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ALEXANDER PAVLOV

Hyper-Real Religion, Lovecraft, and the Cult of the *Evil Dead*

Translation by Anna Amramina

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The article examines the media franchise “Evil Dead.” The author addresses why it grew from a low-budget independent film to a popular culture phenomenon. This popularity cannot be explained simply by the fact that it has become a transmedia phenomenon (musical, theater, video games, comics, remake, TV series, etc. . .). The author believes that the demand for the franchise is explained, among other things, by the influence of Howard Lovecraft, whose work is of particular importance in the context of hyper-real religion and, in particular, for the original “Evil Dead” trilogy. First, the article clarifies the concepts of “popular culture” and “fantasy” and applies both to the “Evil Dead” franchise. It then discusses whether the franchise can be associated with a type of new religiosity, using Adam Possamai’s concept of “hyper-real religion.” Such “religion” is based upon the products of popular culture and only has representations with no real referents (“simulacra”). Although “Evil Dead” cannot be recognized as a proper hyper-real religion, it can be classified as a hyper-real cult. This concept is associated with the phenomenon of the cult cinema and includes ritualized viewing practices among the fans.

Keywords: popular culture, sci-fi, fantasy, hyper-real religion, cult cinema, horror, The Evil Dead, Lovecraft, zombies.

THE *Ash vs Evil Dead* TV show (2016–2018), the sequel of the original *Evil Dead* film trilogy (*Evil Dead* [1981], *Evil Dead: Dead by Dawn* [1987], *Army of Darkness* [1992]), ended after three seasons in 2018. Shortly thereafter, in the summer of 2019, the director of the three original films, Sam Raimi, announced a fourth installment, possibly starring Bruce Campbell, who played Ash Williams, the lead in the earlier films (Sharf 2019). The reprised cult trilogy, with its army of fans around the world, became a massive franchise and transmedia phenomenon that captured the attention of popular culture enthusiasts. In this study, I explore what makes the *Evil Dead*¹ franchise iconic and long-lasting and whether the franchise can be connected with new forms of religiosity. To do this, I use Adam Posamai's concept of hyper-real religion.

My hypothesis is that *Evil Dead's* cult status may be rooted in new forms of religiosity that have a growing presence in popular culture. In pursuit of this goal, I will focus on the following topics. First, I will discuss several conceptual issues related to the terminology I use in the article (including hyper-real religion, popular culture, fantasy, etc. . .) to outline the core methodological principles of the project. Secondly, I will briefly describe cult cinema and its connection to various forms of religiosity, including ritual practices. Thirdly, I will explain the hyper-real religious content of Howard Phillips Lovecraft's mythology, which makes up the core of the original trilogy, and I will show that *Evil Dead* may, in fact, be considered a hyper-real cult, if not a form of religion.

Popular Culture, Fantasy, and Hyper-real Religion

Any mass-produced product aimed at entertaining an audience and making a profit can be considered popular culture. Additionally, any phenomenon, which many people recognize and which is accessible through various forms of media (e.g. cinema, comic books, television, video games, music, etc. . .), can be classified as popular culture. In fact, some scholars claim that all contemporary culture is popular, as almost all its phenomena are available for mass consumption in one form or another and perform a commercial function (Igilton 2012, 177).² These cultural phenomena are becoming so popular

1. This article will use *The Evil Dead* when referring to Sam Raimi's first film (*The Evil Dead* [1981]) but will use *Evil Dead* to refer to the trilogy or the franchise as a whole.
2. Even though some scholars separate the terms "folk culture," "mass culture," and "popular culture," I will be using the latter two synonymously.

that they gain an army of followers. Many consumers become fans and, in the end, experience emotions toward elements of popular culture that are similar to religious feelings of worship. As early as the 1970s, some scholars wrote that the hyperbolic rhetoric of fan fiction reads as though it was literally “written in the spirit of. . . religious devotion” (Jewett and Lawrence 1977).

Scholars have been particularly interested in studying the convergence and interconnections of popular culture and religion. Religion has always had close ties with folk culture, particularly during periods when religion dominated culture, making these ties inevitable. Nowadays, although popular culture acts predominantly in the *secular* sphere, it still produces new phenomena functionally compatible to religion. Thus, in this case it is possible to speak of a *sacred* meaning in individual phenomena of mass culture; a sacred link that becomes foundational, deeper and more penetrating even than ties between “religion and culture,” which, as I will demonstrate later, may simply engage in a dialogue.

Ties between religion and culture can be imagined in various ways. Bruce David Forbes believes that these ties manifest in four ways: religion in popular culture, popular culture in religion, popular culture as religion, and a dialogue between religion and popular culture (Forbes 2005, 10). Recently, scholars have turned to investigating interconnections between popular culture and religion. Many connect religion and popular culture and in fact consider the latter to be a substitute of the former. Thus, a new theme has emerged, the sacred meaning of popular culture. Yet, there is no consensus on how to describe this substitute, and different authors offer their own interpretations. For example, scholars and philosophers see in popular culture “new forms of religiosity of Western society” (Kaputo 2014), “invented religion” (Cusack 2010), “implicit religion” (Pärna 2010), “religion based on fiction” (Davidsen 2012), “hyper-real religion” (Possamai 2012b), etc. . . . Regardless of how scholars describe these new religions, their interest revolves around popular culture and the ways in which “new believers” incorporate it into their everyday practices. Thus, Karen Pärna claims that an implicit religion (presence of an exceptional object seen as an absolute by “believers”) can be found in any product of culture. Drawing on religious ideas, Pärna argues that the internet is a form of an implicit religion because it instilled a new *faith* among its users (Pärna 2010). In the same vein, Kathryn Lofton examines popular culture and consumerism and asserts that religion is the best way of explaining and understanding everyday consumption norms (Lofton 2017).

Other scholars examine the products of mass culture. Using the example of *Star Wars*, John Caputo, a scholar of postmodernist theology, phrased the search for new sacred meanings as follows:

...I would say that something *else* is also astir *outside* the churches, that something is slipping beyond or outside the boundaries of the traditional faiths, that a certain religion flourishes without these traditional religions, a religion without religion, and that the sense of religious transcendence has begun to assume new and other forms. The traditional faiths contain something that they cannot contain, and there is an unmistakable tendency today to wrest religious phenomena free from the religions, to reproduce the structure of religion outside the traditional faiths and outside the classic oppositions of religion and science, body and soul, this world and the next. *Star Wars* offers many young people today a high-tech religious mythology, a fairly explicit “repetition” or appropriation of elemental religious structures outside the confines of the institutional religious faiths. Religious transcendence is beginning to transcend the traditional religions. If some of this is just New Age nonsense and superstition, *Star Wars* is a fascinating *mélange* of mysticism and science fiction that bears witness to a strange symbiosis of religion and postindustrial technologies (Kaputo [Caputo] 2014, 140).

Other scholars of popular culture, primarily those examining other sci-fi franchises, have went even further. Michael Jindra characterizes *Star Trek* fandom as a cultural religion, and John Morehead calls the teachings of *Matrix* fans Matrixism (Jindra 2005; McCormick 2012; Morehead 2012). It is important to note that it is fantasy, one of the most high-demand genres of popular culture, in which most scholars search for new forms of religion.

Before examining *Evil Dead*, it is necessary to explain how an independent horror film, shot in Tennessee and Michigan, became a multi-modal pop culture sensation (Riecki 2019, 82-93). One way was that the film became a transmedia phenomenon as multiple platforms and modes of media depicted its fictional universe, creating more entry points for the audience (Jenkins 2006, 101-108, 113-22). The release of the original films was followed by the production of video games, a musical, the official remake (2013), a series of rip-offs (illegal remakes), porn parodies, as well as a mash-up theater performance (a combination of a classic work of fiction and a mass culture phenomenon, in this case, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and *Army of Darkness*). Moreover, the *Ash vs Evil Dead* TV show (2016–2018) reprised

the original films. Continuous references to the franchise or even direct reproductions of its plot twists are encountered in other products of popular culture. For example, the *Simpsons* “Treehouse of Horror” Halloween specials in 1992 and 2016 paid homage to the franchise. Furthermore, the first films of the trilogy are included in lists of the top horror films of all time. All in all, a local story of a group of young people who evil spirits terrorized in a secluded cabin in the woods transformed into an intertextual myth, well-known in contemporary popular culture.

It is also important to clarify the term “sci-fi.” It is somewhat surprising that *Evil Dead* is often associated with the *science fiction* genre, whose main tropes are computers, robots, space and time travel, aliens, depictions of the future, etc. . . ., since horror would seem to belong in a different category. Moreover, it is important to remember that sci-fi often implies a possible (hence the “science”) fictional world, which typically takes place in the future. In contrast, fantasy narratives refer to impossible fictional worlds (dragons and magic replace robots and spacecraft) and are most often set in the past. Delineating the genres of sci-fi and horror, the film studies expert Barry Keith Grant notes that while both depict the supernatural, the former looks up and into space and the latter looks down and at the body (Grant 2006). It often happens, however, that these two genres merge, as was the case in the *Alien* franchise, which successfully combined the tropes of space, monsters, physical fear, transformations, and claustrophobia.

Although fantasy, sci-fi, and horror represent different genres with their own conventions, they can be brought under the common denominator of what the structuralist Tzvetan Todorov called the fantastic. In Todorov’s understanding, “The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (Todorov 1999, 25). For Todorov, the emphasis is on the hesitation (uncertainty over whether to believe in the event or not) because as soon as the audience chooses an answer, the work is no longer fantastic, but of the genres of the unusual or the wondrous. However, for this study this stipulation is of no particular significance. Although some “believers” have doubts about the existence of *The Necronomicon*, described by Lovecraft, many people believe in it even though they realize that it has no embodiment in reality. Moreover, *Evil Dead* is not simply horror or one of its unique sub-genres “slasher” (in which a monster murders a group of people) or “splatter” (in which the emphasis is on the bloodbath and corporal mutilations), but something larger. The

horror trilogy engages with a specific mythology similar to sci-fi, and in the third film, horror morphs into fantasy, when the main character travels to the past, to the Middle Ages of King Arthur (time-travel is also an important trope of sci-fi). The franchise even contains elements of sci-fi even in the narrow sense. For example, the image of a cyborg is very important for the franchise. The main character even cuts off his own arm, which is possessed by an evil spirit, and fashions a saw to the stump, before later replacing it with a mechanical hand.

Now that the *Evil Dead* franchise has been placed in the context of popular culture and sci-fi, it is necessary to connect it to new forms of religiosity. Here, the concept of hyper-reality introduced by Adam Possamai and developed by the author's colleagues will be useful (Possamai 2005; Possamai 2012b).³ I chose this concept for the following reasons. First, a study based on the theory of implicit religion has already been done (Khillis 2019). Secondly, the authors of the hyper-reality concept do not investigate the Internet or consumerist practices, as done by other scholars, but products of popular culture themselves. Thirdly, within the framework of this concept, scholars mostly study sci-fi works, their cultural phenomena, and how they have become new "religions." Finally and most significantly, it was within the framework of hyper-reality that a scholar tried to describe the influence of Lovecraft on phenomena of mass culture that have a religious dimension.

Hyper-real religion implies the absence of real referents, substituting them with representations. According to Possamai, an example of this is that TV viewers often discuss TV characters as real people. Hyper-real religion "represents a social world built with models or simulacra, which have no basis in any other reality except their own: these are, for example, theme parks that represent Hollywood films or Mickey Mouse cartoons, not 'reality' itself" (Possamai 2012a, 1). Possamai believes that forms of twentieth-century hyper-real religion used popular culture vicariously (e.g., the Church of Satan was inspired by Lovecraft's stories, and some neopagan groups took inspiration from sci-fi). Moreover, twentieth-century hyper-real religions had their own "sacral" corps, which were largely independent of mass culture. Hyper-real religions of the twenty-first century (e.g., Jediism) use

3. After Possamai wrote the 2005 work, in which the concept is introduced, other scholars joined this paradigm, and with Possamai serving as editor published a 2012 volume on hyper-real religions.

works of popular culture as main “sacral” subjects. Possamai claims that Lovecraft or *Discworld* (a series of books by Terry Pratchett and video games based on them) are not sacral per se, but *Star Wars* is (Possamai 2012a, 6). Even though Possamai is generally right about twentieth-century hyper-real religions, I offer a disclaimer. In the late 1970s, the scholars Robert Jewett and John Lawrence used Joseph Campbell’s concept of the monomyth to claim that sci-fi shows such as *Star Trek* and their followers constituted a secular faith, a “bizarre digital religion... in progress,” exemplified by the hyper-real religion of trekkies in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Jewett and Lawrence 1977, 24; Jenkins 1992, 13).

Based on Jean Baudrillard’s arguments, Adam Possamai defined hyper-real religion as follows: “A hyper-real religion is a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life” of its followers and consumers” (Possamai 2012a, 20). Possamai distinguishes three types of actors who engage with hyper-real religion. First, there are active consumers of popular culture who create practices of hyper-real religions (e.g. Matrixism, a religion based on worship of the *Matrix* franchise). Secondly, there are coincidental consumers of popular culture who may be connected to hyper-real religions. For example, although Jediism is the most widely known hyper-real religion in the twenty-first century, this phenomenon also includes those who are religiously inspired by popular culture in video games, such as *World of Warcraft*, because although the latter phenomenon is not as “sacral” as *Star Wars*, it still allows users, often unknowingly, to undergo hyper-real experiences. Thirdly, there are religious and secular actors, who oppose the consumption of popular culture when it creates hyper-real religions around itself (Possamai 2012a, 3-6). Thus, the volume edited by Possamai contains a chapter on the Roman Catholic Church’s crusade against the *Harry Potter* franchise in Poland. Henry Jenkins analyzes a similar case but describes two types of reactions of Christian groups toward *Harry Potter* in the United States — a vehement protest as well as an attempt to adapt the franchise to their needs, emphasizing the harm of magic and exploiting the moral content of books and films (Jenkins 2006).

Actors of all three types described above are present around *Evil Dead*. That being said, the franchise is not as popular as Harry Potter or Star Wars. In part, this is why I prefer to avoid calling it a religion, but rather a cult with a hyper-real religious dimension.

Cult Cinema and Fan Rituals

Although the *Evil Dead* trilogy is undoubtedly considered cult, it remains a highly problematic case in the study of cult movies. There is no consensus even on which part of the trilogy is cult. For example, film critics Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik included only the first film (*The Evil Dead*) in the British Film Institute's list of the hundred greatest cult films (Mathijs and Mendik 2011, 85-7); the media scholar Christopher J. Olson nominated the second film (Olson 2018, 68-71); the critic Jennifer Eiss listed the first and the third (Eiss 2010, 219, 229); and the film scholar Kate Egan, though classifying the entire trilogy as a cult, is convinced that the first part has the most cult status and atmosphere due to its imperfections (Egan 2011, 100). In the book *101 Cult Movies You Must See Before You Die*, *Evil Dead* is not listed at all, but in another collection from the same series, *101 Horror Movies You Must See Before You Die* (in which most films are cult), the second instalment of the trilogy is listed (Schneider 2010; Schneider 2009, 316-19). In 2019 a consensus was reached that the franchise as a whole, the musical, video games, the remake, etc. . . must be considered cult (Riecki and Sartain 2019). Even accepting the entire trilogy as cult, it is important to bear in mind that there are media-specific interpretations of what is cult. I will now clarify the term "cult movie."

The cult movie is a complex concept. Scholars are still debating its definition, to say nothing of regular viewers' misconceptions. Now, it seems that most authors agree that a film can be considered cult if it is featured constantly in the field of cult discourse, (that is, films that consistently appear on specialized lists of cult movies), if it is considered cult in the media space in general or in the scholarly space, or if it is cited in other films, creating cultic intertextuality. In the latter case, many motion pictures that claim cult status create their own discourse (and, in a way, visual) cult space by citing other popular cult films. For example, in the *Happy Death Day* (2017) and *Happy New Death Day* (2019) diology there are three posters of cult films that appear on the walls of the main character's room — *They Live* (1988), *Repo Man* (1984), and *Back to the Future* (1985). All this, however, says little about the nature of cult movies or their attributes, but it is an important first step to take toward understanding the empirical category of cult films.

There are several types of cult movies, and each viewer prefers their type — "so bad it's good," midnight movies, classic B movies, exploitation movies, specific national cinema, etc. . . This is not the entire

list, but it makes relatively clear that cult movies are often para-cinematography, that is, what falls outside the category of regular cinema (Hollywood hits, classics, arthouse, indie, festival films, etc. . .). Obviously, cult movies have their own creators, some of whom are well known in specific genres — bad (Ed Wood), vulgar (Tony Scott), proponents of bad taste (John Waters), or unique mainstream directors (David Lynch and Quentin Tarantino), etc. . . In general, if a film remains popular for some reason (regular reruns, viewers' interest, consistent quoting, merchandise collection and special editions, etc. . .), it can be considered cult.

Considering the diversity of types of cult movies, it is difficult to talk about inherent attributes of this phenomenon except with extremely vague “para” prefixes. Scholars, however, attempt to describe the nature of cult films. For example, Canadian film critic Barry Keith Grant delineated cult movies as a priori transgressive, distinguishing three types of transgression — settings (the author deliberately provokes and shocks the audience), themes (discussed in society — cannibalism, sexual perversities, dismembering human bodies, religion, etc. . .), and style (Grant 1991; Grant 2000). In the latter case, the film should not only be visually intense and offer a unique authorial perspective, but possibly also be conventional within its genre or subgenre. Examples of such films include *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* by George Miller (1981) and *Dead Alive* by Peter Jackson (1992). The first installment of *Highlander* (1986) can also be placed in this category as it was worshipped by fans who enjoyed its visual overload. The first two parts of *Evil Dead* should also be mentioned as some scholars see their visual style as an explanation for the films' popularity with cult film fans.

Although scholars have been engaging with the ties between cult movies and religion less and less (because, apparently, they have reached a consensus), it is still important to discuss this aspect separately. When academics began studying cult movies, they felt it necessary to investigate the ties between cult movies and religion. Some connected cult movies to Gnosticism (secret knowledge of the truth, or in this case, the idea that fans possessed a connection with what Hans Jonas understood as Gnosis), focusing mainly on films in which the cosmos plays a significant role: *Repo Man* (1984) and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) for example (Lavery 1991). Discussing 1970s midnight movies, critics Jonathan Rosenbaum and J. Hoberman compared this phenomenon to a positive cult, as understood by Durkheim (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1983). The critic Danny Peary noted a specific form of religiosity, in which viewers feel privileged and bless-

ed when they recognize something in a film that critics and the rest of the audience misunderstood (Peary 1981, xiii). Film scholars Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton also connected cult movies and religion by describing the process of consuming the former as Dionysianism (ecstatic, outlandish practices of consumption — mirth, constant applause; carnivalesque elements — viewers come dressed in character costumes; repeating quotes in chorus, which often disturbs the average viewer) (Mathijs and Sexton 2011, 133-5). I would like to emphasize that most of these viewpoints, excepting Mathijs' and Sexton's, were expressed long ago, and the connection between cult movies and religion is of little interest to scholars these days.

Scholars have also examined the viewer or the special category, of the “fan,” to study religious belief and pop culture. In the early 1990s, Henry Jenkins pointed out that fans have an obvious religious (negative) connotation because the term, itself, is derived from the word “fanatics.” However, Jenkins insisted on refraining from scandalizing the term “fan” and urged colleagues not to marginalize fans as social and cultural groups. A function of fan culture was actualizing an alternative social community, which Jenkins characterized as a “utopian community” (Jenkins 1992, 12-24, 285). In the early 2000s, Matt Hills took this a step further, asserting that cult fandom should be distinguished from broader discussions about fans. Specifically, Hills claimed that a comparison between a religious cult and a film cult could be declared absurd because the term “religious cult” carried negative undertones, whereas a cult around a film, in the author's opinion, had no such connotations. Nonetheless, Hills distinguished three components that bring these two categories together: both are considered marginal in society; both are characterized by the “practical unconscious,” that is that, without necessarily understanding why they love the subject, fans adore it; and finally, the individualized nature of cult beliefs (Hills 2002, 117-23).

Scholarship examining cult movies and the concept of the “sacred,” which use concepts such as “Gnosticism,” the idea that viewers may feel privileged or “blessed,” or Durkheim's “positive cult” are not sufficient, however, as the concept Dionysianism is too narrow. I propose adding the concept of rituality to Dionysianism because external manifestations of religiosity around many cult movies are not Dionysian but ritualized and may be described through the category of the sacral (for example, young female fans of the first film of the *Twilight* (2008) franchise built altars). Midnight showings are frequently accompanied by rituals: when watching *The Room* (2003),

viewers throw spoons at the screen and greet one of the characters by shouting “Hi, Denny!,” when the character makes an appearance, and “Bye, Denny!,” when the character leaves, etc. . . Fans of *The Wicker Man* (1973), which centers around a fictional pagan cult, have even organized a festival, at which they reenact the rituals shown in the film (Pavlov 2016, 150).

Some cult movies became sources for hyper-real religions. Apart from the above-mentioned Jediism and Matrixism, there is Dudeism (aka The Church of the Latter-Day Dude). Dudeism is a legitimate religious movement that grew out of worshipping the mythology of *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and its main character, who is called the Dude. Those who practice this “slowest spreading hyper-real religion” believe it has roots in Daoism. Dudeism has a scripture, a calendar of holidays, a film quote haiku generator, etc. . .⁴ Moreover, anyone can join this church and even become ordained after receiving an official certificate. If the idea of Dionysianism of cult movies involves merry-making during viewings, the category of rituality is broader as it implies other practices including non-collective ones.

There are rituals around the *Evil Dead* trilogy as well. As critics thought, *The Evil Dead* was a prime candidate to become a midnight cult film (a film shown at special theaters at night for many years). However, when the first film came out, the phenomenon of midnight movies gave way to video, and *The Evil Dead* became a leader in video rentals and home viewings (Eagan 2011, 99). Nowadays, however, midnight showings are more common, and as a result, theatres, predominantly those in the United States, frequently show *The Evil Dead* on Friday and Saturday nights. During these showings, the audience repeats the most memorable remarks of the protagonist, Ash, chanting in chorus “Groovy!” and “Give me some sugar, Baby!” Moreover, fans buy plastic toys based on all three parts of the trilogy — Ash, the “Deadites” (people possessed by a demon), and *The Necronomicon* (the book of the dead that awakens old demons). Necronomicon smartphone cases are also popular as are collectors’ editions of the films that come in Necronomicon cases. For more zealous fans there are other practices. Although the cabin in the woods (which would become a trope of horror films) that was the location of the original film burned down, its owners kept the stone-lined fireplace. Since then, fans who visit this sacral space take away stones, and the structure is

4. See: Dudeism [<https://dudeism.com/>, accessed on August 20, 2019].

gradually vanishing.⁵ Furthermore, in early 2016, fans of the second part of *Evil Dead* rebuilt the cabin and the shed, announced a crowd-funding campaign on Kickstarter to install the horror devices, and easily obtained funding.⁶

Moreover, in the past, cult movies were hard to procure or were under harsh restrictions (since the emergence of the internet, however, it has become much easier to access these films). Searching for a cult film and watching it was, itself, a special pleasure and experience. Returning to Adam Possamai's third dimension of hyper-real religion (religious and secular opposition toward new popular culture), also sheds light on the franchise's hyper-reality. In the early 1980s in Great Britain, when videos for home viewing became a widespread phenomenon, a moral panic erupted over the so-called "video nasties." This led to a 1984 decision to ban the distribution of certain films. *The Evil Dead* headed that list (Cleary 2019). Officially, the film was not released until the early 1990s in a censored version with several shocking scenes redacted.

