

Mimetic Desire 101

A short introduction to why we want the things we want.



Luke Burgis ✓

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What is Mimetic Desire?

Nearly everyone (unconsciously) assumes there's a straight line between them and the things they want.

> > *I wake up one day and “suddenly” decide that I want to run a marathon—amazingly, all of my friends had a similar realization when they hit their mid-thirties, too.*

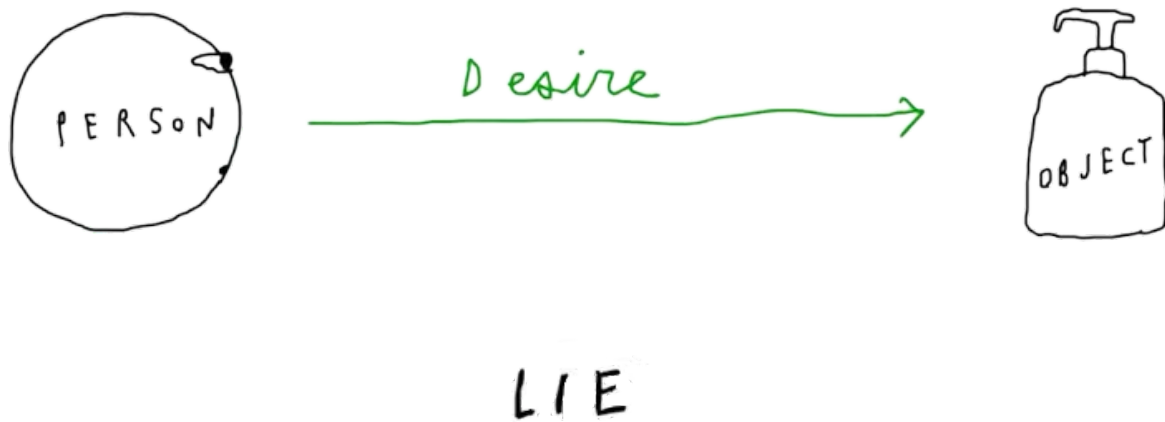
> > I get the brilliant idea that Substack is objectively the best publishing platform for my long-form essay writing, based on all the “data”—right around the time that everyone else and their mother seems to be arriving at the same conclusion.

>> I decide to get a dog during Covid because, well, I’ve been wanting a dog for a long time and now seems like as good a time as ever. (Nevermind that I’m the only one in my friend group who hasn’t, yet, and these guys share pictures of their puppies on Instagram along with the rest of the world on nearly a daily basis.)

In each of these cases, I’ve convinced myself that my desire is independent and autonomous. I want to pursue something because it “just makes sense,” or it’s the right thing to do, or it’s what I “authentically” desire, my personal pathway to fulfillment.

(This all happens beneath my conscious awareness. Very few people question why they want the things they want at all.)

The assumption that my desires are all my own—this story that I tell myself—is what the French social scientist René Girard calls “The Romantic Lie.” The Lie is that I want things independently, or that I choose all of the objects of my desire out of some secret desire chamber in my heart. I know a good thing when I see it; I know what’s desirable and what’s not, unaided.



All illustrations by Liana Finck. Her work can be found in the New Yorker and on her excellent Instagram page.

Julius Caesar was an excellent Romantic Liar. When he won the battle of Zela, he famously declared: “Veni, vidi, vici” (*I came, I saw, I conquered*). If we translate these words into the language of desire, we see what he is really claiming: “*I came, I **desired**, I conquered.*”

