Comparing Plato's Understanding of Mimesis to Girard's

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The literature of antiquity depicts a static world; it does not show changes as a result of everyday life.[1] The instability (of fortune) almost always appears as fate.[2] Erich Auerbach claims that the literature of Antiquity does not reveal the underlying conditions of what it presents;[3] rather it alludes to this condition as fate or divine intervention. However, a certain awareness of governing principles begins to manifest itself with Plato. Thus, with Plato the reason for instability in society is rationalised and understood as mimesis.

In Plato's work mimesis is understood in additional terms to representation, imitation and expression. Plato introduces mimesis as emulation, transformation, as creation of similarities, production of appearances and illusion.[4] According to Gebauer and Wulf, the Platonic concept of mimesis contains no unity.[5] Before writing *The Republic* mimesis for Plato is understood as metaphoric imitation and imitation of action of another person.[6] In *The Republic* mimesis is also defined in relation to poetry and learning,[7] as mimetic art.

The French-American literary scholar, René Girard, however, criticises Plato's concept of mimesis to be limited to representation.[8] The most important factor lacking in Plato's concept of mimesis would, viewed from a Girardian context, be appropriation.[9] Girard indicates that Plato has not located the conflictual aspects of mimesis, i.e. mimesis governed by desire. But Plato has clearly seen mimesis as a powerful force, as a threat to the stability of his ideal state. Therefore mimesis

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[1] Erich Auerbach. (*Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, New Jersey: Princeton U.P., 1974), 32.
[2] Ibid., 29.
[3] Ibid., 31.
[4] Gebauer/Wulf. *Mimesis: culture, art, society*. (California: University of California Press, 1995) 25.
[5] Ibid., 25.
[6] Ibid., 31.
[7] Ibid,.33.
[8] The examples he (Plato) selects for us are consistently limited to representation - to types of behaviour, manners, individual or collective habit, as well as words, phrases, and ways of speaking. (Girard. *Things Hidden* since the Foundation of the World (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), 8.)
[9] Ibid.

both as copying, imitating and re-presenting is clearly forbidden in the ideal Republic.[10] The *fear* Plato reveals towards mimesis demonstrates the conflictual and forceful side to it. Even if Plato's concept of the real is said to be anti-mimetic, imitation plays a fundamental role in Plato's phenomenological understanding of life, right down to the letters (which are formed by the imitation of motion).[11]

By taking a closer look at Plato's understanding of mimesis, one can see that his negative attitude to mimesis already uncovers certain conflictual aspects of mimesis, i.e. mimesis governed by desire. Such a view, however, depends on whether one considers Plato's work to be normative or phenomenological. Clearly Plato considers mimesis as a powerful force, as a threat to the stability of his ideal state. Therefore mimesis both as copying, imitating and representing is clearly forbidden in the ideal Republic.[12] This shows the emphasis Plato puts on the acquisitive and contagious nature of mimesis.

Girard claims that in Plato's work there is no theory of mimetic rivalry.[13] Plato fears mimesis more than he despises it.[14] But in so doing, he thereby recognizes its force. Plato's mimesis works both good and bad, it is a *pharmakon*. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, Plato philosophizes in order to stabilize the alarming circulation of resemblance;[15] mimetism threatens society to push towards feminism and madness.[16] In this respect philosophy is logos, serving as a bulwark against the chaos of feminism and madness. This psychoanalytic interpretation of Platonic mimesis emphasizes the fear of mental disorder, which in Plato, can be extended to a multitude of areas which could potentially create disturbances in the Republic.

Imitating the Model

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[10] See Plato. *The Republic* 394e-396a, in Plato. *Complete Works* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).
[11] Plato. *Cratylus* 426-427c.
[12] See Plato. *The Republic* 394e-396a.
[13] *Things Hidden*, 18.
[14] Ibid., 17.
[15] Lacoue-Labarthe. (*Typography: mimesis, philosophy, politics*, Cambr. Mass.: Harvard U.P, 1989). 122.
[16] Ibid., 129, (footnote 128).

