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RELIGIOUS “AVATARS” AND IMPLICIT RELIGION:
RECYCLING MYTHS AND RELIGIOUS PATTERNS WITHIN
CONTEMPORARY U.S. POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract: Contemporary cultural and media studies have been increasingly interested in redefining the relations between religion and culture (and particularly popular culture). The present study approaches a series of theories on the manner in which religious aspects emerge and are integrated in contemporary cultural manifestations, focusing on the persistence/resurrection of religious patterns into secularized cultural contents. Thus, the analysis departs from the concept of *implicit religion*, coined and developed by Bailey and the theories following it, as well as other associated concepts, influential for the evolution of debates in the recent period, such as *invisible religion*, as approached by Luckmann, *civil religion*, by Bellah, *folk religion*, *residual religion*, by Davies or ‘wild’ *religion*, by Borg. In order to discuss the relations between religion and popular culture in contemporary U.S. and particularly the presence of certain religious patterns in popular culture messages, symbolism and rituals, the study uses an interdisciplinary approach, based on approaches currently used in media studies, film studies, cultural studies, visual culture perspectives, religious studies, and sociology. The article discusses, through different theories (and in its second part, a case study on James Cameron’s cliché masterpiece *Avatar*) the manner in which contemporary popular culture (and cinema in particular) recycles, integrates and reinterprets religious patterns, symbols and behaviours.

Key Words: implicit religion, popular culture, mass culture, religious patterns, rituals, U.S. cinema, *Avatar*, James Cameron

“Is it possible that the power and popularity of the mass media are such that some of the functions traditionally associated with religious agencies, institutions and discourse are capable of being communicated through, and performed by, the medium of film?” (C.R. Deacy)

Introduction. The “Disenchanted Word”: Religion and Secularization

While explicit religion survives and replicates itself in multiple variations in contemporary society¹ (despite the coherent hypotheses announcing, as early as the 19th century², the gradual disappearance of religion into new institutional structures), a parallel and for some even more interesting set of phenomena has become increasingly significant, revealing intriguing effects of the contact between religion and the products of mass culture. Due to the development of image reproduction, the second half of 20th century witnessed the evolution of culture towards massification and industrialisation in terms of production and reproduction, as well as distribution. As the influential Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall argued when discussing visual culture:

“The mechanically and electronically reproduced image is the semantic and technical unit of the modern mass media and at the heart of post-war popular culture. However, while it is acknowledged widely within the discipline of media and cultural studies... the visual image or photograph seems only of interest as the origin, as the technological dawn, of a great process of development in which, in an era of mass communication and the commodification of information, messages can be transmitted in principle to a plurality of recipients and audiences [emphasis added]”.³

This consumerism expanded at the cultural level (visual arts, music, media etc.) has not lead to the extinction of the presence of religious aspects within culture, on the contrary, religious patterns, symbols, characters or behaviours have persisted in the new cultural paradigm, although they were recycled, reinterpreted or even hidden under the mask of secular and even industrialised art, such as, for instance, Hollywood cinema. Popular culture became a favourite space of dialogue and melting pot of the cultural and religious diversity characterising the

contemporary world and in the same time fulfilling, without religious institutions constraints, the "modern man's need for the sacred in spite of tendencies to restrain its force in the cultural practices of modernity"⁴.

Secularization, as a concept and as a process which raised significant debates, cannot be however ignored when discussing the persistence of religious patterns into popular culture, the latter being itself a manifestation of what we could define as the contemporary American - secularized - society. Defined by Berger as "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols"⁵, the concept has led to significant debates, definitions and classifications, some of which should imperatively be mentioned, even if the secular society represents merely a framework for the current analysis. Among them, Bell's, who spoke of the dichotomy *secularization/disenchantment*⁶:

"*Secularization*, the differentiation of institutional authority in the world, which is reinforced by the processes of rationalization. The second, in the realm of beliefs and culture, is *disenchantment*, or what I would prefer to call, for the parallelism of the term, profanation. Thus, the sacred and secular become my pair terms for processes at work within institutions and social systems, the sacred and the profane for the processes within culture [emphasis added]".⁷

Decoding the "signs" of the progressive instalment of a world excluding religion (through its public life devoid of religiousness), the theories of secularization described the process of gradual elimination of transcendence in the modern world. A proof of the concepts' success and partial accuracy when approaching contemporary world is the longevity not only of the term but also of the attempts - equally dynamic and as complex as the process described - to define it, from radical perspectives to Remond's *sécularisation amiable*. Decades after Berger's 1960s definitions, theorists still attempt to explain the phenomenon in its dynamic aspects. Among them, N. J. Demarath III, who - distinguishing between the concept of "secularisation" and those of "secularism" and "secularity" - defined the former as a transition, a process of change, a "historical dynamic that may occur gradually or suddenly, and is sometimes temporary and occasionally reversible"⁸.

