

Chapter 4: Nietzsche's tantra and Girard's sutra

Thomas Hamelryck

Abstract

Humans perennially cycle between two distinct times, regulated by religion. These two times are called profane time and sacred time, first recognised by Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) in *The elementary forms of religious life* (1912) and later by Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) in *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion* (1957).

Profane time is characterised by prohibition, asceticism and renunciation. Sacred time is the realm of sacrifice, transgression, intoxication, undifferentiation and transformation. The function of profane time is curbing the excesses of mimetic desire (we desire what others desire), which otherwise lead to rampant violence. The functions of sacred time include providing antidotes to violence, avoiding ossification due to overly strict prohibitions and (more rarely) revealing the nature of desire. I argue that Nietzsche's philosophy is a desperate plea for sacred time, while offering precious little understanding of the function of profane time or the nature of desire and violence. Nietzsche rejects Christianity because it rejects Dionysian victimisation, which he sees as an inherent and valuable part of sacred time. Instead, Nietzsche offers the fever dream of eternally recurring

ecstasy and self-divinization through the warped rebirth of the Dionysian. As such, Nietzsche represents the disastrous blurring of sacred and profane time that characterises much of the 20th and 21st century, culminating in the Dionysian victimisation on an industrial scale of the Nazi camps and the Communist gulags. I bring Nietzsche in dialogue with his anthropological antipode, René Girard, and his theory of mimetic desire and the victimage mechanism (ritual sacrifice of human scapegoats as a way to appease intra-tribal violence). In contrast to Nietzsche, Girard's work is a plea for profane time, while rejecting sacred time wholesale due to its association with the violence of the Dionysian. Nonetheless, Girard's concept of *conversion* betrays a need for transformation, which is the hallmark of sacred time. I argue that a necessary reconciliation of Nietzsche and Girard can be found in the creative tension of renunciation and transformation, conditioned on rejecting the delusions of the victimage mechanism. Such a creative tension is for example found in Sutric and Tantric Buddhism. From this perspective, the works of thinkers, writers and artists can be examined as emerging from a temporal spectrum that spans from profane to sacred, moving beyond simplistic categorizations in terms of *good* and *evil*. Finally, I speculate that in the 21st century, the increasing revelation of the ties between desire, violence, prohibition and transgression might herald a move to an era of anthropological pragmatism, fueled by digital anthropology.

Introduction: Zarathustra's wild dogs and songbirds

In Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* (written by Nietzsche from 1883 to 1885), we read in part one, *On enjoying and suffering the passions*, the following passage,

At one time you had passions and called them evil. But now you are left with only your virtues: these have grown from out of your passions.

You set your highest goal in the heart of these passions: then they became your virtues and sources of joy.

And whether you were from the tribe of the violent-tempered or of the lustful or the fanatical believers or the seekers of vengeance:

In the end all your passions turned into virtues and all your devils into angels.

At one time you had wild dogs in your cellar: but in the end they transformed themselves into birds and delightful singers.²⁸⁰

I will use this passage to examine Nietzsche's call for a return to the Dionysian. In order to do that, I will bring Nietzsche in conversation with the French-American philosophical anthropologist and cultural theorist René Girard (1923-2015). My aim is to explore the nature of their disagreements by contrasting profane time with sacred time, and subsequently Sutric Buddhism with Tantric Buddhism. I argue that the clashing ideas of

²⁸⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus spoke Zarathustra", Translated by Graham Parkes, Oxford University Press, 2008.

Nietzsche and Girard represent an anthropological tension, rooted in dichotomous time, that cannot be fully resolved.

The article is structured as follows. First, building on the affective neuroscience of Jaak Panksepp (1943-2017) and the mimetic theory of René Girard, I outline the connections between drive, desire, violence, religion, language and hominization. Second, I summarise how Nietzsche and Girard agree on the importance of an anthropology of religion, and on the structure and function of the Dionysian. Third, I argue that Girard and Nietzsche make two assumptions that are worthy of closer examination. On the one hand, Girard equates sacred time with the Dionysian, and thus with mob slaughter and persecution. On the other hand, Nietzsche remains blind to the deep connections between the Dionysian and the dumb violence of the persecuting mob. Fourth, I argue that, due to these assumptions, Girard is overly biased towards the benefits of profane time, while Nietzsche is overly biased towards the benefits of sacred time. Fifth, I argue that a reconciliation of Nietzsche and Girard is possible. This reconciliation amounts to a proper understanding of the role of renunciation, prohibition and tradition vis-a-vis victimage, transgression and transformation. Despite Girard's aversion to sacred time, his concept of "conversion" amounts to transformation, which is an important aspect of sacred time. Despite Nietzsche's contempt for Christianity, his rejection of the mob and the rabble is really a veiled embrace of the anthropology of the cross, which rejects the blind stupidity of mob violence. Sixth, I argue that Sutric and Tantric Buddhism showcase how profane time and sacred time can remain in creative tension,

conditioned on rejecting the victimage mechanism. This creative tension between Sutra and Tantra not only addresses Nietzsche's fear of cultural ossification and loss of vitality, but also Girard's fear of scapegoating and mob violence. Next, I use the above insights to diagnose the modern condition as the dissolution of the boundaries between sacred time and profane time, much of it driven by the evolution of mass media and technology. Finally, I speculate about a possible shift to an era of anthropological pragmatism in the 21st century, where sacred time and profane time again part from each other in the face of desire revealed. This shift might be facilitated by the rise of digital anthropology, based on big data concerning human behaviour and data analysis by machine learning.

Panksepp's bedrock of drives

Central to this article is the nature of desire. Before we can explore the nooks and crannies of desire, we need to take a look at its bedrock, which we share with mammals, and to a certain extent even reptiles. This bedrock is formed by the emotional affects or primary emotions. Primary emotions originate in the evolutionary older parts of the human brain, together with so-called homeostatic affects that include hunger and thirst.