Since I act as an acafan (an academic scholar with a biased interest to the subject of study), I will allow myself to share a memory of reception of the *Evil Dead* trilogy during the video boom in Russia in the early to mid-1990s, of which I was a witness and a participant (Read 2003). After watching the film, my friends in my apartment building called the first two films of the trilogy, the scariest horror films they had ever seen. We had regular discussions of what we saw and organized several group viewings. Although someone would occasionally mention *Star Wars*, *Evil Dead* sparked the most interest. In 1993, when *Army of Darkness* (the third film) came out, an elder friend procured the videotape somewhere and gave it to me. This happened on a Friday night, when I was leaving for the dacha. I turned on the video that same night and only stopped playing it on Monday morning when it was time to go back and return the tape. Some of my acquaintances even novelized the films, writing down everything they saw on the screen. This did not happen with any film. Some fans even search for their favorite translations and create homemade releases that bring the audio tracks together. And although certain American conventions are inaccessible to me and I do not have the ability to travel to filming

5. See: Book of the dead, [http://www.bookofthedeath.ws/website/the_evil_dead_locations.html, accessed on August 20, 2019].

6. See: Evil dead, [https://evildead.fandom.com/wiki/The_Cabin, accessed August 20, 2019].

locations in Michigan, I continue to love these films. I have a collection of plastic toys from the franchise, old videotapes — foreign licensed releases and Russian pirate recordings, several editions of DVDs, etc. . . I also ritually re-watch the films on a regular basis and follow everything scholars produce on the franchise.

These are but a few aspects of *Evil Dead* fandom. Thus, the franchise has all the attributes of being cult. However, the main question still stands: Why are fans so infatuated with the *Evil Dead* universe and everything around it?

Lovecraft, *The Necronomicon*, and the *Evil Dead* Trilogy

As the *Evil Dead* trilogy is considered cult and the term “cult” carries religious connotations, one may assume that scholars have discussed the franchise in the context of (hyper-real) mythology, but this has not taken place. In fact, scholars specializing in cinema studies have only recently examined the *Evil Dead* phenomenon. In the 1980s, Tania Modleski described the original film as a postmodernist horror, but did not distinguish it from other films and only discussed it within the context of other franchises, such as *Halloween*, *Friday, the 13th*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Modleski 1986). In the academe substantial discussions of *Evil Dead* began in the mid-1990s. In 1996 the film scholar Julian Hoxter commented on the evolution of genre diversity in the trilogy, in 2002 Angela Ndalianis examined narrative attributes of the franchise, and in 2007 Tyson Pugh focused on the transformation of “masculinity” in the main character in the third part of the trilogy (masculinity is in quotation marks because the character is cowardly, selfish, and a trickster) (Hoxter 1996; Ndalianis 2004, 73-81; Pugh 2007). The closest a scholar came to addressing religious themes in the films was Julian Petley’s 2007 study, which describes Lovecraftian motifs in the trilogy (Petley 2007). In 2014, Jeffrey Weinstock drew the attention of the academic audience to the franchise once more. Weinstock described *Evil Dead* as a postmodernist text, showing that it was more than simply an illustration of postmodernism, but could itself be understood as a postmodernist theory (Uainstok [Weinstock] 2014). Kate Eagan offered the most complete and substantial study of the original films. Eagan considers the history of the franchise’s creation and its reception and analyzes each film (Egan 2011). Finally, in 2019 a collection of essays was published, in which authors attempted to describe all the products of the franchise from the films to the porn parody, applying to them such categories as queer, liberal individualism,

and convergent culture. Although the franchise is framed as cult in the title, the Lovecraftian theme and its link to hyper-real religion is rarely mentioned in the collection (Riecki and Sartain 2019). In fact, none of the contributors touches upon religious themes in the franchise.

The question that arises is thus whether the cult franchise should even be studied in religious contexts. Most, after all, associate the film's cult status with its visual style. Mathijs believes that the original gained cult status mainly due to its innovative visual style, Olson emphasizes the genre idiosyncrasies of the franchise, and Eiss underscores its cinematographic ingenuity in juxtaposition to its low budget (Mathijs and Mendik 2011, 85-7; Olson 2018, 69-70; Eiss 2010, 219, 229). Kate Egan breaks with this interpretation, however, and demonstrates that the film as a product of its creators' friendship as well as the history of its debut and subsequent popularization were much more critical to its cult status than its plot, content, or cinematography (Egan 2011, 93-103). Although Egan briefly touches upon Lovecraftian motifs in the first film, the film scholar does not connect them to the trilogy's cult reputation. This seems an oversight, as one of the main reasons for the establishment of the *Evil Dead* cult and its increasing cultural significance is its connection to Lovecraft's works.

Howard Lovecraft was not just a popular writer; as the author's work gained a wide audience (posthumously), Lovecraft became an icon. Lovecraft created a powerful religious mythology that has influenced many pop culture works and cult classics. Thus, there are many studies of Lovecraft's influence on popular culture in general, and on sci-fi in particular (Smith 2006). However, sometimes connections between Lovecraft and sci-fi are not as obvious. A conspicuous example is the Swiss surrealist artist Hans Rudolf Giger, who took inspiration from Lovecraft's works. Giger titled one series "Necronomicon"; the "Necronom IV" from that series even brought about the image of the Alien (xenomorph) featured in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and became one of the most recognizable contemporary monsters. According to the film critic Roger Luckhurst, the latest installments of the franchise are also inspired by Lovecraft, particularly "Prometheus" (2012). In Luckhurst's opinion, *Alien* "pulls into the orbit of Lovecraft films a powerful philosophy of 'cosmic indifference,' devolutionary fantasies and dynamics of slime, utterly Darwinian, materialistic and historic" (Luckhurst 2014, 58).

Nowadays Lovecraft's legacy receives much attention from scholars of all types. Some scholars used Lovecraft's works to pose new philosophical challenges, offering projects of "nonhuman phenom-

enology” (Trigg 2017; Kharman 2019). And others placed Lovecraft into the context of “horror theology,” using the author’s arguments of a “blasphemous life” (Taker 2017). Thus, it is no surprise that Lovecraft also had an influence on new religious movements of the twentieth century. For example, some scholars list groups of “magic organizations” (e.g. the “Illuminates of Thanateros” and the “Autonomatrix”), which reject the differences between fiction and reality and take inspiration for their magic directly from Lovecraft’s stories, as new religious movements (Hanegraaff 2007). Moreover, it is known that Lovecraft’s mythology influenced such religious movements as the Chaos Magicians and the Church of Satan. Even though Lovecraft, an agnostic, repeatedly emphasized that the stories were fictional, many cited them as reality. There are also many, who do not belong to new religious movements, but believe that Lovecraft’s stories were not simply products of the author’s imagination, but also transcripts of knowledge about evil forces hidden from our world (Possamai 2012a, 4).

As I mentioned before, few scholars have engaged in a detailed analysis of Lovecraft’s influence on *Evil Dead*. In Riekii’s volume on the franchise’s cult, only one author discusses the subject, using texts by Sartre and Bataille. The goal of this essay is to show that Sam Raimi succeeded in depicting the absolute “mystical evil of literature” or the visualization of “evil books.” And Kate Egan focuses more on reiterating Julian Petley’s conclusions than on performing new analysis (Egan 2011, 73-5).

Petley mostly concentrates on the visual elements of the films, through which “Lovecraft’s love for an utterly evil and destructive force” comes alive (Petley 2007, 46). Specifically, the film scholar notes that Raimi uses the subjective camera, where action is portrayed in the first person from the point of view of the demon, to demonstrate that humans are “at the mercy of forces completely indifferent to their fate” (Petley 2007, 47). This perspective, according to Petley, links into the “pessimistic mindset” described in Lovecraft’s works (Petley 2007, 46). Depicting objects from “demonic” angles (e.g. a closeup on a swing pummeling the wall of a house) to frighten the characters may be connected to Lovecraft’s idea that our familiar world is but a surface layer hiding the abyss of evil beyond (Petley 2007, 41). It is very important that Petley reads the *Evil Dead* films as though they are infused with Lovecraftian spirit. This aura is indeed present; even without mentioning Lovecraft’s name, Emily Edwards writes:

Like all movies in the *Evil Dead* franchise, the 2013 film belongs to the gothic subgenre of horror, which relies on supernatural or occult elements of myth, folklore, or urban legend for its gruesome story. The narrative in *Evil Dead* depends on the abandoned belief that ancient gods, demons, or spirits inhabit the world in its mysterious, unseen dimensions and that with occult or hidden knowledge these entities can be awakened with terrible consequences (Edwards 2019, 60).

Accepting all these important conclusions unequivocally, I would like to discuss the plot around *The Necronomicon* in more detail. Lovecraft described a pantheon of deities called the Old Ones (Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth and Nyarlathotep), who slumber in darkness awaiting to return to Earth and conquer humanity. In “The Nameless City” (1921), Lovecraft told a story of a mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred, who wrote *The Necronomicon* after years of wandering the ruins of Babylon and Memphis and who, upon finishing, became mad and was never heard of again. The book, bound in human skin and written with human blood, is said to reveal all the secrets of the universe, particularly those of the Old Ones (Possamai 2012a, 4). According to legend, the manuscript was translated to Greek in the tenth century CE and in the Middle Ages its copies were repeatedly burned, but several copies could still be found in the twentieth century. Lovecraft claimed to have read the original at the library of the Miskatonic University (also fictional).

Douglas Cowan believes that one of the central components of hyper-real religious innovations in new religious movements is *The Necronomicon* itself. Cowan writes that “Although it [*The Necronomicon*] was nothing more than a literary device Lovecraft invented to lend both an eldritch atmosphere and an aura of authenticity to his work, books alleged to be translations of the real *Necronomicon* began to appear in the 1970s” (Cowan 2012, 256). In accordance with Todorov’s understanding of the fantastic:

Some enthusiasts, however, continue to argue that *The Necronomicon* is real, that Lovecraft perhaps read a copy in a university library, and that this caused the nightmares that plagued him throughout his life and on which he drew for much of his fiction. Others maintain that Lovecraft himself was a black magician who sought the secrets of the dead through the book and only barely disguised his efforts in short story form. Still others want *The Necronomicon* and the dark magics it is said to contain to be real(ised) (Cowan 2012, 256-7).

The Necronomicon is central to the narrative and mythology of *Evil Dead*. Still, Kate Egan questions Lovecraft's direct influence on the original film, as the book that awakens the ancient evil is titled *Naturum Demonto* (Egan 2011, 73). However, there can be no doubt about its influence. In the film, the *Naturum Demonto* was discovered by an archeologist in the fictional location of Candar (hence "Candarian demon"). The youth who found the book listened to the archeologist's message that was left in the cabin in the woods: "Here I continued my research undisturbed by the myriad distractions of modern civilization and far from the groves of academe. I believe I have made a significant find in the Candarian Ruins. A volume of Ancient Sumarian burial practices and funerary incantations. It is entitled *Morturom Demonto* — roughly translated, *Book of the Dead*" (Raimi 1981). Even at this point, Lovecraft's influence is obvious. And by the second film the book is already called *Necronomicon Ex-Mortis*, it is bound in human skin and written with human blood, and its authorship is credited to a mad Arabic poet, Abdul Alhazred.

When the spells from the book are performed, the evil possesses humans and invades their bodies. Part of the reason that *Evil Dead* came to be so popular was because it altered the mainstream American tradition of zombie representation (Kempner 2019). Zombies (corpses that come alive and crave live human flesh) first appeared in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The title of this film purposely uses the word "dead," just as *Evil Dead* does. Whereas Romero's dead were simply alive, Raimi's dead were literally evil. As the British scholar Jamie Russell notes, though *Evil Dead* films were not zombie movies per se, they were often considered in the context of zombie films (Russell 2005, 156). *The Necronomicon*, however, opens a door into this world to spirits (later called "Deadites"), who invade human bodies and make them into the "evil dead." "Deadites" are not zombies, nor do they resemble the possessed from *The Exorcist* (1973). Raimi depicted a monster somewhere in between the two existing versions of the "dreadful other" (zombies and the possessed). In contrast to exorcism movies, in the *Evil Dead* universe there is no other religion to confront the awakening of ancient Lovecraftian evil; on social media, however, the franchise's fans debate the existence of God in the franchise. Although more interested in the cosmic horror of nature, that "endless grim universe of midnight darkness and tenebrous icy cold," the philosopher Dylan Trigg writes: "The affective response of horror — far from an aestheticizing of alien existence — is the nec-

essary symptom of experiencing oneself as other. . . In the writings of H.P. Lovecraft, we gain a sense of the body as the site of another life” (Trigg 2017, 107). In short, the Lovecraftian theme of an invaded body in *Evil Dead* instills such fear because it is nearly impossible to exorcise the demons from human bodies.⁷

In the second part of *Evil Dead* (*Evil Dead II*, aka *Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn*), Lovecraftian mythology is developed further. The viewer learns more about *The Necronomicon*: specifically, that the book’s missing pages contain a prophecy about a hero who defeats the evil and about a spell that unlocks a portal in space and time. The viewer also sees spirits that materialize in forms other than bodies like, for example, a giant tree. And in the third part, the protagonist, Ash, is transported to early fourteenth-century England to fight “Deadites.” Even though *Army of Darkness* is no longer a horror but rather a fantasy comedy, fans still love it mainly because it preserves Lovecraftian mythology, even if to a lesser degree. The popularity of the franchise is contingent upon the hyper-real religious influence (of Lovecraft) on its narrative. Thus, Valerie Guyant notes that though the 2013 remake, *Evil Dead*, was a box office success, fans of the original trilogy were discontented with the new version, largely because it lacked the style and the plot twists that had made the original films cult classics (Guyant 2019, 170).

Conclusion

In their analysis of the *Star Wars* phenomenon, Mathijs and Mendik write that the franchise grew from a cult to a religion (Mathijs and Mendik 2011, 188). Such a religion, as Possamai demonstrates, is called a hyper-real religion. Around *Evil Dead* there is a cult that has not yet reached the scale of religion. Nonetheless, the franchise is expanding in various mediums, its mythology is developing, and its fictional universe gains more followers every day. This means that this “fantastic” text, whose popularity can be explained by its Lovecraftian mythology, is increasingly penetrating popular culture and shaping it. Though *Evil Dead* might not become a religion as powerful as Jediism, as I demonstrate, it is a cult that can be described and analyzed through the category of hyper-real religion.

7. The only exception is the main character. In the second film a Candarian demon inhabits Ash’s body and leaves it at dawn.

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ALEXANDER PISAREV

The Conflict of Immortalities: The Biopolitics of the Cerebral Subject and Religious Life in *Altered Carbon*

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This article explores a possible conflict between the practical and ethical implications of scientific and religious discourses about human nature proposed in the sci-fi series “Altered Carbon.” It discusses the clash between biopolitically implemented technology and religious life. The scientific discourse is represented by the “ideology of the cerebral subject” (F. Vidal, F. Ortega), which establishes the connection between the brain and the self. A brief examination of examples of the representation of this ideology in science fiction and its general logic follows. The final development of neuroscience in this series is the technology of uploading the self onto a digital medium, which makes it possible to achieve a quasi-immortal state by changing bodies. This technology, biopolitically appropriated and introduced into individual lives by the state, conflicts with the religious life of Neo-Catholics who refuse to transfer their selves into another body after their bodily deaths. Thus, the field of collision between the interference of science-inspired biopower into the life of the individual and his or her religious life is marked by the coordinates of life and death. The article discusses this fundamental collision, its biopolitical background, and its implications.

Keywords: cerebral subject, brain, science fiction, biopolitics, death, soul, religion.

Introduction

SCIENCE fiction, as understood for the purposes of this article, is a space of cultural and philosophical experimentation that delves into an invented version of the world (Kuznetsov 1993; Kuznets-

ov 2010). Whether in film, video games, or literary works, science fiction traces out radical consequences from developing or incipient scientific and socio-political trends, risks, ideas, and technologies. By transforming the world's social, political, and human configuration, these consequences structure the image of the future it expounds. The future worlds of science fiction are, however, rarely entirely or even primarily fictional, since they are, after all, genetically connected with the real world. Important features of the author's contemporary world are preserved in science fiction worlds. These worlds offer the reader or viewer a thought experiment that is not limited by the stringent requirements, which shackle them in the scientific realm. A science fiction experiment gains credibility due to the fact that the reader or viewer easily recognizes it as a version of their own world. In that sense, science fiction is an instrument of social imagination.

Religion and religious life are also a subject of science fiction experimentation. In many works, religion and the religious life of individuals are transformed on the basis of future events, such as technological or scientific development, an alien invasion, a transformation of human nature, a change in the political sphere, etc. . . . The subject of interest here is the interaction between scientific ontologies of selfhood, instrumentalized by a biopolitical authority, and religious concepts and practices. Interest in man, specifically man's transformations and how man's life is managed, have long been characteristic of science fiction. It is no accident that one of the first quintessential science fiction works was Olaf Stapledon's novel *First and Last Men* (1930), a narrative of the history of the transformation of the human race over millions of years, as it undergoes a wide variety of bodily, spiritual, and intellectual metamorphoses, sees civilization rise and fall several times, and migrates to other planets (Stapledon [Stapledon] 2004).

Discourses on Man

When speaking of man, we are always operating within the bounds of a particular form of knowledge about man — religious, scientific, everyday, etc. . . . As such, the reconstruction of what a human being is remains inextricable from the practices of archaeological and genealogical investigation. Michel Foucault's 1966 work, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, is one of the most prominent examples of those reconstructions. Foucault found that what twentieth-century people understood as man was “only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and

that he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form” (Foucault 2005, xxv). In Foucault’s reconstruction, which is based on an analysis of the history of the positive sciences and decidedly not of philosophy, a fully secular person is in a historically contingent configuration of positive knowledge, the point of intersection of three sciences — of labor, of life, and of language. Thus, man is discussed in terms of the sciences that study man: conflicts and rules, norms and functions, systems of knowledge and cultural meanings. Labor, language, and life are given to man as the empirical contents of man’s experience; they simultaneously precede man’s existence and shape man’s cognition, functioning like the shadowy, inverse side of thought. According to Foucault, “the modern *cogito* does not reduce the whole being of things to thought without ramifying the being of thought right down to the inert network of what does not think” (Foucault 2005, 353). Comprehending the products of labor and production, words and speech, the body and the activities of daily life, man finds in them the condition and source of thought, which dwindles to the point that it is not, in itself, thought, but rather social structures, language, genetic code, and flesh, all of which lay claim to that status of “human nature.”

During the course of this text, Foucault makes a remark that led to the thinker’s later work, an extensive project on the study of ethics and technology of self-regard, which, in turn, laid the foundation for the field of “governmentality studies” (Dean 2010). Foucault realized that “it is reflection, the act of consciousness, the elucidation of what is silent, language restored to what is mute, the illumination of the element of darkness that cuts man off from himself, the reanimation of the inert — it is all this and this alone that constituted the content and form of the ethical” (Foucault 2005, 357). In other words, in a modern, secular society, perceiving human nature entails creating an ethic. According to Foucault, our age is morally impoverished because thinking about the unthinkable, as embodied in the positive sciences, has become an ethic in and of itself. Positive knowledge of human nature cannot be neutral; it either liberates or subjugates. Logos lays claim to the production of ethos, despite the delimitations established by Kant’s critiques. It is only by fathoming human nature through the sciences that one has an opportunity to align oneself with it, achieve liberation, and structure one’s behavior in accordance with it.

Scientific knowledge of human nature produces ethics as “the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rappor a soi*, which I call ethics, and which determines how the individual is supposed to

constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions” (Foucault 1997, 263). This definition includes the duality of self-knowledge; the individual can self-construct or be constructed by various echelons of power. According to Foucault, control over oneself and over others are based on self-knowledge.

Power, thus, wields positive knowledge of human nature as a weapon, one that became scientifically supported in the nineteenth century. It studies individuals with the objective of interfering in their lives and optimizing them, eliminating randomness, risks, and shortcomings. Through this process, it becomes “biopolitics” or “biopower,”¹ assuming the authority to, as Foucault put it, “make live and let die” (Foucault 2003, 241). The discourse around man, government of the self (i.e. ethics), and governing others (i.e. government and biopolitics) is a kind of triangle that posits the coordinates for further analysis. In this article, that analysis will be dedicated to the conflict between biopolitics and religious life.

In interpreting human nature, the sciences offer their versions of essentialism (e.g. genetic, mechanical, cerebral, etc. . .). Religious discourses were once dominant in this field, then in the age of secularism, they were largely driven out of the commonly accepted public sphere and into the domain of the private, or otherwise compelled to reach an accommodation with scientific and quasi-scientific discourses that have become commonly accepted in the Western world. We understand ourselves predominantly through working objects and propositions of science, even if they are distorted to the point of unrecognizability by the vicissitudes of the process of transmission and circulation of scientific knowledge (about genes, the brain, the body as a functional system, the microbiome), and we correct our self-understanding and practices in accordance with the latest scientific discoveries and associated technologies. These notions and practices are not always the individual’s choice; they may be imposed through education, healthcare or social welfare systems, aggressive marketing, the configuration of urban infrastructure, etc. . . They are the embodiment of secular culture, at the center of which sits science, comprehending the world and changing human life.

As the anthropologist Paul Rabinow has noted, man is a creature that suffers from an abundance of discourses and knowledge about itself, an abundance that is not subject to any Logos (Rabinow 2002).

1. Since the definition used here is the one given by Foucault, biopower and biopolitics as its actualization, are generally treated as interchangeable terms.

The individual's self-understanding is neither a worldview nor a monolithic, non-contradictory system, but rather a bricolage of combined practices with heterogeneous parts that mobilize in different situations and contexts. Some mobilize in response to the search for an answer to the question "who am I and what should I do with my life," while others do so in response to more specific, pragmatic ends (e.g. therapy and the relief of suffering or achieving efficiency, happiness, etc. . .). It is largely thanks to this that an individual is, to a certain extent, able to appropriate and accept mutually contradictory forms of knowledge about him or herself and find a place for them in his or her life. The limits of the convergence of religious and scientific discourse and their practical consequences in the life of a person of faith, and the potential conflict between them, as modeled in science fiction, are the focus of this article.

The Ideology of the Cerebral Subject

More specifically, this article will discuss one of the strongest contemporary discourses on human nature, neuroessentialism, which links the self with the *brain*. It will be analyzed using the concept of the ideology of the cerebral subject, developed by sociologists and historians Fernando Vidal and Francisco Ortega on the basis of contemporary and historical material (Vidal 2009; Vidal and Ortega 2011; Vidal and Ortega 2017). The nucleus of the cerebral subject is an inextricable connection between the brain and the self, or the person. That connection can be expressed by the following formula: person P is identical to person P* if, and only if, P and P* have the same functional brain. In other words, the brain acts as a somatic boundary between a personal and his or her life. The idea of the cerebral subject necessarily involves two progressions of thought. The first is from the empirical fact that we cannot be ourselves without our brains to the metaphysical thesis that we are our brains. Thus, we become "cerebral subjects," not only having brains but *being* brains. The second transition is from the scientifically correct thesis that there is a correlation between the states of the brain and the states of consciousness to the aggressive and as-of-yet unproven thesis that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between them.

The concept of such a connection between brain and person has become the default for the secular Western world. In both popular culture and the sciences, the brain has practically become the unopposed candidate for the locus of the self. Any attempt to argue seriously that

the human self is connected with the soul or some other extrascientific source is perceived as eccentric behavior, a poetic expression, the product of “romanticism,” or perhaps religiosity, but in any case the conversation is essentially terminated at that point. There is no other part of the body (the lungs or heart, for example), manifestation of humanity (emotion or memory), or metaphysical origin (the soul) that has been as successful as the brain at forming an alliance first with philosophy and then with neuroscience.