While the issue has continued to raise interest at the theoretical level, many scholars have gradually accepted the debatable dimension of such an approach. "During the last decade, however, this thesis of the slow and steady death of religion has come under growing criticism; indeed,

secularization theory is currently experiencing the most sustained challenge in its long history"⁹. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke spoke of "prophesies and misrepresentations of both present and past" and suggested "to bury the secularization thesis".¹⁰ Even Peter Berger, an essential theorist of secularization revised his ideas arguing that "the world today, with some exceptions . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled 'secularization theory' is essentially mistaken."¹¹

In parallel with these debates on the process of secularization, the evolution and vitality of religious patterns¹² continues, the latter emerging in some of the most unexpected areas and manners. Thus, religious patterns have not only persisted in an overt form, in coexisting old and new churches and denominations, but also penetrated¹³ areas which were considered secular, such as music, cinema, advertising etc, facets of media and popular culture.

Replacements. Implicit Religion

Recent studies have thus acknowledged that "in the midst of secularization, religion persists"¹⁴. Considering popular culture we could replace "in the midst of..." with the image of a fluid infiltration in a subterranean area and then sudden emergences in most unexpected places and most creative manners, being, as Ostwalt argues, "popularized, scattered, and secularized through extra-ecclesiastical institutions"¹⁵. Critics have discussed concepts such as *civil religion* or *folk religion*, *residual religion*¹⁶ and so on but the most comprehensive and the most connected to our analysis on the manner in which contemporary popular culture¹⁷ (and cinema in particular) recycles, integrates and reinterprets religious patterns, symbols and behaviours is that of *implicit religion*, coined by Edward I. Bailey, replacing the concept of "secular religion" he initially proposed. "By using the idea of some implicit religion as 'hidden' or 'rejected' religious belief or practice, it is possible to conceptualize the charting of a change in the boundaries of traditional religion resulting from the adoption of some forms of implicit religion and the rejection of others"¹⁸. Actually, implicit religion is not only the most articulate but also probably the most comprehensive because, "as *societal consensus* [it] includes civil religion, hidden curricula, and national identity. [...] Popular religion, culture, and residual religion are the manifestations of this form of implicit religion."¹⁹ Bailey is however most interested in the performative aspects of *behaviours* – as associated with implicit religion and being "secular manifestations of religious behaviour"²⁰ – and in the manner in which they are exhibited, repeated and therefore turned into ritualised practices.²¹

This particular interest in the behavioural aspects makes the concept operative when approaching popular culture and particularly aspects belonging (or connected to) visual culture, cinema being one of the most powerful examples in this respect. The mixed symbolism attached to such behaviours, bringing together (or rather exposing) religious references in most unusual environments and contexts describes precisely the manner in which implicit religion becomes an integrated part of contemporary culture and for some the most accessible (and sometimes the only) exposure to certain religious patterns. However, these patterns ceased to be explicitly religious, being processed and therefore altered, converted, through recycling, into products ready to be consumed in deeply secularised environments. Thus, within these reinvented patterns, an interesting example for the behavioural aspect of implicit religion - and the ostentatious paradox in the popular cultural assimilation of performing religion - is considered by contemporary cultural studies research to be the case of Madonna. Departing from the idea that "throughout most of her career, Madonna will to a greater or lesser extent resort to these two variables, sex+religion"²², Prieto-Arranz²³ approaches the example from a semiotic perspective, discussing at some point precisely the body²⁴ (and behavioural) religious symbolism the artist promotes.

"This is specially the case of her characteristic use of religious symbology. This encoding perhaps reached a turning point in 1989-1990, with the (KKK-reminiscent or anti-orthodoxy?) burning cross motif and updated Maria Magdalena role she adopts in her controversial "Like a Prayer" video ... What becomes interesting in this most recent period is not quite so much the religious dimension Madonna's Signified seems to develop as the development experienced by its Signifier: the tendency to ornate her body with religious symbols remains (the kabbalah writsband or her Re-Invention Tour "Kabbalists do it better" T-shirt bear testimony to this) although clearly secondary to another. Taking her skill to construct her own body as text one step further Madonna has of late taken to embodying (and not only wearing) the sacred. Her Hindu goddess Laxmi impersonation in a famous David LaChapelle portfolio and, perhaps most notably, her 2006 Confessions Tour onstage

crucifixion are but two relevant examples which have certainly helped fix unorthodoxy and nonconfessional religiosity as essential elements of the Madonna Signified”²⁵

This *music-product-sex-religion* formula may seem as an extreme (paradoxical) association, however it illustrates most poignantly to what extent implicit and explicit religion can differ and still coexist in defining contemporary society. Thus, the “sacred”, Bailey argued, could be identified in secular areas - *sacrality in secularity* (recognisable legacy of Mircea Eliade’s “sacred into the profane” paradigm, discussing the *surviving religious patterns* under camouflage and rationality cohabiting with irrationality). These secular areas mentioned by Bailey (some of which completely “unholy” at a first look, if discussed from a traditionalist manicheistic perspective on the religious *versus* the secular) are “literature, psychology, technology, medicine, law, acting, dreams, football, human rights, raves, venerated scholars and celebrities, childhood, justice, love, fun, and film”²⁶. The two researchers meet at this particular point, as Eliade also argued, when analysing the traces of the sacred within these secularized areas, that “the ‘dream factory’ of cinema, for example, ‘takes over and employs countless mythical motifs—the fight between hero and monster, initiatory combats and ordeals, paradigmatic figures and images (the maiden, the hero, the paradisaal landscape, hell, and so on).”²⁷