The Estonian-American neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp showed that humans have seven primary emotions, which are conventionally written using capital letters²⁸¹. Four of these are positive, rewarding emotions that we pursue because they

²⁸¹ Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Biven, "The archeology of mind", W.W. Norton & Company, 2012.

generally lead to pleasurable experiences, comprising SEEKING, CARE, LUST and PLAY. These manifest in striving for novelty, friendship, sexuality and play. It is perhaps particularly surprising that play is a primal emotion. Three of them are negative emotions that we avoid because they generally lead to unpleasant experiences, comprising FEAR, RAGE and GRIEF/PANIC. The first two need no elaboration; the latter manifests in heartbreak and social exclusion. The seven primary emotions can be interpreted as a system of instinctual “drives” akin to the life (Eros) and death (Thanatos) drives proposed by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), but now informed by neuroscience. The seven primary emotions give us positive situations and objects that attract us (objects of desire) or negative ones that repel us (objects of aversion).

I now turn to the question of how the drives become tied to concrete objects of desire or aversion. For example, how does the indeterminate and vague primary emotion LUST converge on a specific sexual partner? This is where René Girard’s mimetic theory comes in. Girard will take us from drive, which is shared by humans and animals alike, to desire, which is a specifically human affair. Desire will not only warp, but also intensify, the drives.

Girard’s mimetic desire

René Girard developed a theory of hominization, culture and religion based on the study of literary sources (from Mediaeval texts of prosecution to Dostoevsky) and anthropological data.

According to Girard, the structure of desire is triadic.²⁸² A desiring subject looks to an admired model to find out what object to desire. Rather than Cartesian individuals, humans are best seen as what Girard calls *interdividuals*. The human self is a self-of-desire, consisting of a plethora of desires adopted from various models. Desire provides Panksepp's seven drives discussed in the previous section with actual objects to pursue or to avoid.

Advertising makes good use of the structure of desire and serves well to illustrate its triadic nature. Consider an advertisement of George Clooney for an Omega watch. The target of the advertisement is the subject, George Clooney is the model, and the Omega watch is the object. It is immaterial whether Mr. Clooney truly desires that watch or that he's simply being paid to pull the wool over our eyes. The effect is the same; a simulacrum of desire by an admired model is enough to create a new desire in an admiring subject. Ultimately, Girard points out, desire is always a *desire for being*, that is, *metaphysical desire*: we want the watch, because the watch seems to bring us closer to being what George Clooney stands for in the advertisement.

In this light, human societies can be seen as vast networks of triangles of desire. We simultaneously act as models of desire to others (for example, to our children), and are subjects of desire with respect to models (for example, actors in advertisements or well-off neighbours). Contemporary networks of desire are to a

²⁸² René Girard (with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort), "Things hidden since the foundation of the world", Bloomsbury, 1987. This book provides a comprehensive overview of Girard's theory of mimetic desire and scapegoating.

great extent digital, virtual, deliberately engineered and hyperconnected.

According to Girard, Freud's famous Oedipal triangle can be recognised as a simple example of triangular desire, instead of as a triadic template for future desire. The desire of the son for the mother is mediated by the son's model, which is the father. The key difference with Girard's view on desire is that for Freud, the desire for the mother comes first, and the rivalry with the father follows. For Freud, the mother is an inherently desirable object. For Girard, that desire is mediated by the model, that is, the father. There is never a direct line between a subject and its object of desire - it is always mediated by a third party, the model. Girard calls the belief in the inherent attraction of objects an example of *cultural Platonism*. Cultural Platonism refers to concepts that are accepted as fundamental truths, but that really obscure the true nature of desire and its consequences.

Girard's mimetic theory of desire can also be used to shed some light on one of the famous enigmatic quips of French *enfant terrible*-cum-psychoanalyst-cum-crazy wisdom sage Jacques Lacan (1901-1981): "*Woman does not exist*" ("*la femme n'existe pas*").²⁸³ For Girard, the ideal woman is not determined by some kind of inherent essence, but by the converging desires of models in a certain time and place. Hence, the ideal woman can range from the voluptuous, obese woman painted by Rubens in the 17th

²⁸³ Jacques Lacan, "Psychanalyse", interview of Lacan by Jacques-Alain Miller filmed by Benoît Jacquot for the ORTF (Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française), 1973.

century, to the slender, androgynous woman embodied by the famous supermodel Twiggy in the 1960s. The object of desire only exists by means of a mediating model. The object of desire has no essence; it can be anything. For Girard, Lacan could just as well have said, *l'homme n'existe pas* - it would be equally correct.

Desire is violence, violence is desire

Desire and violence are closely intertwined. When a subject and a model share a desire for a unique object, competition arises. Such a unique object can for example be a prestigious job or an attractive mate. Competition quickly escalates into rivalry, and rivalry into potentially violent conflict. In that way, mimetic conflict has a tendency to detach itself from the object. Consider two men fighting over a love interest. Even if the love interest runs off with a third party, resentment or conflict between the two men still lingers. In addition, triadic desire easily leads to what the English anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) has called a *double bind*. In this case, the model sends two contradictory demands to the subject, corresponding to *imitate me* and *don't imitate me*. A classic example of such a double bind is the teacher who feels threatened by the success of a pupil. The pupil is either poorly performing, or a threatening rival. Both outcomes are equally met with disapproval by the teacher.

It is important to note that the risk of conflict to a great extent depends on the distance between subject and model. *Internal mediation* happens when the model and the subject are close

enough to compete over a unique object, like in the above examples. In contrast, *external mediation* happens when subject and object are at a safe distance and there is no risk for conflict. External mediation is a psychotechnology often used by religion and advertisement alike. Christians, for example, take Christ as a mimetic model to follow, notably in the renunciation of revenge. Such a model is completely devoid of competition. The digital network, with its social media that provide countless shiny mimetic models, vastly proliferates both internal and external mediation. In advertisement, there is little risk in adapting the object of desire advertised by a model: one typically does not end up in competition with George Clooney over an Omega watch. Not only is Mr. Clooney a remote and virtual presence from most of us, Omega watches are far from unique and can be provided in large quantities. The capitalist solution to the inherent tendency for mimetic rivalry by humans is to flood societies with abundant objects, a process that is conditional on the availability of abundant resources, cheap energy and well-functioning supply chains. This solution also requires a society that mostly competes about goods that can be mass produced, instead of prestigious positions, sexual partners or other objects of desire that cannot be multiplied easily.