As Vidal and Ortega demonstrate, the history of the cerebral subject is far older than neuroscience; it took shape gradually in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, following the rejection of Aristotelian psychology in the work of René Descartes, John Locke, Charles Bonnet, and other scientists and philosophers. The details of the connection between the brain and self were clarified over time; it moved into the domain of the natural sciences, reinforcing itself through the accretion of scientific facts, theories, hypotheses, striking imagery (from the phrenological atlas to fMRI scans of the brain), and technologies. Thanks to technological progress in the area of logging the state of the brain, the development of neuroscience saw a qualitative leap in the 1980s and 1990s, strengthening the “brain-person” connection and reinforcing its position as a discipline that acted in the public interest and shed light on human nature.

The cerebral subject, which had already penetrated into popular culture at the beginning of the twentieth century, strengthened its position during the 1980s and 1990s. For example, there were more and more films and television series with plots that included the cerebral subject or themes focusing on the cognitive aspects of human nature.² The titles of instructional and popular science lectures, courses, books, and articles also presented the brain as the true subject behind the actions of an individual, the most human part of a human being: “the ethical brain,” “the social brain,” “how our brains make us do stupid things,” “how your brain keeps you safe,” “your brain is deceiving you,” “we are our brains,” “how our brains make us who we are,” “the liberated brain,” “the rules of the brain,” etc. . . . In recent decades, subjectivities have become more and more neurologized, as more and more practices are defined and redefined in reference to neuroscience and the brain. The concept of the brain as the site of the self is

2. For a catalogue of films of this kind, see the Cognitive Science Film Index, compiled by employees of the Cognitive Science Department at University of California San Diego. [<https://www.indiana.edu/~cogfilms/>, accessed on 12.06.2019].

used to make decisions on how to nurture, correct, and control oneself and others.

The brain is regarded as more and more responsible for who we are, what we can know, what we can aspire to, and what we must do. Furthermore, in many countries, it has redefined death by becoming the site where it occurs. Beliefs about the brain and its connection with the human self that circulate outside the academy are often far removed from scientific knowledge and are actually distortions or absolutizations of the facts, hypotheses, and promises of neuroscience, which itself occasionally corroborates and nourishes extra-scientific discourses. The cerebral subject was born before contemporary science, and though it is analyzed in its laboratories and institutes, it continues to travel well beyond them, making the range of distinct forms it has taken truly impressive.

The ideology of the cerebral subject can be found in many discourses and practices, permeating the lives of individuals, conforming them to new norms, or, alternatively, old norms that have been rebranded with the help of lexicon and the authority of neuroscience. It may be called an ideology, since it imposed historically contingent and contextually conditioned concepts, values, and practices that are naturalized as self-evident on the basis of individuals' belief that they are their brains. This belief structures the range of these individuals' potential actions and the meanings attributed to them.

The ideological space of the cerebral subject is heterogeneous and not at all confined to libraries and universities. At one pole are multi-billion-dollar scientific projects, such as the Human Brain Project (2013) and the BRAIN Initiative (2013), while at the other are numerous self-help books and courses on efficiency and personal growth, neuromarketing, neurotheology, neurobics, and neuroasceticism. The results (and associated interpretations), hypotheses, and promises of neuroscience are seized upon by widely varying agencies and actors, including other scientific disciplines, and then used at their own discretion. The brain is becoming an explanatory resource, to which social, cultural, and gender differences can be attributed; it is to the brain that people go to search for the key to happiness, a harmonious existence, responsible behavior, normality, and efficiency. As if by magic, the prefix "neuro" makes practically anything persuasive, credible, and deserving of attention and financing. In various ways, the neurosciences and their working objects are penetrating into individuals' psychological, spiritual, and everyday lives, including their most intimate thoughts and affairs, encouraging them to interpret more and

more manifestations of their own selves through the optics of the cerebral subject. For the bulk of religious people in the West, however, the ideology of the cerebral subject is easy to tolerate, as are neuroscience and the medical technologies based on its findings. In the domain of practical situations, they have seldom come into conflict with the doctrine of the soul as the basis of personhood.

The mounting intrusion of the positive sciences, and the neurosciences in particular, into the lives of individuals, whether through private choice or via biopolitical compulsion, however, is a domain of potential conflict with the religious lives of people of faith, particularly as the sciences trace out the coordinates of life and (perhaps primarily) death. Equipped with scientific knowledge, biopower lays claim to the right to redefine and subordinate these coordinates, and thereby potentially collides with the concepts and practices involving death in the Abrahamic religions. According to Foucault:

What once (and until the end of the eighteenth century) made death so spectacular and ritualized it so much was the fact that it was a manifestation of a transition from one power to another. Death was the moment when we made the transition from one power — that of the sovereign of this world — to another — that of the sovereign of the next world. We went from one court of law to another, from a civil or public right over life and death, to a right to either eternal life or eternal damnation (Foucault 2003, 247).

The biopolitical mode of power, however, interrupts that transition and attempts to keep death within the orbit of its own activity and the self within this world.

Thought experiments that make it possible to model such conflicts can be found in science fiction. The next section will offer a brief analysis of examples of popular science fiction films, in which the cerebral subject plays an important role in the plot and maintains the connection between personality and brain, despite radical bodily transformations. Two primary types of films dealing with the brain will be of particular interest: one subset shows the personality being transferred via a brain transplant, while the other shows the brain being extracted from the body and placed in an artificial life support system that enables it to exist independently. This sequence of emancipating the brain as the medium containing the personality leads directly to the “logical endpoint” of this article, as represented in the series *Altered Carbon* in its first season — the idea of uploading the brain onto a digital

medium as the fulfilment of the most extreme promises of the ideology of the cerebral subject. This series will serve as an example for the purposes of evaluating the potential conflict between mind uploading technologies in the hands of biopolitical authorities and religious life based on the doctrine of the soul. This conflict unfolds within the coordinates of life, death, and control.

Where Goes a Brain, There Goes a Person

The classic film about the brain is James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), based on Mary Shelley's gothic science fiction novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). It was the first entry in a popular series of films about Doctor Henry Frankenstein and the Doctor's creature. The film was a gnostic drama of the demiurge and its creation and was also one of the first films to feature a brain transplant. The plots of such films generally center on intra- and inter-species transplantation of brain X into body Y and the fate of the resulting hybrid.

Frankenstein includes an additional plotline not found in the literary work, on which it was based, which involves the other man's brain being transplanted into doctor's creature, and how that fact affects its future exploits. This plotline begins in an auditorium at the University of Geneva, where Doctor Waldman presents two surgically removed brains to the audience, one normal and one supposedly dysfunctional. In commenting on the inferiority of the latter, Waldman notes that its visible features — the small number of convolutions in the frontal area and the deformed middle frontal gyrus — correspond to the cruel, criminal life of its former owner. Subsequently, an assistant's blunder causes that "criminal" brain to wind up in the laboratory of Waldman's student, Doctor Frankenstein. Frankenstein does not notice the substitution and implants that brain into the body of the monster, and then animates it using electricity.

The example of this creature is illustrative; a dead brain receives a second life in a body assembled from parts of the bodies of many different people. The brain, intrinsically singular and simple, is qualitatively different from the rest of the body, which can be assembled from parts, precisely because it is not inextricably connected with the personality. It is placed into the body like a soul, and plays a similar role in its life, animating and controlling an otherwise lifeless body. If the soul was once the helmsman of the ship of the body, then the helmsman now is part of the body — the brain — but, with the power of science, the brain like the soul, is potentially separable from its bodily

confines. Thanks to the divine order of the world, when the immaterial soul loses its body, it leaves this world and passes onto the other world in order to face the final judgement and be resurrected in a restored body for its eternal life. The brain, however, that new secular and material soul, may be transplanted from one body into another, younger body. Thanks to technological progress, the only limit to this procession of bodies lies in the degradation of the organic matter of the brain.

The brain is material, and its visible morphology, as Doctor Waldman states, underlies the traits, inclinations, and behavior of the associated person, and even the trajectory of its life. In the characters' view, the morphology of the brain functions as a kind of fate that will follow the brain into whichever body it is placed (Spivak 2010).³ Subsequent events, however, despite the murders committed by the creature, hardly confirm this supposed causal relationship between the "criminal" brain and its behavior, as the creature only displays cruelty in response to aggression.

The interpretations of the film presented in contemporaneous reviews, as well as in later ones written in the late twentieth century, are even more illustrative. As Fernando Vidal demonstrates, many of them facilitated the "cerebralization" of the narrative and placed the film within the framework of biological determinism (Vidal and Ortega 2011). According to these interpretations, the brain transplant plotline was introduced in order to explain the creature's cruelty through the brain it received, and thereby relieve Doctor Frankenstein of any guilt. The events of the film appear as a struggle, with a creature enacting a fate imposed on it by its transplanted brain, as well as the creature's own struggle with its own cruelty and predisposition to murder induced by its brain. It is such interpretations that contradict the film and read cerebral determinism into it, insistently presenting notions, which had become culturally accepted by the 1930s, about the connection between the brain and personality.

The narrative of a struggle against "neurofate" imposed by interpretations of a film made long before the zenith of the neurosciences would become the foundation of many other narratives as its influence grew. *Frankenstein* marked a new limit of biopolitical intervention in an individual's life, an intervention established and buttressed by the

3. Professor Preobrazhensky and Doctor Bormenthal hold the same views as those in Mikhail Bulgakov's novella *Heart of a Dog* (1925). The insistent idea of cerebralization, which proliferated during that era, was fueled in Russia by famous transplant experiments (those of Sergey Voronov and Sergey Brukhonenko), as well as the activities of the Institute of the Human Brain.

development of brain research and the ideology of the cerebral subject. The connection between brain and person operationalizes the person for biopower. Manipulating the brain makes it possible to separate the person from the body, expanding the capability to “make live and let die”; it is now possible for life to be prolonged involuntarily (and, perhaps, indefinitely), even when the body perished. Both life and death, however, still depended on a single irreducible remnant of flesh — the brain — and biopower must contend with that capricious organ.

Brain in a Vat

At the same time as *Frankenstein* was released, science fiction saw the appearance of an even more emancipated brain, one existing separately from the body, maintained by life support systems. The “brain in a vat” refers to a brain kept in a vessel full of nutrient-rich fluid which receives oxygen, other necessary substances, and sensory data through tubes and wires. (At times, an entire living head has been used, as, for example, in Alexander Belyayev’s 1925 science fiction novel *Professor Dowell’s Head*). The idea of the brain in a vat was used quite fruitfully in scientific thought experiments. As early as 1929, Marxist historian of science John Bernal, in discussions about the essence of modern humanity and the means to develop it further, proposed imagining a network of interconnected brains kept alive by a flow of fresh blood (Bernal 1929). Since the 1960s, thought experiments involving extracted, shared, or transplanted brains became popular in the context of philosophical discussions about personal identity and the nature of consciousness.

Unlike scientific thought experiments, science fiction is not limited by the need to provide rigorous arguments in support of its statements and is not obligated to solve the problems it discusses or defend any particular theory. In Olaf Stapledon’s aforementioned 1930 novel about eighteen different species of human beings, the Fourth Men are giant, artificially created super brains with vestigial bodies, and live in huge brain turrets, where they do nothing but cogitate. They communicate via “telepathy” — radiation emitted by symbiotic Martian microorganisms. These creatures’ vital functions are supported by technological equipment and the Third Men, who originally created them in an effort to “produce a man who is nothing but a man” (Stapledon 2004, 235). In their view, the primary attributes of a man were mental activity and its associated organs — the brain and the hand. While technological devices could surpass the hand, they contended that the

brain could not be surpassed; hence it became the essence and body of the new species, so that it could help its creators understand the nature of immortality. (In this novel, Stapledon, who was an atheist, developed a unique cult that worshiped life itself). It must be noted that the Fourth Men never achieved their goal, although they did manage to learn a great deal. In fact, they exhausted their opportunities to learn, and, as they were incapable of anything else, began to hate their creators, who still had access to the joy of life. Ultimately, the storyline ends with the annihilation of the Third Men and the extinction of the super brains.

The brains in vats presented in many pieces of science fiction are surprisingly active, considering their lack of bodies, and are often demonized (while at the same time markedly and unnaturally increasing in size). There are many villainous brains: the alien brain Krang in the animated franchise *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (launched in 1988), the alien brain, named Gor, in *The Brain from Planet Arous* (1957), Martian brains in *Mars Attacks* (1996), the brain of a millionaire named Donovan in *Donovan's Brain* (1953), the arachnid leader in *Starship Troopers* (1997), Stapledon's Fourth Men, etc. . . . Similar to medieval demons, such brains plan to conquer or destroy the world and subjugate all living creatures. Rather paradoxically, it is the most human thing about a human being, the organ closest to a person, in which the self is notionally rooted, that comes under suspicion and is distanced from the viewer (sometimes by being alien in origin). This is facilitated by their naturalistic appearance — a wrinkly, slimy ball of fat floating in fluid — but that does not tell the whole story. A brain without a body is perceived as the ability to think and cognize, taken to the extreme and abstracted from everything else. Without a body, it lacks the capacity to manifest human joys, failings, or the emotions traditionally attributed to the “heart.” Attempts to produce distilled human essence, in fact, release the capacity for evil hidden within and eradicate the actual human element. After centuries of viewing the body with scorn and glorifying the soul (and after the Renaissance, the rehabilitation of the flesh), neurocentrism's elimination of the body and glorification of the brain looks like a secular, rather than religious, attempt to separate man from the living material world.

Altered Carbon: The Brain of the Neo-Catholics

A radical separation of man from the material world would involve transporting the personality beyond the bounds of body and brain. In

many religious doctrines, the Abrahamic ones included, this was accomplished via the soul, but now it is embodied in the idea of uploading consciousness onto some material medium (so called mind uploading). This concept simultaneously continues and finalizes the idea of the cerebral subject. Since the ideology of the cerebral subject is relatively dependent on the neurosciences, it can be finalized. The salient point is that one of the radical possibilities or promises of contemporary brain research, perhaps even its “logical endpoint,” is full brain mapping, identifying neuronal connections and patterns, all of which can then be digitized and uploaded to a computer (Sandberg and Boström 2008). Taken to the extreme, this could mean that it would be possible for a consciousness to live in a real or virtual world, without an organic body and brain. This pushes personality transfer a step beyond brain implants because it dislocates the somatic boundaries of the personality, fully liberating it from its temporal flesh.

The idea of uploading a consciousness onto a digital medium has a solid tradition in science fiction. It can be found in one form or another in the works of science fiction writers, such as Stanisław Lem, the Strugatsky brothers, William Gibson, Poul Anderson, and Ian M. Banks. In cinema it has appeared in *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), *XChange* (2000), *Avatar* (2009), *Self/less* (2015), *Replicas* (2018), etc. . . It is now time to turn to the aforementioned cyperpunk detective series *Altered Carbon* (2018-present), based on Richard Kingsley Morgan’s 2002 novel of the same name, since its plot deals with the adoption and ritualization of mind uploading technology, coming into conflict with the religious life of believers.

In the twenty-fourth century, when most of the series’ plot takes place, humanity has colonized distant planets and artificial intelligence has long since become commonplace (one of the main characters, for example, an AI named Edgar Allan Poe, is a hotel building). While the world of this series is separated from ours by three hundred years, the resemblance is suspiciously similar. The key difference lies in the new possibilities that have been opened up thanks to appropriated alien technology. Artifacts, found in the ruins of an alien civilization on Mars and the other planets, were used to develop the technology to save a personality and set of memories (“digital human freight”) onto a “disk” (or “cortical stack”), which can be transplanted into a new body. This disk is then implanted into the base of the skull. Implantation is compulsory for all citizens of the interplanetary state (“Protectorate”) older than one year of age. In this world, personality digitization has become a routine social convention, and has thus in-

fluenced and, in fact, redefined many social, economic, and political practices. It must be noted, however, that this technology's capabilities are limited; new bodies are expensive, so the ability to choose one, or to switch bodies, is only accessible to a few privileged individuals, who control the world from residences that float through the heavens. They are the only ones who can truly achieve technological immortality. In this sense, the series is a criticism of transhumanist futurism, which ignores the fact that any technology includes not only its capabilities, but also the material conditions of its introduction, distribution, and application. The society depicted in the series is an urbanized, post-capitalist one with high levels of social stratification. The state is also intertwined with corporations, and there are significant gray areas, where it turns a blind eye to their activities or even directly sanctions them.

The time that a personality and set of memories can be stored on a disk is limited only by its material characteristics, but the quantity of bodies and years lived is limited by a person's financial resources and psychological strength. After a person dies, either naturally or through violence, provided the disk has not been damaged, it can be implanted into another body, either one belonging to another person, a cloned one, or a synthetic one (in the show, bodies are called "sleeves" to indicate how readily they can be changed). Duplicating a person, that is, copying one's person onto one more disk, is punishable by the destruction of the original disk, a grave punishment given that as long as the disk is intact, there is a chance of returning to life. Only the destruction of the disk is true death, fully alienating death from the destruction of the organic body. Furthermore, being on a disk without a body can, to a certain extent, be called "existing," if not quite "living." As a result, the penitentiary system has dispensed with incarcerating bodies; individuals simply serve out their sentences on disembodied disks (the protagonist, Takeshi Kovacs, has just finished a 250-year sentence before the series begins). People, whose bodies have died and who do not have the money for a new one, also wait on their disks for their families to save enough to buy them some kind of body.

This alien technology opens up many opportunities. It is possible to travel between planets almost instantaneously by entering a new body on a new planet. Crime victims can "resleeve," that is, be resurrected in another body for one day in order to press charges against their murderer, say their goodbyes, or see their families. There is also a government stockpile of bodies that have been left empty due to people being incarcerated. These bodies are sold or rented out to people,

who cannot buy a body for a relative. Bodies are also rented out for special occasions, such as holidays, family celebrations, etc. . . People also rent bodies in order to preserve their own in risky situations, or to facilitate instantaneous business trips to other planets. Furthermore, this world includes something like social welfare. Since the implantation of a disk is compulsory for all, and the fulfillment of this requirement is monitored by the state, a free sleeve is provided for victims of crimes, accidents, emergencies, and disasters. The body may not match the personality, however; for example, a little girl might be “resleeved” into the body of an elderly woman or a brutal criminal. Prisoners are also provided with a body from this stockpile when they have served their sentences.

There is another large pool of opportunities associated with virtual reality. It is possible to upload one’s personality to the virtual world for various actions and events since what happens there is experienced as if it were real. For example, this capacity is used so that torture and interrogation are real but inflict no bodily harm. In this scenario, death is just the end of a round to be followed by a restart, and the cycle repeats endlessly. Thus, the only limit to torture, the resilience of the human body, has been removed, and the final alternative, death to put an end to suffering, has been taken away from the victims, making their suffering endless.

Neither the series nor the book describes the discovery of any other locus of the person than the brain. In other words, the great undercurrent of the contemporary Western world, the ideology of the cerebral subject, retains its power; the personality is realized on the basis of the substance of the brain. It is from the brain that it is copied onto a disk. As such, it is assumed that alien technology has realized one of the dreams of the neurosciences — the full mapping of all the neural connections in the brain, enabling them to be defined and digitized.⁴ It is interesting to note that humanity was able to realize the idea of mind uploading not through the systematic pursuit of scientific knowledge, but rather through the experience of a disruption or in-

4. Note that the series itself has internal contradiction that contravenes the idea of the cerebral subject that hardwires a particular brain to a particular consciousness. The disk containing a person copied from a unique brain in a single body can supposedly be implanted into any body, i.e. any person can be transferred to any brain. After this transfer, the person sometimes needs time to adapt to the body, but it is hardly likely that all of the neuronal connections are restructured during that time in such a way that they match the original brain. This inconsistency means that the series is either contradicting current knowledge of the brain, or that the alien technology includes the function of rapidly restructuring neuronal connections.

trusion (the discovery and successful appropriation of someone else's knowledge and technology). Immortality and a change in the nature of death were not achieved by man, but were brought in from outside, as a gift or inheritance from a more advanced civilization that has since died out. (This is clearly a reference to the ufology-based interpretation of ancient mythological narratives, describing boons received as gifts from higher beings, who descended from the heavens).

This new technology, however, causes the body to lose its significance and become a commercial consumable (a "sleeve"). It is no longer a temple, as in, for example, Orthodox Christianity, nor is it a prison, as in Neoplatonism or Gnosticism. It is, to put it harshly, an optional and, in fact, temporary residence and instrument for a person; its citadel is the disk, and, more broadly, the data transmission channels. It is possible to have experiences safely in the virtual world as well. Identity, however, is not in the least dematerialized or made to resemble the ancient idea of the soul. It is only the type of materiality which changes — it simply becomes computer equipment rather than organic matter. Liberated from the flesh by technical means, it becomes dependent on technology. That technology also goes on to define the boundaries of true death. Nonetheless, birth remains inextricably connected with the flesh, and a consciousness cannot emerge without a functional brain. The necessity of reproduction affirms the connection between man and the body. This technology potentially offers the gift of immortality by cancelling out death, a topic so important for religious life. Death is quite literally moved beyond the bounds of the flesh, as it is not the destruction of the body, but the destruction of the disk.

It is important to note that corporations and the state appropriated this technology and added it to their arsenal of tools for interfering in individual lives. This is a serious change to the character of biopower itself. In Foucault's interpretation, the power of the sovereign was able to "take life or let live"; the subject's death was, itself, a manifestation of absolute power. Biopower, however, which took shape later, was just the opposite; it consisted of the ability to "make live and let die." It emphasized the cultivation, correction, and control of life and the management of its risks, uncertainties, and shortcomings. At the same time, death as the boundary of life becomes "the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreats, so to speak, into his own privacy" (Foucault 2003, 248). Power no longer has anything to do with death and, in fact, allows it to disappear. In *Altered Carbon*, biopower resolves this shortcoming; thanks to the

disks, they remove the connection between the death of an individual and bodily death, and thus put death back under state control, simply by removing it from the existence of individuals. Individual life loses the teleology that directs it towards death and instead hovers in a timeless vegetative state on a disk. They are literally kept alive “when, in biological terms, they should have been dead long ago” (Foucault 2003, 248). By splitting death into two forms, biopower can potentially force people to exist indefinitely, and thus provides the state with unlimited capacity to interfere in their lives. Importantly, this was achieved thanks to a radical leap in knowledge about the brain. By using this knowledge to reformat death, biopower inevitably comes into conflict with the concepts and practices of believers, for whom death is the central event both of God’s creation and of their own personal lives.

One of the pressing social issues in the series involves how people of faith (“Neo-Catholics,” in this case) view the technologized practice of extending life beyond the death of the body. The Neo-Catholics believe that after bodily death, the soul goes away into the other world, while the person, “resurrected” using the alien technology, no longer has one. In short, the disk saves information, but not the soul. The ideology of the Neo-Catholics is not laid out in detail in either the book or the series, but one can speculate as to why posthumous earthly existence is undesirable for a person, who has already lost his or her soul. A person like that is a kind of zombie that has consciousness and a mental life but has been deprived of an invisible essence that their existence should have. Without a soul, the person is removed from the sphere of divine justice and rewards, unable to post sin or merit to his or her “account,” since he or she does not have one. This existence is a kind of gray area from the point of view of the divine audit. Yet, the soul that was once connected with that person has such an account, and sins can be added to it, though they are someone else’s rather than its own; this could mean either actions taken by the person without a soul, or it could mean that this new soul allowed the creature, for which God is dead, to emerge. Digitizing the person and separating death from the body and attaching it to technological devices is incompatible with Neo-Catholic concepts about the connection between the soul and the body and the role of bodily death. Faced with the choice between universal, transcendental resurrection in restored bodies and inextricably technological investiture in artificial bodies or the bodies of strangers, they, as one might expect, elected to choose the former.

The Neo-Catholics have opposed the technologized public order and refused any manipulation of their disks after their passing and

are the only people to do so since the last uprising against the Protectorate, two and a half centuries ago. As such, disks, belonging to people of faith, are covered with special coding that protects them from being implanted again. In the series, this coding is the only boundary protecting the Neo-Catholic desire for a true death from the nightmare of biopolitical immortality.

