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What is sacred in Instagram? Sacralization, desacralization and resacralization in media culture

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Abstract

From Imaginary Studies postulates referring to the permanency of myths in contemporary times and the inherence of the sacred with regard to the human situation, we have investigated the ways of expression this sacred quality may assume in media culture. As study objects, we have chosen pictures posted on Instagram featuring the hashtag “*sacred*”. We have made use of symbolic interpretation followed by an interpretation of the contextual elements of each post in order to infer all possible associations that users make with the idea of sacred, and comparing them with possible hierophanies. We have concluded that the pictures examined may indicate simultaneous processes of sacralization, desacralization and resacralization.

Keywords: Communication. Imaginary. Instagram. Sacred. Desacralization.

Introduction

The sacred is perhaps the first and most important construct of the imaginary. The awareness of death, when elaborating answers through the production of symbolic images, is in itself a projection of the human experience that goes beyond utilitarian purposes; however, some of these images are particularly endowed with something that incorporates them into an axis not only separated from routine undifferentiation, but also capable of changing the trivial conditions of existence: these are the images of the sacred, charged with values arranged in a hierarchical order that is capable of guiding us amidst the plurality of internal and external appeals with which we come into contact on a daily basis.

Nowadays, social media are major sources of these appeals; their use is notably strong in Brazil, a world leader in terms of users, when considering all social network websites¹. On Instagram alone, almost 80 million pictures are posted worldwide on a daily basis. All this desire to express various points of view mobilizes a scale of values that may be associated, if

¹ According to a study entitled “Digital Future in Focus, Brazil 2015”, published by a company named comScore, which is specialized in audience measurement, Brazilian user are the ones who spend most time on social media. Available at: <http://blogs.oglobo.globo.com/nas-redes/post/brasileiros-gastam-650-horas-por-mes-em-redes-sociais-567026.html>. Accessed on: 12 nov. 2018.

not with the feeling of sacred in a stricter sense, with certain aspect of it that originate from its rationalized elements.

The sacred, as with all symbolic images, is capable of communicating contents that are inaccessible through rational processes. This is hard to assess because the symbolic is not a characteristic that belongs to it, but a condition for it to appear; that is, the symbolic is not materially detectable because it depends on certain conditions present in the imagining being. However, we are working with the postulate that this subjective occurrence may leave identifiable traces when examined under certain parameters. We also believe that, even though technical images - when analyzed in isolation - do not necessarily have anything in common with symbolic images, they are always capable of revealing some of the marks left by the visceral motivations of their maker, that is, an impulse originating from a more or less profound stratum of the imaginary.

Photography is a technical image that can be quickly reproduced; it only takes a few hundredths of a second between seeing something and pushing the button of the photography device that will record the scene. Nowadays, this velocity in terms of production is added to the extremely easy way through which pictures are shared. Most certainly, this expansion in the number of images, as referred by Durand (1994), has been experiencing a paroxysm lately, at a time when each communication means user is not only the recipient of messages, but also a potential issuer. Yes, one may say that the trivialization of technical images has contributed to the emptying of symbolic images; however, any massive phenomenon must be observed carefully, because it is certainly a symptom of some other important event associated with the imaginary. In this case, the expansion in the number of technical images cannot simply be the result of the emptying of symbolism, but it is also a reaction to such emptying and an attempt to compensate, in terms of quantity, this weakening in terms of quality.

In this article, we propose to examine the process of emptying/compensation at a locus that favors the massive sharing of personal and private technical images: Instagram, a social network website specialized in pictures and videos. Brazil ranks second on Instagram in terms of uses, with 50 million active users, only behind the United States, out of a total number of 800 million users. It is an application for mobile phones that allows users to create and distribute pictures and videos by making them available to other application users. The image can be posted along with *hashtags*², a feature that is generally used in order to increase the chances of the picture being seen by a larger number of people. Therefore, we can assume that pictures (and videos, which will not be the focus of our attention in this study) are quickly produced and shared on Instagram, and this swiftness is capable of indicating impulses; the desire to have the expression of such impulse recognized by a large

2 Hashtags are keywords preceded by the # sign; this sign turns keywords into an indexable hyperlink, which can be located by automatic search engines on the Internet, making it possible for other users to click on them or find the post accompanying such hashtag by entering them on a search bar.

number of people is made evident by the range of the social network chosen as well as by the use of hashtags that optimize the visibility of the post made.

While the velocity in which these images are produced and shared is able to reveal impulses, which are fundamental elements when it comes to analyzing the imaginary, the urge for publicizing them runs counter to the experience of symbolic images as it is understood by Durand (1964), who posits a personal revelation, the description of which not only being impossible for imagining beings to carry out, but also being unnecessary and useless, since this in itself shall not change anything regarding symbolic experience, either yours or other people's. Therefore, an equation is formed, according to which the variables for the dilution of the symbolism of the sacred are combined with the anxiety to communicate experiences through technical images. We shall combine some aspects of these two variables in order to understanding the significance of the sacred in media culture, manifested through pictures posted on Instagram.

