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Title	Symptomatology in Friedrich Nietzsche and René Girard: Demarcation, Illustration and Onto-aesthetical Consequences
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Citation	Language and the Scientific Imagination : Proceedings of the 11th Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas (ISSEI), 28 July – 2 August 2008 at the Language Centre, University of Helsinki, Finland. https://blogs.helsinki.fi/issei2008 . ISBN 978-952-10-6118- 9.
Date	2010
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10138/15193



Symptomatology in Friedrich Nietzsche and René Girard:

Demarcation, Illustration and Onto-aesthetical Consequences

We all know that Nietzsche and Girard have lots of themes (Christianity, resentment, etc.) in common in their philosophies. They are also suitable for comparison in the sense that both analyze discourses and behavior in the light of their psycho-physiological background. While Nietzsche starts from instincts that would eventually stem from a will to expand (cf. *infra*), Girard postulates the evolutionarily profitable mimetism which overtook the instincts. In this text, I want to search for the onto-aesthetical consequences of their psycho-physiological point of view. Because of this viewpoint, I would like to call them ‘symptomatologists’. The term ‘symptomatology’ implies that the Nietzschean and Girardian ‘psychophysologies’ presuppose another treatment of linguistic and cultural signs and expressions in which not the search for their effects of signification is crucial. In a symptomatological context, signs and expressions are considered as symptoms for what lies hidden *in* and *through* the expressions, for which these are symptomatic. The description of a human as a ‘predator’, for example, is not just a metaphor with some ‘derived’ meaning, but might (!) be - in keeping with Girard – a symptom of mimetic or even masochistic fascination, whereas the animalisation could point at the obstacle-nature of someone who is both the mimetic model-obstacle and the object of desire. The concept ‘God’ on the other hand is not just some religious ‘idea’ but might (!), for Nietzsche, be a symptom of *décadence*. So, if we think symptomatologically, we are not primarily busy with effects of signification or even with referentiality but with the psycho-

physiological background of all sorts of behavior. There is one problem. If we think consistently, every symptomatology is of course itself a symptom of 'something'. Therefore, a symptomatology also has to be a metasymptomatology, which reflects on itself as involved in the mechanisms which it investigates and draws from this reflection guidelines on an appropriate treatment of this involvement. Girard is aware of this when he mentions the “épistémologie de l’amour”.¹ (For Nietzsche this is somewhat more difficult, because self-reflection is in his symptomatological philosophy in contradiction to a healthy, subconscious determination based on the instincts.) Girard’s view on love however, is also problematic. In my opinion, it must be clear that love shouldn’t be merely thought of as ‘just’ a positive form of de-differentiation, a kind of mirror image of the de-differentiation of violence. It should in no case imply that one gives oneself – yes or no as an *imitatio Christi* – up to a mimetic flux, be it a religious one, or a moral one, or a social one, or an emotional one that, at best, would bring a human being to fulfillment and insight. Although sentiments, social interactions, etc., and the manipulation of these are crucial for the guidance of the human being, *ideally* they have to be included completely in a rational way of thinking and living that is conscious of its circularity and practical implications and does not relapse into 'feeling' or 'faith'. Therefore, I’m very attracted to the idea of rational autonomy, which doesn’t mean ‘freedom’ in the romantic sense, but self-determination. I will say more about that when I will mention Spinoza at the end.

So, I want to discuss the onto-aesthetical consequences of the symptomatologies of Nietzsche and Girard. Before I can do that, I must present some general thoughts about Nietzsche.

In an unprecedented way, Nietzsche analysed all sorts of religious, philosophical, cultural, artistic and aesthetico-existential formulas as symptoms of psychological mechanisms with a physiological background. As I already stated, for Nietzsche, the instincts are at the basis of his analysis.² Nevertheless, he too concludes that man is existentially threatened by the loss of instincts, which is the origin of the consciousness that points at the same time to both the weakness of the organism as well as the strength of its survival instincts.³ This double assessment of consciousness is connected with a distinctive duality in his work. On the one hand, he admires the automatic, unconscious behavior of distinguished people⁴ and sees the ‘innocence’ and the spontaneity of this behavior – in combination with the actual amorality of it – as explanation for the susceptibility of the strong to the criticism from the resenting weak, who, after all, need and use their consciousness for their attacks.⁵ On the other hand, he criticises the automatized and therefore also unconscious untruthfulness of priests and theologians.⁶ Moreover, in the *Antichrist*, he describes Jesus Christ as an idiot whose instincts are so weak that they cannot bear impressions, so that automatically he cannot perceive any differences or hostilities in reality. His resentment remains completely subconscious.⁷ He literally lives in a ‘heaven on earth’. From a psychological viewpoint, we find on the one hand the pursuit of a positive state of impulsivity which at the most instrumentalises consciousness, on the other hand the struggle with false but internalized ideas and impressions that cause a false calmness⁸. The difference between both forms of ‘being-closed-in-oneself’ is the more ‘manic’ and natural character of the drive or impulsivity, positively appreciated by Nietzsche, which furthermore includes, based on its continuously aggressive and transforming activity, the demystification or destruction of false forms of peace.

