From *Echo*

(*Ekko*)

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**THE SOURCE**

The wizards of Silicon Valley promise us immortality and telepathic skills. These may seem like the kind of promises religions make, but there’s a fundamental difference. What happens when mythologies experience a rupture with the truth they are meant to complicate? This is the question posed by the American literary critic John Freeman, in an essay that is really about Donald Trump.

I think it is a wise question to ask. Silicon Valley presents myths in a tabloid format: the truth is simple and “great”. The superpowers we are promised will come without any cosmic consequences. Yet this was not the case with the ancient myths. In the tales about gods and Titans, nymphs and oracles, evil exists for real. It can appear when we least expect it, and take possession of us without our knowing. Even the gods are unsuspecting – in fact it’s the gods themselves that often get caught out, due to their hubris and arrogance.

These antiquated stories are not reassuring. However, they allow us to have a conversation about the forces we have inside us and the battles we must fight with ourselves.

The boy gods of Silicon Valley don’t seem particularly bothered by such spiritual struggles. They aren’t troubled by doubts or paradoxes. Unlike the ancient gods, they have complete control; they are the masters of the universe. There’s a technological truth, and such truths don’t need to be made complicated, just downloaded.

Myth versus myth

Although ancient myths have no scientific standing, they are still bearers of knowledge. In times of upheaval, when the sciences are fighting among themselves, myths can help us to tolerate and understand chaos. The structures of classical myths actually allow for contrasting truths. And they certainly didn’t evolve from pure fantasy. Researchers believe that myths arose as a result of millennia spent observing human behaviour. They have an empirical precision, despite being told in colourful, labyrinthine language. The Norwegian author Terje Nordby gives the following definition: “A myth is wisdom expressed as a riddle.”

The story of Echo and Narcissus was recorded by the Roman poet Ovid in AD 8. In his famous work *Metamorphoses*, he included the two mythical figures in the same tale. Ovid’s myth goes something like this:

*In the beginning Echo had a physical body and was a troublesome nymph. She had a peculiar voice and would always interrupt when others were speaking. Echo certainly talked too much. In those days, Zeus used to betray his wife Hera with other mountain nymphs. Hera suspected something and tried to catch him in the act, out of jealousy. However, every time she tried, Echo would appear on the path in front of her, distracting Hera’s attention and confusing her with her endless chatter. Echo was obviously covering up Zeus’ extramarital affairs. Hera soon realised she had been tricked. She cursed the irritating nymph so that from that day on, she could only repeat the last words spoken by others.*

*One day Echo catches sight of Narcissus and immediately falls in love. She starts to follow him day and night, until finally he notices. “Is there anyone there?” he calls. “Anyone there,” she replies. And so it continues, with her simply repeating whatever he says. In the end, Echo leaps out in front of him on the path and goes to put her arms around his neck. This does not go well. Shocked that she is real, he pushes her away and Echo begins to pine away from a broken heart. In the end, she is so thin that the wind blows right through her body. She is now invisible; only her echoing voice remains. Hiding in the woods, she can no longer be seen in the mountains. But she still continues to follow Narcissus and watches him when he arrives at a spring. Narcissus is thirsty so he lies down to drink. When he views his own reflection in the crystal-clear water, he immediately falls desperately in love with the most beautiful being he has ever seen. He cannot eat, drink or do anything but gaze at himself. Finally, he dies there, crouched over his own reflection. Echo looks down at him from the mountainside. “In vain, my beloved – farewell” is the last thing Narcissus calls to himself. “In vain, my beloved – farewell,” answers Echo.*

*The gods gather to grieve, but when they go to burn his body, it has disappeared. On the spot where he died, a flower has sprung up. Today the flower is called Narcissus.*

As so often is the case, it’s all about unrequited love. One of the things I like about this tale is that it also manages to reset my gaze, so that – in quick flashes – I think I can see what the *medium* is. Because I don’t notice them anymore, all these thousands of channels, apps and platforms surrounding us twenty-four seven. As for most of us, living in the media age has become my new normal. And since we personally are in the midst of it all, it’s difficult to see anything clearly.

But Ovid helps me to see the world with fresh eyes. Set in a pre-media era, I can see how special the echo and reflection phenomena really are. These two natural phenomena are endowed with capacities known from the media. One reflects sound back to the listener, the other reflects images back to the viewer.

We have here two creatures that, in Marshall McLuhan’s terms, are becoming their own medium. Echo is trapped in her own echo chamber, while Narcissus is trapped in his own hall of mirrors. And the outcomes are quite different. Narcissus dies, trapped in his own reflection. Echo survives, but only as a reflection of others.

Narcissus is only himself. Echo is only other people.

Narcissus is “somebody”. Echo is “nobody”.

A closed circle. Compulsive repetition.

In the shadow of Narcissus

Before we let the myth loose on the twenty-first century, let’s just consider its history of interpretation. There’s something curiously lopsided about this: Echo is scarcely mentioned. For two thousand years, almost everything has been about him: Narcissus, psychology’s darling.

He has died a dramatic death in Shakespeare’s sonnets, in poems by Lord Byron and Charles Baudelaire – and countless times in the history of painting, from Caravaggio to Salvador Dali. In social research, different disciplines fight about his real character. In psychoanalysis he is a megastar: Sigmund Freud’s lonely narcissist. Self-centred, of course, but above all empty. And deep inside, endlessly insecure about who he really is. In modern psychiatry he has become someone else altogether: a dangerous, evil character with the diagnosis “narcissistic personality disorder”.

