

Your Fifteen Minutes of Fame: Facebook and the Mimetic Contagion of Disconnect

I too am one of the 600+ million members of the social networking site Facebook.¹ For a perspective on its global reach, Facebook membership now exceeds the populations of the United States and Brazil combined. A hardened detective, I joined in order to clandestinely track my pubescent daughter's activities with the over 300 "friends" that she had suddenly obtained. Signing in under my maiden name, suddenly, I too was in contact with over 50 "friends," whom I had neither seen nor heard from since high school. I was thrilled and started spending hours "chatting" with long lost friends, catching up on their lives. I too became obsessed by the whole thing, going on every few minutes to see whether I saw something "new."

Facebook is contagious, but different people use it for different purposes. Some, especially teens, use it to attract potential boy or girlfriends, while others use it to get in touch with and/or remain in contact with old friends, but also to disseminate ideas and organize events or movements like the recent protest movements in the Middle East. Wael Ghonim, a Google executive, reinvigorated the recent Egyptian protest movement against the regime of Hosni Mubarak through his tweets on Twitter and his Facebook page: *We are all Kaled Said*. He dedicated it to a murdered Alexandrian businessman, who died in police custody in 2010. With over 400,000 followers, the page "played a crucial role in organising the protests."²

As an internet based "social network," Facebook was set-up to virtually imitate modern, primarily western social structures, especially those of teenagers and college students. The award winning movie, *The Social Network*, tells the story of the founding of Facebook by Mark Zuckerberg with several friends. Needing money to set up the website, he invites his friend Eduardo Saverin to participate in the company and explains the idea:

"MARK: 'People want to go on the internet and check out their friends. Why not build a website that offers that? Friends, pictures, profiles, whatever you can...visit, browse around, maybe it's somebody you just met at a party. I'm not talking about a dating site. I'm talking about taking the entire social experience of college and putting it online. .. You'd have to know the people on the site to get past your own page. Like getting punched.'

EDUARDO: 'That's good, that's new.'

¹ Nicholas Carlson, "Goldman to Clients: Facebook has 600 million Users," MSN. TECHS AND GADGETS, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/40929239/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/.

² "Profile: Egypt's Wael Ghonim," BBC NEWS, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12400529>

MARK: 'Wardo, it's like a Final Club except we're the president.'"³

In this article, I will attempt to explain the contagious influence of Facebook through a look at René Girard's analysis of the nature of desire as mimetic or imitative. According to Girard, all desire is imitated desire and none of our desires are truly derived *ex nihilo*, even though many of us would like to think so. In our contemporary society, what some call postmodern, there is a tremendous emphasis on "being creative." Thanks to the pervasive influence of capitalism and the commodification of practically all realms of life, the emphasis becomes creating the unique or establishing difference, e.g. innovation, in order to distinguish a product from its competition. The trend towards commodification goes as much for business as for personal relationships. As increasingly fewer businesses in the modern western world depend upon mechanization and routine, there is indeed an increasing need for innovation and creativity; however, despite the emphasis on newness and differentiation, capitalism as such depends on the consumers' ability to imitate behaviour, without it there would be no capitalism. As a capitalist economy matures and even decays, the need for differentiation, otherwise understood as innovation, is intensified. Success is measured by one's ability to differentiate oneself by doing something innovative or creative. In this sense, the need to be seen as an innovator becomes so desired that even giving the impression that one is an innovator is imitated.

Dan Pink, author of the New York Times bestseller *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*, claims that at the heart of this new "creative" paradigm of work is a sense of "intrinsic motivation" and the demand for "a sense of autonomy and self-direction as well as a yearning to get better at something that matters – all of which are pointed towards a cause larger than one's self."⁴ Although Pink seems to be pointing towards the "Other," paradoxically and precisely, the self looms ever larger. Moreover, the increasing emphasis on creativity points precisely to the increasing "simularization" or banalization of society, where even creativity becomes a caricature of itself. Teen-age "gangsta fashion" is a good example of this, where white, middle class establishment kids attempt to imitate the fashion sense of successful anti-establishment gangsta rappers. Pink, himself imitating the need to create something "new" and to be "original," in fact develops a paradigm that

³ "Aaron Sorkin," "The Social Network Screenplay," SONY PICTURES, http://flash.sonypictures.com/video/movies/thesocialnetwork/awards/thesocialnetwork_screenplay.pdf, 40.

