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Technopaganism: A semiotic approach to digital religious phenomena

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Introduction

When analyzing phenomena such as contemporary emerging spiritualities and religions, one might ask, how have they found their way in the developing digital culture? Why does it seem that, indistinctly of the historical era, social context, and technological environment, religion – or diversity of aspects resonating with religion - seemed to emerge as a need or a stubbornly persistent, recurring aspect of human's understanding of themselves, the world and their own placement into the world? As Hent de Vries assured, whether religion is conceived as a practice, a form of life, a set of norms, "it continues to claim a prominent role in attempts to understand the past, to grapple with the present, and to anticipate, if not to prophesy, the future." (De Vries 2008, p. 1)

These questions gain relevance when exploring phenomena like technopaganism, a term encompassing a variety of practices and expressions related to contemporary Paganism, popular culture, and spiritual pursuits in digital environments. Technopaganism may sound like an odd composition of two different, even radically opposed categories. The suffix "techno" and the noun "Paganism" open a whole corpus of signifieds, where computational technologies and pre-modern forms of religion come together as a manifestation of our contemporary and interconnected reality. It appeared during the 1990s, with the beginning of cyberculture and the arrival of the web 2.0. There, a diversity of religions and spiritual proposals began to emerge in cyberspace, which by that time was not only a space to encounter other users, but also a territory for communion with the sacred, the numinous and the magical imaginary of many cultures.

In this scenario bursting with religious potentialities, technopaganism gained a lot of popularity between commons users, scholars and techno-enthusiasts. Just as Neopaganism - its predecessor – it has been characterized more by ritual practices than by fixed and stable beliefs. And because of its tendency to ritual and poetic expression, Technopaganism started to transform virtual platforms into a sacred space, assigning it other uses and readings.

This phenomenon responds to the hybrid contemporary ecosystem where a multiplicity of texts and discourses crash and interrelate. For that matter, "it is not

possible to think of religion and media as separate spheres [since] the two are now converging on one another" (Hoover 2012, p. 30), contributing to a sort of "re-enchantment 2.0", where the technical developments and progress are also accompanied by the mystification of technology itself (Aupers 2002, p. 218). Such statements highlight a capital importance for semiotics, considering how the permeation of technological innovation in a sphere as universal as religion has distorted the structures of meaning, producing new objects of analysis: religions using digital media as instruments and beliefs inhabiting digital media as an environment. We are going to be situated especially in the second scenario.

Though the notion of technopaganism eventually started to lose its popularity during the first decade of the 2000s, people recognizing themselves as technopagans continue to inhabit all kinds of platforms, like virtual communities and video games. However, what better describes the current technopagan condition is how it manifests implicitly in a variety of texts. Users of all types of religious backgrounds can show family resemblances with the characteristics describing the first technopagan manifestations, especially some Neopagan aspects such as an animistic ontology regarding other beings, entities, and forces, including machines and various technological devices.

According to Erik Davis, technopaganism might just acknowledge the fact that technologies "have been enchanted to some degree all along, and technopagan magic must be seen in the larger and more ambivalent context of a widespread, if unacknowledged, technological animism" (2015, p. 439). In contemporary technologies, several elements contribute to assigning it a mysterious and spiritual aura. Feelings of awe, for instance, can be experienced through many online performances, carrying a particularly intense kind of immersion. Nevertheless, and as mentioned by Stef Aupers, this happens by working "on hardly tangible material such as complex computer programs, electromagnetic waves or microchips apparently forms a fertile breeding ground for interpreting and framing it as a mystery." (2009, p. 160). All these conditions impact in the ways of inhabiting the contemporary panorama. Not simply as a disruption and reformulation of the processes of communication mediated by computer platforms, but also a questioning of our relationship with the digital universe and its complex operations.

After this short introduction, we could say that the importance of technopaganism lies in how these phenomena started to manifest without containing an explicit epistemology describing its practices, functioning, mythologies, and inner structures. This is, perhaps, because Technopaganism never searched for a conceptualization but, instead, its own dynamism introduces other ontologies, spiritual recognitions, and new ways of relating with the technological otherness. In such a way, how can we make sense of emerging texts having resemblances with religious or spiritual narratives and practices? I will attempt to answer this through semiotic analysis, mainly rooted in Julia Kristeva, with the help of other semiotic authors like Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Jacques Fontanille, as well as Posthumanists like Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway and Catherine Hayles, and philosophers like Merleau-Ponty and David Abram. Other authors and approaches will also contribute to this exploration.

It is important to clarify that this thesis does not aim to explain what Technopagaism is, but what it implies, which practices and beliefs come with it, and how, by understanding the conditions that inspired its appearance, it can be recognizable in many experiences involving spiritual pursuits in the digital sphere.

Having this in mind, this thesis will be divided into three different areas. The first one will be dedicated to the study of Neopaganism. Its aim is to recognize its intrinsic characteristics, ontological relational strategies - animism, and why it has permeated so deeply into popular culture. The second chapter will analyze the digital context. This will help to understand our 'cyborg' condition in contemporaneity and other processes, such as digital embodiment. This chapter will also clarify how the digital space is actually a territory that can be experienced sensuously and poetically. The third chapter will explore the arrival of Paganism onto the internet and how it is pictured nowadays in the digital scenario.

Why Julia Kristeva?

We find ourselves involved in a culture that constantly emanates new signs and new signifying systems. Just as Yuri Lotman and the Tartu school carried out exhaustive work in assigning meanings to the cultural and social panorama of the last decades, other traditions in contemporary semiotics manage to enter and submerge in the depths

of the changing fabric of the present. For example, the theoretical proposals of Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Jacques Fontanille, and, of course, Julia Kristeva have tried to dynamize the semiotic method within a society that is producing hybrid and complex objects of study. Since this thesis is based on the analysis of technopaganism, we will not be content with just exploring and documenting its expressions and modes of participation. Semiotics will allow us to traverse the field of this digital phenomenon.

The conceptions of textual semiotics, and the application of semiotics as a discipline that textualizes its object of study, would have a different approach in the Kristevian theory. The text, here, is not a static and fixed piece of a social discourse. On the contrary, it is a productive *significance* that does not stop changing, dialoguing, and interconnecting with other texts, while acknowledging the speaking subject, the society in which the text takes place, and the present historical moment. As she states, semiotics need to replace the former, rhetorical division of genres with a typology of text, "that is, to define the specificity of different textual arrangements by placing them within the general text (culture) of which they are part and which is in turn, part of them" (Kristeva 1980, p. 36).

Methodology:

Julia Kristeva's linguistic theory was deeply influenced by psychoanalysis, and this influence can be perceived in her psycho-linguistic understanding of language, which she introduces in Revolution in Poetic Language (1974). This research was actually her doctoral thesis, and it became the starting point for a series of discussions about the processes that constitute language and how they are centred on the speaking subject (Moi 1986, p. 12). Meaning that subjects' status is created by language, but language itself is transformed and activated by subjects themselves. In other words, "the logic of language is already operating at the material level of bodily processes and that bodily drives make their way into language" (Oliver 2002, p. xvi).

Therefore, the subject's figure is essential both in Kristeva's theory and her critique of the structuralist approaches. She criticizes the philosophies of language as "nothing more than mere archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs" since the only subject appearing in their analysis turns to be that transcendental ego which, in Husserl's view,

"underlies any and every predicative synthesis" (Kristeva 2002, p. 27). In the words of Kristeva, "[t]hese static thoughts, products of a leisurely cogitation removed from historical turmoil, persist in seeking the truth of language by formalizing utterances that hang in midair and the truth of the subject by listening to the narrative of a sleeping body – a body in repose, withdrawn from its sociohistorical imbrication, removed from direct experience (…)" (2002, p. 27).

The technopagan emerges only in the very act of engaging with the digital medium in a poetic way, which means through acts of enunciation where the speaking subject creates an intimate relationship with the virtual space, articulated in rituals or other practices connected to the spiritual. This analysis, therefore, needs a theory working on the signifying processes involving directly the speaking subject: which is the one activating technopaganism in the digital realm. Through Kristeva's theory, we will try to explore the mechanisms and discursive forms by which the religious is enunciated and camouflaged. That is to say, how through the experience that we develop in the digital context, the religious sense emerges as a poetic discourse, which Kristeva considered revolutionary for language.

Some critical notions about Kristeva:

Considering that many of Julia Kristeva's concepts are relatively unknown or differ from general semiotics, some important Kristevian notions are shortly introduced as follows, in order to make the reading of this thesis more efficient. The most important concepts will then be further deepened in the different chapters, when appearing in the text.

Signifying Process: produced by two forces or two modalities. The first one is the a) semiotic, the modality where the so-called primary process occurs. This stage represents "the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such" (Kristeva 2002, p. 35), and it first appears in the infant that does not conceive a separation from the mother and the world. Here, the drives that constitute the child are articulated in what Kristeva named the *semiotic chora*. The semiotic *chora* "is associated with sounds and rhythms that set up the possibility of signification before the infant (mis)recognizes itself in the mirror image" (idem., p. 24). The other stage is b) the symbolic, which is articulated, situated,

and governed by law. The symbolic step occurs when the infant recognizes his/her own subjectivity and separates his/her worldview from the mother. The symbolic is the element of signification associated with position, judgment, and grammar and is what allows communication to be intelligible. These stages coexist together and they are, following Kristeva, "inseparable within the signifying process that constitute language, and the dialectics between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved" (2002 p. 34).

Poetic Language: is what reactivates the semiotic drive force in language through its sounds and rhythms (Kristeva 2002, p. 24). It is an operation "in which the dialectic of the subject is inscribed" (Kristeva 1980, p. 25), that is to say, the dialectical movement between semiotic and symbolic. The dynamics of heterogeneity, interconnectivity, and openness of the poetic function free language from automatism by enriching the signifying process with desire and consciousness. Poetic language does not seek to communicate or represent the 'real' but, instead, challenges the laws of grammar and tradition that enclose it in a single definition or normative syntagmatic relations. It refers to everything that isn't still a law (1978, p. 67). In this sense, the importance lies in how the subject re-appropriates language and its material significance. Poetic language positions the subject not as a mechanical actor but as the 'place' where the process of meaning occurs. In the different scenarios this thesis presents, users are immersed in a poetic action when producing hybrid signifying processes from their own religious desire.

Language: Kristeva's theory of language is based on a Freudian model of language with "its emphasis on the presence of the body at all levels of rationalization" (Gambaudo 2007, p. 18). "For Kristeva, Freudian psychoanalysis is the only theoretical discourse that takes as its task an analysis of the threshold of the speaking being" (Keltner 2011, p. 28). In Kristeva, language welcomes the body and its drives. For her, language is not a tool, "nor is it a subject that can be studied independently from the speaking subject, as Chomsky's treatment of language suggests (Kristeva 1980). Rather, Kristeva's theory of language, comprise both the mundane and the imaginative. In words of McAfee:

> she has come up with very powerful tools for understanding how language produces speaking
> beings who emerge in that fold between language and culture. She offers a sustained and nuanced
> understanding of how subjectivity is produced; how language actually operates when people

speak, write, and create; and how beings who are already at odds with "the other" within might come to terms with the others in their midst (McAfee 2004, p. 2).

Text: According to Kristeva, the text itself is a complex term that must be understood through the specific significative act that takes place through language, even if it is not reduced to language itself. For her, it is a function instead of a closed method of analysis. In The Bounded Text, Kristeva describes it as a "trans-linguistic apparatus that redistributes the order of the language by relating communicative speech, which aims to inform directly, to different kinds of anterior or synchronic utterances (1980, p. 36). The text is the trans-language which "detaches [language] from its unconscious and from the automatism of its habitual unfolding" (Kristeva 1988 [1969], p. 26). Instead of representing the real, the Kristevian text projects the social and historical conditions to which it belongs. The text have no unity or unified meaning but, instead, is part of the on-going socio-cultural processes (Raj 2015, p. 78). Therefore, "Kristeva views text as an interplay of texts not as a singular entity" (idem., p. 80) where its own openness allows the possibilities of addressing a text from different perspectives. Besides, the 'author' of a text is also engage with other texts, stablishing a "creative dialogue where meaning is arranged or composed rather than created" (ibid.).

Intertextuality: The concept of intertextuality defuses the traditional humanist notion of the text as a self-contained, autonomous entity. It is, instead, seen as a web of interrelations with other texts, discourses, and languages. Intertextuality is a concept developed by Mikhail Bakhtin and later retaken by Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes. It means that each text is made up of numerous writings, which, in turn, generates other texts and interpretations when coming into contact with one another (1986, p. 37). The text is a practice and a productivity.

Signifiance: Also understood as 'significance', significance refers to the operation performed in language "that enables a text to signify what representative and communicative speech does not say" (Roudiez 1980, p. 18). It is the heterogenic aspect of meaning. The process of significance represents the symbolic and semiotic dialectics of the subject.

Chapter 1
Paganism

Contemporary Paganism represents an umbrella for a variety of non-traditional and heterogenic set of religious paths. This chapter aims at examining its three main characteristics: the animistic relational ontology, the posthuman condition and the existence into the notion of poetic language. These three aspects may help to dissect, from a semiotic approach, how Paganism can be understood in contemporaneity, how it can be differentiated from other post-Christian spiritualities and how semantically, syntactically and pragmatically it takes part to the phenomena of technopaganism.

Neopaganism is an eclectic term used to cover a diversity of earth-based spiritual paths, focused on ritual practices and magic beliefs. Though pagans claim to be connected to ancient cultures - especially pre-Christian Indo-European societies like the Celts – they are deeply embedded with popular culture, and other esoteric traditions from all over the world. Another goal of this chapter is to assess to other recurrent – and emerging – questions in the field, such as the validity of Neopaganism as a religion and how its openness and heterogeneity can be understood as a language by its own.

Addressing such contemporary religious changes allow to elucidate how contemporary Paganism can represent a solution to the current crisis of meaning by offering a new way of feeling, understanding, and behaving in a context where traditional relationships have been shattered and new possibilities of relationship are being proposed.

1.1 Looking for the bases: Introducing contemporary paganism

Since the last century, there has been a constant alteration in the categories sustaining western ontologies and epistemological approaches towards the world. Fixed and stable structures have become replaced by dynamic ones, and normative notions of 'the same' have been giving space to 'the otherness'. As addressed by Rosi Braidotti, our present time is marked by the return of those "others" of modernity, not only women, and the ethnic other, but also the "the natural or earth Other of techno-culture emerge as counter subjectivities" (Braidotti 2002, p. 148). This return of the other coincides as well, according to Braidotti, to the crisis of structures and to the breaking of classic subjectivities (ibid). On such scenario, different modes of integrating with the more-than-human world are being offered in this contemporary environment, challenging as well the instrumental and mechanical perception towards the natural world. As stated by Peter-Paul Verbeek, "[o]ur reality is a web of relations between human and nonhuman entities that form ever new realities in the basis of ever-new connections" (Verbeek 2013, p. 29).

Religion has always had a role in renegotiating the social imaginary and in contributing to paradigmatic turns, not only by rewriting the relations with the cosmos and with the sacred, but by proposing new ways of "re-enchantment", where humans are just part of a web of translated experiences. This heterogeneity resonates with what is understood as contemporary paganism: a diversity of religious, spiritual, and magical traditions having syncretic and heterogeneous relations among humans with their surroundings and with other non-human entities. The term neopaganism – as it is also understood – encompasses many different earth-based spiritual paths, rejecting dogmas of traditional religions – especially from the West, and that are connected to some forms of Abrahamic monotheism – while proposing a non-scientist ontology of the natural world (Pizza and Lewis 2009, p. 14). As Erik Davis clearly emphasises:

> Pagans also set themselves in opposition to what they see as the patriarchal, authoritarian, and antiecological forms of spirituality that have dominated the Christian West. Women play an enormous role in practice and worship alike, and much of the Goddess feminism that permeates the New Age and the fringes of liberal Christianity can be traced to pioneering Wiccan feminists like Z. Budapest and Starhawk (Davis 2015, p. 424).

Contemporary Paganism is often described as a macro-category rescuing pre-Christian traditions, mixing them with practices related to magic, folk beliefs, and popular narratives. Some expressions of paganism claim to have an ancient origin or an unbroken lineage with an extinct civilization, like the Celts. However, such statements typically lack historical accuracy since they include many elements of fantasy and modern re-imaginings of the ancient civilizations[1]. Even active pagan members such as Christina Oakley, former editor of the Pagan Dawn, recognize that traditions such as Druidism and Wicca have no historical continuity with a pre-Christian form of paganism. They are usually mixed with romantic ideals of an ancient past (Cooper 2010). Paganism today is, therefore, a re-constructed and creative apparatus founded by the practices and beliefs of its own members. Due to its eclectic nature, it lacks an 'unified' way of being conceived as a formal and ordered system.

Paganism comes from the late Latin *paganus*, meaning 'country dweller' or what nowadays might be understood as 'peasant'. It was used to refer to non-Christian societies or individuals, who, leaving in the forest, mountains or peripheries of urban centres didn't belong to the roman empire[2] and, therefore, weren't consonant to the universal character of Catholic society. If Catholicism – from the Greek *katholon* – refers to the totality of the message of Christ and the universal, then the pagans were those inhabiting a *pagus*, the rural and tribal territories. The term Paganism has assumed in history a pejorative character, since being un-Christian – and being Pagan especially so – was often a synonym for savage and not civilized communities. In its more recent usage, the term generally works to indicate beliefs that conceive themselves, in one way or another, as descendants of ancient religiosities[3]. On such a way, Paganism – in

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[1]   Following Liz Williams, "Western neopaganism as a whole draws on folklore, on literature and on the work of groups as diverse as the late nineteenth-century occult society of the Golden Dawn and the Woodscraft Folk" (Williams 2020, p. 10).

[2]   The same goes for the English "heathen", from "heathe," which means "the open field," "the outskirts." The Pagan is one who lives apart from the territory of Christianity (which has already taken over the urban center, with Constantine) and, therefore, lives in "the open country,". The Pagan, as a noun, usually referred to "the one who isn't – still - a Christian".

[3]   However, as the Greco-Roman, many ancient societies are usually described as pagans to make contraposition with Christianity and Judaism instead of referring to a specific religion itself. Paganism, on that matter, does not work as a descriptive concept but instead as a condition given to non-Christian societies.

contemporaneity – has been more related to its linguistic origins, leading it closer to pre-Christian traditions. However it is also infused with social principles involving pluralism and inclusion, while challenging western dualistic and transcendental thought, as it will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Nowadays, Neopaganism encompasses "many different spiritual paths and a wide variety of beliefs and practices" (Butler 2004, p. 109), such as Wicca, Druidry, Asatru, Odinism, and so on. Raymond Buckland shows that most of such traditions have their roots in the amateur anthropologist, author, and occultist Gerard Gardner[4] (Buckland 2002, p. xiii). Paganism can be conceived as a map by which we can recognize common patterns in certain religious groups or spiritual paths, even if they are different from, and not directly related to, an ancient tradition in specific (Williams 2020, pp. 27-53). This could be the reason why many of the definitions used to describe the term tend to romanticize the phenomena, particularly in terms of the dialogic relation between Pagans with the other-than-human world. For Jones and Pennick, for instance, paganism is described as a "[n]ature-venerating religion which endeavours to set human life in harmony with the great cycles embodied in the rhythms of the seasons" (1995, p. 2).

1.1.1 The sacred immanent and the relational ontology

As shown previously, Neopaganism is not a structured, institutional religion. Generally in Neopaganism, "there are no rules regarding 'faith' or how the divine should be worshipped" (Butler 2004, p. 108). That is to say, there are no definite normative notions of what counts as authentic paganism, and it cannot be thought inside a traditional religious structure. However, despite their differences, all the 'paganisms' usually combine specific characteristics such as: a) an eclectic and multiple vision of the deities and the sacred, which is sometimes located in the axis of pantheism or within a polytheistic 'structure'; b) a non-hierarchical status of genders, giving particular importance to the figure of the goddess as well as the possibility for women to be priestesses; c) the performance of magical practices, involving beliefs in spirits and

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[4]   Gerard Brousseau Gardner (1884-1964) was a key figure in bringing contemporary Paganism – specifically Wicca - to the public context, writing fundamental religious texts and founding the tradition of Gardnerian Wicca.

other ethereal entities; d) a special place for rituals[5] - they can be either related to folk traditions or a grimoire-based practices – considering that throughout rituals the believer legitimates, renews and portrays the relation with him/her spiritual path; and finally e) a central spiritual role of the natural world.

It is the last characteristic above, the natural world's role, what accompanies – and describes – paganism the most whichever the path is. Nature is understood as a shared environment where we are all crucially immersed and connected. On that matter, all pagan paths are – in one level or another – a nature-based religion, where "their most common and central manifestations are in the celebration of seasonal festivals" (Harvey 2005, p. 88). For instance, in the 1974 Council of American Witches[6], one of the principles stated the following: "We recognize that our intelligence gives us a unique responsibility toward our environment. We seek to live in harmony with nature, in ecological balance offering fulfilment to life and consciousness within an evolutionary concept" (Buckland 2002, p. 12). In relation to nature, Pagan's pantheism or polytheism occurs either by conceiving it as the supreme embodiment of the divine or by picturing its deities as personifications of nature's different aspects and/or features (York 2009, p. 292). Even in certain currents of non-theist pagans, nature becomes per se the object of adoration, for being the source from which awe is manifested. This conception of nature is opposite to the Judaeo-Christian idea of the relation between God and nature, where the earth was not only *not* God – or a 'divinity'- but also often degraded to a mere instrument for humans, especially since God was no longer found in the world (Merleau-Ponty 1955, pp. 10-28). Therefore, due to God's impossible immanence –

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[5]   Ritual is an heterogeneous and polyedric term with multiple and complex potentialities of construction and transformation of meaning. From a pragmatic point of view, it is one of the most outstanding aspects of religion, since it represents the practice that best legitimates, renews, and portrays the relationship between the believer and the spiritual path. Neopagan paths are more based on the aspect of practices – ritual - than on the aspect of beliefs. The place and role of ritual is therefore very important, since it represents the expressive form of neopagans. This aspect will be explained later in this chapter, in subsection 1.3.1.

[6]   In such list, the group of witches attempted to define what the standards of Neopagans could be in order to fight some of the stereotypes of the era around the notion of 'witch' and 'pagans' in order to seek the approval of the government to recognize any Pagan paths as valid religions. The final document resulted in 13 principles that are known, today, as the "Thirteen Principles of Wiccan Belief". To read more, see: Raymond Buckland, *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft* (1997), p. 12.

according to Merleau-Ponty – creation is nothing more than a mere object and nature lacks of any creative power.

For pagans, considering nature as sacred is also a way to engage with all forms of life. Nature is neither separated nor mechanically diluted in the human world; it is instead a living net of relations where humans are part. In some pagan movements, the earth is represented by the notion of the great goddess (Williams 2020, p. 290). Such conceptions have developed an activist perspective among pagans, since most of them have "something to do with the environmental movement, whether this means ordering one's solstice cards from Greenpeace, or hardcore road protests and political activism" (Williams 2013). The author and high priestess Starhawk, one of the most prominent leaders of neopaganism, is a great example due to her active way of relating spiritual practices with activism and communal networking. She explains: "Meditation on the balance of nature might be considered a spiritual act in Witchcraft, but not as much as cleaning up garbage left at a campsite or marching to protest an unsafe nuclear plant" (Starhawk 1979, p. 12).

The neopagan worldview is also widely syncretic, rejecting immovable dogmas and hierarchical orders. It is, as stated by Raymond Buckland, a "free-flowing in its form, with no central governing authority and with a wide variety of dominations, or 'traditions'" (Buckland 2002, p. xiii). Moreover, contemporary Paganism creates a fertile and dynamic ground for personal expression and creativity by often inviting discourses that don't possess any tangible historical basis, belonging instead to fiction and fantasy. There lies Neopaganism's importance: it is an eclectic assemblage, inviting ecstasy and imagination while rejecting rationalistic scepticism. It merges history, popular culture, mythology, and environmental sensibilities, using almost any media to express itself. It also search to adapts their pre-Christian traditions to the social environment of contemporaneity, while addressing issues as racism, homophobia an misogyny[7]. As stated by the neopagan scholar Ann-Marie Gallagher:

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[7] Many neopagan paths usually provide awareness against racism, misogyny, climate change, and other sociocultural and environmental emergencies. Still, some of such traditions have had conflicts on issues regarding race and gender. For instance, in the Asatru tradition – also understood as Odinism – there has been certain expressions of the Aryan racial soul and hence an exclusive creed open to whites only (Gardell 2009, p. 611). Though categories such as 'race' and 'nation' are products of modernity,

Given that paganisms often abhor dualistic separations, our embodied spiritualities, our notions of immanence and our sense of the interconnectedness of things are particularly fitted to provide models of interrelationship, gradation and flow. Within the structures of our practices and symbols, our acknowledgement of tides, cycles and seasons, lies the potential to challenge political hierarchies and provide an agency for positive change in our society and on our planet (Gallagher 2009, p. 586).

For these reasons, it is very difficult to talk about normative or genuine paganism since it is constantly integrating other forms of conceiving itself within its practices, as can be noticed in popular and internet-based spiritual discourses (Davidsen 2012, p. 189) or in solitary participants redesigning rituals provided by traditional covens[8].

Contemporary paganism proposes, then, a hermeneutics that re-writes the human/nature relation from the territory of the spiritual and the subject's role as an active actor in the religious construction. As Erik Davis points out, Pagans:

have cobbled together their rituals and cosmologies from existing occult traditions, their own imaginative needs, and fragments of lore found in dusty tomes of folktales and anthropology. Pagans have self-consciously invented their religion, making up their "ancient ways" as they go along (Davis 2015, pp. 423-425).

"Pagans of today, however, live in social realities long governed by these classificatory categories as organizing principles and hence impossible to avoid. In fact, a perennial conflict among today's pagans involves different understandings of what paganism is and for whom a certain tradition is appropriate" (ibid.).

[8] A coven is generally understood as a group of witchcraft practitioners (Drury 2009, p. 51), conformed by a priest, a priestess and the other members. Though the first Neopagan covens where hierarchical, there are also 'eclectic covens' which defies the traditional form. There, the leadership follows a rotating model instead of a vertical one (Puckett 2009, pp. 134-135). The solitary phenomenon in Neopagan traditions as Wicca, can be understood as "the result of the explosive growth of the movement and its incapacity to deal with the number of seekers due to its lack of institutionalization. (…) [T]he majority of those who identify as Wiccans are solitary practitioners, and the trend appears to be growing. (…) A 2005 poll by the Covenant of the Goddess of over 6500 Wiccans and Neopagans found that 62% of Pagans and Wiccans surveyed practiced as solitaries, and an additional 12% practiced with the "community." Only 26% reported practicing with a coven." (Roberto Puckett 2009, pp. 136-137).

1.1.2 Contemporary hybridizations: Neopaganism and popular culture

Though contemporary Paganism has been part of the social environment since the middle of the XX century, it is a consequence of a set of esoteric aggrupation and folk-based beliefs (Williams 2020, pp. 232-235) existing in the periphery of culture. Approximately during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the rise of occultism and spiritual orders materialize in movements such as, for example, New Age, R. Steiner's Anthroposophy, and Helena Blavatsky's Theosophy. At the beginning of the twentieth century, popular magic, eastern philosophy, and mystic thought started to make further inroads into the West in a growing way. However, only with the diffusion of anthropological works as James Frazer's Golden Bough – written in 1890 but reprinted in the early 1900s – all those manifestations got articulated into a sort of pastiche of beliefs among practitioners and students of the occult. The rise of the esoteric imagination and a revival interest in folk traditions provided the perfect terrain for Contemporary Paganism and its expansion in Europe, America, and other continents. One perfect example is what occurred with Gerard Gardner and the Wiccan movement, a British form of modern witchcraft, which has been disseminated all over the globe and became one of the few pagan religions to be politically recognized in other countries.

The existence of contemporary paganism wouldn't be possible without the influence of media industries like film, television and the press, mixing the magical and religious communities, and their interest in folk practices, with the own conditions and characteristics of mass media. On that matter, the mediatisation of contemporary paganism has also meant a shift from a private and almost secret path into a public and popular set of beliefs where spiritual beliefs and experiences are invoked in a diversity of mediated environments. This "turn" in the spreading of paganism through Western media has moved it to the center of cultural production, permeating popular culture with a variety of narratives related to the occult and the numinous, while contemporary paganism takes inspiration from popular culture itself. Such condition actually highlights what it means to be in a contemporaneity where a variety of discourses collapse and mix. As showed by Stef Aupers and Christopher Parridge, the contemporary popular culture narratives – even contemporary forms, as digital games -

are deeply infused with the pagan worldview (Aupers 2013, pp. 226; Partridge 2004).

This entanglement with 'non-religious and spiritual' contexts also provided a clue to understand how the meaning-making dynamics of Neopaganism are in a constant state of movement and actualization. Its own intertextuality reaffirms its eclecticism and open textual strategy. Nonetheless, the mediatized nature of pagan texts and the cooperative role of its members - when providing new connections and interpretations of pagan texts - are not always perceived as valid, giving it a dubious effectiveness as a system of belief. Contemporary paganism could seem to prioritise superstition and unactualized views of the world. Authors like Aadam Possamai (Possamai 2012, p. 1), for instance, considers that these phenomena are instances of "hyper real" religions, an expression based on a re-interpretation of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. This perspective has been partially agreed with and shared also by other scholars. Stef Aupers, for instance, also pointed out his preoccupation about how Neopaganism can be perceived as completely mediated "by the modern market and the media", lacking of any real spiritual meaning (2013, pp. 225-226). However, Markus Davidsen, when using the term 'Fiction based Religion', provides a great example of how and why many of the emerging religious practices, influenced by pop culture or fictional narratives, usually represent a valid and spiritually significant faith. Not only do they have rituals and communities of followers practicing them, but also " the activity and beliefs of which they consist refer to supernatural entities which are claimed to exist in the actual world " (Davidsen 2014, p. 378) .

Davidsen's conclusions go in the same direction as those of other scholars, among whom Colin Campbell who – referring to Neopaganism – has previously stated that these practices are a "new religiosity, evidence of a genuine religious revival" (1978, pp. 146-147) instead of being merely superficial religious expressions. Christopher Partridge and others have even referred to Neopaganism as a new "Re-enchantment of the West" (2005, pp. 42-80) in response to the instrumental rationality of the society introduced by Max Weber. In synthesis, the former reflections can be helpful to elucidate how the importance of Neopaganism doesn't lie in its validity but instead in how it is manifested, how it produces other ways of relating and understanding today's world, how it transforms structures and processes of meaning, how it affects the

semantic, syntactic and pragmatic semiotic dimensions of the contemporary religious context. Therefore, debating the legitimacy of these phenomena is ineffective: they are valid practices because they exist. However, this does not mean it is not important to consider those aspects of Neopaganism which create conflicts within the religious and social arena. For instance: there is not an *omphalos* from which its dynamics emerge, there is a scarcity of authority, and it is deeply intertwined – as we have already discussed – with popular culture.

It is therefore important not to idealize and indiscriminately name whichever practice as Neopagan. According to that, it makes sense to distinguish contemporary Paganism from other post-Christian spiritualities as, for instance, New Age. However, the exact boundaries between these contemporary manifestations of spirituality can often be blurred. Contrary to the New Age spirituality, contemporary Paganism "spiritualizes the natural rather than naturalizing the spiritual" (C. Campbell 2008, p. 127), meaning that Pagans tend to sacralise the spaces they inhabit and are open to actually perceive the numinous in places, objects and even media environments. They intertwined disperse elements - thought to be opposites - into a web of dialogic encounters. That could explain the compatibility between Neopaganism with 'pop' culture and media industry. The versatility of Pagans does not execrate anything from their immanent perception of the sacred, alluding as well to Eliade's concept of *hierophany*[9], which means showing of the sacred. New Age spirituality, on the other side, tends to "draw upon multiple traditions, styles, and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic packages. Spirituality is thus referred to as 'do-it-yourself religion', 'pick-and-mix religion'" (Houtman and Aupers 2007, pp. 306).

There is, however, a common consideration by defenders of secularization theories, when referring – in general - to the fragmented character of contemporary and post-Christian spiritualities: "they deny its social significance by invoking the image of a veritable implosion of religion and consumption, suggesting that contemporary spirituality differs dramatically from traditional types of religion in this respect" (ibid.). On this matter, both 'New Agers' and Neopagans can coincide on the positive of their

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[9]   Mircea Eliade's concept of *Hierophany* (from the greek: hieros = sacred/holy and phainein = to reveal/to bring to light) refers to the representation of the sacred can be manifested in any type of object.

heterogeneity and openness to diversity. However, contrary to what Houtman and Aupers affirmed later in their article, even New Age and Neopagan groups can transform themselves in authoritarian and dogmatic traditions while claiming to have a monopoly on wisdom or salvation.

The growing popularity of earth-based religions in Western cultures cannot be studied as separated from popular culture and technologies but, instead, as a pragmatic combination of elements including them. They are not only closely interrelated with the historical scenario but also with the innovations occurring in the places of social effervescence. It is curious to observe how Neopagans nowadays inhabit, principally, urban places and metropoles – as well as the cosmopolis of the internet – opposing to the initial etymologies of 'pagan'. There is, therefore, something paradoxical in this identity: if Paganism is not a concept attached to a territory, and it no longer responds to local deities or a local civilization which characteristics best describe Neopaganism? Which aspects do pagans challenge? The answers may lie in the principle of animism.

1.2 Neopaganism: Rethinking animism

Animism is perhaps one of the most important concepts when analysing the role of neopaganism in nowadays culture. As an ontological perspective, it determines the relational and horizontal approach in which pagans conceive and relate with the more-than-human world, breaking the dualistic and anthropocentric connotations of the western world, while also explaining how it affects the conceptions of the sacred and the divine. According to Graham Harvey, many pagans identify themselves, their worldview, and the world they inhabit as animists (Harvey 2009, p. 393), understanding their existence to be deeply connected with humans and non-humans. On a more abstract level, animism can be understood as a relational strategy where beings and environments are not ontologically separated even if they show there are distinctive and clear diversities among them.

