The Belief System and the Pop-esoteric Wave: a Theory on the Operational Belief System

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Boston College

The Graduate School of Arts and Science

Department of Sociology

THE BELIEF SYSTEM AND THE POP-ESOTERIC WAVE:
A THEORY ON THE OPERATIONAL BELIEF SYSTEM

A Dissertation
by
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

April, 2011
Abstract

This work inquires about the subjectivity construction individuals perform in our contemporary media culture. It examines the structure of believing that can be inferred from the narrative elaboration of beliefs exerted in social conversations when pop-media related to spirituality or transcendency are used as inputs for conversation. For this purpose, I investigate the consumption of three films that triggered for their audiences intense controversies that included topics belonging to the blurry crossroad where spirituality, science, and religion intersect: What The Bleep do We (k)now!? (USA 2004), The Da Vinci Code (USA 2006), and The Passion of the Christ (USA 2004).

My approach departs from the sociology of spirituality perspective, and draws on some insights developed by ritual studies, sociology of religion, social psychoanalysis, consumer studies, and visual studies. Based on a multi-method strategy of inquiry, formal film analysis, focus and discussion groups, and interview data collected from the audience, this dissertation finds that the burgeoning of a media driven popular culture spirituality in Mexico is creating a wave of Pop-Esotericism. As a rational narrative with consumption and conversational drives, Pop-Esotericism is not only a resonant media-reference, but also constitutes a pre-text in the construction of ephemeral and collective
conversational spaces wherein the belief system is engaged and refurnished. To give a full account on the pop-esoteric phenomenon and on overall contemporary belief systems, I propose a theoretical model aimed to uncover the dynamics and strategies we engage to articulate spirituality, identity, and reality in our current global media context.
Lots of names crowd together. I am obliged, in the first place, to my many respondents not only for taking the time to help me collect data so that I could obtain tenable results, but for sharing their thoughts and personal concerns with no reward other than becoming anonymous partakers of an effort to enhance the understanding of a problem. I owe earnest thankfulness to Dr. Stephen Pföhl, my academic advisor and committee chairman for his careful reading, acute observations and guidance he showed me throughout my dissertation process. Thank you Dr. Zine Magubane and Dr. Eve Spangler for agreeing to serve on my committee. I received insightful comments by Dr. David Morgan, Dr. Roberto Goizueta, and Dr. Isabela Corduneadu for whose intuitions and invaluable consultantship I am most grateful. Many thanks shall also be given to Mr. Vincent Murphy who generously and dedicatedly edited my English style, and to Sammy Chong, S.J. for working out the graphic-design of the Three Lobe Model. I give heartfelt thanks to The Jesuit Conference of the United States, The Porticus Fellowships for Research in Media, Religion and Culture, and The International Commission on Media, Religion and Culture for their generosity and willingness to provide support for this experience. Lastly, I express my special feelings to all of those who supported me in any respect during the completion of the project, my mother, my Jesuit fellows, my friends. Your words of encouragement and push for tenacity still ring in my ears. My fondest gratitude.

Juan Carlos Henríquez-Mendoza
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INTRODUCTION

«When I go to the gym it’s like praying to myself»

This utterance was stated in a discussion group about the reception of a film that deals with issues about quantum physics and its implications on religion and transcendency. The group gathered three kinds of people: those who, besides having seen the picture, had been initiated and actively engaged in practices of the sort of yoga, astrology, reiki, tribal fitness, and alike forms of spirituality related to what I term –and further will elaborate– as ‘Pop-Esotericism’; those who saw and resonated with the film but were uninitiated and had no experience in such practices; and those resistant viewers who in addition to not having any pop-esoteric experience reacted adversely towards the film. The above verbatim corresponds to GABRIELA, a young middleclass Mexican woman who shared with the group the practices she has had experienced as spiritual. Her statement strikes because “going to the gym” is a secular activity that is not supposed to fit in the category of religious or spiritual practices. “Praying to myself” is an even more disturbing syntactic construction because the reflexive pronoun actually locks the action in a setting where agent and patient are the same, semantically avoiding any possible encounter with otherness, at least as an addressee of a prayer. Despite its shortness, the phrase reveals not only that media consumption is naturally related to religious/spiritual belief systems, but also that some assumed categories have been shifted and now are expressed through common people’s conversations. Out of her claim, one could predict that GABRIELA is a good example of the initiated typology; however, what really turns puzzling is that she
indeed doesn’t fit into it. Not only has she never participated in any pop-esoteric activity, but when the discussion group engaged later on in the topic of religion, she brought up again the theme of ‘prayer’ but in very different terms:

GABRIELA: umm… I guess I’m constantly kind of speaking with God.

MARCO: Got a hot-line?

GABRIELA: [laughs] Sort of! I got a hot-line because I talk with him and all this thing… besides, I have a rosary in my car, and some images my granny gave me, and I cross myself when I pass by a church.

BEATRIZ: And what do you talk about?

GABRIELA: [chuckles] Wont tell!! You nosy!

From a discourse perspective, GABRIELA’s oppositional beliefs (one with pantheistic accents and the other one aligned with traditional monotheism) seem to suggest a schizophrenic belief system. But the fact that one belief lacks for a correlative practice (she is uninitiated in Pop-Esotericism and goes to the gym only for fitness purposes) whereas the other belief is profusely endorsed by traditional religious practices, makes us wonder if GABRIELA was indeed truthful –in the sense of factual– to the group, or if hers was rather a chameleonic behavior, making up the “praying to myself” stuff and pretending she actually believed in that. Was she just playing games with the group? And if so, what kind of game was that?

As already said, the referred conversation took place while discussing a film with pop-esoteric potentialities. What features, discourses, and dynamics can be asserted about this kind of media products? How do they resonate with the belief system of their
consumers? What structure of believing is revealed in the narrative elaboration of beliefs when pop-esoteric products feed conversations? I argue that such products serve not only as rational or emotional resonant media-references, but also function as (pre)texts in the construction of ephemeral and collective conversational spaces where the belief system is exercised in two fundamental fashions. At the level of the discourse of beliefs, the initiated, the uninitiated, and the resists consider pop-esoteric propositions, pondering their plausibility as ‘ideas’. In so doing, the three typologies coincide indistinctly and join in the creation of a common Text (Gadamer 1989). Nevertheless, when those conversations are taken not as discourses of beliefs, but as believing performances, they manifest something else than a mere sharing of plausibilities, evidencing that each typology does different things during the same conversation.

On the side of the initiated and the resists, conversations are means for vividly expressing texts forged by previous beliefs-and-practices. Hence, believing is acted as expressive rehearsals of prior impressed texts. Through this performance, individuals validate the operative character of the beliefs with which they operate transcendently their everyday reality. On the side of the uninitiated, though, conversations are literal enthusiastic engagements in the creation of a space wherein the actual beliefs that operate in their everyday life are bracketed. The bracketing allows the individual to transform the conversation into a ‘playground’ and to perform therein something that is closer to a ritual practice. Believing, in this setting, is the enactment of performances and inner dispositions aimed to allow an alien text being impressed –though provisionally– on the

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1 Hans-Georg Gadamer regards a text not as a writing but rather as a “locus”, a warp through which other texts are continuously woven. (Hekman 1984)
body of the individual. This is the game GABRIELA, as many of the others *uninitiated*, plays: a ‘ritualization’ similar to the popular henna tattoos or body stickers whose appearance lasts for a short while. In doing so, she refurbishes not only her sense of self (from a mainstream-Catholic self understanding to a pop-esoteric one), but more importantly, she mutates –even if transitorily– the supposedly immovable, hypostasized platform with which one operates decisions, perceptions, and transcendental meaning-makings on daily basis; in sum, what commonly is known as the belief system.

0.1 Topic of study and statement of the problem

My dissertation examines conversations/narrations, among Mexican middle class subjects, around three movies whose content triggered for their audiences intense controversies that included topics belonging to the blurry crossroad where spirituality, science, and religion intersect. This crossroad is an underground and alternative zone that every religious tradition develops at a certain marginal layer –often disavowed by the official religious administrators– aimed to explain reality in its broad sense. This study pertains to the topic of media, spirituality, and religion, focusing on the processes performed by audiences while engaging in conversations where propositions addressed to belief systems are entertained and discussed. The primary objective of the project is to respond to research problems originally identified in previous empirical studies (referred to in the following subsections) from which I derive the research questions to be addressed in the current project. Nevertheless, before detailing the research antecedents of this work, and due to the specific socio historical frame in which my case is situated, I
offer firstly a brief demographic sketch to gauge the role that Catholicism plays in the
dominant cultural practices of Mexico.

0.1.1 A brief sketch of the role of Mexican Catholicism

It sounds commonsensical (both in Mexico and abroad) to classify Mexico as a Catholic
country par excellence, this is due to its “Guadalupano” trait. Indeed, some statistical data
would strengthen that perception. In 2000, 88% of the Mexican population declared
themselves as “Catholic”, from which 57.6% are between 5 and 29 years old and 22.1%
are between 30 and 44 years old (INEGI, 2000). It is interesting to see in Table 1 how the
percentage of Catholics has varied in the last 150 years in Mexico:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of Catholic population</td>
<td>99.1</td>
<td>99.5</td>
<td>99.2</td>
<td>97.1</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>96.5</td>
<td>96.2</td>
<td>89.7</td>
<td>88.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* From 1895 to 1970 the universe is the entire Mexican population; from 1990 to 2000 it is formed by persons aged 5 years or more. Source: INEGI 2000

Table 1. Percentage of Catholic Population, 1895-2000

Notice that the major drop in Catholic population occurs between 1970 and 1990. It is
also important to see in Table 2 that many people, although reporting themselves as
Catholic, consider that they are “Non-Practicing Catholics”. The office in charge of
raising the Census in Mexico, INEGI, does not offer this category in its questionnaires,
but there is data for the younger population (ranging from 12 to 29 years old, see Table 2)
showing that among young generations the odds of being a “Non-practicing Catholic” increase sustainably with age. This category, “Non-practicing Catholic” was also overwhelmingly reported among participants of my research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age / Declared Religion</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practicing Catholic</td>
<td>46.0 39.2 35.1 33.2</td>
<td>51.0 45.2 42.1 44.7</td>
<td>46.0 39.2 35.1 33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-practicing Catholic</td>
<td>41.2 47.0 52.0 52.6</td>
<td>36.1 40.8 45.9 42.4</td>
<td>41.2 47.0 52.0 52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12.5 13.6 12.3 13.8</td>
<td>12.6 13.7 11.7 12.6</td>
<td>12.5 13.6 12.3 13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>0.3 0.2 0.6 0.4</td>
<td>0.3 0.3 0.3 0.3</td>
<td>0.3 0.2 0.6 0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Encuesta Nacional de la Juventud, 2000

Table 2. Percentage of Practicing and Non-Practicing Catholics

For interpreting the difference between declared Catholic Practitioners and Catholic Non-Practitioners among the Catholic population, it is useful to briefly discuss the notion of *Laïcité*. Although the history of Mexico and its very constitution as a Country is founded on the strongest premises of nineteenth-century modern secularism, the dominant cultural practices have been historically marked by Catholicism. Certainly an important part of the Mexican history is characterized by struggles between two political paradigms: the religious state versus the lay state, wrongly called secular state.

Charles Taylor (2009) distinguishes two types of secularism: one that opposes the secular to the religious (as lived in the USA), and one that opposes laity to clergy, namely *Laïcité* (as lived in France or in Mexico). While the former is embraced in order to
guarantee that everyone can exercise religion, the latter is aimed to set a boundary to hegemonic church. The whole point of Laïcité against religion is to assure freedom of conscience and moral integrity, getting rid of the domination of any church. Both types of secularism are inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution, and aimed to better administrate diversity ensuring the maximum freedom (liberté), respect between different religious positions (fraternité), and the maximum input that different religions can contribute to the democratic debate (égalité). Properly speaking, in the Mexican case what has been adopted is Laïcité, rather than a secular regime.

Social anthropologist José Luís González (2007) has pointed out that what has always been at the core of the struggle in Mexico is the “delimitation of the ecclesiastical and clerical power in order to assure, on the one hand, an inclusive social space, and on the other hand to set up robust trenches to resist the clergy’s pretension of monopolistically control the religious field.” (2007, my translation) Unlike other secularist movements, Mexican laïcité was not led by antireligious leaders but precisely by lay Catholics. Definitely, concludes Gonzalez (2007), the Mexican Lay State “never had catholic people as a rival but rather the ecclesiastical apparatus, thus lay culture left untouched traditions and beliefs of popular Catholicism. If Fidel Castro is ‘santero’, why wouldn’t Peruvian and Mexican lay politicians be worshipers of ‘el Señor de los Milagros’ or ‘la Virgen de Guadalupe’?” What is important to note here is that regime definitions, such as secular state or religious state, do not necessarily reflect on the cultural realm. For example, the U.S. is officially self-defined as a secular state, although it reports more religiosity than any other secular country. In the opinion of Winnifred
Sullivan (2009) religion has been naturalized becoming the default position in political and public discourses, “the American way of being secular is being religious.”

Official representatives of the Catholic Church have stated that Mexico is experiencing a substantial shift in the religious field. They claim that since Mexico adopted neoliberalism as its economic model and entered into globalization and postmodern culture (which most chroniclers coincide in dating with the signature of The North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, in 1992), the percentage of Catholic practitioners has consistently decreased while other religious expressions, being them Christians or not, have discretely –though sustainably– emerged. Thus, the Mexican Executive Secretary of the Catholic Episcopal Commission for Interreligious Dialogue, Hilario González García, reports that although 88% of the Mexican population identify themselves as Catholics (in the U.S. 23% are Catholics), only 39% of them attend Mass at least once a month (whereas in the U.S. it is 52%), and only 2% of regular attendees are engaged in other activities at their parishes. He attributes the decrement in participation to the “process of openness and interaction with other cultures, and therefore with other patterns and experiences of the religious, which is attuned with the global tendencies that outreach all dimensions of the human life.”

A similar concern is shared by some scholars like Gilberto Hernández (2008) who considers, based on the latest census, that the monopoly of the mediation of salvation has been broken and that Mexican Catholicism is experiencing its harshest crisis.

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I certainly agree with Hernández when he observes that “Fundamental mechanisms of the relationship with the sacred used to traverse Catholic instances, but now there is the emergence of a religious diversity”. However, in my opinion, this does not necessarily imply a crisis of the Mexican Catholicism as such (understood in cultural terms), but rather reflects a crisis of the institutional Catholic Church because what is challenged is not the catholic tinting of the culture (whose separate elements still pervade most cultural forms, language, feasts, imagery, etc) but questions the exclusivity of the Church as mediator of the sacred. At the end of the day what is at stake is not the inkwell but the many quills contending to handwrite about the contemporary Mexican religious field. As sociologist of religion Hugo José Suárez reflects on the Mexican case, this is related to other crises experienced by various institutions formerly in charge of ruling the social life: political parties, the family, the school. “Such institutions are no longer the fundamental instances for giving sense and organize life. Thus, there are reconfiguring processes of both the role institutions play and the way people find ultimate meanings for their lives”.

As for the idea that the decade of 1990 is the starting point of a sort of ‘stampede’ from Catholicism toward other religious expressions, it is a suggestion that fails when confronted with available statistical data. In fact, the real shift occurred twenty years before when Catholic population abruptly dropped by 6.5 points (from 96.2% in 1970 to 89.7% in 1990). Most who abandoned Catholicism migrated to other religious

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3 Idem.
denominations (which grew 4.2 points, from 2.2% to 6.4%), whereas non-religious population grew from 1.6% in 1970 to 3.2% in 1990 (1.6 points of increment). Nevertheless, since 1990 the religious distribution shows a more stable behavior: Catholic population maintains a slight slope of 1.7 points, decreasing from 89.7% in 1990 to 88% in 2000, almost corresponding to the increment (1.2%) other religious denominations had (which grew from 6.4% in 1990 to 7.6% in 2000). Interestingly, the percentage of non-religious population stayed virtually unvaried since 1990 (3.2% in 1990 and 3.5 in 2000) which is highly contrasting with the US case, which grew from 8% to 14% in the same period (estimation for 2009 is 15-17%)5

The relatively low mobility in religious distribution in these years is striking if we consider that it was precisely in the decade of 1990 when the boom of the spiritual marketplace started in Mexico. For example, the oldest store in Mexico City, “Todos los Angeles” –currently a franchise-chain specialized in alternative spiritual/religious commodities– was opened as recently as 1996; and “Casa Tibet”, an organization devoted to divulge Buddhist spirituality, was established in July 1989. This seems to suggest that religious affiliation in Mexico –seen as a social tag for stating one’s identity– may not be altered by incursions that individuals do in alternative spiritual/religious practices, or at least that such incursions have no significant impact on statistical data.

Mexican Catholics have this historical background of proficiency in re-elaborating what the hierarchical Church enacts as doctrine, making complex ‘syncretistic cocktails’ without any distress or feeling of any contradiction, anguish or

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5 Source: American Religious Identification Survey.
guilt. Most post-colonial theologians trace this feature back to colonial times, when indigenous spirituality and sacred sensibilities (organized in highly sophisticated polytheistic systems) clashed against Tridentine Mediterranean Catholicism, developing complex strategies of resistance. The style of current Mexican Catholicism is certainly shaded by remnants of such historical negotiations in ways that make it distinct from both European and U.S. forms of Catholicism. This is a relevant hypothesis to keep in mind for my research, as it seems that people can engage in different or alternative spiritual or religious practices without leaving or at least without feeling in conflict with their primary religious affiliation.

0.1.2 Research antecedents: exploratory and descriptive previous studies

A first stage of my research was conducted in the fall of 2005. It consisted in an Exploratory Study on the reception of the film What the bleep do we (k)now!? (USA 2004). Its main research question was: what do middle-class Catholics of Mexico City think and talk about their experience of seeing the film. I identified two typologies of consumers: the initiated and the uninitiated. The initiated were those viewers who reported having experienced practices associated with the contents proposed in the film which they describe as “spiritual”. The uninitiated were those who although having seen and liked the film had no experience in such practices. Additionally, the findings of this first stage allowed me to draw a preliminary description of different and specific

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6 The Exploratory Study included four discussions groups, two semi-structured interviews, and two participant observations -one in a cinema theater and another one during a DVD screening of the movie. The population was middle-class inhabitants of Mexico City, both genders, aged 22 to 40 years old.
discourses on religion, spirituality, science, and the discursive strategies with which audiences justify (legitimize) those interwoven fields.

Based on these findings, I conducted the second stage of the study during the first semester of 2006. It was a Descriptive Study\(^7\) based on qualitative methodology focusing on the way film audiences recall, interpret, and use media consumptions in regard to their religious beliefs. I resorted to the same film example to explore how do religion, spirituality, and science discourses relate to the audience’s religious/spiritual\(^8\) beliefs and practices. The subjects who participated in that study were inhabitants of Mexico City, both genders, aged from 18 to 50 years old, with access to higher education.

Outcomes of the 2006 research led me to discover that similar intertwined discourses on religion, spirituality, and science were also found in the consumption of other products and practices people experienced before (e.g. self improvement books, TV shows, films, music, and an assorted collection of activities like jogging, practicing yoga, reiki, different kinds of fitness, and so on and so forth). I concluded that the triad Religion-Spirituality-Science forms a unit that people are able to find in several pop cultural products. In describing its features I suggested that this discursive unit might be constituting a religious-consumption category which I called ‘Pop-Esotericism’. Further studies should elucidate this concept by including more case-studies of similar media products.

\(^7\) The 2006 Descriptive Study was conducted in a Mexican Catholic university, Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México, whose policies for the protection of human subjects are closely aligned with the overall criteria and polices of the IRB in the United States. The findings were published as my Thesis to obtain the degree of Master in Communications at the same university.

\(^8\) I do not use the terms “religion” and “spirituality” in an interchangeable manner; as this study analyses, they are two separate though related notions.
The Descriptive Study also provided other important findings. The first one consists in the empirical evidence that people use their media experiences as primary language to narrate and validate their own religious/spiritual beliefs and practices. Additionally, I found that both beliefs and practices are organized on various levels. Firstly, there are those beliefs and practices organized in, and managed by, institutionalized belief systems to which individuals were *inscribed* (usually by their parents or by other actors of the primary socializing circle, for example traditional Catholicism). Secondly, there are those beliefs and practices –also organized as belief systems– that individuals adopt and adapt from the cultural context they are *ascribed* to (i.e. secondary socializing circles, media references, or cultural trends). This second level has two variations: in one variation subjects perform colonizing processes on both belief sources, thus constructing syncretistic belief systems by fusing chosen elements from the *inscribed* and the *ascribed* systems. Less common is the second variation wherein subjects consider both sources as orthogonal, hence distancing themselves either from the traditional *inscribed* source or from the offers of the *ascribed* source in order to keep preserved and uncontaminated their actual belief system.

In this stage of the research, epistemological assumptions rooted in phenomenology and structuralism are shown to be adequate for explaining this twofold manifestation of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, such framework turned out to be limited in explaining a third level that appears characterized by opposition and apparent inconsistency: though scatteredly, I found pop-esoteric consumers who seemed to be inhabiting different belief systems at the same time, apparently without making a
syncretistic construction. The example that opens this Introduction illustrates quite clearly this case. Gabriela stresses two oppositional systems of belief (the pantheistic “praying to myself” and the monotheist “I’m constantly kind of speaking with God”) suggesting an apparent discrepancy between what she claims are her beliefs and what she actually believes.

There are pop-esoteric consumers for whom embracing different belief systems (pantheism and monotheism, for example) means no cognitive dissonance but something that coexists and untroubledly concurs in their narration. This opposition with cognitive dissonance suggests something like compartmentalization or (schizoid-like) dissociation on the part of the believer, and raises the suspicion that subjects –within a context of a given social interaction such as a focus group– may well be fictionalizing in the narration of their beliefs rather than being factual. It also sets forth the idea of an existent complex performance-based dynamic that is inherent in both the act of believe and the act of socializing our believing.

The previous considerations advance further questions. Is this dynamic indicating a feature of contemporary belief systems that is set in operation when individuals entertain certain propositions, such as those contained in media products with pop-esoteric potentialities? What would that reveal about the system with which we construct transcendental meanings not only for hypostasizing our surrounding reality but also for our own subjectivity?
0.1.3 Statement of purpose / The current stage: Explanatory Study

To attain an explanatory level for the above questions, it is clear that a third stage of the research has to be conducted, one that would restate the problem from different epistemological assumptions, exploring beyond phenomenological and structuralist premises that conceive ‘believing’ as a conscious experience-based action following a centered-driven structure. On the one hand, the new research design should foresee a method that would grant us access to conversations not only at the mere level of the discourses on beliefs (what people think and utter about their beliefs and media consumptions) but also at its performative level (the particular ways with which people represent themselves for another people within the narratives of their beliefs and media experiences) taking into account that all narratives are performed in a social interactive space. On the other hand, the research should deepen the study of the phenomenon by including other case studies of the reception of similar media products, as well as widening the methodological and analytical tools.

Therefore, my dissertation proposes a third and last stage of my research, consisting in an Explanatory Research Study aimed to uncover and understand the structure of believing that is revealed in the narrative elaboration of beliefs. This narrative is performed while talking about the experience of consuming media products with pop-esoteric potentialities⁹. The leading research question, hence, is formulated in terms of how is subjectivity constructed and exerted in the narration/performance of believing,

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⁹ It is important to underline that these products, although having the potentiality, are not pop-esoteric per se; the audience makes them to be that, as I explain in a forthcoming chapter.
when media consumptions related to spirituality or transcendency are used as inputs for conversation. To answer this question, my study investigates the dynamics displayed during conversations where beliefs are discussed apropos media consumptions related to religion and transcendency. My approach departs from the sociology of spirituality perspective, and draws on some insights developed by ritual studies, sociology of religion, social psychoanalysis, consumer studies, and visual studies.

It is important to mention that this is not a film reception study, even though it will use films that deal with issues related to religion and transcendency as stimuli for triggering discussions. I have chosen three blockbuster films that, at the time of their screening in Mexican theaters, made part of people’s cultural agenda, and proved to be highly controversial among their audiences because of the way they treat religious matters. The films were withdrawn from the theaters three years ago, a fact that benefits this research in two manners. Firstly, because the time-span prevents participants from being influenced by the immediacy of the reception, but instead facilitates recalling of scenes that function as pivots for anchoring their own comments about religion and spirituality. Secondly, because it allows us to observe how participants reconstruct their media consumptions without the load media-gatekeepers often put on audiences during the screen period (e.g. influential film critiques, marketing efforts, trailers, advertising strategies, etc). The three selected motion pictures are: *What The Bleep do We (k)now!* (USA 2004), *The Da Vinci Code* (USA 2006), and *The Passion of the Christ* (USA 2004)\(^{10}\). The first and the last ones are the other’s side of the coin, because one is

\(^{10}\) I offer a synopsis for each film in Part One.
representing respectively an openly pop-esoteric proposal while the other has a traditional Catholic approach. The second one bridges both poles by dealing with traditional Catholic topics with embedded pop-esoteric premises.

0.2 Significance of the study

If the contemporary social project is totally identified with the individual’s project for constructing the ‘autonomous self’ and ‘identity’ (Giddens 1991), that endeavor implicitly carries on a redrawing of both the self and the otherness. The privileged site in which such redrawing takes pace is ‘narration’. Our narratives actually form our self-identities insofar, as J. Mitchell (2003:339) suggests, “the formation of moral identity presupposes a ‘narrative understanding’ of our lives [and from this perspective,] the creation of self-identity as a ‘coherent phenomenon presumes a narrative’”. For social sciences, media studies and other disciplines, it is crucial to understand those narrative practices by which individuals perform their identity project and reality construction. In the current global context, such practices converge with consumption, transformation, and social circulation performed in the mediasphere. It is in the media context where certain products come across with particular aesthetic and content proposals that seem to stimulate the search for transcendental meaning in their audiences, nourishing what Vries (2001:3) calls “the return of the religious” in postmodern generations.

The new global configuration has posed a new condition on human cohabitation: the necessary ability to ensure the survival of the diverse, contrasting and sometimes
contradictory worldviews and belief systems that meet at the same space (the social space, the cultural space, or even the intra-personal space). Living in a multi belief system world demands a good understanding of the tensions, dynamics, strategies, and possibilities of the beliefs. Therefore, the central significance of my dissertation is its potentiality to advance the understanding of how contemporary individuals develop strategies to articulate their subjectivity in terms of spirituality, identity and representations of reality, including social reality. This understanding will be articulated as a theory of belief systems, revising the current theoretical trends on the topic and proposing, based on socially situated data, a new explanation of the contemporary structure of believing. All empirical data that I use for constructing this theory comes from the analysis of the interactions with three media products that propitiate discussions on spirituality and religion, together with considerations on identity and meaning construction.

0.3 Structure

The body of this dissertation is structured in three parts, each comprised of different chapters. Preceding it, I present a Method chapter detailing all procedures followed for both the fieldwork and the film analysis. The Conclusion chapter at the end of the dissertation, besides summing up the main findings of the research, advances a discussion on spiritual agency in late-modern times as well as a meditation on its political implications.
Part One is on Film Analysis. The overall purpose is to frame the films object of my study as cultural instigators of spiritual/religious conversations, and to uncover the elements in them that made meaning for my subjects. It opens with a *preamble* to present explicitly some basic categories on film industry, film narrative, and psychoanalytic film criticism. Three chapters follow –each devoted to one film– with the double purpose of framing the films as part of the global repertoire of pop cultural references and to establish the hermeneutic connections audiences made during their interpretative process. Drawing on psychoanalytic frameworks and on a mixed film and reception analysis we will detect the potential proposals in the films for constructing subjectivity and ascertain the way audiences resonate to create senses of spirituality and self-identity for themselves. This part concludes with a *Cross Interpretation* chapter that reflects on the content implications and features found in contemporary pop cultural consumption with spiritual ends. I argue that these common features form a basic discursive line that I term ‘Pop-Esotericism’, a concept that I develop in Part Two.

Part Two builds up the concept of Pop-Esotericism. Mainstream products from the cultural industry act as spiritual or religious inputs awakening senses of spirituality and self-identity for some part of the audience. This part explores one type of consumption with spiritual ends and usages, namely ‘Pop-Esotericism’. In separate chapters, I will firstly approach media and spiritual consumption reflecting on the processes of sacralization and re-enchantment that help consumers to emancipate spiritual and religious motifs from the public-institutional sphere. Secondly, I will elaborate the concept of ‘Pop-Esotericism’, tracking its cultural antecedents and establishing its basic
discursive trait. The part also situates Pop-Esotericism within both a multi-nodal global media network of consumption and the lives of the individuals with whom I converse. It demonstrates the power of media in providing a means for people to get in contact with symbolic systems of meaning and, thereby, produce identities for themselves. Products with pop-esoteric potentialities appeal to matters directly concerned with people’s ultimate meaning-making processes, known as ‘transcendent beliefs’. Such constructions are organized in systems, belief systems that intervene in the way people operate and conduct their everyday reality. However, traditional understandings of belief systems result insufficiently to give full account on the pop-esoteric phenomenon and on overall contemporary belief systems, as Part Three will demonstrate.

Part Three dissertates on Belief Systems and concentrates what is intended to be my original contribution to the field. The work is presented in two chapters: one chapter reviews and opens a theoretical meditation about different sociological perspectives approaching belief systems. From the Weberian influenced traditions that prevailed the thought on beliefs for most part of the twentieth century, to the turn introduced by poststructuralist epistemologies, and the more recent sociological frameworks that regard beliefs as belonging to a logic that surpasses consciousness, language, and empiricism. The other chapter ventures to sketch an alternative theoretical model aimed to make a better sense of how subjectivity is constructed and exerted in the narration/performance of believing when media related to spirituality or transcendence are used as inputs for conversation. Grounding my analytic claims in the voices of those who participated in my study, I make the basic distinction between the belief and the believing, the operative and
the operational, proposing a model that integrates both dynamics in what I call the Theory of the Operational Belief System. There are generative performances individuals enact (awarely or unawarely) to create senses of spirituality that forge subjectivity. During such ritualizing performances reality is playfully bracketed to propitiate ephemeral eruptions of conjuring spells through which alien texts, like Pop-Esotericism, get impressed and inform subjectivity.
1.1. Research Questions

My research examines how and to what extent conversations held among audiences of films related to belief systems intervene in the construction of subjectivity and operability, and what structure of believing can be inferred from the narrative elaboration of beliefs. I examine the structure of believing that can be inferred from the narrative elaboration of beliefs exerted in social conversations held by film audiences. The goal is to determine how middle-class Catholics of Mexico City with access to higher education use films as inputs for discussing topics related to religious beliefs and spirituality. The main research question is: How is subjectivity constructed and exerted in the narration/performance of believing, when media consumptions related to spirituality or transcendency are used as inputs for conversation?\(^{11}\)

Additionally, I formulate the following associated questions that will be answered throughout the research:

1. How do believers deal with oppositional beliefs, coming from different systems and sources such as pop-esoteric ascriptions and inscribed traditional Catholicism?

\(^{11}\) i.e. being engaged in a conversation with others through spoken exchanges of thoughts, ideas, and feelings apropos a certain matter.
2. What dynamics are set in operation and how are they deployed when subjects get engaged in social conversations entertaining belief propositions, such as those contained in media products with pop-esoteric potentialities?

3. Which are the main concerns and topics that give contents and momentum to these conversational performances?

4. How individuals construct transcendental meanings for hypostasizing their surrounding reality and their own subjectivity while sustaining conversational performances related to the realms of religion, spirituality, and transcedency?

Implicit in these questions is the premise that believing is exerted in the form of narratives one is exposed to and also elaborates within a social interaction frame, and that consuming and elaborating narratives related to spirituality or transcedency affects how one constructs subjectivity. In other words: that approaching belief narratives exerted through social conversations helps to understand how individuals apply their media consumptions to their own personal constructions of the self and otherness.

1.2. Design Rationale

To elucidate the above questions, I have developed an Explanatory Research Study intended to attain grounded knowledge on the phenomenon of media-based conversations related to the belief system. The study thematically analyzes multiple conversations among Mexican middle-class Catholics, about the films *What the Bleep Do We (k)now!*,
The Da Vinci Code and The Passion of Christ. In this sense, this type of design is quasi-experimental insofar it is controlled and conditioned by the exposure to these three films.

Besides having seen the stimuli, the independent variables are those descriptors foreseen in the demographic filtering applied in the recruitment stage in the terms further detailed. The foreknown breaking variables are the three typologies (Initiated, Uninitiated, and Resistants) found in the previous exploratory and descriptive stages, and which correspond to how participants are familiarized with and react in front of products and practices linked to Pop-Esotericism.

1.2.1. Methodology

This dissertation is based on a qualitative methodology for it allows the inquiry of lived experience of phenomena. My research is oriented to explore the performance of deconstructions and reconstructions of subjectivity while discussing films with pop-esoteric potentialities that connect with audiences’ belief systems. This dynamism was captured through conversations where narration processes are exposed. In order to facilitate the access to both conversations and belief systems, I adopted an ethnomethodology approach.12

Ethnomethodology suggests methods where natural setting, discourse, and interaction can be observed. Due to the characteristics of my study, I chose the less

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12 Reginald Clifford (1998:393), commenting on Schütz’ concept of *lebenswelt*, states that “Ethnomethodology assumes that social knowledge is inherently unstable: something that is re-worked or re-created as new in each encounter”. 
intrusive methods from the repertoire of this tradition. Therefore, methods in which social
circulation is expressed through conversation among participants, such as discussion
groups and focus groups, were privileged. In spite of the fact that such methods don’t
exhibit totally naturalistic conversations and settings, they in turn ensure discourses and
interactions addressing the common experience of having consumed the media products
of my interest.

1.2.2. Population and setting

The subjects considered for this research are both male and female middle and upper-
middle class inhabitants of Mexico City, ranging from 18 to 60 years old. This
demographic filtering targets those who have or have had access to higher education
(undergraduate to upper levels), are acquainted with mainstream pop cultural media
references, and have a minimal Catholic background (asking them if they were baptized
as Catholics and if there are any Catholic practitioners in their families). Since this study
inquires into the reception of cultural references related to religion/spirituality in a
context of contemporary global culture, Mexico City is a suitable setting due to its global
cultural offering and its dominant Catholic culture (88% of the population has Catholic
backgrounds).

Income levels were not considered factors *per se* because this particular media
consumption is rooted in social experiences more linked to educational level rather than
to economic capital. Certainly, as Bourdieu (1984) argued, beneath this sort of cultural
consumption lies tastes, reflecting class interests and reaching a state of *naturalness* to those who share them. Tastes are shaped by our experiences as members of a particular cultural group, reinforced by social exchanges, and rationalized through encounters with institutions, such as higher education, that reward our commitment to them. In this sense, tastes become “important means by which social distinctions are maintained and class identities are forged” (Jenkins 1992:16). However, as Redden (2002:45) has documented, consumption of products related to new religiosities and spiritual movements has significant correlation with educational level rather than income level\(^{13}\). Yet Hofstede (1997:15-7) indicates that core cultural dimensions tend to be independent of localized social variation and stratification in sub-groupings as religion, generation, gender, and social class. Due to the fact that in Mexico access to higher education coincides with middle and upper-middle class, the Socio Economic and Class Level for the study include these two classes\(^{14}\). A forthcoming section in this chapter presents the demographic descriptives of the researched subjects.

1.3. Data Collection Methods\(^{15}\)

I resorted to a multi-method strategy of inquiry to collect two kinds of narrations: group narrations (reached through group methods such as discussion groups and focus groups)

\(^{13}\) “A study of 908 British New Agers revealed that a high number of them had low incomes despite being middle class by profession and education” (Redden 2002:45)

\(^{14}\) Corresponding to A, B, C+ levels in the Mexican socio economic scale, elaborated by Asociación Mexicana de Agencias de Investigación de Mercado y Opinióin Pública, A.C. (AMAI)

\(^{15}\) This section describes the data collection methods. Additional supplementary documentation for the qualitative data gathering—such as demographic forms, consent and disclosure agreements, protocol scripts and questionnaires— are attached as appendixes A and B.
and one-on-one narrations (captured in semi-structured interviews). On the one hand, group methods are adequate for revealing social interactions sustained among homogenous group-gatherings wherein narratives about common experiences and topics are negotiated in collective processes. On the other hand, one-on-one semi-structured interviews allow informants to deepen their experiences through evocative and associative elaborations in a conversational space. Since narration in these data collection methods is expressed through direct social conversations, they are all methodologically adequate to answer the main and associated questions of my study. In addition to collecting sociological data from the field, and being a study whose participants are required to discuss specific media products, my study includes a grounded formal film analysis of selected scenes singled out by participants of my study, in the terms I describe afterwards in the analysis section.

1.3.1. Overall procedures

Data collection methods were conducted over a period of ten months, starting in July 2009: thirteen discussion groups, fourteen focus groups, and twenty three one-on-one semi-structured interviews.

*Recruitment stage*

Participants were selected using a variation of the snowball recruitment method. This method ensures that participants share economic, cultural, and social characteristics; moreover, peer sampling is particularly important in creating a comfortable atmosphere
for participants. I started to construct the sampling by contacting some of those informants who participated in my previous studies\textsuperscript{16}. I informed them in simple language the current stage of my research and my interest in enquiring into the reception of the abovementioned three films. I encouraged them to invite 6-8 other friends (meeting both the education level and the cultural/media background foreseen for this study) to contact me if interested in participating in the present study. In other words, former informants became ‘snowballers’ or volunteer recruiters among their peers, who in turn started an ongoing personal networking for this research.

Approximately 200 candidates responded to the call. In a first personal meeting I asked them to fill a demographic filtering form which inquired about their media consumption habits, educational level, religious affiliation, among other demographic data. This step was aimed to filter the independent variables (access to global media/cultural references, access to higher education, and religious membership) and to select a group of people balanced in range of age and gender composition.

Those who accepted to be part of the study were provided with the Informed Consent documentation and with a DVD copy of the films. The copies were sub-titled in Spanish as they were screened in cinema theaters. Informants were requested to watch the films within the next two weeks. After that period the copies were retrieved and the date of the session was scheduled, making sure that the date was at least two weeks after the films were watched. As my interest is working with memory reminiscences of the

\textsuperscript{16} Informants of the 2006 study were asked at the end of their participation to give feedback on the experience and to verbally express if they would be interested in eventually taking part in further similar research studies.
experience, this time-span was carefully observed. It is important to notice that the three films were withdrawn from the box office some time ago; therefore, the time-span between the public exhibition in cinema theaters and the time when the methods were applied is relevant insofar as it granted a twofold benefit: firstly, it helped to prevent participants from being too much attached to the many anecdotal details of the films, instead being able to bring into memory only the most top-minded scenes as pivots for anchoring their own commentaries. Secondly, it allowed participants to reconstruct their media consumptions without the load and bias that media gatekeepers often put on audiences during the screen period (e.g. influential film critiques).

Basic protocols

From the time of the recruitment stage, candidates were ensured complete confidentiality and notified: a) that their statements would be tape-recorded and quoted only under pseudonyms, b) that they may withdraw themselves from the study at any stage of it, as well as skip questions they do not want to answer, and c) that no economic stipend would be offered for their participation, though snacks and refreshments would be provided during the sessions, as it is customary for such types of participations in Mexico. (see details of the Informed Consent procedure in Appendix A)

All sessions were conducted in Mexico City. The interviews took place in the location of the participant’s choice. Group methods took place in indoor facilities either in participants’ places if they volunteered to host, or in facilities I provided. Some sessions were conducted in a one-way-mirror room (Gesell Dome); when this type of
facility was used participants were informed that I was observing through the other side of the mirror. Applied methods were tape-recorded, transcribed, de-identified, and coded for analysis. The average time per session was two hours. In compliance with IRB\textsuperscript{17} procedures, participants were asked to read, fill out, and sign an Informed Consent Form.

Data collection tools

I utilized scripts and question guides for the different focus and discussion groups; that is: groups focusing on or discussing separately the three films, groups focusing on or discussing jointly the three films, and groups contrasting \textit{The Passion of the Christ} with \textit{The Da Vinci Code}. As for the one-on-one semi-structured interviews commenting separately each of the three films, and contrasting \textit{The Passion of the Christ} with \textit{The Da Vinci Code}, I followed specific question guides. All these tools are in the Appendix B.

The logic behind this methodological division is the need of detecting possible contaminating effects, or qualitative variances of the codes, between groups focusing on one single film and groups focusing on the three films jointly. It may happen that a position taken apropos a certain film would contradict or influence that taken when other films are discussed. I will report if such a bias occurs and try to make sense of it. The reason for contrasting \textit{The Passion of the Christ} with \textit{The Da Vinci Code} is that both films deal with the same explicitly religious theme but from obvious opposed perspectives.

\textsuperscript{17} Boston College Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research.
1.3.2. Applied methods

The multi-method strategy of inquiry foresaw the following data collection methods: discussion groups, focus groups and one-on-one semi-structured interviews. I firstly conducted the discussion-group sessions. The focus-group sessions were then organized once the main topics of discussion were mapped out from the discussion groups, thus allowing the construction of a more structured questionnaire. Those subjects whose participation singled out from the session-groups were invited to be part of the one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Below I present a description of the procedures that were followed for each method.

**Discussion Groups**

Participants gathered in groups of approximately five, each group homogenous in range of age. Gender composition combined mix groups, preponderantly male groups and preponderantly female groups. They were asked to form a rounded distribution. As moderator, I stayed physically absent during the session, only entering the room to explain the overall procedures and to pose the next issue to be discussed when long silences indicated saturation or on explicit request of the participants. Participants were asked to discuss with no limits of time a set of questions corresponding to the list of topics displayed in Table 3.

There were three types of discussion groups, each one employed a different script version. One type discussed the films separately (one film per session), another type discussed jointly the three films in a single session, and a third type of discussion groups
contrasted *The Passion of the Christ* with *The Da Vinci Code*. I present in Appendix B.1 a comprehensive table deploying the List of Topics with correspondent Formulated Questions for each of the three types of discussion groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Topics</th>
<th>List of Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Antecedents of the exposure to the stimulus.</td>
<td>Please introduce yourselves to the group and tell a little bit about your ‘seeing the film’, as how many times you saw it, if you remember why you did see it, with whom, and when was the last time you saw the film?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Opinion about the film.</td>
<td>Now you are asked to tell us how you find the film, and also the opinions that you remember having heard about the film.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Elements of the film participants agree and disagree with.</td>
<td>Share those ideas, themes, scenes, characters of the film that you agree with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Were there any ideas, themes, scenes, or characters that you somehow liked less? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Credibility about the proposals in the film</td>
<td>Which are the things in the film you find credible and which are non-credible? Explain why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Feelings during the exposure to the stimulus.</td>
<td>Share to the group the feelings or sensations you remember having experienced when you saw the film. Do those feelings resemble other activities, things you have done or experienced before?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Associated media and consumptions.</td>
<td>To what other stuff like films, music, books, Tv shows, magazines, etcetera do you think this picture looks like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Opinions about religion, practice and spirituality.</td>
<td>What would make someone be a religious person, what is it to be a practitioner and what is it to be a spiritual person? Is there any distinction among these three types of persons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Self identification with the film.</td>
<td>Finally, what would you say is the main proposal and purpose of the film? Do you buy it or not? Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Topics for Discussion Groups, discussing separately the films
Focus Groups

These groups were comprised of approximately 5 participants homogenous in range of age. Gender composition combined mix groups, preponderantly male groups, and preponderantly female groups. Participants formed a round distribution and I, as the moderator, took part in the circle and stayed there during the session. After explaining the overall procedures to the group, I applied the questionnaire ensuring participation of all informants. Additionally, I expanded on: 1) opinion about religion, spirituality and science, and 2) opinion about specific issues presented in each film, according to the list of selected themes shown in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What the Bleep...</th>
<th>The Da Vinci Code</th>
<th>The Passion of the Christ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Thoughts modify your body</td>
<td>a) Jesus was married and had descendents.</td>
<td>a) Jesus’ suffering is a token for our salvation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Thoughts modify external reality, external matter.</td>
<td>b) The Church has been hiding secrets.</td>
<td>b) Evil in this world is due to the devil’s work and inspiration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Emotions are addictive.</td>
<td>c) Secret societies, like the Priory of Sion, preserve the truth.</td>
<td>c) Seeing Jesus’ Passion helps to enhance the faith.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) I create my day</td>
<td>d) The role of women in the Church. How is woman represented in the film?</td>
<td>d) Why and who killed Jesus?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) What do you think about the way the issue on religion is treated in the film?</td>
<td>e) What do you think about the way the issue on religion is treated in the film?</td>
<td>e) What do you think about the way the issue on religion is treated in the film?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f) What can you tell about God?</td>
<td>f) Why a character like Robert Langdon was deemed appropriate to solve the mystery?</td>
<td>f) What can you tell about God?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g) Opinion about Quantum Physics?</td>
<td>g)</td>
<td>g) Comment about the historic accuracy of the film.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Topics for Focus Groups
As in the case of discussion groups, there were three types of focus groups, each following a specific version of the script. A comprehensive table with correspondent Formulated Questions for each type of Focus Groups is presented in Appendix B.2. One type focused on the films separately (one film per session), another type focused jointly on the three films, and a third type of focus groups contrasted *The Passion of the Christ* with *The Da Vinci Code*.

*Semi-structured Interviews*

Candidates for this method were chosen out of the previously applied methods depending on how outstanding were their participations therein, if they spontaneously showed interest or excitement while discussing the films, or if the informant had some biographical peculiarity. I tried to balance age, gender, and main activity (professional or student). The one-on-one, open-ended interviews were aimed to deepen the interviewees’ responses on the following issues: positive or negative feelings about the films, opinion about specific themes they identified, opinion about religion, spirituality and science. I conducted two types of interviews: one inquiring into just one single film and the other one asking participants to comment about *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Da Vinci Code*.

In order to favor the engaging of personal responses I tried to keep an “evocative” tone within the interviews. Scripts and instructions for application for both types of semi-structured interviews –specifying customized questions for each film– are presented in Appendix B.3 and B.4. Both types of interviews covered the following list of topics:
List of Topics

1. Antecedents of the exposure to the stimulus.
2. Opinion about the picture.
3. Ideas, themes, scenes, characters of the film interviewees agree and disagree with.
5. Feelings and sensations experienced during the exposure to the stimulus.
6. Associated media products and practices.
7. Opinion and related practices about religion, science and spirituality
8. Opinion about science and religion.

Table 5. Topics for Semi-structured Interviews

1.4. Analytic Approach

1.4.1. Data analysis

This study embraces an open coding analytical approach derived from Strauss and Corbin’s proposal to generate grounded theory. Sociologists Strauss and Corbin (1990) proposed an approach for looking systematically at qualitative data aiming at the generation of theory. They suggest four stages of analysis in the process of conducting research. The first stage consists in identifying the Codes that allow the ‘key points’ of the data to be gathered. The second stage groups collections of similar codes to construct Concepts. In the third stage broad groups of similar concepts configure Categories. Finally, the fourth stage consists in developing a series of explanations to generate a Theory. The aim of this approach is to conceptualize from empirical data. In this sense,
researchers avoid having preformed hypotheses, but instead develop ‘reverse engineered hypotheses’, which means to retrospectively formulate new hypotheses to best fit data. Therefore, the researcher goes back and forth while comparing data, constantly modifying, and sharpening the growing theory along the different steps of the research. The research principle is an abductive, as contrasted with deductive/inductive reasoning\textsuperscript{18}. Therefore, data collection, data analysis, and theory development are not treated as distinct and disjunct, but as steps to be repeated until the researcher finds saturation and can explain the phenomenon that is to be investigated.

Consequently, data analysis for my dissertation involved the following steps:

a) Once transcribed, participant’s name and identifiers were de-identified, substituting the actual data in the transcripts with codes. De-identified transcriptions of applied methods were then entered and organized for analysis with qualitative analysis software (\textit{NVivo}).

b) Applied methods were separately submitted to an open coding process forming a common grid map. Special attention was paid in conserving at every moment the accurate utterances of informants, keeping the analysis decisively inductive and avoiding the rush of theorizing the meanings of the informant’s experience until the interpretive stage (Álvarez-Gayou 2003:42) The data was firstly organized according

\textsuperscript{18} Also known as “inference to the best explanation”. This method of reasoning was thoroughly explored by Charles Peirce, who suggested that new knowledge is only created by abductive inferences by which the knower chooses the hypothesis that would, if true, best explain an observation. Abductive reasoning, hence, does not always lead to correct results, however it is a useful heuristic resource to generate conjectures made on the basis of sufficient similarity. In social sciences, the abductive method is commonly seen as a “third way” to overcome epistemological shortcomings of the inductive and deductive methods, particularly by some versions of reflexivity. Cf. Jensen 2002.
to the following initial free-codes derived from the applied scripts: 1) exposure context (when, how and with whom was the film seen), 2) Perception (emotive, rational and aesthetic levels), 3) Effects on the audience (instrumental, mimetic, emotive), 4) elements in agreement and disagreement, 5) associated products and practices, 6) recalled scenes and identified theses, 7) Discourses (science, spirituality, religion, self improvement). Eventually the abovementioned free-codes evolved as tree-codes to establish Codes for the next step.

c) The Codes were then submitted to a general triangulation process in which similar codes were revisited in an iterative process, aimed to cluster and recode them into Concepts.

d) Concepts were revised and contrasted with the literature concatenated for my study in order to configure similar concepts into Categories, which served as the basis of interpretation. Out of the categories, and in constant relation with my theoretical framework, I modeled diagrams to generate theoretical explanations of my findings.

1.4.2. Formal film analysis

In addition to collecting sociological data from the field, and this being a study whose participants are required to discuss specific media products, my work also includes a formal film analysis of selected scenes of each film. This design foresees a formal film analysis backed up by data collected from the viewers, from whom I pick the scenes to be analyzed as well as the codes to be considered in such analysis. The working hypothesis
is that top-of-mind scenes\textsuperscript{19} condense the hermeneutic guideline audiences use to interpret the whole product. To elaborate the psychoanalytic criticism of the films, I developed the following three steps:

a) Firstly, I selected a scene from each film. The selected ‘key scenes’ were the most salient scenes, those meeting the twofold condition of being recalled by my informants and being commented and discussed by them in a spontaneous way (without been asked for). The aim of this step is to ‘abduct’, out of people’s commentaries, the experience they had and the meaning they draw from the scenes they have singled out. I then constructed codes of such interpretation to guide the second step.

b) Secondly, I proceeded with the formal film analysis, covering two moments:

1) The \textit{Descriptive Moment}, which consists of writing down a detailed description of the ‘key scene’, and in ‘phenomenically loading’ it with the interpretive codes my informants found and used in their meaning-making of the films. In this sense, this moment is not intended to be an “objective” or “aseptic” interpretation, rather the contrary: its aim is to load the selected scene with the interpretive codes in order to make it a basis for the next moment.

2) The \textit{Analytical Moment} consists in identifying, for each selected scene, the narrative \textit{diegetic} and \textit{non-diegetic} components (concepts that I explain in Part

\textsuperscript{19} That is: scenes recalled and identified by viewers as hallmarks of the films.
One), as well as stylistic and formal aspects (such as mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing and sound) that organically inform and give consistency to the system of meaning made by the viewers. The guiding question of this moment can simply be posed as ‘what is inbuilt in this scene, at the narrative, stylistic, and formal levels, that made it possible to be interpreted the way my informants did?’ The assumption is that upon and through this system, audiences perform their meaning makings that are further used in both their interactions (social conversation) and cognitive approaches towards reality.

c) Finally, I render a Cross Interpretation of the analyzed scenes, consisting in pointing out and interpreting commonalities and differences among them. Scenes recalled by the audience are often those in which the dynamic, motifs and main patterns of the whole film are condensed, akin to iterations rehearsed in fractal images. In this sense, separate scenes might be taken as proxies for the whole of films they belong to.

1.5. Demographic Descriptives of the Researched Subjects

The ‘snowball’ recruitment technique produced 200 candidates showing interest in participating in this study. After filtering the independent variables, I selected 150 subjects, ranging 18 to 70 years old, who agreed to be part of the research: 74 males  

---

20 Mathematician Benoît B. Mandelbrot coined this term in 1975. He claimed that a fractal is an irregular shape with the property of ‘self-similarity’ in simple and recursive definition, which means that it can be split into parts, each of which is a reduced-size copy of the whole.
(49.3%) and 76 females (50.7%). The average age of participants was 31.7 years. Although all ranges of age were covered, the majority of the participants (29.3%) were between 23 and 27 years old (see Table 6). The relatively young age of the participants is attributed, on the one hand, to the fact that the study relied on networks produced by the ‘snowballers’ (mostly comprised of young people). But on the other hand, it also reflects how individuals of younger generations are more eager to participate in conversations that involve topics related to spirituality and media.

Evidently, the educational level corresponds to the age-composition of participants; in consequence there is a prevalence of active students: 47.9% of participants are undergrad students (plus 2.8% of graduate students and 4.9% who completed high-school and are

\[ \text{sd}=12.49; \text{ min } 18, \text{ max } 70 \]
about to start college), while the rest of the research subjects hold either a licensure degree, a masters degree, or a doctoral degree. In general terms, my informants are well educated subjects with access to higher education, in equal conditions for both males and females (see crosstabulation of gender and educational level in Table 7). They all belong to middle and upper-middle classes, 23.3% and 76.7% respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School (completed)</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergrad student</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>52.1%</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensure degree</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master degree</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Educational Level by Gender

Putting aside those whose primary occupation is to study, participants reported a variety of occupational activities. The vast majority are career men/women engaged in professions, such as: professional career employees of different kinds (59.42%), faculty members (11.59%), CEO’s (5.80%), scientists (2.90%), and artists (1.45%). There were
12 female informants (17.39%) who declared as their primary occupation being housewives and one who is an independent artisan (a cobbler by trade). The fields of expertise or particular interests are mostly related to the career or professional studies done by participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fields of Expertise</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business &amp; Administration</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law, International Relations</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine, Biology, Chemistry</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphic Design, Photography</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology, Psychotherapy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>likes handcrafting</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing &amp; Advertising</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>likes film, reading</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy, Literature</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>likes gym, dancing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craftsmanship</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics, Physics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 150, Valid 127, Missing 23 (NA)

Table 8. Fields of Expertise or Particular Interest

Notice in Table 8 that had them classified in ‘humanities’ (communications, law, international relations, history, philosophy, etc) and in so called ‘hard-sciences’ (math, engineering, medicine, physics, etc), the proportion makes 59.8% of participants
interested in humanities and liberal arts, and 31.5% in hard-sciences related areas. Also notice that men are more inclined to have science-related areas as their field of expertise whereas women tend to be more into humanities and liberal arts.

Although in the recruitment stage all 150 selected participants declared having Catholic backgrounds, the religious composition of the group varied considerably once I coded the participants’ religious self-identification and spiritual/religious practices they disclosed during the applied methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious/Spiritual Self-Identification</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Churched Traditions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Practitioner</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Light</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic but Ant clerical</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian denominations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>109</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>84.75%</td>
<td>84.28%</td>
<td>84.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unchurched Spiritualities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astrology, Tarot, Angelology</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic Therapy, Reiki, Energy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroscience, Quantum Physics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>6.78%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8.53%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spirituals</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual but non religious</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% % within Gender</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>2.86%</td>
<td>1.55%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non Religious</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-believer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>8.47%</td>
<td>2.86%</td>
<td>5.43%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>59</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>129</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9. Religious/Spiritual Membership by Gender

N 150, Valid 129, Missing 21 (NA)
Table 9 shows four main categories: 1) religious self-identification with ‘churched traditions’ (84.5%), 2) spiritual and religious practices associated with ‘unchurched spiritualities’, like Pop-Esotericism and other New Age forms (8.53%), 3) people who identify themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’ (1.55%), and 4) subjects who declared being either ‘agnostic or non believers’ (5.43%). Interestingly, some Catholics nuanced their Catholicism and branched it into subcategories such as “Practitioner”, “Catholic Light”, and “Catholic but anticlerical”. Notice that the ‘unchurched spiritualities’ category distinguishes three kinds: traditional esoteric practices (astrology, tarot, angelology), energy-based healing practices of the sort of Reiki and holistic therapies, and scientific-based spiritualities (neuroscience, quantum physics, and Cuarto Camino, a movement that explores the spiritual implications of scientific discoveries). While proportions of both male and female mark equal for ‘churched traditions’ –84.75% and 84.28% respectively– when it comes to ‘unchurched spiritualities’ there are proportionally more women (10%) than men (6.78%). On the other hand, there are more men (8.47%) than women (2.86%) identifying themselves as agnostics or non-believers. However, statistically there is no significant correlation between gender and religious/spiritual type.

Table 10 cross-tabulates the variables Gender and Religious/Spiritual Type with Age, which was recoded in three Segments: Young Adulthood (18 to 27 years old), Late-Young Adulthood (28 to 47), and Middle Adulthood (48 to 70).
### Table 10. Religious/Spiritual Membership by Age Groups and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious/Spiritual Type</th>
<th>Age Groups</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Male %</th>
<th>Female %</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Churched</td>
<td>Young Adulthood (18 to 27)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>93.9%</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchurched</td>
<td></td>
<td>female</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituals</td>
<td></td>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Believers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchurched</td>
<td>Late-Young Adulthood (28 to 47)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>88.2%</td>
<td>68.4%</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituals</td>
<td></td>
<td>female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Believers</td>
<td></td>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Believers</td>
<td>Middle Adulthood (48 to 70)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituals</td>
<td></td>
<td>female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Believers</td>
<td></td>
<td>% within Gender</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The segment of Young Adults has the highest self-identification with churched traditions (88.9%), followed by Middle Aged Adults (81%), most of whom are women. The segment of informants that least describe themselves in terms of churched membership are Late-Young Adults (77.8%); instead, they stand out as the ones with more ascriptions in alternative or unchurched spiritual practices with 16.7%, versus 2.8% among Young
Adult and 14.3% of Middle Adults. Interestingly, the category of Non-Believers only marked within the segments of Young Adults (6.9%) and Late-Young Adults (5.6%); among the first ones only men classified in this category.

My study foresees three breaking variables corresponding to the triple typology already explained at the Introduction of this work: the *Uninitiated*, the *Initiated*, and the *Resistants*. Participants were classified within this typology in a twofold step. Firstly, at the end of each session of the applied methods I produced impression-based memos provisionally tagging those informants who seemed, at the time, to fit in each category. Secondly, during the coding stage, I reconfirmed the classification by identifying for each participant the utterances that best showed traits of each category. The above was done in order to avoid classifications based only on seldom decontextualized verbatims. At the end of the coding stage I pondered and assigned the typology according to the overall discourse of each participant. Those who gave not enough elements to be categorized were coded as “unassigned” and are not considered in the present descriptive analysis.

From 150 researched subjects, 139 classified in one of the typologies according to the following proportions: 62.6% (87 cases, 43 men and 44 women) were *Uninitiated*, that is: individuals who are familiar with media products and practices linked to Pop-Esotericism and resonate with them by entertaining the ideas and proposals these products convey. A smaller proportion of 23.7% of participants (33 cases, 12 men and 21 women) were *Initiated*: individuals who besides having consumed pop-esoteric products have been initiated and actively engaged in related practices they describe as “spiritual”. Finally, there were 13.7% (19 cases, 8 men and 11 women) who were cataloged as
**Resistants**: people who in addition to not having any pop-esoteric experience react adversely towards the pop-esoteric proposals. Notice that there are equal proportions of men and women among the *Uninitiated*, while there is a larger percentage of women among the *Initiated* and the *Resistant* types; however, there is no statistically significant relationship between gender and the three typologies.

Table 11 shows each type distributed within Age Groups; it includes the frequency of actual cases and the number of cases that would be expected if both variables are statistically independent or unrelated to one another.
Among the Young Adults (aged between 18 to 27 years old) 90.9% are Uninitiated, 7.8% are Initiated, and 1.3% are Resistant. The number of Uninitiated largely surpasses the expected count whereas the number of Young Adult Initiated and Resistant are by far lower than expected. Among Late-Young Adults (aged between 28 to 47 years old), the majority are Initiated (42.1%) almost the double of the expected count; there are 31.6% of Uninitiated (less than expected) and 26.3% of Resistants (twice more than expected). Middle Adults (aged more than 48) on their part also do not match their expected counts: they too have a majority of Initiated (45.8%) but they marked three times less Uninitiated (20.8%) and three times more Resistants (33.3%) than was statistically expected.

There is evidence to assess a relatively strong association (Pearson $\chi^2 < .001$, Cramer’s V .468) between the Typologies and the Generation participants belong to. In other words: there are more probabilities for a Young Adult to be an uninitiated rather than an initiated or a resistant. Late-young adults and middle adults have relatively more probabilities to be either initiated or resitants; however, there are more chances that a middle adult will be a resistant rather than an initiated.

There is also a strong association between the threefold typology and having a churched or an unchurched religious practice (Pearson $\chi^2 < .001$, Cramer’s V .619). Among the churched, 71.6% of them are Uninitiated, followed by 15.5% of Resistant, and 12.8% of the Initiated type. All unchurched subjects are Initiated (see Table 12).
Table 12. Typologies by Churched/Unchurched Types, Correlation Test and Symmetric Measures

Interestingly, the unchurched have almost 5 times more actual cases of Initiated than the number of cases that would be expected if the variables are statistically independent. Contrarily, among the churched subjects there are barely half of Initiated that would be expected if the variables were unrelated.

Table 13 concentrates the analysis on the kind of Catholic membership and its relationship with the Typologies. There is a strong association (Pearson $\chi^2 < .001$, Cramer’s V .510) between these two variables. Subjects who identified themselves as Catholics nuanced their membership in four basic categories: 81.7% declared being just “Catholics” without making any nuance and apparently using their religious identity mainly as a social tag, 1.9% described their Catholicism as “Light”, meaning that although not denying their Catholicism they are actually not engaged with any religious
practice on a regular basis, 5.8% stated being anticlerical but still considered themselves as Catholics; finally, there were 10.6% of mainstream Catholic practitioners.

| Typologies | Catholic Membership | | | | | |
|------------|-------------------|---|---|---|---|
|            | Catholic | Catholic Light | Anticlerical Catholic | Catholic Practitioner | Total |
| Uninitiated Count | 70 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 76 |
| Expected Count | 62.1 | 1.5 | 4.4 | 8.0 | 76.0 |
| % within Typology | 92.1% | 2.6% | 1.3% | 3.9% | 100.0% |
| % within Membership | 82.4% | 100.0% | 16.7% | 27.3% | 73.1% |
| % of Total | 67.3% | 1.9% | 1.0% | 2.9% | 73.1% |
| Initiated Count | 10 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 14 |
| Expected Count | 11.4 | .3 | .8 | 1.5 | 14.0 |
| % within Typology | 71.4% | .0% | 28.6% | .0% | 100.0% |
| % within Membership | 11.8% | .0% | 66.7% | .0% | 13.5% |
| % of Total | 9.6% | .0% | 3.8% | .0% | 13.5% |
| Resistant Count | 5 | 0 | 1 | 8 | 14 |
| Expected Count | 11.4 | .3 | .8 | 1.5 | 14.0 |
| % within Typology | 35.7% | .0% | 7.1% | 57.1% | 100.0% |
| % within Membership | 5.9% | .0% | 16.7% | 72.7% | 13.5% |
| % of Total | 4.8% | .0% | 1.0% | 7.7% | 13.5% |
| Total Count | 85 | 2 | 6 | 11 | 104 |
| Expected Count | 85.0 | 2.0 | 6.0 | 11.0 | 104.0 |
| % within Typology | 81.7% | 1.9% | 5.8% | 10.6% | 100.0% |
| % within Membership | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| % of Total | 81.7% | 1.9% | 5.8% | 10.6% | 100.0% |

N 150, Valid 104, Missing 46 (NA)
Pearson Chi-Square (df=6) < .001, Cramer’s V .510

Table 13. Typologies by Catholic Membership, Correlation Test and Symmetric Measures

Notice that Catholic practitioners are much less likely to be Uninitiated in Pop-Esotericism (3.9%) than the other categories, which highly contrasts with both plain Catholics and Catholics Light who together make 94.7% of the Uninitiated. Instead, mainstream Catholic practitioners tend to be allocated in the group of the Resistants,
outnumbering 5 times the expected count. The group of the *Initiated* gathers basically plain Catholics and Anticlerical Catholics; actually most of Catholics with anticlerical sentiments (66.7%) classify as *Initiated*.

Besides Groups of Age and Religious/Spiritual types (recoded as churched/unchurched or by kind or Catholic Membership), none of the other demographic variables resulted statistically significant when tested for correlation with the threefold typology. Being an *Uninitiated* in Pop-Esotericism, an *Initiated*, or a *Resistant* type is not related with the person’s gender, or with its educational level, nor with the individual’s intellectual interest (either if it is oriented towards science or humanities\(^ {22} \)). The lack of significant associations between the demographic variables and the breaking variables is relevant insofar as it indicates that these typologies are not factorized and therefore cannot be predicted by measurable demographic factors, but perhaps by other unmeasured qualitative traits. Moreover, it also reconfirms and justifies the adequacy of a qualitative approach to inquire into the pop-esoteric phenomenon.

The 150 selected informants participated in 50 sessions of three different data collection methods. I conducted 13 discussion groups, 14 focus groups, and 23 one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The comprehensive Table 14 shows how participants were distributed among the applied methods indicating its composition of both Gender and Age Group.

\(^ {22} \) I constructed a recoded variable, namely Humanities/Science Orientation, out of the variables Primary Occupation and Field of Expertise.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applied Method</th>
<th>Session #</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Preponderant composition</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DG.2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Mix</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DG.3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mix</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DG.4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mix</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DG.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DG.6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mix</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DG.7</td>
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<td>DG.9</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>Late-Young Adults Male</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>5</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Gender</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
<td>[100.0%]</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Table 14. Sessions and Composition for Applied Methods
This dissertation incorporates and analyzes some of the voices and claims of those I study. From 150 researched subjects, I am directly quoting 127 (56 men and 71 women) in 306 verbatims: 144 bestowed by male informants and 162 by female informants. The word-count of quoted utterances also helps to realize the overabundance of female voices: 8,174 of the 15,096 words were phrased by women versus 6,922 rendered by men. Although there is no statistical evidence for supporting associations between Gender and the three Typologies, there seems to be a qualitative underlying connection – as my work shows– that is manifested in the more eloquent and prolific expressions that women produce while conversing on their use of pop culture references for creating senses of spirituality and self-identity for themselves.

1.6. Delimitations and Limitations

The type of design of this research is oriented to show the complexity of solely one particular context. As such, one of its limitations is the need to draw boundaries around the study where the context is nested. Due to limited resources and time available I drew a boundary between a set of subjects (only urban, educated, Catholic, middle-class population of Mexico City) exposed to delimited stimuli (the three films), and the rest of people who actually comprise the social whole. This semi-artificial boundary means that the whole phenomenon and relationships when taken into account somewhat constrain the understanding and the generalizability of my research findings.
Given the explanatory aim of my dissertation, intended to investigate how media-based conversations related to the belief system articulate the individual’s subjectivity in terms of spirituality, identity, and representations of reality, the direct object of my study is, precisely, the dynamics displayed during such conversations. In spite of analyzing the resonance of three films on the spiritual consciousness of the viewers, my work has limited concern with media consumption as such as well as with the way New Age spiritual consumerism informs the development of a spiritual self in current society. Furthermore, my research includes only a limited/partial review of the works on New Age religion or metaphysical communities, which might be seen as a limitation. Certainly there is a strong and growing body of literature on New Age spirituality\(^\text{23}\); however it seemed to me that embedding my work in that frame would have been more an ensconced diversion rather than a benefit. On the one hand, it would have dragged with it a set of given assumptions about belief systems, believing, and spirituality which I am precisely interested to challenge and redefine. On the other hand, the term New Age has become an undefined and eroded term. Nowadays ‘New Age’, rather than a categorical definition, refers to the particular sensibility involved in the religious/spiritual search that emergent autonomous individuals perform, often implying hybridization of diverse traditions.

Another aspect of the study centers on the sample, which is limited to urban, educated, Catholic, middle-class population, sampled from one of the many milieus of Mexico City. Thus, the findings from the study are yet and somewhat generalizable to

\(^{23}\) For example Paul Heelas’ *New Age Religion*, and his book with Linda Woodhead on *The Spiritual Revolution*. 
any specific population or community. Besides, due to obvious limitations of time and resources I use just three films as markers of Pop-Esotericism, which can somewhat limit the reach of the social scientific assertions.

The exclusively qualitative approach implies that this study elaborates lesser on quantitative data, as for example on the numbers of people who attended these films in theaters, or where the films stand in relation to other forms of Pop-Esotericism that are also available in my subjects’ culture. Thus, as it is in common with qualitative data with regard to its representativeness, my goal does not assert but rather just infers whether this is a significant phenomenon in Mexico or might be impacting only a select social segment.

Finally, the fact that the analytical approach of this study derives from the grounded theory proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), makes the results rather than a report of facts attaining generalization levels, but actually an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses developed from empirical data. According to Strauss and Corbin a theory developed from this method is never right or wrong, it just has more or less fit, relevance, workability and modifiability. Therefore, validity –in its traditional sense of ‘generalization’– is replaced by fit (how closely concepts fit with the incidents they are representing), relevance (how findings concern or capture the attention of both participants and scholars), workability (how the theory works when explaining how the problem is being solved), and modifiability (how the theory can be altered when new relevant data is compared to existing data). The assessment based on these criteria gives a high degree of plausibility to the results of this study; my hope is that the readers will
find that the research was performed with enough rigor so that the results do seem plausible and useful in others’ endeavors.

1.7. Definition of Key Terms

**Pop-Esotericism:** any media product or pop culture item, produced and distributed by the culture industry, whose content and aesthetics grant it the *potentiality* of being attached with the meaning of “esoteric” and be used as such by their audiences, in this sense these products are not pop-esoteric *per se:* the audience makes them be that. Pop-Esotericism is a rational narrative with a consumption and conversational drive which not only works as a resonant media-reference, but also as a (pre)text in the construction of ephemeral and collective conversational spaces wherein the belief system is engaged through a triadic discourse of science, religion, and spirituality.

**Belief System:** may be defined as the dynamic set of collections of accepted propositions, organized in a structuring system, which is involved in the meaning-making processes individuals use as a platform to teleologically ‘operate’ their daily reality. Its teleological edge is implied in its aim to manipulate individuals’ reality according to ultimate ends. Such a system comes across discursively in statements bonded to explicit social practices in which individuals participate.

**Beliefs/ Believing(s):** throughout the study I assume (and eventually develop) the key distinction between *beliefs* and *believing(s).* A ‘belief’ is a propositional part of a creed
one defends or justifies in a rational way. In this sense, beliefs are operative ideas that easily give the (false) sense of fixity because they are displayed in robust edifices founded in paradigms that bestow senses of stability and fixity (Derrida, 1966:405). Whereas the act of ‘believing’ is beyond the acceptance of a proposition because it involves performances, inner postures, gestures, and biographic positions that often are not rationally conscious even for the performer. Instead, believing(s) are generative acts of cognition invoked in haunted and ritualizing performances of more elusive realities that can be grabbed through social conversations and interactions.

**Narration:** a rhetoric construct created in a format that describes a sequence of events. Narrations are performed in social interactive spaces within which the individual engages with others in a conversational dynamic, both discursively (through spoken exchanges of thoughts, ideas, and feelings apropos a certain matter) and performatively (through gestures, positions, and dispositions)\(^{24}\). A narration supposes a cognitive loading that is coherently held within a structured symbolic order, which in turn helps in restricting the boundaries of the meaning.

**Spirituality:** Spirituality is a cognitive condition that heuristically might better be defined by what it is not. Hence, it is not religion, nor ideology, although it encompasses both\(^{25}\). These instances instrumentally nest spirituality to make subjects be oriented towards, and defined by, a certain ideology or a particular religion; but in itself spirituality has no

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\(^{24}\) Implied in the term ‘narration’ is the performance wherein collective and individual selves are deconstructed and reconstructed, a notion compatible with poststructuralist approaches like those made by Lacan, Derrida, Gadamer, Bhabha, and Bell, among others.

\(^{25}\) As documented by Schofield (2003:9-10, 187-8)
institutional form, rather it infiltrates institutions to be performed therein. Spirituality does neither equate to ethical values, although it eventually connects with a foundation for morality. In short we may define spirituality as the dealing with the unspeakable\(^\text{26}\). A cultivated action aimed to address a living-experience of a reality felt as intrinsically ‘exceeding’. At the same time it is a language, a surpassed language to address both the nameable and the unnameable. The intimate surpassing experiences are eventually expelled out in fictional ensembles of what Avery Gordon depicts as “cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric traces of power’s presence” (1997:25). The loadings of this cognitive condition are ‘exceeded densities’ which rather than being merely narrated in the form of discourses are “spelled” out in registers distinct from –though always related to– the symbolic order. A spell concentrates the residuals of a cognitive journey and eventually is capable to re-actualize part of its novelty and power. If a narration is a ‘possession’ of elements strategically picked up and brought together, a spell is a ‘dispossession’, a blast of elements that could no longer be contained as an untold experience. The stream of social circulation, where both possessive and dispossessive narratives simultaneously flow, makes them being readable under the register of discursiveness, which lubricates the understanding and coats it with coherence.

\(^{26}\text{This brief definition echoes Robert Wuthnow (1998) who argued that spirituality is the human response – often articulated as a lifestyle choice– to the need to cope with existing challenge.} \)
Part One

Film Analysis

Presentation:

The overall purpose of this part is to understand the three films as cultural instigators of spiritual/religious conversations, and to uncover the most salient fibers embedded in them that, twisted together, formed yarns of meaning for my subjects. Part One is comprised of four chapters: three of them devoted each to one film, and a fourth chapter rendering a Cross Interpretation of both the industrial aspects and the content implications, pointing out and interpreting commonalities and differences among the films. The chapters discussing the films separately follow the same structure: firstly, they present a factual analysis of the film, focusing on two aspects: its industry (production, distribution, and exhibition) and its basic narrative aspects (genre, narrative form, and synopsis). This mostly descriptive sketching of what the films feature themselves will frame the products as part of the global repertoire of pop cultural references available in the global media market, and to gauge the chances each film had to enter and impact the cultural agenda – at least for the duration of their screening. Secondly, I address what is more subjected to the viewer’s interpretation, that is: the hermeneutic strands audiences threaded during their interpretative process, which strictly speaking constitutes the basis for a content analysis. Both the factualism of a film and the content analysis form a unit of interpretation that will stand as a backdrop for the matters inquired in this work.
As a preview, I advance that along the plots of *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?, The Da Vinci Code*, and *The Passion of the Christ* protrudes a threefold connection of the religious, the gaze, and disempowerment. Guided by this blending, and due to reasons further explained, I have chosen a psychoanalytic perspective to approach the manifest and latent content conveyed in the films. Such framework will help to identify the potential proposals in the films for constructing subjectivity and, thus, to ascertain the way audiences resonate and reflect upon personal and spiritual themes to create senses of spirituality and self-identity for themselves. Therefore, amongst the chapters I articulate theorizing works mostly from social psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic film theory to support the film analyses. For this purpose, the reviewed body of literature spread across the chapters was narrowed to selected psychoanalytical topics that service, on the one hand, the grounds of the film analysis to be undertaken, and on the other hand the subsequent examination of media-based conversations wherein individuals evoked and rehearsed their senses of spirituality, transcendency, and self-identity. The broad framework draws on the psychic topology introduced by Jacques Lacan. Each chapter succinctly elaborates on some key notions derived from his model \(^1\) which will be applied to the hermeneutic strands viewers threaded during their interpretative process.

The above will be done by submitting one selected scene from each film to a psychoanalytic film analysis. Procedures for this analysis follow the method already discussed in Chapter 1: selecting scenes that were singled out by my informants,

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\(^1\) e.g. the haunting of the real, the fears of castration and the psychic production of fetishes, the narcissistic formation of human subjectivity, and the cognitive dynamics of the gaze involved in scopophilic engagements.
identifying the interpretive codes they found in them, and then loading my descriptions and analyses with the elements they used for their meaning-making of the films. The assumption is that top-of-mind scenes\(^2\) condense the hermeneutic guideline audiences use to interpret the whole product. I separately submitted to analysis, in a one run at a time procedure (shot-by-shot itemized analysis), the following aspects of each scene: time, narrative, style, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound. These descriptors, according to film theory (Monaco 2000; Stam 2000), organically coalesce to form a coherent system of meaning when viewing a film. Moreover, it is upon and through such a system that audiences perform their meaning makings that are further used in both their interactions (social conversation) and cognitive approaches towards reality. In order to make the reading agile, and to be more focused on the psychoanalytical implications found in the scenes, I have placed the findings of this ‘dissembling’ exercise in Appendix C, leaving for the body of the chapters only an overall synthesis of the analysis for each film. However, I highly recommend a visit to the shot-by-shot itemized analyses for they constitute the grounds of my assertions. Finally, although in strict sense the examination of the scenes constitutes a formal content film analysis, in order to make it socially situated and for illustrative purposes I occasionally make use of utterances from the field to back up my assertions.

Before embarking on the analysis of each film I offer the preamble which follows to explain some basic categories on film industry, film narrative, and psychoanalytic film criticism.

\(^2\) i.e. scenes recalled and identified by viewers as hallmarks of the films
Preamble

*Valuable intangibles within the film industry*

Films, as any pop cultural items, involve high and complex technological processes not only for their materialization but for ensuring both their circulation and resilience in the cultural stream. This is particularly relevant in cultural contexts wherein the flow of symbolic forms depend on opportune strategies to tackle the scarcity of human attention in current global media society. Disciplines such as media studies, knowledge management, consumption studies, among others, are currently addressing the problem of ‘attention economy’, a term coined by Thomas H. Davenport (2001:20). Davenport stresses that, due to symbolic saturation, mental engagement on items of information has become a sort of scarce commodity that all info suppliers have to deal with. In order to achieve social attention, media products of all sorts –from podcast to broadcast– must be intertwined with intangible valuables\(^3\) that –although intangibles– always imply an economic investment as well as the deployment of aggressive positioning strategies that, at least, would ensure chances for competitiveness. In the film industry, valuable intangibles are distributed along the three identifiable industrial stages of a film: production, distribution, and exhibition. These stages are considered to be film ‘factualisms’ as long as they are measurable and not subjected to the viewers’ interpretation. In other words, the description of budgeting and the recount of some

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\(^3\) Kevin Kelly lists the following valuable intangibles: immediacy, personalization, interpretation, authenticity, accessibility, embodiment, patronage, and findability. These values are present either in the production of a cultural item (i.e. the media product itself), or in its distribution. See Kevin Kelly “Better than Free”. The Edge, February 5, 2008. [http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/kelly08/kelly08_index.html](http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/kelly08/kelly08_index.html) Consulted on September 28th 2010.
involved production values, help as indexes to measure the nature and magnitude of a product not only in terms of economic investment but, most importantly, as a cultural artifact that carries (costing) materialized features to be consumed.

Basic components of a film narrative and the problem of categorization

The idea that assessing film narrative forms or that even outlining film synopses is something “objective” that can be done independently of audiences’ interpretation – and therefore be considered as ‘film factualities’ – is controversial among film historians and film critics. Once a product enters into the mediasphere, all readings, re-countings, and categorizing attempts, inevitably get infused with the inter-subjective cultural reception of the product. Nevertheless, and without disagreeing with the above, there are patterns and components in film narratives that reach acceptable levels of consensus and give to the analysis the equivalent of what industrial factualities do.

Before introducing the narrative forms and synopses for What The Bleep do We (k)now?!, The Da Vinci Code, and The Passion of the Christ in the following chapters, we need to consider three key notions that will be present in our film analyses: the first one, from a narratological perspective, are the basic components of any film narrative (diegesis, extradiegesis, non-diegesis), the second one is the basic distinction between ‘plot’ and ‘story’, and the third one is the problem of film categorization (film genres).

Narratologists (cf. Prince 2003) contend that a story is told intertwining three narrative components. One is called diegesis which refers to the cause-and-effect chain of situations, characters, things and events that factually constitute the main ‘story-world’ of
a narrative. However, the narrator may include elements belonging to situations outside the main story, for example flashbacks or stories-within-stories, called *extradiegesis*. Yet, a third component, called *non-diegesis*, is included when the narrator adds elements that are neither taking place in the world of the main story nor elsewhere, for example scores, voice-over narrations, subjective visual inserts, etc. If *diegesis* is the main ‘story-world’, *non-diegesis* is the insertion of the ‘narrator-worldview’ that personalizes such narration. *Diegesis, extradiegesis, and non-diegesis* ensure the fluidity of the recounted storyline, the first one giving ‘what’ happens, the others tinting ‘how’ it happens.

Film scholars David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2004:70-2) make use of the notions of *diegesis, extradiegesis, and non-diegesis* to explain the distinction between ‘story’ and ‘plot’. Plot is the explicitly presented events plus added *extra* and *non diegetic* material. Story is the presumed events the viewer infers from what is explicitly presented, and thus involves assumed subjective readings. Often, film synopses are ‘story synopses’ insofar that they rarely isolate the explicit from the inferred; that is, what is going on from ‘how’ it goes on. Although strictly speaking a ‘plot synopsis’ would be a condensed timecoded plot segmentation, what I present in the following three chapters are plot-based synopses, trying to keep them on-track to what is explicit in the films, and leaving for the psychoanalytic film analysis the viewers’ interpretation.

Finally, a word on film categorization. Film genres, as any taxonomy, are necessary constructions of analysis with no fixed boundaries, which makes them more descriptive rather than prescriptive. Film critics rarely agree in the way they list and branch out subgenres, besides the basic distinction between fiction and documentary.
Furthermore, the task of categorizing films has become more vague since the decade of 1980, when it became trendy to produce genre hybridizations that combined elements from different genres. Film historian Janet Staiger (2000:63) identifies four methods for labeling the narrative form of a film: the ‘idealist method’ which classifies films by comparing them to a deemed prototype film, the ‘empirical method’ consisting in comparing characteristics of a film against a list of films already cataloged, the ‘a priori method’ which departs from generic elements defined in advance as pertaining to a certain genre, and the ‘social convention method’ of labeling a film based on the accepted cultural consensus within society. For this work I am adopting the ‘empirical method’ for two reasons: on the one hand, it assumes that a film is not an isolated item but takes part of a broader constellation of already received and cataloged films, and on the other hand, this method is commonly used by film critics that publish in mainstream media, and therefore the broad public is likely to be more familiar with its terminology. I will eventually contrast my categorization with what my informants uttered about the films’ genres.

_Socio-psychoanalysis applied to evocative media-based conversations_

If, as psychoanalytic film theory claims, cinematic spectatorship is akin to the dream state in which unconscious wishes are symbolically fulfilled (Lemire 2000:57), then it follows that to peer into the illusions of the worlds displayed on the screen is to rivet the eyes to a canvas where the spectator projects one’s own subjective fantasies. Meeting the former should reveal the latter. However, how reliable is it to inquire into the canvas and assert things about the viewer? Moreover, how does the conscious telling of the viewer’s
meaning-making coalesce with the not so conscious experience of viewing/consuming films? The question (or limitation) therefore remains insurmountable particularly if it is addressed as an issue of ‘decipherment’ or ‘translation’ between the projecting subject and the object of projection. Visual consumption practices, as dreams do, seem to be not a matter of consciously ‘ciphering’ a signified with a signifier in ways that we can just match terms as we do with dictionaries, but rather of subtle hermeneutical ‘encodings’ with which we infuse our own biographies and pour into what we see and reactivate when calling to remembrance what we saw. This intricate psychic mechanism, according to Freud, is aimed to give expression to neglected areas of the individual’s personality.

One year after *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899 [1900]), Freud wrote an afterword entitled *Über Den Traum* (On Dreams) in which he argues that oneiric symbolism goes beyond dreams and extend to the reign of allegory: “It is not an exclusive feature of dreams, but it equally dominates the representation in fables, myths, legends, jokes, folklore, allowing us to discover the intimate relations between dreams and these productions.” (Freud 1951:272, my translation) Moreover, oneiric symbolism captured either in dreams or in cultural imagery, is not an outcome of the elaboration of dreams, but rather a peculiarity of our unconscious thought that such elaboration employs as material for condensation, displacement and dramatization of wish fulfillment.

Through compression processes, as well as fragmentation and internal displacements,

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4 From now on I will refer to my subjects indistinctly as consumers or viewers since their viewing experience is embedded, as we saw in the previous chapter, in an openly consumerism context (the three films were produced, distributed and exhibited in global media markets). Anyhow, the reader is invited to keep in mind the consumption edge of the phenomenon without disregarding the visual spectatorship character of it, and vice versa.

5 *Über Den Traum* was published in 1901, however it was until its second edition (Wiesbaden 1911) when it became wide spread. It was not translated to other languages until 1922.
unconscious psychic material is transformed into a plastic (visual) surface with drama potentialities; that is, dreams can be narrated to others, just as films can, and therefore they can be called back by evocative conversations. And yet, a disturbing obscurity bathes all oneiric formations. Freud attributes this to “the transformations imposed by censorship on the repressed material.” (1951:262, my tr.)

For understanding the nature of the hermeneutical encoding of oneiric symbolism, Freud distinguished the manifest content (the ‘story’ as it is recalled) from the latent content (the meaning it bears for the ‘recaller’). The manifest content is *anecdotic* in the sense that it is built upon daily remains (*tagesreste*) of the dreamer/viewer/consumer, whereas the latent content is a “rich material of psychic formations of the highest order, provided with all characteristics of an intellectual function. Such material escapes consciousness until it notifies the latter through the content of dreams.” (Freud 1951:273, my tr.)

Yet, in the process of hermeneutical encoding there is always present the exigency for secrecy. To keep secrecy, latent content receives a “façade of wholeness” whose function is to give a minimal order to the components of the oneiric form in such a way that once gathered they form a ‘totality’, a composition the individual “can use to give a first, and usually wrong, intelligence of the latent ideas. Though the façade does not cover the content entirely, it intends to grant comprehensibility and ease to the dreamer, hence concealing and keeping the secrecy of the latent content.” (Freud 1951:245, my tr.)
Psychoanalytic therapy appeals to evocation as a means for disclosing concealed psychic material and bring its codes back to the individual. Analogously, a social psychoanalytical approach has the opportunity of accessing such codes through evocative social conversations. This does not mean that hermeneutical coding can be used as ‘picklocks’ to open other people’s readings. Freud himself asserted that not even psychoanalysis based therapy can do such thing because, although it is true that there are symbols of universal use in dreams, “there are individual symbols that are forged by the subject alone, using his/her own representation material […] It would be wrong to expect that a more fundamental knowledge of dream symbolism (language of dreams) would allow us to omit inquiring the subject’s associations.” (Freud 1951:271, my tr.) Rather, it is more conducive to appropriate the codes and perspectively approach our viewing, my viewing, to theirs. This is the sense with which I frame my interest in listening to what viewers tell about the three films and their own projections linked to the stories that are unfolded within the films. Both the proposals for constructing subjectivity embedded in the films (manifest content) and the way audiences resonate with them (the latent content projected in their reflecting upon personal and spiritual themes to create senses of spirituality and self-identity for themselves), afford hints to infer models for experiencing and constructing subjectivity related to spirituality or transcendency.

