a new world, but must destroy the old.[17] Rouvillois writes: "And what we see beyond the common project of seeing 'the kingdom of heaven fulfilled at last upon earth' is a similar wish, inherently linking utopia and totalitarianism, to put

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[13] See Rouvillois (2000), p. 322.

[14] See Sargent (2000), p. 9.

[15] As Kumar (1985), p. 387, points out, Wells himself seems to have abandoned the utopian hope in the last years of his life.

[16] Roland Schaer: "Utopia and Twentieth-century Avant-gardes", in Gregory Claeys, Lyman Tower Sargent, Roland Schaer, eds., *Utopia: The Western Search for the Ideal Society* (New York, 2000), p. 278. However, Carey points out with respect to Wells that he is one of many utopian authors who possibly regard their utopias as dystopias (see Carey (1999), p. xii).

[17] See Carey (1999), p. xi.

man in God's place, even if he must endure all the torments of hell to reach it."[18]

It is the role of dystopia as a literary genre to display openly the horrific, repressed undersides of these modern, "made by hand" utopias – not unlike the tradition of the Jewish prophets and the apocalyptic tradition. After the horrors of the twentieth century one can look back at More's *Utopia*, as Sargent does, and perceive it as clearly dystopian: "But being fallen Christians, the people do not live up to the perfection expected, and a quite vicious legal system is needed to make sure they do."[19] Carey points out how, in their attempts to perfect humanity, "More's Utopians are in favour of exterminating the Swiss, on the grounds that their savage, warlike disposition makes them unfit to survive."[20] The decision over who is fit to live and who has to be eliminated to achieve utopia has taken various forms in history and includes nineteenth-century discussions about the elimination of criminals and Nazi-eugenics. The latter two examples resurface in the (post)modern guise of attempts at identifying a criminal gene and bio-genetic engineering.

But utopia has also suffered heavy blows from within its own system in the twentieth century. The discovery of the Second Law of Thermodynamics puts strict limits on the scientific utopia and posits an end state of chaos and entropy in the universe. M. Keith Booker, in *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (1994), has pointed out how technological utopianism reached its peak in the nineteenth century, with scientific discoveries already beginning to undermine the unlimited faith in the power of science, leading to the ghastly vision of a gradually decaying universe.[21]

A darker view of humanity and human progress, as Booker further points out, was also espoused by Darwin in his theory of evolution. While explaining the emergence of humanity scientifically through "natural selection", it also foreshadowed humanity's dark future: Thomas Huxley's fears that evolution would develop in ways antithetical to human nature, leading to a gradual increase in human misery and eventually to a downfall of civilization were soon to become the horrendous reality of social Darwinism.

The elimination of human beings as a step towards utopia can be related to modern psychology and Freud's theory of a darker origin of

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[18] See Rouvillois (2000), p. 331.
[19] See Sargent (2000), p. 8.
[20] See Carey (1999), p. xviii.
[21] M. Keith Booker, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (New York / London, 1994), pp. 5f.

civilization itself, through the expulsion of a scapegoat in the founding murder. According to Freudian psychology the self is conflicted between the pleasure and the reality principle: individual desire is constrained by social order. At best, therefore, the Freudian drives can be sublimated into a useful service to society. The point of civilization is thus to limit individual liberty and to avoid a primitivism and anarchy that would be even worse. It is these psychological *topoi* underneath the "cordon sanitaire" of civilization that modern dystopian fiction portrays. This is why, as Booker further contends, scapegoating – as the outlet for human aggression – often occurs in dystopian fiction.[22]

The post-war period has witnessed a new type of totalitarianism, transcending the parameters defined by Zamyatin in *We* and Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The rise of the post-industrial era in the West and the collapse of the Soviet Union gave birth to a global, utopian consumerist society in which the mass culture described by Theodor Adorno[23], and prophetically portrayed by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), becomes the new Foucauldian, carceral society. As Kumar points out, science could deliver – and continues to deliver – now in the service of consumerism – utopia in real life and real time, despite the limits imposed on it by a decaying universe.[24]

While consumerism forms the new utopia, indulging the individual pleasure principle, its dark underside is threatening to become a fearful reality. The predictions of the Club of Rome in *The Limits of Growth* (1972), followed by the oil-price shock in 1973, sketch a nightmarish vision of the future, in which all natural resources will have been used up. Ulrich Becks's *Risikogesellschaft* (1986), prophetically published only months before Chernobyl, argues that technological modernity produces "non-intended side effects" ("nicht-intendierte Nebenfolgen"), threatening to destroy the then emerging global consumer society. Recent history thus provides ample resources for the tradition of the canonical dystopias of Zamyatin, Orwell and Huxley to be continued by writers such as J.G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick, Kurt Vonnegut and Ray Bradbury. Their "new maps of hell", as Kingsley Amis put it, document the continuing alienation

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[22] Ibid., p. 11.

