

MIMESIS, MOVIES,  
*AND* MEDIA

*Violence, Desire, and the Sacred*

VOLUME 3

*Edited by*  
SCOTT COWDELL,  
CHRIS FLEMING,  
*and* JOEL HODGE

B L O O M S B U R Y



# Mimesis, Movies, and Media

Violence, Desire, and the Sacred

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Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming, and Joel Hodge

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Theologian-in-Residence  
Scott Cowdell*

*To Eris and John Fleming, with much love, for all of yours  
Chris Fleming*

*To Ed Conrad, Anne Brown, and Rick Strelan, with heartfelt gratitude  
Joel Hodge*





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# Introduction

The astonishingly wide-ranging oeuvre of René Girard developed out of his early literary studies. From the great French writers of the later-nineteenth century, along with the novels of Dostoyevsky, Girard derived his triangular understanding of desire, which is focused on the model rather than the object of desire (refer to the Appendix and Glossary for a short overview of Girard's thought and definitions of key terms).<sup>1</sup> The escalating pathologies of mimetic desire represented by envy, rivalry, and violence were also uncovered by Girard in these sources, affording an early foretaste of his later, more developed accounts of sacrifice and apocalypse. Meanwhile, Girard discovered earlier-modern versions of his mimetic theory in the writings of Cervantes and Shakespeare.

Girard has had very little to say about modernist twentieth-century narrative, despite acknowledging that a work such as *The Waves*, by Virginia Woolf, could have easily gone into *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Such developments in the literary field have been left to literary scholars inspired by Girard, such as William A. Johnsen on high modernism (Ibsen, Joyce, Woolf), Stephen Gardner on F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jeremiah Alberg on Flannery O'Connor, Gary M. Ciuba on Southern fiction more generally (O'Connor, along with Porter, Percy, and Cormac McCarthy), Nidesh Lawtoo on Conrad and Lawrence, and Trevor Cribben Merrill on Milan Kundera.

Girard has not ventured into media theory or modern forms of narrative (e.g. film), either. And, even in the wider Girardian conversation, the application of Girardian hermeneutics to media remains an area thus far, if not *unexplored*, then certainly underexplored. In a related way, although Girardian studies has taken up mediation, it has less commonly taken up the idea of how that mediation itself has been mediated—that is, it has rarely concerned itself with what is often called, albeit presumptively, “*the media*.” This volume attempts a partial remedy of this surprising lacuna.

As you can see, a major focus in these pages is film and television (see Parts 2 and 3). Girardian film criticism is emerging in tandem with the abovementioned Girardian literary studies as a new frontier of mimetic theory. Indeed, reflection on film is beginning to provide a privileged *entree* to mimetic theory for many educators and newcomers to Girard alike. However, apart from a throwaway reference to *Seinfeld* as a leading source of contemporary mimetic awareness (in his book *Evolution and Conversion*), Girard himself does not dabble in popular culture. So we have had to do it for him.<sup>2</sup>

In *La Conversion de l'Art*, Girard maintains, unsurprisingly, “l'art ne m'intéresse [en effet] que dans la mesure où il intensifie l'angoisse de l'époque. Ainsi seulement il accomplit sa fonction qui est de révéler” (“art interests me only insofar as it intensifies the anxiety of the age. Only thus does it carry out its function, which is revelation”).<sup>3</sup> But he argues—harking back to an essay of 1957, reproduced in the same volume (“Où

va le roman?”)—that the novel may no longer be the “privileged form” of revelation; it may even, he says, be “outmoded” (in this early essay, Girard points out that both Sartre and Malraux eventually abandon the novel—perhaps this accounts for his own self-declared lack of interest in most literature that comes after Proust).<sup>4</sup> Whatever the case, in the very least we can allow—or hope—that our interpretive lenses are able to incorporate more than words on a page, allowing us to countenance the idea that high ideas may come in putatively low forms. Indeed, might such “revelations” have been broaching the bounds of the *fin de siècle* for some time, especially in contemporary film and media?

