

Wanting Nothing: imitation and production in the economy of desire

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Abstract

Desire is examined here with a view to informing a theological response to capitalism. The notion of mimetic desire offered by René Girard is used as a starting point, Girard's ideas being brought into critical engagement with, first, other intersubjective accounts, namely those offered by Alexandre Kojève and by psychoanalysis in its Freudian and Lacanian variants; and then the account of desire as productive becoming offered by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in which the link to capitalism is explicit. It is suggested that both mimetic desire and its productive counterpart can be understood as asserting the priority of desire itself over both subject and object. The possibilities for framing a coherent theological account of desire which is both mimetic and productive are then assessed with reference to Bernard of Clairvaux, Aquinas and Augustine, noting that accepting a metaphysics of participation makes plausible a productive desire which is nonetheless coded as a mimesis of the divine precedent. Such a conclusion brings into relief the inevitable difficulty of reconciling Christian and capitalist economies of desire.

Keywords

Theology, Desire, Economics, Girard, Deleuze

Introduction

Coca-Cola, claims Slavoj Žižek, affords a unique insight into the economy of desire in the contemporary world. It is 'the direct embodiment of . . . the pure surplus of enjoyment over standard satisfactions, of the mysterious and elusive X we are all after in our compulsive consumption of merchandise'.¹ It is not particularly thirst-quenching

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 22.

or pleasantly flavoured; indeed, the more you drink, the thirstier you get. And in the case of caffeine-free diet Coke, 'Is it not true that... we almost literally "drink nothing in the guise of something"?... the Nothingness itself, the pure semblance of a property that is in effect merely an envelope of a void.'²

My aim in this paper is to use Žižek's entertaining and succinct account of the libidinal phenomenology of capitalism as a platform for examining the theory of mimetic desire associated with the name of René Girard. Following preliminary dialogues with the work of Alexandre Kojève and Jacques Lacan, the conceptualisation of desire as acquisitive will be critiqued and transposed into an economic key by introducing Gilles Deleuze's notion of desiring-production. To the extent that Žižek is correct in describing Coca-Cola as 'the ultimate capitalist merchandise', I shall argue, first, that Girard and Deleuze offer complementary, even convergent, perspectives on the economic milieu which we inhabit; and, secondly, that a further encounter with the Christian tradition can produce a fundamental theological critique of capitalism as a rival means of organising desire.³

Desire as mimesis

René Girard's thesis regarding the mimetic nature of desire has been widely acknowledged for its distinctive contribution to philosophical anthropology. Throughout his writings, he seeks to locate the phenomenon of mimetic desire at the root of violence in human communities. Such violence moreover characteristically culminates in the identification and elimination of scapegoats, and becomes established in mythologies and religious structures.

For Girard, human desire is always mediated. Rather than simply arising spontaneously, either through an act of subjective will or due to the inherent attraction of a particular object, desires are evoked by the conduct and attitudes of others towards objects. This reflects the inherent sociality of the human.

Humankind is that creature who lost a part of its animal instinct in order to gain access to 'desire', as it is called. Once their natural needs are satisfied, humans desire intensely, but they don't know exactly what they desire, for no instinct guides them... The essence of desire is to have no essential goal. Truly to desire, we must have recourse to people about us; we have to borrow their desires.³

Very obviously, the acquisitive character of such 'interindividual' desiring can issue in rivalry, conflict and violence. Yet Girard is at

² Žižek, *ibid.*, p. 23.

³ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001), p. 15.

pains to stress that mimesis is not in itself a bad thing, nor that it betokens an essentially tragic anthropology. There exist a number of reasons for this. Among the most important relates to the character of the mediator, or model, of our desires and thus the nature of his/her desiring; we shall address this point later when considering the Christian as the one who imitates Jesus' desiring. Another, not unrelated reason, is that desire may be mediated via another who is sufficiently different, in some way, not to be regarded as a rival. Thus in his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard describes Don Quixote's imitation of the fictional knight Amadis of Gaul as an example of an 'externally' mediated desire.⁴ As a fictional figure, Amadis is radically 'different' and thus cannot be regarded as a rival. In general, such differences can involve distances which are either spatial, temporal or symbolic.