The heuristic principles with which we shall work are the following: the symbolic production that takes precedence over the other means to operate the imaginary, including rationality (DURAND, 2011); the imaginary has several ways and forms through which it can be manifested, from most universal and least numerous ones to the most specific and numerous ones, which may be comparable to the roots-trunk-leaves structure of a tree (WUNENBURGER, 2002); myths are one of the ways to organize symbolic images that are closest to the original and unknowable subsurface, articulating a “primary draft of rationalization” (DURAND, 2011) with the symbolic that is inexpressible; myths still are the primary apparition of the sacred (ELIADE, 1992a); the sacred, an emotion originated in the face of what is entirely unknown (OTTO, 1985), is an element used to organize chaos (ELIADE, 1992b).

Desacralization, the role of the media and the terror of history

The sacred is an experience that goes beyond religion, although it originates from it, according to Eliade (1992b). Otto (1985, p.11), one of the authors who influenced Eliade (1992b), seeks to remove from the notion of sacred the moral element and the rational element, only keeping what would be the primal significance of the sacred “[...] completely inaccessible to our conceptual thought [and that] constitutes something that is ineffable”. This element, taken individually, is called *numinous* by Otto (1985, p.12), “a state of mind” that is only accessible through experience, so that the only way to communicate it is by “[...] trying to call the listener's attention to it and make them find in their private life the point from where it originates and then becomes conscious”.

Otto (1985, p.11), when explaining the meanings of the word *sacred*, underlines that it indicates “[...] an interpretation and assessment of what exists in the exclusively religious domain”. Eliade (1992b, p.17 – Our translation, italics by the author) relativizes this reservation by introducing the term *hierophany*:

Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the act of manifestation of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany*. It is a fitting term, because it does not imply anything further; it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e., that *something sacred shows itself to us*. [...] We find ourselves before that same mysterious act: the manifestation of something of a “different kind” - of something that does not belong to our world - in objects that are an integral part of our “natural” and “profane” world.

According to Eliade (1992b), the sacred and the profane complement each other; this makes it possible to identify traces of the sacred in trivial daily life. Nonetheless, Otto's (1985) conclusions are useful for the understanding of aspects associated with the sacred that may eventually find means for objectification in cultural, profane productions.

In Otto (1985, p.55 – Our translation), the numinous is unrelated to the rationalizable elements of the sacred; it is a “creature-feeling” that leads to the “abasement and diminution of the self into nothingness”, but not because of the reasons that we usually associated with self-depreciation, such as moral assessment, the awareness of having committed a transgression, but because of the “[...] presence of the *numen*” (OTTO, 1985, p.55 – Our translation), which brings the “awareness of absolute profaneness” (OTTO, 1985, p.55 – Our translation). Now, if the *numen* leads to clarity with regard to the profane in its highest degree, the profane is therefore necessary in order to reach the *numen*, as the sacred can only have this attribute amidst the profane. Thus, instead of repelling each other, the sacred and the profane make an unbreakable *coincidentia oppositorum* that can only be separated at the expense of great rational efforts.

It is here, in this path leading towards the construction of intelligibility of the sacred, where myths are inscribed. According to Eliade (1992a), mythical narratives describe the first appearance of the sacred, which took place at the beginning of everything, the beginning of time; they exhibit the elements of the sacred, even if in a way that it is highly inaccessible for rational understanding, since it does not make use of linear beginning-middle-ending time structures or similar structures, in which flashbacks are used or in which even the ending can be stated before the beginning, such structures being implicitly inserted in a cause-consequence scheme. By the way, the identification of this scheme in an alleged mythical narrative only serves to make us sure that we do *not* understand the myth.

When causes and consequences are identified in a mythical narrative, it is probably being reduced to references that are *already* possessed, that is, facts outside it, either historical or not. This reading habit when it comes to myths can be traced back to euhemerism, which sought narrative intelligibility in projective, biographic or historical motifs; such procedures strip myths of their profound symbolic nature, which, as with the numinous, is transformative and cannot be apprehended outside of the experience. When we are facing a myth in its

strict sense, we must respect its establishment as a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a guardian of mystery, guarantor of the sacred, as is the case with the numinous and everything that is symbolic, myths cannot be explained: it must be lived.

In several of his studies, Eliade (1992a, 1992b, 1994, 2000) posits, or else shows, the continuity of archaic mythologies in contemporary times. We know myths are not presented nowadays in the same way as in its early days; although they survive the rationalization process that casts them out of the allegedly civilized way of living, there are important modifications in the way they are presented, modifications that are not all associated with the choice of rationality in detriment of other forms of knowledge, but are part of a cycle (latency - appearance - strengthening - decadence - latency) which social dynamics imposes to myths, as shown by Durand (1996). The distance between sacred and numinous, with its rationalization into religious institution, may be a symptom of the weakening of the *coincidentia oppositorum* in myths, which end up molding themselves into less complex manifestations, as the institutionalization of the sacred removes myths from their role of introducing us into mystery.