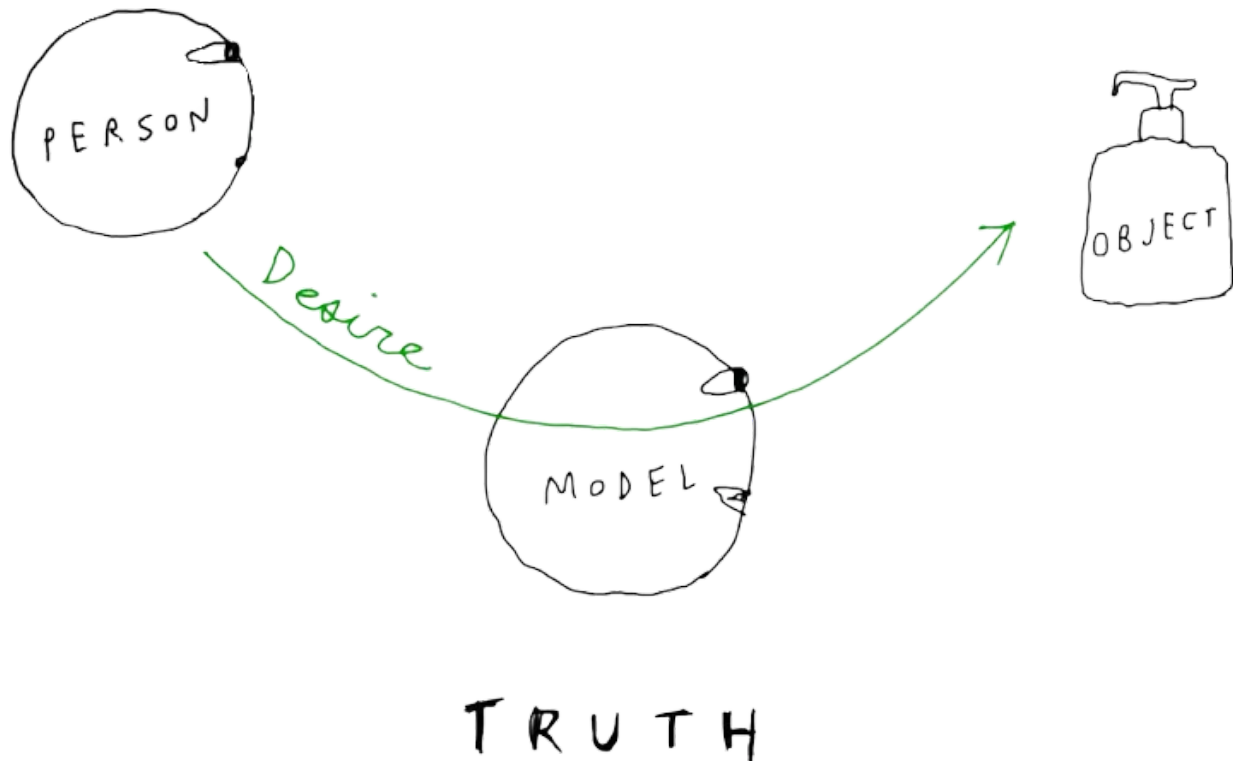
Caesar would like all of us to believe he needs only to lay eyes on something to know whether it’s worth wanting. But Caesar is lying. He’s like the rest of us. The desirability of the particular land on which the battle of Zela was fought had nothing to do with the land itself and everything to do with the value that his rival, the Persian king Pharnaces II, had put on it—simply by being there.¹

The value of objects is not objective—it’s subjective. And that subjective value is determined mimetically, based on our relationships with others. We could say that value is *intersubjective*: we assign value to things (and therefore desire them) according to what other people want.

Models of desire—those people who we look to for guidance about what to want (usually without knowing it)—literally transfigure objects before our eyes. Say you walk into a consignment store with a friend and see racks filled with hundreds of shirts. Nothing jumps out at you. But the moment your friend becomes enamored with one specific shirt, it’s no longer a shirt on a rack. It’s

now *the* shirt that your friend Molly chose—the Molly who, by the way, is an assistant costume designer on the sets of major films. The moment she starts ogling one shirt, she sets it apart. It's a different shirt than it was five seconds earlier, before she started wanting it.

And it doesn't have to be a shirt. It can be anything.



The path between us and the thing we want is never straight. It's always curved. It goes through, or around, models.

Mediated Desire

Models are people, groups, or things that help us know what to want.

“O hell! to choose love by another's eyes!” says Hermia in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It's hell to know we have chosen anything

by another's eyes. But we do it all the time: we choose brands, schools, and dishes at a restaurant by them.



The art of Phillip Guston—the inspiration behind our big-eyed faces.