A psychoanalytic framework for film criticism

It seems ironical that although Freud showed inflexible reluctance in getting involved in cinema projects for he considered films unable to represent his ideas, the cinema did not give him tit for tat. Actually, psychoanalysis has been fundamental in film history,
becoming an inexhaustible well for both filmmakers and film critics. For the latter the question begins with choosing the right angle to approach whatever is mobilized in the inmost world of the spectator. A clue for choosing a conducive analytical perspective is detecting the primordial drives imbued in a given film. Thus, for example, Freudian psychoanalyst Carlos Domínguez Morano (2009) has detected a common drive or motif present in films that deal with the ambivalence of desiring otherness. Reviewing a wide collection of films, he finds a constant articulation between the desire of communication and encounter with the other and the presence of food, nurturing, and oral fixations in films.

Drawing on Freud’s psychosexual theory (particularly the oral phase and its associated perversions, such as cannibalism, vampirism, coprophagia, among other ‘eating disorders’), Domínguez establishes linkages between food, social identity, language and religion: “[food] plays a central role as a sign of identity in all cultures and groups. Indeed, food –as well as language and religion– constitutes the definite cultural imprint” (2009:3 my tr.) In other words, themes and motifs of food/hunger and the craving for the other, supposes settings wherein the self faces the inherent ambivalence of socialization and language. A different story runs when the psychic setting of a film addresses more pre-linguistic stages, and when the craving is not for otherness but for the Self. This seems to be the case of the films studied in this work.

As I will show in the next three chapters, what stands out since a first reading of the story plots of the three films is that all of them, besides explicitly dealing with religious/spiritual themes, tell stories in which their main characters are, on the one hand,
determined by what they are able to see and how they are seen by others, and on the other hand they all depict characters in disempowering and mutilative situations. This seems to be clear for Amanda’s deafness in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*?, for Sophie’s concealed (deprived) true identity in *The Da Vinci Code*, and for the scourged Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*. Moreover, the three films establish associative connections between the religious, the cognitive edge of the gaze, and the issue of disempowerment. Both gaze and disempowerment articulate to question accepted and corseting institutionalized ontologies: what is reality and what is the true self (*What The Bleep do We (k)now!*?), what is the true sacred and the true secular, what is the feminine and the masculine (*The Da Vinci Code*), and what is suffering and what is salvation (*The Passion of the Christ*).

The peculiar ‘visualist’ drive, along with the experience of a disempowering incompleteness and insufficiency of the self in these films, provides reasonable foundations to adopt a psychoanalytic film criticism to perform a content film analysis. Among the many versions of psychoanalytic criticism applied to films, the one that best inform my approach is Laura Mulvey’s (1989; 1992; 1993), for the following reasons: Firstly, her main premise is that pop culture functions as a massive screen “on which collective fantasy, anxiety, fear, and their effects can be projected” and therefore it might be interpreted symptomatically focusing on its blind spots, “finding forms that make manifest socially traumatic material through distortion, defense, and disguise.” (1993:6)
Secondly, Mulvey’s grounding in Lacanian\textsuperscript{6} and Marxist formulations – rather than in clinical Freudian frameworks – endows her approach, on the one hand, with a more sociological resonance insofar as her overall question is whether the real – i.e. the Lacanian ‘unspeakable’ stuff of unconsciousness that surpasses expression – “may also be present within the social collective and, if so, how it may be deciphered\textsuperscript{7}” (1993:9), and on the other hand, with a particular concern about the theme of visuality.

\textsuperscript{6} Issues regarding identity, knowledge, and the visual have been explored by scholars who apply Lacanian approaches to contemporary pop cultural consumption.

\textsuperscript{7} Mulvey points out that she is not claiming that what is unspeakable may be spoken, but to decipher symptoms that might find expression in popular culture. (Mulvey 1993:9)
Chapter 2

What the Bleep do we (k)now!?

2.1 Industrial and Narrative Aspects

*What the #$*! Do We (K)now!?* (USA, 2004) also written “What The Bleep do We (k)now!?”, and commonly called ‘What the Bleep’, is a 110 minute docu-fictional full-length feature. Briefly, the film tells the story of Amanda, a professional photographer confined in her own personal problems (she is a deaf-mute and recently got divorced). A series of fortuitous encounters, dreams, and odd events occurs to her. The ideas that emerged from these occurrences lead Amanda to a cathartic moment in which she finally reconciles with herself, overcoming whatever was stuffed and blocked, repressed and restricted in her life. The film is interwoven with the participation of 14 interviewed scientists from different fields who address issues regarding science (quantum physics), spirituality, religion, and reality. A more detailed synopsis of the film is delivered further in this chapter.

2.1.1 Production, distribution and exhibition

As it is common in indie films\(^8\), *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* was written, directed, and produced by the same core team: William Arntz, Betsy Chasse, and Mark Vicente\(^9\).

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\(^8\) Independent film projects that are produced and distributed by sources outside major film studios

\(^9\)
Financed as a low-budget production (USD $4,000,000)\(^{10}\), the project involved inexpensive production values: shot in two states, a cast comprised of 36 actors –mostly amateurs and few of them with some experience in TV shows\(^{11}\), and 99 people in the crew. The film includes the participation of specialists in different fields of knowledge, such as: theoretical physics, medicine, theology, philosophy of physics, pharmacology, quantum physics, psychology, anesthesiology, psychiatry, nuclear physics, physics engineering, biochemistry, chiropractic, hierophantism\(^{12}\). The authors/producers of *What The Bleep do We (k)now!* created *ex-professo* the producer company *Lord of the Wind* and the special effects company *Atomic Visual Effects* to accomplish the production.

Subsequent phases (distribution and exhibition) were led by different independent companies. In the US theatres the film was distributed by *Samuel Goldwyn Films* and *Roadside Attractions*, two independent distributors specialized in low budget/independent film distribution. Worldwide sales were led by *Lightning Entertainment* which sold the film to several local/regional distribution companies. Distributors promoted the film in some national and international film festivals, achieving five awards (two of them were Audience Choice)\(^{13}\). Thirty two local/regional distribution companies placed the film in 39 countries with a delay of one year after it was released in the USA.

\(^9\) Additionally, Matthew Hoffman shares writing credits, and Scott Altomare and Straw Weisman were associated with the production.

\(^{10}\) Source: http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/series/WhatTheBleep.php Consulted on September 8th, 2010.

\(^{11}\) Leading and secondary leading roles were played by actors who had performed in some TV episodes: Marlee Matlin, Elaine Hendrix, Robert Bailey Jr., Barry Newman, and Armin Shimerman.

\(^{12}\) From the Greek ἱερός φαίνειν, to reveal the holy. Hierophantism is the practice of interpreting sacred mysteries and arcane principles, it is associated with tarot reading and “channeling” practices of otherworld entities.

\(^{13}\) Source: http://www.whatthebleep.com/whatthebleep/ Consulted on September 8th, 2010.
The film lasted 62 weeks in the US with a screen mode\textsuperscript{14} of 146 screens and a screen slope\textsuperscript{15} occurred at the 46\textsuperscript{th} week (see Table 19 at Chapter 5). In Mexico the feature was released with 25 prints and lasted 14 weeks in the box-office starting on August 5\textsuperscript{th} 2005. It was screened by the three major theatre chains: Cinemark, Cinemex, and Cinepolis\textsuperscript{16}. Filmhouse, the distributor for Mexico, reports that as for May 5\textsuperscript{th} 2006, revenues totaled $916,849 USD\textsuperscript{17} generated by 230,606 Mexican viewers. In the opening weekend it generated 660 spectators per copy (6,000 spectators in three days)\textsuperscript{18}. The film broke the record in attendance for a documentary in Mexico. 68.5\% of the gross was domestic and 31.5\% was foreign, out of which the Mexican share was 18.2\%, occupying the third place in foreign grossing after Germany and Australia. What The Bleep do We (k)now!? made a worldwide gross of circa 16 million dollar\textsuperscript{19} with a profit ratio of 1:3. This means that it earned three dollars per each invested dollar. Just the Mexican box-office contributed to pay off one quarter of the total production budget.

2.1.2 Narrative Form and Synopsis

This is a hybrid docu-fictional film comprised of two interwoven parts: the journey of the main character –Amanda– which is told in a narrative plot way\textsuperscript{20} that meets many of the major features of the Melodrama genre, as we will see further, and the discourses of the

\textsuperscript{14} Screen mode indicates the largest number of theaters screening certain film at the same time.

\textsuperscript{15} Screen slope indicates the week when theaters start withdrawing a film from screens.


\textsuperscript{17} Fernando Moreno (Orissa Castellanos, Filmhouse) May 5\textsuperscript{th}, 2006. Personal communication.


\textsuperscript{19} Source: http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=whatthe.htm Consulted on September 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2010.

\textsuperscript{20} A narrative plot is a sequence of interrelated fictional events that follow the logics of causes and effects.
Scientists which are told in an episodic way, going from one commentary by a scientist to another within a certain theme, and then moving onto the following theme. These interventions irrupt episodically into the basic outline of Amanda’s anecdotic account, though not explicitly commenting what the narrative plot is presenting. Thus, from a formal narrative perspective the film holds two different and apparently disconnected plots (Amanda’s recount and the Scientists’ interventions) that are correlated by the viewer into one single story (see Figure 1) aided by the hermeneutical guidance of the scientists.

![Figure 1. Story and Plots in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*? based on the diagram of narrative by Bordwell and Thompson (2004 70-72)](image)

Documentaries nesting fictional stories are profusely used particularly by TV broadcasters for didactic purposes; in this sense viewers are well acquainted with the format and accept it. However, their feelings about using docu-fiction in the cinema screen differs. ROSALINDA, one of those I interviewed, is an undergrad student of communications, she likes all sorts of docu-fiction because she considers it “fun
education”; but besides her, most young informants were reluctant about the format adopted in What The Bleep do We (k)now!? They found it overwhelming and somehow confusing:

SARA: …so many interviewees, it was so saturating, and this thing of hopping from one theme onto another…

ANDREA: what I didn’t like was the so many themes they show. And all those scientists or experts, I neither like they were so many, they were just too many.

RITA: exactly, and they were just going from one theme to another. For example, an interviewee is talking about, I don’t know, about God, and then another keeps on talking about quantum physics.

Hybrid docu-fictional films are rare but not completely new in Mexican cinema screens. Actually none of my informants declared this was the first docu-fictional film they saw in commercial theaters. So, it is not that the format was awkward for the viewers, but rather that it disappointed the expectations they had about the movie, or the possibilities they think the film could achieve using another genre. It seems that the fictional story grabbed audience’s attention in a higher degree than the documental part, and therefore the latter worked to the detriment of the former. For BARBARA, for example, the blend of a documentary within a story did not work out in What The Bleep do We (k)now!? and even made it boring and distractive:

BARBARA: what I found off-putting was the format, it was kind of boring. Maybe they had reasons to do it that way, but still, a documentary linked to this story? I don’t know, for me it didn’t weave well. I couldn’t always find the link and I was like ‘hey go back to the girl!’ [Amanda’s story]
LOURDES, a 33 year-old fashion designer, also had the feeling of being distracted by the Scientists’ interventions:

LOURDES: there were just too many scientific commentaries. I mean, they were constantly interrupting the plot. I think they could have used much less scientific testimonials, perhaps omitting a bunch of them. It was too much science, just too much.

In one of the focus groups participants commented on the aesthetics of the film. They claimed not having any problem with documentaries, but deemed that this film stayed in the halfway: it was not fully a documentary nor a fluent recount of a fictional story, which was sensed as a low-quality performed drama.

ANGELINA: well, I disliked its aesthetics. All scenes looked quite artificial to me, so clumsily featured, uhm they were just not credible at all.

Although the quality of dramatization in the film was questioned by many informants, Amanda’s plot was broadly cited and mostly referred to the scientists’ discourse, which indicates that even if the docu-fictional format was criticized, it indeed worked to lead the interpretation of the film.

Fully detailed plot segmentations for both Amanda and the Scientists, showing how both stories interweave, can be consulted in Appendix D.1; here I present detailed synopses for both Amanda’s story and the Scientists’ discourse.
Synopsis of Amanda’s Story

After a stressful working day, professional photographer Amanda has a weird dream in which an enigmatic male Shaman touches her forehead enabling her to see something that was not visible to her. She also has a nightmare reviving the day she caught her husband cheating on her. The day after, Jennifer, her roommate, helps Amanda to interpret the Shaman dream as a probable parallel life. On her way to work, Amanda meets Reginald, an African-American kid who invites her to play in his basketball “unending possibilities court”. Strange physical things occur there while Reginald explains to her the principles of quantum physics. Continuing her way to the office, Amanda receives a call from her boss urging her to be at the office right away. In her anxiety, she takes a pill, misses the subway, and ends stopping by a photographic exhibition of Emoto’s ‘Water Crystals’\(^{21}\) where she meets a mature man-in-a-suit who explains to her how thoughts affect matter. That night she dreams again with the Shaman.

The next day Amanda is assigned to a photographic coverage of a wedding, coincidently at the same church she got married. Her perception is filtered by her bad experience and at the wedding party she starts hallucinating and distorting all that she observes. A guy at the party, named Elliot, has a crush on her. Both dance and drink in excess. The next morning Amanda experiences a hangover and regrets her behavior. She sees herself as an ugly fat old woman and explodes insulting herself. At a certain point she recalls what the man-in-a-suit told her about the implications of water crystals, and

\(^{21}\) Masaru Emoto is a Japanese doctor in alternative medicine who claims that thoughts directed at water droplets alter the shape of water crystals when frozen. The more positive a thought, the more “beautiful” the crystal, and conversely the more negative the uglier it gets.
starts a bodily self-reconciliation process. That afternoon she visits the exterior of the church where she got married and turns back without entering. She then enters into a cinema theatre where she sees herself many-fold in alternative selves. One of her selves is hugging her ex-husband Bill, another self is alone and approaches Amanda to fuse with her. Amanda walks down the city and spends the night on a bench until daybreak. Amanda gets rid of her pills and joins Reginald in the basketball court where they play together.

**Synopsis of Scientists’ Discourse**

A group of fourteen real-life experts in different fields episodically present their commentaries and explanations in thematic clusters. These clusters stick to the following syllogistic order: a) exposure of overarching premises, b) presentation of evidences, and c) stressing of pragmatic implications. These discourses play an interpretational role, in the sense that they function as guidelines for the viewer to make the “reading” of Amanda’s story.

A content analysis that I have assembled identifies four major theses (see Table 15) that Scientists develop after having posed an opening twofold question: “what is quantum physics?”, and “what is the ultimate question?”

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22 David Albert PhD (philosopher of physics), Dr. Joseph Dispenza DC (biochemist and chiropractor), Amit Goswami PhD (nuclear physicist), John Hagelin PhD (quantum physicist), Stuart Hameroff MD (anesthesiologist and psychologist), Dr. Miceal Ledwith (theologian), Daniel Monti MD (physician), Andrew B. Newberg MD (physician), Candace Pert PhD (pharmacologist), Jeffrey Satinover MD MS (psychiatrist), William Tiller PhD (physics engineer), Fred Alan Wolf PhD (physics theoretician), and Judy Zebra Knight (aka Ramtha, mystic and hierophant. Ramtha is the entity that J.Z. Knight states she channels)
### The Belief System and the Pop-ESOTERIC Wave

#### Part One: Film Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theses</th>
<th>Premises</th>
<th>Evidences</th>
<th>Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontological:</strong> Reality does not preexist the observer, rather it emerges when matter bumps into the observer.</td>
<td>Quantum Physics has demonstrated that matter is empty and comprised of ‘bits of thought-information’ constituting multiple and overlapping universes.</td>
<td>Reality is unpredictable, ubiquitous, and fluctuant. We actually create reality just by our act of observing.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Epistemological:</strong> Reality and time linearity are inner perceptual illusions of consciousness filtered by preconceptions.</td>
<td>Lab experiments show that particles of possibilities become particles of experience until they are looked at.</td>
<td>Objects do not determine us but we are the ones who always determine them. It is not that we ride on a one-way rail of time, but we are able to travel in time at will.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Anthropological:</strong> the ‘observer’ is the spirit within us driving a “bio-suit” (our body).</td>
<td>Experiments on water crystals demonstrate that thoughts alter the shape of matter. Water constitutes 2/3 of the human body.</td>
<td>It is feasible to program our own personal reality. An observer (spirit) can affect both its external and internal reality through thoughts, if he/she accepts these propositions and remains perseverant.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theological:</strong> God is not the Other but the superposition of the spirit of all things.</td>
<td>Organized religion has shown to be harmful; its understanding of God is arrogant, superstitious and guilt oriented.</td>
<td>We are all God.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theodicean:</strong> good and evil are moral misconceptions of an over anthropomorphized God.</td>
<td>Quantum Physics is the closest science to interpret what Jesus really meant about human nature.</td>
<td>There is no guilt because there is not such a thing as good or evil.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Psycho-Biological:</strong> thoughts and emotions provoke chemical reactions and program our responses.</td>
<td>Emotions are produced in the brain through peptides and amino acids which change cells. Aging is the decay of improper production of proteins caused by non-assertive emotional processing.</td>
<td>Cells have consciousness and are vulnerable to emotional processing. Emotions develop physical addiction, however it is possible to have emotional control and live rehabilitated from all emotional addictions.</td>
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</tr>
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Table 15. Embedded Theses of *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*?

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23 Theodicy is a branch of theology and philosophy aimed to reconcile the co-existence of evil and God.
These theses ground the main proposal of the film, introduced as a new paradigm comprised of a new understanding of God, the good and the evil; a restatement of human possibilities and boundaries aimed to let the real desire inform the decision making process; and a new understanding of science and knowledge that surmounts traditional science and the influence of mass media. The explicit invitation is to adopt the “I create my day” program, consisting in a work-out of the mind, rather than the body, losing track of ourselves and interconnecting ourselves with the universe. The promise is to become creators of our selves, or as one of the scientists puts it: “to become enlightened, gain freedom, reach levels of the ‘avatars’ of Buddha and Jesus, and enter to the kingdom of Heaven”.

2.2 Psychoanalytic Film Analysis

During the applied data collection methods, informants spontaneously mentioned different scenes from What The Bleep do We (k)now!?. Males tended to focus on scenes where the interviewed scientists bestow their theoretical explanations, for example, TOMÁS said he was thrilled with the theory of ‘Water Crystals’ proposed in the film:

TOMÁS: One can have a down with the energy of your mind, that’s the main point of the crystals. Your own thoughts can block yourself. Like, hum, what people are commenting now that that it has been scientifically demonstrated that those who don’t express themselves suffer a sort of blockade and then they start fattening, and your mind makes your body get physical diseases and mental diseases. So, well, that’s because the energy is intelligent, and it goes directly wherever you need it if it is not blocked.
The few comments men did about Amanda’s story tended to be dismissive, deeming it unappealing, unnecessary, and distractive. Incidentally, Amanda was mentioned by male informants when in the film her image was used to illustrate an idea (for example when it is shown how her mood is affecting her brain cells unleashing harmful ‘peptides’). This was orthogonal to female informants, who did just the opposite: constantly referring to Amanda’s story and seldom focusing on the scientists’ participation. One female informant, who liked Amanda’s story, reported that she felt intimidated with the scientific aspects of the movie:

BEATRIZ: I was like ‘if this is going to be so scientific I won’t understand it’, that put me off for a while.

This suggests that the film’s proposals for subjectivity or subjective identification were not the same for women as for men. Female informants recalled and reconstructed some recursive scenes: the dreams Amanda has, the encounter with Reginald at the basketball court, the wedding Amanda attends to shoot pictures, and the scene at the bathroom where she reconciles with herself. From all recalled scenes, this 12 screen-minute scene at the bathroom, which I entitle “The Mirror and the Body Painting”, was the most mentioned one; four of every ten females singled it out.

The sequence was recalled and emotionally commented particularly by professional females. From them I drew the interpretative codes to inform my description of the scene. ALICIA, a 55 year-old faculty member, identified herself in this scene with regard to her own personal problem. She underscored the literalness and visual drive of the scene:
Alicia: Mmm yes, when the woman is painting “I love you” on all over her own body. I, who have problems with my own body, in accepting my body, with the excess/excesses of food. And it’s something that I’ve been working on for many years. It was so graphic, so harsh in the good sense of the term. Puff! I mean, what else can you say to your body than “I love you”, and not only as a mental stuff, but you actually paint it on you, like tattooing the love onto your body. That moved me very much. So, again, seeing that graphically, what’s going on inside your brain, what’s going on in your interior… for me there were/are things that I already knew. I, practically/nothing stated there was really new for me, it was just seeing it in a new way or in a very graphic way to state things.

Eusebia, a 43 year-old cobbler by trade, is an initiated in Pop-Esotericism. She also associated this scene with her eating disorder, and openly shared her self-identification to the rest of participants in the focus group she participated.

Eusebia: Because the girl, while being in front of the mirror/For example, what do you do in front of a mirror? I, what do I do in front of the mirror? Well, perhaps I saw myself reflected on that.

2.2.1 Descriptive moment: “The Mirror and the Body Painting”

The scene takes place at Amanda’s house the last day of her journey. Below is described the ‘key scene’ loaded with the interpretative codes used by my informants. Preceding and following the selected scene, I introduce its immediate previous and subsequent context. At the end of this chapter I have appended some film-stills from the key scene.24

24 For broader details of the scenes of each film the reader may see the time-coded Plot Segmentation at Appendix D.
Immediate Previous Context

Day #3 Afternoon. Int. (interior) Wedding Saloon (0.57:33)

Amanda takes snapshots at the wedding party. People eat and dance, and she sees them through the viewfinder of the camera as if they were animated cartoon-like cells. All what she observes looks distorted and linked to her own frustrated marriage. Amanda meets Elliot who has a crush on her. They drink, get drunk, and dance euphorically.

Key Scene

Day #4 Morning. Int. Amanda’s House. (1.13:06)

Amanda leans back experiencing a hangover. An envelope slides under the door containing the pictures she shot at the wedding party. Some pictures show her dancing euphorically and drunk, she turns to a mirror and meets her reflected image, distorted as a fat woman. Crosscut to her cells in cartoon-like animation, screaming and being bombarded by aggressive emotional peptides (see film frames in Figure 2 at the end of the Chapter). Scientists explain: ‘peptides are triggered by the brain and change cells’ sensibility; aging is the result of improper protein production’. We see then a hypothetical flash-forward of an aged Amanda in pain walking on the shore of a river. The scene crosscuts back to Amanda in front of the mirror despising herself she shouts: “I hate you!” Amanda heads to the bathroom to take a pill, she looks at the mirror and repeats “I hate you”; the reflected image is transformed into an old decrepit Amanda. Amanda emotionally explodes: violently squashes the toothpaste tube and smears it on the mirror while yelling and insulting her image: “you’re idiot, you suck, look at you, you’re fat, you’re ugly, you’re worth nothing, you’re getting old, I hate you!” The faucet of the sink
drips, she stares at a drop of water and then sees the man-in-a-suit reflected on the mirror
who reminds her: “if thoughts can do that to water, imagine what thoughts can do to us”.
The man is the one who in previous scenes explained to her Emoto’s Theory of Water
Crystals. Amanda reacts in what seems to be a cathartic outburst of loud laughter (see
film frames in Figure 3). Jennifer, her roommate, enters the bathroom asking for some
toothpaste, and sees Amanda drawing love hearts and baroque lines on her body with a
blue eyeliner. A scientist talks about letting the real desire emerge as we see an animation
of the brain reconnecting and rewiring. Amanda relaxes nude in the bathtub, drawing
love hearts on all over her body (see film frames in Figure 4 at the end of the Chapter).
The voice of Bob, her ex-husband, is heard in the answering machine: he wants to meet
her and patch up things between them.

*Immediate Subsequent Context*

Day #4 Afternoon-evening. Ext. (exterior) Church; Int. Cinema Theatre (1.25:37)

Amanda visits the outdoors of the church where she got married. She does not enter but
instead turns back and keeps on walking heading to the subway. At the lobby of the
Bagdad Movie Theatre she splits in two different Amandas walking in separate ways: one
Amanda meets Bill, the ex husband, and walks with him. The other Amanda stays and
closes her eyes; when she opens them, she sees one Amanda alone and both get fused in
one single Amanda, then she leaves the theatre.
2.2.2 Analytical moment

There are two different styles in the scene. On the one hand, the discourse of the Scientists follows the conventions of classical testimonial-based documentaries: edited answers of the interviewed Scientists are shown in natural settings with stable unobtrusive cinematography and lighting, plus insertions of digital animations for illustrative purposes and to help endowing senses of objectivity and credibility to their statements. The story of Amanda, on the other hand, is narrated in compliance with the melodramatic style. A main characteristic of melodrama is repression. Repression is expressed by oscillating episodes of contention and release, represented in various dyadic forms (scarcity/excess, lack/abundance, reserved withholding/bursting explosions) giving a sort of systolic-diastolic tension to the story, which often occurs in confined environments.

The story of Amanda is one of confinement, blockade, and restriction, which develops in intense emotional registers. For example, the crescendo and cathartic moment of her exploding, smashing her own image on the mirror, and being insulting to herself, attains a climactic breakpoint when she reaches the pinnacle marked by an outburst of loud laughter followed by an anticlimactic slope, when she achieves the sublimating point of her self-reconciliation. But emotionality is not only conveyed through acting style, but also by the emphasis given to the many props employed in the scene (the splattered toothpaste, the mirrors, the bathtub, the many hearts and baroque lines she draws on her body with an eyeliner). The arrangement of certain objects, such as the exaggerated deep blue tone of the steamy water in the bathtub, serves as a visual
metaphor for the new ‘stage’ Amanda reaches when she sublimates her frustrations, symbolizing her return to the warmth of the peaceful maternal womb. Excess, a hallmark of melodrama, is shown here not only in the grandiloquent reaction she has when she sees herself as someone worthless, but also in the exuberance of non-diegetic material such as the various inserts of animated shots. Excess is the booster of her crisis (too many things happen to her, all jammed in a very short time) and excess – her bursting explosion in front of the mirror – is the way through which she reaches sublimation, apparently relieving and solving her repression.

2.2.3 Key concepts for a socio-psychoanalytic reading of the scene

Prior to embark on a psychoanalytic interpretation of the reception of this scene, we need to briefly review the broad framework in which we can understand the dynamics embedded in it. Notions such as castration fears, the stage of Narcissus, and the implication of the gaze in unconscious psychic productions are derived from Jacques Lacan’s triadic model of human developmental process. Moreover, Lacan broadly discussed the field of vision (1949; 1973; 2006) and particularly explored the relations between the “eye” and the “I” (see Miller 1988) at the unconscious levels of the threefold register that he named the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. The following précis of Lacan’s categories and topology of human subjectivity will be useful not only to make sense of the viewing experience of What The Bleep do We (k)now!?, but will also inform my film analysis of the other two films.
The Borromean knot of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic

Disempowerment and incompleteness are issues that predate social-life and even language. They are ‘pre-historical’ in the Freudian sense (cf. *Totem and Taboo* 1998 [1913]), and in Lacan’s they are ‘haunting drives’ beyond (and behind) the symbolic order. For this author, subjectivity is conditioned by the articulation of the ever intertwined registers of the *real*, the *imaginary*, and the *symbolic*. In *Le Séminaire* 1972-1973, Lacan made use of the figure depicted at the coat of arms of the Borromeo family to illustrate the structural interdependency of the three orders. The Borromean knot forms three rings tied in such a way that cutting one of them will dissolve the knot. Lacan used this figure as a model for his topology of human subjectivity, stressing that the three orders and the subject are unhierarchically bound to each, and that the addition of the three realms gives not the structure, but rather the very topology *is* that structure. Lacan situates in these realms the developmental process of the human person.

Briefly, the Real Order corresponds to a state marked only by ‘need’. A baby needs and satisfies those needs with no awareness of his separation from the external world. The *real* is said to be “impossible” in the sense that by definition it can not be expressed in language. Still, the *real* exerts its influence throughout our life erupting when our fantasies and linguistic structures fail, notifying us of the edge of the boundary, the aspect of life beyond which we know there is something. The Imaginary Order is the cradle of the ego, it develops in a phase Lacan calls the ‘mirror stage’ making the subject
move from primal ‘need’ to ‘demand’. The child experiments a sense of loss and anxiety when realizing that his/her body is severed from the world and the mother. Faced to a mirror, the child sees a coherent, whole self, “a total unity that replaces his prior experience of fragmentation” (Muller and Richardson 1982:30) though it is a delusional and virtual one because the image does not correspond entirely to the child. And yet, the mirror image compensates the child’s sense of lack or loss forming what Lacan terms an “ideal-I”. Moreover, the image of oneself can be reflected in others inaugurating narcissistic identifications, as I explain in a forthcoming section. As with the real, the imaginary order continues to influence throughout life.

Finally, the Symbolic Order moves the subject from ‘demand’ to ‘desire’, which implies acknowledgement of language, narrative, law, and community. Lacan argues that desire in the symbolic order is more interested in reproducing itself than in obtaining the object of desire. Indeed, the very function of the symbolic is precisely to avoid full bare-contact with the real. The child enters into language while accepting the social rules that enable him to communicate with others. Lacan associates this stage with the Oedipus complex because, in his words, “It is in the name of the father [le nom du père] that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law [le non du père]” (Lacan 1973:67, my brackets). Both the imaginary and the symbolic order work in tension with the real, forming an inextricably intertwined unity.

25 ‘Needs’ can be fulfilled, whereas ‘demands’ according to Lacan are unsatisfiable. The movement takes the individual into the lack that will define his subjectivity.
As I mentioned earlier, the Lacanian pre-oedipal and pre-linguistic subject recognizes his/her mirrored image as him or herself. This primordial self-knowledge (*me-connaissssance*), thrust by a libidinal dynamism, creates the sense of a whole entity separated from the previous undefined boundaries between self and (m)other. The mirror gives an image that “seems” perfect and controlling, an ‘ideal-I’ or *imago* that produces great *jouissanse* and appeals to be loved in an enduring narcissistic fantasy. However, when the subject takes possession of this imago and compares it to its actual self, the subject realizes that it is insufficient and imperfect, turning the jubilant *me-connaissssance* into a *méconnaissssance*, or misrecognition. Leader and Groves (2000) describes the contrast between the ‘ideal-I’ and the ‘I-ideal’ as a tension between the desire for individual perfection and self-autonomy, and the desire to reconnect with the unbounded lost wholeness, thus exaggerating the difference and cementing the trauma of imperfection and self-loathing and the desire to become the unattainable ideal; in short: oscillating between aggressiveness and narcissism. The once jubilant separation, thus, generates a sense of loss that remains in a lifetime longing and desire to recover the wholeness. Therefore, the Imaginary Order of this stage sets the agency of the ego, before its social determination in the Symbolic Order, in a fictional direction.

The stage ends –developmentally speaking– as the ‘I’ becomes social, enters into the symbolic order, and keeps striving for its ‘I-ideal’ there. However, the mirror stage remains haunting in the *symbolic* and the Self looks at itself from the position of the perfect ideal-I, consequently seeing its life as imperfect, insufficient, and powerless. Adult subjects still feel uneasy about themselves and misrecognize their own image not
only because it does not look like them, but because it really is not them (in the materiality of their relational complexity), and still, self-images continue through their lives in a narcissistic fascination trying to alleviate this discomfort.

Lacan’s mirror dynamic is rehearsed among cinema spectators who experience the interplay of recognitions and misrecognitions of their own images projected as superior and external. The projected image works like an ideal ego which, once reintrojected in the viewer, becomes the ego ideal. This is a key mechanism to understand processes of appropriation of implicit proposals of subjectivity in spirituality-seeking movie audiences. Moreover, the mirror moment among cinema spectators is crucial as long as media culture shows us pictures into which we are invited to project ourselves, remitting us to the primordial fascination with looking “at our selves” in both Freudian and Lacanian senses. For Freud the absorption of the self in its mirror image is the basic characteristic of the varieties of narcissism (Martin 1993:333), whereas for Lacan (1949) it is in the mirror stage (not only as a developmental stage, but also as an ongoing rehearsed dynamic) where the ‘I’ and self-awareness are articulated; although there will always be ‘something else.’

The delusive enchantments of Narcissus

Narrative-films have structures of fascination that reinforce the social formatting mechanisms through which the ego is molded to fit in a social order. Paradoxically, these structures of fascination are so strong that they “allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego” (Mulvey 1992:26). This interplay of loss and
retrieval rehearses the dialectic myth of *Echo* and *Narcissus*, both enchanted respectively with the otherness and the sameness, and both related to the look and to the act of looking and being looked at. Publius Ovidius Naso [43 BC–AD18] intertwined both myths in a rendition full of eloquent and dramatic psychological elements that, on the one hand, illustrate the impossibility of communication when the ‘I’ and the ‘You’ are fatefully decoupled, and on the other hand, show two sorts of interrelated alienations: the ‘dissolving loss’ of the ego (*Echo* enchanted by otherness looses the body and becomes ethereal) and the delusive reinforcements (or retrievals) of the ego (*Narcissus* enchanted by sameness looses the soul despite his body gets a new –floral– materiality).

Ovid’s recount deserves careful attention. Fruit of a rape, Narcissus was born with such an astonish beauty that both men and women had desires on him. A prophecy warned that he will have a long life only if he never sees himself. Echo is a nymph who was punished by Juno to ‘never completely speak’ but just the last syllables she wanted to express. (Cfr. Publius Ovidius Nason. Book 3, Part 3 of *The Metamorphoses*, my synthesis) As soon as Echo sees Narcissus she falls in love, and secretly begins sighting him. One day Narcissus is hunting in the forest and gets lost, a sudden noise makes him shout: “*Who’s there?*” Echo responds “...*there.*” Narcissus is amazed with such a sweet voice (which indeed is his,) and asks “*Where are you?*” Echo repeats “...*you.*” Finally, Narcissus proposes: “*let’s meet*”, to which she answers “*let’s meet*” running towards him, but Narcissus bluntly rejects her embrace: “you must be nuts if you think I love you!” to what she sorrowfully says “...I love you”. Spurned, Echo looks for revenge pleading to the gods “... that when he loves as I do love, he becomes desperate as I am in
despair.” Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance, hears her plead. Sometime after, Narcissus takes a stroll in a valley and when thirsty he leans over a fountain seeing his own image reflected on the water. Foolishly he thinks that beautiful face is of a real being, alien to himself. “Yes, he is in love with the glittering of those eyes, the beardlessness of those cheeks, and that hair worthy of Apollo. He is the object of his own love and wants to possess himself.” Desperate, he chants his woe until he dies, his soul is sent to the ‘darkest hell’, and his body is transformed into a flower. Ovid’s version ends telling that before the metamorphosis concludes, Narcissus exclaimed: “Vain object of my love... good by” And Echo replied: “… good by”. As for Echo, her heartbreak was so deep that her body literally got dissolved and only her voice remained, which ‘throughout all valleys and mountains of the world still repeats the last syllables of all human pathos’. (Ovidio 1977:59-3, my synthesis and translation)

*Echo* and *Narcissus* is a duality regarded in Freudian and Lacanian frameworks as the ground of a twofold pleasure: firstly it is *scopophilia* (the pleasure of looking at another person as an erotic object), and secondly it is the *ego libido*, forming identification processes that may oscillate between narcissism and aggressiveness. Both are commonly present in the structures of narrative-films, serving the social formatting mechanisms through which the ego conforms to a given social order. Mulvey suggests that such an order is both *patriarchal* and *phallocentric*, and that such a couple of expressions depend on the negation of their opposites; in other words, to affirm *patriarchy* is to despise ‘manlessness’ and to affirm *phallocentrism* is to reject ‘phallolessness’. These disavowals (or rejections) are cemented in very specific images,
being women the epitome of them. In this sense, women give order and meaning to the patriarchal unconsciousness basically because they symbolize the castration threat.

2.2.4 The Therapeutic/Regressive Gaze in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?*

The story line of *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* reveals a particular structure of looking wherein the feminine gaze and desire are driven by anxiety for possession. Amanda is possessed by her deformed mirrored image and attempts to complete the reversal liberation: being herself the possessor (the observer) of her own image. This idea was understood by SELMA, for whom the importance of the scene resides in that it:

SELMA: …teaches you how to be the observer, ‘be the observer’. This is what really is worthy of the film. […] which is like not get hooked in all what is happening, but simply live in your center and ‘be the observer’, right?

It has been argued that looking and possessing are homologous since, as Merleau-Ponty (1968:139) puts forward, while “the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision.” Giddens (1991:77-8) considers this reflexivity as a means of cohering the self as an integrated whole. However, Amanda’s attempt to overcome castration by reinscribing her image into another image is in conflict with Lacan’s insistence that castration is not a matter to “overcome” but to “get over it”, that is: to face it, accept it, and deal with it. Otherwise what results is a phallic illusion that simply swaps one imagery for another imagery.
The feminine gaze presented in Amanda’s story relates to my previous discussion of the gaze in the work of Lacan in the sense that it reveals the horizon of the thrust of her experience of ‘lack’ that constitutes her castration anxiety. This is what ultimately happens to the heroine: she tries to ‘solve’ her own castration (divorce as a separating, fragmenting wound, and deftness as the impediment for communication/wholeness) by means of discharging her aggressiveness upon her own mirrored image. The outcome of this mirror dynamic is similar to what Homi Bhabha (1999:375) identified when a colonizer finds/builds an ‘image-as-identity’: a stereotypical identification that always is threatened by ‘lack’ and twofoldly edged by narcissism and aggressiveness.

In the film, Amanda engages in a ‘therapeutic ritual of primary narcissism’ modifying her own image by painting delicate drawings, similar to love hearts tattoos, on her body. Here it is important to distinguish between the imaginary realm of primary narcissism as opposed to secondary narcissism, which is associated with subjectivity governed by the dominant symbolic order. Primary narcissism is the initial focus on the self resulting from the attraction to the specular image. Lacan underscores that primary narcissism arisen in the imaginary order has a twofold character: it is both erotic and aggressive. It is erotic since the subject is strongly fascinated and attracted to his/her image, but it engenders aggressiveness since the wholeness of the mirrored image contrasts with the actual disunity of the subject's real body, who in turn feels threatened with disintegration. Such aggressiveness can lead subjects to self-destruction as illustrated in the myth of Narcissus (Lacan 1966:174, 187) as well as in “The Mirror and
the Body Painting” of What The Bleep do We (k)now!, or even in EUSEBIA’s recount of how she used to see herself in front of her own mirror:

EUSEBIA: the first thing I see is: hey! You are too fat! Look at that love-handle you have! [...] and I started seeing me fat, ugly, and I saw myself just just like that.

What is learned analytically about the self or subjectivity from the myth of Narcissus is that delusive enchantment with sameness carries a destructive drive, a ‘dissolving loss’ of the ego. In all variants of this Greek tragic figure, similar curses are poured on him: that he would “one day know the pain of unrequited love”, “…become desperate as I am in despair.” The Oxyrhynchus papyri include an account on Narcissus that predates Ovid’s by approximately fifty years. While Ovid’s version ends with a quiet –though lethal– metamorphosis, this earlier version suggests that the original myth had a more violent denouement: when Narcissus becomes entranced by his own reflection, he gets so desperate that he unsheathes his sword and kills himself, collapsing into a pool of his own blood. Note that the crystalline and calm waters that serve Narcissus as a mirror are disturbed and ‘smashed’, together with his reflection, just as Amanda did in her fit of rage when squashing and smearing toothpaste all over the mirror. A secondary narcissism would suppose a subject pursuing gratification over the achievement and adequacy to social conformities and norms (le nom du père), but this is precisely the narcissistic stage Amanda was at the beginning of the story, which proved to fail: unsuccessful marriage, disavowed performance as a professional photographer, failures in her social and symbolic interactions. To deal with her failures in the symbolic, Amanda apparently
regresses to the *imaginary*, refolding into herself instead of directly negotiating her (political) agency in the symbolic arena. In other words, by re-appropriating her self-image, Amanda establishes her own body as a site of negotiation (Wilson 1997:5) insofar as it manifests the immediacy of the Self. Furthermore, it is not circumstantial that Amanda’s ‘ritual of narcissism’ takes place in a ‘bath’ setting. Belk (1989:73) has pointed out that “contemporary body care rituals regard the bathroom as a shrine” wherein the self “is ritually bathed, anointed with oils, groomed, arrayed in sacred clothing, and decorated, as with tattoos”.

Female informants identified this scene as the climactic point: one participant reported that she actually performed a similar negotiation by mimicking the protagonist and painting alike drawings on her own body. Body painting is in itself a performance which is much more than a mere mode of theatrical production. Above all it “cites” parasitically the socially hypostasized *symbolic order* the performer lives in (Harper 1994:93). In this sense, Amanda’s performance, as well as those done by my subjects, is a discourse coded not in terms of linguistic language but of gestures, insinuations, and provocations. A similar idea of establishing a re-appropriating contact with ones’ own body through gestures was expressed by FRANCISCO, who declared that since he saw the film, every time he drinks water or eats something, he does the following:

FRANCISCO: So when I am about to drink water I pour good vibes on it, like “this is good”. I don’t know, the idea is to toss good energy onto things.

As I discussed earlier, the ‘Law in the name of the Father’ is both the avenue of solution to the Oedipus complex and the threshold to the symbolic in the developmental process
of the human person, making feasible the passage from the mirror stage to the symbolic order. This Lacanian idea also operates in the realm of pop cultural consumption of forms of filmic subjectivity and facilitates the analysis of consumer desires for visual cultural experiences pertaining to spirituality, because it puts forward two issue questions: Firstly, according to Lacan, desire is related to narrative, law, and community, and it is prone to reproduce the *symbolic* order itself, avoiding contact to or disturbances by the ever haunting *real*. The *real*, though, occasionally erupts notifying a ghostly ‘lack’ that causes misrecognition (*méconnaissance*), sometimes sensed as uneasiness or insecurity. Therefore, the first psychoanalytical question for the pop cultural realm is what kind of haunting (insecurity or anxiety) might a specific media product that proposes subjectivity related to spirituality be addressing. Secondly, also following Lacan the primacy of communication (i.e. narrative, language) in the *symbolic* fosters particular forms of subjectivity governed by the dominant symbolic order. As discussed earlier, this kind of secondary narcissism promises gratification over adequacy to social conformities and norms. Hence, a second psychoanalytical question is: what avenues of solution are proposed to the Self to cope with sensed anxieties and insecurities?

Along the story, Amanda is propelled to the threshold of the *symbolic* in order to overcome her castration. In her journey she has had different contacts with the *symbolic* through a series of encounters with authoritative voices (*le non du père/le nom du père*) who instruct her on the *do’s* and the *don’ts*, but the breakpoint is the presence of this father-look mature *man-in-a-suit* who reminds her of the theory of Water Crystals. The “therapeutic culture of narcissism” as described by Giddens (1991:173-9) is a response to
socially produced ontological insecurity, advocating for an alternative subjective ontology that stresses, like in this film, that reality is not grounded nor identified with materiality; rather, reality is a subjective construction and a perception that depends on volition and thoughts, as a male participant of a focus group echoed:

GUILLERMO: You are your life and you make it your way, and your vision is the valid one and what turns out to be real at the end of the day.

According to Giddens, the therapeutic culture of narcissism foresees the rising of “new paternalisms” that minister to the needs of the narcissistic personality providing a sort of ‘therapeutic control’ to attain and preserve ‘adequate social functioning’ levels. The film offers a variety of figures fulfilling this new paternalism; besides the fictional characters, as the mature man-in-a-suit, it introduces several scientists servicing the same role. Many male participants felt empathetic towards these authoritative voices. This is how ROLANDO and VICENTE regarded the “quantum guys” in the film:

ROLANDO: The coolest thing of these quantum guys is that although they have such an amazing theoretical and practical knowledge, they can explain the stuff using the simple words that are used in the daily parlance of us mere mortals.

VICENTE: they deal with very sophisticated and highly scientific stuff, very complicated; and still all the information they handle is presented in simple terms, using accessible, clear, and ordinary language to make it understandable to the broad audience.

Female participants, though, identified more with the fictional paternities (e.g. characters as the man-in-a-suit) that appear in Amanda’s story. Even though Amanda identifies herself with the ‘Law of the Father’, this identification doesn’t make her renegotiate her
(re)entry into the oedipal triad, but rather she folds back to the pre-linguistic and pre-narrative realm of the mirror stage (the Imago) wherein she swaps the sign of the primary narcissist imago: from an aggressive to an erotic one represented by the body-drawings she does on herself. Thus, cathartic aggressiveness in her case, comes before secondary narcissism, or better said: once the subject has regressed to a primary narcissism.

Settled in her new narcissistic stand, as shown in the immediate subsequent context and ending of the film, Amanda observes, at the lobby of a cinema theater – another mirror, the many open possibilities of the crossroad of her life. One possibility could be ‘marriage’ (reconciling with her ex-husband), which would “solve” her castration by reintegrating herself into the symbolic. However, Amanda refuses this possibility and rather she opts to physically ‘fuse’ with her own projected image, which might be interpreted as a regressive movement to the mirror stage. In other words: Amanda does not enter completely to the Symbolic through the encounter with the Law of the Father, but rather uses it to perform the phallic illusion of a regressive resistance to the symbolic. From this new imagery, Amanda’s female presence will occupy the protagonistic role of the story that, supposedly, will follow in her life. Lacanian schema seems to fit the story told in What The Bleep do We (k)now!? However it only fits analogically because fascinating images of the mirror stage suppose a pre-linguistic and therefore a pre-narrative stance, which is impossible to revisit because once a subject enters into the symbolic all subsequent images it consumes are encoded in language.

While it is not valid to extrapolate Lacan’s developmental process by simply equating fascinating images to consuming media narratives, it is also true that for Lacan
the structural condition of the symbolic (social) order is 'neurosis’ insofar the obsessional, the phobic, and the hysterical are expressed therein through social objects that project conflicts originated at individuals’ earlier stages. Thus, for example, social phobias are articulated in imaginary objects of all sorts –including entertainment media products such as films– aimed to reorganize the symbolic world (Lacan 1991:230, 245-6). Furthermore, while examining the distance between myths and the actual city they originate in, Joshua Nichols (2008) suggests that cultural artifacts are traces of the neuroses of a collectivity, when taken as a type of social conception, they provide “a map of the city as a neurotic social object” (2008:462) insofar as they carry “a form of contaminative excess within their structures and as such become at once the focal point of anxiety and irreducible fascination” (2008:463). Stories like the one told in What The Bleep do We (k)now!? exemplify this conveyance, carrying fears of disempowering incompleteness related to a threat of castration. The marketplace has been sensitive to this anxiety and supplies products that offer practical solutions to “improve” and “re-empower” the Self. The following verbatim by IGNACIO exemplifies this position:

IGNACIO: You are the one who chooses and you can improve. You are the creator of your environment and of all things that happen to you; I agree on the messages, that if your mind is in order, obviously your life will be in harmony, because thoughts, really, I mean, you are what you think, right?

Embedded in a consumer society, ‘self-improvement discourse’ proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves and our lives by means of emphasizing the self-centering of the subject; a thing one achieves by acquiring (adhering to) certain belief practices that
will make us somewhat better. The task is undertaken individually; one male participant accentuated this self-centered drive:

LUCIANO: I learnt that we are responsible for taking our lives in our own hands. Making your life more optimistic, more centered in yourself, in your body and mind, giving yourself time for yourself.

To persuade us of such transformation, these products show us glamorous people who have apparently been transformed and, thus, becoming socially enviable. When envy and glamour glue, as John Berger (1977) notes, experienced powerlessness becomes demobilizing because the possibility of overthrowing the existing social conditions gets inhibited and swapped with a continuous dissolution of the subject into “recurrent daydreams” (Berger, J. 1977:148). But products such as What The Bleep do We (k)now!? not only assume the discourse of “self-improvement”, they also are coated in the form of therapies. Giddens (1991) suggests that therapy is an expert system in settings where religion no longer supplies binding guidelines, and that consumption-driven therapies, far from being surrogates of the authority of previous times, “interpret the reflexive project of the self in terms of self-determination alone, thus confirming, and even accentuating, the separation of lifespan from extrinsic moral considerations.” (Giddens 1991:180)

Both the social interactionist and the Giddenian account of the self as fundamentally incomplete address a distinct, though complementary, layer of incompleteness than the one addressed by the Freudian/Lacanian notion of ‘lack’. As
David Morgan\textsuperscript{26} remarks, in both, one is driven toward completion, but the motive and the goal are quite different. In the first it is not shame or fear or a reminiscent anxiety of a severed wholeness that compels one, “but desire for the fullness that one encounters in the consoling, tender presence of the other (mother, father and their surrogates). The end is discovery of the greater good of presence to and for others.” For the psychoanalytic model, however, the drive is rooted in a range of traumatic experiences that are sublimated in love for companions. One never loves them as much as one loves what they do for the self.

The implications for social presence and social ethics seem profound. Morgan explains how the difference plays out in \textit{What The Bleep do We (k)now!?} as follows: “What Amanda destroys is, by the social interactionist or the Guiddenesque account, the self that was false because it was invested in a misrecognition that became visible with the end of her marriage. But then she takes a wrong turn by turning her love upon herself rather than trying to reconstruct the relationship (both Giddens and the symbolic interactionists would criticize the narcissism of the character, contending that there is no primordial oneness of self upon which the adult ego may be based); whereas the Lacanian view would regard her self-love as a regression to an infantile state, a return to the pre-mirror stage that seeks to ‘reboot’ the psychic system.”

\textsuperscript{26} Personal communication. Comments regarding the present analysis by David Morgan, Dept. of Religion, Duke University. April 16th 2009.
Figure 2. Amanda sees her mirrored image distorted as a fat woman. Cartoon-like animation of Amanda’s cells being bombarded by emotional peptides.

Figure 3. The image morphs into an old decrepit Amanda. Amanda bursts: “you’re idiot, you suck, look at you, you’re fat, you’re ugly, you worth nothing, you’re getting old, I hate you!”

Figure 4. The man-in-a-suit: “if thoughts can do that to water, imagine what thoughts can do to us”. Amanda relaxes in the bathtub, drawing love hearts all over her body.
Chapter 3
The Da Vinci Code

3.1 Industrial and Narrative Aspects

*The Da Vinci Code* (USA, 2006) is a 150 minutes fictional film, adapted from the same title novel by Dan Brown, who wrote the screenplay jointly with Akiva Goldsman. Succinctly, the film tells the story of religious symbol expert Robert Langdon and cryptologist police-officer Sophie Neveu, both committed to solve the mysterious murder of Louvre curator Jacques Saunière, and challenged by the collection of hints and riddles he left before dying. The clues make them find an artifact called the ‘Criptex’: a sealed wooden box containing a papyrus scroll. The protagonists ask help from Sir Leigh Teabing, who uses the Da Vinci’s *Last Supper* fresco to explain to them that the Holy Grail is Mary Magdalene who was Jesus’ wife and had a daughter with him. After following different riddles, the protagonists come to realize that Sophie is the direct descendent of Jesus and Magdalene and, therefore, the living proof either that Jesus was only a human being, a deception concealed by the Church, or that she inherited Jesus’ divinity.

3.1.1 Production, distribution, and exhibition

*The Da Vinci Code* was directed by Ron Howard (*Angels & Demons*, 2009; *The Missing*, 2003; *A Beautiful Mind*, 2001; *The Grinch*, 2000; *Apollo 13*, 1995). Both, R. Howard and
D. Brown served as producer and executive producer, respectively\(^{27}\) in what became a rather high budgeted project (USD $125,000,000)\(^{28}\) with high levels of production values: shot in four countries in Europe, 74 actors –amongst them all who played co-leads and secondary leads are acknowledged movie stars\(^{29}\)–, and 730 people in the crew. This Hollywood studio production was made by Columbia Pictures and Imagine Entertainment in association with the independent production company Brian Grazer/John Calley Company. The production hired 13 special effects companies (SFX Co.) plus 29 intermediate companies for different purposes\(^{30}\).

Columbia Pictures and Sony Pictures Releasing distributed the film in the US theatres. Worldwide sales and distribution were conducted by Columbia TriStar Films and Sony Pictures Entertainment, both used their affiliates and network to distribute the film in 68 countries. Three independent companies were also involved to cover three specific markets (Switzerland, Czech and Finland). Distributors promoted the feature in many international festivals obtaining 12 nominations (including Ron Howard’s for the 2007 Razzie Awards to the Worst Director). No award is reported as won. The film was distributed in Mexico by Columbia TriStar Films.\(^{31}\)

\(^{27}\) Typically, a producer is responsible for raising funding and hiring key personnel; an executive producer focuses on business and legal issues. Also involved as producers for this film, were: John Calley, Brian Grazer, Todd Hallowell, Kathleen McGill, and Louisa Velis.


\(^{29}\) Cast included Tom Hanks, playing Dr. Robert Langdon; Audrey Tautou, as Agent Sophie Neveu; Ian McKellen, as Sir Leigh Teabing; Jean Reno, as Captain Bezu Fache; Paul Bettany, playing Silas; and Alfred Molina, as Bishop Manuel Aringarosa.


The Da Vinci Code was globally released in 68 countries simultaneously on May 19th, 2006. This releasing strategy, known as “day and date”, is becoming a typical form for blockbusters that only major Hollywood studios can do. It consists as in a precautionary measure aimed to neutralize the possible negative impact caused by specialized film critique, piracy, or unfavorable reception. In the US, the film lasted 14 weeks with a screen mode of 3,757 screens and a screen slope at the 8th week. In Mexico, The Da Vinci Code stayed 15 weeks in the box office of the major theatre chains, raising 19 million dollars (which places Mexico in the 9th slot of the foreign grossing). The film made a worldwide gross of circa 760 million dollars (a profit ratio of 1:5); 28.7% of the gross was domestic and 71.3% was foreign, to which Mexico contributed with 3.6% share.

3.1.2 Narrative Form and Synopsis

The story unfolds according to a narrative plot driven by a search-and-find motivation. Its structure sticks to active cause-and-effect situations typical of detective film conventions. As such, the plot furnishes elements to arouse audience’s curiosity hand by hand with main characters’ curiosity. Bordwell and Thompson (2004:13) note that “in the detective film the climax of the plot (the action that we see) is a revelation of prior incidents in the story (events which we did not see)”. Based on Bordwell and Thompson’s diagram for detective narratives, the story and plot of The Da Vinci Code distribute as shown in Figure 5.
When asked to categorize movies seen in the past two years, my informants mentioned a rather short and very specific list, including: comedy, thriller, drama, horror, documentaries, historic, sci-fi, and some other alike categories often used by cinema critiques in mainstream media from where they probably borrow the names. They showed little discrepancy in categorizing films that were currently in the box office. However, what seems to be an assumed and clear taxonomy for categorizing films turned to be not so functional when they tried to categorize *The Da Vinci Code*. A focus group of undergrad students had hard time to define to which genre this film belongs:

**FLAVIA:** Contrary to *The Passion of the Christ* which clearly is a religious movie, this one is a more commercial one. It deals with religion but it is not religious, I would say it is a mystery movie, that’s the genre I think it belongs to: mystery, entertainment mystery. For me it is a mystery movie, but I’m not sure.

**RAMÓN:** for me it was not very clear, I wouldn’t dare to classify it.

**BRUNO:** how about ‘mystery with a touch of action’

**SILVIA:** or mystery… mixed with … mmm.

**RAMÓN:** hard, hum…
FACILITATOR: Why is it so hard to classify it, Ramón?

RAMÓN: because, for me it wasn’t, I don’t know, it doesn’t stick to any genre. It was all confusing, I never knew if data presented there were historical or not. It criticizes the church very bluntly and often without arguments but pretending it has. I guess that’s why I didn’t like it very much.

Adult participants also showed hesitation. RICARDO, a 52 year-old mathematician and physicist, strived in deciding if the film should be classified as “scientific” or as a “fictional” one, and business administrator GERARDO made use of many adjectives to term the genre:

GERARDO: it might be a new genre. Say a ‘religious-suspense-conspiracy-thriller drama’

LORETTA: I’d keep it as a typical police movie, though with less action.

This lack of assertivity in classifying a film that, formally, is completely conventional to the detective film genre might be caused in part by what LORETTA suggests: the film fails in maintaining a thrilling action throughout the film, a feature that most readers acknowledge for the book on which the film was based. But also, as I will elaborate further, because of the way the female main character is cinematically treated and the particular ‘scopophilia’ to which she is subjected.

Although Appendix D.2 includes the complete Plot Segmentation of *The Da Vinci Code*, I present below a more detailed synopsis of the film.
**Synopsis of The Da Vinci Code**

Art curator Jacques Saunière is killed by Opus Dei ‘monk’ Silas at Le Louvre after being forced to reveal to him where the Holy Grail is hidden. Before dying, Saunière sets a collection of hints making the police look for—and suspect—a religious symbol expert, Robert Langdon. Cryptologist police officer Sophie Neveu arrives at the crime scene and tells Langdon she is Saunière’s granddaughter and that he is in great danger. After fooling police Cptn. Fache’s surveillance, Sophie and Robert track the hints (an anagram/riddle) in the museum which lead them to a couple of paintings by Da Vinci. They find there a key for a safety deposit box. In the meanwhile, Silas reports to his boss, Bishop Aringarosa who instructs him to get the Grail at any cost. Silas proceeds but finds out that the place given by Saunière (the Church of Saint Sulpice) was a false clue. At the bank vault Langdon and Sophie open the safe and get a sealed wooden-box designed by Leonardo Da Vinci, named the ‘Criptex’. The box—containing a papyrus scroll—can only be opened by matching a series of rings labeled with letters to form a password. If deciphered the Criptex will open and tell where the Holy Grail is; if forced to open, an intricate mechanism will destroy the papyrus and the secret will be lost forever. Sophie and Robert visit a Holy Grail expert, Sir Leigh Teabing, and ask him for refuge. Teabing explains to them, using images of Da Vinci’s Last Super fresco, that the Grail is actually Mary Magdalene, who was Jesus’ wife and had a daughter with him. He also explains that The Priory of Sion are the guards of Magdalene’s tomb and of Jesus’ bloodline, which is the scientific evidence that Jesus was just a man. Silas trespasses the place and attacks them just minutes before the police arrives. The group subjugates Silas—with the
help of Remy, Teabing’s assistant– and takes Silas with them in a private jet bound to London.

Robert Langdon discovers another hidden riddle in the wooden box of the Criptex that leads to a Templar Church in London. However, Remy sets free Silas and both threaten the group and take Teabing and the Criptex with them. Remy drives Silas to an Opus Dei house and later releases Teabing, who happens to be part of the conspiracy. Teabing kills Remy and sets a trap for Silas and Aringarosa; the police will kill the first and arrest the second. Meanwhile, Sophie and Robert head to Westminster Abbey to Isaac Newton’s tomb in front of which they are supposed to find the correct code for opening the Criptex. Teabing shows up and forces them to open the Criptex for him, but Robert claims he does not know the code, and then throws the Criptex up in the air to deceive Teabing. The Criptex shatters at the time the police arrive and arrest Teabing. Robert tells Sophie that actually he figured out the correct code and opened the Criptex just before he threw it up into the air. The papyrus inside the Criptex poses a final riddle that leads them to Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland. Down in the basement of Rosslyn Chapel, Sophie and Robert find the archives of the Priory of Sion as well as the site that once housed Magdalene’s sarcophagus. The archives reveal that Sophie is the direct descendent of Magdalene and Jesus, the living proof that Jesus was human. However, without the sarcophagus there is no way to make a DNA test. As they exit the chapel, members of the Priory of Sion show up and welcome Sophie, who in turn decides to stay with them. Back in Paris, Robert Langdon realizes that ‘Rosslyn’ can also be read as ‘Rose-Line’ (the marks indicating the meridian line on the streets of Paris). He follows
the marks and gets to the inverted crystal pyramid at the Louvre, realizing that underneath lies the sarcophagus containing Mary Magdalene’s remains. Langdon reverently kneels.

3.2 Psychoanalytic Film Analysis

Informants mentioned a variety of images from The Da Vinci Code that got stuck in their memory: the murdered body of Saunière laying on the floor in a christic position (mimicking Da Vinci’s Vitruvian man), the car chasings in Paris, the albino Opus Dei monk Silas wearing a ‘discipline’ made of iron spikes and whipping himself with a cilice. However these are but separate fragments that due to their eye-catching visualism (all action-based) had impacted viewers, not necessarily leading them to further discussion. Nevertheless, there was one scene in which focus groups spent the most time reconstructing and vividly discussing it, namely, the scene where the theories and rationale of the plot is explained through the exegesis of Leonardo da Vinci’s fresco The Last Supper.

Paulina: I remember the opening scene, when this man is killed in the museum and they find him in the middle of a circle, and when the monk was whipping himself hitting like this, and the paintings by Da Vinci, the Last Supper where they prove how Mary Magdalene was actually a woman and Jesus is hugging her. I think these three scenes were those which called more my attention.

Both women and men commented on this scene, but interestingly women mostly restricted their participation to merely recreate the scene, for example ESTELA was very specific in describing the scene, but refrained to give further elaboration about it:
EStELA: Using the ‘Last Supper’ they explain to you, you see the changes they make in the scene: the apostle next to Jesus is of course Mary Magdalene. When they move her to the other side, next to Jesus, you clearly see she is leaning on his chest. Likewise, without changing her position they lean her over Jesus. She has breasts, her hands are crisscross like this, which means she is a female. Of course it is a painting by Da Vinci because supposedly Da Vinci was a member, right? a member of the Knights Templar. So, here they give big importance to his paintings because supposedly in those paintings Da Vinci described many mysteries he knew.

The ones who most elaborated and reflected on the scene were male informants. In several sessions, at this point of the conversation, a male participant took on the leadership of the group. I present below some of the utterances out of which one can infer elements for reading/describing the scene:

ENRIQUE, a 21 year-old Law student, considers this sequence as a “symbolic” one. He underscores and reflects on the visual and graphic aspects of it, relating them to knowledge and teaching.

ENRIQUE: […] of the pictures of… ah… the, the pictures of Leonardo da Vinci where The Last Supper is painted. They show you Mary Magdalene, in a way they do show her as if she were a woman instead of another apostle.

FACILITATOR: Why did you like that scene?

ENRIQUE: I found it very symbolic, specially the scene of the painting

FACILITATOR: In what sense symbolic?

ENRIQUE: In that if the film wants to tell you that the one who is beside Jesus is Mary Magdalene, it will certainly do. So, in some way, what it “enseña” to you is
what you are seeing, which depends on what you’ve been told about. In some way it can alter your perception of either the painting or of any other symbol.

ENRIQUE uses the Spanish word “enseñar”, which stands for overlapping meanings: to teach, to visually show something, to point out, to proof, to demonstrate, to exhibit, to give a lesson.

LUCAS, a 30 year-old employee for a marketing and advertising firm, identified the scene as the one that grabbed his attention due to its ability of linking different ideas and things:

LUCAS: I found it very/that’s the one which grabbed my attention. because uh, as I said, Dan Brown did a very cool linkage of all those histories.

FACILITATOR: Why is that particular scene so striking for you?

LUCAS: Why it struck me? Well, because it is very ingenious, truly, I mean, it’s like taking someone’s painting that someone who wrote something about somebody/ Just imagine you paint a painting of, I don’t know, a guy who lived a thousand years ago, ok?, so that is a painting pretty much according to your perception, because you really didn’t see that guy a thousand years ago, right? You are a thousand years afterwards. So you look at that painting, ok, and you put signals or codes on it in order to/because you want to say something, ok, again. That’s how artists express, and so do writers and so forth. I mean, all people who expresses in some way does that like this, in their way.

For LUCAS good creative linkages are synonymous of knowledge of “the real stuff”:

LUCAS: So, Da Vinci made that painting and then, I mean Dan Brown takes that, I mean, that painting, five hundred years later, and Da Vinci painted it 1500 years after Christ lived. And he [Dan Brown] merges that burning stuff, and thus, for example, the existence of Mary Magdalene is set in doubt, or if she was Christ’s
lover. That has been always a doubt and there has been always a stream stressing that yes, that she was indeed his lover and so on and so forth. So, he takes all that and takes the real stuff, well, what he asserts is in the Da Vinci’s painting, saying this means that, and he uses this for/to make a novel, right?

For informants of both genders the female character –Sophie Neveu– was somehow overlooked, or shadowed by the male character –Robert Langdon. For example José, a 28 year-old lawyer, uttered the following when asked to express his thoughts about the main characters:

José: I found him [Robert Langdon] actually very interesting. Indeed all about the symbols is quite a lot interesting. I remember that he is specialized in that, so he helps her deciphering everything. He is a good character, very intelligent, right?

Facilitator: And what do you think about her?

José: Uh, she’s kind of mediocre, you know? Nothing of hers called my attention.

Most male viewers were more or less neglectful or indifferent to Sophie’s presence on screen. It is not that the actress playing her part was viewed as mediocre: Audrey Tautou is recognized among my subjects as a good actress since her performance in *Amélie* (France 2001).

Cristina: The film is ok, it could be more… I don’t know, more profound I guess, though Tautou and Tom Hanks make a nice couple, the only thing is that in this film she is like not quite understanding what’s going on.

Interestingly, while participants referred to Robert Langdon indistinctly as ‘Langdon’ or ‘Tom Hanks’, and to Sir Leigh Teabing as ‘the professor’ or ‘the one who played
Gandalf”, they referred to *Sophie* simply as “the girl.” Apparently the low profile or *erasure* of the character was also transmitted to the performer. The following set of utterances, taken from different interviews, illustrates how differently the two main characters were seen in terms of pro-activity:

NADIA: …the daughter of the man who dies and she has to reveal the secret, and how the detective, all clever and almighty, solves the riddles guiding her and helping her, you know, the hero and the intelligence and that stuff.

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TANIA: The character of the girl whose name I can’t remember now, who is trying to, as far as I recall, to find out why her father was murdered, and Tom Hanks, who is an investigator and works in deciphering the clues and finally discovers that she is a possible descendant of Jesus Christ.

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MANUEL: Well, he is like a code-decipherer, right? A very interesting character I really liked.

FACILITATOR: And how about her?

MANUEL: She is an awesome actress. She is, well, the daughter, the supposedly daughter of Christ.

3.2.1 Descriptive moment: “Exegesis of the Last Supper”

The “*Exegesis of the Last Supper*” has a screen duration of 24 minutes and takes place moments after Sophie and Langdon find the ‘Criptex’ and escape from the police. It is late night and they are at Le Château Villette, residence of Sir Leigh Teabing. Below is

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the description of the sequence and its context. Film frames of the scene are appended at the end of this chapter.

Immediate Previous Context

Night. Int. Bank. Ext. Streets of Paris (0.51:10)

The key that Sophie and Langdon found in the Louvre leads them to the Banque Zurichoise de Depot whose manager explains to them that “Technologies change, keys are updated, but our accounts date back to the beginning of banking itself”. A robotic hi-tech mechanism brings them a bin containing inside a small wooden box. The police arrive and the manager helps them to escape. Sophie opens the box, finds the Criptex, and visually explains its mechanism. The manager tries to take the artifact from them, but they escape and drive to Château Villette. In the meanwhile Silas recalls his many killings and lashes himself with a cat o' nine tails-like whip, as penance for murdering a nun at the Church of St Sulpice.

Key Scene

Late Night. Int. Château Villette. (1.11:37)

Sir Leigh Teabing, using a pair of canes as crutches, warmly welcomes Sophie and Langdon. In the meanwhile Opus Dei Bishop Aringarosa orders murderer Silas to get to the Villette. In a ping-pong ‘lecturing’, Teabing and Langdon explain to Sophie what the Priory of Sion and the Holy Grail are (see film frames in Figure 6 at the end of the Chapter). The explanation is illustrated with non-diegetic dramatizations. Sophie recalls the “christic/crucified” figure of Saunière, her murdered grandfather. Teabing states: “as
long as it has been One True God there has been killing in his name”. The characters head to the former ballroom, now conditioned as a library-studio arranged with a variety of scientific instruments. At the center of the room a flat HD screen mounted on an easel displays Da Vinci’s *Last Supper*. At a certain moment the monitor will serve as a blackboard. Langdon explains the symbols for the masculine (a ‘phallus’ or ‘blade’) and the feminine (a ‘cup’ or a ‘vessel’). Teabing manipulates a wireless remote control, zooming in, enhancing, cropping, dragging and dropping the figure of St. John the Apostle in the fresco, calling attention on his long hair and feminine features and stressing that that figure appearing as John is actually Mary Magdalene (see film frames in Figure 7 at the end of the Chapter). Langdon shows Teabing the ‘Criptex’, who carefully examines it with the aid of forceps and a magnifying glass. In the meanwhile Silas has trespassed the property and attacks them, though is quickly subdued (see Figure 8). When the police arrive, the group has already escaped and heads to the airport. Teabing says “What happens if some persuasive scientific evidence emerges that shows that Catholic Church’s version of Christ is inaccurate? What if the world discovers that greatest story of Christ is actually a lie?”

*Immediate Subsequent Context*

Midnight-Early morning. Int. Airplane. (1.34:00)

The fugitives take a private jet. In the meanwhile Aringarosa utters that after the “teacher” delivers him the Grail all the proofs will be annihilated, including Jesus’ heirs. Langdon discovers inside the wooden box a legend with a riddle that leads the group to the Church of the Knights Templar in London.
3.2.2 Analytical moment

There are many aspects built into this scene that inform and give consistency to my informants’ interpretation. Below is the summary of what I deem the most salient ones, referring the reader to the detailed analysis of time, narrative, style, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound aspects of this scene, in Appendix C.2.

Revelation in *The Da Vinci Code* is the outcome of both the plot’s way of distributing information, and the intellectually deductive scientific investigation crafted by the hero. The depth of information is presented as objective. Even though the film entertains the idea –at least theoretically– that “*The mind sees what it chooses to see*” in fact the film avoids any access to the characters’ perceptual subjectivity. Whatever the characters see, and especially what they think and conclude, is taken as an objective and unobjectionable truth with practically no room for doubt. The free deductive linking of historical data is presented as ‘scientific evidence’. We will discuss further in Part Two how scientific rhetoric and crypto-history are typical in ‘pop-scientific’ and ‘pop-esoteric’ discourses for constructing social knowledge.

The story combines two subgenres: the *Treasure Quest* subgenre and what could be termed a *Techno-Forensic* subgenre. As a *Treasure Quest* (the quest for the Holy Grail) the plot flows by the correct answering to a series of clues, puzzles and riddles. *Treasure Quest* stories often imply paths of chained riddles that are posed beforehand by absent haunting-personages (e.g. Jacques Saunière, who is dead). Somehow the one who poses the set of riddles coalesces with the author of the story in the sense that both are omniscient invisible narrators that establish in advance the fate of the protagonists. They
all are –as Sophie complains– “marionettes” of an already written script. As a Techno-Forensic thriller, a concept I develop in the Second Part of this work, the film assumes the aesthetics of a surgical scrutiny aided by hi-tech gadgets and tools to uncover the truth: robotic mechanisms, the last generation surveillance systems, digital tracking devices, fluorescent analyzers, snapshots, interactive image processors. In this particular scene, techno-forensic aesthetics works as a metaphor of the fetishistic scrutiny Sophie is submitted to. Paradoxically the proximity to the painting and to Sophie’s life is achieved not by shortening physical distances between the object and the observer, but exacerbating the gap by means of obstructing the direct experience putting in the midst an artifact (digital image processors) that eventually overcomes distance at least in appearance. The most relevant element of this scene is the digital-based manipulation – and the technology implied– to exert exegesis on the Last Supper. This specific part of the scene had big impact on some of my interviewees:

**Manuel:** The coolest part I think is when, when it describes all the, when links the Holy Grail to the feminine figure, right? When you see the triangle and the curves like this [gesturing] in the painting, you saw it right? When they discover all this, for me it was/that was the part that called my attention. As I told you, Dan Brown did a great job linking all those stories.

The deployment of last generation technology contrasts with the rather contemplative ‘mood’ the sole presence of the Criptex attains. Teabing holds this object with perplexity and reverence, as if he were in front of a sort of sacristy or liturgical ciborium. In a previous non-diegetic scene we already saw the intricate mechanism of this gadget and its power to preserve or destroy its content. Breaking the code would imply a direct and
tangible access to the Truth; hence, Truth is something not revealed nor found, but above all disclosed through decipherment. As a mysterious and mystical object, it acts as a talisman of power, awakening fetishistic relationships with it. It is a proxy of the Sacred Blood, which is ultimately the object of desire for both protagonists and antagonists in the story. To ‘open’ the Criptex is to make the invisibility of the divine (Jesus’ bloodline) tangible and controllable in a motionless vitrified object (Sophie) to possess, but also to be possessed by.

3.2.3 Key concepts for a socio psychoanalytic reading of the scene

The story unfolding in *The Da Vinci Code* implies mechanisms of displacement and disavowal materialized in the person of the main character, Sophie. Such mechanisms of the unconscious prefigure the psychic production of a fetish, which within the Lacanian model of subjectivity is a way –culturally the most recursive– to cope with the uneasiness awakened by the haunting experience of one of the three orders, namely the *Real*.

The formation of a fetish implies a fixation which generally is of a visual nature (also known as scopophilia) through which the subject exerts ‘voyeuristic’ objectifications over what is intuited as threatening. The theme of fetishism and disavowing scopohilias are key to interpret the present film, nevertheless I will enlarge on these two concepts in the next chapter when submitting *The Passion of the Christ* to analogous discussion.
The ever haunting Real

There is ‘something else’, always h(a)unting and tensing both the imaginary and the symbolic orders. The eruption of the real occurs on a daily basis; it notifies us the edge of the boundary, the aspect of life beyond which we know there is something. Lacan was fond of remarking that what is always at stake is the real –le réel toujours en jeu. In his thought, what actually mobilizes the experience and construction of subjectivity is the disavowal that comes when individuals experience “what-does-not-work” –ce qui ne marche pas, another way of depicting the real. Moreover, Martine Lerude’s entry\textsuperscript{33} on the real reads: “when the framework of the imaginary wavers and speech is lacking, when reality is no longer organized and pacified by the fantasy screen, the experience of the real emerges in a way that is unique for each person,” awakening primary displacements, or disavowals, as a mechanism of the unconscious to materialize processes such as religion and/or fetishism, to cope with the lack, the void, the uneasiness of meaninglessness.

Displacements and disavowals of this kind are psychic productions not restricted to the individual’s inner realm. As the real also irrupts within the social collective, it unleashes collective disavowals and displacements often materialized in visual-driven plasticities that are poured into the social imagery. Such collective materialized psychic productions find expression and wide circulation in popular culture. It is right through pop cultural imagery –out of which narrative cinema stands out– that the collective unconscious gets a chance to conjure the threats of the real. As psychoanalytic film

theoricians have argued (Lemire 2000; Mulvey 1993), in contemporary culture the most recursive mechanism to cope with felt uneasiness from the real is that of fetishism. At this point it is worth making a digression to clarify more attentively the term ‘fetishism’ in the way it is employed in this work.

Fetishism, phantasmatic inscriptions of ‘whatever is missing’

Visual media products involve active processes of visual cultural consumption through which viewers are able to construct and recognize promises of spiritual salvation and regeneration often materialized in objects and practices to which consumers attribute inherent value or powers. We find good examples of such objects and practices at the core of the stories told in the films regarded in this work. Consider the rite of bathing in warm baptismal waters of a bathtub inside of which one is reborn to a new meaningful life, as depicted in What The Bleep do We (k)now?!, or the chase for the ‘Holy Grail’ materialized in the person of Sophie in The Da Vinci Code, or –as we will see in the next chapter– the worship that Jesus’ shed blood awakes in The Passion of the Christ. Attribution of mystical qualities to inanimate elements has been one of the signs that symptomize the presence of a fetish since the term came into use in the eighteenth century. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries two general traditions or theories of fetishism were developed, one grounded in Marx and the other in Freud. For the study of media consumption (including media related to the spiritual realm) both traditions have been taken as a basis for analysis. Although I elaborate further a detailed review of fetishism in both traditions, I deem it opportune to succinctly comment here one of the differences and similarities Laura Mulvey found when comparing the two.
In her “Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture” Mulvey (1993) points out that the link between Marxist and Freudian concepts of fetishism is that both are explanations of the disavowal, refusal, or inability of the mind to understand a symbolic system of value within the social and the psychic spheres respectively. Experimenting with Charles S. Pierce’s notion of index (a sign based on direct imprint), she contends that both fetishisms relate to a problem of indexical inscription. In the Marxist fetishism the sign of value of a product (i.e. the worker’s labor) “is, or rather fails to be, marked onto an object, a commodity. It is in and around the difficulty of signifying value that commodity fetishism flourishes”, whereas the Freudian fetish, continues Mulvey, is “constructed from an excessive, phantasmatic inscription: that is, the setting up of a sign, which is of value only to its worshippers, to conceal a lack, to function as a substitute for something perceived as missing. In [the Marxist fetish], the sign of value fails to inscribe itself on an actual object; in [the Freudian fetish], value is over-inscribed on the site of lack through a substitute object.” (1993:8). More about the distinction between Marxist and Freudian fetishism is presented in Part Two, when we reflect on their role in sacralization processes. Up to this point the above differentiation suffices to indicate the distinct angles of each tradition, being the former the concealment of lived historical relations of labor and the latter a kind of psychic protection against the trauma of lack (of ego autonomy).

Scopophilic Gazes

Scopophilia (voyeurism) is associated, within Freudian frames, with a subjecting and controlling act through which a curious eye exerts objectifications. The eye/‘I’, performs
these objectifications by fragmenting the unity of the one who will be objectified (Miller 1988). Fragmentation is, thus, correlative to castration and a principle for fetishism. This corollary is also supported in Lacanian frameworks, though from a different explanation. As he did when distinguishing penis from phallus, Lacan regards the eye only as the metaphor of something that he called “the seer’s shoot” (Miller 1988:72) which occurs within a broader field he calls the gaze.

According to Lacan, the gaze consists not only in my seeing from one point, but most fundamentally in the fact that I am looked at from all sides. Thus, the gaze is a dimension that has nothing to do with vision as such, but rather with what we find on the horizon, and what we find there is “the thrust of our experience, namely, the lack that constitutes castration anxiety” (Lacan in Miller 1988:72-3). Therefore, the gaze is primarily “something symbolic of the function of the lack, of the appearance of the phallic ghost” (Lacan 1988:88), and just secondarily, the seer’s shoot performs fragmentations for constructing a fetish. Film grammar uses mise-en-scène as well as cinematographic resources to perform these fragmentations; for example, close-ups and extreme close-ups. Through them, separate parts of fragmented bodies are integrated into the narrative –generally as a mode of eroticism– causing, simultaneously, a flatness that facilitates control over the unrepressed (Foucault 1978). Furthermore, scholars of postmodernism, such as Fredric Jameson (1984:60), have pointed out that the high-modernity pretension of ‘depth’ has been somehow swapped for what he terms postmodern ‘depthlessness’, and that fragmentation of/by the subject establishes multiple
flat surfaces that elude the abyss of anxiety and alienation by means of intertextual navigations. (Jameson 1984:62-3)

3.2.4 The Fetishistic Scopophilic Scrutiny in *The Da Vinci Code*

According to Prince (2003) *non-diegetic* and *extradiegetic* material set us at the level of the narrator who might assume either a high profile or a low, quasi-inexistent presence, without impairing the fluency of the storyline. What eventually interrupts (or at least slows down) the flow of *diegesis* is what, according to Barthes (1972), actually opposes narration, which is the spectacle. Interestingly, while extradiegetic processes disrupt and re-open a film’s implicit story (and proposals for subjectivity or subjective identification), *diegesis* of mainstream storylines gets broken –or frozen– with the presence of woman. What narratology contends connects to the discussion of feminist and formal film analysis. Following Laura Mulvey, feminist film critic Teresa de Lauretis (1984) has argued that narrative films have an intrinsic sadistic component, telling stories from the assumed viewpoint of a directorial male subject. De Lauretis explores the relationship between sadism and narrative, claiming that this goes beyond thematic connections, she suggests “the possibility of an integral relationship, a mutual structural implication of narrative with desire and *a fortiori* sadism” (de Lauretis 1984:104) Historically, she argues, stories have been male, with the female characterized as “nonman” turned into objects, instead of subjects of desire. Yet, a corresponding psychoanalytical explanation to the rupture in fluency I am referring to is that the very presence of an element loaded with an aura of castration threatens and compromises the sense of wholeness. This
awakes anxiety on the part of the viewer/reader, who in response pushes out the menace to categorize and gain control over it.

The location of the anxiety, though, is not always consciously identified, and even images that convey such anxiety are often overlooked. In *The Da Vinci Code*, for example, there is a particular extradiegetic scene showing the biographical source of the trauma that haunts Sophie. The scene is presented as a short dream-like flashback in which Sophie, as a child, sneakily witnesses something disturbing in her grandfather’s basement: people who wear masks and black robes are watching how someone is copulating with a naked woman on what seems to be an altar. The scene is blurred and opaque, barely distinguishable, but disturbing enough to insinuate that something wrong is happening there, that something *real* is “not-working” — *ce qui ne marche pas*. One female informant reported on this scene when asked to talk about the main topic of the film. She employed some expressions as innuendos of incest.

**Paulina**: Besides the religious theme, I, well, she had issues with her father, I think. There is a ritual there with his grandfather, something about sex. I really don’t remember well. I think he touches her when she was a child. There is this part in which she finally realizes or remembers that once her grandfather was making this ritual in which he had to have sex with a woman in the middle of a dark room, and everyone else is there just watching. And she sees all that. I think the Holy Grail was in that place. I found it very gross, very, I don’t know. I was disappointed because I mean the movie was so far interesting, and then they throw this thing, like saying ‘let’s put this thing in, so everyone gets traumatized and comes back to see the film again’ or I don’t know what they had in mind, but it was disgusting.
Hence, films alternate *narrative* and *spectacle*, a starting-braking-restarting motion wherein the hero’s action (site of the narcissistic identification) is interrupted by static scopophilic stamps which in turn re-launch the former with a new impetus. This process makes the feared imago enter into the symbolic order resulting in an immobilization of the feared entity. In the film, Sophie represents this feared, castrating entity that awakes processes of disavowal. On the one hand, institutional religion (Opus Dei, Bishop Aringarosa, Silas) is disavowing through annihilating the menace. On the other hand, those willing to venerate it (The Priory of Sion, Teabing, Langdon) disavow the feared entity by exerting control over it, reducing it to a static, ‘vitrified’ reality, making the object a neutralized one-dimensional fetish.

A discourse based on fluent action, when including a castrating element as part of it, becomes a blended product of narrative and spectacle. The narrative moment corresponds to the hero’s action, in which the viewer performs his narcissistic identification. The spectacle, on the other hand, corresponds to the scopophilic moment where the source of his fears is conjured through a strategy of analytical scrutinizing contemplation (Mulvey 1992:27, 33). A subtle example of this may be found in the narrative plot of *The Da Vinci Code*. The direct object of investigation in the fresco of the *Last Supper* is the androgynous figure presented as Mary Magdalene, whose consanguinity in the film with Sophie makes the latter an interchangeable figure of the feminine with the former. The protagonist of the action is Robert Langdon, whose role is, on the one hand, to decipher riddles and clues, scrutinizing Sophie’s life (which is a
way of ‘zooming-in’ until obtaining extreme close-ups, fragments of her) and, on the other hand, to make decisions in order to take the story forward.

AURORA: I perfectly remember Tom Hanks running from here to there, back and forth, all the time escaping and trying to find out how to decipher the code.

Langdon is the one who makes the diegesis flow, and the presence of the female character, Sophie, serves him more as an inspirational element and an object of investigation. The story shows a radical transformation in Sophie: at the beginning of the film she is the proactive detective that takes initiatives and saves Robert Langdon; PAULINA remembers how Sophie was at the beginning of the film:

PAULINA: and because she was a police officer, besides being a very intelligent cryptologist, she shows up and rescues him, and then she keeps investigating and the man follows her.

However, at the end Sophie becomes a passive agent, protected and defended by Langdon whose role is now to lead the action and ultimately fixating Sophie into her new status: withdrawn from the active scene, she will now occupy the place of the only descendent of Jesus and Magdalene’s bloodline which implies her becoming an object of discrete passive worship on behalf of both the Priory of Sion and Langdon.

The Da Vinci Code depicts the gestation of a religious image in the person of Sophie Neveu. According to Pierce, images can be indexical, iconic, and symbolic, in the sense that they can be taken as direct imprints or traces of reality (index), as representations leading to identification (icon), and as significations constituted by rule (symbol). In the case of religious images these three elements collapse in a single image
which becomes simultaneously indexical, iconic, and symbolic. W.J.T. Mitchell (1990:14-5) claims that these categories, in a religious or sacred image, take the shape of a fetish, an idol and a totem, respectively. He elaborated these notions by finding resonances between Lacan’s and Pierce’s triads, thus: the Lacanian fetishism, always piggybacking and haunted by the real, resembles Pierce’s index; when taken radically, the index becomes a Fetish. Lacanian imaginary (the identification or appropriation of an outside image as oneself) correlates to Pierce’s icon with the potential of becoming an Idol. Finally, the symbolic in Lacan parallels Pierce’s symbol because both relate to the law (indeed the latter is termed *legisign*, a sign constituted by rule); taken as an absolute, the arbitrary signification of a symbol becomes a universal concept, a conventional “*Code*” that foreshadows a Totem.

W.J.T. Mitchell’s categories help to gauge *Sophie* as a religious image with fetishistic, idolic and totemic imbricated potentialities. She is a Fetish inasmuch as she is indexed with and haunted by the unspeakable divinity, a threatening print of the real that is conjured by means of disavowal processes engaged by herself as well as the others (the *Priory of Sion, Langdon, Teabing, the Opus Dei*). She is an Idol insofar as *Sophie* is the pinnacle of a series of iconic representations (the Grail, the real blood, the royal blood) to which she identifies with and incorporates in her own persona and, most importantly, is recognized as such. Finally, *Sophie* is a Totem because, although and along her very contingency, the signification of herself stops being ruled by the established symbolic order (traditional religious teachings on Christology), becoming herself a universal *Code* of what true transcendency is, from which other signifiers will derive (she becomes, in a
way, sacred not only for the *Priory of Sion* but even for Robert Langdon). Sophie’s figure as a religious image has a latent power that threatens an established myth, awakening mechanisms for its neutralization. This is at the core of the plot in *The Da Vinci Code* and justifies its treatment as a thriller. Often, overpowered religious images become taboos as long as they branch off into two opposite directions. On the one hand they are sacred and consecrated, but on the other hand they are dangerous, forbidden, and impure. A taboo is what *Silas* – a proxy of the established myth – sees in the figure of *Sophie-Grail-Blood-Code*: a matter of an abhorrent impurity, whose magic power goes back to its ability to lead man into temptation.

But at the same time, within the plot Sophie plays an increasingly shallow role. The main male character in *The Da Vinci Code* controls the narrative of a process wherein the female character is hallowed and converted into a literally encased object of devotion (spectacle): at the end of the film Langdon worships the inaccessible sarcophagus of Mary Magdalene buried beneath the foundations of the Louvre, just after we saw Sophie being sheltered and confined by the Priory of Sion in the small Scottish village of Rosslyn. The spectator identifies with the main male protagonist (the narcissistic recognition in front of the mirror), as it seems happened to ENRIQUE:

ENRIQUE: The one performed by Tom Hanks is a very cool character, you know, charming, good-looking, the typical bestseller character. He is learned, knows his business, has a doctorate in biology, he is an expert, but not like those nerdy scholars locked in their researches, but he is, you know, outgoing. The classic wooer dandy who takes care of this girl, the cryptologist, I can’t remember her name now.
At the same time the spectator is prone to objectify the female character (through a scopophilic gaze) enclosing her into a symbolic order that eventually seems to neutralize, by means of disavowal, the anxiety she potentially represents.

