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Desiring Oedipus in Stephen Frears's *The Grifters*

Abstract

Stephen Frears's, *The Grifters*, appears to be a classic tale of Oedipal desire. The desiring relationship between a conman and his mother is established early on as a central tension in the film, however, read through René Girard's schemata of mimetic desire the escalation of this relationship and the ensuing violence will be interpreted as products of a mimetic rivalry between the mother and a lover. This essay will show the way in which Girard's schemata seeks to liberate Oedipus from the structure of desire posited by Freud, introducing the notion of the scapegoat and its redemptive function into a latticework of relationships that extend beyond the triangular structure of Freudian conceptions of desire.

Stephen Frears's film, *The Grifters*, presents an intriguing study in mimetic desire and mimetic crisis. Petty conman, Roy Dillan, becomes the object of desire in a perverse love triangle including his mother, Lily Dillan, a numbers-runner for the mob and his girlfriend, Myra Langtree, a long-con 'roper'. The escalation of rivalry between Lily and Myra culminates in a confrontation between the two women during which Myra is killed. The dynamic between the two women well illustrates the various stages of René Girard's schemata of mimetic desire. Passing from admiration to envy, the metaphysical desire ignited in Myra through her encounter with Lily transforms into one of mimetic desire, wherein Lily becomes the model for Myra's own desires. As mimetic desire becomes mimetic rivalry, possessiveness over the object of desire, Roy, increases, as does the valuation of Roy by both women. While Myra's death can be interpreted as the inevitable consequence of unbridled mimetic rivalry, her depiction and death take on greater significance when interpreted according to the generative-mimetic-scapegoating-mechanism (GMSM). Within this context, Myra becomes a hapless 'mark' herself, sacrificed in order to preserve the sanctity of the borderline incestuous relationship between Lily and Roy. Thus, *The Grifters*, portrays an intricate web of desires and sacrificial functions, which

extend beyond the Freudian Oedipal conception of desire that, at first glance, appears to constitute the film's main thematic.

Girard and Oedipus

Girard suggests that the mimetic impulse precedes other human complexes. His claim particularly challenges Freud's interpretation of the significance of the Oedipus complex, which credits Oedipus's desire for his mother – simultaneously the object of his father's desire – as the source of original violence. Freud's fatal flaw, according to Girard, is his insistence that identification with the father and desire for the mother are two separate experiences. According to Freud, sexual cathexis toward the mother appears and develops independently of mimetic identification with the father.¹ Freud recognizes imitation as part of the process through which the son's libidinal drive is strengthened but ultimately privileges the desirability of the object/mother itself, as the source of rivalry.² For Freud, the two phenomena: identification with the father and the fixation of the libido on the mother, proceed side by side until they eventually fuse into the Oedipal complex. According to Girard, however, mimetic desire precedes object-choice. Thus, Freud ultimately settles on the Oedipal complex as the source of originary violence; a rivalry devoid of the "preliminary identification"³ that is central to Girard's conception of desire and its inclination toward violence.

Mimesis, Desire and Violence in *The Grifters*

The first stage of desire, metaphysical desire, is linked to the notion of “the hero’s askesis,”⁴ which refers to the hero’s, or model’s, projection of self-sufficiency and autonomy. The perception of these qualities in the model, effectively, sows the seeds of desire in the disciple, who perceives herself as lacking these attributes. The relationship between Myra and Lily is established on such grounds. Myra is a former player in a high-stakes con ring, in which she was responsible for ‘roping’ wealthy men to be conned but who has now been reduced to soliciting herself in exchange for rent, and other means of sustenance. In comparison to Myra, Lily is imbued with a certain fullness of being and substantiality that is attractive. While both women are established as con artists and do bear some physical resemblance at the onset of the film, they are most markedly differentiated by their style of clothes. Myra is dressed in skintight leopard print while Lily is introduced in various power suits and well-tailored dresses. Lily is established as working directly for mob boss, Bobo Justus, having access to his private phone numbers and operations. She is confident and organized, tucking race chits and stacks of money into colour coded file folders in her brief case before heading off to her next assignment. The admiring quality of Myra’s relationship with Lily is established at their first meeting. In Roy’s hospital room, Myra comments on Lily’s youthful appearance, to which Lily responds by remarking on the