In paganism, such animistic sensibility is expressed in how pagans relate to other - non-human - entities and how they experience and conceive the domains of ritual and spiritual appreciation. Its members consider the body as sacred since it is part – and a manifestation - of the earth, the sacred territory from which all creatures emanate. Magic, on that matter, is not only a personal craft but a way for connecting humans with the enchanted notion of the world, "before the Enlightenment reduced the anima mundi to a soulless machine" (Davis 2015, p. 425). Therefore, "[t]he environment is no longer background. Nature is no longer mere scenery in which cultural action takes place. The nature-culture dichotomy collapses as more holistic appreciations of the world gain in popularity" (Harvey 2009, p. 401).

Such reflections about animism can be strengthened by the phenomenological analysis provided by David Abram on Merleau-Ponty's work on the sensuous relation between humans with the more-than-human world. For Abram, the world in which we find ourselves, "is not a sheer 'object,' not a fixed and finished 'datum' from which all subjects and subjective qualities could be pared away, but is rather an intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions, a collective field of experience lived through from many different angles." (Abram 1997, p. 32) Subjects leave their inscription in others – humans or not – just as the otherness – organic or not – leaves their inscription in all that come in contact with them. On this matter, Merleau-Ponty writes of the

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surrounding world as a field of animate presences, acknowledging their agency and dynamism (Merleau-Ponty 1964; 320, 322). Communication, then, is not only possible between humans but there are also expressive powers in the surrounding territory. This quality of dialogue, participation and actual interchange between humans and the more-than-human world can be understood as animistic.

Animism came from the Latin word *anima,* which is usually translated to 'soul'. The anthropologist Edward Tylor coined the term "animism" in 1871 to describe the first stage in the development of religious thought. In this stage, there was a consideration of souls and spirits as agents in the functioning of life (Tylor 1871, pp. 20-21). For animistic societies, the 'things' of the natural world were also animated and similar to their own beings. On that matter, the natural environment and the moon, the stones, and the stars, for instance, were considered living objects with souls. Still, for Tylor, the term had a pejorative use, referring to a primitive condition, a 'savage' stage of development situated far away from culturized societies[10]. Nonetheless, the interest in animistic sensibilities remained vibrant, overcoming Tylor's unjustified conceptions.

Other theorists have proposed different conceptions and notions of animism as a relational perspective between subject-object. This 'new animism' usually searches for a 'two ways' relation with that otherness instead of a 'one-way' mechanic approach. The new animism emphasises an actual interaction: something like a conversation instead of a monologue. For Harvey, the new use of 'animism' encompasses worldviews and lifeways, which treat the world as a diverse and vibrant community of persons (human and other-than-human). It is the practice of relational participation where the material world is not conceived from a cartesian-modernist or any other scientist-reductivist perspective (Harvey 2009, p. 409.), in which nature transcends the instrumental conceptions and it is not a mere inert object (Bird-David 1999, pp. 77-79).

Anthropologist Philippe Descola goes even further and proposes animism as an ontological perspective. His 'fourfold schema of ontologies' – conform by naturalism, animism, totemism, and analogism –proposes the animistic ontology as "a continuity of

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[10] Tylor's point is clearly explained by Durkheim: For Tylor, this extension of animism was due to the particular mentality of the primitive, who, like an infant, cannot distinguish the animate and the inanimate. Cfr. Durkheim 1915, p. 53.

souls and a discontinuity of bodies" (Descola 2014, p. 275) between humans and nonhumans (ibid.), meaning that each animistic being has a shared interior quality, such as a soul or vital life force. Therefore, there are different kinds of bodies in any given animist world (Swancutt 2019, p. 9). Nonetheless, Descola's point has been criticized by other scholars, such as Viveiros de Castro, who suggests that animism shouldn't be a projection of human qualities cast onto animals and propose instead the category of "perspectivism", where each living species – or everything - is human for itself:

> Perspectivism is the name we have given to a formulation culturally characteristic of the so-called "animism," a cosmological attitude that consists of refusing the psychic discontinuity between the different types of beings that populate the cosmos, imagining all the inter-species differences as a horizontal extension, analogic or metonymic, of intra-species differences (…). This causes the human condition to cease being "special" and to become, instead, the default mode or generic condition of any species. (…) Animism is "anthropomorphic" to the exact extent that it is anti-anthropocentric. The human form is, literally, the form from which all species emerge: each of the species is a finite mode of a humanity as universal substance (de Castro 1998, pp. 469-488).

De Castro's and Descola's notions of animism - thought their conceptual differences - provide a clue as to how the 'new animism' addressed by Abram and Pagan scholars as Harvey can highlight the recurrent modalities of the multiplicity of Pagan paths, and distinguish them from any other post-Christian spirituality, as mentioned in the previous section.

There are, of course, different animist expressions around the globe, and they can be found in indigenous societies, tribal communities, as well as in urban groups. The Siberian hunters Yukaghir and the urban shamans in Stockholm are great examples showing the internal diversity of animism today (Swancut 2019, p. 2). In contemporary paganism, animism can be vividly noticed not only in the work of many eco-pagan activists, such as Starhawk, but also in the very roots of their beliefs. Therefore, animism lies in their celebrations and ritual practices and in their recognition and invocations of spirits, as deities, elementals and ancestors. Spirits are in almost everything, as in places, objects, seasons, trees and so on (Harvey 2009, p. 398). In the majority of paganisms there is no affiliation to a transcendental god, the divinity or the sacred "is not separated from the manifest world that we perceived by our senses" (York 2009, p. 283). On that matter, the perceived world that is touched, touches in

returns (Abram 1997, p. 68). Each subject is an embodied and participative person in a physical and sensuous continuum with the non-human otherness.

For Graham Harvey, instead of projecting a human-likeness onto other beings, "animists understand that humans are just one kind of person in a wide community dwelling in particular places. The old and new approaches to animism are about quite different understandings of the world and result in distinct modes of discourse and practice" (Harvey 2009, p. 396). Instead of humanizing the 'non-human', animism sets a horizontal approach by attributing sentience and consciousness – in some cases even personhood - to other beings, spirits, objects and the environment. We find a similar perspective in the work of posthumanist philosopher Cary Wolfe, for whom the human being is, before everything, not just a moral and political being but one who has an animal body. Therefore, human dignity is already inherent to the animal condition and rationality is just one more aspect of human animality (Wolfe 2010, p. 66).

Pagans, however, have also developed an animistic approximation towards non-organic entities. Several studies conducted during the rise of computer technology and the internet showed an interesting affinity between contemporary paganism and techno-culture. For instance, in the ethnographic work of many pagan researchers as Margot Adler (1986) and Tanya Luhrmann (1989), many of the pagan communities and subjects they studied were involved with technical fields and computers. As Erik Davis points out: "(t)he machine thus comes to serve as an interactive mirror, an ambiguous Other we both recognize ourselves in and measure ourselves against" (Davis 205, p. 136). Such interconnection between digital technologies and contemporary paganism which are fully derived in technopaganism, show how pagans - as well as other spiritual and religious groups – have increasingly ritualized their virtual environment by bringing – or discovering – the sacred in cyberspace and by shifting the instrumental view of computer technology into a 'lived' territory of spiritual potentialities. This aspect of contemporary Paganism will be analysed in chapters two and three of this thesis, with the entrance of digital technologies into the pagan animistic panorama.

1.2.1 An "enfleshed" relationship with the non-human

When reconsidering Merleau-Ponty's work, perception is understood as a relational and participatory event affecting the perceiver and the perceived in a reciprocal way. On such matter, David Abram concludes that those 'encounters' always transform subjects simply because all existing phenomena is inanimate. It is only by mentally absenting a subject from that relation that a phenomenon remains objectified, or inanimate. In other words, the only way of blocking our perceptual reciprocity is when we define another being as inert or as a passive object (Abram 1997, p. 56). This is because "the perceiving self is not a disembodied mind but rather a bodily subject entirely immersed in the world it perceives" (Abram 2005, p. 1023). Merleau-Ponty was interested in the correlation between the organism and its environment, where nature was not something separated from the human domains. This approach rejects a fragmented conception of the being – between subjectivity and objects. It is exactly in their mutual perceptual relationships that beings reveal themselves.

The disconnectedness from the material and immanent world is part of the ontological statements of the Western world where all bodily and sensorial experiences are considered unreal, unclear or impure, originating an "estrangement from the earthly world around us" (Abram 1997, p. 63). According to a number of historians and philosophers, this condition might be a consequence of the philosophical bases in Plato's "derogation of the sensible and changing forms of the world (…) [as] mere simulacra of eternal and pure ideas existing in a nonsensorial realm beyond the apparent world" (ibid.). This can, however, also be perceived in the bases of Christian and Jewish traditions, where the transcendent God is external to the human domains of sensorial perception, and nature is a given territory that must be mastered and dominated by mankind. Humans – men - are created "in God's image" (Genesis 1:27), therefore such iconicity is an indexical reading of the importance and superiority of mankind. In this way, our human condition becomes, *per se*, a reaffirmation of the hierarchical order in the world.

Contemporary Paganism, with its animistic consideration towards the world, draws a different picture. The respect towards nature and other beings is not for a superior act of kindness but because humankind is unavoidably attached to the perceived world.

Humans inhabit and are inhabited by the world. As the Wiccan author Raymond Buckland puts it, "woman and man were a part of the natural order of things, not separate from it. Not 'above' it" (2002, p. 11). For Pagans, as well as for other animistic societies, the value of any other being doesn't lie in its similarities with humans. Instead, it is an intrinsic right of being "subjects of a life" (Abram 1997, p. 66), inhabiting the same world in an interrelated way. Each living body is in constant dialogue with the beings and elements surrounding it, and its boundaries are not closed or impermeable but open. By acting "more like membranes than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange" (Abram 1997, p. 39). The body limits do not isolate the subject but, on the contrary, enable it to engage with the surrounding world. Therefore, "far from restricting my access to things and to the world, the body is my very means of entering into relation with all things" (ibid.).

The aforementioned can be conceived in a broader sense through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's conception of the 'flesh' of the world, which is a particular understanding of the ways in which humans meet the world (Abram 1997, p. 48). This "enfleshedness"[11] would refer to how entities are not separated since 'the world touches everything'. As Merleau-Ponty questioned, "[w]here are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?" (1968, p. 138), meaning there is an intertwining between the world and the subject conceived as a body. However, such notion of the collective 'flesh' is "not matter, is not mind, is not substance" (idem., p. 139). Rather, it is understood as "a principle of being that is incarnated in everything and from which the difference between perception or knowledge on the one side and reality or world on the other side exclusively arises" (Esterbauer 2019, p. 339).

Abram interprets the Merleau-Pontian 'flesh' as "the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its spontaneous activity" (Abram 1997, p. 48). It is, therefore, a way of establishing an interconnectedness and continuity between humans and other beings. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, "the world is not what I think, but what I live through" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, pp. xvi-xvii). How we perceive and interact with everything around us is not a mechanical action but an organic process of heterogenic connections

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[11]   To read more, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 219.

and couplings. The neopagan practitioners have, then, an "enfleshed" relationship with the non-human context since it is all part of its spiritual dimension. The immanent conception of the sacred and the numinous in paganism consider the sensuous and perceptive body itself as the source of connectedness of all beings. For Abram, "if this body is my very presence in the world" (Abram 1997, p. 37), it is the body alone what "enables me to enter into relations with other presences" (ibid.). Therefore, the sentient living body "is the very possibility of contact, not just with others but with oneself, no soul can be detached from the body" (ibid.).

By bringing the posthuman project together with the animistic perspective, Pagan rituals and seasonal festivals arise as an example of such relational epistemology, since they welcome not only animals and plants but also spirits, elementals beings, and even digital machines. Rituals can be seen as revealing values at their deepest level, allowing us to understand the essential constitution of human societies (Wilson 1954, p. 241). In neopaganism, such practices are a central aspect "since they express the meaning-system or worldview of such paths and also are used as a means to connect with the sacred" (Butler 2004, p. 109). Pagan rituals, then, express in their performative construction how humans live or interact with other beings and the world, framing these relations in their particular ways.

Whereas by casting a circle, invoking spirits or ancestors, devoting to a deity in particular, or just calling the god and goddess together, Neopaganism expresses a dimension of full connection even if not following a structural and ancient tradition. This can be perceived in a broader context still when observing, as mentioned before, its links between classical mythology with popular culture and fictional worlds – for instance, the Lord of the Rings – or, the growing of neopagan sacramental spaces in digital games or virtual community platforms, without actually neglecting their earth-based fundaments. They "create a space where most boundaries dissolve, where all beings become part of a greater web. Ideally this is what spirituality should do" (Ferrando 2016).

1.2.2 Posthumanism: alternative meanings of humanity and the world.

Most of the paradigms that have sustained human society for the last centuries are deteriorating in the current panorama where fixed categories, social structures, and political systems are irremediably collapsing. While the environmental unbalance and the depredation of resources have been challenging the notion of the earth as an instrument for human control – contributing to the (re)emerging of relational ontologies where the earth is conceived as a living organism in which all beings are interrelated -, the ubiquity of digital technology has disrupted not only the conceptions of space and time but also notions such as embodiment and non-human agency. A current topic of discussion is how the interaction of humans with their surroundings is developing and how contemporaneity depicts the perception of bodies, considering their irregular and polyphonic nature. All those changes and innovations have impacted the way humans relate, perceive, and understand the world and themselves. Therefore, in the light of the current dynamics, ontological changes, and interconnected societies, the emerging human condition can be described as increasingly dispersed and in constant flux.

Posthumanism has been answering some of those issues, principally, by defying what is understood as 'human' and 'humanism'. The latter has been a doctrine - especially in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century - "that combines the biological, discursive and moral expansion of human capabilities into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress. Faith in the unique, self-regulating and intrinsically moral powers of human reason forms an integral part of this high-humanistic creed" (Braidotti 2013, p. 13) The European conception of what humanism is became an hegemonic cultural model, prescribing how 'the human' relates with the world - and all that constitutes it – as a central and disconnected being. The binary logic of the human paradigm proposes 'difference' as a negative condition, qualifying the conception of 'otherness' as inferiority. All those branded as 'others'[12] are still humans, but not as human as the normative subjects.

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[12]   There, Braidotti refers to anything and anyone that can be understood as 'the other': the sexualized other, the woman; the racialized other, the native; and the naturalized other, animals, the environment, or the earth (Braidotti 2013, p. 27). Therefore, the notion of 'the other' reduced them "to the less than human status" (idem., p. 15).

The restricted notion of what is considered human has provoked rejection against the unitary subject of humanism, a subject that "is neither an ideal nor an objective statistical average or middle ground. It rather spells out a systematized standard of recognizability – of Sameness – by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location" (Braidotti 2013, p. 26). Here is where posthumanism arrives as a mechanism to explore and provide alternative views of the human condition and the formations of novel – or alternative – subjectivities which emerge from contemporary epistemologies. Posthumanism, then, doesn't "merely oppose Humanism but create[s] other visions of the self. Sexualized, racialized and naturalized differences, far from being the categorical boundary-keepers of the subject of Humanism, have evolved into fully fledged alternative models of the human subject" (idem., p. 38). The extents of posthumanism within Neopaganism will be explained further in the next chapters, when we will be exploring its immersion in the digital context and the latter's ubiquity in today's scenario.

Braidotti proposes a variation of posthumanism that actually infringes on certain limits, challenging strong normative approach towards technology while putting the focus on subjectivity since, for her, "this notion [that of subjectivity] enables us to string together issues that are currently scattered across a number of domains" (2013, p. 42). Her strategy is that of "critical posthumanism", a position that defends complexity and promotes radical posthuman subjectivity where the focus goes from an unitary individual to nomadic subjectivity, and promotes a sense of interconnection between one self and the otherness, including here non-human and non-organic others[13]. In Bratidotti's own words, the critical posthuman subject lies "within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences (…)" (idem., p. 49).

Critical posthumanism[14] answers the current crisis of "humanism" by challenging the hierarchical, dualistic and anthropocentric assumptions of the modern paradigm. It can

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[13]   Regarding the interconnections between human subjects with non-organic others, the work of Katherine Hayles in *How we Became Post-humans* (1999) goes deeply into such dynamics, processes and transformations. This will be fully analyzed in the next chapters.

[14]   This article uses the concept of critical posthumanism of Rosi Braidotti and the posthuman notion addressed by Katherine Hayles.

be understood as an umbrella of different schools of thought focusing, on one hand, "elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject," (Braidotti 2013, p. 37) and, on the other, on exploring how humans relate with non-humans and the surrounding environments. Here, the "human" is, therefore, not a closed, pure, and self-sufficient actor but is rather open, changeable, and interconnected with the biosphere that contains it. On that matter, ecological ethics are a fundamental pillar of posthumanism since humanity is already "fully immersed (…) in a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, viral) relations" (Braidotti 2002, 122).

According to Braidotti,[15] the way of conceiving the world needs to be focused on "multiple grounded perspectives." That is to say, "'we' is not one and the same, but 'we' are in the posthuman convergence 'together.'" Braidotti's critical posthumanism interrogates and redefines the human notion as a whole, paying particular attention to how humans relate with the otherness when the subject/object and mind/body binarism is dismissed or at least thoroughly reconceived. In other words, the posthuman means a radical re-conceptualization of "the human" in light of its entanglement with nature, culture, and technology. It is, therefore, "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (Hayles 1999, p. 3).

The communion between human subjects, the natural world, and other entities – such as machines – is essential to both posthumanism and to contemporary animist paganism since both conceive the world as a web of connections and collaborations. At this point, it is possible to make deeper parallelisms between posthumanism and the animistic sensibilities of pagans. In both cases it is crucial not to consider the manifest differences between humans and other entities as pejorative according to the former's 'perspectivism' and the latter's `relationism'. Accordingly, an animistic and posthuman spirituality is ambiguous, plural, radically immanent, and deeply interrelated with all forms of life. There is, in other words, an animist 'theology' that is coherent with Braidotti's interrogation of what is meant by "being human" and the implications of a post-anthropocentric world inspired by ecology and environmentalism.

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[15] This quotation belongs to Rosi Braidotti's lecture about "Posthuman Knowledge," *Harvard GSD*: 15:40–15:52. https://youtu.be/0CewnVzOg5w

Considering the critical posthuman aspects of pagan animism brings to light the ways in which the binary understandings about body/mind, nature/culture, and real/artificial are replaced by relational and immanent epistemologies. This can be important in order to recognize, on the one hand, how spiritual considerations are responding to the present debates regarding anthropocentrism, speciesism, digital ubiquity, and ecological emergencies and, on the other, how a diversity of subjectivities and ways of conceiving the other are providing "new immanent possibilities for future becomings" (Leonard 2020).

1.2.3 The nomadic pagan: The rebellion against the atomized subject

In Eros the Bittersweet - a literary and philosophical exploration into the concept of Eros and its relation to language and knowledge - Anne Carson wrote: "You are not a god. You are not that enlarged self. Indeed, you are not even a whole self, as you now see" (1986, p. 36). Such a phrase, with its strong poetic intention, perfectly introduces the nomadic condition addressed in posthumanism, a condition which challenges the conception of a centralized and stable individual. Just as addressed in the former section, posthumanism gives priority to the dismantlement of the old dominant model of subjectivity, challenging the discourse of "the same", of "the one". So instead of inviting other's discourses, it is more about observing how the normative and dominant discourse gives space to other perspectives (Braidotti 2002, p. 147). According to Braidotti, that is the objective of the nomadic theory of becoming, operating in a nonlinear temporal sequence. The processes of 'becoming' cannot function in a stable and centralized subject, on the contrary, it lies in a non-unitary, stratified and 'always in flux' self. Therefore, the nomadic condition answers to a posthuman perspective towards the differences, welcoming hybridizations and assemblages where connections don't follow the laws of taxonomies but the laws of affinities. This notion will also be examined through Donna Haraway's cyborg ontology in the following chapters. As was just discussed, the nomadic subject is immersed in processes and, since nothing is isolated, those processes imply as well interconnections with other beings, discourses, and environments. At the same time, such interconnections "push the subject to his or her limits, in a constant encounter with external different others" (Braidotti 2002, p. 118). This condition is, then, rhizomatic. It lacks an origin, a central nucleolus from where all things grow and extend.

When addressing the situation of religion and popular culture not being static spheres since both are in a constant dynamic of intertextuality, Braidotti's reflections about the Nomad also address the continuous processes of negotiation with dominant norms and values (2002). Massimo Leone uses the religious concept of temptation to addressed the notion of religious change. For him, "resisting temptation abstractly means negating the impulse of the force so as to exclude it from the existent pattern, from the form that traditionally shapes meaning in the community or in the obedient self" (2020, p. 12). Etimologically, temptation derives from the Latin *temptationem*, noun of action from past-participle stem of *temptare* "to feel, try out"[16]. This understanding of "temptation" coincides with Neopaganism's dynamic and polygamic interrelations, which are continuously trespassing the limits and rejecting traditional shapes of obedience by 'trying out' and 'testing' its own boundaries. The nomad character of Pagans is what defines their own 'nature'. In this context, the 'grammar' that moulded traditional and institutionalized religions cannot function, since there is not an origin or a centralized 'one' to frame the believer's behaviour outside the dangers of change and the non-normative encounters with other discourses.

The notion of the nomadic can be found in the literary environment as well, where the focus is not attached to the formality of the 'work' but to the aperture of the 'text'[17]. In the contemporary theory of the text, this is understood as "production of significance and not as philological object" (Barthes 1977, p. 126). The text, therefore, is an open network without closure where the many dimensions and dynamics of language can be observed. The textual theory does not give great importance to the origin of the text – historical criticism - or how it is made – structural criticism – but rather focused on its dissemination, its processes of interconnection, its continuity (idem., pp. 126-127). To Roland Barthes, this implies that the author – considered to have a monopoly over sense - is no longer the arbiter of meaning, and the 'work' is not a closed product but, instead, a space of multiple writings. For Barthes, the reader also acts as an author – because of his interpretation - and all writing continues to build indefinitely (idem., pp. 147-148). The text considers significant processes as dialogical, decentralized and open. It is not a

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[16]   Source from the Online Etymology Dictionary: https://www.etymonline.com/word/temptation.

[17]   See, for instance, Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory (1960), as well as poststructuralist theories in Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1969). It is important to clarify that in semiotics, the text is not a written object but everything that can be analyzed as a text.

compact unity since, contrary to the notion of work, it rejects any transcendental meaning. Its difference with work lies basically in the following:

> [T]he work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse (or rather, it is Text for the very reason that it knows itself as text); the Text is not the decomposition of the work, it is the work that is the imaginary tail of the Text; or again, the Text is experienced only in an activity of production. It follows that the Text cannot stop (for example on a library shelf); its constitutive movement is that of cutting across (in particular, it can cut across the work, several works) (Barthes 1977, pp. 156-157).

The text, then, is not a closed product and cannot be categorized. It cannot be fixed on a signified. While the 'work' fits in the sign structure, representing an institution and a norm, the 'text' centres on the signifier. As Barthes said, "[t]he logic regulating the text is not comprehensive (define 'what the work means') but metonymic; the activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy" (1977, p. 158). So instead of controlling meaning, the texts is the field of action in which meaning emerges.

Neopagan discourses can be elaborated into the logic of the text – and not of the work – since they don't respond to a 'sacred beginning'. Instead, they operate against the mythical[18] discourse or dominant ideology. Just as in posthumanism, the normative notions around humans and their way of relating to and understanding the otherness are challenged - in this case, the normative notions around meaning and the commanding figure of an author are dismissed.

The text is, therefore, plural. It welcomes heterogeneity and celebrates differences. The text is an echo-chamber, as described by Barthes, "a tissue of quotations" (1977, p. 146). So, in order to understand the text, it is necessary to examine the notion of intertextuality - specifically that developed by Julia Kristeva[19] - where the text is, itself,

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[18]   In this sense, "products or ideas are understood and promoted to confirm and reinforce a particular view of the world and its values" (Martin and Ringham 2000, p. 90).

[19]   Julia Kristeva's conception of intertextuality disputes, precisely, about that notion of stable meanings. Kristeva states that each text is made up of multiple writings that, upon contact, form a dialogue, generating other discourses and entities: "Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity […]" (Kristeva 1986, p. 37).

a part and a result of another text. It is not possible to find 'the origin' of any practice of signification, since "the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas" (1977, p. 160). Barthes explicitly states that, because of its dialogism, eclecticism and nomadism, the notion of origin in the text simply fades out. There are not mythical conceptions about an origin simply because there is no unitary centre from which the text emerges. Besides, as a significant practice, it can be applied to any facet of life. As Kristeva assures: "All so-called rhetorical systems could be studied as a text: the arts, literature, the unconscious. When seen as text, they obtain their autonomy with respect to phonetic communication, and reveal their transformative productivity" (Kristeva 1978, p. 98).

Hence, the text's intertextual condition is the reason why it exists and why it is constantly breaking any type of 'purity' when connecting to other texts. Here the notion of 'temptation' addressed by Leone re-emerges when integrating 'different' and 'external' elements into normative functioning. In a nomadic condition, subjects follow (inter)textual dynamics where 'tempting' subjectivities emerge, as external and different others. Barthes even compares the openness of the text with demonic figures, as an example of the considerations of variety and variability in his analysis of the text:

> The work has nothing disturbing for any monistic philosophy (…) for such a philosophy, plural is the Evil. Against the work, therefore, the text could well take as its motto the words of the man possessed by demons {Mark 5:9): 'My name is Legion: for we are many.' The plural of demoniacal texture which opposes text to work can bring with it fundamental changes in reading, and precisely in areas where monologism appears to be the Law (…) (Barthes 1977, pp. 159-60).

In synthesis, away from a single ideology or formality, the openness of 'the text' allows us to examine Neopaganism through the lens of intertextuality. Not as a stable structure but as a web of 'tempting' combinations defying normative conventions. At this point, the theoretical synergies between this textual approach towards Neopaganism and Braidotti's nomadic theory of becoming become fully apparent.

1.3 The religious character of Neopaganism

When approaching any neopagan movement, one can find a recurring debate regarding whether Paganism is a 'religion' or not. Since many Pagans do not consider themselves as 'religious' but, instead, as spiritual individuals or followers of "the ancient path", the use of the term "religion" possesses, for many of them, a formal and pejorative connotation. Reflecting on whether contemporary Paganism can be conceived – at least for the aims of this thesis – as a religious system operating as a model of reality and guiding action, we note, first, that this should not be done by following a rigid definition of 'religion'. Instead, it has to be achieved through a methodology which will enable us to understand technopaganism as a fluid set of cultural elements, in which religious patterns can be recognized and which includes an emphasis on subjects' participatory and creative role when interpreting texts according to their spiritual needs. Of course, as the debates in recent religious studies and philosophy of religion demonstrate, the concept of religion is itself problematic and challenging, even when used to describe what are customarily considered to be traditional religions or 'world religions', especially when non-European traditions are concerned.[20] Many cultures do not even have a word equivalent to English 'religion', and others do not make a differentiation between beliefs and practices we would consider religious or spiritual and those belonging to other aspects of life (Boyer 2002, pp. pp. 1-4). For instance, in animist societies, the relationships with supernatural beings are not something that belongs restrictively to a religious domain. In some traditions - like those belonging to Neopaganism - the concept of magic is something embedded in daily life.

Because of these conditions, we must proceed with caution when ascribing 'religion' to Neopaganism, and later also Technopaganism. A suitable way to begin is, we suggest, by considering 'religion' as a "family resemblance concept", as is sometimes done in philosophy of religion, especially that inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein (Andrejč 2019, pp. 6-7). As Andrejč explains, Wittgenstein's warnings against the powerful ways in which language can 'bewitch' us are often applicable in the case of the term 'religion' and how it is used. Usually, this happens when scholars or others,

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[20]   See, for example, T. D. Carroll (2019, pp. 54-72).

due to either personal or theoretical motives, hold fast to a particular idea about what religion is and use it as an "exhaustive definition", or a view of "what religion really is" (ibid.), by which they try to fit the actual, diverse and changing phenomena either within or outside that definition. 'Religion' is better seen – in the first instance and in the broadest, inclusive way – as a 'family-resemblance concept', where no unambiguous boundaries can be drawn, but where one can nevertheless notice a "complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing" (Wittgenstein 2009, §66)[21] among various things that are described as religious or religion (Andrejč 2019, pp. 6-7).

However, this doesn't mean one cannot or should not adopt any conception of religion at all, or that the concept of religion one uses has to be unclear, or a result of untidy thinking. As Hent De Vries emphasises - drawing on the Wittgensteinian philosopher Stanley Cavell - what is crucial is to take responsibility for the ways in which one uses 'religion', for the definitions one chooses to works with for a given purpose:

> 'Religion,' in Cavell's view, is what we are willing and able to take it to be. Its features and actual existence (for us) will depend on the stakes we are willing and able to grant them. Its import and ''importance'' can be found only in how we let it matter to us, in the ways we think and act, judge and feel, eat and drink, work and relax, engage and disengage, live and let live, grow up and die. ''Religion''—like any other ''thing,'' but also like any ''being'' in its very ''existence'' and ''essence''—is *our call*, that is to say, nothing but (or beyond) what we claim, proclaim, or acclaim as its name and concept, its uses and abuses, its meaning and end (De Vries 2008, p. 31).

With this in mind, we can now develop – and take responsibility for – our own approach to Neopaganism for the purposes of the present research. In Paganism, one must, first, keep in mind its pendular condition, its particularities and contexts, mentioned in section 1.1. From its beginnings, it has always represented a spiritual insurgency, but all its different paths aim to rescue old traditions and knowledge. It goes forward, taking social and technical innovations, but also backward, avoiding the phantoms and reminiscences of past civilization to be forgotten. For such reasons, to move wisely and coherently within Neopaganism, this analysis relies in a transversal

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[21] This work is quoted with numbers of remarks, not page numbers. Therefore, this is to remark No. 66.

methodology. On the one hand, a semiotic strategy recognizes the changeable, dialogic and non-dualistic dynamic of pagan texts provided by the theories of Roland Barthes, the *semanalysis* of Julia Kristeva, and the interpretative method developed by Umberto Eco. On the other hand, we will build our interpretation of Paganism *as* religion also on the classic non-structural currents in anthropology, developed by Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Roy Rappaport. Anthropology has a tradition of opposing a merely formal, deductive, and abstract conceptions of phenomena, preferring – as does Malinowski – an approach taking the 'lived discourse' in its contemporary context and in the social situations where such phenomena are produced (Kristeva 1988, p. 50).

First, let us concentrate on the second point - that of anthropology - to situate Neopaganism into the conception of a religious signifying system. For the sociologist Emile Durkheim, 'religion' can be defined as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those adhere to them" (1915, p. 47). Highlighting the social meaning of religion and considering it as valuable institution for society, Durkheim seems to exclude less traditional, non-dogmatic and creative forms of religion in which we are interested here. However, Durkheim identifies a critical aspect: the correlations between spiritual beliefs and social relationships, not only with other people and beings but also with the supernatural. Such 'connectivity' between similar beings but also with the otherness occurs by creating a sort of shared recognition of the sacred – the divine, the contexts where the numinous is manifested, all that transcends the mechanic fluxes of everyday life - and the profane – namely, everything else, the mundane, all that belongs to the ordinary fluxes of life. Religion, therefore, manifests itself in the practice of maintaining clear definitions between these two realms, especially in ritual practices. This process of 'passing through' sacred and profane contexts also explains why 'divine beings' can also demonstrate social qualities and agencies in many religions. There is a contact, a connection, and an encounter with that 'divine otherness'.

Clifford Geertz, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of religion's capacity to provide its members with both an ethos and a worldview. Religion serves as a model *of* reality and a model *for* acting within that reality. Geertz works with a different definition of religion: religion is, for him, "a system of symbols which acts to establish

powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz 1966, p. 4). Therefore, he does not only invite the symbolic functions – giving, by this, a key place to the semiotic analysis - but also distances his perspective from a Lévi-Straussian method that searches to establish universal systems of classification. By focusing on semiotics, Geertz is able to analyse particular signification structures and address how systems of signs work together within a specific context. More specifically, by understanding culture as a semiotic concept (1973, p. 5), he argues that a culture cannot be understood unless the analyst makes sense of a particular culture's structure of signification. Nonetheless, Geertz also ignores less structured and elusively changeable religious phenomena.

These reflections highlight the conceptual need for a more inclusive, heterogenic, and dialogic conception of religion, one which recognizes religions as dynamic and often not conforming to standard constructions of beliefs and institutions. One that still conceives religion as providing social adhesion and an ethos – or worldview – to its members while formulating, through rituals and celebrations, ways of relating with the sacred and the numinous. But, equally important, one that responds to the epistemological changes and paradigmatic turns occurring by engaging in a historical moment, a social context, and – especially important here – a changing technological environment. This resonates with Rappaport's explorations, which aimed to portray religion not as a fixed structure but as a ground that needs to be continuously reconstructed in order to be aligned with the world in which we are living. As mentioned, today's world is deeply intertwined with digital and related technologies, science, and syncretic considerations of the sacred, as well as with sensibilities and emergencies not sufficiently considered by established religions, such as the environmental crisis. Following Rappaport's observations, it is crucial to identify the religious and spiritual manifestations developing within these and other aspects of contemporary culture to reimagine and re-evaluate how religion can – still, in diverse and new ways – work as "the ground" he conceives religion to be.

The aforementioned addresses the importance of theoretical approaches maintaining key religious notions such as the holy, the sacred, the numinous, the occult, the divine

and the ritualistic[22], but also considering the variety of phenomena working as 'religious' and the crucial role of the subject in the construction of its own beliefs. This is essential when considering the complexity of contemporary spiritualities. The evolution of Neopaganism cannot be adequately considered under a fixed religious optic since it has been integrating the exigencies of nowadays scenarios into its practices while creatively creating its own mythopoeic. Due to its heightened ecological awareness and creativity-oriented beliefs (Arthur 2002, p. 303), neopaganism produces, and calls for, creative and fresh ways of understanding spirituality and religion. It also challenges the modernist enlightenment paradigm[23], while addressing the earth crisis directly through ritual, meditation and sacred activism. Since it is not a text-based[24] religion and since it tends to reject the authority of religious institutions, modern paganism is particularly diverse, fluid, and non-systematic (Harvey 2009, p. 393), constantly rewriting itself within the social and cultural environments in which it emerges. Its "openness" allows it to connect with other discourses with unusual ease and deny any sense of structural homogeneity.

