Cooperation and Competition in Open Production

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Abstract: Implied in concepts such as social media, social production, participatory culture, etc. is that value creation on the social web is founded on cooperation, downplaying the obvious role played by competition and rivalry. This paper is an attempt to theorise the relationship between cooperation and competition through Rene Girard's theory of mimetic desire. The claim of the paper is that the infrastructure and interfaces of the social web functions as mimetic machines, extracting value from both cooperation and competition. The first part discusses the importance of cooperation and competition in immaterial production by engaging with theories from autonomous Marxism and Rene Girard respectively. The two following parts discuss YouTube's business model and how the site structures participation through its algorithms and interfaces. In the fourth part the theoretical framework is used to develop an interpretation of YouTube's Partnership program through an analysis of a number of video clips that express discontent with the functioning of the site – a genre of video clips that are usually sidetracked in the literature. Finally, the paper suggests that the sentiments expressed in these clips should not be seen as exceptions but as constituting the very core of participatory culture as we know it.

Introduction

Implied in concepts such as social media, social production, participatory culture, etc. is that value creation on the social web to a large extent is founded on cooperation, downplaying the obvious role played by competition and rivalry. An ambivalence that Christian Fuchs has pointed out is present both in the Internet architecture itself, and in post-Fordist forms of organisation (Fuchs, 2008). Matteo Pasquinelli (2008) has also highlighted the competitive aspects of the immaterial economy in a chapter aptly named "Immaterial civil war". The contribution of this paper is the theorisation of the relationship between cooperation and competition through Rene Girard's (2005) theory of mimetic desire. The claim of the paper is that the infrastructure and interface on the social web function as *mimetic machines*, extracting value from both cooperation

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and competition.[1] This is exemplified by the video distributor YouTube, foremost by the company's Partnership program which invites users to share the revenue that their content generates. Although the slogan of the website is "Broadcast yourself", the user experience is watching other people broadcasting themselves, which is what the theory of mimetic desire points at: the desire to be seen is not natural, but generated by other people's desire to showcase themselves.

The paper is divided into four parts and a conclusion. In the first part I discuss the importance of cooperation in different modes of production, by engaging with the theories of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno respectively.[2] I also introduce Rene Girard's theory of mimetic desire as a complementary take on these questions. The second part of the paper gives the necessary political-economical context for the analysis and an outline of YouTube's business model. In the third part I discuss the structure and algorithms of the social web with YouTube as the guiding example, and in the fourth part the main argument of the paper is developed. This final part of the paper consists of an analysis of the practices of trolls and haters as well as clips from video-makers that express discontent with the functioning of the site: a genre of video clips and a set of practices that are often sidetracked in the literature. In the conclusion I suggest that through the perspective of mimetic desire these clips should be seen as constituting the very core of participatory culture, rather than as deviant exceptions from the norm.

Mimetic Machines

In this section I will develop a theory of Web 2.0 as constituting a mimetic machine. This concept is intended to capture the fact that the technical assemblage that enables the valorisation of open production is basically a machine for producing value from mechanisms and processes of imitation. This imitation takes two different forms: cooperation on the one hand, and competition, rivalry and conflict on the other. The first form is relatively well understood, while the other has gotten relatively little attention and will be developed further with the help of the case study.

In their book *Commonwealth* (Hardt and Negri, 2009), the authors are trying to map out what they refer to as biopolitical production: a form of production whose goal is not the industrial manufacturing of goods, but social relations and forms of life. Hardt and Negri claim that the organisation of biopolitical production poses a number of problems for capital, since this form of production is particularly resistant to the techniques for measurement and control that are successfully applied to industrial production. The value in biopolitical production shuns every attempt to measure and conceptualise it. Hardt and Negri describe it as such: "Biopolitical products, however, tend to exceed all quantitative measurement and take *common* forms, which are easily shared and difficult to corral as private property". But what is actually intended with this statement? Do not all forms of neoliberal governance aim at rationalising, measuring, and auditing production in relation to set goals, regardless of whether they have to do with material or immaterial production (e.g. Rose, 1999)?