However mimetic desire may degenerate into emulation when it is 'internally' mediated, i.e. when the model is a proximate peer. It is this situation which creates the possibility that the model may also appear as an *obstacle*. Moreover, this is the characteristically *modern* situation: commenting on Girard's analysis of the modern novel, Mark R. Anspach writes that '[t]he erosion of traditional social barriers favours the rise of internal mediation, and this in turn leads to a loss of distinctions between mediator and imitator, who are destined to end up as symmetrical rivals.'⁵ In this regard, the loss of the symbolic distance constituted by social hierarchy is compounded by globalisation – the increasing mobility of (anonymous) capital and people. Thus Girard, in his exploration of the Oedipus myth, stresses the mutual anonymity of the two figures who get in each others' way on the road to Thebes. Both desire the same object: priority. But neither will grant it to the other; and so Oedipus ends up killing the stranger who is later revealed to have been his father: 'father and son are competitors, *concurrentes*: they *run together* on the same road.'⁶ Ignorant of each other's identities, the symbolic difference which might otherwise have mediated a non-violent outcome is obscured. This scenario, then a tragic freak of circumstances, increasingly represents the norm in the (post-)modern world. Internal mediation is necessarily a conflictual mimesis.

Despite the pivotal role of the model in the phenomenology of desire, it remains important to emphasise the formal distinction of the third element in the triad, namely the mutually desired object. This is necessary not least in order to distinguish Girard's account from

⁴ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Sources*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), p. 9.

⁵ Mark R. Anspach, Introduction to René Girard, *Oedipus Unbound: Selected Writings on Rivalry and Desire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. xxxiv; see also Chris Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), pp. 29–30.

⁶ Girard, *Oedipus Unbound*, p. 29.

those of Hegel and Kojève, as we shall see below. Nonetheless, Girard identifies a special case of mimetic desire in which the roles of model and object become reversed: that is, when the object functions as a means of acquiring the status of the model. This can occur when the model affects a detachment from desire, thereby presenting a certain (desirable) self-sufficiency or autarchy. Here it is the autarchy, the very being of the model as it were, which is desired by the subject. This in turn reflects a basic ontological deficit on the part of the subject, a deficit noted at length by Girard in his analysis of the modern novel. Such a metaphysical desire may lead to a condition of 'pseudo-masochism', in which the subject endlessly trades model for model in the hopeless quest of filling the gap he or she feels inside.⁷ Discussing Proust's novels, Girard writes:

[d]esire is not of this world. . . it is in order to penetrate into *another world* that one desires, it is in order to be initiated into a radically foreign existence. . . Behind every closed door, every insurmountable barrier, the hero senses the presence of the absolute mastery that eludes him, the divine serenity of which he feels deprived. To desire is to believe in the transcendence of the world suggested by the Other. As soon as it yields to the desire that lays siege to it, the enchanting totality reveals itself to be illusory. It bursts like a soap bubble at the slightest contact, but the mirage springs up anew a bit farther on.⁸

In fact, Girard detects metaphysical desire at work also in the Oedipus myth.

The son desires mastery. He desires his father's *being*, meaning that which his father possesses and seemingly never ceases to desire in the midst of the blissful autonomy that he enjoys.⁹

Reference to the Oedipus myth inevitably conjures the ghost of Freud. It is worth pausing to note what distinguishes the Freudian from the Girardian readings of this myth. In this foundational text for psychoanalysis, Freud finds the basic human problem laid bare: the incestuous love of the son for his mother and consequent patricidal rivalry with his father. In his 1923 *The Ego and the Id* Freud describes how the attraction for the mother is formed alongside an identification with the father, only for the latter to grow in ambivalence to the point of outright rivalry as the former develops in parallel.¹⁰

⁷ René Girard with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (London: Athlone Press, 1988), pp. 295–7.

⁸ Girard, *Oedipus Unbound*, p. 1.

⁹ Girard, *Oedipus Unbound*, p. 15.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works Vol. 19*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–66), pp. 12–59.

Discussing this, Girard discerns that Freud had come close to uncovering the mimetic mechanism when, in the earlier (1921) *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, he had insisted on the priority of paternal identification over the emergence of the mother as object of desire. For Girard, the ambivalence in the father-son relationship noted by Freud is of course none other than the model-obstacle structure described above.

Indeed, as has already been noted, Girard sees here a metaphysical desire on the part of the son: '[f]or the identification thus defined to lead necessarily, mechanically, to a rivalry inconceivable as such, it suffices that the desires for *having* be made to depend on the desire for *being*, that all desire for possession be subordinated to identification with the father.'¹¹ Far from being the cause, as object, of the Oedipal configuration, Girard portrays the mother as an incidental feature, virtually. Whereas for Freud a primordial sexual desire for the mother as object leads to increasing rivalry with the father, which in turn necessitates a subsequent re-identification with the father as part of 'Oedipal normalisation', Girard draws attention to the primary role of the father as model and rival rolled into one, the mediator for a mimetic, indeed metaphysical desire. The mother, as object, does not disappear altogether from the scene, but rather becomes a means by which this metaphysical desire is directed at the father. What is at stake for the child here is less the father as keenly desirous of a contested object – the mother – than the father as the very image of self-sufficiency or autarchy, a fulness of being which induces in the child an experience of profound lack.

