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Masks and mirrors of subject identity. Between the petrification of language and the mimeticization of the gaze

The mimetic character of violence is so intense that once violence is installed in a community, it cannot burn itself out. To escape from the circle it is first necessary to remove from the scene all those forms of violence that tend to become self-propagating and to spawn new, imitative forms.

(Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 95)

Abstract: The article addresses the issue of the constitution of the subject and the formation of identity in a world that is rapidly changing along with threats it cannot control. The discussion will span between the epistemic interpretive perspectives of Rene Girard and Jacques Lacan, involving aspects of the understanding of the subject, the meaning of language, the perception of the image, and the action of the Real. In the cognitive approach, the goal is to show the space of violence, crisis, trauma and finally language as a representative of culture. In the interpretive perspective, two (*signifiant*) mechanisms of human behavior are presented: mimicry and petrification, the action of which is revealed in the subject, or for the subject. The critical perspective will refer to the contemporary condition of the subject and its position in relation to nature, culture and social conditions. As for pedagogical discourse, the question is formulated: how do we understand the reality in which the subject exists, and what is the dimension of violence

that organizes culture or emerges from this culture? The text uses concepts borrowed from Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis.

Keywords: subject, identity, violence, mimicry, language, gaze, lacanian psychoanalysis

The search for new spaces of interpretation in discourses and social practices is rooted in the endless encounters of another impossibility, which we could call the return of the Real that persistently and intrusively triggers further crises. Thus, there is a crisis of subjectivity, identity, personality, masculinity, femininity and, consequently, a crisis of the family, fertility, parenting, and behavior, not to mention a crisis of education. And if there is a crisis, it must be without a doubt due to some kind of oppression, violence, suffering and ultimately trauma. We constantly have to deal with the different faces of violence and what we could call **wound culture** originating in social trauma (Seltzer 2015). Thus, if the subject is in permanent crisis leading to post-traumatic rejection or denial of identity, then, as Seltzer argues, the abnormal normality of trauma becomes a model of subjectivity and social relations inherent in **wound culture** (Seltzer 2015, p. 353). This interpretation views trauma as the product of mimetic identification, which can only be possible if it represents an inability or a petrification of the ability to identify with others. As a result, trauma becomes a determinant of the subject's place in **wound culture** by marking his or her private existence and the failure of the social (Seltzer 2015, p. 352).

Meanwhile, Lacanian psychoanalysts approach the problem of crisis with pragmatism and recognize that it is a *signifiant* that has always been present in social spaces, discourses, or in the office while resonating since Freud, who called it trauma. The Lacanian understanding of trauma takes on a different dimension, as it becomes a moment of rupture that the subject must face despite not knowing how to explain what has violently invaded his or her life (Vanderveken 2022, p. 96). Of course, this is a clinical approach, in which working with the symptom that follows the trauma offers a chance to deal with what is at first impossible for the subject. Be that as it may, we are constantly called upon to grapple with the answer to the question of how the position and condition of the subject, whose meaning is represented by a *signifiant*¹ defined by some crisis, is changing in the modern world. The

¹ Signifiant is a term Lacan borrowed from de Saussure. Lacan referred to this basic element as signifier (signifiant) so that the words "linguistic sign" "acoustic image"

problem begins when there is a petrification of the *signifiant* with which the subject cannot cope. Lacan calls this a subject that is petrified by the *signifiant* and is incapable of asking any questions. The problem reveals itself when such a petrified subject lives as well as acts, but refuses to think about who he or she is (Soler 1995, p. 48).

Viewed from this perspective, the studies of critical educators showing the growing problem of “petrification of the child’s emerging identity in school” (Szczepka-Pustkowska 2014) appear threatening. Unfortunately, more and more often, this is a child denied the ability to speak, left all alone with images stripped of meaning, and ultimately ensnared by the ritualization of appearances that no one notices anymore. This is a child who, in defense against the actions of the Real, remains petrified through a spectrum of various symptoms, unable to cope with a reality that can only be safely accessed through language representing the Symbolic order. For this to happen, however, there needs to occur what Lacan called the parents’ *lalangue* communicated as the place that the child occupies in their desire and in their *jouissance*: defining how they welcomed the child into their lives (Węc 2016). This is a very important act, because *lalangue* is a deposit, a substance, a petrification, in which the group’s way of dealing with its unconscious experience is marked. This unconscious experience stands for the effect of speech and discourse on the substance of the body as well as for what element of discourse, in any given social relationship, has ordered and historically transmitted the *jouissance* that is deposited in language (Soler 2014).