In order to understand Hardt and Negri's argument it is useful to pay regard to the role of imitation, mimicking, copying, or mimesis, in all forms of biopolitical production. Paolo Virno (2008) develops an argument in his essay *Mirror neurons, linguistic negation, reciprocal negation* that is helpful here. Modern brain science has confirmed the old hypothesis that humans are connected to each other in ways that precede language. A mechanism in the brain, called mirror neurons, makes it possible to understand each other through imitation on a neural level. When

someone performs an action in front of another human, this triggers neural activity in the same area of the brain in both persons. According to Vittorio Galese, whom Virno quotes, it is this imitation that forms the basis for interpersonal relations. With the help of the mirror-neurons a "we-centered room" (ibid., p.178) is created, that is shared between the participants in an activity.

Scientists have also proposed that it is these mirror neurons that form the basis for our ability to learn things from each other (Rizzolati and Craighero, 2004). When one sees someone else perform an action – speaking, writing, singing, etc. – this activates the brain neurons. In a way we learn by copying others' behaviour, and mirror neurons are one possible explanation for such learning processes. This means that biopolitical production does not only produce private knowledge, but also common knowledge. When we participate in processes that aim at producing value from immaterial products we cannot *not* imitate or copy the knowledge that is thus produced. Since our capacity to imitate, our mimetic ability, is a crucial component in biopolitical production, one way to describe this kind of production is as a value producing mimetic machine.

This also means that all biopolitical production has a basis in cooperation, which is one of Hardt and Negri's other arguments. In contrast to how work is organised in a factory, cooperation in biopolitical production is not enforced by capital. It is rather something that precedes and is implied in all immaterial production.[3] This interpretation leads to the conclusion that the basis for the production of value in biopolitical production is outside of the direct control of capital, and because of this inability to control, capital must find other ways to intervene and modulate the production process. This paper argues that one way to do this is to organise production around competition rather than cooperation, and that rivalry as a form of control can also be seen as bound up with a mimetic understanding of biopolitical production.

This second way of conceptualising mimesis is present in Rene Girard's theory of mimetic desire (Girard, 2005). According to Virno's interpretation of the results of neurologists, we can understand others' joy, sorrow, and desire through the inter-subjective room that is opened up by communication on a neural level. According to Girard, however, mimesis is not only a source of learning and insight but also of conflict, because through mimesis we not only learn *about* the other's desire, but also *to desire* what the other desires. Desire for Girard has a triadic structure, and is always mediated through the desire of others.

Wolfgang Palaver (2000, no page) notes that: "As long as our mimetic desire is oriented towards non-exclusive goods like learning a language, imitation is peaceful and productive. But if the access to an object is exclusive (social positions, sexual objects, etc.) the inevitable result of imitation is rivalry, conflict and violence". Andrew Feenberg discusses Girard's mimetic desire in relation to economic theory and notes it as a starting point for a critique of the common assumption that desire relates to something that is inherent in objects themselves. A position that can be used to reject some of the founding beliefs of economic science: "the belief that scarcity is a natural phenomenon, the belief that consumer behaviour can be derived from competition for a falsely hypostatised substance called 'prestige'" (Feenberg, 1988, p.136).

Feenberg and Palaver both point out that scarcity is a precondition for mimetic desire to lead to rivalry, but also that scarcity is not a natural phenomenon. What does this mean for the present discussion? Proponents of the position that digitalisation means an end to a society marked by scarcity usually point out that copyright enforces a regime of scarcity on goods that otherwise would have been abundant (Lessig, 2001). Among other things this is what leads

them to advocate the borrowing, appropriation, and remixing of participatory culture. In spite of this optimism, however, open production and participatory culture are marked by another form of scarcity; the scarcity of attention in the so-called attention economy (Pasquinelli, 2008).[4] With Girard's theory we can however also say that this economy of attention is not a natural phenomenon but one mediated by the open and networked structure of the social web. The desire to be seen, to gain the attention of others, is a desire that is created under certain circumstances. It will be argued that openness – the enlarged possibility to partake in cultural production – leads to a heightening of the mimetically induced desire for attention, and that consequently biopolitical production is equally dependent on conflict and competition as cooperation.