Moreover, this ubiquitous persistence of the sacred into the secular would (refusing the sharp dissociation secular/religious) interpreted by researchers not solely as a dynamic self-reproduction of religious patterns (somehow naturally based on some “prototypical human gestures”²⁸, but also as a source of meaning and coherence (“the camouflage of the sacred in the structures of daily life and in those of the professional life is an indicator of the need for meaning, mythologization and ritualization felt by man in modern society”²⁹). Similarly, Luckmann had defined “invisible religion” (which Bailey³⁰ considered to be almost identical with “implicit religion”³¹) - precisely as some “thread-like theme that is woven through the various parts of one’s life”³², religion continuing thus to play its integrative function³³ even if through non-canonical behaviours or symbolism.

Popular Culture and New Religion. Reinventing Rituals

Rituals – as the visible sides of these invisible religious mental patterns – persist in contemporary society, being the manifest form of these recurrent religious paradigms and could be explained as part of the behavioural aspects referred to before, or as an assembly of “prototypical

human gestures”³⁴. Political, cultural, subcultural, contemporary rituals define the contemporary society and become particularly important in popular culture, which intends to give meaning to these forms of expression or representations consciously or subconsciously saturated with religious content. As Possamai argues, when discussing the relation between popular culture and religion:

“Popular culture is not only ‘a sub-culture for the masses, or as a form of evasion’ or ‘control of the masses by various groups of power’. Popular culture might be all of these, but it is also a medium for the autodetermination of social actors, and more specically ... spiritual self-determination...We create our lives and view ourselves through popular culture. *Religion and popular culture co-exist intimately, and cannot be seen simply as a relationship of cause and effect. At times religion creates and regulates popular culture* [emphasis added]”³⁵

Television, cinema, music, media, games and other similar popular culture phenomena define and shape identities³⁶, the religious pattern being a strong presence, even when disguised or, on the contrary, mimicked or, furthermore, attacked. It persists through the invisible links that inevitably connect contemporary popular culture with a cultural tradition for which religion was one of the strongest references (even when fought against). Also interested in the intimate connection popular culture establishes (intentionally or not) with religion, Porter continued a debate on the authenticity of such manifestations or new “sacred” spaces or their fake/simulacrum character. Thus, she questions the authenticity of such recycled rituals and patterns (especially in the fan communities), following Possamai and his concept of “hyper-real” religion (as a “*simulacrum* of a religion partly created out of popular culture which provides inspiration for believers/consumers emphasis added]”³⁷). She also analyses David Chidester’s position on popular culture manifestations and rituals. He argued that “participants in popular culture have described the sport of baseball, the consumer product of Coca-Cola, and the musical genre of rock-n-roll *as if they were religions*”³⁸ using this as an example of “authentic fakes” when compared to the relation of the human and the transcendence and the sacred. While Chidester noticed that popular culture “rituals” are not religious in the actual sense (or explicitly or “authentically” religious) he acknowledged that such manifestations play within the community similar *functions* to religious practices.³⁹

However, Porter questioned this *authentic - fake* dichotomy, but not denying the fact that many everyday routines have become real

community rituals, particularly in relation to games or popular culture events. On the contrary, she disagreed with the need to draw a line between these and “real” or explicit religious events. “And yet, if something looks like religion, acts like religion, and is experienced by someone religiously, why does the popular culture dimension of the phenomenon make it religiously and ‘authentically’ ‘fake?’”⁴⁰ Porter’s daring perspective is thus implicitly opposing the approaches radically perceiving the world as secularized and devoid of transcendence and sacrality. Thus, for Porter, popular culture is no longer seen as mimicking religion (see Madonna’s example above), but it actually contains rituals and “sacred places” which could perform the role of a reinvented paradigm of religiousness.

Media and Mass Culture – Integrating Recycled Religious Patterns

The contemporary world is the product of a series of power replacements (although it should be perceived in a dynamic approach, as the production is an ongoing process). Thus, theorists of the “disenchanted” world spoke of an institutional replacement of the church/religious authority or power (an interesting perspective here belonging to Thomas Szasz,⁴¹ discussing the substitution of a theological paradigm of power with a scientific and institutional one in relation to the ritualic versus scientific prohibition of drugs)⁴².