⁴ Michelle James, "Creativity is at the Heart of the 21st Century, says Dan Pink," INNOVATION TOOLS, <http://www.innovationtools.com/weblog/innovationblog-detail.asp?ArticleID=1450>.

seems more the apotheosis of the goals of romantic modernity, now confined to the sphere of work.

In an earlier and lesser known work, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961), Girard points out the importance of the belief in one's own creativity in romantic literary movements. "The romantic *vaniteux* does not want to be anyone's disciple. He convinces himself that he is thoroughly *original*. In the nineteenth century spontaneity becomes a universal dogma, succeeding imitation. Stendhal warns us at every step that we must not be fooled by these individualisms professed with fanfare, for they merely hide a new form of imitation."⁵ By professing himself to be the creator of a "new paradigm," with the pretention of being thoroughly original, Pink engages in typical form of romantic imitation: the need to be a creator or a god. In our contemporary society, the famous, especially media figures, are worshipped as our postmodern gods. The proliferation of "reality television" shows that many ordinary people will do practically anything, even humiliate themselves and their families, to become (in)famous, which is the postmodern substitution for immortality. In other articles, I have discussed how the supplanting of the religious paradigm of traditional monotheism (theism) to monistic forms of spirituality, where divinity is understood as already inherent within, leads to a necessity in some to confirm their divinity.⁶ The best place to do this is through the media: television, music, film, but also social networking media. The phenomenon of "public shootings," for example, school shootings like Columbine, but also the attempted assassination of US Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in front of Safeway Drugstore and the murder of seven at a shopping centre in the Dutch city Alphen aan den Rijn, are other examples of this. In all cases, destructive and self-destructive youth made crude documentaries of themselves preparing for their atrocities and then posted their "manifestos" on social media like Facebook and YouTube in an attempt to gain their fifteen minutes of fame at all costs. The Columbine youth even encouraged other disaffected youth to imitate them, the surest way to confirm their success.

⁵ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965) 15.

⁶ See, Melanie J. van Oort – Hall, *Murder, Suicide and Self-Divinization in the Media Age*, Website, Girard Studiekring/Dutch Girard Society (Amsterdam: 2011), http://www.bezinnen.nl/girard/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=184&Itemid=135. and "'I am the god of everything:': The Development of (Self)-Destructive Panenanthropism in Popular Youth Culture", Website, CESNUR Centro Studi sulle Nuove Religione (Torino: September 2010), <http://www.cesnur.org/2010/to-oort.htm>.

Although the modern man shies away from anything that reeks of imitation, Girard points out that all human behaviour and learning is based on it. “If human beings suddenly ceased imitating, all forms of culture would vanish.”⁷ Girard believes that imitation forms the basis of human learning and behaviour, but also the basis of human desire so that not even our desires are not our own.⁸ We want things, because the people, who we want to be or to be like, have those things, which we think we want.

According to Girard, desire has a triangular structure.⁹ That is to say, although like Pink we think that our desires evolve intrinsically from our own imaginative creativity, we are misled. He believes that most of our desires are obtained from the desires of those whom we admire or model ourselves upon. Our desires are not directly related to the object of desire, but are mediated by the desires of our models (the people we look up to), and theirs by their models, *ad infinitum*. When our desires are not fulfilled, then, the model becomes an obstacle and mimetic desire develops into rivalry or jealousy.