By the same token, however, when the plot of the series begins, the Neo-Catholics have failed in their struggle against biopower; after all, the limit of their demands is just a ban on manipulation of their disks, not the right to refuse having the disk implanted in the first place or to destroy it after bodily death has occurred. They demand that the difference between bodily and technological death be collapsed for them, rather than that it actually be imposed. Keeping the disks, however, means keeping the threat of what they fear most — being implanted after death. Furthermore, even the coding that protects them from further implantation ceases to be any kind of guarantee at the end of the first season, when Proposition 653 is passed, granting judges the authority to disregard religious coding and resurrect a murdered person to give testimony. The biopolitical regime gradually penetrates Neo-Catholic death and begins to appropriate it — decisively, by eliminating it.

I will assume (since the series says nothing to the contrary) that the nature of religion and religious life in the twenty-fourth century are not substantially different than they are in 2019. In practical life, religious doctrine about the soul generally coexists with the many achievements of science that have changed the concept of human nature (obviously conflicts and resentment occur, but it is generally limited to particular people of faith or religious organizations, such as the Jehovah's witnesses, who refuse blood transfusions). A single individual's life, combining heterogeneous discourses about nature with the associated ethical (in the sense described earlier) consequences, is only possible when they are mobilized in different situations and no irresolvable practical conflict arises between them. The series *Altered Carbon* demonstrates an example of such a conflict, in which practices springing from one discourse begin to contradict the fundamental concepts of the others.

People of faith, with rare exceptions, do not experience any particular difficulties with either recognizing the knowledge produced by the neurosciences (and, more broadly, accepting the ideology of the cerebral subject) or the practices of medical intervention in the activity of the brain that is derived from that knowledge. In the imaginary situa-

tion presented in this series, however, a conflict arises due to the neurosciences undergoing radical development until they reach their “logical endpoint” — the invention (through discovery or appropriation) of the technology required to transfer a personality from the brain to a digital medium, which can then be implanted in any body. More specifically, this is a conflict between religious concepts and practices connected with death and biopolitical interference in the life of the individual that uses technology, which redefines the very nature of death, eliminating it for the sake of unlimited control over life. The Neo-Catholics oppose not scientific knowledge itself, or mind uploading technology and the potential to exist endlessly, but the utterly unrestrained biopolitical forces that exploit that technology to coerce individuals to live on and allow their lives to be appropriated. In this context, the possibility of an unlimited life is equivalent to unlimited interference by biopower. For the sake of salvation, Neo-Catholics protect the boundary of their lives — death — which involves opposing the power that strives to take this boundary away from them to impose an endless, controlled existence on them.

The decision to keep the boundary of their lives somatic and not technologize it makes the Neo-Catholics outsiders and even freaks in this technologized world. Furthermore, due to their vulnerability, the lives of believers approach “naked life.” Neo-Catholics are especially vulnerable to murderers, since after their bodily death, they cannot be resurrected in another body to bear witness against their killer. Anyone can kill them and do so with a high probability of going unpunished. This vulnerability lays the foundation for the narrative’s main element of intrigue. In the first season of the series, false religious coding enables the owner of an elite bordello to prevent girls, who the bordello’s clients killed, from being questioned. The coding prohibits bringing them back to life for the purpose of giving testimony, and the mystery of their deaths remains entombed on their disks. The owner even blackmails the billionaire, who hires the main character, Takeshi Kovacs, to investigate his death, to lobby against the passage of Proposition 653 (since it authorizes judges to resurrect victims or supposed victims to give testimony, regardless of their religious affiliation). While designed to restore justice and protect Neo-Catholics from the state of “naked life,” this proposition takes a step towards stripping them of their last protection against biopower. In other words, in defending the integrity of their deaths and the hope of eternal life from technologized biopolitical interference in the life of all individuals, the Neo-Catholics are compelled to move closer to

“naked life,” but when the state sets about eliminating that condition, they lose their last protection against that technology. As such, people of faith in this series find themselves in a difficult position; they can either become outsiders and practically martyrs while they are alive, but maintain the hope of eternal life, or gain protection from violence and justice in this life but sacrifice eternal life and become subject to everlasting torment.

Conclusion

Despite its undoubted popularity, *Altered Carbon* was panned by many critics, who saw it as, if not the final sunset of the cyberpunk genre, then at least a dead end. It was charged with excessive exploitation of retrofuturist nostalgia, the objectification of female bodies, excessive and convoluted violence, a lack of new ideas, and executing the ideas it did have crudely (Baker-Whitelaw 2018; Britt 2018; Robertson 2018). The critics also challenged the future depicted in this series because it lacks many innovations that exist in the present. It is, however, perhaps precisely this lack of innovation, which enables viewers to relate to the world of the series, that is, it invites the audience to focus on one particular thought experiment. Here, admittedly with the help of aliens, the promises of contemporary neuroscience and the accompanying ideology of the cerebral subject are fulfilled; consciousness is separated from the brain and recorded on a medium, which can then be transferred to any body, and, as a consequence, the death of an individual is separated from bodily death. Biopower, having appropriated this capability and made it a universally required duty, strives to eliminate death in order to interfere — without limitation — in the lives of individuals. As a result, this biopolitical meddling comes into conflict with religious (Christian, in the case of this series) concepts and practices in which death is the central event.

In taking a stand for the right to die and the right to end a controlled earthly life, the Neo-Catholics are marginalized. This case demonstrates that in life it is not discourses themselves that collide — they coexist splendidly in the head of one individual — nor is it privately chosen practices. Technologies, based on scientific knowledge of human nature that transform that nature, inevitably become an object of intense interest from biopower, and once it has appropriated them, they may become a barrier that displaces people of faith to the margins of society.

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The Depressed Messiah: Religion, Science Fiction, and Postmodernism in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*

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The article explores the anime series “Neon Genesis Evangelion” (1995–1996). The work is considered as a cultural product that is within the science fiction tradition of the second half of the twentieth century. The article shows how the series weaves together elements of Shinto and Abrahamic religious traditions as equally relevant. Through the use of religious topics, the science fiction work acquires an inner cognitive logic. The religious in the series is represented on two levels: an implicit one that defines the plot’s originality, and also an explicit one, in which references to religious matters become a marketing tool aimed at Japanese and Western media markets. To grasp the sometimes controversial and incoherent religious symbols, the author proposes to use a postsecular framework of analysis and the elements of a postmodern philosophy of culture. The author then proposes an analysis of the show’s narrative using the religious theme of apocalypse.

Keywords: postsecularism, postmodern, Neon Genesis Evangelion, Shinto, Christianity, anime, science fiction, popular culture.

Introduction

AMONG the many hallmarks that define mass culture are its universality and versatility (Iglton 2019, 177). National cultural industries, which orient themselves toward an audience with specific requirements, seldom become globally popular. The fortunes of Japanese popular culture¹ at the end of the twentieth century, howev-

1. The concepts of “mass culture” and “popular culture” are not identical, but within this article they are used as synonyms. For more on this question, see Pavlov (2019a, 206–207).

er, proved a striking exception to the rule. First of all, Japanese popular culture managed to achieve recognition on the global marketplace (Wong 2006, 26–27). Secondly, its expansion took place at a time of economic stagnation and the loss of Japanese geopolitical influence within the Asian Pacific region, and thus it cannot be ascribed purely to socio-economic factors. When *Pokémon* and *Hello Kitty* exploded onto television screens and supermarket shelves in the United States, Japanese economic influence was paradoxically on the wane; yet it was precisely at this time that American researchers (and many Japanese officials) began to speak of the rise of a new form of Japanese power (Darling-Wolf 2015, 101).

This power referred not to Japanese culture as a whole, but namely to Japanese animation, or anime, which not only attained global prominence, but became commercially successful far beyond the borders of its homeland. By comparison, Japanese cinema, music, and even literature were far less successful.² The term “anime” literally means a Japanese version of animation, the development of which was deeply influenced by Disney’s highly successful animated films — the genre’s primary trend-setters after World War II (Dolle-Weinkauff 2017, 240). If one is too narrowly focused on animation, however, one would miss anime’s broader influence on society and culture. To understand anime, it is important to remember that it is related to other cultural phenomena. Animated shows and films, often adaptations of Japanese comics (“manga”), are frequently accompanied by other kinds of merchandise, including action figures, plush toys, stickers, posters, anime music videos, and cell phone cases. Although external to the films themselves, these items are all part of the phenomenon and influence its reception. I would submit that what unites these diverse products of popular culture is a shared *style*, which the consumer can easily identify.

In this analysis, my purpose is not to disentangle these various pop culture genres, inspired by Japanese mass culture; I simply treat them all as belonging to anime. Researchers often treat anime as an offshoot of Western popular culture. This approach seeks out certain well-known features of Western pop culture in new subject matter

2. This is not to say that Japanese literature or film did not have global success. Obvious counterexamples include the literary works of Haruki Murakami or the iconic film *Battle Royale* (2000), directed by Kinji Fukasaku. Yet *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is one of the single most profitable franchises of all time, taking seventeenth place in the rankings, behind the likes of *Pokémon*, *Star Wars*, and the Harry Potter universe. See Peters (2018).

and thus demonstrates popular culture's universality. However, this approach ignores what is unique about the genre and downplays its "non-Western" content. Another important research tradition relies on an "Orientalist" strategy, which, in contrast, attempts to identify the traditional, nationally specific themes of Japanese culture within anime (Buljan and Cusack 2015, 68).

These approaches do not do justice to the subject matter's complexity and result in certain themes being overlooked in the scholarly literature. Among these is the treatment of anime's religious content (both Western and Eastern) (Artemov 2015). This article analyzes the landmark anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–1996),³ directed by Hideaki Anno, and the subsequent feature-length film *The End of Evangelion* (1997),⁴ produced by the Gainax studio and written and directed by Anno. It will break down how Shinto and Christian religious elements are incorporated into these works, how the former influence the latter's reception by a mass audience, and how religious symbolism emerges as an essential element of fantasy storytelling. Taking the use of religious visual semiotics as a marketing tool, it demonstrates that the anime creator's attempt to overcome the genre's hyper-commercialization failed, and simply turned into a postmodern inscription of the religious in the postsecular reality (Shimchuk 2011, 176–178).

Robots, Fantasy, and Buddha

The giant, humanoid robot is a fixture of Japanese popular culture. An entire genre has developed around it called *mecha*, an abbreviation of the Japanese loan word for "mechanical." Works in the *mecha* genre recount the struggles of either autonomous or human-controlled robots. Adolescents are the target audience; therefore, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* can also be classified as *shōnen*, a subgenre of anime aimed at adolescent boys ages twelve to eighteen.⁵ It is perhaps no surprise that the Japanese — whose cultural anxieties about modern life differ from those of Western cultures — have transformed the products of cutting edge robotics technology into benign objects of wor-

3. Although *Neon Genesis Evangelion* has also become known in Russian by the simple title *Ievangelion*, this article will use the full English title in order to avoid confusion.
4. The US release of the film was called *Neon Genesis Evangelion: The End of Evangelion*, but this text will use its original release title, *The End of Evangelion*, by which it is better known.
5. For more on *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and the *shōnen* genre in general, see Denison (2015, 85–100).

ship and adoration: “While US companies have produced robot vacuum cleaners and war machines, Japan has created humanoids and pet robots as entertaining friends. While the US makes movies like *Robocop* and *The Terminator*, Japan is responsible for the friendly *Mighty Atom*, Aibo and Asimo” (Hornyak 2006, second cover). At the same time, it is not just home robots, but also military robots with destructive power that have become cult objects in Japan and, to some extent, beyond its borders.

Science fiction often deals with the reinterpretation of religious symbols, and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, the focus of this study, is no exception. In fact, one could describe the anime genre of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* as a subset of science fiction. The anime has a non-linear narrative structure, complicated by its atypical method of storytelling, in which many plot details are revealed only in passing and are not verbalized by the characters. The director’s intention was to convince viewers, dissatisfied with a superficial interpretation, to attentively re-watch the show. In deconstructing the popular genre, Hideaki Anno sought to confuse and ensnare the viewer, causing him or her to reflect. Still, in order to support the claim that the show is science fiction, it is important to emphasize several plot elements. This will avoid sacrificing analytical rigor and allow general conclusions based on an analysis of Japanese science fiction to be applied to contemporary fantasy as a whole.

The action of the show takes place in 2015, which was twenty years in the future at the time of the show’s release in 1995–1996. The future is envisioned as a world after a global catastrophe. The true reason for the disaster, however, remains unknown to a large part of the population. According to the official version, an ecological cataclysm occurred after a small meteor, travelling at near light-speed velocity, struck the Earth. The characteristics of the meteor apparently made it impossible for earth-based monitoring services to detect its approach. Apart from officials’ statements, the population received no convincing evidence of the meteor’s existence. Subsequently, the audience learns that it was not a meteor at all. The cause of the event, known as the “Second Impact,” was, in reality, an unsuccessful “contact experiment” with an “angel.” Referred to as “Adam,” this creature was buried in ice at the South Pole in a state of suspended animation. The aforementioned unsuccessful contact experiment, which took place in the year 2000, awoke “Adam” and created an explosion that melted the polar ice caps, causing a rise in sea levels and provoking an ecological catastrophe. As a result,

more than two billion people died. A substantial part of the planet's infrastructure was also destroyed, its biodiversity suffered, numerous species disappeared, and the population was forced to limit consumption due to a resultant economic crisis. Certain technologies, however, made a quantum leap forward.

In this persistent state of threat from attacks by other “angels,” the existence of which is known to the government and the military, a secret paramilitary organization called NERV is formed, which is meant to prevent a potential “Third Impact.” The organization has giant robots called “evangelions” at its disposal, and its motto is a quote from Robert Browning’s play “Pippa Passes”: “God’s in his Heaven / All’s right with the world.”⁶ Only these robots are able to resist the angels, against whom conventional and nuclear weapons are ineffective. The NERV agency, the actions of which are secret even to some within the organization, is actually carrying out an entirely different mission, however. Control of the world, including over NERV, rests in the hands of the secret organization Seele (the German word for “soul”), which is seeking to realize the “Human Instrumentality Project,” around which the show’s intrigue is built.

The idea of the “Human Instrumentality Project” in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is based on the work of the twentieth-century American science fiction writer Cordwainer Smith (1913–1966). These stories describe a future of fantastical transformations and the advancement of humankind. At their core is an attempt to “combine” humanity into one whole by destroying human bodies to create space for the next evolutionary leap, in which people will exist outside the boundaries of their bodies. “The evolution of the human animal into something transhuman, (‘the way to be a god,’ as one character in *Evangelion* asserts) seems to be motivated by a desire for disembodiment concealed by a desire for reembodiment” (Brown 2010, 226n62).

This brief recapitulation of the plot points and stylistic features of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is sufficient to regard this anime as science fiction, in accordance with contemporary theories, which posit that science fiction must create possible worlds (Bertetti 2017, 50–51). On the one hand, the work is distant from the familiar world, in that it contains certain features characteristic of fantasy: the participation of extraterrestrial civilizations or divine powers in the story, the development of advanced technologies, as well as strange and unfamiliar so-

6. In Nikolai Gumilëv’s poetic translation, these lines are rendered “Бог в своих небесах – / И в порядке мир!” (Browning).

cial or political structures. On the other hand, this universe simultaneously follows the psychological and physical rules of the actual world.

According to the authoritative view of the Canadian literary critic, Darko Suvin, “science fiction is defined by narrative predominance or hegemony of the imagined “novum” (innovation), supported by cognitive logic” (Suvin 1979, 63). In *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, giant robots and angels, which bring death to the Earth, represent the innovations or, in Suvin’s term, the “novum.” The angels, around which the storyline is built, are an extraterrestrial phenomenon, which, according to quasi-religious prophecies, regularly attack the Earth. As is revealed in due course, the irony of the plot is that the angels and robots are one and the same. The evangelions are not robots, but are rather cloned from one of the angels (“Lilith”); they are biological creatures wearing mechanical armor, which controls them (and which is piloted by children whose mothers perished in the “Second Impact”). This detail is important to the anime, but the analytical focus of this article suggests another question: if even the evangelions are not the typical robots of *mecha*, is there something within them of general significance for the genre, and even more importantly, is that something attributable to the national religious tradition of Shinto?

For an understanding of how the sacred functions in Japanese science fiction, it is worth looking at how divine power manifests itself in crises requiring external intervention. In Japanese fantasy, the enormous humanoid robots play a role analogous to that of superheroes in American culture: “superheroes seem to manifest the value systems of Abrahamic religions while giant robots tend to reveal their Shinto and Buddhist backgrounds” (Lunning 2008, 276). The distinguishing feature of the functioning of divine power in Japanese culture is the autonomy of objects, which is rooted in a belief in the animacy of all things. Everything in the world, including robots created by humans, contain *kami* or spirits that can influence the bodies that house them. If in the Abrahamic traditions the key scenario is power through divine descent, then Shinto religious concepts would find important the possibility of the autonomous functioning of objects, even those created by humans. In *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, this is even more explicit than in many other works of the genre (Buljan and Cusack 2015, 113-8). It becomes clear that the spirits of the pilots’ mothers are part of the robots, making it easier to understand the spontaneous actions of these bio-mechanical giants.

This reading of *mecha* — as the transfer of Japanese religious concepts into mass culture — is, however, problematic. Clearly, a major re-

religious tradition is not homogeneous. This contention holds true in the case of Shinto, which was itself heavily influenced by Buddhism. There are also numerous sects within Shinto, which influence the country's cultural life to this day. Their presence in mass culture is self-evident, and one can observe their influence in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* as well. The priest Roman Artemov, a scholar of religion and Japanese popular culture, shows that the Aum Shinrikyo cult⁷ was involved in the production of anime within the *mecha* genre, financing a series of projects and heavily influencing many directors and writers, including Hideaki Anno:

In an interview with a Japanese television station, Hideaki Anno reported that the plot of the anime was based on an Aum Shinrikyo doctrine. After the sarin attack on the Tokyo metro in 1995, however, he was forced to change the show's concept after reports appeared in the press about the connections between *Evangelion* and the cult. In light of this, the writers were forced to fundamentally change the plot of the anime series. This fact demonstrates the role that Aum Shinrikyo played in the development of the anime genre of *mecha* (Artemov 2016, 324).

Admittedly, scholars have not yet analyzed the earliest versions of the show's script, and for this reason, the cult's actual influence on Hideaki Anno remains poorly understood.

Pointing out the multifaceted and complex influence of religion on Japanese culture does not invalidate attempts to explain the behavior of giant robots with reference to Shinto beliefs about the animacy of material objects. On the contrary, this intriguing sketch underscores the importance of a religious analysis of anime, in which the sacred can be encountered in the most unfamiliar of forms. The Japanese tradition of science fiction is of global importance, thanks to the popular and engaging way that it has represented and developed science fiction concepts (La Bare 2000, 23). For the purposes of this article, the existence of a religious layer in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is of principle importance. This anime's religious connotations help define the work's unique plot and style, uniting the show with the *mecha* genre and the latter's religious roots. This shows that the religious element

7. Aum Shinrikyo is a terrorist religious organization, founded in Tokyo in 1984 by Shoko Asahara [editor's note: it is banned in Russia]. For a brief overview of the history of the organization, see Gunaratna (2018).

in non-Western science fiction can be structural; it explicitly and implicitly maps out the coordinates by which the genre functions.

Apocalypse, Crucifixion, and Depression

The traditions of Shinto or Buddhism were not of conscious interest to Hideaki Anno;⁸ they were instead built into the storytelling, according to the canons of the genre. The same cannot be said, however, of the Christian, Jewish, Islamic, or Kabbalistic symbols that appear in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. From this perspective, the key to understanding the references to New and Old Testament traditions lies in the area of the visual semiotics of religion (Ortega 2007, 224). Biblical references, along with themes like the late urbanization of Japanese cityscapes and adolescent sexuality, form the visual basis of numerous works. For example, the *Angel Sanctuary* manga and its video adaptation, by artist Kaori Yuki, rely primarily on Western religious elements (Reed 2015, 419). These products of mass culture were influential enough that they drew imitators: “Names of angels, demons, and otherworldly realms have been culled from N[ew] T[estament] apocrypha and O[ld] T[estament] pseudepigrapha for reuse in and across story lines about imagined futures and cosmic realities” (Reed 2015, 419).

On the most basic level, to briefly don a “Westernized” lens of analysis, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* becomes a reinterpretation of the apocalypse. Although one might note that the apocalypse resulting from the “Second Impact” has already happened, the end of the world emerges as a drawn-out process (Thouny 2009, 113). The organizations NERV and Seele use quasi-religious sources in anticipating successive attacks of angels, which are expected to complete what they began and destroy humanity. Furthermore, the “Dead Sea Scrolls,” which the anime series references multiple times, turn out to be a more reliable source of information for the government than the research and forecasts of scientists. Cutting-edge science and religious texts are on an equal footing in the narrative. Suspended between the first phase of the apocalypse that has already come about and the anticipated second phase, social reality fades away into an endless expectation of the inevitable, atomizing society, which from its inception is unable to come together (Thouny 2009, 113–115). The “Human Instrumentality

8. On the other hand, one might observe that, as anime became a global phenomenon, conscious reference to the religious heritage of Japan became a successful marketing strategy, although this topic is outside the scope of this article.

Project” in this context does not appear as an irrational, misanthropic scheme. Rather than allow chaotic destruction and mass death, the secret society plans to take control of the situation, if not to prevent the apocalypse, then to play it out according to its own scenario, while simultaneously solving the problem of social alienation, which the cataclysms only exacerbated by fully revealing human loneliness and underscoring humanity’s imperfection as a life form.

Curiously, the majority of religious symbols that appear in the anime go by without comment from the protagonists. In this way, the viewer is responsible for picking up on the religious visual and verbal symbols. This point is worth dwelling on. The name of the show itself is extraordinarily important, since it is set up as a direct reference to religious traditions. If one were to translate *Neon Genesis Evangelion* literally, the translation might be “the gospel of a new generation.” As described above, the story works with biblical subject matter through the participation of super-human forces. However, even if the series touches on the problem of the apocalypse — which turns out to be inevitable due to human imperfection and humanity’s inability to improve its lot — it still remains unclear how the viewer should interpret this (Anderson 2015, 191). If one recalls that the word “gospel” or “evangelion” (from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον) literally means “good news,” the fact that the main characters are deeply unhappy makes the end of the world seem like a fortuitous event, since it will rid them of the reasons for their unhappiness.

Now I will examine the show’s “angels.” “Angels” (from the Greek word ἄγγελος) are literally “messengers,” which fulfill the function of delivering messages from a higher power. The protagonist of the series, the adolescent Shinji Ikari, is forced to pilot the “Evangelion-01” in order to save humanity. According to the unfolding plot, it falls to this adolescent to determine the fate of humanity, and thus Shinji’s role parallels that of a “messiah.” In addition, this teenager is practically the only one who wonders why the humans are battling the angels. Yet, the motive behind these concerns is to avoid the pain that piloting the robot causes. Shinji’s questioning appears justified if the angels are not bringing evil, but rather divine providence. If this is the case, then resisting and thus increasing human suffering is pointless. It is also striking that the organization that created the evangelions named them this way. Bio-mechanical robots, cloned and built by humans, are bringing “good news,” while the attacking “angels” are not. But this judgment refers to the human, not the divine, and as such is but an interpretation of divine will. Thus, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*

can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, the whole scenario of the apocalypse can be interpreted as “good news.” On the other hand, if one takes the position of NERV, then the robots that humans created are the “bearers of good news,” since they are preventing the apocalypse. And in fact, there are no real reasons — other than a feeling of solidarity with the struggles of the show’s protagonists — to favor one viewpoint over the other.

