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Enclosure and undifferentiation: on re-reading Girard during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This essay reflects on the longer-term challenges posed to societal, political and educational sectors following the imposition of a shutdown of schools and universities by many governments around the world in response to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Using René Girard's analysis of festivals as concealing originary violence, it reflects on the exposure to critique of practices of enclosure, including traditional brick-and-mortar schooling. Drawing on Girard's treatment of undifferentiation and false differentiation, it poses the question of what role remains for education under undifferentiated conditions, without the logic of enclosure. The author suggests a Girardian episteme offers a more insightful theoretical contribution under these conditions, compared to an episteme drawn from one of the sectors which is in flux in this time of crisis. Behind the familiar critique that the practices of schooling serve only the purposes of capitalism, a more devastating and more liberating conclusion is offered; that the practices of enclosure (encompassing both the school and the workplace) serve only the purposes of enclosure.

KEYWORDS

René Girard; mimetic violence; covid-19; Deleuze; symbolic violence; digital education

He said that he was God.

'We are well met,' I cried,

'I've always hoped I should

Meet God before I died.'

I slew him then and cast

His corpse into a pool,

But how I wish he had

Indeed been God, the fool! (Hugh MacDiarmid, 1986, 1923, *The Fool*)

Introduction

The scale of disruption to societal norms precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic requires a theoretical account of the human condition capable of encompassing expansive, whole

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system change. While dialectical and structuration approaches to the sociology of education presume certain structures and relations to persist across agentive events, theorising undifferentiation, the collapse and reconstitution of social order, is rarely attempted. The anthropologist René Girard (1923–2015) attempts such an account, with a singularity of vision that seeks to reunite faith and reason, literary insight and causal inference around a ‘mimetic’ theory of the origins of culture. This paper explores the educational implications of the present moment by testing three theorisations of pandemic schooling against a critical reading of Girard.

The undifferentiation which the Covid-19 pandemic precipitates, with new admixtures of politics and science, information, entertainment and education, presents a grotesque moment. In many cases, however, the grotesque is preceded by the uncanny. Like the monstrous rites associated with the liminoid (Turner, 1974), familiar cultural forms present themselves in unfamiliar hybrids: NHS hospitals abandon medical patient conferences in favour of military ‘bronze’, ‘silver’ and ‘gold’ command structures (Clark, 2020); BBC broadcasters quickly roll out programming to imitate the suspended primary school curriculum; leftists demand intrusive police surveillance, while conservatives throw fiscal stimulus money into a beleaguered economy.

Undifferentiation and mimetic crisis

The key concepts in Girard’s mimetic theory – mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism and false transcendence – are derived from re-reading key texts in literature (1968), ethnology (2013), psychology (2016), and theology (2001). Drawing on a conception of the master-disciple dialectic drawn from Alexandre Kojève’s (1969) interpretation of Hegel, Girard theorises the nature of all human desire is mediated by a model; we desire not so much to possess a thing as to be like the person who possesses it. This mimetic desire leads to crisis, which is then resolved through the sacrifice of a scapegoat – the crisis of all against all becomes a crisis of all against one – the role of the scapegoat in resolving the crisis then leads to an inversion from universal guilt to universal praise of the scapegoat, to which Girard attributes the origins of culture. In this, Girard also draws upon the structuralist anthropology of Levi-Strauss, suggesting that differentiation arises by the ‘radical elimination of certain fractions of the continuum’, beginning not with a diminished but an ‘encumbered field, an excessive density [of meanings] that impedes the functioning of thought’ (Girard, 2016, pp. 103–105). Girard (2013), however, goes beyond the boundary of differentiation set by the structuralist paradigm, attempting to theorise the origins of culture. The act of generative violence creates distance, and is performatively re-enacted in the festival:

As one might expect, this destruction of differences is often accompanied by violence and strife. Subordinates hurl insults at their superiors; various social factions exchange gibes and abuse. Disputes rage in the midst of disorder ... Work is suspended, and the celebrants give themselves over to drunken revelry and the consumption of all the food amassed over the course of many months ...

