

Sociology of religious cinema. Analysis of the Catholic and evangelical entertainment industry in Argentina

Sociología del cine religioso. Análisis de la industria del entretenimiento católico y evangélico en Argentina

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to analyze the religious entertainment industry through catholic and evangelical film projects. The work is divided in three parts. The first one presents the concept of religious material culture, reconsidering the logic of adherence to it. In the second and third parts, the analysis focuses on the documentary “Francisco de Buenos Aires” (2014) and the Christian film Poema de Salvación (2009), reconstructing the director’s perspective based on the ethical, technical and aesthetic dimension developed. Finally, the conclusions compare both films projects. Grounded on a qualitative methodology and a sociological approach, the article includes in-depth interviews with cultural producers and documents analysis.

Keywords

Material Culture;
Entertainment Industry;
Cinema; Religion

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar la industria del entretenimiento religioso a través de proyectos cinematográficos católicos y evangélicos. El artículo se divide en tres partes. En la primera, nos proponemos presentar el concepto de cultura material religiosa que complejiza la idea de cosmovisión y las mediaciones que intervienen en la relación con los objetos. En la segunda, el análisis se focaliza en el documental Francisco de Buenos Aires (2014) a través de la perspectiva del director, así como la estructura y contenidos involucrados en su proceso de producción. Bajo el mismo criterio, la tercera parte analiza la película cristiana Poema de Salvación (2009). Finalmente, las conclusiones estudian ambos proyectos para hacer explícita la lógica del mito y del testimonio que gobierna a cada narrativa cinematográfica.

Palabras clave

Cultura material;
industria del
entretenimiento; cine;
religión

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Introduction

Contemporary spiritualities do not represent an effect of the technical means of production or a system of hermetic, abstract or concealed ideas of social environments and their concrete determinations, nor should they be confined to the ongoing flow of lived experience and the theoretical-practical forms of common sense. Comprehending spirituality¹ and understanding it empirically implies reconstructing the imperfect connections that are stabilized between every one of these spheres. The reciprocal orientations between technology, society and everyday life, shape singular definitions of the sacred and its instituting processes.

This article focuses on the analysis of the Catholic and Evangelical religious material culture based on the ethical, technical and aesthetical records developed by the producers of different film projects carried out in Argentina. The first corresponds to the documentary on Pope Francis that had great diffusion and scope after his appointment. The second belongs to a Christian film, a milestone in the history of the neo-Pentecostalism that recounts the biography of a rock star.

Without ignoring the studies on visual cultures (Morgan, 2005), our approach prioritizes the processes regarding the technical reproducibility formulated by Walter Benjamin (1989) to understand the way auratic experiences (not only those about art but also those about religion) become emancipated from the ritual of origin through all types of industrial mediatization, among which films are emphasized. Therefore, this study does not take into consideration the forms of reception of the public or audience but rather the standpoint of the producers of audiovisual design projects that make the sacred the focal point of their proposal. In this sense, it is important to identify the ongoing development of a large variety of goods with spiritual markings involved in the entertainment industry that promote recreational and mimetic activities (García Canclini, 1990; Elias and Dunning, 2016). These goods lead to collective ways of thinking and classifying the experience religion generates as mass culture.

Regarding the methodology, the cases selected correspond to a larger corpus of Catholic and Evangelical goods (films, books, music), linked to an ongoing research project (PICT, “The Social Forms of Religious Belonging”) co-authored by Dr. Setton. The research is set within the field of qualitative sociology based on interviews with cultural producers and the analysis of documents researched to that effect. By choosing these two competing religious traditions, we contrast different perspectives in generating symbolic goods.

Variations of the Religious Material Culture: The Entertainment Industry

The production, distribution and consumption operate in the background of a complex of entertainment industries where technology represents an institution (García Canclini, 1990; Williams, 2011 and 2008). The rationales of cultural production are indissociable from the technical means available and the historical appropriation modes tested by each group. This is why the dissemination of certain formats, languages and expressive guidelines respond to a set of technological orientations that, if sustained over time, can adopt the form of a production policy that recognizes and identifies a specific religious project and its relation with the market (De la Torre and Gutiérrez, 2005; Seman, 2013); hence the emergence of the material culture, of the system of objects that enunciates and shapes the forms of life, rites, mythology and symbolic hierarchy regarding the sacred in its most varied meanings.

Materialities are not limited to goods, i.e., to the massive products of literature, music, images, garment, food, articles of therapeutic use or Santeria elements, but they also include the sociology of public space and its religious brands (architectural, advertising, associated to memory artefacts or tourist circuits). This term also includes goods other than the clearly capitalist schemes such as works of art, crafts or relics and software programs that mediate spiritual contents in practical life in the way of Christian applications through mobile phones (Meyer, 2006; Puglisi, 2018; Menezes, 2011; Algranti, 2018).

