

Against the grain: Mimetic Theory and the case of Boris Godunov

It hasn't happened again¹

0. Introduction: some facts and notions

What this paper is not going to be is a scholarly work on Russian history, or, a scholarly work on musical history. It is not our object to present an elaborated case – the Godunov-case – and to illustrate that it is a case to which mimetic theory applies. Yet, we want to present a line of reasoning for which the Godunov-case is particularly instructive.

We will start this line of reasoning with a highly derogatory comment René Girard's controversial interpretation of the Oedipus-story elicited. We will try to reinforce the notion that Girard's suspicion – that Oedipus might well be innocent of patricide – is sound. One of the differences between the Oedipus-story and the Boris Godunov-story is that, as to the latter, sufficient historical material is available as to make reliable suppositions about the truth of the accusations made.

The story of Boris Godunov (c. 1551 – 1605) is the story of a regent become tsar, a story which is part of Russian historical consciousness, which reached the West basically by the international success of Modest Mussorgsky opera.² To a Russian audience, this story has a larger emotional charge, though it is also to a Russian audience that the libretto of the opera, which Modest Mussorgsky wrote himself, is the first text for entering this piece of history.

The aesthetic background of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* is very complex. Mid 19th century Russian culture was teeming with all kinds of conflicting movements and one of the great questions was how much or how little was to be borrowed from Western examples – in the case of opera, from German and Italian predecessors. The only thing we will mention here is that *Boris Godunov* marked, though not the first, a very important stage in the creation of a truly Russian national style.

Finally, it needs to be remarked that Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* is probably the most indeterminate opera ever to have made its place in the repertory. There are heaps of score-material, of many scenes there is more than one version, and then there is this always both sympathetic and questionable influence of Alexander Rimsky-Korsakov, there is – in other words – an over-abundance of material from which any director can take his pick. The production that inspired me to write this paper was the Willy Decker reprise in 2008.³

1. Against the grain

However vast the scope of Mimetic Theory, the books and articles of its founder, René Girard, often read like exercises in literary criticism. *Exegesis* the name of the art Girard is at most times performing – unearthing hidden meanings in texts, surprising the reader by unfamiliar accents or unexpected perspectives. At times, Girard's approach to certain texts reminded me of the notion of "reading against the grain", which can be described as showing that a text contains meanings that are obviously not part of, and may be even contrary to, the author's intentions.

In the playful world of literary criticism, to be able to "read against the grain" in a successful manner marks the master-exegete. In the case of Girard, the option to or even the need to divert from the intentions of the original author is always also serious business – is something that forms a crucial part of what Mimetic Theory is about. We are already talking about one of the main tenets of Mimetic Theory: the recognition of scapegoat-mechanisms. To recognize a scapegoat-mechanism, always implies to divert from any author, who, in describing a persecution-story, is siding with the persecutors. The most thorough and eloquent elaboration of this need to oppose the author's own interpretation, we can find in *Le bouc émissaire* – the persecution-text taken as an example being Guillaume de Machaut's *Le jugement du roy de navarre*.⁴ Why can't we read myths in the same way we read (even feel obliged to read) medieval persecution stories? It is to this question the first half of *Le bouc émissaire* is dedicated.

In *Le bouc émissaire*, a medieval anti-semitic story about the Jews causing the plague by polluting the springs is pitted against the myth of King Oedipus. Both stories are taken to be persecution-stories. In the de Machaut story the Jews are the scapegoats, in the Oedipus-myth Oedipus himself is the scapegoat. Maybe we can explain why we have grown sensitive towards accepting stories about anti-semitic persecutions, but, then, why is it so hard to transfer this same logic to the Oedipus myth? Why is the thought that Oedipus, who is accused of being in a very miraculous and irrational way responsible for the plague in Thebe, might be as innocent as the medieval Jews, so controversial?

A text in which I literally encountered this notion of "reading against the grain" was Derek Hughes' *Culture and Sacrifice* – which I had consulted specifically in order to prepare a presentation on Mimetic Theory and Igor Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*. Hughes's reference here is not to *Le bouc émissaire* but to *La violence et le sacré* and to *Les feux de l'envie*.

Girard's reading of *The Merchant of Venice* is more valuable than his wildly against-the-grain interpretation of *King Oedipus*, with its contention that the final selection of the guilty person is quite arbitrary: that Creon or Teiresias would have fitted the bill just as much as Oedipus.⁵

There is no argumentation here – there is only a scholar shaking his head at so much hardheaded controversiality. There are more commentators who suggest that this whole idea of an innocent Oedipus is outrageous.⁶ To some, the Girardian view of the Oedipus-story – that it carries the reminiscences of a scapegoat-process, that Oedipus is most likely an arbitrary victim and that Oedipus might as well be pleaded not guilty for having murdered his father Laius – is just too ridiculous for serious consideration.