Humans have a built-in, *instinctual* radar for our most basic needs—just like animals do. If we're trapped outside in the cold freezing, we instinctively seek shelter in the warmth.

Basic survival, sustenance, sex, warmth: these are all instinctual needs for which we have biological mechanisms to help guide us. If I'm starving and I see a juicy steak and a piece of wood in front of me, I don't need much help to determine which one I should eat. My body tells me what to choose.

These things are not desires per se. It's more appropriate to call them "needs."

A **desire**, on the other hand, is an object that we pursue for which there is no purely instinctual basis. When it comes to desire, we don't have a *built-in* mechanism (like instincts) to help guide us toward wanting one thing more than another. Which new model of car should we buy? What should we major in at college? What style of clothes should we wear? The more abstract the thing is, the more mimetic desire usually comes into play. Our central nervous system certainly isn't going to give us any clear or intelligible answers.

But models can. *Models are people who show us what is worth wanting.*

Rather than an internal (biological) homing device that helps us make choices, models are external signposts that steer us toward the pursuit of certain people, places, things, even lifestyles.

Models are like people who *seem* farther up ahead on the path we're on; they can see around a corner that we can't see around. We assume that they have some insight into which direction to go that we do not. In short, we assume they have something that we do not—that they possess some quality of being that we do not. And so we follow them.

Mimetic desire means that we make many of our choices *according to the desires* of others—our models.

The Mimetic Martini

CASINO ROYALE - VESPER MARTINI



If we choose something that nobody else seems to want, we begin to doubt that we made the right choice. If a high school student starts dating a classmate that none of her friends express even the slightest bit of interest in, she grows insecure. She begins to wonder whether she made the right choice. We seek validation in our desires. We look for social proof.

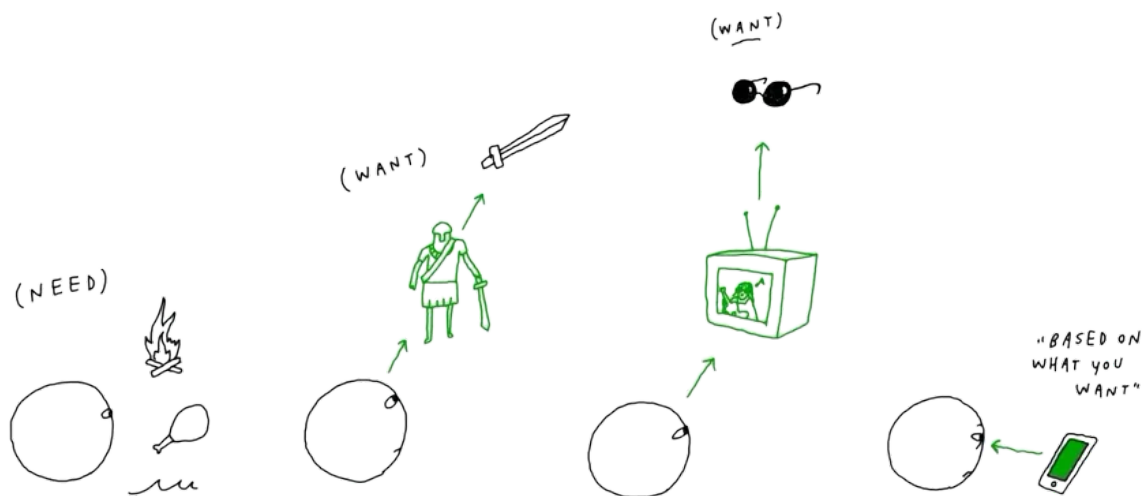
Desire always needs something to latch onto; it can't stay free-floating. In this sense, it operates like a bivalve that has to be attached to a substrate (a rock, or some other surface). As soon as it becomes detached from one thing, it immediately attaches itself to something else: another model.

There is no end to desire because there are always more models. The overnight Bitcoin millionaire doesn't start wanting less, or even simpler things; he starts taking an interest in rare fish aquariums, Nordic cooking, and traveling to obscure places he reads about in his *Monocle* magazines.