The mechanism of disavowal introduced in *The Da Vinci Code* is in psychoanalytical terms a *philia*. This form of subjectivity represents one of two visual-based ‘avenues of solution’ aimed to conjure the anxiety produced by unpleasant threats of castration. Mulvey calls this avenue ‘fetishistic scopophilia’, because it consists in exerting an analytical gaze (investigation) of the woman but in a way that she becomes re-mystified into a new myth, “turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.” (Mulvey 1992:29) In ‘fetishistic scopophilia’ a threatening object is transformed into something satisfying and henceforth innocuous, which is precisely the premise traversing *The Da Vinci Code* and more explicitly expressed at the ending of the film.

Yet, a second ‘avenue of solution’ is foreseen by socio-psychoanalysis applied to films, one that also involves a scopophilic investigation of figures presented as threatening. As in the first avenue of solution (fetishistic scopophilia), this second one is also aimed to demystify the mystery that clothes castrator figures (often associated with the feminine). Films that fit into this *philia* tell stories where threatening figures are shown as guilty and therefore punished. Mulvey terms this avenue ‘sadistic scopophilia’ because its pleasure involves an assertion of control on a party projected as guilty, subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness. *The Passion of the Christ* exemplifies this form of subjectivity, which we will explore in the next chapter.
Figure 6. Teabing and Langdon lecture Sophie about the Priory of Sion and the Holy Grail.

Figure 7. Using a wireless remote control, Teabing manipulates the figure of St. John the Apostle and stresses that the figure appearing as John is actually Mary Magdalene.

Figure 8. Langdon shows Teabing the Criptex.
Chapter 4

The Passion of the Christ

4.1 Industrial and Narrative Aspects

The Passion of the Christ (USA, 2004), also called ‘The Passion of Christ’, is a fictional full-length film with a runtime of 127 minutes directed by Mel Gibson (Apocalypto, 2006; Braveheart, 1995; The Man Without a Face, 1993). The film depicts the last hours of Jesus Christ, starting in the Garden of Gethsemane moments before Jesus is arrested, chained, hit, and taken to the Sanhedrin, where High Priests find him guilty of blasphemy. Jesus is sent to Pontius Pilate who orders a severe flogging session prior to being crucified. At the Golgotha, Jesus is undressed and nailed to the cross. When Jesus dies a tear-drop falls from heaven, an earthquake cracks the Temple, and Satan yells furiously. Jesus’ corpse is placed in a grave sealed with a stone. The stone has been removed and the sunlight illuminates the moment when Jesus’ white shroud deflates. Jesus, sitting on a stone, opens his eyes, stands up and walks away.

4.1.1 Production, distribution and exhibition

The screenplay was co-written by Benedict Fitzgerald and Mel Gibson, who also served as producer34. The film was independently produced by Icon Productions (Mel Gibson’s

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production company) who exercised a moderate-budget (USD $25,000,000)\textsuperscript{35} to afford its production values. The film was shot in many locations and studios in Italy, with 50 credited actors –most of them Italian and East-European\textsuperscript{36}, plus bit-parts and supporting acting roles--, and 463 people in the crew. The production outsourced 4 special effects companies and 28 intermediate companies. \textit{Icon Productions} stayed involved in the distribution phase through its branch \textit{Icon Entertainment International} which took over worldwide sales.

Mel Gibson’s company \textit{Icon Productions}, delegated the US theatrical release to \textit{Newmarket Films}, a major independent distributor. However, \textit{Icon Productions} remained in the distribution phase through its branch \textit{Icon Entertainment International} which handled worldwide sales in 85 countries, including Mexico. Eighteen other companies – mostly non-studio– managed the distribution in 20 other countries.\textsuperscript{37} Distributors promoted the film in all sorts of festivals, and won 12 awards. It was nominated for three Oscars (cinematography, make up and original score).

\textit{The Passion of the Christ} took five months to be exhibited in the 85 countries after the film was released in the US, where it lasted 23 weeks with a \textit{screen mode} of 3,408 screens and a \textit{screen slope} at the 12\textsuperscript{th} week. In Mexico the film was released on March 19\textsuperscript{th}, 2004 in almost every cinema theatre complex and grossed almost 19 million

\begin{footnotesize}\begin{tabular}{p{14cm}}
\textsuperscript{35} Source: http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2004/PASON.php Consulted on September 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2010.
\textsuperscript{36} Excepting James Caviezel (\textit{Jesus}), the rest of co-leads and secondary leads are non-american: Maia Morgenstern (\textit{Mary}), Christo Jivkov (\textit{John}), Monica Bellucci (Magdalene), Mattia Sbragia (Caiphas), Hristo Shopov (\textit{Pontius Pilate}), Claudia Gerini (\textit{Claudia Procles}), Rosalinda Celentano (Satan).
\textsuperscript{37} Source: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0335345/companycredits Consulted on September 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2010.\end{tabular}\end{footnotesize}
dollars\textsuperscript{38}, equivalent to 7.8\% of the foreign gross. This placed Mexico in the third position of foreign sales, preceded by Italy (where the film was shot) and the United Kingdom. \textit{The Passion of the Christ} made a worldwide gross of circa 612 million dollars\textsuperscript{39} (\textit{profit ratio} was 1:19); 60.6\% of the gross was domestic and 39.4\% was foreign.

4.1.2 Narrative Form and Synopsis

The film takes part of the Hollywood list of the Tale of Christ filmography; as such, it pertains to the established film genre of Historical Drama, more specifically to the subgenre known as ‘Biopic’ (biographical picture). In fact one of my informants indentified it as such: “I see it as a historical drama. In my personal cataloguing, it is a biblical-historical film”. As with most historical dramas, its purpose is to accurately portray a broad known event: the detention, trial, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The film was advertised as the true story of the historical Jesus and even rumors of commentaries supposedly made by the Pope John Paul II were used to support this claim. This pretension of historical accuracy is typical of historical dramas, especially for those portraying a biography. During its pre-releasing advertising campaign the author claimed his reenactment was grounded in reliable historical research, something that turned to be controversial among some viewers. For example, ESTELA, a 55 year-old active Catholic practitioner, agreed with the historical accuracy of the film:

\textsuperscript{38} Source: http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&id=passionofthechrist.htm Consulted on Sept. 8\textsuperscript{th} 2010.
\textsuperscript{39} Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passion_of_the_christ#Statistics Consulted on Sept. 26\textsuperscript{th} 2010.
ESTELA: For me it was very strong. Though, I have commented it with some priests, particularly with one who is very close to me, and in fact the film is tightly close to the Gospels. Perhaps is the most stick-to-the-letter movie ever made, you know what I mean? Showing what it really happened.

Whereas ASAEL, a 21 year-old student who joined the ‘Da Vinci Code Tourist Route’, criticized the pretention of historical accuracy in *The Passion of the Christ*:

ASAEL: Certainly it is based on the four gospels, just as the history of Jesus is based on what the apostles said one to each other, or wrote about the life and deeds of Jesus Christ, so it’s not that that was exactly as it happened. The problem is that he [Gibson] says that he was based on that but overstressing that what he puts in the film is the factual truth. I mean, he is going like ‘because I’m based on these books then all is true, period’. And that’s false because his is just but one interpretation, another among many others, as also the gospels themselves are just one interpretation of Jesus’ life.

Participants coincided in classifying this film as a historical-drama or biblical-drama basically because, as BRUNO puts it, “it totally reproduces entire pages from the Bible”. For most of viewers, being based on the Bible is almost synonymous with being factual or historical. BRUNO explains why it is so:

SILVIA: Drama.

FLAVIA: Drama.

RAMÓN: Historical.

BRUNO: Drama, historical, historic-drama, a documentary.

RAMÓN: well it’s not really a documentary, Bruno. (laughter)

FACILITATOR: Why do you think it is a documentary?

BRUNO: because Mel Gibson’s intention was to make a movie depicting what
actually happened without concealing anything. All is on the table, like ‘here it is, this is what really happened, take it or leave it!’ so we can learn about all this.

Part of the style in Hollywood Biopics is the special attention paid to locations, period costumes and set decorations. *The Passion of the Christ* is totally diligent to this convention reproducing a series of stereotypical visualizations taken from the social imaginary’s reservoir for imagining the ancient era. As I did before with the other two films, I present below a detailed synopsis. Refer to Appendix D.3 for the full Plot Segmentation of the film.

*Synopsis of The Passion of the Christ*

Jesus prays with anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Satan unsuccessfully tries to tempt him. Jesus reprehends his disciples for sleeping instead of praying with him. In the meanwhile, High Priests pay Judas for telling them where to locate Jesus. The detention occurs in a midst of a riot: the apostles run away, Peter cuts off Malchus’ ear and Jesus restores the soldiers’ ear and reprehends Peter. Mary (mother of Jesus) awakes with a premonition at the same time that John notifies her and Magdalene that Jesus has been arrested. Jesus is chained, escorted, and hit by soldiers. On the way, they dump him down from a bridge at the bottom of which is Judas. Jesus faces Judas; afterwards Judas has a first of a series of haunting apparitions. Jesus is taken to the Sanhedrin to be judged by High Priests Caiaphas and Annas. Jewish people gather there, among them are Judas, Magdalene, Mary, John, and Peter. The anger of the Jewish crowd is contrasted with the solicitous and fair attitude of Roman Soldiers. Jesus is found guilty of blasphemy, and the
Priests and people demand the death penalty for him. Because of the beating, Jesus has one eye closed. Judas is remorseful and is chased by the haunting hallucinations that will not end until he hangs himself on a tree after seeing a death lamb with one blind eye. Peter denies Jesus three times, and then sees Jesus staring at him. Ashamed, Peter runs away bumping into Mary who tries to comfort him, but he refuses saying that he is unworthy.

Jesus is sent to Pontius Pilate to be sentenced. Claudia, Pontius’ wife, asks her husband to not condemn Jesus. Pilate interrogates Jesus about what the Truth is. Pilate finds that Jesus should be judged by Herod Antipas, for he is the ruler of Galilee. Herod mocks at Jesus considering him only a crazy man but not a criminal. The Priests and crowd take Jesus back to Pilate and puts pressure on him to condemn Jesus, however Pilate only agrees to punish him. Jesus is severely flogged in the Praetorium (Headquarters) with different sorts of whips that rip off strips from his skin. Satan observes the scene. When Jesus is taken away to be crowned with thorns, Mary wipes the blood from the floor with the help of John and Magdalene; the latter remembers her first encounter with Jesus. After being flogged, Pilate presents a bloody Jesus to the crowd but the priests and crowd demand his crucifixion. Pilate agrees and washes his hands.

Jesus carries his cross along the streets of Jerusalem remembering some scenes from his life. He has a first fall. Mary sees Satan and hesitates until John encourages her to continue. At Jesus’ second fall, Mary remembers how she used to assist Jesus when he was a child, and decides to approach Jesus and encourage him. At the third fall, Simon of Cyrene is forced to help Jesus to carry the cross. At the fourth fall, Veronica wipes Jesus’
face with a cloth and the face gets imprinted. At the fifth fall, Simon cheers him up. The condemned Jesus arrives to the Golgotha. He remembers his preaching (Sermon of the Mountain) and his Last Supper while he is being undressed and nailed to the cross. He prays for his prosecutors. Gesmas, the Bad Thief, mocks him but is interrupted by a black crow who plucks his eye off. Jesus dies. A top crane shot morphes into a water drop-like image that falls down onto the ground. An earthquake is produced then and the Temple cracks. A soldier punctures Jesus’ side and a fountain of water comes out from it. Satan yells furious and sorrowfully. When the body of Jesus is taken down from his cross, Joseph of Arimathea, Magdalene, John, and Mary receive his corpse. Mary embraces him.

Later, at Jesus’ grave, the stone that blocked access to his sepulcher has been removed. A beam of light shines into the sepulcher and as it passes through, the white sheet that once covered Jesus’ corpse deflates. Jesus is sitting, opens his eyes slowly, stands up, and walks away.

4.2 Psychoanalytic Film Analysis

All focus groups, discussion groups, and interviews singled out the scene where Jesus is flogged. Occasionally participants mentioned when Jesus is nailed on the cross and the moment of his death:

LUÍS: I remember when they are beating him hard, that’s my top remembrance, mmmm I remember how, somewhere there is a serpent, and how the devil is
always tormenting Jesus, and I remember the last scene when he is nailed and then it starts raining and a thunderbolt falls.

“The Flogging” scene was recursively brought into conversation while discussing the film, sometimes addressing it directly and some other times indirectly by referring to the explicit violence of the movie. PABLO, a 40 year-old graphic designer, criticized the hyper-representation style of the film considering it an objectionable exaggeration. In his view, emphasis on physical pain distracts from the more internal suffering of Jesus:

PABLO: I mean, don’t you remember when supposedly they, uh, they have him in this stone-block where he is whipped, and then you see the shot when he is taken away and the puddle of blood, c’mon it’s like a half soccer court! I mean you see the spread blood like if they’d skin him and reassemble him again. Then the super close-ups showing how the the uhh thorns and the running blood, and how the blows at at 500 frames per second so you can see the mouth shaking and stopping, and how this ah the cross, they, I mean, they just missed to pour some itching powders on him, you know where I’m going to? I mean, they really worked hard in detailing a very physical stuff, whereas what I think is that the suffering of Christ, at least as I understand it, was something related to a much more psychological or more human part as well.

The iterative rhythm of the scene has the meaning of what Barthes described as “rhetorical amplification: the emotional magniloquence, the repeated paroxisms, the exasperation of the retorts can only find their natural outcome in the most baroque confusion” (Barthes 1972: 23). However, Barthes warns that what the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself, and in this sense, the ‘hyper-representation’ style in the scene could have violated this agreement, provoking reluctance on some of my
subjects. Hyper-representation is a postmodern aesthetic feature explored by W.J.T. Mitchell for whom abstract and formalist imageries are replaced by an obsession for realism, and “reality itself begins to be experienced as an endless network of representations” (Mitchell 1990:16). Informants identify blood as a constant motif of the film. IRENE, a 33 year-old female teacher of aesthetics, finds this motif associated with revenge and sadism and identifies these two components as intrinsic features of western culture:

IRENE: All that thing of exaggerating the blood and the fact that the characters of the story wanted a sort of revenge, well there is the fact that we western people, either if we are or are not Judeo-Christians believers, we all have some of that culture. So we all have these things quite introjected in us. […] so what’s the big deal with Mel Gibson screening this thing, showing how Jesus Christ is brutally beaten by the Jews who rejoice on that, when after all situations can be multiple.

Reactions to this scene were generally of rejection. Informants who considered the film as sadistic uttered expressions aimed to distance themselves from or avoiding identification with it. HILDA is an example of this reluctance:

HILDA: Mel Gibson makes a morbid thing out of a given situation. I bet you that if you go to el Reino (?) and you ask them which film they liked the most, well, The Passion of Christ will be by far the best picture they have ever seen in their lives. Whereas when you see it you actually say “How awful! How awful is to display, I mean, to morbidly enjoy the blood and the Calvary.

A common opinion among my subjects is that the use of sadism in this film reflects a twofold purpose on the part of its director: on the one hand there is the use of such style as a strategy to appeal the current society of entertainment, as ENRIQUE insinuates:
ENRIQUE: *The Passion of the Christ* is just the same stuff. Rather than teaching it looks for exacerbate the faith. It says nothing new. It is “mostrándote”, in images and sounds, something horrible! Because people find horribleness appealing and they’re going to say ‘ah! That’s horrible, all the things they did to him!’

Interestingly, ENRIQUE uses the Spanish term “mostrando”. “Mostrar” is rootedly associated with “monstruo” (monster) and has the ambiguous meaning of demonstrating the evidence of something, as well as to visually show and display something that shouldn’t be exhibited on the ‘scene’ –and, in this sense, something ‘ob-scene’. On the other hand, both ENRIQUE and PABLO recognize a second purpose, which is what both call, in separated interviews, “exacerbation” of the faith. Exacerbation is a principle that is deemed dangerous and harmful, as PABLO said when commenting on Mel Gibson:

PABLO: He is a guy that, who adopted religion in a too much “strong” way, I think we shouldn’t exaggerate in nothing neither in religion, I mean religion has to be taken just as it is, right? I do think that if you eat eight million carrots a day they are going to injure you and I think that too much religion is harmful as well. So, here I’m seeing a film that I think is made by a guy that/who has adopted or embraced religion and says “aahhh! Religion! That’s what all is about! And Christ died for us and that shall/that shall be depicted!” So what I see here is an exaggeration, I’m seeing someone who is irrational making a movie, a lunacy.

4.2.1 Descriptive moment: “The Flogging”

“The Flogging” is a 16 minute sequence covering in real time the span wherein Jesus receives a total number of 105 lashes in 10 consecutive minutes. Here is the description of the key scene and its context. Film frames are available at the end of the chapter.
Immediate Previous Context

Late Morning. Ext. Pilate’s Palace Courtyard (from 0:44:11 to 0:52:03)

Jesus is sent back to Pilate after Herod refuses to condemn him deeming he is only a crazy man. Pilate explains to his wife Claudia that if he refuses to condemn Jesus, then Caiaphas will organize a sedition revolt. A squad brings Jesus in front of Pilate who asks the crowd to choose between Barabbas (a one-eyed murderer) and Jesus, Caiaphas instigates them to choose Barabbas, then demands Pilate to crucify Jesus, though Pilate only agrees to severely punish him.

Key Scene

Noon. Ext. Praetorium. (From 0:52:04 to 1:08:15)

Jesus is escorted towards the courtyard of the quarter where he is undressed and chained to a pole. Soldiers start flogging him with wooden sticks. Satan attentively observes the scene crossing (floating) behind Caiaphas and the other High Priests, one of them is one-eyed. The floggers take a break. Jesus bends and kneels: he observes Mary and Magdalene who are watching him, both wearing black dresses and veils. Jesus slowly stands up and poses his body again in a position for receiving more flagellation. The soldiers take this gesture as a dare. One flogger shows different instruments proposing a stick rolled up with nails, but the captain tells him to rather use whips with iron spikes (see film frames in Figure 9 at the end of the Chapter). At a certain moment the spikes stuck in Jesus’ side and when pulled out they tear the skin off, splashing some blood on the soldiers’ face and exposing Jesus’ ribs. The soldiers laugh out loud. John embraces Magdalene. Mary turns back and slowly walks thru a corridor, she meditatively wanders
with a fixed gaze in a fashion similar to someone who is in contemplation. Soldiers turn Jesus face up and flog his chest (see film frames in Figure 10) Satan slides behind the characters, carrying a baby who has a hairy back and whose face is of an adult man. Jesus has a flashback of his disciples. An officer enters and orders them to stop the punishment. Jesus is dragged away, leaving a big pool of blood on the floor. A quick ellipsis shows Mary, Magdalene and John entering to the now empty courtyard. They observe the different instruments of torture and the still fresh blood shed on the floor. Mary wipes the blood with towels (see film frames in Figure 11). In a parallel scene a soldier places a crown of thorns on Jesus’ head and spits on his face (he spits onto the camera.)

Immediate Subsequent Context
Afternoon. Ext. Pilate’s Palace Courtyard (from 1:08:15 to 1:13:28)
Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd congregated in the Courtyard of his Palace. Priests insist that Jesus ought to be crucified. Caiaphas warns Pilate that if he liberates Jesus then he is not friend of Caesar. Claudia and Pilate seem concerned. When Pilate washes his hands, Jesus remembers having the ablution ritual (hands washing) with his disciples before the last super. Pilate tells Abenader to proceed with the execution. Jesus embraces his cross and walk on the streets towards the Golgotha, the hill where he will be crucified.

4.2.2 Analytical moment
As in any drama, characters develop through in-depth intensities of suffering. In the flogging scene intensity is achieved by means of ‘action iteration’ (105 lashes in real
time) gradually incremented: from marks on the skin to bloody rips and strips of flesh, to openly exposed Jesus’ ribs. The *Depth*, thus, results from digging inside one single zone, which is that of physical suffering. In some way the ten minute loop freezes the narrative chain of causes and effects and turns it into a spectacle (the editing employs montage resources such as slow motion to elongate even more the perception of the duration of the flogging).

Biopics have intrigued thinkers such as Barthes (1972) with the repetitiveness of images presented “at once as intentional and irrepressible, artificial and natural, manufactured and discovered” (1972:28), aimed to assess univocal knowledge. Most of my informants noticed and complained about this redundancy. Abelardo, a 21 year-old student of business administration, felt the scene was unnecessarily long-drawn-out:

**Abelardo**: all scenes followed a certain pattern, lasting some few minutes and then moving on to another scene, but that part of the flogging lasted ages! It was too much graphic, showing always the same thing, and I think it just took much more time than needed.

Besides the lengthening of the scene, many informants also rejected the circling around violence and blood. This is what Flavia, a 21 year-old undergrad student of communications commented:

**Flavia**: It has more than enough violence and blood, with almost nothing of… I don’t know, at certain moments it gets so repetitive, so ‘too much’. As Diego was saying, they could have included more parts of the life of Jesus and Virgin Mary, and not only blood, and blood, and blood. I think it was very repetitive and I don’t see it as a good movie.
Anxiously repeated visualisms, according to Bhabha (1999:370), fixate social knowledge and minister the ideological construction of otherness. The selected scene exemplifies this anxious repetition in which baroque redundancy is used to carve the archetype of sublime suffering, granting through such ‘rhetorical amplification’ (Barthes 1972:19-20) moral intelligibility to the audience to understand why and on behalf of whom Jesus suffers. MAURA, a 53 year-old housewife and catholic practitioner, made sense of the “brutality” displayed on the scene, in these terms:

MAURA: […] and to see all what God actually suffered for us, and thus to become aware of it, right? of all what he did for us and, well, that we shall appreciate what we have now.

Fredric Jameson (1984:77) suggests that extreme violence is an enormous force only able to be conceptualized in terms of the divine, as MAURA seemingly does. Jameson explains that the bordering on terror we experience at the glimpse in stupor and awe of what can crush human life is the threshold of what he terms ‘hysterical sublime’.

The arrangement of certain props sets in advance the action that will be taken: a half stone-column with chains and shackles, the torches on the walls, a table displaying the various instruments of torture, all these elements are typical for torture scenes in films. In this sense, the setting has the architectural function of an amphitheatre where the State teaches a public lesson (Foucault 1999:69) and of a sacrificial stone where the Religious Institution immolates its escape goat. Lightning technique, costumes, the color palette and even the amplified and reverberated sound help to detach the main motif of the film, which is blood, off from the background; facilitating the isolation of the victim
(its fetishization) for the sadistic gaze. Make-up occupies a primordial role in this mise-en-scène visualizing the development and severity of the ongoing flagellation until Jesus is transformed into a baroque mass of blood and flesh.

The scene contrasts different gazers looking at a subject who has elected to pursue submissively his God-given “passion”. On the one hand there are those who inflict pain to the victim: the soldiers and priests, whose proactive performance and unrestrained passions (rage, severity, frantic cruelty) give their gazes a rejoicing shape, making the flogging surpass the border of a mere execution of a legal sentence and turning it into a matter of personal pleasure. At some point of the flogging the soldiers reach an ecstatic moment: when Jesus’ blood splashes their faces, they crack up in an orgiastic laughter deforming their semblances into figures that resemble paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. The Priests take pleasure in eyeing the punishment, which makes the actual punishers proxies of the Priests.

On the other hand, there are those who look at the sufferer with sympathy or empathy: Mary, Magdalene, John, and Claudia. Theirs are inbound and contained gazes of a passive self-restrained passion. The contained way with which Mary looks at Jesus makes her being present in space and physically close to the events though somehow aloof and absent in time, her position is similar to someone who is in a meditative contemplation\(^40\). John, Magdalene, and Claudia also seem to be witnessing something distantly also assuming inward and contained gazes: John stays in the background.

\(^{40}\) Mary’s line: “my son, when, where, how will you choose to be delivered of this?” may be read from her omniscient setting: Mary knows that what she is witnessing is the fulfillment of God’s will.
observing Mary’s suffering, Magdalene constantly covers her face, and Claudia shamefully avoids looking at Mary’s eyes.

Amid these gazes, one proactive and unrestrained, and the other one passive and refrained, a third gaze—which is a non-diegetic one— is displayed along the scene: Satan appears ‘floating’ behind the perpetuators. Constituted as the Agency of Jesus’ suffering, his is an openly scrutinizing gaze, supervising the development of his authorship. His fatherhood is represented by the hairy-back baby he is carrying and caressing.

4.2.3 Key concepts for a socio psychoanalytic reading of the scene

As in the previous two chapters this section briefly reviews a couple of psychoanalytic themes pertinent to the interpretation of The Passion of the Christ. The first one is the existing connection between a fetish, the anxiety of lack, and the phallus; and the second one is the psychoanalytic implications for a gazer whose scopophilic objectifications are exerted through phallic means (the Freudian eye/the Lacanian gaze.)

Surrogates for whatever is missing

Seen from the Freudian tradition, the term fetish involves a displacement away from a traumatic site, as well as an affirmation of a surrogate object near the place of absence. Freud (1927) framed fetishism as an almost exclusively male perversion originated in the unconscious (gendering) construction of subjectivity called Oedipus complex.
According to Freud, the boy child desires the mother and competes with the father. When the child realizes that the father has a penis unlike the mother, he assumes that the mother’s penis was cut off. The fear that his father will castrate him as, in his mind, his mother was castrated, makes the child stop the competition with the father and instead identifies with him, thus taking up his masculine position in society. As for the girl child, she takes up her feminine position in society when she assumes that she has already been castrated and thus identifies with the mother. In short, women’s missing penis awakes fears of castration in those who have a penis, and envy on those who lack one. The fetishist, according to Freud, disavows this lack “and finds an object (the fetish) as a symbolic substitute for the mother's missing penis.” (cfr. No Subject41) In Freud's interpretation the unconscious is always desiring the penis and always afraid of castration. Desire, thus, is defined by the negative term of lack.

Jacques Lacan takes up Freud’s terms and basic template of fetishism but elaborates important nuances that make his approach quite different. He agrees that a fetish is a surrogate object but stresses that the equivalence between the fetish and woman’s missing penis can only be understood by reference to linguistic transformations within the structure of language, conceived not as a system of signs (the Saussurean two-sided unity of a signifier and a signified that stands for something) but as a system of signifiers or signifying chain (something that represents a subject to another signifier42).

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41 No Subject, online encyclopedia of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Entry “fetishism” http://nosubject.com/Fetishism# note-0 Consulted on November 4th 2010.
42 In Écrits Lacan explains that the notion of signifier as an element of the signifying chain supposes that the signifier generates meaning only by yielding its place to another signifier linked in the signifying chain. See also the Introduction (pp 11-6) of Susan W. Tiefenbrun’s Signs of the Hidden, semiotic studies. (1980)
In this regard, Lacan makes a distinction between the real penis and the symbolic phallus, stressing that the fetish is a substitute for the latter, not for the former, to which the phallus might be connected but is not equivalent (Wood 1989:376).

But then, what is a fetish ultimately substituting for? For Lacan, a fetish is a symbolic surrogate for a (desired) object that is absent and therefore unspecified (or, if preferred, unique for each individual), namely the symbolic Phallus. The phallus is a particularly privileged signifier of ‘whatever is missing’, it is an object always lacking, for the subject is never finished with the work of signifying that desire entails, and it is a particularly privileged signifier because it inaugurates the process of signification itself. Nevertheless, Lemire (2000:61) contends that “[w]ithin patriarchal culture, the phallus is the supreme symbol of power; conversely, power is ‘phallic’.”

If Phallus is the figurative representation of power, consequently castration is the figurative representation of powerlessness and its associated feelings of loss, anxiety, and longing. Moreover, phallic power is somehow illusory as long as it covers all levels of the symbolic order wherein the self needs to feel autonomous and under control. It is concretized in multiple forms: money, prestige, social status, authority over others, in sum: all what gives the illusion of getting over one’s status of being dependent upon a historically specific linguistic community for both meaning and a sense of Self.

In modern and postmodern consumer cultures, the abovementioned drives of power and powerlessness (phallus and castration) are conveyed through imaginary systems of collective representations, out of which the language of spectacle protrudes in connection with the associated power-edge of the gaze. From a social cognition
perspective, spectacular manifestations, such as films, engage processes of disavowal that
turn a media commodity into an eroticized spectacle. As spectacle, explains Mulvey
(1993:10), the object becomes image and belief, visual fetishes displayed and secured by
an erotic aura. Everything desirable whose lack produces anxiety is, thus, spectacularly
eroticized and displayed. Mulvey reflects on the fact that a fetish very often attracts the
gaze: “In popular imagination, [a fetish] glitters. It has to hold the fetishist's eyes fixed on
the seduction of belief to guard against the encroachment of knowledge. This investment
in surface appearance enhances the phantasmatic space of the fetish and sets up a
structure in which object fixation can easily translate into image.” (1993:12) In other
words: fixation on a surface (the seductive gloss of appearance) facilitates the erasure of
the problematic source of the castration anxiety. Lacan’s notions of phallus and castration
(power and powerlessness, the whole and the lack) provide alternative angles to socially
frame the construction and experience of subjectivity in social historical contexts where
social actors assume a role of self-administrators of senses of meaningfulness,
spirituality, and self-identity for themselves, by means of both rational/conscious
reflections and non-reflective/unconscious projections on cultural artifacts as are the three
films studied here.

Scopophilia and Narcissistic constitution

The reverse side of voyeuristic scopophilia is exhibitionism which traditionally has been
considered as the consent of being objectified and fragmentized by the gaze of the
other(s). However, the issue of consenting to be visually objectified is a more complex
problem because it always goes hand-by-hand with specific visual regimes of power, as it
was studied by Michel Foucault (1999) when describing the psychic and political anatomy of being the object of the panoptic gaze, or by John Berger (1977) when describing the normative position of women as watching (or eluding to watch directly) oneself watching them, and also the postcolonial approach to Edoard Manet’s *Olympia* [1863-1865] elaborated by Jennifer DeVere Brody (2001) or by Griselda Pollock (1999).

In both voyeuristic and exhibitionistic *scopophilias*, objectification is affirmed through a phallic mean: the Freudian eye/the Lacanian gaze. According to Mulvey, by the same token a second pleasure is granted in cinema: the pleasure of the *ego libido* identification that echoes the primordial narcissistic recognition and misrecognition occurred in the mirror stage, as explained in earlier chapters. Scopophilia and narcissistic constitution of the ego are opposed but interplayed and interlaid. The former implies a separation of the erotic identity from the seen object (active scopophilia) whereas the latter implies an affirmative identification with the seen object. This paradox is explained by considering the recurrence to the castration complex and the drive of desire articulated by the symbolic order (Mulvey 1992:26).

Both scopic drives are far from being timeless concepts circumscribed in the realm of the individual’s developmental process: they are historical and socially defined to the point that socially produced imagery –like those implied in cinema– have collective outreach. Socio-psychoanalysis claims that although this dynamism is originated primarily at the individual level of the self, similar processes are rehearsed at collective levels, concurring in our everyday social interactions, particularly –as this work demonstrates– in our media-based conversations. Furthermore, these categories
have an intensified meaning for western consumer cultures where individuals are propelled to construct their own personal agency (Redden 2002:33) out of a series of recognitions and misrecognitions made in front of the various social screens.

4.2.4 The Sadistic Scopophilia in The Passion of the Christ

The Passion of the Christ has formal elements of sado-scopophilia which were acknowledged by the subjects of my interviews and focus groups:

MARIANO: It was too much bloody for me, very… all that beating Christ was truly sadistic. Too much blood. It is sadistic and grotesque, blood flies all around, you see how the skin is ripped off, how his hand is nailed, hundreds and hundreds of liters of blood, there is also a gross scene were worms go out of a donkey and...

Yulk!

ISAIAS: There is visual violence there, no doubt. If you like gore movies, horror movies, sado movies, here you have a good sample. This film has much more blood than any other gore movies I’ve seen.

Strictly speaking, though, The Passion of the Christ is not a gore film (or splatter film). What distinguishes a gore film from a sadistic film is the film genre that each film belongs to. A gore film typically pertains to the horror genre and depicts physical injuries involving blood, flesh and bone matter for the sake of producing repulsion and horror on the audience. A sadistic film is more associated with other visual-driven genres such as pornography or thrillers. Although sadistic films may use the same elements (blood, flesh, bones) these are depicted aimed to tense bonds and relations among characters and to establish a voyeuristic complicities with the audience. Sadistic components were not
determinants in liking or disliking the film among my subjects. ISAIAS rejected the film by all means “personally I love gore and splatter movies, and I am a fan of all that stuff, but the Passion of Christ was just too much, by far.” Whereas MARIANO said that, in spite of all the violence in the film, “it was very well done and I guess that aside from this disgusting thing I kind of like it”. Another informant commented that:

OCTAVIO: Some people felt that the movie was too graphic. I think it certainly has some extremely violent scenes with lots of blood there, but I also think that that is the only way they can make you see and feel the pain, just a little bit of the pain Jesus suffered for us.

But acknowledging the violence in the film, even labeling it as sadistic, does not mean that viewers identify themselves with the leading perpetrators of sadism. None of the informants identified with the victimizers nor with the victim. If any identification occurred, it developed through other characters in the film who exhibit sympathy or empathy towards the victim. This form of identification was seldom reported, the most common reactions were of plain reluctance and rejection, like HILDA’s: “How awful! How awful is to display, I mean, to morbidly enjoy the blood ...”

Nevertheless, as I discuss further, one thing is to be reluctant to a proposal at the level of its form, and another thing is to be dissonant with both the theology and subjectivity embedded in such proposal. The Passion of the Christ exemplifies a ‘sadistic scopophilia’ story that, although offered and consumed, had little resonance as a proposal of subjectivity among its audience. As a sadistic proposal, it is related to the ‘invocatory drive’ described by Lacan, aimed to circle around an object, being the repetitive
movement of this closed circuit the real source of enjoyment. As a scopophilic story, its linear narrative is continuously interrupted by an intrusive, static fetish representing castration.

_The Passion of the Christ_ exerts a scopic fixation on a fetishistic object: blood. Scopic fixation on blood seems to create bloodphilia, an overvaluation of blood that inverts and reverses the fear and the anxiety that blood raises. Freud (1927:147-57) explained that fetishism plays with the ambivalence of splitting beliefs embedded in an object, in his view a fetish object disavows knowledge in favor of belief, however it fails “to lose touch with its original traumatic real and continues to refer back to the moment in time to which it bears witness” (Mulvey 1993:11). In other words: disavowal is not a total erasure of the knowledge felt as threat (blood equals death), but rather an oscillation between that knowledge and the belief that prevents that knowledge to erupt. In _The Passion of the Christ_ blood is related to death (knowledge) and therefore rejectable, but still, it plays an appealing and saving role (belief) in the film (Mary and Magdalene reverently wipe the blood from the ground, like collecting samples of a sacred substance henceforth worshipped). The idea resonated with some informants’ references:

**SELMA:** they [the floggers] are but the vehicle so Jesus could accomplish the work he was meant to do: to shed his blood for us, the alchemical work.

**ROBERTO:** you have all details in the scourge, and then Magdalene cleaning the blood up from the floor.

**MARIANO:** I mean, I already knew that Christ offered his blood for healing our sins, right? But I feel that Mel Gibson exaggerated in this part, he made it too
much disgusting. To be frank, perhaps because blood revolts my stomach, instead of making me feel pity it only made me feel nauseated.

As a fluid, blood is a key theme in phallic economy; following Luce Irigaray’s reflections on Sade and Lacan, Gallop (1980:60) underscores that in phallic fantasy “the solid-closed-virginal body is opened with violence; and blood flows”, signifying deflation, wound as proof of a phallic power exertion, which is patent in the punishment inflicted in *The Passion of the Christ*. Interestingly, one male informant used the word “sodomize” to describe the brutality of *The Flogging*; although perhaps he had a slip of the tongue⁴³, mistaking the word for what he probably meant to refer as ‘sadistically subjecting’, or some expression alike.

PABLO: he was a guy who knew what was going to happen, that’s the worst thing one can live. I mean, an announced death must be the worst thing to live with. But instead, the film mainly focuses on the blood and on these crazy people sodomizing the guy so badly.

However, psychoanalytically speaking sadism is not primarily about punishment, but rather about imputation of guilt. Žižek (2007) reflects on socio historical moments of sadism arguing that sadistic subjects make themselves the object of another’s will, that is: they adopt the position of the pure instrument of the big Other’s Will. In *The Passion of the Christ* the big Other results from the conspiracy of three Agencies: Satan, inspiring the Jews; History, justifying Pilatus; and God, walking his Son into suffering as atonement for the sins of the World. Thus, agents of sadism are enabled to inflict pain on the other with the full awareness that they are merely fulfilling the Other’s Will of

⁴³ According to Freud a lapsus linguae is a slip-up that might reveal unconscious wishes or conflicts.
punishing the guilt of an offender. The agency of the big Other is so accentuated in this particular scene, that the figure of the Christ is presented merely as an object of passive spectacle with little subjectivity, as one interviewee said:

**Mariano:** He is depicted as a guy that bears everything. They are giving him a great swatting for something he didn’t do, and he is just there, enduring. They pound him hard like eight thousand times and he stands there all quiet, leaning on the stone while they are literally bleeding him… all time he is just enduring.

It is not that the Christ is unable to defend himself from those who inflict the pain, his passivity is not due to impotence, because, as one informant interpreted,

**Octavio:** He could finish with the suffering by means of/just by snapping his fingers like this [snaps], however he stays there in an incredible abandonment to Father God’s will, overcoming Satan’s temptations.

Thus, passivity in Christ enhances the real (and really sadistic) agents in the film, which are Satan and God. Even those viewers who rejected how this structure was visually represented, both male and female expressed their reluctance employing language that implicitly assumes the theology and subjectivity that is embedded in such structure:

**Pablo:** If Christ came to this Earth as a man, and suffers as man, and dies for all of us, I mean the basic idea is that God sends his Son transforming him into a man so he may die, so he may live and die as all of us do, as a man. But, come on, no mortal can take what this man takes, when he is flogged he loses like 27 liters of blood, I don’t know if we have 27 liters of blood, but whatever, the suffering in the film is so masochist and so keen in this point that I think it totally misses the main point.
All suggests that what viewers actually reject is more the aesthetic proposal of this structure of look (the ob-scenity of sado-scopophilia) rather than the underlying premises of it. Interestingly, whereas both men and women deemed the *The Passion of the Christ* as extremely violent, men tended to disavow it by simply dismissing the film–sometimes making fun of it–while women were more careful in articulating their criticism in ways that preserved, or at least left unquestioned, the theology underlying the film.

**ISAIAS**: I wasn’t shocked at all, I mean, I saw it just because gruesomeness appeals to me [laughter] I had to see it if I wanted to criticize it, nothing more. But yes, there was plenty blood there, I went out of the theater all splashed with ketchup, ‘oops, now who’s gonna pay for the dry-cleaning?’

Castration is recursively signified in *The Passion of the Christ* through mutilations, specifically in the form of one-eyed blind characters. Freud explored the powerful symbolic resonance of the eyes and the lack of them. Blindness, for example, could imply castration, as in the story of Oedipus (Martin 1993:332). This motif is exuberantly consistent along the film not only on the part of the victimizers, but also on the part of the victim. As already said in the body of literature, the eyes are a metonymic signifier of the phallus insofar as both eyes and phallus exert dominant penetrations to attain their possessions and thus both are figurative representations of power. Conversely, one-eyed person –as any other exposed amputation– signifies a figurated castrated, inducing the before mentioned avenues of solution: the sadistic and the fetishistic mechanisms to undertake that threat. In both voyeurisms fragmentation (fetishism) is mandatory, for it allows the ‘I’–through the ‘eye’–exert its objectifications.
In *The Passion of the Christ* the Agents of castration are themselves castrated, inspired and motioned by a source of phallic power –or Agency– which is of a twofold Fatherhood: Satan and God, confronted in a gaze-driven battlefield. In other words: the structure of looking in the *The Passion of the Christ* corresponds to a story line where a masculine gaze (Satan’s and God’s) actively pulls the diegesis of the narrative in spite of the passivity of the spectacle (represented by Jesus and Mary).

Sado-scopophilic structure in *The Flogging* is explained not only by the explicit graphic violence in it, but by a more subtle dynamic of gazes/‘gazers’ that weaves and tenses the dramatism of the scene. Even if this infrastructure of the sado-scopophilic mechanism may not be consciously evident for viewers, the way characters look at other characters is key for analyzing sadism as long as it offers a gate for identification (recognitions and misrecognitions.) When asked to mention those characters in the whole film to whom they felt attracted to, informants mentioned precisely characters present in *The Flogging* who are constantly exchanging gazes.

ROBERTO: the position and image that Pontius Pilate presents, and personally I’d say the figure of Mary Magdalene, those would be the most representative for me.

Yes, the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Pontius Pilate.

The analysis of the scene reveals three binary divisions in the way characters exchange gazes. The first binary (see film frames in Figure 12 at the end of the Chapter) is represented by two groups of people: the one composed by Mary, Magdalene and John, and the group conformed by Pontius Pilate and his wife Claudia. Mary, Magdalene, and John are *sympathetic-gazers* while Pilate and Claudia are *empathetic-gazers*. Here the
The distinction between sympathy and empathy is important: *sympathy* is the feeling of a compassioned concern derived when one experiences the outlook of another being within oneself, whereas *empathy* is merely the capacity to understand another's state of mind or emotion without necessarily implying a compassionate concern. In the film, though, *sympathetic-gazers* seem to be mediated by time, for example Mary looks like being present in space but somehow absent in time, recalling a contemplative nun from another era. *Empathetic-gazers* also seem mediated but by a rather “philosophical” or cognitive position: Pilate and Claudia observe the deeds, reflecting on and learning from them in a melancholic and austere mood, somehow concordant with the catechumenal ‘*en train de comprendre*’ setting of future converts.

The first binary is the privileged site for sighting the proposal of subjectivity offered by the film for it provides alternatives of identification in the act of looking at the second and third binaries. Particular types of viewers identify with specific sides of the binary, for example those who were less acquainted with Pop-Esotericism –or frankly disliked *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* or *The Da Vinci Code*—tended to embrace a more *sympathetic-position*:

**Samuel:** That would be Virgin Mary, basically. Why? Well, because the suffering of the mother of Christ should have been very, very important, specially if she didn’t have/I mean perhaps she had some idea of what was going on, but she didn’t have the full picture. It was very moving when she kneels down with the towel, then I couldn’t help the tears.
Contrastingly, those initiated in Pop-Esotericism either rejected the proposal of *The Passion of the Christ* or understood it from a more *empathetic-position*, rendering a more rational rather than emotional reading:

**EFRAIN:** the historical context makes Pilate more understandable. Those who condemn Jesus are the Romans, and Pilate washes his hands letting the Jewish high clergy take the decision, the Pharisees, ok? So, I think this is not a matter of race, or of a given social condition, but it’s about a man in a given historic era dealing with a very strong moral dilemma.

The second binary (see film frames in Figure 13) is not proposed as a site for identification but as an observation instance from which the viewer *inducts* the immediate causes of the suffering. It is also compounded by two groups of people playing the role of agents of the punishment: the first group is composed by the High Priests and the Jewish crowd, who get satisfaction and pleasure (*jouissance*) through the action of their proxies, who conform the group of direct agents (the soldiers). The two groups of this binary display proactive and unrestrained passions expressed through outbound unmediated gazes.

The third and last binary (see film frames in Figure 14 at the end of the Chapter) is also a site for observation but this one gives the viewer elements to *deduce* the ultimate causes of suffering. The binary corresponds to Agencies, *medusean* sources of castration. Jay Martin (1993) notes that the “gaze of Medusa” is a penetrating phallic stare with evident sadistic implications: “Here the eye [is] the source of castration rather than the symbol, when enucleated, of its enactment.” (Martin 1993:333) The binary comprises two non-diegetical personifications of paternity: Satan and God. Satan appears as the
Father and the efficient cause of the victim’s suffering. His active gaze is analytical and panoptical in the Foucaultian sense, scrutinizing and supervising the process of his(her?) authorship.

ROBERTO: temptation is always there, sieging and patrolling through this androgynous bald devil.

EFRAIN: Satan is presented as a woman, a jumping-eye woman, very shocking, and always there, you now, mocking at Jesus all the time. But at the ending, after the crucifixion, it is God who mocks at Satan making her yell out loud desperately.

God exerts his active gaze at the very end of the film. When Jesus dies, a crane top shot pictures the gaze of God morphing into a water drop, which is physically precipitated over the earth, unleashing a boisterous wind and an earthquake that cracks the Temple of Jerusalem. The Priests and perpetrators are afflicted and in panic. Satan is desperately furious and yells sorrowfully. The vanishing point perspective of God’s cyclopean eye makes it the centre of the visible world (Berger, J. 1977:16). In sum, the Eye of God (phallic power) is physically poured down as a final sentence, disavowing and punishing, through telluric calamities (symbolic castrations), those who injured his Son.

The scene confronts the first with the second binary, both under the judgment of the third binary. The first binary conveys the proposal of a twofold model of identification and construction of subjectivity. Even though viewers are allowed to have bare-eyed access to the spectacle of victimization, their ‘look’ is indeed filtered through a game of interplayed indirect glances by the first binary. The witnessing character of the viewer is thus mediated by a figurative ‘observatory’ in the person of John: we, viewers,
see John looking at Magdalene who in turn sees Mary contemplatively looking at Jesus; such visualist chain enables Magdalene (and vicariously John, and therefore us) to approach sympathetically to the victim. On another moment we see John looking at Claudia who is unable to sustain eye-contact with Mary, but establishes an empathic approach by ministering and “understanding” those who reached the sympathetic approach.

As I suggested before, the conveyer of this chain of looks is blood, which by means of a sadistic treatment opens its univocal meaning (horror) to equivocality (sublime). This ambiguity of something that is simultaneously condemnable and pleasurable, thanatic and erotic, makes the represented object a lubricant in the ideological reproduction of a given belief (for example the one that stresses that Jesus’ blood is the necessary price of our salvation)

OCTAVIO: As I was telling you, this is to show us or to make us understand all what God had to suffer for our sake, and to remind us, in this world full of distractions, to remind us how he gave his very life for us, how pricey we are, and to make us reflect on that.

As a form of ‘spectacle of excess’ (Barthes 1972:15), sadism in The Passion of the Christ also grants ‘intelligibility’ to understand powerlessness and suffering by proposing a twofold path for constructing subjectivity. Firstly there is the proposal of an emotional and sympathetic identification with those who co-experienced the suffering (compassion). The use of an object (fetishized blood) helps this form of subjectivity to convert knowledge of death-condemnation and insufficiency into its antipode plenitude-salvation:
OCTAVIO: I am a Catholic, so for me seeing how Christ dies, I mean, it brings a lump to one’s throat. I think it is a very good movie, it delivers a great message to all of us, to understand how much Jesus had to suffer for us and how little we give him back for such an awesome present, which in nothing less than salvation.

Secondly, there is the proposal of an empathetic identification through which the subject attunes with the state of mind of the sympathizer, constructing rational understandings of fixated ideological social beliefs for explaining the meaning of human suffering. In both cases, sado-scopophilia is formulated in terms of ‘understanding’, that is: as a strategy for entering the real into the symbolic, or as EFRAIN worded it, to ‘grasp’ the liminality of ‘spirit and flesh, pain and anguish’.

EFRAIN: it is a very crude and harsh film, however that is the way that helps you to grasp and understand the perhaps most commented and reverenced human drama in the entire history of humanity, which is the passion and death of Jesus Christ. It was harsh and crude for me, though. Also the tough topic of Jesus’ identity, I mean, that he shared both characteristics of being a man and the Son of God, spirit and flesh, right? That is the main drama: spirituality within flesh, pain and anguish.
Figure 9. Chained to a pole Jesus is flogged while Satan attentively observes behind the Jewish High Priests.

Figure 10. Mary and Magdalene watch Jesus. Jesus stands up for receiving more flagellation.

Figure 11. After Jesus is taken away Mary, Magdalene and John enter the empty courtyard. Mary wipes the blood with towels.
Figure 12. First binary: *Sympathetic-gazers* (John, Mary and Magdalene) and *Empathetic-gazers* (Pontius Pilate and Claudia).

Figure 13. Second binary: The *Indirect agents* (High Priests and the Jewish crowd) and the *Direct agents* (roman soldiers).

Figure 14. Third binary: a twofold *Agency*. Satan and God, both medusean and active gazes, the former scrutinizing and supervising the process of victimization, the latter precipitating his Eye over the earth to punish those who injured his Son. At left, Satan yells sorrowfully his/her defeat.
Chapter 5

Cross-Interpretation

5.1 Three Industrial Formulae for Disparate Formats and Genres

The three films represent three different production formulae that currently reach out to worldwide commercial cinema theaters: the totally independent low budget production (*What The Bleep do We (k)now!*), the Hollywood studio production, controlling both the production and the distribution within the blockbuster criteria of high budgeting (*The Da Vinci Code*), and the quasi independent production of a medium budget project (*The Passion of the Christ*) associated with a major independent distributor. Table 16 summarizes the differences in budgeting and production values implied for each film. In terms of economic investment the three films are noticeable unequal, which could give the impression that each film had uneven chances to reach out and impact the media based social conversation. Traditionally, the more spectacular images a visual product shows, the more retentive and successful it becomes for massive audiences. Obviously, the higher a budget is the more (spectacular) production values it can afford. Nevertheless, nowadays, neither inexpensive nor highly expensive productions determine if a film is meant to be a blockbuster or a flunk. New conditions of secondary phases of the industry (distribution and exhibition) allow strategies that make economically uneven productions be competitive.
Each film adopted a different strategy of distribution (see Table 17): the independent production *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* scattered its distribution through 32 independent distribution companies among 39 countries. *The Da Vinci Code* used a concentrated model –on the part of the holding company *Columbia*– by controlling both domestic and foreign theatrical distribution in 68 countries. *The Passion of the Christ* relied on a third major, though independent distribution company for the US theatrical release, but holds almost total control for the international distribution in 85 countries through *Icon Entertainment International*. Table 17 illustrates how low or medium-budget non-studio productions can find their way to global distribution by efficiently scattering the placement of the product. For example, the non-studio mixed-strategy of distribution adopted by *The Passion of the Christ*, which holds the control of most of the distribution, but allowed the participation of 18 local/regional distributors, placed the film

### Table 16. Production Formulae adopted by *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* (WTB), *The Da Vinci Code* (DVC), and *The Passion of the Christ* (PXT)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production Budget*</th>
<th>Production Values</th>
<th>Production Formula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>WTB</strong> $4M</td>
<td>USA, 2 States</td>
<td>Cast 36, Crew 99, 3 SFX Co., 1 intermediate company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DVC</strong> $125M</td>
<td>Europe, 4 Counties</td>
<td>Cast 74, Crew 730, 13 SFX Co., 29 intermediate companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PXT</strong> $25M</td>
<td>Europe, 1 Country</td>
<td>Cast 50, Crew 463, 4 SFX Co., 28 intermediate companies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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* US million dollars.  
** Special Effects Company  

Sources: *IMDb* database and box office data *The Numbers*
in 85 countries, whereas the centralized studio formula by The Da Vinci Code – controlling both domestic and foreign distribution – positioned the film in only 68 countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production Company</th>
<th>Distribution Companies</th>
<th>Outreached Countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WTB</td>
<td>Domestic (US)</td>
<td>Abroad (worldwide seller)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord of the Wind</td>
<td>Samuel Goldwyn Films/Roadside Attractions</td>
<td>Lightning Entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVC</td>
<td>Columbia Pictures/Sony Pictures Releasing</td>
<td>Columbia TriStar Films/Sony Pictures Entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PXT</td>
<td>Icon Productions</td>
<td>Newmarket Films International</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 17. Comparative distribution strategy for What The Bleep do We (k)now!? (WTB), The Da Vinci Code (DVC), and The Passion of the Christ (PXT), and outreached countries

A different strategy was assumed by What The Bleep do We (k)now!? which delegated the entire domestic distribution to specialized independent-film distributors, and left entire foreign sales to local and regional companies all over the world. This strategy outreached 39 cinema marketplaces, which is quite considerable for a low-budget independent project if we compare it with similar products such as the multi awarded documentary An Inconvenient Truth (USA, 2006) which was distributed in 37 countries.
The three films were screened with great success in Mexico. A comparative box office analysis (Table 18) shows how Mexican audiences contributed to the foreign gross of each film.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Budget*</th>
<th>Gross</th>
<th>Overall Profits</th>
<th>Profit Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US million dollars</td>
<td></td>
<td>**% of foreign gross</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTB</td>
<td>$4 M</td>
<td>Domestic: $10,942,306</td>
<td>Foreign: $5,037,251</td>
<td>$11,979,557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worldwide: $15,979,557</td>
<td>$916,849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>68.5% (39 countries)</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>** 18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVC</td>
<td>$125 M</td>
<td>Domestic: $217,536,138</td>
<td>Foreign: $540,703,713</td>
<td>$633,239,851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worldwide: $758,239,851</td>
<td>$19,275,573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28.7% (68 countries)</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
<td>** 3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PXT</td>
<td>$30 M</td>
<td>Domestic: $370,782,930</td>
<td>Foreign: $241,116,490</td>
<td>$581,899,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worldwide: $611,899,420</td>
<td>$18,880,455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>60.6% (85 countries)</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>** 7.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: boxofficemojo.com, the-numbers.com, and Sheri Candler Marketing & Publicity

Table 18. Comparative Budget – Domestic and Foreign Gross

Notice that *The Da Vinci Code* collected most of its worldwide gross from foreign screening (71.3%), to which the Mexican box office contributed with 3.6% (approximately 19 million dollars). *The Passion of the Christ* –which attained the best profit ratio (1:19)– did much better in Mexico, raising 7.8% of its foreign gross (almost 19 million dollars). But *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* did the best business of all three in Mexico, gathering there 18.2% of its foreign gross. In dollars that might not seem very impressive (less than one million dollars), however the figure is equivalent to nearly one quarter of the whole budget of the film. The economic success of these films is not
correlated with their marketing expenditures (compare ‘Ad Budget’ rows with ‘Profit Ratio’ rows in Table 18). *The Da Vinci Code* spent three times *The Passion of the Christ*’s advertising budget but the latter quadruplicated the profit ratio.

*What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* deserves special attention; it relied on grassroots marketing methods, such as ‘viral marketing’ (social networks based publicity) and ‘guerrilla marketing’ (thought-provoking campaign aimed to generate buzz and word of mouth marketing). Although distributors spent 2.5 million dollars for marketing the film, most of the money was invested in the domestic marketplace. Film marketing specialist Sheri Candler44 analyzed this case along with *The Blair Witch Project* (USA, 1999) which was another successful example of using online and word of mouth marketing techniques. She concludes that “while there can be a low budget approach to marketing a film, the ‘extremely low budget success’ film does not exist without a firm, focused marketing plan and budget to go along.” However, the box office success of *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* in Mexico is even more remarkable because in this country the film was not accompanied by any marketing effort on the part of the distributor, just a few billboards and outdoor posters paid by exhibitors.

Finally, a brief analysis of the screen behavior helps us to gauge the chances each film had to impact the cultural scene in terms of time permanency in cinema theaters.

Table 19 shows that *The Da Vinci Code* lasted only 14 weeks in the US theaters and started to be withdrawn at the 8th week. This shouldn’t be necessarily interpreted as a

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negative behavior considering the film’s strategy of release aimed to have a shorter run with a faster return of profit. In fact, when compared with The Passion of the Christ (Table 19), The Da Vinci Code surpassed the worldwide gross in less time. Its apparently low profit ratio is due to the high budget it managed (conversely might be said regarding The Passion of the Christ high profit ratio.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cinema Screening in the US</th>
<th>Mexico*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Screen Weeks</strong></td>
<td><strong>Screen Weeks</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTB</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVC</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PXT</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Mexican records do not report data for inferring the screen slope and mode. Source: boxofficemojo.com

Table 19. Comparative Screen Behavior in US and in Mexico

Regarding What The Bleep do We (k)now!?, the long permanency it had on the screens (62 weeks in the US) is highly noticeable, and the fact that the film did not started to be withdrawn from the theaters until the 46th week. In spite of the fact that the film was screened in only 146 venues at a time –most of them small cinema theaters–, its increasing and long-lasting persistence in the American box office indicates the pace of word-of-mouth spreading.
Interestingly, in Mexico the screen weeks of *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* are almost even with those of *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Passion of the Christ*, which is significant considering that in Mexico *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* was not screened in small cinema theaters but in multiplexes\(^{45}\). Notice that estimated sold tickets in Mexico were almost equal for *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Passion of the Christ*. In 2004, the year *The Passion of the Christ* was released, the Mexican box office sold an average of 584,229 tickets per each of the 279 screened titles\(^{46}\), which means that *The Passion of the Christ* sold 9 times above that average. The same calculation with figures of 2006 places *The Da Vinci Code* 10 times above the average of sold tickets in Mexico. In 2005 the average for the 281 screened titles in Mexico was 580,071 tickets, and *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* sold little less than half of that average. In terms of ticketing, *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* sold less than 5% of what the other two films did but stayed almost the same time on commercial screens.

Moreover, what best portrays the difference between the Mexican and the US case, though, is the behavior each film had in the cinema screening. Notice how estimated sold tickets for *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Passion of the Christ* are

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\(^{45}\) A multiplex is a more than three screen movie theater complex; a megaplex is a facility with more than twelve movie theaters. In Mexico 81.8% of the screens are in multiplex and megaplex facilities.

proportional with the weeks each film remained on the US screens, whereas the rather long permanency (62 weeks) of *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* in few small US theaters –attaining less than two million viewers– suggests that this film was consumed in a ‘cult following’ logic rather than as a ‘mainstream media’, targeting specialized or niche audiences. Contrastingly, in Mexico the three films lasted almost the same time on cinema venues that commonly exhibit only commercial pop culture features. The fact that although with much fewer viewers, attendance to *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* remained constant (otherwise it would have been withdrawn from multi and megaplex facilities), suggests that the audience composition was not limited to narrow, niche-audiences, but included mainstream pop culture viewers that often visit these cinema venues. Therefore, it might be said that in the Mexican case, exhibiting conditions favored all three films to enter into the cultural agenda and hence be part of the social conversation.47

All three movies succeeded in making their way into the global media market and be part of the global imagery at least during the exhibiting period. From the industrial perspective the three films represent three different formulae of production, distribution and exhibition. Worldwide the formulae worked as expected: the higher production and advertising budget, the larger the gross. However, in the Mexican case the high-budget Hollywood studio production of *The Da Vinci Code* practically equated to the quasi independent medium-budget production *The Passion of the Christ* in terms of ticketing, meaning that in Mexico –unlike in the US– both films had the same opportunities to

47 Extra details of the Industry of the films are available in Appendix E, at the end of this work.
reach out to the cultural agenda in terms of time permanency and audience extent. As for distribution efficiency, the mixed model adopted by *The Passion of the Christ* proved to be much more successful than *The Da Vinci Code*’s concentrated model, the former distributed in 85 countries whereas the latter did so in only 68 countries. Regarding *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*?, the strategy implemented for its distribution and exhibition in Mexico surpassed expectations. It became competitive with the other two blockbuster films in the sense that it lasted as long as the other two films did on cinema venues commonly reserved for commercial releases, thus sharing not only the market placement but the others’ film audiences as well. Due to local exhibiting conditions in Mexico *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*? was not constricted to a narrow niche-audience, but rather it reached out to broad mainstream viewers who facilitated the entrance of the film into the stream of the media-based social conversation.

In terms of narrative form, the films are disparate in format and genre: a docu-fictional melodrama, detective fictional movie, and a biopic historical drama. In spite of telling different stories with dissimilar treatments, the three films explicitly circle around the theme of organized religion in the western Judeo-Christian world. While each film assumes distinct perspectives towards religion and spirituality, all of them claim to be relying on scientific foundations to make their points. Quantum physics, neurosciences, and biology in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*?, semiotics, art history and crypto-history in *The Da Vinci Code*, and updated historical research and linguistic realism in *The Passion of the Christ*. Scientific claims, as I will discuss in Part Two, is something more than a mere marketing strategy to raise controversy, it is a constituent trait in these films.
that works as a language for naming all what is associated with the religious, the spiritual, and the transcendent.

Finally, there are two noticeable features that protrude from a first reading of the films’ story plots. On the one hand they all emphasize the theme of the gaze and its cognitive edge; the main characters of the three stories are determined by what they are able to see and how they are seen by others, and on the other hand the three films tell stories of characters in disempowering and mutilative situations (a deaf woman in What The Bleep do We (k)now!?, a woman deprived from her own true identity in The Da Vinci Code, and a tortured man in The Passion of the Christ). Narratively, the three films establish associative connections between the religious, the gaze, and the issue of disempowerment. This threefold connection provided a key for my choosing psychoanalytic film criticism to approach both the contents and reception of the films.

5.2 Three Sites of Sights

Lacan’s insights of the three orders, along with some offshoot phenomena such as fetishism, castration fears, narcissism, and the complicit engagement of the gaze, benefit the analysis of consumer desires for visual cultural experiences pertaining to spirituality in three key aspects.

Firstly, his conception of the agency of the self at a stage previous to any further communication\(^48\), and not at the encounter with the others, makes room for

\(^{48}\) i.e. the foundational moment of the encounter with its very own image in the mirror stage.
interpretations opened to the less conscious and less reflective human actions that work beyond symbolic interactions. Otherness, in any case, is a second moment of the initialized primordial self apprehension, “the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual” (Lacan 2002:4)

Situated in a fictional direction, the agency of the ego departs from the virtuality of its specular image, something that by definition is imaginary, other, and un-equated with the subject. Teresa Brennan calls this the “foundational fantasy” in which the ‘I’ hallucinates and conceives itself as the locus of active agency and the environment as passive, denying any will of its own “to the extent that the world is turned into a world of objects and living nature is consumed” (Brennan 1993:14). Surprisingly, she finds that contemporary popular culture has started to question the idea of a self-contained subject at the material level of energy, as she explains “To allow that my feelings physically enter you, or yours me, to think that we both had the same thought at the same time because it is literally in the air, is to think in a way that really puts the subject in question. In some ways, the truly interesting thing is that this questioning has begun […] in popular culture.” (Brennan 1993:10-11) This notion usefully results in explaining the postmodern endeavor of re-naturalizing the ego and his/her environment. Pop culture, as we will see in Part Two, nests a wide specter of new spiritualities (e.g. Pop-Esotericism,) whose beliefs and practices challenge the rigid consequence of both a self-contained subject and
a subject-object divide. It encourages the subject to re-energize nature\textsuperscript{49} by reshaping his/her very own self and the ontology of its surrounding world.

Secondly, by suggesting that the essence of the act of intelligence is not the instrumental apprehension of the world but the foundational apperception of the ‘\textit{I}’, Lacan somehow reverses the Cartesian \textit{cogito ergo sum} assumption. Series of primary and secondary identifications allow the self to be under continuous self-construction. Therefore, visual media consumption practices may be framed as something more related to such self-construction rather than to rational-content acquisitions.

Thirdly and finally, the notion that there are haunting drives, both pre-rational and non-reflective, beyond and behind the Symbolic and the Imaginary, grants to the analysis of media-consumption practices with a call for attending dimensions often overlooked. Most commonly used theories in media studies to approach communicational processes\textsuperscript{50} often fail in reducing media-based cognition as a matter of ‘informational trading’, disregarding that what also goes on in communicational processes are shadowy and insubstantial subtexts carved deep in pre-symbolic stages, and yet forceful enough to shape and tune-up our dealing with reality.

The cognitive dynamics of the gaze drawn from Lacanian psychoanalysis and applied to cinematic readings, as Laura Mulvey has developed, bestow theoretical paths to address the issue of how vision works in dealing with the fear or the experience of a

\textsuperscript{49} Particularly, \textit{Pop-Esotericism} as we will see in Part Two reverses objectification and re-energizes nature commonly in neo-Pantheistic and neo-Gnostic fashions.

\textsuperscript{50} From Stuart Hall’s classic Audience Reception theory, to all other media processing and effects theories, such as Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory, McCombs’ Agenda-setting, Noelle-Neumann’s Spiral of Silence, the Uses and Gratifications theory, the Symbolic Convergence theory, and so on and so forth.
disempowering incompleteness. As I have explored in the previous chapters, the viewing experience of the three films used for my study constituted three strategic sites of sights for my subjects, each one engaging the gaze in the system within which individuals articulate their spirituality, identity, and reality construction to face felt uneasiness. Each film stands for different proposals for constructing subjectivity, each one as a possible psychic production to cope with issues regarding felt lack and uneasiness: a Regressive Gaze proposed as a therapy that would “reboot” the psychic system and set the self in a narcissistic self-empowering stage, as in What The Bleep do We (k)now!; a Fetishistic Scrutiny over objects that evoke threats of castration and provoke senses of anxiety, displacing these objects to more controllable arenas by means of investigations with neutralizing and ‘vitrifying’ effects, as in The Da Vinci Code; and a Sado-scopohilic cognition aimed to reach the ‘hysterical sublime’ (Jameson 1984) by anxiously circling around a threatening object until its knowledge gets disavowed in favor of belief, as in The Passion of the Christ.

Besides servicing the abovementioned proposals of subjectivity, the manifest and latent contents of the films also traverse some common features which, once cross-interpreted, suggest threads of an underlying discourse. Thus, science occupies a privileged place in both What The Bleep do We (k)now! and The Da Vinci Code, and the same can be said for The Passion of the Christ if we consider the marketing emphasis the film made claiming that the script was based on factual events discovered by scientific researches. Mel Gibson explicitly stated to the media that he was on a mission to portray

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51 e.g. figures of the feminine and divinity.
52 Shed blood is known to mean death, but still is believed to be the sacred substance of salvation.
the suffering of Christ with historical accuracy making his film as close to true history as possible, he added: “Passion may eventually help put things in the right perspective, the perspective of truth”. Besides the verbatim use of the Scriptures, the film relies on the use of Latin and Aramaic, the ancient languages the film claims that Jesus and his contemporaries spoke. Originally, Gibson wanted to do the film completely in Aramaic without subtitles: “It (Aramaic) will lend even more authenticity and realism to the film. Subtitles would somehow spoil the effect that I want to achieve. It would alienate you and you'd be very aware that you were watching a film if you saw lettering coming up on the bottom of it.”

Luis: I really liked the fact that it was spoken in Aramaic, I think it gives it a touch of reality because it makes it be stuck to what the Bible states.

Science is identified by Russell Belk (1989:10) as an area where the secular is sacralized, he contends that “[r]ather than religion, science is considered the ultimate arbiter of truth in societies that venerate rational thought and causal explanations […] Now it is science rather than religion that is viewed as imparting knowledge”. However, the understanding of sacralization (and sacralized science) varies from one film to another; for example, The Passion of the Christ aligns with the orderly and transcendental notion of the sacred that is set apart from matter, as conceived by traditional Catholicism. What The Bleep do We (k)now!? and The Da Vinci Code, on their part, embrace the immanent sacred aspect of transgression where fascinated spectators feel magical and intimate connections to the movement of living energetic matter, as it is insinuated by quantum physics and

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neurosciences in that film. A participant of a focus group shared her incursions in quantum physics pointing out that the latter does not undermine her religious beliefs:

SANDRA: I am a Catholic but I am participating, for eight years now, in a group that studies quantum physics, and it is not a religion, but something that completes it because one can belong to any religion and still participate in the group.

The equivalent is found in the crypto-history premise in *The Da Vinci Code*; it is the idea that official history is but the make up of a deceiving conspiracy. Crypto-history—as it will be explained in Part Two– is an assumption present in many forms of esotericism and theories of conspiracy (Taguieff 2005). This premise lubricates alternative ways for explaining reality, not only at the metaphysical level, but also at the social and political levels. For instance, TANIA said that the target of *The Da Vinci Code* were people who like science and history, “educated people interested in learning what scholars are discovering and denouncing as falsehood, such as many religious truths are”, and she gave the following example applied to official Mexican history:

TANIA: I’ll tell you what. You know that Pancho Villa was not exactly the ‘hero’ of the Mexican Revolution? He was actually a thief, a simple Mexican thief who robbed or subtracted, or whatever, I mean, the haciendas54 from families who owned them, and kept the haciendas for himself. It is documented: in the north part of the country, Chihuahua, he used to arrive, kill people, take their properties and cross into the United States. There he robbed money too because he was a persecuted thief. Just few knows that. So he made his Revolution with the socialist idea of taking money from the rich and giving it to the poor.

54 Large plantations or estates.
Moreover, in the three films there is a claim of ‘scientific realism’ holding basically that we are justified in accepting the findings of scientists as ‘tangible evidences’ because outcome of “scientific research is ultimately knowledge of theory-independent phenomena which is actual even for those phenomena that are not observable.”

Everything including inner/intimate realities becomes ‘tangible and (e)vident’ –and thus possessible– with the aid of science in What The Bleep do We (k)now!? and in The Da Vinci Code. Non-diegetical views of Amanda’s cells and brain as well as the traveling shot across the Criptex violate what by definition shouldn’t be analyzable: we are not supposed to look inside a sealed place such as the human body or the hermetic box of the Criptex. Opening these containers without rupturing their integrity is feasible though, by means of un-intrusive visualizations as those obtained by medical endoscopies.

Each film makes an appeal to credibility on the authority of certain notions of accuracy –historical (The Passion of the Christ) and scientific (What The Bleep do We (k)now!? and The Da Vinci Code). Art history, symbology, quantum physics, neurosciences, original languages and archeology are deployed as alternative knowledge and warrants for reliability and woven into the very texture of the film in order to shape the viewer’s experience. These work with docu-fictional film genre like What The Bleep do We (k)now!? and with the detective thriller and historical epic in the case of The Da Vinci Code and The Passion of the Christ, respectively. However, I agree with David Morgan when he points out that “the breaking point in each film when belief can no longer be suspended and the warrant proves insufficient” was, in The Da Vinci Code, the

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loss of Sophie; in *The Passion of the Christ*, the sadism of the scourge scene; and in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?,* the sleazy narcissism of the female perched in a bathtub, tattooing the gospel of New Age self-culture on her own flesh.

*The Da Vinci Code* and *The Passion of the Christ* share many features. On the one hand their structure of ‘looking’ corresponds to story lines where a masculine gaze actively pulls the diegesis of the narrative (Robert Langdon in *The Da Vinci Code*, Satan and God in *The Passion of the Christ*) in spite of the passivity of the spectacle (represented by Sophie in *The Da Vinci Code*, and by Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*). On the other hand, both films intend to grab by means of fetishization the unspeakable, the unrepresentable essence of divinity synecdochically ‘presented’—rather than metaphorically or metonymically ‘represented’—in Jesus’ Blood. Why a synecdoche rather than a metaphor or a metonym? The last two figures are representations by substitution of one object by another, for metaphor substitution is based on similarity, while for metonymy is based on contiguity. But in a synecdoche a specific part of something (the blood) is used to vicariously present the whole (the Christ). W.J.T. Mitchell puts forward that a fetish does not ‘represent’ something, it “is” something “with an indwelling spirit, a trace in matter of the activity of the immaterial” (Mitchell 1990:16). Sacred Blood is the main motif in *The Da Vinci Code* and in *The Passion of the Christ*, revealed through Techno-forensical and Surgical operations respectively, both performed with expertise by professionals (Professor Langdon in *The Da Vinci Code*, and the Roman Captain of the flogging in *The Passion of the Christ*).
Authorship is an inseparable component in the consumption of both films. In *The Passion of the Christ* as well as in *The Da Vinci Code* the fact that their authors (Mel Gibson and Dan Brown, respectively) are known celebrities, tinted the reading experience. ROLANDO commented on *The Passion of the Christ* on the basis of who was its author, and so did LUCERO when commenting on *The Da Vinci Code*:

ROLANDO: Besides, just consider that this was made by Mel Gibson, right? I think Mel Gibson is a wonderful actor, he has done some interesting movies, but to be honest he is sort of a radical, I mean, I think Mel Gibson is an ultra-rightist who has demonstrated that/he believes that Jewish people are wrong, I mean he gets drunk and makes this anti-Semitic statement.

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LUCERO: Absolutely, as I said, he [Dan Brown] is famous for diving seriously into documents to support what he writes, but I am telling you: that was not new for me, he might have his own ways to research on all this, but for me there was nothing that I didn’t know before. I mean, where there’s smoke, there’s fire.

Two biblical female figures are at the core of *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Passion of the Christ*: Virgin Mary (the mother) and Mary the Magdalene (the whore). They represent the dualistic split in western morality that began in the 16th century coincidentally with the colonial European expansion. The split became orthogonal and was manifested iconographically, gaining fixity and naturalization. Pollock explains that Christian theology split femininity between these two figures: the saint one and the sinner. The dyad is a loaded metaphor of light and darkness that pervades the classical western imagery (Pollock 1999:249). *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Da Vinci Code* assume the dualistic split of femininity, though disguised in redemptive fashions. In *The Passion
of the Christ the polarity is maintained by depicting a former sinner (Magdalene) already converted and on the track of likening Virgin Mary. Male informants singled out this character and commented on her even more than they did with Virgin Mary. For example, one male informant found in Mary Magdalene the redefining and vindictive attributes of the feminine:

JAIME: Woman’s role in the Passion is redefined by feminine figures, particularly by Mary Magdalene. This is important in stories coming from our Judeo-Christian tradition, wherein protagonism is always male sided. And here, without subtracting the leading role of man, the figure of woman is reconfigured giving her a different importance.

A trace of assumed dualistic split of femininity (mother/whore) is echoed in the following utterance in which a male viewer of The Passion of the Christ comments why Mary Magdalene was the character to whom he felt more appealed to:

DAGOBERTO: she was the character that most called my attention, she and also Veronica, the one who cleans the blood from Jesus’ face with the shroud and the blood prints out the face of Jesus. But what draws my focus was Magdalene. Besides, well, I’d have to add the collateral ingredient of Monica Belluci. Independently of her physical beauty, which I find outstandingly charming, she is a true actress, not only a beauty face but a woman who really knows her job.

The mention of Veronica is not gratuitous. This secondary character is a surrogate in The Passion of the Christ for both Mary Magdalene and Virgin Mary as she repeats the same gesture of the former, wiping the blood from the ground with towels. Later on in the interview the same informant commented on Virgin Mary, the expressions he uses for this feminine figure contrast with those employed when referring to Mary Magdalene.
DAGOBERTO: He is carrying the cross and stumbles, and Virgin Mary sees him, and the Virgin is like having a regression recalling when her son was little child and he trips. This thing, that you don’t want your child to be hurt by nothing. So this regression is projecting personal things or the way you understand religion. I guess that was the part I couldn’t help tears.

In The Da Vinci Code the polarity is assumed by sublimating the figure of Magdalene: official history, claims the film, defamed this figure pointing her as a prostitute when actually she was the closest human being to divinity, a role supplanted by Virgin Mary. Commenting on The Da Vinci Code one male informant pondered how the stigma on Magdalene was vindicated:

MARIANO: how cool is that! How instead of being the whore and the sinner, they introduce her as somebody who is there supporting Christ when he was troubled, with whom Christ shared bed, with whom Christ, uhm, the one Christ likes and wants. That was so cool.

Although it seems that there is an affirmative vision of Magdalene in The Da Vinci Code, the fact is that what is only vindicated is that she was not guilty of the charge the church imputed to her, without questioning how fair or unfair is the very act of disqualifying women with the charge of prostitution. This position resonated in some female informants who reproduced the discourse embedded in the film:

NADIA: I see it [the Church] as authoritarian, as authoritarian and information controller, trying to control the way one should see things, religion, and life in general. Because they want to impose a Jesus who never fell into temptation, and in order to cover that Jesus could have had a crush on, or married with Mary Magdalene, they depict her as a whore. That’s why they point her as a prostitute,
so Jesus’ image won’t be polluted, and once like that, like a whore, there is no room that he’d be in love with her.

Both *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Da Vinci Code* exert ‘marianizations’ on the figure of the Magdalene, but leave untouchable the stigma of sinfulness in woman because in both films stays preserved the belief that impurity, linked with prostitution, takes part in women’s nature ‘unless’ proximity to the divine redeems them. ROBERTO, a historian and faculty member, sees in this logic a reflection of the patriarchal order:

ROBERTO: [Sophie] doesn’t know, she just doesn’t get it, she is so immersed in the middle of the whirl she didn’t want to be in. She just wanted to help Langdon to get out of the mess he was drawn to, however it is she who now has to be protected because she happens to be the kernel of all. For me it was very significant the last scene when she is brought to her caretakers in Scotland. She says goodbye to Langdon and suddenly turns back and does as if she were stepping on something like a fountain or lake, and noticing her foot doesn’t float, she tells him: “I hope I’d be luckier with the wine” [laughter] the shallowest commentary ever! Can you imagine? That is what her divinity would be good for, just to make wine at will! [laughter] That gives you an idea of who wrote the script and directed the movie, they were all male. The way the feminine is presented is still a sort of ‘a woman has no decision capability or willingness’. All riddles are solved by men and explained by men. Men discuss, fight each other, murder each other, and woman is something like the everlasting figure, just a little bit ingenious, with a little touch of capability but, at the end, she is not a decision maker, but males are.

Finally, the three films have the commonality of emphasizing “visualism” as a surrogate of the understanding. Maps, diagrams, charts, photographs, vignettes are inscriptions of a visualism aimed to affirm senses of rational and unquestionable evidence. This rhetoric
figure is broadly used in current social cognition for assessing spiritual discourses, regardless of being New Age discourses, as in the films *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* and *The Da Vinci Code*; or more traditional church oriented discourses, like *The Passion of the Christ*. Visualism, crypto-history, pop-science, these are features present in contemporary pop cultural consumption with spiritual ends; they configure some of the basic discursive traits of what I have termed ‘Pop-Esotericism’, a concept I will develop in Part Two.
Part Two

POP-ESOTERICISM

Presentation:

Part One drew mainly on psychoanalytic frameworks and on a mixed film and reception analysis to detect the manifest and latent content conveyed in the three films. The films tell stories of characters in disempowering and mutilative situations, and foster different proposals to cope with such uneasiness. What The Bleep do We (k)now!? proposes a narcissistic-based therapy, I term ‘Regressive Gaze’, through which subjects are invited to *reboot* their psychic system in order to regain self-empowerment. *The Da Vinci Code* tackles the anxiety awakened by objects that evoke the ‘uncontrollable’ (the feminine, the divine) by subjecting these objects under a ‘Fetishistic Scrutiny’, displacing them to more controllable arenas. Lastly, *The Passion of the Christ* faces the disquieting presence of mutilation in the form of exposed blood and raw flesh. It takes on a ‘Sado-scopohilic’ cognition, consisting in circling around what is deemed threatening until a given knowledge (*shed blood means death...*) gets disavowed –or sublimated– in favor of belief (*...but still, is the sacred substance of salvation*).

While resonating differently with these proposals of subjectivity, participants of this study coincided in using these pop culture references to create senses of spirituality and self-identity for themselves. It is not that the films stayed at the core along subjects’ conversations, rather media products worked as cultural triggers and recursive references
to feed explicit and sometimes intense spiritual/religious conversations. What enables mainstream products from the cultural industry to act as spiritual or religious inputs?

In Part Two of this work, I explore contemporary pop cultural consumption with spiritual ends and usages. The discussion will yield to characterize one specific type of consumption—namely ‘Pop-Esotericism’—exemplified here by the viewing experience of the films *What The Bleep do We (k)now!* and *The Da Vinci Code*, both contrasted with *The Passion of the Christ* viewing experience. Part Two is structured in two chapters. The first one reviews the topic on Media and Spiritual Consumption. Prior to addressing the pop cultural milieu nesting Pop-Esotericism, I reflect on what I assume as our contemporary global media context embracing the notions of *multi-modal* communication and *multi-nodal* networking derived from my reviewing on Manuel Castells’ (2004) Theory of the Network Society. Within this context, the use of media for spiritual/religious purposes is marked by intense social productions on behalf of individuals, who—through processes of sacralization and re-enchantment—emancipate spiritual and religious motifs from the ‘public-institutional sphere’ and make them essentially a phenomenon of the ‘private sphere’. A subsequent chapter elaborates the concept of what I have termed ‘Pop-Esotericism’, tracking its cultural antecedents and developing three areas that configure the basic discursive traits of this category: its conversational drives, communicative codes, and the endeavors it embarks on for claiming authority and authenticity. I conclude with a summary of these two chapters to facilitate the transition to Part Three.
Chapter 6

Media and Spiritual Consumption

6.1. The Global Media Context and the Multi-nodal Networking

The broad setting that nests Pop-Esotericism is our current global media context. What makes it such, though, is not the affluence of numerous and sophisticated media with planetary coverage gestated along the twentieth century, but the more qualitative shift media conveyed and blossomed in the new millennium. The word ‘media’ has become a term that works as a synecdoche for communication and media-culture due to a couple of reasons: firstly, because in the present-day media can no longer be thought in a divergent logic (multiple and separated devices specialized in different kinds of communications: TV, radio, newspaper, film) but in a convergent logic (fewer gadgets performing multiple communication features); and secondly, because, as Manuel Castells (2004) puts forward, concrete media are but subspecies of communications which includes all forms of communication. In The Rise of the Network Society (2000) he considers media’s performance as the defining factor of present society. Media, according to Castells, shall not be understood as a collection of isolated diverse media (television, radio, cinema, internet), but as a multimodal communication-complex featured among the multiple nodes that comprise the network wherein our mental models are built.

In his revision on McLuhan’s notion of ‘Global Village’, Castells argues that contemporary society is not actually a ‘village’, but “a global network of individual
cottages” (Rantanen 2005:141) linked to the diverse nodes that constitute what can be called a multi-nodal social form. The Castellian approach differs from other globalization theories in envisioning globalization not as an analytical concept, but as one of the many consequences of a global network society. Although both terms go hand in hand, it is the network society which sets off globalization, profoundly changing “the ways in which organizations and individuals interact with each other.” (Rantanen 2005:143) In other words, from a Theory of the Network Society perspective, what makes a context to be Global is not the exportability of its cultural artifacts (for example, the worldwide distribution of blockbusters such as *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?, The Da Vinci Code,* or *The Passion of the Christ,* ) but rather the networking of communication processes that those different items (*multi-modality*) release among the different nodes (*multi-nodality*) of the society. Moreover, the overabundance of media contents has become an issue of so-called ‘economy of attention’, forcing both producers and consumers to develop proficiency in dealing with the incessant flow of media information. Both actors assume the evanescent nature of current media products, which are no longer expected to be fixed in the cultural horizon, but rather to transiently work as more or less relevant inputs, that is: as disposable pre-texts feeding the conversations held by the multi-nodal subjects that gather in communities of meaning along the social network. This was acknowledged by several participants, like interactive designer CONRADO, 21, who explained why he thinks controversial films are needed to provide people with “something to discuss and talk”:

**CONRADO:** the purpose of the film is not to ‘inform’ people, it’s just entertainment. I think we always are in need of, you know, something has to be
produced in order to generate controversy. People always need something to discuss and talk, and these productions are good food for getting together and talk, which is what finally matters.

The recognition of the primacy of inter-subjective networking is at the basis of contemporary theory of reception, which has become privileged by media and religion studies1 –versus, for example, a mere content analysis approach to understand media and religious faith phenomena. The last stage of this cross-disciplinary field has branched into different perspectives; however, as Robert White (2004:198-0) points out, all approaches coincide in acknowledging that the social actors in a global network society are not merely subjected to historical forces, but are actively constructing meanings around personal identities. For most, such constructions are not taking on institutional belief systems, but selecting symbols and meanings from a wide variety of religious and secular systems to build their own belief systems. Bringing media references into conversations when discussing topics on spirituality or transcendency is an encompassing feature. In fact, all interviews, focus groups, and discussion groups in my study referred spontaneously to their associations to media, particularly to films, other than the three movies they were invited to discuss. I coded 143 verbatims of this sort. Those who used *The Passion of the Christ* as a trigger for conversation totaled 20 verbatims with references to other media, mostly explicitly religious films, for example:

PERLA: Or that other movie we saw in part for morbid reasons, but also because we wanted to make out our own judgment, uh, ‘The Crime of Father Amaro’,

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1 See “Soul Searching in a Digital Age, the mission and influence of the International Study Commission on Media, Religion and Culture” Monograph by David Scott. The Media, Religion and Culture Project. Houston, Texas. www.mrcproject.org
right? about this priest living an unedifying religious life, and so people divided: ones in favor and others against it, because it becomes something polemical.

In a group that focused on *The Passion of the Christ*, subjects were asked to define what makes a film to be considered as transcendent, religious or spiritual. Arcelia, a 45-years-old amateur painter, expressed a non-explicitly-religious approach, which provoked disagreement among the group:

"Whatever remits you to the mystery, to the mystical. It doesn't have to be about a particular religion, for me it's more about what is spiritual."

"As long as God is included. I mean, you can talk about values and all that stuff, and that's ok, but if something is meant to be religious or spiritual or whatever, then we are talking about God. Any God: Jewish, Christian, Buddhist."

In turn, those who used *The Da Vinci Code* as a pre-text for talking about spiritual or religious topics produced a larger number of verbatims with media references, 39 in total, some of them mentioning explicitly religious media and some others non-religious. Notice in the next verbatim how rapidly a group of undergrads followed a classmate’s suggestion, and how easily the ephemerality of media products is assumed:

"Well, yes, but there are many others [films], not only religious, but also those dealing with philosophical or spiritual things. I mean, there are more options other than about God. Like… [launches the question to the group]"

"Left Luggage."

"The Reaping, very very creepy."

"The Fountain."

"The Exorcist."

"The Exorcist, so good! The Fountain, I insist."
The Belief System and the Pop-ESOTERIC Wave
Part Two: Pop-Esotericism

Facilitator: You all guys saw that one? [All Participants respond No]

Abel: Never mind. It wasn’t really well-known, it lasted like a month and then it was withdrawn.

While groups discussing The Passion of the Christ produced 14% (20 verbatims) of media references, and The Da Vinci Code produced 27% (39 verbatims), those who commented on What The Bleep do We (k)now!?, and later engaged in conversations regarding spirituality, produced 59% (84 verbatims) of media references. Mentions included documentaries, fictional films, TV shows, and books. Although the list of media references is quite long, one still finds consistency and recurrence. Informants did not only referred to similar media (i.e. dealing with neurosciences, quantum physics, self-improvement, or new age spirituality), but also mentioned products apparently not directly related to these themes. For example, four different focus groups unexpectedly commented on the film 300, and referred to it as an inspiring and spiritual movie.

Isidoro: it’s like a transcendentalist movie, because you want to be like that, like strong and pro.

Julian: yeah, I saw it, and truly you leave the theater willing to kill somebody.

Jairo: it makes you walk as a man when you exit [the theater].

[All Participants laugh out loud]

300 (USA 2006) turned out to have great resonance, particularly among male youngsters. They found inspiring values in it such as courage, bravery, power, empowerment; and labeled such values as spiritual and transcendent ones.

Only 14% of media-reference verbatims came from resistant participants, while 28% came from the initiated in Pop-Esotericism, and 58% from uninitiated pop-esotericists. Proportions indicate that the uninitiated, followed by the initiated, are more in contact with systems of symbols embedded in mainstream media, and bring them into conversation when dealing with spiritual, religious, or transcendent matters. Robert White has argued that for a variety of reasons, “the media are an important means of getting in contact with the available systems of symbolic materials with which to build identity” (White 2004:200) Thus, the question relocates the spotlight from the ‘bricks’ with which subjectivity is constructed (the Castillian multi-modality of diverse, corporate media) to the ‘activity’ of the constructors and the complexity of performances they engage as nodes of a broader network.