Plato's goal in his Idea-world is to establish a difference, a distinction between the original and the copy.[17] In the *Sophist* imitation is presented as a sort of production, but it is a production of copies, not of originals, not of 'things in themselves.'[18] Mimesis produces a thing's double, but the copy, according to Plato, is of no value. The value comes solely from the model. Thus, imitation is good if the model is good, and bad if the model is bad. But in itself mimesis has no value: the 'essence'[19] being a copy which is negative and therefore something bad.[20] Plato dismisses mimesis because of its lack of authenticity, and hands all authenticity and essence over to the model.[21]

Girard, on the other hand, dismisses autonomy, and this dismissal is his starting point for the mimetic principle. There are no free zones as regards mimesis. Therefore Girard does not operate with a qualitative distinction between the model and the copy - since everyone is copying each other.[22] The model's desired qualities should be seen as having been developed through imitation. The model's role as model is a result of mimesis and cannot be considered to be privileged, or to be *a priori* more substantial than the copy. Instead of supporting the act of copying, by showing the non-identical or supplemental factor created by the act of copying the model, Girard *reveals the original as a copy*. In this respect he acts iconoclastically with regard to originality. Unlike Derrida, who tries to save the concept of originality by emphasizing the originality created by the imitator's supplement, Girard tries to save originality within the context of mimesis. Originality thus depends on mimesis, on the ability to decipher the different aspects of mimetic configurations and put the mimetic elements together in an original and fundamental fashion. This ability does not stem from any *a priori* genius, it stems from differentiated imitation, a kind of subtle mimetic mixture.

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[17] See Deleuze. 'Platon og simulakret,' Agora 2/3, Oslo (1989): 98.

[18] Plato. *Sophist*, 265b.

[19] In *Cratylus*. 423d-e, 431d Plato presents mimesis as owning an inherent essence, but its representation is far from truth. See also Gebauer & Wulf. *Mimesis*, 42.

[20] See Derrida. 'Platons mimesis,' Agora 2/3, Oslo (1989): 94.

[21] An interesting fact is that the Platonic dismissal of the copy was not strong, either in the Middle Ages or in the Renaissance. This attitude of negating the copy became popular from the late eighteenth century, especially in regard to the theory of art. The mimetic principle from the eighteenth century underwent a recession where subjectivity and creativity should substitute mimesis. For example the Kantian emphasis on the artist's ability to create an original world could be characterized as non-mimetic.(See J.D. Boyd. *The Function of Mimesis and its Decline* (New York, Fordham U.P., 1980), 303-305.) From the point of dismissing the Romantic dismissal of mimesis, Girard starts off by constructing his concept of mimesis, at first as a critique of the concept of autonomy.

[22] In this respect, when dealing with people's ability to copy, Girard is an extreme post-modernist.

Mimesis as Repetition

Despite the fact that Plato never comments on mimesis as repetition,[23] it is impossible to describe mimesis as representation or copy without including repetition. Also, Girard seldom uses the word repetition, but the repetitive element is present in desiring what the other desires. The desire to repeat often leads to reciprocal violence, a violence where one part imitates the other's violence, often allowing it to escalate into graver forms of violence. Plato must have seen this too. If not, why should he forbid the representation of mimesis, if there were no danger of the acts being repeated? The reason for his anti-mimetic approach is precisely because of this repetitive dimension. Plato does not want anyone to repeat bad deeds in his ideal state.

Girard's concept of the double, the process of doubling desire, is a process whereby the subject and the mediator repeat each other's desire.[24] This repetitive dimension to mimesis is, however, not fully grasped by Plato, because he does not consciously connect mimesis with desire, and thereby limits mimesis to copy and representation. Although the repetitive dimension of mimesis can be seen to be a part of Plato's anti-mimesis, his rather one-sided approach clothed in moralistic terms hinders analysis and leads to rejection. Repetition can only be avoided if interdividual play is subordinated to an Ideal world, where repetition would thus seem to be an illusion.

Mimesis and Ethics

The ethical dimension to mimesis, when mimesis is seen as copying, seems obvious: when a person imitates a bad or a good model, he or she will become a part of what he or she imitates. There is, however, in Plato's work, less emphasis on the possibility of becoming a part of the good model through imitating, since imitation creates falsity. The Sophist's imitation is an imitation of

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[23] Melberg. *Theories of Mimesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1995)**,** 37.

[24] Livingston has pointed out that the model's desire and the imitator's desire are not the same, and those desires are governed by external factors. (Paisley Livingston. *Models of Desire.. René Girard and the Psychology of Mim*esis. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), 52-53.) Therefore, there must be a looser connection between the two. Even in the more intensified relations between subject and model, desires are asymmetrical. Desires sent out can be of so different a nature from the desires received that the intensity may be toned down by the sheer incoherence of the other's desire. If, however, one continues to develop a general anthropology based on mimetic desire, the variety of desires based on different degrees of intensification towards the other, have to be elaborated.

the wise man,[25] but Plato does not accept imitation as a part of any wisdom. Not only is imitation false *per se*, the Sophist is also false in the way he 'forces the person talking to him to contradict himself,'[26] thus indicating the rivalry in dialogue. Plato does not, in this context, believe, as Aristotle does, that imitating a good person will lead to *arête*. But Plato's dismissal of imitating a good model is not consistent. At times Plato clearly gives the model ethical substance.

