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ACROSS THE RED-GREEN SEA

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ABSTRACT

According to René Girard myths narrate the founding murder, which resolves the mimetic crisis. As a consequence, myths contain motifs symbolizing both the mimetic crisis and the founding murder. In Slovene folklore the mimetic crisis is often rendered by the image of the sea, particularly the red and/or green sea, as an undifferentiated, formless entity, or a principle of a state before the emergence of social structure or of a state during and after its downfall. This paper compares representations of the sea in Slovene folk songs and tales and in some Slovene poets and painters.

Key words: René Girard, myth, sea, colours, folk songs, literature, art

ATTRAVERSO IL MARE ROSSO-VERDE

SINTESI

René Girard afferma che i miti raccontano dell'assassinio fondativo, l'evento che risolve la crisi mimetica. I miti contengono i motivi che a livello simbolico raffigurano tanto la crisi mimetica che l'assassinio fondativo. Nella tradizione popolare slovena la crisi mimetica viene spesso raffigurata dal mare, in particolare dal mare verde e/o rosso, spazio né strutturato né differenziato che rappresenta la situazione precedente alla comparsa della struttura sociale e oltre alla stessa. Nel presente saggio l'autrice mette a confronto la rappresentazione del mare nelle canzoni e nelle favole popolari slovene e nelle opere di alcuni poeti e pittori sloveni.

Parole chiave: René Girard, mito, mare, colori, tradizione popolare, poesia, pittura

INTRODUCTION

According to René Girard (1996), human society comes into being after the mimetic crisis – the fierce and chaotic fight fueled by mimetic desire – subsides by the means of the founding murder; i.e., when the mob lynches one individual. The murdering of an individual victim is the basis for the formation and the reinforcement of both the ties holding a community together and the community's twisted self-awareness. In critical situations, such as wars, natural disasters, epidemics, etc., human communities face the danger of passions and violence brimming over into a mimetic crisis, thus threatening the very survival of the social ties within the community and hence the community itself. To avoid this, human communities have developed two ways in which they continuously re-enforce their inner social ties and remind themselves of the horror of the mimetic crisis and the founding murder: the ritual sacrifice and the mythical narration. While the ritual sacrifice reenacts the mimetic crisis and the founding murder in a »controlled environment«, the myth re-presents both of these events. The sacrificial offering keeps the community's violence under control by entrusting the obligation to murder to a singular chosen individual – i.e. the priest – and by resorting to less and less cruel and less and less obvious methods of sacrifice; yet the myth is also crucial for hiding violence and disguising it by changing it into other motifs: the sacrificial murder of the victim (or, in mythical narration, the hero) can be turned into suicide or the hero's departure for the/an other land/world, or the victim's/heroine's wedding to a mythical creature, such as *povodni mož*, the man of waters. As the motif of violence and murder is transformed, so too are the symbols of the mimetic crisis. Among these Girard (1999; 2003) enlists the confusion of day and night or sky and earth, creatures with human, animalistic and divine features (e.g., a snake which changes into a prince; creatures with supernumerary body parts, such as snakes with nine tails), incessant conflicts (frequently among twins) and natural catastrophes.

In this paper, I will try to show that the sea in Slovene folklore can often be seen as a symbol of the mimetic crisis. The human mind envisages the sea as endless and majestic. Chevalier and Gheerbrant's opening of the »Sea« entry in their *Dictionary of Symbols* delineates these qualities brilliantly: »Because of their apparently limitless extent, seas and oceans are images of the primal undifferentiated state of primeval formlessness« (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1996, 836). By being an undifferentiated and inarticulate space, which is ultimately out of control, the sea is an apt symbol of the state before the formation of the social structure or of a state threatening to destroy the social structure. What I am particularly interested in are the narrations depicting the sea as green

and/or red. In my opinion, this chromatic combination enhances the mimetic-crisis symbolism of the sea.

After considering the semiotic view of the two colours and the symbolism of red, green and the sea, I will endeavor to support my thesis with examples from Slovene folklore, literature and painting.

COLOUR, AN EVASIVE CATEGORY

In the essay »How Culture Conditions the Colours We See« Umberto Eco (1996) shows that different languages divide the chromatic spectrum into individual colors (and hence words for colors) in different ways. While differences in the mental/linguistic perception of the color spectrum may be synchronic, shifts can also be expected to be observed from a diachronic perspective.