It is not difficult to contrast this ‘mania’ or zest for living and growth with the, according to Nietzsche, life-threatening character of metaphysics and faith, the representatives of which are described by Nietzsche in the *Antichrist*, not accidentally, as pale people, leeches and vampires.⁹ However, the question is whether or not Nietzsche's concept of life is so viable itself. I think that Nietzsche's concept of ‘life’ reflects the (imagined) ultimate incarnation of what Girard calls “metaphysical autonomy”. Like the child that symbolises the *Übermensch*, the principle of life itself – one could even say: Dionysus – is equally innocent, playful and frivolous as it is – considered from within morality – subconsciously heartless and criminal by indifferently destroying existing forms. It is no coincidence that Girard considers – in the line of Freud, albeit from a radically different point of view – the child and the criminal next to the artist as typical metaphors for narcissism, which – according to Girard – does not really exist.¹⁰ The harshness of life poses not only no obstacle for Nietzsche in the glorification of it; on the contrary, it enhances his fascination.¹¹ We can explain this by means of Girard's view on masochism, which he has already connected with Nietzsche.¹²

The principle of life, controlled and observed by Dionysus, has to do with the narcissism that is also crucial for the distinction Nietzsche makes between “masters” and “slaves”. According to Nietzsche, the “masters” gave names to people and things while being consciously aware of their own sovereignty, of their own being, of the fact that they represent the most powerful and ‘real’ part of being.¹³ Subsequently, one can conclude that the others have at best a derived way of existence. The hierarchy is founded when the “master” awards himself ‘real being’. Nietzsche refers to the Greek word ‘*esthlos*’, which – according to Nietzsche – meant etymologically ‘having more

reality'.¹⁴ Nietzsche's view on the necessity of hierarchy is contaminated with the narcissism that we can also find in Nietzsche's conceptualisation of life in general. Therefore, his view is dominated by the idea of metaphysical autonomy. One cannot, in its true sense, 'strive' for the identification with this autonomy, since striving for satisfaction with and in oneself produces a pragmatic paradox. This is also the typically modern paradox of striving for originality in the double meaning of the word ('firstness' and singularity); one cannot *learn* how to be the first or to be unique.¹⁵ At the same time, Nietzsche also criticises the illusion of originality. In *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* he targets the concept of genius, which probably coheres with the gradual break-up between him and Wagner.¹⁶ Also interesting – because, just like the criticism of the genius discourse, it *seems* to be contradicting the unmediated and spontaneous identification with "life" – is also a passage in which he, *ex negativo*, defines good taste as the ability to resist the desire to strip nature of the masks behind which it hides.¹⁷ These masks are associated with the artistic creation of forms. The question is: when Nietzsche stresses the importance of masks and forms, doesn't that imply a rejection of life itself? Form *could*, in the Girardian point of view, be interpreted as the model-obstacle that presupposes some sort of distance in order to enjoy the suggestion it arouses. Still, this interpretation does not seem correct to me or at least incomplete. The pleasure of the form, which for Nietzsche also implies an active creating of forms ("nur für Künstler!"¹⁸), does not lead to a rejection of life or not even feelings of reservation regarding life, since precisely the deceptive and creative nothingness, which is the essence of life itself, turns out to be the biggest and therefore most fascinating obstacle, with which not only artists identify themselves when they create forms, while celebrating their own creative power, but also that part of the 'public' that is sensitive to what lies hidden in and through these forms, to the

creative potentiality of life as such, whereas life is nothing in itself. Those members of the public can only be artists themselves. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to recognize the creative power as the background and essence of all creative acts. This is the core of the onto-aesthetics that result from Nietzsche's concept of life, with which I would like to continue now.

We have observed that Nietzsche both factually embraces and criticises the originality discourse. In essence this is not to be considered a contradiction, since precisely the ability to collectively form traditions, structures and norms and consequently avoid an 'anarchistic' formlessness that, at best, could be overwhelming is linked by Nietzsche to the presence of healthy instincts, of a healthy cultural climate that supports great individuals. The forms that are made possible by these instincts, by such a cultural climate – also for instance, in the field of politics, so-called natural institutions¹⁹ – concern the whole *being* of man. What is constantly being pursued, individually as well as collectively, is to become and to create what one is virtually 'predestined' to, based on the instincts that constitute one's being. The 'meaning' of the forms that the philosopher or the artist in the Nietzschean sense enjoys and creates, is the sheer fact itself that those forms are the expression of the creative potential that connects the designer, the philosopher or the artist, with life. This 'fact', this connection appears for the right recipients, namely other 'artists', as a sign, as a symptom of affective and creative affinity. Philosophers and artists realise the creative transfiguration of reality, not from a dislike of, but as a participation in this meaningless reality, which 'merely' creates illusions, and is loved as such. We have to associate this point of view, I think, with the dematerialisation that is necessarily caused by the striving for metaphysical autonomy.