In my discussion, I will use Lacanian topological triangulation to determine the logic of causality of the discourse I am attempting. This involves the use of interpretation determined by language, which indicates that a *signifiant* of crisis can be triggered by the mechanisms of mimeticization and petrification that have become cultural phenomena. In terms of the subject’s understanding, there is also the context of a logical turn leading from Freud’s topography of the subject, based on the two topoi of the human mental apparatus, with the first topoi introducing the space of the functioning of the unconscious, (pre)conscious and conscious subject, and the second topoi delineating the structure of the subject defined by the three mental realms of the *Id*, *ego* and *superego*, to Lacan situating the subject topologically in its fluidity and indeterminacy in relation to the three mental orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real.

and “concept” are replaced by words that evoke each other while simultaneously opposing each other (Węc 2012).

The scapegoat or the violence of mimetic identifications

I begin my discussion with an interpretation of Rene Girard's anthropological **concept of violence**, but only to the extent which is determined by the signifiers defined in the introduction of the article. Girard's thought sparked my interest many years ago, especially with regard to the interpretation of mimeticism, which appropriates the subject by sacrificing it on the altar of violence hijacking its existence, and marking it with inevitable suffering. This startling vision of the organization of the subject's universe and the construction of culture emerging from the abyss of mimesis exposes the mythic anchoring in the primitive sacrum. Girard has formulated a universal persecutory pattern showing violence as a specific principle of regulating social relations in a serious social and cultural crisis. The persecutory pattern is based on four stereotypes: the stereotype of general differentiation, the stereotype of differentiating crimes, the stereotype of sacrificial stigmas and the stereotype of violence (Girard, 1991, p. 37), which, according to Girard, means the authenticity of acts of rape and crisis. Consequently, the occurrence of sacrificial signs – anything that suggests the affinity of these criminal signs with crisis – is enough to identify and annihilate the victim as the one held responsible for the crisis that occurred.

Girard adopts a highly pessimistic vision of reality when showing that culture has its origin in violence, which shifts the Freudian formula of culture as the source of suffering to a completely different place of understanding the world in which humans have come to live. Like Freud and Lacan, Girard applied triangulations establishing a logic of causality for human relations constituted by the object of desire, the mediator (rival) of desire, and the subject of desire. In interpreting the scapegoating mechanism, he distinguished three stages: the mimetic crisis, violence against the victim and the sacralization of the victim. Undoubtedly, this theory was influenced by this philosopher's conception of language. So, we are all under **the power of language**, which is the most reliable indicator of "being from" somewhere, and thus exposes what the subject would like to hide. We can also speak of the aversion and impotence of language in erasing the differences that the subject wants to hide. According to Girard, language always says too much and too little, even if it satisfies every matter has its opposite or rage and uproar that mean nothing (Girard 2019, p. 94). In this sense, too, the very desire to integrate (e.g., with another culture) is an attempt to achieve the perfection of its imitation. However, this is not possible, as there will always be someone who will expose the subject by exploiting the impossible

aspects of cultural mimicry, such as the language that lies in the depths of the subconscious of the human psyche (Girard 1987, p. 162). Ultimately, he concludes that Logos Phobous (Greek for language of terror) is ultimately the language of mimetic **desire** and violence, which needs no words to circulate among people (Girard 2019, p. 201).

A pessimistic vision of the world is also found in the concept of mimetic desire, which is thought to be the basis of subjective existence. Girard's claim that mimetic desire is identifiable already in a child, who has no problem with it, is worth noting. Things are different in an adult, who is more likely to be ashamed to admit that he or she mimics another. Of course, this is due to the fear of revealing a lack in his or her being. This leads the subject to mislead others by giving false information about him/herself, while expecting others to imitate him/herself thus hiding the fact that he/she is an imitator. In this sense, the subject, upon encountering another subject who appears complete in comparison with him/herself, wishes to compensate for his/her shortcomings and to make sense of his/her existence. In the chapter entitled "Metamorphoses of Desire," Girard writes that desire according to the Other is always the desire to be the Other² (Girard 2001 p. 89). This means that in order to desire a similar fusion with the substance of the Other, one must feel an insurmountable revulsion for one's own substance (Girard 2001 p. 61). Consequently, all conflict, rivalry and competition have their origin in mimetic desire transforming into mimetic competition. Mimesis becomes the meaning of human life in every aspect of life from the minutest details of everyday life through the grand rituals of culture religion, ideology, or politics. Mimesis is both the source of development and the source of the understanding of good and evil and, by implication, the source of every crisis.