The visual dimension may be of use here. Each angel has its own bodily form, in which it was incarnated. These forms are, for the most part, not anthropomorphic, or, at the very least, the artists distort certain human features, which in turn creates feelings of alienation, disgust, and danger. In one of the episodes, it is said that the physical structure of the angels is comparable to light. If this extra-terrestrial life does not resemble anything human, then it follows that there is no desire to come into contact with it. Remember also that Hideaki Anno took the names of the angels from the Old Testament: Adam, Lilith, Sachiel, Shamshel, Ramiel and others.⁹ Also interesting is the story of the use of the term angel, which was first utilized in the English adaptation and from there in all other translations. The term “angels” could also have been plausibly translated from Japanese as “apostles” but the director personally intervened to ensure that the term “angel” was used in the English version.

It has already been noted that the religious is more often than not embodied in visual semiotics. For the purposes of this research, it would be redundant to describe and indicate all examples of how the director utilizes Christian esthetics. It is, after all, peripheral to the show and was done with the goal of attracting the attention of a young audience. If allusions to Christian and Kabbalistic traditions were too subtle, they might have remained unrecognized or, even worse, gone entirely unnoticed. As such, the references were anything but subtle: when the evangelions defeat the angels, enormous crosses appear in the sky; the angel Lilith, having become the basis for cloning the biological components of robots, is kept in an underground lair, where the angel is crucified on a cross; and a fig leaf appears on the NERV logo.¹⁰ Like many other anime films, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* made

9. A full list of the anime’s characters, including the angels, their images, and necessary reference information about all of the important objects in the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* universe can be found in Gainax and WE’VE, inc. (2015); Gainax and WE’VE, inc. (2016).

10. In this article I discuss the original series from 1995–1996 and the concluding film *Neon Genesis Evangelion: The End of Evangelion*. The commercial success of the anime led

liberal use of religious symbols, but it is how the show's creators used them that is of interest here, because it sheds light on the religious dimension of the show's reception (Jackson 2009, 316).

Even this freewheeling use of religious symbols offers room for analysis and interpretation. It would be a mistake to dismiss possible religious readings simply because sacred images are used in a chaotic and contradictory way. This is, after all, a postmodern product of mass culture, distinguished by a fundamental superficiality when using symbols of traditional culture. For viewers, this means that when the show addresses the apocalypse, it remains perfectly possible for it to be understood in a Gnostic way (Napier 2002, 425). That is to say, the seeming contradictoriness of the horror of the "Third Impact," which ought to be a positive, is removed when one dons another, no less religious, lens. In short, it is possible that a higher power was not acting to save humanity from suffering, but to destroy it; perhaps God was not all-merciful. It is up to the viewer to decide how to look at it. Regardless of the chosen reading, there remains the figure of the messiah, which takes on a great meaning in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

The series is part of the *shōnen* genre of anime, which is often criticized for its triviality, primitiveness, and psychological implausibility. In this subgenre, the key role of hero is played by a child or teenager who possesses unbelievable power, but who is at first unworthy of it or unready to take it on. It is assumed that the target audience (young people or teenagers) should sympathize and identify with the protagonist. From this angle, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* can be understood as a deconstruction of the genre. But Shinji Ikari, a typical withdrawn adolescent, who has the chance to operate an enormous robot, does not elicit sympathy; the protagonist's depression and lack of self-confidence, in fact, alienate the audience. Shinji is indecisive; he cannot even make one decision and consistently shifts responsibility onto others. The messiah, on whom the fate of humanity depends, appears powerless, and thus the anime does not carry out the therapeutic function of mass culture. This contradiction can only be understood through the lens of the series' religious content. Usually, the hero merely appears to be unworthy, improves through training, and then realizes that he or she is capable of more. Shinji, however, does not

Hideaki Anno to release additional full-length films, including *Rebirth of Evangelion* (2009), which departed from the original script. For the most part, they preserved the signature visual style and did not substantively change the religious symbols (only simplifying them in some cases). In the new series, the NERV logo is made up of an upside-down apple (the symbol of sin) with a fig leaf superimposed on it.

have any distinguishing qualities. Furthermore, those characters who might be better suited to the mission laid on Shinji's shoulders are not considered "chosen." The show's divine power is neither all-powerful nor merciful, and the messiah is in a state of depression: this "gospel of a new generation" is devoid of any good news.

Postmodernism, Postsecularism, and the American Market

In February 1995, the American periodical *Animerica*, which covers the anime industry, published an article, in which Hideaki Anno announced the next release from Gainax. In the creator's words, the series would touch on questions such as: "What is the nature of evolution? What is humanity's relationship to his or her god? Does god, in fact, exist? What does it mean for the human race if that question cannot be answered definitively?" (Ledoux 1995, 14). As these questions demonstrate, Anno's interest in religious and philosophical issues was, indeed, genuine. But how does this square with the claim of certain members of the team that worked on the show, namely that Hideaki Anno had never read the Bible, or that all the religious symbols were included for marketing purposes and do not carry any symbolic weight?

At the 2001 Otakon convention, the animator Kazuya Tsurumaki explained the "cross" symbolism in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* to a journalist this way:

There are a lot of giant robot shows in Japan, and we did want our story to have a religious theme to help distinguish us. Because Christianity is an uncommon religion in Japan we thought it would be mysterious. None of the staff who worked on *Eva* are Christians. There is no actual Christian meaning to the show, we just thought the visual symbols of Christianity look cool. If we had known the show would get distributed in the US and Europe we might have rethought that choice (Thomas 2001).

This raises the problem of how one interprets the difference between intentions and reception and whether it would be better to simply abandon attempts to find meaning where it does not seem to exist.

To understand why there is so much religious imagery in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and whether it contains some kind of message, one should turn to a different level of interpretation. Before starting

the project, Hideaki Anno had been in a state of depression for several years. Indeed, reading an enormous amount of philosophy and psychoanalysis and then writing the anime helped the creator overcome this personal crisis. For Anno, the series was a personal and philosophical statement. Its message was not simply a story about a depressed adolescent destroyed by indecision and a world in chaos, but about the industry as a whole. In the 1990s, Japanese society experienced numerous economic crises, which led to an increase of social escapism and the expansion of a specific popular culture that worked according to a postmodern logic (Shumilova 2018, 28).

Situating the genre, including its intellectual pretensions, within the cultural logic of late capitalism helps reveal the artistic uniqueness of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Dzheimison 2019, 28). What so disturbed Hideaki Anno was the hyper-commercialization of the anime industry, specifically the practices of changing the visual imagery and simplifying the content of an anime in order to attract an audience (Schilling 2014). Studios and directors obviously consider the general mechanisms and marketing of mass culture in order to ensure the commercial success of their products, but this does not mean that the commercial product cannot have content unrelated to marketing considerations. Upon examination, the beginning of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* does not seem all that different from its competitors in the *mecha* genre. On the contrary, the story is fairly typical and is told in bold colors. Likewise, the traditional strategy of sexualizing female characters to attract the attention of an adolescent male audience is fully present in the early stages. In the first episode, the protagonist receives a letter containing an erotic photograph and a provocative note from the female officer, who is supposed to meet him. Having won the audience with its dynamism and visual appeal, the show's atmosphere changes over the course of the storyline, and in the end, the traditional attractive style gives way to the incomprehensible style of its finale (episodes 25 and 26), which seeks to portray the characters' internal suffering. In point of fact, the show's audience disliked the last two episodes so strongly that the studio was forced to create a more dramatic alternate ending, after receiving threats from unhappy fans. This explains the appearance of the animated film *The End of Evangelion* (1997), which offered a more visually appealing and comprehensible conclusion to the animated series.

Neon Genesis Evangelion is obviously a postmodern work, and its creator consciously designed it to be a critical statement on contemporary culture. Such a critique of postmodernism in popular culture,

however, cannot really function; as one scholar argues: “what used to be virulent, subversive, or at least offensive ideas, have now been transformed into so many material signifiers, at which you gaze for a moment and then pass on” (Dzheimison 2019, 330). In attempting to deconstruct the hero, Hideaki Anno does not really succeed; Shinji Ikari remains a popular and recognizable fixture of mass culture, shorn of any unattractive qualities. The visual image of the sympathetic adolescent piloting a giant robot causes the viewer to forget about unsympathetic components of Shinji’s personality. The image of Shinji Ikari remains, according to the postmodern logic of late capitalism, a triumph over reality: “For capitalism, it is much more important to create pseudo-events, in order to ensure the triumph of advertising over ‘reality’” (Pavlov 2019b, 6).

Something analogous takes place with the female protagonists. The director creates a provocation by sexualizing and objectifying them over the course of the narrative. Yet, at the same time, Anno asks the audience whether it is right to perceive these deeply unhappy and lost girls as sexual objects. To reinforce this provocation, early in the film, *The End of Evangelion*, there is a scene in which the heroine Rei Ayanami looks at her clones, which are practically falling apart, exposing their internal biological parts: skeleton, muscles, etc. . . It would seem that such non-erotic depictions of corporality might alter the heroine’s reception, leading to an aesthetic catharsis (Yates 1998); yet, Rei Ayanami remains one of the most popular sex symbols and an erotic ideal for fans of Japanese mass culture.

Perhaps the show’s postmodern roots can assist in overcoming the difficulties of interpreting its religious content. After all, the postmodern world and the phenomenon of postsecularity are clearly connected (Uzlaner 2011, 4). In addition, the superficiality of cultural images, the speed with which impressions change, and the development of technology have led to doubts about the late twentieth-century expectation that secularization is progressive and unidirectional. (Williams 2011, 21). The religious began to re-enter the culture of seemingly secularized Western people in the most unexpected of forms: religious fundamentalism, new religious cults, and religious syncretism. The visual became the universal medium of the postsecular religious renaissance. In short, without regard to metaphysical rigor or any limits on possible combinations, the visual can produce a mass culture with the illusion of depth for contemporary audiences bereft of it. The above observations about *Neon Genesis Evangelion* correspond neatly to this proposition. The utilization of religious themes in the anime

may be incoherent, but the visual semiotics of sacred symbols is woven into the storytelling. It thus creates an available interpretive frame that endows action taking place in the constructed world with a “reality.” The creators’ attempt to set their anime apart from its competitors succeeded because they understood the needs of their audience; they were the first ones who dared to work with religious elements in a postsecular setting.

The postsecular lens also allows for an explanation of the symbiosis between science and religion in the series. In this era, “there is no radical contradiction between religion and contemporary European science, between faith and the rational-technological mastering of the world. It is possible to use any of the fruits of modern technological science, while simultaneously rejecting or simply ignoring its worldview” (Kyrlezhev 2013). Science and religion are intertwined in fantasy, and thus, a direct religious reading of fantasy is now impossible. By way of comparison, the most widely used methodology for studying the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, the founding fathers of the genre, consists of interpreting their works as following a Christian spirit (Efimova and Shekhireva 2017, 185-6). Yet, it is not worth basing one’s interpretations of or commentaries on *Neon Genesis Evangelion* on one single religious tradition.

Nevertheless, its references to religion underscore the fundamental role religion plays in the construction of possible fiction worlds. If the sacred is lost, then the narrative’s overall logic would become not one single tradition, but rather the soundness and non-contradictoriness of language games that are irreducible to themselves (Kaputo 2011, 204). The symbolic potential of religious visual symbols is enormous and explains their use in popular culture. As in the case of *Star Wars*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* needs religion: “Although the *Star Wars* saga does not debunk religion or present it as a kind of pre-scientific superstition, its enduring popularity is due not least to its reproduction of fundamental mythic structures, to its transposition of classic religious images into the world of high technology” (Kaputo 2014, 132).

Having appropriated material from religious traditions, the science fiction author is intellectually constrained; first of all, by his or her ideas about the audience’s expectations — that their religious views or their ideas about religion might mean something to them — and secondly, by the limits of his or her own knowledge, which is more than likely to be superficial in religious matters. The inclusion of religion in the conceptual framework of postsecular and postmodern performance, which is external to the show, nevertheless influences the in-

ternal dynamics of the narrative. Thus, it is worth taking seriously the fact that Hideaki Anno chose to use the Judeo-Christian tradition and the theme of the apocalypse. However paradoxical it may be, having experienced an internal conflict (a state of depression) caused by the cultural cataclysms of the 1990s, when Japanese society experienced a crisis of culture. The director has given the viewer a messiah who can only exist in an entirely new world: a weak, feeble, introverted, and depressed teenager: “In the opinion of the Japanese critic Tsunehiro Uno, the story’s protagonist Shinji Ikari, with his pessimistic nature and similarities to *hikikomori*, becomes the face of Japan’s ‘lost generation,’ which lost faith in itself and its future” (Shumilova 2018, 29–30). The real Christian messiah, however, cannot be depressed or down in the dumps (Starobinskii 2016, 54–55). Nor can the post-secular reality of mass culture be Christian, even if those claims may still exist.

Conclusion

This examination of the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, directed by Hideaki Anno, has analyzed the work’s science fiction content from the perspective of its connections with religion. This allows for a few observations about fantasy, religion, and the connections between them in the (post)modern world. Having interpreted the show’s distinctive narrative, one cannot deny that science fiction’s essential mechanisms function, even in the decidedly non-Western genre of *mecha*. The plot is unique and deeply influenced by Japanese national culture in a way that is unusual for American or European popular culture. The science fiction universe of giant robots and extra-terrestrial angels, nevertheless, remains consistent and logical. Its “science fiction-ness” consists of the presence of certain novel elements that do not currently exist, but which are understood as a continuation and expansion of the “cognitive logic” of the familiar world.

To a large extent, this analysis is made possible by the fact that the globalization of the last several decades has influenced the Japanese cultural industry to such an extent that the latter can be described as a hybrid phenomenon (Seo and Takekawa 2006, 238–9). Incidentally, this makes the scholar’s task more difficult because it forces an acknowledgement that elements of national traditions co-exist alongside the global. One of the key elements in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* that connects the *mecha* genre of anime to Shinto tradition is the fact that giant robots manifest divine power. This distinguishes Japanese tra-

dition from the superhero culture of countries in which the Abrahamic religions predominated. The robots are endowed with a spirit and are capable of spontaneous action, which does not fit into the canon of Western popular culture. This observation reveals that these works of fiction are implicitly connected with religious themes.

The show's visual and verbal references to the symbols of Judeo-Christian traditions has created a great deal of debate about the show's proper interpretation. The entire plot is built around the apocalypse, with its attendant semantic connotations; it thus nudges the viewer toward a Christian interpretation, even if the "end of the world" scenario was, of course, also quite popular in Japanese culture after the Second World War (Napier 1993). Furthermore, it is clear that the references to the sacred symbols of the Abrahamic religions do not function according to the canons of religiously influenced science fiction literature; rather they are superficial, surface-level gestures, made according to the logic of postmodern mass culture. It might seem that this makes addressing the question of anime's religious content impossible. Yet, the postsecular lens facilitates analysis that will not overlook religious content and, at the same time, will reveal the rules according to which it is used in the products of mass culture.

The connections between the postsecular world and postmodernism are readily apparent in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. In the show, religious symbols served to attract the audience's attention and pique its curiosity and, in the end, to ensure the work's commercial success. Science fiction's need for religion is thus not only a structural requirement of meaning-making within the genre, but also a response to audience demand. These two theses are equally important in this analysis of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. The science fiction world consists of two elements: a fictional universe and a mystical world of deep symbolism that is difficult to perceive in everyday life. Accordingly, when it comes to content, the sacred does not carry any autonomous conceptual meaning; for the researcher, it is simply a visual illustration of the postsecular. In order to recover a lost sense of the profound and overcome the postmodern hyper-commercialization of culture and anime, the show's creators deconstructed the genre and used sacred symbols, but they did so in full accordance with the principles of the postsecular age, which is to say, superficially.

In the end, the anime lacks a singular internal logic when it comes to working with the religious. What is clear is that the choice of apocalyptic and messianic storylines (as opposed to others) clearly exerts an influence on the narrative. In this case, the messiah of the fan-

tasy world of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is truly in a state of depression. Here, it is useful to recall the “Human Instrumentality Project.” To paraphrase Jameson (Dzheimison), the anime’s protagonist, Shinji Ikari, and director, Hideaki Anno, have simply tired of modernity and “the subjective as such in its older classical forms (which include deep time and memory) and [want] to live on the surface for a while” (Dzheimison 2019, 332). Today’s mass culture provides just such an opportunity.

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Dragon Age: Inquisition: A Christian Message in a Postsecular World

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This article deals with the religious, specifically Christian, message in the video game “Dragon Age: Inquisition,” released in 2014 by BioWare. In order to understand the specifics of this game, the article includes a detailed analysis of the conventional ways that religion, gods, and believers are presented in computer role-playing games (RPGs), the genre to which “Dragon Age: Inquisition” belongs. The study pays special attention to the way “Dragon Age: Inquisition” utilizes a common set of narrative techniques and game mechanics often present in the games of this genre. While borrowing many of them, the developers change them in small but significant ways. In doing so they manage to create a unique approach to the representation of religion that is shaped profoundly by secular ideology, which dominates the genre. This allows us to call “Dragon Age: Inquisition” a postsecular video game that adapts many traditional Christian narratives and conflicts to a new and unaccustomed medium.

Keywords: game studies, phenomenological hermeneutics, procedural rhetoric, Dragon Age, RPG, Christianity, video games.

THIS article examines the religious, specifically Christian, motifs contained in the game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) from the BioWare studio. While seeking to reimagine classic plot elements of fantasy RPGs, the game’s developers also fully reveal their inherent, historically religious meanings. The game’s ludic elements, such as its rules, supplement these narrative motifs. In regard to the representation of religion, harmony exists between narrative and ludic elements of the video game, and makes possible discussion of *Dragon Age* as a complete, postsecular Christian message.

Methodology

Mikhail Fiadotau provided an excellent description of a possible approach to interpreting the religious content of a video game in the article “Phenomenological Hermeneutics as a Bridge between Video Games and Religious Aesthetics,” included in the collection *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* (Fiadotau 2017). This approach, in turn, builds upon the previous work of Veli-Matti Kurhulahti, the famous game studies specialist, and, more broadly, on the tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics as described by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.

With respect to video games, this approach entails that the researcher focus on the interaction between the narrative and “ludic” (that is, existing at the level of the rules) aspects of the game. Do these elements exist in parallel to each other, as in the case of mobile puzzle games, in which the narrative advances exclusively in non-interactive screens, or are they interconnected? Also important are which elements of the game receive more attention and effort from the developers. Finally, the particularly important question in the context of this article is whether a contradiction exists between the narrative and the game mechanics, or whether they complement each other. This article will try to demonstrate that in the case of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the ludic aspects, in particular the dialogue system and some aspects of the combat mechanics, complement the narrative, enabling the game to produce a coherent message that can be considered “Christian.”

This article introduces the idea of a “Christian video game,” drawing upon the concept of “resonance” presented in the works of Adam Chapman (Chapman 2016, 35). Chapman, who dealt with the representation of real historical events in video games, meant by this term a situation in which events on the screen resemble or resonate with something outside the video game. This concept, in turn, makes possible the application of insights from semiotics, especially Roland Barthes’s concepts of “sign” and “recognition,” to the analysis of video games.

In using the concept “Christian video game,” I do not mean that BioWare intentionally incorporated a Christian narrative into its project or conceived of the game as a vehicle for preaching, but rather that many elements of its game resonate with a specific understanding of Christianity. Of course, as with any interpretation, this view of the game remains subjective. But I will try to show that *Dragon Age:*

Inquisition contains numerous elements or, in Barthes's terminology, signs that are historically associated with explicitly religious fantasy works, primarily the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

This article will also draw upon the concept of a "fantastic milieu," first introduced by Danielle Kirby (Kirby 2013, 2–3). It is a hypothetical collection of ideas, plots, stock character types, and other elements of the text that unites all works in fantastic genres. The "milieu" exists at the intersection of specific texts, a shared cultural background, and specific fan culture shaped by earlier texts, which in turn informs the perception of familiar elements that appear in new works.

It is important to emphasize that, although in principle the "milieu" runs through almost all types of fantastic genres, whose motifs flow freely from one to the other, it is not homogeneous. For example, computer RPGs in the fantasy genre have long had their own set of recognizable elements, although historically these elements were associated with literature and movies of the same style. It should be stressed that among the elements of the milieu that are specific to video games some can be called ludonarrative, that is, they involve a consistent link between a specific plot element and game mechanics. Character classes serve as a typical example of these elements. The RPG "fantastic milieu" also contains strictly narrative details that require varied ludic incarnations, such as the portrayals of distinct fantasy races. Finally, there are a small number of purely ludic elements of the milieu that through specific technical choices, such as the isometric position of the camera, create in the fans the sense that they are playing an RPG. Games that include numerous details not previously present in their segment of the "fantastic milieu" acquire a reputation for being original or even "authorial," such as *Tyranny* or *Kenshi*, whereas games entirely confined to their sector of the "milieu" are described as banal or classic, such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

Dragon Age: Inquisition is interesting in this context as an example of a third approach, at least in its depiction of religion. BioWare did not introduce new elements into the "milieu," but rather reinvented a series of well-established ones. One can call the studio's approach "remythologization." BioWare employs many of the plotlines, susceptible to religious interpretation, that *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia* originally introduced to the "fantastic milieu." While these plotlines lost the connection with their original meaning, they remained popular elements of the "fantastic milieu." The studio uses these elements but alters them, restoring to them their original potential for religious interpretation. This is what

makes *Dragon Age: Inquisition* an interesting object of analysis and distinguishes it from other games of the same genre.

Although some of the elements under consideration also appeared in previous installments of the series, this article will focus specifically on *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, as the game in which religious motifs are most clearly present. In the next part of the article, I will give a brief description of the game itself, its plot, its fictional universe, and its basic game mechanics. Then I will analyze a range of key elements of the representation of religion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. I seek to demonstrate how each of them is incorporated into the existing RPG tradition and how they nevertheless retain their uniqueness. Particular attention will be paid to the way in which these specific distinctions develop as they reveal great similarity among the ideas embedded in *Dragon Age* and the stories and ethics that traditionally resonate with Christianity.

The Characteristics of the Game

Dragon Age: Inquisition, the third installment of the *Dragon Age* series (launched in 2009), was released in 2014 for personal computers and several consoles. Its creator, the studio BioWare, has been associated with the RPG genre since the late 1990s, when it released the extremely popular and influential *Baldur's Gate* series. Despite criticism from some fans of the genre, *Dragon Age* was commercially successful and garnered positive reviews from the gaming press.

The action of all three installments of the series takes place in a world called Thedas, a fantasy universe populated by representatives of four “races”: humans, elves, dwarves, and qunari giants. The first three groups are based on characters introduced in Tolkien’s works and are well known to all fantasy enthusiasts. This clearly demonstrates the extent to which *Dragon Age* relies on the established canons of the genre. Each installment of the series tells the story of a new hero, highlighting different regions of Thedas. The series achieves continuity between the parts by focusing on the intertwining global cataclysms that shake this fictional world. Specifically, in the third part of the game, the main character takes control of the Inquisition — a religious organization trying to stop an array of conflicts and disasters that threaten the stability of this imaginary world.

With respect to game mechanics, one can consider *Dragon Age* a traditional RPG. The player creates a character, who explores the world, fights opponents, and completes quests that advance the cen-

tral plot as well as other auxiliary tasks. An important element of the game is the search for companions — characters who accompany the hero and help in battle. Each of these characters has its own backstory; and the protagonist can establish friendly, and on occasion romantic, relationships with them.

In practice, the gameplay is organized around battles, in which the player commands the main character and several companions, and around dialogues in which the player chooses one response from several possible options. Within these dialogues, which affect the game's world, choices can be made that reflect the moral or political preferences of the hero and the player controlling the character. In this case, it seems accurate to speak of two separate actors because often players make decisions based on what their hero would do, not on their own preferences. In doing so, they act in accordance with the character and the biography, which they invented for their character, based on the options offered by the developers.

In addition to these traditional elements of the genre, control over the Inquisition has been added: the player must send agents to areas where his or her character cannot go, manage resources, and form alliances with political factions. This last element deserves special mention because it is one of the few examples of a player in a video game actively running a religious organization. Still, in general, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* may be called a classic computer role-playing fantasy game.