[23] Adorno, Theodor W. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. J. M. Bernstein ed. (London, 1991).

[24] Krishan Kumar, "Utopia and Anti-Utopia in the Twentieth Century", in Gregory Claeys, Lyman Tower Sargent, Roland Schaer, eds., *Utopia: The Western Search for the Ideal Society* (New York, 2000), p. 257.

of human beings by technological modernity, the negative effects of "metal into flesh" as Will Self succinctly summarizes modernity.[25]

The "non-intended side effects" of technological modernity are changing shape, but are present today in the form of "global warming" due to carbon dioxide emissions or the recent Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, fuelling the dystopian imagination. At the same time, the critique of one particular utopia can give rise to a rival utopia. In the case of the criticism of environmental pollution it is the "green utopia", the "ecotopia", paradigmatically exemplified by Ernst Callenbach's eponymous novel (1978). The line between utopia and anti-utopia thus becomes blurred, as Kumar observes.[26] Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan have labelled these particular proponents of the utopian genre as "critical utopias". The latter, inspired by the oppositional political culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, are shaped by ecological, feminist and New Left thought and "reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as a dream. [...] By forging visions of better but open futures, these utopian writings developed a critique of dominant ideology and traced new vectors of opposition." Among critical utopias are the novels of Ursula K. Le Guin and Marge Piercy.

"In the 1980s", as Baccolini and Moylan further observe, "this utopian tendency came to an end." The critical utopia was replaced by the "critical dystopia".[27] The dystopian impulse was revived by films such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) or "cyber-punk" novels such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). In the face of the intensifying right-wing fundamentalism in the 1980s of Reagan and Thatcher, the future seemed once more bleak and totalitarian to these writers. But unlike the canonical dystopias of Orwell, Zamyatin and Huxley, there is still room for hope in the critical dystopia, as for example in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) or Marge Piercy's *He, She, and It* (1991). In contrast to critical utopias, however, the critical dystopias maintain hope outside their pages. This particular subgenre is thus structurally similar to utopias made without hands and the idea of the Kingdom of God: the ideal society is indicated only as a faint hope on the horizon of a portrayed apocalypse.

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[25] See Baccolini and Moylan (2003), p. 2 and Will Self, *My Idea of Fun* (London, 1993), p. 313: "You see I find this image [...] to be almost integral to any understanding of the modern world. Metal into flesh – the impact of metal on flesh. Isn't that the whole of progess in a nutshell[?]"

[26] See Kumar (2000), p. 262.

[27] See Baccolini and Moylan (2003), p. 2.

The blurring between utopia and dystopia is, as Kumar writes, also the reason why

> [t]he end of the millennium sees a confused picture. Apocalypse wars with optimism, utopianism with an acute sense that a "new world disorder" is upon us. Perhaps that is why it seems to have been so difficult for anyone to produce a convincing utopia or anti-utopia in traditional literary form.[28]

Both the utopian and dystopian imagination continue to be inspired by current trends in society. Technological modernity has led to the creation of the "global village" in the network society, as predicted by Marshall McLuhan. While the internet paves the way for a global, utopian community, dystopian fears also haunt "computopia", as for example in the millennial-apocalyptic instance of the "Y2K"-bug or the possibility of "cyber-terrorism", explored by "cyber-punk" fiction. Consumerism, rooted in the expansion of Western capitalism, also sees a return of the repressed in the form of religious fundamentalism and the emerging threat of global terrorism. Francis Fukuyama's utopian vision of an "end of history" (1992) in the global spread of Western-style liberal democracies thus seems to give way to Samuel Huntington's dystopian thesis of a "clash of civilizations" (1996).