Mimetic desire explains many mysterious aspects of human behaviour, without invoking tailor-made drives, complexes, substitutions or intrinsically desirable objects. For example, as obtaining a desired object ultimately ends up in disappointment, humans frantically move from one model and its object of desire to another. Inevitably, they end up finding a powerful model,

called a *model-obstacle*, that successfully bars its object from being possessed. For Girard, model-obstacle addiction lies behind Freud's famous *repetition compulsion*, another case of cultural Platonism. Another example is sado-masochism. As strong desire is closely associated with violence and obstruction, it is possible to put the cart before the horse. Thus, by setting up theatrical situations that involve artful violence, pain or obstruction, desire can be invoked, which is the simple principle behind sado-masochism. The aim of the masochist is not pain, but the presence of a powerful model possessing an ultimate object. Hence, pseudo-masochism is a more apt designation. It is the theatrical violence of the sadist-masochist dyad itself that implies the presence of a virtual, ill-defined object of desire. A third example are charismatic persons such as gurus or coquettes, who seem to utterly love themselves without any need for others. This makes them very desirable. In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard writes "in order to be desired, one must convince others that one desires oneself." Thus, gurus and coquettes alike adopt a *narcissistic stance*, which is nothing else than adopting the stance of a powerful, utterly independent model that only desires itself. As narcissism is only a stance, not a truly lived essence, Girard speaks of *pseudo-narcissism*. The independence of gurus is often broadcasted by flaunting the possession of ill-defined objects of desire such as *inner peace* or *absolute wisdom*. The guru-devotee dyad is thus akin to the sadist-masochist dyad: in both cases the creation of a dyad (sadist-masochist, guru-devotee) brings about a virtual, ill-defined object of desire. Such a virtual object of desire is the hallmark of perversion.

Hominization and the Chthonic

The difference between humans and apes lies in mimetic desire. Apes mimic to some extent, but not to the extent of humans. While animal societies are adequately structured by dominance hierarchies, the increasing extent of mimetic desire required another structuring mechanism for the proto-human. This is because, as we have seen above, desire is strongly associated with violence. Mimetic conflict can quickly spread through a primitive tribe, resulting in a mimetic crisis, i.e. an apocalyptic war of all-against-all. How did tribes of proto-humans deal with the increasing violence emerging in tandem with increasing mimesis?

Girard provides a striking answer.²⁸⁴ In order to avoid the annihilation of the tribe, the violence must be deflected by projection on a scapegoat. Initially, this scapegoat is human. The frenzied killing of the scapegoat defuses the tribal aggression, and results in post-sacrificial pacification. This is the emergence of the victimage mechanism, which is the hallmark of the transition from animal over proto-human to modern human, the latter emerging about 300,000 years ago.

Borrowing and generalising a concept used by Camille Paglia²⁸⁵ and others, I will call the mechanisms that lead to the spontaneous formation of a murderous mob that moves in on a

²⁸⁴ René Girard (with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort), “Things hidden since the foundation of the world”, Bloomsbury, 1987.

²⁸⁵ Camille Paglia, “Sexual personae: Art and decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson”, Yale University Press, 1990.

scapegoat, the Chtonic. It is the Chtonic that made the emergence of the mimetic animal, ie. the human, possible. Humanization, the path from animal to human, consisted of increasing mimetic desire held in check by matching Chtonic scapegoating.

For thousands of years the emergence of mimetic desire and the resolution of ensuing mimetic crises through scapegoating was touch and go. Many tribes must have perished due to ineffective scapegoating. Over time, a mechanism arose that structured the Chtonic and made the emergence of culture possible. This mechanism is religion, which structures the chaos of the Chtonic by means of mythology, prohibition and ritual.

The eternal recurrence of profane time and sacred time

Archaic religion structures time into profane time and sacred time.²⁸⁶ In profane time, desire is curbed by prohibitions. These prohibitions concern objects or behaviours that are associated with the risk of inducing mimetic competition and rivalry, such as food, the exchange of goods or sex. Profane time is governed by traditions that provide clear rules to live by. Such rules typically encompass sexuality, because it is an obvious source of mimetic rivalry. However, the real underlying issue is escalation of mimetic rivalry into Chtonic violence - the central problem is chaotic violence, not sexuality.

²⁸⁶ Émile Durkheim, "The elementary forms of religious life", 1912; Mircea Eliade, "The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion", 1957.

A tight web of prohibitions can lead to stagnation, deadlock and ossification.²⁸⁷ For example, how can humans find mates in the presence of strong prohibitions around sexuality? The answer lies in sacred time. Sacred time is transgressive, i.e. it abolishes or inverts prohibitions in transgressive rituals, and thus makes alternative ways of being possible. This comes at the price of an increased risk for a recurrence of the Chthonic, i.e. unstructured violence. That risk is contained in two ways. First, prohibitions are only lifted under strictly regulated circumstances. As the French philosopher Georges Bataille (1897-1962) astutely remarks: “*Often the transgression of a taboo is no less subject to rules than the taboo itself. No liberty here*”²⁸⁸. Second, in sacred time, potential violence is deflected on a scapegoat. In sacrificial religion, the scapegoating is not due to unstructured Chthonic violence, but the result of a carefully structured ritual, accompanied by myth. Myth is a story that proclaims the absolute guilt of the scapegoat and the justification of its slaughter. It is the unreliable account of the murderous mob. The myth of Dionysus, featuring a murdered and resurrected god, and which is associated with *sparagmos* (the tearing apart of a living animal or human) and *omophagia* (the eating of the raw flesh of the victim), is particularly representative of the victimage mechanism.