Mimetic desire is the combination of appropriative or acquisitive desire (i.e. the desire to have what the other has, namely, greed) with modelling (i.e. the attempt to “be” or to “be like” someone else we admire).¹⁰ In *Deceit, Desire & the Novel*, he explains the modelling mechanism as it is portrayed in modern literature. Humans create models, who later become their rivals. The desire to possess that which the model has is a desire aimed at the model’s *being* or existence. It is a desire that wishes to absorb the other’s being into one’s own. The perceived object merely mediates this desire.¹¹ When a model turned rival’s object cannot be obtained by peaceful means, people are often willing to use force to acquire it, but also to protect it with equal intensity. Because desire is imitative, it is also therefore contagious.¹² Precisely because desire is imitative, mimetic desire turned

⁷ René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann & Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 7.

⁸ Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 4. “Chivalric passion defines a desire *according to Another*, opposed to this desire *according to Oneself* that most of us pride ourselves on enjoying. Don Quixote and Sancho borrow their desires from the Other in a movement which is so fundamental and primitive that they completely confuse it with the will to be Oneself.”

⁹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire & the Novel*, 12. He goes on to say, “Like all victims of internal mediation, the jealous person easily convinces himself that his desire is spontaneous, in other words, that it is deeply rooted in the object and in this object alone. As a result he always maintains that his desire preceded the intervention of the mediator. He would have us see him as an intruder, a bore, a *terzo incomodo*... Jealousy is thus reduced to the irritation we all experience when one of our desires is accidentally thwarted. But true jealousy is infinitely more profound and complex; it always contains an element of fascination with the insolent rival.”

¹⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 321.

¹¹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire & the Novel*, 53.

¹² Girard, *Deceit, Desire & the Novel*, 26.

rivalrous can be the source of violence on a personal, but also a global scale.¹³ Recent international participation in the latest “oil wars” might be an example of the results of global imitation for a desired object, namely, rights to vast oil supplies, all under the auspices of the protection of human rights.

Paradoxically, the more (post)modern subjects reject the role of imitation in their own desires, the more they become blind to their own imitation and, hence, become the greatest of all imitators. In many senses, Facebook is the apotheosis of this typically romantic bent in contemporary society, that is, the pretence of being absolutely creative, but at the same time being blind to it. At this point we will discuss the movie, *The Social Network*, mentioned above. The award-winning movie is about the founding of Facebook, and is an attempt to look into the workings of mimetic desire and rivalry, not only in social networking paradigms like Facebook, but also in founders themselves. Facebook seems to be a response to Andy Warhol’s now prophetic statement that “In the future, everyone will be famous for 15 minutes.” Or, given our discussion above, in the future everyone, through social media, can participate in and create their own illusory sense of immortality. As Girard says: “Deviated transcendency is a caricature of vertical transcendency. There is not one element of this distorted mysticism which does not have its luminous counterpart in Christian truth. The false prophets proclaim that in tomorrow’s world *men will be gods for each other*. This ambiguous message is always carried by the most blind of Dostoevsky’s characters.” This false idea of divinity and community does not lead them into paradise, but into a kind of self-created hell.¹⁴ When one reads the diaries and self-made “documentaries” of public shooters, one sees that their gradual decent into the abyss of absolute autonomy does indeed become a kind of hell for them and, paradoxically, the murdering of others and themselves is perceived as a way to escape their self-banishment into solipsism.

Although it is clear from *The Social Network* that Zuckerberg was the only one with sufficient knowledge of computer programming to initially work out the idea, the film shows the complex web of relationships that led to the development of the site Facebook. Initially, Zuckerberg is depicted as an arrogant, yet, brilliant Harvard undergrad, who was obsessed with being “punched” or invited to become a member of a Final Club, an undergraduate social networking club at Harvard. This is made clear at the very beginning of the movie, during a date with a girl, Erica. Erica and Zuckerberg discuss the importance of being

¹³ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 26.

¹⁴ Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 61.