From an early twenty-first-century perspective, the realizations of utopian dreams with their haunting dystopian undersides have thus had many faces, providing rich and varied sources for the dystopian imagination. In the following discussion of recent, selected dystopian novels, the driving question will be, whether, underlying the various dystopias, and the utopian-dystopian dialectic, there exists a common cause, or deep structure, that can explain the diverse surface manifestations of dystopian worlds. Baccolini and Moylan observe that critical dystopias suggest causes rather than the mere revelation of symptoms.[29] G.K. Chesterton also suggests an underlying cause for the creation of dystopian environments, when he writes:

> The weakness of all utopias is this, that they take the greatest difficulty of man [i.e. original sin] and assume it to be overcome, and then give an elaborate account of the overcoming of smaller ones. They first assume that no man will want more than his share, and then are very ingenious in explaining whether his share will be delivered by motor-car or balloon.[30]

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[28] See Kumar (2000), p. 264.
[29] See Baccolini and Moylan (2003), p. 3.
[30] G.K Chesterton, "Mr H.G. Wells and the Giants", in *Heretics* (London, 1905) p. 73-4.

Sargent, in "The Problem of the 'Flawed Utopia': A note on the Costs of Eutopia" relates Chesterton's argument of an unlimited human desire to the problem of the cost of utopia.[31] He conceptualizes the cost of utopia in terms of the scapegoat, paradigmatically typified in Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1975). The existence of the story's utopian society depends on the sacrifice of one child. The story, as Sargent continues to explain, is rooted in a literary tradition leading back to Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). The pivotal question is: "Would and should we be willing to punish someone or allow someone to suffer if to do so we would produce a good life for everyone else?"[32] Dostoevksy and Le Guin give an emphatic "no" for an answer. But the assumption is still that the expulsion of a scapegoat, even if rejected, would actually produce utopia. Would expulsion really solve the collective problem of desire: bringing a reconciliation of limited satisfaction and unlimited desires within a social context? And why should it in the first place?

Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson have drawn attention to the anti-foundationalist influence of Lyotardian postmodernity on recent dystopian fiction.[33] This, as will be seen, is certainly true in general for most of the treated works in the following discussion, but it is also true in the more particular sense of scapegoat expulsions: the latter fail to found a new utopian, societal order. The critical examination of the failure of sacrifice and scapegoating in dystopian narratives has to be embedded in a coherent theoretical framework which evades the unconscious blurring of terms like "scapegoating" and "sacrifice". In Sargent's example just referred to, both Sargent and Le Guin use the terms interchangeably as synonyms. As will be seen in the discussion of the individual works, this unconscious blurring is a recurring phenomenon in criticism of dystopia and of individual authors.

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[31] Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Problem of the 'Flawed Utopia': A note on the Costs of Eutopia", in Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, eds: *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York / London, 2003), pp. 224ff.

[32] Ibid., p. 227.

[33] Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times: Optimism/Pessimism and Utopia/Dystopia", in Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, eds: *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York / London, 2003), p. 15.

René Girard's mimetic theory provides coherent definitions of both terms, tracing them back to their roots in archaic religion.[34] Girard's reading of archaic scapegoating and sacrifice is firmly based on the Gospel hermeneutic and deconstruction of pagan blood sacrifice. Girard locates the cause for scapegoat expulsions in the escalation of imitative (mimetic) and potentially conflictive desire. He has translated Christian intuitions – like Chesterton's – into a coherent theory of human desire and culture[35], which makes it possible, so runs the argument of the present thesis, to identify the cause at the heart of the creation of modern dystopian environments, both real and imagined. Before an overview can be given of how the fictional material will be treated, it is therefore necessary to introduce Girard's theory.

1.2 René Girard's Mimetic Theory

1.2.1 Imitative Desire

In 1961 René Girard published his first book, *Mensonge Romantique, Vérité Romanesque*, which was translated into English in 1965 as *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (henceforth *Deceit*). The book is a diachronic study of five European novelists: Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Proust, roughly covering the time-span of Western modernity, from the publication of the first part of *Don Quixote* in 1605 to the death of Marcel Proust in 1922. As Girard has put it in *A Theater of Envy* (1991; henceforth *Theater*), his study on Shakespeare, he gambled on the possibility that his five novelists might have something in common.[36] This "something" is that human desire is not autonomous but mediated by another's desire: desire is triangular. The source of desire lies not in the object of desire or in the desiring subject but in the other's desire. This is the "vérite romanesque – the novelistic truth" of the French title which Girard opposes to the "mensonge romantique – the romantic lie". The latter consists of the belief often encountered in Romanticism that the individual's desire is independent from the surrounding social context. The Romantic, for

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[34] According to *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (general editor Jonathan Z. Smith, San Francisco, 1995) the term "archaic" or "primitive religion" refers to the religion of traditional peoples "who until the colonial expansions of the last half-millennia were largely uninfluenced by the cultures of Europe or Asia (p. 1087). For Girard, these traditional societies are established upon a functioning scapegoat mechanism.