This resistance to – what we may call a basic Mimetic Theory insight – is addressed in Sandor Goodhart’s invaluable 1978 essay *Oedipus and Laius’ Many Murderers*

To suggest that Oedipus may not have killed Laius is to play havoc with a legend that for twenty-eight hundred years has remained curiously intact. (...) Oedipus is part of our language in the West. From Homer to Aristotle to Freud, it is the same old story. Oedipus is synonymous with parricidal and incestuous desire.⁷

An innocent Oedipus is so much against our habits of thinking, so much against our ways of picturing and organizing intellectual space, that to propose another solution to this riddle-crammed story simply seems to be *not done*. Basically every interpretation of Sophocles’ play re-incriminates Oedipus, as King Oedipus incriminates himself within Sophocles’ play – choosing the *myth* as the final interpretation of what had happened, of what Sander Goodhart calls “the same old story again”. Significantly Goodhart omits Sophocles from his enumeration – Homer, Aristotle, Freud. The crux of Goodhart’s essay – which we will not discuss further here – is that the author of the *King Oedipus* tragedy can be shown to allow, or even to suggest, that there is an alternative interpretation.

Instead of entering this complex and charged discussion I would like to present another case, which is the case of the chosen, intermittent tsar Boris Godunov. After having visited a performance of Modest Mussorgsky’s opera in the *Musical Theatre* of Amsterdam, after having read Willy Decker’s notice in the performance booklet, I immediately perceived that the story of Boris Godunov is somehow similar to the story of King Oedipus, or, for that matter, to the story Richard III. In each of these stories there is an abomination – parricide and incest in the case Oedipus, infanticide in the case of Richard III and Boris Godunov. Here we have three candidate stories for an “against the grain” interpretation in which the innocence of the victim can be suggested. As for Boris Godunov, and for Richard III, their innocence cannot only be suggested, but it is, in fact, close to historical truth. And apart from historical evidence, there is in the case of Boris Godunov also quite some material present as to why the picture of a child-murdering Boris has persisted through the ages. It is to these subjects we will pay attention in the next chapters in more detail.

The Boris Godunov case then is, as clearly as the case of Richard III, an *exemplum* of an accusation run wild, a retraceable enactment of the scapegoat-process in relatively recent times. In Mussorgsky’s libretto, however, there is hardly any doubt that Boris Godunov actually killed the child Tsarevits Dmitri. Now imagine that some electronic storm or some cosmic disaster erases all our records and archives, and that only Mussorgsky’s opera and his two main sources, Alexander Pushkin’s theatre play with the same name and Nikolay Karamzin’s *History of the Russian State*, were left for scrutiny.⁸ Imagine a historiography in an age that survives all these disasters, a historiography linked to an intellectual world enamored by the “psychological depths” of 19th century Russian culture (in the same way as our intellectual world tends to overrate the depths of classic Greek culture). How could an interpreter in such a world maintain that Boris did not kill the child, as he actually didn’t? The Boris Godunov *exemplum*, is a kind of myth with a piece of genuine history behind it, showing that Girard’s reasoning concerning the Oedipus myth – though highly controversial to some – is sane, sound and probably true.

2. A tsar chosen (Part 1)

The story of Boris Godunov is the story of a regent become tsar. It fully addresses the turmoil of regency itself, that is, the problems arising within an empire ruled by a ruler who may be left without an heir. We are talking about the shift in dynasties between the house of the Rurikovids and the house of the Romanovs that took place in the decades around 1600. The last truly reigning scion of the Rurikovid house was nobody less than Ivan the Terrible, who at his death in 1584 left Russia with two claimants to the throne: the feebleminded and physically backward Feodor, and the infant Dmitry who was a child of Ivan's fourth wife Maria, a marriage not sanctioned by the Russian Orthodox Church. Though Feodor was actually crowned, the rule over the country came into the hands of his brother-in-law Boris Godunov. Feodor exiled his half-brother Dmitry to a court in the city of Uglich, north of Moscow.

In 1591 this Dmitry, at the age of nine, was found dead in the palace garden with his throat slit. The boy, who suffered from epileptic fits, had been playing knife-toss with friends. Rumour spread rapidly that this death was not an accident but murder. When the news reached Moscow, Boris ordered an official investigation, the outcome of which was that the child had indeed been killed by accident. The outcome of later historical research is that there is no evidence that Boris had been responsible for the death of Dmitry – something that at the time seemed so plausible to the imagination of a mob who had their share of suffering in all this political turbulence. It is this supposed murder that is at the heart of the *Boris Godunov* opera, and for which Mussorgsky takes Boris's guilt for granted. In the Willy Decker production this murder is even *staged* straight at the beginning in the first two minutes of the musical introduction. To be sure, this staging of Dmitry's being slaughtered, is *not* a part of Mussorgsky's libretto, but it is in itself consistent with the gist of Mussorgsky's interpretation of the Boris Godunov history.