However, the substitutions of power paradigms have experienced an interesting and essential shift within culture as postwar society (and in particular the American society, due to its development and promoter role in this respect) has become increasingly dominated by media. “As Peter Horsfield attests, we are living in a mediated consumer culture in which people organise and express themselves in relation to the demands of the mass media”⁴³. We could actually speak of this mediated consumer culture as a phenomenon increasingly and overwhelmingly powerful at all levels (having a large impact, from that exercised on emotional reactions to that on political convictions):

“Media images help *shape our view of the world and our deepest values*: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Media stories provide the *symbols, myths*, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture. Media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence, and who is not. They dramatize and legitimate the power of the forces

that be and show the powerless that they must stay in their places or be oppressed. We are immersed from cradle to grave in a media and consumer society.”⁴⁴

Religion, the conundrum or multilayered contemporary challenge, could not be absent from this framework and thus, both implicitly and explicitly invades media and is used, manipulated in a diverse range of manners in order to produce the intended impact on the consumer. Critics⁴⁵ have asked themselves if the power of media can lead to a substitution of the institutional roles and attributes of religion and its impact. While we agree that this power replacement exists (see above our perspective on a new media domination), we believe that it is not a substitution taking place at one level (of the attributes or roles) but that it is a multilayered paradigm substitution, due to the complex needs of expression of a society built itself out of a complex network of ideas, expressions, needs, knowledge, cultures, whose interconnection and interpermeability is sometimes more significant than their individual values⁴⁶. Within this multileveled power replacement paradigm, the “implicit” aspect plays an important role in the impact these recycled patterns or values possess, while the ambiguity, mimicry or disguises interplay phenomena or processes that can be read as “authentic”. The hidden, disguised aspects can mainly be associated with the concepts of manipulation and propaganda, while media exploit precisely the above mentioned human prototypical need for meaning and coherence. As Sandu Frunză argued:

“Mass media plays an important part both with respect to mythical creation and its function, which in archaic societies was fulfilled by mythical communication instances... *Mass media valorizes myth as an ethical mode of responding to human needs* that are always forgotten, always postponed, but pertain to the human condition and its protection. In this context, mass media is responsible for the elaboration and implementation of *politics of symbolic construction of reality*, both at the level of mass culture and of very elaborate professional culture [emphasis added]”⁴⁷.

The “symbolic construction of reality” enunciated by Frunză inscribes itself in the same formula mentioned by Kellner of media constructing and shaping identities, values and behaviours, formula based on the use of reinvented religious patterns meant to offer coherence and

meaning. The roles remain identical, no matter the implicit or explicit manifestation, but if they play the same function, together with these media processed religious patterns, a complex of other more or less tangible products is sold to the costumer (from entertainment to commercial commodities, which marks the tradition Bitarello referred to when speaking of the transition from “myths – religious, *must be believed* – to fiction, untrue, *aims at entertaining*)”⁴⁸. These recycled religious patterns are thus converted, relabelled or rebranded (under names as *entertaining* etc.), *advertising* – in its own terms – the contemporary *Zeitgeist*.

Cinema: New Technologies and Old Heroes: Reinventing Religious Patterns

Cinema plays a privileged role in this media-controlled paradigm and the use of recycled religious patterns⁴⁹, as it functions through all its components as a sort of a modern story-teller and also has the purpose and means to substitute in some areas the role of religion in promoting values, behaviours, heroes. Based on this role of the modern story-teller and myth creator (actually re-creator), it seems that cinema is also the most legitimate within media to perform these actions. “That there is a clear analogy between the function performed by film and that of traditional religious agencies is demonstrated by the fact that, over the years, some film-makers and theorists have sought to lay emphasis upon the degree to which film is adept at carrying and conveying religious hopes and values”⁵⁰. Interestingly enough, religiousness is twice attached to cinema, due to the two levels of reality it involves: first, the “real” space of cinema and its ritualic behaviours. Similarly to Conrad Ostwalt’s idea that “the movie theater has acted like some secular religion, complete with its sacred space and rituals that mediate and experience of otherness”⁵¹, Adam observed that going to the cinema involved a ritualic level –darkness, silence⁵² etc.- and a symbolic, both unified in the religious⁵³. Moreover, he stated that at the functional level, cinema is similar to the medieval church, both as a ritualic space and as a decoder of meaning. Secondly, and even more significantly, religiousness is conveyed within cinema through the virtual world it creates, possessing a real impact in shaping identities, values, realities. Margaret Miles is one of the observers of the phenomenon, arguing that “the representation of values in contemporary culture may be seen to occur most persistently not in the church or the synagogue but in the movie theatre”⁵⁴. No wonder therefore that the connection between this popular culture and media phenomenon which is cinema and religion has been intensively researched and exploited, based on theories on the connection between religion and culture, such as Niebuhr and Tillich. This research has approached the connection from many points of view, from the relation to the secularized

paradigm (“the possibility that a secular agency such as film may carry and convey religious ideas”⁵⁵) to the particular typologies of heroes (the messianism perpetuated by cinema, for instance, has been intensively discussed – “a formula in which the central character is a non-conformist or unlikely redeemer who transforms lives and ultimately undergoes martyrdom”⁵⁶).