The Giradian crisis thrusts people into a constant struggle that deprives them of what differentiates humans from one another by essentially robbing them of their "individuality" and causing language to be threatened (Girard 2019, p. 77). During a crisis, everyone always has to utter the last word of violence, thus forcing his/her opponent to remain silent; everyone wants to strike a decisive blow: the blow that will not be followed by further blows and that will thus serve as a model for a ritual (Girard 2019, p. 171) This ubiquitous crisis governs all aspects of knowledge, its polemical nature, and the rhythm of its development. Girard finds that our anthropological vocation stems from the distinct nature of Western society. This vocation intensifies as the crisis accelerates to become an increasingly serious tragic crisis.

² Let us recall that Lacan says that the desire of the subject is the desire of the Other.

The only possible way of containing these crises is through **rites** of passage, the purpose of which is to shape, like the original crisis, any potential crisis caused by some loss of difference. The goal is to turn the terrifying uncertainty that always accompanies the emergence of contagious violence into certainty. If rites of passage are always successful, if they achieve their goal every time, they tend to slowly transform into a mere more or less “symbolic” rehearsal as one becomes certain of their outcome. The sacrificial nucleus, the central element of the ritual, then also disappears, so it is no longer very clear what the “symbol” refers to (Girard 2019, p. 389). A key premise in Girard’s theory is also that ritualization allows for the control of violence rooted in mimetic competition and unequal distribution of desirable items. Under this view, people are incapable of either taking responsibility or of self-reflection that would allow them to discern their own participation in the conflict. Ultimately, everyone is pitted against everyone and violence spins out of any control. In the end, the destructive stages of either individual or social conflict are set in motion, which leads to a search for a “scapegoat” to blame in order to defuse the conflict. The figure that Girard used is a personification of the crisis of people who are convinced of this victim’s guilt. Killing the **scapegoat** ends the crisis by channeling the collective violence, directing it toward one arbitrarily chosen member while the community experiences reconciliation.

Summarizing the discussion of Girard’s conception of culture and the manner in which it is interpreted, the question emerges of whether, and to what extent we are therefore participants in a collective trauma. (LaCapra 2015 p. 61): a trauma that can be associated with what Girard analyzes as a sacrificial crisis, accompanied by either danger or mimetic violence. In his view, we have been immersed in mimeticism. Some are fortunate to have good role models and the knowledge of how to withdraw and distance themselves. Others are not so lucky and have bad role models (Girard 2018, p. 177). Of course, in the face of this, prohibitions must be formulated, the transgression of which triggers further crises. Analyzing Girard’s concept, one gets the impression that the Real is part of the subject’s reality as something permanent rather than happening. It is as if the Real were at work at all times. Girard exposed what most of us find intolerable. Although Girard inferred his concept by applying hermeneutic tools to the interpretation of cultural texts, he reduces the meaning of language to nothing more than a differentiating, alienating and even exclusionary factor if it in any way distinguishes itself from some collective identification. It seems that the reason for this approach to language is also to reduce it to the level of mimesis: only in the horizon of

what Lacan would call the Imaginary order. In the end, it can also be argued that the subject itself with its willingness to violate prohibitions is a reason for Girard to consider it a scapegoat identified with the identities of violence, divinity, power, or the victim; in other words, with mimesis.

Identity masquerades a case of anamorphic error of perspective

Lacan's mimicry is closely linked to the dialectic of the constitution of subjectivity and the processes of identification in identity formation. Thus, the subject occupies a central place in Lacan's psychoanalytic conception. When referring to the self-constituting subject, one must consider the identification with the Other, originally through the Oedipus complex, which, thanks to the normalizing function of sublimation, helps us determine the changes in the identity of the subject. Freud showed in his works that the need for "topographical" coordination of mental dynamics is related to secondary identification through the introjection of the image of the same-sex parent. So, the sexual development of the subject automatically becomes integrated into the consideration of the formation of his or her identity. In this sense, identity – in the stereotypical or trivialized sense – is only a mask that, for Lacan, is the effect of mimicry, which is a kind of anamorphic "error of perspective." This error is what enables one to resemble someone or something that is externally imposed on a person and leaves the subject embedded in an image. Mimicry shows something insofar as it is different from what could be called (being) itself, which is at the back. The effect of mimicry is camouflage, in a strictly technical sense. It is not a matter of blending in with the background, but of becoming mottled against a mottled background, exactly the way that camouflage works in human warfare. Lacan also describes a phenomenon called intimidation, which entails the survalue that the subject is always trying to achieve with his/her appearance. However, he reminds us not to rush to introduce intersubjectivity into this game. For we must remember that whenever we are dealing with imitation, we should beware of thinking too quickly about the Other who is supposedly being imitated. Unlike Girard, Lacan believes that mimicry is merely the reproduction of an image, not the reproduction of another subject. (Lacan 1981)