Nietzsche's onto-aesthetics imply that someone who has already 'real being' is creative as a consequence of this kind of being and becomes in that manner even more 'real', even more himself as a living representation of the creative nothingness which is the essence of life. The limit of this hyperbolic affirmation is therefore the figure of the *Übermensch*. In affirmative acts of creation, reality itself is transcended into "die Realität *noch einmal*".²⁰ What does all this have to do with Girard and with mimetism?²¹ Girard also sees the creative and aesthetic ability as a symptom of a healthy psycho-physiological state of being, in particular of a healthy mimetism, which renders, for instance, a realistic representation of mimetic phenomena in the form (!) of so called 'romanesque' works possible.²² Creative power and happiness result from the return of Being²³ which Girard associates with conversion and which refers to the end of the dematerialised and chaotic perception of reality that resulted from the metaphysical desire. This return entails an awareness of the importance of mimetism as the background of the form we give to existence and the products of our creative force. A real embracement of this awareness coincides with a full reintegration into reality. We finally found the principle of our life. Nothing else is really essential when we know and have this key to any real progress and happiness. This insight renders self-conscious creativity possible. Fulfillment is, however, already given before and beyond the realisation of creative acts, morally or aesthetically, even though such acts necessarily result from it, as well as they preserve and – indeed – enhance this fulfillment *hyperbolically* as its own consequence. Also for Girard – be it in my own, perhaps also rather 'creative' interpretation – the essence of life is the creative activity itself. As soon as man participates in this activity, his perfection is already achieved and all that he is left to do is to become even more what he already is.

Following the mimetic theory, this creativity appears to be the practical implication of a rational and ‘meta-mimetic’ point of view, which overcomes the romantic (and Nietzschean) conceptualisation of it.

I want to end my text with a short remark on the compatibility of a Girardian ontological-aesthetical view with the philosophy of Spinoza. Spinoza teaches us that real rationality consists of having insight in God or Nature, the only thing that exists on its own, independently, as the unity of everything, governed by necessity (cf. causality). When we understand that unity and when we can live according to that understanding, then we will live actively, which means that we can joyfully be and become even more who we really are. It is clear to me that also the mimetic theory doesn’t (have to) imply that we should depend on religion or on others in order to avoid scapegoating or romantic lies. The only thing we have to do, is to internalize the mimetic truth, which has to become a fixed structure in our brain in order to be able to regulate our way of thinking, acting and reacting in all sorts of situations. In order to do that, in order to internalize that truth, we do need some good examples, but our final goal must be to find that kind of rational fulfillment that is at the same time stable and productive.

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¹ Cf. René Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde. Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort* (Paris, Grasset, 1978), 371.

² (a.o.) Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung. oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophirt*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 71, 73, 85, 144 and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist. Fluch auf das Christenthum*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 171, 172, 175, 177, 180, 183, 190, 191, 196, 200-201, 212, 223, 242, 244, 248, 249, 250, 253.

³ Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 180-181.

⁴ Cf. Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 236.

⁵ Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, 120.

⁶ (a.o.) Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 175.

⁷ Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 200-201.

⁸ Cf. also: “Und was soll er [ein Philolog, kve] gar anfangen, wenn Pietisten und andre Kühe aus dem Schwabenlande den armseligen Alltag und Stubenrauch ihres Daseins mit dem Finger Gottes zu einem Wunder von «Gnade», von «Vorsehung», von «Heilserfahrungen» zurechtmachen!” (Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 233).

⁹ Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 228, 245, 248.

¹⁰ Girard, *Choses*, 504-506.

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, 122.

¹² René Girard, “To double business bound”. *Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 61-83.

¹³ This point of view is most clearly explained in the first part of Nietzsche’s *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral. Eine Streitschrift*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980), 257-289.

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogie*, 263.

¹⁵ Cf. “*Vademecum – Vadetecum*. / Es lockt dich meine Art und Sprach, / Du folgest mir, du gehst mir nach? / Geh nur dir selber treulich nach: – / So folgst du mir – gemacht! Gemach!”. Friedrich Nietzsche: *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. (“*la gaya scienza*”), ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 354.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Menschliches Allzumenschliches*, ed. Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari (München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 141-186 (passim).

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche contra Wagner. Aktestücke eines Psychologen*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 438-439.

¹⁸ Ibidem

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 196.

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, 79.

²¹ This paragraph should be read as (part of) an answer to Biebuyck, who developed a.o. the thesis that the poetical view of René Girard is a classicist one, because of the role that recognition, based on the privileged insight of some people in the audience, plays in the reception of Shakespeare. I hold that purely 'knowledge-based' classicism for too static. Benjamin Biebuyck, "Hermeneutiek van de openbaring. René Girards «Shakespeare: het schouwspel van de afgunst»,” *Documenta* 14:4 (1996).

²² Cf. Girard, *Mensonge*, 36.

²³ Cf. René Girard, *A Theater of Envy. William Shakespeare* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991), 336.