Certainly, this does not prevent the occurrence of hierophanies, maybe not as understood by Eliade (1992b), but in a considerably weaker fashion, so that in the very midst of daily life, the sacred - suddenly materializing itself in prosaic objects - reappears, even if... desacralized! The discussion regarding the quality of this sacred is tricky; we do not have the elements to attest that at some other moment, before and better than this one, humankind was indeed closer to a transforming symbolic experience; however, it is possible that we really are immersed in a culture that is abysmally distant from the sacred.

The claim regarding the central role of the media in the contemporary prolongation of archaic mythologies is not something recent. In the 1960s, Eliade identified a modern version of mythological heroes in comic book characters. The studies focused on television carried out by Cazeneuve (1974) a few years later addressed the effectiveness of this means of communication when narrating mythological contents. In Brazil in 1982, Fischer (1993) developed, in the field of Education, perhaps the first Brazilian study associating mass communication with the survival of myths and rites in contemporary times. Currently, is common sense in Brazilian Communications studies to assert media's mythical role, but there are still several consequences to be taken from this assertion; moreover, efforts are necessary in order to prevent falling into the worn-out antagonism between apocalyptic and integrated (ECO, 1976): either these studies reveal that myths are a false reality, which is ideologically built in order to manipulate masses, mimicking discourse theories along the lines of Barthes (1999), or they indicate that myths in the media resolves any unbalances in the imaginary, according to a poorly understood phenomenology of the imaginary, as proposed by Maffesoli (1995, 2008, 2012).

The investigation on the role of the media with regard to desacralization and resacralization processes required critical attention from us. Contrera (2005, p.118 – Our translation) states that: “The media is the new ‘center of the world’, exercising this totemic

power around which society tries to gather. Everything converges towards it, and it devours us with its thousands of electrified eyes”. We know that “center of the world” is the space of the sacred. Eliade (1992b) states that, in the space of the profane, apparently homogeneous, ruptures that make it sacred are inserted. These spaces can be recognized by the presence of symbols that connect the earth with its depths and with heaven, true *Axis mundi* (the tree, the temple, the stairs, the mountain etc.). According to Eliade (1992b, p.43 – Our translation), religious man has to be at the center: “Whatever the dimensions of the space with which he is familiar and in which he regards himself as situated - his country, his city, his village, his house - religious man feels the need always to exist in a total and organized world, in a cosmos”. Evidently, such reference is not made with regard to a geographic center; this center is established at a place where the sacred decides to manifest itself. Then, if there is a center, there is a sacred - whether in a *latu* or *strictu* sense -, while the spaces of the profane is located at the margins, in chaos.

It is remarkable that communication technologies, though pointed out as confirming elements of the depreciation of the center (TRAFANGLIA apud VATTIMO, 2002, p.XV), potentially welcoming towards the margins that they are, simply underline the importance of a world organization originating from a specific point - in contemporaneity, and the palm of hand-mobile phone pair seem to play this role.

Eliade (2000, p.20 – Our translation) highlights that the starting point of the civilization process was the secularization of myths, because “[...] modern societies are defined as such precisely because they took the desacralization of life and the cosmos very far”; however, the sacred, as an anthropological constant, is not easily rooted out of humans, so that the “[...] the novelty of the modern world is translated by a revaluation, on a profane level, of ancient sacred values” (ELIADE, 2000, p.20 – Our translation). It is in this sense that the media is able to present itself as a new center of the world, according to Contrera (2005), and that sacred values, although they may be distant from the numinous, can still be detected in social-cultural practices through hierophanies.

The symbolic image of the center is a good indication of the survival of the sacred at the core of the space of the profane; however, the sacred also has its own temporality, indifferent to history. Mythical time is a *sui generis* time because there is no before and no after. One of the reasons the civilized modern man despises the primitive and archaic man is precisely the latter’s refusal to make history and accepting to live the history imposed by myths. Indeed, Eliade (1992a) looks at mythical knowledge and sees the symptom of a *terror of history*, archaic man’s refusal to accepting his historical situation and risks, preferring his integration with nature. As for the modern man, he would be free to make history; however, this would be an illusory freedom, as decisions involving the course of history are made by very few people.

Therefore, in the depths of his spirit, modern man also experiences the terror of history, longing for the time of myths on the horizon. There are a few social symptoms of this that we can notice in contemporary culture. Eliade (1992a, 1992b, 1994, 2000),

throughout his work, more or less sparsely, points out several symptoms; let us focus here on two indicators of this contemporary discomfort with regard to history: the imitation of models and the pursuit of means to escape (distractions, entertainment).

The imitation of models is “[...] a trade that we may call, in general terms, human; more specifically: transforming a given existence into a paradigm and a given historical character into an archetype” (ELIADE, 2000, p.25 – Our translation). According to the author, the imitation of models indicated a discontent with local, personal history, as well as people’s desire to transcend their moment and gain access to a time in which things are endowed with freshness typical of early stages. It is not hard to find in media culture historical figures acting as heroes and exemplary creatures; if, before, this was more intense in political scenarios orchestrated by Journalism, it has now spread to other segments of society: an care-free blogger may attract thousands of followers thanks to their personal opinions on fashion and fitness; an artist that posts pictures of their daily life as well. To illustrate this: as I write this piece, US singer Taylor Swift (@taylorswift) has 75,900,000 followers on Instagram, while Pope Francis (@franciscus) has 2,300,000.