Another interpretation of the attention economy would be that there is nothing specific about this desire for attention on the social web, but that today the search for recognition and status is socially and ideologically accepted to such a degree that it is almost ubiquitous; a consequence of a celebrity culture that has taken grip on the whole of society (Rojek, 2001). In this interpretation the desire to be a YouTube star becomes a sub-phenomenon and YouTube yet another channel for this culturally mediated valorisation of attention. If we are satisfied with this interpretation, however, we miss the specific form that this desire takes in social media. What the theory of Girard provides is a possibility to discuss the specific contribution that the open architecture, the ranking, sorting, and linking-system, gives to the desire that runs through the practices on YouTube.

Yet another interpretation would be that the rivalry described in this paper is simply an effect of the convergence between the attention economy and the real economy; thus the popularity contest comes from the fight over revenues from the YouTube economy. What we see is then nothing more than the constant fight over limited resources such as money (cf. Pasquinelli, 2008, p.77). This would however lead us to a full-scale rejection of the premises of participatory culture and social production. If we want to try to think through the premises that are assumed by the proponents of the web's socialness, we have to hold on to the fact that we somehow are facing an immaterial economy – that in the first instance is not characterised by material scarcity or motivated by material rewards such as money. If we want to assume this and still theorise the relation between competition and cooperation the triadic structure of desire is one way to do this.

Advertising, Users, and Platforms

Before I use the theoretical toolbox that I have developed above to analyse YouTube's partnership program I also need to put YouTube in a context and address the political-economic framework which structures YouTube's business model and its mode of operation.

Google acquired YouTube in 2006 for 1.65 billion US dollar at a time when it was estimated that the site owned 46 percent of the market for online video (La Monica, 2006). But already the year before the company had received an investment of 3.5 million dollars from Sequoia Capital, one of the most well-known venture capitalists within the industry. Both these transactions show that from the start the priority for YouTube had to be to find a functioning business model for the platform. At the same time the company has never stopped to communicate that it is the users who are their number one priority (Wasko and Erickson, 2009). The announcement that Google was buying the company was delivered in a clip on the site in which the founders spoke directly to users:

> Thanks to everyone of you who have contributed to the YouTube community. We

> wouldn't be anywhere close to where we are without the help of this community … The most compelling part of this is being able to really concentrate on features and functionality for the community … We're definitely keen on just reorganizing our efforts and energy back into building up the community and resolving these problems that you guys have been having (YouTube 2006).

The ambiguity in this message did not pass unnoticed by the site's users, who in turn posted clips with an ironic twist that commented on the fact that the talk of community increased proportionally with the economic value of the site (eg. Re: A Message from Chad and Steve, 2006).

After Google's purchase new initiatives were launched in order to make the site more profitable. One of those was a fingerprint system called ContentID which is meant to spot copyright material that is being uploaded to the site. When copyright material is detected right-holders can choose to either remove the material or to join YouTube's Partnership program, profit from advertising shown in relation to the clips, and share the profit with YouTube. This practice has managed to harness user habits of uploading large quantities of copyright material, and at the same time to provide opportunities for selling advertising space since advertisers generally prefer to advertise next to professional rather than user-generated material.

Advertiser reluctance to advertise next to user-generated content has always been a problem for the Web 2.0 platforms, since user-generated content varies in quality and may be inhospitable to commercial messages (McDonald, 2009). This has meant that YouTube has only been able to sell advertisements next to a small percentage of the clips, at the same time as the costs for broadband constantly increase with the steady flow of new videos.[5] This problem has lead some to speculate that similar services that specialise in professional content might fare better than those who go for user-generated content (Manjoo, 2009).

Andrejevic (2009) claims that this means that YouTube has to a large extent become an outlet for Hollywood instead of being a place for amateurs to show off their creativity. To some extent this is correct, but at the same time YouTube has also tried to recruit users to produce material that is suitable for advertisers, primarily by extending the Partnership program to also include 'amateurs'. The company now claims that: "As YouTube has grown up it has become a protected and responsive place for any campaign" (YouTube, 2009, no page). This 'protected' environment includes both the increased stream of professional content and content produced by 'regular' users.