[35] René Girard, *Battling to the End* (Michigan, 2010), p. 177.

[36] René Girard, *A Theater of Envy* (New York, 1991), p. 3.

example, can brave the promethean horrors of industrialisation if only his autonomy of desire remains untainted. In one of his few coinages, Girard introduces the term "interdividuality" to capture the process of identity construction as embedded in a social context and influenced by the models surrounding the "interdividual".

But Girard does not only extract a criticism of desire originating in the self from these five novelists but also argues for a gradual transformation of mediated desire from the time of Cervantes to that of Proust. In Girardian terms, "external" mediation is gradually replaced by "internal" mediation. Amadis of Gaul, Don Quixote's fictional model of desire in matters of knight-errantry, never enters Don Quixote's world, but mediates the knight of La Mancha's desire from the outside. The world of Don Quixote is still the world of medieval feudalism and hence still rigidly structured. For Girard, as he puts it in *Evolution and Conversion* (2007; henceforth *Evolution*),

> [t]he only way modernity can be defined is the universalization of internal mediation, for one doesn't have areas of life that would keep people apart from each other, and that would mean that the construction of our beliefs and identity cannot but have strong mimetic components.[37]

In *Deceit* the migration from external to internal mediation is captured in terms of transcendence, or transcendency as Yvonne Freccero puts it in her translation. Medieval vertical transcendency, with God as the ultimate transcendent model, becomes deviated transcendency in modernity or as Girard has put it: "Men become Gods in the eyes of each other."[38] When human beings replace God as the supreme model with each other, imitation becomes anything but harmless. Girard draws on Aristotle's observation in the *Poetics* that the difference between animals and the human being lies in the greater imitative capacity of the latter.[39] For Girard, however, "imitation operates on desire as well." When this is grasped, "it becomes easier to understand how mimesis could produce conflict and rivalries when desire is directed towards the same object."[40]

The emphasis on the conflictive potentials of imitative desire is what distinguishes his theory from other theories of imitation. The dimension of conflictive desire is missing from Aristotelian imitation, which is more concerned with the idea of representation. In recent scientific discussions

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[37] René Girard, João Cezar de Castro Rocha, and Pierpaolo Antonello, *Evolution and Conversion* (London, 2007), p. 240.

[38] René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (Baltimore, 1965), p. 53.

[39] Aristotle, *Poetics,* 4, 48b.

[40] See Girard et al. (2007), p. 140.

on imitation, for example in ethology, cognitive science with the discovery of the mirror neuron or theories of cultural evolution such as Richard Dawkins' meme theory, the emphasis is more on action rather than desire.[41]

Although not specifically explored in *Deceit*, Girard engages with a Freudian, triangular understanding of desire but formulates significant objections and modifications in his later books. In *La Violence et le Sacré* (1972; translated into English in 1977 as *Violence and the Sacred*), Girard revisits Freud's reading of the Oedipus myth and provides an alternative explanation for the "Oedipus complex".[42] Girard posits that Freud came very close to discovering the imitative nature of desire with terms like the child's "ambivalence" towards and "identification" with the father. According to Girard, Freud solved the latent conflict between the mimetic process of paternal identification and the autonomous establishment of a particular object as a basis for desire (the sexual cathexis towards the mother) in favour of the latter. In other words, Freud rejects the interpretation that the child innocently imitates the father's desire for the mother but posits rather an autonomous desire of the child for the mother, which then leads to the rivalry between father and son for the mother. Against the latter interpretation, Girard argues that "if we are to believe Freud, the little boy has no difficulty recognizing his father as a rival […]. Freud is thus conferring on the child powers of discernment not equal but superior to those of most grown-ups."[43]

"The son", as Girard continues to explain, "is always the last to learn that what he desires is incest and patricide. […] The incest wish, the patricide wish, do not belong to the child but spring from the mind of the adult, the model."[44] Girard introduces Gregory Bateson's concept of the "double bind" into the discussion of imitative desire. On the one hand the father encourages the imitation of the child, on the other hand, the imitation of the father's desire for the mother is strictly discouraged. What is repressed in the Oedipus complex is not the wish for patricide and incest, which are openly displayed in the Oedipus myth, but the ambivalence of imitative desire.