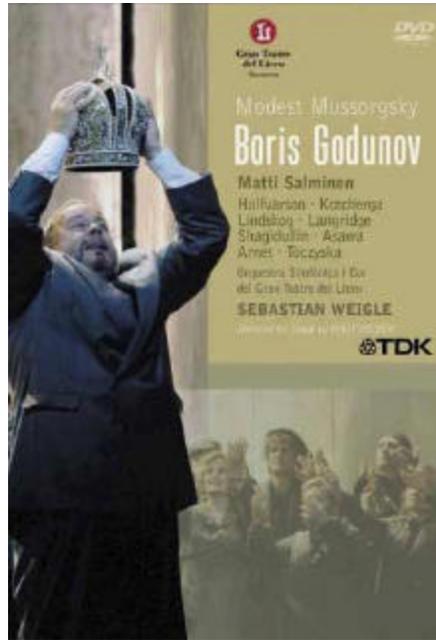
[DVD fragment 1 (chapter1/2) - 0:02:22 – 0:04:58]



When Ivan's son Feodor, the official crown bearer, died in 1598, the Rurikovid dynasty was extinct. After a brief, chaotic period Boris Godunov was elected tsar by a *zemsky sobor*, or an "Assembly of the Land". The notion of a chosen tsar was wholly new to the Russian mind. Considering the threat of outright civil war, to transfer the reign by votes to someone who had already proved his worth was a very pragmatic and understandable decision. This is also the place to remark that Boris's rule, during the time Feodor was still alive, was quite successful. Boris Godunov emerges as a person who tried, as best as he could, to serve his country in hard times⁹. In the first half of his reign Boris was relatively mild to his adversaries (with Russia having the rule of Ivan fresh in mind), and he certainly does not stand out as a typical usurpator.

Although not unique in dynastic struggles, the infant Dmitry, though definitely buried, managed to resurrect as a crown pretender. Contesting both the legitimacy and success of Godunov's rule, the Dmitry claim functioned as a focus point for factions that found themselves, for whatever reason or by whatever motive, opposed to the rule of Boris. The entanglements of dynastic logic are everywhere around in the Godunov-story and are also powerfully present in Mussorgsky's opera. Even unconvincing or blatantly false claims to blood-lineage were still forces to be reckoned with, as they could arouse latent feelings of resentment in large sections of society. Boris was a *chosen* tsar, and precisely this inevitable "democratic" procedure, made, in true dynastic vein, his position contestable.

The question of the legitimacy of Boris reign is the main theme in the first part of Willy Decker's production – containing the *Novodevichy Monastery* scene and the famous *Coronation* scene. In these scenes there is a mischievous irony at work, as if Mussorgsky wants to point at the questionable ways in which legitimacy is fabricated. The Coronation is not a feast at all – it occurs as a sad and strained event, and in the Decker production the icon of illegitimacy itself, the image of Boris putting the crown with his own hands on his own head, has become the picture by which the DVD is advertised. Also this, is in line with general tendencies in Mussorgsky's libretto.



Usurpation, individual hunger for power, is not really the subject of Mussorgsky's rendering of the Godunov story. Boris tries to serve his country and tries to forge a new dynasty. One of the keywords here, is the word *father* – not as a noun, but as a verb. Boris Godunov is trying to father his country, to become a good ruler (and we may remember that in Russian culture the words “tsar” and “father” are closely associated). Boris also tries to be a good father to his own son and daughter, and he is seriously thinking that his own son might be the first new tsar who, unlike himself, rightfully will inherit the crown. Yet this search for emblematic paternity is cruelly undermined by a great transgression, by the crime of having killed a little child.

3. Chroniclers (Part 2)

In the two scenes in the second part, Boris himself is not present. The second scene, *The Inn*, gained renown by the deft way in which Mussorgsky managed to portray the lower strata of society. We are far away from court and witness a landlady singing local ditties. In *The Inn*, we meet the crown-pretendent Dmitry, bluntly impersonated by the monk Grigory Otrepiev, who is preparing to pass the Lithuanian border. This is all in line with Boris Godunov lore – crown-pretendents were hardly ever really taken serious as such. For our purposes, this scene is of secondary importance, and we will focus on the first scene of the act: *Pimen's Cell*.

The monk Pimen brings us back into historical space. Pimen is a writer, a chronicler, and as such he is depicted as one who hoards the truth, the truth and nothing but the truth. In the following passage, the murder of the infant is once again confirmed. This monk Pimen functions as a vehicle of truth. As such he counts as one of the most respectable presences in Mussorgsky's opera.

[DVD fragment 2 (chapter15) - 0:43:09 – 0:46:55]



Ah, I remember! God led me there to see the dread deed, the bloody sin! I was dispatched to Uglich as a penance. I came there at night. On the morrow, at the hour of mass, I suddenly heard the bells ringing! The tocsin had been sounded, there were shouts, noise, everyone running into the Tsarina's courtyard. I went too and saw the murdered Tsarevich lying in a pool of blood. His mother, the Tsarina, was standing over him speechless and the unfortunate nurse was sobbing in despair. And there, on the square, the people dragged in a frenzy the godless traitress, the wet-nurse. Yells! Groans! And among them appeared suddenly Iuda Bityagovsky, savage and pale in his fury. "There he is! There's the villain!" everybody yelled. Then the people rushed off after the three fleeing murderers. The villains were caught and they were brought before the still warm corpse of the infant. And a miracle!