The Protagonist

I will give attention first to the religious dimension of the main character. This must be considered through the motif of the hero's role as a "chosen one" and a "unique" individual, demonstrated by the character's possession of special properties and qualities that the average person in the game lacks. This plot is widespread in the fantasy genre and in popular culture in general: typical examples of "chosen" protagonists are Harry Potter and Neo from the Matrix trilogy. Yet, surprisingly, within the RPG genre, the theme of being a chosen one was absent for some time.

In the early RPGs of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, the main character acted as an "intermediary" between the player and the fictional world. The developers assumed that the player should introduce the protagonist's traits, since developer interference would only distract from immersion in the fictional world. For example, in the *Ulti-*

ma series, the main character was a *tabula rasa* that could be altered as the player wished.

One can date the appearance of the “chosen” protagonist in computer RPGs roughly from the game *Fallout 2* in 1998, in which the main character was explicitly called the Chosen One. And in the fantasy RPG genre, the main credit belongs to *Planescape: Torment*, released a year later in 1999. It was in this game that the protagonist, Nameless, possessed not only the characteristics with which the player endowed the hero, but also other traits and a backstory created by the developers. Of course, the player still wielded considerable control over the fate of Nameless, choosing the path of the hero’s evolution and making decisions in the dialogues that permitted the player to specify any portrayal of the character. But Nameless always retained numerous characteristics inscribed in the fabric of the fictional world that the player could not annul and override at will, and around which the plot of the game was constructed.

After *Planescape: Torment*, the “chosen one” motif quickly gained popularity in the fantasy RPG genre. In the vast majority of subsequent games, main characters are exceptional not only because of their ability to fight evil, but also because of their possession of unique characteristics. At the same time, the motif of the chosen one acquired patently religious significance as most chosen protagonists could be described as religious characters. They appeared as the reincarnation of an ancient prophet (*The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, *Arcanum: of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*), as descendants of a deity (*Baldur’s Gate*), as those chosen by higher powers (*Divinity: Original Sin*), or as those who simply possessed a special connection with the religious sphere (*Jade Empire*, *Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer*).

The status of the main character as a chosen one, assigned at the narrative level, can be reinforced at the ludic level by giving the character unique abilities and attributes. Thus, the Nerevarine in *The Elder Scrolls II: Morrowind* receives immunity to all diseases, and the Descendant of Baal in *Baldur’s Gate 2: Shadows of Amn* turns into an incarnation of the deity. Most often, these abilities appear at the later stages of the story, when the player has become sufficiently familiar with the basic rules to assess the significance of the changes and to experience, on both the narrative and ludic levels, the protagonist’s nature as a chosen one.

It must be emphasized that in most games, the “entry” into the plot occurs very abruptly. As a rule, the hero initially leads a pasto-

ral or, at least, markedly ordinary life, which changes in an instant after the invasion of hostile forces. This occurs most vividly in the game *Neverwinter Nights 2*, which begins with a village holiday and continues with an attack on the village, the target of which is the protagonist. The plots in the series *Baldur's Gate*, *Arcanum*, and *Jade Empire* are similarly developed. All share the common motif of the sudden destruction of life for reasons unknown to the hero. Protagonists, thus, begin their journeys by trying to learn the truth about their nature. As a result, they usually determine rather quickly that they have been chosen by destiny and that their ordinary life was either a lie that concealed their potential or a means of preparing them for subsequent trials.

If one considers that the truth about the main character often has a religious significance, these games offer a kind of retelling of the Gnostic myth, as interpreted in Erik Davis' analysis of the Gnostic elements in modern culture. The "divine" hero, a descendant of the gods, a reincarnation of ancient heroes, or a promised messiah lives in thrall to ordinary life, unaware of his or her nature until chance reveals the truth. The hero then undertakes a journey designed to provide more knowledge of this nature and, consequently, accepts his or her fate, becoming what he or she was destined to be from the very beginning.

At first glance, one sees a similar formula in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. The main character embarks on a journey as one of many delegates to a Conclave designed to end the military conflict between the mages and the Templars — radical religious fanatics who believe that people possessing magic should be tightly controlled. The Conclave is destroyed by an explosion, however, in which all its participants perish except for the main character, who receives the ability to close the "Breaches" — portals between the ordinary world and the "Fade," the world of spirits from which demons infiltrate. The inhabitants of Thedas associate the protagonist's power and survival with the intervention of Andraste, the legendary prophetess, whose "Herald" they proclaim the hero to be.

But upon close examination, it becomes evident that BioWare turns the usual formula upside down. The hero's playing ability is not a confirmation of his or her true nature, but a central attribute that determines the attitude of the inhabitants of Thedas toward the hero.¹ The protagonist, under the player's control, closes the "Breach" for the

1. As in many RPGs, at the beginning of the game, the player can choose the character's class, gender, and race.

first time at approximately the fifth minute of the game. This act also becomes the reason the protagonist is proclaimed the Herald of Andraste. Thereafter, the hero uses these powers repeatedly, almost routinely, throughout the game as new “Breaches” occur around the world. The ability itself, rather than, for example, the narrative exposition of a prophecy, makes the hero a “chosen one.”

Moreover, while trying to ascertain what happened to the protagonist and what the nature of the newly acquired powers is, the main character learns that he or she is not a chosen one in the traditional sense. Andraste was not involved in the rescue, at least not directly, and nothing in the protagonist’s life to that point had prepared him or her to receive the gift. The period before the Conclave was not a lie that had concealed from the hero a pre-existing, if not yet actualized, destiny. The hero’s abilities prove to be not a “reward” for establishing the truth; on the contrary, they are a fact to which the main character, the player, and other inhabitants of the fictional universe give their own interpretations, including religious ones. This departure from a narrative of the only possible truth places *Dragon Age: Inquisition* in stark contrast to games with a “Gnostic” plot model.

One can, however, compare the story of the Herald to the story of Frodo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*. Although Tolkien reflected often about fate and destiny, ultimately it was important to the author to emphasize that Frodo was not the Messiah but a mere mortal, confronted for specific reasons with a difficult moral choice. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the hobbit’s position as a chosen one was not paramount; what was of upmost importance was the pragmatic fact that it was Frodo and no one else who possessed the Ring and controlled its fate. *Dragon Age* offers a similar picture. Like Frodo, the Herald was not destined for greatness, but was obliged to live with certain gifts for good or for ill. The investigation of the character’s own nature does not provide clear answers about the Herald’s place in the world, but it forces the protagonist and the player to decide for themselves how exactly to interpret and use this power. The game itself reinforces this by making the Herald’s abilities extremely obvious and relatively easy to use, hence the character’s uniqueness becomes not simply a narratively reported fact, but something self-evident to the player.

God

This alternate approach to the depiction of the main character in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is reinforced by a different approach to the

portrayal of the gods. As in many fantasy universes, Thedas has several different religious traditions. Elves worship their own pantheon of deities, dwarves profess the cult of their ancestors, and qunari refuse to worship the gods, preferring the philosophical teachings of the Qun. But in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the religion of the humans — the so-called Chantry — receives special attention. This is a monotheistic teaching, whose followers worship the “Maker,” an all-powerful deity who purportedly created the world. The aesthetics and some elements of the ethics of the Chantry clearly draw upon representations of medieval Western European Christianity widespread in popular culture.

The very presence of a monotheistic doctrine is the first notable difference in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. As a rule, fantasy RPGs assume the existence of higher forces. Gods, spirits, and demons often interfere directly in the lives of ordinary mortals, interact with them, give direct orders, and even appear in the flesh among ordinary believers. Under these conditions, the question of monotheism is somewhat meaningless. The only scenario somewhat close to monotheism occurs in games in which one god aggressively forbids the worship of others and uses all its powers to induce the worship of itself, as in the game *Gothic*. Although this plotline, especially at the visual level, derives inspiration from images of religious persecution and forced conversion, the aesthetic similarity masks a fundamentally different meaning. The deity here appears as a ruler, seeking to expand its own territory by force and cunning. Moreover, games usually reveal such divine pretenses as unworthy and expose the gods themselves as tyrants and deceivers, whose plans the main character ruins. The plot of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and of *Gothic* develops around such a confrontation between god and hero, and in other games, for example, *Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows of Amn*, similar conflicts exist in the side quests a character must perform.

Direct conflict between protagonist and god is only a special case, itself part of a broader fantasy trend — the indissoluble connection between the gods and death that is present in the vast majority of fantasy RPGs. The player must save deities from destruction (*Divinity: Original Sin 2, Jade Empire*), contend with the consequences of their death (*Baldur's Gate*), destroy them (*Gothic*), or discover that the very idea of their immortality is a fraud (*Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura, The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*). The mortality of the gods motif pervades the genre, contrasting their “false” claim of eternal life to the “true” immortality of the main character.

The approach to the mortality of divinities can be divided into two separate modes, which, in a broader sense, characterize the two main approaches to the depiction of religion in RPGs in general. One mode continues the “Gnostic” logic mentioned above. In games following this approach, such as *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, the player does not simply discover that his or her character is divine but exposes those who claim to be celestial beings as cheaters and criminals. In some games, this investigation ends in a direct confrontation between the “true” and “false” savior (*Gothic*), while in others, the player demonstrates his or her superiority by saving deities or their followers (*Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*). In such games, the mortality of the deities is problematic and is portrayed as further evidence that they do not deserve worship and are not “true” gods.

A simpler approach, which for the present purpose may be called “pagan,” does not problematize the mortality of deities at all. This mortality serves as part of the logic found throughout the fictional universe — any being has enemies and allies, and any being can perish should it meet a worthy opponent. Of course, the killing of a deity requires special actions, such as a quest for unique weapons, but in the end, the gods in this approach do not differ from other characters. This makes it possible, among other things, to withhold any moral appraisal of their claim of divine status, as they obviously do not possess omnipotence. In some games, such as *Jade Empire*, the gods even appear as “damsels in distress,” defenseless figures in need of rescue.

The reason video games so often introduce the motif of the “death of the gods” finds explanation in the theory of Tomasz Majkowski, who proposed viewing the video game from the perspective of Bakhtin’s “carnival culture” (Majkowski 2015). Majkowski indicated the importance of the figure of the “carnival king” in particular — the unrighteous, temporary ruler of the carnival, who must be humiliated and destroyed by the end of the holiday. Such, undoubtedly, are the “bosses,” the unique, powerful opponents with whom the hero must battle at the end of the game. The gods serve as a fitting basis for the “carnival kings,” precisely because the concept of a god is associated with something powerful and invincible.

Moreover, the similarity between a video game and a carnival often implies that there can be no invulnerable or truly all-powerful characters in the game, and that those who pretend to be invincible must be ridiculed and humiliated. Accordingly, when introducing a deity into the game, the developers assume that the god will either be defeated by the player as a full-fledged “carnival king,” will prove to be power-

less and in need of outside help, or will perish, ending its own “normal” time before the start of the game and starting the “carnival” period, when the player will have to play.

The way *Dragon Age: Inquisition* resolves this situation is quite simple: the game leaves the Maker as an off-stage character. Strictly speaking, by the end of the game, it is unknown whether the Maker exists at all. The protagonist may initially hold various religious views, depending on the character’s race and the player’s preferences, yet regardless of those views, the game’s plot will force the hero to get involved in disputes and conflicts related to the Chantry. Various events may also make the hero strengthen his or her views, but the game gives no definitive answer as to whether there is a creator or on how the deity is connected to the events taking place. Consequently, the developers manage to steer clear of the death of a god or a confrontation with one, and even more importantly, they introduce a motif that is extremely rare in video games, that of religious faith.

Faith

Faith is a phenomenon featured surprisingly rarely in fantasy RPGs, if one considers how often stories and characters related to religion appear in the genre. This is partly due to the above-mentioned characteristics of the representation of deities. Given that their existence is an indisputable fact, discussions of faith often give way to a choice of loyalty. A typical example of this occurs in the game *Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer*, the plot of which is structured around death and the afterlife (“Wall of the Faithless”). This wall in the world of the dead imprisons the souls of atheists, people who did not worship any god during their lives. But as the game progresses, the player understands that it is not so much the convinced materialists who deserve this fate, but rather those characters who were too proud to acknowledge the supremacy of anyone, including a deity.

It seems, however, that these typical attributes of fictional worlds are not the only reason for the absence of the theme of faith. Rather, the specific characteristics of the gods and the absence of faith flow from the dominance of secular ideology in fantasy RPGs. At first glance, this statement may seem strange, as the plotlines of many games center around deities, prophecies, and messianic figures. But here it is necessary to consider two observations. First, secularism is not atheism (Kosmin 2007). The ideal of a secular society is not a society without religion, but one in which religion functions in a separate sphere and does not af-

fect political and social life. Second, according to Barthes and other representatives of the semiotic school, an artistic work sets out an ideology not through explicit statements but through the normalization (or, in Barthes's terms, naturalization) of a particular picture of the world and its corresponding ethics (Bart [Barthes] 1996, 255).

The problem of the depiction of Muslims in video games clearly exemplifies this. This medium has long received criticism for its overt anti-Islamic nature. One can find this criticism in articles such as Vít Šisler's "Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games" (Šisler 2008) or in Kathrin Trattner's "Critical Discourse Analysis: Studying Religion and Hegemony in Video Games" (Trattner 2017). Yet, the researchers focused not on the absence of Muslims from video games, but on the clear ideological message their portrayal contains — they invariably serve as antagonists, bolstering the widespread stereotype that Islam turns people into murderers.

One can observe something similar with portrayals of religion in general. Although the developers formally introduce a plethora of religious actors, a game's plots and individual tasks make it clear that in a normal situation, religion belongs in a separate closed sphere, from which it influences neither political nor social life. The most graphic example of this is the "Gnostic" approach to the representation of deities, in which gods who claim immortality and try to establish a theocracy are invariably presented as deceivers whom the real hero defeats to restore a right and just world. In this restored world, the deities "know their place" and do not try to claim excessive power. At the same time, the main character, although divine, opts neither to take the place of the defeated "false gods" nor to claim power, but returns to ordinary life within the restored secular world order. Though the opportunity to "attain divinity" is possible in these games, it is clearly marked as an ethically evil decision that will turn the character into a tyrant.

In games that follow the "pagan" approach to the mortality of deities, one sees a different, even simpler view of the problem. Because the gods in these games always answer prayers, it is possible to reduce all religious life in fantasy RPGs to definite, controllable, measurable results. In games such as *Baldur's Gate*, temples are not a place of contact between humans and higher powers nor even a center for the dissemination of certain views, but a place for the provision of certain services. The player's character visits the temple when he or she has practical needs and leaves having received all that was needed. One can compare this approach to real, historical paganism, which explains the choice of term.

But “pagan” religions in video games differ from real paganism. In the market economy prevailing in most video game universes, exclusively financial relationships connect priests with the people around them. Priests, however, lack the opportunity to convert the provision of “divine” services into political influence or moral authority, examples of which have occurred throughout history. Those who try to do this by refusing to heal non-believers, for example, or by subjugating a community through the use of divine powers are portrayed as antagonists, or at the very least as misguided people, whom the main character wins over or kills. In these circumstances, religious faith is not simply excluded, which could be explained by the peculiar structure of fictional worlds in which the existence of gods cannot be questioned, but stigmatized. In many video games the only characters guided by religious dogmas are aggressive fanatics who try to kill or convert anyone they meet, while ethical, positive characters demonstrate a secular worldview and an instrumental approach to religion.²

In a typical example of the absence of the faith motif, characters among the player’s companions often position themselves as adherents of a religion, but they rarely use the ethics of their religion as a guide for action, typically perform rituals only to obtain a practical result, and hardly speak of their faith. In *Planescape: Torment* and *Baldur’s Gate 2*, conversations between the main character and companions about their lives, feelings, and principles are an important part of the game, but these dialogues hardly ever touch on religious issues. Moreover, when this happens, the respective characters often appear in a comical role. For example, the priest Virgil, from *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*, is unable even to quote the central prophecy of the Church without errors.

Here it is appropriate to recall the concept of “procedural rhetoric” proposed by Ian Bogost (Bogost 2007). Bogost argued that video games invariably contain a kind of ideology and can convince players of its rightness not only through the plot or visual elements, but also through certain rules and restrictions. When playing a video game, a player encounters various situations, and the game offers a set of options to resolve them. The combination of these options also serves as a guide to specific views. Moreover, the game evaluates which possible actions are valid and which are not: a player who defies the logic of the game, therefore, risks losing and having to begin again.

2. For more detail see Moyzhes 2018.

But Bogost also notes that when analyzing how game rules impact beliefs and value systems, it is important to consider not only how things included in the game are depicted, but also those things the developers excluded. Thus, in most military shooters, even those that claim to be realistic, civilians are entirely absent. The player's character operates in empty cities, in which, besides the protagonist, there are only allies and enemies, and non-combatants appear only in cut-scenes, if at all. This fits into traditional militaristic rhetoric, which portrays war as a controlled and ultimately ordered exercise. Accordingly, civilian casualties prove not an inevitable consequence of the conflict itself, but the result of a conscious decision by one of the parties to disregard their safety.

These "utterances" occur exclusively at the level of the rules, and, moreover, through the absence rather than the presence of specific mechanics in the game. This echoes the ideas of another researcher in the field of game studies, Gonzalo Frasca. Frasca argues that most video games are simulations, and that their ideology manifests itself through the elements the games exclude from the simulation, thus declaring them inconsequential (Frasca 2003). In the case of religion, faith is one such element. Religion is portrayed as something that should either not draw attention to itself, or should serve in practice a socially useful function, for example, to heal and protect those in need. Under such conditions, the difference between distinct teachings are effectively aesthetic. Affiliation with a religion is depicted as the personal choice of the believer, which may reflect his or her character, formed under the influence of other factors, but does not affect behavior, at least in the public sphere.

Thus, in video games, the gods who follow rules applicable to all characters and respect the choice of mortals to move from one temple to another reinforce the secular structure of society. And those who begin to convert people aggressively to their teachings or otherwise encroach upon a secular sphere, such as politics, are therefore portrayed as antagonists whom the main character opposes. Thus, protagonists find themselves the guardians of the established world order, and religion proves a kind of "liminal sphere," the presence of which in everyday life should be strictly controlled. In many games, the entire plot amounts effectively to the restoration of a secular situation in the world, which radical believers, seeking to impose their own views on others, had threatened, as in the game *The Witcher*.³

3. See the corresponding article in this issue of the journal.

It is important to emphasize that in this article the discussion of ideology in video games, whether militarism or secularism, does not imply that the developers intentionally embedded certain ideas in their product. Obviously, the key reason for the lack of civilians in shooters is financial: creating them would necessitate spectacular expenditures of money and time. Similarly, the simulation of religious faith and experiences would require more dialogues at the least and perhaps the creation of new game mechanics capable of describing a character's spiritual life.

Then again, given technology, all these tasks are possible. I will return to Frasca's argument about the exclusion of something from a simulation being an ideological act: in considering something unnecessary and having allocated resources to develop another segment of the game in detail, a developer is guided by a specific vision of the final product. And this product, in turn, arises from the developer's world view, that is, ultimately it is ideologically determined. But it is important to stress that this article, in accordance with the methodology of phenomenological hermeneutics, focuses not on the intentions of the authors, but specifically on how their work may be read.

This leads to the question of what is unique about the representation of faith in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. One can find numerous differences on a purely narrative level. The plot of this game revolves around the premise that religion can and even should play a significant role in people's lives. The Inquisition, a religious organization, founded by the main character and his or her companions, aims not only to reform the Chantry, but also to interfere in politics and to prevent wars and global catastrophes. Thus, the player ignores the genre's traditional boundaries that separate the religious sphere from the secular.

The portrayals of specific characters, primarily the companions and advisers of the "Herald of Andraste," further reinforce this intermixing of the two spheres. These characters are much more open about their religion than characters in other games: they speak of their own religious views, perform religious rituals, and look to the teachings of the Chantry for guidance when making decisions. The game even contains a form of reflection on secular and ecclesiastical views of faith. The protagonist's extremely religious counselor, Cassandra Pentaghast, may tell the hero that one companion, Varric, in fact shares the teachings of Andraste but does not feel the need to speak of it.

In addition to these narrative distinctions in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, there are also ludic elements that depict faith. This is possible

thanks to the different approaches it takes to the main character and deities that I described in previous sections. BioWare places players amid uncertainty without giving them complete information about either the status of their character or the reality of the creator deity. Instead, it forces the protagonist (and therefore the player) to make the relevant judgments on his or her own. During the game, companions approach the main character to ask his or her opinion on certain issues. In particular, they inquire whether the hero believes in the Maker and whether the hero considers him or herself to be the “Herald of Andraste.” The player has a choice of different options from the strictly religious to the atheistic. And through such simple, but surprisingly unique mechanics, he or she obtains the opportunity to reveal his or her own faith or lack thereof. It must be emphasized that these questions have a real effect on the game-world: followers of the main character and sometimes entire kingdoms and organizations react to the answers given, both on the narrative and ludic levels, providing assistance to the Inquisition or hindering its operations.

Thus, the game gives the player the opportunity to simulate an act of faith by asserting the existence of a deity without any indication of which answer would be correct. At the same time, the game demonstrates how the social context, among other things, shapes such assertions: political considerations, personal sympathies, and momentary desires can influence them. It is these mechanics that make it possible to say that *Dragon Age: Inquisition* offers one of the most profound simulations of religious faith to be found in modern commercial video games.

The Central Myth

The importance of faith and monotheism in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* suggest that this game is much closer to the Abrahamic religions than are most projects in the same genre. With this in mind, one must focus on the elements of the game that specifically resemble Christianity. It is clear that the comparison in this case will not be between the game and a hypothetical “real Christianity,” but between the semiotic signs used to create the image of the Chantry in the game and widespread cultural representations of Christianity. The question of how close these representations are to reality, as well as exactly how they were formed, remains beyond the scope of this article. It should be noted straightway that all the elements of this section lie in the sphere of narrative and aesthetics. The game has no specifically pro-Christian

game mechanics, although given the corresponding aesthetic markings it makes sense to consider the mechanics and problems of faith in the game that refer specifically to Christianity.

The similarity of the “Cult of the Maker” to Christianity hinges on the depiction of the Chantry and, specifically, its central myth. In the representation of the Chantry, for its part, one can distinguish aesthetic and narrative components. The former are the more obvious. Visually, temples clearly evoke the appearance of Western European churches. The long robes of the clergy; the distinctive architecture of cathedrals, echoing the Gothic tradition; and the stained glass are all well-established “signs” of medieval Catholicism. Terminological choices evoke Christianity even more clearly: soldiers sworn to protect the Chantry are called Templars, large gatherings are Conclaves, and so forth. It should be emphasized that these elements are quite common in RPGs. The aesthetics of the medieval Church are often used to denote a religion as familiar and “normal.” Other aesthetic choices serve the opposite effect, signaling to the player that the character has fallen into a strange, exotic place.

Narrative signs merit more attention — conventional plots, conflicts, and character portrayals that resonate with many players’ ideas of Christianity. One such sign is the issue of gender. All clergy in the Chantry are women, which at first glance makes it an inversion of real-world Christianity. But from the perspective of Kirby’s “fantastic milieu” theory, the motif of gender restrictions seems more significant than its substance. Priestesses in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* play a role usually performed by male priests and do not correspond to New Age and Wicca stereotypes of priestesses, prevalent in the fantastic milieu. It is noteworthy that prohibitions of any kind, especially ones so problematic from the perspective of real-world politics, often serve to identify enemy organizations in fantasy RPGs. This, in turn, fits into a skeptical attitude toward any rituals that do not serve a pragmatic purpose. But in the case of the Chantry, the ban on male clergy is not considered a sign of restriction. This is perhaps partly done to “balance” the plot: women’s superiority in the Chantry is “balanced” by men’s dominance in other areas, in accordance with the neo-medievalist paradigm of the genre. But in any case, the remarkable fact remains that in this case the game offers an example of a ritual ban lacking strictly negative connotations.