The role of narrative in contemporary Western societies is certainly changing. What we now know as novels of Charles Dickens were first serialized and eagerly awaited by an avid readership. Today, however, since the TV series has long replaced the bloated Victorian novel for popular audiences, Netflix is providing whole TV series for download so that viewers no longer even have to wait for the DVD release in order to gorge on their favorite narratives. Here the narrative is decoupled from its onetime authoritative diffusion by TV channels and stripped of the commercial setting sustained by advertising, making access to it less obviously mediated, through a direct commercial relationship. A related phenomenon is provided by new viewer interfaces, whereby the course of a developing storyline can be redirected by audience feedback. There are differing versions of this, from the choice of endings for fictional narratives to the voting-out of unfavored contestants in reality TV series. Video games represent perhaps the limiting case of this phenomenon, whereby individual skills and interests open up different paths through the “gamespace” to various participants.

There is, of course, the possibility that narrative itself might not only be busy relocating itself to non-traditional, non-textual locations, but that it may soon be eclipsed altogether. A major recent publishing phenomenon is the six-volume diaristic epic of Karl Ove Knausgaard, emerging under the collective heading “My Struggle.” Here is a widely-commented-upon departure in literary style, in which narrative structure is replaced by a meandering text extending the stream-of-consciousness forms of earlier modernism. Yet many find real satisfaction in such writing, even if it is literally “going nowhere.” They report a palpable sense of life and character despite the non-narrative portrayal, more like impressionist than academic painting (i.e. pictures that do not so obviously set out to tell a story, but are content to record impressions). The Norwegian comments on how his published diaries could more effectively mediate the reality of a world than narrative could, though they were “not about anything, but just consisted of a voice, the voice of your personality, a life, a face, a gaze you could meet.” It has been speculated that this might be a new beginning for realism, though it may also represent its end.

Despite this, narrative retains a crucial place at the heart of film and television. One might of course wonder if narrative can entirely be overcome, or if human brains will continue to discern narrative patterns in even disconnected experience, much as we irrepressibly impose meaningful patterns on the random shape of clouds. Even Knausgaard may be more narrativistic than he gives himself credit, especially as detailed memories of his abusive childhood have clearly not deserted him, while many



others subjected to similar trauma have excised these painful recollections from the narrative of their emerging selfhood, losing touch with them under a veil of forgetting. So perhaps it is sufficient to acknowledge the vigorous tenacity of narrative, despite its present re-homing in new contexts, and despite reports from Norway of its impending demise.

That we live in an era of media and the contemporary reimagining of narrative forms has done nothing to diminish the mimetic nature of *homo imitans*. If anything, modern media forms allow for various *amplifications, certainly not diminutions* of speed, of volume, of verisimilitude. Hence, this volume registers not simply an intellectual opportunity to engage with contemporary media, but also something of an obligation—to understand the world we actually inhabit. The first part of this volume engages in an attempt to understand the world mediated by *the* media.

We have an international collection here, reaching both across continents and generations. From our base in Australia, and with the core of this collection representing papers given at the third annual conference of the Australian Girard Seminar, held at the University of Western Sydney in January 2013, we have drawn in old and new scholars and friends from the Colloquium on Violence and Religion and further afield. The result is something of a taster in new directions for Girardian literary and media studies, taking mimetic theory largely beyond the written text. Exciting young scholars from Johns Hopkins and Adelaide, distinguished professors from UCLA and Kyoto, priests and postmodernists, couch potatoes, theorists and humorists, of different ages, institutional affiliations, and disciplinary orientations are all represented. Prominent among our contributors are several of today's emerging second generation of Girardian thinkers, in whose hands the exploration, critique, and development of mimetic theory is advancing. A particular tendency of the Australian Girard Seminar is also in evidence: to emphasize the currency and contemporary relevance of mimetic theory. There is also perhaps an Australian flavor to be discerned in this collection, as it approaches topics of high importance with a light touch.