An important aspect found into the conception of religion, is that it can be even defined as "[t]he means by which human society and culture are extended to include the nonhuman" (Eller 2007, p. 9). This is clearly perceived in Neopaganism which puts spiritual emphasis on human-nonhuman relationships and interconnectedness, and celebrates the differences without anthropomorphizing the other. While posthumanism proposes new ways of considering humans and how they are interlinked with the world, contemporary paganism expands this reflection to the spiritual domain by its animistic relational sensibility. On this matter, it is plausible to say that animist pagans are posthuman by default, just as posthumanism strongly resonates with the neopagan paths when taken into the religious context.

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[22]   To read more, see Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999, p. 23).

[23]   In the modernist paradigm, at least in the Western world, reason and science are the only domains providing an objective and reliable foundation of knowledge. Here, science is considered as the paradigm of true knowledge.

[24]   Here text is used in the traditional way: a written work.

1.3.1 The ritualistic affordances of Neopagan religion

As seen before, neopaganism is characterized for being strongly ritualistic. This happens because it is actually by common rituals, and not by shred beliefs, that pagans can recognize themselves (Magliocco 2009, p. 224). Among all religious activities, ritual is ultimately the most interactive and immersive one that expresses certain meanings and effects (Bell 1997, p. 138) and consequently, in which one can experience transformation and religion itself. Ritual, however, is a heterogeneous and polyedric term with multiple and complex potentialities of construction and transformation of meaning. From a pragmatic point of view, it is one of the most outstanding aspects of religion, since it represents the practice that best legitimates, renews and portrays the relation between the believer and the spiritual path. Ritual, as well, has its own specificity, since it functions as the medium where "certain meanings and effects can best, or even *only*, be expressed or achieved". Therefore, it is more than a symbolic way "for expressing or accomplishing what might just as well – or perhaps better - be expressed or accomplished in other ways" (Rappaport 1999, p. 30)

In a collectively-made, fluid and hybrid system as the Neopagan, it is exactly the recognition of ritual activities that can provide a matrix of differentiation with other beliefs or post-Christian spiritualities. That is the reason why, once the ritualistic manifestations are identified and separated from other non-Pagan activities – especially those having certain neopagan similarities - Neopaganism can be conceived as a valid religious system, with its own meaning-making dynamics. On such a way, when it comes to recognize the particularities and special qualities of ritual, Geertz's development of the subject can result highly useful:

[T]he religious perspective differs from the common-sensical in that (…) it moves beyond the realities of everyday life to wider ones which correct and complete them, and its defining concern is not action upon those wider realities but acceptance of them, faith in them. It differs from the scientific perspective in that it questions the realities of everyday life not out of an institutionalized skepticism which dissolves the world's givenness into a swirl of probabilistic hypotheses but in terms of what it takes to be wider, nonhypothetical truths. Rather than detachment, its watchword is commitment; rather than analysis, encounter. And it differs from art in that instead of effecting a disengagement from the whole question of factuality, deliberately manufacturing an air of semblance and illusion, It deepens the concern with fact and seeks to create an aura of utter actuality (Geertz 1973, p. 112).

All of this can be appreciated in contemporary Paganism, where the vitality of rituals is so present, that they are inseparable from Pagan's most notable characteristic: the connection to the natural world. That is the reason why "the structure of the Neo-Pagan ritual year is based on the solar cycle and seasonal transition" (Butler 2002, p. 121) of the earth. All the ceremonies are organized into the 'Wheel of the Year', a sort of Pagan calendar divided into eight festivals[25]: four major fire festivals and the Equinox and Solstices (ibid.) inviting the forces and energies of nature. Through rituals is therefore possible to see a) what characterizes the Neopagan worldview and b) how this worldview is expressed through ritual behaviour. On that matter, Neopagans did not only construct their own religion from reminiscences of past traditions and folk culture, but they are also reaffirming their animistic ontology by continuously integrating the other-than-human world of nature into their ritual performances.

This can be better noticed when constructing the ritualistic space for a given festivity. Pagans usually prepare a sacred space, which is the "location for formulized repeatable symbolic performances" (Chidester and Linenthal, 1995, p. 9). This sacred space is delimited by a circle that the believer creates mentally or physically. Once the circle is 'open', it is possible to invoke spirits, elementals – creatures representing the four terrestrial directions of north, south, west and east - or deities by using magical tools and by distributing in the altar certain objects representing each of the four elements. For instance, incense representing 'air', a filled cup representing 'water', a plant or a rock representing 'earth' and a candle for 'fire. Such correspondences are semiotically rich, since Pagans can use creative strategies of representation, just as pop culture characters having certain similarities with mythological divinities.

For Magliocco (2009, p. 224), rituals can be generally divided into three categories, all observable in contemporary Paganism. a) Life-cycle rites, "which mark the transformation in the life cycle of an individual" as weddings and initiations; b) year cycle rites, "which mark significant changes in the seasonal year cycle"; and c) rites of

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[25]   Those festivals are generally known as Samhain, Winter Solstice (Yule), Imbolc, Spring Equinox (Ostara), Bealtaine, Summer Solstice (Litha), Lughnasadh and Autumn Equinox (Mabon). According to Jenny Butler, "The wheel of the year is presented as a circle that rotates and "turns" so that it passes through each festival once annually. The image of the sacred circle and cycles are prominent in Neo-Pagan culture – other examples are the cycle of birth-death-rebirth, the notion of the Goddess passing through the cycle of maiden-mother-crone and the solar and lunar cycles" (2002, p. 122).

crisis, "in which the community comes together to address a problem or disruption, such as an illness". However, paganism adds to such ritual a very particular and special element not always found in other traditions or spiritualities: magic. It can be understood as "the organizational principle underlying the cosmos" (idem., p. 224), and as "the projection of the Will into the world, in order to cause change" (Lewis 1996, p. 150). For some Pagans members, magic "can affect matter, without the intervention of the thinker's acts" (Luhrmann 1989, p. 117). In rituals practices, where a multitude of meanings and desires converge, the role of magic is usually that of involving and transforming the subject. However, its use shouldn't be random or arbitrary, but instead part of the learning process of knowing one-self and how one affects and is affected by the world. In words of Starhawk, "[t]he magical and psychic aspects of the Craft are concerned with awakening the starlight vision, (…) and training it to be a useful tool. (…) Starlight vision is a natural potential inherent in each of us, but much work is required to develop and train it (…)" (1979, pp. 18-19).

Magic is also a key element of the worldview many Pagans hold. For them, the world is all interconnected into a web of connections, where a diversity of forces and rhythms regulate the dynamics, tensions and influences between beings. One of those 'regulating forces' is energy, which, according to Magliocco

> can be channelled, raised, grounded and directed by human beings. Thus one central purpose of rituals is to raise energy and direct it towards a particular goal. In the case of year cycle rites, the energy is usually said to help "turn the wheel of the year," in other words, to further the natural cycle; but in rites of crisis, the energy is usually directed at righting the imbalance perceived as the cause of the crisis (Magliocco 2009, pp. 224-225).

It is important to clarify that not all Pagans share the same idea of magic, and not all rituals are strictly magical. "Generally, traditions that derive from Wicca are much more magically oriented than more reconstructionist traditions. In the latter, the purpose of ritual can be simply to experience what was done by historical cultures, and thus to connect experientially with ancestors; or rituals can be simply devotional" (Magliocco 2009, p. 224). This notion, however, is useful to understand how magical practice, far from being a fantastical ability to satisfy wishes and desires, functions as a way of connecting and stabilizing the subject with the rhythms of the living world.

Returning to ritual, in the specific case of Neopaganism there is a prevalence of experience over belief. Here, instead of fixations with mythical narratives, there is a continuous ritual program – the wheel of the year, for instance – that prevails in most neopagan paths, connecting and actualizing the subjective religious dynamics of Pagans. Members of a diversity of traditions can come together and celebrate a ritual festivity without needing to have the same beliefs or pantheons. For instance, in Pagan festivals around the world, participants reunite together in order to perform sacred rites, which are articulated under a more or less shared worldview. However, some of them can be pantheist, other non-theists and others can be flexible and even changeable regarding their relation with the numinous. Their non-normative religious construction highlights, then, how Neopagans privilege the individual experience and their nomadic condition: the textual practice over the *Work,* and - as will be shown in the next chapter - the speech act over the system of language. Such practices are constructed by *jouissance*[26], connecting the subject with earth cycles and natural forces, and highlighting how both Neopagan worldview and ethos are ruled by dialogic relations with the surrounding world.

Rituals, therefore, express the sense of the 'more real than the real' upon which "the religious perspective rests and which the symbolic activities of religion as a cultural system are devoted to producing (…)" (ibid.). It goes further from ordinary domains, intellectual reflections, and scientific methods since, in its territory, all is clear, connected, and articulated into a universal order. Rituals, at the very end, just render all the religious structure and essence into a present and lived experience. They break the blurred fluxes of everyday life and, instead, create a ceremonial moment for connecting to that 'more real than the real'. During rituals, the religious conceptions are lived as veridical because of the consecrated behaviours taking place during the performance. In such process, the imagined world becomes the world experimented and perceived by the religious members who, in return, suffer a transformation – bodily, cognitively, and emotionally - during such ritual development.

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[26]   For Barthes, "[e]nglish lacks a word able to carry the range of meaning in the term jouissance which includes enjoyment in the sense of a legal or social possession (enjoy certain rights, enjoy a privilege), pleasure, and, crucially, the pleasure of sexual climax" ([Translator Note] 1977, p. 9).

1.3.2 The thesis of the secular: Not the end of religion but a religious change

Though we have already seen how Neopaganism can be understood as a religion by locating and recognizing its complex ritual dimension, it is not possible to continue such examination without developing a brief reflection about the thesis of the secular. This, in order to determine how Neopaganism has a role – whereas if it is a cause or a consequence - in the disenchantment and possible re-enchantment of the world. According to Max Weber, we have lived in a constant disenchantment since the dawn of Modernity due to the empirical, calculated and extremely rational principles of society, according to which processes "...simply 'are' and 'happen' but no longer signify anything" (Weber 1978[1921], p. 506). For a variety of scholars, the emerging of neopagan paths, such as Wicca, can be considered a reaction to the disenchantment of the world (Magliocco 2004, p. 120), referring to how formal rationality and scientific thought of Western societies changed people's relation towards religion. Nonetheless, the process of secularization – that is, the shifting away from thinking of the world as enchanted – has become a problematic issue, since, as stated by Casanova, "the concept itself is so multidimensional, so ironically reversible in its contradictory connotations, and so loaded with the wide range of meanings it has accumulated through its history" (1994, p. 12).

Secularization has been related to a gradual loss of religious authority (Wilson 1979, p. 277), which has reduced its status to the level of any other 'product' waiting to be consumed. For other scholars, secularization has been linked to a decline of behaviours and ways of thinking, the reference point of which was religion (Steve Bruce 2002, p. 3), as well as the "breakdown in the previously prevalent power of religion (…) in non-religious spheres—economy, health, education, and so forth" (Ertit 2018), or as the confiscation of religion into the private context. Finally, there are even scholars – although this view has been in notable decline among scholars for at least a couple of decades (Davie 2007) – who are firmly convinced that secularization will lead to the complete disappearance of religion due to the influence of scientific knowledge in supranatural beliefs. For Stark and Iannaccone "[t]he evolutionary future of religion is extinction. (…) Belief in supranatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the World, as the result of the increasing adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge (1994, p. 230).

Such reflections seem to accept the modern view that religion belonged to primitive people and would disappear with modernization. However, conceiving secularization as a rising 'irreligiousness' due to modernisation has been shown to be flawed by the work of increasing number of sociologists of religion (Davie 2007, pp. 61-65). The term 'secularisation' has several established uses even in the religious studies scholarship (Taylor 2007, pp. 1-22), while the more popular – including popular-scientific – secularisation discourse often includes and perpetuates misconceptions about, and prejudice against, religion, idealizing non-religious societies. When observing the contemporary panorama, the presence of religious people and communities, religious revivals in various parts of the world - including the rich and economically advanced countries – as well as the new and changing ways in which religion is manifested under conditions of contemporay pluralism and globalisation – such as the phenomena of "believing without belonging" and of "vicarious believing" (Davie 2007, pp. 138-143) – challenge the older theories of secularisation.

All of the definitions tend to focus the discussion about the secular phenomena in the hearth of religious aspects - as faith or ritual - for traditional and official religions. Nonetheless, as addressed by Volkan Ertit, (2018), "since religion is only one branch of the supernatural, discussions on whether societies or individuals have been secularized or not should be based on their interrelationship with the supernatural rather than religion. Also, for Ertit, "[d]efining secularization in terms of religion has confined the discussions over the term to a narrower perspective, both theoretically and empirically", claiming that the modernization and scientific innovation translates in a unstoppable extinction of religion. Here is when the debate should address a process of 'change' – especially when observing a certain decline in power and prestige of traditional religions – instead of a process of 'extinction'. (Weber, 1919; Bruce, 2002; Dobbelaere, 2007). On such matter, Neopaganism, and its developing mutations and popularization, is a proof that not only religious motivations and moods are continuously entering into "profane" contexts, but that religion-like systems - as folk beliefs, myths, rituals and magic - are even manifesting in implicit religious ways. As assured by Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers:

[w]hat we are witnessing today is not so much a disappearance of religion, but rather a relocation of the sacred. Gradually losing its transcendent character, the sacred becomes more and more conceived of as immanent and residing in the deeper layers of the self. At least in many places, religion is giving way to spirituality (…). But yet, theoretical controversy about the future of individual religiosity persists" (2007, p. 315).

Etymologically, the word has its origins in the ancient Rome, *saeculum,* to refer to a long period of time (Bremmer 2008, p. 432). However, the term has suffered drastic changes in the medieval times. It was used by Christian theologians as "the world in which we live, a world that is characterized by sin and the rejection of God" (Jan Bremmer 2008, p. 432). Therefore, the people living in the *saeculum* are embedded in ordinary time, concerned with ordinary affairs. Seeing the current global scenario from the perspective of this, historical etymology of *saeculum*, the contemporary world does not appear very 'secular' either. Advances in artificial intelligence (AI), genetic medicine and space travel are a proof of human's wilder dream of trespassing certain limits of ordinary life in order to enhance their capacities and provide solutions to long term problems. Besides, some of the technological advances nowadays possess a sort of religious motivation, especially when it comes to transcending our bodies, our human natures and our own deaths as a way of meeting the nature of mythical deities. It is therefore fair that, just as expressed by de Wildt and Aupers (2019b):

[C]laims about the decline of religion have been criticized both as ignorant of global demographics outside of the West, as well as being dependent upon institutional and a-historical, or conceptually vague definitions of religion, that have been accused of being normative, or even 'partly for the aesthetic satisfactions […] and partly as a psychological boost to the movements with which they are associated'.

There is still an interesting domain about this subject. Jeffrey Cox – one of the key theorists of secularization in the 1960s – has later claimed that the theory of secularization had collapsed because there were religious revivals all around the world (Cox and Swyngedouw 2000, pp. 5-6). However, such emerging religiosities possess different influences over the individual and societies in general. They tend to be more privatized, even 'invisible', and they are generally responding to contemporary problems and existential challenges. Braidotti provides an insightful reflection about the present conceptual and epistemological debate, for her:

(…) to speak of a 'return' of religion is inappropriate, as it suggests a regressive movement. What we are experiencing at present is a more complicated situation. The crisis of secularism, defined as the essentialist belief in the axioms of secularity, is a phenomenon that takes place within the social and political horizon of late globalized post-modernity, not in pre-modern times (Braidotti 2013, p. 36).

Considering that genuine religious or spiritual pursuits cannot be present in this pop-cultural, hyperconnected, and digital mediated scenario would not be fair considering the varied manifestations emerging in different contemporary narratives, media, and practices. There is a universal need to assign meaning and coherence… a need to have a sense of belonging and union.

1.3.3 The Contemporary Reenchantment:

For Christopher Partridge, what the West is currently experiencing in this "alternative and holistic spiritual milieu" (2004, p. 2) is a constant religious and spiritual evolution were, on the one hand, there is a creeping secularization affecting traditional and dominating religious from the past centuries and, on the other hand, there are spiritualities emerging that are adopting "forms, ideas, and practices which are not at all alien to the majority of Westerners" (ibid). From this perspective, too, these processes are not adequately understood as a religious and spiritual extinction. Instead, what the Western world is experiencing is a confluence of secularization and sacralization. This process of sacralization can also be understood as a "relocation of the sacred", since 'sacred things' gradually and increasingly become conceived of as immanent and residing in the deeper layers of the self" (Houtman and Aupers 2007, p. 315), bringing about a conceptual approximation to the idea of spirituality (Heelas et al. 2005; see also Partridge 2004).

Since religious expression usually answers to certain human needs, then the saturated scenario of New-Age spiritualities, the popularization of Eastern spiritual practices and ideas, the development of fiction-based religions, and the re-emergence and re-invention of pre-Christian forms of Western beliefs, and other kinds of religious reconstructionism, can all be seen as an expression of the current crisis of meaning. There is both a search and a production of systems of beliefs, proceeding hand by hand with many poststructuralist critiques on those dimensions of meaning indispensable for

individuals and societies. Julia Kristeva, for instance, in her criticism of modernity, reflects the need to "continually renew the capacities inherent in [meaning]" (Inman 2017, p. 62). On this matter, Kristeva claims that, in the history of signifying systems, aspects such as "magic, shamanism, esoterism, the carnival, and 'incomprehensible' poetry all underscore the limits of socially useful discourse and attest to what it represses: the process that exceeds the subject and his/her communicative structures." (1984b, p. 16). From this passage, it is possible to contemplate religion as a revolutionary practice for reactivating the significance process. Contemporary Paganism, therefore, represents the revolutionary capacity of religious language during the periods of crisis of meaning.

The processes described above coincide with the "subjective turn" proposed by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. For them, Western societies seem to be more directed to a subjective life "away from life lived in terms of external or "objective" roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences". The subjective turn is, therefore, "a turn away from 'life-as' (…) to 'subjective life' (life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of myself in-relation)" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, pp. 2-3). In the religious aspect, the subjective turn can explain "the decline of some forms of the sacred and the rise of others" (idem., p. 2) which are less attached to hierarchically organized and predefined roles. Nonetheless, this crash between the 'old' and the 'new' shouldn't be perceived as a new trend. The conflicts between established and novel ways have always existed, allowing the actualization of dynamics and worldviews with current global conditions, and therefore, injecting values and moral debates. An example can be seen in how the subjective turn is "linked to a heightened moral seriousness about the natural environment, rejecting arrogant notions that humans have domination over it" (Aldridge 2013, p. 188).

This Western spiritual milieu today offers a variety of options regarding practices, traditions, and beliefs. By inviting personal selection and freedom to combine and rearrange elements and by discouraging blind acceptances of religious absolutism, the current milieu manifests two important points inseparable of each other: a) the crisis of meaning in a world that is characterized by a disconnection of the transcendental signifieds from a signifier, leaving societies without established truths; b) the need for a

re-connection in a sea of uncertainty and obsolete ontologies, which can also be translated as "need for re-enchantment". For Gordon Lynch, "(..)spirituality sees our only hope in a re-enchantment of the world, a renewed vision of the divine presence within the natural order that can generate new respect for nature and new ways of harmonious living within the natural order" (2007, p. 54). This is coherent with an observation that people in the spiritual milieu, as a consequence of the subjective turn, tend to idealize certain 'premodern' cultures and religions resonating with our current system of values. "From all the groups in the contemporary spiritual milieu, it is particularly the neopagan movement that embraces this worldview (Aupers and Schaap 2015, p. 192).

According to what is explicated above, Neopaganism, as a religion, attempts to re-enchant the world. Religion, more generally, "stabilizes our meaningful interaction with the world, provides an anchor for our vitality" (Rappaport [Keith Hart] 1999, p. XV), and in contemporary Paganism, such meaningful interaction is continually actualized and celebrated through the animistic and dialogic relation which has an important place in the believer's cosmology. The re-enchantment proposed by Neopagans – even when romanticizing the premodern (Partridge 2004, 77) – can, therefore, be described in terms of "connectivity" or "connection" with the other, challenging the normalized/traditional view that "(…) reduced the anima mundi to a soulless machine." (Davis 2015, pp. 423-425)

This dialogic interdependency of Neopagan language coincides with Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of dialogism. In Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, Bakhtin developed influential concepts which characterized much of his work, inspiring key semiotic theorist as Julia Kristeva[27] and Roland Barthes. One of them is the concept of

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[27]   In her article "Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman", Kristeva states the following: "Bakhtin foreshadows what Emile Benveniste has in mind when he speaks about discourse, that is 'language appropriated by the individual as a practice.' As Bakhtin himself writes, 'In order for dialogical relationships to arise among [logical or concrete semantic relationships], they must clothe themselves in the word, become utterances, and become the positions of various subjects, expressed in a word'" (1967). On such basis, Kristeva reformulated Bakhtin's 'dialogism' in textual terms and replaces his concept of "intersubjectivity" with that of intertextuality. Her aim is to capture the notion of 'dialogue' "at the intersection of the two axes of discourse – the word as existing both between writer and addressee, and as oriented toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus" (Mäyrä 2005, p. 101).

dialogism, which is central to this analysis. In such notion, things do not exist 'in themselves', but only in their relations. For Bakhtin (1984, p. 252):

> Dialogue here is not the threshold to action, it is the action itself. (…) [I]n dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is-and, we repeat, not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends. Thus dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end. (…) A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence.

In dialogism, the condition of 'being' is a state which is only possible if there are other beings. There, "we are always in dialogue, not only with other people, but also with everything in the world. Everything 'addresses' us in a certain sense. Each of us is uniquely addressed in our particular place in the world. One can see one's exterior only through others' perspectives " (Robinson 2011). Dialogism is opposed to the notion of 'monologism' – a single-thought discourse, a single-voice – where one transcendental perspective integrates all signifying practices. By pretending to be 'the only and unmovable word' in a monological environment, the otherness are mere things, they are in a state of non-being. Autonomous meaning is denied since there is only one author and one origin. In the words of Bakhtin:

> The consolidation of monologism and its permeation into all spheres and ideological life was promoted in modern times by European rationalism, with its cult of a unified and exclusive reason, and especially by the Enlightenment, during which time the basic generic forms of European artistic prose took shape. All of European utopianism was likewise built on this monologic principle. Here too belongs utopian socialism, with its faith in the omnipotence of the conviction. Semantic unity of any sort is everywhere represented by a single consciousness and a single point of view.

Dialogism, on the other hand, challenges that self-sufficiency of a single consciousness. Similar to Barthes' theory of the Death of the Author[28], it functions by

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[28]   In Barthes' "Death of the Author", the argument is to replace the figure of the author - a capitalized 'Author' - with the figure of *écriture*: writing as the action of an agent. For Barthes, "[t]he connection between the author and the work is "legal," and it becomes, according to Barthes, an obligation for a textual reader to liberate the signification from its monological, legal state, and to pluralise it. As the traditional conceptions of Power and work are 'monist' (singular, reducible to a

means of a multiplicity of voices. Discourse is not spinning around itself but rather interacts with other postures and actors. This interaction of speech, paradoxically, makes dialogical texts more 'realistic' since they do not subordinate reality to the ideology of the author or a unity – monism – of consciousness. For Bakhtin, "[i]n an environment of philosophical monologism the genuine interaction of consciousnesses is impossible, and thus genuine dialogue is impossible as well" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 81) . Whereas in a monological world, "the self cannot tolerate fixity: what it 'is', is undefinable. A person also cannot be fully revealed to or known in the world, because of constant change and 'unfinalisability'" (Robinson 2011). Bringing these reflections to Neopaganism, its intrinsic dialogism makes almost impossible to have a single principle for representing and conceiving the world. Its plurality has erased any form of fixity, so it is always integrating other texts and systems of signification. This perspective resonates strongly with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological work on reception, David Abram's interpretation of animism, and Rosi Braidotti's vision of the posthuman nomad subject.

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unified system), the textual reader is reading specifically those aspects that are rejected by the traditional system" (Mäyrä 2005, p. 103).

1.4 The semiotics of pagan studies: an approximation

According to Kristeva, (1998, p. 8) if the notion of language is related to demarcation, signification, and communication, then all human praxis are types of language since they can demarcate, signify and communicate (ibid.). In other words, because all social practices are structured signifying systems, they can be studied as languages. For such reason linguistic theory is applied to other disciplines: the structure of language is the only logic that can exist in any production of meaning in which signs are involved. There can be no other logic than that of language. Following that reflection and in this broader sense, religion can be investigated as a linguistic domain not only as a collection of practices, beliefs, and worldviews with its own 'religious language', but also as a language itself. As a social practice, a religious system can be studied as a secondary modelling system, in relation to natural language which is also understood as a primary modelling system, according to Russian formalists. Upon this basis, this work proposes Neopaganism as a specific religious language, with its own system and manifestations, expressed in its ephemeral mythological constructions and ritual expressions. In order to interpret Neopaganism as language, the notion of language will be examined first.

Language – independently of time and context – is presented as a complex system, revisited of a diverse materiality – sounds, marks, gestures – and whose own uttered, written or gesticulated materiality both produces as well as expresses thought. For such a reason, it is the only possible way of being of thought, and, at the same time, it is its own reality and realization (Kristeva 1998, p. 10). However, if language produces thoughts, and it is expressed by thoughts, it cannot express anything exterior to it, meaning that no symbolic activities exist without language. Otherwise, language would simply be a mere tool of thinking, an envelope and static instrument without any possibility of suffering transformation itself while transforming the speaking subject and his/her reality. For such a reason, the function of language is double: it produces thought and communicates it. These functions are inseparable from each other. As Kristeva argues, the affirmations 'the human speaks' and 'the human is a social animal' are both tautologic (ibid.). Language, finally, is a diachronical process of development and alteration but also a system – a synchronicity – with its own rules of functioning, structure, and transformations that obey to strict laws (Kristeva 1998, p. 12).

Such affirmation is connected to Emile Benveniste (1971) assertions, about how language is the only semiotic system that can be at once both an interpreting and interpreted system. That is to say, only language can be in itself both object-language and meta-language. As a meta-language, it provides models, it describes, explains and imposes its linguistic features on the studied object (Chang 2003, p. 4). Therefore, by virtue of its double articulation, "language is capable of mapping culture, i.e., articulating cultural phenomena as secondary modelling systems, as aptly demonstrated by Zaliznjak et al. (1977) on religion" (ibid.).

Because of the complex, multiform and heteroclite nature of language, Ferdinand di Saussure ([1916] 1983, p. 25) proposed the dichotomy *langue* and *parole* – language and speech. The former is the social part of language, exterior to the individual subject and not alterable by the speaker. It obeys the structural laws of grammar where the only essential consideration is the union of a signified with its acoustic image expressed in the signifier. "Language is not a function of the speaker, it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual" (idem., p. 14). It cannot be considered in any enunciation act since it represents an anonym system of signs with all their possible combinations and existing differences. Speech, on the contrary, is an individual manifestation (idem., 9) and, as Barthes pointed out, essentially an individual act of selection and actualization where the 'speaker' uses a code to express his/her own personal thoughts (Barthes 1993, p. 22). It is then a sort of discourse.

Those opposing – but inseparable - poles of synchronicity and diachronicity can also be conceived in religious practices. There, *langue* would be that which is governed by the laws of grammar, structure, and normative notions that describe and command a specific religion, while the *parole,* which pertains to the combination of given signs by the speaker of such language, would be the individual practice and the believer's agency into the religious domain. There is, as well, an important linguistic category that is located between *langue* and *parole:* the idiolect. Barthes described it as "a speech already institutionalized, but still not formalized in a radical way as it is language" (Barthes 1993, p. 27). In the religious arena, this means that a 'religion' which is practiced and understood in certain communities, but excluded from the dominant one, can be conceived as an idiolect. Therefore, the firsts neopagan manifestations from the last century, who were disseminated and secrets could be conceived as an idiolect -

somewhere between parole and langue - before it became quite a recognizable system: they shared dynamics, they were part of a common system, but they still didn't have all the structural 'grammar' to be conceived as a proper language by their own. After their growing popularity, they were able to delimit their practices and beliefs into an unstable, open and syncretic system, which is constantly changing by the variability of the speaking – *parole* – process.

In this type of languages, fixed scenarios are constantly challenged, avoiding a dominant grammar to control and map their discourses. Neopagan speakers change but are also forced to adapt to the constant idiolectal innovation in order to achieve mutual comprehension and agreement. The innovations in idiolects, usually, "are spontaneous and unpredictable and are evidence that the linguistic individual does not possess a fixed, closed language system, but rather is an open, complex, and creative linguistic organism that responds to the pressures of the specific linguistic environment in which they find themselves." (Kuhl 2003, p. 2). However, such an innovation do not produce indiscriminate adoption of external elements and interpretations, as will be explained when arriving to the section 1.4.4.

As expressed above, the language structures of Neopagans speakers tend to be more chaotic, and less predictable than in most organized religions. However, they can still be framed, tracked and recognized 1) in the 'rhythms' and 'repetitions' – this will be explained when analysing how the poetic function is privileged in Neopaganism – manifesting 'phenomenologically'[29] in Neopagan discourses, 2) in the relational dynamics Neopagans follow towards other semantic categories and semiotic systems, and 3) in its dissemination in popular culture. In all of these three manifestations, Neopagans remain in the same "language environment". This can be better understood when conceiving the signs arrangements along the two axes, those of syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimension[30], respectively. As stated by Barthes (1993, pp. 53-54), the

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[29]   This is to highlight how things are 'felt' by means of perception, and how we meet the things not as empty envelopes.

[30]   Since in the universes of signs elements are not isolated but functionally integrated, Ferdinand de Saussure uses the binary model to distinguish and integrate the axis of signifiers with that of signifieds. He also introduces other combinatory axes as paradigm/syntagm and diachrony/synchrony. (Zecchetto 2010, p. 109).

syntagmatic axis is horizontal and it is the plane of combination. A sentence, for instance, where its meaning arises for the combinations of different signs. The syntagm connects and differentiates. The paradigm, on the contrary, is vertical and is the plane of association. It is produced by substituting one sign for another. Here, the 'units' that possess something in common are classified in groups. For instance, different words that possess different signifier but keep the same signified. The syntagmatic axis is closely related to individual speech, since it is in the lived act of language – the individual discourse – where the combination between signs take place. The paradigmatic axis, on the other hand, is more related to the laws of language which offer all the possible options that conform the syntagma. Daniel Chandler expands marvellously the understanding of both dimensions:

> Whilst syntagmatic relations are possibilities of combination, paradigmatic relations are functional contrasts - they involve differentiation. Temporally, syntagmatic relations refer intratextually to other signifiers co-present within the text, whilst paradigmatic relations refer intertextually to signifiers which are absent from the text. The 'value' of a sign is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations. Syntagms and paradigms provide a structural context within which signs make sense; they are the structural forms through which signs are organized into codes (Chandler 2004, p. 80).

Openness and heterogeneity – regarding other texts and signifying systems – are among the most remarkable characteristics of the Neopagan language. Such characteristics allow Pagans to choose from a group of signs - listed in the paradigmatic axis - without significantly affecting the intention of the speaker articulated in the syntagm. We could say that similar significative totalities – or syntagmatic chains - can be made without having the paradigmatic axis particularly reduced, since the amount of options to generate similar results are many. There is, however, still a principle of coherence in the syntagmatic axis which guarantees the stability of the 'background' on which the syntagmatic 'form' unfolds (Fontanille 2018, p. 55). For instance, when referring to a deity for a specific festivity, magic work or situation – health, love, protection – or for a season of the year, the believer can name a god or a goddess in specific, or it can invite a group of gods and goddesses, or simply refer to Nature, Mother Earth, the Universe, Spirit, the God and the Goddess, and so on. This, of course, always under a paradigmatic coherence where deities and spirits possess specific

correspondences[31]. Even if the paradigmatic selection depends on the type of Neopaganism, there are no strict categorical differentiations and their openness to other discourses allows the integration of other texts into the system. What is addressed here is the importance of the syntagm and, therefore, of the speaking subject when providing more elements to the linguistic system.

To clarify this further: Though a huge variety of religious languages are connected together into a syncretic narrative, the invocation of deities still follows a principle of paradigmatic selection regarding the type of ritual. For instance, to refer to the Goddess in a ritual focusing on the earth's fertility, the believer can freely invoke the Greek goddess Demeter, the Phoenician goddess Astarte, an artistic representation of many fertility deities put together, or a fictional character symbolically linked to a socially recognizable sign of fertility. This is not to say that all those deities are completely equal for a Neopagan, but that depending on the situation and natural conditions there is a variety of options, where the choice between them does not affect the spiritual work in a significant way. This also means that the religious system in Neopaganism possesses another level of complexity, since its possibilities of combination can also take elements from another religious language, the 'grammar' of which is deemed compatible[32] with Neopagan system.

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[31]   The notion of correspondences in Neopaganism is an important aspect for whichever path. It basically refers to how, during the magical or ritual practice, one can influence something based on its relationship or resemblance to another thing. This doesn't apply only to objects – like when Neopagans work with crystals or certain herbs - but also to deities, ancestors, and so on. Gods and goddesses possess correspondences with certain human aspects – like, for instance, strength, fortune, and wisdom – but they can also be correlated with the cycles of nature.

[32]   Nonetheless, there are even certain Pagans whose level of eclecticism is so big they introduced to their rituals Christian holy characters like the virgin Marie or a given Archangel. This is specially common in members who are part of strong traditional religious culture.
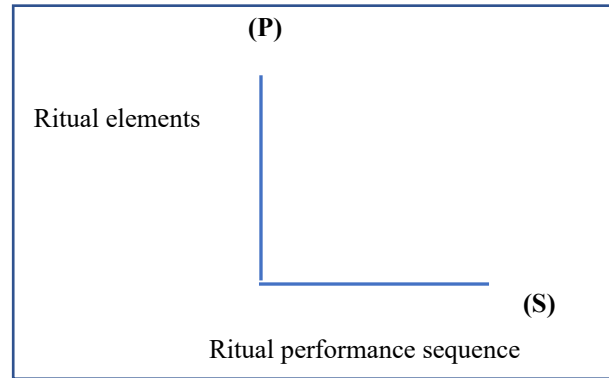
Figure 1.1: Syntagmatic and paradigmatic operations in a ritual from a Pagan's point of view

The aforementioned dynamic can be recognized in what Roman Jakobson called the 'metonymy' and the 'metaphor'. Jakobson (2018 [1956]) extended Saussure's linguistic relational axis with the notions of metonymy – syntagm: combination - and metaphor – paradigm: selection - so that it could be applied to non-linguistic languages. Though these two opposites are inseparable – there are no exclusive uses, they need each other to function – there are discourses where one prevails over the other. Metonymy is ruled by the principle of selection and contiguity – association, whereas the principle of similarity and substitution govern in the metaphor. In Neopaganism we could address them by highlighting the importance of combination and speech, but also the diversity of selections. It is, however, by the operations of segmentation and oppositions given in the syntagm that the paradigm classification is built. Therefore, due to the particular intertextuality and importance of the act of speech, Neopagan discourses are driven more by connections than by systemic categorizations.