What are the dominant features of the religious entertainment industry in Argentina? What is the place of cinema in this setting? At the national level, the book industry is one of the most important and ancient enterprises in the cultural economy of religions. In previous studies (Algranti, 2013), we reconstructed the rationales that govern the manufacturing of written materials in Catholic, Evangelical, Jewish and New Age spaces.

The production and sale of books, newspapers and booklets lead to the diversification of publishing companies toward the commercialization of other audiovisual contents, among which music and films are emphasized which are supplemented by bookstore articles and ritual or ornamental objects. In the Evangelical tradition there are subsidiary producers of large temples and international foundations, branding, direction of feature films and events coordination. These services are directed toward internal activities even though the intention is to reach the general public.

In the Catholic and Evangelical world, the national production of audiovisual contents belongs to historically consolidated complex publishing companies and to producers associated with major churches. In both cases, the offer includes foreign and local films, sometimes produced in the secular circuit. Films represent a secondary developing branch within one of the broader system of goods which objective, for now, is the

production of books, and at a lesser scale, of music that highlights worshiping, adoration and mainstream-underground dynamics of Christian rock (Mosqueira, 2014; Lago, 2018). The visual culture of religious cinema includes a still fragile and heteronomous dominance within the vast space of spiritually marked materialities.

Economy, beliefs and fashion

Three points about the religious material culture are emphasized in the variant that summarizes the entertainment industry. The first point concerns the social bases of the economic world. Cultural goods describe a type of experience in which strongly intervene two governing categories of social life: order and game. We go over a previous argument, developed theoretically and empirically in other articles (Algranti, 2016). Distant from the *homo economicus* theory that reduces commercial acts to rational, repetitive and above all solitary actions that make individuals and their practices on the market a logical consequence of calculation, processes through which objects are made and acquired, as well as the way in which they are used biographically, by presenting a vast repertoire of behaviors made explicit by academic literature (De Certeau, 1996; Miller, 1999; Benzecry, 2012; DeNora, 2012).

The repertoire of behaviors has a lot to do with game and with the situation that fosters game: the sense of opportunity and the possibilities of the context, the entrepreneurial action, experimentation, risk, gain, monitoring of others, direct or indirect competition, imitation, ostentations, strategy, spontaneity, emotion, leisure and feeling of failure or triumph and of belonging to an imagined collective.

In contrast, the playful nature that governs the cultural production is interwoven with powerful order principles, also recognized by different authors (Douglas and Eisherwood, 1990; Appadurai, 1991; Williams, 1994; Jameson, 1999; Bourdieu, 2006; Baudrillard, 2012). They obey to the impositions of an economic cosmos, with its laws, technological innovations and efficiency criteria; to the rules of exchange, suggested modes of usage, to the norms or to the moral burden objects carry and the way or using them, the violations and sanctions that surround them. Far from a simple schematism, the industry reinforces complex processes in the production and reproduction of cultural goods.

The second and third points refer to consumption and fashion respectively. Consumption because the material culture is not only the complement but is one of the conditions of the possibility of the beliefs. The minimum purchase and sale acts describe retroactively spiritual tastes, the patterns of preference and rejection, as well as the dynamics of the biographical changes. It is possible to recreate a versatile field of things in which the different visions of the world are confirmed, justified, exhibited, and brought closer.

Consuming is a way of inhabiting a space of beliefs. This brings us to the third and last point: the significant problem of fashion in religion. Materialities introduce issues relative to the processes of change, presentness and innovation of the contents in which contrasting tendencies intervene: the imitation of someone else's behaviors and the affirmation of individuality. On the one hand, the uniform, leveled and homogeneous character involves to some extent being identified with the imaginary; however, on the other hand, the need to distinguish oneself and flaunt one's own style (Simmel, 1988; Godart, 2012). Both forces participate in the production of new aesthetics of believing that operate as generational bridges.

Ultimately, the material culture within the framework of the entertainment industry not only expresses but also foreshadows dynamic social relationships, that generates orders and games of tastes, styles and innovation patterns. The films we are going to analyze are internally shaped by the dynamism of the relationships described.

Imperfect Adhesions

In order to revise the sociological aspect of the films, it is necessary to acknowledge three analytical registries that problematize cultural complexes related to the entertainment industry. It is common that beliefs regarding sacred aspects have the tendency to identify with the concept of cosmovision or vision of the world to describe a coherent system of ideas, but also of feelings and practices that, within an interpretative framework, express general order criteria about the definition of the real and its possibilities.

This notion of hermeneutic roots possesses, among other advantages, the capacity to capture the existential dimension of the experience and its rationales of sense. However, the comprehensive virtues of this concept can become epistemological obstacles when assuming strongly integrated images from the standpoint of belief and its behavior maxims.