6.2. Pop Cultural Consumption with Spiritual Ends

In modern industrial societies construction of subjectivity is a task individuals take on through incursions to the various sources where inputs for such construction are supplied. Traditional sources –such as religious institutions and other public instances– offer and mediate these inputs in conspicuous ways, but coexisting with them there is an array of inputs which, although they are indeed mediated by the cultural industry as well as structures and social practices involved in the selling of commodities, they appear as if they were ‘unmediated’. In other words: the open-shelf distribution of the market place wherein these inputs are offered implicitly carries senses of both self-administration and self-determination. These ‘senses of autonomy’ in front of media consumptions do not
necessarily imply naïveté regarding the lucrative purposes of media products. In fact there was a general acknowledging among my subjects of the marketing and commercial nature of the three films (I coded more than 140 verbatims in this direction). Participants spontaneously commented on the self-determination and self-administration implied in media consumption. More than a half of those praising these ‘senses of autonomy’ were less than 22 years-old. None of the resistant made remarks on this regard, but only the initiated and the uninitiated did. However, the uninitiated were the most insistent ones, outnumbering the initiated by 3 to 1. Here is how Aurelia raised her point while discussing *The Da Vinci Code*:

**Aurelia:** it’s just a theory, right? I mean, here I am, putting my idea onto the table, and whoever wants to buy it let him buy it, and whoever doesn’t let him go. Just like with many other things: you have the choice of taking it or leaving it. If it fits you, wear it on, if it doesn’t move on. You want to believe it? Go ahead. You like it as entertainment, then enjoy it as entertainment. But when people are too close minded they don’t even care for seeing it [the film]. Many gave up just because the Church told them: ‘it’s a heresy to see that movie’.

The analysis elaborated in Part One revealed the manifest and latent content that is conveyed in the three films and identified embedded proposals in them for constructing subjectivity. Proposals of spiritual salvation, senses of truth, personal growth, regeneration and recovery of the self, are ‘bricks’ audiences resonate with, and use – conscious and unconsciously, as I demonstrated before – to create senses of transcendency for themselves. This sort of proposals, once commodified in books, music, films, artifacts, or any other form of the cultural industry, take part of the aura of desire that
coats other commodities. Bridget Heneghan (2003:62) has explored the desirability aspect of consumerism and noticed that if it is true that any object to be consumed supposes a desire for possessing it, some desires are socially associated with ‘disapproved values’ such as vanity, idleness, or narcissism, and therefore are discouraged from being conspicuously exhibited. Consumers clothe these desires with other socially accepted significances, for example by bestowing sacred meanings on them. Fashion designer and Reiki therapist LOURDES, 30, explained in an interview her rationale for going to a members-only Spa in Mexico City:

LOURDES: I read somewhere that people who don’t express themselves get blocked and start fattening because your mind makes your body get blocked and sick, not only physically sick, but mentally, spiritually sick.

FACILITATOR: Is that why you go there, to be healed?

LOURDES: I go there to open my intuition and to revitalize myself. As I told you, I am in a search for spiritual growth, and that’s what my going there grants me. It’s like a platform where you find motivation to keep growing, for achieving self-knowledge, for living coherently in truth, in harmony with myself and with all what surrounds me.

‘Sacred clothing’ like the one exemplified here, illustrates how commodified products which would strictly belong to certain domains, for instance psychology (e.g. self-improvement techniques, child breeding, therapies for recovering the self) or physical fitness, cosmetics, and health (e.g. martial arts, beauty treatments, dietary), are nowadays easily bonded to the domain of spirituality and religion. Consider for example the spiritualized atmosphere created in spas, gyms, and even in some amusement or thematic
parks\(^3\); and the placing of CDs, DVDs, books, and magazines related to self-

improvement and fitness in the religion and esotericism section of a supermarket or

bookstore.

Following Heneghan, one could expect that a significant majority of those who

consume films that involve spiritual or therapeutic themes or feeling-tones, as *What The

Bleep do We (k)now!*?, somehow do so in ways that prevent them from recognizing that

they are consuming mainly media-entertainment commodities, and instead deeming their

viewing as forms of explicit spiritual or religious practices, bestowing sacred significance

to them. But they don’t. As I will discuss in the concluding chapter of this work, such

prediction failed when tested in this research. Let it suffice now to say that audiences

recognize at any time that they are consuming mainly media-entertainment products

without impairing their ability to easily relate themselves to these products as religious or

even sacred ones. **DAVID**, a 22 year-old student of marketing, said the following apropos

*The Passion of the Christ*:

**DAVID**: I find very cool that religious themes and related topics are taken to the

screens. Although what movies are after to, is to make money. That’s what a

movie wants and does: money. And of course, these themes are so controversial

that it is easy to make money with them.

About half of the *resistants* and half of the *initiated* produced verbatims wherein they

acknowledged the commercial purpose of the three films; the proportion increased among

the *uninitiated*: three of every four of them uttered comments in this regard. What makes

\(^3\) Attractions in Xcaret—a thematic park in the Riviera Maya nearby Cancun—are framed in this

environment. Visitors are invited to keep a “silent atmosphere” aimed to propitiate a “spiritual experience”
even in sportive activities such as scuba-diving.
supposedly oppositional realms –‘the sacred’ and ‘the commodified’– be functional and coexistent for these audiences? Certainly it seems to be a degree of ‘disavowal’ on the part of subjects who may operate in the manner of “I know this is merely a commodity, but just the same it is religious for me”. The question gains more clarity when considering the nature of the so called spiritual marketplace and the complex processes of sacralization (associated with fetishization) that take place therein.

6.2.1. The open shelves of the sacred cosmos

The easiness with which consumers bestow sacred significance to commodities that are originally meant to have another nature –as the self-improvement theme in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?,* or the entertaining thriller plot in *The Da Vinci Code*–, reflects an intrinsic feature of what has being termed ‘spiritual marketplace’. Although Wade Clark Roof (1999) coined this term at the end of the twentieth century, back in the decade of the sixties Thomas Luckmann (1967) thoroughly depicted the social form of religion of those days. In his thought, religion in modern industrial societies was a result of both the principle of free choice inherent in the marketplace and the direct accessibility of an assortment of religious representations to potential consumers. He put it this way: “The sacred cosmos is mediated neither through a specialized domain of religious institutions nor through other primary public institutions. It is the direct accessibility of the sacred cosmos, more precisely, through an assortment of religious themes, which makes religion today essentially a phenomenon of the ‘private sphere’.” (Luckmann 1967:103 Also see comments by Redden 2002:43)
Religion is a matter relegated to the private sphere as it is considered to be potentially confrontational. That is what participants agreed on in a discussion group of women, aged 45 to 60, which joined Catholic practitioners, Catholic non-practitioners, and members of other Christian denominations (like ‘La Secta de los Cristianos’). The group managed to avoid possible conflicts among them while talking about religion. They carefully stated, in the first place, the private nature of religious beliefs.

LARIZA: that is why for me they [the films] always tend to be polemical, because they deal with each one’s beliefs. So, if you disagree with what you are seeing, then a huge conflict comes.

MARICLARA: yes, because religion is a highly controversial topic. To speak about it is sort of slippery because it’s a very intimate matter. It is part of your intimacy.

Likewise did a group of youngsters aged 17 to 19 who opted to skew their religious positions, either being evasive about their own religious identities or even minimizing their own religion membership. All deemed religion as something that is relative and not worthy of discussion, though all praised tolerance towards others’ beliefs.

JANA: exactly, then you have all this problems between religions. That this religion stands for this and that religion stands for that. So as ABEL said before, it gets confrontational.

GRETA: and people end fighting each other

For my informants, religion is regarded as something that concerns only the individual because when it is socialized it often generates conflict. Contrastingly, when participants talked about spirituality their approach changed. The script for focus groups included two questions: “In your opinion what is it to be a religious person?” and “In your opinion
what is it to be a spiritual person?” While answering the latter, participants showed to be 25% more profuse than they were for the former in terms of number of coded verbatims, amount of words employed, and number of informants uttering verbatims.

There are many ways to interpret why religion is conflictive when it is viewed as a social rather than a strictly individual matter. One possible explanation is the polarizing agenda held by the Catholic Church in Mexico, whose issues and concerns will be discussed with a breakdown in Chapter 7. Socializing religion in this context would easily bring into conversation those sensitive issues on, for example, dogma or morality, for which polarization would jeopardize the dialogue among those that held different viewpoints. There is a popular saying that used to be hung in Mexican bars: “In this cantina we don’t speak politics, religion or soccer”. Another picturesque banner hung on some front doors of Mexican houses says: “This is a Catholic home, we don’t accept protestant propaganda or from any other sect. God save Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of God!”

A second and paired explanation—which will be fully elaborated in forthcoming chapters– is that religion, when viewed as a matter for social discussion, it is perceived as authoritarian and inherently opposed to the openness that is required and expected from a social conversation. As AMPARO complained, one cannot discuss further because for religion “this is dogma and you shut up! And that’s it!” Spirituality, on the contrary, seems to be a fertile ground to develop dialogue and construct consensus around common

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4 As a mocking response, some people have attached banners that say: “This is an Atheist home, we do accept all type of ideas. God save Science! God save people who are open-minded and reflect!”
–though abstract– utopian pursuits (as could be ‘harmony’, ‘peace’, etc), regardless of how diverse are those who converse.

RICARDO: the point is not to attain ‘perfection’, but to reach ‘spiritual peace’ which can be achieved without necessarily being a hundred percent [religious] practitioner. What is really shocking is to see the clash among religions. Those who are Catholics fight to death against Protestants, and so on and so forth. What is wrong then? That people don’t fully understand what religion should be searching, which is the spiritual peace.

In addition to this contextual explanation, this finding also backs up Luckmann’s envisioning of religion as a phenomenon of the ‘private sphere’ that draws on symbols one directly accesses from the cultural well. Nevertheless, and in spite that one has “direct access” to religious representations in the spiritual marketplace, such accessibility is not as bare and unmediated as Luckmann seems to suggest. In fact, consumption of spiritual matters is mediated by agencies such as the conventions of the market and the cultural industry, if not by specific organizations with more explicit agendas. For example, the film What The Bleep do We (k)now!? is an initiative taken by The Institute of Noetic Sciences\(^5\). Since the film was released, the Institute has consolidated an international network of 300 community groups committed to organizing study groups, forums, workshops, and more. By the way, this organization recently gained big publicity, once again, as it was largely cited in The Lost Symbol (2009), Dan Brown’s last novel that followed The Da Vinci Code (2006). Audiences, independently of them liking

\(^5\) The Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) is a membership organization located in Northern California that “conducts and sponsors leading-edge research into the potentials and powers of consciousness” http://www.noetic.org/ Consulted on December 18th 2009.
or disliking the films, are fairly aware of the corporate-media interests and their need of placing products in the cultural marketplace:

RAMÓN: I don’t know if that [to make money] was Mel Gibson’s aim. Certainly he filled his pocket up with millions without investing too much money.

FACILITATOR: and what about the film, what do you guys think was its purpose?

FLAVIA: to make money, of course. The only purpose of any production company is to raise money, nothing else.

RAMÓN: yes, to become a blockbuster. That’s the only thing.

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GARDENIA: American film industry is in serious jeopardy, it has been sleepless for a while. So they get good writers, and filmmakers, and good screenplays to sell and rescue the industry. Look, this uh, the writer, the famous one, uh, Stephen King. He found the right elements to sell, making out of fear and mystery a very profitable industry. And he sells millions and millions in books. So, guess what the film industry does? They go like ‘hey, this is a gold mine, let’s make some movies out of it’ because a bestseller makes a blockbuster.

Among the many items displayed on the shelves of the spiritual market, mass-mediated pop culture products stand out with obvious engaging or more subtle or allusive inputs for a meaning-making process that takes place all around us “often in places rarely identified by religious institutions as ‘religious’” (Hess 2004:153).

For the last decades, scholars of consumerism as well as media and religion studies6 have been attentive towards these ‘obvious or allusive’ products, some of which are explicitly religious (e.g. The Passion of the Christ, USA 2004; or the TV series

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6 Such as Hoover, Clark, Campbell, White, Rey, Alters, Horsfield, Marriage, Mitchell, Morgan, Lundby, to mention some of the authors reviewed for this study.
Touched by an Angel, USA 1994-2003; or the TV call-in talk show Mother Angelica Live, USA 1990) and its reading as such takes aback nobody (Horsfield 2005; Medrano 2007); and some have non explicit religious content and yet are read and used for religious/spiritual purposes (Schofield 2003; Henríquez 2004; Jenkins 1992), as documented –for example– for the TV series The X Files, USA/Canada 1993-2002; 2001: A Space Odyssey, UK/USA 1968; or the TV sequels Star Trek, USA 1966-1987-1995. Yet, a third kind of media products are used by audiences as sources for religious/spiritual meaning-making. Take for example the films What The Bleep do We (k)now!?, USA 2004; or The Da Vinci Code, USA 2006; or The Matrix, USA/Australia 1999, just to mention a few from a long list of media products which are neither ‘explicitly religious’ nor ‘non religious’ in themselves but still are consumed as inputs for the belief system. It is in the encounter with pop culture products of this third kind that audiences may exert cognitive approaches to turn them into pop-esoteric products.

In two separate interviews, Nidia and Roxana found What The Bleep do We (k)now! strongly associated with the films Alice in the Wonderland and with The Matrix. They both saw in these stories echoes of philosophical and spiritual teachings from ancient ages:

Nidia: it made me recall Alice in Wonderland. There you also have a woman, a young woman, searching for a world of endless possibilities. It is clearly philosophical and quite Zen; the same Zen style as in The Matrix.

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ROXANA: just look how the kid [Reginald, the basketball player in What The Bleep do We (k)now!?] says that the question is “how far down the rabbit hole do you want to go”, and the “follow the white rabbit” in The Matrix. Yes, it’s Alice.

6.2.2. Sacralizing processes in spiritual consumption

Sociology of religion (since its earliest stages), scholarship of consumerism, and obviously all psychoanalysis traditions stress indissoluble associations between sacralizing processes and fetishization processes. What links both is that for each of these processes an object of desire is recognized as having inherent powers either to materialize promises of yearning fulfillments (the Freudian tradition) or to awake mechanisms of erasure and concealment of unwanted historical realities (the Marxist tradition.) I advanced in the First Part of this work that the study of media consumption, including media related to the spiritual realm, has been equally benefited by both Freudian and Marxian approaches to fetishism and their correlative mechanisms of sacralization. I earlier applied the Freudian framework to the psychoanalytic film analysis of the three films, now it is time to succinctly review the Marxist approach to fetishism, and relate it to media consumed with spiritual purposes.

Marx employs the term ‘fetishism’ to describe the way, in capitalist societies, social relations assume the illusory form of relations between things. In “The Fetishism

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7 Thus, for example, McClintock (1995:211-8) uses Marxist tradition to document how commodity fetishism serves to preserve social order erasing both the signs of labor and the industrial origins of commodities –media included– particularly in those contexts were impending social agitation and anticolonial resistance emerge. Using psychoanalytical formulations, Wood (1989), Eagleton (1983), Stam (1992), among others, have explored how fetishization conveyed in media products, like films, connects with the anxieties and threats audiences experience at unconscious levels.
of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” (Sec 4, Chap 1 of Capital) he considers a commodity a “a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” inasmuch as its qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses: perceptible are the commodity’s physical properties and material relations, but imperceptible is the value relation between the products of labor stamped in the commodity, thus covering over actual historical relations of production and labor for the appearance of a timeless thing, shrouded in the phantasma of what Marx called “the mist-enveloped regions of the religious World. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race.” (Marx 1976:165)

Applied to Pop-Esotericism, commodity fetishism would imply that consumers misrecognize or erase the signs of labor and lucrative interests; in sum, the industrial origins of these products. Instead, they would deem the products as having pure divulging aims, uninterested in any purpose other than sharing information for the sake of knowledge. I stated before that this is not fully accurate in pop-esoteric consumerism: my subjects, particularly the uninitiated, not only acknowledged the commercial nature and intentionality of the films, but also turned out to be aware of and critical towards the complex global industry implied in them. However, and in spite of having displayed this awareness, at a certain moment participants in applied focus and discussion groups seemingly “bracketed” such awareness, and shifted to a register in which the value of the product was regarded differently. The next utterance illustrates the transition:
PERLA: but its purpose [The Da Vinci Code’s] might be other than the economic, it is didactic too because you learn about updated investigations, making you ask questions and prompting you to do some further research on your own.

When “bracketing” occurred, the films were no longer related as pertaining to the pop cultural industry, but rather as if they were documents of actual historical and scientific investigations whose accuracy or inaccuracy should be elucidated. All groups in my study engaged at a certain moment in such discussions, and although all types of viewers (the resistants, the initiated, and the uninitiated) provided utterances in this regard, they did so in significantly different proportions⁸: three of every ten resistants, more than a half of the initiated, and eight of every ten uninitiated. Let us remember that those who manifested to have more awareness of the commodity character of the films were the uninitiated; here they show to be also the ones who more easily ‘misrecognize’ such character. Furthermore, in most discussion groups once this ‘misrecognition’ happened and participants discussed the veracity or plausibility of the contents, the conversation moved to the realm of their own personal beliefs, experiences, and views on spirituality and transcendency. What this is suggesting is that commodity fetishism plays a specific role in pop-esoteric conversations. On the one hand, it equalizes the register in which a product is read, by means of upgrading its status from an ephemeral mainstream entertaining pop-media to a solid object of knowledge, out of which one withdraws premises and starts, in AIDA’s words, ‘knitting’ discussions:

AIDA: He [Dan Brown] is someone who has studied and done research, and he publishes what he has found, independently if somebody agrees or disagrees. It’s

⁸ Here I gauged a number of coding references and amount of words coded in them.
not that he wants to upset any one. No, no, no, he simply wants to present his investigation so we can knit something from it.

On the other hand, commodity fetishism works as a preamble of subsequent conversational performances wherein belief systems are re-enchanted and rehearsed in ritualizing-like ways. I will elaborate in Part Three on the nature of this performance and its implications for understanding contemporary belief systems, and also explain why it is that *resistants* are less likely to use commodity fetishism than the *initiated*, and why the *initiated* are—by far—less inclined to this type of misrecognition than the *uninitiated*. Just as a preview I underscore here that ‘*misrecognition*’ in commodity fetishism goes hand by hand with processes of ‘*reification*’ through which the knower is persuaded that value inheres in commodities instead of being added by originating means and modes of production. As it happens with the Freudian fetishism, attribution of self-sufficiency and autonomous powers (the equivalent of ‘*reification*’) to an object of desire, is always dependent on the ability to disavow (or ‘*misrecognize*’) “what is known and replace it with belief and the suspension of disbelief” Mulvey (1993:7) In this sense: both kinds of fetishistic sacralizations are always haunted by the fragility of the mechanisms that sustain them. In my study it was noticeable that those who most vividly engaged in either commodity fetishism or Freudian fetishism were those for whom the films triggered great emotional resonances. The greater the resonance, the more they embarked on mechanisms of fetishism; and conversely: the more dissonances they had with the films, the more they scorned them, dismissing them as mere entertainment commodities, worthless of any further discussion. This is the case of EDMUNDO who was reluctant to
discuss *The Passion of the Christ* for considering it boring and a bad movie:

**EDMUNDO:** I went to see it just because I wanted to go to the movies and have some fun… just like that. I wanted two hours of entertainment with popcorcons on my lap [participants laugh out loud] but then when I saw it was all in Aramaic and so endlessly repetitive, I got bored. And just for the record I am a big fan of blood-splattering movies, but this one is just bad.

Though different in essence, Marxist and Freudian fetishisms have contact points. As Mulvey (1993:19) acknowledges, they both become the unspeakable and the unrepresentable in commodity culture, concealing disquieting realities that, although not themselves structurally linked, reinforce each other by displacing threats of castration to reified objects. Furthermore, for post-Marxist sociologist Slavoj Žižek (1995), processes of *reification* and *misrecognition* in commodity fetishism capture the nature of all the ideological illusions of bourgeois society that take place in a ‘relation between things’ as well as in a ‘relation between men’. Žižek sees this as a prognosis of the Lacanian mirror-phase, because “only by being reflected in another man –that is, in so far as this other man offers it an image of its unity– can the ego arrive at its self-identity; identity and alienation are thus strictly correlative”.* (Žižek in *No Subject*)

In earlier paragraphs I advanced that what is at stake in processes of sacralization and fetishization is an object one desires (and ambivalently fears) so tenaciously, that either one erases its value (productive forces, in the Marxist approach) or one over-imprints a surrogate value on the site of the lack (in the Freudian approach.) The object of desire and possession is then anxiously coated with a *special* value, somehow insulating it and making it *especial*. The object thus specialized (being a fetish or a sacred object, or
both) moves from one sphere to another, say from the secular to the religious. Let us recall the opening utterance at the Introduction of this work, when GABRIELA claims:

GABRIELA: When I go to the gym it’s like praying to myself.

This is a clear example of someone who has insulated an object (her “going to the gym”) from the (consumption) secular sphere and made it transit to the sacred sphere. The previously commented case of the woman who joined a members-only spa, LOURDES, gives us a close-up of how the transit from one sphere into another is lubricated by the use of language borrowed from the addressee sphere (the religious/spiritual one). Notice the somehow mesmerizing words and phrases she chooses in describing her practice:

LOURDES: [...] your mind makes your body get blocked and sick, not only physically sick, but mentally, spiritually sick. [...] I go there to open my intuition and to revitalize myself. [...] I am in a search for spiritual growth [...] for achieving self-knowledge, for living coherently in truth, in harmony with myself and with all what surrounds me.

LOURDES’s choice of words helps her create a spell-like reinforcement to herself and others. Enchanting spells are common resources for constructing and sustaining fetishistic sacralizations, a theme that will be explored in Part Three.

One characteristic of current consumer society, according to Howard Becker (1957), is that the once separated spheres of the religious and the secular no longer correspond to the sacred and profane distinction. The result has the chiasmic effect of a gradual ‘secularization of the sacred’ and a gradual ‘sacralization of the secular’ (Belk 1989:9). An example of how the sacred becomes secularized is the once sacred Islamic
ritual of *Enneagram* reframed as a commodity in contemporary consumer society. What is now called *Enneagram* used to be an ancient mystical tradition cultivated by the Naqshbandi Order of Sufism which held a monist belief system that stressed the oneness of God (we are all one with each other and with the universe and the divinity). The ritual found its way into esoteric Christianity in the thirteenth century by mystic Raimundus Lullus. The sacred connotation of this tradition started to become secularized in the 1980’s and 1990’s when Latin American psychologists refurnished it with western contemporary psychological language, and applied it to diagnosis and therapy. Withdrawn from its religious connotations, *Enneagram* became trendy in modern psychology and currently is broadly used in education and business arenas.

As for the secular becoming sacralized, there are plenty of documenting works exploring practices performed by what Wade Clark Roof (1993; 1999) typologized as “seekers”. Roof charts the emergence of a quest culture that has generated a marketplace of new spiritual beliefs and practices and of revisited traditions. What he categorizes as *seekers* is a subculture comprised of individuals who create their own mix of values and metaphysical beliefs out of the offer supplied by popular culture. One example is the religious use fandom make of secular TV shows like *Star Trek* (Jenkins 1992), another is

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9 For visually representing this, they used a circle meant to symbolize the cosmos, with nine interconnected points as a symbol of the 9 stages of enlightenment. Inside the circle is a triangle symbolizing God inside the cosmos. The mystic path established that in order to get into our true essence (i.e. being and having the same image as God) we must go through nine rigorous cleansing stages.

10 The Roman Catholic Church first condemned Lullus for his rationalist mysticism but later beatified him in 1858. The Enneagram was still part of the religious cult in the Sufi Sarmouni monastery in Afghanistan in the first half of the twentieth century.

11 The nine points formerly used to express the stages of enlightenment became nine different types of personalities. The inner triangle, formerly used to signify God, transformed into a figure representing an ideal self or ‘justice’, i.e. the balance of wisdom, courage, and temperance.
the sacralizing processes in sports aimed to reach religious experiences among their audiences (Prebish 1993). What all these examples point to is that secular cultural objects are able to be submitted to social elaborations through which objects, consensually taken as secular, are set apart and entered into the sacred. This slide has been termed *reenchantment* (Berman 1981) and implies an affirmative action on behalf of the sacralizing subject who misrecognizes an object as belonging to the secular and recognizes it as sacred. A discussion group of *uninitiated* undergrad students, ranging in age from 21 to 26 years, engaged in the next conversation in which the object of reenchantment was twofold: the whole world and, within it, the subjects themselves:

ABELARDO: being aware than we are not just made of blood and bones, but that, yes, that we are something else, not only bones. That we belong to something else. Your reasoning makes part of something innermost which is other than your brain. I mean, that we make part of something greater, something intangible.

VINICIO: with much more purity, and energy.

JAVIER: same as Nature. This might sound crazy but I do believe that Nature has wisdom in the sense that it is always in harmony. Which makes us believe in something, you know, that is external and beyond us.

We will come back to this conversation later on the Third Part of this work to analyze more comprehensibly the quasi-liturgical construction that preceded and followed this moment. Here I only point out the notions that implicitly are challenged therein. Suzi Gablik has explained her understanding of the term *reenchantment* as “stepping beyond the modern traditions of mechanism, positivism, empiricism, rationalism, materialism,
secularism, and scientism—the whole objectifying consciousness of the Enlightenment—in a way that allows for a return of soul.” (quoted in Morgan 2009:16)

ABELARDO’s self-concept as being “part of something greater [and] intangible” backs up what some thinkers claim, namely that in late modernity what ultimately is sacralized is not the external materiality of the desired object in itself, but the very sacralizing subject. Contemporary selves feel their own identity and personal agency as undermined and insufficient to deal with a world whose institutions no longer afford convincible senses of identity and paths of behavior. Giddens (1991) calls them ‘the mourning Selves’ who in response commit to strategies for recovering both autonomy and identity, making them gain personal agency to exert control over their surroundings. They embark on this journey by assuming, in the first place, what Redden (2002:33) worded as “the burden of plotting their own destinies”, which implies facing the uncertainty, the relativity, and the void-experience of their generation. A group of undergrad students characterized their time as the “age of vacuum and incertitude”, a world wherein everything is relative. They agreed that a way to get out of this void is, in JAVIER’s words, “to believe in something that is beyond”.

JONÁS: to have faith!

JAVIER: Aha! To have faith! In something. Exactly, that’s the word: ‘to have faith in something’, and from there on to know how to decide between good and evil.

The above illustrates how the quest for the autonomous self traverses questions pertaining to the ethical and the religious realms. Nonetheless, albeit participants use religious language (faith, to believe, good-and-evil) they don’t actually seem to identify such terms
with any particular religion. Notice that when JAVIER agrees with JONÁS in parenting ‘believe in something’ with ‘having faith’, the conversation opens to the terrain of ethics, understood not as an external source of behavioral guidance but as a personal exercise of discernment between good and evil.

The recovery of the Self traverses a path similar to what Weber (2001:14-7) depicted as the historical gestation of religion and ethics consisting firstly in the recognition of a sacred text, secondly in the reverence to it, and thirdly in listening to the call it poses. This path was clearly illustrated by Eva Illouz (2003) in her study on how subjects feel compelled to draw from their own ordinary lives elements to construct extraordinary tales. While studying the cultural creation of media-figure Oprah Winfrey, Illouz (2003:22) found that autobiographical endeavors render the self as a text which is held sacred, capable of awakening senses of reverence to the beholder, and from which a calling for meaningfulness is yielded.

Several subjects in my research undertook autobiographical-based recounts with similar purposes. Perhaps the most anecdotal case was PILAR’s. The group she participated in was comprised mainly of mainstream Catholic practitioners, mostly of the resistant type. PILAR is a 55 year-old uninitiated housewife who identified herself to the group as a non-practitioner catholic:

PILAR: I am a Catholic though I never go to mass. Well, if I go is just because of a wedding, a baptism… [pauses] funerals [she chuckles and the GROUP humors her]

After having compared and discussed the films, the group moved the conversation to explicitly religious topics. Participants praised the importance of cultivating religious
practices and piety for their lives. As P I L A R was not actively participating in this part, NER E A, 63, addressed her, presumably for getting her involved in the chat, though using a preachy tinted style:

NEREA: It’s a matter of praying, not only of reciting out of a prayer-book. [she looks at PILAR] I’m sure you do pray, dear, and you hold conversations with God, looking for the best way for everyday’s concerns. This supposes being detached. It’s not just about giving five pesos to a poor old-lady on the street, well I give them ten pesos as someday I will be old too [chuckles] So, it’s about an attitude of detachment, a sort of lively action while following the path that has been given to us: the Commandments that we all shall practice to obtain eternal life.

NEREA then opened a conversational slot waiting for P I L A R’s response, who made a brief pause and then started to negotiate her minority status as a catholic non-practitioner. The way she vindicated herself before the group was not through elaborating ideas or exposing her beliefs and convictions, but rather she draw upon her own personal experience relating it to spirituality and values. She started with this preamble:

PILAR: well, on this last thing you mentioned, about practicing and being detached from things, minding for helping people… It has happened to me that every time I’m in the subway and I come across blind people there, that almost nobody mind to help because that can be time-consuming, yet I always try to do something…

Having said that, P I L A R began telling the group how she met this man-with-a-cane at the bus stop one week ago. The man was blind and needed someone to tell him the route number of the bus. He was a homeless who sings in buses for making a living. Because buses were packed P I L A R walked him to the subway and helped him to commute on trains until the man got to his destination. P I L A R’s autobiographical recount grabbed the
group’s attention. She was never interrupted, but attentively listened to and humored at all times. Cheered up by this, she expanded her biographic anecdote for almost five minutes; the transcript totalizes the uncommon number of 3000 words, which makes hers the longest single-participant verbatim without others interrupting. Her story adopted the form of a classic telling: a preamble stating the point the storyteller wants to make or demonstrate, a plot that unfolds by exacerbating one single situation (often in triplets, as in jokes), a wrapping-up ending without denouement, and finally the explicit moral or lesson to be learned from the telling:

PILAR: … and the man kept saying: “oh, ma’am, I am so sorry if I am making waste your time” and I was: “not at all, sir, I can wait, I have plenty of time”, knowing that I already missed my appointment [GROUP chuckles] and truly it was so gratifying for me, and I am so grateful for that because… look, I told you I’m not a very catholic person, but still I have the spirit of helping the neighbor. At least with tiny little things. If I don’t comply with the full ten commandments of God, I think I keep in mind the most important one: to help those in need. And you feel so much gratification from that, you feel something beautiful inside when you help people, something that I just can’t describe.

It is irrelevant if PILAR’s recount was based in factual or false memories, her telling constitutes a ritualizing moment—a concept I will elaborate in Part Three—aimed to negotiate her not being a mainstream Catholic, and vindicate her as a spiritual person in conformity with the Catholic spiritual teachings. Cases like this where subjects draft resources from the personal history to depict themselves as canvases on which sacred brushstrokes can be painted, were abundant in my study. Some, like PILAR, made use of explicit religious language (“the spirit of helping the neighbor”, “the full ten
commandments of God”), somehow colonizing that realm. Some others sprinkled the personal storytelling with motifs drawn from media or from ancient mythologies mostly from non-western belief systems\(^\text{12}\). This constitutes an anomaly among religious phenomena, because the fact that individuals choose from a range of belief options rather to commit themselves to a central doctrine, prevents it from a fit into churched models traditionally considered by the sociology of religion.

6.2.3. Re-enchanting expenditures

But processes of sacralization and reenchantment do not only respond to principles of neat utility and pleasure that inform the logics of the restrictive economy with which individuals organize social life. Such restrictiveness presupposes utilitarian logics of production and accumulation –as responses to lack and scarcity– shaping, among many other realms, the orderly form of the sacred\(^\text{13}\). Yet, and co-mingled with this orderly sacred, there is a more ecstatic form of sacredness. George Bataille, in his renowned *La Notion de Dépense* (1933) explored the useless side of expenditure. Bataille questions the sufficiency of the principle of classical utility claiming that human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation. He suggests that general economy is also lead by the principle of ‘loss’ represented by unproductive expenditures such as luxury, poetry, mourning, cults, games, spectacles, among many other excesses –

\(^{12}\) David Morgan notes that selection of motifs from media for self-construction is parallel to what Suzi Gablik praises among contemporary artists, who draw from mythology, rituals, and personal storytelling as the sources for self-construction in performance art. (Personal communication 4/5/2009)

\(^{13}\) This approach to the sacred echoes the Durkheimean sacred/profane divide, mostly concerned with beliefs and practices as functional sources of social cohesion. See Hoover 2006:66-70 for a comprehensive review of the different approaches to this divide.
religiosity included—which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves and “constitute a group characterized by the fact that in each case the accent is placed on a loss that must be as great as possible in order for that activity to take on its true meaning.” (Bataille 1985:118)

The greatest loss imaginable is obviously someone’s life as it reminds us the shadow of our own incompleteness, and thus the truest meaning possibly found is that extracted from such loss. This extreme sends us back to the Lacanian haunting of the Real, and how when the self is situated at the verge of the symbolic, experiencing the uneasiness of the Real, the self experiments the urge for meaning. Excess of loss—in the form of exuberant violence—seems to be the main theme of The Passion of the Christ. Audiences acknowledged the extreme violence in the film making no nuances, however they interpreted it differently. The way the initiated and most uninitiated disapproved this excess contrasted with how the resistants and some uninitiated took it. Those who did not like the film considered the deployment of violence as ‘exacerbating’, ‘excessive’, ‘reiterative’, ‘gruesome’, ‘morbid’, ‘unnecessary’, uttering expressions like this:

MARICLARA: That one, The Passion, that was terrible. It leaves you with a horrible feeling about religion and humankind. There is so much cruelty in it, so exacerbated and exaggerated that you can’t even look back to the poster of the film when you exit the theater. It’s totally bloody and harsh. I think religion is not about that.

A matrix coding query showed that those criticizing the explicit violence in the film were the same informants who also coded critical views about the Church. This suggests that in disapproving the gruesome ‘excess’ in The Passion of the Christ, the initiates and the
uninitiated also implicitly commented on what they perceive as an excess of traditional religious authority associated with the Church. Contrastingly, those who did like the film –although fully recognizing it as highly violent– made sense of such excess, and even deemed it justified:

ESTHER: I liked it because one must always bear in memory Jesus Christ’s Via Crucis. Of course I didn’t like the scourge, who would enjoy seeing a person being flogged like that? Or seeing how Jesus ended? But I did like it, because we shall all remember, always, that Christ came and died for us.

It is not that those who saw and liked the film enjoyed the violence, but they could make meaning of it, finding it somehow eloquent to express something that is both surpassing and ungrabbable: the price Jesus paid for their own salvation was excessive and deserves no concealment or softening disguise but to be preserved as both sacred and awing.

Following Bataille’s insight that sacred things are constituted by operations of loss and excess, one might consider the use of entertaining media products for spiritual/transcendent ends –as the ones considered in this study and the examples I just provided– not as mere consumptions, but also as complex societal expenditures through which individuals exert, among other things, resistance and fascination. On the one hand, these expenditures embrace processes that partially re-enchant a disenchanting hyper-rational world. Individuals, like DELIA, a 24 year-old student of communications, resist over-rational systems whose doctrines are felt as cognitively insufficient and pernicious:

DELIA: not everything has to be rational. Reason has never been able to explain all things. It can’t explain everything. There are explanations that are not rational, and sometimes a person needs to believe in something that is beyond its capacities
and beyond the capacity of explanation of any other human being. We are used to living in rational, doctrinal systems, but the day you marry to a doctrine you kill your own mystery, you kill the mystery.

Post-modern sensibility experiences disenchantment toward the promises and rationality that modernity embodied and administered through institutions of all sorts because such rationalization lost trustworthiness when it failed to endow individuals with the needed agency to exert control over their immediate surroundings (Adler 1980:27). Moreover, in some contexts like certain sectors of the Mexican middle and upper-middle class, this resistance has reached political levels and is expressed in an overall distrust of traditional sources of Truth, a phenomenon that has been called “sospechosismo”, or suspicionism towards any assertion made by the State, Science, Church, Media, and any other instance of social authority. “Sospechosismo”, particularly against Church, was broadly common among initiated (4 of every 5) and uninitiated (3 of every 5) who together coded 98 verbatims in that direction.

ALEIDA: for centuries the Church has been concealing information, thinking that people are unable to understand, as if issues happen to be known the whole religion would be questioned, or the validity of the symbols it is sustained on.

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ABEL: The Church would do whatever it takes to keep its power, spiritual and economic power it exerts over so many people, especially in countries like Mexico or any other Catholic country in Latin America.

On the other hand, there is a fascination in transgressing or challenging the dominant cultural hierarchies and systems of Truth. Sometimes this enthralment is approached with a sense of duty:
VICTORIA: The Church has hidden a lot of things and keeps denying many other things. But I tell you what: besides all the obscurity in which the Church has kept us, the main problem is our own being negligent. Most people live with great passiveness instead of going out, do some research by themselves, and finding out by their own how much true or false are what the Church stresses as dogma.

Exo-belief systems—such as organized religions— are social instances that establish parceling and well-defined “domains” where the sacred is distinguished from the profane, the formal from the informal, the apocryphal from the canonical. Any misrecognition of these hierarchically defined boundaries is disavowed and deemed misreading, threatening, and illegitimate; subjects acknowledge some ideas they entertain are seen as defiant by religious institutions.

AMPARO: All these new things they are uncovering, all what has been recently discovered.

VICTORIA: The wedding at Cana, for example, it seems that it was the wedding of Jesus with Mary Magdalene.

AÍDA: exactly.

ARCELIA: but they will never accept it, they always deny everything.

Clearly, consumption is not always a defiant resistance and a resistant reading is not synonymous with a progressive reading, yet what is at stake in such consumptions is the possession of the meaning through means of appropriation (De Certeau 1984). The products chosen by audiences to be used as platforms or pre-texts for spiritual meaning-making are those whose content and aesthetics seem to hold potentiality to express pre-existing beliefs or insights. As Jenkins (1992) noticed, the ideological construction of the
text is correspondent to the ideological commitments of the receivers, and therefore “some degree of affinity will exist between the meanings [audiences] produce and those which might be located through a critical analysis of the original [product]” (1992:34)

Such appropriations and confirmatory uses of media for previous beliefs or stands was common, particularly, among initiated and resistant subjects:

SELMA: I’ve been believing in all this for a long while, so it was not because of the film, the film was just a reinforcement, like a reminder of what I already knew.

This consumption also reveals the cultural fascinations with the occult, mysticism, and paranormal phenomena that defy conventional scientific explanation, a fascination that re-emerged “from the margins of modernity to ritualistically re-inscribe consumers in an enchanted cultural milieu” (Thompson and Coskuner 2007:282) and now entertains and nurtures social conversations, as the one 47 year-old biologist CELIA held with 51 year-old psychologist and political scientist ALEIDA:

ALEIDA: you go through life in the midst of physical, visible, and concrete facts as well as with other facts belonging to something beyond that cannot be explained.

CELIA: sure, it’s quite ambivalent, and it’s part of us. You trust in what you see and touch, but still need something else.

ALEIDA: because not all elements are concrete, measurable and visible. These are important for explaining certain things, but there are others we experience, which are un-measurable, non-concrete, and non-visible by definition. Spiritual stuff.

Seen from a uses and gratifications perspective, this cultural trend is also shaped by the pleasure consumers take in making intertextual connections across a broad range of
media inputs. Jenkins (1992:36-7) explains that consumers of popular culture “read intertextually as well as textually and their pleasure comes through the particular juxtapositions that they create between specific [media] content and other cultural materials”.

EDMUNDO elaborated associations between the films The Da Vinci Code and The Passion of the Christ by bridging them through Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel ‘The Last Temptation of Christ’ (1951), a reference also cited by 14 informants in the other 10 groups.

EDMUNDO: morbidity, a lot of morbidity. Like this other one, with Gael Garcia, ‘Father Amaro’, and you know what? The Passion of Christ clicked also with that other one ‘The Last Temptation’ which in its days was also very controversial. They even re-released the film version of ‘The Last Temptation’ in those days. Some people saw it in the hopes of finding again something about sex, and also went to see ‘The Da Vinci Code’ expecting the same.

Finally, as new media emerge and modes of consumption change, intertextual references exponentially proliferate, being the movies, especially Hollywood cinema, a “constant source of quotation and connotation in the more complex cultural climate of the electronic media.” (Mulvey 1993:5) Therefore, part of the transgression consists in treating pop cultural texts as if they were ‘classic texts’. “Classic text” is a concept developed by David Tracy (1982) which refers to symbolic resources that are regarded as depositories of revelation and radical transformation. They are, in this sense, ‘extra-ordinary’, ‘sacred’, just the opposite of what ‘ordinary’, ‘profane’ pop cultural resources
are\textsuperscript{14}. While for classic texts it is acceptable to apply elaborate exegesis and close scrutiny through repeated exposure, pop cultural texts are expected to be consumed with the more disposable logic of a mass-culture product (Jenkins 1992:34). However, what seems to be constituting the main point of transgression is the very search for \textit{ecstatic} merger (as opposed to self-preserving order\textsuperscript{15}) and \textit{reenchantment} (as opposed to a canonical rationality that emphasizes a distance between the subject and the world) that might be present in visual consumption practices such as those explored here, which takes us back to the dual forms of the sacred (the Durkheimean orderly form and the Bataillean ecstatic form) discussed earlier. Part Three will elaborate on this; nevertheless—as a preview—let us advance that fascination with symbolic forms drawn from the cultural ambience, once entered into social conversations, sometimes awakes ecstatic raptures in which the self is carried away beyond the realm of meaning, losing control over semantics but finding spiritual resonance in ways that exceed the controlled meaning found in modern self-identities.

\textsuperscript{14} Tracy’s concept will be discussed in fuller detail and applied in Part Three.  
\textsuperscript{15} Roland Barthes (1975), in his \textit{The Pleasures of the Text}, contrasts the orderly pleasure that contentment to and preservation of established categorical order grant, to the \textit{jouissance} of self-loss which involves a temporary relaxation of boundaries between the self and the other through \textit{ecstatic} relational mergers.
Processes of sacralization and characteristics of consumption, as the ones discussed in the preceding chapter, are detectable in pop culture products that are susceptible to spiritual readings. I previously mentioned three kinds of media productions where these processes and characteristics tend to be manifested, namely: the explicitly religious pop-media, the unintended religious media, and media which are neither ‘explicitly religious’ nor ‘non religious’ in themselves but still are used by audiences as sources for religious/spiritual meaning-making. It is precisely around the consumption and social circulation of products of this third kind that the phenomenon of Pop-Esotericism is shown more evidently due to the particular features these products are endowed with. Keeping in mind the working definition of Pop-Esotericism earlier stated in the Introduction of this work, I will now set out the elaboration of a more conceptual definition of this category.

“Pop-Esotericism” is any media product or pop culture item, produced and distributed by the cultural industry, whose content and aesthetics grant it the potentiality of being attached with the meaning of ‘esoteric’ and used as such by their audiences. There are some polysemic attributes in these products that make them potentially pop-esoteric: one might find in them some easily identifiable Christian metaphors and metonyms (Kovecses 2002), as for example the messianic path of the hero (Campbell 1973) audiences recognize in characters such as Neo from the Matrix (1999), Luke
Skywalker from *Star Wars* (1977), or Jake Sully from *Avatar* (2009), or one might find less openly Christian characters such as Lyra Belacqua from *The Golden Compass* (2007). However, what they all have in common is a decisive questioning of the established Reality. Think about *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*? (reality depends on us and we create it), *The Matrix* (the reality is a computer simulation), *The Da Vinci Code* (the real religion is a tricked one), and so on and so forth. All these products tell you that the reality one is living in is but partial and concealing, and that there is something beyond it that could help one to know the Full Truth. Audiences clearly identify this cognitive position, sometimes resonating with it (*initiated* and *uninitiated* types) and some other times rejecting it (*resistant* type). The following utterances, taken from different group-sessions while discussing *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*?, give a sense of the thrill that the thesis ‘reality depends on us and we create it’ provoked among *initiated* and *uninitiated* participants:

**RITA:** nothing is unquestionable or absolute, you are the one who makes your life real and valid.

------

**NIDIA:** these are the new paradigms of reality. Religion has been so far the great educator and the one setting the paradigm, what the film is inviting us is to break and get rid of such paradigm.

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**ÁGATA:** the man is to be at the center of everything for we are the ones who create everything. You are the center of your full reality.

The same overall resonance among *initiated* and *uninitiated* had the thesis ‘the real religion is a tricked one’ in *The Da Vinci Code*. Although all *resistants* and some
uninitiated disqualified the way this film blends actual with fictional facts, some participants found this blending of the real and the unreal as an insightful and provocative proposal:

MARICLARA: what is fascinating is how it makes you question and doubt on the validity of all that information and education they have imposed on you. That’s what I found most interesting.

It is important to underline that these products, although having the potentiality, are not pop-esoteric per se; the audience makes them to be that. Comprised in pop culture, ‘Pop-Esotericism’ shares the characteristic of being part of the complex formation of discourses, which indeed are dialectically related to their producers and consumers (Schneider 1994; Roseberry 1996). Put differently, a pop-esoteric product is broadcasted and might be consumed by the broad massive audience as mere entertainment, and at the same time reaches narrower audiences who consume it and use it in pop-esoteric ways. The same film, for example The Da Vinci Code, was viewed by some participants as mere entertainment and following no hidden agenda:

CELIA: it was a novel and as a movie it was fun and entertaining. You have a good time and that’s it, I don’t think it wanted to have any further repercussion.

------

JULIAN: come on, it’s just a Hollywood movie. No one should have taken it so seriously.

Whereas some other participants viewed the same film from a perspective that matches with one hallmark of Pop-Esotericism, namely challenging institutions that hold power and administrate social truth:
GARDENIA: its aim is to shake the very foundations of the Church, the structures formed by groups or power. It’s like moving and digging and bringing out to light the many political and religious things they have concealed. So the aim is that, to give a little shake to those structures of power.

FACILITATOR: Ok. So, what is the point of shaking those structures of power?

GARDENIA: shaking them is to question them. If you never question, things will never change; and sometimes movies like this can be key for starting a change, though always structures of power shield and defend themselves in denial.

What distinguishes participants who consume the same media product as “mere entertainment” from those who find “pop-esoteric” meaning in it? I classified 232 utterances organized in 10 codes with the different reactions on the reception of *The Da Vinci Code*. In order to elucidate this question, I created two merged-codes: the first one grouping the codes that explicitly referred to the film in terms of media entertainment, and the second one merging the verbatims that expressed pop-esoteric readings of the film, either accepting or rejecting the proposals embedded in it. Having done that, I ran a compound query, crossing the merged-codes (Entertainment Reading and Pop-Esoteric Reading) with some demographic and biographic attributes of the participants. Table 20 shows the percentage of cases (subjects) for each attribute.

Among the three typologies, the *uninitiated* are the ones who tend to balance their pop-esoteric readings (almost 52% of the cases) with their regarding the film in terms of media entertainment (48%). An inverse relation is presented by the *initiated* who tend to view the film more as a media entertainment (53% of the cases) than with pop-esoteric meanings (almost 47%).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>Entertainment Reading Percentage of cases</th>
<th>Pop-Esoteric Reading Percentage of cases</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uninitiated</td>
<td>48.31</td>
<td>51.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiated</td>
<td>53.33</td>
<td>46.67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resistant</td>
<td>36.84</td>
<td>63.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>54.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>54.29</td>
<td>45.71</td>
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<th>Education Level</th>
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<tr>
<td>High School (completed)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergrad Student</td>
<td>48.31</td>
<td>51.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensure (completed)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA or PhD degree</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 – 27 years old</td>
<td>49.45</td>
<td>50.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 – 42 years old*</td>
<td>26.67</td>
<td>73.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43 – 52 years old</td>
<td>61.54</td>
<td>38.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53 – 67 years old</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>71.43</td>
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<tr>
<th>Religious self-identification</th>
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Practitioner</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>71.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic “Light”</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Non/Anti Religious</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Believer</td>
<td>41.67</td>
<td>58.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No cases coded in range 28-32

Table 20. Type of Reading by Demographic and Biographic attributes

The difference, approximately 3 points within the *uninitiated* and 7 points within the *initiated*, makes the former the typology that best joins the two terms of Pop-Esotericism, namely that it is consumed simultaneously as both a *pop* cultural item and an *esoteric*...
text. Interestingly, *resistants* to Pop-ESotericism produced much more pop-esoteric readings: 63% of the cases identified and reacted against pop-esoteric ideas in the *The Da Vinci Code*, and only 37% referred to the film as a product of entertainment (26 points of difference!). *Uninitiated* tend to see the film as equally an entertainment media product and as a carrier of esoteric content. This finding also serves as a parameter for analyzing the other attributes.

Gender seems to intervene, though moderately, in pop-esoteric reading. Women are more prone to express pop-esoteric readings (54%) than men (46%). Conversely, men tend to regard the film more as entertainment (54%) than women (46%). Moreover, as the reader might have already noticed, most of my findings on Pop-ESotericism are illustrated by expressions uttered by female participants.

Another demographic factor is Education: while participants with high-school completed and undergrad students generally equal for both types of reading, those who have completed college (called Licentiates\textsuperscript{16} in Mexico) viewed the film more in a pop-esoteric way (54%) than as a media entertainment (46%). Conversely, participants holding a Master or a higher degree reported their viewing experience more as entertainment (52%) than as a pop-esoteric consumption (48%).

Although Education is obviously associated with Age, the latter is the most relevant demographic factor. Participants aged 18-27 marked almost equally for both types of reading. Participants between 43-52 years-old viewed the film more as

\textsuperscript{16} A licensure is a degree from certain Latin American and European universities equivalent, in the American system, to somewhere between a BA and a MA.
entertainment (62%) than as pop-esoteric (38%). Notice that those aged 33-42 rated high in pop-esoteric reading (73%) and low in entertaining reading (27%), more than 46 points of difference. These proportions are almost identical to those participants aged 53 and above, most of them resistant to Pop-Esotericism. The two generations have similar approaches to media products with pop-esoteric potentialities in the sense that both of them put emphasis on the ideas and proposals exposed in the film, either to confirm previously existent pop-esoteric beliefs (the initiated between 33 and 42 years old) or attach to them and fight them in open disagreement (the resistsants who are 53 years old or more). In both cases there is a difficulty in recognizing, at the same time, that the product is part of the entertainment offer of the mediasphere.

Finally, Religious Self-Identification also factors into the type of reading. There are three categories that showed an even proportion of both readings: participants who identified themselves as Agnostics, those who consider themselves Spirituals but Non Religious (or Anti Religious), and Non Practitioner Catholics (or “Catholic Light”, as they prefer to be labeled). Catholic Practitioners, on the other hand, tend to find (and disagree with) pop-esoteric proposals (71%) over viewing the film as a mere media entertainment (29%). Notice also that Non Believers showed an uneven proportion: 42% saw the film as entertainment and 58% saw it as Pop-Esotericism.

If we were to sketch out a typical pop-esoteric subject –or if preferred, the natural audience of Pop-Esotericism– that would be any uninitiated male or female, 18 to 27 years old, with access to higher education (perhaps pursuing the equivalent of a BA or a MA degree). Typically, pop-esoteric subjects do not locate themselves in any pole of the
spiritual/religious spectrum (atheists or mainstream religious persons). Some of them might declare themselves as agnostics or even as anti clerical or anti religious, but still they would like to be seen as Spiritual persons. If asked, the majority would label themselves as “Catholic Light”, meaning that they do not attend to religious services or do any religious practices on regular bases.

These findings provide the empirical social ground to what I have been suggesting theoretically in this work and will elaborate in the next section: that Pop-Esotericism is a two-term concept that assumes the commodification (or entertainment character) of a global media context in which it is produced, without eroding its character of source for spiritual and subjective construction.

7.1. Pop-Esotericism as a Two-term Concept

‘Pop-Esotericism’ is a two-term concept and therefore is better understood when its terms are analyzed separately. For the sake of clarity, though, I will start explaining the second term of the concept.

‘Esotericism’ is the term that indicates that Pop-Esotericism is a symbolic product linked with what commonly is understood as esoteric: the knowledge acquired by initiates in occult beliefs and practices. The term is commonly associated with words as: secrecy, the occult, the reserved, the inmost, the sly, mysteriousness, hermetic, the unintelligible (Taguieff 2005). The word ‘esoteric’ had always been used as an adjective. The noun form emerged during the first quarter of the 19th century and the sense it gained
was that of an inner knowledge related to spiritual affairs. The difference between Esotericism and Pop-Esotericism is that the former originally meant that the acquired knowledge was reserved to, and kept in secret by, those who formed the inner circle of the Initiates. It had a *belonging* sense, in opposition to the term ‘*exoteric*’ that meant whatever had public accessibility which is inherently implied in the ‘*pop*’ term. In this sense, ‘*Pop-Esotericism*’ has a shifting interplay among the esoteric and the exoteric (see Figure 15) which seems to constitute a *contradictio in terminis*. The *hermetic* feature of esotericism implies a secret *initiatic* community with unique and original pieces empowered and managed by institutionalized belief administrators. The *massive* feature of ‘*Pop-Esotericism*’ implies a visible *non-initiatic* community, with series-produced pieces empowered and managed by the cultural industry (producer and distributor).

All of the *initiated* in my study praised the popularization of esoteric contents, among other things because public accessibility and massive outreach grant legitimacy, de-marginalizing the otherwise disqualified social knowledge. Reiki therapist *LOURDES*, 30, also saw a social benefit in divulging esotericism through pop-media:

*LOURDES*: this is something that is coming out to light up to now. Perhaps just few knew these things before, and now everybody can see. Many will see this and say

![Figure 15: Chiasmic-relationship between the Esoteric and the Exoteric](image-url)
“look, we can make it!” or “yes, there is an alternative ways to do things!” This is to say: there is a plan ‘B’ for humankind to achieve things. So, it is good to wide spread knowledge and techniques that empowers us to achieve goals, so at least we can get a better life.

On the other hand, ‘Pop-Esotericism’ shares close similarities with its precedent esotericism in the shape of its rationality because its symbolic forms are organized as open constellations oriented to inform a symbolic universe ruled by a specific logic which is *a-logical* rather than *illogical*, *non-rational* rather than *irrational*. Such cognitive structure, stresses Richard Shweder (1998), contacts points beyond universal standards of logic and science, “points in which truth or falsity, mistake or validity, practicality or efficiency are not the issue. In those points there are not rules of logic, not a law of nature who decrees what is necessary or appropriated to belief. It is an arbitrary realm where man is free to create its own symbolic universe.” (1998:91 my tr. )

‘Pop-esoteric’ products are made of constellations of symbolic forms oriented to inform the symbolic universe mentioned by Shweder. These forms are not closed, their openness functions as innuendos provoked by a dynamic of revealing and hiding, constituting an ideal type of language for articulating discourses of belief in postmodern times, as well as for naming and explaining reality, above all the ultimate reality. Such discourses strongly draw on analogy figures, such as the metaphor and all its subspecies (metonym, synecdoche, parable, simile, etc.) which on the one hand, are not

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17 “Hay muchos puntos [ ] más allá del alcance de los estándares universales de la lógica y la ciencia, muchos puntos en los que las cuestiones de verdad y falsedad, error y validez, practicidad y eficacia no vienen al caso. En esos puntos no hay regla de lógica ni ley de la naturaleza que dicte lo que es apropiado o necesario que creamos. Penetramos en el reino de la arbitrariedad. Es un reino en el que el hombre es libre de crear su propio universo simbólico”
circumscribed in stable and defined narratives, and on the other hand allow readings both reflexive and transcendental (Vattimo 1991; Kovecses 2002). An example of a metaphor recursively cited by my informants is Reginald, an afro-American kid playing basketball in What The Bleep do We (k)now!? This character was puzzling for many viewers, who tended to see in Reginald a metaphor of God or a heavenly entity.

Saul: you find the God theme in the black kid, the one who is playing basketball and talks about endless possibilities, that there is not a fixed fate, but countless possibilities. If you choose one you get another bunch of new possibilities because they are branched. So cool! because they are no talking about a specific religion’s God, but about a Universal God who is like a higher energy. It never says you ought to believe in something, but that there is an energy beyond any religion.

Reginald was the most recalled character by participants, besides main-character Amanda. The film does not explicitly specify that he is a representation of the divine, or the energy, and still subjects consistently made that reading, either liking or disliking it.

Raquel: what I definitely didn’t like was this black boy bouncing a ball, it’s so stereotypical. I don’t know why in all ‘películas gringas’ God has to be depicted either as a child or as a black man [the group laughs out loud] Here is like a double commonplace.

Evaristo: [laughing] God’s politically correctness.

Other informants associated Reginald’s childhood with openness, innocence, and freshness. Such a reading resonates with the paradox of ‘minority theology’ in which the less favored ones (blackness-childhood-physical impairment) better understand mysteries.
RITA: Children have no prejudices, and deaf-mutes are the best listeners.

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ROXANA: he is a sort of Peter Pan, someone like Peter Pan, always there, suggesting, leading you to gates that when opened will take you to another realm of possibilities. Peter Pan is childish because he is innocent and free of prejudice.

Infantile state is an idealization and in some cases serves as a screen on which the Self is projected. This informant reported in other parts of the interview memories from her own childhood. By self-representing with Peter Pan and his fantastic and liberating features, the subject seems to rehearse her ideal ‘I’ as someone wise and liberator, innocent and open-minded. She previously commented that as one of the initiated in esotericism she has been scorned by certain academic circles, placing her in a state of minority. She is a despised one, but wise and magical. She is a pop-esoteric ‘regressive self’, as the one I introduced in the psychoanalytic section in Part One.

Likewise, there is a metonymic reading in *The Da Vinci Code* in regard to another most-recalled character in that film: the Opus Dei monk, Silas. His albino traits, enhanced by cerulean-face make-up, were interpreted by one of my interviewees as a photograph-negative to indicate his inner blackness:

LUCERO: they depict him as an albino so one cannot see the blackness of his soul. Because there are sectors in the church, so recalcitrant, that they can’t be but negative. Always chasing power and money along history.

LUCERO reads melanin of the skin as related to the realm of morality. Silas represents how the Church hides its real malevolent intentions (black) as if it were beneficial (white). Silas is an example of the orthogonal representations western narrative systems
oppose to exacerbate the distance between the poles to such an extent that thinking in any reconciliation becomes impossible. Griselda Pollock has remarked that in such oppositions “whiteness is all possibility; blackness all nullity. And yet, the latter term, black, is necessary precisely to make meaning for the former white” (1999: 257)

As for the term ‘Pop’ in Pop-Esotericism, it refers to a symbolic form (item or media content) that belongs to the popular culture or “pop culture”. As such, Pop-Esotericism implies a production and reproduction in series, manufactured and distributed by the cultural industry for the global media marketplace. It is merchandise commonly offered in conventional mart-spots that reach diverse nodes of the ubiquitous network society. The more global the marketplace, the more legitimized the merchandise.

ROXANA was proud in having seen *What The Bleep do We (k)now!* four times before it was released in Mexico, as well as in having had access to derived products of the film in marketplaces abroad:

ROXANA: let’s see, the first time I saw it was in the USA at the end of 2004. I saw it with my brother, who lives there. A group of friends, American friends, were all psyched about the movie: “you’re gonna love it, all what is posited there is awesome”, they all said it was amazingly interesting. And then came out the book/no, no, no, actually I firstly got the booklet and then I saw it. That book is like a reference for learning how to see the movie. I saw the movie and then the book made fully sense to me. I was so excited. Besides, before all this, I already had learnt about the water-crystals because time ago I purchased the books also in the States.
Pop-Esotericism, as any media-symbolic form, is in a constant remediation and circulation in ‘semantifier’ contexts. The distribution is primarily done under the ‘supermarket’ model which implies a low interaction during the acquisition of the product. Therefore, the meaning of the product is not primarily formed during the exposure to the product, but in previous and subsequent stages; that is: there is a community of meaning-making that influences the consumer to go and find the product, and afterwards there is a community of meaning-making wherein such consumptions are retaken and semantified in conversational performances.

‘Pop-Esotericism’ finds its closest antecedent in pop-science, with which it maintains strong linkages. Pop-science is not a new phenomenon. Science-fiction media products, the stream of “popularized science” books in Eastern Europe and Soviet Union, divulgence books such as those written by Carl Sagan, the “space age” fever of the 50s and 60s, the entry of UFOs into the social imaginary in the 70s and 80s, to name just a few cultural practices, testify for the displacement of ancient myths of origin, on behalf of narratives of the future based on pop-science discourse. In the TV series Cosmos, the teaser posed three questions: “Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going to?” The gaze is not posed any longer into the Genesis, but into the ambiguous fate

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18 A media studies term indicating the continuously quoting and refashion of prior media forms by other media. (Cfr. Bolter 2000)
19 Contrary to the logic of traditional marketplace: whereas the dialogue sustained among the people that transit traditional marketplace makes this the oldest public space in history, the inbuilt self sufficiency that rules the supermarket (open shelves, attendees under request, and selectivity) enhances the private component in the experience of acquiring any sort of items.
HE BELIEF SYSTEM AND THE POP-ESOTERIC WAVE
Part Two: Pop-Esotericism

The same perspective is embraced by Pop-Esotericism, with the difference that, unlike science-fiction, the frontier between reality and fiction is much more blurred. It is this blurriness what the uninitiated, like CONRADO most appreciate in Pop-Esotericism:

CONRADO: what I liked the best is that as you are seeing it [the film] and you are: “oh, yeah, in that year Da Vinci did this and that” because it gives you data you know is real, and then it introduces stuff you didn’t know before, and there is when you say “ok, is this guy making up all this?” Now, is this unethical? How ethical can be the issue of reality? How ethical or unethical can be one’s point of view? I don’t care if it is reliable or not, but it is as valid as any other creation because finally, that is reality: a construction, a creation we make.

What CONRADO finds appealing is not the religious controversy in The Da Vinci Code, but the way the story is told: mixing actual historical facts with facts invented by the author but presented as historical. The purposely blurred frontiers of the real and the unreal, the facts and the fictional in the film were deemed somehow as dishonest by many informants, but for others this ambiguity fostered reformulations of taken for granted concepts, such as reality, fiction, veracity, truth. Although CONRADO sees reality not as a

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matter of ethics, what he is indeed vindicating is the value of freedom for constructing reality through individual expressions and regardless institutions of validation.

**Pop**-Esotericism does not only entertain, it promises to give you the practical tools for achieving transcendence and to deal with ‘actual reality’. This cosmic, transcendent source of meaning was foreseen by Lacan, who attributed it to religion: “Religion will give sense to the most curious tests, those in which even scientists experiment a bit of anxiety. Religion will find astonishing meanings for those tests.” (2006:79 my tr.22) Nonetheless, we witness the displacement of such a source of meaning from traditional religion to scientific narratives. Nowadays, science nests the best scenario for myths of believing. In his *Message to the Future Martians*23, Carl Sagan mentions the dance between science and science-fiction; the partner of science in that dance was fiction, and this motivated many people to become scientists. What I argue here is that the new partner of science is esotericism, leading to the birth of **Pop-Esotericism**. This dance is the only way for science to enter into the current social imaginary. It entered first as science-fiction, and now as Pop-Esotericism.

7.2. Conversational Drives and Communication Codes

Pop-esoteric narratives are rational discourses with consumption and conversational drives. In the context of Pop-Esotericism, the quality of rationality is connected with the rhetoric that is employed to present ideas as independent of emotions, personal feelings,

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22 “la religión dará sentido a las pruebas más curiosas, esas en las que los propios científicos comienzan a experimentar un poquito de angustia. La religión les encontrará sentidos truculentos”

or any kind of instincts. Proposals embedded in Pop-Esotericism are stated as having sound judgment on the basis of reasonability; they merge argumentative and rational language with imagery, iconic language. This blend is a characteristic of ‘classic texts’ (Tracy 1975; 1982) employed for belief readings. However, these narratives, as it is evident in both *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*? and *The Da Vinci Code*, strongly emphasize the rational-dialectic language by using scientific discourses and rhetoric. Because of this emphasis on the understanding, pop-esoteric consumption propels users to deepen the contents by means of a twofold strategy: firstly, it sends the consumer back to the pop-esoteric supermarket for further consumption of byproducts such as booklets that explain the meaning of the original product or even to consume again the same product. For example, Lourdes, 30, an initiated pop-esotericist, reported having seen the film five times and having attended a conference by Ramtha, the psychic that appears in the movie. Another initiated, business administrator Donaldo, 58, saw the film four times and was proud that he saw it before the movie was released in Mexico:

**Donaldo:** I already had the booklet of the movie but I didn’t understand it very well until I saw it [the film]. Oh, and before that I also got the three books by Dr. Emoto.

Secondly, consumers get involved in social conversations where the content is shared and discussed, as Roxana told the group:

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24 This trait is evident in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!??* insofar its format assumes a documentary genre, but still is present even in the most decisive fictional products, such as Dan Brown’s novel *Angels and Demons* (2000) which spends almost the first 150 pages exposing the pop-esoteric theses, and scatters more rational information at the last ninety pages of the book.

25 Dr. Masaru Emoto is the author of the Water Crystal theory.
ROXANA: I had long chats [on this movie] with friends of mine, males and females, who are in the same track, and we were all excited, like: ‘yeah, of course, this rocks, and look at this, wow!’ All in total confirmation. Friends who are, let’s say, journey fellows.

This utterance exemplifies the conversational drive of pop-esoteric narratives that seems to fuel and propitiate belief practices, even to engage consumers/believers in bodily activities where the learnt knowledge can be practiced. The chats are social circulations with meaning negotiation, forming communities of meaning (in this case, a group of initiated that shared common meaning on the value of the film). There is an intense dynamism through which discourses on science, religion, and spirituality articulate based on intertextual connections across a broad range of media inputs, as well as a prominent role of conversational interaction. The above suggests that the conversational side is a constituent performance of contemporary belief systems.

Moreover, the abovementioned triad (science-religion-spirituality) reflects the fission of the old covenant between Spirituality and Religion. In traditional settings, these two terms are fused and act alliedly against science and secularism. The dominant code linking religion and spirituality –the former servicing the latter– was held mostly by the resistant type of my study:

RICARDO: what religion looks for is to attain spiritual peace. And spiritual peace, at least for us who are Catholics, is achieved through what Jesus gave us as his message. When one does good, when you do good to somebody, you feel good, don’t you? And when someone does good to you, that also feels good.
Contrastingly, for both *uninitiated* and *initiated* in Pop-Esotericism traditional religion is no longer associated with spirituality, but rather it is regarded as totalitarian, closed, manipulative, and not by any means a spiritual system.

**AMPARO:** that’s another way religion has to manipulate: ‘this is dogma and you shut up! and that’s it’ they don’t allow you to think by yourself. This is what the Legionaries of Christ do all the time, they forbid you to think by yourself. For them everything is a sin: advertising is wrong, even *The Simpsons* are wrong, everything is wrong. And what do they get? Well that people just get more interested in seeing these things.

The new alliance is between spirituality and science, particularly with new sciences – such as quantum physics and neurosciences— that make room for shadows and multiplicity of meanings (beyond established dyads of good/evil, black/white, etc.) In this emergent code (spirituality severed from religion and allied with science) spirituality colonizes scientific language using its images and terminology. In so doing, Pop-Esotericism achieves legitimacy and plausibility, at the time that it takes distance from institutional religion, although keeping it as a contrasting realm. Such distance can take belligerent forms as those held by EDMUNDO or AMPARO in the previous paragraph, or take smoother ways to state the preeminence of spirituality over institutional religion:

**ARCELIA:** In my thought there is a basic distinction between spirituality and a religious expression. Spirituality is about believing in a God, whereas a religious situation is more a matter of codes and norms you are based on. You have specific sacred books, either the Bible, the Koran, or whatever other sacred book of your religion, and you are guided by what your religion tells you according to what that sacred book indicates. So, I see a difference between religiosity and spirituality: if
you talk about a God and that God is meant to suit everybody, or about higher-values, then that is spirituality, which I think is a much more elevated thing than religiosity. Yet, when they talk about a particular sacred book and norms and all this, then they are talking about something different, a religion.

Since Renaissance and all through modernity, religion stopped being the privileged seat of social knowledge. Instead, science became the source from where authority and legitimacy is granted. Although severed in modernity, attempts of bringing science and religion back together awake enthusiasm among pop-esotericists. Business administrator PiÁ, 44, found appealing and contemporary the merge of scientific detective-methods with history and religion in *The Da Vinci Code*, and explained how historically religion and science split apart:

PiÁ: At a certain moment there was a group of scientists and intellectuals who had nothing to do with religious concepts anymore. They started detaching themselves from religious contexts because intellectually they couldn’t get along with religion. You have these first physicians who tried to analyze and do autopsies on human bodies, they were considered heretics. Finally the rationality of medicine and, so to speak, mundane sciences detaches you from religion and from dogmas of faith, to which some still think are true and some others not.

The pop-esoteric discourse admits the preeminence of the modern over the pre-modern (that is: knowledge legitimized by science over that by religion); however, it is not entirely submissive to the former. Science (particularly traditional science) is regarded as an institution with a suspicious agenda, and thus Pop-Esotericism advises one to be critical and skeptical towards it. This stance of being highly critical towards modern institutions and its rationality, without necessarily rejecting them –as pre-modern
positions do—typifies a post-modern cognitive standpoint. Even though pre-modern, modern, and post-modern discourses correspond to different historical moments (each one representing different assumptions, meanings, values, and worldviews), they are not exhibited as orthogonally as one could expect. In fact, these are coexistent and overlapping discourses structured by patterns of communication codes.

According to Monty Alexander (1999) a discourse can be regarded as the “‘voice’ of a culture or sub-culture (or context) made up from the total ‘package’ of communication it contains as such, discourse is also the vehicle for communicating the assumptions, taken-for-granted meanings, values and worldview that distinguish the ‘people like us’ of that culture from other cultures” (1999:10) In his view, communication codes are clusters of understood and shared assumptions materialized in visual, verbal, aural or in any combination. They constitute typical expressions of the culture a discourse represents at a particular moment in its history. Alexander (1999:5-8) distinguishes three types of communication codes: residual, dominant, and emergent. These codes are never fixed at any one time, but rather they are always present in any discourse at any time, albeit at different strengths. Eventually, cultural shifts make them move from emergent to dominant, from dominant to residual, from residual into oblivion.

In the pop-esoteric discourse the topic on the triad science-religion-spirituality is expressed through residual, dominant, and emergent codes corresponding to pre-modern, modern, and post-modern communication codes, respectively. In the following example we can see how the three codes dialogue (or clash) among each other. The conversation
developed in a discussion group in which JOSUÉ, LETICIA, and MANUEL engaged in a somewhat harsh argument on this topic:

JOSUÉ: Ok, ok, but, c’mon! I mean, this goes beyond. I am not completely sure of the actual existence of Christ, or that fish appeared in the sea, or that he turned water into wine.

LETICIA: there are people who have proved that through religious experiences though.

While JOSUÉ criticizes pre-modern religious discourse (residual code) from a modern scientific discourse (dominant code), LETICIA praises the residual code but she does so by also appealing to the modern dominant argument that demands and provides ‘proofs’. If both participants move within the same dominant code, why do they have oppositional stands, JOSUÉ dismissing and LETICIA advocating for the residual code? One explanation is the resilience of residual codes. Albeit these are leftovers from earlier sets of cultural values and usages, they remain existent, though becoming increasingly outdated. They rarely disappear altogether, but eventually are absorbed or replaced by newer codes.

Occasionally, formerly residual codes that once were disqualified may be reawakened and presented as emergent codes to challenge the now dominant codes. This explains in part the revival of global indigenous and often animist forms of spirituality whose aura of authenticity is used to confront dominant codes of spirituality. The conversers in the present dialogue, however, use dominant codes (rationality and science of modernity) to laud the emergent codes (the post-modern proposals introduced in the
film), as well as to directly defy residual codes, at the point of degrading them at a “magic tricks” condition, as JOSUÉ does:

JOSUÉ: yeah, but that is scientifically impossible, so I find these proposals [in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*?] backed up in something that has much more credibility than, than mere magic tricks.

MANUEL: I agree, it’s not the same to listen to, I don’t know, to, a…

LETICIA: a priest

MANUEL: to Maria Sabina²⁶, explaining all this.

JOSUÉ: exactly, or listening to Norberto Rivera²⁷, than listening to these folks.

Notice how afterwards they gather dominant modern and residual pre-modern agents (Cardinal Norberto Rivera and Mexican witch Maria Sabina, respectively) to oppose to, and highlight the credibility attained by the emergent agents in the film (the group of post-Newtonian scientists). Resorting to dominant codes in a discussion makes the argument appear more solid and convincible because dominant codes signal taken-for-granted realities, which is why they often are difficult to spot as codes. Occasionally, LETICIA slips an emergent code into the conversation:

LETICIA: though, for me, well, in my personal opinion, validity is not given to me by a medical robe, or a cross, or a cassock, or... Validity is something I give by myself.

Although this subject had previously invoked dominant codes for raising her points, she now introduces an emergent code that belongs to a postmodern stance in which neither

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²⁶ A well known Mexican indigenous shaman and witch.
²⁷ The Cardinal and Primate Archbishop of Mexico City, known for his belligerent conservatism.
pre-modern nor modern agents can explain validity, for that “…is something I give by myself”. Notice how emergent codes are not yet fully formed; somehow they are but signposts over the cultural horizon. What today is experimental and emerging, might become dominant tomorrow, which is why emergent codes, when seen from dominant codes, look ‘threatening’ or at least suspicious. The next fragment shows how emergent codes challenge dominant codes by degrading them as residuals, just as dominant codes dismiss residual codes as having poor credibility and hidden interests:

**JOSUÉ**: where I’m going to is that this stuff is supported by an instance that is not discredited

**MANUEL**: Bullshit!

**LETICIA**: It is indeed discredited!

**JOSUÉ**: Science?

**LETICIA**: Sure it is! It’s like religion, I mean if, you are alienated by religion you can also be alienated by science. Both equally have political interests.

Settled in a dominant code position, though sympathetic towards the emergent codes, **JOSUÉ** sees modern sciences as backing up the post-modern proposals exposed in the film. He deems science as not discredited as some other dominant and residual instances, like religion, are. **MANUEL** and **LETICIA** are also enthusiastic with the emergent codes, but they are settled in an emergent code position, thus they disqualify and pair both residual and dominant codes. Both modern science involving Pythagorean demonstrations, and political interests held by traditional religion lead to only-one-truth assertions, and implicitly alienate individuals from their capability to validate and assess truth:

**JOSUÉ**: No way! If it were a sci-fi film then I’d agree that it could make up things.
MANUEL: But that’s what science does always! ‘two plus two equals four’ That’s bull! Screw Pythagoras!

LETCIA: You ought to keep skeptical, even with science.

Reactions towards modern science, as those by MANUEL and LETICIA, recall Donna J. Haraway’s discussion on successor sciences in postmodern times. Haraway explores how sociology of knowledge, influenced by social constructionists, has seen science as the knowledge game, “the one we must play”. Its persuasiveness is formed not only by language but also by artifacts and facts that, being “parts of the powerful art of rhetoric” (1988:576), produce condensed nodes in a power field. Scientific entities that emerged during the transit to the new millennium have the structure and properties of rhetorical objects, sometimes exempted from the internal laws of coherence of modernist objects: “[...] infective vectors (microbes), elementary particles (quarks), and biomolecular codes (genes) [...] are momentary traces focused by force fields, or they are information vectors in a barely embodied and highly mutable semiosis ordered by acts of recognition and misrecognition.” (Haraway 1988:577)

The emergent codes in Pop-Esotericism do not regard modern science as absolutely objective and reliable, but as a contestable text and a power field, as Haraway foresaw. However most of my subjects concede that it has more credibility than religion and traditional esotericism. Neither religion nor modern science are absolutely reliable discourses, in front of both it is better to maintain a critical distance and to take as truth only what one decides to believe, a stand shared by both initiated and uninitiated. For the initiated science like quantum physics, and not the mechanical, Newtonian physics,
eventually confirms what traditional esotericism already knew. Most participants agreed that science does not answer the ultimate questions although it can grasp some answers.

**Leticia** concluded the previous discussion, saying:

**Leticia:** Not everything has to be scientifically approached, though. Science has never been able to explain everything. It can’t. There are issues beyond its scope and sometimes humans need to believe in something beyond their capacities.

Contrary to dominant modern science, emergent codes in Pop-Esotericism reconcile what got divorced since the beginning of modernity, that is: spirituality from authorized knowledge. Pop-Esotericism marries them back, not only by not excluding nor mocking spiritual or religious beliefs, but giving them new foundations of authority and authenticity. Playing again with Sagan’s metaphor of the dance of science (and) fiction, we may say that if it is certain that science needs Pop-Esotericism to enter the ballroom of the social imaginary, such an alliance does not imply reciprocity or marital exclusiveness on the part of the former. Eventually, Pop-Esotericism *swings* with a second partner: the once scorned ‘history’ in modern times. Coupled with pop-science or with crypto-history (and sometimes playing threesome, as in *The Da Vinci Code*), Pop-Esotericism embarks on what is its ultimate aim: to raise claims of truth.

### 7.3. Categorical Features and Claims of Truth

In strict sense we should talk about “Pop-Esotericism” rather than ‘pop-esoteric products’ since what makes a product to be pop-esoteric is not an intrinsic quality of the product, but the meaning and uses audiences attach to it. Certainly there are products more
susceptible or with more potentiality of becoming pop-esoteric than others. What aids a product to be ‘actualized’ as a pop-esoteric one is the presence of attributes and sub-discourses upon which audiences/consumers can hook and exert their power of making objects of knowledge emerge. When a new object of knowledge emerges, new bodies of ‘unauthorized’ information accumulate, which need to be submitted to what John Tagg (1999:262) termed ‘rituals of truth’ to constitute its authority and authenticity.

Pop-Esotericism pursues authority/authenticity through two linked mechanisms for claiming Truth. One is the reliability of the source of trueness by stressing the authority of the source, and the other is the substantiation of the object by accentuating its authenticity (originality). The paramount source of authority in the pop-esoteric discourse is science, from which the former borrows its rhetoric to articulate pop-scientific premises. However, its authenticity is attained by appealing to history, more specifically to uncovered, unofficial, crypto-history. Back in 1936 Walter Benjamin explored how history works in bestowing authority to objects. Ultimately, he argued, authority rests on the substantive ‘duration’ (or aura) of the original object, since what is rooted in the aura is the very concept of authenticity (1936: Part II, 4) I examine below how both scientific rhetoric and crypto-history assist the claims of truth in the pop-esoteric discourses.

7.3.1. Science, source of authority

Rhetorical figures and extrapolation of scientific factualities are typical in ‘pop-science’ embedded in ‘Pop-Esotericism’. They play the role of reinforcements in the construction
of alternative social knowledge, which is always at the core of pop-esoteric products. Knowledge provides the subject with an exchangeable capital that re-empowers the individual and increases his/her agency. There is an intrinsic binary relationship between social knowledge and power; the intertwining is so tight that it allows the latter to become almost invisible. Tagg (1999:248-0) refers to this invisibility as the ‘microphysics’ of power, it infiltrates in un-localizable ways “the most hidden places of social life, even those places which apparently are not part of an institution or state apparatus.” Science imaginary is one of these places. Scientific rhetoric adopted in both Pop-Esotericism and pop-science exemplifies the search for authority as a validating mechanism to assert Truth. For example, ROXANA considered the scientific approach in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* as a scientific version of what traditional religions have asserted:

ROXANA: Buddha had said that before, as all traditions had said as well. ‘What The Bleep’ is an update of this: The mind controls matter and external reality. Of course, if you say: ‘you have to sit down like Buddha did thousands years ago’, well, maybe that is too sophisticated and I am living in the 21st century and, how is it going to be that? I, well, yulk, religions, yulk the traditions of the religious days.

In this utterance the participant mixes up religion, spiritual practices (meditation) and pop-esoteric products, while affirmatively rejecting the institutional construction of reality, what she calls the “religious days”. She is not distressed by the end of religion realm, but enthusiastic about the scientific update of the message she sees in all religions (the mind’s control over the body), that is the only message she seems to extract from all religions and she is extrapolating it to her personal quest for Truth.
The mind over matter aspect of some Pop-Esotericism is not a scientific claim itself, but a remnant of earlier Gnostic thinking which stresses a radical distance between mind and body, the former above the latter. This hylomorphism works differently for the initiated and for the uninitiated. For the initiated, like ROXANA, it supposes a hierarchical order, the upper level corresponding to the intangible and non-sensible compound mind-spirit and the lower level to the set body-emotions. The distance between these sets has implications for spirituality—as we shall see more detailedly in Part Three—sofar ones’ true self is separated not only from external reality, but also from ones’ own emotions; a stand that is consonant with some Buddhist propositions that cultivate ataraxia, that lucid state of mind characterized by freedom from any passion, desire, or emotion. This is how LOURDES praised the convenience of such an idyllic state:

LOURDES: when you hook to the same thought, you hook on the same pattern of depression, right? and then if somebody does something wrong to me, I cry, and I cry, and you cry again and again. My personal point of view is that/how I understand this is like a path one walks through spiritual practices that help you to break those patterns.

Uninitiated, in turn, by separating mind from body without furthering the severance to the spirit and the emotion, arrive at a different implication: the distance between the cognitioner and both surrounding and inner reality is such that makes the former to become its own observer. Due to the notion of the body as not implied in the notion of the mind, the cognitioner subject sees its own materiality, the body, as a sort of biological garment (a bio-suit) that can be molded at will—even by wishful thinking—along with all other realities. This is what summarizes the pop-esoteric motto “I create my reality”.
MARCO: Thoughts modify your body and everything because we are what we think, and as the proverb says: “To want to is to be able to”. It depends on how much you believe in the force of thought.

BALVINA: In fact there are medical studies about people who got cured by modifying their way of thinking.

For both initiated and uninitiated, Neo-Gnostic positions are embraced as ontological and epistemic frameworks that give explanation to the subjects’ quest of truth. These positions, though, are not expressed in philosophical terms but shrouded in scientific language.

The kind of science that best serves the current quest for truth is one that yields the expression of a new epistemic condition that no longer assumes the clause of a one single reality -*principium contradictionis*, but one that endorses the coexistence of multiple realities. Subjects, like 21-year-old undergrad PAMELA, can live with the relativism of a polymorphic, belief-founded reality, not debating the vision of others while asserting firmly their own vision on the world:

PAMELA: because theoretically this is something real, I mean if you do believe it, then it is something real real real for you. The Da Vinci Code, huh, that was a just a novel.

The scientific rhetoric in Pop-ESotericism bolsters the issue of what is real and what is not, and the solution is found in a willing way: If one decides that something is real, then so it is. For PAMELA, *The Da Vinci Code* was a fiction, so the real thing for her is to not take the thesis of the movie for granted, however she does not reject the possibility nor those who think otherwise. What decides if a statement is false or true does not rely on
solid facetics or proven evidences, but rather on personal choices of enactments upon reality. These personal choices of enactments are, on the one hand, justified with the credibility of the products (since these products produce beliefs based on scientific proofs) and, on the other hand, they are filtered by networks of cultural meaning to which individuals submit to confirm their interpretation. Science is often used as a rhetoric figure in the sense that in spite of emphasizing scientific jargon and ‘paraphernalia’ (a major feature of pop-science), there is no effort in providing or demanding empirical evidences, and a minimal methodological rigor is scorned or disregarded. For those who accepted the theses of *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*?, the justification was that it provided “scientific proofs”:

KARINA: [the movie] is very good because they indeed demonstrate scientifically the whole thing and everything is proved

The proofs that enchanted the audience of this film came from the way quantum physics and neurosciences are divulged in a pop-science form (visually based on cartoon-like animations). This couple of relatively new sciences substitutes the modern, classical physics and anatomy. They are not anymore “inhumane” sciences, excised of anthropomorphism, as Lacan (1949:49) considered Newtonian physics to be, rather they become the anthropomorphic knowledge that deals with the transcendental and aims to be the hard base of a transcendental proposal. The fact that they are presented with the irrefutability of hard sciences (cold, objective, impartial) makes them not being in conflict with inscribed, institutional belief systems. SANDRA, a 25-year-old lawyer, has
been participating in a group that uses neurosciences and quantum physics for self-improvement purposes, she explains that:

SANDRA: The quantum physics is more than just a science, is a Way of Living, because the point is: what are you doing with your life? […] it is not a religion, but something that completes it.

Quantum physics approaches spiritual concerns as immanent to matter; this possible reading, though, is not an impediment for drawing transcendental senses. The nuance, nevertheless, is that quantum physics is not primarily seen as a path for encountering the ‘transcendental Other’. In any case it is a ‘complement’, a way of living, to shape the perspective with which one searches and finds the “transcendental ‘I’”, be it religiously or un-religiously.

In general, science is chosen as a source for asserting the veracity of the message of the product. Moreover, the gravity force of the scientific halo is so prominent, that the paramount mechanism of legitimacy is not when a pop-esotericist becomes a scientist, but when a scientist converts himself into a pop-esotericist. Astrologist ROXANA made this clear when she explained how legitimacy worked for best-seller Deepac Chopra:

ROXANA: Deepac Chopra, being a Medical Doctor, Medical Doctor in Boston, very prestigious one and it suddenly results that he was also Mahara Vishi’s disciple and that he was practicing transcendental meditation and it is for this that I think that he is one of the most legitimized persons in this medium, because he is not disguised nor dressed as maharishi, or monk, nothing like this, he is a Medical Doctor and he is making these approaches as someone who will discuss these problems from the scientific side of the matters.
It is not by chance that she mentions medicine, one of the first modern sciences of the Renaissance. Modern medicine is a hard science, directly opposed to the magic and shamanist ways of *cure*, and it deals with life and death, healing the body. Since the last decade, though, scholarship from different fields have developed documenting works\textsuperscript{28} vindicating medicine as the holistic arena in which the realms of science and spirituality, body and mind, words and ideas and physical well-being amalgamate. Ernest L. Rossi and David B. Cheek (1994) record how since ancient times there has been the assumption that ideas evoke physiological responses, and heal. Rossi calls this relationship *ideodynamic*, whose notions can be tracked back in writings that date earlier than 1500 B.C. “[in *Papyrus Ebers*] describe the practice of magical incantation and ritual that evidently evoked healing by facilitating the experience of altered states, belief, and expectancy” (Rossi 1994:3) In the above verbatim, although for ROXANA being an MD endows Chopra with his primary authority; what makes him remarkable is having paid attention to the spiritual, making him at the same time a physician and a disciple of transcendental meditation. Science, or better said scientific rhetoric, is the ultimate source for legitimizing the thesis of the product. Indeed, audiences recognize that pop-esoteric products are not targeted to actual scientists, but as ERNESTO said:

**ERNESTO:** to people who are very interested in science, because (the movie) is very well explained, one does not need to know about science, only to like it.

\textsuperscript{28} A historical review on holistic approaches to science and spirituality is exposed in Anne Harrington (2008) *The Cure Within, a history of mind-body medicine*. More specifically on holistic healing see Ernest L. Rossi (2002) *The Psychobiology of Gene Expression: neuroscience and neurogenesis in hypnosis and the healing arts.*
The subject does not even need to be an initiated, less a scientist, but to “like” the approach of science and be part of a community that accepts multiple realities.