In the case of neopagan language, the poetic function is decisive for differentiating it from non-religious expressions having similar signs – another cultural expression focused more on a ludic aspect – since its texts are predominantly poetic. At the same time, Neopagan discourses can be clearly differentiated from other religious discourses due to the strong intertextual dynamics – as understood in Kristeva and Barthes' theories – and how it creates connections and transformation with other semiotic systems and environments as digital media and popular culture.

The semiotic of religion proposed in this study would not seek to validate or disapprove religious practices or movements, nor would it seek to describe the content of those practices or their origins. On the contrary, the task is to study the texts in which

these practices are enunciated, to analyse the processes characterizing them as well as the contexts in which they develop. In addition, it seeks to explore how objects and narratives are combined or interconnected with other social practices. We could say that semiotics does not aim at understanding the discourses that take place in the body of such religious corpus as content, but as significant acts.

On this matter, Kristeva's semiotic theory is an elucidating mechanism to explore and study unregular processes as Neopaganism. In her proposal of the *semanalysis*, she sees a way of subverting established beliefs in authority, order, and functions by conceiving meaning not as a sign-system but as a signifying process (Kristeva 1986, 28). Therefore, instead of a fixed product, Kristeva introduced a productivity: a process that is always in movement and transformation due to the operations of the speaking subject, the influence of the historical moment, and the conditions of the social context. As Toril Moi assured:

> [d]istinguishing between 'semiology' or 'structuralism' on the one hand and 'semiotics' or 'semanalysis' on the other, Kristeva maintains that structuralism, by focusing on the 'thetic' or static phase of language, posits it as a homogeneous structure, whereas semiotics, by studying language as a discourse enunciated by a speaking subject, grasps its fundamentally heterogeneous nature. For semanalysis language is a signifying process, not simply a static system (1986, p. 24).

It is therefore essential to posit a subject in the religious dynamics, one that, through his/her own processes and operations, defies and renews the signifying practices that are part of such religious systems, recognizing himself in opposition to a transcendental ego - or a 'monologic' being avoiding dialogue and connectivity, while monopolizing meaning in the process. In the words of Kristeva, the speaking subject must "restore his connections with that negativity – drive-governed, but also social, political and historical – which rends and renews the social code" (Kristeva 1986, p. 33).

1.4.1 The relational pagan and the semiotic Chora: A Kristevian view to irregular and disruptive dynamics

In a brief pagan manifesto, the author and Wiccan priestess Selena Fox expresses how her feeling of connection with the cosmos and her surroundings – humans, nature, and technological "objects" – are embedded in an animistic sensibility:

I am a Pagan.

I acknowledge that the Divine is everywhere in the energy of life.

I am Animistic. I sense the life force in the oak tree on the hill, in the herbs in the garden, in the birds singing at my window, in the boulders on the hill, in myself, and yes, even in "things" such as my car and computer.

I understand that everything has its physical and non-physical aspects. The physical and spiritual are deeply intertwined, not separate, and one is not better than the other.[33]

Such poetic expression of Fox's spiritual life shows the level of connectedness between humans and non-humans in contemporary paganism and how the human subject is actually interrelated in a web of relations. This section arguments how Julia Kristeva's theory of the poetic language and the semiotic *chora* can provide some ground to address the notions of connection and separation, and therefore the notions of the *semiotic* and *symbolic* and the importance of poetic language in the process of decentring the subject. This occurs by slightly addressing the Kristevian theory of speaking subject: that subject which is not only thought and it is not only an automatic biologically organism, but a being that by dialoguing with the world transforms it and is transformed by it. A subject in constant process – in movement - which is continuously constructed and destroyed in his/her space of mobility: the semiotic *chora*.

At the core of Kristeva's studies on the role of language, the *signifying process[34]* is produced by two forces or two modalities. The first one is the semiotic, the modality where the so-called primary process takes place. This stage represents "the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such" (Kristeva 2002, p. 35), and it first appeared in the infant that does not conceive a separation with the mother and the world. Here, the drives constituting the child are articulated in what Kristeva named the semiotic *chora*[35]. The second stage – that of the symbolic - occurs when the infant recognizes his/her own subjectivity and separates his/her worldview from the mother. It is

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[33]   Selena Fox, "I'm a Pagan," *Circle Sanctuary,* accessed August 12, 2021, https://www.circlesanctuary.org/index.php/about-paganism/i-am-pagan

[34]   See Julia Kristeva, *Semiotica 1*, (Madrid: Fundamentos, 1978).

[35]   The term *Chora* was taken from Plato's *Timeaus*, who used it to refer to a receptacle. *Chora*, for the Greeks, meant "space" or "land." Kristeva associated it with the maternal body "because the infant's drives are structured around the mother's body." (Oliver 2002, p. 24) It is the stage where the infant is not yet a separate subject" and therefore still unified with the maternal sphere (ibid.).

articulated and differs from the semiotic - drives and affections – because it is situated and governed by law.

The *chora* is a non-expressive totality "associated with sounds and rhythms that set up the possibility of signification before the infant (mis)recognizes itself in the mirror image" (idem., p. 24). It represents the lack of separation in this pre-symbolic state of being where there is no distinction between the self and other, a place deprived of unity, identity, or ideology. The *chora* is rupture, untidy, unarticulated, and transgressive (Kristeva 2002, p. 36), and it precedes the conceptions of evidence, spatiality and temporality. There are no distinctions between the "I" and the external world. "The endless flow of pulsions is gathered up in the chora (…) Kristeva appropriates and redefines this Platonic concept and concludes that the chora is neither a sign nor a position, but 'an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their emphemeral stases'" (Moi 1986, p. 13). Once the subject enters into the symbolic order, "the chora will be more or less successfully repressed and can be perceived only as pulsional pressure on or within symbolic language: as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences" (ibid.). The *chora* can therefore be described as "a rhythmic pulsion rather than a new language. It constitutes the "heterogeneous disruptive dimension of language" (ibid.).

Plato already identified the *chora* – or receptacle – as nourishing and maternal modality not unified in an ordered whole. For this reason it doesn't work as a sign, it doesn't recognize a transcendental ego and it doesn't follow any ideology. However, the *chora* is not an anarchical 'space' since it is also subjected to regulations coming not from social law but from the mother's body. The mother's body can be thought as that process/condition that generates but also 'negates' the individual other. On such way, the semiotic *chora* can be described as "the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and states that produce him" (Kristeva 2002, p. 37), leading towards an infinitive of potential signifiers. That negativity is the organizing principle of the subject's process. In other words, it is what avoids the subject to be fully constituted, fixed and closed. Borrowed from Hegel, negativity is the "time of dissolution of structure" (Kristeva, 1977, p. 16). This notion, therefore, clarifies how all unity is resisted. It causes the "unitary" subject to fade away, pointing to its own process of production – all the

processes of construction and destruction involve an inherent productivity - while challenging the idea of a fixed sign and, consequently, giving way to a signifying space understood as *chora*.

As a 'place' of renewal and constant motion, the *chora*'s dynamic are pulsional movements/drives, manifesting in the semiotic force as psychosomatic, "in other words, not a symbolic modality but one articulating (in the largest sense of the word) a continuum (…)" (Kristeva 2002, p. 38) that can be recognized in rhythmic and intonational vocal modulations. Those processes and relations are previous to language but necessary to its acquisition. In synthesis, and to provide a more direct explanation of the role of the semiotic *chora,* it generates the semiotic rhythm in language[36], which is irreducible to any articulated verbal translation of itself. Therefore, the subject in language – generated in the semiotic *chora* – is considered "as decentring the transcendental ego, cutting through it, and opening it up to a dialectic in which its syntactic and categorical understanding is merely the liminary moment of the process" (idem., p. 39) By acknowledging this, any speaking subject is never unified. It is, therefore, a subject in process – unfinished - which is always challenging fixed identities and regulating the symbolic order. It welcomes innovation, opening and renewal because of his/her engagement within the signifying processes. In other words, subjects in process are "an impossible unity" (Kristeva 1984 [1974], p. 118), "a splitting subject in conflict who risks being shattered and is on the brink of a heterogeneous contradiction" (idem., p. 187).

Though the nature of the symbolic refuses the semiotic – and vice versa – the semiotic and symbolic modalities are inseparable from the signifying process. The dialectic between them (Kristeva 2002, p. 25) is what determines the type of discourse – narrative, theory, poetry, etc. – emerging (Kristeva 2002, 34). On one side, the symbolic mode allows signification by its rules and reinforcement of law. On the other, the semiotic provides a "more fluid, playful, instinctual" (McAfee 2004, p. 43) dynamic: a living discourse uttered by the speaking subject. For Kristeva, the poetic language – a type of discourse which does not have any utilitarian use, therefore it does not objectified language – is what reactivates "the semiotic drive force" through its sounds

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[36]   The semiotic that enters language draws upon the corporeal memory. See: Smith 1998, p. 16.

and rhythms (Kristeva 2002, p. 24). It is an operation "in which the dialectic of the subject is inscribed" (Kristeva 1980, p. 25), that is to say, the dialectical movement between semiotic and symbolic. The dynamics of heterogeneity, interconnectivity, and openness of the poetic function free language from automatism by enriching the signifying process with desire and consciousness, since the poetic dimension splits the subject and decentres it (Idem., p. 24).

In texts, poetic language plays between what Kristeva calls the genotext, corresponding to the semiotic aspect of language, and the phenotext, which corresponds to the symbolic. The genotext is 'a process' since it is where the potential meanings lie. There, the drives, "as constrained by the social code yet no reducible to the language system" (Kristeva 1973, p. 1249), are released and articulated. On the contrary, the phenotext is static, because it needs to be articulated and attached to grammar or social laws to communicate coherent sense. It is the signifying system, "describable in terms of structure, or of competence/performance" (ibid.). In the case of a signifying practice such as poetic language:

> the semiotic disposition will be the various deviations from the grammatical rules of the language: articulatory effects which shift the phonemative system back towards its articulatory, phonetic base and consequently towards the drive-governed bases of sound-production; (…) syntactic irregularities such as ellipses, non-recoverable deletions, indefinite embeddings, etc, (Kristeva 1992, p. 78).

1.4.2 The Poetic Language: The foundations of Neopagan ritual

It should be noted that the animistic ontology – already discussed in this chapter - is very well-suited for recognizing the semiotic stage reactivated by poetic language. In the spiritual context, the animistic sensibility welcomes a sense of profound interconnection between 'self' and 'others' by manifesting how humans are also a part of the web that collectively inhabit the other more-than-human bodies. Religion, ritual, and magic are signifying systems where the poetic language emerges as it displays the boundaries of common social practices. That is occurring since such spiritual-oriented performances generate meaning and produce belonging, separating the space where the

sacred is being manifested from the ordinary and "profane" space.[37] This process does not take place from a rationalized perspective but from subjective and emotive implications. Poetic discourses create, then, a sense of intimacy with the "outsider," which instead of being perceived as an object is now a "related other" with whom a dialogue is created (Aretoulakis 2016, p. 82).

Another important consideration when thinking religious as a language is deeply embedded with one of the functions - of language - provided by Jakobson, that of the poetic. Such poetic function is usually characterized by rhythm, understood as the free variation of verse instances which determinates the design of the poem and its multiplex and polysemantic essence (Jakobson 1960, p. 370). For Jakobson, "[a]ny attempt to reduce the sphere of the poetic function to poetry or to confine poetry to the poetic function would be a delusive oversimplification. (…) This function, by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects. Hence, when dealing with the poetic function, linguistics cannot limit itself to the field of poetry" (Jakobson 1960, p. 356). That's the reason why in any discourse were the materiality of language represents, on a phenomenological view, a crucial element for the utterance act, it can be considered poetic. There is a rhythm, a texture, a value in the chosen words - the paradigmatic level - and the connections it established with other signs in the leave discourse - the syntagmatic level.

Poetry – or better, all that confines the poetic context – was understood by Paul Valéry as one of the most important and vital expression, located at the top of a hierarchy of values. "Poetry is but literature boiled down to the essentials of its active principle. It has been purged of every kind of idol and every realistic illusion, of all the possible ambiguity between the language of 'truth' and the language of 'creation' . . ." (Valéry [various dates, *Odds and Ends*] p. 97). For Valéry, poetry is not a random and mechanic act but, on the contrary, a complex, conscious and meticulous act where

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[37]   According to Mircea Eliade, the sacred and the profane constitute the "two modes of being in the world" (Eliade 1959, p. 14). The sacred represents fascinating and awe-inspiring mystery, a "manifestation of a wholly different order" from our natural or profane everyday lives. (idem., p. 11). The manifestation of the sacred in a ritualized space answers to the concept of hierophany (from the Greek: hieros = sacred/holy and phainein = to reveal/bring to light) where the sacred can be manifested in any type of object.

certain aspects of language came clear to individuals. The poetic's task is of a great reflexive labour since it aims to express in an articulated way certain phenomena consisting on irrational sentiments, disruptive feelings and corporeal rhythms. In his own words, "The attempt to represent or restore, by means of articulate language, those things or that thing that cries, tears, caresses, kisses, sighs obscurely attempt to express, and that objects seem to wish to express insofar as they seem to live or to have a presumed purpose" (1974, pp. 1099-1100). Such considerations confirm the dialectical dynamics proposed by Kristeva between the symbolic and the semiotic, where, in the case of poetic language, the discursive experience is focused on the latter, but using the former to make it communicable and intelligible. Valéry, as well, welcomes Merleau-Ponty's language theory – extended by the explicitly animistic interpretation of David Abram – about the power of language as a way perception and dialogue:

> there is a poetic language in which words are no longer the words of free practical usage. They are no longer held together by the same attractions; they are charged with two different values operating simultaneously and of equivalent importance: their sound and their instantaneous psychic effect. They remind us then of those complex, numbers in geometry; the coupling of the phonetic variable with the sematic variable creates problems of extension and convergence which poets solve blindfold-but they solve them (and that is the essential thing), from time to time (Valéry 1985 [1937], p. 104)

The poet possesses his/her own mode of relating to the world, which, in words of Valéry, is unique and musical. Here it appears another interesting analogy between the poetic context and spirituality, which can be further understood with the help of the work of Octavio Paz. Just as Valéry (1927)[38], Octavio Paz considers that poetic emotion is opposed to 'ordinary' feelings, just as the sacred space is opposed to the ordinary spaces of daily life. For Paz, such experiences – poetic and spiritual - possess a common origin, and language itself possesses a mystic domain. The poetic communication is comparable to spiritual enlightenment and it is the only valid mechanism in search of the divine. The poet is always in an eternal search and contemplation, and the poetic process is the access to that process: "I have no name and no face, I am here, cast at my

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[38]   From a lecture of Paul Valéry in the Université des Annales, December 1927.

feet, looking at myself looking to see myself seen"[39] (Paz, 1984, p. 37). The poetic of Octavio Paz seems to be a statement of the constant interconnectedness of the world and how all the existence is uttered by something greater: "Unknowing I understand: I too am written, and at this very moment someone spells me out"[40] (Paz 1987, p. 37). Poetry is, then, the medium to manifest what cannot be communicated by referential and common language. Paz's open, explorative and contemplative relation with language is brought into the territory of faith and human beliefs, challenging the notions of univocal signification and the castrations of religious or other kinds of normativity.

In his pursuit for spiritual answers or connection, Paz conceives the time and space of poetic experience as a producer of signification and as a fountain of meaning. This is important when reflecting that the poetic realm is neither a transcendental order, nor a disconnected sphere. On the contrary, the poetic is immanent, experiential and situated in the present moment of the writing process. That creative moment that writing invites is the essential part of the poetic experience: the vision, the thought, the creative playfulness, and so forth are symbolically translated into language in order to be shared and offered to an otherness with whom the poet is connected. Having in mind these specific considerations about the poetic, and its analogy with the spiritual, one religious practice in particular resonates with everything stated above and can be considered the experiential key point of a religious system: the ritual act. There, time and space break their ordinary conceptions, welcoming other orders of existence and relationship with the more-than-human world.

Ritual, according to what has already been presented, is the creative form through which pagans "[involve] the articulation of meaning about the nature of reality" (Butler 2004, p. 109), and by this, express their worldview. The development of ritual and its way of affecting the subject is deeply intertwined with poetic experience but, besides, is the medium were poetic language manifest at its maximum, since ritual works in terms of experience, connectivity and subjectivity. Just as poetic language, ritual is not

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[39]   Trans. by Eliot Weinberger. Spanish original version: "Este instante soy yo. Salí de pronto de mí mismo, no tengo nombre ni rostro, yo estoy aquí, echado a mis pies, mirándome mirándose mirarme mirado".

[40]   Trans. by Eliot Weinberger. Spanish original version: "Sin entender comprendo: también soy escritura y en este mismo instante alguien me deletrea".

utilitarian and doesn't try to achieve any specific result. As noted earlier, the poetic functioning, by being subjected to the semiotic power, doesn't follow the specificity, clarity and mechanist ways of referential language. Ritual actions, in a similar way, "do not produce a practical result on the external world – that is one of the reasons we call it ritual" (Homans 1941, p. 172). Ritual's 'meaning' is not goal-oriented. According to Staal they are "pure activity without meaning or goal," since ritual exists "for its own sake", meaning that   rituals are "useless". Just as the poetic act lies, itself, in its own experience and in the writing moment where language is unfolded, the importance of ritual lies in its own enunciation. None has an end, since they are not to be considered as a means toward a specific end.

Another important similarity is that both poetic and ritual experience deposit on subject's feelings of alteration – the individual is not anymore in a common and ordinary state of being – generating also a sort of intoxicating 'ecstasy'. In rituals, that 'ecstasy' can be produced when the subject, in a state of liminality, enters in contact with the numinous - from the Latin word *Numen*, meaning 'presence' – as "the mysterium tremendum et fascinans" (Otto 1982[1923]). That connexion with the numinous results from the encounter with deities, the sacred, the holy, and the transcendent, manifesting that 'mysterium tremendum' which, according to Otto, arrives:

> [L]ike a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into the more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane', non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, to ecstasy (Otto 1982 [1923], pp. 26-17).

In combination with this, the ritual can be understood as a mode of communication (Rappaport 1999, p. 50) that creates the conditions for the 'numinous' to emerge[41] or to

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[41]   For Roy Rappaport, ritual is, itself, one of many modes of communication (1999, p. 50). All of its strangest features – like the separation in time and space from daily life, its gestures, its peculiar utterances, the aesthetic elaboration of some of its elements – confirms how ritual can be understood as communication. However, he also points out how this affirmation could result conflictive considering how many rituals are perform in solitude. On this matter, the "subjective experience of private devotions is however one for which the term 'communication' is appropriate, for in such rituals the performers

'reconnect'. This quality of ritual takes place by altering the participant's consciousness, so they "can come into contact with other ways of perceiving the universe and their place in it. I call this state 'religious ecstasy,' and the stream of imagery it stimulates the 'ecstatic imagination'" (Magliocco 2009, p. 225). The magical principle in Neopaganism plays a huge role in here, as a transforming poetic force emerging from the core of ritual activity. In pagan religious paths, all ecstatic experiences, techniques and symbols that belonged to the folk traditions –goddesses and gods, fairies, nature and animal spirits, ancestors - are inserted into the modern ritual corpus. According to Sabina Magliocco,

> [a]ll the elements of ritual — the structural framework, props, music, dance, costumes and other components — work together to help move participants out of the ordinary world and into a space "between the worlds" where they can experience ecstatic states. The actual experiences people have while in these states are very individual. They range from a feeling of unity with the sacred and harmony with the universe (…) to personal communication with goddesses and gods, ancestors and other spirits, to feelings of being inhabited or possessed by divine beings (Magliocco 2009, p. 234).

Ecstatic experiences are very powerful because they mix material from the individual's memories and personal life with cultural material — in this case, material from Neo-Pagan religious culture, much of which is self-consciously drawn from folklore. Taking this into consideration, by inviting poetic language — with its relational and dialogic approach towards words — the Neopagan religion is a linguistic practice that creates meaning by situating subjects in a web of relation, while providing ways of acting, moving and relating with the surrounding otherness surrounding. At the same time, Neopaganism is constantly producing itself, creating new sacred aspect from where it develops its practices. Just as seen through Bakhtin's dialogism, Neopaganism lives in the present time of its interconnectedness. As Erik Davis points out, "one thing

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presumably do feel themselves to be communication with spiritual beings" (ibid.). Though this might seem to be contradicting what is stated before, about the meaningless of rituals, what is actually important here is that, as stated by Rappaport, rituals are not done in order to produce a practical result in the external world (1999, p. 46), and this is why this perspective connects deeply with Staal's conceptions. Its poetic dimension does not mean they do not produce something – notably, transformation, which is one of the most outstanding aspects of ritual - but that it is not referential or informative. It lacks the intent of material efficacy or extrinsic goal.

that unites all Pagans is their sense of the imagination as a craft — at once an art, an instrumental practice, and a vessel for spirit" (2015, p. 423).

1.4.3 Poetic language as a way of singing the world

For Merleau-Ponty, linguistic meanings are based on – and develop – our perceptive experience (Dreon 2016, pp. 50-51). Therefore, language produces and implies an essential restructuring of our experience of the world (Kristensen 2010, p. 73), that is to say, how we meet the world. Nevertheless, in order to clarify this and introduce why Merleau-Ponty's conception of language is a key aspect for the semiotic understanding of Neopaganism, it is necessary to return to the notion of perception and what it means for the author. Perception is itself something expressive and refers to the way things are immediately — and not originally — given to us. Therefore, having this clear, expression is not about transmitting pre-existing meanings but rather "that peculiar property characterizing objects, human artefacts, utensils and works of art (…) [as implying] something that is not given in presence or which remains opaque, implicit and not visible, by contrast to the object which is given" (Dreon 2016, pp. 51-52). On that matter, humans never directly experience any phenomenon as it is, and in a static way. According to Abram, it is an "open dialectic wherein my sensing body continually responds and adjusts itself to the things it senses, and wherein the perceived phenomenon responds in turn, disclosing its nuances to me only as I allow myself to be affected by its unique style, its particular dynamism or active agency" (Abram 2005).

When bringing language into this reflection, it does not try to represent the world and it does not contain the essence of how to interpret the world itself. On the contrary, language intervenes in the world and invades the world. In other words, language is a way of speaking with the world, of entering in contact with it and generate a dialogue, a way of welcoming perception. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language can help elucidate how the rhythms and gestures characteristic of the poetic are an animistic act by itself. For him, language is not a fixed and immovable form but a collective medium correlated with the perceived world that contains all beings (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 213). For Merleau-Ponty, the initial forms of language were expressive, consisting of gestural and poetic rhythms, similar to a song. Therefore, "language is always, in its depths, physically and sensorially resonant" (Abram 1997, p. 55), and it can be

understood as a way of "singing the world" (idem., p. 54). This would also mean that language corresponds to all expressive bodies and not only to human beings. Considering this, even the non-organic entities — as machines and computational technology – that are actively participating in the world's dynamic, can produce their own and particular 'song' and generate a dialogic relation with the rest of the living beings.

On that matter, to describe, communicate and relate with the animate world by means of poetic language is to reconsider "the non-intellectual, spontaneous responses to gestures, facial expressions, and so forth, which are at the roots of language" (Andrejč 2012, pp. 243-244). As Andrejč claims, the poetic and expressive functions of language are given in the form of creative movements involved with the pre-linguistic stages (idem., p. 248). Those 'movements' are not guided by a final resolution or objective, but by the process of such practices in the present moment. It is in those instants of linguistic innovation and irregularity of meanings, where the poetic force addressed by Kristeva[42] emerges. A moment where the semiotic stage challenges the conceptualization of the symbolic, and where the gestures and body expressiveness become significant.

In other words, both the semiotic stage described by Kristeva and the expressive language proposed by Merleau-Ponty, would mean the diluting of the isolated human subject with the outer and non-human reality, challenging the homogeneity of the symbolic and the anthropocentric conceptions regarding the more than-human life world. It is a state of undifferentiatedness in which the critical posthuman project, explored earlier, meets the animistic pagan sensibility which, in turn, welcomes a relational spirituality. Due to Merleau-Ponty's untimely death, his work on language remained unfinished. Nevertheless, when situated in the living experience on language, it serves as a map for analysing animistic linguistic constitutions in a nomadic environment, as it is the Neopagan. In relation to Merleau-Ponty's explorations, Abram assures that:

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[42]   This does not mean that all unarticulated language is poetic, but that through the poetic appreciation of language it is possible to rethink its function and its expressive power. Language, then, is not just a simple envelope of meaning, but is connected to the speaking subject and their own dialectics.

it provides the most extensive investigation we have, as yet, into the living experience of language—the way the expressive medium discloses itself to us when we do not pretend to stand outside it, but rather accept our inherence within it, as speaking animals. When we attend to our experience not as intangible minds but as sounding, speaking bodies, we begin to sense that we are heard, even listened to, by the numerous other bodies that surround us. (…) We find ourselves alive in a listening, speaking world (1997, p. 59).

1.4.4 *The poetics of Neopaganism: openness, movement and revolt.*

The linguistic considerations emerging from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty in language and its consequences in the new animism — what David Abram proposes with his animistic approximation in The Spell of the Sensuous — can be considered as a way of relating and establishing dialogic relations with the otherness, involving the sensual perceptive experience that is, according to both philosophers, intimately related to the poetic language. At the same time, the posthuman postulates can mean an approximation to language as a strategy — of the embodied speaking subject — of being in the world. In both reflections the Pagan subject establishes countless relations into a web of connections, manifesting such poetic experience in the spiritual domains of ritual performances. This entanglement that deposits the speaking subject in a shared environment means as well the possibility of having hermeneutical freedom with the uses and experiences of language.

The notions of perception, connectivity and hermeneutical freedom resonate with Umberto Eco's theory of the *Opera Aperta* - open work- where he explores and dissect such notions through the idea that the open work serves to explain the radical differences between the nature of modern and traditional art. For Eco, "conventional forms of expression convey conventional meanings, and conventional meanings are parts of a conventional view of the world. Thus, (…) traditional art confirms conventional views of the world, whereas the modern open work implicitly denies them" (1962, p. xiii). In his research, he pointed out the existence of texts that, instead of having a defined and concluded message, allow to generate many organizations depending on the interpreter initiative. Eco carefully clarifies that the open work is an hypothetical model and the quality of "openness" is a constant in all the work. It is an operative tendency and the author doesn't have to be aware of it, meaning that it is independent of the conscious decisions and psychological attitudes of the author.

The "poetic" of the open work provides a field to consider semantically polyvalent texts and an aesthetic enjoyment arriving from two degrees of openness: one that is present in every form endowed with aesthetic value – even if the author/artist provides a univocal type of communication – and other where there is an explicit intention of achieving openness. In this second-degree openness, the user/reader organizes the structure by means of a series of relations that can be reorganized while the text is being experienced. In this degree, the 'works' "carry a continuous fermentation and germination of internal relationships, which each consumer has to discover, and between which he has to choose during the very act of perception or aesthetic enjoyment" (de Mallac and Eberbach 1971, p. 33). Therefore, the 'work' is a collaborative process made by productive dynamics of hermeneutical participation. In this sense, it is also important to highlight that the presence of a continuously altering subject – a subject in process – makes it impossible to reveal or 'predict' any possible series of manifestations. Every act of perception implies, as well, a dialogue between the beings and entities involved and this means that nothing is completely closed.

Within this second-degree openness, the addressee is therefore participating in the 'making' of the 'composition'. The work's capacity to continuously assume 'other modes of organization' makes it a "work in movement", consisting of "unplanned or physically incomplete structural units" (Eco 1989, p. 12). The 'work in movement' can be seen in all types of cultural expressions projecting non-Euclidean geometries: from music to literature to contemporary scientific thoughts. In literature, for instance, the work of Mallarmè emphasized "the breaking down of the initial unit into sections which could be formulated and which could express new perspectives (…)" (Eco 1984, p. 58). In science, the poetics of the open work "implies a revised version of the classic relationship posited between cause and effect as a rigid, one-directional system: now a complex interplay of motive forces is envisaged, a configuration of possible events, a complete dynamism of structure" (ibid.). In religion, the beliefs systems are updated through a continuous process of dialogue among the believers and with external languages that seem alien to the religious organization. This can be seen in emerging phenomena such as Open Source Religion,[43] as well as in traditional systems of beliefs

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[43]   According to the online site, Open Source Religion corresponds to "the era of humanity in which belief systems are created from numerous sources". To read more: https://www.opensourcereligion.com/.

that create meaningful connections with social changes and technological innovations. Consider, for instance, how Buddhism has integrated discourses belonging to the field of robotics[44]. In the specific case of Neopaganism, such poetics can be recognized in the relational strategy of animism, its nomadism, mythopoesis, and its sense of revolt.

Revolt is vital – and novel - to this study, since it strongly characterized the essence and consequences of Neopaganism in the social and cultural scenario. Usually understood in political terms as an act of rebellion or insurrection, it comes from the French (v.) revolter or (n.) révolte, which is from or cognate with Italian rivoltare 'to overthrow, overturn'. Kristeva, however, makes use of this expression to develop an original approach to the conception of revolt: like a return to the initial basis, a 'back and forth' trip allowing to question ourselves – and our development - without fear or disconfort. For Kristeva, "there is no answer to social, historic and political impasses without a radical inner experience; an inner experience that is demanding, unique, and able to appropriate the complexity of the past in order to approach the present and the future" (Kristeva 2014, p. 2). However, this inner experience is not about a passive and mechanical negation but it needs to propose an alternative. It needs to have the process of construction-destruction of all productivity. That is when the Kristevian notion of revolt emerges, understood in contemporaneity as "a challenge to pre-established norms, values and powers" (idem., p. 3). For her, revolt, "as return/turning back/displacement/change, constitutes the internal logic of a certain culture that I would like to revive here and whose acuity seems quite threatened these days" (idem., pp. 4-5).

The sense of "re-turning" is the key in order to understand the Kristevian notion of 'revolt', since it involves a whole reflexive process of movement and explorative reconstruction. It interrogates, recollects and re-thinks what is given. "Revolt exposes the speaking subject to an unbearable conflict, and our century has assumed the daunting privilege of manifesting the necessary enjoyment (jouissance) and the morbid dead-ends associated with that conflict" (Kristeva 2014, p. 6). Jouissance here is not about narcissistic pleasure but, as Freud demonstrated in his theory, "is indispensable to keeping the psyche alive" (idem., p. 7) – the location where life could find its meaning –

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[44]   To read more, see Masahiro Mori, 1992.

for its rejuvenating effects. In line with this, psychoanalysis could itself be understood as part of the internal revolt, an act of reconstruction of the human psyche.

Contemporary Western society, according to Kristeva, is experiencing a crisis between declining discourses associated with premodern, religious culture and the newer, secular discourses of modernity. In moments of such crisis of meaning, the only valid thing to do is to question everything as part of an act of revolt. Such a revolt, however, cannot occur from the world of action "but rather in that of psychical life and its social manifestations - writing, thought, art. This revolt seems to me to manifest the crises of modern man as much as its advances" (idem., p. 10). In such transformation of human's relationship to meaning, this cultural revolt also concerns the religious context, which moves between the most intimate process of any individual, acting as a "meta-reflexive pattern, meaning that it is the cultural matrix through which human beings seek to bestow meaningfulness upon the mechanism itself of meaningfulness" (Leone 2020, p. 3).

This sense of revolt can also be examined from Eco's perception as an instrument of revolutionary pedagogics (1989, p. 11), since the subject's interpretation must be part of a conscious act. It put into manifest the importance of (re)turning to a point of contemplation and subjective implication towards social and private life. The 'modern man' is in extreme need of such dynamic, considering how current life has cancelled almost all type of retrospective reflections as well as spiritual drives. For Kristeva,

> [t]he conditions of modern life – with the prevalence of technology, image, speed, and so forth, all inducing stress and depression – tend to reduce psychical space and to abolish the faculty of representation. Psychical curiosity might be considered natural but turns out to be less and less natural; it yields before the demands of so-called efficiency. The unquestionable advances of the neurosciences are then ideologically valorized and championed as antidotes to psychical afflictions. Gradually, these afflictions are denied as such and reduced to their biological substrata, a neurological deficiency (Kristeva 2014, p. 10).

That is the reason why this sense of revolt – which will be later used for the aims of this thesis and the phenomena of technopaganism – welcomes the interpretative role of the subject – the believer, the addressee of the religious text – transforming him not only into the writer of the spiritual experience and the religious discourse but also into

someone who questions and evaluates such operations by practicing them. The dialogic consideration of Neopagans towards their own cultural context and the world around them is, therefore, a strategy of revolt used to challenge the normative notions of what religion is and what it means to be a contemporary human being.

The relational aspect of neopaganism, rooted in the notion of animism and manifested in their ritual performances, sets an interconnective and dialogic process between the human with the non-human world. Its own "theology" reveals an organic perception of the numinous, which is not static, settled, or apart but present in our immediate reality. In this 'more than human' spirituality, the individual is not separated but in a state of "interrelatedness" with the otherness, reaffirming – as seen earlier in this chapter – its posthuman condition since pagans inhabit a world with dialogic and clear relationships between souls, beings, and things.

Conclusion: A productive thinking of the human and the sacred

"(…) A Witch must not only be familiar with the mystic planes of existence beyond the physical realm; she should also be familiar with the trees & plants & birds & animals of her own backyard, be able to name them, know their uses & habits & what part each plays in the whole. She should understand not just the symbolic aspects of the moon's cycle, but the real functioning of the earth's waters & mineral & energy cycles. She should know the importance of ritual in building human community, but also understand the function of mycorrhizal fungi & soil microorganisms in the natural community in which human community is embedded."