Structures for Participation

How is participation structured by the YouTube platform? One central and important structure is found in the organisation of various competitions, which has been a recurring feature YouTube has utilised to encourage increased participation, and to encourage users to produce content of higher quality.

The first contest, YouTube Underground, was announced in September 2006 and was directed towards musicians, encouraging them to upload videos with personally composed music. Keeping in line with the ethos of the site, the winners were elected by the users, who were given the opportunity to vote for their favourite. Among the prizes were equipment from the guitar manufacturer Gibson, a trip to New York, and an appearance on a morning TV-show. After YouTube Underground other contests have been launched, such as comedy

contests (YouTube Sketchies), short film contests (Project Direct), and the YouTube Scholarship Competition, in which the prize was a scholarship for a film school. Furthermore, there are also the recurrent YouTube Awards in which users are allowed to vote from a number of selected videos for the best video of the year.

Although interesting, these contests are not important by themselves, but by virtue of the fact that they illustrate in a very clear and straightforward manner how the social web works as a whole. In this sense they serve metaphoric purpose for my argument, since the structures that are used in these contests are functionally analogous to the structures that are used to sort, rank, and valorise the sum total of the content on YouTube.[6] The argument is thus that these contests are not exceptions from YouTube's regular functioning – which has been a recurring critique of them – but are only a special case of the underlying logic of the social web.

There is, however, one difference between these organised contests and the structure of YouTube, and the social web in general, that is crucial for my argument. In the competitions a final ranking is achieved, a ranking that is beyond dispute, and which consequently puts an end to the competition. The ongoing flux of social production elsewhere on the site constantly avoids such closure, a decisive point which I will come back to in the next section of the paper.

The structures for sorting and ranking on YouTube follow, with some exceptions, the schema identified by Jill Walker Rettberg (2009) where clips are organised temporally, geographically, socially and semantically. On the first page we find an editorial ranking and an algorithmic selection.[7] The algorithmic selection shows the most popular clips within a number of selected categories: entertainment, music, sports, news, politics, etc. The editorial selection is called Featured content, and can include everything from content produced by amateurs to professional material from YouTube's partners. The search function sorts clips according to popularity, number of views, and recency. In the sub-menus one also finds sorting tools that reward clips that have attracted the most discussion; attracted comments from a large number of users; been marked as favourites; become well-known from the web; and are climbing in popularity on the site.[8]

Although we recognise the structure of YouTube from a number of information systems: from web magazines to academic publishing systems that rank articles after the number of citations, the institutional context is markedly different in the case of the open innovation systems on the Internet. The relative security that comes from being employed means that competition is not as prevalent in the former contexts. The frequency with which mechanisms for sorting and ranking recur on the web also means that these tend to become backgrounded; the specific meaning that these mechanisms have on sites for user-generated content thus become less obvious. An ordinary user perceives them as helpful navigational tools, but for the small group that produces material they become measures of success. In a media environment that is about expressing yourself in front of an audience – to broadcast yourself – these structures form a hilly terrain with steep slopes that can be very difficult to climb.[9]

Since popular clips are promoted by the site, these structures work according to a principle of positive feedback; popularity leads to visibility and the chance of spreading that popularity. Each clip is consequently competing against constantly approaching entropy, something which is not the least obvious in the temporal structure of the site. A clip might be popular today, but will it be as popular in a week, or in a month? The constant influx of new videos means that every clip is doomed to eventually drop to the bottom of lists, which is made obvious through the design of the interface. The first page presents only the most popular clip from a given day,

but there is also the possibility of looking for the most popular clips from the preceding week, month, or year. But as the user widens the scope of the search the number of clips and the competition between clips also increases. The only way to counteract this increasing entropy is to constantly produce new clips and hope that some of them will rise to the top, only to fall once again.