²⁸⁷ René Girard (with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort), “Things hidden since the foundation of the world”, Bloomsbury, 1987.

²⁸⁸ Georges Bataille, “Eroticism”, translated by Mary Dalwood, Penguin Books, 2001.

Scapegoats are deified in myths because they have the seemingly magical ability to bring about peace in the tribe. Thus, gods are nothing else than slaughtered scapegoats, while kings are nothing else than scapegoats that are waiting to be slaughtered. The sacred is both the absolute guilt of the abjected scapegoat before the slaughter, and the peace and tribal reconciliation after the slaughter. Therefore the sacred is deeply ambiguous, and subject to strict regulation, even within transgressive ritual.

Nietzsche's famous concept of the *eternal recurrence* refers to the endless recurring of sacred time punctuating profane time. Nietzsche himself clearly links the Dionysian and its *sparagmos* with the idea of the eternal recurrence: "*Dionysus cut to pieces is a promise of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction.*"²⁸⁹ Now the topology of desire, violence, prohibition and ritual is roughly sketched, we are ready to investigate Nietzsche's and Girard's anthropologies of religion.

Nietzsche and Girard, anthropologists of religion

Nietzsche and Girard both enquire into the origins of religion in general, and the nature of Christianity in particular. On the one hand, Nietzsche called himself the Antichrist and generally despises Christianity with a vengeance, despite some sparse positive notes about Christ himself. On the other hand, Girard is often called an apologist of Christianity. For Girard, Christianity amounts to the revelation of the victimage mechanism through

²⁸⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The will to power", translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books, 1968.

the story of the crucifixion of Christ. The sacrificial goat is turned into the lamb that reveals the victimage mechanism itself. The passion of the Christ follows the classic structure of a myth: a scapegoat is killed by a mob and subsequently deified. But in the Biblical case, the scapegoat is innocent and the role of the murderous mob is revealed. Thus, the passion of the Christ is an anti-myth that deconstructs the nature of archaic, scapegoating religion. Surprisingly, despite Nietzsche's and Girard's dramatically different stances vis-a-vis Christianity, they actually agree on its nature. Nietzsche writes in *The Will to Power*:

*Dionysus versus the "Crucified" there you have the antithesis. It is not a difference in regard to their martyrdom—it is a difference in the meaning of it.*²⁹⁰

Thus, Girard and Nietzsche agree that the passion of Christ is an anti-myth. Girard writes: *As incredible as it may seem, no one made this simple but fundamental discovery before Nietzsche - no one, not even a Christian!*²⁹¹

However, Nietzsche, in contrast to Girard, defends the Dionysian, even up to the point of advocating a return to human sacrifice:

Through Christianity, the individual was made so important, so absolute that he could no longer be sacrificed: but the species

²⁹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The will to power", translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books, 1968. Also quoted in René Girard, "I saw Satan fall like lightning", Orbis Books, 2001.

²⁹¹ René Girard, "I saw Satan fall like lightning", Orbis Books, 2001.

*endures only through human sacrifice... Genuine charity demands sacrifice for the good of the species—it is hard, it is full of self-overcoming, because it needs human sacrifice. And this pseudo-humaneness called Christianity wants it established that no one should be sacrificed.*²⁹²

In *Twilight of the Idols*, section 36, *Morality for physicians*, Nietzsche writes:

*The invalid is a parasite on society. In a certain state it is indecent to go on living. To vegetate on in cowardly dependence on physicians and medicaments after the meaning of life, the right to life, has been lost ought to entail the profound contempt of society.*²⁹³

It is clear that Nietzsche radically rejects the concern for the victim and the inherent worth of a human being, both central tenets of Christianity. The common interpretation of Nietzschean sacrifice as a pure self-overcoming is simply another myth that obscures the victimage mechanism. The simplistic white-washing of Nietzsche by much of 20th-century philosophy can be rejected. The frail seer of Sils-Maria, like the Nazis, was ultimately willing to accept the necessary implication of a return to the Dionysian: not only self-sacrifice, but also sacrifice of the weak and the misfit by the elites. But who exactly are these elites

²⁹² Friedrich Nietzsche, “The will to power”, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books, 1968.

²⁹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Twilight of the idols”, translated by R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin Books, 2003

that get to decide on that elusive matter? As Thomas Mann wrote in 1948,

*Who was it that recently had the power to assume this responsibility, who impudently thought themselves capable of such greatness, and unfalteringly fulfilled the high obligation to sacrifice millions of human beings? A horde of megalomaniacal petty bourgeois, at the sight of whom Nietzsche would immediately have succumbed to an extreme case of migraine with all its accompanying symptoms.*²⁹⁴

No amount of appealing to ameliorating “context” or contradictory passages can obscure that Nietzsche’s stance clearly foreshadowed the perverted, sacrificial neo-pagan nightmares of the Nazi camps and the Communist gulags. This is exactly why Nietzsche is more than worthy of our attention.

Nietzsche’s méconnaissance

Girard calls the lack of understanding of the mimetic nature of desire and its consequences, *méconnaissance*. Méconnaissance is closely related to one of the three afflictions of Buddhism, namely *ignorance*. It is méconnaissance or ignorance of the nature of the self-of-desire that leads to various forms of greed and aversion, which are the other two afflictions of Buddhism. I will discuss three clear cases of méconnaissance in Nietzsche.

²⁹⁴ Thomas Mann, "Nietzsche in the light of modern experience", Commentary, V, 1948 (part 1, January and part 2, February), 149-156.

