

Transcending the Transactional

A Conversation with writer Thomas J. Bevan on the Anti-Mimetic Act of Creating Art



Stanczyk by Jan Matejko—an image my guest adopted as his avatar for a while.

I first met Thomas J. Bevan, a fascinating writer (because a fascinating person) who is based in a small town in England, after I started spending more time online during the pandemic.

For better or worse, I got back on Twitter for the first time in years. Within a short period of time, the algorithm began showing me his tweets (so, the algorithm has some benefits after all...), which led me to his recently-launched Substack, [The Commonplace](#), where I was struck by the honesty of his voice, the sharpness of his prose, the anti-mimetic topics he was choosing to write about (“[The Death of Lunch](#)” / “[The Meaning of Nostalgia](#)” / “[Catacombs as Metaphor](#)”), and his willingness to share his story. His [fiction](#) is also stellar, even though the essays initially drew me in.

Though he is pseudo-anonymous, he shared with his audience that he had worked a series of relatively normal jobs (i.e. in restaurant kitchens) and most recently took a post that

allowed him to work for 3-4 long days every other week, a situation he intentionally sought to be able to more fully focus on his writing for extended periods. He has since become a full-time writer.

The seriousness of his mind was evident from the start, and it was obvious he had studied or at least drunk deeply from the well of philosophy and classic literature. It was also apparent that he was experienced as a writer (“just your your first million words”) is advice we both took to heart, I think, and he had obviously written his), and was serious about perfecting his craft.

But it was something about his down-to-earth nature and celebration of the grandeur and beauty of *ordinary life* that really attracted me to his work. (When I first began to read him, I had an image in my head of someone like the character Paterson, the poetry-writing bus driver in the 2016 film *Paterson*.)

Tom was indeed what the social theorist [René Girard](#) (the subject of my book, [Wanting](#)) would call a model of desire to me in this *sphere of the ordinary*, as I had lost a bit of that wonder—especially at the time when I stumbled onto his work, in the dark days of uncertainty and family illnesses that were hitting close to home for me.

Come to think of it, Tom’s was the first substack I ever subscribed to—and, when he offered additional work and access to a community to premium subscribers late last year, it was the first I ever paid for. I have never been sorry.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this brief dialogue between the two of us. I’ve enjoyed getting to know Tom immensely over the past couple of years, and it’s all the more fun for me because he has a rough-and-ready knowledge of one of my favorite thinkers, René Girard, which you’ll see below.

Conversation with Thomas J. Bevan

Luke: What is Content? And what is Anti-Mimetic Content (if such a thing exists)?

Thomas: ‘What is content’ is a question I’ve given a lot of thought to. I haven’t fully figured it out by any means (I think it would take a full book to do so) but I have a few ideas.

Content is a massively pervasive and (over)used word but we don’t really give much thought to what it means. On the internet everything is content. A tweet is content, a TikTok video is content, a 5,000 word essay is content, a selfie is content. The word has a levelling or

flattening effect, turning everything that is created or shared by humans into a piece of content. But if everything is content then nothing is content and if everyone can be a content creator then no one can be, or rather being so ceases to mean anything. Content creation is sold as being freeing or democratising but it strikes me as being a terrible trap and one that robs the creative act of much of its meaning.

But to try and be more precise you could say that content is the product of an impulse to create an audience (and algorithm) pleasing, highly digestible and highly shareable work with the goal of gaining attention, increasing metrics and growing an audience. It is optimised for engagement. The orientation is transaction—if I post x, then I will receive Y. And if I don't receive sufficient (or ever increasing) y then I will tweak x based on this feedback until I do. And on and on it goes, usually until the content creator burns out.

So given this 'Anti-content' is what we used to call art. Art is an emanation of the spirit presented to the world as a gift. Lewis Hyde wrote an essential book called [*The Gift*](#) that makes the case that art (in all mediums) is fundamentally a gift to the world. The artist is driven to create it, they are neither motivated nor especially interested in how the work is received or what they will get in return either in terms of plaudits, praise or pecuniary means. At least that's the idea(I).

Luke: I agree—that's the idea(I).

Do you think there can be any peaceful co-existence between content and art, then, or are they always antagonistic rivals?

I read an interesting article about how Albrecht Dürer, the greatest figure of the northern Renaissance, was considered the first “artist entrepreneur”—he was first to take commercial or market-based concerns into account. Now one could argue that this didn't make Dürer any less of an artist; in fact, it may have allowed him to create the things he really wanted to create.

This is the age-old (so-called) ‘Artist's Struggle’, isn't it?

I suppose what I'm wondering is whether or not there is some middle term between Content and Art, or something that is not “content” but simply an artist's legitimate desire to have their work seen and more importantly appreciated by as many people as possible—especially if the artist's goal is to change hearts and minds.