cheapness of Myra's appearance. "Yes...I imagine you're lots of people's friend..."⁵ she responds, while looking Myra up and down. The hostility expressed by Lily in this instance does not diminish her prestige but instead intensifies it in the eyes of Myra. The subject's admiration is, characteristically, predicated on a belief that the model would reject her as a disciple if her true admiration were known.⁶ This belief in her ultimate rejection by her model eventually transforms into hatred directed at the model; the model is interpreted as malicious for preventing the fulfillment of a desire that she herself has inspired, wittingly or not.⁷ Subsequently, the disciple must repudiate the bonds of mediation that would acknowledge the model's role in her own desires in order to preserve a sense of autonomy and save herself from the realization of her own masochistic tendencies. Thus, the model's obstacle function takes on a primary role in the mind of the subject,⁸ concealing the initial attraction that actually underlies the relationship.⁹ In this way, the subject can convince herself that her desire, in this case Myra's desire for Roy, preexists the arrival of her model.¹⁰ While Myra's admiration immediately exposes her as the disciple in the relationship, Lily's own hostility exposes her awareness of the potential threat inherent in this admiration. Furthermore, while it is not until nearly the end of the film that the two women's appearances begin to formally merge, they are established wearing and continue to wear almost identical earrings in each scene leading up to their eventual displacement of each other. The symbiosis of mimetic

rivalry is intimated in this discreet way. While the power relation appears to favour Lily, the matching earrings stand as a symbolic reminder of the way in which the origin of the mimetic relationship is rarely ever absolutely attributable to one or another individual involved.

In the second stage of Girard's schemata, mimetic desire, the model's real or presumed desire for a particular object makes the object infinitely desirable to the subject.¹¹ Violence results from the way in which the model both shows the disciple the way to self-fulfillment and blocks that path by already seeming to possess the object that symbolizes this path. The desiring subject believes, by virtue of the model's desire for an object, that the contested object must be capable of conferring a greater "plenitude" of being.¹² In this way, mimetic desire actually transfigures objects, whose value is based on the value the subject imagines the object(s) to have in the mind of the model, generating the reality the subject believes exists. Competing desires are born of the model's perceived desire for and possession of a coveted object that the disciple 'must' possess in order to attain the status represented by the model; the model becomes simultaneously the obstacle to and mediator of the subject's desire.¹³ Myra's desire for Roy is seen to ignite after her interaction with Lily in the hospital room. Prior to this interaction, the relationship is merely a sexual one. Her interest in Roy is superficial; he must convince her to come see him as promised in an early

scene and she ignores the near fatal wound he had sustained earlier that day and that was immediately apparent to his mother. After meeting Lily, however, Myra's interest in Roy is piqued. Seconds after Lily leaves the hospital room Myra leans in alluringly and tells Roy, "I want to know everything about you..."¹⁴ The next day Myra's agitation grows, as she suddenly wants to know where the relationship is going and what kind of a future Roy can provide for her. She starts to get suspicious that there is more to him than meets the eye. She pushes to know what kind of prospects he has as "a matchbook salesman...or whatever you are."¹⁵ While he held no intrigue for her before, after meeting Lily she is now convinced that there must be more to him if her model, Lily, created and covets him. Thus, the impulse towards Roy, as the object of desire, is ultimately an impulse toward Lily, as the mediator of that desire.

As mimetic desire escalates into mimetic rivalry, the next phase in Girard's schemata, the value of the contested object is magnified, indicating the way in which imagination and imitation are intricately linked.¹⁶ Roy's escalating status between the two women is characteristic of the mythologizing of the object of desire that commonly occurs within mimetic rivalry. As the rivalry escalates between the two women, their fixation on Roy increases as well. Lily becomes more and more agitated and her attempts to repossess Roy become more extreme. The rivalry takes on an animalistic tone as Lily kisses Roy, sniffs his neck and

comments with disdain, "Myra's been here."¹⁷ Lily also fetishizes Roy's skills as a conman. "You've got so much more on the ball than I ever did."¹⁸ She is desperate to know what "angle [he's] workin'"¹⁹ convinced that he has some grand scheme in the works that he is keeping secret from everyone. In reality his only secret is a stash of money he has accumulated through years of nickel-and-dime bar tricks, and no grand con. Similarly, as Myra starts to feel her grip loosening on Roy, she becomes increasingly absorbed in her fantasies about him, elevating him to almost divine status. Following Roy's rejection of Myra's offer of partnership she pleads, "I looked and I looked and believe me ...I kissed a lot of ...frogs ...and you're my prince."²⁰ She becomes convinced that she needs Roy in order to become the person she imagines herself to be. Roy, as the object of desire, is coveted as an emblem of that 'more real' existence represented by Lily.²¹ Once she realizes that Roy wants no part in her scheme and in fact does not hold her in the same esteem that she holds him she turns her full attention to eliminating Lily.