In *The Republic* Plato describes the act of striving to become like one's model,[27] thus indicating that mimesis can be a positive principle in upbringing and education. In *Laws,* the ideal state is described as mimesis of the noble and perfect life, [28] [29] not very different from tragedy. In Book Three in *The Republic,* from 397a to 398b, the verb 'to imitate' is used twice, once with a positive meaning, the second time with a negative meaning.[30] There is, however, a tightening of the anti-mimetic aspect between Book Two and Three and Book Ten of *The Republic*. This uncertainty in Plato's position Derrida reveals to be a textual mimesis where the frequent exchange of positions comes into play as the parts imitate the forms and borrow the paths of the opponent.[31] The Greek myths about gods and heroes are not stories one should imitate in order to become a useful member of the state. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, Plato has a resentment against the original maternal domination and original feminine education,[32] as this means bringing the children up with (destructive) myths, thus creating bad mimesis from infancy. According to Andersen, bad mimesis in Plato's work is manifested as imitation, copying and mirroring,[33] indicating that almost all mimesis is bad. Also mimetic theory emphasizes bad mimesis.

In Girard's first work (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel)* practically all imitation is seen as violent and destructive. And in Girard's later works, due to the fact that a more pronounced distinction between good and bad mimesis appears, there is some attempt to view good mimesis as a part of a religious and ethical ideal. In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, however, a negative movement is outlined, leading through a mimetic crisis and ending up in conversion. Such a negative mimetic structure is not present in Plato's work. The idea of becoming stronger, wiser or more human through negative

[25] Plato. *The Sophist* 268c.
[26] Ibid., 268b.
[27] Plato. *The Republic* 3.397 d.
[28] Plato. *Laws* 7.817 b.
[29] See Gebauer & Wulf. *Mimesis*, 32.
[30] Andersen. *Allegori og mimesis (*Aarhus: MODTRYK amla, 1989), 60.
[31] Derrida. "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 108.
[32] Lacoue-Labarthe. *Typography*, 127.
[33] Andersen. *Allegori og mimesis*, 63.

experience has no value in Plato's worldview[34] because he believes mimesis should be avoided and suffering is of no value. The paradox of becoming stronger or better in confrontation with negative models is not a central motif in pre-Christian Antiquity, even if Aristotle's *catharsis* may indicate a parallel, paradoxical structure.

Mimesis, Art, Literature and Ethics

Both Plato and Girard criticise bad mimesis in their own contemporary society, as leading to a break-down of moral values. But for Girard there are no moral values exempt from mimesis, meaning that moral values can only be attained through mimesis. Since Girard emphasizes the acquisitive sides of mimesis, this leads to a certain dismissal of representation, not because representation is false but because ideas and ideals cannot change anything in human life as humans are bound to the act of imitating through their different desires.

Plato, in his society, saw or experienced the effects of mimesis in the way human beings are affected by art. Therefore, in the realm of art, Plato's overall view in *The Republic* is to dismiss mimetic art as something bad, as not deserving of representation. In *Epinomis* imitative art is dismissed because it is not considered able to make a person wise,[35] while in the *Laws* imitation in art is said to be self-contradictory,[36] splitting a person's character.[37] [38] As mimesis in art is an assimilation of the good and the bad, Plato has needs to dismiss mimetic art, as imitation of bad models threatens the Republic. One could say that Plato's critique of art is consistent as regards his non-mimetic ontology, but quite inconsistent as regards his aesthetics[39] since his own Dialogues may be seen as mimetic masterpieces, evolving as a play where different mimetic responses control the action. The mimetic and polyphonic structure of the Dialogues makes it problematic to conclude that the voice (of Socrates) and the one-sided conclusion is actually Plato's own conclusion - even though that is probable.[40]

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[34] Gebauer & Wulf. *Mimesis*, 33.
[35] Plato. *Epinomis* 975d.
[36] Plato. *Laws* 719c.
[37] Ibid., 2.655d-656c.
[38] In *Laws* Plato clearly sees a symmetry between character and imitation, but in a fashion that neutralises the formative elements of imitation. (See *Laws* 2.655d-656a.)
[39] Andersen. *Allegori og mimesis*, 59.
[40] According to Lacoue-Labarthe, the reason that Plato is never present himself is that he has a secret love for Homer, and does not wish to present the dismissal of art as his own. (Lacoue-Labarthe. *Typography*, 134-135.)