Desire as recognition

Girard's apparent marginalisation of the object in this contrasting of mimetic desire with Freudian libido readily leads to an engagement with the portrayal of desire by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, particularly as read, influentially, by Alexandre Kojève. Desire here is essential in prompting self-awareness on the part of the human subject. Primordially, the human is rapt in contemplation of objects; the dawn of self-awareness comes only with an awareness of *lack*, and the concomitant desire for satisfaction. Desire 'is but a revealed nothingness... the revelation of emptiness, the presence of the absence of a reality.'¹² In this awareness of lack, a sense of the 'I', the hollow 'I', is born. However, in order to qualify as specifically *human* desire, it must take as its object another such 'greedy emptiness': '[t]o

¹¹ Girard, *Oedipus Unbound*, p. 91.

¹² Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr (London: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 5.

be *human*, man must act not for the sake of subjugating a *thing*, but for the sake of subjugating another *Desire* (for the thing).¹³ What is at stake for Kojève is a contest for pure recognition in the sense of prestige; the outcome of which must be victory for one – the Master – and defeat for the other – the Slave.

Thus is the Master-Slave dialectic set in train. For things cannot stop here. Victorious as he is, of what value is the recognition of a mere Slave to a Master? Satisfaction eludes him, even in the moment of apparent victory; he has reached an ‘existential impasse’. The Slave, on the other hand, has everything to gain. For Hegel, the outcome of the French revolution was the synthesis of Master and Slave in the form of the citizen as bourgeois property-owner. For Kojève this resolution was only temporary, setting the scene in Marxist vein for a class war.

There has been some debate concerning the nature and degree of resemblance between Girard’s mimetic desire and Kojève’s reading of Hegel. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe is one author who has claimed to detect a significant convergence of ideas.¹⁴ It is not hard to see why. Girard’s insistence, in contrasting his ideas with those of Freud, on the ‘objectlessness’ of desire might seem to reduce desire to a merely intersubjective trial of strength. In fact Girard himself acknowledges a distinctly Hegelian influence upon him in the 1950s. However he goes on to deal with the accusation of Hegelianism in a similar manner to that in which he dealt with Freud: the Hegelian desire for recognition is derivative upon a more fundamental mimetic dynamic involving an object.¹⁵

Developing this defence, Chris Fleming refers to Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s distinction between Hegel’s *un desir de l’Autre*, a desire for the other’s desire, and Girard’s *un desir selon l’Autre*, a desire according to the other. It is certainly true that Girard does not describe desire as being fundamentally concerned with recognition – far less recognition as understood by Kojève as subjugation. However we have already seen how, once desire becomes metaphysical, the dynamics change and the object acquires an instrumental quality. Instead of desiring an object in imitation of the other’s desire, the relationship appears to be reversed, the subject’s desire being ‘directed towards the being of the other through an object’.¹⁶ Fleming is obviously right to distinguish this formally from an objectless desire; but surely Kojève’s point has less to do with the absence of an extraneous object than it has to do with the *character* of the

¹³ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁴ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, ‘Mimesis and truth’, *Diacritics* 8 (1978), pp. 10–23.

¹⁵ René Girard, ‘To Double Business Bound’: Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology (London: The Athlone Press, 1988), p. 201.

¹⁶ Fleming, *René Girard*, p. 169, n. 35.

relationship of desire between the two protagonists, the subject and the model. Rivalry here has become 'personal'. No longer is it a matter of who gets to have the mutually desired object; it is now a question of who has more 'being' understood as a kind of prestige, who – so to speak – is greater. Certainly, 'desire can only become concrete on the level of objects', but nonetheless Girard is clear that it is the very *being* of the father which is its stake in contemporary re-enactments of the Oedipal myth.¹⁷ His early analyses of the works of Proust and Stendhal emphasise at length the hero's awareness of an ontological sickness, such that the narrator in Proust's *Swann's Way* can record the impression that others appeared 'more precious and important, endowed with a more real existence'.¹⁸ It is difficult to see why this could not validly be described as a desire for recognition.

Robert Hammerton-Kelly had sought to provide a Girardian reading of the Hegelian problematic of desire, although the result could perhaps more accurately be described as a Hegelian reading of Girard.¹⁹ For he embarks from the Hegelian-Kojevian starting point of a self which comes to self-awareness only through the desire for another's recognition and the contest inevitably conditioned by this circumstance. However he introduces a Girardian note by suggesting that there exists an alternative to the Master-Slave dialectic, which arises through the introduction of a third, mediating element into the dynamic – the object. The contest for recognition is thereby transposed into a contest for possession of the object.