The secularization of myths set in motion by history results in the desacralization of human acts, which allegedly repeat gestures from the gods by way of “work, love and war”. In this regard, Eliade (2000, p.29 – Our translation) states that:

“The true ‘fall into time’ starts with the desacralization of labor; only in modern societies does man feel a prisoner of his profession, as he does not manage to escape from time. [That is why] he makes an effort to ‘leave time’ during his free time; hence the astounding number of distractions invented by modern civilizations.

Eliade (2000) wrote this in 1953; it is found in one of his texts that would later be included in a compilation that resulted in the book *Myths, dreams and mysteries* in 1957. If back then the number of distractions was seen as astounding, what can we say about nowadays, when we reached the point of non-stop stimulation by our gadgets, which are constantly battling for our attention? Once again, the desire to escape from historical time materializes; the sacred, unable to find more specimens of *Homo religiosus* in order to manifest itself, has found a possible haven in mythical behaviors masked by the profane.

Methodology approach

It is unquestionable that the sacred has been undergoing some changes, even if we deem it a constitutive structure of conscience instead of merely a stage in its evolutionary path, as underlined by Wunenburger (2009). According to the author, these changes are often misnamed, with the use of the word *desacralization*: “This term encompasses, in fact, various situations, not properly reflecting the contemporary multiplicity of resacralization

methods” (WUNENBURGER, 2009, p.89-90 – Our translation³). So, while the depth of the imaginary remains stable, the signification of the sacred is displaced from one symbolic manifestation to the next, subject to historical, cultural and social coercions, in alignment with postulates by Durand (2011), and being molded into mythical behaviors, since myths are ways through which symbols present themselves in an organized way to living experiences.

While searching for material indications of these surviving mythical behaviors, we will exhibit some uses of the hashtag *sacred* on Instagram, observing its potential to represent traces of possible hierophanies and taking as guiding elements the space-time characteristics of myths mentioned previously: symbolic images of the center (the various possibilities for representing the *Axis mundi*) and the longing for the perfection of the early ages (imitation of models, escape from history).

The reason behind the choice of such a literal hashtag is to consider, even if minimally, the concept of sacred that inspires the person who made the post. It is more like an illustration, instead of an empirical body of evidence that is analyzed with the purpose of corroborating or refuting hypotheses.

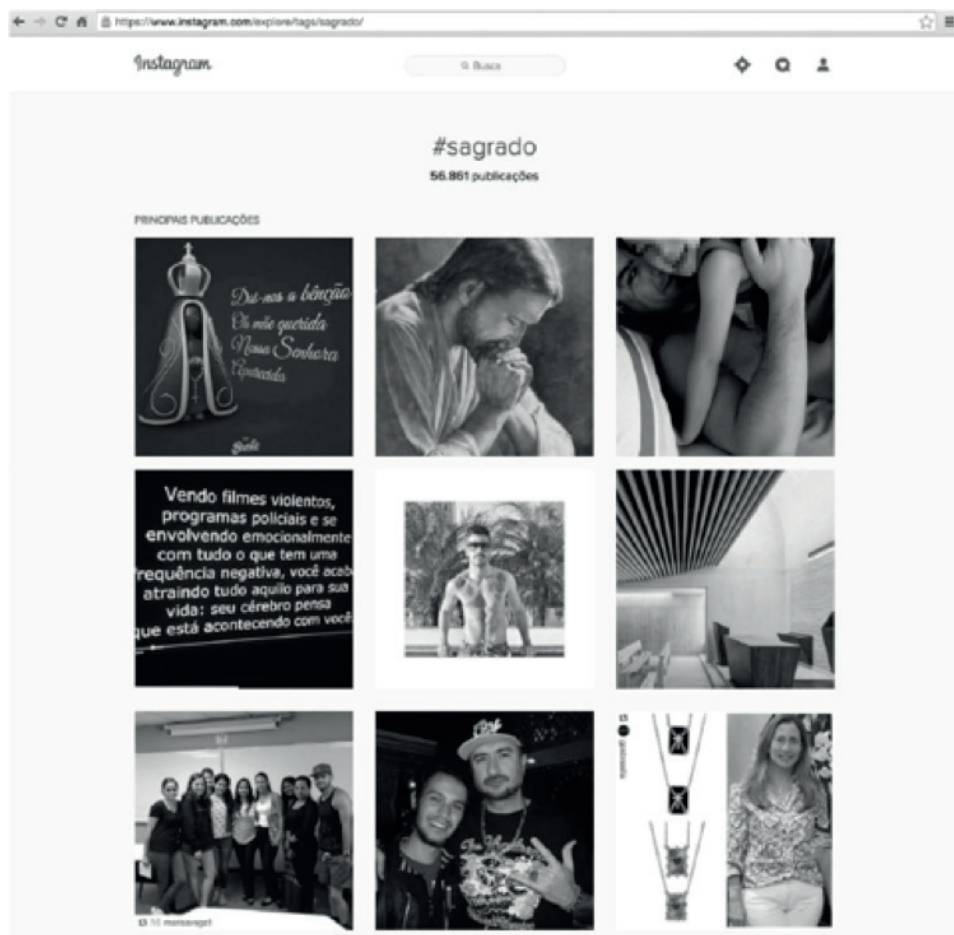
As a result of our search⁴, we found 56,861 posts. The word for *sacred* is written the same way in both Portuguese and Spanish (*sagrado*), so these results include posts coming from countries that speak any of these two languages. The application displays, in a prominent position among the search results, the nine most popular pictures (that is, the ones with most likes), and bearing the hashtag with the word subject to the search. Following these nine pictures, we find the most recent posts made.