Plato criticizes mimetic art for depicting sexual desires, passion and everything that is associated with pleasure and pain within us. The argument is that art enhances these desires, while they ought to be controlled.[41] Plato does not only criticize mimetic art for depicting vices, but also for leading people to commit bad deeds. The realism and moralism in Plato's understanding of mimesis is evident when he emphasizes the force and potential contagious effects of imitation. According to Girard, Plato's rejection of tragic violence is itself violent, for it finds expression in a new expulsion - that of the poet.[42]

Girard, it seems, initially has no moralistic overview of the arts but, when it comes to literature, he divides literature into romantic literature and the literature of realism, where the former propagates the negative influence of a model while the latter reveals the negative role of the model. Plato sees the work of the artist as nothing but a copy of the Ideas, an absence implying three or more steps from the original Idea.[43] [44] In relation to the concept of the Idea, one might claim that Girard's term *mimetic desire* is devoid of any idea-concept and that the great authors reveal the interdividual mimetic game relatively independent of any *a priori* idea. Girardian mimesis applied to literary theory does not even claim, as Bakhtin does, that there is a governing idea[45] crowning the polyphonic gala of persons,[46] since there is a dynamic process at work of revealing desires, not ideas. All the same, it would be somewhat superficial to claim that Girard does not evaluate literature in any moral way. His dismissal of *romantic literature* (which underscores the whole of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel)* is what he sees as a lie concerning the perception of human beings'

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[41] Plato. *The Republic* 606d.

[42] Girard. *Violence and the Sacred* (Maryland Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 295.

[43] According to W.J. Verdenius, it is questionable that Plato intended mimesis to mean a slavish copy. (W.J. Verdenius. *Mimesis. Plato's Doctrine of Artistic Imitation and its Meaning to us* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 2.

[44] In Book ten of *The Republic* Plato claims that the artist's representation of reality is three steps from the truth. The carpenter is only two (Plato. *The Republic*, 597b-598c), and because of the distance to truth the carpenter should be called a demiurge, a false creator. In this sense mimesis is the source to delusion and the more artistic the imitation is, the further away it is from truth. Plato does not reflect on how far away the writer stands from truth, but his way of representing reality is not in concordance with the Ideas. This is actually the opposite view which Girard takes as regards to the novelist. Because the novelist writings are governed by the mimetic principle, he has the closest insight into the interdividual relationships, to a profound anthropological reality. The realist novelist is regarded as a primary source of truth as he uncovers the mimetic principle. Imitating is regarded in *The Republic* as second and third-rate approach to truth and in *Phaedrus* imitation stands six stages from truth, a truth which one only can grasp through the Ideas. (This approach to mimesis has been imitated by Heidegger who defines the essence of mimesis as distance. (See Heidegger. *Nietzsche*, Vol 1 (Pfullingen: Neske, 1961), 215.) It would, however, be wrong to say that Platonic mimesis represents the unreal, as Platonic mimesis refers to a reality, but it is not an essential reality. There are also forms of art which Plato claims are mimetically authentic, as they refer to a transcendental signifier, an original Idea. (See Andersen. *Mimesis og allegori*, 64). Therefore, it is important to highlight the ambiguity in Plato's concept of mimesis, both as imitation and assimilation of the good and the beautiful, and in his condemnation of mimetic art.

[45] Girard claims in *Things Hidden* that he does not know from where he is speaking and he does not care. (*Things Hidden*, 435.)

[46] Mikhail Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1984), 18.

basic relation towards each other. The reason is that romantic literature does not reveal the contagious and manipulative effect of the other. Literature is truth, in Girardian thought, so long as it reveals desire, and so long as it is motivated by a non-desiring point of view. On the other hand, art is false if it hides or proclaims the mediator without revealing its destructive power. Therefore it is impossible to claim that Girard evades the moral dimension in literature; or that he regards mimetic literature as positive *per se.*

Mimesis and Evil

Girard's work deals almost entirely with the destructive aspects of mimesis. This , I suppose, is due mainly to the sources Girard uses to uncover mimesis. Both the literary and religious texts he selects are mainly texts about evil. There are few mundane solutions to the mimetic crisis as the main solution is religious in that the way to avoid violence is to imitate Christ through forgiveness and active love. Thus, Girard's work cannot be classified as an ethical theory (even though it has numerous ethical implications) and it therefore gives few indications on how to imitate in a positive manner. Plato's moralistic tone is more clearly pronounced, as he considers most mimetic expressions to be the source of conflict and disintegration in society. But Plato is not immune to the positive aspects of mimesis in upbringing and artistic education.

