

THE SCANDALOUS ANCHOR: A GIRARDIAN READING OF PORNOGRAPHY

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Amidst the ‘escalation to the extremes’ that too often illustrates our academic conquests, let me step down from the stage. Acknowledgments of intellectual and conceptual inaccuracies may be more instructive than the passionate beliefs of some ambitious elaborations. Two years ago, I undertook what would soon be called a ‘Girardian reading of pornography’. Girard’s Mimetic Theory, with its multifaceted directions, and implicit ethico-religious recommendations, appeared to me the most powerful theoretical construct to account for the complex realities of pornography. But this long reflection also revealed the limits of running towards a theoretical tradition in the immoderate hope of solving the personal and collective tensions surrounding what is by now a solid compound of our lives. Thus, this presentation is as much a reflection on pornography through the lens of the Mimetic Theory, as the expression of a feeling of bewilderment before the irresolvable breach that any theoretical reading maintains with the ethico-political recommendations it silently promised.

In my previous study, I had attempted to demonstrate the relevance of the Mimetic Theory to understand pornography and the challenges it poses today, by following Girard’s ideas one by one. According to the classical organization, this exploration counted three steps, broadly matching the three main books of the writer: *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, *Violence and the Sacred* and *Things Hidden since the*

Foundation of the World. These corresponded with three main hypotheses, namely: the **mimetic desire**, the **scapegoat mechanism**, and the **Christian Revelation**.

Mimesis and *desire* are two unavoidable phenomena bringing dynamics to the psychological functioning of pornography. Desire is the main motor, the *raison d'être* of the pornographic product: the representation pretends to feature pre-eminently the **desire of the actors**, a depiction that is meant to animate the sexual excitement of the watcher, in general via his or her simultaneous masturbation. The watcher is witnessing an instance of desire, and not just an emotion-less copulation: the pornographic product complies with the commonsensical assumption that sexual intercourse is very often, if not necessarily, the expression of desire. The Girardian reading can go further: we can speculate that the depiction of this desire by two specific individuals – the actors – confirms each other as **appropriate objects of desire**. We can also see a move towards what Girard calls '**ontological desire**', if we suggest a phenomenon of *transposition* in the psychological experience of the watcher: through the watching, he or she imagines to be one of the actors; he or she would desire becoming this actor for the time of this intercourse; he or she identifies with the actor and comes to feel his or her depicted excitement and sexual pleasure. We could also wonder about the process of **desensitization** or **habituation** of the watcher, about pornography in general, or specific sexual practices in particular. When pornography influences the sexual practices of entire populations, should we ask whether the industry's preference for acts such as sodomy or external ejaculation, are not instances of what Girard called, around Proust's episode of the opera singer Berma and Bergotte's clichés on the performance, "**the triumph of suggestion over impression**"? What is pornography doing, if not *suggesting* objects of desire?

The **anthropological reading** of pornography, as per Girard's sacrificial hypothesis, opened even more parallels. If we wish to draw the earliest roots of pornography, in the very structure of human societies, one way is to speculate elements of sexual representation in key, foundational moments of communities. For all of us familiar with Girard's thought, one instance comes to mind: **the original sacrifice**. Could the original scapegoat mechanism also contain **elements of sexual intercourse** visible to the surrounding audience? We know, from innumerable genocide and civil war testimonies, for instance, how sexual violence is very often a war weapon, when human groups give full expression to their violent drives. There, the **violence** committed on the victim and the macabre effect of a **spectacle** of rape for the audience are equally important in the forthcoming social order that the mob attempts to regain. There lies one of the most common criticisms about pornography: its reinforcement of male-centric power games and patriarchal social structures. This moment could also be what Girard calls the resolution of a **'crisis of differences'**: following the same critique of pornography on the line of gender politics, a majority of plots start with the simultaneous desire of both partners (corresponding to the crisis of differences), and ends with an insistence on the satisfaction of one individual over the other, generally the male in heterosexual pornography (corresponding to the resolution of differences). Should we also see specific participants in pornographic products, in particular **women**, as easily identifiable and rather **vulnerable targets**, as in Girard's hypothesis? The actor or actress as object of desire could also be seen as what Girard calls an **'ambivalent victim'**: she or he provokes intense, yet polar emotions: from a locus of sensual worship to an object of disdain in certain pornographic scenarios; from a source of sexual obsession to an object of indifference for the habituated watcher.