Girard's mimetic rereading of the Freudian relationship between father and son is the prime example for internal mediation. With the rise of modernity the double bind of imitated desire comes to increasingly

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[41] Ibid., p. 140.
[42] René Girard, "Freud and the Oedipus Complex", *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, 1977), pp. 169-192.
[43] Ibid., p. 176.
[44] Ibid., p. 175.

dominate all human relations. In *Theater*, Girard claims that Shakespeare's plays document the increasing importance of internal mediation in the modern world. On *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, he writes:

> Valentine and Proteus can be friends only by desiring alike and, if they do, they are enemies. […] This Gordian knot is its own explanation, in the sense that any effort to bypass the mimetic *double bind*, short of total renunciation, must produce some kind of "monster", a false reconciliation of entities that should remain irreconcilable.[45]

Mimetic desire is thus not negative per se. It can lead to friendship due to shared interests. But it can turn into destructive rivalries, once the mutually imitated desires converge on the same object – as they must, unless desire is completely renounced. However, it is important to already note that for Girard mimetic desire is not a modern invention. In *Evolution* Girard identifies Augustine in the *Confessions* as the earliest thinker to define this type of mimetic rivalry. Augustine gives an example of two infants who are rivals for milk despite the abundance of milk.[46]

Since friendship and enmity stem from the same source in the mimetic double bind, Girardian theory can dispense with Freudian drives. As Girard puts it in *La Route Antique des Hommes Pervers* (1985), translated as *Job: The Victim of His People* (1987): "It eliminates simply and elegantly the mistaken common-sense notion that claims there must be at least two causes of such apparently contradictory effects: the duality, for example of a 'pleasure principle' and a 'death instinct'. One principle is enough for both."[47] The theoretization of mimetic desire allows Girard to get rid of "the entire bric-a-brac of psychiatric terms", as he puts it in *Theater*[48], in particular "sado-masochism" and "narcissism".

In order to trace the origin of these latter two conditions to internal mediation, it is necessary to first understand the difference between mimesis and imitation in Girard's use: "There is less awareness in mimesis

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[45] See Girard (1991), pp. 16f.

[46] See Girard et al. (2007), p. 61 and Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (Stillwell, 2008), p. 8: "The weakness then of infant limbs, not its will, is its innocence. Myself have seen and known even a baby envious; it could not speak, yet turned pale and looked bitterly on its foster-brother. Who knows not this? […] Is that too innocence, when the fountain of milk is flowing in rich abundance, not to endure one to share it, though in extremest need, and whose very life as yet depends thereon?"

[47] René Girard, *Job: The Victim of his People* (London, 1987b) p. 63.

[48] See Girard (1991), p. 109.

than in imitation."[49] Internal mediation is normally an unconscious process. Just as the Romantic really believes in the autonomy of his desire, so does the narcissist believe in his desire for himself, the masochist in the righteousness of his punishment and the sadist in his supremacy over the masochist. But if desire is indeed mimetic and not rooted in the desired object, narcissism and sado-masochism can be understood as different ways of dealing with the problem of the obstacle.

When internal mediation turns into mimetic rivalry, the rival is perceived as the obstacle between the fulfilment of desire in the possession of the object. But once the rival is defeated, desire is necessarily frustrated, because the object loses its desirability it only had due to the presence of the rival in the first place. Masochism evades this frustration by creating an insurmountable obstacle in the sadist, whereas the sadist in his repeated violence against the masochist recreates the moment of overcoming the obstacle in his effort to attain divinity. The Freudian myth of narcissism is unmasked by Proust, as Girard explains in *Mimesis and Theory* (2008). Whereas Freud continued to believe in the self-sufficient self-love of others, Girard through Proust sees that "[n]arcissism, especially intact narcissism is a projection of desire. No one can really be a self-conscious narcissist, a narcissist for himself."[50] The narcissist believes himself to be self-sufficient. But this is of course an illusion, as the aura of self-sufficiency is created by the desire of others, who, like the narcissist himself, desire the apparent self-sufficiency of the narcissist. Or as Robert Doran has expressed it in his introduction to *Mimesis and Theory*: "Narcissism is thus revealed as a strategy to attract desire, rather than as a psychological condition."[51]

Underlying these various manifestations of mimetic desire is the subject's quest for "being". The world of internal mediation suffers from "ontological sickness". Thus for Girard, phenomena like sadism and masochism are not sexual in the first instance but existential. In the modern world, in the absence of an external mediator, the other's being seems superior to one's own. But everyone feigns superiority towards all others, while at the same time knowing about one's own absence of being. This is also Girard's definition of hell: "Everyone thinks that he alone is