When desire recognises another desire, it does so in terms of the object of that other desire. To be sure, the ultimate aim of desire is to substitute the self for the object of the other desire... But that substitution can take place only representatively through the object. Therefore, the struggle for prestige takes place as a struggle for a material or symbolic object that represents the self in the struggle for recognition.²⁰

In a further Girardian move, he insists that, since desire is inherently acquisitive, the object cannot be regarded as some secondary addition to a fundamentally binary system. Granting the primordiality of the mutual quest for recognition, he introduces the object as the always already present representation of this quest, whereby the intersubjective drama becomes enacted through the object. In this way intersubjective relationships are presented as mediated through a matrix of objects culturally coded as desirable in various ways and to various extents. Even so, he goes beyond Girard in asserting that

¹⁷ Girard, *Oedipus Unbound*, p. 66.

¹⁸ Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, quoted in Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, p. 55.

¹⁹ Robert Hammerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 199–207.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

object acquisition and personal status are fundamentally conjoined: what is at stake in mimetic desire is status recognition as expressed through the appropriation of symbolic objects. Hammerton-Kelly thus provides an interesting way of synthesising *desir de l'Autre* and *desir selon l'Autre*. This represents something of an improvement on Girard's formulation of mimetic desire, in that it provides an explicit account of intersubjective status as an integral aspect of the economy of desire.

It would seem then that Girard's views are rather more akin to those of Hegel than some of his supporters would wish to maintain. However this is not to suggest any failing on Girard's part. Rather, as I shall argue below, reading Girard, Hegel and Kojève alongside each other leads to theologically suggestive conclusions.

Desire and the *objet petit a*

Girard's thinking in relation to desire may be further interrogated by reference to a figure in whom psychoanalytical and Kojevian-Hegelian analyses converge, namely Jacques Lacan.

This necessarily brief detour through Lacan's thought will deal simply with his key idea of the *objet petit a*, the 'other (*l'autre*) with a small a'²¹ For Lacan, the growing child is initiated into a public, Symbolic universe in which its potentially boundless desires become constrained. The *objet petit a* names the fundamental irreducibility of the subject's desiring to that which is rendered realistic by such social constraints. It therefore has a fantastic quality, being the unsatisfied residue remaining once such realistic desires have been gratified, a permanent ache for *jouissance* – a bliss lying beyond anything mundane existence can provide. Significantly, Lacan came to speak of it as the object-cause of desire: that is to say, an object which functions as the cause of a desire which nonetheless is directed beyond it – to the unattainable Other (*l'Autre* with a capital 'A'). The (partial) non-coincidence of object and cause here is crucial to its phenomenology. In Lacanian terms, the *objet petit a* always takes the form of an object manifested in the Symbolic order which yet provides a point of conjunction with the Real. Such an evocation of the trans-mundane has a necessarily tragic aspect. In like manner to Freud, Lacan saw the paternal role in terms of reconciling the child to the unattainability of *jouissance* and so inducting it into the limitations of the public, Symbolic order; but the phenomenon of the *objet petit a*

²¹ Lacan's account of the *objet petit a* developed considerably during the course of his writings. See Lewis A. Kirshner, 'Rethinking desire: the *objet petit a* in Lacanian theory', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 53 (2005), pp. 83–102 for a full bibliography and useful overview of this development.

provides a recurring reminder of the always incomplete character of this project.

Among Lacan's most notable contemporary exponents is Slavoj Žižek, who provided our opening meditation on Coca-Cola. Coke is an object which causes a desire – thirst – which it cannot yet satisfy. Emphatically Coke is *not* 'the Real thing' in Lacanian terms, yet its persistent evocation of the unattainable Other – in this case, a fully satisfied thirst – renders it a fine example of the *objet petit a*. How might Girard account for this phenomenon?

Girard, too, distinguishes the object from the cause of desire, the latter being identified with the model. But this is where the differences begin. First, the cause need not be human (in this example it is a Coke can); second, the cause does not simply point towards a desirable other but rather in some measure makes present the object of desire (I put the Coke can to my lips in an attempt to acquire the object of definitive thirst satisfaction); third, the quest to acquire the object of desire is bound to be in vain, not because of the presence of a rival but on account of the economy of desire itself, as understood by Lacan (however much I drink, definitive satisfaction eludes me – and yet Coke does not cease to evoke my desire). Most basically, however, Žižek's example illustrates the obvious fact that I do not need a particular individual to model a desire in order for me to find a given object desirable. It is rather that – in this instance – the Coke can itself, *as a cultural artefact*, exerts its own attraction.

However Lacan's account has somewhat more in common with Girard's description of metaphysical desire in its pseudo-masochistic mode, in which desire becomes hopelessly directed towards the being of the human model via a third element – the *prima facie* object of desire. The Lacanian parallels here are obvious: the tragic unattainability of the true object, that is, the model; the close, yet incomplete, identification of the true object with the *prima facie* object; the fantastic character of the entire enterprise. With metaphysical desire, Girard and Lacan are agreed that frustration is a necessary feature. But Lacan argues this within the context of a considerably more sophisticated (if also more contentious) theoretical model which accounts rather more elegantly for this phenomenon than does that of Girard, who seems able only to awkwardly juxtapose the two modalities of mimetic desire, the simple and the metaphysical.