The nine posts found in the result of the search using the hashtag *sacred* were the following:

³ In the original piece, written in French, we have: “*Ce terme embrasse, en effet, des situations variées et rend mal compte de la multiplicité contemporaine des formes de resacralisation*”.

⁴ Carried out on Apr 20, 2016.

Figure 1 – screenshot from Instagram showing the results of the search using the hashtag #sacred



Source: research collection.

Among the publications featured in a prominent position, seven are from Brazil, one is from Puerto Rico and two are from Spain.

As a methodological procedure, we have adopted for this what we call *symbolic reading*, which does not make use of traditional photography interpretation techniques. These involve the analysis of language elements (framing, exposure, composition etc.) along with semiotic analysis, considering, for instance, the connotation of the elements featured in the picture, the associations that they bring to mind, the relationship between elements, and the cultural knowledge required to understand their references (PENN, 2002). The studies we have been carrying out regarding the connections between photography and the imaginary causes us to speculate that this decoupage of pictures into smaller signifiers, a typical procedure in content and discourse analysis, is not capable of properly addressing

the presence of the myth in the materials studied, as it annuls the possibility of symbolic experience, which is, as we have seen before, complete and sudden.

For the time being, we can describe symbolic reading as follows: We take a look at the material studied, analyzing it in a brief and immersive way, in a state of receptivity towards the picture being analyzed, carefully directing visual attention to it, suspending thoughts in order to restrain the rationalization flow to which we are used in analytical works. Please observe that the suspension of thoughts does not mean suspension of attention; on the contrary, it is a dense concentration in a single point, aiming at removing all other distractions from that which is being observed. Later, we analyze the profound impression given by our interaction with the visual image, trying to put this into words. Associations with indicators of cosmological hierophany traces are made only at a third stage, and analyzing the texts that accompany the pictures at a fourth stage.

We recognize that this method may posit the danger of a “delusion of interpretation”, an accusation that Cailliois (1979, p.18) directs towards those who attribute a decisive importance to the “relentless residue” that is fatally left out when one analyzes a myth from an explanation system. However, it seems that no researcher, whether empirical or not, is freed from this danger. By what we call mythical reading, we intend to honestly avoid the temptation to mold facts according to a priori principles, giving some room so that the materials studied can act as a conduit for symbolic images. The main purpose is to escape from the decoding game and touch the eaves of anthropologically motivated symbols.

While drawing up the text addressing symbolic reading, we have not chronologically followed the four stages described above, although this order was observed for the reading procedures. We believe that writing, being inevitably coded, mobilizes rationality in an overpowering way. Trying to recompose, in verbal discourse, a symbolic experience would be not only artificial but also useless: artificial because, fatally, after the suspension of thought is completed, the associations with cultural references and text information would be prior to the description of the revelation of a symbol; and useless because the symbolic experience is first and foremost an *experience*, that is, it cannot be imposed onto other people (in this case, the reader).

Moving to a symbolic reading of the pictures posted, cross-referenced with the small captions accompanying them, we were able to identify symptoms of two kinds of cosmological hierophany referred previously, despite its quantitative disproportionality: one post refers to sacred territoriality (escape from the space of the profane) while seven refer to the longing for primordial time. Out of these seven pictures, six are related to the symbolism of exemplarity, while the seventh is both related to exemplariness and to the desire to escape from historical time through the (recreational) intensification of the moment. Furthermore, there is one post that we could not associate, in a more conclusive way, with any symbolism capable of referring to traces of the sacred in contemporary aspect of the profane. We shall detail below the findings of such symbolic reading.

What is sacred on Instagram

Let's begin by the group of pictures that refers to the main motivation of hierophanies in this study, that is, the terror of history. The first picture in prominent position in this group was published by user @hugogloss, and it is the portrait of a Brazilian jewel designer next to four scapulars that she designed:

Figure 2 –



Source: hugogloss [personal post]. Instagram.com.