In line with different contemporary studies (Frigerio, 2007; Wright and Ceriani, 2018; Setton, 2014; Ludueña, 2012), we found complex forms of adhesion in which cosmovisions tend to break down in different sensitivities, which correspondence is not necessary or indispensable. These are beliefs governed exclusively by criteria of consumption of goods, identifications detached from any type of rite or contrary to ritual practices that ignore the statements, emblems and primary allegories of a tradition.

It is possible to differentiate between ethical, technical and aesthetic mediations that participate in the adhesion act (Bordes and Algranti, 2014, pp. 223-228). Mediations represent a set of relatively autonomous symbolic tasks and patterns in the division of religious work. Our interest is to briefly highlight the theoretical-practical specialization

of three dominant registries intervening in the social production of beliefs religious cinema amplifies.

Ethical mediations gather meaning devices that work in developing authority statements, justifications, reasoning and confirmation operations that ratify the idea of “veracity”. The problem with the truth is usually linked to the sensitive experience and to moral notions in which the sense of good and bad, right or wrong, error, ignorance or enlightenment, complete the ideological validations of practices.

The religious material culture, in its semantic functions, recreate under different formats not only large discursive matrices, but also strong and imaginary statements (Castoriadis, 2007, pp. 251-257) on the sense of reality that sustains expected beliefs and behaviors. Images build visual and narrative arguments about sacred truths.

On the other hand, there is a registry that prevails in technical mediations that hierarchizes the comprehension of the usefulness of practices. At the level of consumption, it refers to the use of the body in ritual circumstances such as ceremonies, performances or solitary routines. Gestures, imitations, accurate procedures and interaction formulae constitute the repertoire of bodily dispositions and cognitive schemes that reinforce the efficacy of the rite even without sharing the symbolic principles of a belief.

At the level of production, this registry underlines the capability of coordinating collective efforts in generating religious objects. The development of a film implies an orchestrated complex of activities, formalities and expert knowledge that summarize the technical tasks.

Lastly, aesthetic mediations are committed to representing the beautiful according to the criteria of the imaginary and its way of perceiving beliefs. If in the previous activities and registries the accents would fall on the sense devices, on the one hand, on the technique on the other, here the analytical emphasis corresponds to the role of materialities in all their variety and extension.

The system of preferences describing the taste and the rejection for certain spiritual items, the indifference or fear toward others, the identification with one or more styles of belief or the emotions that govern the relation with things, are some of the dimensions that the analysis of aesthetic mediations contemplates. The visual culture that conveys the images constitutes an activity in itself that focuses on strengthening criteria of representation and perception.

Veracity, usefulness and beauty define the registries that tend to synthetically that go hand in hand with the design of audiovisual projects. Here are two examples.

Mythological Advertising: Francis of Buenos Aires

“This is a rigged photo, we added the mate”². The complete picture, the poster of the most important documentary made in Argentina of Pope Francis, consists of a half-body portrait of Bergoglio, which rises and stands out over a multitude of worshipers through a backdrop of colors where the calm and smiling face of the Supreme Pontiff differs from the extension of his right hand inviting to a mate neatly edited. “He’s offering an Argentinean mate, it’s perfect!” stated the director when speaking of the cover design of his film.

The above communicates the concept intended to be transmitted: the possibility of simultaneously capturing the essence and the aesthetics of a character. “The essence was Borgoglio: who is Bergoglio? And in this question, be really faithful to the person, I even tell you, be very faithful to the aesthetics of the person” (Miguel Rodríguez Arias, August 26th, 2016, Buenos Aires). From an advertising standpoint, the mate communicates the symbolic structure that accompanies the transition from Jorge Bergoglio to Francis, as an archetype of mundane spirituality, indissociable from the choice of a name and its mythology.

The documentary shows the essence of a character, his distinctive features which cannot be seen in advance at a glance, but are the product of an audiovisual research, of accumulated files, of interviews, readings regarding a person and his journey. A hasty interpretation could suggest that the initiative of this project is the work of the Catholic Church, its publishing companies, congregations and its press agents, but it is not so.

The election of the Pope is not only a religious or political event but also a communicational event that strongly revolves around the entertainment industries, more specifically on those engaged in building novelty and its agenda. The written press, television, networks and advertising are areas of activities especially alert to recursive comments on a new topic.

The director of the project is a man trained in the 1970s and 1980s advertising environment. He worked for the major advertising companies and until running his own media agency. This is the reason why he interprets rapidly the opportunity of context that represents the election of Bergoglio and his consecration among well renowned Argentinean personalities. Since his retirement from the world of campaigns, Miguel R.A. knew how to capitalize his studies in psychology and cinema, as well as a vast file with more than 50 thousand hours of television classified in detail to carry out two complementary objectives.