By relating a passage from Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae* from the 2nd century AD and by providing examples from other ancient Roman authors, Eco warns that the Latin word *flavus*, for instance, denotes the colour shades resulting from a mixture of green and white or green, white and red. In Roman times these colour shades were classified as either red or green. Thus the Latin word *flavus* is used to describe Dido's blond hair, the muddy waters of the Tiber, and – olive leaves. Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996) point to a similar phenomenon: *sinopsis*, they say, was originally used in Low Latin to denote the reddish brown soil – or the pigment made from it – from the Black Sea port of Sinope; yet in the 14th century *sinopsis* meant both red and green. The way in which words cover the color spectrum therefore changes over time.

This phenomenon still reverberates in the relative elasticity of words for colours: blood, wine and hair can all be said to be red, although the first two shades may be very different and the third shade might be, if referring to a cloth, rendered by the words brown and orange. Furthermore, golden or yellowish wine is called white, and the white, pale complexion of an ill person is described as greenish in English, but literally *zelen*, green, in Slovene.

It is therefore necessary to apply a good deal of caution when we interpret the meaning of words for colours in old texts; they may not denote the same colours today as they did in the past. In semiotic terms, we could say that we know the sign's level of expression but not its level of content.

Let us now leave behind the way languages correspond to the physical wave lengths of colour light, and turn to the symbolic meanings of colours. In this respect, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006) show that »colour codes« are far from being universal and that individual colours can acquire very diverse meanings in different contexts. Usually, a particular colour has a strictly specific meaning only for a relatively small and specialized community.

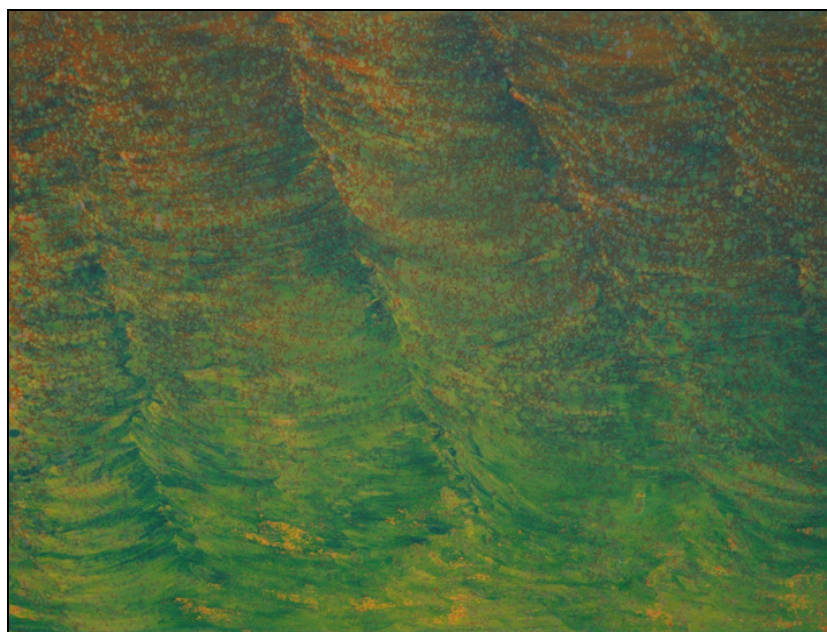


Fig. 1: Alenka Koderman: From the Sea Cycle, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 45 x 60 cm.
Sl. 1: Alenka Koderman: Iz cikla Morje, 2008, akril na platnu, 45 x 60 cm.

Hence we should deduce that our understanding of words for colours and of their symbolic meanings is anything but certain. How, then, can we know what colours, e.g., green and red with reference to the sea, in such texts as folk songs mean? Considering that poetry has often borrowed from folklore, one might want to look at such dictions in modern literature; yet there is a possibility that they be a result of a literary convention. To verify the meanings of these colours, I confronted the literary images with the imagery in paintings and found that images in art mirror those in literature, while both show continuity with ancient symbolism. I therefore propose a hypothesis that in artistic expression, whether it be folklore, literature or visual art, symbolic meanings, including those of colours, may be much more persistent than in everyday language.