Desire, according to René Girard, is always for something we think we *lack*—or else it wouldn't be desire at all. Desire is *not object-oriented*, as we commonly

assume. Desire never finds fulfillment in any particular “thing.” There is literally no object or achievement or person that would ever satiate our desire. If anything, we dream up new and strange things to want the more that we have.

Desire is unique to humans in this sense. Animals don’t have abilities of abstraction, which means they can’t *want things* beyond their immediate worlds. Humans, on the other hand, have learned to want the most obscure and trivial things. And our mimetic nature has made us a target of manipulation by those who understand how this mechanism works.



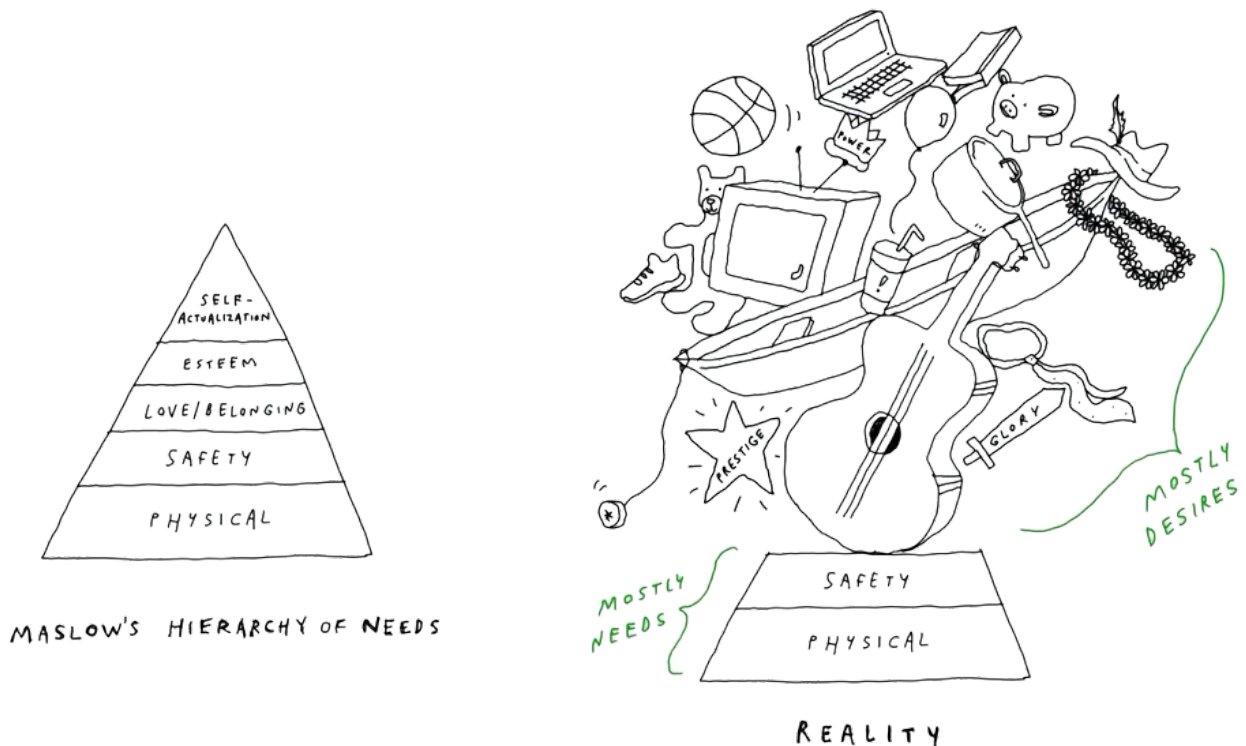
This continuum is an oversimplification. In reality, the lines are blurry. Our most basic needs are also driven largely by mimesis.

Even *water* has transitioned from the world of needs to the world of desires. Imagine you came here from another planet that was still in the pre-bottled-water stage of evolution (a critical stage). I asked you whether you preferred Aquafina, Voss, or San Pellegrino. Which would you choose?