7.3.2. Crypto-History, warranty of authenticity

If science is evoked—bringing into play its rhetoric, language, and imagery—as the source of authority, Pop-Esotericism relies on history to substantiate and attest the authenticity of the object it states to be true. If the former favors post-Newtonian sciences such as quantum physics and neurosciences, the latter reckons on unorthodox views of evidence, motivations, and decision-making processes surrounding historical events. Modern historiography (Shermer and Grobman 2000:34) distinguishes two major avenues of alternative, unofficial ways of historical reinterpretation. Firstly, there is the historical revisionism, which assumes the need of re-examination of existing knowledge and interpretation about a historical event or period. It entails an interpretative refinement that comes through the examination of new empirical evidence or a reexamination of existing evidence, moving away from accepted paradigms held by the establishment. Critical approaches to history taken by Michael Foucault or Walter Benjamin fit this stream: for the former, the historical discourse is not tied to the subject, but the subject is a construction of discourse, a product (and the battleground) of multiple political forces. History, therefore, is not the science of ‘true deeds’, as essentialists assert, but the discourse of a political stake. Benjamin, on the other hand, proposed to create a history ‘from below’ as opposed to the idealist and bourgeois conception of history. His
alternative is to avoid discourses of major states which are always infused by victors’ angle, disguised in juridical and philosophical costumes

Secondly there is the historical negationism, characterized by denying well-established historical facts and records accepted by legitimate academic scholars. British historian Richard J. Evans (1999) notices that in order to advance a given interpretive historical view, historical negationism uses a variety of techniques to distort facts so that certain events appear in a more or less favorable light. Such techniques include presenting forged or apocryphal documents as genuine; inventing reasons for distrusting genuine documents; manipulating statistical series to support the given point of view; deliberately mis-translating texts; and using many logical fallacies to obtain the desired results. Pop-esoteric products usually borrow aforesaid techniques from historical negationism to fashion stories that, on the one hand deny official versions of historical events, and on the other hand propose the authenticity of new bodies of information, whose novelty resides in having disclosed hitherto well concealed events.

FACILITATOR: you mentioned before something about the discovery of the Tomb of Jesus Christ. I’d like to know more about other materials related to this, you know: films, documentaries, books…

PERLA: there are plenty of them. TV channels such as Infinite, Discovery Channel, NatGeo. They show these programs, questioning if the Shroud of Turin is good or fake, if they found this or that new scroll…


PERLA: … and they make these shows based on recent researches and scientific evidence of the existence of these characters. Like this one, on Jesus’ sepulcher.
This excerpt was taken from a focus group comprised by housewives, aged 44 to 60. Interestingly, those conversing here are not initiated nor uninitiated, but from the resistant type. Despite being mainstream religious practitioners and strong opponents to pop-esoteric theses, they are familiar with and have access to crypto-history present in broadcasted documentaries and media alike, and sometimes use them to reaffirm their own previous beliefs and convictions. As earlier discussed, there is a shifting interplay in Pop-Esotericism between secrecy and revelation: the esoteric reserved information and the exoteric public accessibility to knowledge. When it comes to history, this chiasmic-relationship between the esoteric and the exoteric is expressed through a very popular variety of crypto-history: the conspiracy theory. By definition, conspiracy theories are tentative explanations that imply concealment on behalf of powerful and fearful organizations. Many focus and discussion groups engaged in considering the reliability of conspiracy theories related to the Catholic Church. Those less likely to engage in this theme were the resistsants (only 12% of them did), whereas 69% of the initiated and 59% of the uninitiated involved more actively in this respect. However, as shown in Table 21, the uninitiated produced 86% more words in their utterances than the initiated.

VICTORIA: I can’t understand why the Church has been hiding so many things, when someday all was going to be uncovered.

AIDA: and it keeps on hiding. Because all what has come out recently about that tomb and about the family of Jesus, and all that thing, the Church is still denying.

AMPARO: the Church has been hiding so many things…

VICTORIA: and now you have these new researches which I truly mind when are disclosed, because all we got before were just made up by the Church.
Most literature on conspiracism stresses that in the late 20th and now in the 21st century, conspiracy theories have become commonplace in mass media, which has contributed to conspiracism emerging as a cultural phenomenon. In the aftermath of 9/11 a global fever of conspiracy theories arose; Noam Chomsky (2006) analyzed the phenomenon and opened an online debate entitled “9-11: Institutional Analysis vs. Conspiracy Theory”. From a counter-institutional rather than a subjective position, Chomsky reckons an overall crisis of legitimacy of external agencies of analysis. While being critical towards conspiracism for considering it socially demobilizing, he acknowledges that institutional disqualification is yielding part of the population to constitute themselves as agencies of truthfulness. It is becoming a cultural assumption that social truth rests no longer in social institutions, for they do not represent by default the social subject. Nevertheless, in the decade of the 1980’s Frank P. Mintz (1985) demonstrated that conspiracy theories do not typify a particular epoch or ideology, but are useful mechanisms to identify elites, blame them for previous positions of social discomfort, and “assume that things will be better once popular action can remove them from positions of power” (1985:199). After exhausting the various conspiracy theories about the Church and their trustworthiness, some participants spontaneously commented on actual controversial issues in the agenda of the Catholic Church in Mexico. I coded these issues under a tree-code named “talk on church controversies” and cross-referenced it with the free-code “talk on conspiracy theories involving the church”. Table 21 shows the outcome of the matrix coding query.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Uninitiated</th>
<th>Initiated</th>
<th>Resistants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk on Conspiracy Theory</td>
<td>59% of uninitiated</td>
<td>69% of initiated</td>
<td>12% of resistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk on actual Church controversies</td>
<td>31% of uninitiated</td>
<td>25% of initiated</td>
<td>6% of resistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk on Conspiracy Theory</td>
<td>108.7 words (average per case)</td>
<td>122.4 words (average per case)</td>
<td>60 words (average per case)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk on actual Church controversies</td>
<td>195 words (average per case)</td>
<td>80.5 words (average per case)</td>
<td>78 words (average per case)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk on Conspiracy Theory</td>
<td>57 verbatims coded</td>
<td>29 verbatims coded</td>
<td>4 verbatims coded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk on actual Church controversies</td>
<td>26 verbatims coded</td>
<td>6 verbatims coded</td>
<td>1 verbatim coded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 21. Matrix of ‘talk on conspiracy theories involving the church’, ‘talk on actual church controversies’ by Type of Informants.

Table 21 shows initiated and uninitiated outnumbering the resistants in talking on conspiracy theories, as well as in commenting on the actual controversies of the Church. There seem to be a constant in the proportions: about half of those who commented on conspiracy theories engaged later in addressing actual issues of the Church. The less interested in both talks are the resistants by far. They produced 5 verbatims (4 on conspiracy theories, and 1 for actual church controversy) versus 83 verbatims produced by the uninitiated (57 on conspiracy theories and 26 on actual church controversies). Although more initiated commented on conspiracy theories (69%) they were slightly less
involved than the *uninitiated* in discussing the controversies of the church. This becomes more evident when considering the amount of words employed by each type. While the *uninitiated* employed, as an average, 195 words in addressing the issues of the church, the *initiated* used barely 81 words, that is 59% less than the *uninitiated*. All this seems to suggest that for the *uninitiated* conspiracy theories are not idle, but play the role of vehicles to convey more concrete and historical concerns of their lives. Notice that the number of words employed for addressing actual concerns about the church almost doubled those they used to entertain conspiracy theories.

Issues that were commented by participants included sexual abuse scandals, mandatory clergy celibacy, financial and political corruption in the Church, Church’s position against abortion, notion of family, contraception methods and reproductive policies, and views on sexuality. Table 22 shows these issues distributed by type of informants. Excepting Financial and Political Corruption, the rest is related to themes on sexuality and sexual ethics. There are practically no issues commented by the *resistant*, but there are diverse and prolific topics mentioned by the *uninitiated*. Although mandatory celibacy for clergy was most referenced, the issues phrased more extendedly were both the church’s teaching on sexual ethics (i.e. ban of condom and contraceptive methods), and the sexual-abuse scandals of the church, producing 964 and 850 words respectively.

**JAIME:** what truly menaces the faith is not films, but real things from real-reality like this problem with the Legionaries of Christ who committed pedophilia.
MARGARITA: Pedophilia is something unleashed only within the Catholic Church, am I right? I haven’t heard such things happen among protestant married pastors.

-----

FLAVIA: specially now with all what is going on with priests, with pedophile priests, many people are thinking in leaving the Catholic church for good.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Uninitiated</th>
<th>Initiated</th>
<th>Resistant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celibacy of clergy</td>
<td>9 references</td>
<td>3 references</td>
<td>1 reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>589 words employed</td>
<td>75 words employed</td>
<td>78 words employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption (financial and political)</td>
<td>7 references</td>
<td>2 references</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>303 words employed</td>
<td>218 words employed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual-abuse scandals</td>
<td>7 references</td>
<td>1 references</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>850 words employed</td>
<td>29 words employed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproductive ethics</td>
<td>6 references</td>
<td>NONE</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>964 words employed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>4 references</td>
<td>NONE</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>211 words employed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality, view points on</td>
<td>2 references</td>
<td>NONE</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>324 words employed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family notion</td>
<td>2 references</td>
<td>NONE</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>403 words employed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 22. References coding ‘Felt controversial issues in the Church’ by Type of Informants

Conspiracy theories exert fascination and grant emotional gratification by locating events in understandable moral frames; while attributing moral responsibility to groups of power (that exclude common people), individuals feel excused from any moral responsibility or need of political engagement. But besides functioning as social immobilizers and social controllers, conspiracy theories –as all crypto-history does– are also subversive since they
channel social discomfort and resistance to established cognition. Furthermore, they act as a kind of social medium for connecting people, entertaining them, bonding them, constructing images of undesirable others, and stoking powerful fears. The inherent narrative of current entertainment society facilitates such a function as it creates objects of knowledge through rituals of truth that feed on personalized (and dramatized) reports, rather than mapping complex structural explanations.

*The Da Vinci Code* cognitively puts together two different ‘rituals of truth’ to construct authority/authenticity (Tagg 1999:248ss): one relies on the traits of ‘uniqueness’ that constitute authenticity (the very Jesus’ bloodline in the flesh and blood of Sophie), and the other one relies on methods for collecting and classifying evidences based on Teabing and Langdon’s scientific authority and expertise to de(re)code the Truth. As already said, the film follows most of the conventions of detective narratives. The efficacy of this genre in dealing with religious or spiritual matters was spontaneously pondered by one of my interviewees:

ENRIQUE: It’s like a blend of Hollywood thriller with religious mysteries. The fact that they are always/that there is always a “perseguición”\(^\text{29}\) going on, on the one side by those who are “persiguiendo” the Truth, and on the other side by those who conceal and “persiguen” those who are in the search of the Truth. There is a lot of mysticism here, a lots of, I don’t know, odd data and mystery. For example when they are following the clues to reach the Holy Grail which is in fact what the film is all about.

\(^{29}\) ENRIQUE plays with the twofold meaning of the Spanish word, which stands for ‘pursuing a goal’ and for ‘Persecuting or chasing somebody’. The wordplay implies that pursuing Truth involves being persecuted.
In the analyzed scene there are many historical recreations (Constantine and the Roman rite for worshiping the Sacred Feminine, the turmoils, the Council of Nicaea, Magdalene’s delivery of her daughter, the Church’s Inquisition) that serve to didactically illustrate what Teabing is lecturing. All this, sort of flashback insertions, are resolved in quasi monochromatic granulated texture which gives a sense of documental antiqueness, very similar to those recreations shown in documentaries broadcast by *The NatGeo Channel* or *The History Channel*.

‘Visualizations’ such as historic recreations and Sophie’s flashbacks, as well as the scholar didactic resources (similar to sophisticated power-point presentations) are aimed to bestow credibility to the theories stressed in the film, working as empirical ‘historical’ evidences and at the same time imprinting a scientific character on it. Some informants, like Lucero, stressed that the basic theories in the film were not fictional but come from serious scientific investigations:

**Lucero:** You know Dan Brown is well known as somebody who really does in depth research, he even has a team of researchers that work for him. I mean this stuff in the film is not just something that he made it and put it into the film, but there is a solid investigation behind. Of course it’s highly controversial and has made big money from it.

All the emphasis on history in this scene, as well as in the rest of the film, is linked to a cultural mystification of the past in order to make meaning for the present; as John Berger points out “History always constitutes the relation between a present and its past. Consequently fear of the present leads to mystification of the past. The past is not for living in; it is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act” (1977:11).
If veracity of *What The Bleep do We (k)now!* rested on scientific arguments—an anthropomorphic science, for those who adopted the theses of *The Da Vinci Code*, like graduate student in communications MARGARITA, 40, veracity depended on another type of proof: the outcome of historical research:

MARGARITA: clearly he [Dan Brown] did a lot of research. The way he treats characters and situations and traditions of that era, shows that he had to study a lot. Obviously some things in the story are fictional, but at the same time there is a lot of real historical stuff there.

Nonetheless, historical research is felt not as solid as science proofs; that is why the viewpoints of the participants on *The Da Vinci Code* tended to emphasize more the fictional character of the product as a movie based on a novel—a fiction product—that thus leaves more liberty for accepting or not the results of the research. The veracity of *The Da Vinci Code* is more vulnerable due to its fictional resource: a novel. Lacking the proofs of “hard science”, the subject has more liberty to take it or leave it:

ARCELIA: If I want to accept it, then I do, and if I do not want to accept it, then I do not. It’s up to me.

Therefore, not every research can produce complete veracity, less when it has an agenda. Historical research gives the possibility of a critical scrutiny of the results, and the subject has the choice of accepting or not the results; these are not imposed on him/her. The subject is an active agent that constructs meaning. The possibility of choice undermines an absolute veracity of the thesis, and its place is taken by a perspective of a global
market rationale: the product was controversial in order to produce a selling phenomenon, as an undergrad student of communications said:

SELMA: Rather than disseminating a truth or a doubt about religion, it was exactly this: selling a book, a story, starting from certain data that, as said here, were genuine and other data that were not, this is: mixing up reality and fiction.

All participants agreed on the issue of the mixture between “reality” and “fiction”; however, they disagreed in which data were real, and which were not. Some few discussed on how real were certain locations and scenographic details in the film, and most of them focused on and discussed the image of Jesus as a married man and Mary Magdalene as the heiress of Jesus’ church.

For some, the image of the Christ as a sexually active person, although impossible to prove, was a credible hypothesis, or even a detail of minor importance, as we can notice in the following excerpt from a discussion group comprised by males and females, ranging 47-52 years-old, from different professional backgrounds: a biologist (CElia), a political scientist (Aleida), an economist (Emma), and a mathematician and physicist (Ricardo):

CElia: Regarding the theme that caused polemics about The Code, if Magdalena really existed [sic] and if she were Jesus’ wife…

Aleida: That is totally irrelevant

CElia: It is totally irrelevant. Finally Jesus is important not for having being a man, a husband, or a father

Emma: But for having transcended

CElia: For having transcended because of his message
RICARDO: Because of the clearness of his message

Historical evidence and historical-based syllogisms are seen weaker than scientific proofs. This is so, in part, because in pop-science veracity is concentrated not in humanities, but in positivist sciences, a heritage of the modern structure of thinking. Moreover, humanities—in the form of crypto-history—give a space to postmodern stances of multiple realities as well as to the agency of the subject who is free to choose if (s)he believes or not the proofs.

In the case of The Passion of the Christ, the elements of authenticity were two. The first one is again a historical resource: the use of Aramaic language in the movie bestowed some veracity to it; the second one, stronger than the first one, is the Bible, which is the support of the message of Jesus’ suffering for the sake of humanity:

ESTHER: the movie is very close to reality; it is spoken in Aramaic, the language that was spoken back then. And yes, gee! I think Jesus was flogged even more than he should have been, as he did not harm anyone. And these scenes were very depressing, but the movie is worth to see because you learn a little bit more from him, all what he did for us.

Those taking these arguments of veracity are the modern selves, who are more prone to be attached to historicity and facticities as modern institutions taught them to do. Postmodern selves, on the other hand, tend to put in doubt these two elements, and revert, again, to the multiplicity of truths and viewpoints over reality.

EDMUNDO and GERARDO, both business administrators and self-identified as Catholics, 35 and 38 year-old respectively, discussed on the historicity of The Passion of
the Christ. One questioned the film’s veracity and the other one conformed his thought to a rather institutional position:

EDMUNDO: I think both (The Da Vinci Code and The Passion of the Christ) are fictional because, come on! Where is the existing documentation for backing up all what is presented in the Passion?!

GERARDO: Well, but there are some books, the Bible, millions of people follow. I mean, we Catholics.

EDMUNDO: yes, but…

GERARDO: and those books have much more power to convince people, than all the imagination Dan Brown had for writing The Da Vinci Code. I mean, they (both films) are but just two different versions.

For the modern selves, the veracity of The Passion of the Christ is thus attributed to an institutional way of thinking. Postmodern selves, on the other hand, live in relativism and consider insecure the historical argument unlike the scientific one. For ISIDORO, 18, history is subject to many alterations and it cannot provide a solid proof, as he puts it: “one can never say”

ISIDORO: It is probable [that Jesus was married] because he had free will and also in The Last Temptation, but one can never say, because it is written by others human beings who modify history, as Dan Brown or as any of the apostles, and then they can do whatever they please with history.

Again, it is reiterated the idea that there is no ultimate truth, but only various versions of it, and that the agent/subject has the possibility of being a bricoleur and form his/her own reality. The main stream, institutional approved vision of The Passion of the Christ was severely criticized by postmodern meaning-makers, like CONRADO, not only because they
want to freely collate different meanings according to their own judgments, but because they see in such visions seeds of imposition, and even fanaticism:

CONRADO: It is a diversion, the thing that this person (i.e., Mel Gibson) makes you think that this was what actually happened and full stop, instead of making you understand that this is only the construction of the reality from the viewpoint of one person and that there are many more, to have only one is to have this one, this is, the deviance to fanaticism, to believing only one thing and … knowing moreover that the possibilities are open to many more realities and one can construct his own criterion.

Contrary to what Lévi-Strauss (1964:346) claimed in the sense that what ultimately we look for is to be subjected by a source of meaning, these persons seem to refuse being ‘subjected subjects’. Rather, they are fond of exploring multiple ways to (de)construct veracity, not wanting to be grabbed by the myth, but to grab the myth.

7.3.3. Technoforensics and talismanic gadgetry

The two avenues to assess truth in Pop-Esotericism –the authority backed in scientific rhetoric and the authenticity claimed through crypto-history– have the commonality of emphasizing “visualism” as a surrogate of the understanding. As I advanced at the end of Part One, there are plentiful and very specific visual inscriptions in pop-esoteric products aimed to affirm senses of rational and unquestionable evidence. Visualism has been an inherent feature in all forms of communication along modernity, yet in current social cognition it has become the necessary condition for assessing spiritual discourses, either explicitly traditional-religion discourses or alternative spiritual discourses. In a focus
group of undergrad students aged 19 to 24, RAMÓN justified the use of explicit visual violence in *The Passion of the Christ* not only because it makes the life of Jesus more understandable, but also because visualism in nowadays culture is present even in activities formerly considered as non-visual, like reading.

RAMÓN: the scenes are that graphic to make us understand how cruel it went.

FLAVIA: yes, but it shouldn’t have been that graphic!

RAMÓN: look, for me it was shocking and very cruel, but my point is that even kids read books about this since children, and they are familiar with the life of God. And reading is also visual because it makes you see images in your mind. So, if you are to see it in a movie, why shouldn’t it be graphic as well?

His last sentence seems to regard ‘visualism’ as something more than mere ‘optics’. Visuals is whatever makes us form “images in our minds” to facilitate the understanding of certain reality. Along my study, participants of both genders and all age-groups referred to the emphasis on visuals in the three films as something related to rational understanding and learning processes, but coupled with senses of affection, emotion, and feelings. On the other hand accents on visuals are reckoned as a didactic language that makes contents –as in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*– more accessible and entertaining to mass audiences.

FRANCISCO: the film is fairly accessible mainly because of the animations and good photography in the fictional story.

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DARIO: special effects are not entirely credible though they are there to make it more understandable for broad audiences and not too boring.

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Rosalinda: in my opinion, the cartoon-like molecules appearing here and there was a resource aimed to make it more visual and more entertaining.

In Pop-Esotericism visuality is the material dock to which earlier discussed mechanisms for claiming truth anchor. Once the reliability (authority) of the source of trueness is secured and the object is substantiated (authenticated) and therefore stated as true, then the individual may embark on gaze-driven dynamics for creating senses of spirituality and self identity. In Part One, I identified three kinds of such dynamics, namely: the therapeutic/regressive gaze (as in What The Bleep do We (k)now!), the fetishistic scopophilic scrutiny (as in The Da Vinci Code), and the sadistic scopophilia (as in The Passion of the Christ). In fact all participants who resonated and engaged with any of these three scopophilic dynamics coincided in having successfully submitted the new bodies of information proposed in the films to the above explained mechanism of trueness, decreeing for propounded objects of knowledge, both authority and authenticity.

Visualism is a key aspect of consumer culture in its entirety. It traverses all pop cultural items, particularly those based on scientific rhetoric or crypto-history. However, it gets a very particular character when it is applied to Pop-Esotericism. I have previously pointed out the different visual metaphors used to exert scopophilic scrutiny upon two objects (Jesus’ suffering in The Passion of the Christ and Sophie’s life in The Da Vinci Code). The former, an explicitly church religious film, adopts a sado-scopic approach to defragment and reveal what by all accounts was meant to stay off the scene: Jesus’ bloodshed in its fullest (and most baroque) detail. The latter, also a pop cultural film but with pop-esoteric potentialities, adopts a fetishistic visual-based examination to analyze,
dissect, and also put on stage what supposedly was meant to stay concealed: Jesus’ bloodline. In this sense, both films visually display the ‘ob-scene’ through dismembering and fragmenting operations that recall meticulous surgical procedures; however, each one resorts to different kinds of ‘invasiveness’.

While the non pop-esoteric film (*The Passion of the Christ*) represents a typical open surgery, breaking, penetrating, incising, and finally directly exposing the organs and tissues of Jesus to raise its truth, pop-esoteric films like *The Da Vinci Code* (but also *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*?, as we will see) opt for ‘non-invasive’, or ‘minimally invasive procedures’ to scrutinize their objects of analysis. The task supposes the concourse of an imposing array of hi-tech devices aimed to inspect, scan, and produce images so far concealed. Pop-esoteric stories might skip these procedures, limiting to render the resulting images, such as the endoscopic views of Amanda’s cells, peptides, and brain in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*? Or they can show-off, conspicuously, the procedures followed in their investigations –as in *The Da Vinci Code*–, in which case the texture of the story acquires the particular aesthetics of ‘techno-forensics’, a term I already introduced in the First Part of this work.

Briefly, what I call ‘techno-forensics’ is that popularized cinematic resource that implies the application of a broad spectrum of actual and fictionalized technologies (typically digital) to answer questions, often related to a crime or to an issue that disturbs the social order. Conventionally, forensic sciences encompass accepted scientific methodologies as well as technological tools under which certain facts are ascertained as being true before a social group. Therefore, it always involves a social-cognition agent
that is politically situated either as a proxy of the establishment or as a dissident of it. Psychoanalytically phrased: what is rehearsed beneath the forensic interest in determining whether an object is what it purports to be, is the ongoing neurosis that makes us desire—ambivalently—the collapse and/or consolidation of a given symbolic order. One can track the antecedents of this genre in popular culture from Sherlock Holmes (created at the end of 19th century) to the comic strip Dick Tracy (featured in the 1930’s), both using forensic techniques as effective investigating methods. However, the advent of new-technologies at the end of the 1990’s enchanted the social imagination and propitiated a vigorous revival of this resource. Since early in the present century, popular television series—both fictional and non-fictional—have been focusing on crime detection, lauding technology and depicting glamorized versions of the activities of this century’s forensic sciences. Screens got overflowed with fluorescent analyzers, last generation surveillance systems, digital tracking devices, interactive image processors, and all sorts of hi-tech gadgets. All this deployment of glittering technology creates neat and cold atmospheres, a blend of expressionist sharpness and gothic austerity that we recognize in contemporary US television with its many versions of X-Files, CSI, The Mentalist, Bones, Numb3rs, Law & Order, 24, and also in full-length films such as The Da Vinci Code.

I have already analyzed from a cinematic point of view how mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound all work in creating the techno-forensic style and ambience. I also explored, from a psychoanalytical perspective, how this aesthetics when

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30 There is an intrinsic link between forensics and politics since the term began to be used with the twofold meaning of ‘legal evidence’ and ‘public presentation’. The Roman legal procedure for criminal charges included a stage of forensis, “to face the forum”, in which the case was presented with allegations before a group of public individuals in the forum.
applied to Pop-Esotericism tend to be synecdochically represented by talismanic-like gadgets, as for example the ‘Criptex’ in *The Da Vinci Code*. Such objects of power in pop-esoteric stories hold strong associations with fetishism, as we have already examined. If scientific rhetoric and crypto-history are categorical features for settling authority and authenticity in Pop-Esotericism, techno-forensics (with its talismanic gadgetry) is a possible ambient resource to materialize and convey the former, though with social cognition implications.

The implicit message in techno-forensics is that even what is invisible to all, becomes neatly visible to the technological ‘phallic eye’ of the State. Truth, therefore, is not a lost thing to be ‘found’, but something deceivingly concealed to be ‘uncovered’. The iterative disassembling and reassembling procedures produce new objects and shape new perceptions of reality, presented as objective and ideology-free as science is thought to be. For some viewers such cognitive proposal is highly convincing; for example, while commenting on how Da Vinci’s fresco was photoshopped and rearranged in the film, ASAEL shared with the group that one year after he saw the film, he went to Europe with his parents and did the ‘Da Vinci Code Tourist Route’:

ASAEL: can’t remember the name of the Church in Paris where the line is, where Silas shatters the floor, and also I went to this Italian monastery where the painting is. And I was like: ‘oh my God, no way that dude is a guy!’; and indeed she could fit perfectly next to Jesus.

Moreover, seen as a strategy of inquiring, techno-forensics shares similar effects ‘electron microscopes’ have over observed objects. When applied to living cells, the high
resolution and magnification of these devices require that the former ought to be “stabilized”, in other words become “vitrified specimens”. So, for example, the object under scrutiny in the film is Da Vinci’s fresco, more specifically the figure of what is claimed to be Mary Magdalene; however, because of her consanguinity with Sophie, the scrutiny through techno-forensics extends to this character. Thus, due to metonymic proximity with Magdalene and Jesus, Sophie experiments *in persona* a process of an increasing “vitrification”, until she reaches the neutralized, though glorified position of Jesus’ heiress.

One would expect that an object under observation would grant visibility and even increase its action over the beholder; however, “vitrification” does just the opposite: it seemingly neutralizes the action of what is observed, turning threatening felt realities into a matter of misrecognition. Sophie Neveu’s high profile (detective, cryptologist, independent, and bearer of Jesus’ divine blood) challenges not only theological stances of the institutional Church, but also patriarchal conceptions of femininity and women’s role in society. However, her leadership and protagonism fades not only throughout the story, but also in viewers’ interpretive reading of Sophie. This is a good example of what I discussed earlier in Part One about disavowal masking recognition (Žižek’s formulation *I know, but act as if I don’t*) and partially explains the apparent erasure or indifference male viewers had with Sophie’s presence on screen, and the uneasiness it provoked in some female viewers.

EDMUNDO: she seemed to me just as an uninteresting, milk-toast detective.

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ARCELIA: he [Robert Langdon] is the one who protects the girl and helps her find
her truth. The guy is totally protective, all the time providing care and shelter to her as she is the one who carries Christ’s royal blood. Ultimately she went thru all the movie shadowed by him.

**Mariclara:** ditto. She never stood up for herself, a totally follower. The one who gets standing ovations is him, the investigator.

The techno-forensic strategy of inquire used to uncover the hidden secret in Da Vinci’s fresco advances the nature (and outcome) of the scrutiny Sophie is about to be submitted. I earlier pointed out the apparent paradox in such inquire: both Sophie and the fresco are **approached** not by shortening physical distances between the observer and its object of study. On the contrary, cognitioners purposely increase their distances from the objects: Teabing using digital image-processors to approach Da Vinci’s fresco, and forceps and a magnifying glass to examine and handle the ‘Criptex’ and Langdon, being distant and over-reverential to Sophie, avoiding the slightest physicality with her, a ‘cold’ emotional distanciation already seen among main-characters of other techno-forensic samples, such as in *Bones*, 24, *The X-Files*, and so on and so forth.

Walter Benjamin (1936: Part X) reflected on the paradox of distance from reality and elaborated the metaphor of ‘the magician and the surgeon’ –transposable to a painter and a cameraman, respectively. He explained that a painter, while maintaining a bare distance between his eyes and reality, obtains a picture that is a total one. A cameraman, on the contrary, interposes an apparatus between his eyes and reality to penetrate it deeply, attaining multiple assembled fragments. And yet, concludes Benjamin, the representation of reality by the cameraman “is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality
with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment.” (1936: Part XI, 13) The paradox consists in that the more conspicuous is the interposed medium, the more unquestionable senses of naturalness it grants.

*The Da Vinci Code* also plays with the ambiguity of abovementioned figures of the magician/painter and the surgeon/cameraman. In the scene analyzed in Part One, it is not easy to tell whether the setting is the *atelier* of an artist, wherein a “whole” is created; or if it is a kind of a *lab*, wherein dissections of that whole take place. Appraisal for fragmentality in techno-forensics also has implications related to social control insofar as it converts the separation of a pure community into a segmentation of an analyzed and distributed disciplined society. Fragmentation derived from technological means is an exercise of power on which systems of Truth rely. Michel Foucault considered how modern systems of truth deploy mechanisms through which power is capillarly instilled, assigning each member of the society –e.g. female officer Sophie– with a distinctive identity and social place, so each individual “fits his ‘true’ name, his ‘true’ place, his ‘true’ body, his ‘true’ disease” (1999:62). Finally, techno-forensic aesthetics celebrates the post 9/11 societal architecture\(^{31}\), as one elegant, cold, sophisticated, and yet implacable in its twofold pursuance of ‘truth’ and absorption of subjects thru political technologies.

\(^{31}\) Foucault (1999:65) describes how this architecture distorts the dialectics of seeing: “he is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication [...] hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic function of power [...] the Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen. It is an important mechanism, for it automatizes and disindividualizes power”
Summary of Part Two and Transition

With these remarks on how pop cultural media with spiritual ends claim authenticity and authority, I have presented enough elements and evidences to introduce the concept of Pop-Esotericism. Before Part Two concludes, let us highlight some points we have so far considered.

Social imaginary formation in our days takes place within a global media context marked by a twofold complexity: on the one hand there is a practically boundless landscape of cultural references produced by sources of all kinds (multi-modal), informing us what has been called the ‘media ecology’. On the other hand, such assortment of cultural forms are not merely ‘consumed’ and interpreted individually, but used as ‘currency’ among the many nodes (individuals) that compound the network society. Interestingly, in the age of information, the overabundance of contents has made them work as lubricants, or relatively disposable pre-texts, of the more radical text that is written by multi-nodal subjects throughout intertextualities and conversational interactions. Within this media ecology, products related to the innermost concerns of the self have the potentiality of being furnished with sacred significance and consumed as inputs for the belief system. Fetishism plays a key role in sacralization processes. Through it consumers convey, on the one hand, their felt anxieties and insufficiencies, addressing the problem of personal agency; and, on the other hand, they exert their fascination toward the occult and reserved, the sly of the unintelligible mysteriousness. Certain entertainment products (e.g. What The Bleep do We (k)now!? or The Da Vinci Code) address topics belonging to the blurry crossroad where spirituality, science, and
religion intersect. This crossroad is not new, every religious tradition develops at a certain marginal layer –often considered at least suspicious to religious officialdom– an underground and alternative framework comprised of these fields aimed to explain reality in its broad sense. Commonly, this frame is referred to as ‘esotericism’ (Granholm 2005).

However, the novelty with the products I am analyzing here is not that they fulfill those features that would allow us to label them as esoteric films, but precisely that ‘having them’, the films shall not be considered as esoteric ones, neither as not-esoteric. The reason of this ambiguity is because one of the inherent features of any ‘esoteric knowledge’ is its hermetic edge that makes it be reserved and kept in secret by those who form the inner circle of the initiates. In opposition, ‘exoteric knowledge’ implies public accessibility, which is implicit in any pop culture product. In other words: both *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*? and *The Da Vinci Code*, taken as entertaining commodities produced, distributed, and consumed within the realms of the cultural industry, have the massive attribute of a visible non-initiatic community. Nevertheless, what makes these products distinguishable is not the nature of their content, but rather the social use consumers give to them. From a reception perspective, these products are able to be consumed as an initiation to and disclosure of hidden truths. It is this shifting interplay between the esoteric and the exoteric concurring in the same symbolic form that makes both films fit into what I have termed ‘Pop-Esotericism’.

Pop-Esotericism is displayed as a rational narrative with decisive consumption and conversational drives. It works not only as a resonant media-reference to its audiences, but also as a (pre)text in the construction of ephemeral and collective
conversational spaces. The experience of pop-esoteric consumption implies mechanisms of self-reproduction through intertextual linkages articulated in conversational frameworks within which individuals construct or reinforce their subjectivity as an autonomous and (re)empowered one. Furthermore, within these spaces subjects entertain a triadic discourse (science-religion-spirituality) furnished with metaphors, metonyms, gestures, and silences they use to sustain performances in which well-established belief systems are subverted and challenged. This performative edge will be more closely examined in the Third Part of this work.

Finally, we have considered pop-science and crypto-history as two visible characteristics of Pop-Esotericism. The various pop culture items pertaining to this category are currently distributed in the marketplace, in the form of films, books, TV shows, music, magazines, and many interactive media. For instance, *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*? and *The Da Vinci Code* qualify as good examples of products with pop-esoteric potentialities due to both the explicit issues these films address at the content/aesthetic level, and the conversations and social practices they have triggered among their audiences. Their social circulation, as my study demonstrates, appeals to matters directly concerned with people’s meaning-making processes, particularly those where the meaning is explicitly loaded with the weight of transcendency. Such constructions are commonly known as ‘transcendent beliefs’, and because they are organized in systems that intervene in the way people operate their everyday reality, sociology of religion refers to them as *Belief Systems*. However, I will discuss in Part Three the adequacy of this term when applied to pop-esoteric phenomenon.
Part Three

Belief Systems

Presentation:

Media based conversations function as pretexts to convey loads of concerns related to existence and transcendency. They release spontaneous social meaning-making processes individuals use to connect to their own ‘transcendent beliefs’ and biographies. Sociology of religion, since its classical stages, has been addressing this societal construct from different perspectives and socio historical contexts. Part Three will review and rework the theme of Belief Systems with the scope of furnishing a suitable theoretical explanation to the pop-esoteric phenomenon.

The Part is comprised of two chapters. Chapter 8 momentarily parenthesizes the empirical grounds of this work and opens a theoretical meditation about how different sociological perspectives have impacted the approach to Belief Systems. The aim of this theoretical interlude is to establish critical distances—and also points of proximity—between those models and the one I am deriving from the grounds of my research and proposing in a following chapter. My reflection mainly contrasts two major traditions: the first one is the stream of thought that over distinct socio-historical contexts has been formulated, somehow interfacing and updating various intuitions originally set out by Max Weber. The second stream is that represented by poststructuralist epistemologies which have introduced to the discussion on belief systems some cognitive dimensions
that were disregarded in the former. The Chapter is structured in three sections. A first section sketches what I identify as the *Axiom* for the operability of a belief system in Weber’s thought. According to Weber the construction of the sacred intrinsically involves a struggle condition: meanings must struggle against terms they exile, marginalize, or exclude. I argue that this axiom lies at the basis of a matrix that served to interface the Weberian foundations at least in two theoretical frameworks: Peter Berger’s and Anthony Giddens’, each corresponding to different social contexts. A second section explores these interfaces: one articulated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann when developing the notion of *Anxiety of Anomy*, and the other one produced by Anthony Giddens in his depiction of a *Mourning Self* as the archetype of late-modernity. Following the above, I introduce a third section to overview the belief system in post-structural frames. I firstly discuss how Lacan’s reflections on structuralism contributed to conceive belief systems as languages loaded with psychic material, which in itself surpasses language. Subsequently I address the poststructuralist turn made by Jacques Derrida and the complexity brought by Deleuze and Guattari: both the recognition of the unconscious and the recovery of negative dialectics lead the thought to consider deconstructively the act of believing as *loci* of dis/placements. Finally, I elaborate on more recent sociological frameworks that entertain the suspicion of an even more un-apprehensible reality. Such frameworks, when applied to beliefs, make them be regarded as having inherent denying, negating, apophatic edges. In this sense, works by Gordon, Poloma and Gouldner are provocative invitations to explore alternative ways of
knowledge, grasping and facing the idea that when it comes to belief systems something might be beyond consciousness, language, and empiricism.

Chapter 9 brings us back to the empirical grounds of this study, and therefore sets in the center, again, the main research question of how is subjectivity constructed and exerted in the narration/performance of believing, when media consumptions related to spirituality or transcendency are used as inputs for conversation. A traditional understanding of a belief system results insufficiently to give full account on the pop-esoteric consumption with spiritual/religious usages, and on overall contemporary belief systems. Therefore, I will embark in sketching an alternative theoretical model aimed to make a better sense of the issues of this investigation. My starting point is the basic distinction I make between the belief and the believing, the operative and the operational. A first section elaborates on it and offers working definitions. I argue that contemporary belief systems are comprised by these two dynamics, and propose a theoretical model to integrate both in what I call the Theory of the Operational Belief System. The second section is devoted to this endeavor and breaks down the main features of each dimension. Providing social bases from the fieldwork, I underscore how the operative and operational sides of my subjects’ belief system resonated during my investigation.

Therefore, the operative side –as the third section will show– proves to be the ‘expressive moment’ of a belief system that is both autopoietic and intertextual. Furthermore, empirical evidence allows us to identify three different sources of contemporary belief systems (the inscribed, the ascribed and the gatekeepers) out of which subjects acquire elements and put forth different types of appropriations and
colonizations. There are three tactics to perform these appropriations, namely the Canon, the Codex, and the Archive. According to the emphasis given to each of them, is shaped the believer’s subjectivity. I will explore possible models or shapes of subjectivity and identify the one that best suits pop-esoteric subjects and explains the ‘narcissoid’ edge that is expressed in their operative belief system.

If the operative side brings out the expression of a belief system, the operational side is the instance where the impression takes place. I make use of documenting and theorizing works mostly from social hermeneutics and ritual studies to explore this in Section Four. Individuals collectively enact –awarely or unawarely– generative performances aimed to create senses of spirituality that forge subjectivity. Their strategy includes the necessary conversion of a given (secular) text into a self-sustained, revelatory and transformative (sacred) text, or Classic Text. Subjects achieve this by playfully bracketing their reality and getting involved in ritualizations. By doing so, they eventually propitiate ephemeral eruptions of conjuring spells through which alien texts (e.g. Pop-Esotericism) get impressed on their subjectivity.
Chapter 8

Belief Systems, an overview

8.1. The Threads of the Weberian Matrix

In discussing Max Weber’s contribution to the understanding of belief systems, I keep as a backdrop what I mentioned in the Introduction for this dissertation: that during the field research of this study I found individuals who were able to bring into conversations different belief discourses and refer distinct social practices. People who identify themselves as Catholic practitioners also reported having resorted to other practices, such as Buddhist meditation or divinatory consultations for their daily decision making. The dynamic among these apparently contradictory levels and discourses makes us wonder if there is a bridge between what people state they believe in and the personal and social practices they actually perform. Apparently, in a global media context –understood as defined in Chapter 6– a belief system does not necessarily imply a correlative operational level. Put it differently: on the one hand there is the narrative of what one socially declares to believe in, and on the other hand, there are some other beliefs that actually drive one’s actions. But if so, what correlates beliefs with practices?

Revisiting Max Weber’s contribution is pertinent because he tackled a similar question, finding suitable answers for his historical context. Nevertheless, it was not in Weber’s scope to expound our current scenario where distinct religious frames simultaneously act in one single individual; rather, he considered societal unities defined
by one single system—namely Protestantism—within which a common meaning of reality was socially and coherently elaborated. Therefore, a revision on Weber’s contribution would be insufficient without regarding a theoretical interface between his historical context and our contemporary global media context. For this purpose, I have chosen the theoretical frameworks developed for two different social formations which are still coexistent and overlapping in our days. The first setting corresponds to the modern context of institutionalized life as elaborated by Peter Berger, whose sociology of religion presumes an age where mass media is already consolidated, though inserted in a divergent logic. The second setting is that of a late-modern context in the view of Anthony Giddens, whose social theory is developed in and for a context of a global media convergence.

Before reviewing these two theoretical interfaces, though, I will reflect on the two fundamental functions of the act of believing according to Weber: the function of operability towards social practice and the function of social control. It is within the frame of these functions that one can infer Weber’s methodology for inquiring belief systems, and single out the key elements of the process and structure he discovered.

8.1.1. Axioms of a belief system, operability towards social practice

‘Belief System’ is a current and well known term employed in many subfields of sociology such as sociology of religion, social psychology, media studies, among others. Although the term has been reformulated several times and refurnished with important
nuances according to the socio-historic contexts where it has been used, it might be said that all re-conceptualizations done during the 20th Century and first decade of the 21st Century, remain strongly anchored to the primordial matrix depicted by Max Weber in 1905. According to Weber, the operability of an idea (a belief) is not directly derived from neat deductive logics, but rather from the blurred zone where meanings are made. In his view,

“The fate of an epoch which has eaten of the tree of knowledge is that it must know that we cannot learn the meaning of the world from the results of its analysis, be it ever so perfect; it must rather be in a position to create this meaning itself. It must recognize that general views of life and the universe can never be the products of increasing empirical knowledge, and that the highest ideals, which move us most forcefully, are always formed only in the struggle with other ideals which are just as sacred to others as ours are to us.” [my emphasis] (Weber 1949:10)

This quotation mentions three major insights that function as axioms in the study of beliefs: The first one is that a meaning is something created by ritual interactions between individuals rather than something pre-existing and eventually found. The second one is that a worldview (weltanschauung) involves a struggle of ideas, rather than a peaceful encounter with the Truth. And the third one is that beliefs comprised in worldviews are set apart as untouchable and undoubted, they are rendered sacred in its most literal sense1.

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1 This sense of sacredness is comparable to Alfred Schutz’s notion of the taken-for-granted realm of the commonsense. For Schutz (1953), the social construction of commonsense creates a kind of sacred canopy of believability around things, transforming the arbitrary and situational into “objectivity.” Schutz’s work
Basically, when aggregated, the three axioms stand for reckoning the struggle condition within the construction of the sacred. This is: at a certain point meanings get involved in a battle against what is often called the profane, struggling against terms they exile, marginalize or exclude. In this sense, what is rendered “other” by a particular practice of meaning-making might itself be viewed as a constitutive feature in the making of meaning as such. The axioms function as a threefold contextual axis, because concrete social forms shape the way people perform their meaning construction, the way distinct beliefs confront each other, and the way people conceive the realms of the sacred and the profane.

Since Weber, the classical explanation of the formation of belief systems and religious identities is that one is born into or converted into a religious tradition and that this, let us call it ‘inscribed system’, impresses its worldview on the believer, inherently linking both beliefs and practices. Robert White (2004) points out in amazement that as recent as the early seventies “the landmark study of what Americans believe carried out by sociologists Stark and Glock (1968) assumed that religious beliefs and practices are defined largely by denominational membership” [my emphasis] (White 2004:339).

attempts a synthesis of Weber and Husserl and is the key inspiration for his students, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, to develop the concept of “social hypostases.”

For example, while conducting my field research it was common to find cases of subjects to whom the reception of The Da Vinci Code and The Passion of the Christ behaved in a ‘mutually exclusion’ way (deeming one film as religious or spiritual implied deeming the other as non-religious or non-spiritual) among members not only of the same group but even from the same family. This was not due to opposite aesthetic preferences, but rather to confrontational notions and cognitions participants use in organizing and understanding life (e.g. the individuality and the communality, the active historicity and the passive historicity, the evil as an external entity and the evil as an inner condition)

In fact the Latin traditionem carries the idea of being “inscribed” into an ongoing receiving-and-delivering chain. The word has the sense of passing on or handing over, the action of surrendering something to another.
These axioms have been somehow revised and re-elaborated by those theoreticians who have studied the phenomenon of believing along the history of modernity, emphasizing different aspects of the triad. For example, Castells –concordant with his Marxist background– focuses on the second axiom (struggle of ideas) fought in the arena of power relations. Interviewed by Terhi Rantanen (2005:138,146) Castells revealed: “I always look first at the power relations that exist and second at the resources for fundamental social change. […] The reason I am deeply interested in communication is that in modern times power is played out in media and communication. […] The struggle for power is a struggle for our minds, and our minds function in a communication environment.”

Peter Berger, on the other hand, devotes a large part of his work to the third axiom (sacredness) which constitutes an essential element for his sociological theory of religion\(^4\), as will be explained further. As for the first axiom (meaning as something created) there is a long theoretical tradition after Weber firstly set this ‘proto-constructivist’ brick, with which he addressed the problem of Practices and Beliefs as belonging to the registry of signification. Meaning construction, in his view, is not an outcome of analytical knowledge but of social interaction where it is gestated. Practice (i.e. the operability or materialization of an idea) is certainly based on consciousness but fostered by the personal views of life and the universe which not always are clearly or solely rational. These values –hidden persuasions of an individual– are the ultimate practice drivers. Weber acknowledged in his historical context that rather than rational

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\(^4\) In 1967 Peter Berger published “The Sacred Canopy” where he set down the sociological bases for his theory of religion.
knowledge or material struggle for existence, it is values that organize life. (Weber 1949:6)

The trans-historical adequacy of Weber’s framework applies not only to different socio-historical contexts where particular worldviews change, but also has shown applicability in contexts where even the one who ‘views the life and the universe’ experiments new forms of conceiving and experiencing the notion of his very self. Views of life and universe (concretized in beliefs) are at the very foundation of the various ways with which we organize both our private and social life; they are the constituents of Culture, if by culture we understand the “finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning and significance” (Weber 1949:37).

One of Weber’s original contributions is having conceptualized culture as the prime element that bridges the individual realm with the social realm. Furthermore, whereas Freud (1856-1939) realized that within the individual domain there was a complex system organizing the structure of the self, Weber (1864-1920) realized that when it comes to the social domain a cultural value is converted into an ethic imperative when it is organized by a system, such as it is with religion. Therefore, the quality of a social event is not its ‘objectivity’ but its cultural significance (Weber 1949:18).

Belief systems –inasmuch as organizers of ‘worldviews’– are relevant as far as they have significance and consequences in social life. In front of Marx’s equation in
which consciousness is determined by the social being,\textsuperscript{5} and the latter is a product of the former, Weber creates a kind of synthesis where social being and ideas are seen as reciprocal and productive of mutual historical affinities.

Epistemologically, beliefs play a fundamental role insofar as they bestow the “meta-empirical validity of ultimate and final values” (Weber 1949:65) wherein the meaning of our own existence is rooted. The significance Weber attributed to beliefs supposes the harrowing assumption that Life itself is meaningless and irrational. One of the final sentences of a text\textsuperscript{6} in which he renders a brief summary of his thought on knowledge, helps us grasp his view about Life, the meaning, and the role of beliefs:

“Life with its irrational reality and its store of possible meanings is inexhaustible. The \textit{concrete} form in which value-relationship occurs remains perpetually in flux, ever subject to change in the dimly seen future of human culture. The light which emanates from those highest value-ideas always falls on an ever changing finite segment of the vast chaotic stream of events, which flows away through time.” (Weber 1949:65)

The former assumption foreshadows what was further reformulated by Vygotsky and the symbolic interactionists whose work set up the platform for current constructivism\textsuperscript{7}. At the very root of current constructivist tenets lies Weber’s insight about social knowledge, the role of beliefs, the struggle of ideas, and the meaning-making in social conversation.

\textsuperscript{5} The early Karl Marx envisioned this principle since his work ‘The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’ Cf. Tucker (1978: 66-125)

\textsuperscript{6} In 1903 Max Weber became the editor of the journal for the social sciences in Germany: \textit{Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik}. He stated the overall purpose of the journal in a text entitled: \textit{Objectivity in social science and social policy}, which can be seen as a brief manifesto of his theory of knowledge.

\textsuperscript{7} I am thinking of Paul Watzlawick, Gregory Bateson, Kenneth J. Gergen, Humberto Maturana, among others who consider intelligence as an entity that reconstructs experiences and acts of knowing, orders them, and gives them form.
8.1.2. Belief systems and the function of social control

Max Weber is well known for establishing the relationship between religion and the economic/political realm; nevertheless he was the first one in acknowledging former thinkers, like Montesquieu, as pioneers in exploring this linkage (Weber 2001:11). What is Weber’s original contribution in this matter is the socio economic analysis of the nature and function of this link. In his view, the struggle for meanings takes the appearance of a socially shared and controlled consensus, which impresses meaning on human behavior at both individual and social dimensions. In this sense Weber addresses Durkheim’s concerns about social control, but whereas the latter conceives control as an external and coercive instance, preexistent to the individual, the former conceives it as the outcome of a more intangible social meaning-making. Distanced from other classical social views such as Durkheim’s and Marx’s, Weber stresses that behavior is not a response to external situations, but rather its explanation “must be sought in the permanent intrinsic character of religious beliefs, and not only in temporary external historic-political situations.” (Weber 2001:7)

Berger sees no contradiction between the Durkheimian and the Weberian poles. He agrees with Durkheim that society manifests itself by its coercive power and even that its “capacity to impose itself over the reluctance of individuals” is the final test of its objective reality or facticity (Berger 1967a:11). But ultimately that objective reality is not

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8 Emile Durkheim (1982:52) focused on those “manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him”.

9 Although in Durkheim’s model of religion, explained in his 1912 work The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, beliefs are primarily dependent upon the enactment of ritual practices, and secondarily exerted with coercive power.
other than the objectivation of Weber’s subjectivity. In other words: without rejecting the Marxist thesis that beliefs are at the ideological service of the social being, Berger imagines the social being at the service of the beliefs in so far as it materializes the implied order of ideas; as he puts it: “every human society is an enterprise of world-building [and] religion occupies a distinctive place in this enterprise.” (Berger 1967a:3)

What the intangible human mind consensually builds are materialities, which is to say that intangible mental operations do not remain in the unphysical evanescent realm of conversation (the Word), but that —actually— the Word becomes Flesh with specific weight and socio-material effects (Res extensa ex res cogitans.) Furthermore, both premises —social facticity and social construction— are related to each other when social control comes into the scene. Coercion is aimed to protect and ensure the constructed materiality, even if that implies the destruction of the individual who might have founded it under the appearance of consensus10, but “the fundamental coerciveness of society lies not in its machineries of social control, but in its power to constitute and to impose itself as reality.” (Berger 1967a:11)

But whereas Durkheim (1982:52) conceived heteronomous visible control in the form of social entities —such as the state or the church—, Weber realized that besides the heteronomic control wielded by those social institutions, the ‘control factor’ seemed to be previously embedded in the autonomy of the individuals. He noticed that, historically, modern societies have not made any effort to eliminate the institution’s control over

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10 The appearance of consensus might be explained as the result of disavowed processes of struggle. Both consensus and coercion compact the social blend.
everyday life, but rather sought the substitution of new forms of control. Additionally, Weber realized that independently of visible social instances within which conduct is supervised and controlled, there are inner instances of regulation of “the whole of conduct which, penetrating to all departments of private and public life, [are] infinitely burdensome and earnestly enforced.” (Weber 2001:4)

Beliefs, hence, function as inner supervisors of the individual’s actions, often managed by outer supervisors (institutions). Even in contexts like ours with an energetic spiritual marketplace\footnote{A theme thoroughly explored by Wade Clark Roof (2001)} displaying a wide range of belief offers, the management and supervision of beliefs—though diluted—still persists. In Weber’s thought when a belief needs no surveillance or external managing to orient individuals’ actions, it becomes an ‘ethical value’. Once a belief spills out from the private sphere of an individual, or from the control of the public sphere (where institutional gatekeepers administrate and supervise the believing), a third sphere is revealed. Ethics constitute that third sphere needed to intersect the private with the public sphere. Therefore, values and beliefs, along with the whole worldview of Life, reside not in the visibility of any institution—say the State or the Church—, nor in the subjectivity of each individual, but rather in the depth of the more abstract and intangible reality: the invisibility of the spirit.

Weber refers to the spirit as the ‘state of mind’ of a given reality. Beliefs set up states of mind which restrain and struggle against opposed states of mind (Weber 2001: 21-3). When analyzing the spirit of capitalism he noticed that “The most important opponent with which the spirit of capitalism, in the sense of a definite standard of life
claiming ethical sanction, has had to struggle, was that type of attitude and reaction to new situations which we may designate as traditionalism.” (Weber 2001:23)

When weakened or threatened, the *spirit* is taken on by institutions which in turn exacerbate their surveillance in order to reestablish the *state of mind*\(^\text{12}\). This is valid for socio historical contexts such as current global media society, where traditional institutions formerly acknowledged as sources of Truth traverse through severe institutional crisis. In situations of eroded and weakened institutions, it seems to work an inversely proportional relation: the less effective interpellation an institution has, the more coercive it intends to be—even if that coercion results unsuccessful or even generates boomerang effects against the institution. There are many examples of this situation with Mexican leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, who have vigorously reacted against some film releases. Their harsh prohibitions and warnings against films such as *The Last Temptation of Christ, The Da Vinci Code* or *The Crime of Father Amaro*, actually had boomerang effects among their parishioners, who in turn felt more encouraged in watching these products.

8.1.3. Weber’s contribution to methodology for inquiring belief systems

Contemporary sociology of religion, particularly the scholarship devoted to the intersecting fields of media, religion, and culture, are debtors of Weber’s inquiry on beliefs. In the ‘*Spirit of Capitalism*’ he unfolds an exercise of reflexivity by showing

\(^{12}\) Michel Foucault (1975) explored this mechanism in his major work *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. 
himself aware of the slippery object of his inquiry. His aim in understanding what he calls the *spirit* could have easily fallen in the vortex of an over-deductive speculation. He avoided this by keeping himself faithful to his conviction that cultural sciences—as he liked to refer to social sciences—depend on the setting of the problem (Weber 1949:58). Thus, at the beginning of his study Weber “frames” his object by hooking it to what he calls “an historical individual”, which he defines as “a complex of elements associated in historical reality which we unite into a conceptual whole from the standpoint of their cultural significance” (Weber 2001:13). His method to keep the research attached to the concrete object of study is “the only possible one from which the historical phenomena we are investigating can be analyzed” (2001:14), somehow coinciding with the overall goal of Husserl’s phenomenology.

Beliefs are historical concepts based on historical phenomena, and as such they must keep their concretion. Weber’s methodology to investigate belief systems implies “not to grasp historical reality in abstract general formulae, but in concrete genetic sets of relations which are inevitably of a specifically unique and individual character.” (Weber 2001:14) Following this method, Weber determined his object: the analysis and historical explanation of what he meant by *spirit of capitalism*, and hooked his inquiry to specific cultural items he felt might be containing such spirit “in almost classical purity, and at the same time *[with the]* advantage of being free from all direct relationship to religion, being thus for our purposes, free of preconceptions.” (Weber 2001:14)

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13 Actually Weber used two documents (collections of sentences) written by Benjamin Franklin: *'Advice to a Young Tradesman'* (1748) and *'Necessary Hints to those that would be Rich'* (1736).
If we were to analyze the global media society employing Weber’s method, would it be valid to adapt his procedures to our setting? That would mean that the starting point should be a heuristic scouting among our cultural items, searching for the concrete cultural/media products in which the spirit of our time has been incarnated. Nevertheless, that would only falsely evade the high complexity of current media context. As seen in Chapter 6, the global media society qualitatively differs from other communication contexts. Multiplicity, simultaneity, interactivity, selectivity on demand, prosumerism\(^{14}\), remediation\(^{15}\), are just a few of the many traits that challenge the classical notion of message. For contemporary theory of reception, the message is not a fixed content locked in an item, but a product of the social interaction in which that item gets involved. Therefore, rather than focusing on a particular symbolic form or in any media product, an inquiry shall explore closely into those interactions wherein media items are used as pretexts in the construction of larger social texts.

The analysis of a symbolic form (Benjamin Franklin’s writings) led Weber (2001:14-7) to discover not only the essence of the matter he was interested in, but also the process it followed. He could distinguish the several steps a belief takes before it becomes part of an ethos of a culture. According to Weber a belief system –such as Calvinism– is related to the way people operate their reality in their everyday life. He found out that between a belief system and the operability of reality (practice) there are processes and materializations functioning as interfaces.

\(^{14}\) A coined word to refer to consumers who assume their role also as producers.

\(^{15}\) i.e. the appropriation and modification of a product to construct from it a distinct but yet related product.
A first interface consists in stripping the essence of a belief out of its sacred frame, and inserting it into the narrative flow of the everyday life. This sort of “secularization” of a sacred narrative is actually a ‘re-sacralization’ through which the belief is rephrased and reframed in philosophical terms, hence achieving a new ontological status. In his texts, Benjamin Franklin rephrased the essence of both beliefs and practices of the ethos of his time, coloring them as ethical maxims for the conduct of life. In so doing, former religious beliefs are preached as civil values on behalf of Wisdom (sapientiae, Sophia, the holder of the truth of reality). The second interface translates that materialized philosophy in terms of consequences and duties: it is the ethical interface which supports, legitimates, and gives its ‘rationale’ to the ethos of a culture. The spirit resides within the ethos, shaping the fundamental or epistemic attitude with which we approach and operate our reality. The dynamic mobilizes our “reading of reality” as well as our “writing on reality”. The next figure schematizes this process:

Figure 16. Weberian process of beliefs and practices
Nonetheless, this explanation is not fully sufficient to make sense on how a mere philosophic idea once configured as an ethic becomes a state of mind. At its most it explains the process, but not the structure of the phenomenon. For Weber, the structure has no mechanical (functionalistic) explanations based on rationality, but rather has a-rational existential grounds. Eudemonistic rationalism—a type of “attitude which sees and judges the world consciously in terms of the worldly interests of the individual ego” (Weber 2001:38)—is not enough to explain the ‘spirit of capitalism’, because such spirit is paradoxically anti-eudemonic: always preventing individuals from taking full pleasure of the worldly. Weber deduced that there had to be some background ideas giving foundation and justification to the way of life, “which could account for the sort of activity apparently directed toward profit alone as a calling toward which the individual feels himself to have an ethical obligation.” (Weber 2001:36)

The question had to be sought in a place other than the process he described. While observing the linkage of social practices (ways of life) with the belief system, Weber discovered a fundamental epistemic attitude: the self-denial asceticism on the part of individuals. Such asceticism was derived from the inner vacuum left when certainties of salvation were stripped off. The vacuum, lived as anxiety, acts with the force of a vortex, pulling the surrounding reality into the understanding of the individual in a very specific mode. Thus, the individual experiences the surrounding reality as compulsively “calling” him to perform activities and duties to fulfill its claimed nature “as if it were an absolute end in itself” (Weber 2001:25). The calling is far away of being a rationalistic persuasion to adopt a particular philosophy; rather it has the imperative trait that only
ontological and transcendental weights grant. Such a "calling" is powerful enough to give every-day worldly activity a ‘religious’ significance, as it was ‘religion’ the one who firstly created the conception of a calling in this sense. “The only way of living acceptably to God [is] solely through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling.” (Weber 2001:40)

Knowing the vacuum is to find the thread that eventually leads us to the calling that upholds the spirit. In my opinion it is the notion of the ‘calling’ what is at the core of Weber’s contribution to the inquiry of beliefs. The particularities of his findings were pertinent to frame the specific historic context he intended to understand. Other social contexts, though, might have similar structure but different sort of ‘callings’ and ‘vacuums’. In other words, his theory of beliefs is not a prét à porter one that simply applies to any social circumstance without questioning, firstly, what would be the ‘calling’ of the spirit of a given society.

8.2. Belief Systems in the Modern and Late-modern contexts

The Weberian premise holding that subjects act toward reality on the basis of the meanings they are inscribed into, which in turn are derived from and modified by ongoing processes of social interaction and interpretation, was taken-on in the 1930’s by symbolic interactionists, who applied it to urban sociology16.

16 Herbert Blumer, a disciple of Herbert Mead, summarized these Weberian-rooted premises and set them out in a couple of titles: Society as Symbolic Interaction (1962) and Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method (1969).
I have previously stated in Part One that from a psychoanalytic perspective, each of the three films analyzed in this work seems to address the fear or the experience of a disempowering incompleteness, a problem of the insufficiency of the self. For symbolic interactionism\(^\text{17}\), though, the self is never imagined as complete or self-sufficient, but as relational and dependent on its symbolic relations to others; that is, it depends on the viewpoint of others towards the self. At its roots, as Charles Horton Cooley (1998) put forward, is the precondition of any symbolic interaction, namely the sense of self (the *I*-feeling) which is granted “once a subject secures some measure of control over its immediate surroundings” (Adler 1980:27). Cooley’s insights influenced George Herbert Mead (1934) to conceive the self as comprised of two components: the “I” and the “Me”, being the former “the impulsive, non-deterministic aspect of the individual” that acts with an opinion of the self as a unified whole, and the latter the more “controller, socially conscious aspect of personality [separately manifested] for each of the individual's roles and social groups” (Adler 1980:32).

Mead’s distinction allows me to make a nuance to the expression I have been hauling since the beginning of this work: ‘disempowering incompleteness of the self’. The experience of incompleteness, as such, places the *uneasiness* in terrains of the “Me” insofar senses of completeness and sufficiency of this component of the self emerge and are sustained in ritual social interactions with others. Whereas the theme of disempowerment –referred to the sense of loss of the basic control over the immediate surroundings of the self– puts the issue at the more radical level of the “I”, whose

\(^{17}\) Grounded in pragmatist philosophical positions by Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead, among others.
capabilities to successfully operate the broad reality are perceived diminished or jeopardized, thus turning the feeling of uneasiness into anxiety. ‘Disempowerment incompleteness’ is a possible state of the self (‘I’/‘Me’) addressed by modern symbolic interactionists such as Louis Zurcher (1977) for whom modernity is characterized by rapid social changes (leading to a fracturing of stabilized self-other relations) that weakens stability and puts forth ephemeral social anchorages, promoting the emergence of a mutable self, an individual that “achieves autonomy by learning to shift modes of self-reference so as to cope most effectively with the fluctuations of varying situations” (Adler 1980:53).

More than sixty years after Weber’s work –and almost three decades after the initial works by symbolic interactionists– Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967b) took up, from a different perspective and context, Weber’s implications of a meaning-based social construction and explored how social interactions intervene in converting subjective meaning productions into objective social facticities. They merged two of the most influent logia in classical social theory: Durkheim’s view of society as possessing objective facticity, and Weber’s conviction that society is the expression of a subjective meaning-complex action. Berger and Luckmann did not find any contradiction between those statements, but a fascinating complementation insofar “It is precisely the dual character of society in terms of objective facticity and subjective meaning that makes its ‘reality sui generis’” (1967b:18)
8.2.1. The belief system in the modern context: Berger’s *Anxiety of Anomy*

Weber’s understanding of belief systems is not entirely a replicative model insofar as its categories may vary from context to context. Peter Berger’s sociological understanding of beliefs is a theoretical interface that revises and updates Weber’s notions in the modern context of institutionalized life of the decades of 1960 and 1970.

The sixth and seventh decades of the twentieth century might be regarded as representative of modernity because in this period there are some significant solidifications: strong and defined nation states, capital organized in transnational holdings, consolidated cultural industries, all this framed in an assumed scientific rationality, a seemingly autonomous individuality, and a supposed secularization. The institutional strength reached all levels, even the relatively marginalized religious institutions. Moreover, as already explained in Part Two when discussing our global medial context, mass-media is consolidated in this period and inserted in the everyday life with a divergent logic. These traits must be kept in mind when considering Berger’s work because they shape the way individuals, institutions, and beliefs are seen in his work. In this frame, the ideal type of the believer envisioned by Berger is one whose notion of the *self* is understood by and attached to the fate of institutionalized life.

Berger (1967a) embarks upon a long philosophical excursion to firmly cement his view on religion. His overall model makes sacred beliefs fit within three processual categories (*externalization*, *objectification*, and *legitimation*) which jointly explain how subjective meaning-construction eventually becomes objective social facts. Berger and Luckmann retake Marx’s assumption of history and society as a dialectical phenomenon:
a human product that continuously acts back upon its producer in such a way that “every individual biography is an episode within the history of society” (1967b:3). Instead of departing from the assumption that society simply produces culture, they explored the implications of its reversal: culture as the sum of the totality of man’s material and non-material products, and society as one of the latest products of culture. Society, therefore, is not an external thing (a Durkheimian facticity) but a human ‘externalization’ of the anthropological necessity and proficiency of making our ‘world-building’ appear as ontological sufficient, an idea they termed ‘societal hypostases’.

Societal hypostases includes institutions such as the family, the economy, the state, the church, the science, and all other constructions whose materialization – ‘objectifications’ – enables them to act over us and even destroy us. Berger acknowledged Weber as one who felt the necessity to dehypostatize social objectivations, but at the same time considered it “wrong to accuse Durkheim of a hypostatized conception of society (as a number of Marxist critics have done). His method easily lends to this distortion, as has been shown particularly in its development by the structural-functionalist school.” (Berger 1967b:191 note 13)

According to Berger, what ultimately underlies the hypostases with which we construct our world, is a rather evanescent reality: a constituent nomos that serves as a frame of order –the Law that ‘makes sense’ and thenceforth bestows ‘legitimation’. Individuals appropriate the nomos and use it in their own subjective ordering of experience. Nomos is the anthropological mechanism through which the “meaningless infinity of the world” (Weber 1949:37) is solved, getting the world closer to the Cosmos
–the universal ‘nature of things’. Therefore, “to live in the social world is to live an ordered and meaningful life. Society is the guardian of order and meaning not only objectively, in its institutional structures, but subjectively as well, in its structuring of individual consciousness.” (Berger 1967a:21-2)

The lack of nomos is ‘Anomy’, which leads to chaos. Fear of anomaly is the vortex or ‘vacuum’ equivalent to the Weberian anxiety. The fear is forcefully enough to raise the ‘calling’ to assert and preserve the nomos and to uphold the spirit of this particular context of modernity. Berger adverted that fear of lawlessness is so overwhelming that it drives individuals towards the main stream of institutions, where the seat of nomos resides and ensures Cosmos’ sustainability. The radical separation from the social world (anomy) constitutes the most feared threat because that would imply that the individual loses his sense of reality and identity, becoming what Berger calls ‘worldless’ (1967b:22).

Furthermore, Berger points out that when the nomos meets the cosmos, it reaches a stature and stability granted by more powerful sources than the historical efforts of human beings. It is at this point that religion enters significantly into play: “Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Put differently, religion is cosmization in a sacred mode.” (Berger 1967a:26) Therefore, one may formulate that for this author religious beliefs are accepted propositions aimed to establish and sustain a sacred cosmos, and that such beliefs are compiled in sets and organized in systems administrated and guarded by institutions. Each belief system competes with other belief
systems in inscribing believers, for whom being subjected by institutionalized systems is a way of avoiding states of anomy.

8.2.2. The belief system in late modernity: Giddens’ *Mourning Self*

Until the last days of modernity, the struggle over the meaning-making of sacredness was organized neatly through institutionalized life, as Peter Berger (1967a) thoroughly explored. Somehow the Self was understood as attached to the fate of institutions. Such a notion of the Self was correlative to the epistemological assumption of that stage of modernity: the assertion of one single reality. Yet, in the eighties and nineties a new context generated a new type of Self, one that could detach itself from the rigidity of the institutional life. The temper of emerging selves includes continuous negotiations and tactics, in terms of Michel de Certeau (1980), used for inhabiting different sources of beliefs, without the self needing accountability or adherence to any institutional fixed identity. This tactic is totally identified with the contemporary social project by which the individual aims to construct an ‘autonomous self’ and ‘identity’. Anthony Giddens (1991) explains that construction processes of social reality are rooted in the situation and structured by tacit knowledge of the rules and tactics of social life. Social life, thus, is constituted and reconstituted not at the exceptional and *sacro* level of institutions, but within the individual’s everyday social life.

In the middle of the nineteen eighties emerged what is now called the global media context. Rapid changes in technology of communications, new consumption
patterns, as well as reconfigurations in the global economy, boosted this change. Some thinkers saw in the ethos of this scenario the end of a meta-narrative, namely ‘modernity’; others—although acknowledging shifts within the patterns of modernity—did not necessarily see such an end. For instance, Anthony Giddens (1991b), without denying that important changes had occurred, observed that the four main characteristics of modernity are essentially still active: capitalism, industrialism, surveillance, and monopolization of the means of violence by the state. Giddens endorses Weber in considering capitalist industrialism\(^{18}\) as the institutional axis of modernity, which performance is ensured by institutions of surveillance that exert “the supervisory control of subject populations, whether this control takes the form of ‘visible’ supervision in Foucault’s sense, or the use of information to coordinate social activities” (Giddens 1991a:15)

In his analysis he underscores the dynamic process that makes modernity being constantly developing, and concludes that what others term post-modernity\(^{19}\) is a rather radicalized ‘late’ modernity. A similar stand is held by Zygmunt Bauman (2007), who introduced the concept of liquid modernity as opposed to the “solid” modernity that preceded it in earlier decades. Essentially, what current society does is to continue modernity, but under conditions of endemic uncertainty. According to Bauman, ‘liquid’ modernity creates social forms which institutions are unable to solidify, and thus to serve

\(^{18}\) i.e., social relations implied in the widespread use of material power and machinery in production processes within a system of commodity production involving both competitive product markets and the commodification of labor power.

\(^{19}\) My review of the discussion on whether postmodernism is conflated with modernity is summarized in ‘Posmodernismo y neoliberalismo, ¿filialidad o parasitación?’ (Henríquez 1995)
as frames of reference for individuals. Subjects, in turn, are forced to seek other ways to organize their lives. Therefore, individuals must be “flexible and adaptable, constantly ready and willing to change tactics at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret and to pursue opportunities according to their current availability.” (Bauman 2007:4)

Giddens observes how social action (individual actor-ness or agency) takes place within societal totality (the structure, which includes culture), and concludes that the idea of a deterministic ‘dualism’ of structure vis-à-vis agency is unacceptable; instead he stresses a dual structuration: a ‘duality’ through which human action is performed within the context of pre-existing social structures, which at the same time are the outcome of those very human actions. In other words, social structure is both the medium and the outcome of social action (Giddens 1984). And yet, in late-modernity the self is engaged in a peculiar striving for granting agency.

Using the allegory of the grieving period one experiences after the loss of a beloved one, Giddens focuses on the survivor’s experience of ‘reclaiming him/herself’ and facing the task of establishing a new sense of self and a new sense of identity. He realizes that when threatened by abandonment, identity folds back into earlier experiences looking for some other images and roots to attain independence and being able to live alone. By doing so, the subject recovers the concrete being of a “structuring structure”, or agency, constituted by the potency of subject-object relations (see Hazelrigg 1989:269, also Giddens 1979:41-2,55,91). Giddens wonders if these experiences are actually expressing the social landscape of modernity.
Where Weber identified *Anxiety* as the vacuum of his time, Giddens found *Mourning* in his own. Where the former inferred a call for *devoting duties*, the latter inferred a call for *devotion to the self’s identity*. The former requires compliance with well-defined sources of meaning prescribing duties; the latter sets subjects in a proactive search-mode, launching them into a variety of possible sources out of which self-identity can be sketched. The above helps to interpret current processes of ‘active reception’ and consumption of global media products, such as the three films analyzed in this work.

Giddens suggests that the prevalent feeling individuals experience in the anodyne life of late modernity is a nuanced form of anxiety\(^{20}\) which is ‘mourning’. Often this feeling emerges in disrupting circumstances, or at the threat of them, mobilizing individuals to engage in the search for ‘new senses of identity’ by means of processes that involve active intervention and transformation, especially in intimate relationships. Thus, the pursuance of self-identity forms a *trajectory*\(^{21}\) across the different institutional settings the individual lives, holding at every moment the question ‘how shall I live?’ which “has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat –and many other things– as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity.” (Giddens 1991a:14) Therefore, the contemporary social project is totally identified with the individual’s project for constructing the ‘autonomous self’ and ‘identity’, what Giddens calls “the identity searching plan”.

\(^{20}\) According to Giddens, ontological security and existential anxiety are intimately linked with the sociological reflexivity of late modernity (1991:35-69)

\(^{21}\) Giddens (1991:70-108) explores the awareness of the body, the being, and the others, and maps what he calls “the trajectory of the self”.
Weber’s fundamental intuitions to find out the *spirit* of a particular social form by identifying the *calling* beneath the experienced *vacuum* of a certain age—as late modernity—may implicitly be found in Giddens’ work. Put in Weberian language, the ‘*devoting call*’ in our global media context is to engage in the identity searching plan as a response to the vacuum left by a threatened identity. Such a plan is performed throughout the whole process of consuming, negotiating, and transforming the various media products. Contemporary sociology of religion has suggested that most individuals construct their own belief systems out of a repertoire of symbols offered within the context of religious affiliation but also by many other sources such as media. The ‘*active reception*’ of convergent media nurtures our social interactions within which we establish both our senses and trajectories of identity.

One of the most cited works by scholars of the intersected area of media and religion studies has been *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, published in 1991. Certainly the relationship between media and religion is not at the core of Giddens’ work, not even is it explicitly addressed. However, what makes him one of the most recurrent theorists in this field is, on the one hand, the depiction of the self as a seeker for identity and agency in the midst of late modernity, and on the other hand, his view on religion as a cultural category placed at the heart of the formation of cultural identities. Robert White (2004:197) points out that sociologists like Giddens observed “the continued relevance of religion in cultural development as a

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22 Some sociological explanation encompasses the impact of globalization implying higher levels of education, incomes and leisure to explore other lifestyles, more mobility and broader access to pluralist images through media (White 2004:339-40)
sign of the incapacity of modernization as theory and as practice, with its emphasis on functionalist automatic responses, to provide a moral foundation for society.” Furthermore, his contribution has allowed linkages between media and the active performances of belief systems in the formation of cultures.

8.2.3. Summary and critical reading

What bolsters the self envisioned by Giddens is the prospect of being relieved from the mourning stage in which the individual apparently has fallen at the end of modernity, and the recovery of security, formerly bestowed by modern institutions. The subject, thus depicted, becomes a compulsive searcher for a lost identity and a stable reality, and privileges religious belief systems as promising wells to quench such a quest.

From a different perspective, Lacan also foretold that religion would be the only surviving institution that would be able, ultimately, to offer security to the human being in a disordered world, which is why it would ultimately triumph (Lacan, 2006:91). Nevertheless, what my study has found is that the subject, rather than being engaged in a compulsive and anxious search, in fact navigates pleasantly among different choices, environments, propositions that offer different solutions for tackling the haunting of the (Lacanian) real. In other words: it is not clear that contemporary subjects are dramatically concerned with solving “what it is not working” (the real); they rather seem to be at ease at the multiplicity of symbolic constellations they can resort to whenever the haunt of the real becomes too distressing.
Somehow, Giddens’ subject is depicted as someone forced to embrace strategies for gaining autonomy and identity, to such an extent that this constitutes its very social project. As he puts it: “What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity –and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behavior.” (Giddens 1991a:70) Nevertheless, the so-called Chicago School of symbolic interaction, the theory of social construction of reality by Berger and Luckmann, as well as Gidden’s thought on structuration, have been questioned and considered problematic –particularly by postmodern sociologists and socio-psychoanalysts, who see them as overestimating the importance of meaning. The three streams of thought tend to portray both social actors and social processes as excessively rationalistic, and consciously reflective; thus disregarding human actions that are non-reflective, automatic, and unconcerned with symbolic significance. (Adler 1980:50)

The belief system one can derive from Giddens’ framework coincides with Berger’s in the sense that both imply the articulation of a set of accepted propositions. For Giddens such a collection is dynamically involved in the identity searching plan of the self. Although institutions attempt to organize and administrate the system of beliefs, and individuals –since birth– are inscribed into a specific one, it is the individuals who eventually take on the responsibility of acquiring, selectively, the elements that better fit their trajectory, making it operable to alleviate the grief of their lost identity.
Both Berger’s and Giddens’ theoretical frameworks can be considered embedded within the constructivist tradition, and consequently are related with the assumption of an order that is *totalized* by a constructive consciousness\(^{23}\). Therefore, the implicit notion of a Belief System –either if it is a complex to which individuals are adhered through institutional *inscriptions* (Berger), or if it is a customized outcome of the individuals’ *acquisitions* of offered systems in the cultural milieu (Giddens)– supposes the following three main features: 1) a belief system is something primordially “out there”, an *exosystem* (Bronfenbrenner 1979:237) to which the individual inscribes to or appropriates through selective acquisitions; 2) it is structuring insofar as it grants a totalizing order to perceive the world; and 3) it is teleologically ‘operative’ because its aim is to allow individuals to manipulate their reality according to ultimate ends. Within this frame, a Belief System may briefly be defined as the dynamic set of collections of accepted propositions, organized in a structuring system, which is involved in the meaning-making processes individuals use as a platform to ‘operate’ their daily reality. Such a system comes across discursively in statements bonded to explicit social practices in which individuals participate.

I adhere myself, partially, to the above definition, which I think underlies the literature of a long list of sociologists of religion, such as Robert Wuthnow (1992; 1998), Robert Bellah (1985), Wade Clark Roof (1999), Jesús Martín-Barbero (1997), Stewart Hoover (2001), just to mention some of the most prominent scholars whose empirical studies on religion and media have influenced the field in recent times. Nonetheless, we

\(^{23}\) The *totalized* order is simultaneously a *totalizing* order of further experiences and constructions; an idea explored by early structuralism and cultural studies by De Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Barthes and Hall.
should be aware that such assumption carries the risk of overemphasizing the operative edges of the phenomenon: on the one hand, it *naturalizes* the bond between ‘beliefs and practices’, inducing a focus on their coherency and, thus, privileging the pragmatic side of the phenomenon (what people do). As a result, it tends to underscore the institution and its role as gatekeeper of the discrepancies between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. On the other hand, it is prone to overlook the basic condition for any *belief*, which is precisely the mere act of *believing*. Often, belief systems are regarded as constellations of propositions (ideas) to which individuals adhere or reject. For example, Snow and Machalek (1982) explain the reduction of cognitive dissonance appealing to existing counteracting beliefs within a structured belief system, overlooking that there might also be underlying levels not primarily ruled by the symbolic-order, but governed by alternative pre-symbolic drives.

8.3. Overview of the Belief System in Post-structural frames

In 1916, Ferdinand de Saussure seeded in his *Cours de linguistique générale* a statement that eventually surpassed the restricted field of linguistics: “language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system” (quoted in Coward & Ellis 1977:13). Saussure’s notion of a preexistent *langue* (system) to any *parole* (individual speech) is a way to assert that there is a structure creating both signifiers and signifieds, and that the subject is somehow *subjected* by those structures, replicating them, and acting as their agent. Claude Lévi-Strauss extended this notion to the realm of culture and stressed that
The subject is constructed by transforming and structuring myths: “Myths signify the mind which elaborates them by means of the world of which it is itself a part. Thus simultaneously the myths themselves are generated by the mind that causes them, and through the myths is generated an image of the world that is already inscribed in the architecture of the mind.” (Lévi-Strauss 1964:346)

The dialectic of a totalizing order (myths signifying the mind) that simultaneously is totalized (the mind signifying myths) was taken up by Jacques Lacan, who provided a more complex explanation of this loop by decentering this psychically divided subject in both history and the realm of symbolic interaction with others. The subject, in his view, is entangled within the chain of signifiers that constitute a Symbolic Order. On the one hand, the subject hallucinates an imaginary objectification of other subjects and overall reality (which indeed is but an illusion of totalization); but on the other hand for this ego-founding imaginary operation the subject must also take up its seemingly transcendental (phallic) position with a historically specific community of language, which in turn constructs—or totalizes—the subject. In so doing, the subject enters the realm of what both Lévi-Strauss and Lacan theorized as the Symbolic Order.

The Symbolic Order is a realm where conscious subjectivity is accompanied and, indeed, haunted by the unconscious realm. In the Lacanian topography of the self, the unconscious realm speaks (if unconsciously) through the speaking subject that interacts within the Symbolic Order. In other words, despite that to the (phallic) subject it seems that he is the one who constitutes, totalizes, or objectifies reality—due to its “foundational fantasy” (Brennan 1993:14); in fact it is the subject himself who is constituted in rites of
hallucination by which a specular image is substituted for what is real. Later in history, as I explain further, this subject becomes attracted to “spells” of esoteric release of what was disavowed and repressed, but never entirely extinguished.

The Lacanian understanding of the Symbolic Order has important implications in the understanding of Belief Systems. These are to be conceived not only as systems of rational, conscious language, stated in the form of beliefs and practices (*orthodoxia* and *orthopraxis*). While being a language, a belief system is at the same time loaded with something that surpasses language, this is: residual unconscious material that, although intangible, shapes, foreshadows, and drives both beliefs and practices. I already discussed in Part One how for both Freud and Lacan unconscious material, though intangible and by definition pre-symbolic, does not remain entirely un-communicated. At both levels of subjectivity (the individual and collective levels of the self), surpassing experiences – transcendent and pre-symbolic – eventually are expelled out in fictional ensembles such as dreams, narratives, myths, of what Avery Gordon depicts as “cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric traces of power’s presence” (Gordon 1997:25). As I explained earlier in Part Two when discussing Manuel Castells’ theory of the Network Society, these fictional ensembles eventually enter the flow of the social conversation under the form of media references, such as the three films we are discussing in this work. In this sense, pop culture conveys always the potentiality for channeling the return of the repressed.

Very often these (media) cultural imaginings are erratically treated as if they were mere narratives or flows of a causal driven *diegesis*, overlooking that they are at the time
exceeded densities more related to “spells” than to narratives or discourses. A ‘spell’ follows not the motion of a chain of causalities that characterizes a narration, but rather rehearses the motionless mesmerism left by the blast of condensed contents. Further on, I elaborate more detailedly on the implications and importance that this nuance has for the understanding of beliefs and the act of believing.

8.3.1. The Dis/place of Believing (Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari)

The idea of a subject that is at the same time ‘subjecting’ and ‘subjected by’, implicitly supposes the existence of a ‘gathering construct’ which by definition is a centered/centralizing structure. Early structuralism places this construct in communication systems (language) and social structuralism visualizes it in broader socio-cultural systems. The different schools of psychoanalysis conceive it as a constituent dynamism of the psychic system. In all three, the notion of a ruling meaning-making structure is assumed.

The structural paradigm appears to be verifiable and operating at every single level of individual and social life. Steven Seidman imagines this paradigm as a universal law anchored at the infrastructure of all individual and social operations. In his view, what is implied while arguing that beneath the apparent randomness of social life are universal structures that create order and social coherence, is that “The real organizing force of the social world are these structural codes, not the individual.” (Seidman 2004:164). Such an assertion seems to be ‘visibly evident’ while considering belief
systems. Certainly the visible angle of the phenomenon of beliefs shows fixed structures aimed at providing meaning, which in part is due to the fact that visibility is one of the sumptuousnesses of power. Indeed, focusing on vision and structures of visibility is saliently important to historicize the dominance of vision in terms of the rise of modern western forms of social domination. What are visible are structures and institutions aimed to naturalize and administrate the Truth. Structures exercise their power by imposing forms through means of misrecognitions and ‘fixation of meanings’. The strategy of such imposition and legitimacy was denounced in the Derridian notion of logocentrism, which “lies in its quest for an authoritative language that can reveal truth, moral rightness, and beauty” (Seidman, 2004:168). Derrida’s theory is, according to Kenneth Allan (2006:324), particularly relevant for texts that make a claim to authority, such as religious or political ones.

Jacques Derrida put forward that the role of a center always is power, more specifically the power of organizing and limiting the play of the structure. In his thought, the ‘structurality of the structure’ consists in “giving it a center or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin.” (Derrida 1966:406) This notion is linked to the operations of differance, as I explain below, which Derrida repeatedly connected to the work of ‘writing’. Derrida regards ‘writing’ as the ritual structuring of haunted boundaries between things –including the things of the self– and their “other.” If transposed to the realm of beliefs, Derrida’s ‘writing’ makes the former a more dynamic notion: beliefs, or better said believing(s), are ‘structuring’ social practices effecting and affecting belief and a certain kind of de-centered subjectivity.
The assumption of a center, whose density is such that the rest of things gravitate around it, is so rooted in the architecture of our minds that makes us take for granted a metaphysical structure of the world. The mere idea of an empty center is unthinkable, *horror vacui!* There is always some presence proposed to fill it: Eidos, Arché, Telos, Energeia, Ousia, Alétheia, Theos. This is true for both traditional organized religions and all new forms of spirituality, such as Pop-Esotericism, that put forward alternative substituting centers. Sometimes centers are *re-placed* by new constructed Beings, and some other times it is precisely the very center (the shrine of the Being) the one that is deconstructively *Dis-placed*. Derrida sees in these re-placements and dis-placements the history of metaphysics, which, “like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix [...] is the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word.” (Derrida 1966:406)

The anti-metaphysical standpoint, which conceives the center as nothing but the desire for a center, makes Derrida understand beliefs as, ultimately, systems of truth. Nevertheless, Derrida does not advocate for reversing the multi-vocative, ambiguity, and conflict nature of signs by proposing an alternative system of truth, nor he is interested in denying the desire of truth. In his three major works (*Of Grammatology*, 1967; *Writing and Difference*, 1966; and *Positions*, 1972) Derrida explicitly opposed to projects aimed to uncover an order of truth. Seidman underscores that Derrida assumed, with all

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24 Julia Kristeva (1982) explores the idea of an empty center and theorizes it as a sacred space in her work of psychoanalytic (negative) theology *The Powers of Horror.*

25 Derrida observes a paradoxical trait in any structure because its center is within the structure and at the same time outside of it, which constitutes a ‘coherence in contradiction,’ and “coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire” (Derrida 1966:406)
consequences, the unstable, multivocal, and changing meaning of signs. The aim of deconstruction “is less to oppose the hierarchy or reverse its values than to weaken its force and contribute to its displacement or marginalization.” (Seidman 2004:168)

I mentioned previously that beliefs share the characteristic visibility of structures. Interestingly, such visibility loses clarity when instead of looking at the phenomenon of beliefs we start considering the phenomena of believing as such. As any episteme, beliefs are ideas displayed in robust edifices founded in the paradigm of science and western philosophy bestowing senses of stability and fixity (Derrida 1966:405). Believing(s), on the contrary, are surrendered acts of cognition imbibed in languages, yes, but not in fixed structures but rather in fragile and errant flows.