WHEN THE SEA IS RED, GREEN OR REDDISH GREEN: A SYMBOL OF THE MIMETIC CRISIS

In the passage from Aulus Gellius to which Eco refers, the author quotes Ennius (*Annales*, XIV, 372–3), who describes the sea as follows: »marmore *flauo* / *caeruleum* spumat mare« (as quoted in Aulus Gellius: Gellio, 2001, I/266; italics M. Šauperl). Favorinus, Gellius' interlocutor, is puzzled by Ennius' choice of words *flauo* and *caeruleum*, while he interprets them as red and green: »like red (?) marble the green sea foams«.

I became interested in this combination of colors when I suddenly realised that I had already come across it in relation to the sea in one of the Resian variants of

the Lepa Vida folk songs (Šauperl, 2009), a motif to which I will return later.

My enquiry departs from the question whether the descriptions of the sea as reddish green in old texts refer to shades of colors that we would today call by a different name, or should we trust our eyes and ears and believe that we understand the expression correctly. Furthermore, it is worth asking whether the expression refers to a homogeneous mixture, where red and green fuse into a monochromatic plane, or to a heterogeneous one, where spots of red and green alternate. Finally, we must be ready to accept the whole range of shades of the mixture, including both extremes, the »pure« green and the »pure« red.

Focusing on the paintings produced in or around Istria, examples of reddish-green seas range from the rather primitive ex-voto paintings in the church of St Mary Ascension in Strunjan, Slovenia (viz. those by Nicolò Fonda from 1823 and Giacomo Castro and sons from 1851; although, the reddish tone might be the result of ageing or dirt), to the Triestine marinist Ugo Flumiani (1876–1938), particularly his »Yachts in the Harbor«, and to recent works of Slovene artists. Janez Matelič's »Logbook« (2008) is an example of a homogeneous mixture, while Joni Zakonjšek's »Under the Surface – Red« (2004) and a series of Alenka Koderman's paintings exemplify heterogeneous mixtures of red and green (figures 1–3). There is no end to cases of completely red or completely green seas, such as Igor Bravničar's collection »Seas« from the years 2000–2004, which includes several (almost) monochromatic grass-green seas, or

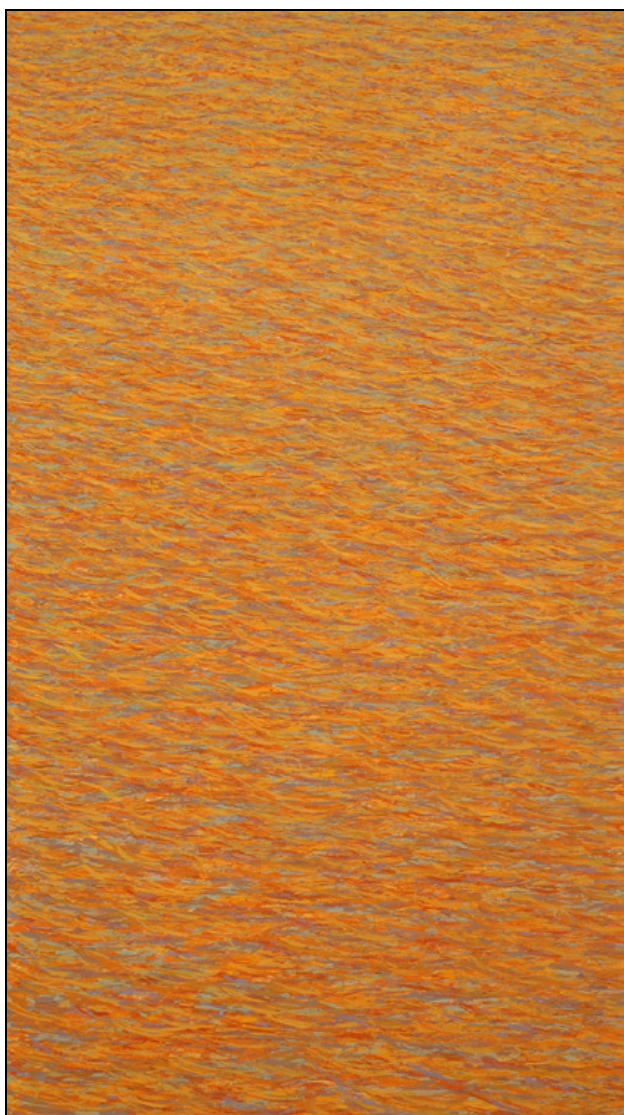


Fig. 2: Alenka Koderman: Lumière, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 160 x 90 cm.