As is always the case, it has taken a small village to raise this child, and any attempt to list all of the villagers would try the patience of even the most dedicated reader—carrying so many proper nouns that it would destroy the equanimity of all but the most diligent among us, while simultaneously risking offending the same reader for leaving crucial names off when so many others were allowed in. So what to do? While we are not awaiting invitations to any awards ceremonies (or at least are not prepared to admit as much here), if we *were* forced to give an acceptance speech it would necessitate loud and sincere thanks at least to *Imitatio*, whose generosity we cannot hope to reciprocate, save through the quality of our efforts; to Haaris Naqvi, who is helping make us part of the furniture at Bloomsbury; and to Christopher Brennan, a copyeditor so terrifyingly acute that his capacity to see errors so small they hardly seem to matter, as well as those so large we wonder how we missed them, leads us to suspect either divine or even alien intervention. Or both. Actually, *that* sounds like a good plot for a film—so, onward ...

Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming, and Joel Hodge

## Notes

- 1 For detailed and concise overviews of Girard's thought, see Scott Cowdell, "René Girard, Modernity, and Apocalypse," in *Violence, Desire, and the Sacred: Girard's Mimetic Theory Across the Disciplines*, ed. Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming, and Joel Hodge, 3–17 (London and New York: Continuum, 2012); and Chris Fleming, "Mimesis, Violence, and the Sacred: An Overview of the Thought of René Girard," in *Violence, Desire, and the Sacred, Volume 2: René Girard and Sacrifice in Life, Love, and Literature*, ed. Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming, and Joel Hodge, 1–13 (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014). See also the Appendix to this volume.
- 2 In this vein, alongside this volume, *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* has featured a number of articles on film criticism.
- 3 René Girard, *La conversion de l'art: Textes rassemblés par Benoît Chantre et Trevor Cribben Merrill* (Paris: Carnets Nord, 2008; Flammarion, 2010), 15.
- 4 Ibid.

Part One

# Media and Representation



# On the One Medium

Eric Gans

Ever since Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase “the medium is the message” in *Understanding Media* (1964),<sup>1</sup> the notion of “media” has entered the consciousness of the human species, which media of one kind or another have indeed always connected. McLuhan’s rewriting of world history in terms of the medium characteristic of a given era (writing, print, radio ...) was surely prophetic; his differentiation (does anyone remember this?) between *hot* media (e.g. radio) and *cool* media (e.g. television), no doubt less so. But what his writing was prophetic *of* was something McLuhan himself would not have been able to anticipate. The fulfillment of McLuhan’s media prophecy (as well as of very different earlier dreams of universal libraries and museums, from early modern encyclopedias to the Mundaneum of the Belgian visionary Paul Otlet [1868–1944]), has been the emergence of a universal medium that seems well on its way to absorbing all the others: the One Medium—the Internet.

The universality of the sight-and-sound-reproducing *screen* with access to the interconnected web of human culture is the virtual realization of the universality of the (human, cultural) *scene*.<sup>2</sup> It is surely not without significance that, for the moment, the word *media* is insistently associated with the word *social*. The One Medium is remarkable even more for the ever-more-realized potential of its universal clientele than for its absorption of the old media. Yet the two phenomena are complementary. The Internet would be far less significant as merely a universal system of telephones or television broadcasts.

We have hardly begun to assess the potential theoretical and practical consequences of this transformation. We shouldn’t expect the old media simply to disappear; some forms of presentation of audiovisual data (books, magazines, CD players ...) may remain more practical in some contexts than the ubiquitous computer/television screen. And it is useless to speculate on the emergence of new platforms through which the One Medium may be accessed. Google Glass may be just a gimmick, or else it, or something like it, may become mainstream. Perhaps holographic 3-D presentations will one day become practical—and portable. Those of us old enough will recall that the early, pre-Internet versions of “tablet” computers didn’t sell very well, whereas now I am typing this text on (one of my) iPads, and younger people seem to prefer smartphones’ still smaller screens, even for watching movies. This development is

a direct result of the Internet's ability to distribute its products through ever more compact, if not simpler, devices.

But if speculation on platforms is futile, we can already begin to reflect on the apparently definitive phenomenon of the Internet as the One Medium that, precisely, reduces all earlier media to secondary differences of platform and presentation. A movie in a theater is, one might say, independent of the Internet, but at some point it may well become stored on the Internet (on the site of Netflix or Hulu), downloadable in only secondarily modified forms to computer screens and even phones, at which point the media distinction has been reduced to a matter of platform. Today movies are commonly shot in digital video, that is, as binary files, sequences of bytes. What will be the consequences of the reduction of all of culture—art, music, cinema, and the various forms of literature (literary texts, but also records of their performances)—to collections of bytes, to files coded to be displayed (at least for the moment) on two-dimensional screens? It is hardly insignificant that books and paintings, the two most prominent visual media of the past centuries, are “screen-ready.”