Far from being temporarily suspended, in the antifestival all cultural prohibitions are strongly reinforced ... physical contact between individuals is to be avoided, even physical contact with one’s own body. A threat of imminent pollution – that is, of violence – hangs over the entire community ... The logic of the antifestival is as strict as that of the festival. The

goal is to reproduce the beneficial effects of violent unanimity while abbreviating as much as possible the terrible preliminaries. (pp. 135–139)

In the *Bacchae* and elsewhere, Girard, as with Nietzsche, identifies Dionysus as the archetypal ‘master’, perennially opposed to the suffering servant of Judeo-Christianity. ‘Dionysus is the god of decisive mob action’ (Girard, 2013, p. 151) – when mimetic desire reaches a crisis, it is resolved through such mob action identifying a scapegoat whose elimination, coincident with the elimination of the crisis, establishes both the guilt and the deity of the victim.

Nietzsche tells us that Dionysus accommodates all human passions, including the lust to annihilate, the most ferocious appetite for destruction. Dionysus says yes to the sacrifice of many human lives ... violence accompanies and often precedes Dionysus everywhere. All epiphanies of the god leave ruins in their wake. (Girard, 1984, p. 819)

The link between such an account and the pandemic may at first seem obvious. Facile attempts proliferated in the early stages of the pandemic to sacrifice actual human lives for an entity raised to the level of deity:

No one reached out to me and said, as a senior citizen, ‘Are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?’ And if that’s the exchange, I’m all in. (Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, cited Stieb, 2020)



A still more egregiously Dionysiac message displayed at an anti-lockdown rally [‘Sacrifice the weak, reopen TN’ image source: (Evon, 2020)] at first seems to settle the case. Such a simplistic account, however, fails to account for the power Gerard invests in decisive mob action to root an efficacious transcendence, having real material authority despite its false ethical and metaphysical claim to the same (Girard, 2001). The fact that such accounts are so obvious negates their relevance to Girard’s argument; Dionysus does not arrive in fancy dress.

Indeed, in Girard's system, it is necessary for such origins to be hidden in order for them to be effective, a 'double displacement' occurs where both the process of elimination and its arbitrary nature are hidden from view (Girard, 2013). If the world is only experienced, it is ahistorical (Haraway, 2016), Girard points to a meaning behind experience, in which 'world history and all the values realised in it are based on a primal tragedy that has now been disclosed' (von Balthasar, 1994, p. 204). Undoing the bifurcation of experience and measurement which characterises the 'Copernican turn' in Western thought (Pakula, 2000), while ambitious, quickly stumbles over Girard's outdated paradigmatic assumptions about the sciences. His misconception of 'incontestable scientific conquest' (Girard, 2016, p. 1), presuming a pre-existent terra incognita of meaning on which science plants flags of knowledge, risks losing sight of the generative power of both science and discourse. In presenting the core of his theory, the origins of culture in mimetic desire leading to a crisis resolved through the sacrifice of a scapegoat, Girard presents Euripides' *Bacchae* as 'strong evidence in support of my theory of the meaning of festivals' (Girard, 2013, p. 144). This neglects that Euripides was making new theatre, not telling old history – ritual functions because we give it meaning. Rites situate events within the larger contexts of life in the world, pointing to iterational histories, repeated in the retelling of stories, reinscribed with meaning and value, and to projective aspirations (Bamber, Bullivant, Clark, & Lundie, 2019; Tambiah, 1990). For this, and other reasons of over-generality the Girardian synthesis represents a 'magnificent and unforeseen gift – too good, perhaps, to be accepted without caution and misgivings' (Dumouchel, 1987, p. 153).

Enclosure as a false transcendence

A festive remnant exists within education in the form of our academic year, with holidays around the agricultural and Christian liturgical calendar making manifest the ways that liturgical and agricultural time have been rendered epiphenomenal in a time marked by logics of enclosure: the factory whistle, the school bell. These logics of enclosure, corresponding to what Deleuze (1992) terms 'disciplinary societies', pass unremarked in all of the theorising of education. It is this logic of enclosure, rather than the economic imperatives cited in favour of 're-opening' which functions as a false transcendence. Shorn of the demands of ritual observance of our routines of enclosure, the mimetic pull of the brick-and-mortar school proves so powerful that some children in the UK attend distance learning dressed in their school uniform.