Forty years ago, a whole culture was named after Narcissus. In his classic work *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), the cultural historian Christopher Lasch exposed and condemned American society. He described a culture characterised by individualism, materialism and vanity. The new self was porous and lacked empathy.

Things would only get worse. In the early 2000s, this Greek demi-god became subject to mass production, in what researchers claimed was a “narcissistic epidemic”. For example, this is an analysis made by two influential psychology professors:

American culture’s focus on self-admiration has caused a flight from reality to the land of grandiose fantasy. We have phony rich people (with interest-only mortgages and piles of debt), phony beauty (with plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures), phony athletes (with performance-enhancing drugs), phony celebrities (via reality TV and YouTube) …

Researchers have found symptoms across the range, from reality TV to spending and parenting, silicone breasts, selfies and ball gowns. The US has become “the land of grandiose fantasy”, which for four years was run by an orange president whose diagnosis as a narcissist was almost official.

There’s an extraordinary number of podcasts and YouTube videos about narcissism today. There are books with titles such as Disarming the Narcissist (2008), The Narcissism Epidemic (2009), Selfie: How We Became So Self-Obsessed and What It’s Doing to Us (2017), The Narcissist You Know: Defending Yourself Against Extreme Narcissists in an All-About-Me Age (2016), The Me, Me, Me Epidemic (2016), How to Handle a Narcissist (2017), Narcissist: A Complete Guide (2019) and Empaths and Narcissists (2020) – just to name but a very few. Research into the link between narcissism and social media has also exploded. Between 2013 and 2018, 62 different research projects were conducted in the USA and Europe – and that’s just the major studies, only focusing on the relationship between social media use and narcissism. Research on narcissism could even be considered an American tradition, in the same way as the British research Shakespeare and Norwegians research salmon.

Since 2020, research has also been conducted on narcissism in political participation. Both the alternative right and the woke movement on the political left have been diagnosed as narcissists. In fact, there seems to be a widespread belief among researchers and social psychologists that politics in general holds a mysterious appeal for self-absorbed people.

Narcissus is therefore no stranger to us; he has had a prominent role in the modern history of ideas. Even the word narcissism has become so “normal” that it’s no longer confined to the jargon of clinicians. It is now commonly used in everyday speech meaning: pathological self-absorption (britannica.com).

Every year since 2016, the USA has observed World Narcissistic Abuse Awareness Day on 1 June in order to educate people about narcissism. This word is among the most popular searches on YouTube (with 15 million searches each month). The US certainly seems obsessed with narcissism. And here in Norway we aren’t exactly indifferent either. In 2018, I discovered that when Google did their annual calculations of which were the mostly commonly searched words by Norwegians, “narcissism” came right at the top. This is probably due to a certain reality-president. But it just goes to show: Norwegians gaze at the narcissist, just like everyone else.

So everyone is talking about Narcissus – it’s not surprising that he is self-centred. And this makes me a little curious. What is it we don’t see when we gaze at him?

BECAUSE WHAT HAS happened to poor Echo? She makes up half of Ovid’s myth, but hasn’t given her name to any diagnoses. She hasn’t caused social researchers and psychologists, poets and artists to interpret, research or dream. It’s true that Echo is sometimes portrayed in oil paintings of Narcissus from the seventeenthand eighteenth century, albeit usually naked and placed at the side of the picture. But I don’t think I have ever seen Echo as anything more than an extra, directing our eyes towards Narcissus – look how beautifully he’s dying, see how mysterious he is.

No doubt much of the explanation for her anonymity lies in our own interpretation of the myth. I believe that the reason Echo has been suppressed is that, in a way, she is monstrous. She challenges a fundamental premise of modern Western philosophy: that we are all unique, autonomous individuals. Echo shows us the opposite: that we are not actually such independent beings. On the contrary, we often just follow other people.

But now we can’t ignore Echo any longer. Here she comes! With the advent of global digital platforms, Echo has been given a new arena. She has got her very own technology, enabling us to see pattern formations – echo effects – more clearly. Echo’s technology joins us together, showing us how numerous we are, how similar we are, how small we are. Suddenly it’s no longer just Narcissus but also his sidekick Echo that we need to understand, in order to grasp the distinctive features and challenges of today.

So I will hereby rescue the nymph from thousands of years of cultural ignominy. I will dig her up and place her on a pedestal to celebrate the spirit of the age. She will have her own era named after her: the Echo epoch.

The Echo epoch is not meant to be a scholarly concept. I am simply trying to articulate my own sense of the times we are living in. And this tells me that I’m increasingly caught in a transition between human and medium, as McLuhan would have put it.

The nymph without qualities

When I was a child, an elderly relative once told me that if I wanted to find out where echoes can’t be heard, I just needed to stand in front of a mountain and shout: “Echo! Where can’t you use your capacities?” Then, my relative said, the echo would shout back at me: “cities … cities … cities”.

And I did so as soon as I got the chance. I called out to the mountain and got that strange answer in return. But now I want to follow up this question of Echo’s capacities.

Does she have any at all? Apparently not.

However, in Ovid’s myth Echo actually undergoes a transformation in the course of the tale. In the beginning she has a physical body. By the end she has become invisible. In the meantime, two things have happened: she has been cursed and she has fallen in love. And it doesn’t seem as though she fell for Narcissus purely by chance.