> *It is not only to the poets therefore that we must issue orders requiring them to portray good character in their poems or not to write at all; we must issue similar orders to all artists and craftsmen, and prevent them portraying bad character, ill-discipline, meanness or ugliness in pictures of living things, in sculpture, architecture, or any other work of art, and if they are unable to comply they must be forbidden to practise their art among us. We shall thus prevent our guardians being brought up among representations of what is evil, and so day by day and little by little, by grazing widely as it were in an unhealthy pasture, insensibly doing themselves a cumulative damage that is very serious. We must look for artists and craftsmen capable of perceiving the real nature of what is beautiful, and then our young men, living as it were in a healthy climate, will benefit because all the works of art they see and hear influence them for good, like the breezes from some healthy country, insensibly leading them from earliest childhood into close sympathy and conformity with beauty and reason. (The Republic 401b-d).*

This didactic principle or morality in the ideal world, despite the emphasis on reason and logos (God), can never be completely stripped of a mimetic content. But Plato's relative dismissal of mimesis establishes a weak link between mimesis and morals. In *The Republic* Socrates forbids the imitation of negative models[47] and only admits 'the pure imitation of a

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[47] Plato. *The Republic* 3.394 e+.

decent person,'[48] while in *The Sophist,* the Visitor concludes by holding up the sincere imitator (who imitates the wise man) on behalf of the Sophist who falls prey to insincere imitation.[49] In *The Sophist* Plato divides mimesis into belief mimicry and informed mimicry (267d-e), where belief mimicry is a deceitful imitation. The deceit of belief mimicry consists in the person (the Sophist) thinking he knows what he imitates, but in fact he does not. This insincerity is characteristic of the Sophist and is often manifested in long speeches and manipulative behaviour.[50] The sincere imitator, on the other hand, is fearful of being sure of his knowledge. He has the Socratic attitude of not knowing anything *a priori*. Thus, there is an inconsistency in the imitation of the decent and wise person in *The Republic* and in *The Sophist*, where, in the former, mimesis is morally recommendable, but, in the latter, only turns a person into a demagogue. These shifts in point of view can only be explained through Plato's own mimetic inconsistency. In relation to morals in *The Republic*, Plato wishes to replace Homeric-mimetic thinking with analytic thought.[51] Myths are morally despicable, created by poets. Morals are not the poets' business, but the philosopher's.[52] This clearly shows Plato's aim to admit only representations of good mimesis, not because acquisitive mimesis does not exist, but because on the contrary, it exists in such a forceful and damaging way that it could destroy society. Imitation therefore, in its raw and unstable representations, must be quenched.

Violence in Art

This leads us to the question about violence and art. Plato seems to reject mimesis because he is aware of the violence it can bring forth. Plato, in an almost prophetic manner, understands that imitating violent gods, violent heroes and violent myths will create violence. Plato has no theory of *catharsis*; instead he understands the representation of myths as escalating violence. In this way Plato is perhaps the first to connect the concept of mimesis with violence. Plato does not, however, dismiss myths in a peace-activist manner; he regards mimesis as de-stabilizing, creating anarchy within the Republic. Plato wants order in the Republic, but does not see this stability as a stage towards any universal peace-process. Thus Plato's context is provincial when he dismisses mimetic

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[48] Ibid. 3.397 d.
[49] Plato. *The Sophist* 268 a-c.
[50] Ibid., 268a-b.
[51] Melberg. *Theories of Mimesis*, 40.
[52] Girard holds the opposite view as he emphasizes the great novelists' insight into mimesis at the expense of the philosophers. The ability which some great novelists have shown in revealing interdividual structures, is, according to Girard, a revelation of the basic structures, the logos of conflict. This does not make the novelist

contagion in order to create stability but not peace. Girard regards art that reveals the mimetic game as a kind of secular apocalypse, as a preliminary stage to religious imitation. Art therefore is necessary in order to understand the destructive sides of society.[53] But for Girard there are no ways out of mimetic desire. There are only different models creating different desires.