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[49] See Girard et al. (2007), p. 60.
[50] René Girard and Robert Doran ed., *Mimesis and Theory* (Stanford, 2008), p. 182.
[51] Robert Doran, Introduction. In René Girard and Robert Doran ed., *Mimesis and Theory* (Stanford, 2008), p. xx.

condemned to hell, and that is what makes it hell."[52] In *Mimesis and Theory* he writes:

> The more modern the novel becomes, the more you descend down the circles of a hell which can still be defined in theological terms as it is in Dante, but can also now be defined in non-religious terms–in terms of what happens to us when our relations with others are dominated exclusively by our desires and theirs, and their relationships dominated by their desires and ours.[53]

Because of the modern attempts to evade the escalation of mimetic desire into open conflict, mimetic desire migrates to the underground world of psychopathological relations, as brought to light for example by the narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864). As Girard writes in *Mimesis and Theory*: "Everything changes when the duel disappears as a social institution. Deprived of a worthy object, ambition is transformed into abstract competition, and this competition, deprived of any real consequences, perpetuates itself and becomes obsessive."[54] The end state of internal mediation is the world of death: "The will to make oneself God is a will to self-destruction which is gradually realized."[55] This might be confused with a Freudian death drive. But it is through the repeated disappointments of the overcoming of rival-obstacles or through the frustration of attempts at overcoming the obstacle rivals that the subject decides that "death is the meaning of life".[56]

In *Je Vois Satan Tomber Comme L'éclair* (1999), translated as *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* (2001; henceforth *I See*), Girard has interpreted the Tenth Commandment against covetousness as an interdiction of and protection against mimetic rivalry. In the context of the Ten Commandments, coveting what belongs to one's neighbour can be seen as idolatry: desiring and imitating the neighbour's being instead of worshipping God. But already in *Deceit* the term "deviated transcendency" implies a spiritual cause for the malaise of modern mimetic rivalries: "Although this rivalry is the source of considerable material benefits, it also leads to even more considerable spiritual sufferings, for nothing material can appease it."[57]

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[52] See Girard (1965), p. 57.
[53] See Girard (2008), p. 264.
[54] Ibid., p. 106.
[55] See Girard (1965), p. 287.
[56] Ibid., p. 287.
[57] Ibid., p. 137.

The latter quotation points to one way Western modernity has tried to come to terms with the problem of mimetic rivalry. As Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Paul Dumouchel argue in their Girardian study *L'Enfer des Choses* (1979), Western capitalism institutionalises a culture of mimetic rivalry. The implementation of Bernard Mandeville's alternate title of the *Fable of the Bees* (1714), *Private Vices, Public Benefits*, has led to economic and technological progress on an immense scale in the past two centuries. But if Girard is right, and nothing material can appease the rivalry, then one can on the one hand understand how capitalism, particularly in its current consumerist form, is continuously fuelled: because desire is constantly frustrated, ever new products promise "being" to the consumer. The stage of consumerism can thus be labelled post-mimetic in the sense that mimetic rivalries are channelled towards the objects to be consumed. What Girard remarks on Proust's *Time Recaptured* is thus also true for consumerism:

> It is the perspective that imprisoned him in a sterile process of jumping from one frustrated desire to the next over a period of many years. Everything the narrator could not acquire, he desired; everything he acquired, he immediately ceased to desire, until he fell into a state of ennui that could be called a state of post-mimetic desire.[58]

One should thus expect to find evidence of these spiritual sufferings as modernity develops – making the creation of a secular utopia impossible. But before this evidence is examined in the discussed works of the present thesis, the second major branch of Girard's theory, scapegoating and sacrifice, has to be introduced.

1.2.2 *Violence and the Sacred*

Girard, while associate professor at Johns Hopkins University, continued to pursue his interests in the modern novel after *Deceit* by editing a book on Proust (1962) and by writing a study on Dostoevsky (1963)[59], before turning his attention to cultural anthropology. This shift can be at least partly explained through the 1960s revolutionary rise of "Theory" in the

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[58] See Girard (2008), p. 270.

[59] *Proust: A Collection of Criticital Essays* (1962), *Dostoïevsky, du double à l'unité* (1963; translated into English and published in 1997 as *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*).

realm of literary criticism.[60] In very simple and simplified terms all of Theory can be said to revolve around the "linguistic turn" of Saussurean linguistics and its major claim developed through structuralism and post-structuralism that everything is structured like a language.