First, Nietzsche is not aware of the interindividual nature of the self-of-desire or the purpose of prohibition and profane time. According to him, Christian prohibitions originate from otherworld beliefs and repress so-called life-affirming instincts and desires. That is almost astonishingly naive and optimistic. That these prohibitions could also be interpreted as renunciations needed to avoid the delusions associated with rampant desire and the mob violence of the Chthonic seems to escape Nietzsche entirely. Nietzsche advocates life-as-art, life as aesthetic intensity, and ultimately offers a “*bacchantic rage against truth, morality, religion, humaneness, and everything else that might serve passably to domesticate ferocious life.*”²⁹⁵ In other words, Nietzsche advocates life as an intense transgressive ritual, by-passing profane time. But one cannot live in sacred time permanently without succumbing ultimately to mania, madness, self-destruction and death. Rather than a revaluation of values resulting from so-called liberated life-affirming instincts and desires, we end up with the personal or societal chaos of the Chthonic.

Second, Nietzsche’s concepts of *ressentiment*, *will-to-power* and *the Overman* can be seen as symptoms of mimetic desire running rampant. Nietzsche’s strong susceptibility to mimetic desire and rivalry is clearly showcased by his relationship to his ultimate model-obstacle, Richard Wagner, with whom he bizarrely competes over women (involving Wagner’s wife Cosima) and

²⁹⁵ Thomas Mann, "Nietzsche in the light of modern experience", Commentary, V, 1948 (part 1, January and part 2, February), 149-156.

prestige (involving Wagner as celebrated composer²⁹⁶ and as guru of his Bayreuth-cult).²⁹⁷ The will-to-power is nothing else than being under the spell of a powerful model and competing intensely over an object of desire. Ressentiment results from not being able to gain victory over a triumphant model, especially in the presence of prohibitions concerning violence. Will-to-power and resentment correspond to two of the three poisons of Buddhism, namely greed and aversion. The third poison of Buddhism, ignorance, manifests in Nietzsche as not seeing that they are both sides of the same coin. And what else is the Overman but an all powerful model-obstacle projected in the future? Nietzsche simply replaced the transcendental god with a transhuman idol, an unassailable model-obstacle, inhabiting an otherworld located in the future.

However, with respect to resentment manifesting as Nietzsche's *slave mentality*, Girard sides with Nietzsche: in an era of concern for victims, one cleverly veiled way to continue the persecution of scapegoats is to do it in the name of victims. *Digital slave mentality* is rampant in the age of the internet - it is one of the last socially accepted ways to scapegoat. Girard writes in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*:

The most powerful anti-Christian movement is the one that takes over and 'radicalises' the concern for victims in order to paganize it.

²⁹⁶ Nietzsche's attempts at composing were met with scorn from Wagner, his wife Cosima and the composer and conductor Hans von Bülow. Von Bülow compared Nietzsche's musical attempts with a "rape of Euterpe" in a letter to the philosopher.

²⁹⁷ Guiseppe Fornari, "A god torn to pieces: The Nietzsche case", Michigan State University Press, 2013.

In other words, the Christian concern for scapegoats, which has now diffused over the whole planet, is used as the last remaining excuse to persecute in order to get a Dionysian kick. This is risky business in a post-sacrificial world, and those who scapegoat often become scapegoats themselves, eventually.

Third, although Nietzsche despises the mob, he is blind to the equivalence of the Dionysian with mob violence. René Girard writes in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*:

*[Nietzsche] opposes, so he believes, the crowd mentality, but he does not recognize his Dionysian stance as the supreme expression of the mob in its most brutal and its most stupid tendencies.*²⁹⁸

As far as I know, even though Nietzsche wrote about Greek culture extensively, he never mentions the *sparagmos* that is so closely associated with the Dionysian - a telling omission.

Finally, Nietzsche has an even more powerful model-obstacle than Wagner. Nietzsche saw himself as the Antichrist, that is, the ultimate competitor to the ultimate model - Christ himself. *Also sprach Zarathustra*, a pastiche on the bible using the language of the Luther bible, is an anti-anti-myth - a call for a return to the Dionysian even after its nature has been at least understood and revealed.

²⁹⁸ René Girard, "I saw Satan fall like lightning", Orbis Books, 2001.

During Nietzsche's final breakdown in 1889, the cycle of attraction and repulsion by the obstacle-model becomes crystal clear. In his insanity, Nietzsche wrote several letters (*Wahnbriefe*) that were signed with the Dionysus and The Crucified One. The title of Nietzsche's final book and intellectual autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, refers to the words used by Pontius Pilate when he exposed the scourged and thorn-crowned Jesus to the bloodthirsty mob. Christ and Antichrist become one in the final pangs of Nietzsche's mimetic mania.

However, despite his flawed anthropology and blatant méconnaissance, Nietzsche's life-as-art has something very important to say about the importance of sacred time. That is the subject of the next section.

Renunciation, transformation and conversion

Perhaps one way to bridge the abyss between Nietzsche and Girard is to consider the possibility of a transformative and transgressive ritual that rejects - or even reveals - the victimage mechanism. In order to do that, I will connect Girard's concept of *conversion* to the transformation that is a hallmark of sacred time, next to transgression and sacrifice.

For Girard, conversion is not so much an acceptance of revealed truth, but a realisation of the nature of desire, an overcoming of méconnaissance. Girard argues for example that Marcel Proust (1871-1922) underwent such a conversion. Proust's early work *Jean Santeuil* (written between 1896 and 1900, and published

after Proust's death) shows no signs of conversion yet and features a romantic notion of desire. In contrast, Proust's masterpiece *A la recherche du temps perdu* (written from 1913 to 1927) contains deep insights into the mimetic nature of desire. For Girard, this is the result of a conversion. He sees similar conversions in classic writers such as Miguel de Cervantes²⁹⁹ (1547-1616), Stendahl (1783-1842), Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881). Arguably, Girard does not seem to attribute these conversions to any specific practices or events - they seem to arise from *grace*.³⁰⁰ I argue that conversion is nothing else than a form of transformation and that ritual can serve to bring about such transformation without resorting to the victimage mechanism. Thus, spontaneous grace gets a helping hand in transformative ritual.