Furthermore, YouTube has provided its users with tools for measuring their popularity. With the help of the tool Insight the company hopes that users will: "learn how to create more compelling content that best engages the audiences you want to reach" (YouTube, 2008a, no page). Insight gives users detailed information about who is watching and how they watch. It also makes it possible to "delve deeper into the lifecycle of your videos, like how long it takes for a video to become popular, and what happens to video views as popularity peaks" (YouTube, 2008b, no page). The tool gives enough details to analyse which parts of the video yield higher activity and at which parts users tend to leave the clip, which is referred to as 'hot' and 'cold' sequences. Insight accordingly gives rich enough information for users to not only reflect over the choice of subject but also over the dramaturgical aspects of the production. The tool is marketed as a way to: "increase your video's view counts and improve your popularity on the site" (YouTube, 2008b, n.p.).

Despite YouTube's efforts to find structures for participation that foster certain kinds of creativity, problems have continued with advertiser reluctance to advertise next to user-generated material. This has arguably led to the launch of the extended Partnership program in 2007. The program invited users who "have built and sustained large, persistent audiences through the creation of engaging videos [that thus] has become attractive for advertisers" (YouTube 2007, no page). This meant that 'ordinary' users now were given the same rights and possibilities that media companies already had and were now able to reap financial reward from the attention their clips generated.

Partnership, rivalry and social production

As stated, this paper argues that mimetic rivalry and competition is central to the structure of the YouTube platform and its Partnership program. To support this argument we must be able to observe this on the site, a fact that, unsurprisingly, is frequently noted in the literature. Burgess and Green (2009, p.96) comment that the rivalry is so widespread that it has become a natural part of the community. As they describe, "the apparently anti-social communicative practices of trolls and haters have already become normalised in the cultural system of YouTube, at least for the most popular videos." Furthermore, following Lange's (2007) ethnographic observations, they claim that:

> dealing with the 'haters' – negative and often personally offensive commenters – is part of the YouTube experience for those who participate in YouTube as a social network … Learning how to 'manage' trolls, both practically and emotionally, is one of the core competencies required for effective or enjoyable participation (Burgess and Green, 2009, p.96).

Strangelove's (2010) video ethnography makes essentially the same observation. Apart from the literature, YouTube also acknowledge this problem with their numerous site updates directed towards giving users the possibility of protecting themselves from unwanted comments and other forms of unwelcome behaviour. YouTube has probably spent more energy on fixing this problem than taking care of the prevalence of unlawful copyright material on the site.

The occurrence of hateful behaviour is, however, almost always explained away in favour of the dominant community frame. Strangelove (ibid.) for example, hypothesises that this is typical American behaviour, since most of the site's visitors are American. Anonymity and scale are two other explanations on offer (Burgess and Green, 2009). I would, however, like to test the interpretation that this behaviour is not an (widespread and established) exception but rather a central feature of the structure of the social web, and that this can explained by how Web 2.0 platforms function as mediators in a triadic structure of desire. This interpretation can be tested through an analysis of clips that express the discontent of the site's users.

A search for clips relating to the Partnership program reveals a lot of interesting themes that relate to the hypothesis of the paper. Using keywords such as "YouTube Partnership program" and "Partnership program", I ended up with around 1000 clips. None of these clips rated highly on popularity or viewings, which probably has to do with the fact that only a small minority of users are interested in the program. The majority of clips was irrelevant and was put into the spam category. The rest, however, formed a body of texts that was possible to sit and view in its entirety and to conduct a schematic analysis on.

The themes addressed in these clips boil down to the following categories: videos portraying happy users announcing that they have been accepted to the program; clips featuring aggravated users who inform us about their rejection letters or that they have been kicked out of the program; clips discussing the arbitrariness of the program's principles for admittance; clips that promise to reveal the do's and don'ts of the program; and additional clips that constitute a kind of meta-commentary to the discussion. As, for example, a clip on the "the cult of the YouTube partnership", in which the user in a tongue-in-cheek manner describes how after becoming partner he was shut into a room and forced to screen videos for compliance to the Community Guidelines, and forced to pray in front of the Google altar, etc. (YouTube Partnership Secrets, 2008). In the following I will focus on aspects of these videos that illustrate how mimetic desire functions on the open web.