Sure, I could present you with the minerality breakdown and pH levels of each, but we’d be kidding ourselves if we think that’s how you will make your choice. I tell you I drink San Pellegrino. And if you’re an imitative creature like me, or if

you just think I'm a more highly developed being than you—because you come from a pre-Pellegrino people—you're going to choose San Pellegrino.

It's revealing to think of mimetic desire along a continuum. Certain people and organizational cultures are more prone to mimesis than others. And one thing is clear, on a societal level: any society in which people are no longer struggling with scarcity but *coping with abundance* will undergo an explosion of mimetic desire.



In this universe of desire that we find ourselves in, there is no stable hierarchy. Since desires are determined by models and not by instincts, we can begin to want something new at any given time if the right model comes along. The sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman referred to this kind of situation as “liquid modernity”—almost nothing is stable. Not least of all our desires.

None of this is to say that our evaluation of people and things is *merely* subjective. It is (hopefully) formed in part by the objective qualities of the thing itself. A baby banging on pots and pans, a high school punk band, and Mozart have different levels of musicality. *Beauty is objective, but we perceive it subjectively*—that is, mimetically. We perceive it through the lens of models who distort reality. The more we want to be like a model, the more we lose sight of the objective qualities of the things they have.

The *things themselves* don't matter much when it comes to desire. We care about people (models), not things. They represent some *quality of being* that we think we lack.

This is what Girard calls **metaphysical desire**: *desire of another's desire*—not of any particular object. One way to think about the word metaphysical is “after the physical.” Metaphysical desire is not concerned with physical things. It is concerned with *being* a certain way. It is concerned with identity.



A chef who lusts for the elusive Michelin Guide stars does not want the silly red star that appears next to the name of his restaurant (like a blue verified mark on Twitter...)—he wants the prestige that comes with it. The credentials of universities, having bylines in certain publications, getting named to certain “lists”, or simply just being thought of as an “expert” by others are all forms of this mimetically-driven sense of identity.

I'll re-iterate in slightly different terms: a model is someone, real or fictional, who *mediates desire* to us. We already call people who mediate desire for certain clothes or styles by their true name: "models." Their purpose is not to model the physical articles of clothing but the *desire to wear the clothes*. Their purpose is to make us want what they have.