A case in point is Tantric and Sutric Buddhism. Roughly speaking, Sutric Buddhism is a path of renunciation, while Tantric Buddhism is a path of transformation.³⁰¹ Sutric Buddhism uses practices based on renunciation, purification and prohibition, which are characteristic for profane time. On the other hand,

²⁹⁹ In contrast to Girard, who held Cervantes in high regard, Nietzsche thought that "*one of the most harmful books is Don Quixote*" (Quoted in Walter Kaufmann, "Nietzsche", Princeton University Press, 2013).

³⁰⁰ Grant Kaplan, "René Girard, unlikely apologist: Mimetic theory and fundamental theology", Notre Dame Press, 2016.

³⁰¹ See Namkhai Norbu, "The crystal and the way of light: Sutra, Tantra and Dzogchen", Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1986; Chögyam Trungpa, "The lion's roar: An introduction to Tantra", Shambala, 2001 and David J. Kalupahana, "The Buddhist Tantric deconstruction and reconstruction: Their Sutra origin", Sramana Vidyā/Studies in Buddhism, 1987. For a historically and textually informed anthropological perspective on Hindu and Buddhist Tantra, see Geoffrey Samuel, "Tantric revisionings: New understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian religion", Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2005.

Tantric Buddhism uses practices based on incremental, carefully guided transgressions of the practices and views of Sutric Buddhism. This is characteristic of sacred time. However, Buddhist Tantra strictly excludes victimage practices. We can conclude Tantra aims to bring about transformation in a more directed way than what is usually implied by grace. Sutric and Tantric practices seem mutually exclusive, but are in fact practised together. They correspond to a creative transcendence of a more primitive cycle of profane and sacred time.

Just like Girard rejects sacred time because of its connection to the violent Dionysian, I believe Nietzsche embraces the Dionysian because of its connection to sacred time. As Nietzsche rejects the mob and the rabble, his embrace of the Dionysian can be understood in this light. Much of Nietzsche, including the celebration of the body, the use of transgressive paradoxes, the advocating of transformative self-overcoming and experiential intensity, the exclusion of the rabble and the call for nobility, the generous use of hyperbole and provocation³⁰², the donning of masks³⁰³ and Zarathustra's *enjoying and suffering the passions* are tantric stances par excellence. We can thus reconcile Nietzsche and Girard by considering the possibility of a sacred time that induces transformation without the Dionysian - that is, a sacred time without scapegoating, mob violence or myth justifying persecution. In this respect, the Swedish philosopher

³⁰² Jacques Derrida calls these devices *Nietzsche's spurs* in his book "Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles", University of Chicago, 1978.

³⁰³ Walter Kaufman, "Discovering the mind, Volume Two: Nietzsche, Heidegger and Buber", McGraw-Hill, 1980.

Alexander Bard distinguishes scapegoating mobs from collaborative swarms.³⁰⁴

Lou Andreas-Salomé called Nietzsche a “*God-seeker [...] who came from religion and was heading toward religious prophecy.*”³⁰⁵ Girard is often called a Christian apologist and even a kind of theologian.³⁰⁶ I argue that Nietzsche and Girard can indeed be interpreted as defenders, or even prophets, of profane and sacred time, respectively. Their disagreements reflect to a great extent the opposite natures and purposes of profane time and sacred time. The underlying issue addressed by both Girard and Nietzsche is how to structure desire on a societal and individual level. This requires navigating the Scylla of ossifying prohibition (Nietzsche’s concern) and the Charybdis of rivalrous desire leading to apocalyptic violence (Girard’s concern). Given the industrial-scale Chthonic slaughter that characterises much of the 20th century, it seems the West veered towards the Charybdis in that century. In the 21st century, AI-driven surveillance might well steer towards the Scylla.

The dissolution of dichotomous time

Judeo-Christianity has many characteristics of Sutric Buddhism, notably putting prohibition and renunciation at centre stage. However, there does not seem to be a counterpart of Tantric Buddhism in Judeo-Christianity. Did Judeo-Christianity simply

³⁰⁴ Alexander Bard and Jan Söderqvist, “Digital libido”, *Futurica Media*, 2018.

³⁰⁵ Quoted in William Dibrell, “The Dionysian significance of eternal return”, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, 1995, 451-470.

³⁰⁶ Grant Kaplan, “René Girard, unlikely apologist: Mimetic theory and fundamental theology”, *Notre Dame Press*, 2016.

abolish sacred time, with its transgression, transformation and sacrifice?

One could argue that Judeo-Christianity allowed sacred time to manifest itself in a sublimated form as art and various forms of more-or-less sanctioned *festivals and carnivals*. Camille Paglia writes in her magnum opus, *Sexual Personae*:

*I argue that Judeo-Christianity never did defeat paganism, which still flourishes in art, eroticism, astrology and pop culture. [...] The amorality, aggression, sadism, voyeurism and pornography in great art have been ignored or glossed over by most academic critics.*³⁰⁷

Art, in contrast to sacred ritual, is largely non-participatory - it is to be watched as a spectator. In *Sexual Personae*, Paglia writes “*The Western eye makes things, idols of Apollonian objectification.*” Western art is Apollonian: a neutered sacred ritual watched safely from afar.

The Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) also viewed much of modern art as attempts to invoke a neutered paganism, driven by the progress of technology, advertisement and mass media.³⁰⁸ In his correspondence with the political philosopher Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) from 1953, McLuhan writes:

³⁰⁷ Camille Paglia, “Sexual personae: Art and decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson”, Yale University Press, 1990.

³⁰⁸ Marshall McLuhan, “Understanding media: The extensions of man”, McGraw-Hill, 1964.

*I hardly know where to begin to suggest to you how the arts are involved in the theology of modern paganism.*³⁰⁹

Unlike Buddhism, which to a great extent includes sacred time in the form of Tantra, Judeo-Christianity only allowed sacred time in these sublimated manifestations. However, I want to emphasise that there is a deep abyss between art as sacred ritual and the Dionysian³¹⁰: the latter is inherently associated with the stupidity of a mob that believes in the absolute guilt of a scapegoat. While art often takes inspiration from the Dionysian, may use the Dionysian as subject matter and may include transgressive elements, it never truly reaches the realm of the Dionysian *an sich*. A horror movie or a heavy metal concert, while containing elements of the Dionysian, cannot be equated with actual ritual slaughter.³¹¹ Finally, in addition to art, we also find a rich tapestry of more-or-less tolerated subcultures on the fringes of Judeo-Christianity.