Sl. 2: Alenka Koderman: Lumière, 2008, akril na platnu, 160 x 90 cm.

Matelič's completely red seas. Aleš Sedmak has both heterogeneous mixtures and green seas (figures 4–5).

Let us take a look at how Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant explain the symbolism of red and green in their *Dictionary of Symbols* (1996).

The bright red can symbolize »the mystery of life hidden on the dark floor of the primeval ocean depths«, while »[t]he 'wine-dark sea' of the Ancient Greeks and the 'Red Sea' [stand for] the womb in which life and death are transmuted one into the other« (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1996, 793). Dark red, as all chthonic motifs, is ambiguous: when hidden, it appears to stand for life, whereas when spilt and visible it means death,

therefore signifying something untouchable. Furthermore, »red will always be the spoils of the war – or of the dialectic – between Heaven and Earth, the fire of the Sun and the fires of the Hell« (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1996, 794).

According to Chevalier and Gheerbrant green may as well be »the colour of the awakening of the primeval waters« (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1996, 451) and thus a regenerative life force, but also immortality and even passing and death. River and sea divinities and semidivinities are green or dressed in green, but green is also the colour of the divinities of regeneration – these »spend the Winter in the Underworld where they are regenerated by chthonian red [and as] a result they are externally green but internally red, and their rule extends over both worlds« (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1996, 454).

The Slovene mythical figure Zeleni Jurij (Green George) may also be related to these divinities of regeneration. Zeleni Jurij, a bearer of opposing symbolic meanings, may be represented as wearing trousers with one red and one green trouser leg. Šmitek (2008) suggests that this might symbolize the alternating warm and cold halves of the year. This mythical hero returns every year »from behind the green grove, from behind the bloody sea« (»izza loga zelenoga, izza morja krvavoga«; SNP III, as quoted in Šmitek, 2004, 43). It is precisely this bloody sea that in Slovene mythology surrounds the world and represents the limit separating this world from »the other one«, life from death, with a »boatman« (»brodnik«; *ibid.*) providing a passage. Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996), too, say that the sea is both an image of life and death, and that in mythologies of many peoples the sea represents a passage to the other world.

Returning to René Girard, if myths tell the story of victims – i.e., of their death or »departure for the other world« – then the space of this passage, the sea, is of crucial importance. While Girard discusses sacrifice by drowning (Girard, 2002), he does not list the sea among his many examples of symbols of the mimetic crisis. Yet the sea, this enormous, inarticulate, majestic body of water, fits his descriptions of the typical features of the mimetic crisis: entanglement, absence of differentiability, terrible chaos, conflict between life and death.

To better illustrate the case, let us look at how ancient Greeks and the Renaissance painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo imagined the sea.

Pierre Cordier (2007) shows how in antiquity the inhabitants of the Mediterranean coasts saw the sea as an element which is detached from this world and open to the world beyond and which is imbued with sanctity and populated with divinities. Ancient Greeks believed that the bodies of the drowned lingered *nowhere*, drifted towards some *no-place*. The underwater world haunted Ancient Greeks with horror, as they imagined it to be the reign of homophagy (feeding on raw meat) and alelophagy (feeding on meat of an individual of the same kind



Fig. 3: Alenka Koderman: Contemporaneity, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 60 cm.
Sl. 3: Alenka Koderman: Sočasnost, 2008, akril na platnu, 30 x 60 cm.