The caption accompanying the images reads: “Adored designer @carlaamorim... presented today her highly-anticipated collection named #Sagrado (#Sacred) to a group of Brasilia women!!! Among the pieces of religious nature, the main highlights are the new scapulars, which are always objects of desire”⁵. We may infer in this case the association made by the user who made the post between the notion of sacred and Christian iconology; however, it’s noteworthy to realize that the emotional emphasis is not concentrated on religious aspects, but on the designer’s personality (“she is “adored”) and on the purchase of her jewels (they are “desired”). The artist moves from an ordinary to a special plane:

⁵ @hugogloss [personal post]. Instagram. Accessed on: 20 apr. 2016.

the adoration directed towards her, whether rhetorical or not, protects her from human vicissitudes. Her art may not be copied, but it may be purchased and act as a passport in the escape from the misery of daily life. Placed on the background of the abovementioned hierophanies, this post can be brought back to an escape from the oppression of history through the election of models assuring the possibility of escaping from time. However, beyond the already-known deterioration of the symbolic power of exemplariness, the model in this case does not takes part in the equation as something to be imitated, but rather as an enabler for admission into its own world by means of an object it created.

Regarding this other post featured prominently, the variation of the role-model-to-be-followed manifestation appears through the self-attribution of exemplariness:

Figure 3 –



Source: @djarthurvalleti [personal post]. Instagram.com.

The picture shows a young man wearing sunglasses, with a bare chest in order to show off his muscles and tattoos, promoting an obvious association between his image to the image of heroes, who are more beautiful and stronger than ordinary people. The comment by the author of the post, who is also the subject featured in the picture, reads: “Another amazing week on the way. gratitude. acceptance. peace. sacred”⁶. We believe the post not

⁶ @djarthurvalleti [personal post]. Instagram. Accessed on: 20 apr. 2016.

only addresses attitudes or states of mind the author wishes to have/reach, but also implies that the author is recommending these attitudes or states of mind to his followers⁷, so the author proposes that he should play the role of an example to be followed.

A third post featured prominently also portrays a peculiar view of the role-model-to-be-followed manifestation:

Figure 4 –



Source: jumarconatoddv [personal post]. Instagram.com.

By following the path going from father-son iconology to the depths of the sacred, one can easily arrive at the archetypology of the Heavenly Father, the Creator. God may have remained suspended in the mist of human ancestrality, but the recollection of Him remains in the figure of the adult that supports and teaches children - therefore being their role model. However, if we search for additional information in the post, we will see that this role also features some degree of change, which we hesitate to minimize. The author behind this post is a woman, probably the wife/mother of the man and the child featured in the picture. The comment accompanying the post that she wrote reads: “My masters! Loves of my life that help me be a better person every day!”⁸. Although an

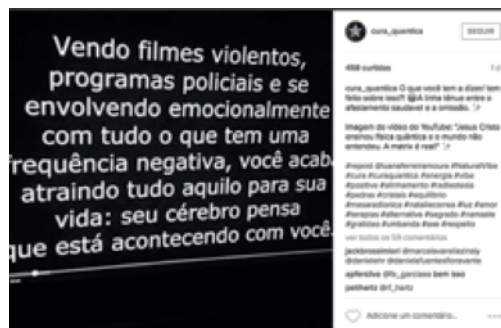
⁷ Here we refer to users who subscribe in order to view up-to-date posts from other users of their choosing, on the home page of their account; however, without a question, the word “follower” can be easily associated with the idea of “example”, “role model”.

⁸ @jumarconatoddv [personal post]. Instagram. Accessed on: 20 apr. 2016.

archetypological look at this post may lead us to the Heavenly Father, another look at the related circumstances reveals that the feeling of sacred at stake here is the feeling of a woman towards her husband and son, calling them her “masters”. Additionally, we have an anthropological constant of the attempt to organize chaos through the observance of certain principles; however, these principles are not intentionally given by the role model, thus allowing for imitation, but rather they are understood based on lessons arisen from coexisting with these role models.

This *lesson* as the materialization of the sacralizing model came up as we made our speculations as well when we examined the following posts featured prominently and using the hashtag *sacred*.

Figure 5 –



Source: @cura_quantica [personal post]. Instagram.com.

Figure 6 –



Source: @sagradoedu [personal post]. Instagram.com.

Figure 5 features the still frame of a video by an institution located in São Paulo, Brazil, specialized, according to its introduction found on its profile page on Instagram, in integrated therapies, harmonization of environments, cleansing and energy rebalancing. The caption for the post reads: “By watching violent movies, cop shows and being

emotionally involved with everything that emanates a negative vibe, you end up attracting all of that into your life: your brain believes those things are happening to you”⁹. In this case, the personalization of the role model is very distant, and the lesson here is the only symptom of the terror of history, instigating followers not to expose themselves to profane cultural productions (“violent movies, cop shows”), which would make them fall into time (“negative vibe”).