In fact what distinguishes Lacan, on the one hand, from both Girard and Kojève, on the other, is an implicit acknowledgement that desire always occurs as (proto-) culturally constructed, appresenting a symbolic order within which multiple roles exist. That is to say, the other is not primordially perceived as simply a bare 'other' but is already coded as mother, brother, neighbour, lord, vassal, etc.; and one's intersubjective response to their desires will therefore generally reflect that arrangement. Rather than simply covet the object

coveted by an anonymous other, I may rather be moved to satisfy the desires of my mother or, equally, to frustrate the desires of my clan's traditional enemies.²² In both cases, what is at stake is appropriate recognition from those whose recognition I am culturally predisposed to valuing. My affective inclinations are predisposed according to the roles with which I identify, the function of particular models/rivals being to provide occasions for such latencies to become actualised. Such a process might indeed be described as mimetic; but what is being imitated is not so much the contingent desire of a particular other as the typical, culturally-coded attitude of the ideal son/neighbour/patriot etc. with which I happen to identify.

Desire as production

Thus far, the various figures which have been brought into dialogue with Girard have one thing in common: an understanding of desire as essentially acquisitive and therefore presupposing some lack. A quite different conceptualisation is provided by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their two volumes of writings on capitalism and schizophrenia. In *Anti-Oedipus*, they present a powerful exposition of desire as a positive movement of becoming. As a key category in an ontology which privileges the vocabulary of fluidity, desire emerges as 'the autoproduct of the unconscious' which itself produces reality.²³ Production is desire's immanent principle, whereby desire 'constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects... Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows'.²⁴ Brian Massumi, in his 'deviations' from Deleuze and Guattari, stresses that desire should therefore not be regarded as fundamentally 'for an object'; neither should it be taken, in a Freudian or Lacanian manner, as a drive or a structure. Rather, desire is 'the production of singular states of intensity... never a strictly personal affair, but a tension between sub- and superpersonal tendencies that intersect in the person as empty category'.²⁵ Indeed, it is less a case of subjects having various desires than of desire 'having' varying subjects: the subject is merely the residuum of productive desire.²⁶

²² As will be acknowledged below, Deleuze and Guattari would wish to insist that it is of the nature of desire to escape its cultural codings, so that such orderings of desire cannot be regarded as absolute; yet this is not to conclude that the anonymous peer represents the primordial identity of the human, as Girard seems to assume.

²³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁵ Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (London: The MIT Press, 1992), p. 82.

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 28.

The nature of authentic desire and the contrast with its deformed aspect as lack is brought out memorably and instructively in a passage from *A Thousand Plateaus*. Here Deleuze and Guattari talk of the 'triple curse of desire': the negative law of lack; the extrinsic rule of pleasure; and the transcendent ideal of fantasy. The absent object of desire, inherently unattainable, becomes therefore a thing of fantasy; and desire itself becomes something which must be assuaged by pleasure, such that the baleful clamour of desire is silenced, albeit temporarily. In this polemic against the priesthood of psychoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari deal in turn with the central categories of castration, the pleasure principle and *jouissance*. Against this tragic account of inevitable dissatisfaction, they present desire as a succession of states of intensity arising from the productive deferral of pleasure.

Pleasure... is something that must be delayed as long as possible because it interrupts the continuous process of positive desire. There is, in fact, a joy that is immanent to desire... a joy that implies no lack or impossibility and is not measured by pleasure since it is what distributes intensities of pleasure and prevents them from being suffused by anxiety, shame and guilt.²⁷

A Deleuzian critique of Girard is not hard to imagine. Girardian desire, as we have seen, always involves three components: the subject, the model and the object. The subject learns what is desirable by imitating the model's desires, the eventual upshot of which is an awareness of lack on the subject's part, which in turn issues in rivalry with the model. Despite Girard's distancing himself from the libidinal account of desire provided by psychoanalysis, there can be little doubt that Deleuze and Guattari would perceive him as still being in thrall to Oedipalism. Primary for them is not the subject but rather desire itself, endlessly generating its own objects. 'Lack' can only arise within a given social configuration which inhibits desire in such a way that only certain kinds of objects are coded as desirable and which, concomitantly, constructs certain kinds of desiring subjects. In the contemporary capitalist context, a characteristic diremption occurs: 'desire' is privatised as a matter of merely subjective fantasy; while production is presented as a merely social/industrial process independent of subjective desire.