According to Girard, the social order permitted by the original sacrifice is further reinforced through the cyclical performance of **rituals**. In today's reality of pornography, we would not expect watchers to gather in public spaces to attend the regular event of sexual visual depictions. The modern pornographic watcher is supposed to be in his or her private sphere, but pornographic paintings in the late Renaissance or porn cinema halls a few decades ago, truly made of the porn experience **a social moment**. And in both cases, the **cyclical** and **regulatory** aspect of the practice remains intact. What is an individual's recourse to porn, but the cyclical satisfaction of his or her sexual drive? Girard also suggests that ritual victims are generally **selected** in very specific groups, so that the ritual does not initiate new cycles of revenge. Could we see the vast social distance between the actor and the watcher as a safeguard, assuring that a great majority of the audience will have no personal relation to the individual enacting the ritual victim? Pornography may also play the **cathartic** role seen by Girard in rituals: these special moments often act as exceptions for a number of fundamental societal **norms**. Through the formulaic fantasies of adultery, the porn industry's active lobbying to legalize pseudo-child pornography, or its depiction of unusually intense sexual practices, isn't the porn product inviting the individual to leave societal taboos aside, and satisfy repressed desires?

Following the rituals, we come across the **myths**. For Girard, this second layer of representation allows for the punctual rituals to feed in **narratives** justifying the social order permitted by the original sacrifice and its ritualistic reminders. These myths are told **from the side of the perpetrators**, thus dissimulating the arbitrariness and the innocence of the victim, while under-playing his or her execution or expulsion. Pornography is familiar with such narratives of justification. It is visible at the level of the pornographic **plots**, when the character, a so-called 'slut' is seen as the originator,

provocateur or catalyst of the sexual intercourse. And in the larger scale of the **industry**, it is also a habitual narrative to hear of actors and actresses who got into the business of their own will, to respond to a particularly high libido, and enjoying a particularly low inhibition. And finally, we could see in pornography's largely **private consumption** today the pivotal stone of its **dissimulation** in our culture.

The third main stage of Girard's thought is, naturally, the **Christian Revelation**. Through a historical and theological reading of the Bible, Girard attempted to account for a major turning point, after which human societies had to slowly shy away from having sought recourse to sacrifices, in favour of more symbolic rituals and disseminated victimization processes. But the natural tension of social communities must create new outlets, and according to Girard these are to be found in the structures and dynamics of **modern institutions**. Pornography is at the crossroad of two such core institutions. On the one hand, it echoes and extends the prescriptive *and* normative role regarding cultural and social order, played by the **entertainment and leisure industry**. But it is also there in today's **sexual order** of our society, regulating not only sexual desire but also daily tension, energy, tiredness, into the unified medium of an almost self-sufficient autosexuality. This process is pervasive, but often **muted**: too aware of the various levels of victimization occurring through pornography, the practice is, still today, surrounded by a climate of **shame** and **taboo**. If we acknowledge its incredibly vast reach today, we must recognize its regulatory role in the perpetuation of prevalent social structures, a real, heavy weight stabilizing our collective subconscious: we must propose **pornography as the *scandalous* anchor of our time**.

Well... we may.

By the tens, features of pornography, in its historical constitutions, in its social roles, in its psychological effects, seem to encounter the various steps of the Mimetic

Theory, turning into extremely powerful and topical illustrations. If pornography is a modern descendant of early ritualistic and mythological traditions, **what does it leave us with?** Should we **accept and organize** pornography, realizing that its psychological and social ills are a lesser evil enabling the status quo of social orders? Or should we extend the Christian project of a **thorough refusal** of all processes of victimization, real or symbolic, public or dissimulated?

Few are the mentions of pornography by Girard. Here is one. In *Quand Ces Choses Commenceront*, Michel Treguer argues that the spread of **pornography has “rather increased the cases of impotence by placing the watchers in a position of “mimetic rivalry”. In the rear of sexual liberty we find the last prohibition that is the non-desire of the other...”** Girard comments on what he sees as **the “sexual hysteria that disorients our world and that has nothing to do with the promised liberation.”** For the little bit that he engages the topic from an ethical perspective, Girard seems to rejoin a rather accusatory discourse, favouring conservative practices of sexuality. Clearly, my own analysis leaned towards the same shore.