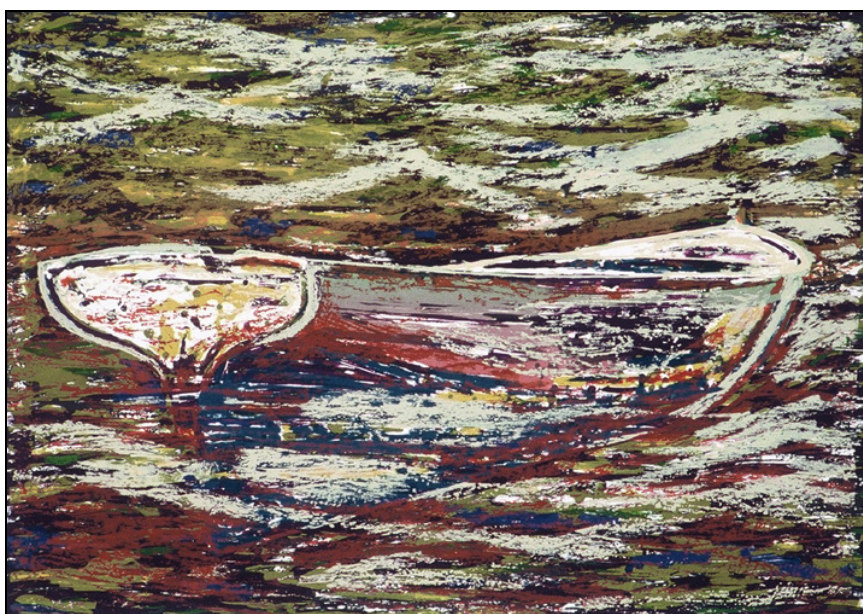


Fig. 4: Aleš Sedmak: Boat 003, 1990, serigraphy, 70 x 100 cm.
Sl. 4: Aleš Sedmak: Čoln 003, 1990, serigrafija, 70 x 100 cm.

as the eater). Ancient Greeks saw the underwater world as a place where all laws of nature were turned upside down. In their view, the ocean devoured its own children.

Surprisingly similar to this perception is a thought which we can find in the Slovene philosopher Taras Kermauner's interpretation of Arcimboldo's painting »Water»: »A myth is found in the *Water*, yet it is a completely pagan, a pre-neolithic myth, so to say, a myth

from a time when the human was not yet an institutional, organic creature: when the human was still only raw nature. [...] Arcimboldo's nature is pre-natural, pre-human, from a time when life only crawled under water. A human as a humanistic creature does not exist. Not any more? Not yet? There is a human, but it is of an animal order: it is composed of the lower« (Kermauner, 1979, 20; translation M. Šaupperl).¹

¹ »V *Vodi* odkrijemo mit, a povsem poganski, tako rekoč predneolitski, mit iz časov, ko človek sploh še ni bil institucionalno, organsko bitje: ko je bil še gola natura. [...] Arcimboldova natura pa je pranaturalna, predčloveška, iz dobe, ko je gomazelo življenje le v vodi. Človeka kot humanističnega bitja ni. Ne več? Še ne? Človek je, ampak isti kot živalstvo: sestavljen iz nižjega« (Kermauner, 1979, 20).



Fig. 5: Aleš Sedmak: A Man in a Boat, 1992, tempera – canvas – wood, 125 x 145 cm.
Sl. 5: Aleš Sedmak: Mož v čolnu, 1992, tempera – platno – les, 125 x 145 cm.

If we look at the Slovene myths about the end of the world – e.g., the fish *Faronika*, which bears the world on its back – we find that the Slovenes imagined the end of the world being caused by water, not fire (Kelemina, 1997; Šmitek, 2004). Girard (2007), on the other hand, writes that the end of the world, the apocalypse, is a metaphor of the mimetic crisis – of that particular mimetic crisis which does not culminate in and end with the founding murder, but which escalates to the eventual destruction of society. Although Girard does not explicitly name the sea among his examples of the mimetic crisis, he certainly argues that this symbolic meaning is present in the announcement of the end of the world. Hence if the sea is capable of causing the end of the world, as in Slovene mythology, then we can deduce that the sea does imply symbolism of the mimetic crisis.

