

## Questions for Berry

### Erik Buys

- 1) In your book, and writing from your personal experiences with psychosis, you repeatedly warn against a romantic or nostalgic longing for "a loss of differences." On the other hand, you also somewhat recommend organized cultural practices, such as initiation rituals, to make the experience of the loss of differences possible or bearable. The traumatic experience of physical and mental violence in organized cultural settings paradoxically prevents members of a community from developing habits that could destroy them. You could say that the fear of violence *contains* violence. If I understand you correctly, it is a similar kind of fear, born from your experience with one psychotic episode in particular, that keeps you from developing the feed back loop of a new psychosis.

Are we, in the West, and perhaps Western Europeans especially, too removed from that frightening experience of violence – or, in Girardian terms, from the experience of the sacred? Are we so removed from it that it comes back with a vengeance? Like, when the potential psychotic journey of an adolescent cannot be experienced in the setting of an initiation ritual, the risks of it spiraling out of control are even bigger than in archaic societies, causing ever more damage?

- 2) Apart from Girard, Heidegger and Derrida figure prominently in your book. Both these philosophers seem to provide you with a language that sheds light on your experience with psychosis. At the same time, that experience also helps you to uncover the potential dangers of their thinking. For instance, when you write about Heidegger's *Lichtung* in relation to art, specifically in relation to the painting *Shoes* by Vincent van Gogh. Such a painting unhinges objects from their context. It makes that context appear as it dissolves. And the shoes *light up* in the decontextualization of the painting. In Dutch we know the expression "iets uit zijn hengsels lichten," wherein "lichten" means to unhinge. We also know "lichten" as "lights" – which is connected to Heidegger's German *Lichtung*. Anyway, the Dutch language makes clear that *Lichtung* has something to do with the loss of context. And the loss of context has something to do with the loss of meaning. This, in turn, has something to do with the loss of differences. After all, unhinged objects no longer refer to something different or other than themselves. It is telling that Heidegger warns, as you point out in your book, not to read the images in Hölderlin's poems as metaphors. Hölderlin's images, according to Heidegger, do not refer to anything other than themselves. The experience of *Lichtung* is the experience of the absence of any *transcendental signified* – as Derrida would describe it. There is no fixed transcendental referent that provides (one) direction. And thus the experience of the loss of meaning goes hand in hand with the experience of the potential to create meaning upon meaning in ever new contexts. From a Girardian point of view, this endless sequence of destruction and creation of meaning can be understood as the ambiguous game of the violent sacred, which destroys the identity of one (sacrificial victim) in order to create or preserve a cultural identity for the many.

Would it be fair to say that a psychosis is a kind of internalization of this dynamic? In other words, would it be fair to say that the ordinary cultural context loses its meaning and that the psychotic person is subjected to a *legion* of ever newly created contexts, causing him to inhabit a world of meaning (upon meaning, upon meaning, ...) on his own? Of course, the word

"legion" refers to the story of the Gerasene demoniac and how Jesus healed this possessed person. Perhaps you could tell us something more about the importance of that story, both in the work of Girard and with regards to your personal experience?

- 3) As both the *polemos* of Heidegger's Heraclitean *Logos* and Derrida's deconstruction point to the arbitrariness (and violence) of cultural identity formation, they also take part in the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism – at least when they are understood from a Girardian point of view. Indeed, as Girard once said in an interview for Dutch television [IKON, 1985], "the choice of the scapegoat, I would say, ultimately is random..." In a sense, if I understand you correctly, the psychotic person internally relives the event (and – paradoxically – truth!) from which culture is born, but he remains on the level of violent rivalry: the competition between the consecutive, different contexts the psychotic person identifies himself with is not resolved by a "collective," unifying violence against one outside enemy (or scapegoat). If anything, it is the other way around: the psychotic person experiences himself as "one, alone" against "the many." In your book, you write about pride and unhealthy ambition regarding this aspect of the psychotic experience. Paradoxically, the psychotic person establishes a difference between himself as the so-called enlightened one on the one hand, and the so-called common people of "the crowd" on the other (who then allegedly "live in darkness"). However, by doing this he seems to mirror the crowd. After all, the identity of the crowd depends on the establishment of a difference between itself (as people who live "in the light of truth and peace") and a so-called "monster" like a possessed, crazy person (as someone who lives "in the darkness of madness and violence").

In other words, it seems there is not only a mimetic rivalry going on in the life of the psychotic person himself (who desires to be "better" than others), but also between communities and their madmen. That would mean that there is in fact a deep affinity between so-called "normal" and "crazy" people in a society. In any case, the way crazy people are treated by normal people is sometimes crazy, not to say violently crazy. Do you have any thoughts on these statements, perhaps from the perspective of your own struggles with mimetic desire and rivalry, and with certain therapies? And what do you think of some of today's conspiracy theories? It seems they are comparable to the way the psychotic person tries to create a coherent story from ever new elements. Are conspiracy theories forms of mass psychosis, often directed at a common enemy to maintain a sense of cultural identity – a sense of sanity that only exists because it does not recognize its own insanity?

- 4) At first glance, there is a striking similarity between the letters of the apostle Paul and philosophers like Heidegger and Derrida. Paul also indicates the relativity, the arbitrariness, yes even the "nothingness" of every cultural order or so-called meaningful context. However, there is a radical difference: Paul does not uncover the "nothingness" of whatever cultural identity or psychosocial self-concept out of a spirit of rivalry. Mimetic rivalry leads to the loss of differences in the very attempt to establish differences – until the most powerful party is able to establish a temporary difference of which the arbitrariness goes unnoticed. Paul, on the other hand, in imitating Jesus, points to a kind of sameness between every human being, not to provoke rivalry (as in, "Why would he possess something that I deserve also, or even more so?"), but, on the contrary, to prevent people from competitive pride or the desire to establish themselves over against one another. Your own conversion experience had to do with that insight as well, that you were "no different" from other people – which kept and

keeps you away from certain dangerous mental feedback loops. Could you tell us something more about the difference between "the loss of differences" in your psychosis and "the loss of differences" in your conversion experience – which, if again I understand you correctly, does not even "compete with" a psychotic state of mind?