Lack is created, planned and organized in and through social production... It is never primary; production is never organized on the basis of pre-existing need or lack. It is lack that infiltrates itself, creates empty spaces or vacuoles, and propagates itself in accordance with the organization of production. The deliberate creation of lack as

²⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 171–2.

a function of market economy is the art of the dominant class. This involves deliberately organising wants and needs amid an abundance of production; making all desire teeter and fall victim to the great fear not having one's needs satisfied. . .²⁸

Furthermore, Oedipalisation constructs subjective identities within the constraints of the modern nuclear family and delivers these quasi-stable constructs for exploitation by the capitalist axiomatic. Oedipalised desire is in essence a compensating device, required to offset the decoding and deterritorialising effects of untrammelled capital. 'Capitalism's drive for ever-new sources of profit fosters innovative flows of desire that, if left to themselves, could so alter capitalist foundations that the latter would evolve into something else. . . "Oedipalisation" is a contemporary form of social repression that reduces the forms desire takes. . . to those that sustain the social formation of capitalism'.²⁹ This is achieved by substituting authentic productive desire, fluid and mutating, for fixed subjective personae which appear to have given desires or 'needs' for certain objects.

Girard, for his part, was dismissive of *Anti-Oedipus*, describing it as 'a rather tired recapitulation of outmoded cultural forms. . . the small child all alone playing with his toys'.³⁰ More substantively, he assimilates desiring-production to Nietzsche's will to power and goes on to interpret this as an instance of pseudo-masochism, that pathological evolution of mimetic desire whereby the other automatically reveals him- or herself as a hindrance to the acquisition of some arbitrary object. The other must therefore be defeated in order that the as yet obscure object may be won. On this reading, desiring-production is simply that prior inclination to overcome the other as obstacle characteristic of a developed form of mimetic desire; a desire which could, in a sense, be said to generate its object as that to which the obstacle denies access.

Rather surprisingly, and despite his polemics, Girard can even state that 'desiring mimesis engenders its objects'.³¹ By this he means to stress that there is no 'pure', primordially non-mimetic desire for an object which consequently evokes desire in others; rather, *objects of desire arise as artefacts of a systemic process involving two individuals*. Desire is always already mimetic, the roles of model and imitator being entirely and endlessly interchangeable. Thus it could be argued that for Girard, as much as for Deleuze and Guattari, objects are the products of an impersonal dynamic desire; and that they 'belong' primarily to desire itself rather than to either of the rivals,

²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, pp. 29–30.

²⁹ Tamsin Lorraine, 'Oedipalisation', in Adrian Parr, ed., *The Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 189–191.

³⁰ Girard, 'To Double Business Bound', pp. 118, 93.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

each of whom – as Deleuze and Guattari would maintain – can only be said to ‘lack’ the object to the extent that they identify themselves as distinct subjects. Desire – conflictual mimesis, in Girard’s terms – comes first: the construction of the object and of the rivals, as rivals, is secondary. Or, as Fleming puts it, ‘the rival (competition) is everything and the *object of desire is nothing*’.³²

Striking differences in terminology and approach apart, some significant points of convergence are therefore discernible here. The particular value of Deleuze and Guattari’s account lies in its location of desire in a socio-economic context. Indeed, desire’s manifestation in terms of lack is only radicalised in late capitalism, as stable Oedipal identities are increasingly threatened by the anarchy of the capitalist axiomatic.³³ More and more, the other is stripped of a culturally-coded persona and becomes the anonymous stranger at the crossroads of the Oedipus myth; more and more, the acquisition of commodities becomes a metaphysical issue in Girard’s sense, the vain quest for the secure identity seemingly possessed by the other – even if that identity is only that ultimate simulacrum, the fantasy persona of the celebrity.

Imitating the Creator

It would be natural for Deleuze and Guattari to condemn Girard’s rendering of mimetic desire as complicit with attempts to reterritorialise flows unleashed by the operation of the capitalist axiomatic through the construction of fixed subjectivities defined by their lack of certain objects. In this way desire is configured, not least in its mimetic expression, according to the requirements of a society capable of sustaining a capitalist economics: consumerism writ large. Their preferred response is to eliminate Oedipal formation with a view to achieving the full release of desiring-production. What might a Christian response resemble? Is it possible to incorporate Girard’s identification of the mimetic mechanism and Deleuze and Guattari’s account of the productive nature of desire in such a way as to foster a distinctively Christian critique of capitalism?

The critique of capitalism presented in the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* has a homeopathic character, inasmuch as the authors advocate ‘more of the same’, an increasingly decoded, de-territorialised socius in which the artificial props required to secure competitive production for the market are dismantled.³⁴ However, the unqualified decoding of flows of desire can only be regarded as

³² Fleming, *René Girard*, p. 27.

³³ See e.g. Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 83–130.