On the other hand, maybe quantity doesn't matter. I know you're a believer in the ["1,000 true fans"](#) idea.

What are your thoughts on how an artist ought to deal with this tension?

Thomas: I don't think they necessarily have to be rivals or antagonistic, but I think the two realms are different in kind whereas it is tempting to see them as being merely different in degree. That they somehow exist on a spectrum rather than being two completely different orientations towards creation. It's also worth noting that there is no implicit value judgement here- there can be good content just as easily as there can be bad art.

So to take Durer as an example he may have made art with an eye towards money but he was still making art. Because the technology of the Northern Renaissance meant he could not do otherwise. Content is metric-driven by nature and thus a product of the internet age. This is why the term did not exist before then. Durer did not have access to a dashboard which told him how many seconds each viewer spent looking at each respective painting or what the expected lifetime monetary value of each buyer was and so forth. Such things are the engine for content creation as over time they end up insidiously dictating what you create.

So even the most ruthlessly commercial artist of Durer's day was driven by hunches and guesswork rather than by cold hard data. Sure they might schmooze for potential patrons and stick to the remit of their commissions closely but they still ended up creating art ultimately.

It's all a question of scale I believe. Art isn't concerned with scaling up as it's *raison d'être*. The artists purpose is to get ever closer to achieving their personal vision of perfection, to get ever closer to expressing what they want to say and taking what is within them and externalising it in exactly the way that it appears in their inner vision. Of course this is usually a recipe for penury, hence the Artist's Struggle.

Now with Content, on the other hand, it is all about scale. The quality of the work, what it expresses, what it says is almost entirely irrelevant, if it moves the metrics it is a success, if it doesn't it is a failure. Virality is the goal, shareability, likes, and the high-falluting talk of precisely externalising the internal and offering an emanation of the spirit presented as a gift is an utter irrelevancy unless the appearance of such is what the algorithms and the twitter hivemind have today decided is what gets the most engagement.

Does that make sense?

So I think the way the artist deal with this tension- or at least the way I deal with it- is to studiously avoid looking at any metrics and to consciously choose to forgo the scale-by-any-means-necessary mindset. Art is a personal vision, not merely a knee-jerk reaction to market forces and metrics. Art is inherently human whereas that content creator way of being is more akin to how a machine, to how an AI behaves. So 1000 True Fans as an idea works because it makes you think and act at a human scale again. I'm not looking for virality, I'm looking for the small band of people who resonate with what I *freely choose to create*, no matter how strange or idiosyncratic that ends up being based on what I feel *driven* to do. Or at least that's what I tell myself!

Luke: Okay, switching gears a bit. As you know, the majority of my work this past year has centered around the ideas of the great French social theorist René Girard, who first articulated his [theory of 'mimetic desire'](#) in the 1960's.

How did you first encounter the work of René Girard? And what, if anything, does the term 'anti-mimetic' mean to you? Does it relate to our discussion so far in any way?

Thomas: Ironically enough I first encountered Girard because all of the intellectuals and cool kids online were talking about mimesis and I likewise wanted to be able to talk in these terms so that I would also seem clever! It really is mimesis all the way down, which is Girard's point.

But prior to explicitly going down the Girard rabbit hole I had noticed, or intuited, bits and pieces of mimetic theory from fiction. I'm a fiction writer which means I'm a big fiction reader and it was readily apparent that all of my favourite novels and stories were about rivals, mirrors, doppelgangers, love triangles, feuds that escalate into bloody chaos and so forth. And in trying to teach myself how to write stories I saw that the engine of drama was conflict and desire. So as you can imagine reading '*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*' took all of these swirling hunches and pre-vocalised intuitions and logically (and captivatingly) explained them all in a way that pretty much blew my mind.

So mimesis is the engine of (good) stories but I don't think it is the engine of a good life here in reality. Of course mimesis is inevitable but unconsciously allowing it to run rampant and dictate our choices and our fate is *not* inevitable. Hence the mitigation of striving towards anti-mimetic things, things which put the brakes on this process. To tie this into what we

have said so far 'Content' is highly mimetic, it is all follow-the-leader based on what the algorithms and the hivemind decides to reward on any given day.

Mimesis increases in scale as its spreads outwards. 'Virality' is a telling word. It is mimetic contagion. Whereas art- at least in the ways that I have attempted to define it above- is not about scale. If art is a freely given gift which is offered up without the expectation of reciprocation (artists want to make a living but they'll keep creating come what may) then I think it can transcend and subvert transactional, tit for tat relationships and so in that sense be anti-mimetic. Would you agree with any of that?

Luke: I absolutely agree with that. I spent a good portion of *Wanting* trying to get at the same idea by talking about how every artist (or entrepreneur, or creative person in general) has to transcend 'the market' in the act of creation to bring something new into being. Otherwise, we end up in market research hell.