Initially Girard welcomed the fresh breeze of Theory, liberating literary criticism from the suffocating dictates of New Criticism in the Anglo-American world and the emphasis on literary history in France. In 1966 Girard co-organised the famous conference held at Johns Hopkins university titled "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man", with such future greats as Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida participating. But Girard would soon part ways with the further development of (post-)structuralist thought with its abandonment of the referent and its focus on the "ludic" – mere language games. While, as Robert Doran writes, *Violence and the Sacred* (1972; henceforth *Violence*) "was interpreted by many as being part of the "post-structuralist" movement in French thought […], the convergence was more coincidental than essential. Girard had arrived at a similar crossroads as these other thinkers, but he had come on a different path and was travelling toward a very different destination."[61]

In *Violence* Girard extends his theory of mimesis developed in *Deceit* to all culture by investigating the origins of culture in archaic religion. He thus engages with the structural anthropology of Claude-Lévi Strauss, the Cambridge myth-and-ritual school epitomized by James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) and the anthropologies of Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski. Girard does not accept "the Enlightenment view for which religion is superstition and if ritual is everywhere it's because cunning and avid priests impose their abracadabras on the good people."[62] For Girard, the function of archaic religion is to keep mimetic rivalries in check and to impose order on society through rigidly defined social roles, reinforced by myths and rituals.

Girard acknowledges Lévi-Strauss' contribution to structural anthropology by introducing the notion of binary differentiation, which allowed a systematic and comparative study of kinship systems. What Girard objects to, however, is the idea that structural differentiation is

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[60] Valentine Cunningham, in *Reading After Theory* (Oxford, 2002, p.17) argues that the last fifty years have seen the dominance of a very specific type of theory in literary criticism: "The scope is, of course, Structuralism and Feminism and Marxism and Reader-Response and Psychoanalysis and Deconstruction and Poststructuralism and Postmodernism and New Historicism and Postcolonialism."

[61] See Doran (2008), p. xii.

[62] See Girard et al. (2007), p. 72.

always already in place. There is no room in Lévi-Strauss for undifferentiation. With respect to the latter Girard is post-structural and follows, for example, Derrida's discussion of the "pharmakon" in his essay "Plato's Pharmacy". Derrida draws attention to the various possible translations of *pharmakon* as both "poison" and "remedy". Thus the same term comprises opposite meanings rather than clearly separating them into binary opposites. For post-structuralists meaning is thus constantly deferred, as signified meaning is constituted by a chain of signifiers rather than through some external reference.

At this point, Girard also parts company with Derrida and post-structuralism. For Girard, undifferentiation itself has meaning and it is tied to the loss of differences between mimetic rivals. For Girard undifferentiation in language originates in a loss of differences in the real world of human relations. This is what Girard has labelled "the sacrificial crisis" in the context of archaic religion. During a sacrificial crisis, the rigid differences within society disappear and rituals, normally ensuring the stability of society, wear out. The recurring mythic motif of "enemy twins" signifies the loss of differences due to an intensification of mimetic rivalries. At the peak of the sacrificial crisis, when the mimetic doubles are on the verge of annihilating each other in a struggle of all against all, the violent potentials are redirected against an arbitrary victim. The victim is made responsible for the societal crisis and is killed by the unanimous mob.

The resolution of the sacrificial crisis through the expulsion of a scapegoat relies on a double misunderstanding or "méconnaissance" to use Girard's preferred term. The first méconnaissance lies in the belief of the responsibility of the victim for the crisis, whereas in reality the mimetic conflict between all members of society is the real reason behind the crisis. The second méconnaissance occurs once the victim is expelled. Because peace is suddenly restored to society, the victim is in retrospect recognised as a god in disguise and becomes the first sign of the newly reborn culture. Because the victim absorbs the opposites of absolute evil and absolute beneficence – poison and remedy – the victim mediates a new ritual system of stable differences and becomes the posthumous external mediator, thus keeping internal mediation at bay. The originary event of the founding murder is repeated in ritual sacrifice, either symbolically or through the sacrifice of a surrogate victim, either human or animal. For Girard the riddle of the pharmakon, the undifferentiation in language, is thus tied to the Greek "pharmakos" ritual: the killing of a real human

victim in a sacrificial ritual.[63] A distorted version of the originary event is also retold in myths: distorted because the event is always described from the position affected by the double *méconnaissance* of the violent, undifferentiated crowd. This is Girard's interpretation of the most universal myth-ritual-complex, the "dying-and-resurrected god" and the "eternal recurrence" identified by the Cambridge Ritualists.[64] In the world of archaic religion, history is cyclical. Whenever society is threatened by the destruction through mimetic escalation, a new cycle and ritual system is initiated through the expulsion of a victim. Violence is thus the secret heart and soul of the sacred.