My wife, Stacey Meeker, director of publications for the UCLA Graduate Students Association (which, in a university program I believe unique in the entire world, sponsors some 30 scholarly journals run by graduate students), had to deal recently with a practical problem posed by this universalization. Journals increasingly appear in electronic form, making them cheaper to produce and above all easier to distribute, and are often made available online free of charge (“open access”); the articles that appear in them are “just” computer files. This has led some ideologues (notably in the Free Culture movement) to attempt to impose on these articles a uniform “CC-BY” licensing agreement (CC stands for “Creative Commons,” a non-profit foundation; see “About the Licenses,” <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>, accessed March 15, 2014) that would allow users of these materials, once the original source is referenced, to “tweak, remix, and build upon” the materials they contain. One can imagine the headaches the author of a scholarly article would have with this form of licensing, where inclusion of his name in the bibliography associates him with a “tweaked” version of his text that he may not even recognize. Clearly this terminology was designed (in “old media” terms) for music or video; text can be modified but hardly “remixed.” But if everything is just a sequence of bytes, then the tweak-remix temptation becomes understandable as an easy gesture to creative freedom, one-size-fits-all, that only reflection on these works’ original intention can prevent.

Stacey was able to stave off this particular challenge to her journals’ scholarly and textual integrity. But the question it poses for the future is whether our sense of the difference between genres of representations—musical, plastic, textual ... —will indeed erode not just anecdotally but permanently as a result of the subsumption of all our creations under the One Medium. Thus what for the moment can be seen as the too-quick overgeneralization of a protocol may in time come to reflect a new reality: that in an Internet world of files and bytes, such things as textual integrity no longer need to be respected. However unlikely this may seem, we are nonetheless obliged to face the question of how current media genres evolve when they are increasingly seen within the One Medium.

In the domain of video-cinema-TV, one evolution is already apparent. The growing practice of binge-watching whole TV series at once on one's computer or on a cyber-connected TV breaks down the chronology-based notion of a "series." For example, Olivier Assayas's *Carlos* (2011) was released in two versions, a movie-length version of 165 minutes and a three-episode "mini-series" version of 338 minutes. Watching such a film over the Internet, the two versions can be seen not as representatives of two media genres, but merely as occupying more or less time.

## The utopian market

This reflection on media is not the place for an analysis of the economy of the Internet. But the latter's self-sustaining nature should not be taken for granted. As the recent offer of \$19 billion for a start-up indicates, all these marvelous free or near-free services are sustained by a vast input of advertising dollars, which in turn are brought in by the steady growth of Internet commerce. The prow of this ship bears the figure of the Amazon, a non-phallic warrior whose victory in battle combines aggression with attraction. It is this market-grounded utopia that nourishes the "social media" that help make the Internet the locus of an uncontrolled and centerless interaction, an esthetic and practical sharing that shows the One Medium at its most typical. Nowhere is the unity of text, song, and image more obvious than in the tweets, Facebook entries, Snap- and WhatsApp chats, Instagram posts, and so on, that so many spend so many hours posting, sending, receiving, resending, "liking," and commenting on. To the extent that we are "all" equally creators and consumers of representations, their absorption by One Medium is our final destiny. But we must not forget that this operation is financed by the "capitalist" market, and that the market, here as everywhere, is itself dependent on political systems, with peace enforced by arms. The visible existence of the Internet in places in the world where peace does not reign, or its use to promote neo-Nazism or jihad, depends upon its core remaining in lands that have not been at war since I was a small child. There is little chance that the Internet would survive the first days of World War III.