Let us now take a look at some examples of traditional Slovene conceptions of the sea. In one of the myths about Kresnik, recorded by Jakob Kelemina, we read that this mythical hero and his twin brother »flew all the day high under the 'bloody sea'« (»Ves dan sta letela visoko pod 'krvavim morjem'«; Kelemina, 1997, 41; quotation marks by Kelemina). While for Girard, a possible symbol of the mimetic crisis is a fusion of sky and earth, Kelemina provides an example of a mixture of the sky and sea, which I interpret as a similar image. This sky/sea is the site of the fight of the hostile twin brothers, such a fight being – according to Girard – a characteristic symbol of the mimetic crisis. This sky/sea, where the duel takes place, is a »bloody sea«, an image that Kelemina seems

to have found interesting or intriguing enough to emphasize and distinguish it with quotation marks.

The Lepa Vida motif can be interpreted as a sacrificial myth in which Vida is a victim, offered by *Zamorec* (foreigner) or the Boatman from a *pisana* boat – *pisana* meaning variegated, but also hostile (Šauperl, 2009). In the Lepa Vida matter, there is a series of elements symbolizing the mimetic crisis, but I restrict my focus to the sea, the medium by which Vida crosses the line between life and death. The ambiguity of the sea as a passage between life and death is accentuated by the use of colours in the Resian variant »Lipa Vida,« where Vida and the Boatman roam the *čarnjelo*, red, and *zelëno*, green, sea for ever: »mij konca ni bilo,« »there was no end to it« (Vrčon, 1998, 173–174). Curiously, the red and green combination is also used by Rudi Šeligo in his play *Lepa Vida* (1978), where stage directions to scene 7 of act 2 instruct that the orgiastic scene which leads to Pedro de Alvarado being violently scapegoated take place under wild red and green lights (Šauperl, 2009).

While the Lepa Vida matter, not an exclusively Slovene motif (Grafenauer, 1943), has seen dozens of renditions in Slovene literature (Pogačnik, 1988), many other folklore motifs inspired Slovene writers and poets. One was Anton Aškerc (1856–1912), who employed the folk motifs he recorded in the Slovene fishing villages between Trieste and Duino. The resulting collection of poems, *Jadranski biseri*, 'Adriatic Pearls', was published in 1908 (Aškerc, 1989). Aškerc's sea is inhabited by a green or black devil and other mythical creatures, such as

mermaids, which tempt fishermen and may take their lives. These creatures, together with their space, the sea, thus provide a passage between life and death. The sea itself in Aškerc's poems is »immeasurable and deep« (the poem »Potok in morje«, 'The Brook and the Sea'). The sea continuously changes its colour (the poem »Dekle in morje«, 'The Girl and the Sea'). Both the immensurability and the mutability of the colour symbolize the turmoil of the mimetic crisis. Aškerc's sea is often green (e.g., the poems »Kapitan«, 'Captain', »Noč ribiča Petra«, 'Fisherman Peter's Night', »Jutna pesem ribičeva«, 'The Fisherman's Morning Song', »Ribičeva ljubica«, 'The Fisherman's Lover') and even *zeleno višnjevo*, green – cherry red (the poem »Podmorski zakladi«, 'Underwater Treasure'). Aškerc's sea, or its mythical inhabitants are authorities deciding on the mortals' fate (the poems »Kapitan«, 'Captain', and »Razžaljeno morje«, 'The Offended Sea').

A similar moral authority, aside from independence of spirit, is attributed to the sea by Oton Župančič (1878–1949) in the poem »Ob Kvarneru«, 'By the Gulf of Kvarner' (Kastelic et al., 1970). Here, Župančič, in what with respect to his Catholic background can be seen as quite a blasphemous gesture, describes the sea as older and mightier than »the holy cross«: »You don't want any true *catchpolls*, / Without eager helpers / *You yourself murder in your own name*. / When your horns howl for death, / *Bloody banners fly*, / Under the clouds you roll your black rage, / not fearing justice, law ...« (Kastelic et al., 1970, 482; translation and italics M. Šaupperl).²

Srečko Kosovel, too, in his poem »Jadro«, 'The Sail', calls the sea »sivin[a] žveplnih voda« (Kastelic et al., 1970, 775), i.e. »the grey of sulphuric waters« (Kosovel, 2008, 65; translation by Bert Pribac and David Brooks), as though hell were oozing through the sea surface. Chthonic also is the red, bloody sea in »Ekstaza smrti«, 'The Extasy of Death'; yet despite its apocalyptic quality it offers a faint hope of deliverance. Still violent, but markedly positive is the »red, red sea« in the poem »Tujci«, 'Foreigners' (Kosovel, 1977, 917), where it announces victory over fascism.