The first objective was the diffusion of an innovative journalistic genre of the last years that consists of the critical analysis of the media and public figures appearing in them, based on a file registry that exhibits them (not without a certain dose of humor) in their

contradictions, inconsistencies and excesses. He exploits the television reflexivity through a format that thinks about its own contents. The second objective consists of making research documentaries on prominent figures of politics, music, sports and entertainment, as well as events of public impact or great events of the history of the country.

Along these lines, the documentary on the Pope is the continuation of a way of thinking and narrating that combines the strength of communication, the economy of resources and the aesthetic quality of advertising, as well as the use of files with past sequences and the conduction of new interviews, in order to produce a biography capable of enhancing as well as shaping collective feelings regarding an unprecedented event in the country. “I wanted to tell a story that was as close as possible to Bergoglio’s reality, i.e., not to make a documentary to lower the bar. I made 47 biographies; you know in making a biography, one has to be faithful to the essence of the character” (Miguel R. A, August 26th, 2016, Buenos Aires).

The status of veracity of the biographical documentary lies in the art of producing reality and the essence of a character based on multiple registries, which specific combination bring him closer to the idea of veracity and authenticity, as opposed to conventional images. The differential value of this genre (the way in which it is being hierarchized) requires for the interviewee of our research being distanced from the consistent interpretations massified by the press.

I then looked for the sermons and I found five or six with a high political content, which surprised me a lot because I did not have a bad image of Bergoglio. The image given in the media, all the media criticized him: *La Nación*, *Clarín*, *Página 12*, all of them, for different reasons, but it was like a guy that did not pay attention to the press. He even seemed as a man of the right who was against abortion, that is, the idea we had of him was that of a conservative, antipathic, obnoxious guy. When I saw these sermons, I started inquiring on who was this guy, and I found the real Bergoglio. When I realized that Bergoglio was a person committed to fighting against human trafficking, that he had saved people during the dictatorship, that he was utterly modest and that he had nothing to do with what a cardinal is, i.e., a person wearing a black cassock, commuting in *bondi* (public transportation) without using the official vehicle. A strange man for the ecclesiastic hierarchy. I became interested (Miguel R. A, August 26th, 2016, Buenos Aires).

Now, how is a biography made? The quality of a product must meet some conditions; in this case, to a calculated and systematic set (almost like a formula) of distinctive marks: the possibility of undertaking a co-production with Italian partners, add one’s own files with sermons and fragments prior to the enthronement, conducting new interviews (25 in total) in Argentina and Italy to specialized journalists and authors of books; relatives, companions, friends from elementary and middle school; plastic artists, philosophers, theologians, scholars, public servants (one legislator, an ambassador, a Secretary of cult), leaders from the Vatican (director of the television centre, radio), priests and priests ministering

in shanty areas, references from the San Lorenzo de Almagro club, rabbis committed to interreligious dialogue and friars.

Furthermore, files with exclusive images of the Vatican were gathered and public subsidies were obtained to release the film in movie theaters. The documentary premiered through a State program in Buenos Aires shantytowns by hiring an international seller in order to offer the documentary to *Discovery* to broadcast it in the United States and Latin America and to also catch the interest of Spain, Italy and Portugal. The San Pablo Argentina Publisher bought and distributed its own copies.

Thus, the entire cinematographic product consists in an audiovisual project religiously branded, with resources and contents different from emergency documentaries identified as such by Miguel R. A. given their scarce research, lack of innovative elements and sometimes, of an explicit political intent.

The film and its script proceed without any voice-over or spacer plates that organize the different thematic axis of the narration: “one has to tell the whole story with interviews and files without saying nothing, not even basic data” (Miguel R. A, August 26th, 2016, Buenos Aires). Here is the first decision that gives evidence of the skills of the director to edit a variety of material without interrupting the development of the plot and the numerous topics that include the following chapters:

- a) The surprise of the appointment but also the previous signs and certainties anticipating such appointment among some friends, and simultaneously, the choice of a name: Francis.
- b) His profile constructed on recurrent notions such as simplicity, humility, coherence of example, concern for others, capacity to listen, synthesis between affectivity and character, his austere and Spartan way of living, the same shows on his desk of cardinal, full of papers, letters, books scattered more or less untidily, signs of material simplicity and work, that is what the documentary strives to describe.
- c) The religious denunciation of social problems identified with human trafficking, modern expressions of slavery that recreate child labor and sweatshops, bribery culture, retirees’ precarity, high political content sermons that summarize an attitude equally intransigent with the affairs of the Church.
- d) The resistance he encounters from the conservative sectors for his “desacralizing” ways, his Latin American origin, his condition of Jesuit, his anti-intellectual attitude while pointing him out as the “Populist Pope”, the “Evita Pope”, the “Argentinean”.
- e) The memories of his childhood, the seminary and his sense of vocation, narrated

through precise anecdotes by his sister and friends of those years exalting his love for the Italian culture, films, opera and football soccer.