Let’s go back to the start.

THE NARCISSUS AND Echo myth takes place in three different settings: in the mountains, woods, and by water. In the mountains Echo was a troublesome nymph, a lively and unruly figure. She engaged in endless chatter, according to Ovid. What had she done to make Hera so furious?

She had produced too much information. A torrent of words, in the wrong place and at the wrong time. Echo is an information nymph, and a loose cannon. Her information is misleading; it helps to deceive Hera. Echo is punished severely for this. She loses the ability to form her own sentences. She becomes totally dependent on the voices of others to be able to speak, and even then she can only utter fragments, repeating the last words they say.

Thus we are presented with Echo’s foremost characteristic. Meet the mimic. An individual that is made for talking to others, and more than anything else wants *contact*, but can’t do anything more than repeat and reproduce what other people say. A tough life, many would say, and I agree.

The mimic is not a respectable figure today. No one says to their children: Make sure you don’t stand out from the crowd; be like everyone else. Instead we say: Find yourself, be yourself. People in the West have considered themselves to be autonomous individuals since the Enlightenment, with the more self-fulfilment the better. The unique self is modernity’s biggest brand. But there’s a total mismatch between this ideal and Echo. She’s a parrot. A plagiarist. A copyist. Is there anything more embarrassing for a modern human being than to be exposed as a copyist? It’s better to be nothing at all.

This hasn’t always been the case, though, not even in the West. If you were a pupil of Rembrandt or Titian, it was an honour to be a good copyist. If you had lived in the Middle Ages and said that you needed to find yourself, it would have been a sign of madness. Historically speaking, the need for self-realisation is quite a new ideal. Being like everyone else, on the other hand, has always been a survival strategy.

ECHO STANDS FOR replication, repetition and reproduction. She is able to show her enormous potential by means of twenty-first century technology. Using her super tools, algorithms, she can practise her copyism on a grand scale. She is changing the world by means of mass movements, shitstorms, campaigns, memes – her very nature is *viral*.

Viral information propagates like a virus, in other words by replication (hence the metaphor, borrowed from the world of medicine). This also applies to memes – the term coined by the infamous evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. Internet memes, these snappy images that function as brain candy, are simply an offshoot of Dawkins’ original concept. Memes should be considered as cultural genes, according to Dawkins: ideas, cultural phenomena, fashion trends, songs, customs. They spread via their hosts: people. Memes and genes are both replicators. Imitation is therefore the basis of all culture, said Dawkins.

So all aspects of culture spread via replication. The difference is that digital memes spread much faster than the “old” cultural memes.

Thanks to both social research and brain research, the idea that emotions are contagious is nothing new. At the beginning of the digital era, however, it wasn’t obvious that algorithms could actually be carriers. Ironically, one of the first studies to demonstrate emotional contagion online was conducted by Facebook itself, in collaboration with academics from Cornell University. A research team wanted to test the effect of emotional contagion, so they manipulated the news feeds of almost 700,000 ordinary users to display sad, upsetting posts. The goal was to find out if people then posted sadder, darker content themselves. When the report was published in 2014, it caused a privacy protection scandal: the Facebook team had broken all the rules by using people as guinea pigs without their knowledge. The study was heavily criticised. The findings, however, were most interesting:

We show, via a massive experiment on Facebook, that emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagion (…) We provide experimental evidence that emotional contagion occurs without direct interaction between people (…) and in the complete absence of nonverbal cues.

Several major studies have since shown the same results. For better or for worse, instead of being cold and distant online, we are highly susceptible to influence.

IN THE FOREST we meet Echo, the stalker. She has spotted Narcissus from a distance and made her way down from the mountainside to look at him. She follows him for a long time without him realising that she is watching him through the trees. Why does her gaze fall on him in particular?

In my view, Ovid has given us a key to understanding Narcissus, and the key is Echo. There’s a clue in the angle of vision itself: Ovid lets us see him from the pursuer’s perspective. She discovers him, not the other way round. She is the one that pursues him, from the mountains to the woods to the water. And she is the one that imitates his voice. She is there the whole time – but is so ubiquitous that she’s easily forgotten.

Echo is Narcissus’ enabler, his follower and fan. Figuratively speaking, she is the culture and context that makes Narcissus possible. And as depicted by the poet Ovid, Narcissus is certainly not unaffected by the nymph’s presence: he talks to her because he is fascinated by the sound of his own voice. Narcissus himself needs an ardent echo surrounding him; it reinforces his illusion of grandeur.

The tale of Echo helps us to understand the decline of the West narrative over the last fifty years. Because Narcissus is not an isolated enigma: Echo creates a narcissistic culture by cultivating it, imitating it, copying and spreading it.

As we explore the times we live in, Narcissus will not actually disappear. There are too many narcissistic figures in the forefront of our intense media age. It’s more a question of a front stage/back stage scenario. Narcissus will keep stealing the limelight, like the experienced eye-catcher he is. Personally, I’m still trying hard to see the outline of Echo in the shadow he casts. When Echo appears as his sidekick, the “narcissistic epidemic” changes character. The silicone breasts and pouting lips, the now normalised out of body experience that characterises our age, is it all just a symptom of self-love? Perhaps this increase in narcissism is the visible expression of a burgeoning cultural “echoism”?