What is at the heart of Lacan's theory is that beyond the Symbolic order of language, there exists and operates the Imaginary function of the gaze, which is worth considering in the educational relationship to be as important as speaking. After all, it is no secret that the gaze reflects who the subject is to the Other. If either speaking or looking fails to occur, building

a relationship with the Other may be impossible. Thus, the organization of the educational process itself cannot be more important than educational sensitivity and concern, in which the teacher must take care to embody the idea whereby the Other will come to exist for the subject through the constitution of the subject's desire, rather than through the construction of his or her mimetic identity prosthesis. The essence of the Lacanian concept of the child's subject formation lies in the assumption that the child sees him/herself in relation to the Other. It is the gaze of the Other that gives the child validation and allows it to apprehend its body as a whole, even though this apprehension does not occur in the child itself, but precisely in the gaze of the Other. Only then does the subject acknowledge, insofar as he or she receives validation from the Other, that what he or she sees in the mirror is him or her. From this moment, the subject becomes trapped in the gaze and speech of the Other, for since the gaze and speech appear, the subject tries to attune him/herself to the Other and respond to his/her desire. It is also necessary to understand that when the child passes through the mirror phase, he/she is able to say "I" and establish the subject in relation to the symbolic ideal of the Self, with all the baggage of the parents' ideals and judgments, in which it will be trapped from that moment on.

Lacan believes that the Symbolic order (linguistic: I am what I am called) should become crucial in the child's development, thus superseding the Imaginary order (image: I am what others see me as). Certainly, the mirror phase, during which the child's initial identification is made, determines his/her future identifications. Reaching the ideal Self is tantamount to accepting the social values represented by the Other and confirming that the subject is already embedded in language. In effect, the image that is reproduced by the subject is only a response to the need of the Other. We see clearly here what the difference between the Symbolic and Imaginary orders is, and how important this is for the constitution of subjectivity and the formation of the subject's identity. **This difference is marked by entry into language or entrapment in the gaze of the Other**, which is a sort of petrification that locks the subject in a trap, liberation from which can bring at most the production of a symptom (Węc 2015). If the subject fails to cope with the situation, he or she must face the trauma that petrifies what the Real brings to the situation.

Lacanian preoccupation with the subject, his/her identifications and identity gives us hope that what we commonly call an identity crisis does not in fact occur in the dimension in which it is posited. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe also reminds us of this, and stresses that dialectical thought, whose

source is the reconciliation of difference constitutive of identity, will always be the result of mimesis whose representations are visible either through imitation of reality, or through the supplementation of what nature itself is unable to produce (Lacoue-Labarthe 2014, p. 42). Nevertheless, there will always be a gap in the system of representation itself. Potentially, we can assume that there is no possibility that the premise of “the same” will not be subject to the principle of mimicry. And although the operation of the “forgetting effect” is presupposed, we will always reveal the difference in identity through repetition.

Lacan refers to the function of seeing, which can be considered an error of perspective. He reveals the gaze as such in the anamorphic transformation, in its pulsating, flashing and extended function, as seen in this painting, which is merely a trap for the gaze, since anamorphosis shows that the goal of painting is not to realistically reproduce objects in space. The discussion on anamorphosis highlights the importance of the gaze, which plays an increasingly prominent role in the modern world. After all, we cannot close our eyes and stay silent in a world where reality is being created by media coverage based on a mass-produced images devoid of a symbolic meaning. The phenomenon of anamorphosis is part of the interpretive sequence I have been undertaking: where tongue-ear-eye cease to be instruments of the mind, and become representations of desire through speaking-listening-seeing. In this case, the assumption that seeing and looking (in the same way as speech and speaking or hearing and listening) reveal a different perspective of cognition, one warranting the invocation of the Lacanian dialectic of the gaze, in which the principle of anamorphosis opens up a hitherto invisible horizon behind which another meaning is hidden: a horizon accessible only to those who know where to turn their gaze (Węc 2015, p. 68).