Let me conclude this brief – and far too incomplete – insight into the sea imagery in Slovene culture. One cannot overlook the fact that images of the red and/or green sea are indeed not limited to Slovene culture alone, but that they abound in mythologies, literatures and art worldwide. In many of them, red and green are used to disturb and to alert us to the monstrosity of the human; or as Vincent Van Gogh put it: »With green and red I have tried to give expression to the terrible passions of the human heart« (Van Gogh, 1888, as quoted in Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1996, 456).

CONCLUSION

According to Girard, the myth's role is to testify to the mimetic crisis and the founding murder, and to keep the memory of both alive. Performing this function, the myth disguises the violence involved in both events, yet it bears traces of both in symbolic representations. Girard shows that the apocalypse should be considered as a symbol of the mimetic crisis. In Slovene folklore, the apocalypse can be caused by the sea, which is sometimes described as red or bloody and constitutes the line between »this world« and »the world beyond«, between life and death. Although the interpretation of the names for colours and their symbolic meanings change in time and therefore demand caution, examples from art seem to confirm the hypothesis that red and green, and their combination or mixture, may mark the persistence of ancient symbolism and can be understood literally. Like Slovene folklore, modern Slovene poetry and painting still use green and/or red to characterize the sea. While an ambiguous relationship between life and death and the line between them are implied in each of these colours, this symbolic meaning is rendered even more markedly by the combination of both colours. The red, green, and red-green seas are thus warning symbols, alerting us to the danger of the mimetic crisis, the annihilation of society and »the end of the world«.

PO RDEČE-ZELENEM MORJU

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POVZETEK

Prispevek preizkuša konkretni in simbolni pomen rdeče in zelene barve v prisposodbi morja kot simbola mimitične krize. Po Renéju Girardu miti pripovedujejo o utemeljitvenem umoru, dogodku, ki razreši mimitično krizo. Miti zato vsebujejo motive, ki simbolično predstavljajo tako mimitično krizo kot utemeljitveni umor, vendar pri tem

² »Ti nočeš vernih krvnikov, / brez vnetih pomočnikov / ti samo v svojem imenu moriš. / Kadar tulijo tvoji rogovi na smrt, / zastave vihrajo krvave, / vališ pod oblaki svoj črni srd, / ne bojiš se pravice, postave ...« (Kastelic et al., 1970, 482; italics M. Šaupperl).

z različnimi postopki cenzurirajo nasilje obeh dogodkov. Apokalipsa je simbol mimetične krize, ki je ne razreši utemeljitveni umor, pač pa se stopnjuje do razkroja družbenih vezi. V slovenskem ljudskem izročilu apokalipso povzroča voda, ki prinese ribo Faroniko, še zlasti zeleno oziroma rdeče morje kot nečlenjen in nediferenciran prostor, ki predstavlja mejo med »tem« in »onim svetom«, med življenjem in smrtjo, ter v mitogenetskem smislu ponazarja stanje pred pojavom družbene strukture ali onkraj nje. Motiv vsemogočnega morja, včasih naseljenega z bajeslovnimi bitji, pogosto v kombinaciji z rdečo oziroma zeleno obarvanostjo, je navzoč vse do sodobnega pesništva (npr. Aškerc, Župančič, Kosovel). Čeprav moramo biti zaradi spremenljivosti pomena besed pri interpretaciji poimenovanj barv previdni, likovna umetnost potrjuje domnevo, da gre pri ljudski in pesniški prisposobi rdečih, zelenih in rdeče-zelenih morij za starodavno simboliko, pri kateri poimenovanja barv lahko razumemo v današnjem pomenu. Glede na to, da morje simbolno predstavlja mimetično krizo, rdeča in zelena barva pa že vsaka zase, zlasti pa še v povezavi, označujeta tako življenje in oživiljanje kot smrt in onostranstvo, gre v prisposobi rdečega oziroma zelenega morja za zgoščanje simbolov, ki svarijo pred mimetično krizo, izničenjem družbe in »koncem sveta«.

Ključne besede: René Girard, mit, morje, barve, ljudsko izročilo, pesništvo, slikarstvo

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