As the structures of enclosure were in turn rendered epiphenomenal by the national lock-downs initiated across most of the developed world during the Covid-19 pandemic, human beings were for the first time brought to an inescapable awareness of the spatial and temporal conditions of what Deleuze (1992) terms the 'societies of control'. Unlike the societies of enclosure, which foregrounded the individual – the voter alone in a booth, the student alone at an exam desk – these new forms of control are 'always on' (Lundie, 2016), the work e-mail at 6 am; the lecture podcast to listen to while running; the web conference camera momentarily turned off to answer a child's homework questions. Deleuze argues that 'dividuation', the dividing of the individual among these ceaseless entailments constitutes the mode of being in the societies of control. This mode of being has fundamental implications for the philosophy of education. Enclosed society is

secular, the individual body, autonomous within its site of enclosure, constitutes a 'buffered self' (Taylor, 2007). The frame of enclosure is the frame of secularity, of the temporal order, detached from the natural order with its agricultural calendar and the religious order with its liturgical one. It is from within this frame that all hitherto existing arguments for autonomy as an aim of education, from Kant's (1784) to Wendelborn's (2020) have been advanced.

As the contingent nature of brick-and-mortar schooling, examination and inspection regimes is exposed, the temple curtain rent by the closure of schools, the long-neglected foundations of the educational edifice are exposed. A mimetic logic requires each nation to compete globally for 'rigour', understood in relation to the individual in the exam hall. Initial responses to the pandemic are dominated by concern with 'preparation for work' (Hill, 2020). '[J]ust as the corporation replaces the factory, *perpetual training* tends to replace the *school*, and continuous control to replace the examination. Which is the surest way of delivering the school over to the corporation' (Deleuze, 1992, p. 5). In framing the debate on examinations in terms of the corporation, however, a pre-differentiated 'world' is presupposed, which no longer demands the skill of individualistic exam performance (Worth, 2020).

For some time, our society has operated by these new loci of control, decentering the logics of enclosure of industrial societies: factories, schools, archetypally, prisons. While many vocal critics invoke Foucauldian panopticism, customer surveillance is not the substance of the digital society, but merely its business model (Ghosh, 2020), the means by which it cannibalises its dying industrial host. Educational changes over the past 30 years have shifted expectations away from a universal entitlement to be in a place where teaching is offered, to a universal requirement of learning (Bayne, 2015), as dictated by the 'world' of the corporation.

The uncanny and educational malaise

Undifferentiation precedes the crisis, however, presaged by the collapse of ritual structures such as festivals, their degradation into banality, or their failure to avert social contagion as they once did. The collapse of formerly robust festive elements in educational culture may be seen in contemporary higher education; while the *Bacchae* is synonymous with intoxication, campus alcohol consumption has declined in recent years, with 29% of young people never drinking alcohol (Fat, Shelton, & Cable, 2018). While alcohol retreats into banality, concerns escalate around the prevalence of sexual violence on campus (Brown, 2016).

I drank beer with my friends. Almost everybody did. Sometimes I had too many beers. Sometimes others did. (Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh)

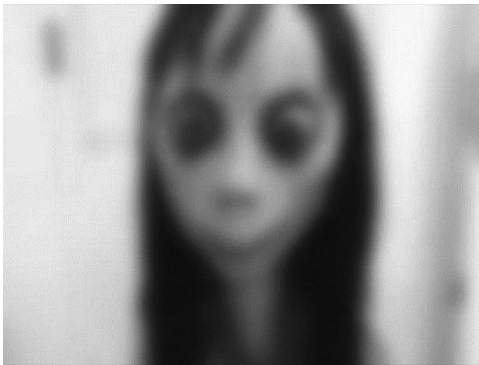
Exposing an undifferentiation between fraternity culture and rape, the Kavanaugh-Ford hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee made it impossible to ignore decades-long warnings about rape culture (Boswell, Ayres, & Spade, 1996). Seen in its light, popular cultural representations of campus transition from 'trivial, vulgar and banal' to 'the approach of something uncanny and terrifying' (Girard, 2013, p. 142); campus comedies of the preceding decade, such as *American Pie 2* (2001) and *College* (2008) become uncomfortable viewing. Growing crises in student mental health point in a similar

direction – before the viral contagion, a social contagion on our campuses was making us sick. The decayed foundations of the logic of our former categories of order/disorder in education were being exposed.

The uncanny also appears in relation to the new, digital forms of dividualisation and control. Like many parents across the UK, I received a troubling communication about online safety from my son's school in 2019:

Tell them it's not real

Just like any urban legend or horror story, the concept can be quite frightening and distressing for young people. Whilst this may seem obvious, it's important for you to reiterate to your child that Momo is not a real person and cannot directly harm them! Also, tell your child to not go openly searching for this content online as it may only cause more distress. (National Online Safety, 2019)



A brief moral panic ensued, with fears of children being influenced toward suicide and self-harm by the monstrous meme. There were no reports of any children having been harmed, but the anxieties caused among parents were very real. Why is the digitally re-enchanted, dividualised world haunted by such monstrous fictions?