New spiritualities, such as Pop-Esotericism, show traits of organic fluidity. Both initiated and uninitiated in Pop-Esotericism explore cognitive possibilities by means of twisting myths, thereby merging elements from different sources and experimenting provisional memberships. They are submitted not to pre-fixed epistemic structures, but rather to their very own cognitive explorations and acquisitions. One can infer from what was exposed in Part Two, a twofold state in pop-esoteric consumption:

A first state manifests a structure that is so blurry and diffuse that seems to be confused with the very person of the pop-esoteric consumer. Believers perform a bodily extension of themselves as an extended corporality exploring and colonizing alien territories of imagery. It is the body in mode of expansion, fluidity, and non-hierarchy. This stage approaches to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari depicted as the main dynamic in their work: a notion of non-human centered “machinic assemblages” of
reality that opposes the notion of a structure. They call it the stage of plateau, a “multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems” (Deleuze 1987:666). In a stage of plateau the believer eludes the imperative of a subjugating Center and Absolute, even if that Center is his own ‘I’. Deleuze and Guattari resorted to a botanical image to explain what they understood by state of plateau. That image is of a ‘rhizome’, the horizontal stem of a plant characterized by sending out roots and shoots from its many interconnected nodes, forming unpredictable organic complexes. A rhizome conjugates different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. It is irreducible neither to the One nor the multiple, “It is composed not by units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) [...W]hen a multiplicity of this kind changes dimensions, it necessarily changes in nature as well, undergoes a metamorphosis. (Deleuze 1987:665)

At the same time, pop-esoteric consumption manifests a second state in which believers constitute themselves as their own center and priority. I advanced this feature when, using psychoanalytic explanations, I discussed the narcissistic edge of Pop-Esotericism. A post-structural perspective, though, deepens the discussion significantly. Teresa Brennan underscores the priority of the subject in Derrida’s thought, for whom the subject is the very source of meaning, “the origin of both meaning and meaningful signification” (Brennan 1993:16). Some verbatims in Part Two showed how pop-esoteric practitioners tend to gravitate around their newly constructed cores of meaning. In this self-gravitational stage, the subject assumes a retentive mode to hook itself to a center
that would ensure a needed ‘immobility’. Similar to a *mandala*\(^{26}\), the re-placed center bestows the basic certitude to deal with ‘anxiety’. Notice, by the way, how terms such as *immobility* (which I previously associated to the mesmerizing effect of ‘spells’), or *anxiety* (a common concern of Weber, Berger, and Giddens) are also present in the post-structuralist thought when theorizing on the nature of beliefs.

Moreover, the concept of a centered structure for Derrida is in fact “a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game.” (Derrida 1966:406)

The ambiguity of these simultaneous and seemingly contradictory states (the a-centered *plateau* and the centered *self*) is related to the ambiguity and simultaneity of Derrida’s neologism «differance». Derrida builds this notion by conciliating the time factor involved in postponed –deferred– matters (*le différe*), with the alterity that is present in any difference (*le différente*). Structuralists stressed that ‘difference’ was at the very basis of language, but Derrida discovered that the meaning was not totally explained by the relationship among signifiers and signifieds (the ‘written’ structure), but rather that its residuals were actually covered at the unpredictable and deferred moment of ‘reading’ (Derrida 1982:5-17).

\(^{26}\) *A Mandala* is a concentric diagram used to induct spiritual “trance” in both Buddhist and Hindu traditions. All the drawings in a Mandala image point at its center, wherein some see a representation of the deepest level of the Self.
The dynamic of the play of «differ-ance» (difference/deferral) enables pop-esoteric believers to perform the deconstructive cognition of the abovementioned twofold state. In other words, believing is less a matter of being inscribed into a certain belief system, or being culturally ascribed to one, or having acquired an already ‘written’ belief system, than the ‘reading’ exercise of one’s subjectivity that is alternatively retentive and expanding, centered and a-centered, arborescent and rhizomatic, constructive and deconstructive. Pop-Esotericism celebrates and practices different individual and social cognitions; at some point it seems be sharing the deconstructive subversion of signifying hierarchical oppositions. Among other belief systems emerged in postmodern times, Pop-Esotericism should also be seen as part of a broader social strategy, where marginal and excluded differences gain voice and visibility.

8.3.2. On Apophatic edges

I have advocated in the past few pages for making the distinction between the phenomena of believing and the phenomenon of beliefs, and to privilege the former over the latter. Beliefs are ideas presented as permanent, enduring, and immovable, whereas Believing(s) are continuous outpouring of surrendered cognitions. Still, the phenomena of believing can easily tease us with its evanescent nature. On the one hand, there is the experience of the believer for whom believing is something else than a simple act of ‘accepting propositions’; on the other hand, there is the fact that as soon as we categorize any

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27 Arborescence is another botanical term used by Deleuze and Guattari to contrast with the already explained Rhizoma. An arborescent structure supposes ramifications from a well defined center or ‘trunk’, like in progressive, one-directional genealogy trees.
experience we irremissibly enter it into the symbolic order. The outcome is that even if we privilege—as a unit of observation—the ‘experience of believing’ as such, what we get when we take it to the level of analysis is, again, a more or less fixed category.

We have seen how the symbolic order functions with a centripetal force, pulling down all contents of experience into a single hermeneutic core where the sense of nature is made and reinforced. Social cognition scholars recognize this construction as the source of any further meaning makings and decision processes. Pulling down the experience of what is happening and expelling out the basic grammar to encode the surrounding reality, gives a sense of total control over the circumstantial. The social repercussion of this surpasses the realm of beliefs and involves political edges. Randall Collins reflected on the mechanisms implicated in achieving cognitive control over reality. He points out that in the various struggles for achieving control it is precisely beliefs which protrude as the most efficient mechanisms of what he terms ‘means of emotional production’, these are forms of social interaction, namely rituals, designed to arouse emotions, thus creating “strongly held beliefs and a sense of solidarity within the community constituted by participation in these rituals.” (Collins 1975:58)

Certainly, beliefs are cognitive constructs conveying emotional valences. They also are lived, as Collins suggests, as “personal ideologies, furthering their dominance of serving for their psychological protection” (Collins 1975:61), and in this sense they

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29 Collins finds communalities in this matter among Durkheim, Weber, Nietzsche and Freud. He recalls that “Weber’s theory of religion incorporates all of these aspects of domination through the manipulation of emotional solidarity” (Collins 1975:58-9)
naturally become part of the symbolic order. But this explanation leaves untouched the inherent ambiguity of \textit{believing} which is experienced by believers as evocations (and invocations) of surpassing or exceeding realities hardly able to be locked in the logics of control.

It is true that the symbolic order has total control over experience because it exercises upon it the totalizing power of language. However, the symbolic order controls nothing more -but nothing less- than \textit{totality}, i.e.: what the self “makes indication to himself of things in his surroundings and thus to guide his actions by what he notes” (Blumer 1962:146, commenting on Mead). In other words: totality is not absolute but relative to awareness; one may say that it is a \textit{partial totality} which is \textit{totally partial}. Absolute wholeness would surpass totality by embracing all of what is experienced as happening (the accounted) plus all other possibilities (the unaccounted), such as what is happening but not noticed and indicated by the self.

The unaccounted, the un-codified, and non-totalized remains of reality have been eventually a concern in western thought. It was Nicolas de Cusa (1401-1464 a.D.) who in \textit{De Docta Ignorantia} stated that Reality, ultimate reality above all, is ‘apophatic’\textsuperscript{30} because it cannot be named nor circumscribed in stable and defined narratives. His notion of infinite reality exceeding finite linguistic confinement provoked important esoteric theorists of “natural magic” such as Giordano Bruno in the sixteenth century (considered the precursor of free thought in Renaissance philosophy, and burned at the stake by the

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Απόφασις}: ‘negation’ or ‘denial’. Apophatic is a term referred to a style of theology which stressed that God cannot be known in terms of human categories. This theological approach is often associated with the monastic tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Cf. Glossary of Theological Terms, in Theology and Religion Resources: http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/Religion/Glossary.asp
Inquisition for his pantheistic positions), and still resonated in the twentieth century in thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Derrida, Vattimo, among others.

De Cusa’s Negative Theology confronted the speculative method proposed by Thomas Aquinas by stressing that sacred ignorance teaches us that God is ineffable, and that human beings are sensate if what they seek is not to affirm what is divine but rather simply name what it is not. This addresses the evanescent nature of realities which apparently gain ‘explainability’ as they enter into categorical frames, but in fact lose their forcefulness and become fake dummies in rigid theoretical buildings. Totality sacrifices the absolute, but sacrifice does not annihilate reality. On the contrary: what is sacrificed remains beyond the totality -language, symbolic order- and from its invisibility continues happening (haunting) over mundane life. The fate of the repressed and disavowed, as psychoanalysis teaches, is to return.

In more recent times new serious endeavors have been undertaken aimed to not miss what legitimated knowledge has disregarded. Reflexive sociology is an example of this effort oriented to at least acknowledge the presence of other left-aside cognitions. The recovery and acknowledgment of marginal cognitivities is not only a concern reserved to modern or postmodern akademeia, but also is present in practices and new assumptions among ordinary transients of the polis. Margaret Poloma, while reflecting on Alvin W. Gouldner’s work on reflexivity, points out that although Gouldner (1976:245) found in ecology the best example of an emerging alternative worldview, there are other popular social practices in where what she calls “dematerialization of daily life” takes place: “other ideologies, including new religions, quasi-religions, and occultist
movements are also developing, emphasizing the “dematerialization” of daily life.” (Poloma 1979:264)

From a different and perhaps darker standing point, Avery Gordon hits on the apophatic edge of daily life. Her reflections upon the nature of power make her aware of its ambiguity: power can be elusive and invisible, though its effects can be experienced and eventually unleash all its ferocity over us. Names, concepts, categories give us the sense of knowing power, the illusion of safely locking it in particular frames. Nevertheless, its complexity and the complexity of personhood reveal that what is left from those frames is still acting and contributing to the complexity of the phenomenon. What is left remains “haunting”, Gordon states, and “even those who haunt our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted too by things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not” (Gordon 1997:5)

Gordon makes an important distinction –and connection– between the haunt and the ghost. A ghostly haunt notifies that something is missing and that “what appears to be invisible or in the shadows is announcing itself, however symptomatically- [Moreover,] if haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place.” (1997:16-8)

Furthermore, the sometimes naïf positions in many studies about spiritual practices fail in reducing and flattening the phenomenon until its paradoxical nature gets neutralized. Spiritual practices, as other social practices, share the peculiarity of being in the dialectic of what Gordon calls the presence and the absence. The challenge is to
avoid eluding this dialectic and to assume the inherent ‘ghostly’ haunting of reality. There have been attempts in this direction and Gordon records an example from modern history. She cites Walter Benjamin’s notion of ‘profane illumination,’ a theme he firstly introduced in 1929 while considering the cognitive and revolutionary potentialities of Surrealism. According to Benjamin cognitive positions like the ones held by Surrealism are attempts to disorient and estrange through profane illumination already domesticated realities. By loosening the tight bonds of rationality, the subject is able to perceive the naturalized order of the everyday life as uncanny, supernatural, and a-rational.

8.3.3. Summary and critical reading

Belief systems are intrinsically cognitive and as such their haunting ghosts reveal what has been happening, what is currently happening, and what will be happening. The loadings of this surpassing knowledge are ‘exceeded densities’ which rather than being merely narrated in the form of controlled discourses are “spelled” out in registers capable of scratching the thresholds or liminalities of the symbolic order. The ensembles of these excesses have been erratically treated as mere narratives. However, strictly speaking, a narration supposes a cognitive loading that is coherently held within a structured symbolic order, which in turn helps in restricting the boundaries of the meaning. The utterances of the act of believing are not controllably formulated, but expelled out in a more wild fashion. As will be discussed in Chapter 9 these fictive expenditures are closer

to the spells enchanted after/during trance episodes. And yet, spells are strong enough to pervasively haunt and enchant our lives. Apparently they are dissolved when they are partially reduced into controller narratives, what Gordon would call ‘cold knowledge’: “Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (Gordon 1997:8)

The study of beliefs within the modern paradigm tends to overlook the existence of left-aside realities of social life. If eventually those realities come across, modern sociology has an assortment of means to make them fit in pre-conceptualized frames. A change of paradigm –such as postmodernism– opens a chance; however, as Gordon acknowledges, it does not automatically warrant the transformative recognition of haunting realities, because “when postmodernism means that everything is on view, that everything can be described, […] it displays an antighost side that resembles modernity’s positivities more than it concedes” (1997:13).

The issue, thus, is not whether apophatic realities underlying beliefs are acknowledged, but rather if there is a way to handle those haunting ghosts – methodologically, politically and spiritually speaking– without annihilating them or transforming them into tamed realities, cast in the deceptive form of captivating but illusory hyper-visible simulacra.32 Before the lack of adequate methods, the core question

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32 Gordon addresses, not too far from Baudrillard’s notion of simulacrum, the deceiving nature of current technological irrationality with its sense of hyper-visibility, where it seems to be no secrets, gaps or errant trajectories: “hypervisibility is a kind of obscenity of accuracy that abolishes the distinctions between permission and prohibition, presence and absence. No shadows, no ghosts. In a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of
in the study of beliefs is a meta-theoretical one that still remains unanswered. In the meanwhile, perhaps the better way to deal with it is to keep on exploring, experimenting, modeling, in sum: playing around those heuristic methods –no matter how obscure they appear– that promise to be more receptive to what is “elusive, fantastic, contingent, and often barely there” (Gordon 1997:26). The following chapter, the last one in the body of this study before conclusions, will take on precisely the task of modeling a grounded explanation on the structure and dynamics of believing that can be inferred from the narrative elaboration of beliefs rehearsed in social conversations.

hypervisibility, we are led to believe not only that everything can be seen, but also that everything is available and accessible for our consumption” (Gordon 1997:16)
Chapter 9

Beliefs and Believing(s), a proposal for a theory

The leading question of the previous chapter was to discern if current theories of belief systems entirely grasp the subjectivity construction individuals perform in our contemporary media culture. The chapter temporarily bracketed the empirical grounds of my research to give forth a more conceptual discussion based on relevant theoretical background on belief systems produced by two major traditions: the Weberian stream of thought applied to modern and late-modern settings and the contributions made by the poststructuralist turn.

I have argued that while theories derived from what I termed the Weberian matrix focus more on the rationality beneath the structural constitution and dynamics set off by beliefs, poststructural approaches tend to accentuate the cognitive dynamism involved in the very act of believing. I also implied that if one is to examine the structure of believing that can be inferred from the narrative elaboration of beliefs exerted in social conversations, like those held by film audiences, a traditional approach to belief systems may result insufficient. More conducive is to model a framework that, on the one hand, would reckon the non-conscious and non-reflective side of the phenomenon (i.e. the underlying levels of alternative pre-symbolic drives) and, on the other hand, that would make sense of the basic distinction between the belief and the believing, the operative and the operational.
9.1. The Operative and The Operational, my disambiguation

If we were to infer a common definition of a Belief System from a traditional scope, that could be uttered as a set of collections of accepted propositions which comes across discursively in statements and in explicit social practices in which individuals participate. Such definition (prioritizing the notion of beliefs as being essentially a constellation of ‘ideas’) suits well if the interest is to understand how beliefs operate in reality through social interactions. It becomes problematic, though, when the research interest moves from “how beliefs operate” to “why, in the first place, a belief can ‘operate’ at all, and what makes it operable”.

A more comprehensive definition of what might be called The Operational Belief System can be phrased as the set of performances organized in systems that individuals use as a platform to “operate” transcendently their reality. Whereas a plain Belief System refers to beliefs, which are relatively easy to describe, the Operational Belief System refers to the act of believing as such, which is beyond the acceptance of a proposition and involves performances, attitudes, actions, positions, dispositions, and disposessions that most commonly come across unawarely even for the performer.

Let us put the terms ‘operative’ and ‘operational’ aside for a moment, and focus on the more concrete distinction I make between belief and believing(s). It was Pierre Bourdieu who empirically discovered, while inquiring into cultural consumption, that what factorizes a practice is not its ‘operation’ per se, but the generative ‘disposition’ of the ‘operator’. What is ‘operative’ in a factor, explains Bourdieu, “depends on the system it is placed in and the conditions it ‘operates’ in” (1984:113). More simply, the acts we
perform, rationalize, and link to other rationalizations and practices, are shaped by dispositions that make those acts functional in specific ways. Take for example someone’s education: what has been learnt conforms a cluster of interrelated theoretical contents and practical knowledge upon which the individual ponders and attaches hierarchical values. This endows the learner with attitudinal positions at the moment of deciding and maneuvering on the concrete circumstances of his reality. Notice that when focusing on the side of what a person has ‘learnt’ automatically leads us to join knowledge with practice. This is because there is indeed something in what has been learnt that makes it ‘practicable’. Now, is this ‘practicability’ of the learnt knowledge intrinsically vested on the knowledge in itself so that learning could be seen as a process of acquiring contents already embedded with practicability?\(^{33}\) or rather, is there something else the learner is doing while learning that generates such a practicability? This is a simple way to pose Bourdieu’s question.

When focusing on what someone does while learning we notice two things: firstly, that the edge of practicality of the contents seems to be somehow shadowed or not so evident\(^ {34}\). Secondly, that what becomes tangible is a variety of performances and interactions not directly related to the concrete matter the subject is learning; however, these performances grant the individual the craft of creating practicality for the matter. Moreover, the set of performances produces in the learner particular perceptions and classifying strategies for dealing with further matters to be learnt. Hence, the act of

\(^{33}\) An affirmative answer to this question would imply the banking education denounced by P. Freire, 1970.

\(^{34}\) Commonsense tells us that contents, although oriented towards reality, by essence are ideas not necessarily correspondent to reality, they are ‘theory’.
learning—as a continuous tense of performative interactions—creates the environment from which practicability is bestowed. Bourdieu calls this environment the habitus. Replace the words ‘knowledge’, ‘content’ and ‘the learnt’ with the term ‘belief’, and replace the word ‘learning’ with the term ‘believing’ in the above example. Again, beliefs demand correlative practices (orthodoxy compels orthopraxis), so if someone embraces the belief of a God who becomes human, dies and rises, it is expected that the subject will also embrace the belief of eternal life for his own, behaving consequently now and at the hour of death. Notice how once a belief is ‘set in operation’—once it is said “this is my belief”—a chain of ‘operative’ effects is unleashed. Here the term ‘Operative’ is used in its most commonsensical meaning of “in practice”, “in operation at the moment”. But, so far, the example is inexact because to make the belief (idea) of ‘resurrection’ so effective to actually effect on the believer’s life, it had to be loaded with certain weigh endowed by the believer himself. This is: the believer had to do something else than simply accepting the belief, he had to appropriate it and “fit” it to make it ready for use, making it operational, in his own life. ‘Operational’ here is understood as it is in the common language: “to be ready for use”, “fit to operate". The object in question may not be in operation (operative) at the moment, but it has practicability (operability).

A more mundane example might help to make the point clearer: one can fully accept—rationally—whatever evidences are proving how hazardous it is to smoke, but accepting these evidences is not enough to put in practice the quitting and staying quit. It

35 “the habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions; it is a general, transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application—beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt—of the necessity inherent in the learning conditions.” (Bourdieu 1984:170)
is until the smoker does “something else” to appropriate them that they can have a chance to operate on him. Appropriation, thus, is a condition for any belief to operate; better said: through appropriation a belief is conditioned to operate. That “something else” one does to make a belief appropriable and operational is the enactment of inner dispositions and willful performances, through which believers constitute the ‘generative schemes’ of their own the act of believing.

9.2. Proposal for a Theory of the Operational Belief System

I claim that a belief system is a complex phenomenon comprised of two dynamics: the operative and the operational. A methodological implication of this distinction is that focusing on the former enhances the pragmatic edge of linked actions (“my belief is this, therefore I do that”), posing questions such as ‘what do people do with their beliefs?’ whereas the latter attends to the basic condition of any operation, which takes place at the level of previous dispositions (Bourdieu 1984:68-9) and mechanisms that make possible such linkage of actions. The question, then, is not posed in terms of ‘what are people’s beliefs’, but of ‘how people inhabit their beliefs?’

Asserting the Operational (the “how” of the phenomenon) does not discard the existence of the Operative (the “what”), but it allows us to focus on the mere ‘act of believing’, which goes beyond accepting propositions and rather involves performances, inner postures, gestures, and biographic positions, not always fully conscious to the performer. In sum: it places us at the very moment and space where the applicability of
schemes is produced. As Bourdieu (1984:170) explains: “Different conditions of existence produce different habitus –systems of generative schemes applicable, by simple transfer, to the most varied areas of practice”.

Moreover, those who had explicitly inquired into the side of the operational have discovered different things than those found on the operative side. For example, Marcel Mauss (1981), while inquiring on sacrificial rites, concludes that religion is not primarily about ideas of the transcendent (the ‘operative’ beliefs) but about the enactment of performances (the ‘operational’ believing) aimed to produce sacredness:

“It is not the idea of god, the idea of a sacred person, that one finds over again in any religion, it is the idea of the sacred in general.” (Mauss quoted and commented in Ferrarotti 1979)

Just as beliefs pervade and operate on the totality of social life, social production of sacredness is an unceasing practice. It is so because, as already explained, the condition for a Belief to keep being operative within a system is precisely to keep accurate its operability. Indeed, there are identifiable formal moments in which groups gather explicitly to perform social expenditures36 of this kind –rites, rituals, ceremonies, and so on and so forth, but those purposeful moments do not exhaust the necessarily ongoing construction of the sacred. As I further demonstrate, the social production of sacredness takes place inadvertently, more often than not, in our everyday social interactions.

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36 I refer the reader to the process of sacralization and reenchantment explained in Chapter 6, when discussing what George Bataille (1985) called la notion de dépense (the notion of expenditure).
9.2.1. Flickering positioning of Belief Systems

Are the Operative and the Operational properly “levels”, one being higher than the other? Are they separate, yet interdependent, “systems”? Based on the reviewed literature and on the empirical evidence and analysis of my work, I stress that certainly these two terms follow opposite dynamics and logics, and yet they sustain a dialectical interdependence one with each other. Nevertheless, this shouldn’t rush us to deduce that we are in front of a twofold belief system, one comprised of thoughts (beliefs) and the other one of actions (believings). Catherine Bell (1992:19-5) emphatically warns us on this tempting dichotomy. She criticizes the taken for granted distinction between thought and action that is at the bottom of and pervades structuralist approaches (starting with Ferdinand Saussure’s system of linguistics which separates synchrony from diachrony, langue from parole, etc.) In her study on ritual practices, Bell (1992:28) underscores that ritual, above all, is meaningful for the ritual actor, and therefore it is intrinsically a fusion of thought and action.

Rather than deeming the Operative and the Operational as two separate levels or (sub)systems that once aggregated compose the belief system, it is more accurate to visualize the belief system as a one-piece palimpsest comprised of twofold layers (the Operative and the Operational), none of them having preeminence over the other, but mutually needed for constituting the system. A more tangible analogy would be those widely popular Chinese 2D postcards –technically known as Stereoscopic Lenticular Printings– that display people winking, or landscapes changing, or a character dressed and then naked. These auto-stereograms form two distinct images, each viewed by
twisting or flicking the postcard to one side or the other. The laminar support (a plastic screen upon the two images) and the angle of observation present the amusing effect. Similarly it is the carrier of the belief system and its flickering Operative/Operational positionality who gives concretion to the belief system. There is no binarism in a belief system; however a heuristic distinction between both the Operative and the Operational side clears the way for a better understanding of the system.

9.3. Operative side (Ex-Pression)

Exposure to and social circulation of belief texts, whether being themselves pop-esoteric or mainstream religious ones, resonate in the subject’s belief system at both the operative and the operational sides of it. This is revealed during the narrative elaboration film audiences collectively perform. Throughout sessions of the applied methods my informants performed a conversational dynamic wherein films were recreated and re-read (re-written), outfitting them to be taken as quasi-religious texts (what David Tracy calls a ‘classic text’, or ‘classicalization’, a notion I discuss later). Once established as such, what firstly becomes evident is its use as a basis for discussing and making sense of the involved beliefs (the operative side of the belief system), either those proposed in the text (the films *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*?, *The Da Vinci Code*, and *The Passion of the Christ*) or/and their own personal beliefs.

The content of these discussions includes ideas, beliefs, values, attitudes, practices, and consequential behaviors. In this sense, the Operative Side is fundamentally
correlative to the traditional understanding of a belief system, as defined earlier. I have previously underscored that such understanding in a strict sense implies an *exosystem*, insofar as their elements are somehow “out there”. They are indeed ‘so out’ of the subjects that these can take enough distance to identify, objectify, analyze, and communicate them rationally as something external to themselves. This externality of the operative side of belief systems is what enables it to be essentially expressive. The following subsection explores how film audiences resonated *expressively* with the three films of my study.

*Resonances in the Operative Side*

The *initiated* tend to build up their arguments by means of a synthesis of rationality (expressed in logical syllogisms) and affectivity (expressed through personal-testimonies). ALICIA told an anecdote about what occurred to her when she was a child and attended catechism class at her Catholic parish school. When she was told that God created everything but that the Devil was not a creature of God, she figured out what seemed to her a fallacy or an inconsistency:

ALICIA: And I was puzzled, and I was just a little girl: “How come the Serpent and Satan are not God?! If he created everything, he should also create that! am I wrong?” and, ugh, they were like: “Blasphemy! Blasphemy! [mimicking]”, and I was just/and they: “Blasphemy! You sinner! How you dare to question, if the Devil is the Devil, period!” and I: “Then don’t you ever tell me again that God created everything.” I mean, of course they couldn’t answer that, of course they couldn’t.
The *initiated* in Pop-Esotericism often employ the syllogistic-testimonial exertion to show plausibility and to prove to others that they have already ‘impressed’ the ‘Text’ in question in their own bodies by means of previous initiation practices (Bell 1992). NIDIA, an *initiated* pop-esotericist and a Zen practitioner exemplifies the above. Notice how she insists in making clear that she “knows”, and how she resorts to rhetorical listings to create a prayer-like, almost mesmerizing moment out of her statement:

NIDIA: I know something happens when you pray. I know something happens when you practice meditation. When the intention is positive, something is transformed. I know something happens with negative intentions, I know what happens with negative words. *[pauses and lowers her voice] That is the power of the word, that is the power of intentions, the power of prayer, the power of meditation. I believe in all that. Absolutely.*

The *uninitiated* make their argumentations also backing up in rationalizing discourses, but instead of bringing up spiritual language or referring to their own personal testimonies they tend to make more intertextual connections across scattered pop-scientific information. The following is an excerpt of a conversation among *uninitiated*:

ALMA: It wasn’t totally new for me. I already knew that Mercury affects the plumb contained in the water when it aligns with the moon forming like a triangle.

FRANCISCO: The tides thing?

ALMA: And then if you drink water it affects you because the plumb absorbs part of your energy, and you get a down.

Both cases, NIDIA’s and the last one, were taken from different discussion groups. At this point of their sessions they were advocating for the theory of ‘Water Crystals’ proposed
on the film *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?* These examples show how conversations about pop-esoteric texts involve in a high degree the articulation of rationalizing discourses. Such rationalizations are comprised of chains of syllogisms, intertextual linkages, and the use of rhetoric figures of language –the latter more frequent among the *initiated*. The result is an engaging mechanism that nurtures and fuels not only the conversation as such, but the operability of the involved belief system.

This mechanism is consistent with the resilient strategy Snow and Machalek (1982) claim is present in what they call “unconventional beliefs”, but it also reveals the inherent property of a belief system –at both the operative and the operational sides– namely its ability to produce what it needs to reproduce itself. Humberto Maturana (1994:15-6) reflected on this self-productive feature of any system which he termed “*autopoiesis*”. Both *Autopoiesis* and *Intertextuality* are two prominent aspects of the operative side of a belief system that come across ‘discursively’ in statements when the belief system is narrated and justified (*expressed*). Both aspects became manifest in all sessions I conducted for this study. Below I present a brief explanation for each.

*An Autopoietic closure:*

None of the three films tested in my study showed as imposing their premises over audiences; rather, film audiences were the ones who expressed, or projected, their already existent beliefs on the media products. Subjects engage processes of adoption, adaptation, and resonance with some proposals from the films, and the offspring are expressions that operate as inputs to the belief system. The process results stimulating, confirming, and
validating of the system, although ultimately the production is a close-circuited one (an autopoietic closure) insofar the substance of production comes out not from an external source but from the believer’s system itself. In this sense, from the operative side, beliefs produce the needed input to keep them valid and pertinent; and from the operational side this means that believing involves the skill of ‘keep on believing’. By extension it is the believer through his/her performances who continuously produces himself as a believer.

It is worthy to note that whereas rationalizing discourses –like the ones exemplified earlier– help in keeping the beliefs valid and pertinent, the self reproduction of the believer as such does not appeal to the external propositions (the beliefs contained in the content of a particular text, such as films or any other media product) as it appeals to the believer’s own subjectivity. In other words: believers regard their rationalizations as internalized parts of their inmost personal experiences. Let us recall SELMA, the participant for whom the films functioned as reinforcements of her already present beliefs. She backed up her commentaries appealing to her own experience: “Because I’ve been believing in all this for a long while”. Later on, when she was commenting on the thesis of ‘The Observer’ in What The Bleep do We (k)now!?, she told the group:

SELMA: I, well, as I have been studying in different courses, I have learnt how to be the observer of my life, which is like not getting hooked in all what is happening, but simply live in your center and “be the observer”, right?, of all what is happening around you.

Most of the initiated tended to employ recursively the argumentative-set “the studied, the learnt, the experienced, and the practiced” as a resource to legitimize their stances.
Another participant, ALICIA, employed a similar argument but in her utterance she brought up two components worthy to be highlighted:

ALICIA: In that sense the film really moved me, because I saw there in visual so many things that my teachers had taught me and that I had read and that I had experienced throughout so many practices and so many years.

The two components associated with the argumentative-set are ‘the emotive’ and ‘the visual’, both are used as sufficient evidence to add credibility and justification to her previous beliefs. Some participants, whether initiated or uninitiated, used words such as “emotion”, “touching”, “moving”, “awesome”, “cool” for garnishing their rational perceptions. This suggests, on the one hand, that the abovementioned argumentative-set synthesizes the rational level with the emotive/aesthetic levels. On the other hand, the importance given to the ‘visual’ was an overall trait for both the initiated and the uninitiated who saw the three films. The force of an argument and its reliability is not measured by its deductive or inductive coherence, but it lays on its visibility, which is taken as undoubted ‘evidence’.

One discussion group commented on a particular scene of What The Bleep do We (k)now!? in which the main character has a dream about an indigenous Shaman touching other natives’ forehead in order to ‘make them able to see’ a fleet of caravels approaching the shore. One male participant said: “what one doesn’t believe in, cannot be seen, like the Caravels of Columbus”. This expression bonds the visual with the evidence but in a way that reverses empiricism. For empiricist epistemology, knowledge is aposteriori: one believes in what one sees, and one sees what is ‘already there’. However, my subjects’
setting inverts that epistemology towards an aprioristic one: one sees what previously one believed in, and it is the act of believing what ‘makes’ the things being there.

Another male informant asserted while summing up his critique on *The Da Vinci Code*: “we only see what we want to see”. This position is a functional one insofar as it contributes to the sustainability of the belief system in an autopoietic way: believers see what they need to see in order to keep on seeing, and they believe what they need to keep on believing.

The above was true for viewers of the three films independently of them being *initiated*, *uninitiated* or *resistants*. This could have been anticipated for mainstream religious viewers of *The Passion of the Christ*, as Catholicism is obviously a constituted belief system; what was unexpected was to find these mechanisms more vigorously present in pop-esoteric *initiated* and *uninitiated* while commenting on *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*? and *The Da Vinci Code*.

Just like organized religious belief systems do, Pop-Esotericism produces the necessary operations and inputs to perpetuate itself as a system. Put it differently: Pop-Esotericism –when considered as a belief system– deploys circular and tautological mechanisms aimed to ensure the resilience of the system. Rationalizing mechanisms are used by *initiated* and *uninitiated* to operate their belief systems, but alongside these external rationalizations, operators also involve their own subjectivity through engaging internalizations: *initiated* tend to include personal anecdotes and testimonies to demonstrate that the pop-esoteric text is already *impressed* in them, and the *uninitiated* involve their subjectivity by including emotional and aesthetic considerations, based on
'visual evidence', to set up plausible scenarios that stimulate their enthusiasm toward the proposed text. In each case the conversational dynamic generates a propitious environment –let us call it a “believesphere”– to foster and house the act of believing. This conversational dynamic grants us a window to take a glimpse at the operational side.

Despite having been explicitly invited to discuss and focus on the three films, participants of my study spent relatively little time of their conversations commenting exclusively on them. If the length of a discussion group lasted two hours, participants used an average 15 to 20 minutes for commenting on the films and then moved into other topics. The same happened with focus groups: the moderator had to help bringing the films back to the center of conversation after the first quarter of the sessions. The fact that during group conversations the belief text (the films) rapidly vanished or relegated to a second layer, and that the personal experience or subjectivity occupies the first plane of the conversation, indicates that the high-priority object to be perpetuated is the believer ‘as a believer’, rather than the beliefs as such.

An Intertextual openness:

Along sessions of all applied methods, participants brought up a wide variety of pop-esoteric beliefs and products. In front of the various versions of Pop-Esotericisms, participants’ belief system adopted a relativistic position, facilitating not only the sociability among conversers, but also a personal and collective intertextual construction. Such a relativistic position and intertextuality, however, turned out to be sensitive and reactive against those systems perceived as closed and totalitarian, such as traditional
belief systems. The following quotes, taken from three different groups, illustrate this reluctance:

**SAUL:** Religion is an oppression that constrains your thinking to a very specific type of ‘beyond’, people are kind of confined by certain religions.

**ROCIO:** What religions promote is fanaticism. They are like “I am right and you are wrong and you are going straight to Hell” See what happened to the World Trade Center. That was religions’ fault.

**CESAR:** I am a Catholic but I am not a hundred percent practitioner. As I attended to an Opus Dei school I got kind of annoyed, though once in a while I go to Mass. I’d say that I am more spiritual than religious.

In spite of being reluctant towards traditional religions, none of my informants reported having migrated to other systems. During socializations, the identity tag (how people identify themselves in terms of religious membership) is not affected by unconventional belief systems like Pop-Esotericism, whether subjects are exploring, acquiring, or even actively ascribing to them. Pop-esoteric believers do not detach their religious identity from the belief system they were biographically inscribed to (Catholicism, for the majority of my subjects); on the contrary: they use it as a social tag and occasionally continue participating in some traditional religious activities. This is how GREGORIO incidentally stated his religious stance when commenting on *What The Bleep do We (k)now!* and *The Da Vinci Code*:

**GREGORIO:** The movies indeed mess with religions but not with God, they do not mess with God but they do with religion. I am a Catholic, but I am not a
practitioner. However I do believe in a God and felt no offence because the films were attacking religion.

This utterance—as well as CESAR’s—shows a subject that has withdrawn notions (“God”, “being spiritual”, etc) from an organized construction that is religion, adapted them and made them independent and individual. These subjects do not give account to any form of institutional life. The continuous negotiation that is seen in the last two quotes (I am but I am not) is the tactic the subject uses for inhabiting his Catholicism and his pop-esoteric beliefs and practices without needing an adherence to an institutional, fixed identity, and therefore, without needing to struggle over fixed identities. Therefore, the lack of correlation between identity and associated practices is not experienced as a contradiction or as a need to state a different identity. It could be said that the carriers of the belief system ‘colonize’ their inscribed Catholic belief system as well as the pop-esoteric belief system they are ascribing to. Nevertheless, during the conversations it was the acquired pop-esoteric beliefs and theses which drove the operative side of the belief system along the discussion groups. Installed in a pop-esoteric setting, participants regard traditional religion not as a means for a consistent relationship with the divinity, but rather as a category that eventually can be helpful in comforting distressful circumstances, as the next quote acknowledges:

LORENA: The most important, I think, is that the first person in whom I believe is in myself, in Lorena. She is the only person that would never let me down, and after this, it is my family. Now, what is going on? What is religion good for? It is good when you are in trouble; can prevent you from feeling badly in moments of anguish. I think this is what it is good for.
This verbatim reveals a subject who assumes her everyday life as an independent and autonomous one, not pursuing a relationship with the transcendence on a regular basis because she relies deeply on herself. A similar position is assumed by another informant, for whom religion’s idea of God fails in adjudicating moral categories to the transcendence:

**JULIETA:** It is that the religion tells you that if you do this, that bad thing will happen to you. It puts forward a good-God, when there is no such thing as good or evil, the only thing is that you be a better person.

The judgment about good and evil is not related to the ‘other’, or to any surveillance-type of entity, but to the personal sufficiency. The subject interiorizes the notions of good and evil, and can construct their own subjectivity based on them: as there is no one to refer to, the individual becomes his/her own reference. In my study, *initiated* and *uninitiated* explicitly resonated with the notion of an amoral God. This has important implications as it leads to skeptical positions when it comes to social relations: one can not assert or deny, trust or distrust anyone who has not yet acquired the attributes of empowerment that everyone looks for. One male informant pointed out:

**VALENTÍN:** The film tells you that God is the only true thing, and that he is good and evil and all together. So, how can you trust a human being who is/we all are imperfect, when someone says ‘this is the truth’? You see where I am going to?

In general, religion is deemed something obsolete and in opposition to the empowerment agenda of the Self, nevertheless it is acknowledged—especially among the *initiated*—that
at the roots of traditional religions there are valid spiritual insights worthy to retrieve and use them to inform, spiritually, new belief systems such as Pop-Esotericism.

MERCEDES: all other traditions preach the same. These are universal wisdoms. What does religion preach, any religion? The mystery of Love. Buddha, Jesus, Krishna, all of them arrived at the same thing. There is no tradition or ancient religion that would contradict this, none is gonna tell you to kill or to be selfish or to steal. On the contrary, all of them teach you how to become a good person.

The spirituality that resonates at the operative side of the belief system of these subjects, as we already observed in Part Two, embraces the *hylomorphic* assumption that stands for a total separation between mental operations and physiological operations, establishing a radical distance between Mind and Body: the Mind ‘objectifies’ the Body which in turn can be ‘programmed’ at will.

ABELARDO: You can establish a direct connection between your body and your mind, and make your mind change your body. I like that, though it must be kind of hard.

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BRUNO: Thoughts alter the body. I do believe in that because most sick people can heal with a good attitude, like with cancer.

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HELDA: Weren’t you thrilled about that idea of programming your body?

In general, my subjects implicitly agree on the idea that mental operations and physiological operations are two distinct entities. There is a tacit distance between mind and body that might be shortened. Obviously they accept that both body and mind have strong connections, but these are connections between two different natures.
Among the initiated there is a ‘higher set’ comprised by mind and spirit, and a ‘lower set’ comprised by body and emotions, whereas the uninitiated conceive this split in terms of ‘thoughts’ versus ‘body’. This split understanding suggests a Neo-Gnostic standing wherein the body is considered detached from the observer and, therefore, having control over emotions is a sign of spiritual height. The paramount of such height is ataraxia, a state in which ‘the observer’ is indifferent and beyond passions, feelings, and moral judgments.

The indifference towards material realities makes Neo-Gnosticism the frame for pantheistic views in which even the Self is regarded as divine. A pantheistic view benefits the individual’s empowerment prospect because, on the one hand, it eludes any attempt of a totalitarian system to wield control over the subject, and on the other hand, such an extreme proximity to the Source of Power increases the chances to recover the lost empowerment. The following verbatim from a discussion group illustrates such a pantheistic position:

**WENDY:** this…uh… awareness that everyone, that all of us are one with God, and God is inside us, right? I think that everything is part of the same…

**SANDRA:** Ditto! And if you consider that God is everything, then by default we all are God. I mean, you cannot say that you are a whole without placing yourself in that whole, so when we say God is everything and we are God, at the end of the day our thoughts are part of the thoughts of God.

**ERNESTO:** You carry God inside of you and you are God, that’s to believe in yourself because you are God. Nothing can stop you.
In sum, God is asserted not in terms of a ‘relational persona’ with whom a believer develops an affective relationship, but as the supreme source of power and an amoral entity whose attributes are needed to empower the subject. The subject approaches this entity not for the sake of the relation in itself, but for attaining an infused power.

9.3.1. Sources of Belief (the Inscribed, the Ascribed, and the Gatekeepers)

Throughout my subject’s conversations, the inherent expressiveness of the operative side brought to view three different external sources (or exo belief systems) from which participants draw elements for constituting their own belief system. The first one is the Inscribed Source, comprised of well organized, explicit creed forms. This source has clear structure of organization; it is hierarchical, with the overt purpose of being adhered (in-scripted) to the self. For instance, an inscribed source is Catholicism in its most dogmatic and catechetical mode, or any other institutionalized religion expressed as perennial basic axioms on which the entire belief system is funded. Usually the first contact subjects have with these sources occurs through the primary socialization circle (parents, tradition, family) cementing worldviews and cognitive paradigms not always mindful by the subject.

The second source is the Ascribed Source involving secondary socialization circles wherein identity roles and senses of belonging are defined; that is, the cultural environment beyond the first circle of socialization (school, peers, neighborhood, work, political groups, communities of mutual interests.) It includes the most secular realm as
cultural ambience, trends, and socially assumed historical backgrounds. So media consumption is on this side, as well as any other symbolic form we use as currency in our daily social interactions (for a global media society that means the entire media-ecology.) Both symbolic forms and correspondent types of usage inform one’s *habitus* ensuring stability to the subjects in spite of the intrinsic instability (or changeability) of these forms and usages in time.

Here the word “ascribed” shall not be taken as it is in common language (like ‘assigning some quality to something’), but in its more original Latin meaning. *Ascriptio* is the “written addition” one *deliberately* aggregates to an already written text, and by doing so, adhering oneself voluntarily to such writing. Likewise, the Ascribed refers to many offers, many systems existing in the cultural ambience, each of them assuming that the management is up to the individual who consumes or gets in touch with them.

Most important is that the ascribed source shapes and modulates the inscribed source, giving it ‘concretion’. The inscribed is informed by the nuances of the cultural contextualized narratives of the ascribed. Thus, for example, Catholicism as a mere creed does not constitute any phenomenon, since it does not generate by itself any social interaction, while urban-Mexican-middleclass-Catholicism does constitute a social phenomenon that can be expressed, described, and provokes other phenomena.

The third source of a belief system is comprised by those agents in charge of providing hermeneutical guidelines for both the Inscribed and the Ascribed sources. It is the Source of the Gatekeepers. The inscribed source has conspicuous authoritative voices to ensure correct readings and practices. I explained before that the Inscribed are
organized beliefs that have a clear structure and administration, controlled by a hierarchical order so the presence of administrators is something neat. For example, for Mexican Catholics it is clear who personifies the instance that tells you what to do and what not to do.

Yet, the ascribed source has also its own Gatekeepers. They might appear to be less imposing than those from the inscribed, because they are presented as any other supply meeting subjects’ demands. The ascribed source is a place, an ambience one lives in and receives offers from it. As a site of the cultural offer there is traffic of different contents –and even systems, and the assumption is that the acquisition, management, and organization of them are on the subject’s (consumer’s) behalf. However, the fact that the agency is located on the side of the users does not imply that they are exempted of authoritative reading. In fact, all contents offered in the ascribed source are accompanied by or eventually develop mediators, gatekeepers (teachers, mentors, connoisseurs, media figures) with whom users relate to make particular negotiations and to draw hermeneutical guidelines for their interpretations.

Before moving the model forward we need to make two remarks. The first one is to acknowledge that although all these three sources are cultural offers it is worthy to make the distinction between the organized religion and the text that comes from there, and the different texts one takes from our cultural incursions, either from the Ascribed media ambience or from its Gatekeepers. The distinction is important because each realm enacts different ways to relate with users. The Inscribed runs its text in a membership relation requiring senses of “belonging” on the part of believers, whereas the Ascribed
demands no affiliation, rather it establishes senses of “participation.” One does not “belong” to contents proposed by the ascribed but one “participates”, more or less temporarily, in them. Secondly, it is important to keep in mind that the Inscribed, the Ascribed, and the Gatekeeper are but sources from where subjects draw elements to constitute their belief system. Therefore, in strict sense, they are external proposals, or exo belief systems if preferred, reservoirs for further constructions. What properly inaugurates a belief system are not the contents of the sources but the basic act subjects do with them, which is the act of “acquiring” them.

Acquisition is the procurement of symbolic forms that once appropriated constitute the individuals’ belief system. Contrary to the sources, which appear somehow stationary, the acquirer gets involved in incessant processes of appropriations and colonizations, adoptions and adaptations of territories engaged in the meaning making. Figure 17 charts the Inscribed Source, the Ascribed Source, and the intersected Source of the Gatekeepers comprised by the mediators of both the Inscribed and the Ascribed. The red line demarcates the Zone of Acquisition, indicating what the acquirer “buys” from the sources, what one procures for one’s own belief system. Notice that one does not acquire all and every single element from the sources, but just a portion of them. Also notice that although the chart shows the line as a delimited fixed border, in reality the zone of the acquirer is much more fluctuant and polymorph.
As part of the operative side of the belief system, acquisitions are expressed in narrative forms and practices of a system that is continuously fluctuating, constructed and under construction. Sometimes, acquisitions are done in passive, adoptive ways, and other times in proactive, searching ways. Adoptions and adaptations are dynamized by the mere act of believing. Even if one chooses not to modify one’s inscribed source, this choice becomes itself a constructing operation of the acquirer. Subjects develop three basic types of relationships with the elements they acquire from the belief sources. As I explain further, the nature of these liaisons is originally infused by the nature of the sources the subject adheres to or acquires.

In Figure 17 we see that the zone of the acquisition graphically sets the boundaries of three new surfaces; each containing elements of correspondent sources, but also each one indicating a different relationship between the subject and the contents.
Nevertheless, the flatness of the 2D chart above can be misleading, making the areas look separated and independent. If the areas were independent from each other, one could expect –erroneously– three types of relations among them: either a juxtaposed form (wherein religious practitioners would be picking exclusively those elements from both the ascribed and the gatekeepers that would be in full compliance with their religious institution and creeds), or an adjacent form (in which case individuals would be playing a continuous shifting between the three sources, according to the context and the needs of the individual), or even an intersected form (in which the Self would be constructing subjectivity out of and only with intersected elements of his acquisitions). But in the fieldwork of my research none of these formations was found. Moreover, I have found no empirical evidence that one source eventually dominates and annihilates the others. On the contrary, the three sources and their correspondent relations with them coexist without conflict, and it is the individual, during social interaction and the production of the social language, the one who makes the choice of which of three sources –and with which status– should speak at a certain moment.

Therefore, although distinguishable, the three basic types of relations with acquired elements are not independent from each other, but organically interdependent. If charted they should not look like flattened fixed ‘areas’, but rather three-dimensional and with much more plasticity. Perhaps they could be represented as dynamic interconnected spheres, or complect circumvolutions akin to those structures found in the brain. I call these spheres, Lobes.
9.3.2. Lobes of the Acquirer (the *Canon*, the *Codex*, and the *Archive*)

Picture the human brain where you have different lobes and different sections and circumvolutions of the brain altogether and bring interactions integrated in this physical anatomy. Think about it intertwiningly. Likewise, there are some meanings that are *inscribed* for me, there are some *ascriptions* that I make on my own, and there are some in which there is interaction where I enter into a relationship with authoritative *gatekeepers* and re-jointly negotiate the meaning. These possible relations are in strict sense appropriations on behalf of the subject. I term them, respectively, the lobes of the *Canon*, the *Archive* and the *Codex*. Figure 18 uses the template of the previous diagram to represent them not as separated sections but as a single organ in which the different lobes interact and structure it. It is in the midst of it where the subject carves senses of identity and constructs subjectivity.

![Diagram of Lobes of the Acquirer](image18.png)

*Figure 18. Lobes of the Acquirer*
The logic of the lobes derives from the nature of their sources, however they allow crisscross combinations. For example, one can relate to elements from the Ascribed or from the Gatekeepers “canonically”, or one can behave as an “archivist” filing away and disposing of elements at will from both the Inscribed and the Gatekeepers. One can also take certain unofficial voices from any source and endow them with our trust, empowering their opinions to work for us as reliable compilations, or “codices” guiding and backing-up our interpretations. Nevertheless, in reality this model is not as balanced as it looks in the diagram. People emphasize differently each lobe at certain moments or contexts, in doing so they position themselves in relation to different possible subjectivities. Next I discuss and give some examples for each lobe.

The Lobe of the Canon refers primarily to meanings meant to be inscribed for me, and hence somehow naturalized in me. Secondarily it refers to the appropriation of selected elements from the Inscribed source individuals make through direct and unmediated incursions into such sources. The word “Canon” is not used here as in ‘canonic texts’ (versus ‘apocryphal texts’) held by religious institutions, but it is considered from the side of the believer: what actually constitutes a ‘canon’ for the subject, whatever one finds meaningful for oneself, what is normative and nonnegotiable in one’s life. ELISEO shared in a focus group, at early stages of the session, why he considers The Da Vinci Code spurious:

ELISEO: seen from my religious experience and from my beliefs, I found it [the film] very inconsistent. I watched it with my Bible in hands, and I could realize
how many words and sentences from the gospel were inaccurate and distorted. I think it’s very, very inconsistent, and obviously it didn’t shake my faith an inch.

Later, the group debated on how women have been regarded by the Church and by society in general throughout history. The topic spontaneously arose from the idea in *The Da Vinci Code* that Mary Magdalene was the true heiress of Jesus’ legacy. Pía advocated for more recognition and more agency for women in both the Church and society.

**Pía:** I do think that in current conditions, I mean in the economic, social, political realms all over the world, women are demonstrating that they are capable to assume leadership in any field. Religion included.

**Eliseo:** no problem with that, except here we are talking about a spiritual function, a role that is appointed, assigned by. In the case of Peter, when he is told “You are Peter and now you are going to be the cornerstone of my Church. Peter, do you really love me? Build my Church... feed my sheep… tend my sheep” He is asking Peter, both as a human person and as a man, to become the foundation of his Church. But then, [*mimicking:*] ‘How can it be! This is outrageous!’ the idea sounds so repugnant to some, even though it is perfectly documented that the chosen one was not a woman but a man, and the fact that all four gospels coincide in this.

**Facilitator:** are you saying this is a literary fact?

**Eliseo:** not just literary, but a literal fact. And if there are doubts, you go see where Peter is buried. He is in the Vatican.

A text deemed canonical by the acquirer aspires to become naturalized\(^\text{37}\). In this sense, there is a compulsion about the text to make it both foundational and fundamental. For this reason when the operative side of a belief system is mostly or largely based on

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\(^{37}\) ‘hypostasized’ in P. Berger and T. Luckmann’s words (1967b), or ‘classicalized’ in D. Tracy’s (1982).
canonical appropriations, the resultant model of subjectivity is a fundamentalist one. If charted, the Fundamentalist shape of the model would look like Figure 19, mainly filled with *Canonical* appropriations subjects do over Sacred Texts by themselves, few insertions of the *Codex* seeking confirmation and endorsement by same-minded Gatekeepers, and a minimal though tamed and well-delimited surface for the *Archive*.

The *Lobe of the Codex* is the positionality of the operative side of the belief system with which the believer takes hermeneutical guide-lines from the mediators or Gatekeepers. *Codex* is the technical name for a collection of texts gathered, edited, compiled, and published by a legitimated authority in the field. Editors of codices eventually become documents themselves, secondary sources relating and interpreting information originally presented elsewhere. Access to Gatekeepers grants to the acquirer not only an indirect contact with the text, but also and more importantly, provides it coated with authority and
assured reliability, which is precisely what individuals look after while forming their Codex. Therefore, two associated characteristics differentiate the Canon from the Codex. The first one is that whereas the former praises unmediated access and self-interpretation of meanings, the latter looks precisely for mediated, hermeneutical guidance to approach them. The second one is that whereas the Canon acknowledges the authority of a text as being imbedded and substantiated in the text itself, the Codex locates authority as personified in qualified interpreters.

Moreover, proximity to so considered legitimate mediators facilitates, on the part of the acquirer, close identifications and interactions akin to those enacted in oedipal processes. In other words, it is not that the contents uttered by the mediators get imprinted in the believer without further ado. Subjects enter into a relationship with authoritative gatekeepers and re-jointly negotiate the meaning. As it happens in oedipal processes, identification with (paternal) authorities is ambivalent. There are phases in which the identification is so strong that subjects not only ditto the gatekeeper’s opinion, but become followers of his personal charisma, pricing his leadership above the contents he might be conveying. But then there are phases wherein former fandom turns against gatekeepers, overthrowing and (symbolically) murdering fatherly figures. I found examples of this ambivalence occurring at the same venue and for the same gatekeeper.

Sometime after the screening of What The Bleep do We (k)now!? in Mexico, groups of initiated organized study-groups to further the study of the proposals of the movie. They called themselves “the Bleepers”. Among other activities, they organized a series of conferences held at the World Trade Center in Mexico City. Most scientists and
experts interviewed in the film were invited as keynote speakers. The sessions that gathered more audience were those lectured by mystic and hierophant Judy Zebra Knight (aka Ramtha\(^{38}\)), doctor in alternative medicine Masaru Emoto\(^{39}\), and physics theoretician doctor Fred Alan Wolf (aka Dr Quantum). I attended the conferences to make participant observation and I would describe that the conferences were mainly full of initiated. The relationship taken to the text had a hierarchical tint. Audiences seemed to be decisioning themselves as supplicants to an authority expression either to start a movement (e.g. ‘when are you going to organize us?’, ‘we need a community to grow deeper’) or to receive paternal counseling. Alan Wolf entitled his conference “Puedes Crear tu Realidad”\(^{40}\) In the question and answer period at the end, most of the audience apparently saw themselves as receiving both authoritative text and advice. This is the first of the questions he got:

**MALE:** [addressing Dr Wolf] I have this emotion, this… while you were saying right here at this conference that one should not be afraid of breaking rules but to explore all possibilities, I started to feel so much fear that if I jump into alternative realities my Self would be dissolved and lost. I guess my question is what, how can I do to not be afraid of lose my Self?

Nonetheless, the Codex does not behave always in conformity with chosen authoritative voices. The relationship is ambivalent as what is at stake with these voices is authority and power. At the end of Dr Quantum’s conference I did some exit-interviews. JOAQUÍN, 24, is an engineering student. He knew Dr Wolf from the film and read his book.

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\(^{38}\) Ramtha is the entity that J.Z. Knight claims she channels.  
\(^{39}\) Dr Emoto is the author of the Theory of Water Crystals, referred in Part One of this work.  
\(^{40}\) “You can create your reality” my tr.
JOAQUÍN: what I admire in Professor Wolf is that having studied quantum physics he is into all these things that seem miraculous and are beyond classic science and physics. But now I think he is confused, he blends different schools and stuff, shakes the cocktail, and then he makes no point at all. I was about to ask him: “that’s a nice speech, but so what? So what?” I was expecting something else. I was hoping and came here with great joy looking for explanations and grounds. Nothing! He left me with a bad taste in my mouth.

ERICA is a 50 year-old physician. She became a “bleeper” and joined the group Cuarto Camino, which gathers people every Saturday morning to study and discuss pop-esoteric topics. Cuarto Camino was founded by Mexican radio anchorman Martin Aparicio who broadcasts a call-in radio show in Mexico City.

ERICA: people came here hopeful, because the film awakes you, the film makes you think in your actions. Why you? Why me? Why the World? He talked about a world of possibilities, and in the film he says you have unlimited possibilities you don’t see but when you see them they become real and acting. Why didn’t he explain it here? He didn’t explain it to me. It was frustrating. I heard nothing of what I wanted to hear and understand. […] The lesson I draw from this is that you have to be careful in choosing your teacher. I am fortunate in going with a teacher that is much better than this Mr Wolf, who is Martin Aparicio from Cuarto Camino.

Notice in the above three examples how informants’ expressions are filled with emotionality and interpersonal sentiments (“I have this emotion”, “I started to feel so much fear”, “I came here with great joy”, “He left me with a bad taste in my mouth”, “It was frustrating”, “I am fortunate in going with a teacher”) Heavy dependency on paternal gatekeeping-figures or the craving for them shapes the operative side of the
belief system as a Codex-based one. Figure 20 illustrates this formation. In Mexico, this model of subjectivity is commonly found in popular religiosity where canonical incursions into *Inscribed* sources are practically nonexistent (direct reading of the Bible or other sacred texts are not part of average Mexican Catholic practitioners) People in this model certainly resort to *Ascribed* sources and file away some contents by themselves to form their archive; however they are predominantly attentive towards *Gatekeepers* of all kinds (media figures, political agenda-setters, local parish priests, mentors, teachers, and so on and so forth) who codify for them and set the keynotes for their meaning construction.

Figure 20. Popular Religiosity shape of the model emphasizing the CODEX

The *Lobe of the Archive* takes its name from a basic characteristic of any archive which is being always *undefined*. An archive is never closed but open to continuous filings and withdrawals. It is active in this sense, “alive” as opposed to ‘dead files’ or inactive
archives which are depositories or collections containing defined historical records and documents. The lobe of the *Archive* is that positionality of the self that allows subjects to perform appropriations and disappropriations of selected elements from the broad ambience (habitus). The archivist dives into the traffic of different contents and systems available in the cultural offer, and seeks to codify them while disavowing (or trying to temporally bracket) influential voices from the Canon and the Codex. These voices, though, remain always as a backdrop and eventually come afore as aids to support and give language to the individual’s intuitions.

**ROXANA:** Here they are telling you: “watch out, brother, your emotional states are always affecting your cells” Why? Because your cells are the perception of how you see the world, and you are not living in reality, you are wrapped in a bubble; and there you are, and this is affecting your body. But this is nothing new. For centuries, I mean, these are philosophies, wisdoms, proposals that go back not one hundred or two hundred years, but millennia. I was talking the other day with a friend of mine who knows a lot about religion and we were commenting that these films are not really saying nothing new that any other fundamental human-tradition haven’t posited before. Jesus, you know, healed: “Lazarus, come out!, [snapping her fingers:] C’mon, dude, you are just fine!” and he walked on the water, and multiplied fish and bread, didn’t he? Your mind has control over the matter, your own and the external.

From the level of Archive, ROXANA articulates what she saw in language of self-improvement, borrowed from the *ascribed* discourse of the marketplace. The way she explains it to herself is through religious language and experiences proper to the *inscribed* source. But there are also people significant to her who shape and back up the
discourse, and she resorts to these *gatekeepers* without having to waive or give up her managership.

When the operative side of a belief system is formatted mainly by archive-like appropriations the resultant model of subjectivity looks like Figure 21. The subject with this positionality is able to make unmediated incursions into sources of any kind: from official sacred texts to apocryphal ones, from authorized interpreters to sound-biting voices, from highbrow culture to mainstream pop culture. Elements are selected and filed away in collections that are assumed to be provisional and not particularly concerned if coherency gets compromised. In my study this model of subjectivity, emphasizing the Lobe of the Archive, was found largely among *uninitiated* pop-esotericists. I call it the postmodernist model of subjectivity.

![Figure 21. Postmodernist shape of the model emphasizing the Archive](image)
The triple-lobe model helps to explain why it is easier for some people than others to utilize pop culture for their meaning construction. Furthermore, it helps to make sense of the cognitive positionality that is adopted by the three types of users of Pop-Esotericism, namely the resistant, the initiated, and the uninitiated. Resistsants to Pop-Esotericism tend to emphasize the lobe of the Canon, whereas the initiated are likely to have a Codex-based model of subjectivity. On their part, the uninitiated in Pop-Esotericism develop and privilege the lobe of the Archive. There are important implications for an archive-based subjectivity; the most important one is that such formation fosters the transit from the modern Self to the Narcissus, as I shall explain further. But before going there, it is worthy to place some clarifications and caveats on the triple-lobe model.

Firstly, this is not a model of the human self (which certainly would be much more complex) but in any case it is a model of an inner organ-like system that allows the Self to adopt different cognitive positions and possible subjectivities. The diagrams described above do not refer to “three types of persons” (e.g. a fundamentalist, a popular religious person, or a postmodern personality) but rather they describe three possible positionalities that even the same person may adopt in different contexts. The image I am using of the lobes intends to reflect this plasticity I found based on data; indeed, I could have used other images like a triple-water-balloon –or embedded bubbles, inflating and deflating according to circumstances. The model is messy enough to not separate things out in a way it is problematic to keep it.

Secondly, the model might change when people are exposed to different media. People may adopt and perform differing positionalities based on both content and context.
(as bubbles or water-balloons on a slope would do). It is important to keep in mind that my study is not comparing media products (the three films) but it is comparing different kinds of reception and usage of media expressions. My taxonomy is a taxonomy of use, I am not expecting a certain category of, say, a film, to be heavily loaded in one lobe or the other. In any case what the model shows is how people receive those products and use them as inputs for their own constructions. And yet, the fact that someone sees *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?, The Da Vinci Code, or The Passion of the Christ* does not mean that the viewer is going to use it as an input for his belief system, but perhaps as mere entertainment. “*A very boring entertainment*” as one of my informants put it.

Thirdly, the model is socially based, and therefore its categories convey the socio-historical context from where data was gathered and coded. Applications to other contexts should be done carefully to avoid generalization. Thus, for example, the postmodernist shape that some mainstream Mexican Catholics showed may not apply to a U.S. context, since the relationship with religious institutions is different. In Latin America relationship with institutions in general is less “belonging” than “participating”, so individuals have always room to negotiate and colonize elements from/within institutions. The postmodernist model works well with middle class Mexican Catholics, but when I consider middle class U.S. Protestants it is more likely that they are going to behave not as *archivists*, they are going to invest in the authority of their pastor (*Codex*) and in alternative sources of authority.

A final remark about the model: Individuals do not shift schizophrenically among belief sources, rather they colonize them reciprocally, and construct their subjectivity at
the interplay of this swing by activating –inflating and deflating organically– the three lobes of the operative belief system. Believers are exposed simultaneously to distinct sources of beliefs, and establish different relations with them with different status according to the preeminence they give to each lobe at a certain moment. Individuals, particularly those shaped in the archivist or postmodernist mode, can survive the simultaneity of different logics, because the approach to the three sources is –in Saussurean terms– a parole rather than a langue. Nevertheless, this parole is constituted by the different discourses that accompany the three sources and the three lobes of the expressive (operative) side of the belief system. This individual is a polyglot within one language, as Braidotti (1994:14-5) suggests. While polylinguism is related to langue, polyglotism is the proficiency that enables the subject to navigate among differing paroles.

I mentioned before that the shape of the model that best suits pop-esotericists is the one that emphasizes the Lobe of the Archive. The logic of this lobe makes pop-esoteric subjects orbit around relativism, though without living in “relativist despair”.

DElia: I am not going to hook into this stuff like a nutty fanatic because that would be like substituting one absolute truth with another absolute truth, and that’s not the point. The idea is that you take what you need.

RITA: Exactly, you pick what you like and leave what you don’t. That’s the way people are functioning today.

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41 According to Saussure (1977), language has two components: langue, which is the abstract though homogeneous system one internalizes through a given speech community, and parole, which is the heterogeneous system of individual acts of speech that put language into practice.
Their choice is to focus on ‘oneself’ and consider everything else relative, acquirable, adaptable, and eventually disposable. The idea of living multiple realities –often suggested in some pop-esoteric discourses that use quantum physics imagery– is for them not more a utopian scope than the very possibility they are actually exploring on daily bases. Both relativistic and self-centering drives help the subject that has been shaped as an archivist to transit from canonical and codexical models of subjectivity (typical of the modern self) to what can be called the Narcissus, for the reasons I discuss below.

9.3.3. From the modern Self to the Narcissus (or narcissoid Self)

Lacan realizes that the foundational moment of the ego is the monadic encounter with its very own image –the mirror stage, as we reviewed in Chapter 2– and not at the encounter with the others. In any case, otherness is a second moment of the initialized primordial self apprehension, in which the constituted ego “[pushes] off into outer space on the strength of its imperative to expand” (Brennan 1993:3). The avoidance of the Other as such leaves the ego in an existential solitude, namely a Narcissist ego, which does not feel lonely because it relies deeply on itself. Let us recall LORENA’s narcissoid\textsuperscript{42} statement.

LORENA: The most important, I think, is that the first person in whom I believe is in myself, in Lorena. She is the only person that would never let me down.

\textsuperscript{42} I am purposely avoiding the more loaded term ‘Narcissist’, which refers to a diagnosis made about someone’s personality. Subjects might have narcissoid edges and/or episodes without necessarily having narcissistic personalities.
This Narcissus is the one who lives predominantly in the lobe of the Archive, carrying out multiple and unmediated appropriations of elements from the three sources of belief. The inherent elasticity of the lobe of the Archive produces not only expanding colonizations on behalf of the subject, but expands –almost unlimitedly– the subject itself. Not having an Other to report to, allows the Narcissus to accept, for instance, the idea that Christ was sexually active without any conflict or fear of compromising their religious identity. It is so because the Narcissus can reflect its own image in whatever appropriations he does (Christ, for example, or in any other character she would want to be like)

FACILITATOR: What is your opinion about the thesis that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalena?

TANIA: I would love to think that it is true. I see Jesus, according to my own beliefs and to what I have read, as a prophet and a human being in flesh and bones, with an extraordinary charisma and a craft in speaking, and his message of love and peace for humanity was a very interesting message back then and in our times.

In his unlimited expansion the Narcissus might consider himself akin to God, or even believe that he is directly God. Jesus was only a messenger, with a strong and fine message, but not different to me. He is not considered as the ultimate Other but a similar other wherein anyone can mirror and objectify.

LUCERO: And Jesus said: “you are God as well, and you will be able to do bigger things than I did” so, where did this come from? So, just to freak you out, for me Jesus is not God, he is just another prophet who came to teach us the road to God.

FACILITATOR: Where did you hear this?
LUCERO: Where I heard this? I told you I grew up with this, always, Jesus is not God. Jesus is God, but you are God and I am God too. The same: if we are one, how something can be outside of this unity. We are all God. Jesus is not more than us, or perhaps he is more than us because he is a soul that transcended and that lovingly came back to show us the way.

But, on the other hand, not all respondents are Narcissus; those who arranged their operative belief system with emphasis on the Canon or the Codex are modern selves, obedient to the institutional order and/or to their proxies. They do report themselves to an external Other, and they do accept the triumph of the religion, as Lacan foresaw, because it has a sufficient response to their interrogations about reality. This profile was revealed when *resistants* spoke about *The Passion of the Christ*, where divinity is represented as absolute Otherness, and therefore mundane otherness (the others) are also present and accepted as different. Here is where the ethical rationale is anchored with this logic: if he is the transcendent Other, then we ought to walk his way when dealing with the others.

ESTHER: [*The Passion of the Christ*] is like a gate of faith that is opened for you. All what Jesus had to suffer for our sake makes us aware of how often we complain about trivialities. He endured all having done nothing wrong, and without deserving it at all. And all this leads you to what he came for: to give us the way for a true life as Catholics, a life with more love, more tolerance, more endurance to undergo hardship. And I really think that this is a demonstration of love, a very cruel and blunt one.

Contrary to the Narcissus, who projects himself even on his images of the divine (“we all are God”), the modern self establishes otherness when it comes to formulate his self-
understanding. Even when Jesus is accepted as a full human being, it is nuanced by attributes that differentiate him radically from the others:

**Pilar:** Jesus was a human being in body and soul as we are; he was like us in all things except sin. This is the only difference: that Jesus had no sin.

The expression “like us in all things except sin” makes part of the doxology of the Catholic Church, which suggests that *The Passion of the Christ* was received by these viewers as a reminder of the Inscribed source. Same can be said about other expressions like “Jesus had to suffer for our sake”. This repetition almost *ad litteram* of the message of Mel Gibson’s movie is a language that is approved by the modern institution (in this case, the Church) and results as highly efficient for expressing the reception experience.

More interesting is that this argumentation was repeated almost identical by those informants who coded for the *resistant* type and who additionally showed being shaped by a Codex-based model of subjectivity.

**Graciela:** Father Pancho, the one I was telling you is a very close friend of my family, told me: “you should go and see it, because it is the most faithful and realistic film on the Passion of our Lord and it will broaden your horizons”

In contrast, interpretations made for *The Da Vinci Code* or *What The Bleep do We (k)now!* were by far more plural and verbalized in various forms. In the case of these films, there is no such institution that can offer a linguistic framework, other than the pop-esoteric frame I explained in Part Two wherein the postmodern vision of multiple realities and sources is rooted. That is why those informants pick elements from the

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43 After the credit title the film opens with the following cite from Isaiah 53: “He was wounded for our transgressions… by his wounds we are healed”.

Inscribed and Ascribed sources (such as Buddhism, astrology, and so on and so forth) to express their experience of reception. While the audience of the modern self is mono-morphic, the audience of the Narcissus is polymorphic. In the mono-morphic mode, the ethics are clear and reported both to the “goodness” and to the Other:

RICARDO: When one does a good deed, when you do a good thing for another person, then you feel well, isn’t it so? And when someone else does to you a good thing, you also feel well.

For Narcissus subjects, on the other hand, what matters is to improve oneself, without taking into account the others. That is, one does good deeds for the sake of oneself and not for the others. Strictly speaking the erasure of others drives away the realm of ethics, as for these subjects it is not clear that there is such a thing as good or evil. The following excerpts were taken from different group sessions:

KARINA: It locates the human being at the core of everything. It is like you are the center of all your own reality. You create your own reality.

GILBERTO: I don’t believe there is the good and the evil; what I’ve learnt is that we have the responsibility of taking control of our own life.

The judgment about good and evil is not related to the Other, nor to a surveillance-type of entity but on personal perfection. The Narcissus is perfect enough to internalize the notions of good and evil, and create a whole reality based on them. As there is no one to refer or report to, the Narcissus becomes his own reference.

The model of the three sources feeding the triple-lobe, and the latter formatting shapes of subjectivity—the fundamentalist, the popular religiosity, and the (narcissoid)
postmodernist—gives explanation to what is expressed by the operative side of a belief system, and what is expressed is a collection of discourses comprised of ideas, beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors. However, one thing is to speak the discourse, another is to believe the discourse, and yet another thing is to do the discourse. So far the model is incomplete as it only categorizes the discourses of beliefs without addressing the believing performances of the individual. It gives account of texts that are expressed (what people’s beliefs are) but does not explain how such texts got impressed (how people inhabit their beliefs). This is what the operational side of the belief system intends to respond.

9.4. Operational side (Im-Pression)

The operative side as presented in the last section is correlative to the traditional understanding of a belief system inasmuch as it comprises the dynamic set of collections of accepted propositions that, once organized in structuring systems, intervene in meaning-making processes one uses to ‘operate’ our daily reality. Such a system comes across discursively in statements bonded to explicit social practices in which individuals participate. However, the operative does not exhaust the phenomenon because the core of believing is an exceeded reality, a ‘ghostly matter’ whose roots extend far beyond the grabbable order of the symbolic, giving transcendent operability to the subject.

The phenomenon of belief/believing(s) is at once a language and a surpassed language. It includes both the named and the unnamed, the concrete narrations and the
apophatic reality, the rational and conscious material and the less mindful drives. All coalesce together and drive ones actions. (Fore)shadowing the operative side—in the generative sense—is the operational side of a belief system, which I define as the enactment of aware and unaware performances aimed to create and inhabit a sacred space wherein texts are bodily impressed on a subjectivity. While the operative is a content-based side, the operational is a performance-based one.

Resonances in the Operational Side

A brief digression: at this moment I deem it opportune to share a personal anecdote that I think will help to better frame my point. As soon as I had in my hands all the sets of transcriptions of the applied methods of my study, I began to build up a first grid map of the codes that I would use for my analysis. Since the early steps of the exploratory stage, I had identified the three types of pop-esoteric consumers, namely the initiated, the uninitiated, and the resistants. I became fascinated with the first type while developing the coding, suspecting that eventually I would have to follow up and focus on those who consume pop-esoteric products and have pop-esoteric practices on regular basis. It was my first interpretation that whereas the initiated were playing the leading role of the phenomenon, the uninitiated were sort of supporting characters, whose lack of engagement in pop-esoteric practices made them just enthusiastic echoers of the pop-esoteric “ideas”, beginners of a previous consumer stage, at the most. I had to reconsider this interpretation, though.
While reviewing the transcriptions, I started noticing what seemed to me a series of syntax oddities and logical inconsistencies spread here and there that made me go back to the original audiovisual recordings to check out their accuracy. I found no major errors in the transcriptions and, yet, those few “oddities and inconsistencies” were there, uttered by my informants, forming scattered singularities. Hearing and seeing again the recordings made me focus not only on ‘what’ the subjects expressed, but also on ‘how’ they uttered their ideas. I found that by transcoding the pieces from the original register to an alternative one (translating the verbatim quotes from Spanish to English, for example) worked like a photographic developer, surfacing those singularities that otherwise would be overlooked. I began to realize that in those conversations there was something else than a mere sharing and discussing pop-esoteric ideas.

For example, FRANCISCO, a 23 year-old student of communications, articulated the following sentence about his viewing experience of What The Bleep do We (k)now!? Here is a (transliterated) translation of his utterance:

FRANCISCO: What stuck on me since I saw the film, and I rarely forget it, is that every time if I were [subjunctive form] to be drinking water or each time I eat [present form] something I start throwing positive energy on it, say positive thoughts, yes? Because, I say: ‘what is the worst it may happen?’ That nothing happens, and ‘What is the best?’ That I could affect what I am drinking or eating. So when I am about to drink water I pour good vibes on it, like: [he makes the gesture of imposing hands and shakes them] “this is good”. I don’t know, the idea is to toss good energy onto things. [my emphasis]
In its original Spanish, this quote has a syntax stumble totally uncommon for a Spanish first-language speaker. The Spanish construction “que cada vez que vaya a tomar agua o siempre que como algo” mixes a present subjunctive of a hypothetical future with a present perfect tense. In English the subjunctive is a mood because it doesn't deal with factual reality but with suppositions, desires, and speculation: “if I were to be drinking water” is a hypothetical state that logically calls for a subsequent complement stated in similar hypothetical futurist terms. The oddity is more blunt in Spanish because the present subjunctive is not a mood but a tense representing the things we recommend or wish but haven’t actually done yet, and syntactically demands that the rest of the construction be followed by the same tense44.

Roberto Goizueta (1999:93) notices that “the subjunctive mood plays a much greater role in the Spanish than in the English language, and that ‘learning the subjunctive’ is usually the most difficult obstacle confronting a native English-speaker trying to learn Spanish”. The strangeness of the analyzed phrase sounds in Spanish as awkward as if a native English-speaker mixes verbal tenses in a same sentence, something that would sound like “I love to eat popcorns when I see a movie tomorrow”. It seems that FRANCISCO’s swift swapping from a subjunctive to a present tense indicates the inflection point where his conversation starts functioning as a ritualization.

Mixing a subjunctive with a present tense has an intriguing effect: it does not abolish FRANCISCO’s initial subjunctive attempt turning it into a state of an actual fact,

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44 Either “que cada vez que vaya a tomar agua o que coma algo” (present subjunctive tense), or “cada vez que tomo agua o que como algo” (simple present tense).
but on the contrary: it enhances his subjunctive mood as such, and raises it to its
cultural performances belong to culture’s subjunctive mood and not to the indicative
mood of social control. Goizueta, on his part, sees a subversive and generative character
in liminal subjunctivity since it asserts the present as projected into a possible future, and
vice versa: the subversive character of liminality ‘lies precisely in its ‘in-betweeness’; in
the case of temporal liminality, in its lying in between the present and the future, thereby
representing an implicit challenge to the status quo” (Goizueta 1999:93-4)

What I am suggesting is that in those conversations participants certainly ‘set in
operation’ a chain of discourses comprised of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors,
reflecting the already explained operative side of a belief system. The model of
subjectivity they were adopting could be tracked by observing the emphasis given to the
lobes of the Canon, the Codex, and the Archive. But simultaneously, participants
generated a conversational dynamic by deploying gestures, positions, and dispositions –
sometimes unconsciously– aimed to create and inhabit a propitious environment. It is
within and throughout such environment –we may call believesphere– where the beliefs
are enabled and ‘fit to operate’, thus becoming ‘operational’.

In other words, conversations that engage rational discussions on belief texts,
such as Pop-Esotericism, trade/express not only ‘discourses of beliefs’; along with them,
they enact ‘believing performances’ akin to ritualizations. It is through these
performances that such texts, on the one hand, gain the twofold status of being revelatory
and transformative, and on the other hand, get bodily impressed on people’s subjectivity.
As I explain further, the above makes the operational side the locus of spirituality, generating the ‘frame’ (Bell 1992) from which the operative platform starts functioning with transcendental meaning.

9.4.1. Classicalization and the bracketing of reality

David Tracy put forward that the gate to any religious dimension is the experience of limit; to overcome it, individuals try to find their “mode-of-being-in-the-world” (Tracy 1975, chap.4). People tackle this endeavor by relying on certain resources they recognize with the status of being ‘Classic Texts’. Tracy defines a ‘Classic Text’ as a resource used to grasp decent, responsible, and humanly meaningful existence (1982, part 2). As ‘classic’, a text has a public stance and is taken as something ‘given’, thus not needed to be defended. Additionally, it is regarded as revelatory and transformative, and therefore as having a conversion potential. These attributes are endowed to the text through subtle hermeneutic processes conveyed in ordinary social conversations.

I established previously that the three films used in this study were not the main object of conversations; rather, they worked as pre-texts in the creation of a collective-text wherein individuals addressed the main issue of their conversations, which is their own personal experience and worldviews. In this sense, media products –being them pop-esoteric or mainstream religious products– are pre-texts and resonant cultural references servicing, inter-subjectively, the empowerment agenda of the Self. Moreover, these conversations can be regarded as ritualizing moments. By expressing the operative
discourses of beliefs, *initiated, uninitiated*, and *resistants* contribute to weave a single warp (Gadamer 1989) from which the operational ‘believesphere’ fosters and houses believing performances. The threads of this common warp have different nuances: *initiated* and *resistants* engage conversations by *vividly* expressing the texts that once were forged in their previous pop-esoteric practices or religious inscriptions. For example, EUSEBIA, the pop-esoteric practitioner who identified herself with the main character of *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*?, recalled and emotionally commented on one particular scene to which she firstly attempted to give a rational explanation:

EUSEBIA: For example, when the girl is there and sees herself in the mirror, I mean, what does she do? She sees herself *this* big [*opens her arms*], right? and starts saying: [*mimicking:]* ‘I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!’*, right? So, what’s going on? Maybe, I don’t know, the thoughts, the attitudes, the emotions [*pauses*]; there are things we cannot do with emotions, since we can’t/ because it’s an emotion that comes and goes and that’s it. But what we *can* do care is for the attitude and the approach we take on that emotion.

The explanation became more vivid as she included herself to make her point clearer. Notice how she then gets increasingly involved in her identification:

EUSEBIA: Because the girl, while being in front of the mirror/For example, what do you do in front of a mirror? I, what do I do in front of the mirror? Well, perhaps I saw myself reflected on that. Long time ago I used to go to the mirror and looked at myself, and I started seeing me fat, ugly, and I saw myself just *just* like that, I saw myself *this* big, ok? [*opens her arms*] But then, there was this moment when I said: ‘Enough!’ I don’t know if that was the reason or whatever, ‘Hold your horses, Eusebia! You can’t keep doing this to your life!
As EUSEBIA keeps on with her story she becomes more autobiographical, leaving the scene from the film aside and referring to her own therapeutic experience in front of her mirrored image:

EUSEBIA: So I stick a banner on my mirror that said: ‘Fragile, do not approach if you are not worthy to admire yourself’, and for two days I did not looked at the mirror. Two days! So, I didn’t look at myself in the mirror until I said: ‘No, wait, up to when are you going to be upset with yourself?’ [chuckles], ‘if your love-handles are nothing else than those ‘tacos al pastor’ you have once in a while. You enjoyed them, didn’t you? Well, you see, now they are in those love-handles’

The dramatization and rhetoric of this quote suggest that EUSEBIA is performing an expressive rehearsal of prior impressed texts (beliefs and practices), and uses it to validate the operative character of the beliefs with which she operates transcendently her everyday reality. In general, the initiated are involved in pop-esoteric bodily practices and have the experience of sharing their consumptions and practices in social conversations. They tend to articulate their arguments in a way that synthesizes the dialectical dimension (the rationality of their beliefs) with the analogical dimension (through personal and emotive testimonials). In the above example, the vehemence with which EUSEBIA tells her story contributes to generate a propitious environment for the group that would make the conversation be parallel to, or upgraded from a rational discussion to a more performative locus.
Contrastingly, *uninitiated* engage conversations with a more decisive rationalist drive, often furnished with a literal *enthusiasm*. Theirs are rationalist-oriented argumentations, generally uttered with great excitement, as shown in the profuse use of superlatives in the next quote:

RAMIRO: I really loved the super fresh attitude of that guy we all liked, the funny old-man one. So cool! Because I think he embodies for fair and very neatly all this thing of ‘I don’t know where the hell do they go!’ [quotes him in English], because he’s like ‘listen, I could say this and that but, honestly, who knows’. I mean, his attitude super rocks. I was psyched with it. [speeding up his voice:] And I bet you this dude is an awesome genius with fifty five master-degrees in applied maths from Berkeley, and he can be the best hyper doctor in whatever you wish and still keeps saying ‘there are tons of questions that I could never answer’.

In some cases their *enthusiasm* gets closer to proselytism, making the *uninitiated* appear as if they were actual pop-esoteric practitioners. Some *uninitiated* informants granted first and third-person testimonies to gain reliability on their statements. PAULA participated in a seven-person discussion group. All participants for that group were undergrad students of communications and marketing and all of them were *uninitiated*. Since the first round, all participants but PAULA criticized unfavorably *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*? After some unfruitful attempts to make her case, she assumed a reserved behavior withdrawing her participation for most of the time. In spite of the unfavorable overall opinion of the film, the group resonated and agreed with most of the pop-esoteric premises of the product. Almost at the end of the session they were asked a projective

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question “To whom would you recommend the film?” Again, the group declared the film ineligible, but Paula made a final effort to make her opinion pervade:

Paula: I would recommend it to everyone.

Lola: To everyone in general?

Paula: Perhaps you, you didn’t like it, but each one has its own version, and I, it is a good way for making people change their minds. A friend of mine, her mother had cancer, and in those days she [her friend’s mother] was really really bad and we recommended the movie to her and so she saw it, and you should see how, [interrupts and sobs] how she, I mean, how she changed completely her attitude, her last days [pauses], and she indeed changed for good after seeing the movie and was like: ‘yes, I am really sick but because I want to spend more time with my daughters I will change’ I mean, from a defeat attitude to a more like this. And I think that it is important people see the film because it can be a chance for a change.

Although it is hard to prove, some testimonies bestowed by uninitiated informants are suspicious of being pseudo-testimonies. In effect, there are some inconsistencies of what Harvey Sacks (1975) called the “sequential implicativeness”, such as missed interactional slots, as well as over-reactive responses, narrative contradictions, among other clues, that give the impression of being simulations –or, if preferred, theatricalizations. As said before, while the operative side of a belief system is communicated discursively, demanding a rigorous coherence between beliefs and actual practices, the operational side is expressed performatively, through gestures and dispositions that are not commanded by the principle of logical cohesion. These simulations (theatricalizations) belong to the repertoire of ritualizations (Bell 1992) that the operational realm performs.
Let us recall GABRIELA, the young middleclass *uninitiated* participant whose utterance “When I go to the gym it’s like praying to myself” served as the opening sentence at the Introduction of this dissertation. Her case illustrates both sides of the belief system acting in the same person at two different moments of the conversation she engaged in. GABRIELA’s operative side is shown in the traditional monotheistic religious practices she detailedly exposed to view:

GABRIELA: I have a rosary in my car, and some images my granny gave me, and I cross myself when I pass by a church.

Despite the Catholic beliefs and practices that operate in GABRIELA’s everyday life, she *enthusiastically* echoed and entertained –at least during one section of the discussion group she participated– the pop-esoteric idea that ‘we all are God’, and presented herself ‘as if’ she had actually experienced these beliefs and ‘as if’ they were actually operating and informing her spirituality. In doing so, GABRIELA ‘bracketed’ her actual beliefs and practices, and enabled the operational side of her belief system to transform the conversation into a ‘playground’. It is in this playground setting where subjects exercise the act of believing as an enactment of performances and inner dispositions, akin to ritualizations, aimed to allow an alien text (Pop-Esotericism) being *impressed* –though provisionally– on the body of the individuals.

The above suggests that for *uninitiated* consumers, conversations are used to exchange opinions and positions regarding pop-esoteric propositions, but also that they are able to use these conversations as ritualizing spaces wherein ephemeral believing performances are enacted by means of bracketing their standard operative beliefs –
including the ontological and epistemological ones. In this sense the lack of a pop-esoteric explicit spiritual practice is substituted by the social practice of conversation.

When uninitiated interact with initiated consumers, the vehemence with which the latter tend to participate contribute to create the believesphere. However, this dynamic does not depend on such interaction for it can be also produced when uninitiated interact among themselves. In another discussion group both sides of the belief system also became manifest when participants confronted the frame they were collectively constructing (the operational side) versus their actual beliefs (the operative side). Along the session, participants of this group of undergraduate students were entertaining the idea that God is a convenient invention with which we explain to ourselves unanswered questions. When all seemed to agree, CESAR posed: “But, isn’t it stupid that we have to make up the answers to questions we can’t answer?” JULIO interrupted him: “It is stupid but that’s what God is. God is the explanation for the unexplainable. Like ‘don’t know where we come from? Voilà! God created us!’”. Then CESAR uttered a question that resulted disruptively and eventually made the spell break:

CESAR (to JULIO): ok, that’s my point, so you are aware of that, right?

JULIO: of course I am aware.

CESAR: then, how can you believe in God if you are aware that you invented him?!

The group started speaking all at once, GLORIA said that that “is a matter of faith”; JULIO echoed: “because a belief is a belief! and you believe and that’s it... I don’t have to prove you nothing”. Interestingly, when CESAR jeopardized the constructed operational
atmosphere—one that was of an agnostic position—the group did not tolerate his oppositional viewpoints and reacted defensively, challenging him in return by appealing to their operative beliefs (which were of a theistic position), once CESAR was repressed the order was reinstalled:

LORENA (to CESAR): What’s gonna happen to your soul when you are not here? What do you think it’ll happen to you?

CESAR: I’ll just stop existing

JULIO (to CESAR): You believe you have a soul?

CESAR: No I don’t! I mean... yes. [JULIO chuckles mockingly] I want to say yes, but that’d sound stupid after all the shit we have discussed here about the… the need we have to invent something because we ain’t tolerant to the idea of being finite.

This example evidences how the operative side of the belief system is bracketed while an operational space is created and inhabited within a social conversation. Through performances of this kind, individuals rehearse hypothetical positions as ‘believing(s)’, reframing what prior was stable and fixed for them.

I argued in Chapter 8 that Beliefs are operative ideas assumed as immutable and displayed in systems founded in paradigms, and therefore impregnated with senses of steadiness and control (Derrida 1966:405). Believing(s), on the contrary, are surrendered acts of cognition imbedded in fragile and errant operational flows that occasionally disrupt the system of inflections, syntax, and word formation of a language. However, these disruptions are far from being abrupt cathartic outbursts. Their efficacy resides precisely in being subtle; they come and go fleetingly, sneaking now and then amidst
social interactions. They are inconspicuous to external observers and certainly undetectable for those who conflate to conjure them.

9.4.2. Chanting and breaking the spell

Disruptive acts of cognition as the ones commented at the end of the previous section are ‘densities’ voiced as narrations but not necessarily accomplishing the coherent chain of causalities that characterizes a narration. When the group in which ESTHER participated made a round sharing their religious identifications, she identified herself as a non-religious and a non-spiritual person:

ESTHER: I am not religious at all, I never pray or visit a church. As for being spiritual; well, I don’t know, I am not a spiritual person, neither. Someone spiritual might be a saint or something and I am not spiritual.

Some time after the group discussed the *The Passion of the Christ*, they questioned if it was properly rated and criticized the explicit violence in it. ESTHER, who at this point was not actively participating, disrupted the pace of the conversation and intervened with a soft and emotive voice:

ESTHER: yes, they flogged him badly, smashed his bones, he was practically dead when he ascended to his cross. And still, in that inhuman state, he forgives: “forgive them, Father, for they don’t know what they are doing”. It’s something [pauses] beautiful, ugly, sad, and yet precious. He forgives Dismas, the good thief, and takes him to heaven. So, what I say is this: he who does not believe that Jesus forgave us all and gave up his life for our sake, well, I say he is wrong and faithless. [GROUP remains in silence]
By means of emotionalizing her account, ESTHER produced a mysterious atmosphere that extended for more than a ten-second lapse of deep, meditating silence. There is a colloquial expression to name disconcerting conversational slots of this kind: “An angel passed by!” Once it “passed”, NEREÆ recapitulated the conversation and reactivated the pace and tone the group had before as if no disruption had been occurred:

NERÆ: Now, I wanted to say that I don’t understand how such shocking images can be shown to children. There are films meant for children and others for adults, and this one definitely should have been rated for adults only.