Against the background of 5th century BC artistic life, Plato dismisses the majority of artistic expressions. He is not, however, totally dismissive of poetry. Poetry, which pays tribute to the gods and prominent citizens, is allowed,[54] a poetry which might also be labelled as mimetic in the way gods and prominent citizens are ideals to be imitated. Arne Melberg writes that 'the purely diegetical narrator is thus allowed to stay in the city while the mimetic is rejected.'[55] In my view both kinds of art are mimetic, although praising the prominent citizen is a more uncomplicated and direct, copyistic kind of mimesis. According to Plato, the former focuses on good mimesis, the latter on bad mimesis. Plato, however, has no problems in dismissing comedy, [56] but he has far greater problems in dismissing tragedy.[57] He even goes so far as to indicate that his ideal state would be a representation of tragedy. Book Ten, which, at the beginning, is the clearest dismissal of mimetic art in Plato's work, ends with a more relaxed and more uncertain dismissal of art. Lacoue-Labarthe claims that there are signs of love towards poetry in *The Republic*.[58] There is a political element governing this relaxation, as Plato indicates a loosening up within the context of a well-run society.[59] Plato regards art from a political standpoint, thus limiting it to a function of the Republic, and if one could find arguments to say that drama and poetry would have a positive function in society, Socrates says he would gladly admit it.[60] The ideal of how art should function is, in Plato's work, a static and reactionary ideal - despite the wish to dismiss the traditional poet and replace him with a severe poet who portrays and imitates the style of the good man.[61] The reference to

more moral in any way, but clears the ground for depicting morality as being based on mimetic models.

[53] This differs radically from Plato's overall view on art. Plato regards the man who has envisaged the ideal good, the ideal beauty as not interested in imitation. He does not want to become an artist (three or more stages away from truth); he wants to live a good life, which is identical with a non-mimetic, moral life. This thought is, actually, not entirely absent in Girardian thought regarding the artist's own dealing with mimetic desire. He claims that people in the artistic world who have revealed their romantic rivalry may quit literary activity altogether as a consequence of their insight into mimetic desire. (Girard. *Things Hidden*, 398.)

[54] Plato. *The Republic*, 607a.

[55] Melberg. *Theories of Mimesis*, 19.

[56] Music and dance are also exceptions, but only the music and dance which repeats the traditional expressions. (Plato. *Laws* 7.798e.)

[57] Plato. *Laws* 7.817a-c.

[58] Lacoue-Labarthe. *Typography*, see footnote 106, page 107.

[59] Plato. *The Republic* 607c.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid., 3.398a-c.

Egypt[62] is no coincidence, as the Egyptians' worldview was static and conservative. And in the light of a static worldview most imitation has to be dismissed, as mimesis implies all kinds of destabilizing cultural transmissions.

Dialogue

In *The Republic* Plato's two elder brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus raise no objections to Socrates' views on the formation of the ideal state, and *The Republic* is one of the dialogues where the polyphonic element is most suppressed. The lack of a free dialogue in *The Republic* tends towards an anti-mimetic form, and is written from the point of power view. Even if the form is dialogical, the content is driven by acquisitive desire, the desire for order and control. One might tentatively ask whether Girard adopted the dialogue form in *Things Hidden,* in order to emphasize his mimetic approach. In Girard's mayor work, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, however, acquisitive mimesis is propagated as the most original and fundamental form of mimesis. Despite this, there is no notion that the discussion itself is acquisitive. The dialogue is not primarily a discussion on the validity of the theory as such. This question seems to be agreed on. The aim of the dialogue is to develop the mimetic theory through analysis and comparison, and by showing its relevance to culture. The Girardian dialogue is governed by Girard in that his discussion partners, Oughourlian and Lefort, discuss Girard's themes on the basis of Girardian theory,[63] and there is very little controversy between the three. *Things Hidden* can thus be seen as containing an imitation of the Platonic dialogue-form. The lack of controversy between Girard, Lefort and Oughourlian has been criticized by Johan Asplund in *Rivaler och syndabockar* for containing no real controversy and allowing Girard to come up with all the right answers.[64] The dialogue between the three is not, however, as in the Platonic dialogues a process of persuasion which suddenly changes the worldview of the participants; the dialogue is based upon a common consensus regarding the basic principles of mimetic desire.

Rivalry

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[62] Plato. *Laws* 2.656d-657b and 7.799a-b.
[63] The dialogue in *Things Hidden* is based on Girard discussing his findings with two psychiatrists well acquainted with the then evolving mimetic theory.
[64] Johan Asplund. *Rivaler och syndabocker* (Gøteborg: Korpen, 1989), 22.

Girard claims that Plato does not have any theory on mimetic rivalry.[65] Although Plato has no theory on rivalry, he does give examples of mimetic rivalry. According to Plato, the Sophist's mimesis is *acquisitive*.[66] Acquisitive mimesis for Plato is bad mimesis and the Sophist's acquisitive attitude to things is compared to hunting,[67] a forceful and brutal metaphor used to describe a manipulative way of learning and taking possession of other people.[68] The distinction Girard makes between imitative and emulative forms of mimetic desire[69] is also indicated in Plato's work, even if the references are to the philosophical concepts of truth and illusion.