In their treatment of technological re-enchancement, McEwen and Cassimally (2013) draw on the figure of Väinämöinen in the Finnish epic the Kalevala – in many of the myths of the cycle, Väinämöinen is presented with enchanted objects: a harp, a comb, seeds, which re-ontologise the character as musician, adventurer, warrior, creator. The objects of technological re-enchancement, cellphones and personal devices have re-ontologised our young people toward the cultivation of hitherto unimaginable multi-platform enactments of the self (Miller et al., 2016). These objects, however, have largely been excluded from the classroom environment, and, after near total reliance on technologically mediated education during lockdown, stand to be still more strictly excluded again in the UK (Wright, 2021). Their absent presence (Battaglia, 1997) haunts the minds of adults, while our children experience the displacement of their authentic technologically narrated selves in the service of competitive metrics of neoliberal performativity.

There are, of course, legitimate reasons to be concerned about the customer surveillance model of profit employed by many of the social media platforms popular among young people (Ghosh, 2020), the risk that targeted advertising reduces autonomy to a mere stimulus-response (Wicker & Schrader, 2010) or that young people ontologise

themselves heteronymously, in relation to artificial rather than human agencies (Florida, 2013). The fears of teachers, parents and governments, however, are far more likely to relate to fictively monstrous moral panics like Momo, or scapegoat moral monsters such as the risk of online grooming by sexual predators.

Education as differentiation

Thus far, however, the paper has only considered the appurtenances of education – examinations, campus culture, and technology. Central to Girard's theory is that it makes sense only in the context of undifferentiation; the collapse of the moral categories of the social system. In Girard's account of mimesis, 'the principle of the model and that of the obstacle are one and the same' – critiquing the Freudian understanding of desire, Girard holds that Freud introduces a 'false differentiation' into his system (Girard, 2016, p. 341). Having criticised false transcendence and false differentiation, does Girard provide a principle of authentic differentiation? On this question hangs a matter of consequence – in embracing post-pandemic undifferentiation, must everything of the preceding culture be annihilated? Is it meaningful to speak of education, or indeed of anything in the social world, under conditions of undifferentiation? On this question, it is difficult to furnish from Girard an answer.

Returning to the origins of the disciplinary societies, here too, education experienced violent birth pangs. The second most printed book in the first century of the printing press was a witch-hunting manual (Broedel, 2003), and men of learning were at pains to differentiate 'magical science' from black arts and witchcraft (Williams, 1999). It was only in the scapegoating of the latter that the former could be sheltered until the emergence of a more authentic principle of differentiation as the sciences discarded the allegorical order, focusing on a disenchanted notion of causality. It was his failure to separate the two, a contemporary argues, that is the lesson to be learned from Doctor Faustus (Hildebrand, 1631). The witch hunt, with its exultation of superficial differences to existential significance (Girard, 1989) is another archetypal instance of the scapegoat mechanism in action.

The question of decolonising the curriculum presents one example, dividing opinion on what, precisely, it divides, and its teleological implications. On 17 June 2020, the governors of Oriel College, Oxford announced the removal of a statue of Sir Cecil Rhodes, reversing an earlier decision. *Rhodes must Fall* (Hlophe, 2015) quickly expanded to considering the substantive matters of curriculum bias, asking 'Why is my curriculum white?' (Hussain, 2015), before some of the same Cape Town activists where the Rhodes critique had begun turned their decolonial perspective to claiming it oppressive that science does not give equal place to indigenous forms of witchcraft, a view labelled by some as 'Science must Fall' (UCT Scientist, 2016). Is this an act of social theory acting as model, exposing the obstacles of colonialism and institutional racism, and enabling the disencumbering of thought from them, or is it absurd to posit a differentiation between obstacle and model? Must theory also fall?