The above is an example of a successful chanting/breaking of a spell. It is transitory, unexpected, almost unmindful, and loaded with effective (and affective) convoking material. The loadings of a spell differ from common narrations: whereas narrations are held within the structuring order of language that restricts the boundaries of the meaning at the time that imposes coherency on it, these other cognitions exceed such language and often release (mesmerizing) material that otherwise would be kept aside, perhaps in the realm of the disavowed.

Generally, sudden changes in the register of a conversation indicate that an episode of ritualization is taking place and that a spell is about to be conjured. The parlance of ritualizing agents swaps rationalist-drives for emotionality, like ESTHER; or chaotic and unarticulated disagreements for lucid verbalizations that reach harmonious consensus. This happened in a group of five well educated adults, aged 35 to 45, all of them uninitiated in Pop-Esotericism, who discussed on the adequacy of the institutional church. The conversation began smoothly, almost scholarly, but eventually it roused
passionately and harsh: all snatching and tripping into the others’ points of view with loud interventions. At minute 24, when all seemed to be in total disagreement, EDMUNDO raised his hand as if he were in a classroom, and with his hand risen and eyes on the floor, he lowered the tone of voice and summarized the following:

EDMUNDO: The church sees itself as being beyond and above everything and everyone. It hasn’t evolved. It is ruled by structures that date hundreds of years. Now, this archaic structure is unable to acknowledge what humanity is today, what people are in essence and what their needs are. Thus, the church does not respond to the current spiritual needs and to what people are searching today.

LORETTA seconded him in the same pace and mood, like recapturing and forwarding his thoughts, but also taking the speech from a third-person discourse to a first-person one.

LORETTA: it has lost, since long time ago, the opportunity of housing this ideal of a social community, a life-sharing community of people who gather and share and help each other. For the church, everything is about going to mass and pray and confess and get baptized. An obligation you ought to do, but people go and then nothing happens, because that doesn’t touch you, that doesn’t give you the inner feeling of being supported. For me, current society does not need any longer this kind of spiritual help, what one needs is to share one’s life with a supportive community, a community that would give you human support, and this is what the church has failed to achieve.

The rest of the group joined this stream and ambience, which lasted several minutes more until reaching saturation and someone made a joke, moving the conversation into a different topic. The above is equivalent to the chant of a spell aimed to construct
consensus based on lucidity; by doing so, participants are enabled to inhabit texts they were previously constructing—they are “textualized”.

Similar register-shifts for initializing a spell are even more noticeable among youngsters. In my research, young participants engaged in purposely disarticulated conversations, as if they were pretending to be clumsy. This seems to be a strategy for gaining identification and establishing rapport among youngsters who meet for the first time. However, in my focus and discussion groups this worked like a long preamble for the ritualizing moment.

One group of undergrads started the session—and went all thru—with very unarticulated and clumsy sentences. At certain moments their commentaries sounded somehow shallow, wordy, and irrelevant; what Mexicans call “cantinflezcos”. This is JAVIER, a 21 year-old undergrad student of Law, speaking during the first third of the session:

JAVIER: ’cause, I don’t know, I, yeah, I studied in a school which was, mmm, whatever-you-want-Catholic school; but mainly, I mean, I mean, Ok, right? yes, it is like very too much blood or you name it, but it lasted the entire thing, I mean not only like those points. Mainly it’s like, well, it’s not, I mean, what I was told is that it was not so…I mean it is like very I-don’t-know. That’s nothing compared with what it was in/because even like those whips they use there were not those they used, and I don’t know, I mean…

As the conversation evolved, the group left aside the themes directly associated with the films, and started addressing topics more related with their own concerns. They conversed about self-sufficiency and autonomous ethics, talked about lack of certainty
and the “age of void”, and pondered how spirituality helps to cope with this. This is JAVIER talking again in the last third of the session, notice how the awkwardness swaps for sophistication, and how –like in the example of EDMUNDO and LORETTA– the other participants second him and extend his thoughts:

JAVIER: …to believe in something beyond, not necessarily in a Catholic God or in a Jewish God, but to believe in something. Because, because now we are living in an empty world in which we don’t know if there are some absolute truths or not.

HORTENCIA: a world wherein everything is relative, in which you are able to …

JAVIER: aha, able to say anything you want, and if you postulate some human values as key values for society, then you are questioned, because now society has complex levels of diversity, or because this or that. My feeling is that these are efforts people do, you know, to overcome the age of vacuum and incertitude we are living in. I mean, from my perspective the clue is to believe in something, whatever you are up to believe, believe in something that is beyond…

JONÁS: To have faith!

JAVIER: Aha! To have faith! In something. Exactly, that’s the word: ‘to have faith in something’, and from there on to know how to decide between good and evil, and reach, you know…

ABELARDO: …balance.

Subjects find themselves captivated by these releases which rather than being uttered discursively, are “spelled” out in registers capable to invoke the verge of liminality. Interestingly, both adults and young informants who showed to be very well articulated during off-ritualizing moments, adopted ‘clumsiness’ as a style when trying to chant a spell, and turned back to ‘eloquence’ to cool off or break the spell.
Similar to ‘spells’, acts of believing do not follow the continuous motion and linearity of logical discourses, but rather rehearse the motionless mesmerism caused by blasts of condensed contents. Those in my study who held more rational/academic conversations were less likely to initialize ritualizing episodes; however, when they did so, they appealed to personal emotive experiences reckoned as transformative. ALICIA is a faculty member of a university at Mexico City, she is also an initiated practitioner of astrology. In an interview she elaborated largely on the idea of a “universe in balance” associating it with the proposal of *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*? She explained this in strict academic terms: rendering logic, ordered, and objective linear explanations on the Shaiva tradition in Hinduism, and then comparing it to the notion of Nirvana in original Buddhism. At some point she made her lecture transit from the “cold knowledge” (Gordon 1997) to her personal opinions and preferences, and then to the zone of experiences in which her structure of feeling found a transformative recognition.

ALICIA: Shiva creates, preserves, destroys, she is balance. But I like more to think that at a certain moment, like in Nirvana, you will walk away from all this, that you will get rid of duality because this world is a world of duality, it is a world of contradiction. But this is how it is! That’s the experience, right? Cold-hot, night-day, good-bad, white-black, tall-short. Yes! Like Sesame Street! [*she bursts in loud laughter*] right? Uh, so, this [pauses] uh, that’s how it is. Um, and if we believe that God created everything [sighing] I mean, truly, when I… I had a teacher who once told me: “if God is to love, to love and serve above all, then you must reach this point in which you can love even the murderer, the prostitute [with pitiful voice] because they are also there, they are also God’s work, too”. [sobbing] eh, something, something… [*she searches for the idea, her eyes get watery*]. Love is compassion.
Spells are gestated in episodes of ritualization like the ones exemplified above. Considering them as ensembles of surpassing knowledge is consistent with post-structuralist narrative theories and narratology studies (Prince 2003), however it also resonates with the “effervescent emotionality” Durkheim (1912) identified as the key lubricant of the social conduction or transference of beliefs. Put it differently: in front of a spell one is not ultimately dealing with beliefs or with any other ‘noun’-form as one does in orderly symbolic discourses; but primarily, one is willfully set into the stream of a ‘continuous tense’, namely the very act of believing, made of ensembles of excesses. What ultimately gives efficiency to a spell –and here let us use the metaphor literally, as in “sorcery”– are not the words compounding the incantation by themselves, but the craft and the vivid embodiment with which the sorcerer spells (and expels) them, sometimes becoming the sorcerer not more in control than being controlled by the excesses he channels.

I earlier introduced Eliseo, the resistant participant who watched The Da Vinci Code “Bible in hands” and disagreed with it because he found it very inconsistent with “my religious experience and from my beliefs”. At minute 63 of the session, when the focus group was exploring the rationale of the thesis proposed in the film, that Jesus was married and had an active sexual life, he uttered the following:

Eliseo: at least for me that wouldn’t affect me at all. Even that mundane side of Jesus would make me feel more, more, closer to him.

Facilitator: Closer to…?
ELISEO: [changing his tone of voice to a poetic and evocative one] It is a sensation that I would love to perceive, and taste, and savor. [pauses] It wouldn’t take out my faith at all.

FACILITATOR: So, can you imagine Jesus married?

ELISEO: yes, I can imagine him not only as a married man, but rather I imagine him more as being like close to people instead of being distant.46 […] A person who had all human sensibilities. I think that one enormous sensibility humans have is love, physical closeness, to come in contact and touch and be touched; and it would take nothing from me if he had an active sexual life. [my emphasis]

His statement seems contradictory with his previous assessments and also with the opinions he would bestow 10 minutes later, at minute 73, when another participant defended enthusiastically the plausibility of Jesus having descendants.

ELISEO: but see, for example, I go back to/there, for example, I don’t think Jesus Christ was a man like any other terrestrial man, because he was not conceived as it is usual among men in the Earth; so I wouldn’t see him as having offspring.

In the first of these two excerpts, ELISEO not only humored the stream of thought the group was rationally entertaining, but he initialized an incantation by means of theatrical affections in his voice and the use of words that recall physicality (“sensation”, “taste”, “savor”, “sensibility”, “contact”, “touch”). By being him the first one in inhabiting the ritualizing space he created, he drew the rest of participants into it, raising an overall ‘group enthusiasm’. However, his release was a fictive one as we can see in the second excerpt. There, ELISEO folds back to the more doctrinal position of Jesus’ virginal birth, contradicting his previous stance. Moreover, one can find traces of ‘fictiveness’ in his

46 “en cambio me lo imagino sí más siendo como cercano a las personas en lugar de que pusiera distancia”
first intervention. Notice the syntactic oddity when Eliseo says “I can imagine him not only as a married man, but rather I imagine him more as…” In Spanish the phrase “en cambio” works as the English adversative adverb “rather” (or instead) which suppresses or contradicts a previous idea. The sentence begs for another connector, such as “también me lo imagino…” (I also imagine him…).

Rather than propositional discourses, these fictive expenditures are closer to the spells enchanted after/during trance episodes. A spell concentrates the residuals of a cognitive journey, and eventually it is capable to relate and re-actualize part of its novelty and power. If a narration is a ‘possession’ of elements strategically picked up and brought together, a spell is a ‘dispossession’, a blast of elements that could no longer be contained as an untold experience. The stream of social circulation, where both possessive and dispossessive narratives simultaneously flow, makes them being readable under the register of discursiveness, which ultimately is the lubricant of understanding under the guidance of coherence.

I have assessed that the operative and the operational run simultaneously in a belief system; no side has preeminence in time or importance over the other. Both give concretion to the system and both are manifested due to their flickering constitution. In a previous section I made use of the Chinese auto-stereograms as a metaphor for explaining the palimpsest formed by the operative and the operational. Now that we have elaborated on each of the sides, if we were to chart them at work, well, that image would be much too complicated. Let us try, instead, a simpler design: a foldable page, as in Figure 22, which once bent over overlaps and merges the two sides of the belief system.
The dotted line indicates, obviously, where the page should be folded. The arrows stress the loop that is continuously feeding-back the system; only that this loop does not follow the order of linearity but a non-linear co-occurrence.

On the Operative Side, ‘beliefs’ –their being circumstantial or terminal– are expressed in collective narratives that reflect values, attitudes and behaviors desirable to the Ideal-Self. The very act of expressing the text enables it as a ‘pre-text’, a ‘raw’ material the Operational Side carves and recognizes as a classic to nurture the ‘believing act’. Through conversational performances, believers loose themselves in tattooing-like rituals: pricking and ingraini ng on their skin, along with the classic text, pigments of conscious or unconscious biographical material. Fresh senses of meaning and spirituality get impressed then, and the loop perpetuates as the new ‘textualized self’ shapes its further acquisitions.
Figure 22. Folded-page diagram of The Operative and The Operational
Summary of Part Three

In contemporary global media society, there are three distinguishable reservoirs of symbolic forms susceptible to feed and inform belief systems related with transcendency: the sources of the inscribed, the ascribed, and the gatekeepers. Subjects approach these sources by involving different cognitive positionalities, or lobes. Firstly, it is the Lobe of the Canon which consists in direct and unmediated incursions into sources from which subjects identify meanings that become normative and nonnegotiable, foundational and fundamental for them. When the operative side of a belief system is largely based on canonical appropriations, the resultant model of subjectivity is a fundamentalist one. In my study, this model of subjectivity was manifested primarily among the resisters to Pop-Esotericism. Secondly, it is the Lobe of the Codex which compiles hermeneutical guidance bestowed by and always connected to authoritative mediators from the inscribed and ascribed sources. A subjectivity based on codexical acquisitions is typical in popular religiosity. In this research those showing this formation tended to be pop-esoteric initiated. Thirdly and finally, it is the Lobe of the Archive lubricating appropriations and disappropriations of selected elements from the broad ambience. A subjectivity shaped by this lobe forges and fuels provisionality and fluidity, which are key characteristics in postmodernist cognition. Those in my study who showed a fit in this category were the uninitiated pop-esotericists.

The triple-lobe model of subjectivity locates my subjects as proficient ‘archivists’. Moreover, their consuming and conversing about media products –like the three films analyzed here– behaves in a resonant manner with their belief system. From the
operative, the content-based side of the system, they express rhyzomatic and polyglot parlances of beliefs. From the operational, the performance-based side, they deploy generative strategies to create and inhabit (ephemeral) spaces wherein their subjectivity gets impressed. By bracketing the everyday reality and conjuring spell-like moments, archivists rehearse, properly speaking, the act of believing.

Although it is difficult to define a believer, the difference between beliefs and believing can be stated. ‘Beliefs’ are creeds, propositions individuals appropriate from different sources. Once entered into the ‘Zone of the Acquirer’, a belief has to be defended or justified in rational ways, using proofs either scientific or historical. For instance, a belief might be that Mary was a virgin until the end of her life, or that Christ was a sexually active person, or that the mind creates and governs external reality. But all these are ‘pro-positions’ that may or may not correspond completely to what the subject might actually experience. They are pre-texts for ‘positioning’ and sustaining the more radical act of believing. ‘Believings’, in turn, are phantasmatic performances of realities that are beyond language and expression. Sometimes these performances open the gate to material that ordinarily belongs to areas different from the practicality of the symbolic realm. Although being essentially of an elusive nature, believings can be grabbed through social conversations and interactions, as my study demonstrates. This does not waive the need of being aware that the study on beliefs and believings will always miss a component that is impossible not only to measure, but to be expressed in the logical

47 The Greek Φαντάσματα does not refer primarily to inexistential entities popping-up out of nothing. Phantasmata are not hallucinations. Etymologically, the root carries the idea of an agent that makes things visible, an “I/eye” causing or bringing to light things otherwise concealed.
structures of the *langue* and *parole*. Furthermore, both beliefs and believings are contextual responses. In coincidence with Weber, belief systems are not a-temporal or a-spatial phenomena; therefore, the theory I am proposing of the Operational Belief System has a high correspondence to the postmodern contexts. This is a context of multiple realities and lack of ultimate truths, of multiple subjectivities assumed by polyglot and nomadic subjects (Braidotti 1994). Such a scenario allows the birth and survival of the Narcissus, side by side with the Modern Self. They live side by side, although they do not enter into a debate, as it was observed in the focus and discussion groups of my research where participants systematically avoid a confrontation, asserting that “*all viewpoints are valid and have to be respected*”.

This study provides empirical proofs that media –regardless of being explicitly religious, as *The Passion of the Christ*, or with pop-esoteric potentialities like *What The Bleep do We (k)now!!?* and *The Da Vinci Code*– once entered into ritualizing settings, strives to be reckoned as a Classic Text (Tracy 1975; 1982) and thus inform the belief system. In the case of media with pop-esoteric potentialities, the pop-scientific language present in these products becomes the equivalent of a liturgical language facilitating images and metaphors to the ritualizing agents (i.e. the participants of a ritualization/conversation).

The *uninitiated* are able to stress their membership to a traditional religion while enthusiastically exploring other belief systems. During these scoutings, the *operative* side of the belief system with which believers maneuver transcendently their everyday life, remains intact because the believer decrees it bracketed. This bracketing of the *operative*
side allows the operational side of the belief system to be mobilized to ‘reframe’ the believer’s fundamental and ‘ghostly’ concerns; in other words, it exposes the Self to the locus where spirituality is forged. Even if the outcome of this re-framing exercise is ephemeral, it gives the individual the actual experience of having exerted agency over the belief system, at the time that habituates the subject for further ritualizations.

There is evidence to affirm positively that all three typologies foreseen in this study (initiated, uninitiated, and resistants) initialize and/or get involved in ritualizing performances during conversations on media consumption, and that such performances include the chanting-breaking cycle of spells. However, pop-esoteric conversations, seen as believing performances, are differently experienced by each typology: for both the resistants and the initiated, conversations are means for expressing and reproducing the canon of an already impressed Text (the Text that was bodily impressed on them through their explicit religious or pop-esoteric practices). On the side of the uninitiated, the conversation works as a proxy of a spiritual practice whose gestures and spells are aimed to achieve a corporeal—though temporary and provisional—impression of the Text.

Finally, for an observer, the two sides come afore depending on the angle of observation. That is why it is relevant for sociological readings to have in scope theoretical frames that not only foresee the expressiveness of rational-driven discourses on beliefs, but also take into account the more phantasmatic presences that often bump into the phenomenon. This is what the Theory of the Operational Belief System intends to convey.
Chapter 10

Conclusions

«As a balloon might be your God. You yourself can be your God»

The quote is actual. It evokes the opening voice at the Introduction of this work: GABRIELA’s “praying to herself”. May this reminiscence tint the concluding pages. We have so far gone through different theoretical considerations and approaches to empirical data to interrogate the dynamics displayed during conversations where beliefs are discussed apropos media consumptions related to religion and transcedency. In examining the narrative elaborations of beliefs exerted by film audiences we have inferred how subjectivity is constructed and brought to bear in the narration/performance of believing. I answered my research question setting forth a model: the ‘theory of the operational belief system’.

The body of my dissertation is presented in three parts. The first one established the hermeneutic connections audiences made and detected the potential proposals in the films for constructing subjectivity and senses of spirituality. The second one dissertated on the processes through which audiences emancipate spiritual and religious motifs from the public-institutional sphere, and elaborated the concept of “Pop-Esotericism”. The third part discussed traditional understandings of belief systems and proposed an alternative theoretical model to make sense of how subjectivity is constructed and imprinted with transcendental/spiritual ends. Each of the three parts, besides ending with
a summary of the main findings, rendered a conclusion in dialogue with the leading research questions. Therefore, rather than forcing a reiterative condensation of the essential points of the whole research, this concluding chapter takes on the task of delineating the possible implications of what was found in each part. It firstly reflects on the mythical resonances of the viewing experience and the complex production of psychic material it prompts. It follows a consideration of Pop-Esotericism as an expression of a wider form of social cognition, conjecturing its possible prospect. Afterwards, it advances a discussion on spiritual agency in late-modern times. Finally, in relation to future investigations, I lay out a set of notes that I think should be taken into account for inquiring the political implications of belief using my model.

10.1. Psychic Productions, mythical resonances of the viewing experience

Although the embedded proposals of the three films were accurately identified by my informants, that doesn’t mean they necessarily resonated with them. In fact, participants of this study showed to have had the threefold reading of a myth options foreseen by Barthes (1972:129), namely a cynical reading, a critical reading, and a mythical reading. For example, the static cynical reading in which the interpreter deciphers the meaning of a myth by relating a given signifier to a specific signified –almost like finding translations for signs– was expressed by those viewers who took elements from the story of The Da Vinci Code and used them ‘exegetically’ to confirm their previously acquired knowledges (“Silas symbolizes the actual corruption of the Church’’); one finds a demystifying critical reading meant to destroy and unmask proposed myths in spectators
of *The Passion of the Christ* who uttered critical expressions (“Gibson’s sadism seeks to exacerbate the faith”); and yet, there were also viewers who properly performed a dynamic mythical reading, consuming the myth according to the very ends of its structure, like those who saw *What the Bleep Do We (k)now!* and considered *Amanda* as “the very presence of a healing Self”, identifying themselves with her and even emulating her.

The above suggests that films’ models for constructing subjectivity (as any other narrative) have the potentiality to provoke mythical resonant effects, but that signification is bestowed by audiences when the viewing experience implies the dual mirroring recognition that makes the plane of language (that is, the ‘literality’ or literal-sense of a story) overlap with the plane of myth (the ‘metaphoricity’ of a story), making a story being read as fictional as well as revelatory. In other words: those who view the films and use them to create senses of spirituality for themselves relate to the films in terms of a cognitive revelation, deeming ‘sacred’ the object that is revealed rather than the narrative or the product itself.

We have discussed Heneghan’s (2003:62) assumption that consumers tend to clothe their consumptions with sacred meanings in order to gain socially accepted significances; in our specific case preventing them from recognizing that the spiritual meanings or feelings they discover in visual media products derive from their participation in a consumer society. In fact, all my subjects, independently of having cynical, critical or mythical readings, did recognize at every moment that they were exposed to mainly media-entertainment products. They certainly recognize this, but in a
way that such recognition seems suspended or rendered null. For example, one discussion group recognized the consumerist drive in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!?,* and even teased on that, but this did not prevent them from also acknowledging the spiritual meanings and values in the film:

CESAR: I think it’s an excellent infomercial, I would give it the award as the best infomercial ever (laughter)

BALVINA: (parodying) ‘if you are…’ as they say ‘if you are tired of being…’

RAMIRO: (parodying) ‘tired of those hemorrhoids?’ (laughter)

CESAR: besides, it’s the only infomercial you have to pay for watching it.

RAMIRO: hey, so what happens with the deep insights you said before you found in it?

CESAR: no, no, no, wait a sec! The fact that I’m saying that it is an infomercial doesn’t mean I didn’t like it.

BALVINA: of course not, even the Bible is a Bestseller.

In this excerpt the sense of humor helps nullifying or suspending the knowledge that a commodity is not supposed to be consumed as a spiritual input. It reckons both the consumption nature of the product and its spiritual potentiality. Such interplay of *knowing* and at the same time *not-knowing* recalls Mulvey’s (1993) portrait of disavowal (*I know very well, but all the same*) and Žižek’s (1995) related form (*I know, but act as if I did not have such knowledge*).

Media consumption of narratives related to spirituality or transcendency, far from a passive reception, is a complex production of psychic material. The films analyzed here put forth three ‘sites’ in which the Self is presented as insuffi cient and experiencing
mutilative situations, and propose different ways to cope with that. Viewers meet the embedded contents of film narratives and construct systems of meanings upon which they are able to ‘project’ themselves and find senses of subjectivity and self-identity, either by means of biographical identifications (pairing their own personal situations to those plotted in the story, and even mimicking them), or by intellectual identifications (resonating or dissonating cognitively with the proposals of the films).

The studied films represent three strategies that deal with the cognitive edge of the gaze: the characters of all three stories are determined by what they see and how they are seen by others, which in turn determines the needed knowledge to overcome their misadventures. Consumers can use these strategies to address their own experience of disempowering incompleteness and draw spiritual implications. Each film stands for a different visual-based philia proposed as a therapy: a therapeutic/regressive gaze in *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*?, a fetishistic scopophilic scrutiny in *The Da Vinci Code*, and a sadistic scopophilia in *The Passion of the Christ*. They are models for experiencing and constructing subjectivity by equating *sighting* with *knowledge*. In *What The Bleep do We (k)now!*? the knowledge of oneself (refurbishing one’s image) reshapes the way one understands otherness, in *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Passion of the Christ* the knowledge of otherness reshapes the way one understands oneself. In these models subjectivity is engaged in the effort of ‘reordering’ the symbolic order, either by means of techno-forensic investigations (*What The Bleep do We (k)now!*? and *The Da Vinci Code*), or by more intrusive surgical procedures (*The Passion of the Christ*).
The previous visual cognitions grant the seer with the illusion of grabbing and controlling the haunting and unspeakable ‘(w)hole’, the Lacanian impossible-Real. They are psychic productions of mythical resonances that set the knower in front of a source of truth that seems to him evident, unquestionable, and intelligible. Nevertheless, none of the models conceive individuals as recipients of truths elaborated and administrated by other agencies (organized institutions of any kind), instead they advocate for an individual constituted as the main agent and agency for all meaning-makings through which both otherness and the Self are re-conceptualized.

Surely there might be other dynamics besides the ones identified in my study which could be brought out with frames other than psychoanalysis. The point or main finding is that the exposure to visual-narratives related to spirituality or transcendency stir engagements which are not only discursive, argumentative, or merely rational. These are deployments that refurnish the proposals and belief propositions –like those conveyed in media products with pop-esoteric potentialities– enabling them to be used as personalized inputs for relevant further elaborations.

10.2. Pop-Esotericism; crests, troughs and possible prospects

Pop-Esotericism is a ‘category of use’ rather than a ‘media genre’. It implies, of course, certain media products produced and distributed by the cultural industry, whose content and aesthetics are related to spirituality, science, and transcendency; but these are just features that endow the product with a raw potentiality. What actualizes Pop-Esotericism
is the audiences’ recognition of meanings of esoteric and spiritual significance for themselves. The analysis of characteristics, dynamics, and legitimating mechanisms of these commodified narratives, as well as the practices and discourses (science-religion-spirituality) associated to their consumption, allows us to affirm Pop-Esotericism as a rational narrative with a consumption and conversational drive. In this sense, it is a text that works as a resonant media-reference, but most importantly it is able to be taken as a pre-text in the construction of collective conversational spaces wherein the consumers’ belief system is engaged.

The reliance on conversational and discourse analysis to explain rationalizing discourses that viewers use in interpreting the meaning of the films, besides having resulted helpful to lay out the argument for the notion of Pop-Esotericism, provided revealing evidence to support the claim that conversation is a constituent performance of pop culture. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the consumption experience and social circulation of pop-esoteric products implies mechanisms of self-reproduction through intertextual linkages aimed to articulate frameworks with which individuals construct their subjectivity as an autonomous and empowered one.

I purposely deferred to the end the justification of a word that makes part of the title of the present work: “wave”. How to ascertain the dimensions of the pop-esoteric phenomenon? What is its status in the social life, its sitz im sozialleben, where it occurs? Is it a trend, a stream, a movement, an age? I argue that what best gauges Pop-Esotericism is conceiving it as a wave. The term wave is often understood intuitively as the transport of disturbances on a given milieu. Waves not necessarily associate with
motion of the medium as a whole, but as they propagate they transfer energy to or through the surface they cover. Likewise, Pop-Esotericism perturbs the steady waters of two traditional sources of truth – religion and science, but it does so not because profound changes are taking place in those realms, but for the reason that subjects experience new cognitive positions and imperatives to find transcendental meanings for the construction of their own subjectivity, and they channel the energy of this new cognition by relating differently to the rationality of modern life. The concrete form for Pop-Esotericism to relate with modern rationality is one that severs spirituality from religion and allies it with science. Somehow, spirituality colonizes scientific language borrowing its images and terminology without being submissive to it, but also without entirely waiving the images and terminology from the religious wells.

While some spiritual expressions of the so overarching tide of New-Agism obtain spiritual meaning through selectively invoking and reframing various traditional narratives, rituals, and symbols, some other spiritual ‘waves’ – like Pop-Esotericism – embrace a commitment to the rationality of modernism, and uses it as a collective language in the twofold effort of reconciling transcendent meaning with emerging rational discourse (Besecke 2001) and, thus, obtaining social and cognitive legitimacy. It has been argued that both ‘selectiveness’ and the ‘personal/individual accents’ of this commitment inaugurate a “reflexive spirituality” (Roof 1993; 1999) that stands for a personal way of relating to religion, and that the resulting individual religion is a tradition- eschewing method of personal spiritual fulfillment (Wuthnow 1992; 1998). Some other voices question this understanding of reflexivity, though. Sociologist of
spirituality Kelly Besecke deems reflexive spirituality as an offered language that acknowledges some insights of religious traditions, and uses them “to engage with each other in talk about meaning in the modern world” (2001:367-8, *my emphasis*). The use of this common language allows those who participate in a conversation to communicate and affirm the importance of transcendent meanings. Otherwise stated, it makes religious traditions meaningful for a rationalized social context (Besecke 2001:368) and, by the same token, it bonds people and reconciles reason and rationality with spirituality (Mihelich 2007:3-4).

In Pop-Esotericism, the main vehicle of reconciliation is science: the supreme embodiment of the rationalized argument. Media products analyzed in this work make extensive use of scientific claims as main guarantees of their theses, and audiences acknowledge accurate reception of these discourses, independently of liking or disliking the films. One participant reflected on this and found it paradoxical:

**FLORENTINO**: I think this shows the paradox of our days: on the one hand we are eager to find meaning to our spirituality through orthodox science and, on the other hand, we strive hard to bestow a spiritual meaning to the orthodox science.

In strict sense there is no paradox here. This quote grasps the essence of the subjects I studied, who are simultaneously pre-modern, modern, and late-modern (or postmodern), caught in-between\(^1\) the contradictions of a “subjective turn” (Voas and Bruce 2007:43-4) that has to deal, at the same time, with the irrationality of the pre-modern subject and the rationality of the modern subject. It is manifest that this tension is felt as another source

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\(^1\) I use here Homi Bhabha’s (1994) elaboration of the subject’s “in-betweeness”.
of anxiety (sometimes perceived as a paradox, like FLORENTINO does, and some other times expressed in oxymoron-like synthesis, such as ‘scientific spirituality’ or ‘spiritual science’). One avenue of solution is to make peace between the two sides (pre-modern and modern; that is, the irrational and the rational) through mixing science and spirituality as a way of living one’s life:

SANDRA: Quantum physics is a way of living. Is a way of living. Is the way of making reality your actions, of guiding your life, your thoughts, the way you get up and the way you go to bed.

Considered as a cultural discourse placed in a particular moment in history, Pop-Esotericism is destined to not be fixed at any time but to follow the changeability of all communicative codes. It moves from being an emergent code to a dominant code, from being dominant to become residual, and from residual into oblivion. That’s the fate of a wave train: it grows, it strikes and then recedes. The aftermath is what matters. What is left on the shore is the sediment over which following waves will break, and apparently that is a re-empowered individual who has trained himself as self-constructor of subjectivity and who has taken the risk of scouting out of the safety that legitimate sources of meaning grant.

It is still premature to know when Pop-Esotericism will yield its place to the next wave and what would that be. We have seen, though, that some categorical features of it—like crypto-history, pop-science, and manifestations of esoteric release—have existed in other moments of modern history, and they may persist in what follows. Nonetheless, if rushed to sketch out the next move, perhaps we should monitor the latest trends in
cinematic narratives. There we have *The Book of Eli* (USA, 2010), a post-apocalyptic tale of a blind nomad who travels across America protecting a sacred book (the last copy of King James version of the Bible) that holds the secrets to saving humankind; or more recently *The Rite* (USA, 2011), a conversion tale of an American skeptic Catholic deacon who enrolls in an exorcism school in Rome, meets a Jesuit exorcist, and resoundingly affirms his faith and the value of priestly ministry. What I am suggesting is that whatever comes next, it will not necessarily align to or escalate the stream of Pop-Esotericism. We shouldn’t even discard a swinging back of the pendulum: from heavily drawing on the sources of the *ascribed* (the many systems existing in the media-cultural ambience, like the spiritual implications of post-Newtonian sciences) to the procurement of symbolic forms from the *inscribed* sources (the well organized, explicit creed forms, like the confession of the Bible as a sacred text, or the credit given to the Catholic Church’s rite of exorcism). However, that who would eventually ‘swing back’ to approach traditional religious sources would do so not *canonically* (the normative and nonnegotiable position of the fundamentalist shape), nor in *codexical* ways (seeking consent of legitimated authority as in the popular religiosity shape), but rather as a skilled *archivist* (forming provisional collections of meanings, characteristic of the postmodernist shape). In sum, the surfer of the next wave will be one rehearsed and sedimented by the pop-esoteric adventure.

The burgeoning of a media driven popular culture spirituality in Mexico suggests that a wave of Pop-Esotericism is merging among the middle and upper middle classes, and that this wave promotes a *Narcissoid* self that focuses on self improvement and self
empowerment to the exclusion of concern for other. Furthermore, the development of the concept of Pop-Esotericism, besides helping to define a set of media that are oriented toward metaphysical communities, brings to light the high level of globalization of this worldview, at least among the urban, educated population of developing nations. It might also be announcing the emergence of a global-class whose spiritual shape is modeled by both the usage of commodified global media-narratives for spiritual readings and the social interactions these readings awake. The grounded knowledge attained from this phenomenon should be of interest to a broad readership including those interested in contemporary belief systems and the strategies of colonization and adaptation of traditional religious spaces and practices.

10.3. The ‘Seat’ of Spirituality, a discussion on spiritual agency

The model of the Operational Belief System foresees two dynamics: the *operative* and the *operational*, they correspond respectively to the realms of what commonly is known as *the beliefs* and the *believing*. I have explained that both dynamics (or sides) run synchronically and complementarily. I have also suggested that within the *operational* side a ‘frame’ is generated that enables the *operative* side to function and express transcendental meanings. Such frame is fashioned by a variety of aware and unaware performances aimed to (bodily) impress a Text on one’s subjectivity. One expresses a thing because such a thing is somehow already impressed on us. This may sound platitudinous, but is a plain way to say that it is not the beliefs what makes us believe, but our believing what makes us articulate certain (and circumstantial) beliefs. There is an
implication of no little account in all this: if we were to situate the ‘locus’ of spirituality, that cradle would be the operational side.

The analytical observation on the operational side of the belief system brings to view ritualizing operations in which individuals bracket their reality to yield themselves into playful, oneiric-like collective states. There, they “sit and wait” for the eruption of the right ‘incantation’; that would confer them senses—rather than conceptual meanings—of spirituality. “Sit and wait” could be the implicated terms for a colloquial description of Spirituality: the carrying out of actions we do in the hopes that something other than us come into being.

The term ‘spirituality’ was scarcely used in the common language of the sixties and shyly reappeared in the eighties. However, it was in the nineties when it came afore as a rediscovered category and began to be applied to social phenomena related to the sacred. The term has become increasingly visible in the sociological ambit, somehow rescued “from the shadowy realms of theology to become a ‘fashionable’ sociological concept.” (Giordan 2007:162) Furthermore, the reemergence of the term has reshaped its axis of legitimization, from the authority bestowed by religious institutions (the inscribed source) to the freedom of the acquirer subject, who no longer relates the sacred to heteronomous morality, but rather accentuates individual creativity and expression in the

2 In his *Estudios sobre el Amor*, José Ortega y Gasset links falling in love with ecstasy, hypnosis, and mysticism. He elaborates a thorough philology out of the linguistic turns that condensate peeks of millenarian psychology. What enamors, he says, is always a certain «charm». “The name, borrowed from the magic technique and given to the object of love, indicates that the anonymous mind –creator of language– has realized the extra-normal and irremissible state in which lovers fall. The most ancient verse is the magical formulae Cantus and Carmen; and the act and magical effect of such formulae was the incantatio. From there, enchantment; and in French, charme, from Carmen.” (1981:50 my translation)
course of his *canonical*, *codexical* and *archival* acquisitions. The individual is the one who determines what is spiritual and what is not. Participants of my study showed this tendency to include the role of the individual agency in dealing with religiosity and spirituality.

**SANDRA:** To me, a religious person is anyone obeying the rules and the structure of any religion, those who accomplish all practices. And a spiritual being is that person who is in communion with a Supreme Being, whatever you call it, but a person who receives this spiritual communion within his soul (….) The spiritual is what makes us different from one another: it is the essence, in my view it is the very essence everyone has inside. I am a Catholic, and the difference [*between a spiritual and a religious person*] is that [*a religious person*] follows somebody religiously, follows his steps. And the spiritual means to completely think in and by oneself.

To the majority of my informants religiousness is associated with being in compliance with institutional norms, while the spiritual implies a contemplative stance focused on the individual and its essence. According to Giordan (2007:165) the terms ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ are no longer mutually implicated as they were in pre-modern times. In those days, the limits and interpretations of spiritual matters were regulated and administrated by religious institutions via their proxies (the source of the *Gatekeepers*), which in turn offered to the individual the horizon of authorized pathways for relating to the sacred. In other words, the main shift is a twofold one: on the one hand it reallocates the parameters of belief: from a ‘strong’ institutional legitimization to the recognition of ‘weak’ belief on the part of the individual. On the other hand it transfers the agency formerly placed in the *sources of belief* to the ever-fluctuating domain of the *lobes of the*
acquirer. The neat articulation with which subjects dissociate spirituality from religiousness points at a new narrative which can only be voiced with re-appropriated (emancipated) language. Indeed, such a distinction is only possible once a subject claims his own agency and demarcates a border between the heteronomy of the sources of belief (the inscribed, the ascribed and the gatekeepers) and the autonomy of his own ‘being acquiring’ elements of meaning to inform his own construction of subjectivity and identity (either through unmediated incursions into deemed sacred texts and self-interpreting their meaning by the lobe of the Canon, through seeking hermeneutical guidance in qualified interpreters by the lobe of the Codex, or by activating the lobe of the Archive and forming provisional collections of meanings out of the traffic of the many contents and systems available in the cultural offering).

The triple-lobe model of my theory of the Operational Belief System helps to make more conspicuous the emergence of a new spiritual agency. In fact, the sprouting of empirical evidence or even the sole suspicion of a subject who has emancipated the notion of spirituality from its original religious realm has forced scholarship to envision the concept of spirituality from the traditional subfield of ‘sociology of religion’ to the new ambit of ‘sociology of spirituality’, focusing not only on the relationship between institution and individual –in terms of obedience to external authority– but instead placing at the core the freedom and autonomy of the individual. Giordan draws on Berger’s (1967; 1969; 1992) assertion that if religion constitutes a normative universe to which people must adapt, “spirituality makes the sacred open to the individual to build
and find the meaning for his or her own life” (Giordan 2007:170) Another participant in my study strengthens this viewpoint:

GILBERTO: To me, being spiritual means that you decide for yourself the good and the evil, and how to behave. This is, the difference between what will make me a better person and how can I evolve as a better person. I don’t attend Mass, however, I get up in the morning, cross myself and “Lord, may my day be a good one, and what is to be happen, it will happen.” I see a spiritual being as the consciousness of oneself; let’s say, the internal child we all have inside ourselves who can tell you what is good and what is evil and who guides you in all your errands. It is your internal guide. And a religious being is more like the doctrine of/to be following someone, you know, the religion.

Both SANDRA and GILBERTO set out the difference between a “follower” (the religious person) and the contemplative person focused on its own self, on its consciousness and also on its innocence (the metaphor of the “inner child” acting as a spiritual guide). It is implicit the idea of a community or group when speaking about religiousness (one following others on a path, which is ruled by the institutional religious norms), and the idea of the self (the lone contemplative individual) when it comes to spirituality. It is also an autonomous individual who constructs its agency through discerning between the good and the evil, with the supreme goal of evolving into a “better person”. This confirms what Heelas (2002) suggests, that “[t]he spiritual is associated with the personal, the intimate, the interior and the experiential, contrasted with ‘religion’, which is associated with the official, the external and the institutional, often picking up negative connotations of the hierarchical and patriarchal along the way.”
In reviewing Georg Simmel’s (1858-1918) thoughts on spirituality –for whom the term refers to the ‘act’ of assessing the existence of forces or divinities beyond the experienced reality of the individual– Ian Varga puts forth reasons to redefine this concept as “a rather diffuse sentiment of belief in transcendent forces that may or not directly influence the individual’s life” (2007:145 *my emphasis*). Therefore, spirituality is less a matter of ‘assessment’ and ‘action’ –both key definers of the symbolic, the language, and the social– than a matter of ‘diffuseness’ and ‘sentiment’ –constituents of the imago, the narcissoid misrecognition (*me-connaisssonse/méconnaissance*), and the pre-social individual haunted by the pre-historical Real. It has less to do with the adherence of an agent to a preset system than to the exercise of who has assumed himself as his own agency and willfully operates canonical, codexical, and archival appropriations and submit them to generative (operational) strategies through which subjectivity gets impressed.

The above helps to explain why spirituality can be exercised by and deemed important to those subjects of my research who do not participate in or belong to religious institutions, a phenomenon Beaudoin (1998:51-72) called “privatization of spirituality”. Yet, stressing such privatization or placing the seat of spirituality on the side of the individuals is not detrimental to religious institutions which may include in their repertoire spiritual elements to root in them church-related dogmas or doctrines. Furthermore, many pop-esoteric *initiated* and *uninitiated* have overwhelmingly mentioned that, although Catholics, they do not consider themselves as practicing Catholics, since they attend Mass from now and then, just on special occasions such as
Christmas, baptisms, weddings, and alike. Even so, they did reported practices inspired in institutional religion piety, such as praying in the morning or in the evening, crossing themselves like Gilberto, or asking favors to God, from “may my day be a good one” to any other petitions. At the same time, they have also mentioned that spirituality is linked with the individual, with the inner self, with one’s improvement in order to “become a better person.”

If spirituality is “rather a diffuse sentiment of belief”, a pre-symbolic state of being spread out over the wide area of the individual’s existence, then how do subjects translate into language this ‘unspeakable’ experience? As shown in Chapter 9, verbalizations held by the Narcissus Self depict selves in contemplation of themselves, individuals in front of their very own image with the common goal of finding ways of self improvement, self acceptation, and love to themselves. This mirror contemplation is closer to a monologue rather than to a contemplative mysticism. While for the latter the object of contemplation is otherness and its mysteries, for the former the object is oneself. It seems that narcissoid selves –such as initiated and uninitiated pop-esotericists– ‘deal with the unspeakable’ through necessarily individualistic projections. Nonetheless, these individuals are not isolated from society. They are not asocial beings, living in narcissistic enclosures and inner contemplations. On the contrary, as my study
demonstrates, they are very much proficient in social-conversational skills\(^3\) they use to conjure the necessary beliefsphere in which spirituality and subjectivity is forged.

Simmel (1997b) identified what he called the function of sociation, namely the process through which an individual becomes a member of society. This process is obviously present in every religious group giving senses of belonging and cohesion; but in contemporary global media society individuals not only participate in specific religious affiliations but they are also involved in many other communities of meaning. Multiple affiliations and the unceasing scouting into all available sources or meaning––being them of inscribing, ascribing, or gatekeeping nature––generate complexity and tension between the individual and the social, and yet it is through this complexity that individuals define their place in societal relations. It is in the process of sociation that “the individual recognizes the other and through the other his or her self. Sociation as a process includes individuation.” (Varga 2007:147). In other words, my subjects are not at all secluded from society. They can perform institutional religious practices––and this is why they declare themselves as “Catholics” in the surveys––while at the same time they can engage in alternative spiritual practices. When in a context of a discussion group they socialize these practices focused on the individual self, they share the Narcissistic fascination, and build commonly a language, or even a jargon, that helps them to create a community of “spiritual persons”. The basic units of this linguistic jargon are the “I”, the “self” and “one’s inner improvement”.

\(^3\) Classicalization, bracketing of reality, ritualizations, chanting and breaking of spells, and the other conversational (believing) performances explained in Chapter 9 that make part of the Operational Side of the belief system.
I mentioned before the clear distinction participants of my study made between religious and spiritual persons. In a time when religion and spirituality where regarded indistinctly, Simmel viewed the former as a *seinsform* (form of being). He argued that being religious was not only having a religion (as one owns a possession or an ability), but that the very ‘being’ of a religious person was ‘being religious’; that is, functioning “in a religious way, so to speak, just as the human body functions organically” (Simmel 1997a [1911]:10). Once the spiritual has been severed from the religious (as pop-esoteric subjects do) the attributes Simmel originally assigned to religiousness are somehow withdrawn from that realm and credited to spirituality. Thence, spirituality might be seen as the *seinsform* “according to which the human soul experiences life and comprehends its existence” (Simmel 1997b [1909]:5). This is not dependent on the actual content of given beliefs and practices, as my study demonstrated when discovering the ‘bracketing’ performance in the operational side of the belief system. In other words, beliefs do not condensate the object of belief, but as Varga phrases it: “it is the believing that creates its object. Spirituality, viewed in this light, is an individual’s outlook on the world –the physical one and beyond– according to his or her beliefs without necessarily believing in a Supreme Being.” (Varga 2007:151). This is widely seen in the discourse of my subjects, who stressed over and over again the importance of “believing in something”, whatever this “something” is named:

**CAROLINA:** I do believe that esotericism and religiousness imply to believe in something, to believe. As **TERESA** was saying, it is a dogma of faith. That is, no matter who your God is, I think that the human being has the necessity to…

**TERESA:** To believe.
CAROLINA: To believe in something superior, someone who is going to help you, and who is going to make you better, in a way; and who has the answers to everything you cannot find out by yourself. So, yes, maybe if for me is “The chair-God”, well then “The chair-God” it is. And perhaps for another person is “The hand-God”, or “The whatever-God”. So, the God, whatever his name is, that's not important. And it is also not important the way we worship It, because there are so many distinct forms of religion and so many different forms of presenting these religions.

I have to mention here that participants in this focus group were very critical towards the studied media products. For instance, they classified dismissively What The Bleep do We (k)now!? as a “self improvement” product and reported recurrent practices linked to Catholicism, such as attending Mass and praying regularly. Hence, it is even more significant to see that there is no attachment to the Catholic dogma, even among uninitiated participants who reported these strictly institutional practices. They can be, at the same time, “pre-modern”, as they pray to God and think that religion and spirituality are one and the same, and “late-modern” or “postmodern”, since they agree that the important thing is “believing” in whatever type of God you want: be it a Chair, a Hand, or, as another participant mentioned, “a Balloon”:

WENDY: The message of the movie is to believe. As a balloon might be your God, you yourself can be your God. They never tell you to not believe in anything.

Therefore, believing is, for these subjects, far more important than the beliefs. Participants reiterated that “anything” and even “one can be one’s God”, a phrase we have related to the individualistic and Narcissistic gaze of the self over the self. Unlike pre-modern religious spirituality which unites indissolubly the affirmation of certain
knowledge (the existence of a God) with an emotional relationship and dedication to Him, in late-modern spirituality beliefs are juxtaposed to the act of believing, which in itself is –paraphrasing Varga– “a state or a spiritual rhythm lacking any object” (Varga 2007:153).

In this vein, Roof’s approach to spirituality has a different and perhaps less ghostly view. Rather than regarding it in its imago-like diffuseness, he places spirituality in terrains of the symbolic and sees it as a concrete mode of cognition, “a source of values and meaning beyond oneself, a way of understanding, inner awareness, and personal integration” (1999:35). Roof reflects on New Age movements characterized by conceiving spirituality as attempts of inner-transformation and the holistic, spiritual healing of the self. The language of such spiritual movements draws on descriptions of mysticism and the more experiential dimensions of mainstream religion. Thus, New Age spirituality tends to incorporate certain aspects of religiosity, particularly those that deal with “the experiential, the interior, and generally the subjective dimensions of personal identity” (Guest 2007:181), and addresses them in the form of a ‘quest’. This trend is also manifest in the approach that pop-esotericists have towards spirituality. One of them directly mentions the word “searcher” and defines it as follows:

DONALDO: I leave behind what is symbolically called the Mass, and I turn myself into the searcher. I am going to search what I am doing here, why I came here, without leaving aside, so to speak, the beliefs that I think important in Christianity; but regardless of this, I convert myself into the searcher. This is, I am not the one that knows, I am the one that does not know.
A quest culture is shaped by cultural emphases on individualism and self transformation “in a context of pluralism and rationalization that celebrates spiritual uncertainty and fluidity” (Mihelich 2007:2). However, this trait is a double-edged sword insofar as at the time it enhances individual freedom, it also “contributes to anxiety on an existential plane because of the degree of uncertainty it engenders and the difficulties of plausibility, as Berger once argued, in finding a larger cultural realm that reinforces and helps maintain a personal religious narrative.” (Mihelich 2007:14) “Searchers” somehow take anxiety to fuel their ‘being searchers’. My study has shown how anxiety is present since the early hermeneutic connections audiences make over their media consumptions, and how these anxious resonances work all along the collective conversational space individuals create for both fit to operate and set in operation their belief system. Anxiety is the commonality beneath the three ‘therapeutic’ readings identified in the viewing experience of What The Bleep do We (k)now!?, The Da Vinci Code, and The Passion of the Christ; namely the regressive gaze, the fetishistic scrutiny, and the sado-scopohilia, respectively.

The cultural celebration of uncertainty and pluralism tints the way anxiety is coped. Rather than expecting to transform uncertainties into certainties or truth, initiated and uninitiated pop-esotericists come to terms with anxiety by hooking thrillingly to the notion of “multiple possibilities”. That is what allows them to keep on searching, and during this process, to consume more and more products that they link with spirituality.

CARLOS: All of us are multiple possibilities and everything is multi dimensional. I love the idea that, in a way, you choose the reality or the possibility that you wish for yourself. So then, I find fascinating that we only see a part of what we really
can see; moreover, that we are limited, or better said, we limit ourselves when we think that things must be only in one way, when there are multiple paths and possibilities.

The outcome of a quest culture has bred what Roof (1999:75) categorized as “reflexive spirituality”, which demands from individuals an intentional engagement in the task of reflecting on the plurality of possibilities, as they revisit a variety of religious narratives potentially meaningful to their direct personal religious experience. This revision is, for my participants, linked with a spiritual enterprise:

**VALENTÍN**: A spiritual person is a person concerned with, you know, metaphysical things; with what is beyond the actual material world. A person concerned with his mission in life, with what happens after death, with a bigger force than the human one, with being in contact with one’s essence. Basically, this is a spiritual person, this is to be spiritual in my opinion. I don’t know, to be reflexive, like thinking a little bit further than what happens in the everyday life.

Here anxiety is translated in terms of “concern” with existence and mission in life, but also with transcendental matters such as after-death issues and a “force” (other participants preferred the term “energy”) that is greater than the human nature. Nonetheless, the contemplative, thinking position is again mentioned, as well as spirituality as a concern (anxiety) with things that are beyond (transcendental to) everyday life.

Concern, disconformity, uneasiness, disavowal, meaningfulness, neurosis, mourning, disenchantment, what-does-not-work – *ce qui ne marche pas*. These are terms I have been using throughout this dissertation, drawn from different frameworks and
approaches, that point at the same spot, or better said ‘gap’ between what is expected and what is found. Here I call it ‘anxiety’. Seen in its negativeness, it reveals a ‘hollow’ or ‘lack’ that is attempted to be filled with a borrowed language that can adequately relate people to transcendent meanings without sacrificing a commitment to modern rationality. Reflexive spirituality browse for adequate languages with which people can talk with each other about felt anxieties. It does so by incorporating simultaneous commitments to modern rationality (in the form of pop-science or crypto-history, for example) and to the value of transcendent meaning (for example, religious narratives). Ultimately, reflexive spiritualities such as Pop-Esotericism are cultural resources used to create guiding transcendent meanings for a rationalized society. Moreover, the many voices and claims analyzed in my study show individuals resorting to a particular language, or if preferred, a technical jargon that implies previously codified, standardized meaning-agreed terms. They share this terminology without previously defining it because they are members of a particular linguistic community, the community of those who ‘deal with the unspeakable’ through narcissistic self-representations and spiritual agency construction.

Nevertheless, engaging in a multi-sourced spiritual ‘quest’ demands from the ‘searcher’ high degrees of both dynamic fluidity and level of maintenance, which at the end of the day bills back invoices of uncertainty and increased anxiety. The pursuit for groundings that would mitigate such uncertainty and anxiety may be solved in different ways: many opt to stay anchored to their traditional denominations giving preponderance to the lobes of the canon or the codex (coming closer to the fundamentalist or popular religiosity shape of subjectivity, respectively), while others base their subjectivity on the
lobe of the archive (approaching the postmodernist shape of subjectivity) though keeping at least a line attached to traditional religious narratives by hooking to scattered traditions, practices, and symbols.

To the main question of how is subjectivity constructed in the narration/performance of believing, we shall conclude in the first place that it co-occurs with the construction of the spiritual agency. In the case of pop-esotericists this implies a ‘subjective turn’ manifested in their mixing up pre-modern forms of thinking (traditional religious beliefs) with modern rationality (the preeminence of scientific proofs and rational arguments over the speculative thinking) and the late-modern (post-modern) disenchantment with institutional life, together with a vocation of individualist isolation and self-adoration. However, as said before, this is not an autistic individualism, but a relational individualism which develops in conversational interactions. During such conversations subjects engage, on the one hand, in a discursive agreement and a reciprocal enrichment of concepts on the self’s quest of the spiritual; there is a shared linguistic jargon –seemingly known beforehand– that provides a common ground of understanding. But on the other hand, during same conversations individuals enact generative performances of less conscious nature: by bracketing reality, conversers propitiate ephemeral ritualizing eruptions of conjuring spells aimed to create and inhabit a beliefsphere. It is within this playground setting that senses of spirituality and subjectivity are produced.

It is becoming almost a commonplace the assertion that the most meaningful expression of identity for many people living in advanced post-industrial societies is the
spiritual rather than the religious. Many have argued that late-modernity is the age of the 
spiritual (Guest 2007:181), a time of affirming subjective life over the conformity to 
externalized bodies of truth (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Some others adventure to 
proclaim the advent and spread of a Post-Christian era in Western developed countries 
characterized by a sacralization of the self as a result of the weakening of the grip of 
tradition on individual selves (Houtman and Aupers 2007). Surely there are documented 
indications to support all this and every so often scholars present their observations on 
Western developed countries contrasting them against cases from developing countries 
(typically Latin American examples). Such a contrast works fine as long as it foresees 
overall populations approached quantitatively (Mexico, in this sense, is still a 
predominant Catholic country with a vibrant traditional popular religiosity), but it does 
not work that well when one focuses on specific cultural segments like the one I have 
researched⁴. The pop-esoteric emphasis upon the cultivation of the subjective self and the 
construction of the spiritual agency is not restricted to post-industrial societies nor to 
openly secular enclaves. The catering to the inner dimension of identity and subjectivity 
is also true for societies caught in between the pre-modern and late-modern social 
formations, such as the Mexican case. It is not a matter, therefore, of developmental 
levels of given societies, but an offspring of a global media context in *multi-modal* 
communication and *multi-nodal* networking. In this sense, my study provides empirical 
evidence on a globalized spread of worldview and knowledge through the media and the

⁴ Middle and upper-middle class adults of Mexico City with access to higher education, acquainted with 
main stream pop cultural media references, and having a minimal Catholic background. In a context of 
contemporary global culture, Mexico City is a unique setting due to its global cultural offering and its 
dominant Catholic culture (88% of the population has Catholic backgrounds).
way in which spiritual consumerism informs the development of a spiritual self (constituted as its own spiritual agent) in late-modern society.

The ambit of beliefs has been historically administrated and typically corseted within the frames of institutional belief systems. This is also true for late-modern contexts, though in these settings the performance of the beliefs also takes place – alongside traditional organized belief systems– in non-institutional domains, usually in the form of everyday informal social interactions, such as conversation. It is throughout these conversations that individuals claim and construct a belief agency that is more proper to be called “self construction of spirituality” than religion or religiosity. But the spiritual agency that individuals claim for themselves has political implications, an innuendo I would like to briefly set forth as a final remark for future investigation.

10.4. The Politics of Belief, sketching a provocation

I have stated from the outset what drives my investigation and traverses the three parts of this dissertation, namely the very important distinction of belief and believing. In order to explore the social basis of this distinction we have so far gone through theoretical considerations mingled with the examination of multiple media-based conversations collected from the field, media analyses, and revisions of a variety of models of self-construction –from the insights of classical sociology of religion and psychoanalytic criticism, to more recent theoretical models. The endeavor has allowed me to assemble arguably an alternative model aimed to integrate the nature of beliefs and practices of
believing. It is true that the spell of believing surpasses the totalizing illusions of discursive language (beliefs), but it does so by transgressing discursive language in a paradoxical both/and manner, rather than absolutely either/or manner. In other words, although being of irreconcilable natures, both beliefs and believing(s) are always mutually implicated and ever inseparable. Moreover, while the Theory of the Operational Belief System facilitates the attempt to examine the ‘spell’ of that which transgresses discursive language, including the discursive language of dogmatic religious belief, it surfaces what strikes one as being the kernel of the ‘politics of belief’.

Consider any institutional form… the Church for example, taken in its generic sense. The Church is officially preoccupied with correct belief (ortho-doxy), and invests a host of power in exiling, marginalizing or excluding terms coming from alien systems out of its control. Part of this is due to the inherent dialectics of the construction of the sacred, which requires demarcating crystal lines from the profane. In addition and jointly with this, it is also due to an ontology assumed by ecclesiastical officialdom that, on the one hand, affirms a self with no irresoluble incompleteness, nor irremissibly haunted by “le Réel, qui c'est l'impossible” insofar as the Real is avowed as mysterious yet possible; and on the other hand, equates beliefs with the everyday exigencies of believing, and consequently expects coherency on the part of the believer. For this frame of mind, there is no binary distinction between the two terms: non-belief or disbelief is seen as the accurate opposite of belief and not believing. Believing, thus, is conceived as the correct placement (ortho-praxis) of correct propositions –the beliefs– so that the latter may set-off transcendental meanings to ‘operate’ the daily reality.
But believing is not an act of placements as it is of fundamental dis/placements. I stress, based on my research findings and theoretical development, that a more complex and fascinating ontology of the self—one marked by incompleteness and haunting—underlies the construction of subjectivity, and that believing is the much more accurate description of lived religion. Otherwise stated, if the self is an ever incomplete project, believing is a project of self-construction, and therefore a cavalcade of groping, probing, risking, hoping. This threatens the authoritarian notion of belief, which is a static, complete ontology.

What really bothers the Church about the usage of popular cultural references to create spiritual/religious senses and self-identity, like Pop-Esotericism, are not the discourses of beliefs that are involved as the believing performances they put into play; because reigning the latter in the revelation, curtailing them, surrounding them with history and doctrine, and showing that there is nothing new about them, is impossible. That means that belief is menaced by believing. It is that way and not contrariwise because beliefs as such—regardless of their kind—are quite tamable and much safer since in the course they are able to be deeply ensconced and reabsorbed by authority. Look at the long line of once-unorthodox beliefs and practices now remediated, like the Zen insights and meditation methods, just to mention one. Now they have been adapted and frequently adopted by some mainstream pastoral ministries, particularly in Catholic youth ministry. The Zen-inspired language and technique of meditation (usually accompanied by the also once-satanized New Age music) became a popular resource among prayer workshops and spiritual retreats causing no tearing of garments. They have surrounded it
with orthodoxy. There is nothing edgy or unfinished about it anymore. The same is true of Catholic Charismatic Renewal. It was once a very questionable, unstable, disturbing preoccupation for the Church—the Pentecostal-rooted emphasis on direct personal experience of God manifested in fluent unintelligible vocalizations (speaking in tongues) and mesmerizing healing-services. The initial reaction by the Catholic hierarchy was condemnatory, then cautious, and finally supportive. Four pontiffs in line ended endorsing it. Generations of modification and dressing up, theologizing, simplification, and orthodox conditioning turned it into a vehicle of absolute orthodoxy.

The above reveals the negotiative dialectics of the politics of belief/believing. Believings are “relaxations” of emotional valences and naturalized cognitive constructs that, for sure, threaten the closed ontology of beliefs, but at the same time they are subject of taming “contractions” that turn them into beliefs. That means that beliefs and believing(s) are ultimately never conflated. Believings are constitutive of the form and content of belief, and in this sense we might consider the operational side of the system as a kind of ritual that simultaneously constructs both believing subjects and objects of belief that eventually will enter the sources of belief\(^5\) to be considered in further canonical, codexical, or archival appropriations. Politically, the movement is a systolic and diastolic one: beliefs coil what believing(s) recoil. In other words, what is coiled and contracted and repressed eventually returns in haunting spells that disrupt or hystericize the experience of wide-awake personal and social consciousness. Derrida repeatedly

\(^5\) Either to the Inscribed source of hierarchical explicit creed forms, the Ascribed source of symbolic forms offered in the many cultural shelves, and the source of the Gatekeepers providing hermeneutical guidelines for both the Inscribed and the Ascribed sources.
connected to the work of ‘writing’, the ritual structuring of haunted boundaries between things, including the things of the self, and their “other”. Likewise, the dynamic notion of believings avows them as ‘structuring’ social practices, effecting belief and a certain kind of de-centered subjectivity.

The purpose in the outlining of the previous paragraph is to disengage my analysis from a tempting “vis-à-vis” reading of the belief and the believing, the operative and the operational, the institutional and the autonomous self. There is no simplistic and univocal repression by the first against the second terms, although indeed there are undeniable mechanisms of disavowal at play. An interrogation on the politics of belief that would like take into account the operational belief system, may want to frame it within a general economy of discourses, as Foucault (1990:3-13) suggested for exploring another suspect of what he termed “the repressive hypothesis”, namely sexuality. He rather advocated for approaching such slippery realities as political instances of “discursive production (which also administers silences, to be sure), of the production of power (which sometimes have the function of prohibiting), of the propagation of knowledge (which often causes mistaken beliefs or systematic misconceptions to circulate” (Foucault 1990:12)

My closing note is perhaps something the reader has already glimpsed. That the operational belief system theory is not merely circumscribed to the realm of religion and spirituality, but it is applicable to other domains of contemporary sociological concern. While my dissertation provides a model for the study of the subjective construction of the self and is intended to help thinking about the creative experience of media, in particular
among young people, there is a host of imaginable fields—places where forces contend and events unfold—where the model could be explored and prove to be contributing. I am thinking specifically in the realm of ideologies, where the belief and the believing are ever present and determinant, fostering the cultivation of values, coloring perceptions and decision makings, foreshadowing the strategic actions that impact civic engagement, political activism, social movements, and so forth. The broad applicability is not due to the model itself as it is to the very pervasive nature of beliefs. There are times in History—as José Ortega y Gasset (1967:98) phrased lyrically—so filled up to the brim with beliefs, that even doubting this or that is a way of believing.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A. Informed Consent Procedure

A.1 IRB Review and Approval

BOSTON COLLEGE
Institutional Review Board
Office for Research Protections
Waul House, 3rd Floor
Phone: (617) 552-4778, fax: (617) 552-0498

IRB Protocol Number: 09.225.01

DATE: April 28, 2009

TO: Juan Carlos Henriquez-Mendoza

CC: Stephen Pfohl

FROM: Institutional Review Board – Office for Research Protections

RE: The Belief System And The Pop-Esoteric Wave, A Theory On The Operational Belief System

Notice of IRB Review and Approval
Expedited Review as per Title 45 CFR Part 46.110, FR 60366, FR, # 6&7

The project identified above has been reviewed by the Boston College Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research using an expedited review procedure. This is a minimal risk study. This approval is based on the assumption that the materials, including changes/clarifications that you submitted to the IRB contain a complete and accurate description of all the ways in which human subjects are involved in your research.

This approval is given with the following standard conditions:

1. You are approved to conduct this research only during the period of approval cited below;
2. You will conduct the research according to the plans and protocol submitted (approved copy enclosed);
3. You will immediately inform the Office for Research Protections (ORP) of any injuries or adverse research events involving subjects;
4. You will immediately request approval from the IRB of any proposed changes in your research, and you will not initiate any changes until they have been reviewed and approved by the IRB;
5. You will only use the informed consent documents that have the IRB approval dates stamped on them (approved copies enclosed);
6. You will give each research subject a copy of the informed consent document;
7. You may enroll up to 200 participants.

8. **If your research is anticipated to continue beyond the IRB approval dates, you must submit a Continuing Review Request to the IRB approximately 60 days prior to the IRB approval expiration date. Without continuing approval the Protocol will automatically expire on April 28, 2010.**

**Additional Conditions:** Any research personnel that have not completed an acceptable education/training program should be removed from the project until they have completed the training. When they have completed the training, you must submit a Protocol Revision and Amendment Form to add their names to the protocol, along with a copy of their education/training certificate.

**Approval Period:** **April 28, 2009- April 27, 2010**

Boston College and the Office for Research Protections appreciate your efforts to conduct research in compliance with Boston College Policy and the federal regulations that have been established to ensure the protection of human subjects in research. Thank you for your cooperation and patience with the IRB process.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Stephen Erickson  
Interim Director  
Office for Research Protections  
TSL
A.2 Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Informed Consent for Participation as a Subject

Thank you for considering being part of this study. I asked you to participate because you are acquainted with some cultural products such as films related to religious or spiritual beliefs. I hope to learn about your opinions and experiences on films, religion and spirituality. This form provides you with information about the study. As the Principal Investigator (Juan Carlos Henriquez) I will provide you with a copy of this form to keep for your reference, and also will describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can refuse to participate without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

The purpose of this study is to learn about people's opinions on religious and spiritual topics embedded in three films. If you agree to participate I will ask you to do the following things:

1. You will be asked to fill up a demographic filtering form stating your age, education level, neighborhood and home descriptions, religious affiliation, and media consumption.
2. You will be provided with a set of DVDs with the films *What the Bleep do we Know*, *The Da Vinci Code*, and *The Passion of the Christ*. The average length of each is 2 hours. I will ask you to watch the films within the next two weeks. DVDs will be retrieved after that period.
3. I will propose you possible dates and sites to meet with me (if you are invited to be interviewed) or with other participants (if you are invited to participate in a focus or discussion group). You will chose the date and place at your convenience.
4. In case you are selected for a one-on-one interview you and I will meet and have a conversation in which I will pose questions regarding your opinion
about the films, the ideas and characters of the films you agree or disagree with, and your opinion on the topics of religion, science and spirituality related to the films. Your participation is voluntary so you can end it at any time, or skip any questions you don’t want to answer.

5. In case you are selected for a focus or discussion group you will gather with another 5-8 participants who also saw the films and share with you some features (age, education.) I will be moderating the group-session posing questions such as the overall opinion about the films, the ideas and characters of the films, and your opinion on the topics of religion, science and spirituality related to the films. You can end your participation at any time, or skip questions you don’t want to answer.

6. After your participation I might invite you to a second group-session or to an interview. You will always be free to accept or decline this second invitation.

The study lasts about two hours plus the time spent in seeing the films. If you agree I will record your participation. The reason for tape recording is because this study is interested in group characteristics and behavior including language communication during conversations. However, tape recording will be done only if you agree. You can state that you don’t want to be taped and it will not be. You can ask that the tape be turned off at any time.

Your confidentiality is important to me. Your name and identity will be protected, and they will never be exposed in my study. The recording will be kept on a secure computer to which only I have access.

The study may include risks that are unknown at this time. Although this is a minimal risk study, there are some reasonably foreseeable risks:

1) Some people may be sensitive when discussing issues about spirituality and religious beliefs: if you feel that your participation may cause distress on you, it would be better to decline your participation.

2) During the group session participants will be sharing information and ideas about their religious and spiritual practices and beliefs. There might be possible disagreements among participants, eventually causing discomfort. Therefore, if you feel that discussing these issues would carry some distress on you, it would be better to decline your participation. In order to minimize this risk, I will ask participants to commit with respect and tolerance to others’ opinions, and in the eventuality of harsh arguments I will intervene to move the discussion towards another point.

3) Although I am, as a researcher, committed to keep confidentiality and will always use pseudonyms when reporting the findings of the study, if you participate in a focus or discussion group you should be aware that other participants in the session may share information outside the session. This is important to keep in mind because in some cultural environments certain positions on religion, science, and spirituality are sensitive matters that might
carry social stigmatization by others. I encourage you to ponder well what information you wish to share in the group.

This study is designed for learn more about films and religion, I am conducting it in order to inform my Doctoral Dissertation. This study has no lucrative purposes and is not designed to treat any illness or improve your health.

Your participation is voluntary. You can end it at any time. You can also skip any questions you don’t want to answer. If you have any questions now or during the study, please ask.

Although there are no immediate benefits or compensation for taking part in this research, I hope you enjoy being part of this study and learn more about your own experience, and other people’s experience, of seeing films and reflecting on religion and spirituality.

At the end of your participation I will be happy to listen to your verbal evaluation in order to improve the experience. I will ask you if you would eventually be interested in participating in further similar studies. If you have any questions about my work, you can reach me at jc.henriquez@bc.edu. You can also contact my faculty advisor Professor Stephen Pfohl at pfohl@bc.edu. Also for information about your rights as a research participant you can contact the Boston College Director of the Office for Human Research Participant Protection at 617-552-4778, or irb@bc.edu. Please keep a copy of this form for yourself.

You have been informed about this study’s purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

___ I have a copy of this form for my records
___ I agree to participate in this study

Study Participant (print name)____________________________________

Participant Signature______________________ Date_____________
FAQ. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR THIS STUDY:

Title of Research Study: A THEORY ON THE OPERATIONAL BELIEF SYSTEM.

Principal Investigator: Juan Carlos Henriquez. Doctoral candidate in Sociology, Boston College. Tel. 044 55 54082770

• What is the purpose of this study? The goal of this study is to determine how people use films for discussing topics related to religious beliefs and spirituality.

• What will be done if you take part in this research study? Your will be asked to watch three films within two weeks, then you will be appointed for an interview or a group session to discuss the films and topics related to religious beliefs and spirituality.
   - In case you are chosen for a one-on-one interview we will meet and have a conversation in which I will pose questions regarding your opinion about the films, the ideas and characters of the films you agree or disagree with, and your opinion on religion, science and spirituality related to the films.
   - In case you are chosen for a focus or discussion group you will gather with another 5-8 participants who also saw the films and share with you some features (age, education.) I will moderate the group-session posing questions to the group such as overall opinion on the films, ideas and characters of the films you agree or disagree with, and overall opinion on religion, science and spirituality related to the films.
   - After your participation I might invite you for a second group session or an interview. You will always be free to accept or decline this second invitation.

• What are the possible discomforts and risks? The study may include risks that are unknown at this time. Although this is a minimal risk study and no physical or mental discomforts are foreseeable, there are reasonably foreseeable risks:
   2) Some people may be sensitive when discussing issues about spirituality and religious beliefs, if you feel that your participation could cause distress on you, you might better decline your participation.
   3) During the group session participants will be sharing information and ideas about their religious and spiritual practices and beliefs. There might be possible disagreements among participants, eventually causing discomfort. Therefore I
advise you that if you feel that discussing these issues would carry some distress on you, then it might be better to decline your participation.

4) Although I am, as a researcher, committed to keep confidentiality and will always use pseudonyms when reporting the findings of the study, if you participate in a group session you should be aware that other participants in the session may share information outside the session. This is important to keep in mind because in some cultural environments certain topics and positions on religion, science, and spirituality, are sensitive matters that might carry social stigmatization by others. I encourage you to ponder well what information you wish to share in the group.

- **What are the possible benefits to you or to others?** None, except perhaps you will become more motivated to discuss the topics of this study.

- **If you choose to take part in this study, will it cost you anything?** There is no cost.

- **Will you receive compensation for your participation in this study?** None economic compensation will be given.

- **If you do not want to take part in this study, what other options are available to you?** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to be in the study, and your refusal will not imply any consequences.

- **How can you withdraw from this research study and who should you call if you have questions?** If you wish to stop your participation in this study for any reason at any time, you should contact the principle investigator: Juan Carlos Henriquez at (044) 5554-082770. You should also call the principle investigator for any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research. You are free to withdraw your consent and stop your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits for which you may be entitled. Throughout the study, the researchers will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study. Additionally, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or if you have complaints, concerns, or questions about the research, please contact Professor Stephen
Pfohl, research adviser at Boston College, at pfohl@bc.edu. You can also contact the Boston College Director of the Office for Human Research Participant Protection at 617-552-4778, or irb@bc.edu.

• **How will your privacy and the confidentiality of your research records be protected?** If the results of this research are published or presented at scientific meetings, your identity will not be disclosed. Any reports derived from the research will not reveal anyone’s true names, but pseudonyms will be used instead or the data will be aggregated without the use of names. The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it.

• **Will the researcher benefit from your participation in this study?** No benefits for the researcher other than the completion of his school work at Boston College.

Please remember that you can ask questions at any time.

Juan Carlos Henriquez-Mendoza
Principal Investigator

Date
A.3 Demographic Filtering

BOSTON COLLEGE
Department of Sociology

Research Study: Operational Belief Systems
Researcher Name: Juan Carlos Henriquez-Mendoza

Demographic Filtering

Name: 
Age: 
Gender: 
Name of the neighborhood you live: 
How can we contact you (telephone, e-mail):

Education (specify the name of the school)
Primary
Jr High-school
High-school
College (specify semester and department)
Do you currently have a job? Yes No
If Yes, specify occupation and name of the company

How many:
Rooms (without kitchen and bathrooms) have the place where you live? 
People live in your home?

Cars are in your home?

Cars: specify brand and model:

The house where you live is
Rent Owned by my family (I don't pay rent) Of my own
In my house there are: (specify Number of devices)
- Washing machine:
- Micro-wave oven:
- TV Sets (specify how many and what kind of service (cable, open tv, etc)
- Refrigerator:
- Computer:
- Internet (specify company)
- Other devices:

Do you use public transportation?  Yes [ ]  No [ ]

If yes, mention which kind and how often do you use it:

How many times a year do you take vacations and go out of the city?

Where do you usually go for vacations?

How often (daily, weekly, monthly) do you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Everyday</th>
<th>Weekly</th>
<th>Monthly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>watch TV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>go to the cinema</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>theater</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rent a dvd</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read newspapers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read magazines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Favorite TV shows:
Favorite Radio station:
Favorite Music:

Mention three Films you have seen recently and you liked them:

Questions to be asked only orally alter filling up the form, recruiter shall look for a wider elaboration:
- What do you like to do in your free time?
- Do you have any religious affiliation?
  - Were you baptized as a Catholic?
  - Do you consider yourself a Catholic practitioner?
- Tell me about your religious beliefs and practices, if you have any.
- Are there any Catholic practitioners in your family?
- Have you seen the films: WTB, DVC, PXT?
- When was the last time you saw each?

Thank you!
Appendix B. Scripts and Question Guides of Applied Methods

B.1 List of Topics and Questions for each Type of Discussion Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Topics</th>
<th>Group sessions discussing separately the three films</th>
<th>Crossed Discussion Groups</th>
<th>Group sessions discussing jointly the three films</th>
<th>Group sessions contrasting PXT with DVC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Antecedents of the exposure to the stimulus.</td>
<td>Please introduce yourselves to the group and tell a little bit about your ‘seeing the film’, as how many times you saw it, if you remember why did you see it, and when was the last time you saw the film?</td>
<td>Please introduce yourselves to the group and tell a little bit about your ‘seeing WTB, DVC and PXT’, as how many times you saw each, if you remember why did you see them, and when was the last time you saw each?</td>
<td>Please introduce yourselves to the group and tell a little bit about your ‘seeing DVC and PXT’, as how many times you saw each, if you remember why did you see them, and when was the last time you saw each?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Opinion about the picture.</td>
<td>Now you are asked to tell us how you find the film, and also the opinions that you remember having heard about the film.</td>
<td>Now you are asked to tell anything you want about these three films in the order you wish. What can you say about each film, and also what opinions do you remember having heard about both films.</td>
<td>Now you are asked to tell anything you want about these two films in the order you wish. What can you say about PXT and DVC, and also what opinions do you remember having heard about both films.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ideas, themes, scenes, characters of the film participants agree and disagree with.</td>
<td>Share those ideas, themes, scenes, characters of the film you agree with.</td>
<td>What would you say is the main theme or main idea behind each WTB, PXT and DVC? and what do you think about?</td>
<td>What would you say is the main theme or main idea behind each PXT and DVC? and what do you think about?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Were there any ideas, themes, scenes, or characters that you somehow less liked? Why?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Let’s talk now about WTB. Recall ideas, themes, scenes and characters in there, and share which you</td>
<td></td>
<td>Let’s talk now about PXT. Recall ideas, themes, scenes and characters in there, and share which you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Credibility about Ideas, themes, scenes, characters of the film.</td>
<td>Which are the things in the film you find credible and which incredible? Explain why.</td>
<td>Which are the things in WTB you find credible and which incredible? Explain why.</td>
<td>What can you tell about how Christ is represented in each PXT and DVC? You think this depiction is credible or incredible?</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In your opinion, how is Catholicism reflected or depicted in both films?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finally, Which are the things in the DVC you find credible and which incredible? Explain why.</td>
<td>Finally, What can you say about how woman is represented in DVC?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Feelings and sensations experienced during the exposure to the</td>
<td>Share to the group the feelings you remember you experienced when</td>
<td>Share to the group the feelings you remember having had while seeing each of</td>
<td>Share to the group the feelings you remember you had when you saw the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Stimulus

Those feelings resemble other activities, things you have had experienced before?

### Associated Media Products and Consumptions

To what other stuff like films, music, books, tv shows, magazines, etcetera do you think this picture looks like?

### Opinion about Religion, Practice and Spirituality

What would make somebody be a religious person, what is to be a practitioner and what is to be a spiritual person? Is there any distinction among these three persons.

### Self Identification with the Proposals of the Films

Finally, which would you say is the main proposal and purpose of the film? Do you buy it or not? Why?
## B.2 List of Topics and Questions for each Type of Focus Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Topics</th>
<th>List of Tentative Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Group sessions focusing separately on the three films</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Antecedents of the exposure to the stimulus.</td>
<td>Please introduce yourselves to the group and tell us a little bit about your 'seeing the film', how many times you saw it, if you remember why you saw it, and when was the last time you saw the film?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Please introduce yourselves to the group and tell us a little bit about your 'seeing WTB, DVC and PXT', as how many times you saw each, if you remember why did you see them, and when was the last time you saw each?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Please introduce yourselves to the group and tell us a little bit about your 'seeing DVC and PXT', as how many times you saw each, if you remember why did you see them, and when was the last time you saw each?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Overall opinion about the picture(s).</td>
<td>Tell us how you find the film, and also the opinions that you remember having heard about the film.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tell us anything you want about the three films in the order you wish. What can you say about each film, what opinions do you remember having heard of them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Now tell us anything you want about these two films in the order you wish. What can you say about both, and what opinions do you remember having heard of them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What would be the main message or idea of the film?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is the main theme or main idea behind each of three films? and what do you think about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is the main theme or main idea behind each PXT and DVC? and what do you think about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ideas, themes, scenes, characters of the film participants agree and disagree with.</td>
<td>Which ideas, themes, scenes, characters of the film come to your mind to which you agree with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Which scenes from each film come to your mind?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Let's talk now about PXT. Recall ideas, themes, scenes and characters in there, and share which you found particularly appealing or unappealing to you? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Were there any ideas, themes, scenes, or characters that you somehow less liked? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Credibility about Ideas, themes, scenes, characters of the film.</td>
<td>appealing or unappealing to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let’s talk now about PXT. Recall ideas, themes, scenes and characters in there, which you found particularly appealing or unappealing to you?</td>
<td>Now let’s move to DVC. Again: recall ideas, themes, scenes, characters, and share which you found particularly appealing or unappealing to you? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Feelings and sensations experienced during the exposure to the stimulus.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share to the group the feelings you remember having had while seeing each of the three films.</td>
<td>Share to the group the feelings you remember having had when you saw these two films.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. Associated media products and practices.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Are there any activities or practices in your daily life that resemble with the feelings and contents the film taught?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those feeling resemble other activities, things you have had experienced before?</td>
<td>To what other stuff like films, music, books, tv shows, magazines, etcetera do you think each film looks like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what other stuff like films, music, books, tv shows, magazines, etcetera do you think this picture looks like?</td>
<td>Have you ever applied any advisement or proposition mentioned in the film?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>7. Opinion about religion, science and spirituality.</strong></th>
<th><strong>What is it to be a religious person?</strong></th>
<th><strong>What would make somebody be a religious person, what is to be a practitioner and what is to be a spiritual person? Is there any distinction among these persons.</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Opinion about esoteric practices</td>
<td>- Opinion about the relationship between religion and science</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Practices associated with spirituality</td>
<td>- Tell us about your own religious practices and those you have observed within your family and friends.</td>
<td>- Tell us about your own religious practices and those you have observed within your family and friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would make somebody be a religious person, what is to be a practitioner and what is to be a spiritual person? Is there any distinction among these persons.</td>
<td>Tell us about your own religious practices and those you have observed within your family and friends.</td>
<td>Tell us about your own religious practices and those you have observed within your family and friends.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## The Belief System and the Pop-ESOTERIC Wave

### Appendixes

#### 8. Self-identification with the proposals of the films.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is it to be a spiritual person?</th>
<th>Is there any activity linked with spirituality in your daily life?</th>
<th>Is there any activity linked with spirituality in your daily life?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is there any activity linked with spirituality in your daily life?</td>
<td>Comment about the relationship between religion and science?</td>
<td>Comment about the relationship between religion and science?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment about the relationship between religion and science?</td>
<td>Comment about the relationship between religion and science?</td>
<td>Comment about the relationship between religion and science?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, which would you say is the main proposal and purpose of the film? Do you buy it or not?

Finally, which would you say is the main proposal and purpose of each of the three films? Do you buy it or not?

Which would you say is the main proposal and purpose of DVC? Do you buy it or not? Why?

Finally, which would you say is the main proposal and purpose of PXT? Do you buy it or not?

To whom would you recommend and to whom you would not recommend the film?

Please think in a phrase in which you can summarize the film.
B.3 Question Guide for Semi-structured Interviews (commenting separately each of the three films)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introductory Battery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Would you please tell me something about yourself? For instance what do you like to do in your spare time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. (you mentioned going to the movies) How often do you go to the movies, and what kind of films you like to see?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ¿With whom do you usually go to the movies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ¿Tell me about the last Films you saw recently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. In your own opinion, what would be a religious and or a spiritual theme film? Please mention films you think can fit as religious theme films and those fitting as spiritual theme films?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. These films you just mentioned, did they cause any kind of controversy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What features must have a film to be considered a religious and or a spiritual film?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Battery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do you remember when you saw (WTB/DVC/PXT)? how you saw it, with whom, when, who recommended to you? Please tell me what you recall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do you remember in those days all commentaries about this film, remember some of them? With which commentaries about the film you agreed or disagreed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. And how about you, how did you find the film yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For DVC: DVC is a novel based adaptation, what do you know or have heard about the book?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Which would be the scenes you remember the most, the first one coming to your mind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Why is that that precise scene comes to your mind? What is it going on there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Which things in the film you find credible and which incredible?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For DVC and PXT How historically accurate or factual based do you think the film is?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For WTB: How scientifically reliable or factual based do you think the film is?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 10. Let’s talk about the characters, someone in particular who called your attention? |
| 11. What do you think is the main theme of the film? Are there other themes implied? |
| 12. What themes or message you think the director of the film wanted to deliver? |
| 13. and what is the message you actually draw from the film? |
| 14. Which ideas, themes of the film grabbed your attention and you liked or feel like agreeing with? |
| 15. Were there any ideas, themes, scenes, or characters that you somehow less liked or were in disagreement? |
| 16. I am going to mention certain themes that are present in the film. I ask you to comment each |
and tell what are your feelings for each theme:

For WTB:
   a) What do you think about the idea that Thoughts modify your body.
   b) What about the idea that Thoughts modify external reality, external matter.
   c) What do you think about the idea that Emotions are addictive.
   d) What do you think about “Create your Day”, that idea that one can construct its life.
   e) Do you practice or have practiced any activity related to create your day? If so, tell me how the experience was like, and what results you have achieved. You feel like keep on practicing?
   f) What do you think about the way the issue on religion is treated in the film?
   g) What can you tell about God?
   h) What's your opinion about Quantum Physics?

For PXT:
   a) Tell me about how Jesus is presented in the film? and what do you think about that?
   b) What do you think about the idea that Jesus’ suffering is a token for our salvation.
   c) Is Evil in this world due to the devil’s work and inspiration.
   d) How do you think about the idea that seeing Jesus’ Passion helps to enhance the faith.
   e) Why and who killed Jesus?
   f) What do you think about the way the issue on religion is treated in the film?
   g) What can you tell about God?
   h) Comment about the historic accuracy of the film.

For DVC:
   a) What do you think about the idea that Jesus was married with Mary Magdalene and had descendents?
   b) What do you think with the thesis that the Church has been hiding secrets and that Secret societies, like the Priory of Sion, preserve the truth.
   c) Tell me about how Jesus is presented in the film? and what do you think about that?
   d) How is Mary Magdalene depicted and what do you think about that?
   e) Comment about the role of women in the Church. How is woman represented in the film.
   f) What do you think about the way the issue on religion is treated in the film?
   g) Why a character like Robert Langdon was deemed appropriate to solve the mystery?

17. Try to remember the feelings and sensations you experienced with this film. In which situations have you experienced similar feelings or sensations that are evoked in the film.
18. Would you say this film deals with religion, and if so, how you find the approach of the film to this matter?
19. You think some people might feel offended with the ideas presented in this film?
20. To whom would you recommend or not recommend the film?
21. What do you think about keep on making this kind of films? Why you think they are so popular?
22. Do you think this film had any sort of effect on the audience? Give some examples.
23. If you had to label this film, to which film gender you’d say it belongs?
24. To whom do you say this film is addressed to? How would you describe its natural audiences?

25. What kind of people you think liked and resonated the film, and why did they go to see it?
26. Do you think these kind of Films have a particular purpose, what would be that purpose?
27. With which products such as books, tv shows, magazines, Films, and so on would you associate the film?
28. Have you heard about documentaries or have seen documentaries related to the themes of these films, like those broadcasted in Nat-Geo or Discovery Channel?
29. What can you tell me about the term religious, often applied to these kind of stories?
30. and what about the term spirituality, is it the same thing or something different?
31. Do you perform activities related with religion?
32. How important is spirituality in your daily life? Are you engaged in some sort of spiritual practice?
33. In your opinion what is to be a believer?
34. What is to be a religious practitioner?
35. and what is to be a spiritual person?

For WTB: What do you think about quantum physics and its spiritual implications suggested in this film?