BY THE WATER, the last of Ovid’s settings, Echo no longer has a body. Ovid describes her becoming thinner and thinner, until finally she is so thin that the wind blows straight through her. Like an invisible but omnipresent force of nature, she continues to watch Narcissus.

It’s interesting, I think, that she actually outlives Narcissus. She goes on echoing his words until his death and beyond. “In vain, my beloved – farewell!” Narcissus calls to himself, by the edge of the water. Then he dies, crouched over his own reflection. “In vain, my beloved – farewell!” answers Echo. The troublesome nymph has the last word.

By the end of the myth, Ovid has painted a portrait of Echo. She is passionate, highly social and reflexive; her capacities aren’t activated until others speak. At the same time, she’s like the air we breathe: invisible and all around us. Ovid has portrayed a relation, a communication logic, a force that is concealed from ourselves.

As a symbol of our age, Echo can tell us something about mass suggestion and feelings of unreality, about intense fan culture and equally intense stalking. The forces of the media are powerful; they can prevent us from seeing and hearing each other. The issues don’t sound so positive, but there may also be a reason for optimism here. Echo provides the contours of a new self, which is quite different from the inflated ego of “the narcissistic culture”.

“Homo echo” doesn’t act like the centre of the universe like the narcissist does. “Homo echo” is online, sensitive to the gaze and movements of others. Connected, merged and entangled with others, in a common destiny on a pressured planet. This individual is part of something bigger – and knows it.

Disruption!

6 January 2021: This was the day the so-called Alt-right movement left the internet and took to the streets of Washington. Like a troll with many heads, the mob started to march towards Congress. They were red cap-wearing Trump supporters, some openly fascists, and in the midst of it all was a half-naked man in a fur tiara and enormous horns, known as the QAnon Shaman. For the Norwegian author and historian of ideas Bjarne Riiser Gundersen, the sight of the mob storming the Capitol echoed what happened in fifth-century Rome, when the barbarians attacked the original Capitolium. This was an attack that ushered in a new era, dominated by superstition and witch hunts, an era we later chose to call the Middle Ages.

Images on the news were like historical paintings. The motley crew wandering around beneath the chandeliers – were they attempting a coup d’état? Instead of being armed with rifles, they carried smart phones, which most of the time they held up to film themselves.

June 2020: In town after town, in state after state, statues were toppled and painted red. Down with the tyrants placed on plinths – slave owners, politicians and kings. Some statues were decapitated or thrown in the river. In Bristol protestors tore down the statue of slave trader Edward Colston. It was left lying on the ground with a protester sitting on it. The protester then knelt on the statue’s neck and pressed down hard.

May 2020, Oslo District Court: A thin boy with fair hair. He has killed his own half-sister, who had been adopted from China. It was really a mosque that was his target that day. In court the boy testified that he had been “chosen”. He said he was “the third disciple”. When police investigators went through his internet history, they didn’t find two other terrorists, but a chain of at least thirteen murderers who referred to each other, mostly on the internet forums 4chan and 8chan. The chain started with Anders Behring Breivik.

The fair-haired boy is an echo. One of us Norwegians, just like ABB.

January 2020: There’s a young girl with long blonde hair in a thin jacket standing outside the Storting, Norway’s parliament. She had come forward in the end, after the sixteenth Norwegian girl in the network had committed suicide. And then it all came out, a suicide network on Instagram with almost a thousand members, which no adults knew about. The girls had shared their suicidal urges with each other for months. They had behaved considerately, marking their posts with a professional sense of duty. *Trigger warnings*, they wrote. Because even though Instagram denied all responsibility, the girls themselves knew: NB. This is highly contagious. The blonde girl outside the Storting said it out loud: “We can’t lose any more lives.”

I HAVE PONDERED whether it is actually a political revolution we are witnessing now, and not the disruption that originates from Silicon Valley. The decapitations and storming of monuments – our modern age has some classic revolutionary features. And when I glance up at the world from my tiny little Norwegian peephole – a laptop on a desk – I get the feeling that Ragnarok, cosmic destruction, can happen any time soon. Is this rage against the world primarily political rage?

There’s definitely a difference between revolution and disruption. The difference becomes clearer to me when I compare involvement and “engagement”. They are two different things. Involvement is a deeply human feeling, a boost of energy in your head and in your chest. Silicon Valley uses the word “engagement” the whole time; it’s one of big tech’s favourite terms. Their definition goes like this, however: “Engagement measures the number of shares, likes, clicks and comments.” We all know that there’s a huge difference between a data point and that certain feeling in the chest. Our free will and politics lie here: in this distinction.

Because this Silicon Valley disruption isn’t going anywhere, politically speaking. White nationalists or Black Lives Matter, Islamic terrorists or #MeToo – algorithms don’t care. Involvement means “engagement”. This is more of a coup from above than a political coup. Silicon Valley’s platforms control our feelings as if they were electric currents. The slightest spark seems to ignite and spread like wildfire: to a mass movement, a campaign, an appeal. Or worse: to a shitstorm, a witch hunt. Something happens in the interaction between us and the algorithms that is incredibly profitable for the big tech companies, but not always good news for us.

Algorithms gather, spread and divide. And the same thing happens to us.