“punched” by a Final Club, not just for success, but in order to climb the echelons of power, for example, to become the Chairman of the Federal Reserve. Zuckerberg feels like he needs to do something substantial in order to differentiate himself from the crowd so that he will have a chance to be selected by a club and become a powerful player in society.¹⁵ At the end of the date, Erica tells him: “You are probably going to be a very successful computer person. But you’re going to go through life thinking that girls don’t like you because you’re a nerd. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won’t be true. It’ll be because you’re an asshole.”¹⁶

His original idea was to access the pictures of Harvard student houses, placing two pictures side-by-side and then asking users to vote on which student was “hot” and which was “not,” in other words, attractive to date. He does this in a moment of inspiration and rage after his unsuccessful date with Erica. He humiliates her on-line and then proceeds to hack into the University student file system, for which he will need to appear before an ethics board – but he also gain notoriety on campus by getting an article about his escapades in the University newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*. Seeing the success that Zuckerberg had with the site (450 visitors with 22,000 viewing)¹⁷ and thinking that he would want to redeem himself in the eyes of his peers, he was approached by Divya Narendra and the twins Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss to help them implement an idea they were working on, HarvardConnection. HarvardConnection was meant to be a social networking site for students of Harvard and potentially other universities.¹⁸ In the movie, the Winklevoss twins, well-built rowers, and Narendra invite Zuckerberg into a backroom room of the exclusive Final Club, Porcellian, as non-members were not allowed into the interior of the house. This scene is significant, because Zuckerberg’s goal is to be invited through the front door as a potential member and interprets his visit more as a humiliation than an honour. Conceived as a way to attract girls, the twins believed that their social networking site would be original because it originated from “Harvard.” It was a way to find out, who was dating “who,” and who was interested in “who.”

“TYLER: And the whole site’s kinda based on the idea that girls--well...

¹⁵ Sorkin, “The Social Network Screenplay,” http://flash.sonypictures.com/video/movies/thesocialnetwork/awards/thesocialnetwork_screenplay.pdf, 6.

¹⁶ Sorkin, “The Social Network Screenplay,” http://flash.sonypictures.com/video/movies/thesocialnetwork/awards/thesocialnetwork_screenplay.pdf, 8-9.

¹⁷ “Facebook,” WIKIPEDIA, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook>.

¹⁸ “ConnectU,” WIKIPEDIA, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ConnectU>.

CAMERON: Not to put anything indelicately.

DIVYA: Girls wanna get with guys who go to Harvard.”¹⁹

Although Zuckerberg had the superior programming knowledge and intellect, the Winklevoss twins are everything that he is not and somehow wants to be: from a socially influential, well-connected family “of means,” big built, world-class athletes, handsome, who can get any girl they want.²⁰ But Zuckerberg’s rivalry doesn’t end there. For example, his best friend and Facebook’s co-founder, Eduardo Saverin, gets punched for a prestigious Final Club the Phoenix, something that Zuckerberg himself desires. Both the Winklevoss twins as well as Eduardo are his models, because of their real life social status and connections, something he desperately desires. He claims that Eduardo is his friend – perhaps his only true friend – even though he is jealous of him. Because Saverin obtains the object Zuckerberg desires, admission to a Final Club, he is prepared to sabotage his friend’s success and plants a story in the University newspaper that Saverin displayed cruelty towards a chicken during his club initiation.²¹ Although the Winklevoss twins were Zuckerberg’s models, they immediately become rivals. Both are affected by snobbery and each think that they are the originators of Facebook. Mark tells the Winklevoss’ lawyers:

“I think if your clients want to sit on my shoulders and call themselves tall, they have the right to give it a try. But there’s no requirement that I enjoy sitting here listening to people lie. You have part of my attention--you have the minimum amount. The rest of my attention is back at the offices of Facebook where my colleagues and I are doing things that no one in this room, including and especially your clients, are intellectually or creatively capable of doing. Did I adequately answer your condescending question?”²²