Starhawk, The Earth Path (2005, p. 7).

Contemporary Paganism can, indeed, be understood as religious. It offers an immanent and horizontal worldview where nature is not the creation that 'we' inhabit, but instead is the manifestation of deities that also inhabit in us. In other words, there is no 'nature' as a separated realm, since we are an inseparable part of it and a consequence of it. Paganism, also, provides a certain order sustained by an eclectic variety of mythical expressions. These myths function as a system of language, that normative part which articulates Neopagan views. For instance, idealized notions of pre-Christian civilizations, beliefs of a blood linage, the presence of mythological stories that transform the yearly seasonal cycles into transformative experiences, and so forth. And, finally, the existence of ritual - understood as the medium where poetic language best manifests itself – which renews Neopagan foundations by interconnecting external elements of the sociocultural reality within the internal Pagan corpus. Ritual, besides, maintains the network connecting Pagans with other members but also with other beings and entities.

Paganism can be understood as animistic in regards to how it relates to the world, which is what, at the end, differentiates it from the dualistic perspective on the mind/body that is still largely accepted in other post-Christian spiritualities, such as New Age. Poetic language, thought as linguistic understanding of animism, also takes neopaganism out of strict conceptualizations, maps but also heavy idealizations, acknowledging the experience of relating with the otherness without normative ideals and expectations. Paganism is not a past, it is not a transcendental unreachable, nor is it an original moment from which everything starts. It is a nomadic practice, an animistic way of relating where static conditions are being challenged. What characterizes early

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Neopaganism, then, is not only the dialogism existing in its multiples discourses and semiotic systems. It is how, in that intertextual dynamism, there is a relational ontology where the coupling with others follows the rhythms of poetic language. It does not reproduce, it produces. It is not a final product, it is a constant productivity. It does not refer to something else - separated from it - it is that to which it refers.

A poetic approach is, as well, coherent with the present condition of Neopaganism, where different paths coming from a religious macro-concept focus in the here and the now, and whose intents of reviving ancient traditions are not a consequence of melancholy but, instead, of an act of revolt. In that sense, the poetic work is not the echo of a past but, as so well expressed by Bachelard in The Poetic of the Space, has its own dynamism (1984, p. 8), as it is by itself an approximation and an experience. It is not a product or a mere effect; it abandons the supremacy of the sign – as expressed by Kristeva – in order to become a productive apparatus. The poetic text is then of an imminent nature originated by a sensuous perception and dialogue between the subject and the surroundings more than human world. It is sensuous since it is perceived in its totally, by its own self-referentiality. Just as in Merleau-Ponty's conception of language, objects and non-human entities are not empty envelopes for the pagan individual.

Finally, it is important to note that Kristeva's presence in this analysis coincides as well with the "revolutionary" power of contemporary Paganism regarding the crisis of meaning in late modernity. Kristeva's semiotic project was – and continues to be – radically subversive to established preconceptions and theoretical monologism. As she stated in her preface to Desire in Language:

> Next to structuralism, a critique of Hegelian, Heideggerian, Marxian or Freudian derivation jolted its occasionally simplistic elegance and carried theoretical thought to an intensity of white heat that set categories and concepts ablaze - sparing not even discourse itself. Semanalysis, (…) meets that requirement to describe the signifying phenomenon, or signifying phenomena, while analyzing, criticizing, and dissolving 'phenomenon', 'meaning' and 'signifier' (Kristeva 1980, p. vii).

If religion is understood as a language[45], as we have been suggesting, then Neopaganism coincides fruitfully with Kristeva's assumption of the revolutionary power of language itself. Language is not an inalterable system. Instead, it behaves as an heterogenic and productive field, where the same system is being cyclically transformed and destructed. There are, therefore, constant modalities of production and crisis in the social and subjective spaces which are interconnected through language, and interrelated by the symbolic and semiotic dialectics of the speaking subject. By including into the analysis of religious phenomena - as Neopaganism - the social and historical context, as well as the subjects practicing them, it is possible to dismantle the limits imposed on language and signification in order to approach contemporary significant systems as hybrid and dynamic.

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[45]   Since all social and subjective organization has 'the form' of a language.

Chapter II
The Digital

The appearance of electric media is probably one of the most crucial phenomena after the industrial revolution, originating a culture strongly mediated by digital technologies and integrated by networks. With the raising of digital mediation and connectivity, virtual environments have started to be perceived as a different type of reality, generating other ways of understanding and representing the world.

The contemporary subject, as a being moving through a society mediated by digital technologies, can be understood under the cyborg paradigm. Such cyborg notion can be used not only as a reference for biological-technological hybrid bodies, but also for hybrid embodiments of contemporary human beings in the online context. On such way, the cyborgean condition can be clearly recognisable in the avatar, a figure resulting from the processes of digital embodiment occurring in virtual worlds.

Due to the potentialities of experience and textual productivity of avatars, it represents a key concept when trying to define not only how we inhabit and relate to virtual spaces, but how the relationship between the user and the religious act is occurring. This, considering how in the formation of religious online communities, the performance and construction of rituals and even the way of inhabiting virtual "sacred" spaces are all activities lived through avatars.

This chapter aim at addressing how the phenomena of digital religion can emerge from the technological integration in subjects and how the conception of avatar embodiment is nothing more but a manifestation of a poetic practice.

2.1 The ubiquitous techne: an overview to digital media

Humans have long been manipulating and transforming their environment to survive, creating technologies (or mediums) allowing them to extend their abilities to a non-natural point to facilitate work and life. Marshall McLuhan finds that mediums are an extension of man, and for that reason, they are amplifiers or accelerators of existing processes[46]. In the digital era, "we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned" (McLuhan 1994, p. 3). In this sense, electronic media become an extension of collective human consciousness. From McLuhan's point of view, mediums are not vehicles or "bridges" between nature and human beings, but they are rather nature itself. New mediums change the structure of the human world by becoming the new environment in which social and cultural activities are developed. Environments cannot be thought of as containers but as processes, since they do not change what is being communicated but how communication occurs in all its variety.

This is in accordance with Pierre Levy's assumption that cultural forms and interpretative faculties evolve with humanity's writing machines[47]. Similarly, Timothy Taylor writes[48] that human progress is closely related to the technologies of a specific

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[46]   For McLuhan, "media, as extensions of the senses, establish new proportions, not only among our private senses, but also among them, in their interactions" (McLuhan and Zingrone 1998, p. 217). In his theory, a medium represents everything which is extending a man, in some way or another, opening up diverse and unique ways of communication by affecting the existing environment.

[47]   For Pierre Levy, a cultural theorist and media scholar, cultural phenomena emerge from a process of editorialization consummated by symbolic machines. He affirms that even if there is still a human species, in a biological sense, the essence of man is almost inexistent today. In the course of historical evolution each meta-memory machine weaves its semiotics, its socio-political institutions, and its techniques, to which correspond—philosophically—certain epistemologies, anthropologies, and ontologies. It is not possible anymore to oppose nature to culture, nor the human to the technique. Now there are only ecosystems or meta-machines of memory exploitation. Humanity indeed emerges from the development of a symbolic ecosystem. See: Levy 2019.

[48]   The archaeologist Timothy Taylor proposes that humans belong to an artificial category. He considers modern humans as a product of technological change which allows them to overcome biological limitations. Since humans do not have the necessary biological equipment for surviving, it would be impossible to do it in a completely 'natural' context without technology. We have become, following this logic, an artificial ape. This is the result of a million year process of evolution, in which

time and observes how specific characteristics of technological media have physically and mentally moulded humans. Taylor's hypothesis focuses on early human evolution, highlighting the significance of technology from the very beginning of human existence and survival, claiming that "technology evolved us" (2010, p. 9). In this way, according to Taylor, human evolution has itself been influenced by technology. Therefore, we are artificial creatures of our own making.

Regarding human's technological interdependence, computational media probably represent one of the most important phenomenon after the industrial revolution, originating a culture strongly mediated by digital technologies and integrated by networks. Parallelly, they have started to be perceived as another type of reality through their vast territories. In this hybrid and multidimensional ecosystem new paradigms are being proposed regarding the integration of the offline and online environments, which instead of differentiating, augment and complement each other. These situations can be reflected in a variety of theories such as the Global Theatre of Mobile World of Eric McLuhan[49], the Software Culture of Lev Manovich (2010), the Collective Intelligence of Pierre Levy (1997), the 'Digital Embodiment' of Katherine Hayles (1999), and the 'Posthumanism' of Rosi Braidotti (2013).

Such scenarios which were projected as a reality yet to be studied during the dawn of cyber-culture are now, at least to a notable extent, inherent conditions of contemporaneity: complex identities emerging from the virtual space, like cyborgs and avatars, as well as a myriad of data circulating at high speeds, bots, algorithms, among others. All of those situations are expressions of a new reality, where space and time are experienced in ways never seen before, and the conception of humanness is understood as a process in a constant change rather than as a universal state.

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technology has allowed humans to disperse into and survive in every environment on the planet, without the need for developing physical adaptations as most other biological organisms do. To read more, see Taylor 2010.

[49]   Eric McLuhan. "Media Ecology in the 21st Century". A conference delivered in Bogota, Colombia on May 17th 2018, in the occasion of the presentation of the PhD program in Communication and Media studies at La Universidad de la Sabana.

Marshall McLuhan (1989) already predicted how, in an era dominated by new media, immediacy and globalization would allow the development of what he called 'global village'[50], where the revival of a tribal mentality would open through technological mediation and electronic interdependence: "[…] our world has become compressional by dramatic reversal. As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. Electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together" (McLuhan 1964, p. 5). Following McLuhan's thought, such a situation brought back the acoustic properties of tribal societies as well as decentralized, organic, fragmented, simultaneous, and sensory processes. Nevertheless, this environment would also complicate normative conceptions such as 'reality' and 'materiality' - as will be shown later on this chapter - since, at the current stage of the electric age, the virtual and the real constitute the same technological, social and semiotic environment or ecosystem. On this matter, José Augusto Mourão assures that "the universal laws of things and the imprescriptible rights of the subjects, which were the constitutional guarantees of the moderns, have definitely collapsed. The nature of societal regulatory processes has changed[51]" (2001). Digital networks constitute, therefore, a new dimension of the real, which, at the same time, is presented under several aspects as opaque to our intelligence and elusive from our control (Vecoli 2013, p. 7).

With all of these emerging hermeneutical conditions changes arose regarding the pragmatic relations between humans and their technological context. Due to the growing evolution and success of the internet during the '90s in almost all sociocultural fields, digital computers evolved from "being a particular technology (a calculator, symbol processor, image manipulator, etc..) to a filter for all culture" (Manovich 2002,

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[50]   In a global village, electronic media become an extension of collective human consciousness. According to Tom Wolfe, the global village is the first and most memorable name for the digital universe McLuhan predicted. This premise changes a little bit in Shafer's conception, who assures the global village has not arrived yet. Contrary opinions did also appear. For Eco's point of view McLuhan's global village is a fallacy: "we are certainly living in an electronic global world but it is not a village, if by village one means a human settlement where people are directly interacting with each other" (1996, p. 304). Nevertheless, as Andrew Chrystall detailed, the global village is not a theory but instead " it is an empirical observation of a situation that by the 1950s had been made readily visible as *figure* by the new *ground* of Television (…)" (2011, p. 7). To read more: Andrew Chrystall, "After the Global Village", *Canadian Journal of Media Studies* 9(1), 2011.

[51]   My own translation. To read more, see: Mourão (2001).

64). Consequently, these devices are mediating almost any social and cultural field with elements of their own nature. Computational media and other technological digital devices have become codified culture in digital form (Manovich 2005). The interface modifies how we perceive and communicate when we are immersed in online territories. Moreover, their heterogenic use has created an almost mythical aura around them, where mediated things can no longer pretend to be unaffected.

The digital cannot be conceived as a mere instrument but, instead, as an environment possessing its own rules and logic. Given their dynamism, simultaneity, and immersive nature, online digital worlds are a highly attractive scene for practicing any intimate or personal activity and to host and/or manifest human beliefs. Their influence has reached the spheres of spirituality, having a significant impact upon religious experiences, formation, and behaviour; this will be discussed in the final section of the present chapter. On the one hand, we see a variety of traditional and non-traditional religions using digital media to meet with others and practice their own rituals, but, on the other hand, we often find digital platforms themselves functioning as a gateway to a differently conceived spiritual reality. Since an essential focus of this chapter is related to the studies of digital technologies in order to explore: a) how they are connected to spiritual pursuits and b) why they are valid for the celebration of religious activities, it is crucial to clarify at first some critical aspects of the online context and the process of its merging with the human subject. From a better understanding of these techno-spiritual intersections, it will be possible to overcome influential misconceptions around it and to conceive, as well, critical theoretical points regarding human interdependency with digital media.

2.1.1 The virtual and the real: the (matter)iality of media

In his work, Pierre Levy argues that internet has not changed merely *the concepts* of space and time, but space and time *proper*. Why? If an information system modifies our environment of proximity, things that seemed distant before now approach and enter into our space of experience (Levy 2007). In such a territory, two concepts permeate all texts emerging from computational technologies: the digital and the virtual. The former could be seen as the technical foundation of virtuality, and the latter as the distinguishing feature of information technology. The translation of processes,

experiences and information to digits, that is to say to digital codes, is what characterizes the virtual world in which we are immersed (idem., pp. 32-35). The virtual, on the one hand, is an opaque term possessing a variety of signifieds coming from popular culture and different areas of knowledge. Philosophically, it refers to the power that an entity has to become something instead of being related to the false or the imaginary. An example provided by Levy is how a tree is virtually present in a seed. The virtual is in fact – as Gille Deleuze suggested - not the opposite of the real, but rather the opposite of the actual. Both of them – virtual and real - are just different ways of 'being'. According to Levy, a virtual condition is dynamic and indeterminate. It refers to an event, an object or an entity calling for a process of resolution: an actualization (2007, 24). The virtual environment is, therefore, another dimension of reality, which instead of being an artificial or unreal context, is nothing more than an infinite chain of possible updates.

On the other hand, the "digital" – from the Latin term *digitus* – is all that can be represented by numbers; the laws that regulating the net are connected with the "mathematical abstraction that in our culture we associate with sharpness of perfection (Vecoli 2013, p. 23). The digital, however, is not so distant from the notions of 'touchable' perception. In the digital age, virtual tools and interfaces are actually operated through hands, meaning that they are, in a certain sense, touched by us. Besides, if digital culture is taken etymologically it would mean 'the culture of fingers' since the sense of the world *digitus* is not only that of 'number' but also 'finger' (Ackerman, Grespi and Pinotti 2020). When reflecting about the role of hands with human techne, instead of being a mere instrument, the hand's high plasticity has allowed it to become a supra-tool. Following Aristotle:

> (…) the hand is not to be looked on as one organ but as many; for it is, as it were, an instrument for further instruments. This instrument, therefore, — the hand — of all instruments the most variously serviceable, has been given by nature to man, the animal of all animals the most capable of acquiring the most varied arts. (Aristotle, pp. 2340-41)

The role of hands is, therefore, deeply tight to craftmanship and in the evolution of civilization. It is embedded with techne while guiding and manifesting human's desires and imagination. As such, "it is also the organ through which the human being can indulge himself in an artistic activity and which can express one's

sensitivity and one's worldview (Weltanschauung)" (Ackerman, Grespi and Pinotti 2020, p. 15). Hands[52] are also, of course, deeply related to mind in multiple ways, as explained by Henri Focillon in his Praise of Hands (1934), in which he states that the hands and the mind are mutually constitutive of their respective power and that hands have also created man (idem., 16). The importance of hands in the digital context responds in a certain sense to the process described by Walter Benjamin about the progressive tactilization of the image experience – a process that started with photography (Benjamin 1936, p. 23).

At the same time, hands help us to move and communicate in virtual environments. Together with eyes they represent the perceptive bridge to our presence in computational technology, revealing a series of liminal dimensions of perception and allowing a variety of experiences to take place. Liminal since we cannot feel its texture but we can imagine it. We don't 'touch' virtual objects but our hands are embodied in the interface so we can control them and transform them. Such considerations can be seen "when we observe touch-screen natives, for whom the experience of the image is haptic as well as visual, for whom a picture that cannot be zoomed in or out, rotated or handled, is not really a picture. These interfaces are truly 'digital' in the etymologic sense of the Latin *digitus* (…)" (Pinotti et al 2020, p. 603).

According to what is expressed above, digital networks and virtual spaces are not only something that is continuously manifesting as a productivity – understanding the virtual as the many potentialities of being – but also as collectively built environment remitting to "something else" that can be perceived, accessed and experienced by the senses. These reflections give a phenomenological and semiotic dimension to computational media. On that way, a possible 'phenomenology of the web' - specifically when considering sensory perception as inherently participatory – would involve a dialogue between the subject and an 'otherness' manifested in environments, beings, and entities which are all part of the immediate online reality. Such Merleau-Pontian insight is explicated by David Abram:

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[52]   It is important to point out the existing connection between this understanding of 'digitus' and Merleau-Ponty's work on the sense of touch, which is a central aspect to his phenomenology of perception.

As Merleau-Ponty has maintained, perception (broadly considered) is the inescapable source of all experience, how can we possibly account for the apparent absence of participation in the modern world? "What right have I," asks Merleau-Ponty, "to call 'immediate' this original that can be forgotten to such an extent?" (…) If perception, in its depths, is wholly participatory, how could we ever have broken out of those depths into the inert and determinate world we now commonly perceive? (1997, p. 61).

In virtual platforms – sustained in a digital space of interconnected networks – users' experiences are produced and shared with others: users' avatars, bots, software of artificial intelligence, virtual reality environments, and so on. Even communication with other users is mediated by the online environment that it is perceived. Therefore, their experiences are both animate and expressive by perceiving and by the ability of being 'perceived' by such otherness.

At this point, we should note an interesting tension between the ontological and the phenomenological stratum of the online world. Its simulation of the actual world as a process of mimesis - that is comparable to the platonic myth of the cavern (Vecoli 2013, p. 25) – could also be conceived as a simulacra suffering "from an inevitable perceptual impoverishment and a demeaning reduction of the complexity of reality within the controllable limits of human technology"[53] (ibid.). Regarding the rupture with the offline referents in the virtual, Massimo Leone (2014), when investigating digital spirituality through a semiotic approach, thematises the dematerialization of the signifier[54] and therefore of a perceptible loss of value of the material condition of subjects and things. This dematerialization is present, for instance, in religious performances taking place in online communities and indicates a digitization: the material – conceived traditionally - loses its value and preponderance. The digital form, a virtual construct not having a referent in the physical form, becomes a simulation[55].

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[53]   All Vecoli's (2013) quotes are form my own translation.

[54]   According to the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), the two-parts linguistic unit he referred to as a 'sign' is a dyadic entity, formed by a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the acoustic print (the sound-image) and the signified is a mental component (mental impression) referred to the idea or concept represented be the signifier. To read more, see: Ferdinand De Saussure (2011).

[55]   Baudrillard's theory points out how, in postmodern times, media is not a simply mechanism for the transmission of information, but instead, actively construct knowledge and affect social behaviors and normativity, so that the conception of reality is, in fact a media-constructed 'reality'. To read more, see: Jean Baudrillard (1994).

The disconnection between the sign and its external referents is visible in the virtual worlds' aleatory dynamics of meanings[56]. Nonetheless, in the words of Vecoli, the vastness of the net might be out of the control of its own creators to the point of having a sort of autonomy (2013, p. 8). That is why such absence of an existing referent in the 'actual' – offline - world could indicate, at most, a spatial visualization of fluxes of information circulating in globalized computer systems (idem., p. 27).

The digital realm is constructed according to its own logics. Its conformation answers to a) iconic resemblances of sounds, gestures and images of the actual world, b) discursive symbolic constructions as well as conventional elements having sense only in the online world, and c) indexical causal connection between software programing digital platforms. Due to its complexity and particularity, the digital reality should not be conceived as a 'wanna-be' reproduction of the offline world. Following Merleau-Ponty, we can conceive of "[t]he world" as "the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions (2002, p. 12). According to such phenomenological perspective, similar kinds of considerations pertain to the online world on its own, as they do to an animated environment. Instead of evaluating or considering virtual worlds under binary conceptions, the focus should also lie in how we are experientially, 'feelingly' and interactively immersed in our environments - actual or virtual.

Keeping in mind the aforementioned, could an experience in the digital context be considered as 'real'? Many activities having a place in virtual worlds have reached a high level of immersion and transparency[57], thanks to interactive features such as haptic feedback, lifelike graphics and the surround sound. Virtual Reality nowadays can enable the user to simulate online scenarios or it can create new ones with 3D objects and other virtual elements giving a sensation of 'territorialization'. In short, despite its textural

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[56] On this matter, it is curious how it presents certain coincidences with some religious imaginaries where spiritual or divine beings doesn't have a referent in the physical and material world.

[57] By transparency, I refer specifically to that process when a medium "fades into the background despite its material presence (e.g. the form of technical apparatus) so that the mediatised comes to the foreground, not the medium itself" (Jäger and Kim 2015, p. 45). It is important to highlight that advances in digital technology does not only propose new platforms but they also alter the basic distinguishing characteristics and defining features of such media.

intangibility, the realm of digital networks could possess another type of materiality that corresponds to it: a materiality that should not be confused with the 'bare' physical structure sustaining and allowing the digital world to exist, i.e. the hardware.

Richard Kedzior, in his article "How Digital Worlds Become Material", uses the perspective on materiality from scholars such as Appadurai (1986), Kopytoff (1986), and Miller (1987, 2005), for whom "the materiality of consumption is not just a projection of socio-cultural conditions, but also an active agent of change able to structure action, create new meanings, and enable social connections" (Kedzior 2014, p. 15). In the case of Miller (2005), he states that "different understandings of immateriality become expressed through material forms". Religion is a powerful example of this when in many traditions the approach and understanding of God is mediated through temples, sacred objects, or rituals. From this perspective, "the material is not only what is tangible or physical, but also what is culturally significant, meaningful, or consequential" (Kedzior 2014, p. 15). As Miller argues, the definition of materiality needs to consider "the large compass of materiality, the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological, and the theoretical; all that which would have been external to the simple definition of an artifact" (2005, p. 4).

Digital materiality emerges, then, "as a set of arrangements between intangible graphical representations, digital artifacts, or simulations, experienced by consumers through the mediation of computer screens" (Kedzior 2014, 15). Even if they lack of physical material properties, digital elements can be considered material when we approach them through the prism of practical instantiation and significance (Leonardi 2010). Thus, in the process of digital consumption "what matters most about an artifact is not what it's made out of, but what it allows people to do" (Leonardi 2010).

All of the exposed perspectives represent different ways of understanding the intersection between the online and offline environments. By addressing their postulates, the dialectics between the real and the virtual could find more hermeneutical potentialities. Even though when talking about digital texts it is difficult to locate and define them as stable points or reference centres, and our experiences get distorted by the disruptions of space and time, this research proposes also to search for the new depths that digital technologies have to offer. Moreover it focuses also on how they can

change and extend our horizons beyond what we could have perceived without digitization. As McLuhan pointed out, since each extension comes with an amputation, then why not think that with each amputation also comes a new extension?[58] While it is true that many digital objects have lost their aura, it is also true that digitalization generates other modes or types of aura.

2.1.2 Integrated techne and decentred semiosphere(s)

The internet can be conceived as a "fragmented and interconnected macrosystem" representing "thousands of information systems"[59] (Hernández et al. 2012, 99). The term - formed by the words 'integrated' and 'network' - is basically conformed by dynamics of relations, "constituted by a fast and pervasive exchange of information arriving continuously from millions of nodes (…)" (Vecoli 2013, 15). The net, therefore, is a web of connections. Due to such characteristics and its progressive growth – thanks to the participatory role of users – "it never ceases to exist and to be active" (ibid.), which means that it cannot be interrupted.

By generating communicative processes led by the features of connectivity and ubiquity, computational media's integration into the daily life has change the way of understanding the world, how we relate to it, and how they generate meaning. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the digital has started to be perceived as another type of reality through its vast territories, where space and time are "hopelessly distorted" (Vecoli 2013). Such a condition is perceptible when observing how, nowadays, digital space is no longer referring to isolated processes experienced through electrical devices but to the software. Following Lev Manovich, it represents the interface between our own imagination and everything around us, "the universal language through which the world speaks, and a universal engine on which the world runs" (2014).

In such instances, we have become experts at entering and exiting frames. Still, we have many difficulties understanding the diverse natures in all the different "realities"

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[58]   Fragment taken from a lecture of Victor Krebs called "Virtuales, Digitales y Ubicuos" from the Seminar Next: Imagining the Future, 2020. Caracas, Venezuela.

[59]   My own translation.

we are participating. Frames are, nowadays, much more permeable than ever before. Classic conceptualization is insufficient to understand the variety of experiences that are possible nowadays, meaning that the conceptions of unreal, hyperreal, immaterial, or simulacra are all limitative at the moment of evaluating these spaces, not measurable or categorizable with modern procedures. In this way, contemporary digital technologies transcend the classic schemas and produce other ways of symbolic production. Following this reasoning, the internet is neither a good nor a bad medium, considering that in the interaction between people and the virtual world, "[both] strengths and weakness manifest in the technology, here the internet blurs the boundaries of what is real and virtual, as a technology which both unifies and alienates. Therefore, a different and more balanced approach is necessary to understanding the complexity of the internet." (Campbell 2004, p. 210).

As pointed out by McLuhan in his theory about media[60], the ecology between man and his surroundings is not linear but all-directional, simultaneously connecting any object or entity as equal organisms[61]. Human beings, therefore, have become indiscernible from the electronic environment of our era, meaning that there are not two different and separated natures but, instead, a context where all is simultaneous. For McLuhan, the computer was an extraordinary "technological dress" (McLuhan et al. 1971, p. 45), a metaphor which calls on the deep relation between the new electronic environment and the human condition. According to him, the relationship between man and computational media is even more significant than the existing relationship between man and nature. That continuous and absolute presence of the digital in everyday life has caused people to develop an "internalization of the machine [which] is the moment when the human condition becomes invisibly mediated by technology" (Smith-Windsor 2005, p. 39). Technology, then, doesn't remain external to mankind even if a physical body can remain external to technological processes.

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[60]   The word 'media' (derived by the word 'medium'), refers to an intervening object/tool through which something else is transmitted. For McLuhan, a medium is "any extension of ourselves," or "any new technology" (McLuhan 1994, p. 19). The medium affects society not by the content but by the intrinsic characteristics of media itself. In Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1994), the author developed the well-known phrase "The Medium is the Message".

[61]   To read more, see McLuhan (1994).

Lev Manovich, on the other hand, assures us that "there is no such thing as 'digital media.' There is only software—as applied to media (content)" (2013, p. 152). Therefore, all previous digital media have lost their specific function, and the actual forms of understanding and relating with the digital context derive from the software[62]; that is to say, "the new ways of media access, distribution, analysis, generation and manipulation are all due to software" (Manovich 2013, p. 148). This supposes a new paradigm in the convergence of media, in the production of content, and, as well, in ideas about the integration of technology into the human body. What Manovich calls media "softwarization" (2013, p. 5) is not enough to produce its convergence. It is not about inserting a new software into an old technology. It is necessary to separate such media from their physical supports and turn them into software, so they can interact and produce hybrids: a sort of computer metamedium which is simultaneously a set of different media and a system for generating new media tools and new types of media (Manovich 2010).

According to Manovich, this process would allow humans to combine media's properties and techniques in a previously unthinkable way. This new order of hybridization produced by software generates new representations and new ways in which humans can interact, move and proceed. The hybrid media, more than a concept or a category, can be understood as the possibility of creating new alternatives of combination and interaction. It does not depend solely on mixing the old media between them, but on generating new paths by different ways of combinations. In this sense, the internalization of the electric media, according to McLuhan, can be related to the penetration of a flux of energy, extending our central nervous system (while pre-electric media worked only as extensions of a physical scale), which can be metaphorically compared to an 'inner travel,' quite similar to the stimulating effect of LSD. This situation—the impact of the new environment— produced rejection of the ancient

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[62]   The digital culture and media art theorist Lev Manovich, in his assertion about "there is only software"—included in his book Software Takes Command— states that "for users who only interact with media content through application software, the 'properties' of digital media are defined by the particular software as opposed to solely being contained in the actual content (i.e., inside digital files)" (2013, p. 152). Taking into account this statement, it can be concluded that what we consider as 'digital media' does not have any particular property by itself, because all of the operations carried out online are defined by the software — in a general sense.

mechanic and alphabetized culture. However, for Manovich, the issue was not 'rejection,' but rather the patchwork of techniques, methods, ways of representation, and expression of old and new media in the software context.

These notions of integration and productivity can be partially conceived also from Jury Lotman's semiotic theory of culture, a project whose methodological venture attempted to combine the formal-structural paradigm of Roman Jakobson and the contextual--dialogical paradigm of Mikhail Bakhtin (Spassova 2018, p. 22). Lotman's theory is a theoretical strategy for studying how different signifying practices and semiotic systems make contact with others. In this context, the interaction between various media and discourses and between computational media with other sign systems doesn't simply affect them both, but also impacts other cultural expressions. In order to understand the dynamics and the new information systems which are being created, they can be conceived as part of a semiosphere[63]: "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages" (Lotman 1990, p. 123); a space "outside of which semiosis cannot exist" (Lotman 1984, p. 208), and where everything is connected. This space possesses internal elements, like a centre, a periphery, and boundaries. Because of its boundaries, the semiosphere is delimitated but not closed – such borders function like porous membranes to allow the transference of messages and the translation of texts into other languages. A semiosphere must have an inherent irregularity, where its own sub spaces have their own peripheries and a heterogeneity that allows dynamics of sense.

Each semiosphere is defined by the dialogic interactions it has with others and in the exchange of semiotic forms - of languages – which are produced from a 'dialogue' and from exchanges of semiotic forms - of 'languages' - which are produced on both sides

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[63]   Yury Lotman developed the term semiosphere as an analogy of Venadski's biosphere. It can be understood as an space that has "prior existence and is in constant interaction with languages" (Lotman 1990, p. 123). "The semiosphere is the result and the condition for the development of culture" (idem., p. 125). Another interesting concept arrives from Schönle and Shine: "Lotman's notion of the semiosphere, the semiotic environment in which communication occurs and from which it derives its codes, holds great interdisciplinary appeal. (…) The organicist metaphor of the semiosphere serves not to essentialize discourse but to restore to it a sense of unceasing life, of the continuous metabolic exchanges discourses undergo when they are thrown into the world" (Schönle And Shine 2006, p. 7).

of the symbolic border: the domain of 'us' unfolds inside the border, whereas beyond the border is the domain of 'the others' (Fontanille 2018, pp. 161-162). The recognition of both territories, the encounters between identity and alterity, and the resulting cultural exchanges, all occur in the border space. Because of its proximity with the border, the periphery is, instead, the place of exchanges with the culture of the other, the place of heterogeneity and transitory semiotic forms in the process of integration and adaptation (idem., p. 162). Finally, the centre is the place of greater coherence with the 'essence' and 'identity' of the semiosphere.

That great semiotic system of digital networks can also be interpreted as (a) semiosphere(s). Though Lotman refers to physical cultural centres, his theory is full of "spatial metaphors" (Nöth 2014, p. 14). Of course, the "digital" semiosphere can also be, and often is, interpreted as a metaphorical *space*. This reinterpretation of Lotman's theory is important in order to assure that some of nowadays semiospheres are decentralized and their centres and boundaries "have become liquid" (ibid.). Even if there is an existing hierarchy in the uses of data, software, and shared discourses in the online context, their movements, interrelations and transformations are simultaneous and transgressive. On such way, it becomes difficult to define a general dynamism or a geography of the territory (Vecoli 2013, p. 7), an "*omplalos*" or a centre from which foresee the behaviour of the digital realm. However, both the periphery and the border spaces can help us understand the 'digitalization of culture' and how its translation and integration into the digital semiosphere is produced.

Without a unified and stable centre, it is necessary to find a strategy that allows us to analyse the signifying processes of a 'world' that defies almost all fixations and stabilities. This is because the online territory is defined by a heterogeneity of relations (social, psychic, etc.) that sustain themselves in a permanent state of crisis. It is constructed by language and manifested in language, but at the same time, it is not reducible to it, since a variety of extralinguistic processes participates in the online. That is why when dealing with the interaction between humans and machines, new paradigms emerge due to the separation from previous modes of self-presentation and representation.

At this point, again, I draw on Julia Kristeva's semiotic project, since it opens new areas of signification while considering the 'other', the historical and social moment, as well as the speaking subject dialectics and his/her influence in practices of meaning. Since all social practices are governed by that law of language, therefore all social practices can be understood as languages. For Kristeva it was necessary to "'dynamize' the structure by taking into consideration the speaking subject and its unconscious experience on the one hand and, on the other, the pressures of other social structures" (Kristeva 2002, p. 9). That dynamization was provided by a subject that matters, a speaking subject – not governed by a transcendental ego – responsible for signification by transferring the living body into language. This subject is therefore the place where structure and transformation take place. Language, in this regard, is "the articulation of a heterogeneous process" (1980, p. 24) with the speaking subject leaving its imprint – the dialectics between the symbolic and the semiotic that was introduced in the first chapter - on such process. She calls poetic language the operation where the dialectics of the subject are inscribed. This type of language is what characterizes all texts emerging from the interrelation between subjects and computational technology, having a transformative power and - as we will see later in this chapter and the following one - a spiritual aura.

The relocation of the subject in such practices will address the condition of hybridization and embodiment characteristic of the digitally mediated era. The confusion and instability resulting from the connection of different realities, as well as the crisis of meaning occurring from the relentless weakening of transcendental truths and their grip have created an environment of disruptive connectedness that can be understood from the posthuman notions of nomads and 'the becoming'.

2.1.3 Virtual nomads: A collaborative space of hybrid dynamics

Machines, artificial intelligence, robots, complex algorithms - Today, digital technology and cybernetics are inherent aspects of a globalized culture and of our *selves*. The world has started to function as a network in which the subject is irremediably connected to the liquid nature and immediacy of the digital space. In this regard, contemporary digital media have transformed the individual into a being that is immersed in digital collective processes, influencing how humans relate to themselves and to 'the otherness'. This implies a new paradigm according to the technological

integration with the individuals and their cultures since the environment radically disrupts social practices.