Like the structuralists, Girard suggests that there is a single deep structure, a grammar behind the surface structure of all myths and rituals. He is not, however, only interested in the grammar of myth and ritual but also (and mostly) in the real expelled victims underlying these structures: "What I do, on the base of textual evidence, is to guess that at that origin there is a murder, and it is collective, and that the innocent victim is killed by the whole community."[65] The founding murder does, however, not only function as the tool for cultural and societal renewal but forms for Girard the major step towards hominiscence itself. In *Des Choses Cachées Depuis la Fondation du Monde* (1978), translated into English as *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987, henceforth *Things Hidden*), Girard engages with yet another academic discipline, namely ethology. He suggests that, as hominids evolve to become humans, dominance patterns disappear and are replaced by mimesis. The first mimetic crisis is solved through the first foundational murder, which gives birth to the first symbol, the killed victim.

The examination of the Girardian interdisciplinary hermeneutics, engaging with modern literature, archaic religion and evolutionary theory, would not be complete, without examining its underlying worldview. Until *Violence* the latter only implicitly informed Girard's theorizing. Although his Christian stance can be discerned from his earliest writings onwards, it was still possible to miss it, especially since Girard did not discuss the role of the Bible with respect to his theory of religion in *Violence*. As Michael Kirwan notes in *Girard and Theology* (2009): "It is this neglect of the Biblical text that caused some early reviewers of *Violence and the Sacred* to misunderstand what they read as the first authentically atheistic theory of religion and the sacred."[66] It is in *Things Hidden* that Girard discusses

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[63] See Girard (1987b), p. 71.
[64] Cf. Eleazar Meletinsky, *The Poetics of Myth* (New York, 1998), p. 20.
[65] See Girard et al (2007), p. 185.
[66] Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology* (London, 2009), p. 27.

the significance of the Bible for his theory and formulates the decisive
difference between the Gospel narratives of Christ's death and
Resurrection and the mythic motif of the dying-and-resurrected god.

1.2.3 Girard and the Bible

With *Violence* Girard had fully formulated his hermeneutical key for
deciphering archaic myths and rituals. What he refers to as the "scapegoat
mechanism" consists of the following stages. Whenever the existing rituals
wear out – or, in the case of the originary crisis of hominiscence, when
dominance patterns are eroded – mimetic rivalry leads to a loss of
differences and a potential escalation of violence of all against all. But the
loss of differences already prepares the next step of the mechanism, the
formation of the unanimous crowd. When the violent potentials are
polarized against one arbitrary victim, the slightest difference from the
mimetic doubles is enough to be chosen as victim. The violence is then
vented against the victim. With the expulsion of the victim peace returns
to society as all violent potentials are absorbed by the victim. The latter
becomes the presiding deity of the sacred peace and a new ritual order.

When Girard approached the Crucifixion accounts of the canonical
Gospels in *Things Hidden*, he found that the accounts fitted his paradigm
only partially. The elements that did fit were the loss of differences in the
formation of the violent, unanimous crowd demanding Jesus' death and
the subsequent violent expulsion of Jesus on the Cross. Girard even detects
traces of a restoration of peace in the Lukan passage in which Pilate and
Herod become friends during Jesus' trial.[67] The decisive difference Girard
identifies, however, is that the narrative is told not from the perspective of
the persecuting crowd but from that of the innocent victim.

Whereas in world myths and rituals the victim is always found guilty
by the unanimous crowd, the small minority of the dissenting Disciples –
another unique feature of the Gospel accounts – proclaim Jesus as
innocent after the Resurrection. What is usually repressed in myth, i.e. the
violence against an innocent victim of the expelling crowd, is plainly
revealed in Jesus' prayer on the Cross: "Father, forgive them, for they
know not what they do." (Luke 23:34). In this passage, so Girard points
out in *The Scapegoat* (1986; originally published as *Le Bouc Emissaire* in
1982), "we are given the first definition of the unconscious in human

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[67] Luke 23:12. All references to and quotations from Scripture are from the
Authorized Version unless otherwise indicated.