- f) The Jesuit values, the analogies with Pope John XXIII and the theological and institutional importance of the II Vatican Council.
- g) The dispute over his role during the last military dictatorship with testimonies of people he helped leave the country, collected in a book “*La Lista de Bergoglio*” (The Bergoglio’s List) by Nella Sacavo, who participated in the interviews.
- h) His style, aesthetics and communication model based on gestures (an improvised talk in full flight after his visit to Brazil, his use of humor and complicity with the crowds). In the words of the director of the Television Center of the Vatican, Monsignor Darío Viganó: “People would run to Rome to see Pope John Paul II. They came to Rome to listen to Pope Benedict and came to Rome to embrace Francis.
- i) The conviction of the interreligious dialogue (here confined to Judaism), but also concrete, geopolitical actions focused on stopping the invasion in Syria or to criticize Europe’s migratory policies with his presence on the Lampedusa island.

Lastly and to reinforce the revolutionary condition of his figure, his actions are turning against the structures of the Church through the financial reform of the Vatican Bank (IOR) and the revision of the official stances on the issue of homosexuality, the challenge for the Church to go public.

The biographical production, its anecdotes and stories recreate a concept of close spirituality, full of definitions, gestures, attitudes and nods that occur outside the consecrated spheres of enunciation. Hence, the documentary concludes mythologically³ as it started, with images of the La Verna sanctuary, the Saint Francis of Assisi Grotto and a friar who recalls, in Italian, the last project that involves a name, because, as in sacred times, in which the life of the martyr and his primary actions are situated, the Church is facing all kinds of difficulties to relate with the world and to communicate its message to people in a clear and simple way according to the friar’s interpretation.

The name is bearer of an archetype, a purpose, a program that encapsulates (under the economy of signs of the advertising message) the mate of the poster; hence, Francis, as the image of the true and updated story that describes the will to express computerized states of the Catholic spirituality to the worshipers of his time in a simple manner. Advertising is a genre that understand as few do the structure of the myth and its symbolic efficacy (Lévi-Strauss, 1968, pp. 178-179).

Veracity, usefulness and beauty are registries that internally shape the timely production of a consumer good with spiritual brands. The ethical imperative of the documentary i.e., the notion of truth on which his project is sustained obeys the attempt to produce the

essence of the character (the response to the question: who is Bergoglio?), deliberately breaking with the mediatic common sense and the political uses of his figure.

There is also a useful and technical dimension that consists in the context opportunities that offer a topic of interest for the public and private financing for a local and international audience, for different platforms and diffusion circuits, the utilization of one's own files, as well as the contact networks and foreign partners; it is a disperse but close set of social forces that converge in the same product.

Lastly, beauty lies in the development of an aesthetic criterion that enhances the spiritual attributes of the protagonist based on a language of austerity, simplicity and forcefulness of a message contrary to the Baroque or intellectualism. This goal is completed with the narrative economy of a story that, similarly to a myth, tells the story of a hero and the encounter with his archetype.

Pacts, Vanities and Metaleros Redemptions: *Salvation Poem*

The case of models of spirituality that do not come from the advertising and documentary world but from the sociabilities of the Church expressed in the ancient genre of testimony is different. For example, the defeat that leads a teenager down the path of gospel to heavy metal and then back to gospel. "I once heard someone say: when a mother prays, God listens, the angels prepare to take action and things start happening. This saying came to my mind when I met Pablo Olivares and he told me his story". This is how *Poema de Salvación (Salvation Poem)* (2009), probably the most important Argentinean film in the evangelical entertainment industry, begins.⁴

The movie is based on a period of the life of the singer of *Halógena*, the metal band, that takes place between his childhood and the founding of the band in 1989, until the band's sudden dissolution in 1998, after the release of their last record. The significant moment of the narration corresponds to the period of greater spiritual intensity of a conversion story⁵ that includes all kinds of events: his childhood life in church, his distanced father and, on the other hand, his over-protective and controlling mother, his rebel attitude toward the pastor, college, metal culture, influence of the occult, diaries he wrote, the diabolic rings, the unyielding firmness of his mother's faith and her group of intercession, vices, applauds, tours, a collective kidnapping and the certainty of death.

The movie does not emphasize the language or the structure of the documentary but rather the completely fictionalized logic of a conversion testimony and the "alchemical absorption" it involves, according to Benedict Anderson (2007, p. 33), when demonstrating that "the entire nature of the being of man is sacredly malleable" and capable of being identified with the spiritualities of a community imagined through the evangelical Christianity and its films.