Nietzsche clearly saw that this state of affairs was becoming increasingly unstable with the demise of traditional religion. This culminated in the industrial-scale Chtonic outbursts of the world

³⁰⁹ Quote from “The Voegelin-McLuhan Correspondence”, <https://voegelinview.com/mcluhans-secret-societies-problem/>. I thank Clinton Ignatov for bringing this to my attention.

³¹⁰ When the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen called the events of 9/11, “*the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos*”, he crossed this abyss by conflating the Dionysian with art, to great public outrage. In the 21st century, we recoil from such conflation.

³¹¹ Contemporary artists frequently find themselves in a competitive race to approach the intensity and “shock value” of the genuine Dionysian, seeking attention and recognition. This race leads to expressions such as the amusing *Merda d'artista* (1961) by Italian artist Piero Manzoni, or the less amusing burning down of mediaeval churches by Norwegian metal fans, as the logical conclusion of this escalation. See Chapter 5 by Owen Cox for more on the relation between art and the Dionysian, and the increasing reliance of art on the evocation of Dionysian phenomena.

wars in the 20th century. In the 21st century, the difference between profane time and sacred time has blurred. On the one hand, various new forms of perverted prohibitions are popping up, driven by ideologies, scapegoating driven by vacuous moral outrage or simply profit. On the other hand, profane time is increasingly permeated with transgressive elements that are the hallmark of sacred time. We are witnessing the increasing dissolution of dichotomous time. In the next section, I attempt to explain how we got here, and where we might be going.

The era of anthropological pragmatism

One of the appealing aspects of Girard's theory of mimesis and victimage is that it provides a striking account of hominization. Based on this account, I outline five subsequent eras below, starting with the prehuman period and ending with a hypothesis on the nature of the currently emerging era, which I call the era of anthropological pragmatism. The five eras, of which two are transitional eras, are also summarised in the Table below.

The first era is the prehuman *era of dominance hierarchies*. Mimesis among animals exists, but it is limited compared to humans. Sacred time in its primordial shape consists of animal rituals, such as mating rituals, while profane time is structured by dominance hierarchies. Obviously, language and religion have not emerged yet.

In the second era, which is the transitional *era of hominization*, the dominance hierarchies that characterise the pre-human era of

dominance hierarchies degenerate. Instead, mimesis increases together with mimetic conflict. This conflict is defused by the killing of scapegoats in Chthonic outbursts. Language emerges in tandem with the victimage mechanism: the first sign is the sacrificial victim that resolves mimetic conflict.

The third era, the *era of the sacred*, sees the split of time into profane time and sacred time. Thanks to the emergence of language, religion can now provide the myths that justify prohibitions and the victimage mechanism. The scapegoat, with its seemingly magical power to bring about peace with its death, gives rise to a pantheon of deities. This is the era of polytheism, sacrificial paganism and slavery. Myth is inherently anti-scientific, as it requires the belief in the absolute guilt of a scapegoat.

The fourth era, the *era of the death of god*, is another transitional era. Sacrificial religion and its myths degenerate in tandem with the rise of anti-sacrificial religions, such as the Abrahamic religions and Buddhism.³¹² Religion veers to monotheism and subsequently atheism. The nature of desire and religion, and the eternal recurrence of prohibition and transgressive sacred ritual, is increasingly revealed. Girard writes in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*:

When considered as a whole, modern research (of which our own project constitutes only a new, more advanced stage), can be seen

³¹² René Girard, *Sacrifice*, Michigan State University Press, 2011.

as part of a much larger dynamic, that of the first society to become capable of deciphering a causal sequence and revealing it to be one of arbitrary violence - whereas in the history of all humanity this causal sequence has never appeared in any form other than that of mythology.

Why did sacrificial religion decay? Perhaps the explanation has something to do with population size. As communities get larger, it becomes increasingly difficult to focus the whole community on a single scapegoat using the “grand narrative” of a unifying myth. Note for example how the industrial-scale myth of Nazism ultimately failed miserably. In the era of the death of god, the myth of god is replaced by the myth of freedom,³¹³ as exemplified by Nietzsche’s deified human, the Overman. But this myth of freedom is really a plethora of myths. Society brims with disparate myths and their matching scapegoats. This evolution ultimately lies at the heart of Lyotard’s so-called *postmodern condition*.³¹⁴ What all myths have in common is that they obscure the nature of desire and the victimage mechanism: the Overman can be understood as an example of such a “veiled myth.” Other veiled myths include ideologies, scientism, fundamentalist religion, and so on. With the increasing decay of myth, prohibitions also decay, giving rise to the so-called “meaning crisis” and frantic attempts to introduce new forms of prohibition. Similarly, sacrificial ritual decays into unsatisfying ersatz rituals -

³¹³ Stephen L. Gardner, “Myths of freedom”, Greenwood Press, 1998.

³¹⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, “The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge”, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

spectator sport events, spectator art, addictions, social media dependence, industrialised leisure and so on.