According to Girard's schemata, the perceptual shift wherein Lily moves from object of admiration to "model-obstacle"²² serves as the source of violence. Myra takes on a serpentine quality suddenly hissing accusations of incest at Roy. "It's your mother...you and your own mother...you like to go back where you been huh..."²³. She is convinced that the reason he will not partner with her is

because his mother already occupies that role. Myra determines that she does not want a similarly substantial existence to Lily's but instead wants the only 'real' existence she can see, which is the one occupied by Lily; in other words she wants Lily's life. As such, Myra follows Lily to a motel in Arizona where she attempts to strangle her, with the intention of eliminating her rival and assuming her identity. Myra arrives at the motel shortly after Lily has checked in. She is dressed in a near identical outfit to that of Lily – a transformation that has slowly been occurring over the course of the film – to the extent that the motel manager mistakes her for Lily. "Oh, I thought you were the other woman"²⁴ the manager says, to which Myra responds meekly, "No, I'm me."²⁵ Armed with only an ice bucket and her bare hands Myra is no match for Lily who has likely been aware of her presence all along and as such has stashed a gun under her pillow. Instead, Lily kills Myra and is forced to assume her identity. Dressed in Myra's clothes, Lily is mistaken for Myra as she makes her way into Roy's apartment later that night. "Evening Ms. Langtree"²⁶ the night clerk calls to Lily as she passes by. Thus, the two women have inevitably become "symmetrical rivals."²⁷ The model has ultimately become the imitator of her own imitator. According to Girard, mimetic rivalry results in a "feedback process"²⁸ whereby the rivalry tends toward reciprocity. The model is mimetically affected by the desire of her imitator.²⁹ This becomes most apparent at the film's end, which culminates in the realization of the incestuous tension between Roy and Lily. According to Girard, the individual

who first acts as model will experience an increase in her own urge to appropriate the behaviours and desires of her imitator/rival.³⁰ Lily's seduction of Roy can be understood in this light. Having fully displaced Myra, she is able to assume both her desires and fantasies, one of which is a projection of incestuous desire that Myra had imagined between Lily and Roy. Thus, the mimetic rivalry between Myra and Lily is portrayed as having a generative quality. While there is an uncomfortable tension between Lily and Roy throughout the film there is no indication that the sexual dynamic of their relationship would ever have been physically realized prior to the mimetic rivalry between the two women.

At once the object of desire and mimetic rival, Roy and his relationship with his mother provide an overlapping layer of mimetic desire – one that well-illustrates the double bind inherent to this structure. The individual must believe that his desires are spontaneous and freely chosen. In order to maintain this belief, Roy is constantly seeking ways to repudiate the mimetic bond and differentiate himself from Lily but is drawn to imitating her life choices and desires. As the mimetic rivalry between mother and son increases so does the need for a “scapegoat effect.”³¹ Both Lily and Roy describe Myra's death as “perfect.”³² If Lily runs away from the murder scene she's “got Bobo and the law after [her]...stay and how [does she] explain.”³³ Myra's death provides the ‘perfect’ escape for Lily. She says, “now I'm out, I can make a clean break.”³⁴ As well,

Myra's death eliminates the discomfort of her accusations of incest, alleviating Roy's sense of guilt and shame over his conflicted feelings for his mother and providing the potential for a fresh start between them. Roy suggests Lily could, "get a square job and lead a quiet life."³⁵ This "double transference"³⁶ is characteristic of the scapegoating mechanism whereby the scapegoat/victim is depicted as the source of crisis while simultaneously being credited with restoring harmony.

In this instance Myra takes on a Christ-like function that bears mentioning. While she is an imperfect surrogate victim in comparison to the Christ-model, it is still significant that her death carries a sacred quality in that it represents the violent founding of a new social and cultural order. For Roy, Myra's death provides Lily with a clean slate from which she can establish herself as a 'normal' person, get a 'square job' and perhaps become the mother she never was for him. For Lily, Myra provides a new identity that she can assume to evade being murdered or incarcerated. Thus, Myra has the potential to be Lily's salvation in death, and by extension to save Roy as well. Myra's status as a scapegoat is complicated, however, due to her unscrupulous character. Myra is depicted as someone deserving of violence as opposed to the sort of people Girard describes who are more purely innocent victims, with Jesus being the "victim par excellence"³⁷ due to the fact that Christ has no connection with violence and no

affinity for it. For Girard, Christ was not sacrificed for God's justice but because of man's inability to overcome its violent beginnings and accept the Word of Love.³⁸ Thus, the Passion exposes the victimary mechanism underlying human culture, by which man's violence is endlessly projected onto new victims. Myra's guilty character enables the film to maintain the fundamental myth that society does not take advantage of or sacrifice the kind of people Girard describes but only those that in some sense 'deserve it.'