³⁴ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 315.

emancipatory if one takes all coding to be arbitrary and therefore coercive. Such an assumption reflects the Nominalistic, univocal ontology so central to Deleuze's philosophical project.³⁵ This remains an assumption, of course, simply dismissing the claims of a Realist ontology of participation, and so of the *via analogia* associated above all with the name of Aquinas.³⁶

In this understanding, God's ontological difference secures the possibility that the coding of desire may be aligned to a substantive good, a purpose which transcends the contingencies of particular assemblages of desire. The productivity of human desire noted by Deleuze and Guattari, therefore, may indeed be affirmed on the basic theological ground of the creation of humanity in the image of the Creator God, as a refraction of a primordial desire for being in time – that is, becoming. Since God's desire for creation is derived from the superabundant plenitude of the Trinity, the human creature's desire must, primordially, be like in kind. Daniel M. Bell Jr helpfully introduces the figure of Bernard of Clairvaux to illustrate such a doctrine of productive desire. Expounding Bernard's Commentary on the Song of Songs, he writes as follows.

Human desire is nothing less than a mirror of the positive, creative desire of God... an excess in the sense that, among Bernard and the Cistercians, desire was synonymous with love... As an expression of charity, desire is not so much an acquisitive drive, characteristic of lack, but a generosity and donation expressed in the many forms of charity.³⁷

Bell therefore reads Bernard as providing a corrective to Deleuze and Guattari's account of desire, in which productivity can only appear, in Graham Ward's words, as 'an indifferent flux, a malleable flow of molten energies'.³⁸ Bernard's alternative, predicated as it is on a mimesis of the primordial divine creativity, is only available if one accepts the possibility of a participation in the transcendent. By contrast, 'relations of desire in the univocal mode can finally only degenerate into the violence of conflict and conquest': at best, utterly discrete and inherently unrelated individuals can only hope to achieve a reconciliation of arbitrary desires through establishing a balance of power. At worst, this means violence and annihilation; at best, the sublimated violence of contract.³⁹

³⁵ Daniel M. Bell Jr, *Liberation Theology After the End of History: the Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 33–4; see also Claire Colebrook, 'Univocal', in Parr, *The Deleuze Dictionary*, pp. 278–80.

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 32–34; cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 258–61.

³⁷ Bell, *Liberation Theology*, p. 34.

³⁸ Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 185.

³⁹ Bell, *Liberation Theology*, p. 90.

Avoiding this pitfall means cultivating a productive desire which skilfully imitates its divine source. In this respect, then, theology can affirm the mimetic nature of human desiring. I have argued above that Girard's version of mimetic desire is unsatisfactory on a number of scores: that it assumes desire to be basically acquisitive; that it ignores cultural roles in its 'interdividual' formulation of desire; that it fails to adequately appreciate the inherent linkage between object acquisition/identification and personal status. However Girard's distinction between internally and externally mediated desires is helpful to the extent that it gestures, albeit perhaps inadvertently, towards the transcendent. Internal mediation may well represent 'the characteristically modern situation'; but, at root, this is because of the ascendancy of a Nominalistic, univocal ontology, embodied socially in capitalist practice and its ancillary political and cultural devices. If imitation remains restricted to the created order, then the tragic picture of conflictual mimesis painted by Girard must hold true.

If on the other hand we take external mediation to tend, asymptotically, to the *imitatio Dei* then the situation changes entirely. The Christian, states Girard, seeks to imitate Christ: specifically, Christ's own imitation of the Father; and the Father's desiring, as we have seen, far from being the voracious desire to make good a lack, is of its very nature generous – true donative desire.⁴⁰ Indeed the resolution of the fatal 'lack' occasioned by the Fall involves the ultimate act of self-giving on God's part. Imitating God as revealed in Christ therefore cannot be the quasi-Stoic exercise of suppressing desire (thus evoking in turn Girard's metaphysical desire) towards which opponents of capitalism might most readily be drawn. Rather, the Christ who ached with desire to share his last meal with his disciples models a different *kind* of desire: a positive alternative to the arbitrary, univocal desiring of capitalism.⁴¹ Desire, conceived mimetically, can only not issue in tragedy if the basic model is God the Christian Trinity, in whom desire is defined less by its objects than it is by its inherently donative, creative character. And God's desire, unlike that of Kojève's human, is not for recognition of self but rather for the recognition of the other, that he or she might be allowed to come to be, free to respond in love to the one who desired her creation.

In responding to this love, human love may also register a sense of privation, but this is not the lack that provokes the lust for acquisition: '[t]he notion of desire as "lack" can only be used of unfallen desire in a benign, analogous sense, for it is not about an absence or void but an inexhaustible divine plenitude or surplus'.⁴² This observation of Bell's helps us to distinguish the phenomenology of charity from

⁴⁰ Girard, *I See Satan*, pp. 13–14.