What comes after the transitional era of the death of god and its postmodern condition? We can speculate. Perhaps the fifth era will be the *era of anthropological pragmatism*. The availability of big data on human behaviour and machine learning methods to make sense of such data, combined with philosophical anthropology, will increasingly reveal the nature of the human condition. Such insights might percolate society and induce new religious stances, or clarify established ones. Prohibitions are not sanctioned by a transcendental god, but correspond to the pragmatic renunciation that is necessary to curb the excesses of desire and the resurgence of the Chthonic. Ritual is invoked for its transformational potential. This era has its own idol: the network - a notion that has been extensively explored by the Swedish philosophers Alexander Bard and Jan Söderqvist.³¹⁵ The right network is expected to provide a suitable interplay of prohibition and transgressive ritual. Modern social justice movements and participatory cultures are examples of structures that attempt to provide prohibition and sacred ritual, respectively. The confusion between prohibition and the sacred thwarts their efficacy, however. Prohibitions might percolate on a fairly global scale, while transformative and transgressive rituals might occur safely

³¹⁵ Alexander Bard and Jan Söderqvist, “The Futurica Trilogy”, Stockholm Text, 2000-2009; “Syntheism”, Stockholm Text, 2014; “Digital libido”, Futurica Media, 2018.

behind isolating membranes.³¹⁶ In the words of Alexander Bard, such rituals are “barred” and the domain of so-called *shamanic archetypes*. In other words, access to sacred ritual might be limited and polymorphous - concern for diversity might become concern for the diversity of sacred ritual within a matrix of prohibition. Rituals, as Bataille understands well, need to occur in carefully constructed time-bound *containers*. Dystopian alternatives to anthropological pragmatism include a Chtonic explosion as in the 20th century, or ossification through inescapable and ubiquitous AI-enforced prohibition.

Era	Profane time	Sacred time	Narrative
Era of dominance hierarchies	Animal dominance hierarchies	Animal rituals	None
Transitional era of hominization (proto-religion)	Degenerating dominance hierarchies, increasing mimesis	Chtonic proto-ritual	Language emerges, victim as first sign
Era of the sacred	Prohibition	Dioynsian ritual	Myth
Transitional era of the death of god	Meaning crisis, decay of	Spectator art, ersatz rituals	Deconstruction, myth, postmodern

³¹⁶ Such membranes remind of the Markov blankets that play a key role in modern, Bayesian theories of the sentient brain and living organisms. See for example Martin Kirchoff *et al.*, “The Markov blankets of life”, *J. R. Soc. Interface*, 2017, 15 and the recent book “Active inference” by Parr, Pezzulo and Friston, MIT Press, 2022.

	prohibition		condition
End of anthropological pragmatism	Renunciation (global)	Transformation (barred)	Anthropological pragmatism

Conclusion

For Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Nietzsche with his will-to-power is the last metaphysician of the West. For Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), Nietzsche takes us out of the straightjacket of Hegel’s dialectics and German idealism. Like any crazy wisdom trickster,³¹⁷ Nietzsche dons many masks.³¹⁸ He presents us with many paradoxes and contradictions, rooted in the insoluble tension between profane time and sacred time, dimly perceived. Together with Walter Kaufmann (1921-1980), I consider Nietzsche a master in exploring psychology and philosophical anthropology. Nietzsche is the flawed, eccentric and shrill intellectual father to Freud and Girard. As Nietzsche himself writes in *Ecce Homo*:

*That out of my writings there speaks a psychologist who has not his equal, that is perhaps the first thing a good reader will notice [...]*³¹⁹

³¹⁷ Georg Feuerstein, “Holy madness: Spirituality, crazy-wise teachers, and enlightenment”, Hohm Press, 2013

³¹⁸ Walter Kaufman, “Discovering the mind, Volume Two: Nietzsche, Heidegger and Buber”, McGraw-Hill, 1980.

³¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Ecce Homo”, translated by R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin Books, 2004.

Nietzsche gives us a message straight from the Chthonic underground, from deeply within mimetic desire, rivalry, mania and madness. Nietzsche, like Hegel, “*sees desire as desire sees itself*,”³²⁰ that is, through a glass darkly, under the sway of méconnaissance. His account is a personal account characterised by rampant mimetic desire, rivalry and conflict, undifferentiation, breakdown of prohibition and the slow but certain resurgence of the Chthonic - a compelling account from the era of the death of god. In 1880, Nietzsche writes:

*Strange! I am dominated at every moment by the thought that my history is not only a personal one, that I am doing something for many people when I live like this and work on and write about myself this way.*³²¹

He was right. Nietzsche is a voice from within sacred time, a voice utterly alien to profane time. Therein lies both its strength and its weakness. Giacomo Casanova (1725-1798), D.A.F. de Sade (1740-1814), William Blake (1757-1827), Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Georges Bataille (1897-1962), William S. Burroughs (1914-1997) and Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) are his spiritual kin. In the words of the English novelist and film director Clive Barker, they are “*explorers in the further regions of experience; demons to some, angels to others.*” In contrast, writing from profane time, the likes of Cervantes, Shakespeare, Stendahl, Dostoevsky, Proust,

³²⁰ Stephen L. Gardner, “Myths of freedom”, Greenwood Press, 1998.

³²¹ Quoted in the introduction to the translation of “Thus spoke Zarathustra” by Graham Parkes, Oxford University Press, 2008.

Girard and Paglia provide a vivid and astute commentary on the rich landscapes of desire and sacred ritual. By examining the works of writers, thinkers, and artists as emerging from a temporal spectrum³²² that spans from prohibition to sacred, we can gain a deeper understanding of intricate works, moving beyond simplistic categorizations in terms of *good* and *evil*.

Nietzsche and his spiritual kin remind us of the inescapable siren call of sacred time, with its transgressions, transformations, ecstasies and violence - its rich opportunities and its death traps. However, the sacred might be inescapable, but the stupidity of sacrificial scapegoating might not. In any case, every epoch is invited to turn the distorted voices that come to us from within sacred time into delightful singers - or perish in the erupting miasma of the untransformed Chthonic. As Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) writes in his magnum opus *Process and reality*,

*Also the fact of Satan's journey helped to evolve order; for he left a permanent track, useful for the devils and the damned.*³²³

³²² One could call a hermeneutics that focuses on the dichotomy between sacred time and profane time "Temporal Contextualism." Such an approach emphasises the importance of understanding the temporal context (ie. sacred versus profane time) in which a work was created and is deeply rooted in anthropology.

³²³ Alfred North Whitehead, "Process and reality", Edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, Free Press, 1985.