Another sign reminiscent of Christianity is hierarchy and the motif of the struggle for power. This is also not unique to *Dragon Age: Inquisition*: organized religions in RPGs are often constructed around

a complex, multi-tiered official hierarchy inspired by Catholicism. In some cases, as in the game *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, for example, this may contradict other elements, such as the visual aesthetic, which in *Elder Scrolls III* is inspired by the Far East. The distinctiveness of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* lies in the close attention this game pays to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, explaining to the player in detail exactly how the organization is structured and how promotion occurs within it, presenting it as a social and political process. This makes possible the introduction of another characteristic plotline that resonates in popular culture with the image of Christianity — the story of the election of the head of the Church, or in this case the Chantry. The explosion at the Conclave, with which the game begins, takes the life of the leader of the Chantry — the Divine Justinia — among others. As a result, the question of who will become the new spiritual leader of Thedas and how this leader will reform the Chantry becomes an important supplementary plotline.

Finally, the third sign showing that popular conceptions of Christianity serve as the basis for the Chantry of Thedas is the struggle between the Chantry and the mages. Echoing the image of a “witch hunt,” popular in twentieth-century culture, this sign is also common in fantasy RPGs. The image of a crowd led by priests trying to kill a “heretic” or “sorceress” appears in many video games, for example, in *Baldur’s Gate II*, in which the main character must literally snatch a companion out of the fire. But *Dragon Age: Inquisition* differs in that it does not include this sign simply to reinforce that a certain organization is hostile; rather the game analyzes the issue in detail, presenting the conflict between the mages and the radical-Templars as a problem inherent in the very essence of the doctrine of the Chantry, which the player must somehow solve. And although the developers obviously implied that the side of the mages deserves more sympathy, they leave the choice to the discretion of the player, seeking to highlight that each side is motivated by its own views. The struggle occurs not between the Chantry and reason, but between different interpretations of the same teaching.

The game contains a host of other signs that also refer to the Church, but their detailed enumeration would be superfluous. Enough has been written to recognize that *Dragon Age: Inquisition* contains elements that draw upon the popular image of Christianity, not Islam, Judaism, or an abstract “monotheistic religion in general.” Such a detailed analysis of the given signs is intended to serve still another pur-

pose — to identify a general strategy for the treatment of these signs, which this study proposes to call remythologization.

Each of the elements presented here is widely known in popular culture and occupies an important place in the “fantastic milieu.” They came to that milieu, in turn, from the literature of the nineteenth century, in which these elements appeared as part of the interpretation, representation, and critique of Christianity. Over time, these images lost their direct connection to real religion and became recognizable, convenient symbols that authors and development teams used as they saw fit. But BioWare builds a single narrative about a specific religious organization out of individual elements of the fantastic milieu, and thus partially restores the context in which they originated. This forms a closer connection between this game and Christianity — in contrast to other projects in which the link is mediated by culture, namely, by the “fantastic milieu.” I call this process of partially restoring the original religious meanings to the elements of the fantastic milieu “remythologization.”

One observes a similar picture in the central myth of the Chantry. From conversations with characters, text screens, and other in-game texts, the player can learn that, according to legends, the Maker once existed in harmony with the world, but that the rulers of the state of Tevinter, the empire of the mages, decided to take the deity’s powers for themselves. They infiltrated the god’s dwelling place, the Golden City, causing the angry god to turn away from the world, while the lords of Tevinter themselves turned into so-called “creatures of darkness” — monsters that have since threatened the entire civilization. The world existed for many centuries without the attention of its creator, until a prophetess named Andraste appealed to the deity with a song so beautiful and sincere that the Maker believed that all was not lost for Thedas. The Maker took Andraste as a Bride and through the prophetess explained to the nations exactly how they should live so that the creator deity could fully return. Later, Andraste dies when the prophetess’ mortal husband, Maferath, bribed by the enemies of the prophetess, betrayed Andraste, but the disciples of Andraste continued the prophetess’ work, which led to the emergence of the Chantry.

The parallels between the separate elements of this myth and the central themes of Christianity are obvious. It is important to emphasize once again that the developers of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* did not pioneer these ideas. Thus, the motif of an ancient empire that perished because of the ambition of its rulers is present in numerous RPGs. In part this has a purely pragmatic cause. Daniel Vella notes that ruins

serve as a type of space much in demand in video games (Vella 2011), and that the story of the downfall of an ancient civilization can become an excellent narrative rationale for their inclusion. Similarly, representations of prophets and their death at the hands of traitors, as well as the motif of the departure of deities from the world and their return, have long been present in the fantastic milieu.

The distinctiveness of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, however, lies not in the inclusion of new elements in the fantastic milieu, but the recombination of old ones. By reuniting separate plotlines that had lost their interconnection in the fantastic milieu, the developers offered their own reading of the foundational Christian narratives: the story of the fall and redemption. In this sense, the story of Andraste and the Maker may be compared to the works of C.S. Lewis, as yet another retelling biblical stories in other realities that make the central themes and conflicts more salient and vivid.

The Chantry

The last aspect of the representation of religion that merits attention is the player's direction of the Inquisition, a religious organization that advocates for Chantry reform and for its more active participation in politics. In this part of the game, players encounter various problems that they assign to their subordinates to resolve. These problems can range from a political crisis or complex negotiations to organizing the procurement of food and building materials.

The existence of game mechanics that enable a player to control a dominion or organization that would complement the hero's own adventures is not new. In the game *Neverwinter Nights 2*, the protagonist is appointed commandant of the fortress and compelled to look after its development and defense. This was preceded in turn by similar game mechanics in *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* and even older games.

Dragon Age: Inquisition differs from other games, however. For one thing, there is a quantitative difference: the management of one's own organization is not an incidental mechanism in one chapter. Rather, the player begins to lead the Inquisition from the very beginning of the game and continues to plan operations and distribute the organization's resources until the finale. This allows developers to build a clear connection between the personal decisions and adventures of the hero and his or her companions and the broad socio-political context of the fictional universe. Besides this quantitative distinction, there is

also a qualitative one that consists of the characteristics of the organization the player directs. The Inquisition is a religious association. The presence of political goals within it allows it to recruit characters to the Inquisition who do not worship Andraste and the Maker, but who share specific aspirations, thus removing the complicated issue of conversion. Yet, the group is still strongly associated with a specific fictional religion. Players must make decisions about how their followers relate to the religious conflict between Templars and mages and which candidate to promote for the position of head of the Chantry.

The religious aspect of the Inquisition may also prove problematic. Thus, it is often possible to conclude negotiations by invoking the authority of the “Herald of Andraste.” At the same time, many political complications stem from the dissatisfaction among conservative circles in the Chantry at the emergence of the new organization. It must be stressed that the game does not make fundamental distinctions between religious and non-religious issues. All these are simply the challenges that arise in the path of the protagonist, who serves simultaneously as a religious and secular leader. In choosing how to resolve these issues, a player can rely on his or her character’s religious beliefs as well as on political pragmatics or any other factors.

As mentioned above, the main characters of many RPGs are religious figures: incarnations of the gods, chosen ones, or reincarnations of ancient prophets. The plot, however, rarely depicts the social and political significance of this status. As a rule, developers avoid this in three ways. The protagonist may receive information along the way that renders meaningless the very foundations of the religion in question. Another similar approach entails the protagonist’s voluntary renunciation of his or her high position for a simpler life, most often continuing to roam the world in search of adventures. Finally, in the third and rarest approach, the main character acquires sacred status and plans to act upon it. But this only occurs at the very end of the game, which leaves the political consequences of the decision outside the game’s plot. Tellingly, developers usually find this approach ethically dubious.

All this fits into the general ideology of conservatism and secularism that dominates the genre. The hero’s task is not to change the world but to restore the demolished boundaries between religious and secular spaces. To this end, the protagonist uses any means, including divine powers, but after completing the mission these powers lose both meaning and allure. The protagonist opposes religious actors changing the world, and thus ought not participate in it. It is in-

interesting to note that in many games of other genres that touch on the topic of religion, the same situation persists. Moreover, one can find some among them that also allow the player to assume the leadership of a fictional religious organization — for example, *Cultist Simulator* — but usually the same strict opposition of the “secular” and “religious” spheres remains in these games, too; it is just shown from a different perspective. In such cases, the player’s task becomes not to restore the established order but to change it, however, religion is still portrayed as something wholly separate from ordinary everyday life and its problems.

Dragon Age: Inquisition is different, in that this game abandons the naturalized ideology of secularism. Political, social, ethical, and religious factors are so intermixed that it can be difficult to draw a boundary between them. Using both narrative and ludic means, the developers show that religion is intertwined with all spheres of life. And the player’s task is not to “contain” religion, keeping it separate from the other spheres, but to use the powers the hero has discovered to achieve his or her goals. This is the most striking postsecularist narrative built into *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

Conclusion

This article deliberately set aside the question of historical or biographical reasons for the uniqueness of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*; rather, its purpose was to demonstrate how this game may be viewed as a postsecular Christian message. At the same time, the study pursued two objectives: on the one hand, to analyze the genetic relationship between the depiction of religion in this game and its depiction in earlier RPGs, and, on the other hand, to pay attention to seemingly insignificant details and changes in-game mechanics and narrative, which make the depiction of religion and religious life in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* unique in its genre.

Instead of a “Gnostic” plot about a hero discovering his or her true nature, one sees the story of a spiritual quest. Instead of knowledge of a plethora of gods, one finds a simulation of acts of faith and unbelief. Instead of a hero standing guard over the borders between the spiritual and secular worlds — religion is woven into the fabric of society, politics, and economics. This is what makes *Dragon Age: Inquisition* a postsecular work, unique in a deeply secular genre. Its specific allusions made at the level of both narrative and game mechanics make possible comparison to Christianity.

It must be stressed that nothing said here makes *Dragon Age: Inquisition* a better or worse game than others. But an example of an alternative view, a different approach to the representation of religion, is important. And it is especially important to emphasize that the developers were able to produce their unique statement by drawing upon the same tools as their predecessors. This suggests that the potential of video games as a medium for discussion and even debate about religion is far from exhausted.

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Religious Cults in the Fictional Universe of the RPG *The Witcher*

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This paper deals with religions found in the fictional world of “The Witcher” video game. Within this fantasy universe, religious communities, institutions, and conflicts are not constructed around theological doctrines, nor do they refer to the issues usually associated with religious faith (such as cosmology, eschatology, ethics or worship). Instead, their depiction is primarily based on their position on violence and their attitude towards the Other. In many respects, this game is a typical product of contemporary pop culture; religions, religiousness, faith, and believers are portrayed here from a secular perspective. As a result, it is the question of religious cults’ willingness to peacefully co-exist with each other and the world around them that comes to the forefront, while issues that are less interesting for non-believers are downplayed or ignored. This article aims to show one of the dominant strategies of representation of religions and believers in contemporary video games.

Keywords: game studies, RPG, *The Witcher*, video games and religion.

Introduction

IN recent years, the topic of religion and video games has developed rapidly; not only has the amount of research grown, but so too has the number of shared aspects (themes and questions) between religion and (video)games and digital culture more broadly. Like other related topics, the study of video games and religion is generally divided into the following categories:

- research on the representation of real religious phenomena in video games (e.g. the representation of Islam, shamanism, and believers, etc. . . .);

- research on the attitudes of believers toward video games and their relationships with video games;
- research on the internal structure of the video game universe, for example, analysis of religion and mythologies as components of a fictitious world in a specific video game or video game franchise;
- the development of research methodologies to examine religion and video games, which is relevant given that game studies lacks a defined method, and thus, like religious studies and other interdisciplinary fields, it borrows and adapts from other disciplines.

There have been several recent works of note that examine video games and religion (Šisler, Radde-Antweiler, and Zeiler 2018). The work of W.S. Bainbridge, which considers concepts such as God, the soul, and death in video games; the work of C. Deitweiler, which examines a wide range of theological questions in video games; and a detailed analysis of religious components in the fictional worlds of *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* by R.M. Geraci (Bainbridge 2013; Deitweiler 2010; Geraci 2014; Linden Research 2003; Blizzard Entertainment 2004).

Currently, academic assessment of video games is poorly developed. This is because there is not yet a generally accepted methodology for analyzing video games. As a result, scholars rely on methods borrowed from other disciplines (e.g. film studies, literary studies, theater studies, etc. . .). Another important feature of scholarship on video games is that the objects of the analysis are often RPG or MMORPG¹ — two genres that are distinguished by an immense amount of content, and thus offer great opportunities to analyze virtually any theme. Since these genres have the greatest scope, they provide the researcher with much material, including textual material, which is more suitable for scholarly analysis because it does not require familiarity with media-specific metrics, which, as of yet, are nonexistent in game studies.

The media specificity of video games is expressed in what video game researchers, following Ian Bogost, call the procedural, that is, the interactive nature of video games that allows a player to perceive certain facts about a fictitious world by observing the game's reaction to their actions (Bogost 2010). For example, in a film a religious ta-

1. RPG — Role-Playing Game — a computerized game, in which game play is based on the management of one or more characters, whose skills, abilities, morality, and actions vary based on a player's or user's actions. MMORPG — Massively multiplayer online role-playing game — an online multiplayer version of similar games.

boo can be depicted through dialogue about the existence of that taboo, or through the fact that none of the heroes perform the prohibited action. In a video game, all of the above is possible, but it is also possible for the taboo to be demonstrated through the players lack of technical ability to do what is forbidden, or through the presence of negative consequences for a player that performs the prohibited action.

Religion in Contemporary RPGs

This article analyzes religious cults in the first part of *The Witcher* trilogy from the studio “CD Projekt” (CD Projekt Red). Rather than examine how believers are analyzed in video games by examining specific religious communities, practices, texts, symbolic systems, etc. . . , this study uses the video game, *The Witcher*, as a case study to illustrate how contemporary Western pop culture depicts religion and people of faith in video games. If this article were examining modern popular literature or cinema such a question would be extremely problematic, if not irrelevant, because of the difficulty of identifying a typical representation of religion and believers. Video games, however, provide an opportunity to explore such a topic, since throughout their existence mainstream video games have maintained and expressed a purely secular view on religion, both its essence and its pragmatic aspects.

Since the author is not a religious scholar but a researcher of popular culture, the focus of this article will not be on the philosophy and history of religious concepts in video games but on the game’s perspective on religious subjects. The analytical basis for this study is the concept of the “fantastic milieu,” developed by Daniel Kirby (Kirby 2013). Based on Partridge’s concept of the occulture and Campbell’s “cultic milieu,” Kirby proposed the “fantastic milieu” to depict the intertext composed by all objects identified as fantastic by popular culture in the current moment (Partridge 2005; Campbell 1972; Kirby 2013). A “fantastic milieu,” which is revealed through a synchronous analysis of texts and works of art that report the meaning of mass culture and texts and practices produced by participants in thematic communities, reveals an ahistorical and egalitarian environment. It is ahistorical because the ordinary consumer is often unaware of the historical source of the cultural object (e.g. a druid, a totem, polytheism, the trinity, prayer, or church), is unaware of the relationship between them, and does not know when, why, and where it originated, how it changed historically, how it faded, or how it survived to the present day. It is egalitarian because, if there is an interior hierarchy among these objects, it

is mainly based on the principle of “more or less well-known.” In other words, the significance of a particular object is determined by its popularity, not by its ontological characteristics.

Before starting an analysis of religious cults in *The Witcher*, I will briefly describe the dominant strategies for constructing religion, faith, and believers in the video game industry in general, and in the RPG genre in particular. By situating the work in a wider context, this study can more clearly observe the construction of religious groups in *The Witcher* and consider what is typical of the genre and what is unique.

First, I will outline the two main ways that religion is depicted in video games: religion as a delusion and religion as a recognized practice that interacts with magic and supernatural forces. Given these two modes of depiction, the veracity of a particular doctrine seldom comes into question because the protagonist (and thus the player) either knows for sure that it is real or true, or he or she has the task of proving that it is a hoax. In either case, the player and the characters they control demonstrate the validity or fallacy of a certain belief. Furthermore, most video games lack the typical features of religious criticism. In general, theology and everything related to it, such as the interpretation of sacred texts and theological debates, are absent from video games. In addition, cosmogony and eschatology seldom appear in video games because all the characters have knowledge about the origin of the world, the presence of intelligent life, etc. . . . If, however, the plot features a religious group that deliberately misleads its adherents, then their cosmology (and more often eschatology) exists in order to be refuted. It is roughly the same with faith; when the existence of gods and other higher powers is not in question, there is no question of faith, but rather a question of proper worship. In fact, often the characters of the fictional world must choose to which forces to swear allegiance in exchange for certain benefits. In the other scenario, in which religion is a delusion, the result is much the same; people blindly believe in a lie (either disseminated maliciously or by mistake) that destroys their lives. Their actions, in this case, are not acts of faith but of excessive trust; they behave as they do simply because they do not verify the information they receive or analyze the situation critically.

As for the believers themselves, the video game industry typically uses the four most common archetypes.

1. The “hypocritical believer” is a character, who verbally proclaims the greatness and importance of certain dogmas, who masquerades as an authority on higher powers, and who claims to appeal to a greater good, but is, in reality, interested only in improving his or her own sit-

uation. Often this character uses religion as a cover or an instrument to achieve selfish ends. Such a character, as a rule, believes that the ends justify the means and does not shy away from deceit, violence, and betrayal. They also actively promote a certain system of principles or restrictions, despite the fact that they themselves violate them. Their goal is, quite simply, to create unequal opportunities that will enable them to rise above others to a position of privilege and power, and their standard role in the storyline is to manipulate others for their own benefit. This type of believer typically acts as an antagonist, who the player must expose.

2. The “fanatic” is a sincere believer of a certain religion. This character also believes that the ends justify the means, and as a rule, their role in the plot is to inflict violence on the other characters. This type of believer is also an antagonist, who the player must often defeat.

3. The “duped believer” is a person who certain religious institutions or figures (often of the previous two types) mislead. This type of believer functions as an exploited victim. They are often convinced by the previous two types to fight on the wrong side or to give them certain powers. Typically, this believer needs to be saved and enlightened by the player, and occasionally they become “collateral damage” in the protagonist’s quest to defeat the main antagonist of the game.

4. The “keeper of balance” is a believer who preaches pacifism, harmony, and tolerance. Often this character is a wise mentor, a keeper of knowledge, and a defender of the prevailing world order. Despite being peaceful, this character is able to fend for themselves and often takes up arms against threats to the status quo. This character is often the protagonist’s teacher and an ally that fights against common foes. This mentor often functions as a source of information about the world and occasionally serves to ensure that the protagonist follows the right path.

The System of Religious Organizations in *The Witcher*

The Witcher is based on a series of Andrzej Sapkowski novels released in the 1980s and 1990s. The novels are a postmodernist bricolage of fantasy of the past and the future (old myths and futurist science fiction). These postmodernist works blend together a variety of elements from mythology and science fiction. Time travel is melded with witch-hunts and burnings, Celtic druidism, naiads and dryads (water and tree nymphs) from Greek mythology, Germanic paganism and runes, and much more. The video game, by and large, is true to its literary

heritage — in particular, its amalgam of ancient mythology and futurist science fiction.

The franchise is of particular interest for this research because of its importance and influence in the RPG genre and because its religious world is quite typical of the fantasy genre, allowing for this study's conclusions to be extrapolated to other mainstream works of the genre. At the same time, there is much that is unique. Religious organizations in *The Witcher*, unlike those in most video games, not only serve to embellish plot points and to stereotypically depict antagonists but are also sufficiently systematic and internally consistent to advance a specific political message. To examine religion in *The Witcher*, this study uses primary and secondary storylines, information about characters belonging to specific religious groups, game dialogue, the in-game encyclopedia (the so-called "Glossary"), as well as books that the protagonist discovers. This study focuses solely on the first installment of the video game trilogy. Information from other parts of the franchise and the card game will not be considered, largely because the depictions of these religious groups evolve significantly from one work to another.

The first installment of the franchise depicts six religious groupings, all of which can be divided into two groups — "religions of peace" and "religions of war." On the one hand, the "religions of war" are characterized by intolerance, aggression, racism, destruction, masculinity, and a cult of power, and are without exception the enemy of the protagonist. On the other hand, the "religions of peace" are inherently pacifist, cooperative, constructive, and tolerant. All of them are also united by their worship of female deities, their acceptance of both men and women priests, and their alliance with the protagonist.

I will consider each of the two groups, starting with the "religions of peace." This group is first represented in the game by a Druidic cult that worships Mother Nature. Such religious groupings, based on "ecological" mythologies, are common in modern fantasies, and typically combine romanticized elements of ancient Celtic, Scandinavian, and Greek mythology (e.g. druids, elves and fairies, sacred trees and forests, and naiads and dryads). Depictions of "ecological" druids in fantasy are influenced by the following elements: pop-cultural ideas about eco-spiritual practices (or Ecospirituality) and larger religious movements, a set of fantasy elements related to nature, and the environmentalist agenda. As a result of all of these elements, druids appear to protect nature from "dirty civilizations," completely disregarding the fact that real druids by no means opposed civilizational

pollution. In popular culture, ecological philosophies are usually accompanied by ideas of balance and equilibrium, and hence egalitarianism and tolerance. Such depictions can be found in countless video games, and *The Witcher*, by and large, follows this pattern. In the game this cult is represented by one community of devotees (several druids and one dryad) living in a sacred grove. The sanctity of this place is manifested in the game by the fact that wild animals that typically attack the protagonist are not aggressive here. The aforementioned stereotype of the “keeper of the balance” is realized. The druids live in the sacred grove “in harmony with nature,” are peaceful and tolerant, and their grove is open to all (e.g. man, elf, Witcher, wild beast, etc. . .). Moreover, the druids fight for equality by assisting rebels, who are fighting against the oppression of ethnic minorities.

The next group of interest is the Cult of the Lady of the Lake. Its original source is Greek mythology (the protagonist calls the Lady a “water nymph”), but it also draws significantly from Arthurian storylines, as evidenced by the Lady’s name; the sword given to the main character; the presence of knights looking for the grail (the pseudonym of one of whom is the Fisher King); and a number of other small details that refer to Arthurian mythology. Like the druid cult, the Cult of the Lady of the Lake is associated with nature and peace. The Lady maintains peace between people and water, grants fertility to the fields, and ensures the prosperity of the village “Murky Waters.”

The next group, the Melitele Cult, is similar to the previous two as is demonstrated by this in-game source:

Melitele is the goddess of the harvest, fertility, and nature. Like nature, she brings peace and balance to everything she touches. This cult is very similar to the faith of the Druids; naturalness and harmony are characteristic of both faiths. The priestesses of this cult are famous for their therapeutic abilities (CD Projekt Red 2007).

In the game the player also finds the following text, allegedly written on behalf of a scientist from Nilfgaard, a country hostile to the northern kingdom.

Among the numerous faiths of the Nordlings, the most widespread is the Cult of Melitele, a goddess in three forms: young girl, mature woman, and old hag. Melitele is a Mother Goddess, caring for her children. Primarily women pray to her, though men in need might also utter supplications. The religion is a vestige of the old matriarchy and testifies to

the weakness of the Nordlings — people who worship female deities are soft-hearted and incapable of preparing their sons for war” (CD Projekt Red 2007).

The Cult of Melitele is derived primarily from pagan fertility cults and to a lesser extent from Christianity and 20th century theories, developed by Margaret Murray and Robert Graves, about matriarchal Proto-Indo-European Europe (Murray 2012; Murray 2014; Graves 2013). Although the scientific community does not accept their argument, recent works on the triune Goddess, by the American archeologists and anthropologists Graves and Marija Gimbutas, argued that proto-Indo-European society was matriarchal, based on ideas of tolerance, equality, and peaceful coexistence, and was destroyed by the invasion of Indo-Europeans, who brought with them a warlike and intolerant culture (Gimbutas 1989; Gimbutas 1991; Gimbutas 2007). The concept of the triune Goddess has become widespread in neopagan thought, within the broader New Age movement, and to some extent in the feminist milieu. Furthermore, this concept is used in many fantasy works, for example, in George R.R. Martin’s well-known *A Song of Ice and Fire* series.