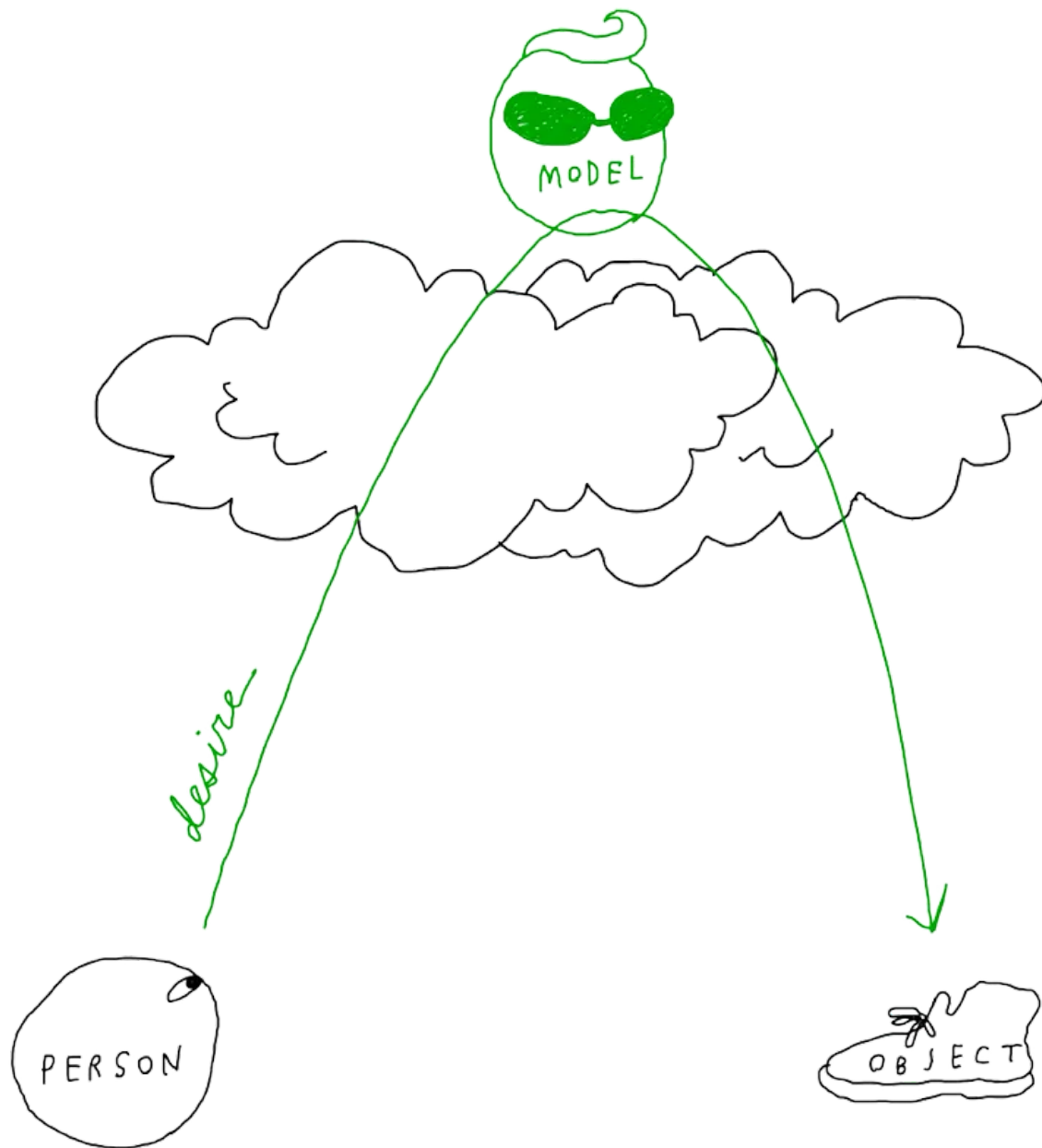
What you actually want is their face, their body, their withering stare—which don't come with the clothes.

Two Types of Models

There are two major types of models with whom we have different kinds of relationships. Mimetic desire works differently in each of the two situations.

If the model stands at a great distance—not physically, but socially and existentially—then the model is an *external mediator* of desire. The model is external to the subject's world. This means that no serious competition with the model is possible.

I like to call the world in which these types of models live **Celebristan** for short.



CELEBRISTAN

There is a barrier between the models in Celebristan and the people who take them as models. That barrier can be death, or time, or space, or simply status.

While everybody likes a feel-good story of a movie star or singer taking a high schooler to the prom, we all know that the high schooler isn't on a real date—

he or she has no chance of competing with the movie star's real suitors. They live in Celebristan.

Don't get me wrong. I don't mean that a person *literally* has to be a celebrity to exist in this world. I am referring to situations where a person is simply an *external mediator of desire*—their desires cannot be directly challenged by their imitator because they seem to occupy a different plane of existence. Even the growing gap between rich and poor in the United States can put neighbors in the awkward situation of one person living in Celebristan while the other does not. (And that's a recipe for resentment—and more.)

In the greatest novel ever written—Cervantes' *Don Quixote*—the protagonist Don Quixote has his desire inflamed to be a knight (more specifically: a “knight errant”) merely by reading about the adventures of the famous knight Amadís de Gaula. The chivalrous knight, Amadís, was completely external to Don Quixote's world. He existed in Celebristan.

Don Quixote sets out on his crazy adventure with his trusty sidekick, Sancho Panza. But even though they are side-by-side through much of the book, Don Quixote is still an external mediator of desire for Sancho Panza. They are separated by social class and their sense of identity. At no point in the novel does Sancho believe he is a serious competitor to Don Quixote—he doesn't even dream about wanting or achieving the same things that Don Quixote does—even though they occupy the same physical space and time.

We all have people who are in Celebristan from our perspective. A Managing Director at an investment bank lives in Celebristan to an Analyst (an entry-level position); NBA players do to college players (college athletes can't compete for the same championship and trophy); even a much older brother can seem to be in Celebristan to his younger brother. At least until they both make it through adolescence and the older brother doesn't seem more like a man than a peer in the younger boy's eyes.