Figure 6 features a group - seven ladies, one guy and an older woman - standing in a room, possibly a classroom. It is noticeable that these people are really close to one another, and five ladies are even holding each other by the waist. By associating this scene to the idea behind the hashtag accompanying it (#sacred), the image of affective complicity that may originate in a group is not that distant, and this group may be transported - through the transcendence provided by love - outside ordinary time. However, even if this idea can be applied to one part of the picture, it does not correspond to the feeling observed in its entirety; the dissonant element is the older woman’s posture: hands folded in front of her body, resting on top of the lower abdomen area, with no gesture directed to those around her. Also, the guy on the left (right end of the picture), with his hands in his pockets, seems to distance himself from the group, even though he gives a big smile for the camera.

The captions tell us that the group is made up by students from a university in Puerto Rico and a news correspondent from CNN, who prepared an intervention as part of a class in the Public Relations program, in which the students in question are enrolled. Instead of assisting us to make speculations regarding the deep-down motivations that unite the notion of sacred and this image, the caption is even more confusing: if the older woman is a successful professional, what would qualify her as a role model to be followed, then why is she so distant from the center of the picture? The body gestures expressed by the group are not welcoming towards her, and it seems like she was the last one to join the group, maybe even reluctantly. The complicity of the group does not include her. Before we concluded that *sacred* definitely does not refer to anything else, we click on the post author’s username to see their profile page, and then we see that this is the profile of the University of the Sacred Heart, located in Santurce, Puerto Rico. In this case, that is, the hashtag was used only to indicate the geographical location of the institution where the picture was taken. Initially, we included this post in the exemplariness group, as we had previously read the caption that informs the presence of someone who is supposedly more experienced, therefore capable of teaching the lesson. It is interesting to see in this case that the symbolic reading did not corroborate the interpretation of contextual indicators.

The other two posts featured prominently are associated with the conventionality of the relationship between the sacred and religion; Christianity, in this case:

9 @cura_quantica [personal post]. Instagram. Accessed on: 20 apr. 2016.

Figure 7 –



Source: @elartereligioso [personal post]. Instagram.com

Figure 8 –



Source: @sagradainspiracao [post personal] Instagram.com

These two posts explicitly show themselves as attributes of the exemplariness with regard to devotion and mediation.

Figure 7 feature's Mary's son, that is, God Himself, mysteriously incarnated in a man, Jesus Christ. The exemplariness borne by Jesus and Mary is well-known in Christian tradition. Jesus Christ would be God made man, whose purpose was to save humankind, who'd see in Him an example to be followed. The text accompanying the post depicted in Figure 7 is a transcription of psalm 86¹⁰ topped by a sentence reinforcing the image: "Praying with the psalms, to thee, o Lord, I elevate my soul" (Our translation)¹¹; that is, praying like Jesus Christ is the way to escape from fall into time (elevating the soul).

10 Book from the first part of the Christian Bible (Old Testament), made up by psalms and prophetic hymns that are used nowadays and prayers and songs of praise.

11 Freely translated from Spanish, the original text being: "Orar con los salmos: a ti señor, elevo mi alma". @elartereligioso [personal post]. Instagram. Accessed on: 20 apr. 2016.

Figure 8 features the patroness of Brazil, Our Lady of Aparecida, one of the many Marian apparitions, Mary being deemed the mother of God. Brazilian folk wisdom recommends: “Ask to the mother and the Son shall deliver”. The text highlighted over the image posted revives the protective power of Our Lady: “Gives us blessing, o dear mother, Our Lady of Aparecida”, thus making evident the prominence given to the attribute of mediation, which accompanies exemplariness.

Figure 9 features an image the topic of which can be associated to what has been called ‘killing time’ in contemporary times; that is, suppressing time through amusement/entertainment:

Figure 9 –



Source: @classic_fellow [personal post]. Instagram.com.

Two guys, one of whom is smiling, with his head slightly turned towards the other, who puts one of his arms around the other guy's shoulders and appears to avoid smiling. This guy, who is also taller, wears several kinds of accessories as part of his attire: a metal chain necklace, a thick ring on his right hand, two other rings on his left hand, plus bracelets made with seeds or wood, a cap, a black T-shirt with some print element on it. He makes a *hang loose* sign with his left hand, this sign being used by a wide range of groups, from skydivers and surfers to people into heavy metal and hip hop; in general, this sign means “take it easy”, “good vibes”. This is sufficient to indicate the association between this post and the reminiscence of a mythical desire to leave ordinary time through entertainment and relieving oneself from the pressure imposed by historical time.

When diving into the coding of the verbal discourse, we are informed that the author behind this post is the guy on the left, and that the picture was taken at a tea shop (*La Teteria*)

in Úbeda, Spain. This shop is described as “[...] *a unique place where people can enjoy a laid-back atmosphere, listening to the best in music (often played live) and drink the most iconic types of Eastern teas*”¹². Therefore, our initial inference, that *killing time* motivates the use of the hashtag *sacred* in this post, is reinforced. However, another piece of information adds to theme of exemplariness to this motivation: the guy on the left is Sho-Hai, a well-known Spanish rapper who performed at that tea house that night. Posing for a picture next to a music star means entering in their dimension a little; it means escaping from triviality by being in contact with someone who embodies the supra-real; it means to escape, at last, from the pettiness of the profane. As with the post featured in picture 1, the embodiment of exemplariness, in this case, is displayed more as an enabler - allowing for the escape from the profane - than as an imitation model.