ECHO DIVIDES. The internal conflict level has increased since the beginning of the 2000s – not only in the USA, but in most countries. The conflicts are usually about race, class and gender issues. There’s always “a war between the rich and poor (…) between the man and the woman (…) between the black and white”, in the words of Leonard Cohen. These conflicts have been around for a long time, but now they have gained a new momentum. #MeToo was perhaps the first clear demonstration of Echo technology in practice: *It’s happened to me too … me too … me too*. New conflicts arise the whole time: between “terfs” and trans women, jihadists and counter-jihadists, incels and alpha males, vegans and meat-eaters, town and country, red and blue and green and grey. And everyone’s at war with middle-aged white guys.

There’s a war for everyone now.

Researchers call this polarisation. The term was first widely used in the public debate in 2016, but has already become a feeble description of the political climate. Suddenly the people you disagree with online are no longer your opponents, they are “haters” or “cyber bullies”. Algorithms participate actively in all stages of polarisation. They create the *echo chamber*, where they put like-minded people in touch with each other. Another term for echo chamber is moral tribe. You don’t need geographical proximity to find your tribe, you are simply herded together: *your vibe attracts your tribe*. And finding your tribe is no trifling matter. It can feel like connecting with your family: a spiritual sister, “a brother from another mother”. In this way, platforms are rigged to let emotions run high; they are identity technologies.

Just as polarising as the echo chamber is another internet phenomenon known as *flame wars*. This happens when people with opposing views find each other online. When flame wars erupt on social media, algorithms draw in users and generate “engagement” on the battlefield. Some researchers have claimed that people develop more balanced views from discussing issues on social media. However, the majority of findings point to the opposite: people become more even convinced that they are right, and that other people are stupid.

ECHO GATHERS. The modern age is a new era for mass movements, for better and for worse. Never in history have there been more demonstrations than now. All over the world, furious crowds are taking to the streets and squares. The numbers speak for themselves: according to researchers at Havard University, the number of protest movements doubled between 2010 and 2020. Anti-government protests have spread from country to country, from Hong Kong to Lebanon, Algeria to India, Chile to England. They have been met by truncheons, tear gas and water cannons.

Paradoxically, the largest global mass mobilisation in history – organised by Black Lives Matter – took place during an epidemic. Everywhere you looked there were blue face masks. When photos flash past on the news, I can recognise the different factions by their “uniform”. One movement wears yellow vests and builds barricades at crossroads and roundabouts. Another one wears traditional Norwegian embroidered skirts, a female guerrilla group protesting against the relocation of a hospital. Antifa members wear black clothes and balaclavas. Neo-Nazis have shaved heads and green shirts. The boogaloos in the US wear Hawaiian shirts and carry rifles. One of the crowds is made up of children, with homemade banners saying: “There’s no planet B”.

The masses of people are not alike; it just appears so from a distance.

ECHO SPREADS. Echo spreads falsifications and fabrications, lies and rumours. Whenever the media and authorities have a similar message about a major event, this automatically spawns any number of conspiracy theories. More and more people believe that the world is one big conspiracy. There’s a deep state, an enemy within, a traitor in our midst. The enemy can change identity and be globalists, Satanists, paedophiles, cultural Marxists, Jews or Muslim-lovers. They can operate in secret through institutions such as the Illuminati, Masonic lodge, the government, Norwegian Labour Party, the health authorities or child welfare services. Ultimately, they all have the same goal: to eradicate the population’s identity.

Researchers have identified a certain kind of algorithm as the main reason that people are radicalised to the point of paranoia. They are called recommendation engines, and they work like this: “Did you like the video about Jews being responsible for Covid-19? Then you’ll like this one about Trump saving the world from a Satanic paedophile ring.” All social media are super-spreaders of conspiracy theories, but YouTube stands out in particular: “One of the most powerful radicalising instruments of the twenty-first century”, according to one researcher.

I remember the first surreal weeks of Covid-19. The panic circulating online mirrored the virus circulating around the world. “We’re not just fighting a pandemic; we’re fighting an infodemic”, said the head of the World Health Organisation.

The most popular conspiracy theory about Covid is that Silicon Valley is spreading the coronavirus via radio waves from the new 5G mobile network. This is pure fantasy driven by the sense of powerlessness experienced by people who fear technology. Spreading technology.

ALGORITHMS DON´T cry when yet another black man is killed by the police. Algorithms aren’t afraid of losing their jobs; they don’t worry about their children’s future. They don’t believe that everything is a conspiracy. They don’t struggle with suicidal thoughts. They don’t feel the contempt in their neighbour’s eyes. They don’t fear that one day they will wake up and *be a nobody*.

Gather, divide, spread. Algorithms feel nothing, they are simply extensions of ourselves. It is in that sense that they are dangerous.

A spectre is passing through the world: the spectre of Echo. Disruption seems to bring out certain sides in people, sides which have probably always come to the surface in times of upheaval, but which now are more typical of our age – typical of technology. How has Silicon Valley managed to get under our skin?

I myself often feel contaminated. I hate the hate and fear the fear. Perhaps this is the real impact of algorithms: we are radicalised only to the extent determined by our own disposition. Because I am a sceptic, I am radicalised as such: I doubt myself and all others. If I spend any more time online, all this scepticism will make me explode.

A Frenchman in Silicon Valley

Stanford University, Silicon Valley, consists of low, sturdy, yellow brick buildings. This is what academic self-confidence looks like: no other university in the world has produced as many billionaires as Stanford. Entrepreneurs and CEOs of everything from Google and YouTube to Snapchat, LinkedIn, Netflix and Yahoo have studied here.