⁴¹ Luke 22: 15

⁴² Bell, *Liberation Theology*, p. 132, n. 23.

the operation of Lacan's *objet petit a*. It was noted above that Lacan offers what is, in some respects, a more fruitful account of desire than that of Girard. Desire is evoked not only by human models but by any object which happens to be imbued with an apposite cultural-biographical significance. It is the property of the *objet petit a*, moreover, that it provides a flavour of a greater object which is inherently unattainable, at least within the constraints of the public Symbolic order.

To the extent that the phenomenology of the *objet petit a* entails the frustration of desire, theology must insist that this describes existence in its fallen mode only. Theologically, the partial non-coincidence of cause and object noted by Lacan must ultimately be regarded as due to the divine transcendence which renders any prior conception of the desired object incomplete. All created reality has the capacity to gesture towards its Creator, though only if the desire by which it is apprehended is *not* acquisitive but rather productive in the manner indicated above. As Augustine saw, such a productive desire may rightly be termed love, *agape*, *caritas*, as opposed to the *cupiditas* of fallen desire: 'not that the creature ought not to be loved, but if that love is referred to the Creator, then it will not be *cupiditas*, but *caritas*.'⁴³

Rather than indicate the tragic eternal frustration of desire, therefore, the created reality undergirding the phenomenology of the *objet petit a* may instead be seen as witnessing to the boundless attraction of God, made concrete in and through mundane objects.

For this desire, the endless 'dissatisfaction' that remains, even in the realization of desire, as noted by Gregory of Nyssa in his idea of *epectasis*. . . is not really the 'lack' of frustration which is still mastered by power but the surplus delight of fulfilment, which only knows its consummation in holding the other. . . at a distance. . .⁴⁴

Provided the subject is not moved by an underlying sense of ontological deficiency but rather by the promise of an inexhaustible ontological plenitude, then, sanctified desire moves the subject to ever-new inventions, in the older sense noted by Paul Ricoeur as a conjunction of discovery and creation.⁴⁵ Instead of the sublime *jouissance* doomed to eternal denial by the Symbolic order, we are offered here the fulness of the beatific vision, in all its unpredictable, surprising concrete actuality, made possible through the disciplines provided by the symbolic order of the Church. In this dispensation,

⁴³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IX, 8.

⁴⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 320.

⁴⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 306.

symbol and ritual, discipline in general, far from representing arbitrary restriction as an univocal ontology would maintain, provide rather the codes essential for fostering productive desire *as an authentic refraction of the divine love* and for inspiring it to ever more beautiful inventions.⁴⁶

In summary, we may conclude that theology proclaims a desire which is both mimetic and productive. This is possible only because the model of desire, in Girard's sense, is the Trinity, whose desire is always that the other might be brought into being in order that love may abound the more. By contrast, the desire evidenced by Lacan's *objet petit a* reflects a pedagogy of desire fashioned according to the requirements of capitalist social-production. Coke is the epitome: the more you have, the more you want; dissatisfaction is inevitable. And this is because, in truth, the object of your desire is Nothing. Acquisitive, Oedipal desire, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, cannot be otherwise.

And yet, we may also conclude that there are grounds for contesting Deleuze and Guattari's claim that the only alternative to the capitalist, Oedipal assembly of desire is the radically decoding and deterritorialising nomad existence which they espouse. As John Milbank has pointed out, capitalism – with its mechanisms for establishing formal equivalence in terms of monetary value – is already an optimal expression of their univocal ontology.⁴⁷ As long as one's horizons of possibility remain constrained by a Nominalist metaphysics, emancipation must reduce in the end to a nihilistic celebration of the (indifferent) same. However if one accepts the possibility that the notion of participation in a transcendent other is not just a political ruse, then it becomes viable to view the coding of desire as something other than mere arbitrary restriction. In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, we might even go so far as to speak of a discipline necessary for constructing a mode of being in which desire is freed from the baleful threefold of lack, pleasure and fantasy. Desire, in order to be restored as the basic movement of human being, requires – as Deleuze and Guattari accept – a certain ascesis. Such an ascesis is offered by the Christian tradition, as exemplified by Bernard of Clairvaux: the coding of flows in such a way that the degenerate mode of desire as acquisitiveness and internal mimesis is transformed – not without pain – into an ever more authentic imitation of the eternal love of the Trinity. This, surely, and not any strategy of exacerbation or of neo-Stoic withdrawal, represents a genuinely radical attempt to free desire from its capture by the Oedipalism of capitalism and its handmaids. But this in turn requires that the Church, as the locus of

⁴⁶ See Bell, *Liberation Theology* pp. 91–9 on Bernard's methodology regarding the disciplined formation of character.

⁴⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 315–6.

such an emancipatory practice, must at the same time renounce any such ancillary role.

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