Suddenly the dead boy started to quiver! "Confess!" the people roared at them. And in horror, beneath the axe the villains confessed and they named Boris.

Though Pimen's summary is close to the description of a lynching mob, his presence functions as the authority of what really happened at Uglich, not only as a historian, but even so as an eye-witness. His role, might be noted, is very similar to that of Teiresias in *King Oedipus*, although this time it is not soothsaying but factual evidence, eye-witnesses – historical science, that holds the final version of the story. Mussorgsky's Pimen becomes all the more heroic if we realize that writing down chronicles was forbidden at the time, very much in the same way as photographing or filming (or blogging or twittering) is forbidden today by repressive regimes who want to cover up their illegitimate actions.

But also the chroniclers of the late 16th century had to rely on rumours and were susceptible to embracing misrepresentations as truths. In fact, Guillaume de Machaut's *Jugement*, René Girard stages as a definite example of an unreliable text, can be understood as a chronicle in itself, as an almost-eye-witness description of what went on. It requires a more acute historical awareness to peek through all the stories chronicles offer. Most importantly, after the surrender of the Bodunovs, chroniclers voiced the perspective of the newly risen dynasty, the Romanovs. As for Mussorgsky, to stage a medieval chronicler as the corner-stone of historical truth, is in terms of historical truth finding naïve to say the least.

Ironically, the suspicion against chroniclers is clearly present in the archive of Nikolay Karamzin, whose *History of the Russian State*, published between 1818 and 1824, was one of Mussorgsky's two basic sources. The thought of rejecting Boris as the murderer of the young Dmitry had, despite all chronicles, been seriously on Karamzin's mind. I will offer a lengthy quotation from Caryl Emerson & Robert William Oldani's admirable study *Modest Musorgsky & Boris Godunov: Myths, Realities, Reconsiderations*.

Powerful political and religious forces conspired early in the seventeenth century to "confirm" Boris's guilt and to register it in writing. The Orthodox Church – despite its achievement of a Patriarchate under Boris as Brother-in-Law – had little use for Godunov after his death. Official distrust began in 1606, when Tsar Vasily Shuisky, in an effort to fasten Dmitry of Uglich in his grave and prevent further pretenders to his name, ordered the canonization of the "martyred Tsarevich." From 1606 on, in the eyes of the Church, Boris Godunov was both *tsareubytsay*, tsarecide, and *svyatoubytsa* murderer of a saint. Civilian authorities were equally ungenerous to Boris's memory. The Romanov clan, which had suffered such persecution under Tsar Boris, lost no time in censoring their predecessor once they themselves occupied the throne. Up through the nineteenth century, then, almost all surviving state documents and chronicles (compiled by government clerks or by monks in monasteries, not unlike Pushkin's and Musorgsky's Pimen) condemned the Godunovs in the harshest possible terms.

There were, however, reasons quite beyond the stories told in the historical sources that made a guilty and illegitimate Boris attractive to Karamzin. These reasons have more to do with Karamzin's own era than with any events of the sixteenth century. To put them in context we might go back to 1802, sixteen years before the first volumes of the *History* appeared, to an essay that Karamzin wrote entitled "Reminiscences on the Road to Troitsa" (The Troitsa-Sergeevo Monastery near Moscow, where the Godunov family is buried). In this essay Karamzin reprimands the seventeenth-century chroniclers for their cruel judgment of the Godunovs. Boris's services to Russia as Brother-in-Law and

as Tsar were so great, that later generations would like to doubt evidence that he had cleared his way to the throne by murder. And fortunately, Karamzin notes, this evidence is indeed open to doubt – for the chroniclers, who passed over in silence Boris's positive achievements, readily "incorporated false opinion through senselessness or malicious intent." Karamzin warns against "the timid historian [who] repeats the chronicles without criticism... [Then] history sometimes becomes the echo of slander."

In passages like these a true scientific spirit transpires, something that might have countered the Boris Godunov myth. And ironically it is the writer of one of Mussorgsky's main sources, who is saying such-like things. Key words here are "rumour", "slander" – words referring to intensely mimetic phenomena, words we will meet again when treating Mussorgsky's other main source, Alexander Pushkin's play *Boris Godunov*.

Of course, after having shown that Karamzin's sense of history encompassed the option that Boris might be innocent, Emerson and Oldani beg the question by having to explain why Boris is so vehemently incriminated in Karamzin's final work. Karamzin's letter was written in 1802 when tsar Alexander I had just entered the throne. It was widely believed that he had played a role in the deposition, and possibly even the murder of his father, the tyrannical Paul I. In those days the audience would take up Boris's murder of Dmitry as a reference to Alexander's possible crime. Though the whole of the historiography on Boris throughout the 17th and 18th century, as Emerson and Oldani explained, was written from the perspective of the Romanovs, in the opening years of the 19th century circumstances were favorable towards finding counterevidence to Boris's guilt. In general, writers would be reticent about once more telling this tale as it always had been told.