Titles such as "How to be popular on YouTube", "How to make it on YouTube", "How to make money on YouTube" and "How to become a YouTube partner" are among the more popular of the clips I discuss here. These clips feature a number of tips on how to proceed in order to be accepted to the Partnership program. For example, that one should do clips on issues that are already popular, that one should upload clips often. These clips confirm what has already been established in this paper; that all clips on YouTube compete over a limited amount of attention from the site's users. More viewings, more subscribers, and better ratings are the best ways to become a partner.

The attention aspect is also underlined in another category of clips in which the posters complain about the fact that their clips do not receive the kind of attention that they deserve. Some of these contain appeals to other users to subscribe to the uploader's channel, or to give a good review to one of the uploader's clips, or, as one of the clips puts it, "I'm making this video to get their [YouTube's] attention" (YouTube is NOT involved with the Community, 2007). Other clips from users who are already in the Partnership program but still struggling for attention instead complain that he or she is not one of the "Big YouTube Partners" (Vampire Partners Suck YouTube Off!?!, 2009). The desire seems to be always directed at the level just above where the user is at the moment.

Another aspect that shows up in many of these clips is the fact that YouTube claims that

they are trying to get as many as possible into the program. Several clips quote the message the following message in relation to being denied partnership: "Our goal is to extend invitations to as many as we can. Unfortunately we are unable to accept your application at this time" (eg. Rejection letter from YouTube's partnership program, 2008). The possibility for 'anyone' to become a partner seems somewhat paradoxically to be one of the aspects of the program that gives rise to the most aggravated comments. This is, however, consistent with the thesis that desire is mediated by the other. Desire increases proportionally with the possibility for more people to take part in the competition.

The most pertinent indication of mimetic desire is, however, the extent to which clips about the Partnership program are about other users: their popularity; number of subscribers; numbers of viewings, and so on. Not only are these clips used to vent dissatisfaction over the 'unwarranted' attention that other users receive – the field for comments for these videos are also filled with comments that either confirm the position of the uploader or take the opportunity to direct the same accusation to the user who has posted the clip.

A closer analysis of one of these clips can serve as an example. In "YouTube Partnership: Denied", the admittance procedure is depicted in the form of a job interview between a Google employee behind a large desk, and the hopeful user in the opposite position as an applicant (YouTube Partnership: Denied, 2009). As the camera zooms past the wall behind the desk we see a diagram showing the connections between YouTube and a number of large media companies, and a number of portraits depicting YouTube stars with their names engraved on gold-plated plaques. Next to these portraits a large gray pile rises from the floor, above which a plaque has the tag "The others" printed on it. YouTube's alleged favourising of its company partners and its YouTube stars forms the basis both for uploader desperation and desire for acceptance into the program – with the goal of rising from the gray mass of anonymous users to become one of the chosen few.

Walter Benjamin (1968) claimed that the camera 'tests' the person posing in front of the lens and invites the audience to become critics. For Benjamin this was a liberatory consequence of media technology, since it elevated the masses to the position of reflexive participants in the cultural circuit. For the person in front of the camera, however, it meant that they suddenly found themselves in a position where they were evaluated, scrutinised, and tested. Benjamin compared the camera to vocational aptitude tests; the camera is a participant in a procedure where things are sorted out according to their performance on a test. According to the clip mentioned above, on YouTube we are always in the position of being judged, only the camera has now been outfitted with network capabilities, functions and algorithms which take Benjamin's metaphor literally. "What matters in these tests are segmental performances of the individual" (Benjamin, 1968, p.246), a development which comes full circle with the addition of database functionalities that reifies these performances into patterns of individuals. According to Benjamin, performances under such conditions are not amiable to cult values. From the clips analysed here we can claim that instead of instigating a cult of artwork, on YouTube this process encourages the spectator to desire the position of the actor, and to a belief that he or she can perform equally well or better than the person in front of the (web-)camera.