But I am interested in the Department of Philosophy.

There happened to be a leading thinker in the valley who became interested in Echo. This professor developed a grand theory that was based on imitation, yet he never mentioned the nymph by name. He was originally a French Catholic. In the course of the almost 40 years he lived in this valley, he saw how it changed character and became the centre of activity for the world’s most popular capitalists. He died here in his home, in 2015.

Rumours circulated about him in the corridors among the first-year students. They claimed that this professor was able to turn everything you had ever thought or believed on its head. He combined history, anthropology, philosophy and religion in a theory that embraced the whole of human civilisation. The last great thinker, it was said. The professor’s name was René Girard.

A lecture hall, consisting of just a wooden roof and walls. The sun shines in through a series of windows just below the ceiling, lighting up the lectern. I imagined Girard standing here, with his mop of grey hair, and hundreds of attentive students sitting in front of him. He never adopted the casual American look when it came to clothes. He always wore a suit in the heat, and sometimes even a tie. He had dark eyes, thick eyebrows and a strong French accent.

“Listen,” I imagined him saying in this room. “You think your desire comes from your innermost self. You think you are expressing *you.* But it’s not like that. People learn what to desire from other people.”

This might have been how René Girard introduced mimetic desire to his students. Admiration and learning, conflict and violence all originated from the same source. He called it *mimesis*.

Mimetic theory consists of four main pillars: *mimetic desire*, *mimetic rivalry*, *mimetic crisis* and *the scapegoat mechanism*. Girard based his whole theory on his reading of texts. Ancient texts: medieval texts, Greek tragedies, Bible stories and anthropological notes. He was highly critical of postmodernism and its pretentious claim that a text is just a text. He personally regarded these texts as historical sources. They told of true events that had taken place.

From all his sources, Girard identified a common pattern in his book *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Through the layers of history, he revealed that humans were imitative creatures, but had to hide it at all costs. Indeed, we are programmed to believe that other people have something we ourselves lack, argued Girard. So we imitate. The reaction is so automatic that we aren’t aware of it ourselves.

IT COULD BE anywhere, anytime, anyplace. There’s a group of children playing. One of them gets up and starts to walk in the direction of a toy. Another one spots what is happening from the corner of her eye, scrambles to her feet, races to get there first – makes it – and lifts the toy triumphantly in the air. What kind of toy was it? The child hardly notices; it doesn’t matter at all.

This reflex, which originates from a place deep inside us and *covets* what other people have, is the essence of mimesis. Mimetic desire is not a basic need. Nor is it an instinct. It is rather an inner yearning that arises once our basic needs are satisfied, a craving that is aimless to begin with, but automatically picks up on what our social surroundings consider desirable. Where should I look? Who should I see? What and who matters? This mimetic reflex exists in adults too, according to Girard, but we hide it from ourselves by means of our adaptability, sense of shame and repression.

As a young man, Girard was inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre and the philosopher’s distinction between two forms of consciousness. Being-in-itself (*en-soi*) is used to describe the things in the world that are not conscious of themselves. On the other hand, being-for-itself (*pour-soi*) is used to describe human beings, who are conscious of their own existence. The latter form of consciousness is in fact a mixed experience, Sartre pointed out; self-awareness brings with it considerable freedom, yet also a significant amount of existential angst. We therefore go around longing for something simpler. How wonderful, how easy it would feel just “to be”! We yearn to fuse these two forms of consciousness into one, a “being-in-and-for-itself”. This longing is fundamentally religious, Sartre argued. “The fundamental project of human reality is the desire to be God”, as he stated in *Being and Nothingness*.

Girard agreed with Sartre that this lack of being explains the attraction of religion, but he added his own social take on things. Due to their own lack of being, humans idolise *each other*, he claimed.

We imagine that other people possess a complete self, an essence which we ourselves lack. The idealised others may be celebrities, or simply people we know who seem to have an aura, a fullness of being that we are drawn towards. Girard called them “models”. Faced with our own lack of being, we believe that the model is special, and more self-sufficient than us. So we imitate in order to be on the other’s wavelength. The model has divine autonomy and doesn’t need us, or at least that’s how it feels.

I can picture Girard standing there at the lectern. He effectively destroyed the Western philosophical tradition, which had produced such a radical individualism. The autonomous human was a myth, he said. A romantic lie! Nietzsche’s declaration that God is dead was wrong. Humans have a propensity for idolatry, Girard claimed. An end to religion simply meant a displacement of who we idolise: God is “dead”, so we worship our neighbours instead.

Because in reality we are not autonomous beings. As a species we are extremely open to other humans, he said. We create both identities and cultures by unconsciously imitating those around us. According to Girard, humans should be called *interviduals*, not individuals.

MIMESIS CAN EXPLAIN why we always end up competing for the same things: status, markets, appearance. Why, after trying on a pair of shoes and deciding not to buy them, we still feel a twinge of regret when a cool dude picks them up and says: “What great shoes!”

Mimesis explains all kinds of cultural phenomena linked to “contagion”. How fashions can influence what clothes we like. How the spirit of the age can change as fast as the weather.

