

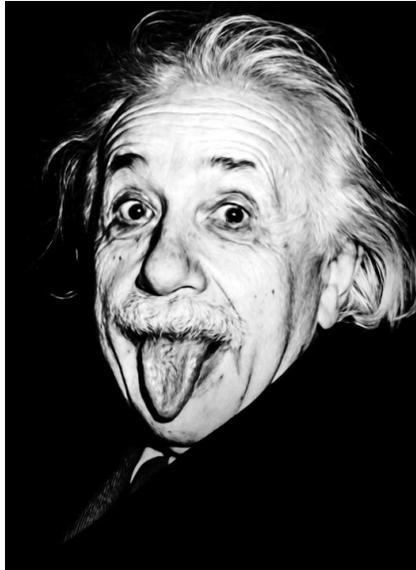
Using Girardian ideas for understanding psychosis

1. Introduction

Two years ago, Berry Vorstenbosch published *De overtocht*, which in English would be translated as *The Crossing*. The subtitle of the book is *Philosophical View on a Psychosis*. In this book, Berry tries to understand what had happened to him in his adolescence, employing the help of philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and above all René Girard. The first hallucinatory period resulted in hospitalization. A second period, five years later, finally resulted into a conversion to Christianity. For explaining some of the workings of what is called “psychosis” by psychiatrists, or “madness” in more popular terms, Berry will in his talk focus on two Girardian concepts: “metaphysical desire” and the “crisis of difference”.

2. Metaphysical Desire

One of the first questions Jean-Michel Oughourlian poses as a psychiatrist, hearing the stories of his clients, is: where are the models? *Cherchez le model!*¹ In the case of my psychosis, to answer this question is not really difficult. Being an undergraduate student in physics, my absolute hero was Albert Einstein. And so he was to many other students of physics. You could find his picture – particularly the one with the tongue protruded – hanging on the walls in many student rooms.



Doesn't he look like madman?

Apart from Einstein himself, I need to mention another person who played an important role in my psychosis, someone in my social environment. He was a student of physics working on his thesis, in which he was trying to reconcile relativity and quantum physics. He was the brother-in-law of one of my friends, four or five years older than me. In my book I call him Cecil.² Stories about his audacious intellectual enterprise were circling around. Recently, he had read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert Pirsig³, a book which had greatly inspired him.

At high school I was a very talented student, particularly in math and physics. One of the questions that started to play up in my psychosis was already haunting my mind at high school.

With his fourth dimension and the idea that mass can be converted into energy, Einstein was the father of modern atomic physics, and contributed to the building of scientific knowledge indispensable for the manufacturing of nuclear weapons. What would he have done if he had known this beforehand? This question had been bothering me for a long time. It was in the late 70s, the great peace demonstrations of 1981 and 1983 in Holland were coming. At the time, we often talked about 'the bomb' and 'doomsday'. Knowing how Einstein had fared, I wondered what I would do if, as a physicist, I discovered the fifth dimension. Would I make it known to the world?

In the early phase of my psychosis, I had a delusion about becoming part of a group of initiates, becoming part of a secret society. I thought I participated in a group of geniuses who were hiding an apocalyptic secret. It started with a train of thoughts about the *Cogito* of René Descartes. Suddenly, I realized Einstein was also part of the club.

But suddenly it seemed as if the scales were falling from my eyes. Of course!!! Einstein already had discovered the fifth dimension himself! How could I have missed that? – Einstein also is an initiate! Here, the borderline between fantasy and reality became very thin. In the weeks that followed, as my mental excitement was still interrupted by series of 'normal' days, I could sometimes wake up in the middle of the night, thinking - how many people actually are initiates? And who are they? Leonardo da Vinci? William Shakespeare?⁴

The initiates knew that if the truth of the world would be revealed, the world would come to an end. The truth of the world was that it possessed five dimensions. In my psychotic mind the fifth dimension acquired a name, and the name was 'Man'. I developed some very strange theories, becoming a sort of reconciliation hero. My theory was not only reconciling relativity and quantum physics, but also anthropology and psychology. Yes, like many psychotics do, I developed a Great Theory of Everything.