36. Is there something else you would like to say?
B.4 Question Guide for Semi-structured Interviews (contrasting PXT with DVC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introductory Battery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Would you please tell me something about yourself? For instance what do you like to do in your spare time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. (you mentioned going to the movies) How often do you go to the movies, and what kind of films you like to see?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ¿With whom do you usually go to the movies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ¿Tell me about the last Films you saw recently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. In your own opinion, what would be a religious theme film? Please mention films you think can fit as religious theme films?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. These films you just mentioned, did they cause any kind of controversy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What features must have a film to be considered a religious film?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. // you just mentioned (PXT/DVC), so let’s start with it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. // You mentioned (PXT/DVC) but you didn’t include (PXT/DVC) Is that because you don’t consider it as a film about religion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. // You didn’t mentioned neither PXT or DVC, Is that because you don’t consider them as films about religion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. So, with which of them shall we start, PXT or DVC?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PXT Battery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do you remember when you saw PXT? how you saw it, with whom, when, who recommended to you? Please tell me what you recall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do you remember in those days all commentaries about PXT, remember some of them? With which commentaries about the film you agreed or disagreed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. And how about you, how did you find the film yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Which would be the scenes you remember the most, the first one coming to your mind?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Why is that that precise scene comes to your mind? What is it going on there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How historically accurate do you thin PXT is?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Let’s talk about the characters, someone in particular who called your attention?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What themes or message you think the director of the film wanted to deliver?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. and what is the message you actually draw from the film?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Tell me about how Jesus is presented in the film?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. To whom would you recommend or not recommend the film?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. What do you think about keep on making this kind of films?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Do you think PXT had any sort of effect on the audience? Give some examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Something else you would like to say about PXT?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DVC Battery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do you remember when you saw DVC? how you saw it, with whom, when, who recommended to you? Please tell me what you recall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do you remember in those days all commentaries about DVC, remember some of them? With which commentaries about the film you agreed or disagreed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. And how about you, how did you find the film yourself?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. **DVC** is a novel based adaptation, what do you know or have heard about the book?
5. Which would be the scenes you remember the most, the first one coming to your mind?
6. Why is that that precise scene comes to your mind? What is it going on there?
7. How historically accurate or possible do you thin DVC is?
8. Let’s talk about the characters, someone in particular who called your attention?
9. What themes or message you think the director of the film wanted to deliver?
10. What do you think is the main theme of the film? Are there other themes implied?
11. and what is the message you actually draw from the film?
12. Tell me about how Jesus is presented in the film? and what do you think about that?
13. And how about Mary Magdalene, how is she depicted and what do you think about that?
14. What do you think about the idea that Jesus was married with Mary Magdalene and had descendents?
15. Please tell me how do you find the way the Church is depicted in the film?
16. What do you think about the role of woman in the Church as it is presented in DVC?
17. You think some people might feel offended with the ideas presented in DVC?
18. To whom would you recommend or not recommend the film?
19. What do you think about keep on making films on these themes?
20. Do you think DVC had any sort of effect on the audience? Give some examples.
21. Something else you would like to say about DVC?

### Crossed Battery

Now, keeping in mind both PXT and DVC...

1. If you had to label each of these films, to which film gender you’d say each of them belong?
2. Keeping in mind these two films, to whom do you think they are addressed? How would you describe their natural audiences?
3. What kind of people you think liked and resonated with each of both films, and why did they go to see each?
4. Do you think these Films have a particular purpose, what would be that purpose?
5. With which products such as books, tv shows, magazines, Films, and so on would you associate DVC and PXT?
6. Have you heard about documentaries or have seen documentaries related to the themes of these films, like those broadcasted in Nat-Geo or Discovery Channel?
7. What about El Evangelio de Judas or La Tumba de Jesus? Are you familiar to these documentaries?
8. What can you tell me about the term religious which often is applied to these kind of stories?
9. and what about the term spirituality, is it the same thing or something different?
10. In your opinion what is to be a believer?
11. What is to be a religious practitioner?
12. and what is to be a spiritual person?
13. Is there something else you would like to say?
Appendix C. Shot-by-shot Itemized Analyses of the Films

C.1 Itemized Analysis of What The Bleep do We (k)now!

Narrative and Style Aspects of “The Mirror and the Body Painting” Scene

Time Aspects
The screen duration of the scene is 12 minutes. The action occurs on the morning of the 4th day, the last day of Amanda’s journey. This segment of Amanda’s story covers probably 4 hours of Amanda’s process and it is resolved in 7 minutes and 40 seconds of plot duration. This reduction in duration of the plot is achieved through both elliptical editing within the scene and crosscutting to six interruptions or digressions by the scientists, as well as to non-diegetic material, filling up the 4 minutes and 20 seconds left for completing the screen duration. The non-diegetic material are animated cartoon-look scenes of Amanda’s cells and brain to bridge and illustrate both the scientists’ explanations and Amanda’s subjectivity (i.e. what is happening inside her body).

Narrative and Style
The discourses of the scientists focus on ‘Assertions about Emotions’, they expose the premises: 1) the brain produces the emotional chemicals and predisposes the cells, and 2) aging is the decay of improper production of proteins. Then they present the practical implication: there is a way to overcome this process by shifting to a new paradigm in the understanding of God, good and evil, natural boundaries, science, and learning ways to make correct choices and letting the real desire emerge. The non-diegetic material and the use of voice-in-off serve as bridges and ellipses to interweave the two stories and give continuity to the sequence. The 3D cartoon-like animation performs a metaleptical function, in the sense that even originally belonging to the narration of the scientists, it leaps into the narration of Amanda’s story, illustrating what she is living internally. Thus, this metalepsis works as the kernel for both stories, making the digressions of the scientists less intrusive in Amanda’s story, and her story less unrelated to the scientist’s discourse. As to the range and depth of information, the narration is subjective and restrictive to what Amanda knows. However, although the scientists do not comment directly on Amanda’s story, they in fact function as objective and omniscient narrators driving the audience to a specific and focused reading of the story.

There are two different styles in the scene. On the one hand, the discourse of the scientists follows the conventions of classical testimonial-based documentaries: edited answers of the interviewees shown in natural settings with stable unobtrusive cinematography and lighting, plus insertions of digital animations for illustrative purposes and to help endowing senses of objectivity and credibility to their statements. The story of Amanda, on the other hand, is narrated in compliance with the Melodramatic style. The story focuses on a handicapped woman (she is deaf-mute and recently got divorced) confined in her own personal problematic, and living emotional situations that
affect her relationships with those who configure her the first circle of socialization (her friend Jennifer, her ex husband Bill, her boss, etc.) Amanda’s problem is that something is stuffed and blocked, repressed and restricted in her life. As it is typical in melodrama genre, the inner intensity of the character is plastically captured through *mise-en-scène* traits, for example by intensifying the emotional register through acting style and giving emphasis to the many props used in the action (the splattered toothpaste, the mirrors, the eyeliner used for painting over her body, the bathtub, the many hearts and baroque lines drawn on her body). The excess, characteristic to melodrama, is shown here not only in Amanda’s quasi hysterical reaction when she regrets her behavior at the party and sees herself as someone worthless, but also in the exuberant and prolific non-diegetic material (e.g. the various intershots of animated cells and brain.) The crescendo and cathartic moment of her exploding, smashing her own image on the mirror, and being insulting to herself, attains a climactic breakpoint when she reaches the pinnacle marked by an outburst of loud laughter followed by an anticlimactic slope, when she achieves the sublimating point of her self-reconciliation.

**Formal Aspects**

a) *Mise-en-scène*

Besides the above, there are some other *mise-en-scène* aspects in the scene worthy to remark. The sequence conveys the action from the space of familiar socialization (the living room) to the more intimate space of a bathroom. The depth of space shown in the establishing shots of both living room and bathroom marks a considerable ample space: the house is quite big, more than enough to let Amanda move, which makes Amanda look small and somehow suggesting that what holds Amanda confined is something internal that she ought to overcome working at a personal level. The scene uses a three-point lightning technique which, along the use of a color palette based on blues, gives a sense of glossy and neat environment, anticipating the final stage Amanda will reach at the end of her story. Costumes and make-up reflect also the ‘messy’ internal stage of the character (haggard eyes, dirty clothes, a lost earring). This feeling of internal messiness is represented as well with the track of dirty clothes she has dumped on the floor. Finally, the arrangement of certain props such as the exaggerated deep blue tone of the steamy water in the bathtub serves as a visual metaphor for the new stage Amanda reaches when she sublimates her frustrations, and also allows a symbolic reading of the returning to the warmth of the peaceful maternal womb.

b) *Cinematography*

The camera places us in a neat and bright space in vivid colors, with abundance of whites and blues. Shots have eye-line match level and there is no use of POV shots but rather over-shoulder shots. The camera acts as an objective but discrete gazer: it starts slowly panning over Amanda’s bad shape (she has a hangover) and then slowly zooms-in to attain intimacy with the character. Depth of field is in deep sharp focus while establishing shots, but when Amanda starts her crisis the camera shifts to wide angle lenses, making the background fussy and out of focus, and thus detaching Amanda’s medium close ups.
from the background rendering a more intimate relationship with her. An extreme close-up of the dripping faucet establishes the water as a motif for the last part of the scene. At the end, a crane top shot and a slow motion shot of Amanda immersed in the water underline the peaceful stage reached by the character, who seems not being listening at the off-screen answering machine with Bill’s message. Special digital effects with the mirror are used for distorting Amanda’s reflection, and to morph her image either into the old lady or into the man-in-a-suit.

c) Editing

The montage sequence follows the rhythm and pace of the emotional process of the character. Short elliptical cuts and dissolve transitions help to condense time and to indicate a larger psychological process. Besides this resource, the rest of the montage follows established conventions for cutting according graphic, rhythmic and spatial relations. The length/time relation follows the intensity of the inner emotions of Amanda. In some parts the montage uses especial editing effects, such as non-diegetical reinforcements to emphasize the subjectivity lived by the character, as for example the use of quick flash inserts aided with blast sound effects. At the climax of the scene, the editing pace accelerates employing a series of jump-cuts using takes from different angles which dramatizes and crisps even more the situation. The effect of multiple cuts collaborates with the emotional excess at this point of the scene. Likewise, the use of smooth dissolve transitions and fades accompanies the feeling of relaxation and peace at the end of the scene.

d) Sound

The scene opens playing a song that talks about abandonment, disappearing, and things that are “wasted, wound, without appeal”, claiming that “there must be someway out of here”. The use of non-diegetic sound is abundant. Besides the use of background music to accompany the emotional moments, there is a rich use of sound effects: sound blasts to emphasize some cuttings, battle sounds when the cells are bombarded, the screaming and splashing cells when they die, the noisy electrical storm of the brain when it launches the peptides, and so on. The scientists are backed-ground with soft New Age scores, and so is Amanda. At the ending of the scene, when she is relaxing in the warm waters of the bathtub, the music resembles the relaxation tunes used in Spas. The diegetic sound is concordant with the framing of the shots, thus the falling drop of the faucet is amplified and reverberated to gain relevance on the water element, which constitutes a motif throughout the film.
C.2 Itemized Analysis of The Da Vinci Code

Narrative and Style Aspects of the “Exegesis of The Last Supper” Scene

Time Aspects

Screen duration of this scene is 24 minutes. Its position within the film is after one hour and eleven minutes from the beginning. It happens the night Jacques Saunière is murdered, when Robert Langdon and Sophie take refuge at the Château Villette, a mansion owned by Sir Leigh Teabing (aka “the teacher”). The scene undertakes probably four hours of the story duration. Without the parallel scenes, the flashbacks, and the action scenes, this explanatory segment is resolved in 16 minutes of plot duration. The segment covers the explanation (lecture) by Teabing on the Holy Grail, Leonardo da Vinci’s fresco The Last Supper, and the Criptex (the “Key Stone”). The abundance of historic information and interpretative conjectures intermingles with parallel action scenes and non-diegetic flashbacks and historic recreations, as well as the use of didactic devices (such as video screen effects). Such resources are aimed to reduce the risk of tediousness in front of what basically is an overall presentation of the theoretical frame of the story.

Narrative and Style

Since the narration engages audience’s interest and curiosity by hiding elements and causes, its range of information is tightly restricted. The plot is often confined to the protagonists’ (investigators’) range of knowledge regarding the advancements of their investigation (the answering of the riddles). However, the film becomes unrestricted regarding the police chasing subplot: we are allowed to know beforehand who the real enemies are and how close to the protagonists are their chasers, enhancing the anxiety of the thrill. In some points we are moved to the opposite state: an ultra-restricted information range where we are set in a blind spot, ignoring momentarily how the protagonists could succeed certain obstacles. The depth of information is presented as objective: whatever the characters see, and especially what they think and conclude, is taken as an objective and unobjectionable truth with practically no room for doubt. The free deductive linking of historical data is presented as ‘scientific evidence’.

As I stated previously, The Da Vinci Code is a detective narrative that follows most of the conventions of this film genre. However its story combines two subgenres: the Treasure Quest subgenre and what could be termed a Techno-Forensic subgenre. As a Treasure Quest (the quest for the Holy Grail) the plot flows by the correct answering to a series of clues, puzzles and riddles. The form ‘riddle-solution-riddle’ (A-B-A’) suggests not a linear nor a circular structure, but rather an ascending spiral (circular and linear at once) springing the story forward. Treasure Quest stories often imply paths of chained riddles that are posed beforehand by absent haunting personages (e.g. Jacques Saunière, who is dead). In some way the one who poses the set of riddles coalesces with the author of the story (Dan Brown) in the sense that both are omniscient invisible narrators that
establish in advance the fate of the protagonists. They all are—as Sophie complains—“marionettes” of an already written script. As a *Techno-Forensic* thriller the film assumes the aesthetics of a surgical scrutiny aided by hi-tech gadgets and tools to uncover the truth: robotic mechanisms, last generation surveillance systems, digital tracking devices, fluorescent analyzers, snapshots, interactive image processors. In this particular scene, *techno-forensic* aesthetics works as a metaphor of the fetishistic scrutiny Sophie is submitted to. Paradoxically the proximity to the painting and to Sophie’s life is achieved not by shortening physical distances between the object and the observer, but exacerbating the gap by means of obstructing the direct experience putting in the midst an artifact (digital image processors) that eventually overcomes distance at least in appearance.

Formal Aspects

a) Mise-en-scène

Teabing’s aristocratic palace, its gardens, façade, and the presence and size of certain props such as the collection of classical statuary and paintings, the Gobelin tapestry and antique furniture, along with certain architectural details like the height of ceilings and the fireplace, recall on the one hand, the psychological and social setting of *Citizen Kane*’s Xanadu¹, and the hand other hand other buildings devoted to preserve knowledge, art, and history. A museum not only preserves knowledge but freezes reality by submitting it to a rigid taxonomical process of de-historization and re-mystification. All the emphasis on history in this scene is linked to a cultural mystification of the past in order to make meaning for the present.

The setting where the *Last Supper* is exegetically explained is a former ballroom converted into a library-studio, stuffed with disordered miscellaneous objects: art objects, laptops, screen monitors, clipped prints of Leonardo da Vinci’s paintings, old books, replicas of fragments of ancient papyri², magnifying glasses, astrolabes and other scientific instruments. Even though the depth of space is large, the amount of objects results overwhelming: its messiness looks not only as a lab for investigation and re-classification, but also as an artist’s *atelier* for deconstructing and re-creating images. At the center of the room an image of Da Vinci’s *Last Supper* is displayed on a flat HD screen mounted on an easel, which eventually serves as a digital blackboard. Leonardo’s fresco is subjected to an exhaustive analysis: with the use of a wireless remote control Teabing performs a surgery-like manipulation by cropping and masking, dragging and dropping elements to support his hypotheses.

¹ A quotation that is more explicit with the use of transition effects for the flashbacks similar to those used in O. Welles’ film. Moreover, in both movies the theme of possessing and collecting pieces of art is present. In a consumer society (where pop-esotericism emerges) everything “becomes exchangeable because everything becomes a commodity. All reality is mechanically measured by its materiality” (Berger, J. 1977: 87)

² Papyrus scrolls are commonplace since pop-esoteric TV shows discussed the Apocryphal Gospel of Judas.
The scene is shot using Low-key lightning technique to create deep dark shadows that suggest mystery and danger. The color palette used in both set decorations and costumes is restricted to grays, dark blues and steels. The only vivid colors in the settings are those bestowed by the shining bluish screens of the hi-tech gadgets. Similarly the rest of characters in the film wear uniforms all the time, indicating that they represent not their personal interests but finally are institutional agents (the Church, the Police, the Academy). Attires and accessories serve to construct the characters, thus Robert and Teabing are characterized each one with a personal gimmick. Robert is dressed with the seriousness of an academic scholar though wears a Mickey Mouse watch, representing his desexualized innocence and freshness that make him worthy to find the successful code. Teabing walks with the help of canes, indicating his handicap or unworthiness to walk through the paths that lead to the Grail.

Sophie and Robert wear sort of professional uniforms: flat black sober dress for Detective Sophie Neveu and black shirt, no tie, dark suit for Professor Robert Langdon. Costumes set main characters within a frame which is at the same time professional and chaste. Regarding acting styles, the role of each character is clearly established by means of both dialogue and acting performance. Sophie plays a role of a submissive pupil that is taught with no more contribution than posing explanatory questions. Langdon and Teabing play the role of Senior and Junior professors. Rather than a discussion among colleagues, theirs is a master-disciple lesson, the latter attempting to overcome the former, but at the end recognizing his superiority and agreeing with him.

Acting style is different for male and female characters, the former coldly pondering pros and cons, defending the plausibility of their hypotheses: they move in a rational register, whereas Sophie moves in a more emotional register, bringing her feelings and moral judgments afore, and reacting with astonishment at the males’ conclusions. The more she enters into the story the less initiative she shows; the more we know about her true identity the more neutralized she turns. Sexuality is a ghostly issue in this scene. It is obliquely addressed by Teabing and Langdon’s discourses and Sophie is surprised that pagans used to find God through sex. Sophie’s flashbacks of the secret sexual rite she witnessed when she was a little girl seem to be a blind-spot in her life, a reminiscence or an innuendo of sexual abuse. Langdon concludes “women, then, are a huge threat to the church”. But what seems to be a vindication of sexuality turns out to be actually a ‘de-sexualization’ stand.

The scene at the library-studio opens with a large portrait of a woman - presumably Teabing’s wife- which makes him a widower. This portrait is shown in the background in most of the shots. On the other hand, the relationship between Sophie and Langdon never approaches to the hero-keeps-the-chic commonplace of police stories’ ending. There is no love story or romantic references, but rather linkages of sexuality related to religious rituals. This chastity traverse all characters besides the protagonists’ bachelorhood, asexuality is also present in Jacques Saunière, bishop Aringarosa and in

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3 In fact “Teacher” is one of Teabing’s nicknames. When supporting his ideas with the aid of Apocryphal Scriptures, he does so leaning on a lectern, as priests do when preaching.
the Opus Dei monk, Silas. This last character violently irrupts at the end of the analyzed scene. Teabing and Langdon describe him as a “monster”, a “dragon wearing a cilice” who “inflicts pain so he can suffer as Christ suffered”.

Silas’ albino traits, enhanced by a cerulean face make-up, is a reverse metonym (a photograph negative) indicating his inner ‘blackness’. Melanin of the skin is read as related to the realm of morality. Silas becomes a figure that represents how the Church hides its real malevolent intentions (black) as if it were beneficient (white). Silas is an example of the orthogonal representations western narrative systems oppose to exacerbate the distance between the poles to such an extent that thinking in any reconciliation becomes impossible. Griselda Pollock remarks that such oppositions are the condition for fixing concepts and situations.

b) Cinematography

Camera behaves analytically but maintaining an objective approach, assuming the invisible position of an unnoticed voyeur. Medium shots and medium long shots are privileged letting us observe the various details of the set decoration as well as keeping us involved in the conversation. Movements are soft and driven by characters’ actions. The subtle style of descriptive cinematography is coherent with the epistemological assumption of the story, which assumes objectivity and scientific curiosity. Historic recreations are captured in full-long shots as in conventional historic and epic films; this, along with the film process of eroded and granulated texture on those scenes, serves to insinuate that those insertions are historic documents. Slight unprovoked movements of camera, such as soft panning, slow traveling, and dolly-ins are used to increase the sense of suspense and mystery, and to fulfill the visual description. A similar function has the overall use of deep sharp focus which gives neat access to the various details in the background. Relationships are reinforced through abundance of three-shots and two-shots as well as over-the-shoulder shots reminding us that the explanation (lecture) that is taking place is a role-play of teachers and pupil.

c) Editing

The montage is a three layer ensemble: the main layer (the action at Château Villette) intercuts to parallel scenes of the plot (Captain Fache tracking the security truck the main characters used to escape, Aringarosa instructing Silas, and Silas heading to the Villette and trespassing it) and to non-diegetic material in the form of flashbacks and historic

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4 "Blackness operates at the polar opposite to whiteness, where whiteness is lights, knowledge, civilization, all that makes knowledge possible. Blackness becomes black darkness, the unknowable time before civilization, or a place which, if it has any civilization at all, has it only as the result of the illuminating admixture of whiteness –the coming of Europe, the enlightenment of Christianity or modernity. […] whiteness is all possibility; blackness all nullity. And yet, the latter term, black, is necessary precisely to make meaning for the former white, through the junction between a nothingness –blackness- and the beginning of meaning –whiteness/Europe/the West." (Pollock 1999: 257)
recreations. This style of montage grants dynamism for an action that in itself is basically informative. Continuity editing based on actions, reactions and spatial relations frames the information in a dialogic didactism of the setting: there are speakers actively arguing ideas (Langdon and Teabing) and listeners (Sophie) being passively convinced and transformed by those ideas. The addressee subject of the scene is Sophie, to whom the lecture provokes assaulting quick images bringing her back to the traumatic moments of her past and recent history: the confusing image of the sexual rite she accidentally witnessed in her childhood, and the image of his grandfather found dead, naked and bloody in a disturbing ‘crucified’ position. Non-diegetic didactic materials grab viewers’ attention and put them in a learning position.

d) _Sound_

Realistic sounding is used for dialogues and actions, however special sound effects are added to the technological gadgets that actually in real life are soundless. Ringtones, beeps, buzzes from the computers and scans grab attention to this sophisticated equipment. Reverberated and blurred sound accompanies non-diegetic images along with epic choral scores, making them appear distant in time. Background orchestral music accompanies major emotional moments of the scene enhancing the thrill and creating a mysterious atmosphere.
C.3 Itemized Analysis of *The Passion of the Christ*

**Narrative and Style Aspects of “The Flogging” Scene**

**Time Aspects**

The sequence is placed at the minute 52 of the film and it has a screen duration of 16 minutes. The action takes place the day after Jesus is apprehended, probably at noon—few hours before his crucifixion. The story duration of this sequence undertakes approximately two hours of Jesus’ Passion and it is resolved in 16 minutes of plot duration. The segment covers in real time the span wherein Jesus receives a total number of—at least—105 lashes in 10 minutes, plus the subsequent scenes of Mary wiping the blood on the floor in parallel with the scene of the crown of thorns. While these latter scenes are edited using ellipses and crosscuts aimed to reduce the length of the action, the former uses other montage resources—such as slow motion, flashbacks and non-diegetic intercuts—to elongate the perception of the duration of the flogging.

**Narrative and Style**

The use of non-diegetic material such as dramatizations of Jesus and Magdalene’s remembrances, as well as the visualizations of Satan witnessing the action, have a twofold purpose: on the one hand they function as relievers for the accumulated tension, so the subsequent curve of thrill can start from a more flattered plateau to raise to the next peak. On the other hand they play an accusative role, in the sense that through them is explained the ultimate causes of the displayed effects. They act as a visual rationale to answer the question for the source and sense of such victimization, openly exhibiting the ultimate victimizer. Hence, the sadistic triad is complete: the punished one (Jesus), the agents of the infliction (the crowd, the Priests, the Roman soldiers) and the Agency (Satan). The shallow ellipses are aimed not to abbreviate the plot, but just to ensure the fluency of it.

Regarding the range and depth of information, the narration is both omniscient and objective. It is omniscient not only because the audience have total access to all perspectives and already know the development and ending of the plot, but above all because the main characters have total knowledge and awareness of the meaning of what it is going on and what is to come. Such omniscient range of information sets the audience in a position similar to pilgrims strolling a *via crucis*: walking through various already known passages and ‘stations’, they perform ‘like if’ they were suddenly encountered by an unknown diegesis. This “enactment” of a restricted information, facilitates the emotional impact needed to construct a sight that is closer to the contemplative gaze of meditative practices.

Regarding the depth of information the story is presented as objective and unobjectionable. Elements such as the use of Latin and Aramaic for the dialogues, the verbatim of the Scriptures and the inclusion of scenes (vignettes) extracted from the popular piety tradition are oriented to achieve a sense of ‘scientific factuality’. The
recourse to ‘pop-scientific’ appeal is analogous to what Norman Bryson calls ‘Natural Attitude’ which consists in pursuing the Essential Copy, the perfect reproduction of the Being, by reproducing the external appearance without seeming to imprint on it a personal meaning or interpretation (Bryson 1999: 25) The scientific factuality pretension alongside of the omniscient narrative results, nevertheless, in an implicit, though invisible, narrator driving the reading to determined and univocal conclusions. The assumed model of communication is that the content is a transportable matter, independent to the receiver or to the transmitter, and that the narration transports intact the event within the space of film into the corresponding mental space in the consciousness of the viewer (Bryson 1999: 31). The spectacularity of this scene rests in its excess and grandiloquence in portraying a purely moral concept: justice. The nature of this spectacle which demands abandonment to an intelligible representation of an obscene passion is similar to the one examined by Roland Barthes in his piece *The world of wrestling* (Barthes 1972: 25).

*Formal Aspects*

*a) Mise-en-scène*

For analyzing this particular scene, the following mise-en-scène aspects are taken in consideration. The action takes place in the quarter’s courtyard of the Roman soldiers, a place known as Praetorium. The establishing shot demarcates a close space devoted to punishment. The arrangement of certain props sets in advance the action that will be taken: a half stone-column with chains and shackles, the torches on the walls, a table displaying the various instruments of torture, all these elements are typical for torture scenes in films. Other props such as the desk of the captain, the piles of helmets, shields and spears remember that the action is run not in a public space but in a military facility and, therefore, the punishment is the act of an apparatus of justice twisted by the conspiracy of the Jews (the perpetuators).

The depth of space is shallow thought not claustrophobic, helping to realize that the space is at the same time a confined space (a military facility) and an open-to-the-public space, as could be a theatre where a spectacle is performed. Foucault stressed that ours is not a society of spectacle but of surveillance and punishment. While Churches, theatres and other buildings respond to the social need of spectacle to “render accessible to a multitude of men the inspection of a small number of objects”, the Panopticon building (machinery) addresses the opposite problem: “to procure for a small number, or even for a single individual, the instantaneous view of a great multitude” (Foucault 1999: 69); though PXT merges both spectacle and punishment in the same space and action, a theme that was beforehand treated as part of the list of fears in futuristic film narratives. The inflicted punishment in Jesus’ story is also a negotiated blend of two natures: for the Religious Institution punishment is a mean for constructing a sacrificial escape goat, whereas for the State punishment has the social function of teaching a lesson. In this sense, the Praetorium has the architectural function to work as a classroom or an amphitheatre where a public lesson is taught and as the sacrificial stone where a goat is immolated. The scene uses a soft flood-lightning technique that illuminates everything
without shedding distracting shadows: all is in neat detail but without withdrawing the
viewer’s attention to the main motif of the film, which is the blood of Jesus.

The color palette used in set decorations and costumes is aimed to similar
purpose: grays and sands in the set, and light browns for the costumes of the witnessing
crowd, make the effect of an almost black and white background, helping to enhance the
glossy color red of Jesus’ blood. This “detachment” from the background functions to
contour the figure as a separated object, which facilitates the isolation of the victim (its
fetishization) for the sadistic gaze. It also gives the feeling that the main character is
swallowed by the environment. Conversely, the costumes of the ‘voyeurs-spectators’ (the
gazers of the sadistic spectacle) contrast the environment with black and dark brown
clothes, some of them are dressed fancy -as the Priests or Claudia (who wears a white
dress) - or are dressed in coarse and rags -as Satan, John, Mary and Magdalene. It is worth
to notice that Mary and Magdalene’s veils and robes resemble the religious habits of
convent nuns. Flashbacks change the color palette to monochromatic sepia (for the FB of
Jesus washing his disciples’ feet) or in quasi monochromatic terracotta (for the FB in
slow motion of Jesus defending Magdalene from being stoned). The turn to
monochromatic palettes and the exaggerated slow motion in the FB contributes to ease
the visual saturation of the scene and to make a clear bracket with these vignettes. Make-
up occupies a primordial role in this mise-en-scène for it visualizes the development and
severity of the ongoing flagellation and the process through which Jesus is transformed
into a baroque mass of blood and flesh. The excess of this element contrasts with the
shallow make-up of other characters, such as Mary and Magdalene, who show rather a
pale washed face with subtle reddish eye contours.

The scene, as the whole film, opposes two acting styles. On the one hand there are
the soldiers and Priests representing the perpetrators of the victimization, these agents
perform within a register of proactive and unrestrainable passions: rage, severity, frantic
cruelty. At some point of the flogging the soldiers reach an ecstatic moment: when Jesus’
blood splashes their faces, they crack up in an orgiastic laughter deforming their
semblances into figures that resemble paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. The gazes of
Caiaphas and the rest of the Priests -one of them wearing an eye patch- are of rejoicing
voyeurism: their satisfaction is not in having their petition accomplished, but rather in
witnessing with their own eyes the inflicted punishment, this makes the actual punishers
proxies of the Priests. The proactive and unrestrainable passion of the perpetrators makes
the flogging surpass the border of a mere execution of a legal sentence turning it into an
issue of personal pleasure. On the other hand, there is the register of the group comprised
by Mary, Magdalene, John and Claudia. The register of this group is the opposite of a
proactive and unrestrainable passion: their performance is of a passive self-restrained
passion. Theirs are inbound and contained gazes. Mary’s line: “my son, when, where,
how will you choose to be delivered of this?” has to be read from her omniscient setting:
Mary knows that what she is witnessing is the fulfillment of God’s will. Her voyeurism is
therefore aloof and absent in time, yet present in space and physically close to the events,
this position is similar to someone who is in a meditative contemplation. Magdalene,
John and Claudia perform also a distant though empathetic witnessing of the scene, John
staying back, observing Mary’s suffering, Magdalene covering her face and Claudia shamefully avoiding to look at Mary’s eyes. Amid this opposite passion gazes, the proactive unrestrained and the passive refrained, a third gaze—which is non-diegetic—s is displayed along the scene. Satan appears twice in the scene, in both ‘floating’ behind the perpetuators (The group of Priests and the Roman Captain of the floggers). Constituted as the Agency of Jesus’ suffering, his gaze is a scrutinizing one, supervising the development of his authorship. His fatherhood is represented by the hairy-back baby he is carrying and caressing.

b) Cinematography
The camera framing places us as observers privileging eye line match level shots and balancing long shots with medium shots. Occasionally a hand held camera gives us few POV shots of Jesus. For example: when Jesus is hauled away an upside down shot shows Jesus’ POV, and when a soldier -at the end of the crown of thorns scene- spits on Jesus’ face, he actually spits to the camera. Nevertheless, the briefness of these POV’s are not intended to make us fully identify with the victim, but to grant a minimal sympathetic level that would approach us to the ‘key’ spectators of the scene (Mary, Magdalene, John, Claudia) and to facilitate an empathic identification with them, particularly with Mary. The shots allow the audience to exert a judgment after having an objective and selective view of all the action (full group shots) and voyeurs of it (close ups to the soldiers, the Priests, the women). Crossover close ups are used to establish relationships of gazes for example between Jesus and Mary; wide angle lenses are used to make the background fussy and out of focus, detaching the gazers from the background and letting a more intimate relationship. The overall depth of field is in deep focus giving access to the various reactions provoked by the punishment, however the sharp focus is on Jesus’ body, making its wounds neatly visible. Slow motion is used to dramatically enhance and elongate the pain reflected in Jesus’ face and the effects of the whip stroking and tearing the body.

c) Editing
The montage ensembles the various aspects of the action in real time cutting according graphic, rhythmic and spatial relations. Match action editing is used to follow the rhythm of the whipping, which as such maintains a stabled pace, but several takes from different angles and the acceleration of the length/time relation is used to dramatize even more the situation and to enhance the sense of an increasing violence. Special attention is given, besides the flogged body, to the reacting gazes of the main characters: Caiaphas looking attentive to both the soldiers and Jesus; Mary and Jesus exchanging gazes; Satan observing the process of the punishment; John watching the suffering of the women. The first set of lashes intercuts with the Priests’ reaction. The second set of lashes opens with reverse shots of Jesus and Mary exchanging gazes, then keeping Mary along this set of lashes as the voyeur of the flogging. The third set of lashes establishes the gaze of Satan over the flogging shown in slow motion. The action is interrupted with two inserts of flashback scenes, one in monochromatic sepia and the other one in extreme slow motion.
As already mentioned, these non-diegetic materials are aimed to relieve the accumulated tension, making the subsequent curve of thrill start from a lower point to raise up to the next peak. Between the flogging scene and the next scene where Mary wipes the blood, the edition uses a short elliptical cut and then crosscuts to the parallel scene of Jesus been crowned with thorns. These resources have the purpose of ensure the fluency of the plot but without removing the sense of real time. The editing point at the end of the analyzed sequence is when a soldier, after setting the crown with thorns, spits on Jesus’ face, spiting actually to the camera (to us).

d) Sound

The scene opens with and maintains a realistic sounding of the objects involved in the action: the chains, the lashes, the groans of pain, the background. The use of non-diegetic sound accompanies non-diegetic images, such as the appearances of Satan which are announced with background music and a fade volume of the diegetic sound, or the slow motion flashback of Magdalene, which sound is exaggeratedly reverberated and echoed, similar to classical duel scenes in Westerns. Back ground music also accompanies the emotional moments when the spectators observe the scene (Mary and/or Magdalene). Starting from the second set of lashes, foley sound effects are enhanced, reverberated and placed at the first plane of the soundtrack. Special attention is paid to the blood as constituent motif of the film: the diegetic sound is amplified and reverberated when the blood is splashed, gaining relevance on this element. Even sounds that naturally do not exist, such as the tearing of the flesh, the stroking of a metal spike or the insertion of a thorn in the skin, are dubbed. The music used as background is based on choirs, bass and middle-east instruments, similar to new age oriental music.
Appendix D. Plot Segmentations

D.1 Plot Segmentation of What the #$*! Do We (K)now!? (for both Amanda’s and Scientists’ plot)

C 0.00.00  Credit Title
   a. “In the beginning was the Void teeming with infinite possibilities of which you are one”
      a. Cosmic outbursts. Overlapped voices of interviewees’ statements.
      b. 0.01.44 (FF) Amanda takes the subway and goes to the movie theatre where multiple Amandas are seen. Interviewees posse questions.
      c. 0.03.22 Mical Edwith, Ph.D., Stuart Hameroff M.D., Ramtha, Fred Alan Wolf, Ph.D., Jeffrey Satinover, M.D., Amit Goswami, Ph.D., Dr. David Albert, John Hagelin, Ph.D., and Dr. Candace Pert, address the issue of the “ultimate question” and “quantum physics”.
      d. Title: What the Bleep do we Know?

1. 0.06.34  (Day #1).
   a. Amanda takes pictures in a Terminal Train Station, observing and photographing different people.
   b. 0.07.39 Interviewees
      i. Jeffrey Satinover, M.D. explains “existence occurs when a particular matter bumps with another particular matter which is altered”.
      ii. Andrew B. Newberg M.D. explains “we interpret perception as the real”.
      iii. Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C. explains “tomography shows that for the brain there is no difference between what it sees and what it remembers”.
   c. 0.09.13 Amanda continues taking pictures at the Terminal Train Station. When finishing, she takes a pill. Interviewees continue in voice in off.
   d. 0.10.35 Amanda’s Home. Amanda arrives when Jennifer, her roommate, is leaving saying “catch you up latter”. Amanda sits down in an armchair.
      i. 0.11.30 Ramtha explains how the brain discriminates what is going to be recorder in it through objection and judgment.
   e. 0.11.58 Amanda sleeps.
      i. 0.12.27 Dr. Candace Pert explains how we only see what we believe is possible. Example of the Native American Indians in the Caribbean Islands when they saw Columbus’ ships. Quick flash of an island.
   f. 0.12.56 (Amanda’s Dream) A Shaman looks at the sea trying to see Columbus’ ships. Amanda is there, he touches her forehead with his finger, then she is able to see the ships. The shaman touches her again and she awakes from the dream.
   g. 0.13.48 (dream in dream) Amanda wakes up and opens the shades. The shaman is stood up behind her. The image on the other side of the window builds up in a
digital effect. A voice in off says “we create the reality, we are reality producing machines”. Quick flash of Amanda in high speed furnishing her living room.

h. 0.14.22 (Dream - FB) Amanda in black and white catches his ex husband cheating on her. She screams. Amanda awakes from her dream/nightmare.
   i. 0.14.24 Andrew B. Newberg M.D. hypothesis on reality as an illusion.
   ii. 0.014.57 Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C. states that the brain doesn’t know the difference between what is out there and in here.
   iii. 0.15.02 Fred Alan Wolf, Ph.D. states that there is no independence between what is out there and in here.

2. 0.15.06 (Day #2)
   a. Amanda drinks her morning coffee. Jennifer asks her if she is ok, because she heard Amanda screaming. Amanda is deft and tells her dream about the shaman. Jennifer says that it could be a past life, or a parallel reality or a future life. Amanda replies “get real”.
   b. 0.16.33 Amanda walks on the streets.
   c. Basketball kid “Duque Reginald”.
      i. 0.16.52 Fred Alan Wolf, Ph.D. talks about subatomic world and how Quantum Physics emerged to explain those phenomena.
      ii. 0.17.35 Jeffrey Satinover, M.D. (psychiatry) matter is not static nor predictable.
      iii. 0.17.48 William Tiller, Ph.D. talks about the space within the atoms.
      iv. 0.18.07 Fred Alan Wolf, Ph.D. particles appear and disappear. Alternative universes.
      v. 0.18.38 Dr. David Albert talks about time, past and future, the past affecting the future but not the contrary.
   d. 0.19.33 Amanda continues walking on the streets. A basketball ball rolls to her. The kid invites Amanda to try some shots with the ball in his “unending possibilities court”.
      i. 0.21.14 Stuart Hameroff M.D. The universe is almost empty.
      ii. 0.21.28 Animation of atoms. Matter is not solid but insubstantial. Matter is like a thought, like a bit of information.
   e. 0.22.27 The kid explains, through Animation of atoms, why objects never touch nothing. Amanda tries and fails the shot.
      i. 0.23.15 Stuart Hameroff M.D. explains the illusion of conscious of flowing of time.
   f. 0.23.23 The kid tells Amanda that there is always possible to go back in time. Amanda becomes younger and succeeds in her shot. The kid explains he knows these things because he reads ‘Dr Quantum comics’. A guy enters the court, says a line, and exits (is he the kid, but older?).
      i. 0.24.01 Fred Alan Wolf, Ph.D. light is a wave and a particle.
      ii. 0.24.06 Amit Goswami, Ph.D. when we are not looking, they are particles of possibilities, when we are looking they are particles of experience.
g. 0.24.10 Amanda looks away from the kid, then the ball multiplies in many. When she returns to look at him, only one ball is seen. A voice in off explains how one of the possible positions take place as soon as the observer watches over reality.
   i. 0.24.33 Stuart Hameroff M.D. Explains quantum superposition, to be in two places simultaneously.

h. 0.24.40 Amanda looks to the kid and the multiple balls become one. The kid asks her: “how far down the rabbit hole do you want to go?”
   0.25.14 Animated Collage of different aspects of Amanda everyday life.
   0.25.45 Amanda shoots a “nice shot”. The kid spins the ball in his fingertip.
   i. 0.26.08 Amit Goswami, Ph.D. proposes to stop thinking that things are preexisting before us, but that things are possibilities of consciousness. Cites Heisenberg ‘atoms are not things but tendencies’.
   ii. 0.27.02 Jeffrey Satinover, M.D. things that are in two different places at the same time (quick flash to the Kid splitting in two).

i. 0.28.18 shots of the city. Amanda heading to her work. She stops by a fountain and observes children splashing and playing in it.
   i. 0.29.12 Fred Alan Wolf, Ph.D. raises the theme of the “Observer”
   ii. 0.29.36 Ramtha. Posses the question on the Observer.

j. 0.29.56 Amanda walks to her office. Voice in off talks about the spirit in a body-suit.
   i. 0.30.20 William Tiller, Ph.D. keeps explaining his theory of the spirit in a body-suit driving the vehicle.

k. 0.30.27 Amanda witnesses how a lost dog is recovered by its owner and she takes out her photographic camera and takes a snapshot. Her cellphone rings, it’s her boss, Frank, urging her to be at the office.
   i. 0.31.35 John Hagelin, Ph.D. tells the story of having people together meditating produced a decrease in crime in Washington DC.
   ii. 0.32.24 Fred Alan Wolf, Ph.D. every single person affects the reality that we see.

l. 0.32.43 Amanda in the subway station. She gets anxious, tries to take one of her pills but the can drops from her hands and she misses the train. She, then, approaches the exhibition of Water Crystals by Dr Emoto and attends its explanation. A man (played by Armin Shimerman) reflects on the crystals.
   i. 0.35.59 Dr. Candace Pert stresses that though can modify the body.
   ii. 0.36.02 William Tiller, Ph.D. explains how people don’t believe they can modify their reality through thoughts: lack of perseverance.
   iii. 0.36.27 Miceal Ledwith, Ph.D.: if someone accepts that you can walk on the water, you will. Positive thinking.
   iv. 0.36.59 Amit Goswami, Ph.D. we assume reality more concrete than it is. If reality is my possibility, then it can change. I create my own reality.

m. 0.38.23 Evening. Amanda arrives home. Jennifer is dancing/painting. She thanks Amanda and gives her a present: a photographic album.

n. 0.40.42 Amanda dreams on what she lived during the day, Summary of the content.
i. 042.25 John Hagelin, Ph.D. We are one unity.
o. 042.56 Amanda awakes after dreaming again with the shaman touching her forehead.
i. 043.00 Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C. I create my day in the morning when I awake.

3. 043.47 (Day #3)
a. Amanda’s office. An order indicates that she has to cover a wedding at St. Paul of the Rock. Amanda flashbacks her wedding. Frank is looking the body of a young woman.
i. 044.40 Ramtha explains how emotions are chemical reactions, exemplifies how thoughts are enough for men to have erections.
b. 045.14 Amanda complains with Frank, finally she accepts to cover the polish catholic wedding.
i. 046.22 William Tiller, Ph.D. raises the question about what God means.
c. 046.35 Amanda arrives to the Church and read a banner: “have you confessed your sins to the Lord?”
i. 046.39 Miceal Ledwith, Ph.D.: Religion took away that idea that I am one with the Being who brought me here and, instead, stated that God is something different from us who has to be pleased.
d. 046.50 Amanda enters the church which is empty and adorned for the wedding. Inter-shots with the interviewees:
i. 047.35 Dr. David Albert: what is associated with organized religion is that it had harmed oppressed people
ii. 047.58 Ramtha. Quantum Physics is the closest science to interpret what Jesus said about the seed of mustard bigger than Heaven. She remarks that having this wonderful technology we still have this ugly superstitious image of God.
e. 048.45 Amanda (sort of FB) as a girl in the church. Voice in off speaks about traditional conception of guilty. Amanda (as adult) sees a priest walking in front of the altar.
i. 049.24 Ramtha questions, how a man or a woman betray God who is Almighty? “The height of arrogance is the height of control of those who create God in their own image!”
f. 050.28 Wedding Ceremony. Amanda FB her wedding when catches her husband looking at a woman in the ceremony of theirs wedding.
i. 050.57 Animation of neurons. Ramtha in off explains synapsis as an electric storm
ii. 052.07 Ramtha names the different emotions in the brain.
iii. 052.16 Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C. explains that the brain doesn’t differentiate between what the eyes see and the memory remembers
iv. 053.14 Dr. Daniel Monti M.D. we experience the reality according with our previous experiences
v. 0.23.46 0.52.16 Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C. explains, with animations and images of Amanda, how the brain wires neuronal network through our emotions.

g. 0.55.01 People of the wedding exit the church
   i. 0.55.27 Ramtha: Emotions are holographic chemical imprints
   ii. 0.55.33 John Hagelin, Ph.D. Brain is a sophisticated pharmacy.
   iii. 0.55.37 Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C. explains with animation that the hypothalamus is a mini factory of peptides and aminoacids. There are chemicals for various states of mood and emotion.
   iv. 0.57.09 Dr. Candace Pert explains how peptids dock the cells. The animation shows a cell saying “it’s party time”.

h. 0.57.33 wedding party. Amanda takes pictures and observes. She drinks a cocktail
   i. 0.59.00 Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C. explains the cells’ receptors
   ii. 0.59.39 Dr. Candace Pert, with animation, explains how peptids changes the state of cells.

i. 1.00.00 Amanda takes pictures of people dancing. She gives a tip to a girl who wants to be a photographer.
   i. 1.00.12 Dr. Candace Pert states that each cell has consciousness if we consider consciousness as the point of view of an observer.
   ii. 1.00.16 Animation of cells, one says “I’m hungry”

j. 1.00.36 A fat man takes some food from the trays. Amanda sees the cells through the viewfinder of her camera.
   i. 1.01.07 Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C. defines addictions as something we can’t stop.

k. 1.01.14 Amanda. One man spills his drink onto some woman, the animated cells complains “it always happens to me”
   i. 1.01.36 Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C. explains what is emotional control vs emotional addicted.

l. 1.02.18 Amanda starts seeing weird things like a woman flattering to the priest. She heads to the ladies room and take a pill.
   i. 1.02.56 Ramtha talks about being in loved as anticipation of the addictive emotions.

m. 1.03.20 Amanda sees a woman having sex with a man and misinterprets it as if the man were the groom of the wedding. The animation shows a reaction. Amanda FB the day she cough her ex husband having sex with another woman. Elliot approaches Amanda and clarify her misunderstanding.
   i. 1.06.11 Dr. Candace Pert: says that we are emotions with molecules of emotion.

n. 1.06.36 People dancing. The priest is dancing. Amanda shows Elliot how to use the camera. Both are drinking. Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C. in off speaks about addiction to emotions.
o. 1.07.20 a couple of teenagers drink and watch girls. Amanda and Elliot keep drinking. Dr. Candace Pert in off talks about sexual emotions. Elliot flatters Amanda.
  i. 1.09.03 Ramtha speaks about people addicted to sex.

p. 1.10.00 Other people are flattering each other, illustrated with animation. Amanda gets rid of their ‘repression’ cells and dances with Elliot. A man fights and puts a polka, everybody dance crazy.

4. (day #4)

  a. 1.13.10 Amanda experiments a hangover, watches the pictures of the wedding stares at her image dancing in the pictures and then she looks at the mirror and sees herself. She sees herself as a fat woman. The animation shows the cells being bombarded.
    i. 1.14.55 Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C. explains how the body produces the peptides but the brain produces the signal that triggers them.
    ii. 1.15.04 Dr. Candace Pert: says that the receptors change their sensibility over time. Ramtha
    iii. 1.16.40 Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C. goes on explaining how cells reproduce the sensibility when they are multiplied. Aging follows that logic of improper production of proteins.

  b. (FF) Image of Amanda walking in the shore of a river, she stops, and now she looks old and in pain.
    i. 1.17.48 William Tiller, Ph.D. announces a course correction, the movement to a new paradigm where the universe is larger of what we think it is.

  c. 1.18.16 Amanda in front of the mirror says: “I hate you”, then goes to the bathroom to take a pill but then she sees in the mirror again and repeats “I hate you”, the reflected image in the mirror is Amanda as an old lady. Amanda smashes the mirror and insults the image. The she sees a drop of water and remembers the man at the subway reminding her that that thoughts can do to us. Amanda laughs at herself.
    i. 1.20.06 Ramtha speaks about the beauty of the self and the importance of dream. You are not good or evil, you are God.
    ii. 1.20.44 Jeffrey Satinover, M.D. psychiatry doesn’t allow liberty of actions to people who what really need is to be tough how to make good choices.

  d. 1.21.05 Jennifer enters to the bathroom and finds Amanda drawing love hearts in her body.
    i. 1.22.15 Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C people are hypnotized through media so real desire never raise to the surface.
    ii. 1.24.29 Animation of brain reconnecting and rewiring.

  e. 1.25.25 Amanda in the bath tube relaxing in the water. Bob, her ex husband leaves her a phone message, he wants to see her and have a talk.
5. Day #4-5 (noon-evening and morning) Epilogue
   a. 1.25.37 Church. Amanda visits the exteriors of the church, but does not enter, she turns back and keeps on walking
      i. 1.26.04 Miceal Ledwith, Ph.D. Questions the concept of a God who punishes or rewards. There is not such thing as good or bad.
      ii. 1.26.52 Ramtha there is no God condemning people: Everybody is God.
      iii. 1.26.56 Dr David Albert. God is the name we put to name those parts we experience as transcendent.
      iv. 1.27.09 Fred Alan Wolf, Ph.D. I have not idea to see God as a person or a thing. It’s like asking a fish to explain the water where he swims.
      v. 1.27.41 William Tiller, Ph.D. God is the superposition of the spirit of all things.
      vi. 1.28.01 Ramtha: the way to be great with my self is what I do to my mind, no to my body.
   b. 1.28.14 The Subway station of the first scene. Amanda takes the train.
      i. Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C talks about the observer in his performing his ‘I create my day’.
      ii. 1.29.44 Andrew B. Newberg M.D. explains how the brain can do incredible and diverse things
   c. 1.30.31 Amanda enters into the Bagdad Theatre and pays a ticket.
      i. 1.31.00 Dr. Joseph Dispenza, D.C says that when we lose track of our selves and track of time, then reality is manifested, that is quantum physics in action.
   d. Amanda unfolds in two Amandas walking in different way: One Amanda meets Bill, her ex husband, and they walk away in a hug. The other stays in the stairway and closes her eyes.
      i. 1.32.33 Collage of images with voices of the interviewees.
   e. 1.32.45 Amanda opens her eyes and sees one Amanda alone and another Amanda hugged with Bill the ex husband. Amanda looks how Amanda and Bill leave, then she look at the Amanda alone and both get fused in one and leaves the theatre.
   f. 1.34.15 Amanda walks on the street and sees one Amanda carrying an advertising of hamburgers in which back says “make known the unknown”. Then sees another Amanda dressed as a police woman, and another Amanda chatting with another woman, and another Amanda talking with someone who can not be identified.
      i. 1.34.41 Stuart Hameroff M.D. explains spirituality as interconnectedness with the universe.
      ii. 1.34.52 William Tiller Ph.D. states that our purpose is to be effective creators
      iii. 1.35.06 Ramtha says that we are here to be creators and infiltrate space with ideas.
      iv. 1.35.21 Amit Goswami, Ph.D. talks about been enlightened. Quantum physics is possibilities.
   g. 1.35.36 Amanda, sit in a bench gazing the city at night
i. 1.35.45 Jeffrey Satinover, M.D. stresses that quantum mechanics is about freedom

ii. 1.36.23 Ramtha talks about what will happen when we get rid of our addictions.

iii. 1.36.45 William Tiller Ph.D. says that we will reach the level of the avatars like Buddha and Jesus.

h. 1.36.56 Amanda falls sleep Ramtha in off says: Welcome to the kingdom of Heaven.

i. 1.37.37 In the morning, Amanda wakes up in the bench. Takes out of her pocket the container with the pills, then sees a waste basket and throws the pill as shooting a basketball. The pills become a basketball ball and now Amanda is playing with Reginald in the basketball court.

E 1.39.26

a. Collage of images summarizing the film

b. 1.39.36 Fred Alan Wolf, Ph.D. Says to camera “Ponder that for a while”

c. 1.39.42END CREDITS (each interviewee introduces him/herself saying their academic background)

d. 1.43.45 crew credits 1.48.10
D.2 Plot Segmentation of The Da Vinci Code

C 0.00.00 Credit Title
   a) Title: “The Da Vinci Code”

1. 0.06.34 (Night #1). Louvre
   a) 0.01.34 Louvre int. Sauniere, Sophie Neveu’s father, runs away from Silas through the galleries of the Louvre. Silas reaches him and shoots him after he tells Silas that the secret is in St Sulpice beneath the “line of the Rose”
   b) 0.3.18 Parallel scene. Conference room. Robert Langdon (prof. of religious symbology Harvard Univ) lectures a conference in Paris on the interpretation of symbols.
   c) 0.5.15 Langdon signs autographs of his book Sacred Feminine. Lt Cooley shows him a picture of a corps and asks for his collaboration.
   d) 0.6.48 (parallel) Silas reports the information to the Teacher, then he lashes himself ‘punishing his body’
   e) 0.9.25 Louvre, Langdon meets Cpt Fache and gets to the crime scene.
   f) 0.12.47 (parallel) Bishop Aringarosa, from the Opus Dei, is having a personal media training on his jet. He receives a call from the Teacher.
   g) 0.14.24 Langdon explores and explains the Da Vinci’s Vitrubian Man position of Sauniere. Arrives Sophie, a police cryptologist, warns Langdon that he is in great danger.
   h) 0.17.35 (parallel) Sister receives a call and is asked to receive Silas in St Sulpice.
   i) 0.18.19 Sophie explains Langdon he is been under surveillance. They tend a trick for escaping. 0.24.59 FB Sophie as a child. Sophie explains Sauniere was her grandfather. Langdon deciphers the anagram Leonardo Da Vinci La Monalisa.
   j) 0.27.48 (parallel) Fauche finds out that the chasing of the truck was a trick.
   k) 0.28.18 Langdon explains La Monalisa. From La Monalisa they decipher Madona of the Rock, they find there the key of the Fleur de Liz.
   l) 0.31.17 Sophie and Langdon escape out of the Louvre. In their way Langdon explains her that the fleur is associated with the Priory of Sion. She FBs images of her childhood of witnessing a secret gathering.
   m) 0.32.30 Car chasing, she drives the car backwards escaping the police.

2. 0.34.00 (Night #1) St Sulpice
   a) 0.34.10 Silas gets to St Sulpice. FB explaining Silas’ history. Of his childhood his father beats him and yields “you are a ghost”, he kills his father in self defense. He goes to jail and escapes because an earthquake. Aringarosa finds him in a christic position and protects him.
   b) 0.36.40 Silas enters St Sulpice, the Sister explains him what the rose line is.
c) 0.38.16 Cpt Fache orders to report the fugitives to the Interpol.
d) 0.39.11 Sophie and Langdon hidden in Bois de Bologne, with the whores.
e) 0.39.58 The sister notices that Silas is smashing the floor with a hammer
finding a hidden tile with an inscription on it.
f) 0.40.46 At Boi de Bologne Sophie gives money to a junky, telling him to buy
something to eat. Sophie tells Langdon her story of puzzles and codes with his
grandfather (FB) who now set ‘treasure hunt to find his killer’. Langdon
explains (recreational images) the history of the Priory and the holy Grail.
g) 0.45.06 The Sister tries to contact Sauniere to tell him about Silas. Silas
murders her.
h) 0.47.07 Aringarosa meets Cardinal Manuel and then is hold a meeting of a
counsel of cardinals discussing about the Grail. Aringarosa mentions the
Teacher.
i) 0.50.44 Sophie and Langdon get to the bank. They take the box and escape in
a security truck.
j) 0.58.00 Aringarosa speaks with Card. Manuel about Silas and the Teacher.
k) 0.58.30 FB Silas recalls his many killings. He whips himself as penance.
l) 0.59.13 Sophie opens the box and finds the criptex. FB of her childhood, how
she lost her family. They escape from the driver of the truck.

3. 1.06.44 (Night #1) Chateau Villette. Teabing’s mansion
   a) Cpt Fache tracks the stolen security truck.
   b) 1.07.49 Sophie and Langdon gets to Leigh Teabing’s mansion.
   c) 1.10.00 Fache calls Aringarosa.
   d) 1.10.50 Teabing receives S and L
   e) 1.12.34 Silas receives a call instructing him that S and L are in Teabing’s
      mansion.
   f) 1.12.40 Teabing explains what the Priory is and what the Holy Grail is. Inter-
      cuts of the history he is telling. Theory that Jesus was just a prophet but not an
      immortal God. Assertion of God has been always a motif to murder in his
      name.
   g) 1.18.48 Video screen with which Teabing explains Da Vinci’s ‘Last Super’
      theory: The Grail is Mary Magdalene. (visual evidences, thesis discussion,
      pros and cons) and she run to France to give birth Sarah, Jesus’ daughter. FB.
      Hypothesis of Sophie as the heiress of the secret: the map to find the Grail.
   h) 1.31.22 Silas trespass the Chateau and attacks Langdon. Silas tries to take the
      criptex but Teabing hits him. Police enters the Chateau.
   i) L, S, Teabing and Remy -his assistant- escape taking Silas with them. They
      take a way to a private airport. Teabing says that some people in the Opus Dei
      and the Vatican try to destroy the evidence of Jesus’ blood line, seeking and
      killing his descendents. What happens if a scientific evidence demonstrates
      that catholic church version of Jesus is a lie?
4. (Night #1) Airplane.
   a) 1.37.29 Airplane. They take off.
   b) 1.39.13 Aringarosa receives a bag with money and tells to Card. Manuel that the sarcophagus and the documents will be destroyed so there will be no way to make DNA tests with Jesus and of Magdalene’s heirs. They will be executed as well.
   c) 1.40.30 in the plane Sophie complains that Sauniere used her as a marionette.
   d) 1.42.50 Fache demands the flight plan.
   e) 1.43.26 Airplane. Teabing says that Magdalene had knights to defend her and to pray to her, she was the proxy for the oppressed and for those who lost power. Langdon discovers inside the box a legend with a riddle. They decide to flight to London to answer the riddle.
   f) 1.46.49 Fache tells his commander that he is an Opus Dei member, and that Aringarosa told him that L was a murdered and had asked him to stopped Langdon. The police chief tells Fache that the fugitives went to London.

5. Day #2 London. Temple Church. Westminster Abbey Isaac Newton’s Tomb
   a) 1.48.55 they fool the police at the airport.
   b) 1.52.13 Card. Manuel Palace. Aringarosa calls the Teacher. They will exchange money for the Holy Grail.
   c) 1.53.18 the fugitives walk towards the Temple Church in London. Teabind explains Langdon’s claustrophobia (FB).
   d) 1.54.45 inside the church. Sophie’s point of view, the church is scary and cold, with suffering images “this place is wrong”. Silas interrupts them (Remy let him go) and threatens Sophie. Remy is armed and threatens Langdon. Silas gets Teabing, Remy stays with R and S, but they can escape and run away on the streets.
   e) 1.58.53 the police in Paris finds Remy’s hidden place where he spied the four murdered seneschals.
   f) 2.00.24 Remy and Silas get to an Opus Dei house. S and L head to a library but on their way they discover that ‘A Pope’ is actually another clue ‘Alexander Pope’. Teabing kills Remy and it is revealed that Teabing is the Teacher, he calls the police telling them to seek in the Opus Dei house where Silas is.
   g) 2.04.37 L and S go to Westminster Abbey where is buried Isaac Newton, the image is overlapped with the sets of Newton’s time. (Newton’s science – physics, gravity- challenged the church). Newton was also the Gran Master of the Priority.
   h) 2.03.29 Teabing appears and threatens S and L with a gun. He says that the church has been smashing ideas and passion on the name of God, proof of Jesus’ mortality will end that suffering and free humanity.
   i) 2.08.00 parallel scene. Silas fights the police, in the shooting he accidentally shoots Aringarosa. Police shoots Silas who dies. Fache confronts Aringarosa for using him.
j) 2.11.41 Teabling complains that the Priority just kept the secret without revealing it, and says that revealing the heir will liberate all the oppressed poor, the powerless of those of different skin, the women. Secret vs revealing the secret. Langdon is forced to open the criptex, but he can’t and throws away the apparatus. Teabling tries to catch it but fails and the criptex crashes. Police enters and arrests him.

6. Day #2 Third Act. Rosslyn Chapel
   a) 2.18.16 Westminster Sacristy. All the proofs in the desk. Fache tells S and L that he should have been smarter but he acted by faith. Langdon: we study history so we stop killing each other.
   b) 2.10.00 Ext Westminster. Langdon explains to Sophie how he opened the criptex. And shows her the papyrus with a new riddle to get to the Holy Grail in Rosslyn Chapel.
   c) 2.22.54 They get to Rosslyn Chapel and walk in, eclectic symbols. Sophie remembers the place. (FB of her as a child visiting the chapel). Symbols of sword and chalice, man and woman, the Star of David. They walk beneath the chapel into two basements where the tomb of Magdalene used to be placed among paintings of Da Vinci and many documental records and archives. Langdon says that a DNA testing would proof the blood line of Jesus if there was the actual sarcophagus.
   d) 2.29.55 Parallel people arriving the Chapel
   e) 2.31.14 Sophie remembers when she was in primary school. Revelation: Sophie was not Sauniere’s granddaughter. Through a genealogic tree L traces Sophie’s ascendants, the Merovingians. Sophie is the last living descendent of Jesus Christ.
   f) 2.35.54 The keepers-guardians-Priory of Sion are waiting for Sophie at the chapel. Her real grandmother explains to her and welcomes her back.
   g) 2.37.25 Sophie says that the sarcophagus of Mary Magdalene is lost forever because Sauniere never revealed where it was hidden. L: the only thing that matters is what you believe. Maybe human is divine. Will she, as a descendant of Jesus, destroy the faith or renew it?

E 2.41.38 (Night # 3) Epilogue. Paris
   a) Langdon in his Ritz Hotel room shaving. He cuts himself and sees how the blood forms a blood line in the sink. He discovers that the blood line is the Rose Line of the meridian line in Paris.
   b) 2.43.10 Langdon follows the marks in the floor of the streets of Paris that lead to the Louvre. He steps on the crystal roof of the inverted pyramid where the final mark of the rose line is. He kneels as praying. The camera descends beneath the crystal until the bottom where the sarcophagus with the body of Magdalene rests.
   c) 2.47.10 END CREDITS to 2.54.25
D.3 Plot Segmentation of *The Passion of the Christ*

C 0.00.00 Credit Title
   a) Cite from Isaiah 53 “He was wounded for our transgressions… by his wounds we are healed”

1. 0.00.32 (Night). Garden of Gethsemane.
   a) 0.00.32 Jesus is praying. He observes his disciples sleeping and reprehends Peter. Peter ‘orders’ John and Andrew to pray. A bird screams.
   b) 0.03.23 crosscut to Judas and the Priests. Judas receives 30 coins and tells the soldiers where Jesus is.
   c) 0.04.39 Gethsemane. Jesus prays. Satan tempts him arguing that it is very expensive to save their souls. Jesus prays looking at the moon which gets shadowed by a dark cloud. Satan emanates a serpent from his body but Jesus steps on it and crushes it. 0.09.16 soldiers arrive: kiss of Judas. Peter cuts off Malchus’ ear and Jesus heals it. (slow motion).
   d) Crosscut to: 0.14.30 Mary sleeps, she awakes afraid and paraphrases the Easter rite (the questionnaire for the Passover). John arrives and tells the women that Jesus has been detained.
   e) 0.14.53 Jesus is escorted and hit with a chain. Peter looks at Malchus’ face.
   f) 0.15.25 Jesus tied with a chain is dumped down from the top of a bridge. Beneath Judas is hidden. Jesus and Judas look at each other. Jesus is lifted by the soldiers. Judas has an apparition of a haunting creature.

2. 0.16.15 (Night) Highest Priests Caiaphas and Annas.
   a) 0.16.15 Jewish soldiers pay people to gather at the Sanhedrin’s court yard.
   b) 0.16.40 At the court yard the Priests arrive. Mary, Magdalene, Peter are there. Magdalene asks roman soldiers to defend Jesus but a Jewish soldier obstructs her. The Roman looks concerned. Jesus sees a carpenter and has a FB
   c) 0.19.58 FB (day) Jesus working as a carpenter, Mary his mother calls him for lunch and he teases her.
   d) 0.21.48 Court Yard. Jesus is hit. Mary with John and Magdalene. She gets conformed and says “so, this is how this begins”.
   e) 0.22.23 crosscut Pontius Pilate’s place. A roman soldier reports him a tumult with the Pharisees. Claudia, Pilate’s wife, asks about the detainee.
   f) 0.23.15 Jesus in front of the Priests. He is interrogated. Judas shows up (wipes out his lips). Many people accuse Jesus. One priest protests saying that this is an outrageous set up judgment, but the crowd shouts him up and takes him away. The Priests accuse him of blasphemy and the crowd condemns him to death. Judas witnesses the scene. Jesus is beaten. Peter denies him three times, Jesus looks at his face with his one only open eye. Peter has a FB.
   g) 0.30.08 FB (night) Peter swearing loyalty to Jesus who in turn announces to him that he will deny Jesus.
h) 0.31.00 Peter runs away and comes across with Mary, John and Magdalene. He falls in his knees, Mary tries to comfort him but he says that he is not worthy because he has denied Jesus.

i) 0.31.50 Judas asks the High Priests to release Jesus, throws the coins.

j) 0.32.42 Judas has remorse. He has a second hallucination: two boys approaches him and mocks at him. They become deformed creatures (one has only one eye; the other looks like an old man)

k) 0.34.00 Mary walks in the Sanhedrin. She stops and puts her face on the floor, beneath is Jesus chained who looks up to the ceiling where Mary is.

3. 0.38.00 (early morning) Pontius Pilate I
   a) 0.35.37 (at dawn) Judas is chased by many boys who spit at him. Satan contemplates the scene. Judas observes a death one-eyed lamb besides him with many flies around it. He hangs himself in a tree aside the killed lamb.
   b) Claudia, Pontius’ wife, asks him to not condemn Jesus because he is a saint. Soldiers bring Jesus in front of Pontius Pilate.
   c) 0.35.38 The priests present Jesus to Pilate. Jesus stares at a white dove which is flapping trying to reach Pilate’s place but it seems to be flying frozen in the air. A soldier with one blind eye is escorting him. Pontius Pilate offers him water and interrogates him about the Truth and what kind of king he proclaims to be. Claudia looks at Mary, Magdalene and John.

4. 0.44.10 (morning) Herod’s Palace.
   a) Herod, effeminate, wearing a wig and surrounded by young men with make-up. He asks Jesus if he can restore blind people’s eyes and resurrect dead people. A black slave looks at Jesus. The ambient is orgiastic, people drunk, cross-dressed. Herod says Jesus is a crazy but not a criminal.

5. 0.46.20 Pontius Pilate II
   a) 0.46.20 Pilate complains with Claudia that his truth is to extinguishing rebellions in this province. His dilemma is that if he refuses to condemn Jesus then Caiaphas will organize a sedition revolt.
   b) 0.48.08 Soldiers take Jesus back to Pilate. Caiaphas controls the crowd who are disrespectful towards Pilate. Pilate asks the crowd to choose between Barabbas, who has one blind eye, and Jesus. They choose Barabbas instigated by Caiaphas. Caiaphas asks Pilate to crucify Jesus, Pilate only agrees to severely punish him.

   a) 0.52.04 Jesus is flogged. At # 30 the priests leave the place. Satan observes. Jesus stares at Mary then he stands up like asking for more flagellation, the soldiers change the whips for ones with spikes. The flogging continues. Mary looks attentive at scene with tears in her eyes. The new whip rips Jesus’ skin in stripes. Mary wonders when Jesus is going to stop this suffering.
b) Mary (this is like seeing somebody contemplating the Passion) walks meditatively with a fixed gaze. Magdalene is crying and Mary comforts her. John looks at both. Claudia comes to scene with some towels and gives them to Mary, then she runs away.

c) The soldiers turn Jesus over to flog his chest. Satan observes the scene caring a baby who has hairy back and whose face looks old.

d) Jesus looks at one soldier’s sandal and has a FB.

e) 1.02.11 FB Jesus washes one disciple’s foot saying that if the world hates them, they shall remember that the world had hated him before.

f) 1.03.05 Abinader interrupts and stops the punishment. They take Jesus away.

g) 1.05.00 Mary grabs the towel and dries the blood from the floor. John is in tears. Mary is serene with no tears.

   a) 1.05.12 The crown of thorns.
   b) 1.05.51 crosscut to Magdalene helping Mary to wipe the blood from the floor at the praetorium with her own veil. She has a FB
   c) 1.06.11 FB Jesus draws something on the sand, the Jews drop the stones they were carrying. Magdalene touches Jesus feet and he helps her to stand up.
   d) 1.08.00 crosscut to soldiers mocking at Jesus as the king of the Jews.

8. Morning. Pontius Pilate III.
   a) 1.08.15 Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd. The priests insist that Jesus has to be crucified. Claudia and Pilate are concerned. Caiaphas threatens Pilate saying that if he liberates Jesus then he is not friend of Cesar. Somebody approaches a container with water to Pilate. Jesus has a FB.
   b) 1.11.12 FB Jesus washes his hands with his disciples in a super.
   c) 1.11.40 Pilate washes his hands and orders to proceed with the execution.
   d) 1.12.30 Exiting Pilate’ place, Jesus embraces the cross. He starts walking with other two condemned prisoners.

   a) 1.13.25 Jesus carries his cross on the streets of Jerusalem. He has a FB
   b) 1.14.06 FB Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, people cheers him up and celebrates him.
   c) 1.14.08 Jesus walks. Mary contemplates him and walks with John and Magdalene. Mary sees Satan walking in the front of the street.
   d) 1.15.30 Jesus falls. Mary, Magdalene and John try to reach him. Mary stops doubting to continue. John assists her calling her “mother”.
   e) 1.17.21 Second Fall. Mary has a FB
   f) 1.17.42 FB Jesus as a child falls and Mary runs to assist him.
   g) 1.17.45 Mary approaches Jesus in his falling with the cross. She says “I am here” he answers “You see? I do anew all the things”. A soldier watches the scene and is astonished.
   h) 1.19.26 many women are crying. Veronica tells her daughter “don’t be afraid”
i) 1.20.36 Third Fall. Pilate sees the crowd from his balcony. Jesus falls again. A man, Simon of Cyrene, is obligated to help Jesus to carry his cross.

j) 1.23.48 Fourth fall. Veronica approaches and wipes his faces, then kisses the cloth. Jesus is beat. Simon of Cyrene stops the beating. Veronica displays the cloth with the face of Jesus imprinted on it.

k) 1.27.17 The priests exit the city of Jerusalem and head to the mount Golgotha.

l) 1.28.00 Fifth fall. Simon of Cyrene cheers him up.

10. Afternoon. Golgotha.

a) 1.29.30 FB Jesus preaches (Sermon of the Mountain) on love to the enemies.

b) 1.30.07 Jesus arrives to the Calvary. The priests are there.

c) 1.31.00 FB Sermon of the Mountain “I am the good shepherd, I give up my life for my sheep”

d) 1.31.26 Simon of Cyrene is dismissed, before leaving he stares at Jesus. Mary, Magdalene and John arrive to the Golgotha.

e) 1.34.00 Jesus stands up and his cloths are ripped off.

f) 1.34.37 Jesus is nailed and crucified. Crosscut with FB last super

g) 1.42.20 Jesus hangs on the cross. John FB last super.

h) 1.43.05 the Bad Thief Gesmas challenges Jesus to get off the cross if he is the Messiah. Caiaphas approaches Jesus and challenges him too. Jesus asks His Father to forgive them. The Good Thief, Dimas, asks Jesus to remember him in his kingdom. Gesmas laughs out laud. A black crow plucks his eye off.


a) 1.46.34 the sky gets cloudy, windy and with some thunders. The soldiers are gambling and notice the oddness of the sky. People leave the Calvary, the priests look at Mary and John. Mary approaches to the cross and kisses Jesus feet. The last words of Jesus. The Romans observe intrigued and astonished.

b) 1.51.57 God´s POV. Jesus dies. The POV becomes a water drop and falls down to the ground. Noisy wind. Earthquake. Crosscuts with Jerusalem: Pilate, the Temple. A soldier punctures Jesus side and water comes out from it. The priests at the temple gaze at the cracked open floor and look scared. Roman soldiers run away from the Calvary.

c) 1.55.13 Satan is furious and yells sorrowfully.

d) 1.55.35 La Pieta. The corpse of Jesus is descended. There are two soldiers, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary, Magdalene, John. Mary looks at Jesus and then stares at the camera. Fade out.


a) 1.57.12 The stone of a cave is removed. The light gets into the sepulcher. As the light passes, the white sheet that once covered Jesus’ corpse deflates. Jesus is sat and slowly opens his eyes. He stands up and walks away. Fade out.

E 1.58.46 END CREDITS to 2.06.00
Appendix E. Extra details of the Industry of the Films

E.1 Extra Details of the Industry of What the #$*! Do We (K)now!?

PRODUCTION:
Written by William Arntz, Betsy Chasse, Mark Vicente and Matthew Hoffman, and was co-directed by the first three of them. The production was also made by William Arntz, Betsy Chasse and Mark Vicente (who also performed the cinematography together with David Bridges). These three writers-directors-producers created ex-professo the Lord of the Wind production company and included Scott Altomare as line producer and Straw Weisman as associate producer. The film was shot in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, San Francisco, California, USA, in Hillsboro, Oregon, USA and in Portland, Oregon, USA. A total number of 63 people are credited as involved in the cast. The 6 main characters were performed by: Marlee Matlin (as Amanda), Barry Newman (as Frank), Elaine Hendrix (as Jennifer), Armin Shimerman (as Old Man), Robert Bailey, Jr. (as Reggie) and John Ross Bowie (as Elliot). 15 actors played secondary characters, and 29 actors were involved playing bit parts and extras.

The film included the following 13 interviewees: Dr. David Albert, Dr. Joseph Dispenza, Amit Goswami, Ph.D., John Hagelin, Ph.D., Stuart Hameroff, M.D., J.Z. Knight (Ramtha), Miceal Ledwith, Ph.D., Dr. Daniel Monti, Andrew B. Newberg, M.D., Dr. Candace Pert, Dr. Jeffrey Satinover, William Tiller, Ph.D., Fred Alan Wolf, Ph.D., Dr. Masaru Emoto. (Dr Masaru Emoto is credited, though in the film he does not appear, but only mentioned through his theory on Water Crystals).

Credits are given to 99 people who comprised the crew.

A special effect company was created for produce related scenes: Atomic Visual Effects (for the brain animation) who coordinated the work of two other companies involved: Mr. X (for the cells animation) and Lost Boys Studios (basketball sequence and rabbit-hole effects). A total number of 34 people are credited for special effects. The film includes over three hundred visual effects shots. Estimated production budget was $4,000,000.

DISTRIBUTION:
The WTB official website claims to have been awarded in the following festivals:


Distribution in USA theatres was made by Samuel Goldwyn Films and Roadside Attractions. Through Lightning Entertainment, the film was sold to 32 companies abroad for its international theatrical distribution in 36 countries:

Americas (Non-US):
- Capri (Canada) (theatrical)
- Filmhouse (Mexico) (theatrical) August 5, 2005
- Pachamama Cine (Argentina) (theatrical)
- Exhibits S.A. (Chile) (theatrical)
- Cinemac (Colombia) (theatrical)
- Playarte (Brazil) (theatrical)

Europe:
- Ascot Elite Entertainment Group (Switzerland) (theatrical)
- Cinemien (Netherlands) (theatrical)
- Einhorn-Film (Austria) (theatrical)
- Filmtrade (Greece) (all media)
- Gaia Films (Italy) (all media)
- Icelandic Film/ Graena Ljosid EHF (Iceland) (all media)
- Isaan Entertainment (Spain) (all media)
- Propeller Communications (Germany) (all media)
- ABC Distribution (Belgium) (theatrical)
- Smile Entertainment (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden) (theatrical)
- MEDULA films (France) (Theatrical)
- Discovery Film & Video (Croatia, Slovenia) (theatrical)
- Budapest Film (Hungary) (theatrical)
- Pi Film Production (Turkey) (theatrical)
- Revolver (United Kingdom) (theatrical)

Africa:
- Comart Films (South Africa) (theatrical)

Asia:
- Beijing ZhongZhiBoWen Publishing Co. (China) (theatrical)
- Shani Films & Lev Cinemas (Israel) (theatrical)
- Major Cine Pictures (Thailand) (theatrical)

Oceania:
- Hopscotch Productions (Australia) (theatrical)
- Hopscotch Films and Polyphony Entertainment (New Zealand) (theatrical)

The following distribution companies joined for DVD distribution:
- Argentina Video Home (Argentina) (VHS and DVD)
- Blanco & Travieso (Venezuela) (DVD)
- Discovery Film & Video Distribution (Bosnia-Herzegovina) (DVD)
Samuel Goldwyn Films [US, founded in 1997]) is a distributor company for low budget/independent films who has distributed 70 motion pictures. It has been also a production company for 5 films. As to the first semester of 2007 it has distributed 8 films. In 2006 it distributed 11, among them there was the sequel of WTB “What the Bleep!?: Down the Rabbit Hole (2006)”. In 2005 its operations were 8 films, same number than in 2004 when WTB was distributed along with Super Size Me (2004). Roadside Attractions [US, founded in 2004]) distributes low budget/independent films. It has distributed 28 motion pictures. It started the business in 2004 with 6 operations, among them there were “What the Bleep!? (2004) and Super Size Me (2004). As to the first semester of 2007 it has distributed 12 films. In 2006 it distributed 6. In 2005 its operations were 3 films.

Lightning Entertainment [US. Founded in 2001] has been the international distributor of 54 titles. This company is specialized in distribution in non-USA markets (worldwide sales). Its catalog includes various awarded Mexican films, such as Matando Cabos (2004), A Day Without Mexican (2004), Nicotina (2003). Filmhouse [Mexico, founded in 2003] has 32 independent productions distributed in large theaters in Mexico as to the first semester 2007. Its catalog comprises 200 DVD titles. In 2005 it distributed 16 films, among them there was WTB. In 2004 the distributed films were 14.

EXHIBITION:

Release date was April 23th 2004 in Phoenix, Arizona in one single screen. International exhibition started one year later, in Australia on April 14th 2005. Successive releases followed across 36 countries. The last release was in France in November 7th 2007. The film was released in Mexico on August 5th 2005. In Mexico WTB (screened under the title: “Y tú qué %$"# Sabes?!”) was released on August 5th 2005 and lasted 14 weeks in the box-office, until November 11th 2005. It was screened through the three largest theatre-chains of the country: Cinemark, Cinemex and Cinepolis. DVD’s were sold in Tower Records, Mix Up and Ghandi stores for $40 USD, though the pirate market started the distribution even before the theatrical screening, selling the DVD at $1 to $3.50 USD. In October 23rd pirate DVD were sold out and people booked in waiting lists. The third distribution window was rental video leading Blockbuster Co. In Mexico WTB started with 25 prints. Filmhouse reports that as for May 5th 2006, WTB had a revenue of $916,849 USD. The film generated 230,606 viewers. In the opening weekend it generated 660 spectators per print (6,000 spectators in three days). The Film broke the record in attendance for a documentary film in Mexico (now the record is hold by La Marche de l’empereur (2005) -The March of the Penguins/La marcha de los Pingüinos). A total of 48,573 DVD’s were sold as to May 5th 2005. The average for a Filmhouse DVD releases was 2,500 units per title.


Marketing:
The film relied on "guerrilla marketing" first to get the film into theaters, then to attract audiences. In Mexico, WTB lacked advertising efforts, it became a *word of mouth* issue in people’s conversations. In July 2006 there were still conferences and seminars organized by pop-esoteric organizations, addressed to broad audiences still holding in Mexico City. In these conferences and seminars people explained, analyzed and discussed the film, although it was already withdrawn from the screens. This is an unusual long lasting effect for a documentary release.

Box Office:
The opening weekend in the USA gross $7,656 in one screen. This contrasts with the international opening weekends figures (Netherlands $24,123; Austria $33,983; Germany $44,468). The reported Gross in the USA, until April 10\textsuperscript{th} 2005, was $10,941,801.

The film started being screened in one theatre in the US, and stayed in the box office for 15 months (57 weeks). It reached a mode of 146 screens in the USA in October 24\textsuperscript{th} 2004, making in that week $385,359. After December 19\textsuperscript{th} 2004 the screens lowered to 54 and kept lowering until 2 screens on April 10\textsuperscript{th}. In Mexico WTB started with 25 prints. Filmhouse reports that as for May 5\textsuperscript{th} 2006, WTB had a gross of $916,849 USD.\footnote{Fernando Moreno (Orissa Castellanos, Filmhouse) May 5\textsuperscript{th} 2006. Personal communication.}

WTB had grossed about $10,941,801 in the U.S. alone.

\begin{itemize}
  \item Domestic Grosses: $10,942,306 68.5%
  \item Foreign Grosses: $5,037,251 31.5%
  \item Worldwide\footnote{http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=whatthe.htm. Consulted on September 26\textsuperscript{th} 2010.}: $15,979,557
\end{itemize}
E.2 Extra Details of the Industry of The Da Vinci Code

PRODUCTION:
Directed by Ron Howard (A Beautiful Mind, 2001) who also participated as a producer. Screenplay was written by Akiva Goldsman who adapted Dan Brown’s novel. Copyright Holder is Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. Executive producers were Dan Brown and Todd Hallowell. Kathleen McGill and Louisa Velis were Associate producers. John Calley, Brian Grazer and Ron Howard were the producers. Cinematography was performed by Salvatore Totino. Filmed in interiors and exteriors of the following countries: England, Scotland, France and Malta.

A total number of 57 actors are credited in the cast. A number of 8 secondary characters are listed but uncredited. Main characters were performed by: Tom Hanks (Dr. Robert Langdon), Audrey Tautou (Agent Sophie Neveu), Ian McKellen (Sir Leigh Teabing), Jean Reno (Captain Bezu Fache), Paul Bettany (Silas), Alfred Molina (Bishop Manuel Aringarosa), Jürgen Prochnow (Andre Vernet), Jean-Yves Berteloot (Remy Jean), Etienne Chicot (Lt. Collet), Jean-Pierre Marielle (Jacques Saunière).

The crew involved in the production and credited was of 730 people. Ten special effect companies were involved in the production. 23 intermediate companies were hired for different purposes (three different studios were involved). Shooting started on July 8th 2005. Estimated budget was $125,000,000

DISTRIBUTION:
The DVC was nominated in the following festivals:
4. Golden Globes, USA. Nominated for Best Original Score – Motion Picture.
6. Grammy Awards. Nominated for the Best Score Soundtrack Album for Motion Picture, Television or Other Visual Media.
7. Motion Picture Sound Editors, USA. Nominated for the Best Sound Editing in a Feature Film.

Nominations included Ron Howard’s for the 2007 Razzie Awards to the Worst Director.
Distribution in USA theatres was made by Columbia Pictures and Sony Pictures Releasing. Worldwide sales for all media were led by Columbia TriStar Films and Sony Pictures Entertainment. The former distributed the film through its affiliates in Singapore and France. Sony Pictures Releasing distributed the film through its affiliates in Singapore, Germany, the UK, Italy and the Netherlands, and distributed the DVD in Brazil. Other companies were involved in the international distribution: Buena Vista International (Switzerland), Falcon (Czech Republic), and Nordisk Film Theatrical Distribution (Finland). Through these two major companies the film was distributed in 68 countries.

EXHIBITION:
Global Release date occurred almost simultaneously on May 17 to May 20 2006. India was the only country in releasing the film until May 26th 2006. The film was released in Mexico and Colombia on May 19th 2006. In Mexico TDC (screened under the title: “El Codigo Da Vinci”) lasted 15 weeks in the box-office, until September 3rd 2006. It was screened in all the three main theatre-chains of the country: Cinemark, Cinemex and Cinepolis.

Box Office:
The opening weekend in the USA (May 21st 2006) grossed $77,073,388 in 3,735 screens. Netherlands made €1,636,566 in the opening weekend.
The reported Gross in the USA, until August 20th 2006, was $217,536,138.
The film started with 3,735 screens in USA theatres, and stayed in the box office for 13 weeks. The screens mode was 3,757. However, by July 2nd 2006 (at the 6th week of screening) the number of screens lowered to 1,384, and kept lowering until August 20th when the film was withdrawn from 211 screens. In the UK the decrease started at the 4th week (July 9th 2006) dropping from a beginning 517 screens to 140 screens until the film was withdrawn on July 23rd 2006.
DVC had grossed about $244 million in the U.S. alone. Worldwide the gross is estimated $758,239,851, making it the second highest grossing movie of 2006.
In Mexico TDC grossed $19,275,573 and in Colombia $2,777,383

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<th>Domestic Gross:</th>
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28.7% 71.3% 11

DVC had grossed about $244 million in the U.S. alone. Worldwide the gross is estimated $758,239,851, making it the second highest grossing movie of 2006.
In Mexico TDC grossed $19,275,573 and in Colombia $2,777,383

E.3 Extra Details of the Industry of *The Passion of the Christ*

**PRODUCTION:**

Directed by Mel Gibson who also participated as screenplay writer and as producer. Screenplay was co-written by Benedict Fitzgerald. The executive producer was Enzo Sisti, producers were Bruce Davey, Mel Gibson and Stephen McEveety. Cinematography was performed by Caleb Deschanel. Copyright Holder is Icon Distribution, Inc.

The filming locations exteriors and studio were shot in Italy: Rome, Basilicata (Lazio, Craco, Matera); Cinecittà Studios.

A total number of 75 actors are credited in the cast. 18 are considered main characters and the rest secondary characters. Protagonic characters were performed by: James Caviezel (Jesus), Maia Morgenstern (Mary), Christo Jivkov (John), Francesco De Vito (Peter), Monica Bellucci (Magdalen), Mattia Sbragia (Caiphas), Toni Bertorelli (Annas), Luca Lionello (Judas), Hristo Shopov (Pontius Pilate), Claudia Gerini (Claudia Procles).

The crew involved in the production and credited was of 463 people. Four special effects companies were involved in the production. 47 intermediate companies were hired for different purposes, such as Cinecittà Studios. Production dates were: 4 November 2002 to January 2003. Estimated budget was $30,000,000.

**DISTRIBUTION:**

The PXT won the following awards:

1. 2005. ASCAP Film and Television Music Awards. ASCAP Award for the Top Box Office Films.
3. 2004. Christian WYSIWYG Film Festival. Film of the Year.
8. 2005. Motion Picture Sound Editors, USA. Golden Reel Award for best sound editing in domestic features, dialogue and ADR.

The PXT was also nominated in the following festivals:
1. Academy Awards, USA three nominations for the Oscar for Best achievement in cinematography, makeup and original score.
6. Irish Film and Television Awards. Best international film

Nominations included MTV Movie 2004 Awards, Mexico to James Caviezel for Most Divine Miracle in a Movie For the ear of Malcus (Jesus heals the ear cut by Peter).

Distribution in USA theatres was done by Newmarket Films and for DVD distributors in the US were 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment and FoxFaith.

Worldwide sales for all media were managed by Icon Entertainment International, through 20 regional distributor companies. 20th Century Fox distributed the film in Singapore, Argentina, Taiwan. The UK was distributed in theatres by Icon Film Distribution and in DVD by MGMHome Entertainment Ltd. The film was distributed in 85 countries.

EXHIBITION:

PXT was released on February 25th 2004 in the USA, Canada and New Zealand. The Global release for the other 82 countries took place in different dates (from March 5th 2004 to July 21st 2004). It was withdrawn from the screen on July 25th 2004.

In Mexico and Colombia the Film was released on March 19th 2004. One year later, from March 11th to 25th 2005, 10 countries re-released the film (USA, Croatia, New Zealand, Philippines, Panama, Argentina, Australia, Chile, Netherlands and UK).

In Mexico TPX (screened under the title: “La Pasión de Cristo”) was screened in all the three main theatre-chains of the country: Cinemark, Cinemex and Cinepolis.

Box Office:

The opening weekend in the USA (Feb 29th 2004) grossed $83,848,082 in 3,043 screens. The re-released weekend on March 13th 2005 in 957 screens, raised $227,789. The reported Gross in the USA, until March 27th 2006, was $370,614,210.

The film started with 3,043 screens in USA theatres, and stayed in the box office for 22 weeks. The screen mode was 3,408 screens. However, in its 13th week by May 16th 2006 the number of screens lowered to 715, and kept lowering until July 25th when the film was withdrawn from 18 screens. In the UK the decrease started at the 8th week (May 2nd 2004) dropping from a 331 to 201 screens. The film was withdrawn on May 9th 2004 from the 84 remaining screens.
The film had grossed about $370,782,930 in the U.S. alone. Worldwide gross is estimated in $611,899,420.13
In Mexico PXT grossed $18,880,455 and in Colombia $3,831,47014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gross</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic gross</td>
<td>$370,782,930</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreign gross</td>
<td>$241,116,490</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worldwide gross</td>
<td>$611,899,420</td>
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