Differentiation is the endless task of pedagogy. Proceeding from Kojève's (1969) Hegelian analysis that every act of self-awareness is an act of awareness of the unequal other (Lundie, 2016), many pedagogical debates can be reduced to the question of whether the teacher transmits the curriculum-as-other (as in Arendt or Young) or transforms it (as in

Freire or the constructivists) – both approaches proceed by differentiation, and differentiate themselves from one another as they enact it. To differentiate is to educate: the school is not the home, the biology lab is not the art studio, Whitman is not Shakespeare, Marx is not Hegel, group work is not emancipatory pedagogy. The challenge of even naming or differentiating the educational arrangements which presently subsist in much of the world is illustrative. It is not ‘homeschooling’ in either a narrow (Badman, 2009) or expansive (Holt, 2001) definition. Schooling seeps into digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams, designed for business, or YouTube, ubiquitous for children’s on-screen leisure viewing, and education finds itself relegated to a mere epiphenomenon, an unintended user of corporate software, a non-paying free-rider on commercial content platforms, an assemblage of ‘teachable moments’ crammed into parents’ multi-tasking existence.

Education presupposes some matter of shared concern (Arendt, 2006), a shared world between teacher and student. Increasingly, the lack of such a world is obscured by persistent reference to ‘crisis’ (Sardar, 2010). In relation to the ‘migration crisis’, intercultural education proposes a ‘curriculum of return’ (Karakatsani, 2020), routed neither in the actual world of migrant children’s place of refuge nor the present realities of the place they left behind. Latour suggests in relation to the ‘climate crisis’ that we have all become migrants (Latour, 2018) though the persistence of inequality may suggest instead that we have all become colonisers. In relation to the Climate Strikes, traditional assumptions about children’s status in liberal democracies (Fowler, 2014) which take for granted a deficit model of childhood (Schapiro, 1999) also come to break down. These assumptions also rest on the logic of enclosure – that children exist in a ‘place apart’, kindergarten, school, college – before entering the enclosures of the adults. As children’s worlds became increasingly undifferentiated from those of their parents during school closures and work-from-home orders, the contingency of this deficit model is also disclosed.

Conclusion

The closure of schools which accompanied the Covid-19 pandemic brings into focus the realisation that the foundations of schooling under the logic of enclosure have been eroding for some considerable time. Our norms of ‘in person’ society, behaviour and culture have long been destabilised. Our practices of attention through enclosure have long since been insufficient to the ends to which education has been harnessed. The epistemic roots of the curriculum are subject to justifiable challenge, if not total erasure, neither additional ‘space’ nor ‘time’ in the curriculum will suffice. Technological solutions which could effect a paradigmatic shift are rendered futile, or excluded from the classroom altogether; far from liberating, technology haunts us in the classroom, whose enclosure serves a logic which can no longer be authentically enacted but only cynically performed.

The obstacle and the model are one: the logic of the neoliberal corporation and the well-worn sociological critique of the same both serve the double displacement (Fleming, 2004) of the deeper logic – enclosure. The practices of education under enclosure, brick-and-mortar schooling, with its sickness-, stress- (Widnall, Winstone, Mars, Haworth, & Kidger, 2020) and failure-inducing externalities, serve only to present a

social 'world' to young people as though its structures were transcendent when this false transcendence is no longer credible. Under these circumstances, the speed and vehemence with which the political world has sought to re-establish 'normal' conditions of enclosed schooling is an understandable rear-guard action, but quite possibly an unsustainable one, with education systems in much of the world stretched beyond breaking point (Wagner, 2021).

The exposure of the contingency of the ends which enclosure serves, however, means that the new 'normal' can never return to the cultural force it enjoyed as a social transcendence over the preceding century and a half. Notwithstanding the diagnostic power of Girard's account of undifferentiation, his tendency to illustrate through ethnologically distant exemplars and literary myth allows him to pass over the internal complexity of the moment of crisis, offering any answers as to how authentic differentiation or authentic transcendence might be preserved in the moment of the exposure and iconoclasm of false transcendence. What began with a concern for the festive accompaniments which once regulated, and now debase, our educational spaces, quickly becomes a concern for education itself, spilling over into the totality of life in society. The near-global model of delivering a child's right to an education through the provision of school buildings and enclosed classrooms is often justified on the basis of a child's right to an open future (Feinberg, 2015). This space of enclosure inscribes 'openness' as dividualisation, a separation from the right to family life, or from the right to work. Such spaces of enclosure are deeply enmeshed in the 'school-like' nature of society – it is no longer the case that our schools resemble the factories that children are being prepared for, rather than our social, civic, and working environments increasingly resemble the schools from which their adult inhabitants came. This logic of enclosure is so deeply enmeshed in our social contracts that we now see, in its exposure, how radical and how potentially abyssal the project of 'deschooling' society (Illich, 1971) might truly be. Its final end may yet require preconditions of social contagion far more destructive than the present viral contagion.

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