At the end of the second decade of the 19th century, the political landscape had undergone a profound change. Russia had heavily suffered from the Napoleonic invasions, and the rise to emperor-like status of a low-born person, profiling himself as a savior of the people, became projected back onto history. When Karamzin wrote the final tomes of his *History of the Russian State*, from 1818 until his death in 1824, the illegitimacy of Boris's ascension to the throne was emphasized once again. In Karamzin's description of the Uglich episode, finally, also the influence of a truly sacrificial Slavophile folk belief was intermixed. In Emerson and Oldani's words:

Early Slavophile thought was deeply apolitical. Its adherents often perceived the Orthodox Tsar as a sort of secular Christ who, in accepting the burden of autocratic rule, took upon himself the guilt of the world, thus rescuing the populace from the compromising and polluting responsibilities of political power. A virtuous tsar could intercede on Russia's behalf with saints and deities; a criminal tsar could not. This tenet of Orthodox faith had immense consequences for the nation's fate. By linking the Time of Troubles directly with Boris's own flawed biography, Karamzin arrived at the refrain of volume XI: "the ruins of Uglich howl to Heaven for vengeance" (xi, 85).

So in Karamzin, we have on the one hand a man with a genuine scientific suspicion against the truth value of his source material, yet on the other hand a man with a great vision of history as moral education in which sacrificial elements, like a whole country being "punished" for the crimes of one man, found home. From the many Boris stories that might have found a place in Karamzin *History*, finally a pathetic version was written that stressed Boris's illegitimacy and misdeeds and that offered a far more prominent place to the murder of young Dmitry as even

17th century chroniclers would have done. And so, the accusatory version of Boris story became sanctioned as historical truth by the then most prestigious historiographer, Nikolay Karamzin, who was the most important source both for Modest Mussorgsky and Alexander Pushkin.

4. Good conscience/bad conscience (Part 3 & 4)

Historical research, according to René Girard, is not decisive in the process of recognizing a persecution story. If this were the case, than one would never have a claim against the accusations of Teiresias in the *Oedipus* myth, for the simple reason that there are no correcting historical records available. Stories of anti-semitic persecutions or stories of witch-hunts do not evolve into persecution stories in our eyes because we rely on historical data. In the present world the word witch-hunt is often used as a metaphor for scapegoat processes that have nothing to do with witches.¹⁰ We can recognize persecution stories as such, because, as Girard explains in *Le bouc émissaire*, we will always find the same elements in those stories recurring time and again – like the disappearance of differences, images of a social or cultural crisis, finding one person responsible for all disasters, a person often carrying victim signs like a physical deficiency. History, as in the case of Boris Godunov, may even be used to sanction the persecutors' interpretations. It is not by historical evidence, it is by a certain set of the stereotypes, by which we can start to suspect the truth value of the crimes attributed to the protagonist in a persecution story.

The importance of the great social crisis against which the story of Boris is set, with a people tending to hold Boris responsible for all their misfortunes, becomes most clear in the great monologues of the third part. This third part consists of one scene: *The Tsar's Quarter*. At the beginning of this scene we find the tsar's daughter Xenia mourning her young deceased lover. We see her old wet-nurse and her brother Feodor singing silly songs in order to cheer her up, in which they even finally succeed. When Boris enters the stage he is happy to find his son studying the map of Russia and envisions him as a future tsar. It is in this scene Mussorgsky allows the audience to fully experience Boris as a human being, as a loving father capable of tender feelings. With the children and the wet-nurse present, it is also a very intimate, yes, domestic scene. Halfway the scene the rival bojar¹¹ Shuisky enters, telling Boris that a pretendent with the name Dmitry is on the verge of entering Russian territory. When hearing the name Dmitry Boris is terrified and the scene ends with Boris prostrate, praying God to have mercy on his guilty soul.

Before showing a part of Boris's monologue, I want to quote a section of the text from which this monologue is derived, the *seventh scene* of Pushkin's play *Boris Godunov*, a scene which also takes place at the tsar's palace. Mussorgsky did not merely use Pushkin's play as a source record, but he actually tried to put many of Pushkin's lines literally into his own libretto. Mussorgsky had been influenced by the *kuchkist* movement, in which musical composers, instead of writing new texts tailored to already present musical phrases, employed music to approach the rhythm, silence, cadences, pitch-variations, in short the "music" of natural speech. Before *Boris Godunov*, Mussorgsky had been working on Gogol's prose text *The Marriage*, using the original text *verbatim* for bringing out the music within it, an exercise not really considered successful. For our purposes, the whole habit of *using* and *quoting* his source text, rather than *rewriting* it, makes comparisons between these two approaches towards the Boris story particularly instructive, because we find exactly the same phrases returning in wholly different contexts and settings.