The conceptions of humanism constructed "through contrast with the object" (Latour 1993, p. 136) should be overcome to understand the liminality of today's environment. Following Rosi Braidotti, in this present era of undifferentiated contexts, individuals develop complex, heterogeneous, and non-unitary identities (2002, p. 72). These nomadic subjectivities are never final or fixed but exist in "different levels of power and desire, that is to say wilful choice and unconscious drives" (2002, p. 22). This consideration resonates deeply with Kristevan notions of significance – or *significance* - based on the semiotic and symbolic dialectic of the subject: "The process of *signifiance* in language is two-fold: semiotic which comprises the subject's internal drives by means of which physical energy and emotions are expressed in language and symbolic that are governed by rules, grammar and transparency and are used for expressing the situation" (Kristeva 1974, pp. 22-23).

Both models – Kristeva's and Braidotti's - reaffirm how it is important to consider the instabilities of contemporary texts which function as strategies to provide meaning, reaching even areas such as religion – as will be explain later. These models also seek to highlight the subject itself and how his/her nomadic condition of being constantly in flux and far from any stable ground - rather than a static one – can be understood and expressed by cultural texts as cyborgs and avatars. In other words, it is in 'the subject' where transformation and revolution of meaning occur.

From authors who praise the particularities of human beings, such as Pierre Levy[64], to those proposing an anti-humanist and perspectivist approach, as Rosi Braidotti, they all emphasize the urgency of understanding that we are facing a different notion of humanity; this happens due to how our relations with technology have been redefined. According to Pierre Levy, the substantial modifications that humans suffer in their own territory can be "a new stage of hominization inventing some human attribute as essential as language, but on a higher scale"[65] (2008). By integrating into what he

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[64]   To read more, see: Pierre Lévy (2004, p. 9).

[65]   My own translation.

denominates 'collective intelligence', it is possible to develop sign systems, ways of social organization, and regulations to sort out practical solutions against the uncertainty and compulsive saturated environment. Being a nomadic subject does not only represents an unconscious moving, but also constant examinations and actions. Therefore:

> [w]e would gradually learn to orient ourselves in a new cosmos in mutation (…) to become its authors while we can, to invent ourselves as a species collectively. Collective intelligence points less to notions of domination by human communities than to an essential 'give in' that has to do with the very idea of identity, mechanisms of domination and the unchaining of conflicts, liberalization of confiscated communication, and mutual reactivation of isolated thoughts (Levy 2008).[66]

This situation of human nomadism is deepened by quoting Jeremy Paxman's interview of David Bowie from 1999, in which Bowie comments on the internet and its transformative consequences in its very early stages. As a transgressive and visionary artist, Bowie held a particular view not only on the changes occurring in society and the understanding of culture but also on how the era of digital networks is about interconnectedness[67] and hybridizations rather than separated processes. He was able to perceive the posthuman potentialities that computational media was evoking, resulting in an appearance of subjectivities and decentred dynamics. It is worth reading Bowie's comments in some context, hence a somewhat longer quotation:

> The internet is now what carries the flag of being subversive and possibly rebellious and chaotic and nihilistic (…). I embrace the idea that there is a new demystification process going on between the artist and the audience. If you look back at this last decade, there hasn't been a single entity, artist or group that personified or became the brand of the 90s. It started to fade in the 80s… in the 70s there were definitely such artists, in the 60s… the Beatles, and Hendrix… in the 50s there was Presley.

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[66]   My own translation.

[67]   It is important to highlight that, even if in this section there is an emphasis about 'connectedness' the global digital media that we experience nowadays have contribute to disconnecting humans and communities in radical ways. We cannot ignored the power of social media to atomize communities and subjects, and to make encounters harder in some ways rather than easier.

Now it's sub-groups, it's genres: it's hip-hop, it's girl-power, it's a communal kind of thing. It's about a community, it's becoming more and more about the audience. Because the point of having someone who led the forces has disappeared, because the vocabulary of rock is too well-known. It's a currency that is not devoid of meaning anymore, but it's become only conveyor of information, not a conveyor of rebellion, and the internet has taken on that, as I said. So I find that a terribly exciting era.

So, from my standpoint, being an artist, I'd like to see what the new construction is between artist and audience. There is a breakdown, personified I think about rave culture, where the audience is at least as important as the person who is playing at the rave. It's almost like the artist is to accompany the audience and what the audience is doing. And that feeling is very much permeating music. And permeating the internet.

(…) And I think it's because at the time, up until at least the mid-70s, we really felt that we were still living under the guise of a single, absolute, created society—where there were known truths and known lies and there was no kind of duplicity or pluralism about the things that we believed in. That started to break down rapidly in the 70s, And the idea of a duality in the way that we live—there were always two, three, four, five sides to every question. That the singularity disappeared. And that I believe has produced such a medium as the internet, which absolutely establishes and shows us that we are living in total fragmentation.

(…) I don't think we've even seen the tip of the iceberg. I think what the internet is going to do to society— both good and bad— is unimaginable. I think we're on the cusp of something exhilarating and terrifying.

(…) The actual context and the state of content is going to be so different to anything we can envisage at the moment—the interplay between the user and the provider will be so in simpatico it's going to crush our ideas of what mediums are all about. But it's happening in every form. It is happening in visual art. The breakthroughs of the early part of the century with people like Duchamp who were so prescient in what they were doing and putting down the idea that the piece of work is not finished until the audience comes to it and adds their own interpretation, and what the piece of art is about is the grey space in the middle. That grey space in the middle is what the 21st century is going to be all about.

During the 1960s and 1970s Marshall McLuhan claimed that the electric era would have affected us by reshaping our bodies and senses and extending them beyond our natural human capacities. In this environment, humankind is disfigured by technology. It is transported into a non-linear environment of the "Global Village," dominated by the simultaneous, where one thing does not follow the other but is instead all about the

'joy of instants'[68]. The structures of space and time have changed, along with how reality is represented. The conceptions of sequence and limits are now replaced by moments, stimulus, disruptions, and networks.

Just as proposed by McLuhan from his media studies, Barthes and Kristeva from semiotics, Braidotti from philosophy and Duchamp from art, Bowie did it from the territory of music and visual culture. The virtual space is a great collective memory, a great meta-ontology (Levy 2019, p. 5) shaped by processes in constant development, while allowing us to go from one space to another. We live in an environment of multiple disruptions. Nonetheless, the condition of nowadays environment cannot be seen only as mere interactions between machines and human beings. It is, actually, an epistemological issue related to interconnected thinking between software and human beings, integrated into the same sphere of existence. The emerging of other metaphors such as pilgrimage and nomadism, opening the road to hybrid conditions, continuous metamorphoses, and diversities of languages.

The following section will continue the reflections provided in these paragraphs by means of the cyborg figure, describing the cybernetic posthuman as "a material-semiotic symbiosis that argues for technology as the extension of the human (McLuhan, 1964) and the transformations that humans suffer by such integration.

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[68]   Barthes referred to the fragmentary as the erotic, and by 'fragment' he referred to the authenticity of instants. Fragments are both an instant of time and what it is truly authentic in literature. In The Pleasure of the Text, he wanted to associate a theory of the text with a neglected concept during the glory of structuralism: that of pleasure. To read more, see Barthes (1975).

2.2 The contemporary cyborg

In today's context, the impact of digital technologies has affected all human sociocultural aspects. The ubiquity of digital mediation is continuously blurring the frontiers dividing the categories of online and offline, demanding new practices and new ways of being in the world (Barreneche 2019, p. 79) as well as a re-examination of the assemblages that are taking place between humans and machines. Such a scenario has influenced the subjectivities emerging in computational media itself, which has gone from being merely instrumental to constituting the very environment in which contemporaneity is immersed. This situation implies a new paradigm according to people's technological integration since the virtual environment has radically disrupted social practices.

On that matter, the subjective dialogues built with the digital context can be understood through the cyborg. The cyborg represents a composition of the organic and the artificial, revealing a non-dualistic understanding of itself and of the world. Consequently, the cyborg defies the dichotomic distinctions that rule the western world. In her popular Cyborg Manifesto (1985), Donna Haraway - a critical feminist theory - focuses on those non-dualistic, rebellious, and without-origin conditions of the cyborg as resistance to essentialisms. Those characteristics, according to Haraway, describe the modern scenario, defined by "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities (…)" (1991, p. 154). Although she built her cyborg concept as a critique of essentialism in both ecofeminism and by those opposed to feminism, while other scholars have used her work in different contexts still, including those in the field of popular and digital media. Her research focuses on "the blurriness of boundaries between categories such as human/nonhuman, human/animal, human/machine, living/dead, mind/body, nature/culture, and female/male" (Lupton 2013, p. 4).

For the specific aims of this thesis, contemporary processes such as artificial language, cybernetics systems, and hybridity between human beings and computers will be analysed through the concept of the modern cyborg: an entity formed by pragmatic – referring to the semiotic dimension - dynamics with several signifiers across history and in different cultures. Due to its hybrid status, the cyborg has been challenging the notions of what a human is. The cyborg is an organism in which biological and

technological parts communicate and build dialogues between each other. Some of the qualities and characteristics of the cyborg—when intended as a versatile cultural text—can be prefigured in different cases and representations through history: from the ancient Hebrew myth of the Golem to Mary Shelly's Frankenstein creature—described as a terrifying creation with no possible classification, origin or name; from the cyborg's first appearance in science as "self-regulating systems of information feedback and communication in machines and animals, including humans" (Giddings 2016, p. 2) to its role in dystopic fiction narratives understood as "futuristic fabrications, . . . imaginative mixtures of humans and machines that mimic human life but remain outside it" (Brasher 1996, p. 809).

The first mention of the cyborg was in an article by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline, appearing as an entity that "deliberately incorporates exogenous components extending the self-regulatory control function of the organism in order to adapt it to new environments." (1960, p. 27). For them, "the purpose of the Cyborg was to provide an organizational system in which such robot-like problems are taken care of automatically and unconsciously, leaving man free to explore, to create, to think, and to feel" (ibid.). It was therefore conceived as a hybrid – man and machine – driven by utilitarian and practical objectives but, rather than being a simple instrument, it represented more of a support and an extension of the subject's abilities. This innovating entity continued to evolve with the technological ideals of developed societies. It became very popular in science fiction narratives, especially in films where cyborgs were projected mainly as a tool of space conquer or an entity gifted with artificial intelligence. The function of cyborgs was usually limited to being servants, as, for example, in the series Star Wars and EX Machina, or potential threats to humankind, as in the Terminator series.

During the '80s, a decade characterized by a growing of cyberculture[69], the arrival of the internet – understood as a common and collective space – and the social instability generated by the integration of new technologies (Lozano 2018), the cyborgs in the entertainment industry started to transform into a more complex entity, reflecting a

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[69] Here is important to take into account the concept of cyberculture referred by, for instance, M. Dery (1996); Bell, D. and B. Kennedy (2007).

scenario connecting fiction and non-fiction and appearing in the cultural imaginary more as a tormented being than as a simple machine with militaristic intentions.

Nowadays, the term cyborg continues to be strongly polyphonic[70], but is getting more distant from the field of fantasy and the label of 'unreal.' It is commonly seen in the following two scenarios: 1) the cyborg that semantically possesses, in its physical/biological body, technological devices allowing it to enhance its capacities and survive in a single environment, and 2) the digital cyborg[71], i.e. a digital-embodied presence of the subject resulting from its connection to the web—that is to say the online condition—and from creating or consuming virtual content. It is therefore constructed by the continuous presence of digital tools in everyday life. The cyborg, in the second case, keeps an indexical relation[72] with virtual spaces and digital technologies. In such mediums, users act as "a cyborganism, enhanced or extended by computer technology which is external to the body" (Lebkowsky 1997). This scenario is becoming more and more ubiquitous with phenomena such as the Internet of Everything, a context in which we are always connected to digital networks, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a period which arrives through the convergence of digital, physical, and biological technologies, causing important transformations in business and disrupting the ways in which we live.

In such a way, these hybrid entities have rejected their old-fashioned and militaristic narratives "which have proved their limits when facing extreme complexities" (Toscano 2018, p. 1) and have instead come to represent a fluid and open process of incorporation of new attributes, generating hybrid entities not belonging to any specific category. From the Japanese manga and anime series Ghost in the Shell to the performances of

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[70]   Polyphonic in relation to its trans-textual nature, from which it can be conceived only as a relation of ambivalent elements and hybridizations. Regarding polyphony, see Kristeva 1978 and Bakhtin 1984.

[71]   Nevertheless, the term "cyber" doesn't have the same impact as the term "digital" in our contemporary times, both in science and popular culture, due to the presence of digital media technologies. Following Deborah Lupton, unifying both terms into "digital cyborg" (2013) seems more appropriate in order to describe the phenomena we are living, not only in our bodies but also in the spaces we inhabit.

[72]   That is to say, a relation of causality as it is understood by Peirce in his trichotomy of the sign in relation to the object: Icon, Index and Symbol. To read more, see Peirce (1991).

Stelios Arkadiou, better known as Stelarc, their manifestations are diluted in culture. That gives us a very good reason why it is necessary to rethink the cyborg as a dialogic and complex entity, whose constitutive ambivalence rejects any stable meaning or intent of categorization while also projecting a horizontal ontological status of humans in relation to other living creatures and even machines[73]. Haraway's work, therefore, provides an exciting ground of analysis for de-naturalizing what has been taken for granted in terms of categories, as either a social or natural law. She analyses the hybridization of machine and organism in order to explain how cyborgs, as human constructions, "reflect the self-image and situation of contemporary human beings, whose lifeworld is shaped by the integrated circuit of science and technology" (Munnik 2001, 103).

Adding to the above, the present section aims at understanding the complex processes of attribution of significance emerging within the figure of the cyborg, whose composition comes from different languages and cultural systems. From the textual postulates proposed by Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, the cyborg can be understood as a dialogue of relations and encounters between various texts and discourses. An act of productivity[74] that rejects any ideology or immovable structures. This means thinking the human-technological integration from the dynamic of intertextuality. This theory dissolved the notion of text as a unity and the idea of a 'common origin', since a text is always in relation with other texts. Therefore, instead of being a single and closed product the cyborg represents a textual assemblage where the meaning is fluid and never fixed.

2.2.1 Merging with the machine: a conception of intertextuality

When considering the cyborg as a textual form, a hybrid without any fixed composition resulting from dynamic interconnections, the theory of Julia Kristeva offers a particularly apt conceptual resource. Through her *semanalysis*, she aims to reveal the dynamics of the signifying process – her notion of significance that we already explored

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[73]   Her work, regarding the ontological status of human beings with other species, was deeply enhance by posthuman theorist as Katherine Hayles (1999) and Rossi Braidotti (2013).

[74]   When referring to productivity, it means generating meaning and experiences instead of a finished product.

in sub-section 2.1.3 - while confronting and defying stable meanings. On that matter, her postulates allow to re-think and re-locate the cyborg more as a process than as a definition, more dialogic than discursive. With Kristeva, the text acquire a more disruptive strategy than with Barthes – as we could see in chapter one, subsection 1.2.4. For her, the text cannot be detached from the social or cultural 'textuality' where the text is created. It becomes a trans-linguistic apparatus redistributing the order of the language (Kristeva 1980, p. 36) which "detaches it from its unconscious and from the automatism of its habitual unfolding" (Kristeva 1969, p. 26) because it considers all the contexts. Instead of representing the real, the Kristevian text projects the social and historical conditions to which it belongs. However, since for Barthes and Kristeva the text is not a 'product' as the 'work', then for both it is a practice and a productivity: always in movement, with intertextuality as its main condition since it elucidates the communicative interconnections between a text and the other and text and context.

To explore their contemporary implications, cyborgs should therefore be understood as a textual corpus, workings as a semiotic system where languages interact. As pointed out in Roland Barthes's concept of the "Echo Chamber" (1977c, p. 74), in every text resonates the echoes of innumerable texts. To be a "chamber of echoes" is, precisely, to be "[a] resonance box of different discourses, without being in the obligation of assuming with mastery none of them" (Alpizar 2003, p. 138). We can connect this premise to Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality[75]. Barthes also integrates this concept – intertextuality - into his following works by defining it as: "The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text" (Barthes 1977b, p. 160). With intertextuality, Kristeva dissolves the notion of text as a unity. The elements of 'a common origin' and 'fixed signifieds' are put into question as archaic affirmations. Therefore, since a text is always related to other texts, the dynamics of meaning are constantly changing[76]. The digital space, with its nodes all interconnected,

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[75] In the following sections and chapters the concept of intertextuality appears as a recurrent condition of the analysed texts. It is a crucial concept in Kristeva's theory and one of the distinctive features of contemporaneity - see, for instance, "Word, Dialoghe and Novel" and "The Bounded Text" in Kristeva (1980, pp. 36-91). By such assumptions, the intention is not to assure that intertextuality wasn't present in past historical moments. Instead, now it is perceived a more accelerated and observable considering the hybridizations occurring in present times.

[76] As Roland Barthes states in "From Work to Text" (1977b), while the work is closed and can be interpreted literally, the text, on the other hand, is open-ended, and has several associations and a plurality

is a clear example of how all text is an intertext: conceived as a network melded by icons, indexes, and symbols, it does not have a hierarchical and integrated organization, but instead is "a macro system fragmented and interconnected" (Hernandéz 2012, p. 99) representing "hundreds of information systems" (ibid.).

This textual polyphony in the virtual space, creates a digital environment characterized by hybrid categories and simultaneity, allowing texts to move freely in a world dominated by networks and data fluxes, whose only constant is transformation. The text, in the end, is a web of multiple relations with language as a performance[77]. The digital cyborg "alludes to a new horizon of meaning, where we find ourselves facing a world in which the limits between nature and culture, the object and the subject, the mechanical and the organic, men and women become diffuse" (Platzeck and Torrano 2016, p. 237). Since digital technologies mediate every social and cultural activity in the lives of the large majority of societies today, the use of such technologies has produced diverse routines and rituals, as well as different forms of symbolic production and world representations.

The popularization of technological digital devices has absorbed not only other types of media but altered, as well, both media itself and the functioning of social dynamics. In turn, digital media accompany and accelerate a general virtualization of objects, experiences, and relationships, allowing many other processes to emerge. This cyborg emerges and develops in cyberspace, reflecting the meaning-making processes occurring in the digital, where categories crush and intertwine with each other. Signifieds are always mutating, not only in the way that those chains of relations create new texts but in the new interpretations born every time a 'reader' sets a new perspective, creating a complex system of syntactic and pragmatic relations between signs. On that matter, an act of decoding occurs when reading "by accumulating

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of meaning. This is because the text is not static. On the contrary, it encourages the reader to be a producer and to make associations.

[77]   Barthes's terms are less related to literature and the act of writing, and more related to performances. As he said during his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France (1977): "To stay still and to step aside, both pertain in the end to a method of performance, to play. So it is not surprising that on the impossible horizon of the anarchy of language, at that point where language tries to escape the power inherent in it, to escape its own servility, one finds something that relates to theatre."

decodings (since reading is by right infinite), by removing the safety catch of meaning" (Barthes 1989, p. 42). Therefore, the reader "does not decode, he overcodes; he does not decipher, he produces, he accumulates languages" (ibid.).

These operations of codification and decodification—a multiplicity of semiotic operations—allow a sort of organic development in the construction of texts and, therefore, a continuity in the process of signification and in the formation of new texts. Nevertheless, due to the lack of a common origin and to the impossibility of a unified identity, this constant process of production of meanings cannot be defined or categorized[78]. As Parejo states: "The idea of deciphering a text, forever, becomes a chimera. That would mean to close the text, to imposing it limits" (2004, p. 5)[79]. The cyborg and its textual corpus is, in synthesis, a web of connections: a complex system of ideologies and the result of the dialogue between spaces so different between them that recreates a good example of "how the relationship between texts produces 'tones' that resonate in new and often unexpected ways" (Reis 2002, p. 260).

The eclectic conditions present in the semantic and pragmatic construction of the cyborg makes it a heterogenous corpus, transversal to different languages[80], cultural systems and times, freeing it from belonging to any category in specific but still keeping some characteristics that allow to treat a text as a cyborg. The cyborg can therefore be defined as a trans-linguistic creature, because of its multiplicity of voices - coming from

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[78] Since there is not an author or a single origin, meaning cannot be fixed. On that matter, we are not referring to a defined product but instead to a production, to a process. See Kristeva 1978 and Barthes 1977a.

[79] My own translation.

[80] We should keep present that Kristeva gives to language a much more broader sense than for other semiotic theorists. Language is the only way of thought, says Kristeva. This was already mentioned in chapter one, section 1.4. Language is dynamic, fluid and changeable since the subject is embedded in it. The fundamental principles governing the subject are related with language and within language. For Kristeva, "since social practice (the economy, mores, 'art', etc.) is envisaged as a signifying system that is 'structured like a language', any practice can be scientifically studied as a secondary model in relation to natural language, modelled on this language and in turn becoming a model or pattern for it" (Kristeva 1986, p. 75). Language, therefore, is not simply a tool used by subjects. Speaking subjects "signify and are constituted by their signifying practices" (McAfee 2004, p. 7). Language produces subjects.

different languages – and its playful dynamics that while rejecting any form of ideological or structural imposition, creates its own connections by affinities and not by grammatical or genetic laws.

Bereft of a centre, in these hybrids figures all is distributed and in constant movement. As a consequence their bodies become what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call 'assemblages' (1987), a condition where the self functions as a series of couplings to other elements. Each body – text – acts as an assemblage that gets defined by how it is hooked up to other assemblages. Under a semiotic point of view, such a process describes exactly what a cyborg means: a corpus of infinite possibilities of connections, each producing different meanings. These movements and the different forms of assemblages can indeed be approached as an intertextual dynamics, where the cyborg is referred to as an entity resulting from the composition of multiple writings. That is to say, to consider the cyborg as a text means to understand it as a web of interconnections and as a permutation of other texts. The cyborg corpus is, then, a fabric of quotations, a network of multiple relationships and meanings from where its monstrosity emerges, its uniqueness and swinging in-betweenness.

In synthesis, if the notion of intertextuality refers to field of transposition of various signifying systems, the text would be that space in which a multiplicity of other texts intersect and collide. It needs to be updated precisely because it is constituted by a permutation of other texts, that is to say, because it is an open device (Eco 1962) that cannot exist without the other. For this reason, Haraway's conception of the cyborg is possible since it integrates other texts as an assemblage. By the dynamics of intertextuality, the cyborg is created as a network of different texts, of different cultural languages and of different authors. There is not a divine source of origin simple because it is not a linearity but a network of relationships. Therefore, its meaning does not rely on a final product, but rather on the resultant experiences and on the connections that are being carried out. In other words, these contemporary textualities of hybridization are not about shapes, or bodies, but about experiences. It is all about connections.

In this textual cyborg, the subject also becomes writer of its own body, actualizing its status from a potential variety of options. This affirmation can be seen in the Australian artist Stelarc (Figure 2.1), also known as the man with his ear on his arm. Defined by

the public as "a portal to the internet", he experiments with his own organism during his performances by inserting technological devices into his body. Those performances of man and machine which challenge standard compositions can be understood as a 'monstrous' mix since the configuration of its body is reactive to what is traditionally understood as the human body. Stelarc assures that the seduction of technology is a powerful dynamic: "We are all mediated by our machines, there is no limit", assuring that technological hybridizations require a rethinking of what a body is and how it works. Stelarc's body is therefore constituted by relations without being dominated by a social, biological or cultural "author". It is a text built from fragments of other languages, from links with other texts and from the historical moment in which it is immersed.

Figure 2.1: Stelarc

The monstrous chimeras and technological hybrids that used to exist only in the human imagination have abandoned the realms of fantasy in order to inhabit the contemporary scenario. From art to science, their presence reveals how currently opposition between the self and the machine is no longer functional – and their dualism is obsolete. The contemporary conception of cyborgs described in this contribution also indicates how digital technologies are far more than passive technological devices. As Peter-Paul Verbeek argues, "in the world in which we live, humans and nonhumans cannot be had separately. Our reality is a web of relations between human and nonhuman entities that form ever new realities on the basis of ever-new connections" (2013, p. 29). For Verbeek, since technologies are strictly interrelated with our actions, they are mediating and externally contributing to human intentions. Roberto Esposito

gives a similar statement, writing that "there is not a natural life which is not, at the same time, technical" (2006, p. 25).

2.2.2 The digital Monster: contemporary hybridizations

As seen in the previous section, Haraway opens a new cyborg paradigm, in which the boundaries seem to embrace each other. As she explains: "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (Haraway 1991, p. 150). According to Haraway, technology has, indeed, diffused in the human body: an active source from which the cyborg emerges. Considering the cyborg as "our referent," it is valid to rethink it not only as a mere metaphor of humans' immersion in cyberspace but as a process of continuous transformation, almost alchemical, due to the constant translations between discourses and the new conditions it reveals. The cyborg's importance lies in how it rewrites social codes.

Language appears here as the most popular code of human culture. It is a system of order, which reflects the social and cultural changes by denoting how we understand and relate with the otherness, with oneself, and with the given environment. That 'continuous' and 'alchemical' transformation described by Haraway can be recognized in the Golem as a result of a magic force or a mystic code acting in the linguistic system. The Golem, a type of an early ancestor of cyborg, is a creature who belongs to the mythical corpus of Jewish tradition, coming to life by magic words whispered to its automaton body. The Golem appears once in the Bible's Psalms, when Adam praises God saying, "Thine eyes, did see my golem, my unformed embryo, its limbs not yet fashioned, lying in the dark depths of the earth" (Psalm 139:16)[81].

Since the Golem is created by a linguistic magic, its development "corresponds to the basic thesis of cybernetics, that inorganic and organic processes are driven by data flows and codes" (Battegay 2016). Not only in the Cabala but in other sources of Jewish Mysticism the power of language becomes more evident. Scholem writes:

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[81]   It would be good to signal that when the Hebrew word "golem" is mentioned in the Bible it doesn't mean anything like cyborg but simply an embryo. I'm aware, therefore, that the biblical text doesn't include any reference to the notion of technology in the way this thesis addresses it.

By means of the 32 "wonderful paths of Wisdom" God created all things. These paths consist of the 10 original numbers, which are called Sefiroth here and which are the fundamental force of the order of the creation, and the 22 letters, that is, consonants, which are the elements which lie at the basis of everything created (Scholem 1972, p. 30).

A precursor to the cyborg, the Golem recognizes and defies its own programming, threatening the dominant code, by making it crush with other languages and contexts. Both creatures reveal and subvert meaning. They do it by integrating the codes, and consequently, a new hybrid is produced in the interaction of the different properties now imbricated in a software-text. The cyborg's technological biological elements, and its material (mud)-linguistic – divine word – components, forget their initial characteristics, integrating them into an intertextuality that activates different processes in its performance. As in the hybrid media described by Lev Manovich, "[t]he previously unique properties and techniques of different media became the elements that can be combined together in previously impossible ways" (2013, p. 176).

Most of the conflicts portrayed in recent cyborgs are because of their monstrous composition[82] of machine and organic parts, reflecting their own feelings of disconnection, nostalgia, or anxiety for the very uncertain future (Broncano 2009). Taking as examples the fictional characters of Motoko Kusanagi, the augmented-cybernetic human commander from the manga and anime Ghost in the Shell (Figure 2.2), and Alita, the Hunter-warrior cyborg from the manga and live action film Alita Battle Angel (Figure 2.3), they are both strangers to themselves and their environment, dubbing of their ontological condition. These cyborgs are violators of the law of nature, the taxonomy, and the social system sustaining them. Unlike the militaristic cyborg's imaginary, they are beings in suffering, in transformation, expanding between the organic and the machine and assuming their own alterity as the resulting condition of specific connections.

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[82] The monster's body is a construction and a projection of an era or a cultural moment. It is the breaking point of the norm, the exception by definition. When addressing the figure of the other, important parallels stand out with the figure of the human monster pointed out by Michel Foucault and its appearance in his genealogy of the abnormal. The monster it is the one who transgresses any civic, natural and cultural law. See: Michel Foucault, Abnormal (2003 [1999]), p. 49.

Figure 2.2: Motoko Kusanagi (Ghost in the Shell)   **Figure 2.3:** Alita Battle Angel
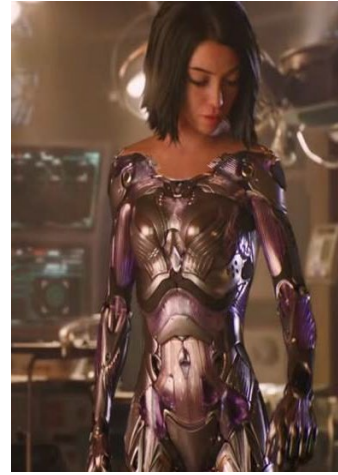
Those cases would also denote the problem of the human limits or the aggressive gap from one state of obsolescence to another. This allows us to connect to similar scenarios located through the history of human culture, where beings in a condition of inner conflict emerge, in addition to the monstrous condition of the protagonists. An example is Mary Shelly's Frankenstein creature, described as a monster, with no possible classification or origin; uniting different parts, different bodies, and different languages. It can actually be understood as that "mythical shadow that expresses repressed fears the culture has about its relation with technology" (Toscano 2018, p. 2).

Whichever the manifestation, it remains clear that the cyborg is not a plain figure; it interrogates human condition (Lozano 2018, p. 166), especially in a context where technological advances are disrupting established notions and generating new ones which would have looked like fantasy or futuristic idealizations just a few decades ago. This can easily be seen, for instance, in medicine, biology, and robotic engineering fields. Here, the cyborg became a great model for understanding the incorporation of mechanical parts to the human body: either by substituting an organ, an extremity, or an extension or development of a biological faculty.

One of the most incredible real-life cyborg cases is represented – indeed, embodied – by Neil Harbisson (Figure 2.4). He was born with achromatism, or total colour-blindness, and therefore in 2004 he had an antenna implanted into his skull, allowing him to perceive colours as audible vibrations. As the first cyborg officially recognized

by a government - the United Kingdom - he perceived himself as a mixture of man and machine. Even if at the beginning the intentions of Harbisson were strictly medical, he became one of the main activists of a movement aiming at incorporating electronic elements inside the human body to modify the brain functioning, defending the rights, advantages, and the beauty of "the prosthetic": "I identify myself as a cyborg because I am a cybernetic organism. Not only am I attached to cybernetics biologically, but also psychologically. I don't feel like I'm carrying or using technology; I feel like I'm technology"[83].

Figure 2.4: Neil Harbisson

Rob Spence (Figure 2.5) is another interesting example. The filmmaker, who is blind in his right eye, installed a wireless video camera in place of his eye, describing himself as an "eyeborg". The camera is not connected to his optic nerve but sends its footage to a receiver. Due to the many possibilities of perception this camera-eye can offer, he has been using his prothesis to record segments for a mini-documentary about cyborgs, people that, according to him, augment their bodies using technology. In this case, the subject acts as "a cyborganism, enhanced or extended by computer technology which is external to the body" (Lebkowsky 1997). Spence, just as Harbisson, took advantage of a medical need in order to expand his vision and experience of reality, enhancing human functions but, at the same time, creating new pragmatic relations, disrupting what is considered normative.

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[83]   As explained by Harbisson at the HR conference on Science and Technology, organized in Barcelona by Advantage Consultores. Source: https://www.lavanguardia.com/tecnologia/20191005/47800763095/neil-harbisson-reclamo-derecho-ser-ciborg.html.

Figure 2.5: Rob Spence

The cyborg, in these cases, is a hybrid body of organic parts and machine. However, numerous hybridization processes do not necessarily take place at the same level or in this way. Whether seen from the empirical/material perspective, or within the cultural and entertainment contexts, in the intertwining between technology and bodies, the cyborg conceives in itself both composition and fragmentation. In other words, fragments that unite simultaneously without caring about categorizations. Therefore, in the cyborg, the ideas of a total unity – of its parts – or a common origin are lost, invoking to mind Foucault's thought that the body is like a synthesis of undefined natures (1989).

Several semantic interpretations are therefore embedded in the concept of the cyborg, a term that has, arguably, been written and re-written excessively. It has become a sort of fetish in certain cultural, scientific, and entertainment fields in ways which do not give justice to the importance of this figure. Nevertheless, its primary conceptualization can still highlight its more distinctive characteristics: the cyborg remains a helpful medium when it comes to addressing the evolution of the human condition in a technified world (Lozano 2018, p. 158). Therefore, besides denoting human alienation from his own surroundings and himself, it also makes manifest the leading role of technologies in contemporaneity in which individuals are digitally embodied in computational tools or use them as prostheses.

2.2.3 Some posthuman considerations about technological integration and the cyborg

What is considered to be human nowadays is nothing more than a process, an unfinished configuration where individuals are created by the worlds they produce. As a

consequence of its dialogues with digital technologies, this expansion of the human condition reaffirms the cyborg as a textual entity. That is to say, as a continuous process of intertextual connections that allows exploring how new relationships – assemblages - are taking place without considering issues such as paternity or simplistic binaries. Even if the prosthesis in Stelarc were originally an answer to an artistic purpose, whereas in Harbisson and Spence it was a solution to a medical condition, what they have in common is that they represent an exploration of new possible experiences offered/enabled by their hybrid condition. Their cyborg bodies represent a writing and a reading of the potential dialogues between organisms and machines. It is the breaking point of the norm where language re-invents and confronts itself.

These contemporary textualities can be interpreted as being, not about shapes or bodies, but experiences. It is all about connections. And it is in this territory where the cyborg appears: the activation of the Golem through the transformation of codes. This transformation occurs in a process similar to media hybridity, as described by Manovich. The cyborg blurs the boundaries between organism and machine, fusing elements and transcending existing dichotomies. For Katherine Hayles, as for Donna Haraway, cyborgs are concurrent entities and metaphors, living beings, and narrative constructions. Their lack of center debilitates the need for defining them; the cyborg's non-essentialism strips away a common past. There is no origin or a source to look for – besides the history of ideas expressed in its different manifestations in culture and science - there and, in that perspective, there is no identity but the contemplation of a neutral place.

This corpus of signifiers moulds our perceptions and understandings of all cultures in which the digital has penetrated every area of existence. The cyborg, in fact, reflects the type of experience that can be found in the virtual world, transforming itself into a landscape of encounters between dichotomies, an assemblage of discourses, co-existing in a territory of great diversities. The cyborg works as a text of strong signifiers and dying signifieds. In this way, it can produce several meanings without being completely dominated by any myth or discourse.