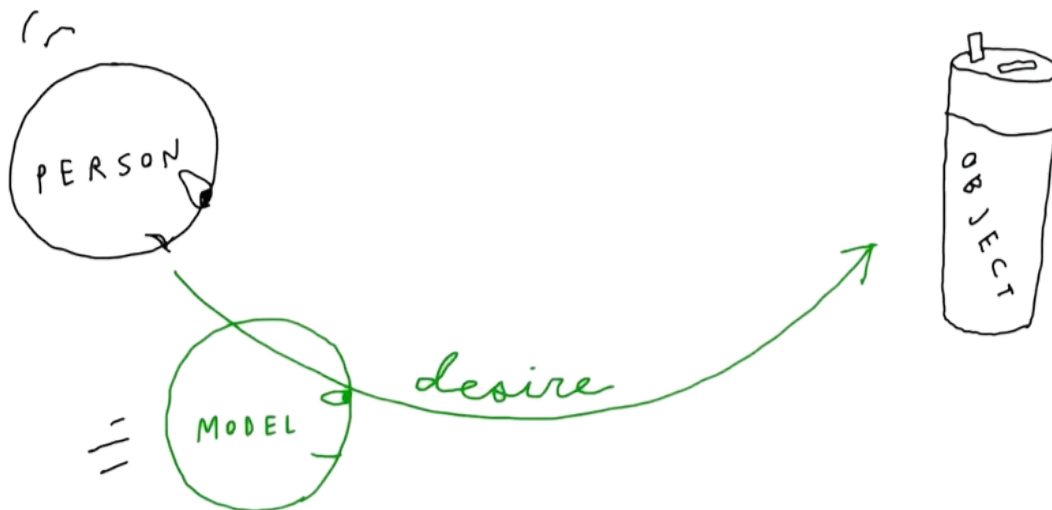
It's worth asking ourselves, honestly: Who in my life do I look at as if they live in Celebristan?

Freshmanistan

The other kind of model is an *internal mediator of desire*—one who mediates desire from inside the subject's world. I like to call this world **Freshmanistan** for short.

Remember what it's like to be a freshman in high school or college? Despite the “great differences” between the jocks and the nerds and the Thespians, they're all far more alike than they are different: they sit next to one another in the same classes, they're all roughly the same age, and they're all vying to carve out an adult identity. None of them have that much power or money (I'm not counting mommy and daddy's). They're all, so to speak, in the same boat—as much as they try to deny it.

Most importantly, there is no barrier separating them from one another. They are in a situation where competition over anything and everything is possible.