One of the theorists and supporters of the film-religion formula is John Lyden who approached the connection between religion and culture at both levels previously mentioned – the cinema going as a ritual and the religious patterns transmitted on the screen. Furthermore he analysed cinema as more than a ritual, as a form of religion (somehow similar to what Adam calls “the cult of cinema”, “live religion” or religion of the future⁵⁷):

*“If the practice of film viewing can be understood as religion...then the dialogue between ‘religion’ and ‘film’ is really just another form of interreligious dialogue...Rather than assume that religion and culture are entirely different entities or that religion can assume a hegemonic position in relation to culture, perhaps traditional religions might benefit from learning to listen to the religions of popular culture as they are learning to listen one another” [emphasis added].*⁵⁸

While we shall not insist on the perspective which analyses the behaviours associated to cinema going as religious rituals themselves, we are more interested in the religious patterns attached to the contents promoted by cinema through different categories of products. We shall refer to a specific case, a relevant example both due to its huge mass impact and its density in cumulating religious patterns and symbolism, James Cameron’s *Avatar*.

The *Avatars* of Religion: Cameron’s Cliché Masterpiece

Cameron’s film is it one of the most relevant products of the Hollywood industry both for recycling religious patterns and for selling processed religion to mass audiences. The film possesses all the ingredients advertised and sold in the most accessible package. This eclecticism adopted in relation to the religious patterns employed in the film has probably been the reason for the existence, so soon after its release, of so many studies on the film, from those interested in its messianic character(istics) to those focused on its shamanic elements or recycled mythology. Of course, the references are easily readable or

recognizable (through names, such as the Ancient Greek mythology related toponymy: Pandora, Polyphemus etc, or other recognizable patterns). The film is conceived in a user-friendly manner from the point of view of references, despite their richness: “creating sacrality for a general audience... The Na’vi religion is meant to be accessible for the contemporary imagination. And beyond mere accessibility, the audience is meant to identify empathetically with Na’vi existence.”⁵⁹

Cameron is the master of recycling, the diversity of patterns⁶⁰ he uses being amazing when looking at the appeal and cohesion of the final product (if not considering the plot, itself recycled⁶¹ and simplified to the extreme). He brings together Hindu beliefs and Ancient Greek typologies, messianic heroes and shamanism⁶², tantric rituals and animism⁶³, African, Asian and American rituals. The title and main concept – *avatar* – makes reference to Hinduism⁶⁴ and in the same time has new media suggestions (internet games or social network “avatars”).

The film is saturated with sacrality at all levels: religious patterns overlap and connect; implicit and explicit references alternate (such as the implicit messianic character of Jake Sully and Pandora as the initial paradise combined with explicit religious rituals for Eywa). If Anton Karl Kozlovic (2001) spoke of “the holy alien” in Science-Fiction cinema, in Cameron’s case we could speak of the “holy avatar”, with all the redundancy involved, due to this saturation with religiousness, and, as Linnitt suggests, due to a “nostalgia for the sacred”, in other words the need of the contemporary world for coherence and meaning.

“It could be argued that, in many ways, the Na’vi are crafted in response to a *general social nostalgia for the sacred*. Following this argument, the cathartic vision of Na’vi life is seen to offer a type of sacredness from which the general audience is alienated in their everyday life. While the Na’vi’s unadulterated way of living in almost no way resembles modern life, it is based upon many modern ideals of a sacralised life in commune with the planet, community and a powerful transcendent”.⁶⁵

This sacred alien planet, Pandora, is conceived as a primordial lost paradise, for which people have atavic nostalgia. The paradise pattern is here based on the opposition to Earth, as Pop argued (“Pandora is a negative replica of our own world”⁶⁶) the differences being emphasised through the exoticism of Pandora, its un-earthly vegetation and creatures⁶⁷. A “computer generated Garden [of Eden] in another planetary system, has multiple connotations, it can also be Samsara, the absolute

illusory reality in Buddhism transformed by 3D technology. So Cameron is mixing again two different cultural representations, and out of this double mirroring a new symbolic context is created”⁶⁸. The opposition is even further emphasised by the conflict between the natives and the humans, transformed into “an allegory of conflict between Mother Earth and Father Machine, typical to the Gaia vs. God theories.”⁶⁹

The natives (the name, Na’vi, suggests, beyond its intended exoticism, *native*) are themselves “holy aliens”, living around the sacred tree, the cult of the female mother goddess and immersed in a religious mysticism. Eliade’s “sacralised cosmos” is associated with the sacredness of the primitives, associated with the myth of *le bon sauvage*⁷⁰, the “primitive man ...[who] lives and acts in an environment of beings and objects, all of which, in addition to the [observable] properties that we recognize them to possess, are endued with mystic attributes”, in Lévy-Bruhl’s words⁷¹. However, an extremely important feature of this paradise re-found is that for the contemporary audience sacredness (and the ritualic aspects associated with it) is translated into:

“highly technologized interaction. The metaphysical becomes the physical; the transcendent becomes the immanent. ...Thus *believing* in Na’vi religion is not unlike *believing* in electrical circuitry. As is the case with electricity, the details are not necessarily essential for the whole enterprise to become believable. The connection is sufficiently observable or sufficiently reliable to be trusted. The Na’vi religion is meant to be accessible for the contemporary imagination. And beyond mere accessibility, the audience is meant to identify empathetically with Na’vi existence...The Na’vi have a desirable and specifically technological access to their spiritual transcendent: conditioned, structured, available, instrumental, tangible. These are the comforts, the limits, of the modern imagination, of the modern ethos. By responding to our need for the objective and technological and also our nostalgia for the sacred, *Avatar* is ultimately suggesting something to us about our modern religious sensibilities.”⁷²