The constant processes of hybridization and the unfolding of other paradigms are all reflected in the entity of the cyborg developed by Haraway: a "semiotic" figure that she

describes as monstrous and liberating and whose body acts as an assemblage. In that intertwining between technology and organic bodies, they represent an imaginative mixture of intersections. while losing the idea of totality. "In short, the cyborg does not seek the whole or the unit, but the composition between the parts". (Platzeck and Torrano 2016, p. 241). The old ideals of homogeneities are giving way to, instead, pluralistic discourses and liquid structures.

The validity of Haraway's cyborg in today's mediated society also relies on the fact that it does not seek to overcome the organic with the technological but, instead, achieves a strong coupling between both, representing, in turn, new forms of symbolic production by assuming the technological as a constituent of oneself. As she explains, "We are experiencing a change from an organic and industrial society to a polymorphic information system" (Haraway 1991, p. 161). The relationship between the human being and this new environment of digital technologies breaks the norms, proposing new conceptions of the self with the self, the self with the otherness, and the self with the digital technology itself. The cyborg could then reflect both the situation and subjectivities of contemporary individuals in its assembled body.

It is precisely through these relationships and interconnections that it is possible to connect with the idea of the cyborg as a textual creature, that is to say, as a textual composition of multiple writings brought into dialogue (Barthes 1977, p. 146). According to Roland Barthes, there is the requirement of a new object, "obtained by the overturning of former categories," and that object is the text, "a tissue [or fabric] of quotations", "a web of liberating possibilities" (ibid.), that instead of a static, taxonomic and formal product – the work – represents an open act of productivity. The text does not follow the impositions of an author because the author is just such when performing the act of writing. In the same way as the linguistic subject, its role is active only when the act of enunciation takes place. On that matter, there is no past holding the text fixed to an ideology or a memory, neither a transcendental figure ruling its future sense.

Following this reflection, each process of writing legitimates, as well, the process of reading, and the reader becomes, just as the author, responsible of assigning meaning to the text (Barthes 1977). We, therefore, observe that the text supposes a production, a significant and plural practice in which meaning is given by the participative dynamics

between writers and readers and the connections that are proposed in such dialogues. Considering that a text does not suppose an object or a "paternity" and it does not look for hidden or intrinsic attributes (Sirvent Ramos 1987, p. 149) the notion of text allows us to consider the cyborg in all its complexity: as a hybrid subject in a constant process of interrelation with its surroundings and the otherness.

Not having a central source from which structuring practices and from where extracting the meaning of such practices, cyborg, intended as a text, relies on the connections and experiences produced with the digital technologies. In that sense, it is not completely subjugated neither to the status of human nor to cyberculture and science fiction narratives, even if their influence is undeniable. Therefore, the cyborg is a combination of different discourses offering a variety of experiences and meaning-making potentialities. The resulting conception of "textual cyborgs" embraces the postulates proposed by Donna Haraway, later enriched by post-human feminist reflections as those carried out by Katherine Hayles. However, considering the incidence of digital technologies and how its ubiquitous presence mediates almost every aspect of culture and society, this 'upgrade' to the concept of the cyborg takes on board further redefinition of 'human' in the light of its relations with technology.

Concerning the aforementioned, Katherine Hayles[84] developed an important concept: embodiment in an age of virtuality, or more specifically, digital embodiment. Hayles proposes embodiment as "the practice of the body and the articulation of discourse at specific historical moments" (Kurtz 2000), arising directly from the influence of technologies on man. Such experiences of embodiment give people a notion of individuality without providing a central model or a universal code determining the totality of the experience. In digital embodiment, "there is no body as such; there are

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[84]   Hayles (1999) analyses the posthuman condition by re-inserting the conception of embodiment. She builds a sort of chronologic history of cybernetics, connecting some subjects to a diverse selection of science fiction literature in order to theorize the encounter between science and humanistic culture. Hayles believes that the importance of embodiment, as the interconnection and interdependence of the mind-body 'system', has been underestimated. She writes: "Yet because embodiment is individually articulated, there is also at least an incipient tension between it and hegemonic cultural constructs. Embodiment is thus inherently destabilizing with respect to the body, for at any time this tension can widen into a perceived disparity" (Hayles 1999, p. 197).

only bodies"[85] (Hayles 1999, p. 197); thus, "in contrast to the body, embodiment is contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, psychology, and culture, which together compose enactment" (ibid.). While a human body, as an object of discourse, can disappear into a universe of virtual data and digital languages, this disappearance cannot happen in the case of embodiment. This is mainly because the embodiment articulates according to the circumstances. If there is a mixture of the physical with digital technologies, we can conceive virtual worlds as existing in a more consistent, and even "real" way; therefore, we should consider that they have a particular materiality in their own right where selves can be embodied digitally.

It is therefore possible to understand the processes originated by the current digital-mediated scenario: individuals embedded in a network of multiple relationships, overlapping the physical with the virtual and the organic with the techne. In this context, the relation of the "machine" with the "natural" proposed by Haraway emerges: "Bodies have become cyborgs – cybernetic organism -, hybrids composed of techno-organic embodiment and textuality. The cyborg is text, machine, body, and metaphor (…) (Haraway 1995, p. 364).

The cyborg, then, becomes a liminal entity located between borders. Its borderline nature allows it to inhabit different discourses without being reduced to any of them. When Neil Harbisson declares himself as a mixture of man and machine, he is manifesting his right not to belong entirely to the category of humans or robots. By "he is technology", he breaks the dichotomic conception of nature and science, since both discourses are constantly interrelating. In this way, the notion of the cyborg-text would come to replace and surpass that of the human work – understanding the latter as a closed and limited product. It is precisely this capacity for a plurality of meaning and displacement of connections that characterizes Barthes's textual contribution and allows us to appreciate the disruptive capacity of the cyborg.

It is essential to recall that the posthuman condition is present in such configuration of the human being, in a way "that it [the human state] can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or

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[85]   To understand more about this idea exposed by Hayles, see: Grosz (1994).

absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology, and human goals" (Hayles 1999, pp. 2-3). However, the development of the posthuman does not require the subject to be understood as a literal cyborg:

> Whether or not interventions have been made on the body, new models of subjectivity emerging from such fields as cognitive science and artificial life imply that even a biologically unaltered Homo sapiens counts as posthuman. The defining characteristics involve the construction of subjectivity, not the presence of nonbiological components (idem., p. 4).

The posthuman consideration of the cyborg perfectly introduces the next section of this chapter: that of the avatar; a nomadic self, a manifestation of non-normative subjectivities. The example, par excellence, of digital embodiment. Considering that an important aspect of our integration process with computational technology is related to the user's experience of immersion with the digital environment - enabling a merge between the offline and the online contexts – the avatar figure represents such digital immersion in the most striking of ways. Through the semiotic analysis that follows, it will be possible to understand the avatar as a translinguistic text that plays a central role in the general processes of communication, developing complex performances, such as rituals.

2.3 Subjectivities in the techno-world: a semiotic reading of the avatar

When reflecting on the processes of embodiment within the virtual world, the figure of the avatar[86] pops up. Coming from the Hindu religious culture, the term has been used in the cyber-cultural scenario, referring to the user's graphic representation in the virtual world. Despite the contribution to its popularity provided by digital games, the Avatar has a wider role in how individuals manifest, relate and experience the online world thanks to the ubiquity of digital media in human activities.

As Paula Sibilia assures, the new practices of online self-exhibition "would be strategies that contemporary subjects put into action in order to respond to these new socio-cultural demands, marking new ways of being in the world" (2008, p. 28). On that matter, users have found in the avatar a mechanism to express their subjectivities in all the different fields of actions that it deals with, starting from virtual communities and web forums to digital games. Through avatars, user inhabits and experiences the online landscape in a more practical way. The avatar, therefore, can be defined as "graphic representation that acts as a digital proxy through which internet users, a cybernetic community or a computer interface (as in the case of video games), negotiate their presence and interact with synthetic objects or other avatars of the digital world" (Pinotti 2019, p. 28).

In the classical notion, the Sanskrit term avatāra literally refers to "descent" – that is to say, the descent to earth of a divinity, in particular Vishnu, in order to restore and preserve the cosmic order. The avatar indicates a new, unexpected, or revolutionary event such as the descent of the divine in a sensible and perceptible form – whether in animal or human body – to the physical plane. However, the term's meaning in contemporary times owes its meaning much more to its massive use in computational media and its reference to cyberculture and science fiction narratives of the nineties.

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[86] For the purposes of this thesis, when avatars are mentioned the term will be referring to any graphical and visible constructions of the subject that allow the user's interaction with other digital avatars and the virtual world itself.

Several avatar appearances can be traced in recent popular culture, initially inspired by its classic eastern origin. This is the case of Richard Garriot's Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar, a 1985 computer game whose main objective was to allow the player to fully experience the fictional realm created by Garriot and behave as if the avatar was the true self. Later on, Neal Stephenson used the term in his 1992 cyberpunk novel Snow Crash where people around the world were connected by a virtual reality-based internet, known as the Metaverse. There, users' interaction was carried out through digital forms of themselves called avatars. The book popularized such notion as a synonym for 'online persona', influencing the sci-fi literary world and predicting key inventions as extended realities.

Such a conception of the avatar – as human's digital forms – remained present in cyberculture, but not merely as a fictional element. Just as what occurred with the cyborg and the contemporary processes of digital hybridization, the avatar became a perfect term to indicate the digital embodied presence of a subject in the online context. The digital avatar actually reverses the process of the Hindu avatar, "bringing the earthly into a realm of mediated abstraction" (Coleman 2011, p. 44). It places the embodied user in the virtual world (Mukherjee 2012) and allowing him to inhabit a plane that otherwise would result unattainable for the user. So, instead of divinity becoming flesh, "flesh would become virtual" (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p. 144).

In the virtual world spaces, the relationships established between the user and the computer are carried out through graphic interfaces, in which the digital image occupies a predominant place. Since the avatar becomes the graphic representation of the user, it would allow him to configure and configure himself as an image, proposing "new models of subjectivation based on the transfiguration of oneself" (Sánchez Martínez 2011, p. 35). As a digital image, the avatar can be understood as "a sensitive transformation regarding the status of the virtual [allowing] intervention and transfiguration" (ibid.). Digital images can, therefore, be altered and used in multiple ways (ibid.).

Due to its dynamic and configurable properties, the digital avatar allows the user to establish micro-universes of subjectivities without reproducing its physical referent. In other words, it reveals the 'enunciated' user by processes of self-representation and self-

reflection without necessarily repeating the 'offline subject' through simulations. The avatar, for that matter, is mostly symbolic. Its arbitrariness allows a liberating aperture on the users to processes of negotiation of meaning (Pinotti 2019) about their own identities. However, when configured in that other virtual universe, the avatar incorporates differences generated by the digital interfaces themselves, since the interface links, through a device, technical aspects with individuals (ibid.). That is to say, it would no longer be 'the same', since it makes use of the tools and innovations that the computational medium offers, in order to generate a certain iconic correspondence with its physical referent – the user – or to creatively express its own identity as a simulation. In this sense, the avatar reveals the very openness of the digital system, giving the user the freedom to choose – among all the possible options – its own graphic construction.

The changeability and pragmatic properties of the digital avatar are, in some way, still related to its original classic roots from the Hindu religion. Even if the field of action has drastically changed, they hold analogical relations between each other. For instance: neither the classic avatar nor its digital version carries iconic relations with its referent. Besides, the Hindu avatar's cyclicity and numerousness (Sheth 2002, pp. 112-113) offer more similitudes to the virtual heterogenic scenario than the West's dualistic and linear cartesian conceptions.

2.3.1 Genotex and Phenotex: The Avatar as an act of productivity

Instead of being a closed work with fixed meanings, the contemporary avatar can be conceived as a productivity, since it proposes different readings of itself – as a corpus – and allows for new analysis expectations. In other words, the avatar is a text of multiple readings each time it is updated. It is not only a system of signs but an unfinished process. Therefore, it would also bring about other processes of interpreting the digital space, contributing to the textual cooperation between authors and receivers.

This conception of productivity comes from the semiotic theory of Julia Kristeva, for whom - as we have already seen - language is a dynamic transgressive process. In the development of what she calls the *semanalysis* – a critique of the elements and laws of meaning (Kristeva 1969, p. 23) – the text is described as a web of connections, a

dynamized object, and an intertextual network (Kristeva 1969), possessing a potential infinity of significance (Pérez Iglesias 1981). Each text is made up of multiple writings that, upon contact, form a dialogue, generating other discourses and entities, and disputing the notion of stable meanings: "Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva 1969, p. 37).

In her theory of text, Kristeva moves away from the conception of signification and enters in that of significance since the text searches for the processes of production and transformation of meaning. The result is the establishment of the signifying practice, which can be understood as the recognition of a "speaking subject within a social framework", that in turn, he challenges, producing change and renewal (Roudiez 1980, p. 18). In that regard, the Kristevian text cannot be understood outside the open and infinitized productivity of meaning that the intertextual process implies (Bohórquez 1997).

As already mentioned in chapter 1 – sub-section 1.4.1 - the signifying practice taking place in texts can be subdivided into two parts: a first and deeper area would represent the genotext, "which may be detected by means of certain aspects or elements of language, even though it is not linguistic per se" (Roudiez 1980, p. 7). The genotext is not a structure. It portrays the semiotic element, the heterogeneous, and the potential infinity. Instead of revealing a signifying process, it offers all possible signifying processes. The second and superficial area, the phenotext[87], is "the language of communication" (Roudiez 1980, p. 7) and represents the articulated operations of the genotext. The phenotex supposed a subject of the enunciation and a receiver. It is the text in its concrete manifestation or material form. This pheno/geno distinction gives light to the processes of formation of the speaking subject and the works produced by him or her.

When bringing the avatar to this analysis, its field of action in digital environments can be interpreted as always in a state of virtual potentiality before being articulated as a discourse. That condition of "emptiness" ends when the user starts the process of its

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[87]   The phenotex actually seeks to explain and make intelligible the Genotex.

writing[88] by designing its appearance, providing some information details, interacting with other avatars, or entering into the storytelling of the digital world where it belongs. Therefore, the avatar's phenotext is available only when it is enunciated. Only the genotext is always present: that deeper level possessing all the unintelligible information and data already given by the algorithmic construction of the avatar.

In this open dynamic of meanings generated by the avatar, Julia Kristeva's semiotic and textual proposal will allow us to consider it more as an entity in process – a productivity – than as an established, closed, and unalterable product (Figure 2.6). This is, in fact, the logic of the Kristevian texts: less signification and more significance. Given that analysis, the "avatar text" is the result of intertextual connections among which other contextual circumstances, intervening in the production of its significance, also stand out. It is a multimodal, intertextual, and dialogic corpus, representing a practice of productivity of other texts and meanings. Therefore, "its intertextual position symbolizes its configuration of words and utterances that already existed making a text double-voiced. It is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a text, many utterances taken from other texts intersect with one another and neutralize one another" (Orr 2003, p. 27; Raj 2015, p. 78).

Figure 2.6: Second life avatar construction

2.3.2 Bringing the body into avatars: a subject in process

The transformations and the potentialities of experiences that avatars provide to users confirm how they are more than a mere artificial tool for navigating the virtual world. The avatar could be understood as a vessel itself, as an extension of the human subject,

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[88]   For Kristeva (1969, p. 53) the concept of writing refers to a text seen as production.

but also as an intelligible articulation of other digital objects or 'beings' – depending on how animistic the online world is being conceived[89].

This would also answer to the nomadic posthuman considerations, where fixed conditions and controlled subjectivities are being challenged. Human beings are not finished subjects but a product of the techne, a subject in process: "cyborgs, beings made of organic materials and technical products such as clay, writing and fire" (Broncano 2009, pp. 19-20).   In such a way, humans have created the notion of cyborgs since we, as well, are beings conformed by prostheses. Each new prosthesis – appearing with each technological innovation – would produce certain discomfort until the prosthesis is reabsorbed as an additional body element. This might explain the cultural crisis and revolutions occurring each time a new technology generates different environments.

However, how can the avatar be considered in this digital environment? Can it be considered as an extension - or a prothesis - of subjects when they are connected to the online context? Following Hayles' conception of digital embodiment - where there is not 'a body' but, instead, 'bodies' - the avatar would function as an extended body of humans in an environment produced by computer technologies. In such a way, when introducing the notion of body - with its drives, urges, its disruptiveness, and disorderliness - into these avatar practices, it means that signification is 'reactivated'. This is because the introduction of 'body' means the introduction of a subject with his/her symbolic/semiotic dialectics, motivating to engage in signifying processes where language[90] "is lifted up from the catatonic state assigned to it by the theories of language that Kristeva criticizes in her Prolegomenon to Revolution in Poetic

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[89]   It is important to clarify that, for the aims of this research, I'm not implying that in virtual spaces users can always find entities – instead of virtual objects – with whom stablished dialogues. I'm aware many of the digital interchanges – human-machine communication – are develop through programs which do not have the capacity to actually answer autonomously to human subjects. However, there are many experiences where users can 'stablished' or 'feel' a dialogue and be affected by them. So it is possible to find in some cases an actual exchange - animistically speaking – when a human-machine 'true' communication is developing.

[90]   Language got 'revitalised' in practices where the speaking subject takes place since, for Kristeva, language is a process involving both semiotic and symbolic elements. It is precisely because the semiotic is connected with the body that 'revolution' in the sphere of the symbolic is possible.

Language" (Inman 2017, p. 19). In other words, positing the speaking subject into the avatar reactivates the semiotic drives where poetic language's transformative and disruptive power is manifested. Therefore, those practices performed through an avatar are not mechanist, referential, or simply communicative. They represent a productivity of poetic nature.

This relation between the enacted subject - present with its flesh on one side of the computational interface – and the avatar – produced through the verbal and semiotic markers constituting it in an electronic environment (Hayles 1999, p. XIII) – is what unfolds Kristeva's significance. "This construction necessarily makes the subject into a cyborg, for the enacted and represented bodies are brought into conjunction through the technology that connects them" (ibid.). However, the technological mediation can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject (ibid.), meaning that, as humans, we are reaching new levels of technological interrelationality.

Two important conceptions emerge here. On the one hand, these reflections about avatar answer to a posthuman conception of assemblages and cyborg ontologies of non-binary logic. According to them, information cannot be separated from materiality and the latter is not conceived as something superior. All of this can also be reflected in the conflict between matter and information, body and consciousness, the earthly and the ethereal. Which, in turn, leads us to understand the heart of the paradigms linked to cybernetics and computational technologies where, apparently, we inhabit scenarios of supposed immateriality, disembodied from our bodies. However, the most coherent posthumanist postulates do not reveal the body/mind dialectic, thus the disembodiment thesis would be totally annulled. It is not about a separation, but rather about rethinking embodiment as something where our body is not a "fixed one" but, on the contrary, we expand in relation to our technological environment and objects that function as extensions of our body. We would then speak of bodies as differentiated groups that coexist with their environment and are affected by them.

On the other side, the process of significance, reactivated by the subject's presence in the arena of language and culture, exposes her subjectivity[91] and reveals a subject that is always "in process" or "on trial", breaking the illusion of unity and separation. The subject is interrelated with her environment and her contextual reality, and it is affected by all linguistic utterances where significance takes place. The practices where the avatar is considered as an embodied subject – or when the subject is 'open', so she perceived and relates with the digital environment through her avatar - correspond to certain kinds of discourses which highlight the subject-in-process/on-trial, shattering the preponderance of symbolic law: the poetic language. According to what stated in chapter one about poetic language, it can be affirmed that, this way of understanding and conceiving the avatar embodiment is nothing more but a manifestation of a poetic practice since it transcends denotative meanings. Then, the focus lies on the subject dialectics, not in referential communication. Its function is to create, to "make it new," and this creating must come from drives outside the prosaic, the structured, the symbolic (Stokes-king 2006, p. 43).

All this process represents a revolutionary act, affecting and disrupting normative – more specifically, mechanic - notions of digital environments and user-avatar relation. The injection of the body into this equation welcomes revolutionary reformulations of social practices. Simply because when bringing the body as a whole, it brings as well its practices, needs, and desires. (Braidotti 2013, p. 33). It welcomes other human spheres, closer to the semiotic flows, that challenge life's rationalized and lawful aspects: the spiritual.

2.3.3 The spiritual dimension of avatars: opportunities of religious experiences in virtual worlds.

With its own conditions and structures, the digital universe can offer to users new depths that extend their horizons, thus allowing them to access levels of experience that would be impossible to enter without the virtualization generated by such technologies. We could even reflect about how the radical "digital turn" experienced during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted many religious potential offered by the

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[91]   The subjectivity emerges here as a product of linguistic processes involving both the homogenizing elements of culture – the symbolic – and the heterogeneous experience of the body - the semiotic (O. Inman 2017, p. 47).

online context, not only by providing multiple platforms that facilitate meetings but also by migrating spiritual dynamics of almost all kinds in its territories. From funeral rites and group prayers, to spiritual assistance between members of a congregation. It could be affirmed that this aggressive transfer to the digital also allowed us to appreciate the versatility and immersive benefits of the network. A universe that, for so many people, was even closer and more habitable than physical space itself.

All of these conditions present in the contemporary panorama imply the disruption and reformulation of the communicative processes mediated by computational platforms and a rethinking of how we relate to the digital universe and its complex processes. Users might not just communicate 'through' the machine, but actually, inhabit it. This can lead to feelings of great affection and proximity with the online context and digital devices, even an erotic impulse, since we consider them as a reflection of who we are (Lupton 2015, pp. 201-203) and, at the same time, as a being who answers, listens and observes us. Secondly, this affection can lead us to experience an intimate process in the digital sphere, allowing poetic and ritual experiences welcoming the territory of the religious. Such a scenario is important when reflecting why digital networks represent a space in which believers can also live out and explore their own beliefs. This can be done by taking into account that "religion has always been in the vanguard of social movements" (Cowan 2005, p. 5).

Although digital networks have already become an important part of our memory and of our cultural and scientific heritage, their effect continues to transform and reinvent each of these structures. The limits of what was thought to be valid in terms of religious beliefs are being disrupted when novel ways of performing rituals take place. Therefore, when observing how computational technologies have acquired a great importance in every aspect of human lives, it is not a surprise that the algorithmic construction and the peculiar dynamics of participation of virtual spaces have the power to influence cultural practices as much as the religious ones. Quoting Campbell & Vitullo: "The Internet is not a completely separate space; it is integrated by its proximity in many religious behaviours and rituals. As part of everyday social life, it is also a central part of religious existence" (2016, p. 82).

By establishing cyberspace as a stage where religious practices can also be manifested, the avatar would become that liminal element between the physical self of the user and the virtual universe in which the religious act takes place, representing at the same time all the potentialities that an online dimension in specific can offer. Through its participation as an avatar, the user contributes to updating digital texts in the dynamics of communications. However, she also becomes a co-author or "co-enunciator" (Meneghelli 2007) when proposing other potential actions or aesthetical combinations for the avatar, as well as other relationship strategies with digital platforms, either by producing digital religious performances or by rethinking the virtual context as a space that welcomes the sacred. It is then possible to speak of a new scenario in which complex semiotic processes are being developed, while inviting the reader to collaborate and propose other textual practices related to the religious.

In the case of religious experience, the agency that allows the interaction with the avatar also enables the user to experience important transformations, just like the believer's agency does during the ritualistic performance. This, as Andrea Pinotti (2019) argues, generates a bidirectional relationship between the avatar and the user. In fact, the process of virtualizing the "I" through the avatar is an experience that involves a whole practice of self-reflection and personal projection, in which the influence of the graphical interface and the mythologies found in the environment converge. It would be, following Pierre Lévy, "like the movement of 'becoming another' —or heterogenesis of the human—" (1999, p. 14). This could be seen more strongly in virtual platforms like Second Life – a point which will be analysed in more detail in the next chapter - where the very creation of the avatar allows us to experience the virtual space from our own desires or interests. Here, each user would inhabit an intimate but simultaneously collective dimension, in which they can go from visiting a church or a monastery through VR technologies, to carrying out a ritual with other players in Second Life (Figure 2.7).

Figure 2.7: Anonymous. Ritual Second Life. Digital image.

Understood as Kristevian texts, both the avatar and the virtual space where it unfolds generate other interesting textual relations when combining, resulting in performances of poetic and heterogeneous nature. These performances can be also related to Fontanille's semiotic practice, where a text can be understood from a practical point of view and therefore the importance lies not in the limitations or in the object's meaning, but instead in how the development of such actions are articulated. That is to say, the meaning arises from the own practice, i.e. the movements and the dynamism (Fontanille 2016, p. 129). Therefore, it is possible to understand how the interpretation of those spaces and the faculties of the avatar allow the user to transcend the dualistic limits of these practices – which most of the time propose the online scenario as merely artificial – and instead generate a poetic of the digital ritual practice, where the objective is not a specific act of communication but rather the production of significance through new intertextual connections and therefore new interpretations.

Considering what was explicated about the cyborg ontology earlier, the avatar recognizes and defies its own programming: threatening the dominant code by making it crush with other systems of meaning, with other discourses and contexts. The avatar – as the Golem - integrates those new texts in order to produce hybrids, based on linguistic 'magic' - the software that allows it to function – and 'mud' – the organic human subject embracing it.

2.4 Digital Religion: virtual environments for spiritual pursuits

After all what presented regarding the nature of digital networks and their meaning-making potentialities as a collective and interconnected space, we can see that the changes in the ways of inhabiting the contemporary panorama do not just imply the disruption and reformulation of the processes of communication mediated by computer platforms, but also a questioning of our relationship with the digital universe and its complex processes. It can be sustained that the computer media and their vast territories begin to look like another type of reality with its own ways of generating experience and producing meaning.

As stated by Fontanille, media – in general – occupy a very particular place in contemporary culture. They interfere in all private or public practices, participate both in the globalization of trade and in the organization of our daily and intimate life, determinate all genres of discourses. Moreover they contribute to build a new semiotic architecture of our societies and, mainly, to modify in a substantial way what constitutes semiospheres, that is to say, the dialogues they hold between them (Fontanille 2018, p. 161). In this conjunction of constant information flows and intertextual dynamics between cultural systems, the dialogues between religious imaginaries and the digital medium have intensified. Such intersections make visible the impact of virtual networks in the realm of the sacred, the numinous, and the magical, as well as the potentialities of meaning acquired by the two worlds when coming into contact.

In this hybrid ecosystem, new paradigms are being proposed regarding the integration of religious discourses with computational means, altering the way in which individuals relate to their own beliefs in multiple aspects. Such a premise, in fact, would give us a further reflection on how religion is written and rewritten in relation to the social dynamics in which the subjects participate, as is the case of technological innovation. It would be enough to see the spiritual interpretations of many users when they bring their own beliefs to video games environments, visit 3D virtual temples or even carry out ancestral ceremonies through electronic devices and virtual or augmented reality technologies. There is, therefore, an urgent need to understand many of the activities that take place on the web since these can make visible the type of relationships existing with the sacred and the numinous.

It is then necessary to observe all the possibilities those media are enabling because of their intrinsic characteristics. Virtual spaces are fragmented, interconnected, and decentralized, conditioning the spiritual experience itself[92] by a variety of processes that have affected traditional religions, and allowing, perhaps, the manifestations of new religious experiences. Since this macro semiosphere of computational media, with its liquid boundaries, is spreading all over other cultural semiospheres' borders, its own characteristics affect in a particular way the dynamics of exchange and translation occurring in the borders. In this way, digital media have created a kind of faith which is "fluid and evolving, and seeks out new resources, symbols, and experiences to bring into a kind of 'syncretism of individual experience'" (Hoover 2012, p. 30).

Due to the continuous evolution of digital technology, the attention of scholars should contemplate the shaping of religion in a broader and interdisciplinary way. In Give me that Online Religion (2001), Brenda Basher explains that internet, besides enabling other forms of experiencing traditional religions, also offers new ways in the understanding of the sacred and the spiritual life. Due to the cyberspace's characteristics, the user can cultivate unique ways of religiosity and also, come up with new rituals and practices. From catholic monks performing a ritual to a 'blessed cyberspace' to catholic cyber-churches, the 'domestication' of computational media by users and the effect of technology on humans beliefs create, together, the perfect scenario for a path epitomizing both phenomena, and with it the possibility of a religious evolution.

Jennifer Cobb, in her work of Cybergrace: the Search for God in the Digital World, assured that cyberspace "has the potential for opening us to a new way of experiencing the world, a way that relies on a divine reality to give meaning and substance" (1998, p. 10). A similar scenario occurs with Brenda Brasher, for whom online religion was "the most portentous development for the future of religion to come out of the twentieth century" (2001, p. 17). However, in the context of digital religion, cyberspace can be

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[92]   If technology in general is contextualized about its uses and significations through the own discourse of users about that specific technology. Then, if we think the internet as a tool of public discourse (Agre 1998), in that way, is not a coincidence that both "traditional religious groups and individuals, employ particular rhetorical discourses or images of the internet, describing it In way that presents it as suitable for religious use or spiritual engagement" (Campbell 2005, p. 9).

considered as not necessarily embedded with an ontological spiritual value, but instead, it can become sacred by the user's 'reading and writing', assigning new areas of experience. This can be seen, for instance, in the performance of rituals or other holy activities in digital platforms which were once conceived for ludic and profane exchange. It can also be a technology which 'affirms religious life' allowing communities of believers to develop certain activities in the virtual world which can, in turn, influence manifestations in the 'offline' religious practices.

Those metaphorical evocations also uncover diverse views about the nature of technology according to the user. Heidi Campbell (2005) details four different narratives describing digital media technology and its relation with religious expressions. Internet can be positioned as a 'spiritual network', highlighting the possibilities of combining, exploring, and experiencing different types of beliefs, myths, and practices; as well as a 'mission tool', enabling individuals to connect with online communities of similar interest. A third narrative presents the internet as a 'sacramental space'. Here, Campbell makes reference to the adaptation of symbols, rituals and practices within the virtual environment and how technology is used for spiritual searches (2004). Lastly, the internet can develop a 'religious identity', allowing the user to convert into a new faith or reaffirm it. Among the many considerations to be taken into account here, even if it is very notorious how technology can be shaped into social and spiritual purposes, is that there is a constant evolution of the role of digital media in religious traditions, as information technologies and the influence of communication media improves.

The use of computational media as a mediator of religious experience has become a common practice during the last two decades. Both the migration "to the online" of traditional beliefs and the emerging of hybrid forms of spirituality are a clear consequence of how virtual worlds provide an exceptional territory to develop and basically practice any form of faith. Digital Religion (DR), as a category, answers this phenomenon of the encounter between faith and technology. Campbell defines that intersection as "the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we discuss how online and offline religious spheres have increasingly become blended and/or integrated into our network society" (Campbell 2004, p. 3). For Campbell, also, "[c]ontemporary society often feels isolated and disconnected", and therefore "…the

Internet has come to represent another-worldly space allowing people to re-engage with issues of spirituality" (Campbell 2006, p. 3). In synthesis, practicing beliefs in a virtual space creates new dialogues between technology and spirituality, with their own aesthetics formation while considering technology itself as a point of encounter, or even a medium, to connect with the divine. This represents a merging of all the collective and cultural texts we associate with religion and the elements we relate to a digital mediated society.

The field of Digital Religion has been understood in many different ways, as the influence of communicational media and information technologies increase. As online discourses continue to provide other ways of religious inter-connection and new expressions of religious practice and beliefs emerge, the work of Hojsgaars and Warburg (2005) – consisting of three stages – is such a helpful guide to understand how the relationship between cyberspace and religion will keep opening theories and interpretations.

In its beginnings, cyberspace was considered a completely separate universe, so there were a lot of dystopian and utopian projections of its sociocultural impact. It was also the time when the first religious communities started to find the virtual space as a comfortable alternative to spread their activities and beliefs. Consequently, in this first wave, the internet was seen as a tool to either build new possibilities of faith or destroy the existing religious structures. The second wave brought with it more contextualization by taking as more normal the incidence of the digital context in daily life and the migration of many sociocultural aspects to virtual spaces. Researchers started to find that together, the power of technology and people – considering the latter as active users of digital media, generated those types of religious expressions. In this stage, the well-known distinction made by Helland (2000) between religion-online – consisting on importing traditional forms of religion and their online practices – and online-religion – which is the adaptation of religion in order to create genuine forms of networked spirituality[93] – appears.

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[93]   To read more, see: Heidi Campbell (2011).

On the contrary, in a third wave, scholars started to investigate the internet as a meaning-making resource in which users can find religious orientation and formation practice (Hoover and Park 2004). Here, religion mediated by digital media is considered one more practice, another aspect of religion, so the division between the online and offline spaces becomes less relevant. Contemporaneity might be seen in a fourth stage, in which a variety of practices from the digital context are affording spiritual use and, therefore, they allow the emergence of religious discourses belonging to the virtual universes.

This section aims at proposing a possible fifth wave: an exponential step in the level of hybridization between religious beliefs, practices and experiences on the one hand, and digital media on the other, where the emerging spiritual digital practices are the result of the intrinsic conditions of the virtual universe, summarized aptly by Campbell as "(...) a hybridized and fluid context requiring new logics and evoking unique forms of meaning-making" (Campbell 2012, p. 4). Folk culture and tradition are more latent in the world of contemporary technologies, so they are "busily recruiting and adapting new technologies to old purposes" (Bausinger 1990). This is strikingly close to McLuhan's conception of how tribalized cultures, being more sensorial with a pre-alphabetized structure, are more able to find themselves comfortable and in accordance with electric technologies, such as, for instance, computational media.

By those means, when mediation is considered as an inherent function of religion and digital media technologies are intended not only as technical innovations but, mainly, as cultural and social territories, the issue about digital religions is precisely the way of practicing, understanding and considering religion in conjunction with emerging spaces. That is to say, the territory where religious practices live and digital culture meet. Hoover and Echchaibi (2014) focused on the many relationships between digital media and the sense of religiosity in contemporary society. Actually, the concept of 'The Third Space of Digital Religion[94]' suggested that digital media has practically moved on from merely exploring the 'digitalization of religion' to a deeper level of analysing how today religion is *constituted* through digital media. In other words, the

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[94]   In his article (2014), Stewart Hoover express how important it is for scholarship to move forward and study how religious tradition, authority and authenticity is changed through the process of digitalization.

particular conditions of the virtual space – considering it as a fragmented, interconnected and decentralized space – have determined the spiritual experience itself, contributing to processes that affect traditional religions and allow the manifestation of new religious experiences. According to this, Stewart Hoover assures us that recent media have gone from limiting to explore the digitalization of information (Hoover 2015) to a deeper level we are uncovering in this section: to examine how religion is constituted through digital media.