But, which wave moved it there? If we follow it more carefully, we can notice that the object of my reflection underwent a **silent shift**: pornography as, fundamentally, the **public depiction of a sexual intercourse**, slowly became, as if equivalent, the instance of **an institution of physical violence**. The incredibly pluralistic and complex faces of pornography are then conveniently dismissed. Where, in this critique, should we consider the political role it played in France in the 17th century, when pornographic painting was a medium of **satire** against the ruling class? How to avoid forgetting the **liberalizing** power – even if minimal – of erotic and pornographic contents, perhaps not today but a few decades ago, in heteronormative and conservative cultures? How not to condemn the recourse to porn by **healthy adult couples**? Porn remains an incredibly

thorny topic, involving in any instance of its discussion pre-existing assumptions on the **body**, on **emotions**, on **pleasure**, on **sexuality**, on **privacy**, on the **media**, etc.

When we fit a reality inside a theory, the edges have to be moulded to match the frame. The elaboration of arguments often comes to satisfy, if not a clearly defined dogma, at least a general set of features particular to a specific episteme. The exploration may start with **a genuine and powerful, open curiosity**, but the emergence of compelling interpretations slowly contributes to the **sedimentation of the frame**. And it is when we question the theory to help contribute with concrete **ethical and political implications**, that these **assumptions** come back to the surface. Between the theory and its prescriptive implications, is found an *aporia*, a disjunction highlighting how the findings need a preliminary direction to be translated into conclusions.

This invites me to consider **two hypotheses**. Either there is a necessary **jump** between understanding and action, and, then, no theory, however relevant and accurate it may be, can suffice alone to point towards specific recommendations in our everyday life. Action would thus be irremediably marked by the fingerprints of **ideology** and **cultural conditioning**, by principle incapable of benefiting fully from the creative and critical powers of intellection. **The other hypothesis** is that it is Girard's theory that is **only partially satisfying**, at least in the case of its application around the mechanisms and effects of pornography. There would be ways to keep the insights of his intuitions, while openly acknowledging the weakness of other aspects of the theory. In our case, this would concern all the highly speculative propositions encountered in the process of matching each step of Girard's theory with its potential equivalent in pornography.

But this would constitute a complex epistemological and methodological bet. If the mimetic theory is powerful to highlight, say, the mimetic mechanism of the psychological dimension of porn, or its dissimulated regulatory function at a social level,

can these hypotheses remain valid after we deny the value of speculating the scene of an original sacrifice including sexual elements? Similarly, can we observe and question the physical and economic violence of porn and its industry, without returning to a **normative** and classical account of sexuality, where **monogamous / marital** sex is the **healthy** reference and where **masturbation** is the **shameful** supplement of sexual intercourse? Can we question pornography in a way that includes its larger **societal context** where **individual** preoccupations and **consumptions** are the ruling paradigms? In societies where an **anxious** craving for **safety** and **comfort** makes of the **satisfaction** of pleasure the only possible quest of communities unable to aspire for a larger **social and cultural vision**? Can we use Girard's insights to elaborate creative **alternatives** to such situations, beyond the primarily descriptive nature of his theory, or his ethical presuppositions?

I will leave you with what may perhaps appear as a provocative hypothesis. By silently implying that any form of truth or conceptual construction necessarily requires **human mediation** to be translated into prescriptive directions, Girard complies with the tradition of a religion that has seen its message voiced out through the form of a man, the Christ, and to a tradition of philosophy that has seen in the animal of reason the necessary agent of interpretation for the cosmos. But the relation between ideas and actions can be approached differently. 2nd century Buddhist philosopher **Nagarjuna** elaborated a method generalizing Buddha's idea of *Anatta*, or non-self, into the realm of conceptual constructions. His method could demonstrate the **hollowness of any intellectual proposition**: pull the strings of an idea, and it contradicts its conceptual ambition on its own. Almost two millennia before Derrida, the idea of *deconstruction* emerged in India. It is towards this direction that I would be tempted to bring our ethical reflection on pornography: instead of jumping from analysis to conclusion in order to

condemn, punish or ban pornography, let us try to look at its mechanisms to find where it deconstructs itself, to find where it fails to become what it believes to be. To find where **a small flick** by thinkers *and* policy makers, will suffice to make the whole building crumble.

Thank you.