On New Year's Eve of 1979, I met Cecil at a party. I assumed he was an initiate too and now I was able to find out:

I sat down next to him and quickly turned the conversation to his senior thesis and the number of dimensions the world possesses. I suggested writing down our ideas on a piece of paper and then exchanging them. On my note I wrote: '1. Space, 2. Space, 3. Space, 4. Time, 5. Man'. We exchanged notes, and I opened Cecil's note. With growing amazement, I read: '1. Space, 2. Space, 3. Space, 4. Time, 5. Imaginary, 6. Imaginary.' My brain was running at full speed. If you multiply two Imaginary dimensions, you get one Real dimension! Yes, Man! A real living human being! Because $i * i = -1$! Cecil had arrived at the same result in a different way! My first feeling was one of immense relief.

Do I have to explain that metaphysical desire is at play here? The desire for the Being of a model? The Being of Albert Einstein? Both Cecil and I were enthralled by becoming a great physicist. We shared a model, and he, being more informed about physics than me, had advanced knowledge. Of course, after exchanging our notes, I assumed Cecil also knew about the end of the world.

When I got home the next day I panicked, and I called Cecil. He came to me and took me in his car to his house, in a small town some thirty miles away. There I lived for three days. I wanted him to explain his theory, and to some extent he did. Now here Girard's theory starts to lose its explaining power. Maybe there was competition and rivalry between Cecil and me, but we didn't have any conflict. Cecil, was my experience in my psychosis, helped me out of a horrifying loneliness.

After three days he brought me back home, but, understanding that something was wrong with me, he was afraid to leave me alone. He called in one of my friends and together they took me, first to a doctor and then to the local hospital. I was easily convinced, there were hardly serious arguments, let alone violence.

3. Crisis of Difference

I will pick up the story on the day Cecil and a friend took me to the hospital, instead of leaving me alone. At this juncture I want to move on to the next Girardian notion – the ‘crisis of difference’. I will not be talking about the sacrificial crisis or about scapegoating, because no violence emerged between Cecil and me. This peaceful hospitalization is not the story of all psychoses.⁵ Situations may arise in which an all-against-one configuration emerges with the psychotic person being the scapegoat. In my case it didn’t. I also was never put in solitary confinement. So to me, the most useful term for the crisis is the ‘crisis of difference’, which basically were the differences in my head.

Here I have to say something about the term ‘interindividual’, that is often employed, also by René Girard himself, about the psychological branch of mimetic theory.⁶ Often it is opposed to ‘individual’ psychology, which is then presented as being based on the autonomous subject. So if one wants to emphasize the importance of things happening in individual minds, one is often – among Girardians – reproached for reverting to, or even regressing into individualistic ways of thinking.

But what happens to the individual is also part of the anthropological story. To put it very simply – if violence is controlled by myths, rituals and prohibitions, then these anthropological phenomena have to be effective. That is, the myths must be believed by individuals, the rites must be shared by individuals and, most importantly, the prohibitions must be obeyed by individuals. So, an important part of the process of hominization is the internalization of culture – that is, obeying prohibitions also when the direct threat of violent retributions – the wrath of the alpha male in monkey-speak – is absent. I think this individual, or maybe we should call it ‘intraividual’ part of the story, is neglected in mimetic theory.

Mimetic theory focusses on the crisis of difference on a social scale. But a crisis of difference can also take place on an individual scale, or inside a single mind:

In a psychosis, a number of important differences, differences that are of fundamental importance in everyday life, are disrupted or have disappeared. One of the most important differences, according to mimetic psychology, is the difference between me and my models. It is a difference that is linked to a whole series of other differences. If I really believe that I am Einstein, then this also affects my awareness of my home country, my native language, whether I have children or not, my religion. Even the conventional difference between life and death, as we experience it in our Western society, cannot be maintained when such a radical appropriation of identity takes place. To remain Einstein, one needs a very occult explanatory system, for example using reincarnation-like elements borrowed from other religions. I could cope with Albert as a first name, because my name is Berry. But how do I explain Einstein’s sudden command of the Dutch language? And what the hell is he doing in my birthplace? Much psychotic activity is concerned with solving such thorny riddles. Psychotic thinking is above all trying to make the world coherent, and for this coherence often very strange, outlandish ideas are required – just as for Don Quixote, for remaining the knight that he wants to be, a constant supply of wizardry is required. The only hypothesis that would return everything to normal, namely that I am *not* Einstein, will, as long as I hold this identity in the clutches of my metaphysical desire, be the least plausible to me. Open any psychiatric textbook (or better yet, open Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*), and you will read everywhere that no one will be able to talk a madman out of his delusions.