This reminds me of a scene from Dag Solstad’s novel *Professor Andersen’s Night*. The professor is sitting with six friends, having dinner and drinking wine. His friends feel that they are such free, spontaneous individuals. They outdo each other in how distinctive their traits are: that’s so *typical* of you, they laugh. But Professor Andersen is not laughing. He feels uncomfortable, like an outsider, and it makes him view the whole scene as if it were a photograph. If anyone saw a photo of this dinner party in 30-35 years’ time, he thinks to himself, they wouldn’t notice how typical each individual’s traits were. What would be typical would be the spirit of the times: “The spirit of the times operates like this, concealed from the person who is its prisoner, but apparent to someone who observes us in photographs from another period, liberated, from the outside.”

What Solstad describes here is mimesis.

Mimesis explains why people compete for high status jobs that don’t really make them happy. Why bidding wars on the stock exchange can create enormous paper valuations for companies that haven’t yet produced anything at all. How, for example, the bitcoin bubble is possible, a currency that can’t be used. Mimesis explains credit, a word that comes from the Latin for believe (*credere*). Because people are perfectly capable of believing in things that don’t actually exist – as long as other people believe it first.

We can change course like a flock of birds in the sky.

Imitation is therefore social glue. It’s how we create bonds and culture. However, this doesn’t mean that mimesis is a purely innocent force. Mimesis will always entail a paradox, Girard believed. The mechanism functions like this: When I want “to be in your shoes”, first you are my “model”, but later you become my obstacle. It’s logical – because I can’t have your aura and status if you have them.

My idol has become my rival. A mimetic rival.

Thus both of us face a more complicated social reality.

WHEN PEOPLE CHANGE from being models to rivals, the object they are competing for often assumes an immense value. The rivals reinforce each other’s firm belief in the object’s value. The more they stare at each other, the more the value of the object increases: since *you* (with your fullness of being) covet this particular piece of land/friendship/make of shoes, it must somehow be special and attractive. The stronger the rivalry, the stronger the feeling that your own longing is totally genuine and an expression of your innermost desires.

Mimetic rivalry explains the apparently paradoxical situation that can arise when two parties are in conflict: they become increasingly similar. In the heat of the action, they both believe they are complete opposites. From the outside things looks totally different, like a strange dance, as enemies start repeating each other’s language, behaviour and actions. Girard calls such pairs mimetic “doubles”. They are reflections of each other, as a result of their common object of desire.

Mimetic rivals may become obsessed with each other. Girard explained that people can fight tooth and nail all their lives about meaningless things, almost forgetting what the actual argument was about in the end. Because the fiercest conflicts are rarely about material objects, like big cars or houses. They are about the fullness of being: status, honour and position. We really want to see admiration, preferably envy, in our opponent’s eyes. It’s only then we have proof of our social recognition.

Literature is full of “doubles” such as these, bound together in a love-hate relationship. Shakespeare pitted the Montagues and the Capulets against each other: “Two households, both alike in dignity”. Elena Ferrante depicts Elena Greco’s intense competitiveness with her brilliant friend Lila, a dynamic that motivates her to write books. This mechanism exists in politics too. It’s not easy for an outsider to see the difference between punks and neo-Nazis, as their uniforms are pretty similar. The Norwegian security service is well aware of the parallels between IS fighters and the extreme right.

At this stage of the analysis Girard introduced a new mimetic concept. Disputes over honour and status are extremely likely to spread, he said, thus having “a mimetic snowball effect”. Whole sections of the population can then end up as rivals. This is where Girard’s mimetic theory became a theory about societal conflict. He introduced the mimetic *crisis*.

The mimetic crisis is a dark place. Many societies have been there, and none by choice. When the crisis arises, society is on the brink of collapse, succumbing to chaos and violence. The crisis is often caused by an external threat, Gerard believed. It could be a natural disaster or a military invasion. Throughout history it has often been a disease: the plague. The threat then triggered an internal societal crisis, with the collapse of the cultural order. Society reverted to Thomas Hobbes’ brutal state of nature, with everyone against everyone.

The kind of conflict Girard set out to explain is not a cold war, it’s the logic of fratricide and civil war. Over the centuries, shocked witnesses to atrocities have attempted to describe the horrors taking place around them. Girard studied these accounts. He demonstrated that crises are experienced as the removal of distinctions, and that there is terrible monotony in chaos. The meaningful organisation of roles and tasks in society breaks down, and a kind of mass delirium takes over. A terrible, nihilistic sameness emerges.

Where will it all end? It goes without saying that internal conflicts are not sustainable, as the community will end up annihilating itself. Girard stated that very often something else happens during mimetic crises. There’s another way out.

A new formation emerges: now it changes from everyone against everyone to all against one.

And it doesn’t seem unfair there and then. It seems natural, inevitable and true.

The solution lies in finding a scapegoat.

FROM A HERD of goats grazing in the sun, I pick out one. It looks quite normal, with hoofs and a shaggy coat; it bleats and chews the cud. The difference between this one and the others in the herd is that this goat is a scapegoat. It has been chosen by the villagers, and now it will be washed and made ready before being led before a “priest”, who will recite certain verses. The verses say that all the villagers’ sins will now be placed on the goat’s head.

Then it is slaughtered.

Just as the word “witch hunt” derives from actual hunts for witches in the 1600s, the scapegoat was once a real goat. The sacrificial rites are described in the Bible, as well as myths found in Greece and Syria. Today, of course, we call such rituals primitive. But at the time they were a sure sign of progress. Because before goats were offered as a blood sacrifice, humans were.