However, to agree with Girard that Platonic mimesis is limited to representation,[70] and that appropriation is lacking,[71] is problematic. Plato does discuss acquisitive mimesis, but he does not express it directly. From my reading of the *Sophist* text, I cannot agree with Girard that 'Plato never relates conflict to acquisitive mimesis,'[72] as the Sophist's imitation is described as manipulative. Plato uses many potentially mimetical and desirous words, such as *selling, exchange, acquisition, competition, combat,* and *fighting* to characterize the Sophist.[73] On the other hand, Girard is right when he claims that Plato fails to see the essential role of desire as based on rivalry between subject and model, where the object gradually plays less and less of a role in the desire.[74] Plato does not locate the conflictual core of mimesis, i.e. mimesis governed by desire because he believes in a world of Ideas. But Plato clearly sees mimesis as a powerful force, as a threat to the stability of his ideal state. Therefore mimesis, both as copying, imitating and representing, is potentially forbidden in the ideal Republic.[75] Thus, from a Girardian point of view Platonic morality or anti-mimetism could be interpreted as a superficial interpretation on what moves a society, motivated by a fear of instability. Plato deals indirectly with acquisitive mimesis in that he sees imitation as a de-stabilizing factor in society, but, at the same time, he avoids seeing the other as engendering the acquisitive. Therefore there can be no real theory in Plato on the workings of mimesis, only a general moral description of mimetic power.

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[65] *Things Hidden*, 18.
[66] Plato. *The Sophist* 265a.
[67] Ibid. 219+.
[68] Ibid. 222a, 223b.
[69] Livingston. *Models of Desire*, XVIII-XIX.
[70] 'The examples he (Plato) selects for us are consistently limited to representation - to types of behavior, manners, individual or collective habit, as well as words, phrases, and ways of speaking.' (*Things Hidden*, 8.)
[71] *Things Hidden*, 8.
[72] Ibid., 15.
[73] Plato. *The Sophist* 223-226. See especially 226a.
[74] *Things Hidden*, 15-16.
[75] See *The Republic* 394e-396a.

Imitating God

According to Plato, the stories told by Hesiod and Homer are untrue and bad when they describe the heroes and gods in an unfavourable light.[76] Such alleged misrepresentation is based on describing the gods as immoral and evil. For Plato, God is good and we must look for the causes of evil elsewhere than in God,[77] indicating that evil is caused by humans. Plato criticizes Homer for presenting Zeus as both good and bad.[78] This daring demythologization resembles Girard's own attempt to rid the Christian God of violence. Girard's attempt to strip Christianity of its sacrificial roots and his continual attempt to reveal the non-violence of the Gospels, are, however, based on an anthropological reading of the Gospels, not on a Platonic or Neo-Platonic reading. Plato presents his daring critique as a point of view (Socrates' point of view) not as society's misreading of Homer. In the same way as Plato does, when he criticizes the author (Homer) for presenting the gods as bad and immoral, Girard claims that there are sacrificial elements in the Judaeo-Christian image of God which the authors of the Gospels have not been able to dispel.[79] But Girard's critique of the authors of the Gospels is minimal, and his critique of the violence materialized in the Christian sacrificial tradition is only loosely hinted at, never directly criticized or revealed as anti-Christian violence. Girard's interpretation of myths as both concealing and revealing the events described in them, is relevant in the context of misrepresentation. Interpreting the mythological as something that hides the real reasons for the sacrifice, amounts to a critique of Greek religion. The Greek stories about the gods and heroes can be interpreted as a misrepresentation of the events. Zeus and the other gods are blamed for rape and murder. The real events are hidden within the myths, perhaps covering an actual rape and giving a certain legitimation to rape (for even the gods may act as rapists and murderers). It is this mythology that Plato frenetically tries to dismiss. Knowing the force of mimesis, Plato knows that when Homer depicts an adulterous and rapist version of Zeus, the risk will be that such acts committed by the gods could lead, among common people, to their imitating the vices of the gods. But, at the same time, it is impossible to strip the stories of divine vice and violence.[80] Therefore Plato dismisses Greek mythology precisely because he perceives the acquisitive dimension in mimesis. This understanding of the contagious nature of mimesis is the reason for Plato's anti-mimesis.