Poema de salvación (Salvation Poem) constitutes a cinematographic project that synthesizes, through different genres and aesthetics (drama, musical, videoclip, fantasy elements), a perspective of the world with a high symbolic content. The title identifies the name of a song that celebrates the might and grace of the divine to rebuild individuals (“change me and make me again/ help me to be faithful to you”, says the second line). Now, in this cosmology, the Will of God competes with other forces, other entities that fight over the protagonist’s soul in a spiritual war that precedes him and transcends him.

Three irreconcilable orders constituting however the same ontology take place in the story of the protagonist:

- 1) The forces of good represented in Carmen, the mother, accompanied by an intergenerational succession of feminine models of righteousness, self-denial and piety; Pablo’s sister, his first church bride, the elderly women prayer group and a sacred entity that under the shape of a young redheaded woman fights against a demon over the salvation of the musician in the most dramatic scene of the narration. The pastor accompanies, counsels but does not mobilize the spiritual weapons with the same intensity as the group of anointed women. The Bible also as a holy book with its own agenda, intervenes through the verses read or recited at a specific moment.
- 2) Desires, moralities, rewards and dangers of the world are identified with the excessive attention of the father for his businesses, work, money, rebellion as a value between college friendships, vices, product of disorder, the ambition of record labels, vanity arising from applauds, exaltation of individualities, television programs and violence of a kidnapping during a Central American tour, followed by a request for ransom; then, the vital question at gunpoint: “Do you believe in God?” and the delinquent’s sentence before freeing him: “If you had said no, I would have killed you, bastard!”.
- 3) The third order of reality is not of this world or of God’s but rather of the strict actions of the enemy, deceits, temptations, promises and ephemeral results expressed through the obscurantist influence of Abel Black (a character specifically created for the film). This character captivates Pablo with his songs, his messages; there is even a personal diary hidden in his room at the religious boarding school, which the diabolic metal star had also attended.

The diary instructs him on the satanic initiation rituals (located in an abandoned house, filled with candles and murals depicting rams, sensual women, mean-beasts) in exchange for his success in the music industry. The rites of evil also have their own materialities, sounds, attitudes and aesthetics. Paul makes his face up in his performances adopting the style of Black Metal; he fakes a low and guttural voice, lets his hair grow, wears black nail polish and chains, tattoos his arms and wears a ring with the face of a devil with protruding horns besides painting his eyes bright red.

The film highlights the aggressive, irascible and self-destructive behavior that entails obscurantism values. The highest expression of this order is represented by a young demon, with a bass voice and leather jacket that fights openly against the angle sent to protect him during the final scene.

The three orders seem connected by the same guiding thread: the idea that music is a power instrument that operates in the world of humans and on the spiritual realm, whether to get people closer to or away from God. In fact, the film does not address all people in the same way but focuses more specifically of young teenagers such as liminal individuals *par excellence*, susceptible to all kinds of influences (Mosqueira, 2014). The sound space is bearer of emotions, messages, meanings and the power to create worlds that speak the language of the spirit in all its possibilities.

Therefore, it is important that music be used to produce an encounter with God where His capacity to rehabilitate people is shown, regardless of what they have done before or how badly they have offended Him. The power of breakdown and conversion testimony is reaffirmed in the last astuteness of the Providence which consists in using the same talent that the believer applies to evil but now with other purposes related with the exaltation of the Celestial Work. The film ends with Pablo Olivares, not the actor, but the musician that inspired this story. The latter composes another version of the song *Poema de Salvación* with his band, in the way of a Christian rock ode. During the song, photo scenes showing Pablo's real family appearing together with captions that synthesize how God restored his life.

Why does this film represent a milestone in the Christian entertainment industry? It is a proposal that successfully gathers and coordinates resources of the Argentinean Evangelical environment. The story, the cast, the stages, soundtrack, public subsidy, most part of the filmmaking and the places where the premieres were held correspond to the social forces of the internationally informed local context, a Rio de la Plata neo-Pentecostalism *for export*.

This is where the meeting between two processes intervenes. On the one hand, the expansive development of the CanZion group, the company of musician Marcos Witt that addresses the creation and distribution of Christian contents, and his growing interest in Argentina. On the other hand, the progressive movement of the institutionalization of the mega-churches which, as they consolidate, tend to become systematically professionalized in audiovisual means. The cinematographic project *Poema de Salvación* describes the convergence between Christian entrepreneurs of the entertainment industry and large-scale, highly complex religious organizations with diversified functions.

The success of this experience “makes us penetrate a more industrial place; we are no longer in this church-boy ghetto” (Pablo Muñiz, October 30th, 2015, Buenos Aires),

these are the words of one of the main managers of the project; hence, the invitation to participate made to a new production company focused no longer on the design of cultural goods identified with strong Evangelical labels but rather committed to the development of “contents with content” that fights the “level of contamination” generated by the “consumption of devalues”, in the words of his founder Luis Q. The goal, he clarifies, is “to diffuse values in the mass media with maximum quality entertainment products” (Luis Q. April 4th, 2016, Buenos Aires).