In this explanation, Linnitt captured precisely the interesting mixture between religion and technology which Cameron used in order to

help the contemporary audiences identify with these recycled religious patterns (audiences who are familiarised with Sci-Fi complex technologies and “reading” easier the language of this electric-like network than of less digestible/processed religious patterns). Moreover, he recycled not only religious symbols and matrices but also cinematic conventions (and even clichés), visible in the combat between the natives and the “Sky people” (who, in a reversed celestial logic, are *unlike* gods). Thus, as Hollywood has recycled and then continuously reinvented messianic features in constructing its heroes, *Avatar* – already saturated with religious patterns – also assimilated this typology (directly or, rather, indirectly, through other cinema references, as the fight stereotypes associated to it make us think at previous films rather than at religious messianic figures). Thus, some authors compared the protagonists of *The Matrix* and *Avatar*, Neo and Jake Sully, as possessors of predestined, messianic features: “like the Christian Messiah, they emerge re-born with a new and powerful body, awakening to a new life with vision and purpose”⁷³.

With a military training, technical knowledge and a spiritual initiation on Pandora, Sully embodies not only the local “chosen” Taruk Makto but also a synthesis of the two civilizations reunited. He embodies thus the ideal hero typology and is perfect, in this synthetic (or half man-half alien) form for the audiences to identify with him more easily. The saving of the paradise (associated with a total salvation, as Jake Sully is saved himself by Eywa) inscribes itself in the series of clichés, both religious (good *versus* evil) and cinematic (happy-ending).

Conclusions

The contemporary world is dominated by media, which have substituted and overwhelmed other previously mainstream sources of values and codes (institutionalised religion being probably the most relevant example). However, this media dominated world is not a secularised one, despite the theoretical prognoses started in the 19th century and continued in the following decades. The post-war Western culture (and particularly the American one, due to its technological advancement and dominating ideologies) is thus a specific environment for a dynamic intermixing (in the logic of an implicit or invisible religion, as discussed by Bailey and Luckmann and exposed before) of religious patterns, behaviours (rituals) or symbols recycled into “secular” contexts such as music, film or games.

Cinema is however the most privileged, perhaps, due to its storytelling character and to the complex audio-visual means it possesses for communicating its messages to the audiences. While itself a space for developing new popular culture rituals associated with contemporary “sacred spaces” (such as the cinema multiplex within the commercial centre, the new consumerist *axis mundi*), the cinema also seem to offer a

sort of new access to transcendence. Thus, not only through the experience itself but especially through the messages and products delivered by cinema (containing a set of ready processed recycled patterns and clichés – religious or cinematic), the film has become a favourite supplier of a new type of life-integrated religiousness. This becomes obvious when analysing a particular case such as the cliché masterpiece signed by Cameron, *Avatar*, designed to have a huge audience impact and yet saturated with implicit and explicit religious references. More than a film, a mass culture phenomenon, the film embodies – itself like an avatar – a long series of religious patterns (of behaviour, of thinking etc.), building a multilayered body of religious reference and symbolism (all wrapped in Sci-Fi technology). The film, its message and its success, in addition to other previous similar works (such as *The Matrix*, for instance) are therefore relevant for an analysis on the direction in which is the contemporary popular culture is evolving in which religion (particularly at its implicit level) is concerned. Thus, the theoretical studies analysed in order to approach the phenomenon as well as the case study revealed that the contemporary (popular) culture is not, as expected, evolving towards a technological secularized world, but it proves instead an increasing nostalgia for the sacred and nature (as a “paradise lost”), even if/when, paradoxically, these are supplied by sophisticated technology, as in Cameron’s *Avatar*.

Notes:

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“Critics point to multiple indicators of religious health and vitality today, ranging from the continued popularity of churchgoing in the United States to the emergence of New Age spirituality in Western Europe, the growth in fundamentalist movements and religious parties in the Muslim world, the evangelical revival sweeping through Latin America, and the upsurge of ethno-religious conflict in international affairs”. Pippa Norris, Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.

² “The seminal social thinkers of the nineteenth century – Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud – all believed that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society” Norris and Inglehart, 3.

³ Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 3

⁴ Sandu Frunză, “Media Communication and the Politics of the Symbolic Construction of Reality”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol.10 issue 29 (Summer 2011): 194.

⁵ Peter L. Berger (ed.), *Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 [1969]), 107.

⁶ See also M. Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

⁷ Daniel Bell, “The return of the sacred?: The argument on the future of religion” in *The Winding Passage: Essays and Sociological Journals, 1960-1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 332.

⁸ N.J. Demarath III, “Secularization and Sacralization Deconstructed and Reconstructed” in *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, eds. J. A. Beckford & N. J. Demarath III (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 66.