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[76] Ibid., 377d-e.
[77] Ibid., 379c.
[78] Ibid., 379d.
[79] See *Things Hidden*, 224-262.
[80] Stripping the stories of violence would be to destroy the stories' core, the inherent worldview. Instead Plato

God is good and non-violent, both for Girard and Plato, though understood very differently. For the Hellenistic Greeks imitation of God was a state of mind,[81] while the Catholic Christian imitation is understood as something dynamic, focused on the interdividual and ethical.[82] Plato's concept of God or the One, is usually interpreted as an Idea that refers to the good and the beautiful. However, Plato also presents God as a caring God, caring for the person who strives for righteousness, trains to be good, and wants to be like God himself.[83] The elements of *training and repetition* indicate imitation. Man imitates God's goodness. In *Timaeus,* mimesis is even given as the formula for the creation and form of the world.[84] Timaeus claims that the absolute being can be reached by the mind and one can imitate its nature.[85] In *Timaeus* mimesis represents a creative, acquisitive force, the force of becoming part of creation. This creative element, however, is modified in Plato's understanding of creation through his introduction of a lower representation of god, the Demiurge. Thus the creation of the world is a second rate creation, one step away from the Ideas which creation symbolically and materialistically represents as distorted reality.[86] In *Cratylus* the act of imitating nature, the forms of things by bodily movement[87] is described as imperfect compared to the imitative power of language.[88] The smallest syllable is an imitation of things.[89] Language is both a true and correct imitation of the essence of things. Thus, as regards language, imitation is a means towards truth. And language is both a true and correct imitation of the essence of things.[90]

Girard does not deal with the topic of creation in relation to mimesis. Neither does he refer specifically to any theology on creation. But, as Girard separates violence from God the creator, the problem of violence in creation inevitably arises. From a purely theological point of view, Girard's understanding of creation can be interpreted as being Platonic in that

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dismisses the stories and forbids the production of new versions.
[81] E.J. Tinsley. *The Interpretation of God in Christ. An Essay on the Biblical Basis of Christian Spirituality* (London, SCM Press, 1960), 29.
[82] This historical gap, caused by the introduction of Christianity, which provoked a shift in mentality, is the main reason for the difference between Plato's concept of God and Girard's.
[83] Plato. *The Republic* 613a.
[84] Melberg. *Theories of Mimesis*, 22.
[85] Ibid., 23.
[86] Aquinas, inspired by Timeaus and the Bible, looked upon the beauty of this world as a mimetic reflection of God's beauty.
[87] Plato. *Cratylus* 423a.
[88] Ibid., 425d.
[89] Ibid., 426c+.
[90] Ibid., 430d-e.

violence in creation is not attributed to the real God. Girard's argument regarding original violence, however, is given an anthropological instead of a theological answer. In this way God is separated from the act of creating violence. At the same time Girard reads the Genesis myth from the point of view of God as the victim.[91] Girard's christological approach to the Old Testament means that the Old Testament is interpreted as a series of stories of scapegoating, where God is not the one inflicting violence but one who suffers violence. [92] In this way he links God to human history through Christ's revelation of innocent victims. Such an anthropo-theological thought is not, of course, present in Plato.[93] The image of a dynamic, acting and suffering God manifested in history, is the main theological difference from Platonic thought, which also generates their different interpretations of logos. For Plato, God represents the good but the mimetic acquirement of the good is only mentioned in relation to a degenerated creation. A mimetic relationship between God and humans are therefore not part of Plato's theology.

Conclusion

Even if Plato did not develop any theory on acquisitive mimesis,[94] he uses the term, and his anti-mimetism indicates the conflictual side of mimesis. In this respect there is a similarity between Girardian and Platonic mimesis (Plato's anti-mimetism) based on an understanding of conflict and instability. Plato defines acquisitive mimesis as bad mimesis, Girard, on the other hand, labels almost all kinds of mimesis as acquisitive mimesis. But what he interprets as acquisitive mimesis is, in some ways, remarkably similar to what Plato fears in mimesis. To claim that Plato's understanding of mimesis is only related to representation is, as we have seen, an exaggeration.

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[91] *Things Hidden*, 275.
[92] Ibid., 275.
[93] In the work of Plato there is no movement whereby anthropological insights lead to a revelation of God. Anthropology and theology are separate, and the human situation is not a starting point, a positive factor leading to God. There is however an exception in *Timaeus*, where there is a certain imitation of creation, and of the creator. But the Platonic image of the godhead is not a God participating in history; rather it requires a flight from the shifting nature of history.
[94] According to Girard, Plato does not have any theory of mimetic rivalry, even if the Greek word, mimesis,

makes the conflictual aspect of mimesis conceivable. (*Things Hidden,* 18)