According to Girard, “The closer the mediator gets to the desiring subject, the more the possibilities of the two rivals merge and the more insuperable becomes the obstacle they set in each other’s way.”²³ To the lawyers, Saverin explains that the Winklevoss twins did not understand Mark. They thought that he wanted to become a “respectable” member of the ruling elite, but Mark’s real aim was to differentiate himself and gain notoriety, which he had done by hacking into the University computer system and “thumbing his nose at the Ad board.”²⁴ Mark’s new model had become Sean

¹⁹ Sorkin, “The Social Network Screenplay,”

http://flash.sonypictures.com/video/movies/thesocialnetwork/awards/thesocialnetwork_screenplay.pdf, 34.

²⁰ Sorkin, “The Social Network Screenplay,”

http://flash.sonypictures.com/video/movies/thesocialnetwork/awards/thesocialnetwork_screenplay.pdf, 62-64.

²¹ Sorkin, “The Social Network Screenplay,”

http://flash.sonypictures.com/video/movies/thesocialnetwork/awards/thesocialnetwork_screenplay.pdf, 107-108.

²² Sorkin, “The Social Network Screenplay,”

http://flash.sonypictures.com/video/movies/thesocialnetwork/awards/thesocialnetwork_screenplay.pdf, 74.

²³ Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 26.

²⁴ Sorkin, “The Social Network Screenplay,”

http://flash.sonypictures.com/video/movies/thesocialnetwork/awards/thesocialnetwork_screenplay.pdf, 73.

Parker, the eccentric and licentious co-founder of Napster, who built his reputation by helping to transform the way music was bought and shared. Zuckerberg saw Parker as the anti-establishment rebel, who had bucked the entire music industry. Mark resented the Winklevoss' because of their snobbery, or the fact that they thought that the object of Zuckerberg's desire was "respectability," while his real object was power and fame, an object that Zuckerberg initially thought was only achievable by becoming a member of a prestigious Final Club, an object that the twins already had. Zuckerberg mirrors his rivals in their snobbery, but now reversed. Instead of appearing as a well-dressed, successful-looking professional, he appears in his nerdish "gangsta rap look": a hoodie, sweatpants and Adidas flip-flops, a personal uniform that distinguishes him from his rivals.²⁵ On the surface, the sloppy look appears to be making an anti-establishment statement by a former Harvard student – the most prestigious and pro-establishment university in America --, who appears to not care what the established elite think about him. However, his desire to be welcomed into the upper echelons of the Harvard privileged reveals the true nature of his distinguishing "personal uniform," a personal style that is recognizable and imitated amongst juveniles as a fashion statement. Girard's insight into snobbery is important: "The triangular structure is no less obvious in social snobbism than it is in love-jealousy. The snob is also an imitator. He slavishly copies the person whose birth, fortune, or stylishness he envies. ... The snob does not dare trust his own judgment; he desires only objects desired by others. That is why he is the slave of the fashionable."²⁶

Zuckerberg's new model, the anti-music-establishment rebel Sean Parker, encourages him to push Saverin out of the business and cheat him out of the original value of his shares. When Saverin realizes that he has been bamboozled by both Parker and Zuckerberg, he turns and asks his former friend:

"Tell me, this isn't about me getting into the Phoenix! ... And I'll bet what you hated the most is that they identified me as a co-founder of Facebook--*which I am!* You better lawyerup, asshole, 'cause I'm not comin' back for my 30 percent, I'm comin' back for *everything!*"²⁷

The defining moment comes toward the end of the movie, where the subtle suggestion is made by Zuckerberg's own lawyers that he not only planted the story on Saverin, but also called the police on a wild party of attended by Parker and some girls, who were minors. At that party, Parker was arrested for possession of cocaine, implying that by this time Parker was not only a liability, but also a new rival. His lawyers feel that Zuckerberg's own behaviour and persona will put him at a disadvantage with a jury. In the scene, Zuckerberg is advised to pay the twins and Severin a

²⁵ Sorkin, "The Social Network Screenplay,"

http://flash.sonypictures.com/video/movies/thesocialnetwork/awards/thesocialnetwork_screenplay.pdf, 22.