⁹ Norris and Inglehart, 3.

¹⁰ Norris and Inglehart, 4.

¹¹ Berger qtd. in Norris and Inglehart, 4.

¹² “Scholars interested in the study of implicit religion often appear to work from the assumption that traditional forms of organized religion have become less pervasive, but that less visible and important religious expressions nonetheless persist”, Reginald W. Bibby, *Canada's Data-less Debate About Religion: The Precarious Role of Research in Identifying Implicit and Explicit Religion*. (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion Vancouver – June 2008), 1.

¹³ The construct of *implicit religion* originates from the idea that religiosity is innate to human society, although not always present in overt form. Karen Lord, “Implicit Religion: A Contemporary Theory for the Relationships between Religion, State, and Society”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 23, 1 (2008): 34.

¹⁴ Bibby, 2.

¹⁵ Ostwalt, qtd. in John Lyden, *Film as religion: myths, morals, and rituals*, (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 12.

¹⁶ Rupert E. Davies, “The Residual Religion of the English”, *Modern Churchman*, 34 (1993): 37–43. “The society may also become either less culturally and religiously homogenous or more secularised, thus introducing other competing forms of identity. However, Christian practices linger within the culture. This is residual religion, a type of implicit religion described as being the effect of explicit religion. Davies describes those who have this residual religion as people who “think they are being truly religious, therefore, when they attend any kind of ceremony on Armistice Day, Easter Day or Harvest Festival”, Lord 37, 41.

¹⁷ “Although mainly associated with secular manifestations of religiosity, implicit religion is especially applicable to cross-cultural studies of religious behaviour as it is not confined to the view of sacred and secular as separate spheres”. Karen Lord, “Implicit Religion: Definition and Application”, *Implicit Religion*, 9, 2 (2006): 217.

¹⁸ Lord, “Implicit Religion: Definition and Application”, 217.

¹⁹ Lord, “Implicit Religion: A Contemporary Theory”, 34.

²⁰ Lord, “Implicit Religion: Definition and Application”, 206.

²¹ Lord, “Implicit Religion: Definition and Application”, 206.

²² José I. Prieto-Arranz, “The Semiotics of Performance and Success in Madonna”, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 45, 1 (2012): 176.

²³ Prieto-Arranz, 176.

- ²⁴ "Madonna will ... construct her body as a complex, meaningful text", Prieto-Arranz, 176.
- ²⁵ Prieto-Arranz, 187-189.
- ²⁶ Bibby, 2.
- ²⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1959), 205.
- ²⁸ Peter Berger qtd. in Lord "Implicit Religion: A Contemporary Theory", 34.
- ²⁹ Frunză, 195.
- ³⁰ Bailey, 34.
- ³¹ "[T]here is little if any difference between the two concepts", Bailey qtd. in Bibby, 2.
- ³² Bibby, 2.
- ³³ "Thomas Luckmann (1967) and Edward I. Bailey (1997) have argued that, because of the integrative function that religion performs in the lives of individuals, it will persist in less visible and less explicit ways. Accordingly, Luckmann suggested to the author [Bibby] in the early 1980s that individuals develop systems of meaning that run like thread through the various sectors of one's life, giving it coherence", Bibby, 2.
- ³⁴ Lord, "Implicit Religion: Definition and Application", 206.
- ³⁵ Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2005), 20.
- ³⁶ See also Douglas Kellner, "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture" in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media*, eds. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003), also available online at <http://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/papers/SAGEcs.htm>
- ³⁷ According to Possamai, a "hyper-real" religion is a "simulacrum of a religion partly created out of popular culture which provides inspiration for believers/consumers", Possamai, 49-52.
- ³⁸ Chidester qtd. in Porter, 273.
- ³⁹ Chidester, 273.
- ⁴⁰ Porter, 273.
- ⁴¹ Thomas Szasz, *Ceremonial Chemistry: The Ritual Persecution of Dugs, Addicts and Pushers* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1974).
- ⁴² See also Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu "Disenchanting Drugs: Science, Cultural paradigm Switch and Prohibition (1900-1920)", *Caietele Echinox*, 17 (2009): 334-241 and Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu, "The 'Infernal Chemistry' of the 19th Century. The Opiates Between the 'Witchcraft Paradigm' and the Development of Modern Toxicology", *Caietele Echinox*, 12 (2007): 322-333.
- ⁴³ Christopher Robert Deacy, "Redemption and film: Cinema as a contemporary site of religious activity", www.waccglobal.org.
- ⁴⁴ Kellner, <http://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/papers/SAGEcs.htm>
- ⁴⁵ Deacy, www.waccglobal.org (accessed February, 2012)
- ⁴⁶ See Júlio César Adam, "Religião e culto em 3D: o filme Avatar como vivência religiosa e as implicações disso para a teologia prática"[Religion and 3D worship: The movie Avatar as religious experience and its implications to the practical theology]", *Estudos Teológicos*, 50, 1 (2010): 105.
- ⁴⁷ Frunză, 194-195.