More in general, Pushkin's play is a far more historical and far less psychological work than Mussorgsky's opera. The vista of a criminal endlessly tortured by his guilt, which is of course also a Romantic cliché, is not really present in Pushkin's play – or, to put it differently, Pushkin is less

sentimental, more cynical, or perhaps you should call it, more realistic, about high politics. So in Pushkin's monologue, we basically do not find a guilty Boris, uttering his emotions, but a highly disappointed Boris, trying to rationally scrutinize how fate has treated him. Neither do we have a preliminary intimate scene, as if to warm up the audience's empathy with the tragic hero– instead we find two attendants talking about Boris's habit of seeking the company and advice of "sorcerers, magicians and the like". Again we see here a kind of mirror image of Oedipus, who had everything to fear from the soothsayers, whereas Boris has to dread the historians. Pushkin's monologue starts with a description of Boris's own state of mind, a description which reminds one very much of 19th evocations of *ennui*, a passage almost literally transcribed by Mussorgsky. I have everything – Boris says – great power, six years of successful rule, but I am bored, I am not happy. Gradually attention shifts to the catastrophes of recent times, famine, conflagration:

When conflagration's flames consumed their houses,
 I built them new and better habitations;
 And they blamed *me* for all the devastation!
 Such is the rabble: seek their love in vain.
 Within my family I then did seek solace;
 I sought my daughter's happiness in marriage,
 But like a tempest, death swept off the groom...
 And now a scabrous rumour makes the rounds,
 And says the culprit of her widowhood
 Was *me*, yes *me*, her own happy father!
 Let someone die... and I'm their secret killer:
 I hastened Fyódor to his sorry death,
 I poisoned my own sister, the Tsarina,
 A gentle nun... I'm guilty of all deaths!
 I realize now: there's nothing we can trust
 To give us peace amid our worldly cares;
 There's nothing save our conscience in the end;
 A healthy conscience triumphs over all,
 It overcomes all wickedness and slander.
 But if it bears one solitary blemish,
 One single stain to make it less than chaste,
 Then – woe! As if infected by the plague,
 The soul will writhe, the heart will fill with poison,
 And, hammer-like, reproach assault the ears;
 The head will spin, foul nausea take hold,
 And visions come of bloody boys... aah, no!...
 You long to flee, but nowhere can you go!
 Oh, pity him whose conscience is unclean.¹²

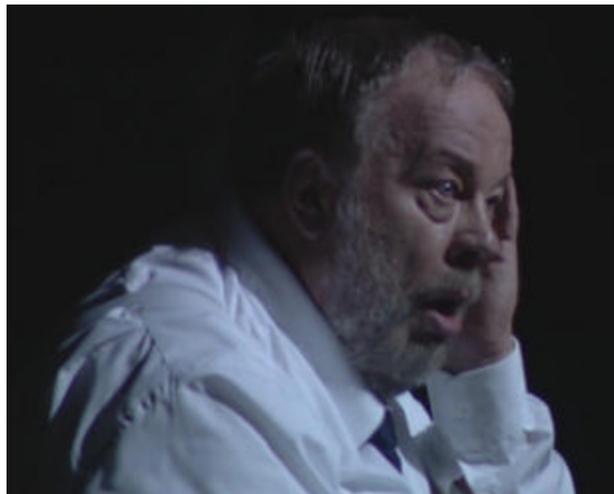
In this passage we have the playwright explicitly mapping historical events to scapegoat processes. The number of crimes the people are ready to attribute to a tsar fallen in disgrace is endless. Boris is astonished and would be even amused, if only it were not for himself being the victim. Still Pushkin's Boris, conform Karamzin's version, is thought to be guilty. Judicially, Pushkin believes Boris's position to be: guilty of the murder of Dmitry – acquittal of all other accusations. Pushkin's Boris is so to say a

“guilty victim”, a somewhat difficult notion in Mimetic Theory, certainly when René Girard sometimes likes to shape contrasts like – “in myth, the victim is always guilty, in the Bible, the victim is always innocent.”¹³ Victimizing processes may occur anywhere, and in general, I would say, the guilt or innocence of the victim is irrelevant. Victimizing or scapegoat processes may get on top of public executions, both today and in medieval times. Also the adulterous woman in the famous story of John 8 is without doubt guilty, but this does not imply that she should be subjected to collective violence.

In Pushkin, it is this guilty victim that values the way a clear conscience could work as a buttress, as a refuge, against all accusations that come from the outside. A clear conscience allows one to experience everything coming from the outside as remaining truly external, a clear conscience is a true remedy against all mimetic pressure. And though we in our own world know that people who are factually innocent of crimes (of child abuse for instance) may give in under high pressure to confess things they have not done – I still think Pushkin’s notion about the reserves of a clear conscience is profound. Yet, Boris, being the murderer of Dmitry, has this one big stain, preventing the benign working a good conscience might offer and making him vulnerable to the phenomenon of accusation as such.

We will now turn to the opera and show how Mussorgsky handled this matter at the end of the third part.

[DVD fragment 3 (chapter33) - 1:40:04– 1:43:03]



How painful! Let me get my breath! I felt all my blood rushing to my face and then it drained away suddenly. Oh cruel conscience, what a terrible punishment you exact! If there is by chance one stain, just one stain on you, your soul burns and your heart is filled with poison. It becomes painful, so painful... It hammers in your ears with its reproaches and curses. It somehow suffocates you. It suffocates and you head reels! The child is before your eyes... Blood-stained... There! Over there! What

is it? There, in the corner... It is hovering, it is growing, it is coming closer... It quivers and groans...
Keep away, keep away! It wasn't me... I did you no wrong. Away, child! It was the people... It wasn't
me, it was the will of the people! Away child! O Lord! Thou dost not wish to claim the life of a sinner...
Have mercy on the soul of the criminal Tsar Boris.