Now it is time to consider the three remaining groups, the so-called “religions of war.” These include the Cult of Dagon, the Cult of the Lionhead Spider, and the Cult of the Eternal Fire.

The Cult of Dagon is the antithesis of the Cult of the Lady of the Lake. The two share a common space (the altar of Dagon is on the same island, where the Lady lives) and a common flock (Dagon is also worshipped by people and an amphibious humanoid race) but have opposing agendas. Dagon was the name of an ancient Mesopotamian and Canaanite deity later appropriated by popular culture in the works of H.P. Lovecraft and the author’s successors — Brian Lumley, August Derlet, and other popular writers, who referenced Lovecraftian mythology (e.g. Neil Gaiman, Stephen King, etc. . .). In addition to the name and amphibious-humanoid devotees, the game borrows from Lovecraftian mythology references to a giant staircase descending into the water; the destructive origin of the cult (its devotees believe that one day Dagon will emerge from the water and destroy the land); and the presence of a village of bricklayers, who do not attack the main character, but worship Dagon and dream of destroying the land (an obvious reference to Innsmouth and other “calm waters” from Lovecraftian storylines). Similar to the Lady of the Lake, Dagon links people and the water, but not for the purpose of coexistence; Dagon’s

devotees want to help destroy the land. Dagon and the creature's amphibious-humanoid followers are openly hostile to both humans and other aquatic worshippers of the Lady of the Lake. Throughout the story they are enemies of the hero, and in the main storyline, the protagonist fights with Dagon and the creature's followers.

The Cult of the Lionhead Spider is more difficult to analyze. Initially, the developers planned to feature this group in several secondary storylines but abandoned these storylines and their related tasks and characters. In other words, unlike the other five religious groups considered, there is little information about the Cult of the Lionhead Spider. No information is received from other characters, the cult does not appear in the main plot, and the player has the opportunity to not encounter it at all. Nevertheless, several in-game objects, related to the group, remained in the game that the player can discover and on which he or she can form an impression of the cult. These include a situation where, upon searching the city sewer, the main character discovers a letter on the corpse of a knight with information about the group; a non-player character (NPC),² who curses the surrounding crowd, invoking the Lionhead spider; and a cave filled with hostile NPCs using the name "Priest of the Lionhead Spider." It is not known how these were to be tied into the initial plan for the group, but I will analyze the elements in the final version. Everything that the player learns about the cult from the release version of the game, without consulting third-party sources, is as follows: the cult is forbidden in the territory of the known kingdoms, it is associated with human sacrifices, it is practiced in secret, and its followers, by and large, only interact with the player's character in battle. There is only one character in the game, which based on a single remark, is a follower of the cult and friendly with the protagonist, however, this character's faith in the Spider deity remains a secret, one which is only revealed in one of the two possible outcomes in the final chapters of the game. Followers of the Lionhead Spider, as a whole, appear to be aggressive, impossible to understand, radical sectarians, who avoid dialogue with the player.

The last organization of interest — the Cult of the Eternal Fire — can be described as the most consistent with stereotypical representations of medieval Christianity in popular culture and fantasy. The Cult of the Eternal Fire is the only organization called a "Church," it has a spiritual and chivalric order, it engages in witch-hunts and burnings,

2. NPC — Non-Playable Character — any player in a game who is not controlled by a player.

and it is extremely intolerant. Here is how it is described in the aforementioned in-game book:

In recent years, the Cult of Melitele has found a rival in the Cult of the Eternal Fire, which came out of Novigrad. Clerics of the Eternal Fire demonstrate fanaticism and almost compete devotion. The religion is hostile toward any form of otherness, including non-humans. The faith is based on the worship of the Eternal Flame. The embodiment of the flame is any manifestation of fire. According to the belief, the Eternal Flame is the essence of all living things. At the heart of the cult is the dominant masculine principle. This explains why the priestly posts are occupied by men. The order of the Flaming Rose is the cult's military arm (CD Projekt Red 2007).

It should be noted that it is only this religion that includes “hypocritical” believers. The “religions of peace” are composed only of “keepers of balance” and the Cults of Dagon and Spider are composed only of fanatics. I will briefly describe one of the characters, who is positioned as a typical representative of the Eternal Fire, the Reverend Fura. Although the Reverend frequently speaks of kindness, the character's actions demonstrate that those words are hollow. During the game, the main character learns that Fura protects local bandits that drove the hero's daughter out of the house and to prostitution; that Fura calls for the punishment of a man, whose guilt has yet to be proven; that Fura sells children to a dangerous gang; and that the reverend tries to kill the hero, even after the protagonist rescues the village and Fura from a monster. Over the course of the game, Fura is distinguished by a distrust of strangers and a tendency to blame problems on external enemies.

This cult needs to be considered in more detail, particularly its chivalric order, the Order of the Flaming Rose, since it is the principle antagonist in the game. The Order embodies a popular cliché, namely the Order considers itself or at least depicts itself as a necessary evil that is required to protect the world from greater evils. It is important to note that the Order was not always like this. It was originally called the Order of the White Rose and, like the entire Cult of the Eternal Fire, lacked a well-defined system of morality, dogma, theology, or a cosmogony or eschatology. As numerous in-game sources report the Order of the White Rose decayed over time and was supplanted by the Order of the Flaming Rose, as its goal became the protection of temples and clergymen. The Order became more immor-

al as well. According to the in-game text: “Masters and knights were equally corrupt, lacking in faith; they preferred a warm bed to fighting, street girls to prayer” (CD Projekt 2007). This change occurred when Jacques de Aldersberg became the Grand Master of the Order, renaming it the Order of the Flaming Rose and transforming its purpose. Publicly, its goal was and is to protect humans from monsters and rebels, but behind the scenes it strives to implement a secret plan that would guarantee salvation from the coming apocalypse. Jacques, who possesses strong magical abilities, has visions, in which the world is destroyed by global cooling. This eschatological concept — the only one in the game — preoccupies Jacques’ mind, leading the Grand Master to search for a path of salvation, one which Jacques finds by creating a superhuman race that — under the Master’s tutelage — can survive the apocalypse. This becomes storyline behind the key conflict of the game. Jacques is the only character in the game who acts on faith. Even though the vast majority of people place little credibility in the Grand Master’s premonitions, Jacques believes them and works tirelessly, ultimately perishing in the effort to prevent the end of the world. Thus, the conflict between the main character and Jacques’ Order is, in fact, the only religious conflict in the game, and the actions of the Grand Master (experiments on people, contract killings, and an attempted coup) can only be justified if the world is truly facing an apocalypse that would serve to vindicate Jacques’ faith.

Thus, the game presents a spiritual binary between peaceful and militarist religions. In the absence of theological problems and the question of faith in deities, the choice of religion comes down to a choice between peace and war, tolerance and intolerance. While the main character is typically given the opportunity to choose sides in conflicts, the user is forced to be at peace with the “religions of peace” and at war with the “religions of war.” This is consistent with how other games depict the religious environment. Religions are typically categorized based on whether the secular community considers them harmful.

It is also important to consider peaceful and militarist religions from a different angle. The “religions of war” (e.g. the Cult of Dagon, the Cult of the Lionhead Spider, and the Cult of the Eternal Fire) are revolutionary and seek to violate or alter the status quo, while good religious organizations defend it. This new state of the world or revolutionary change is brought about through violence. Without these enemies, who want to change the world, it would remain unchanged. The story uses traditional fairy tale tropes, whereby the antagonists vi-

olate the status quo and the hero's task is to restore it. This parallels secular society's views on religion, whereby religions are categorized by whether their believers practice their faith insularly, away from the eyes of "normal people," or whether they use their beliefs to actively shape the world around them.

The mobilizing power of the game's militarist cults lies in the promise of struggle, danger, and death, which may seem counterintuitive, but for many is more appealing than the stability, tranquility, and harmony promised by the peaceful cults. The call of the "religions of war" to forcibly alter the status quo enables the individual to be involved in bringing about revolutionary change. In other words, the appeal of such religions is that they allow an individual to feel like they have some influence over their world and their own situation. The preservation of the status quo — supported by the "religions of peace" — is, in fact, the struggle to ensure that nothing new occurs, and hence the individual is unlikely to be able to contribute to the course of events or to improve their own lot.

In the case of the knights of the Flaming Rose, revolutionary change should be understood literally because they strive to achieve a literal physical transformation. The question that arises is why their particular goal is unacceptable to Witchers; not only are the Witchers hybrids, they are the hybrids upon which the Order's mutants are based. The answer put forth by the game is that the Witchers were created not to change society, but to protect and preserve it from other supernatural threats that seek to transform it, such as the Order. With this in mind, Jacques is an existential enemy of the Witchers because the Grand Master seeks to fundamentally modernize society and the world. In the same vein, Nilfgaard — the modernized state in the south — is also an enemy of the Witchers because it promises to disturb the status quo by bringing its progress to all kingdoms through military conquest. Jacques, however, is a larger concern because the Master's eschatological project offers not simply the modernization of man and society, but also the transformation of time and history. Specifically, it implies that the history of the world is linear — approaching an apocalypse — as opposed to cyclical and repetitive. In accordance with this view of history and time, Jacques seeks to transform the knights to a new state of existence so that humanity can continue to live in the world. The protagonist rejects this linear view of the future, and upon defeating Jacques and the Order triumphs over the linear view of time, bringing the world back into cyclical time.

Conclusion

The system of religious organizations in *The Witcher* promotes a conservative message for the game. The fundamental question is not only about violence against people, but also about violence against the prevailing world order. When religious organizations try to transform the world order, the protagonist (a protector by profession) aligns with preservationist cults and aims to eliminate the existential threat and preserve the status quo that the religious revolutionaries try to undermine.

The video game's purely secular view on religion and people of faith becomes obvious. The fact that *The Witcher* like many other pop culture works presents only certain aspects of religions and not others is not an accident. Within the framework of Western secular ideology, non-believers value religions that are peaceful, that are tolerant of dissenters, that do not intervene in secular affairs, etc. . . In other words, the main question for non-believers seems to be whether religious practitioners will try to interfere in their lives. Theology, acts of faith, and many other religious practices for most non-believers are either invisible or unimportant. Therefore, when secularists create art forms that contain religious themes, they often depict them from a secular perspective. Thus, for the creators of *The Witcher*, religious groups are distinguished by their willingness to live at peace with Others.

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Viktor Shnirel'man. 2017. "Koleno Danovo". *Eskhatologiia i antisemitizm v sovremennoi Rossii* ["*The Tribe of Dan.*" *Eschatology and Antisemitism in Modern Russia*]. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo BBI (in Russian). — 631 p.

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Viktor Alexandrovich Shnirel'man has released another *magnum opus* distinguished by its fine methodology and meticulous research. This huge volume explores several key aspects of contemporary Russian culture by using Post-Soviet "modernity" as a mirror to examine Judeo-Christian religious memory in *fin-de siècle* Russia. The author draws links between several modern phenomena: Christian eschatology as a theological tradition and cultural practice; the folklore and urban apocalypticism of Russia's turbulent twentieth century; Judeophobia (and concurrent Judeophilia) as religious and ethno-national narrative archetype; pre- and post-Soviet anti-Westernism, anti-liberalism, and anti-globalism; and Russia's ultra-right, nationalist subculture. Shnirel'man draws intuitive connections between all these phenomena and examines how they manifested in pre- and post-So-

viet Russia. Readers will be in awe of the sheer amount of material that Shnirel'man has processed. His deep textual readings and nuanced ethnographic approach provide a deep immersion into revolutionary and post-Soviet Russia, in particular their texts and actors.

Before moving to Shnirel'man's main conclusions, it is useful to explore the content and structure of the work. The first-fifth of the work is devoted to a historical overview through the late imperial period, in which the author describes deep-seated anti-Judaism in Christian, and in particular Orthodox, eschatology. He not only analyzes stereotypically anti-Semitic theologians, but also deeper-seated Judeophobic reflections by Sergei Bulgakov and Vasily Rozanov; by Judeophile thinkers from Vladimir Solovyov to Nikolai Berdiaev; and by Orthodox writers and publicists, led by the notorious Sergei Nilus. The

work explores *fin-de siècle* anti-Semitism within the context of the unfolding revolutionary situation, paying particular attention to key concepts, such as the apocalypse and the millennium; the Antichrist and the *katechon* (a monarch or a nation “withholding” the arrival of the Antichrist); and the trope of *peccatorum Judaeorum*, the sin of the Jews, which was intensified by racial, nationalist and anti-global sentiment, and ultimately manifested the “Jewish (Judeo-Masonic) conspiracy.” The next sections, devoted to the Soviet period, are much scarcer. The author demonstrates that while there was a near absence of theological debate in the USSR, the continuation of pre-revolutionary anti-Semitic traditions can be observed in émigré theology. Shnirel’man then unpacks the main themes of the book: the general cultural framework of post-Soviet apocalypticism; the revival and reissuing of the texts of Sergei Nilus and other anti-Semitic authors; the rise of apocalyptic anti-Semitism in the ultra-right (nationalist and patriotic) post-Soviet press and literature; the Church’s Orthodox eschatology of the recent decades; and the mass panics that accompanied individualized tax numbers and other similar conspiracies. Shnirel’man also includes a chapter on similar phenomena “outside the Church” —

in new religious movements, such as the “White Brotherhood,” the “Center of the Theotocos,” and the “Church of the Last Testament.” Finally, he adds a short comparative chapter on American millenarianism, which the author calls “eschatological optimism,” characterized by its fundamentally different, positive attitude towards Jews and Israel.

Many of the work’s limitations are the inevitable result of its multi-layered complexity and scope. The last chapters in particular are structurally disjointed (e.g. the position of the Orthodox hierarchy is highlighted after the non-Orthodox movements; the chapter on the murder of the Optina Hermitage elders is not sufficiently integrated; and the chapter on American millenarianism, despite its comparative relevance, seems a bit superficial, etc. . .). The plethora of names and publications are also difficult to keep track of, particularly since they often appear, then disappear, and after a few pages resurface yet again. The abundance of quotations, sometimes in endless sequence, also make the argument difficult to perceive. All of these issues, as well as the structural ones mentioned above, could be referred to as shortcomings that are a result of the work’s merits. The author is “overwhelmed” by his material, making its systematization and

integration into a core argument extremely difficult, and rendering the work hard to grasp and follow, especially as it discusses contemporary anti-Semitism, unfolding in “real time.” These critiques aside, the richness of the work and its overall design are unquestionable. In addition, the desire to challenge the work and ask new questions of it are themselves a productive component of the scholarly process.

The work makes several important contributions. Shnirel'man's ultimate task is to show the connection between Christian eschatology and Judeophobia (anti-Semitism) and to demonstrate how they influenced each other. Such an interpretation may be inescapable since the author proceeds from two primary postulates: firstly, that the apocalyptic (catastrophic) eschatology is characteristic of the “Christian perspective” on history, and secondly, that behind the idea of anti-Judaism rests “the sin of the Jews,” a concept which became central to the apocalypse, linking the image of the Antichrist to the “tribe of Dan.” Although such a scheme dominates in the book, the author avoids conclusions that are overly direct to maintain a sense of ambiguity. It must also be understood that the “Christian perspective of history” is quite a broad concept, which may not include anti-Judaism. Moreover, this perspective,

although in essence eschatological, is not necessarily catastrophic, and interest in the apocalypse *per se* was, on the whole, quite marginal. The author recalls the Russian Church Council of 1917-1918, which, despite the unfolding catastrophe, in the days when Vasily Rozanov was writing his “Apocalypse of Our Time,” deliberately opposed excessive catastrophism (p. 16). Both before and after the Revolution, in the Russian Orthodoxy and in the Western Christian tradition, the expectation of the Antichrist and its connection to the Jews manifested fleetingly, in moments of particular social tension, but in general Christian eschatological thought and liturgical routine proceeded without these two elements.

What is certain, as Shnirel'man notes, is that, whereas interest in apocalyptic (catastrophic) eschatology and the Antichrist in the West has steadily declined (with nineteenth-century American millenarianism as a potential exception), in Russia, from the seventeenth-century Schism to the Revolution, popular cultural myths retained the figure of the Antichrist, the fears associated with it, and the prophecies connected to a sort of applied eschatology of conspiracy. But interest in these subjects erupted only periodically, in times of deep cultural fracture. Russia experienced such a disruption at the end of

the twentieth century, but that too gradually died down by the end of 2000s. As post-Soviet uncertainty quieted and mass anxiety subsided, theological discourse softened (p. 41). Shnirel'man demonstrates that by 2005 the All Church conference on "The Eschatological Teaching of the Church," was clearly oriented towards the expectation of Christ, not the Antichrist (p. 141). The same applies to the "tribe of Dan." Attention to it has decreased in the twenty-first century and has been accompanied by a decline in sociologically recorded anti-Semitism. Interest in the "tribe" was low in the nineteenth century as well, even among such passionate theologians as the Optina and Athos elders; the Professor of the Spiritual Academy, Alexander Beliaev; and the Archimandrite Theodore (Bukharev), the originator of the idea of the Russian tsar as a *katechon*.

Shnirel'man also tracks the shifts from theological discourse to racial ideology and from Christian anti-Judaism to anti-Semitism. Racialized, ethnic anti-Semitism was a new, nineteenth-century phenomenon with deep roots in European nationalism. This ideology originated in Europe and was imported to Russia (as Shnirel'man shows, from France), where it found fertile soil among popular ideas about the Orthodox apocalyptic. Sergei Ni-

lus linked this Orthodox apocalyptic with new anti-Jewish phobias, connecting the image of the Antichrist and the Jew to suspicions of a worldwide "Jewish-Masonic conspiracy." In Nilus' *Protocols*, "the Elders of Zion" were to become both the future army of the Antichrist and the leaders of world government. It is also interesting to note that Nilus used Solovyov's Judeophilic constructions, with the emphases and value judgements inverted, deepening ties between Judeophilia and Judeophobia. (The *fin-de siècle* journalist, Vasily Rozanov, demonstrated this seeming contradiction in one person!).

After the *Protocols*, Orthodox literature — both semi-anonymous popular literature and academic-theological works — was filled with anti-Semitic discourse, which reached a fanatical exaltation in the revolutionary era as the process of Jewish emancipation proceeded. For many Christian observers in exile, the Revolution itself became the best proof of the prophecy. The Bolsheviks, as Shnirel'man stresses, were not only associated with the "Mongol hordes" (p. 89), but also with the Jews. This dramatic change in Jewish destinies and its prominent place in the eschatological discourse deserves more attention.

In the post-Soviet period, the sinister concoction of apocalyptic theology and anti-Semitism

proliferated once again, recalling the atmosphere of a century earlier. Shnirel'man focuses on this very mixture, and with the meticulousness of a true social entomologist examines a corpus of materials from wide-ranging collection. He lists, for example, all the publishers that reissued Nilus and explores anti-Semitism in lesser-known periodicals and works from those such as Konstantin Dushe-
nov, Alexander Shargunov, Alexander Dugin, and other relatively unknown or even anonymous authors. Shnirel'man repeatedly emphasizes that there was little unanimity among these writers, however, one trend emerges. When reviewing anti-Semitic conspiracies, the authors introduce different versions and interpretations to invite readers to make their own choice — a rhetorical technique employed to maintain authorial impartiality while capitalizing on the expected anti-Semitic instincts of the audience.

The main question that arises from these post-Soviet cases is to what extent they are representative or marginal. The size and breadth of the book certainly forces the reader to take this phenomenon seriously, but it is paramount to remember that post-Soviet *glasnost* made what was previously beyond the pale fair game and launched an unprecedented increase in publications, surpassing even that of the ear-

ly 1900s. Amidst this tidal wave of publications, prophecies about the end of the world and suggestions of Jewish malevolence may be marginal. The same applies to apocalyptic praxis and the Orthodox elders behind them, resistance to the introduction of individualized tax numbers (presumably containing the “number of the beast”), and the rise of right-wing radical groups. The most important methodological task is thus to maintain proportionality and to be wary of exaggeration or highlighting atypical cases. This, in turn, leads to several other theoretical issues, the social constructive role of myths, the cognitive expectation of stereotypes, and the assumption that while popular lore may be “dormant,” it remains potentially significant and volatile. To put it simply, is it by chance that in the year of the centenary of the murder of the royal family (2018), the myth of “ritual murder” revived?

Another important conclusion is the idea that the Russian apocalyptic (or millenarianism) was not only anti-Semitic, but also anti-Western, and that this is perhaps an even a stronger current in Russian Orthodox thought.¹

1. For a recent work on anti-Western sentiments in Eastern Orthodoxy, see G. Demacopoulos and A. Papanikolaou, eds. *Orthodox Constructions of the West* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

While this was the case in the nineteenth century, in the early twentieth century, anti-Semitism was an arguably stronger current. The latter half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century pose the biggest problem for this argument because as the global hegemony of the liberal West deteriorated, so too did anti-Westernism. It is also important to note that in some circumstances this anti-Westernism provoked anti-Semitism or could be manipulated to encourage it if desired; most often, however, the two remained separate as the author demonstrates even though it detracts from his principal argument.

With this work, Shnirel'man completes his trilogy, the first two parts of which were devoted to the "Khazar myth" and the "Aryan myth" in Russian culture.² All three studies are connected by one main theme — anti-Semitism. For the most part, the works discuss ideological, discursive practices and although they occasionally address popular, im-

PLICIT, and often unarticulated anti-Semitism, such subjects are explored in much less detail.

Anti-Semitism — whether popular or eschatological — is an awkward topic for academic research. On the one hand, there are norms that compel scholars to go beyond the scope of academic studies and to cast anti-Semitism as an absolute evil — the most concentrated form of xenophobia. On the other hand, academic ethos requires objectivity, balance, and caution so as not to replace scrutiny and impartiality with emotional impulse. In general, Shnirel'man proceeds with caution and removes charges from his subjects in cases where anti-Semitism is only intuitively expected, but not proven. His restraint when presenting dubious constructions and the occasionally outlandish conspiracies of his characters compels him to use the word "allegedly" 566 times in the book (almost on every page) to question the veracity of their statements and claims. He does not, however, hide his antipathy towards his subjects or their deplorable words. From time to time, the text erupts with ironic exclamations ("oh, how terrible!" — he adds in parentheses, when quoting an anti-Semitic passage, and on another occasion he writes that an author is "possessed" with the idea of "Orthodox globalization" opposed to the "corrupted West.") Though

2. V. Shnirel'man, *Khazarskii mif. Evoliutsiia politicheskogo radikalizma v Rossii i ee istoki* [The Khazar Myth. Evolution of Political Radicalism in Russia and its Origins] (Jerusalem: Mosty kul'tury, 2012); V. Shnirel'man, *Ariiskii mif v sovremennom mire. Evoliutsii ariiskogo mifa k Rossii* [Aryan Myth in the Modern World. The Evolution of the Aryan Myth to Russia] (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2015).

Shnirel'man is cautious, he does not seek to pass for an unbiased observer, a stance which I support unambiguously! While the author acknowledges the general decline in open, public anti-Semitism in Russia in this century, he is absolutely correct, when he reiterates that public opinion is "as unstable as the weather"; that implicit anti-Semitism persists; that new forms of xenophobia, such as the rejection of the Western and liberal tradition, which political propaganda often support, are no

better; and that the Russian ultraright, sometimes conjoining with Orthodox alarmism, while currently constrained by the authoritarian control of the state, could, at any moment, exploit events to find fertile ground among both political elites and the general public. As long as these dangers persist, the importance of this book goes well beyond its undeniable academic merits.

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