Miniseries, movies and concerts operate under market standards. Some are premiered on public television and capitalize State support which, in turn, combine international support of Christian networks (the CBN *Christian Broadcasting Network*). We are dealing with a new type of material culture, different from most of the Central American offer that diffuses *Expolit*. In this case, the cultural goods summarize contents with local characteristics (Argentinean actors and directors, close themes, specific language uses, as well as humor or settings, reference and national-imprinted landscapes), of high technological quality, aiming at the audience of the secular medias and under the format of a dissociated spirituality.

Capitalism converges in the producers’ goal, in the sense that the technological innovation, the packaging quality, the consumption as goal, the commercial success, the public and international networks of financing of the Argentinean entrepreneurship, as well as the ethics of the vocation, the professionalism and, lastly, the evangelistic purpose as religious goal capable of translating into economic terms the search for new audiences, markets and formats.⁶

What we want, if we make a quality product, is that it works commercially, that the channel works, that it generates sponsors, and everything available, our message is going to be broadcasted. Since the system is somewhat crazy, what generates money propagates and what doesn’t, doesn’t. Then, what we have to do are things that generate money [...]. We believe that the problem spiritual principles have is usually a packaging issue. It is not that the principles are wrong or that people do not want them; the problem is a packaging issue; they come in a non understandable language and an unattractive way. Then, people cannot consume them. What we want to do is to put these principles in a format that makes them consumable. We want to make God a product of mass consumption (Luis Q. April 4th, 2016, Buenos Aires).

The advances and setbacks of the Christian entertainment industry find in this cinematographic project of the *Poema de Salvación* a benchmark to imitate, break or improve, that combines three analysis registries. The production of “veracity” obeys the rhetorical force of the conversion testimonial⁷ as a discursive genre that is sustained by and driven toward personal experiences. The sacred biography conveys a message of universal scope, totalizing in its effects and semantic functions.

The film’s concern is to remind the viewer that it is a fictionalization of real events that exhibit a divine power to make and rebuild individuals. “The usefulness” is expressed

in the accumulation and exploitation of collective, technical and artistic forces that brings together two worlds not necessarily coherent: that of Christian entrepreneurs and that of the ministries of large churches. Everything is put at the service of a cultural good with local brands that relocates the Argentinean neo-Pentecostalism on the broader film-making scene with an economically sustainable proposal.

Lastly, the idea of “beauty” responds to the need to re-create the social drama of the testimony as a ritual process (Turner, 1975) that meets the criteria of representation of the evangelical mindset: the aesthetics of the good, the evil and the world (the three orders of Christian ontology, with their materialities and dominant symbols), the production of a juvenile, liminal and unstable individual, the narrative structure focused on the breakdown and the proofs of veracity the film manages. The intergenerational conflict is developed through theatricalized drama and models of spirituality that children of evangelical families face recurrently: the old problem of religious transmission and the role music plays as source of power, deceit or salvation.

Conclusion: A Religion of Free Time

The question for spiritualities in the entertainment industry makes us think in long-lasting associations between religion and different forms of leisure, pleasure and rest; i.e., all those activities that appear as residues of those that are perceived socially as a counterpoint to obligations. The minimal leisure routines are object of proposals that fictionalize the sacred, not from a solemn or miraculous place, but based on other registries (at first sight of lesser ideological intensity), as can be curiosity, laughter or entertainment.

Multiple mediations of the technological institutions are found between entertainment and spirituality. It suggests and inhabits a technological informed world of beliefs that proposes differentiation within a certain unity of style. That which individuals do when they do nothing describes an area of dispute between different proposals they present to their gods under an attractive language of visual culture. This is challenged through ethics, technique and aesthetic summarized in different genres. In the cases we analyzed, two rationales arise that we would like to explain briefly: the myth and the testimony.

The first case corresponds to *Francisco de Buenos Aires* (Francis from Buenos Aires), the feature film that presents a point of view on the Supreme Pontiff through the documentary narrative genre that combines the plasticity and the communication efficacy of advertising resources with elements pertaining to the structure of the myth. The production of the biographical truth describes the process of encounter of man and the archetype, the primary idea that defines his comprehension of Christianity and the tasks of the Church. The name condenses and updates a program of action, an identity that exalts, by pursuing the argument, certain spiritual values: he chooses a culture of

simplicity, poverty, closeness to worshipers, openness, criticism or even challenge of the ecclesiastic authority.