Clearly, the whole background argument of a mob piling accusation upon accusation has evaporated. Pushkin is praising the spiritual resources of a blotless conscience against mimetic assaults, which Boris unfortunately, only because of this one transgression of having murdered Dmitry, cannot access. In Mussorgsky's monologue this whole context is lost, and the emphasis on "one stain, just one stain on you" does not really make sense.

In the second part of Mussorgsky's monologue it seems as if, after all, the thought of an innocent Boris shines through. But Boris is not really claiming innocence. He is rather shedding responsibility for something of which he doubtlessly had been an agent. Dmitri Shostakovich is particularly harsh on this passage:

I always considered the ethical basis of *Boris* to be my own basis. Uncompromisingly the author condemns the amorality of an authority hostile to the people. Such an authority is unavoidably criminal, yes, I would say inescapably criminal. It is a kind of authority that will be corroded from the inside. It is especially repugnant in the way it manages to conceal itself behind the will of the people. I always hope that those words by Boris, you know what I mean, "It wasn't me, it was the will of the people" will keep on ringing in the heads of the ordinary listener.¹⁴

In this paper we already mentioned how Napoleon helped to establish the notion of a guilty Boris. In the case of Dmitri Shostakovich, the looming presence behind this fervently incriminatory attitude is, of course, Joseph Stalin.

It is with Shostakovich that we will finish our walkthrough through Mussorgsky's libretto. In the final part we have the passage with the *Yurodivy*, the simpleton, a character Shostakovich was so fond of. In the way he can uninhibitedly speak about whatever is going around him, crimes included, this simpleton plays the role of the jester in medieval European court histories. Shostakovich, in his *Testimony*, likes to portray himself as Stalin's *Yurodivy*, the simpleton in close contact with things everybody feels, but no one dares to articulate. Mussorgsky's simpleton, a scene which is again borrowed from Pushkin's play, gets robbed of a kopeke by a bunch of children and asks the Tsar if he please can slit their throats, as he had slit the throat of young Dmitry. While the authorities want to drag the simpleton away, Boris kneels beside him in reverence and asks for his blessing. The simpleton answers by: "Oh, no! No prayers for the Herod-Tsar... Our Lady won't allow it." Once again the second sight or sixth sense perception of the simpleton serves the Boris *myth*

Finally, at the end, there is a real threat of civil war. We have the bojares getting together about taking measures, and we have Boris dying in grand opera style on stage. Still tormented by the visions of the murdered child, Boris's last words are "forgive me...". When the bojares whisperingly declare that Boris is dead, the opera has come to an end.

5. Persecution stories and persecution texts

Hopefully I have managed to show that the Boris Godunov -case, with respect to Mimetic Theory, is a very interesting case. Whereas there already has a lot been written about Sophocles and Shakespeare, the works of Pushkin and Mussorgsky are relatively new to the debate and may help one to think over the mimetic theory tenets afresh.

The question I would like this paper to end with, is how “reading against the grain” can be thought to be related to persecution stories. Up till this final chapter, I have restricted myself as much as possible to the use of the term “persecution story” instead of “persecution text”. A persecution story is a story in which the recipient may perceive a scapegoat-process is or has been going on. The Boris Godunov-story, the Oedipus-story, the Richard III-story – each can be read as a persecution story. As to these stories, there are many versions and many authors, and focus in this paper has been on the dominant texts voicing the canonical version of how the plot of the “story” is supposed to be presented: William Shakespeare for Richard III, Sophocles for Oedipus and Modest Mussorgsky for Boris Godunov. Clearly, each of these authors did not make up their own stories, but drew from already abundantly available historical material. Somewhat tentatively, I might write here – the myths were already in place. Already, when Sophocles wrote his tragedy, there was such a thing as an Oedipus-myth, and in the same manner, Shakespeare and Mussorgsky had to draw from or confront an already existent “myth”.

From the viewpoint of Mimetic Theory, the basic question for any writer finally is: to what extent does he or she undermine the scapegoat-process going on in the mythical plot? To what extent is the evocation of the persecution story itself a persecution text? Obviously, Guillaume de Machaut’s *Le Jugement du Roy de Navarre* is a persecution text. But what about Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*? Or Alexander Pushkin’s *Godunov*? – Or William Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, or Sophocles own *King Oedipus*?

To begin with Sophocles’ *King Oedipus*, according to René Girard and Sander Goodhart, the possibility that Oedipus might be innocent perspires through the way Sophocles handles the plot. In the famous debate between Oedipus and Teiresias in the first episode, Oedipus accuses Creon and Teiresias of conspiring against him. An audience familiar with the Oedipus myth will be inclined not to take Oedipus’ accusation seriously. Yet there is quite some evidence that Sophocles himself considered supporting the conspiracy theory more than his later audiences were wont to. So Girard’s and Goodhart’s reading is not so much against the grain of the author’s intentions, but against the grain of the way the play has been unanimously received through the centuries. Sophocles seems to suspect the myth, whereas the impressive list of interpretators refuse to follow him in this direction.