Out of the nine posts featured prominently, there is only one that can be associated with a hierophany of the *Axis mundi* kind, which can refer to the mythical desire to leave the space of the profane and to institute an ordered sacred space:

Figure 10 –



Source: @revistadicasa [personal post]. Instagram.com.

In this post, the association with the sacred takes place through religion, since the picture features the inside area of a Christian church. The author of this post is a Brazilian architecture magazine; its business goals leaves room for the interpretation that the hashtag *sacred* plays a utilitarian role, helping people who are looking for ideas for their architectural, design and decoration projects. However, unlike the post featured in Figure 6, the hashtag was

12 Our translation of the original caption in Spanish: “[...] *un lugar diferente en el que disfrutar de un ambiente relajado y distendido, escuchando la mejor música (muchas veces en directo) y probando los téis orientales más característicos*”. Available at: <http://www.guiadelocio.com/jaen/tarde-y-noche/ubeda/la-teteria>. Accessed on: 20 may 2016).

chosen in order to qualify the image, and not simply to indicate geographical coordinates or to identify the institution. It is predictable how the topic visually represented in this picture can refer to sacred space, in the limits of which chaos is organized. The ordering of chaos in this post is construed by the softness of hues, all of which belonging to the same beige palette, and by how objects are placed, so as to shape parallel lines.

Profane space, sacred time: the examination of these posts seems to point out towards this.

Final considerations

The fact that pictures, featuring various topics that are so different from one another, were tagged by their authors with the same word, *sacred*, may be intriguing at first; however, it does not shock the archetypological fields of the study of the imaginary, which find, on a common ground shared by all human experiences, the dynamic and fertile matrix for symbolic production. After accepting the Eliadean premise of the sacred as intrinsic to the anthropological condition, giving rise to the values that organize existence, one might wonder what shapes the sacred may take within a civilizing process, in which freedom is associated with an intellectual enlightenment that can explain everything, therefore denying any mystery the sacred may entail.

After corroborating the postulate of the permanency of myth and the sacred to which the myth refers, regardless of the current historical time, it is necessary to introduce matrices of symbolic fertility so that contemporary hierophanies are assessed and understood. Durand (2011) has already indicated these gradations of fertility through the notion of a “pathway of meaning”, placing on one end pulsatory forces, which constitute the anthropological underground where archetypes live, and on the other end social forces, where the phenotypes of the imaginary are molded. Symbolic production is found in the dynamics between these two ends. It is true, then, that the most evident manifestations of symbolism, those taken as study materials for Applied Social Sciences, maintain a relationship of necessity with this fertile and invariant underground.

The sacred, animated by the numinous archetypal element, needs to dissociate itself from the unspeakable, from the need to reveal itself; only then can it survive under the layers of civilizing edification, where there is no place for shadow areas, which are associated with ignorance and superstition. Thus, all there is left is the social symptoms that, removed from its center of meaning, are multiplied frantically as if to compensate for the emptiness introduced between them and their archetypal root. The thousands of personal posts on Instagram featuring the word *sacred* point towards this desacralizing emptying.

However, in addition to pointing out the emptiness left by the numinous, the fabulous amount of posts also allows us to think about a process of resacralization, which returns to the sacred what has been taken away from them, and we even can talk about a process of sacralization, with the institution of new relationships with the mythical desire to

escape the profane time-space. The instantaneity of exchanges in media culture and the incomprehensibility of its technical processes are comparable to magic; the seizure of attention as executed by technological means finds resonance in mystical trance.

The rational effort found in the split between sacred and profane has been carried out for millennia in the pursuit of progress, development and the improvement of intellectual abilities. Photography took part in this process, even being one of its most successful accomplishments, and media culture seems to have been its paroxysm: at last, anything can be sacred, which means that nothing is sacred anymore.

It's not possible to know if the purpose of the hashtag *sacred* went beyond being a sign (a more or less arbitrary combination of a signifier and a signified) on these Instagram posts that illustrate this study; however, it was possible to verify that the mythical desire to achieve freedom from profane history manifested itself profusely. In cases in which the embodiment of a role model was represented by contemporary individuals - the designer, the rapper, the DJ -, the emphasis was not in their exemplary status, but rather in their power to forge a path towards mythical time, in which there are no threats from death. As for the sacred space, it did not receive that much attention; this may be only incidental, given the small extension of the empirical material under study here, but we can also speculate if instant communication technologies will not have been able to eliminate the issue of the amorphous chaos, thus establishing the ubiquity of the cosmos. Or, on the other hand, perhaps chaos overtook all possible spaces, therefore making it impossible for the sacred to rise? In one instance, the ubiquity of the sacred is obtained at the expense of the repression of the profane; in the other case, the profane is restraining the sacred. Any of these two scenarios is frightening, because it presupposes a great deal of repression, thus implying major violence in any case of return.

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