## Media holdouts: The two originary modes

There remain two sets of phenomena that cannot be reduced to the One Medium because they depend on an immediate relationship to their public: *performances* on the one hand, and *art-objects* on the other. Students of GA will recognize the two essential components of the human (cultural-representational) scene: the sacred central object and its sacrificial/alimentary substitutes, and the peripheral human group that surrounds the center, celebrates and consecrates it, and eventually, in a typical rite, takes nourishment from it.

## Performance

We are all familiar with Jacques Derrida's pregnant revelation of the *différance* or *deferral* inherent in writing, although to situate it in a coherent anthropology (such as GA claims to be) it is necessary to supplement it with René Girard's conception of the human as, to put it in GA terms, *the species that poses a greater danger to itself than does the outside world*.<sup>3</sup> The deferral Derrida associates with the sign as a member of a paradigm within which the speaker/writer must choose is indeed inherent in all use of representation, all "media," which term in this context takes on the literal reality of a *mediating* element, both between me and the object I refer to, and more essentially, between me and the other human(s) I am communicating with *about* (rather than fighting *over*) this central object. Derrida's most telling point is that the temporal separation between emission and reception characteristic of writing is in fact an aspect of *all* communication through signs—notably the apparently immediate relation between speaker and hearer—and by extension, of all human interaction.

But Derrida perversely makes of this revelation a debunking of the notion of "presence," which reflects what is in his view the spurious social unity achieved in ritual (which he rather unanthropologically associates as a matter of course with centralized hierarchy, neglecting the essential egalitarianism of *les formes élémentaires* described by Durkheim).<sup>4</sup> Derrida views the center of the public scene as a kind of pharaonic sun radiating the unifying force of the community and its centralized leader (we might recall that, in his 1873 *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, Max Müller posited the sun as the object of the first human worship and therefore of the first linguistic/representational sign).<sup>5</sup> This critique of presence fails to grasp the element of *mediation* that is fundamental to "presence" itself as a human phenomenon—a mediation nicely expressed in topological terms by Sartre's idea of the *néant* that intervenes between the human consciousness and the world.<sup>6</sup> Even in moments of social "effervescence" (to use Durkheim's term), the apparent immediacy of human interaction is mediated by signs—which may on occasion exacerbate rather than moderate its potential violence, a phenomenon familiar to Georges Bataille, and of course to Girard. Ritual, which provides the tacit model for Derrida's examples of "presence," is by its very nature a "paradigm" that the participants are following, however apparently spontaneous their actions.

Which is to say that our relationship to "performance" in any form is always mediated, even if, as in ritual, we are among the participants. Thus we are encouraged to speculate as to the degree to which performance can be (re)produced in the One Medium. The point is often made that the proliferation of pornography and such things as "sex dolls," or practices such as "sexting," reflect a movement of sexual activity toward the latter pole of the equilibrium Chamfort noted two centuries ago between *le contact de deux épidermes* and *l'échange de deux illusions*—and if sex leaves the sphere of performance, the species is in big trouble. Yet the retreat into the world of the imagination extends the chain of mediations between the imaginer and the performer without really cutting it off. Societies may decline demographically, but it is surely too soon to associate the One Medium with the death of human



connection, sexual and otherwise. The dream of transforming the “real” world into a representation in fulfillment of Schopenhauer’s (and in a very real sense, Nietzsche’s) nineteenth-century dream cannot be realized except *as* a representation. We cannot conceive a human world wholly devoid of performative interaction, and therefore of performative art as well.

We can watch a play on TV; we can watch an opera (for a much lower price) in a movie theater, but we cannot be unaware of the difference between seeing a worldly event and watching its transmission on a screen. Even if the two elements may be combined, for example in “live TV” where there is a studio audience to serve as our surrogates, no one can be oblivious to the difference between watching the screen and watching the actors themselves perform. A theater or concert performance takes place in real time and is accessible only to those present, whereas anything that appears in a Medium is at least in principle re-produced and therefore indefinitely re-producible.