Concerning William Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, this is a text that can truly be understood as a persecution text. For the development of this thought I want to refer to Els Launspach’s paper *Reading Shakespeare’s King Richard against the grain*.¹⁵

Alexander Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov*, can to a certain extent be compared to *King Oedipus*. In Pushkin’s play there is no outright suspicion that Boris might be innocent, but there is such a thing as a suspicion that “truth” cannot be said to really exist during social and political crises. In great crises, there are warring factions, credulous crowds and the ones who fight for supremacy are often cynical,

ruthless and have no scruples about tampering with truths. In turbulent times “truth” is subjugated to the power of rumour and slander and so any accusation, if it but serves a political aim at a certain moment, may finally rise to received historical interpretation. In Pushkin we find a general scepticism against the truth value of any accusation. Underneath the persecution story there is another – in Pushkin’s case clearly mimetic – pattern visible that, pushed a little bit farther, might have led to the conclusion that also the accusation of the Uglich murder is nothing but the outcome of slander. The difference with *King Oedipus*, however, is that for Sophocles’ play there is a reception history in which almost every commentator insists on the mythical version. Pushkin, on the contrary, is often esteemed for the way he weaves a certain amount of ambiguity into his plots, and so to suggest that Boris is innocent is rather mainstream Pushkin interpretation than anything against the grain.

Remarkably, the ambivalences and ambiguities in Pushkin’s play have been removed in Mussorgsky’s libretto. For Mussorgsky, as I have tried to point out in this paper, Boris is definitely guilty. The next question to ask is – is Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* then a persecution text? Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, as Launspach argues, finally can be said to work as a persecution text, because we find in the protagonist “no agony, no internal struggle to identify with”.¹⁶ Things are totally different in Mussorgsky’s opera, with a portrayal of Boris who is, almost from the beginning, tormented by feelings of guilt and despair. Boris had wanted to save his country, to save his family, and in the end to save his soul, and we pity the man who has failed in all three. In other words, unlike *Richard III*, Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* is a story with a genuine tragic impact. The audience is not invited to experience the fall of Boris as a punishment – but as the lamentable outcome of forces that cannot be controlled.

If we suggest that Boris might be innocent after all, we are basically pointing at a wholly different plot. Within Mussorgsky’s opera, Boris’s guilt is a necessary plot-fragment without which the story as such would fall apart. Instead of countering the collective accusation by the golden mimetic road of suggesting the possibility of innocence, Mussorgsky chooses to raise empathy for the undeniably guilty protagonist. In true tragic vein, Mussorgsky moves away from the collective condemnation, by pitying or re-humanizing Boris, and in this sense, we may conclude, Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* is not a persecution text.

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¹ Phrase used in the BBC program *Spitting Image* ridiculing Russian news coverage on the 1986 Tsjernobyl nuclear disaster.

² World première, 27th January 1874 in the Marijinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. Brought to Paris by Serge Diaghilev, where it was first performed in 1908.

³ Première, September 29th 2008. The first staging of this production also took place in Amsterdam, with the première on June 1st 2001.

⁴ Girard 2001, p.7 vv.

⁵ Hughes 2007, p.76.

⁶ Academics typically denounce Girard as an over-pretentious theorist. For many of them this denunciation comes close to disqualifying anything Girard brings into the discussion. One further instance is: "Should we really extensive attention to this remarkable interpretation? Girard's postulate is like a pair of glasses that turns the text inside out", Vergrote 1996, p.136.

⁷ Goodhart 1978, quotes taken from p.61 and p. 68

⁸ For background material I made grateful use of Emerson & Oldani 1994.

⁹ In Russian history this period is called *Smuta* or "The Times of Troubles"

¹⁰ Also the word "scapegoat" is used as a metaphor, and even as a metaphor of a metaphor. See Elias 1992.

¹¹ The *bojares* were noble, sometimes very powerful, families surrounding the tsar at court. Notably Boris was from lower descent.

¹² Pushkin 2007, p.28.

¹³ This quote is from the television interview in *De eeuw ige zondebok*, broadcast by IKON in 1985.

¹⁴ Shostakovich 2009, p.17.

¹⁵ Launspach 2009, this paper has also been presented at the COV&R 2009.

¹⁶ Launspach 2009, the whole of this passage reads: "The difference [between *King Oedipus* and *Richard III*], I dare to say, lies in our *experience* of catharsis. In our play there is no agony, no internal struggle to identify with. We know from the start who the scapegoat is and witness his conscious exposure to criminal acts. In a short moment at the very end of the play Richard reflects on his actions. Within a couple of minutes he is vanquished and slain. And the audience is pleased. Not torn apart, not even shaky. We are pleased, because the villain is punished and everything is okay now, justice has been reinstalled."