The crisis of difference in terms of individual psychology than corresponds to the disruption of the internalized cultural system, that is, loss of self. This can lead to outrageous behavior and scandalous disinhibitions, but also to states very similar to the experiences reported by mystics. In any mystical teaching, it is always the 'self' which is the greatest hindrance to experiential contact with the divine.

When in mimetic theory the term 'undifferentiation' is used, emphasis is usually on its negative aspect. Focus then is on the loss of the difference between 'good violence' and 'bad violence', leading to the escalation to extremes. Though rarely, Girard sometimes also employs the term 'positive undifferentiation'. The following quote is taken from the Hölderlin chapter in *Battling to the End*:

Up to a certain point, we might be in a state of positive undifferentiation, in other words, *identified with others*. This is Christian love, and it exists in our world. It is even very active. It saves many people, works in hospitals, and even operates in some forms of research. Without this love, the world would have exploded long ago.⁷

Girard here is speaking of loving sympathy for others. But in mysticism, the dissolution of 'self' and 'other' may be even stronger, go farther than just 'empathy' or 'sympathy'.

'Loss of self' is a very ambiguous term indeed. In terms of psychopathology, the words I prefer to use for distinguishing negative and positive undifferentiation are 'sacred' and 'holy'. The 'sacred' then relates to being possessed, to metaphysical desire running out of control, to the chaotic and horrific parts of madness. The final chapter of my book is entitled 'The Distance to the Sacred'. Regaining distance to the sacred then would correspond to being taken out of a psychotic state. Being able to stabilize this distance then could be related to being dismissed from the hospital, to being cured, to seriously and definitively leave a psychotic period behind.

One of the greatest tasks of someone who has suffered from psychosis, in my view, is how to integrate all the exotic experiences, all the 'special effects' being exposed to in mad time, in his or her life. There are some people who finally integrate their psychosis in terms of a 'spiritual awakening'.⁸ It is not a term I would use for what I have gone through. I would rather say that I have been 'exposed to the sacred'. Also, I never started on a mystical schooling – I thought that would be too dangerous for me.

Still, certainly when growing older, moments of positive undifferentiation, moments of 'good loss of self' occur to me. For instance, when being enveloped in nature, or when experiencing a deep sense of beauty when listening to music. Inevitably, these moments bring me back to certain moments in my psychosis. When the fear of re-experiencing chaos has dissipated, when feeling assured metaphysical desire will not carry me away once more, I can welcome those moments as part of what Carl Gustav Jung called 'old age mysticism'. No meditation or prayer is required, it just happens...

¹ In saying this, inspiration is taken largely from Jean-Michel-Oughourlian, *The Mimetic Brain*, tr. Trevor Cribben Merrill. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013.

² In my book I actually call him 'C.' C is a meaningful letter in his name, but it is not the first letter of the real name of the person this story is about. For convenience's sake, I now, for telling this story in English to an audience, transformed his letter into the name 'Cecil'.

³ We cannot pay more attention to this remarkable book here. In *The Crossing* the role of this book in my life is explicitly elaborated. In the penultimate chapter I deliver a delve-down, not into the philosophy Robert Pirsig proposed, but in the way he managed to overcome madness while saving a lot of the value of the thoughts he had while being immersed in it. Robert Pirsig finally got out, in a way that is related to how I got out myself. In this proud book, I found the moment of humility that saved him. The penultimate chapter of my book, entitled 'High Mountainous Area in Philosophy' is the key chapter to the whole of my book

⁴ In my book I added an ironic footnote here, saying: 'Actually, William Shakespeare is an initiate. But at this juncture, I am not able to explain this yet.'

⁵ This is the reason I stopped studying the work of Henri Grivois. Henri Grivois was a psychiatrist sympathetic to mimetic theory. He has worked at the first aid section in a hospital in Paris, where scapegoat-like situation often occurred.

⁶ René Girard never really elaborated the idea of an 'interdividual psychology' in his later works. Still, it is massively present in his legacy as the title of the third part of *Des choses cachées*.

⁷ René Girard, *Battling to the end*, 131.

⁸ There are many examples. The story I particularly have in mind is the story of David Lukoff I found in David B. Yaden en Andrew Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience* (p. 185). You can watch Lukoff telling his story himself at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQ-oUvV2w0>. I also exchanged experiences with participants of a small Dutch group under the header 'Balanced Spirituality', see also: <https://www.spiritualiteitinbalans.nl/>.