From his lectern at Stanford in Silicon Valley, Professor Girard presented his students with a historical pattern. A community is torn by internal conflicts, and what happens? Rivals bond over an idea they all share: that a small group of people – sometimes just one individual – poses a danger to everyone else. After the victim is killed, harmony can be reinstated – for a while. Girard called this *the* *scapegoat mechanism*, and it was his most important analysis, from a societal point of view.

Since the beginning of time, then, scapegoats have provided the solution for societies ravaged by mimetic crises. Together with his students, Girard read and interpreted what he called “texts of persecution”, which were accounts of the massacres of Jews in the 1400s, and witch trials in the 1600s. When we read such sources today, said the professor, we immediately realise that the Jews and “witches” were scapegoats. But contemporary authors were convinced: Jews *had* poisoned the water, that’s what caused the bubonic plague. Witches *had* bought misfortune over the community, so they had to be executed. The reports were written “in the dark”, from the persecutors’ perspective.

Girard handed out even older myths to his students and asked: Why did so many of the ancient gods and goddesses have a physical defect? Why did they have a stoop, one eye, or a limp? Why were the oldest stories in the world so often about a king-like character who was killed by his own people? Because hallowed figures, like heroes and kings, had to suffer a cruel fate, he said. They were executed in their day because they stood out.

Ancient myths thus cover up the scapegoat mechanism, he argued. They were unconscious “lies”, concealing the sacrifice of members of our own species. However, something happened in the retelling of the sacrifice over the course of history. The bloody act came to heaven, in a way. The purging function of the scapegoat was also stored in the collective memory, as the sacrificial victim was the harbinger of peace between peoples. This heralded a new era! And scapegoats went down in history as its *founders*.

Girard believed that without scapegoats, civilisations would never have existed. Early human communities evolved as a result of communal acts of violence against quite random victims. This mechanism made it possible to keep violence at bay. He pointed out that in Greek, the internal link between the scapegoat and the cure still exists. The word *pharmakos*, meaning “ritual victim”, is related to *pharmakon*, which means both poison and medicine.

Religions dealt with violent mimesis but also covered it up. By making a barbaric action sacred, humans were able to live with their brutal nature.

GIRARD WAS CRITICAL of institutional Christianity. On the other hand, he regarded biblical texts as groundbreaking, since they exposed the scapegoat mechanism. What Jesus really represented, he believed, was a historical break with mimetic spirals of violence: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. You shall not covet anything belonging to your neighbour. Turn the other cheek. Such phrases were once radically innovative. As the first texts in history to take the victim’s perspective, they paved the way for humanism and modern legal institutions, argued Gerard. He nevertheless warned against believing that the judicial system had solved the problem of scapegoats. On the contrary, the practice is widespread even today. When the blood begins to boil, the need to single out a guilty party bubbles to the surface. It is this compulsion that ultimately leads to ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Who are the scapegoats among us? Girard’s sources revealed that scapegoats typically had various traits in common. They were often minorities, either ethnic or religious, or they had a physical handicap that made them stand out. Girard’s thesis was that, historically, women were also more likely to be victims of the scapegoat mechanism than men. Because why are there more female than male deities in the ancient religions? The romantic, and usual, interpretation has been that ancient societies were matriarchal, and thus more peaceful and egalitarian. Girard didn’t agree. The large number of goddesses simply meant that women were more easily victims of rumours and accusations, he claimed, a process that often resulted in death.

Then there were the privileged few: kings, queens, idols and leaders. The powerful were also marginalised. Gerard rattled off the names of historical kings and leaders who had been sacrificed as scapegoats in times of conflict: King Oedipus, Socrates, Romulus, Caesar, Jesus. They could be popular idols one minute, but the next minute nailed to the cross.

A scapegoat, then, often existed on the margins of the cultural system. The person could be popular or unpopular, but there was always something about them that the population could direct their frustration at. Girard made the unsettling, humanistic point that in theory we could all one day have the finger pointed at us. In his view, the scapegoat was, by definition, innocent. The scapegoat was a symptom of a whole culture’s problem. One individual could not be held responsible for a crisis in society.

So scapegoats could come from all social classes. Both kings and fools fit the bill, said the professor.

GIRARD´S LECTURE WAS over and the auditorium empty. What had the professor presented to his students? A provocative portrait of human nature. A claim that is counter-intuitive and goes against our belief in people as independent, rational beings. A truth which, if we accept it, is shameful. For who would acknowledge that they are controlled by the gaze of others? No one wants to be a “nobody”; everyone wants to be *someone.*

Girard describes people as imitators, followers and persecutors. He provides an original view of our idolisation of Narcissus, secular society’s God substitute. He explains the effects of contagion on society. How rumours circulate, the lynch mob forms and scapegoats are singled out. Aspects of society that we might have thought belonged to the distant past, but which fully impact our digital lives.

Why? Because technology *reinforces* our mimetic nature? Or simply because technology itself is mimetic?

At this point we need to go a bit further back in time, to Silicon Valley’s early years.

Economy of attention

Yet another mystery. Because who was sitting in the lecture hall at Stanford with all the other students? Peter Thiel.

He was 24. The logical choice for him would have been to study the sciences, as he was a chess master and gifted mathematician. But he had chosen philosophy. And as he sat there listening to Girard, he felt his world was about to change…….