Francis represents a name charged with symbolisms. The objective of the film is to find retrospectively the events, minimal attitudes and the positions that anticipate as way of a self-fulfilling prophecy of the hero's destiny. Likewise, mythology is perfected with specific features of a nation, which idiosyncrasy expresses this exemplary model of Christian spirituality.

Francis is from Buenos Aires, as outlined in the title. The advertising but also the interpretative shrewdness of the documentary lies (to replicate the analogical format to other great national emblems) in the production of a mythological reading of the biography where the essence of the character is the nation that converted him into an archetype. The myth of a Catholic Argentina and the ideological structure it naturalizes can be a consumer good, a commercially efficient invention, which development, design and aesthetics do not necessarily or exclusively originate from religious institutions. The cultural imagination of an Argentinean Catholicism thus encounters its fiction (Ceriani, 2014; Mallimaci, 2015).

Audiovisual entertainment (this is the teaching that the second case provides) is in line not only with the logic of the myth but also with other similar devices such as the conversion testimonials. This narrative model easily subsumes elements of genres other than those of the popular and mass culture, such as soap-operas, videoclips, science-fiction and terror, which are reorganized according to the economy of an argument which goal is the staging of a social drama of whom it narrates extraordinary events, the falls, treasons and healings, that lead a young man to the ultimate experience with his Creator.

The biography of rock and religion summarized by Pablo Olivares exalts the spiritual power of the music. The project aims at a generic juvenile audience and to situations or context of dispersion. The logic of the testimonial and the sense of veracity resulting from it enables two powerful forms of experimentation: one commercial since it convenes the productive forces of Christian media entrepreneurs and producers of mega-churches.

The other artistic, due to the narratives of encounter, that go beyond the regularity of its structures, the typicity of the sequences, the similarities of the rites of passage and the moments of initiation, are compatible with different expressive approaches that promote the ensemble between different languages. The testimony, as a lived fact capable of adjusting to multiple formats, expresses one of the dominant possibilities of creative reinvention of the evangelical entertainment industry.

Christian spiritualities re-create cultural entertainment goods, leisure and recreation that thematize a free-time religion which goal is to entertain while transmitting metaphors

charged with cosmovisions and ideological structures. The interpretative frameworks that amplify the fictions of the sacred are not a supplementary description of reality but (as taught by hermeneutics) an aspect that constitutes it, i.e., a mean in the imperfect production of meaningful worlds.

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¹ The objective of this paper is not to reconstruct the academic connotations of the notion of spirituality and its epistemological scope (Frigerio, 2016, pp. 210-221), but rather understand it as a way of naming the generic sacred, allegedly universal, in audiovisual projects that bear religious signs of specific groups.

² It is an infusion made of yerba mate leaves, extremely popular in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, as well as in certain areas of Chile, Bolivia and Brazil. It is in part associated with the Buenos Aires cultural heritage and idiosyncrasy.

³ According to the studies of Mircea Eliade (1992), we can point out that the myth is a true story, true because it is sacred and it is sacred because it refers to the acts of supernatural beings occurred in a primal time, *in illo tempore*. The actions in the stories usually refer to the moments of creation to explain how the norms, customs and rules of a society came about. In this sense, the myth possesses a clearly etiological and cosmogenic nature. In our work, it is important to acknowledge the twofold function of the myth as a significant explanation of the environment and as a practical orientation. If the rite is the staging, the efficient dramatization of a form of relation with the sacred, the myth is the script that allows the actors to identify themselves with the situations, adventures, misadventures and teachings that archetypal heroes experience when relating with the gods.

⁴ The movie was one of the most box-office premieres of 2009. It was viewed by 25 thousand spectators in Argentina and 500 thousand in Mexico and the United-States. It won the Arpa award as “Best DVD, short or feature film of the year” and had an impact on the large medias outside the strictly Christian circuit.

⁵ It would be possible to establish the mythological elements of the “heroic narratives”, their schemes and thought models (Alves and Costa, 2018, pp. 239-242). However, our goal is not to conduct the structural analysis of biographies but rather the possibility to acknowledge the ethical, technical and aesthetic records that producers put into play.

⁶ The visual Evangelical culture has the tendency to expand through the cinematographic revalorization of Latin American leaders as is the case of the feature film on the biography of Edir Macedo: “*Nada que perder*” (Nothing to lose) or “*Palau: la película*” (Palau: The Film) (2019). Similarly, we must include successful biblical series: “Joseph of Egypt” (2013), “Moses and the Ten Commandments” (2015) and “Joshua and the Promised Land” (2016); these three films were broadcasted on one of Argentina’s leader channels (Telefe). Likewise, the *novelas* were made in Brazil by Record TV, channel that belongs to the founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

⁷ For an introductory approach to the debates surrounding the studies of the “conversion” and “passage” to South American Pentecostalism, see Frigerio and Carozzi (1994), Birman (1996), Mafra (2000), Algranti (2010).