Reijnders, Rooijakkers and van Zoonen (2007) discuss Girard's theory of mimetic desire in relation to the television show *American Idol*. Their conclusion is that *American Idol* can be understood as a ritual through which mimetic desire is neutralised through the course of the series. Girard has developed his theory by introducing the "scapegoat" as a figure through which mimetic desire can be channelled (Girard, 1986). With the help of scapegoats, competition

is allowed to pass over into community, by directing the imitative behaviour toward a shared rival. In contrast to the desire for a rivalrous good, such as attention, aggression towards a rival can be shared by many. In the case of *American Idol* this ritual is staged as the difference between the first and second part of the series. In the first part the underachievers are sorted out and disappear, one by one, from the contest. These become the scapegoats of the series, paving the way for the more optimistic second part which is aimed at achieving community. In this second stage the judges' negative comments are replaced with consistently positive opinions. This symbolic staging of the mimetic desire allows for a transition from competition to community. As I hinted at earlier, however, in the case of the social web and sites such as YouTube this transition never happens, since there is no progression in the same sense that *American Idol* progresses over a season of the show. This fact is underlined by the video clips under analysis; the uncertainty and ambiguity that underlies the admittance procedure is a constant source of conflict. In this sense conflict, rather than community, is a central part of YouTube as a cultural form.

The sociologist Johan Asplund's critical discussion of the limits of Girard's theory is helpful to qualify the argument of the paper. Although Girard claims that mimetic rivalry is a universal phenomenon, it seems that it is more likely to be generated between equals. In this sense it is a horizontal structure. Other kinds of conflicts, such as class conflict, are not based on mimetic desire, but are conflicts based around objectively existing social positions and values. The needs and desires of the poor are not primarily generated by mimetic desire but by the very real and effective hindrance that the uneven distribution of wealth puts on their possibilities of developing themselves and caring for their near and loved ones (Asplund, 1989). Mimetic desire is thus typically generated under certain circumstances. Asplund uses the example of the emergence of modern sports, which he sees as the antithesis of mimetic desire, to clarify this. At the turn of the 19th century a vertical model of society was contested by a horizontal model. The vertical model was finely graded and static; everyone belonged to a specific place in the structure and there was no chance of movement within the structure. The horizontal model on the other hand was characterised by a large accumulation of people on a certain level and the number of levels were less. This model is also dynamic and allows for movement between positions. The first model was timeless and loomed large over society, the other is characterised by constant movement, but movement is foremost directed sideways rather than upwards or downwards. The aristocratic founders of the modern sports movement – for example Pierre Coubertin – sought in sports a way to mediate between these structures and to counteract the widespread nihilism that resulted from increased societal rivalry and mimetic competition, which Asplund claims characterised French society at the time. This mediation is achieved by allowing and encouraging competition under strictly regulated and organised forms. A sports competition solves the vicious circle of mimetic desiring by fixing an outcome that cannot be contested. Asplund claims that in sports we compete for trophies that are beyond mimetic rivalry. Situations that are characterised by mimetic rivalry however do not have a fixed object, and hence desire is constantly intensified and never resolved. Sports aim at achieving an unambiguous ranking which forever distributes trophies between the participants (Asplund, 1989).

Asplund's argument is helpful in theorising what Lev Manovich (2001) has described as the emergence of the database form in the digital age. According to Manovich the database as a symbolic form consists of "collections of individual items, where every item has the same significance as any other" (p.80). Since Manovich wrote his essay the web has, however, changed significantly, and today it is not only digital objects that are handled and displayed on the web, but to a large extent digital subjects, such as the numerical representations of users. Manovich

further claims that "as a cultural form, database represents the world as a list of items that it refuses to order" (p.85). This claim also has to be qualified considering the social web. What we have is rather a constant ordering and re-ordering; a constant process of valuation and ordering. This process does, however, not end at a pre-specified moment and it is only in this sense that it can be seen as a refusal to order. The rules according to which this ordering takes place are not fully known by those being ordered, but can only be second-guessed at and sensed. What Manovich describes as a "database complex" can thus in the age of Web 2.0, and especially in the case of YouTube, be specified as a result of increasing mimetic competition between formally equal participants.