⁴⁸ Maria Beatrice Bittarello, "Another Time, Another Space: Virtual Worlds, Myths and Imagination", *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 1, 1 (July 2008): 4.

⁴⁹ See also Adam, 107: "As an expression of culture, cinema had no choice but be religious" ["Como expressão da cultura, o cinema não teria como não ser religioso."]

⁵⁰ Deacy, www.waccglobal.org

⁵¹ Conrad Ostwalt qtd. in Lyden, 12

⁵² "Não só os avatares do filme deixavam seus corpos humanos para ingressar no mundo dos na'vis. Todos nós, espectadores, éramos ligados a uma experiência, muito além do que um simples filme". Adam, 102.

⁵³ Adam, 103.

⁵⁴ Miles qtd. in Deacy, www.waccglobal.org

⁵⁵ Deacy, www.waccglobal.org

⁵⁶ Matthew McEver, "The Messianic Figure in Film", *Journal of Religion and Film*, 2, 2 (1998), <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/>

⁵⁷ Adam, 113.

⁵⁸ Lyden, 126.

⁵⁹ Carole Linnitt, "The Sacred in James Cameron's *Avatar*", *Journal of Religion and Film*, 14, 1 (2010), <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/>

⁶⁰ "Some of the most important ideas from the 'green tradition' of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism and Hinduism have found their way in the mainstream of contemporary ecologism, and by consequence into *Avatar*. Cameron has taken from Daoism the notion that all things are interconnected, in an ecological metaphysics constructed around the energy of Eywa, while another resource is to be found in the Eastern philosophies of Jainism, founded on the principle that human beings are not to harm any living thing, even plants, because life itself is sacrosanct", Doru Pop, "The 'Double Mirror' in James Cameron's *Avatar*—Philosophy, Ecology, Ideology and Ontology on Pandora", *EKPHRASIS. Integrating Methodologies, in Visual Culture Research*, 1 (2009): 27.

⁶¹ "Avatar is a familiar story: the failure of a Eurocentric colonial enterprise due to the resilience of the noble savage unfolding alongside a Pocahontas-style romance. A militarized American faction represents the Western imperial regime, pitted against the Na'vi, a graceful alien race inhabiting the planet Pandora. The success of *Avatar* as a story largely relies upon the audience's ability to identify with the Na'vi", Linnitt, www.unomaha.edu/jrf/.

⁶² Shamanic ecstasy, they develop the cult of the ancestors and they lead a "normal" primitive life, in a very striking similarity with the Amerindians. Their material culture is also imported from paleoamerican sources, the hair due and the clothing, the ornaments of the leaders of the tribe and the religious chanting are references to Paleo-Indians. Pop, 28.

⁶³ Cameron's view of the Pandoran animism comes from the human-forest kinship as manifested in the various rituals of the proto-American civilizations, like the Waorani tribe, in South America, and the Sioux oral tradition in the North of the continent. The Waorani, like the Omatikaya, have built a culture around their relationship with the Equatorial forest, where the trees play an important role in their ethnogenesis. Pop, 28.

⁶⁴ "The Avatāra doctrine within Hinduism is based on this kind of „descending" of the god Vishnu, as Krishna, Vashudeva, Narayana or any of the other gods, so that

they are visible for the believers, but not dependent to their bodily expressions. ...the god Vishnu undertakes avatāras in order to bring benevolence and to positively influence the life of the mortal beings and Krishna comes as avatāra in order to bring salvation to humanity...There is also a double reference for Sully, who is portrayed in a similar way to the Vishnu avatars, who are usually heroic, as Rama (in the Ramayanas), or as Parasurama, Balarama, Khrishna himself, or the mesianic hero Kalki. While the other five avatars of Vishnu (of the total ten) are totemic: fish (Matsya), tortoise (Kurma), boar (Varaha), lion (Narasimha), and semi-human, dwarf-like (Vamana), in the Sanskrit language avatāra may also be a surname, or the calling name for an extraordinary human being, that is avatara is synonymous with heroism", Pop, 34, 48.

⁶⁵ Linnitt, www.unomaha.edu/jrf/

⁶⁶ Pop, 25.

⁶⁷ "60% of this movie is artificial reconstruction, it transports the viewer deep into the fantastic flora of Pandora, an exotic moon outside the solar system, in forests populated by fabulous animals, with creatures belonging to another world and another way of life", Pop, 23.

⁶⁸ Pop, 26

⁶⁹ Radford qtd. in Pop, 44

⁷⁰ Emilie Merlin, "Les religions et les mythes dans Avatar. Sur Pandora, James Cameron s'inspire du néo-chamanisme ", <http://emilie-m.suite101.fr/les-religions-et-les-mythes-dans-avatar-a5052>

⁷¹ L. Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, Translated by Lilian A. Clare, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985 [1926]), 65

⁷² Linnitt, <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/>

⁷³ Rafaele, Robert A Dallen Prize 1, Topic: A study of the influence of the Bible on the two contemporary science fiction films, *The Matrix* and *Avatar*, with a focus on the link between religion, myth and plot, <http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/7017/1/RobertADallen2010.pdf>

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