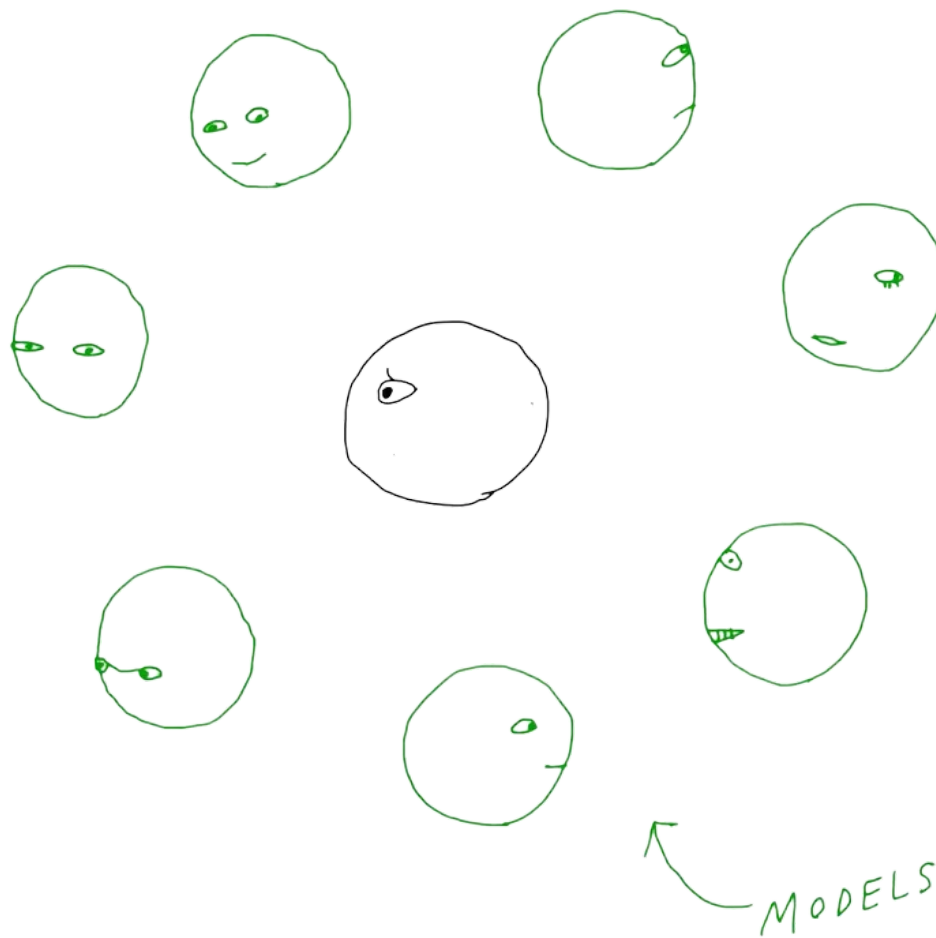


[Note: a model's location in either Celebristan or Freshmanistan is always *relative* to the other person. The rapper Kanye West is in Celebristan to

me—but he's not to Jay-Z. The two of them exist in Freshmanistan together because they have a relationship in which real competition is possible.]

If you lived in 1954 and had 100 students in your class, that would be your Freshmenistan. In 2021, if you're in a class with 100 students, your Freshmenistan is those 100 kids plus every other freshman you follow on Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. That's a lot of modeling, comparing, and desire-shifting.

In Freshmanistan, things can get messy very fast. And all social media is Freshmanistan—we are surrounded by models of desire at all times.



SOCIAL MEDIA

In a way, we're all Freshmen again. Freshmanistan is characterized by a dangerous level of *sameness*, which leads to a crisis of undifferentiation—even as everyone is imitating their secret models, whom they profess to love (but secretly hate), they are desperately trying to carve out their own identities on a tiny raft, in the middle of stormy waters that threaten to swallow them up in a sea of sameness.

Go ahead, differentiate yourself. You have 180 characters.

Until next time,
Luke

>> **Continue with Part II** of this series on Mimetic Desire.

1 The example of Julius Caesar as an excellent Romantic Liar is inspired by work of James Warren, who includes this anecdote in his excellent book, [Compassion or Apocalypse: A Comprehensible Guide to the Thought of René Girard](#).

7 Comments



Write a comment...



Conor Gallagher Writes Conor's Thoughts Jan 18, 2021 ❤️ Liked by Luke Burgis

Wow. Excellent article Luke.

I've been resisting, for the sake of spending time with my loved ones, but I'm ordering your book, and going to start in on Girard's catalogue as well.

After reading this article, mimesis has gone from some interesting, but abstract concept that would be "nice to know about", but now I feel it's more likely to be the kind of thing that alters my worldview significantly and that I won't be able to help bringing up in conversations.

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2 replies by Luke Burgis and others



Anton Cebalo Writes Novum Jun 21 · edited Jun 21

A fun article, really enjoyed it. Especially like the word 'Celebristan,' I think most of social media-induced FOMO we feel nowadays falls on this plane, honestly. But I think it creates strong feelings of inferiority, and so many people I talk to feel useless in relation to it as if their lives are not "fulfilled enough" with these implanted desires they want satiated. It also possesses this algorithmically-infused addictive quality to it.

So, there is something alien in desire-production today, and I've been grappling with just turning so much of it off because it depresses me, as if my life is not "good enough." The internet is dominated by Celebristan and it can make you feel permanently behind an objective not of your own choosing.

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