There remains the question of violence, which has a special significance for Lacan as a clinician. Of course, in psychoanalytic interpretations, we find that violence is rooted either in what is repressed or in what is associated with Lacanian *jouissance*. In either case, the representations of violence are grounded in the Imaginary order, when no passage through the Symbolic order has taken place. Lacan pointed to the presence of aggression as a residue in the Imaginary order after the mirror phase, where a matrix is constituted on the basis of the mirror image, on the basis of which all subsequent relations of the subject to someone similar to him or her are formed, from the order of the competing alternative: he or she or I. This means, however, that aggression is the result of the inability to accept another subject due to his or her otherness. The second very important aspect is the representations of

violence or even the obscenity of social discourse ruthlessly taking away the subject's voice in recognition that he or she has nothing to say. Here language becomes a representation of the trauma of the Other fighting a constant war against the Law.

Instead of conclusion: the subject in the mirror of the Other

The reflection that comes to mind as a conclusion leads me to recognize that it becomes necessary to recover the symbolic space both for social life and for each subject, so that language, speech, discourse, as well as silence are not the same as violence. Of equal importance is the recovery of the Imaginary order, whose representations are determined by these identifications, which can acquire a mimetic or petrifying dimension. The type of identification, as we can see in Lacan's work, however, is the perspective that offers a chance to develop the non-mimetic desire of the subject. The point is also to rebuild interpersonal relations in order to re-create a space for being together in such a way that the potential and symbolic **wound culture** does not lead to a petrified pain of the subject that pushes him or her into a space appropriated by the Real. By giving up the fight for our own freedom, as well as the freedom of the Other at our own request, we become hostage to the ritualization of appearances. We allow violence to become a petrified signifier subordinated to an object imposed by another with power. It is hard to believe that the Foucaultian aporias of power and knowledge so fantastically identified in this ritualized game of the Imaginary (Foucault 2005) continue to occupy social space.

My perspective of understanding Girard's and Lacan's concepts continues to make me realize that after all, this knowledge is not arcane science for us. Two great intellectuals who are talking about the same thing and in the same language share their knowledge. They do so in order to stir something in us to move desire as Lacan says. We are constantly faced with the challenge of coping with the idea that there must finally come a moment when the subject will be given the opportunity to move from a state of enslavement to a state of freedom, so as not to relive again and again the situation that triggers permanent trauma. It is also a matter of ensuring that trauma does not become the result of the interpenetration of what is social and what is antisocial so that it does not lead to the disappearance of the boundaries between what is public and what is individual. There can be no consent, in any dimension of the subject's life, at any period of his or her life, to the creation of such forms of social being that inflict wounds and open up old ones. For in doing so, we discover a social existence and an audience that

gathers and meets in the spectacle of an unfortunate event and in identification with a world that is conceived as hostile, this is a pathological public sphere (Seltzer 2015, p. 353). If nothing is done then the abnormal normality of trauma becomes a model of subjectivity and social relations inherent in **wound culture** (Seltzer 2015, p. 353).

As researchers, academics, and teachers, we have the opportunity to take part in the organization of what is commonly called science and which establishes a certain attitude towards a certain social group once proudly called scientists meant to represent knowledge and, of course, to ensure the progress of that knowledge. Thus, we have the object of study, “science,” along with the question of what conditions must be met for the subject undertaking research to become a reflective researcher, and not a collector of slots: slots that give the semblance of achieving success as determined by a fiendish other, whose sniggering echoes in the ears of those who become entangled in this game. Of course, this game of appearances does not only concern researchers, but mainly appropriates the object of study. Lacan would not hesitate to regard this embedding of research as a perverse game of appearances that petrifies the object by depriving it of meaning. After all, we are under no illusion that anyone is concerned with a search that situates the object of research in the perspective of a Heideggerian thing. All that is at stake is the ritualization of appearances taking on a dimension defined by Girard as violence represented by a form of mimetic behavior that, once set in motion, remains petrified and deprives the subject of any causal power.

This tacit colonization of discourse and research practices activates deposits of trauma, thus petrifying the suffering of the subject exposed to the perversion of power producing law beyond its symbolic location. Researchers using intellectual tools that allow reflexive discourses of power and knowledge to continue to insist on emancipation point to the ritualization of appearances, which in reality is a petrification not only of the gaze, but also of language. It is time to exclaim that the ritual dances around the space designated by slots are a type of colonialism that has imperceptibly taken away our freedom, which we had little of before anyway. Also important in this game of appearances is a question that should be posed following Girard: who is the scapegoat here? Just as important is the question of where the lines of the sacred and the profane run for all those who are forced by the oppressive practices of power to struggle for survival?

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