²⁶ Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 24.

²⁷ Sorkin, "The Social Network Screenplay,"

http://flash.sonypictures.com/video/movies/thesocialnetwork/awards/thesocialnetwork_screenplay.pdf, 151.

settlement, because he is not “likable” and stands to lose. In the end, his lawyer Marylin tells Zuckerberg: “You’re not an asshole Mark. You’re just trying so hard to be.”²⁸ A suggestion that even his obnoxious, arrogant personality is imitative.

The movie, *The Social Network*, is about the founding of the internet company, Facebook, as well as about the nature of rivalry. But in many ways, the rivalrous manner that the company was founded mirrors to a great extent the darker side of the beast itself. Although Facebook is meant to connect people, in many ways, it actually does the opposite. The user sits at his or her desk alone for hours at a time, attempting to write pithy, “creative” little statements about one’s daily life for everyone to see. “Friends” write short, notes back or click on a “like” button, giving one the impression that one’s otherwise banal activities are noteworthy. As one commentator noted, Facebook appeals to a person’s need for snobbery, as we noted above, a sense of snobbery that was similarly present in its founders:

“Facebook appeals to a kind of vanity and self-importance in us, too. If I put up a flattering picture of myself with a list of my favourite things, I can construct an artificial representation of who I am in order to get sex or approval. (“I like Facebook,” said another friend. “I got a shag out of it.”) It also encourages a disturbing competitiveness around friendship: it seems that with friends today, quality counts for nothing and quantity is king. The more friends you have, the better you are. You are “popular”, in the sense much loved in American high schools. Witness the cover line on Dennis Publishing’s new Facebook magazine: ‘How To Double Your Friends List.’”²⁹

Facebook in some ways functions as a substitute for the loss of the belief in individual immortality and what Girard would call vertical transcendence. By being able to construct or even create an impression of one’s desired identity, namely, someone who others like to imitate, helps give the users the impression that they are creative little creators themselves. The object of desire is similar to Zuckerberg’s, but on a much smaller scale, notoriety or fame amongst one’s “friends.” Although Facebook gives one the impression of being popular or even “connected” to a community, obsessive use of the media actually increases one’s sense of alienation from real community, like one’s real family and friends. One no longer takes the time to sit around the table with friends and family and discuss everything from religion to politics, share a meal or even a hug. Dialogue is limited to “thread lines” and “statements,” where random people chime in with their two cents worth of opinions. Because “friendship” is gained through a click of a button and is imitative, i.e. you become friends of friends of your friends, there have been occasions where unsuspecting children have been led to

²⁸ Sorkin, “The Social Network Screenplay,”

http://flash.sonypictures.com/video/movies/thesocialnetwork/awards/thesocialnetwork_screenplay.pdf, 162.

²⁹ Tom Hodgkinson, “With Friends Like These....,” THE GUARDIAN UK,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/jan/14/facebook>.

believe that they were talking to someone their own age, who cared, while all the time, they were being set up to be manipulated or worse.³⁰

Behind the screen, after a while, one's sense of estrangement, of being alone in the world, or being the only being in the world can grow. The solipsistic user develops a false sense of autonomy, and begins to feel as if he or she no longer really needs real live human contact, since virtual contact appears to be sufficient. But as we have noted, instead of "finding themselves," they become increasingly alienated from themselves, for as much as to be human is to imitate, it is also to be with other humans. Facebook, instead of connecting the world, through mimetic contagion, actually increases the possibility of a major disconnect, on a global scale.

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³⁰ Andrew Norfolk, "Sex Offender Peter Chapman Killed a Girl after Posing as a Teenager on Facebook," THE SUNDAY TIMES, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article7054518.ece>. For example, the sex offender, thirty-three year old Peter Chapman, posed as a seventeen year old in order to lure a girl to her death.