Thus it is not surprising that as the One Medium assimilates the traditional performance media, it does not give rise to radically new forms of performance on its own. The ultimate source of all representational forms is living human interaction on the cultural scene of (deferred) presence, and to the extent that this interaction is not simply reduced to an exchange of symbols, it must itself be witnessed. We cannot predict the space live performance will continue to occupy in the culture. To what extent will live theater, opera, ballet, concerts of popular and classical music continue to flourish? Will DJ’ed raves take the place of rock concerts, for example? But even if public live performance were wholly replaced by some form of cybervideo, given that live performance is the principal source of media reproductions, resisting (indefinitely?) its dethronement by increasingly sophisticated techniques of animation, we can say with no obvious fear of historical refutation that in order to fill at least some, and the most meaningful, of the screens of the One Medium, performance must be maintained as a human practice, and therefore as a *profession*. Actors, singers, dancers will remain, and consequently there will always be a demand for their live as well as reproduced and/or simulated performances. At least for the moment, “lifelike” advanced animation still requires human models. But I would predict (in contrast with many sci-fi plots) that even the future’s most lifelike “virtual” human performers will fail to create the link we feel with living humans.

We might consider the example of the game of chess. Computer programs have by now achieved ratings beyond the capacity of any human player, yet we still hold “human” tournaments and championships in which fans display immeasurably greater interest than in the higher-rated cybernetic battles.

## **Performance art**

Performance art is best understood as an esthetic ritual. Its practitioner combines the performing arts with the plastic arts by playing both of the constitutive roles of ritual: the sacred center and the human periphery. The artist-sacrificer as representative of the mob performs a sacrifice, normally on his/her own body, although other symbolic and/or real victims may be added or substituted. This activity of the artist-as-artwork

is not truly reproducible in the One Medium. A reproduction of an art-performance is better understood as a reportage than as a re-presentation comparable to showing a play or ballet on screen. For in the latter performance, the players act and suffer only “in the play,” whereas the performance artist and/or his/her victim-double “suffers” at least a bit for real.

This tension between the real and its representation within the One Medium is itself productive. Such things as Lady Gaga music videos, not to speak of the graphic violence of film, suggest that the increased unity of the Internet encourages more intensely simulated performances that at least appear to threaten to pass over into lived reality. This intensification of the scenic appears destined to compete with the Medium’s invasion by the banality of the social media and its endless reproduction of “life itself.” If the cat videos and Facebook photos and tweets of everyday activity make use of the Internet’s limitless connectivity to transmit the only perfunctorily estheticized stuff of daily life, then to be an “artist” requires that performance be *marked*, and a key possibility for this marking is not an excess of skill or even spectacle but *sacri-ficiality*, (the image of) irreversible violence, which is in such cases a not altogether mocked sacrality.

### **The art-object**

The art-object, separated now from the sacrificial artist of performance art, is the complementary element of the cultural-ritual scene that resists assimilation to the Medium, even as it may itself include displays, that is, screens of all kinds. Because the plastic artwork takes the place of a sacred object re-presenting the central divinity, it cannot be merely a (reproducible) representation. Although the archetype of the art-object is the icon/statue representing a god, the substitutive sacrificial animal of ritual provides a more originary, pre-esthetic model. It is eaten as a representative not simply of its species but of the sacred, peace-bringing center itself, traceable in principle to the scene where humans first deferred consumption via a reciprocally shared proto-linguistic sign. Separated from all but the loosest definition of “art,” the sacrificial animal remains at the center of the religious and secular feasts of the modern world. Here, at least, the difference between reality and Medium is clear: it is felt in the pit of the stomach.

In the world of the One Medium, the contrast between the in-principle indefinite reproduction of non-nourishing, merely signifying signs and the object-reality of the art-object is enhanced. The Internet appears to have stimulated an increased fetishizing of the object-ness of the object, of its presence as and on display. This phenomenon may be traced back to Duchamp’s urinal (“Fountain,” 1917), but whereas Duchamp’s gesture of exhibiting a “found object” among crafted works of art was openly subversive—less of the works themselves than of the pseudo-sacred space in which they were obligatorily exhibited—the same cannot be said for such things as Jeff Koons’s notoriously high-priced “sculptures” of balloon animals. Here the revolutionary gesture is to deny that there is *any* useful distinction to be made between the “readymade” and the “true”—pretentious, artistically accomplished artwork. Koons’s sculptures are, so to speak, scandalously expensive *reproductions* of urinals.