While Myra's apparent responsibility for her own demise conceals the sacrificial function, the ultimate revelation of the film is in line with that of the bible in regards to sacrificial violence. According to Girard, the ultimate lesson evidenced in biblical accounts of history, from Genesis and Exodus through the Gospel, is that "a culture born of violence must return to violence."³⁹ Girard notes as one example the demise of the Cainite community wherein the proliferation of violence following Abel's founding murder turns Cain's seven victims into seventy-seven.⁴⁰ In a Dionysian turn of events, characteristic of unchecked mimetic rivalry, the boundaries between mother and son are dissolved when Lily attempts to seduce Roy. In a confused frenzy they struggle and Lily slashes Roy's throat with a broken glass. Roy's death by Lily's hand at the film's end illustrates the biblical message that a society founded in violence will ultimately maintain its murderous character and self-destruct. Supplanting Freud's object of desire,

Girard privileges the structure of the desiring relationship, in which the object is merely one intersection point in a complex of desire that governs relations between human beings. Girard liberates human culture from a singular suppressed fixation on the mother, however, his findings show society to be trapped within a violent cycle of mimesis for which it has found no salve but murder.

¹ Girard, René, *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1977. p. 229.

² Girard. 1977. pp. 226, 229.

³ Girard. 1977. pp. 226.

⁴ Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. London: John Hopkins Press, 1965. p. 154.

⁵ *The Grifters*. Dir. Stephen Frears. Prod. Martin Scorsese. Miramax, 1991. pp. 23:39.

⁶ Girard, René. *The Girard Reader*. Ed. James G. Williams. New York: Crossroad, 1996. p. 40.

⁷ Girard. 1996. p. 40.

⁸ In Girard's works 'subject' and 'disciple' are used interchangeably, as are 'model' and 'mediator.'

⁹ Girard, René. *The Girard Reader*. Ed. James G. Williams. New York: Crossroad, 1996. p. 40.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Girard. 1996. p. 38.

¹² Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1977. p. 146.

¹³ Girard, René. *The Girard Reader*. Ed. James G. Williams. New York: Crossroad, 1996. p. 38.

¹⁴ *The Grifters*. Dir. Stephen Frears. Prod. Martin Scorsese. Miramax, 1991. 25:23.

¹⁵ Frears. 1991. 27:36.

¹⁶ Girard, René. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford: SUP, 1987. p. 23.

¹⁷ *The Grifters*. Dir. Stephen Frears. Prod. Martin Scorsese. Miramax, 1991. 30:10.

¹⁸ Frears. 1991. 31:05.

¹⁹ Frears. 1991. 31:00.

²⁰ Frears. 1991. 1:15.

²¹ Girard, René. *Oedipus Unbound: Selected Writings on Rivalry and Desire*. Ed. Mark R. Anspach. Stanford: SUP, 2004. p. xxxiv.

²² Girard, René. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford: SUP, 1987. p. 26

²³ *The Grifters*. Dir. Stephen Frears. Prod. Martin Scorsese. Miramax, 1991. 1:16.

²⁴ Frears. 1991. 1:24.

²⁵ Frears. 1991. 1:24.

²⁶ Frears. 1991. 1:32.

²⁷ Girard, René. *Oedipus Unbound: Selected Writings on Rivalry and Desire*. Ed. Mark R. Anspach. Stanford: SUP, 2004. p. xxxiv.

²⁸ Girard, René. *The Girard Reader*. Ed. James G. Williams. New York: Crossroad, 1996.

²⁹ Girard. 1996. p. 12.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Girard. 1996. pp. 9, 14.

³² *The Grifters*. Dir. Stephen Frears. Prod. Martin Scorsese. Miramax, 1991. 1:36.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Frears. 1991. 1:37.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Girard, René. *The Girard Reader*. Ed. James G. Williams. New York: Crossroad, 1996.

³⁷ Girard. 1996. p. 183.

³⁸ Girard. 1996. pp. 174-181.

³⁹ Girard. 1996. p. 150.

⁴⁰ Girard. 1996. p. 151.

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