I met up with one of my readers in LA a few weeks back (serendipitously, btw. I received an email and noticed in his signature that he ran a company in LA, and I just happened to be there to give a talk, so I asked him if he wanted to meet up for a drink). Then I noticed the tagline of his company is "Transcending the Transactional", which I love.

I suppose it takes me back to your emphasis on Gift. One gift you gave to me (and all of your readers), btw, were your "Under-the-Radar Movie Reviews" (I forget what you called them—but they were essentially reviews of great, older films that hardly anyone knows.) What was your inspiration for doing that? It would seem to tie-in well to our discussion about mimesis and the market.

'Transcending the transactional'—I wish I'd coined that. That just cuts to the absolute heart of everything we are discussing here in three words. And yes, if we don't have this transcendence of the transactional as our aim then any creative project of ours will inevitably descend into market research hell. Nothing destroys focus quite like a focus group.

And it's a real temptation to go down such a road- to listen to the metrics rather than the gut- in some misguided utilitarian hope of trying to make something that satisfied the widest possible demographic of people. But art can never be like this. Intuitions must be followed that go against the current conventions of the creative market. Otherwise nothing will ever change or grow and the collective well of inspiration will run dry.

I like Amiri Baraka's definition of art being anything that makes you feel proud to be human. That sounds extremely general but in truth it is specific, much like the art that fits that remit. Anything that is human is specific, it is individual and it bears the fingerprints and foibles and quirks of its creator just as how a child's painting that they offer you is clearly their creation and is about their world as they understand it. It's presented as a gift and is made purely because it *could* be made. The *process* was the focus which is why they could obsess over it in the moment but then quickly move on to the next thing once it was stuck up on the refrigerator.

I suppose the film reviews you mentioned fit into this dynamic. I did them in the moment because I felt compelled to. I didn't check the data bit it was self evident no one really cared about them. Hahaha. I did them for a while and then I took them down and moved on to continuing with essays and short fiction writing. And I knew this was how it would go before it began. You don't need to do market research to conclude that a 1000 word discussion of This Year's Love or Heaven Knows Mr Allison are unlikely to reach that critical mass of shares that make them a viral sensation. But surely there's more to life than that? Isn't creating something for fun and attempting to do it well enough? Isn't 'failure' a form of success if it impacts the few who read it and shows them that you can write about whatever you want? And isn't success a form of failure if you are straightjacketed into churning out repetitive, hyperfocused, accessible, low bandwidth content simply as a means of keeping your personal brand afloat?

Surely I'm not the only one who feels this way.

Luke: Well, we could go on like this for a long time but I don't want to push the limits of this newsletter. We'll have to save the rest of our correspondence for *The Collected Letters of Bevan and Burgis*, to be published posthumously (yet I suppose we're off to a good start considering that letter I scrawled and tried to send your way last year never made it to you). That was my way of trying to practice the ancient art of Correspondence. I was inspired by Merton and the many others who have done this. (I haven't given up on it!)

What about you? Do you have any practices you've developed to help inoculate yourself from being lost in the dissembling technological fog?

Thomas: I was once told by an astrologer that my fame would be posthumous so if I go before you then you might find that *The Collected Letters of Bevan and Burgis* really moves some units!

I have some practices to avoid being sucked into the world of screens primarily because I am temperamentally/neurochemically very drawn to it if I'm not careful. Without awareness and mitigation I could easily find myself betting on the corners market of Mogolian Premier League soccer in the early hours wondering where the day went.

So the way you avoid being the online pigeon constantly pecking at the proverbial food pellets is to prioritise the world outside. Walks without phones, reading physical books, making small talk with people, avoiding defaulting to the self-service checkout. Simple things that it's easy to not bother with out of worship to the false god of convenience. The internet should be an augmentation to a life lived out in the world, not the other way around.

I find analogue media helps- physical books and records and so on. The financial hit stops the endless hunt for the new and the tangibility and tactile effect helps you retain what you consume and keeps you grounded in reality. I know none of what I am saying is exactly groundbreaking here but I think we forget how quickly being extremely online has become normalised and just how alien that is for human who are used to being grounded in nature and community.

Fog is exactly the word for it- a creeping miasma that catches you unawares and then suddenly your vision and sense of perspective is completely distorted and obscured. The way out is to walk through it. The internet is an incredible tool- I met you through it, I can write for a living because of it, I have discovered all sorts of wonderful art and people because of it- but it is not real.

The world is real, your neighbourhood is real, all of the small interactions and overheard conversations and fleeting moment of our ordinary lives are what is real. And attending to them and cherishing them and turning them into art is what makes this ordinary life extraordinary. You transcend via immersion. And perhaps that is how you become a little more anti-mimetic.