Review of: "The Age of the Algorithmic Society — A Girardian Analysis of Mimesis, Rivalry, and Identity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence"

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Review of 'The Age of the Algorithmic Society — A Girardian Analysis of Mimesis, Rivalry, and Identity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence'

This is a well-written and accessible attempt to use the philosophical anthropology of René Girard in order to probe the phenomenology of AI, specifically as used in social media.

Girard's account of the dynamics of mimetic desire is accurately described and attention is pertinently drawn to the enhanced risks of mimetic/memetic contagion associated with the employment of AI algorithms by social media firms. Here the maximisation of user engagement operates as a basic rule, favouring feedback loops which involve the stimulation of strong emotions. The author is right to emphasise how the most sophisticated current forms of AI function as black boxes: their internal workings resist comprehension by their programmers and anyone else, such that unpredictable emergent responses are to be expected. Potentially disastrous unintended consequences may result, as many in the field have been warning.[1]

However questions arise about whether the author has fully grasped the implications of Girard's account of desire. For example, he states:

> We must question whether the proliferation of algorithmically curated content diminishes the uniqueness and diversity of human expression through the digital rituals created or whether it reflects a new form of collective consciousness. We must also consider whether the opaqueness of the algorithm takes away our autonomy or whether it offers a new way of understanding and engaging with the world.

Basic to Girard's understanding of desire is that it is inherently mimetic. This immediately renders the meaning of individual autonomy problematic. Human desiring is always already subject to conditioning by cultural norms as mediated by others, and while this may well be both channelled and intensified through AI-driven social media engagement, 'autonomy' in a strong sense must therefore be regarded as illusory. If immersion in social media presents an additional risk to human flourishing then the grounds for this must lie elsewhere.

The author's account of Girard's sacred/profane binary is accurate and helpfully illustrated, but in subsequent discussion

he appears to elide this with the process of mimetic contagion itself. It is important to note that Girard's schema describes the unfolding of a process through time, The sacralising of victims only occurs as they are excluded at the culmination of a crescendo of mimetic tensions. However the author seems to confuse this climactic sacralisation with the AI's promotion of certain memes. For example:

> The sacred emerges as algorithms shape desires and behaviors, influencing the mimetics we encounter and interact with. The algorithmic curation effectively transforms certain trends, cultural elements, or ideas into objects of desire and reverence within the digital space. By amplifying specific memes or trends, algorithms confer a sense of importance and value upon them, positioning them as worthy of attention and imitation. This process aligns with Girard's notion of transforming violence into something sacred, as algorithms shape our desires and behaviors, effectively creating a digital ritual that influences our lives…
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> … The sacred, in this context, is not just the divine or the extraordinary; it is the algorithmically amplified and recommended content that captivates our attention and shapes our desires.

On the basis of passages like this it is not clear to me that the author sufficiently distinguishes between the sacred as that which issues from climactic violence on the one hand and selective AI meme promotion, as important and valuable, on the other.

The adequacy of the author's account of the perils of meme contagion via social media can also be questioned. The obvious victims of mimetic contagion are culturally subaltern groups adhering to deviant ideologies. In this context the question of what counts as 'fake' news and which positions should be regarded as 'extremist' inevitably reflects which voices are hegemonic within the larger discursive space. In this sense categories such as 'fake news' and 'extremism' are exposed as inherently suspect, to the extent that what they designate simply reflects the contingent current consensus within that space. Interrogating the larger political context in which such valorisations get made is crucially important here.[2]

Finally, it would be interesting to further explore current developments in social media/AI with reference to Girard's distinction between internally and externally mediated desires. As consumerist late capitalism unravels in the face of long-term growth and productivity stagnation, the liabilities of internal mimesis hitherto promoted as cultural norm ('keeping up with the Joneses') are becoming increasingly apparent. How might externally mediated desire be constructively recovered so as to promote the true flourishing of all, human and non-human, at a time of civilizational upheaval? And how might desire, contra Girard, function positively in producing a new world?[3]

1 Eliezer Yudkowsky, 'Pausing AI Developments Isn't Enough. We Need to Shut it All Down'. https://time.com/6266923/ai-eliezer-yudkowsky-open-letter-not-enough/ 29 March 2023

2 See e.g. Tariq Ali, *The Extreme Centre: A Second Warning*. London: Verso (2018)

3 See e.g. John Daniels, 'Wanting Nothing: imitation and production in the economy of desire' *New Blackfriars 90* (1025)

pp.90-107 (2009)