Conclusion

Although the social web has received its fair share of critics it still seems as though there exists a consensus regarding its core features. Web 2.0 is allegedly about 'sharing', 'participation', 'creativity' and is a cultural form that is 'popular', 'liberatory' , 'democratic', 'emancipatory', 'social', and so on. In spite of the argument I have made in this paper I do not see any reason to deny this *tout court*. The web provides possibilities for participation that exceed what is offered by the traditional mass media. For that reason it is only with some reluctance, and at a certain risk, that one criticises these possibilities. The purpose of this paper is not to join the kind of critique that has been forwarded by people such as Andrew Keen (2007) and Jaron Lanier (2010), which tend to be as populist as that which they attack. The point is rather that there are many ways to organise 'open' production and we should not be satisfied with the commercial variants that dominate the net at this particular moment in time.

The purpose of the paper has thus been to contribute to a sound critique of openness. With the help of an example I have tried to show that the so-called 'social' web might as well be characterised as a highly 'anti-social' form of production. When studying social media as an organisational form for cultural production we should pay more attention to the conflictual and competitive elements in this organisation. To describe organisations that aim at openness – such as those envisioned by proponents of Web 2.0 – I have proposed the use of the concept of mimetic machines that encompasses both the cooperative and competitive aspects of 'open production'. In the case of YouTube I have shown how mimetic desire can be seen as part of the structure that propels production on YouTube forward.

The point that we need to consider is thus the specific function that openness fulfills in a certain mode of production. The function of openness on YouTube is not only or primarily aimed at creating an egalitarian and democratic culture of production, but also to generate an entrepreneurial desire that is aligned with the commercial interests of the company.

Endnotes

1 Michael Taussig (1993) also uses the concept of mimetic machines which he designates for example the camera and the advertising image. I would, however, like to use it in order to highlight not only technologies of representation, but entire technical assemblages encompassing users, technologies, and companies. Although this means a certain risk of confusion I think that the distinction between my use of the term and Taussig's use will be evident in what follows.

2 One reason for choosing Hardt and Negri as a starting point is that their work bridges

over some of the differences between writers on digital cultures with different political inclinations. There are for example many similarities between the work of Hardt and Negri and Yochahi Benklers' (2006) *The Wealth of Networks*, even though Benkler obviously does not share the politics of Hardt and Negri in other matters.

3 Capital cannot "organize *productive cooperation*" (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p.140).

4 Pasquinelli (2008) makes a similar argument to mine, drawing experience from both the academy and the art world. Although the academy is often used as a baseline example for how non-rivalrous knowledge production should work, this rosy picture is more of an ideal than something that can be observed in reality. Pasquinelli relies on the French sociologist of imitative behaviour Gabriel Tarde, and although the differences between Tarde and Girard should not be overstated it seems to me that Girard is much more helpful for theorising what Pasquinelli calls the "animal spirits" of the commons. Primarily since Girard puts the conflictual elements of mimesis in the center of his theory. Girard himself mentions Tarde as one of the sociologists who "were indeed strongly influenced by the optimism and conformity of a triumphant bourgeoisie … who sees in imitation the sole foundation for social harmony and 'progress'." Girard (2003, pp.7-8). For a more general discussion of the attention economy, see Davenport and Beck (2001) and Lanham (2006).

5 Although YouTube has not explicitly commented on the exact numbers, this seems to be taken as a matter of fact within the advertising industry (e.g. Spangler 2009; Learmonth 2009).

6 Also the prizes that can be won in these competitions are good illustrations of how for example YouTube's Partnership program works; for the majority of the participants the reward is zero and only for a privileged few do the rewards amount to something more than a symbolic recognition of a job well done.

7 Algorithmic selection does not mean selected by the users, neither does it mean editorial selection, but a combination of both. Since the algorithms and categories are decided by the platform, algorithmic selection should be seen as structured but not decided by the platform.

8 The sorting mechanisms are not transparent, and even a closer investigation doesn't make it obvious what is meant by the 'popularity' of a clip, something which is obvious in the discussions in various web-forums and blogs (eg. Algoritmically demoted – All about YouTube, 2009).

9 Every minute more than 24 hours' of video is uploaded to the site, which obviously turns reaching out into a difficult challenge (see YouTube, n.d.).

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