This can be the reason why digital networks are increasingly considered a way in which the believer can understand his/her reality and discover his/her own faith. The communicative processes between religion and technology contemplate this latter as a meeting point or even a part of divinity, generating other paradigms where it is not only about how religious users shape technology towards their goals and desires (Campbell 2005) but about how communication technologies influence the way users practice or perceive religiosity. In synthesis, spirituality 'from' and 'in' the digital environment.

So, with this blurring of the division between the online and the offline space – the condition of being always connected – many religious practices did not only migrate, but they also started to get contaminated with the characteristic of virtual spaces. This happened both, with traditional religions as well as other, less traditional manifestations of religion and spirituality, like pagan reconstructionism or movements related to oriental mysticism.

2.4.1 Technological innovation and religious changes

Although digital networks have already become an important part of our memory and of our cultural and scientific heritage, their effect continues to transform and reinvent each and every one of human's spheres. This is especially important when reflecting on why digital networks have been representing a space in which believers can understand the global panorama and discover their own beliefs. As is made clear by Massimo Leone, all cultural changes give rise to new communication technologies, which often produce unforeseen sociocultural effects (Leone 2019).

As explained in the previous section, technology is not incompatible with spiritual

pursuits[95], particularly when reflecting on the integral concept of technology[96] itself and how it alters the individual and shared understanding of society and culture. To speak of technology – in its general conception – is to speak about objects, but also about the culture of human beings and their capacity for knowledge, that is to say of the ways in which the world is understood. Levy states that:

> It is impossible to separate the human from its material environment, or from the signs and images through which humanity gives meaning to life and the world. Similarly, we cannot separate the material world – even less so its artificial component – from the ideas through which technological objects are conceived and used (…) (Lévy, 2001, p. 4).

Throughout history, technological innovations have influenced and revolutionized human societies and their cultural practices, generating other ways of expressing devotion to the sacred or the values that govern a society. As assured by Pierre Levy (2004), each alteration in the modes of symbolic manipulation – among which the appearance of the alphabet, the invention of the printing press, the arrival of massive media, and the subsequent development of digital technologies – produces an unstoppable and immeasurable echo in all aspects of culture. The invention of Gutenberg's printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, for instance, notably influenced the later appearance of Protestantism in Europe. Thanks to a greater spread of anticlerical ideas, Martin Luther distributed his influential theses against papal indulgences. In such a way, it can be affirmed that each technological innovation comes with profound sociocultural changes, fully including the religious domain.

On one hand, technology has been considered as a coherent evolution of a disenchantment of the world – a product of a bureaucratic rationalization of society – or as a danger that will reduce the subject to be just 'one more gear' in an industrialized world (Marcuse 1967). But on the other hand, technology itself is seen as the product of freedom and progress, a genuine and sometimes the clearest expression of a human

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[95]   This, by understanding spirituality as "the human search for meaning significance" (Jones & Yarnold 1986, p. 50) and technology as an element responsible of human's evolution (Taylor 2010, p. 9).

[96]   Already in the XIX century, authors as Ralph Waldo Emerson considered it to be an extensions of man (1875). This idea was also shared by Marshall McLuhan, for whom man is "perpetually modified" by technology, considering that "the machine world reciprocates man's love by expediting his wishes and desires" (1964, p. 46). To read more, see: Marshall McLuhan (1964).

tendency to develop (Vecoli 2013, p. 53). On that last point, technology could even be considered a sort of techne, from the moment it constitutes a product of the creative effort that distinguishes human actions (Newman 1997, p. 109).

The influences of digital technologies in our digitally hyperconnected contemporaneity is shepherding the conception not only of man but of reality and of its surroundings. The relationship between humans and technological devices – understood through the cyborg's notion – highlights the condition of nowadays environment, based on irregular dynamics, in-betweenness and interesting compositions.

Concepts and ideologies of the digital functioning are often conveyed through religious language and images: the possibility of going beyond the limits of time and space is sometimes compared to the type of religious manifestations in which only divine beings can overcome the limitations of the body. Another similarity is found in the common language for describing computational procedures: Uploading files to the 'cloud', instead of a server, and staying 'connected' to the 'network'. If, as seen above, technology produces environments where other religious manifestations can emerge, religion also inspires technological innovations and objectives. Language, which contains the ethos of a culture, articulates all human praxis under those desires, dreams and expectations. Here, again, its transformative power is observable when technical areas translate spiritual desires and transcendental nostalgia.

Religion can therefore be considered an important inspiration for mass media communications, which has revolutionized the exchange of information and transformed society. However, the spiritual imagination also appropriates information technology for its own pursuits. "In this sense, technologies of communication are always, at least potentially, technologies of the sacred, simply because the ideas and experiences of the sacred have always informed human communication. (…) By reimagining technologies in this way, new meanings are invested into the universe of machines, and new virtual possibilities emerge" (Davis 2015, p. 42). He even takes this thesis further, suggesting that "the history of technology — from hieroglyphics to computer code — is itself inseparable from the often ambiguous exchanges with something nonhuman, something otherworldly, something divine. Technology, it seems, is religion by other means, then as now" (Thacker 2015, p. 24)

This pragmatic dimension regarding digital media and religious scopes highlights the former's openness and disruptive nature by offering us a new way of seeing, feeling, understanding, and accepting issues regarding spirituality or religious practices. In a universe in which traditional relationships have been shattered, and new possibilities of relationship are being sketched out, monstrous phenomena emerge in the liminal spaces existing between the spheres of techne and the sacred, between the analogical and the digital. These monsters result from algorithms, speculation, and virtuality, taking us to limits that we still do not perceive.

The role of digital technologies in our contemporary environment has introduced a scenario that a few decades ago was thought to belong only to fictional narratives: Artificial intelligence, advances in robotics, a more fluid interaction between human-machine interaction, and an increasing use of virtual and augmented realities in the areas that range from the ludic to science and medicine to religion. All of these conditions present in the contemporary panorama imply the disruption and reformulation of the communicative processes mediated by computational platforms and a rethinking of how we relate to the digital universe and its complex processes.

2.4.2 Re-writing religion expressions into digital language

Let us visualize for a moment the following situations: bare feet upon a carpet, a chorus of voices singing loudly, the sound of a mp3 format music guiding the repetitive dance and gestures of a group: an ancient Sufi dancing ritual is being performed. However, all the participants are wearing an Oculus Rift, as they move in a sort of common space that cannot be seen from outside (figure 2.8). In another scenario, a female avatar explains how she often practices a techno-pagan ritual in a sacred space created by her, through some software, where the dispositions of magic tools and the representations of the four elements give her a deep sensation of connection with the deities[97] (figure 2.9). These are different situations, belonging to different religions and with only one thing in common: Digital-technological devices mediating the religious activity in order to connect with the sacred, as well as with other people and/or other

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[97]   Technopagan ritual video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eTCP_i04K4.

environments. This represents an intense sensorial experience of faith, happening in virtual worlds.

Figure 2.8: Sufi digital ritual

Figure 2.9: Technopagan ritual (screen capture)

These activities, which were considered as narratives belonging to science fiction less than a decade ago, are a common practice nowadays in many religions, where the spiritual activities can go hand by hand with computational media. However, can we consider as 'spiritually valid' these types of experiences, which are mediated by VR technologies and synthetically generated by a software? How do the process of development and propagation of cyberspace and virtual reality technologies create new strategies for the diffusion of faith?

It has already been shown how digital media, as well as the increasing state of connectivity of individuals, have fostered spiritual practices that are emerging and developing in the cyberspace. Traditional religions have penetrated into this digital environment, and other ones, not 'properly' institutionalized, have found the right terrain to settle and expand. Social functioning and cultural manifestations were both absorbed and disrupted by the popularization of digital technological artefacts and, in turn, they accelerated a general virtualization of objects, experiences and relationships.

If the spiritual realm has meant a medium to connect people with metaphysical spheres, what it has in common with digital technologies is that both of them share that characteristic of mediators, "uniting the visible world of human interaction with the invisible world of spirits " (Witte 2017, p. 1), between the real and the ethereal, the terrene and the spiritual. At the exact moment a religious practice takes place in the digital context, new chains of meaning will start emerging, even if the 'object' was a traditional ritual belonging to the offline world. The digital realm on its own possesses different conditions and ways of perceiving time and space, 'contaminating' the

discourses they mediate. The texts being produced in a virtual world cannot be completely judged by an approach which doesn't contemplate the advances and importance of digital technologies in contemporary cultural and social movements.

Texts and discourses cannot pretend to be understood out of the context where they are produced, as well as they do not only depend on their basic semantic meaning.

> Meaning emerges by the interaction of values and signifies in relation to the cultural interpretations that comes out from the contextual elements where the communication is verified. They are understood as the relations of meaning, because potentially all meanings are affected by their location in a semiotic network (Zecchetto 2010, p. 179).[98]

On this regard – and as shown in chapter 1 – Markus Davidsen (2013), in his work about the conceptualization and validation of emerging Tolkien's religion communities used the term 'fiction-based religions'[99] considering that even if they are not conventional, that doesn't make them less real or 'hyper', since they possess rites and communities practicing them. In a relatable theoretical move, for Jean Baudrillard all religions where hyper real[100]. Davidsen draws, as well, an analytical distinction between religion and play, "which makes it possible to distinguish between religious use of fiction (fiction-based religion) and playful engagement with fiction (fandom)" (Davidsen 2013, 380). This assumption can also help us to infer that even if the uses of computational media — such as VR — can be more straightforwardly related to 'the fictional', it is not less efficient or serious when it comes to the use of digital technology

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[98]   My own translation.

[99]   To read more, see M. Davidsen, The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu: A Study of Fiction-based Religion, Leiden University 378 (2014).

[100]   Even if Baudrillard never applied his sign theory to contemporary religion, he actually develops his key concepts of simulacrum, simulation and hyper-reality contextualized in the discussion of the Christian concept of God (1994, pp. 1–7). Markus Davidsen (2013) underlines that under Baudrillard's theory, the nature of God answers in fact to the concept of simulacra: "In other words, the God concept is a simulacrum no matter whether the worshipper considers it to be a simulacrum or not, simply because the concept 'God', objectively speaking, is void of reference to any reality whatsoever. This has important implications, for if God is a simulacrum, then all other religious notions referring to supernatural agents, worlds or processes are also simulacra and all religions are per definition systems of simulacra". To read more, see: Baudrillard (1994) and Davidsen (2013).

focused on religious aspects: to perform a ritual, to open or enter into virtual religious spaces, to connect with other members of the community, to meditate, and so on.

Davidsen's distinction between fiction-based religion and fandom is crucial because it clarifies how not every use of digital media working with some religious narrative - as in video games - represents a religious performance on virtual spaces. Nonetheless, many online religious activities - especially rituals – use narratives similar to role-playing video games[101] - like Second Life - where virtual communities can interact.

This interpretation of the ritual[102] performance in the digital indeed applies in a great measure also to video games idiocrasy, which are interactive and have so much more to do with activities changing our behaviour, particularly in case of games involving ritual practices. Similarities between the behavioural structures in ritual and video games lies mainly in things the believer/gamer can and cannot modify. In the ritualistic act of entering into a sacred space, for example, the practitioner/believer is also entering into a different space/time, following certain instructions and/or assuming a certain archetype which will leave some kind of experience even if it doesn't change the actual reality of the subject. In online virtual worlds, solitary practitioners or religious communities can reunite as avatars, entering in that space through a ritualized process of logging in (Wagner 2012). The sacred, then, is believed to be manifested in those territories during the ritual, following Mircea Eliade's concept of Hierophany, which denotes the presence of the sacred in any object -it could be a physical stone or even a digital three, for instance - as a "wholly other", differentiating from other objects of the same categories.

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[101]   In chapter 3 there is a deep analysis about this subject, specifically about the similitudes and structure of video games and religions. Nonetheless, for additional information into a sociological point of view, see Wagner (2012).

[102]   An analysis of this subject will also be provided in chapter number 3. However, just for contextual information: ritual can be considered as the ground where religion is made. As well as: "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers" (Rappaport 1999, p. 24). Wagner (2012), on the other hand, consider ritual as a doing and as an activity. To read more, see Rappaport R. (1999) Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity. Cambridge University Press.

Religious social behaviours can also be *learned* as well as *modified* in virtual environments, as the avatar immersion contributes positively or negatively to users' attempts to meditate or pray. When people interact with others for significant periods of time, using avatars in virtual world's dynamics, new forms of social interaction will emerge. However, even if what that means for the human cognition will only be understood many years from now, the effects of avatars on human interactions and dynamics in VR enter in consonance with what is known as digital embodiment. As was already shown before, this concept – investigated critically by Katherine Hayles - can be described as an experience of embodiment which grants a state of individuality, without considering to possess a central or universal code which determines all the experiences. By establishing cyberspace as the scenario where these practices of encounter between religion and digital media are manifested, their 'immaterial' representation seems to be minimized by the impossibility, or non-presence, of a body as well of a sacred physical space. Different points of view might however be encountered in the academical debates.

As assured by Heidi Campbell, when technology is understood as a social process "it is possible for different social groups of users to shape technologies towards their own ends by the ways they use or modify a given technology" (Campbell 2005, p. 3). This stress originated by digital media technology is clearly seen when exploring the idea of cyberspace and its roots in science fiction. Cyberspace is a metaphoric image of an imaginary world – a 'space' – existing beyond the computer screen. In science fiction, cyberspace —especially in the work of William Gibson carried out nearly 30 years ago — was, or could be, a realm of total-immersion. Virtual Reality, in fact, epitomizes a human desire to merge together with technology and transcends the limitations of the physical/offline word, resonating with religious narratives and desires.

2.4.3 Virtual Reality as a religious tool

VR is a technological reproduction of the perception of the real. Nevertheless, it corresponds to a pragmatic process, conditioned by the social realities: A constant interplay between culture, social relations and technology. VR, evolving into the field of New Media, refers to any audiovisual technology — more like a set of tools — allowing the interaction with a computer-simulated environment, representing a sensory and

psychological experience of immersion through animated representations called avatars[103]. In Godwired, Rachel Wagner considers VR as "any form of digital technology that involves user engagement with software via a screen interface" (Wagner 2012, p. 1) so the conception of "virtuality", in this context, describes an experience enabled by digital mediation.

In contraposition to other types of medium, virtual reality operates most often under the logic of transparency[104]. The immediacy of virtual reality derives from the intensity of the 3D immersion and from the capacity of interaction it allows, engaging the user in a dialogue with the system. A defined interface represents the key element to the level of immersion these other realities can transmit, that is to say, "the degree to which a person can feel wrapped in the virtual world" (Rojas and Rebolledo 2014, p. 888) by means of the level of transparency. "In this sense, a transparent interface would erase itself, so that the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead is deeply inside it; encountering, in an immediate relationship, with the contents of that medium" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, pp. 23-24).

Continuing with that perspective, a religious performance in the virtual world can be easily enhanced thanks to the qualities of interaction and immersion that these environments proposed, as well as other disruptive characteristics proper of digital media related to time/space conception, a subject that will be later deepened in this thesis. Virtual Reality is often described as a medium which allows us to see and hear things in ways we haven't experienced before. Furthermore, VR technologies also generate the 'real' sense of being present in a 'virtual' scenario, as well as natural responses to the experiences which are being produced. Experiences that can be lived are genuine and real.

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[103]   As we already shown early in this chapter, in online digital worlds, people experience their presence through avatars. Human-controlled avatars engage in a variety of social practices. Oftentimes, avatars communicate in a chat-like manner, using voice or text-based instant messengers for private discussions. For a deeper lecture about avatars in virtual communities, see Leone (2010, p. 8).

[104]   For example, a three-dimensional-space flight simulator is a VR experience offering a natural sensation of driving a plane over the sky, even if the user is not inside a plane or in the sky. The experience itself is generated by a software, creating a synthetic copy of the real world. The screen disappears due to the head-mounted display, portraying images which encompass the viewer's visual field.

These media are 'granting' us a new kind of increasingly ubiquitous access to 'actual' reality, by filtering it and changing the things related to it. In these technological media the 'reality' becomes multiple. Non-existing scenarios can be simulated, co-created or proposed. Human experience consists of "many worlds" (James 1983) or "multiple realities" (Schutz 1973), "countless, separate social worlds, each of them with its own internal logic and principles of organization" (Chayko 1993, p. 172). Indeed, as an experiential medium, it revolutionizes the logics of storytelling and the rules of meaning-making, optimizing the systems surrounding us.

Considering the characteristics above cited, it is not surprising that VR works as a coherent and powerful tool to perform, organize, expose and guide religious activities. Independently on the type of faith or its exclusivity, the exponential presence of digital context in social areas has encompassed and merged with a wide variety of traditions of faith: from Catholic Eucharistic and Buddhist meditations chambers to Muslim prayers and Wiccan rituals recreated in a sort of virtual magic forest. Other practices related to spirituality, like meditation, have also been proposed and carried out through digital discourses, indeed in the form of video games. VR medium technologies allow the possibility to follow and practice almost any religious tradition in virtual worlds in a multiplicity of ways, also considering that the more a religion is 'wired' the more it incorporates the values of the software it embraces (Wagner 2012).

In the early use of computational media for practices related to religious, as for example cyber-churches, digital technologies were basically used as a mere copy of offline religious activity. Typical examples were audios to spread ceremonies, podcasts or videos to offer sermons to members of a given congregation. However, after the boom of internet 2.0 and its massive use, religious groups are now embracing and shaping a variety of technologies, such as Second Life or its VR equivalent Samsar, "to create an online worship experience that offers interactive worship via avatars" (Campbell 2013, p. 1).

In contemporaneity it is already common to find narratives of spiritual life experiences developed through computational media, where authors transform online

platforms into a sort of sacramental space[105] (Campbell 2004). From video games and 3D Virtual Communities to virtual and augmented reality technologies, these domains serve as cultural registers for the addresser, offering hybrid ways of communication since there are no closed or normative limitations on how narratives will be uttered. The online context, therefore, acts as an expressive medium, a sacred space, a chamber of memories, and a poetic detonator in the subject's spiritual journey and the resulting narratives.

To conclude, digital tools like virtual reality possess interesting religious meaning-making potentialities, capable of encouraging a personal and spiritual understanding of technology and the relation that individuals have with those devices. On that matter, the symbolic efficacy of digital rituals are not necessarily minimized by their condition of virtuality and deterritorialization: The versatility and the characteristics of computational media itself can enhance the experiences as well as its immersive qualities. As was pointed out in the first section of this chapter – quoting Marshall McLuhan - every technological extension of ourselves leads to a set of amputations, meaning that not all the conditions one can expect are present in the online context. However, the losses that the digital experience can generate means also a gaining, an enrichment. Our technological extension does not only transform our experience but hybridizes ourselves.

For instance, some characteristics of the online, like no spatial or temporal constraints, and the possibility of working with multimedia tools, do facilitate the transformation of the virtual space itself as a frame from the ordinary world, becoming a sort of sacred zone, a magic circle where to unleash the deepest desires and values, or a map of order which takes away the complexity and chaos of the outside world. In fact, many mediums and platforms from the computational universe have become that sort of "other place": a universal door to meet and relate with family and colleagues, as well as with other non-human entities in a sort of digital animist experience.

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[105]	According to Heidi Campbell, conceiving the internet as a sacramental space "involves the adaptation of symbols, rituals and practices as technology is used in spiritual pursuits. While contemporary society often feels isolated and disconnected, the Internet has come to represent an other-worldly space allowing people to re-engage with issues of spirituality" (2004, p. 221).

Conclusions

The development of digital technologies and their extension in practically every area of social and cultural life is probably the scenario that best describes contemporaneity. With time slipping away in ways that are still unsuspected and a space that is being built and rebuilt incessantly, electrical networks have become a global environment not only revolutionizing the communicative processes of the human being, but that also reformulates the universal categories. All these conditions have implied a rethinking of the existing relationships with the digital universe and its complex processes. It would no longer be a simple technological instrument, but an environment mediating and transforming almost, if not all, the symbolic spheres of the human.

Thus, it is becoming increasingly evident how the universe of digital technologies, with their increasingly immersive and 'transparent' virtual worlds, have ceased to have a merely instrumental value. Given our intrinsic relationship with computational devices, they have become not only an extension of ourselves, but we have even come to perceive them as that 'otherness', capable of containing a particular agency while opening channels of *jouissance*. Erik Davis specifies this concept properly: "By creating a new interface between the self, the other, and the world beyond, media technologies become part of the self, the other, and the world beyond" (2015, p. 34). The machine, therefore, links categories that were previously conceived as opposites. It is, above all, a universe of calculations and logical propositions, reflected in the macro category of Information Technology (IT), which has been building its ubiquity through the software: that universal language capable of storing an endless quantity of data and making visible 'atoms of culture' (Manovich 2011).

Digital spaces are conditioned by a permanent re-definition and construction. From being closed and fixed, the image in its digital form – as the object describing virtual spaces - invites new modes of immersion and modification, always in motion, since it

can be shared, copied, manipulated, deleted and recovered. Whether through virtual reality technologies or innovative accessories to create haptic experiences, digital spaces do not only allow humans to move and inhabit their spaces through an avatar, but also to generate experiences that, far from being secluded into a single purpose, respond to a constant process of becoming and to new opportunities of human-machine hybridization. The cyborg ontology is therefore presented on the digital stage as a reference to the condition of the contemporary subject, irremediably connected to the online context. For this reason, as Erik Davis has stated, the machine is mainly a hybrid entity that appears closer and revealing with respect to our own sensory processes and to the conception of being in the world; this occurs to the point that we can no longer prescind from certain conditions that link our existence to them (2015, pp. 157-158).

Donna Haraway proposed a new cyborg paradigm, in which the boundaries separating the organic physical self from the machine and the digital technologies seem to embrace. As she states, technology has dissolved in the human body and, from that process, the cyborg emerges. The cyborg can refer to encounters and hybridizations of all kinds of categories, although Haraway's proposal advocates a feminist critique where the dichotomous distinctions are questioned. This definition of cyborg portraits technology as a constituent of the human body and not as something external: as a merging between machine and organism, its aim is to re-think the processes of digital technological hybridization taking place in contemporaneity.

Instead of a techno deterministic view, what the cyborg does is to challenge and question the relation of human beings with technological innovation. Timothy Taylor, for example, examines that human's progress is highly related to the technologies of a specific time and how, depending on the characteristics of that specific technological medium, they have shaped humans physically and mentally. On that matter, the cyborg could be considered as our current condition. This supposes a new human ontology, which must incorporate the non-organic elements interacting with it. Some scholars even affirm that the main objective of anthropology nowadays should not be the traditional category of humanity but the cyborg, and therefore they suggest a "cyborg anthropology" (Platzeck and Torrano 2016, p. 241) as the condition better fixing contemporary human. As stated by Teresa Aguilar García, this concept of cyborg is already proposing new ways of understanding individual bodies that "due to the incision

in their flesh of new technologies, its classical ontology has suffered radical changes that forces us to think about it from different parameters" (2008, p. 9).

Such a notion welcomes perfectly the digital avatar, which besides being and extension of the physical body is also a translator of the subject's intentions and beliefs, functioning as a mechanism to articulate our presence towards the language and nature of virtual world's. The digital avatar is complex and dynamic. Contrary to analogic images - it is in a constant process of transformation, with endless possibilities of actualizing without closing in a inalterable condition. Because of its intrinsic condition, the different uses of avatar embodiment in the fields of medicine, psychological therapy, science and arts, have demonstrated how it is bi-dimentional (Pinotti 2019), since it does not only allow us to be "in the image" but also affects the offline version of us. For such a reason it can also represent an issue for validating its religious performances, especially when thinking how this "virtual self" can provide meaningful experiences. The performance of digital rituals and the construction of virtual "sacred" spaces are all activities that can be lived through the avatar, since it permits an even stronger process of agency by embodying the user. Therefore, the term avatar - which has been part of the cyberculture scenario especially in videogames and digital communities - comes to play a special role in the digital religious context by allowing the presence and immersion of the user, sometimes by extended reality technologies as it is the case of VR or any other computer-generated reality.

Instead of dualistic approaches questioning its condition of real or not real, this way of experiencing faith in the digital mediated scenario would be generating other ways of relating with one self, with other avatars and with the sacred in an environment that, although diverse, is not less real. The digital environment with its own conditions and structures can offer to users new depths that expand their horizons, while allowing them to access other levels of experience that would be impossible to be accessed without the virtualization generated by such technologies.

Considering that the user embodied in his/her avatar is always in a state of change and transformation - due to the intertextual dynamics between semiotic systems and speech acts - the relation between the subject and the avatar epitomizes the textual productivity highlighted by Kristeva. However, when this embodiment exteriorizes

spiritual sensibilities and intimal practices with no practical objectives, then we can say that all those avatar utterances are embedded with poetic language. On the other hand, bringing to the "online" a ritual would determinates how the user translates the religious act into the online. The processes of translation between the offline to the online environment annul some areas of experiences but allow the emerging of others. Therefore, the religious practice is always actualized according to the cooperative contribution of the user, revitalizing language while offering new spiritual functions to the digital realm.

By such cooperative interpretations and user's cooperation, other digital platforms' functionalities can emerge, as well as new ways of relating with virtual worlds. The particular conditions of the virtual space have determined the spiritual experience itself, contributing to processes that influence traditional religions and that have perhaps allowed the manifestation of innovative ways of experiencing religious encounters and performances. On such a way, an enhancement of poetic experience by means of digital embodiment could result in possible spiritual or religious manifestations inspired by the digital context.

Chapter 3
Technopaganism

In the contemporary scenario, the dialogues between religious imaginaries and the digital medium have been intensifying. Such intersections allow making visible the impact of virtual networks in the sphere of the sacred, the numinous and the magical, as well as the potentialities of meaning that these worlds acquire when they come into contact. The discourses about the links of digital technology with the spiritual contexts can however be very versatile. the internet has allow new forms of expression. One of those emerging phenomena is what is known as Technopaganism, a term that became very popular during the '90s, especially in the Californian cyberculture, bringing together contemporary paganism, shamanism, and popular culture.

Technopaganism never had a single definition since its limits are blurred. However, when thinking about technopaganism as a whole, technology and spirituality are related in such a way that they work as an inseparable unity. Even if the term became obsolete after the first decade of the '00s many contemporary practices include directly or implicitly a 'technopagan aura', considering how the halo of mysticism surrounding digital technologies seemed to be reemerging within the posthuman postulates and in the advances of artificial intelligence, robotics, and immersive extended realities.

3.1 Contemporary Paganism and the spiritual machine: Introducing Technopaganism

"As we will see throughout this book, mystical impulses sometimes body-snatched the very technologies that supposedly helped yank them from the stage in the first place. "

Erik Davis, TechGnosis (2015, p. 31).

Hybridization and interconnection are possibly two concepts that characterize the ways of living in the contemporary world in a particularly striking way, describing a scenario in which ontological borders and traditional categories – subject/object, human/machine, human/animal, etc. – seem to dissolve. This occurs to the extent that subjects and technological entities establish dynamic relationships[106] between them. In such a sense, thinking about what belongs to the sphere of the human today also implies a reconceptualization of those 'objects' or 'entities' with whom humans interact. In other words, with those 'other' modes of existence that were previously thought to be irreconcilable and that challenge, following Bruno Latour (2012), specific schemes characteristics of the modern mentality.

From its beginning, the internet and digital culture have originated mystical technological fascination. They represent a meeting space between users and an area of communion with what many consider sacred, with the numinous and with that 'otherness' that constitutes the magical imaginary in many cultures. For many scholars, cyberspace' abilities to connect individuals with new spheres of perception and knowledge gave it also spiritual potentialities, and a hybrid and complex ontology, "opening us to a new way of experiencing the world (…) that relies on a divine reality to give meaning and substance." (Cobb 1998, p. 10). Margaret Wertheim, for instance, assured the internet would come to revalidate the "space of the soul" (2000, p. 16), as well as the physical space. The same occurred with many developers and techno-enthusiastic as Mark Dary, Erik Davis, and others. The digital culture was full of spiritual pursuits originating a techno-mysticism conformed by myth, science, and ancient magic. As Davis argues:

> The virtual topographies of our millennial world are rife with angels and aliens, with digital
> avatars and mystic Gaian minds, with utopian longings and gnostic science fictions, and with dark

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[106]　　　To read more, see: Bayley (2005) and Bailey and Bailenson (2016).

forebodings of apocalypse and demonic enchantment. These figures ride the expanding and contracting waves of media fads, hype, and economic activity, and some of them are already disappearing into an increasingly market-dominated information culture. But though technomystical concerns are deeply intertwined with the changing sociopolitical conditions of our rapidly globalizing civilization, their spiritual forebears are rooted in the long ago (Davis 2015, p. 36).

The twentieth century presented another meaningful moment wherein the occult could re-surface: the appearance of electric media. Electricity itself gave wing to many ideas and occult experiences, serving as a vehicle for spells, ghosts, and animistic intuitions. It is not a coincidence that when many scientific inventions were taking place in the Victorian era, a whole fashion of mediums – people connecting with the spheres of spirits – arose. Electricity, then, can represent a mixture between magic and innovation, media and mind. Such situations during the nineteenth century, "when magical powers were attributed to mesmerism and electricity and when the desire for a scientific verification of esoteric phenomena became more and more pronounced" (Brînzeu and Endre Szonyi 2011, p. 186), resonates in twentieth-century technologies, where new links between science/technology and the esoteric have been found in phenomena such as the internet. (ibid.).

Whether computational media have become a spiritual event for human beings (Kelly 1999, p. 387) or whether cyberspace has the potential to open us up to new ways of experiencing the world (Cobb 1998, p. 10), that magical and cosmological components of spirituality that seemed to have vanished during modernity have, coincidentally, been revived inside one of the most significant technological innovations of humanity: the digital machine. The net, from its beginning, has been opening up "a technological liminal zone that swamps the self with new paths of possibility" (Davis 2015, p. 61). As Kelly assured, digital realms "are worlds that we can immerse ourselves in. We could make a painting before, but only now can we enter that painting (via virtual reality) and explore it. We have had games before, but now we can become one of the pieces on the board. And they take us places that we, their creators, never imagined" (Kelly 1999, p. 388).

At this point, when thinking about digital devices and, in particular, about our relationship with the virtual world, one question appears: How can we describe our

relationship with computational media? It should be said that our bonds are not merely technical or practical, but that we have - with them and with others through them - an intimate bond. They 'touch us' so deeply that they can produce organic responses in us each time we relate – especially with a growing innovative design of immersive interfaces and extended reality software - with their processes of generating meaning and experience, not to mention the emotional charge that we experience when we are involved with a specific activity. For instance: fascination and/or fear when we are engaged in a conversation with a virtual assistant program like Alexa, awe and rage while playing videogames, and grief when visiting the social media profile of someone who recently passed over. Though our emotional responses might not be directly *produced* by the software and while we know they have been designed and programmed by a human, they still enable specific conditions to access such experiences, creating certain interactions and 'needs' that previously weren't even conceived. For example, we can see on Facebook that after hosting several profiles of people who have passed away, this social network now offers several tools to commemorate users' accounts or to create pages to remember the dead. Such tools improve the possibilities of exploring one's own pain (Stokes 2012, pp. 363-379), by allowing some form of dialogue with the deceased (Karppi 2013, pp. 1-20). In this way, online messaging becomes a substitute for prayer.

Because of its own nature and the potentialities of uses it offers, the ubiquitous digital medium continues to encourage and develop a variety of religious and esoteric discourses, giving rise to a kind of surrounding techno-mysticism (Davis 2015, pp. 38-40). Therefore, it is impossible to reflect on digital technologies and beliefs or practices related to the spiritual as exclusive spheres because they are intimately linked with one another in the contemporary field. As we could see in Chapter 2, the digital is a field where the poetic force of imagination emerges, creating unexpected connections. For this reason, it is essential to consider how, in the digital context, it is possible to find popular culture narratives and practices working as religion due to the interactivity between digital media and social/cultural expressions.

3.1.1 Technomisticism: From religious language to spiritual promises in the cyberspace

During the boom of cyberculture and the web 2.0, the term cyberspace was deeply embedded with utopic and dystopic promises about the human condition. Coinciding with the arrival of the new millennial, for many the word cyberspace was more related to ancient magical notions of a sacred space (Drury 2002) than to a disenchant techne. Probably because its potentialities of connection and communication marked a before and an after regarding media technology. On this matter, results curious how the same word of cyberspace had its origins in the science-fictional fever produced by computer technologies.

Before Perry Barlow applied the term cyberspace to actual digital networks, William Gibson, in his book Neuromancer[107], described it as a "consensual hallucination.... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system.... Lines of light ranged in the non space of the mind" (Gibson 1984, p. 51). Gibson already intuited the collective force and endless dataflows of contemporary digital networks, as well as "the psychological dynamism that would come to fuel the real culture of early cyberspace, a culture that, at the time his book was written, was still in the mountain man and fur trapper phase" (Davis 2015, p. 263). He anticipated that the human imagination would create a perceptive 'reality' within a technological setting (Drury 2002, p. 96). Fiction, in such way, was more efficient than scientific predictions to articulate the properties of a computer network that wasn't an actual space at all. But, as Davis explains, "spatial metaphors inevitably emerged, lending the medium an imaginary dimension that paradoxically made it more real." (Davis 2015, p. 264).

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[107] Neuromancer is one of the most famous in the cyberpunk genre. In his work, Gibson welcomes the idea of a 'cyberspace', a "consensual hallucination" created by millions of connected computers. In the novel, mercenary hackers and digital cowboys "jack in" to the worldwide computer network, moving between the financial centers of the world. The protagonist, Case, a "console cowboy" who has been disabled as a hacker, is coaxed into hacking the system of a major corporation. For many, Neuromancer "helped crystallize an alternative view of the future, one dominated by hackers, drugs, and mega-corporations. This darker view, which came to be called cyberpunk, proved far more prophetic" (https://www.wired.com/2021/07/geeks-guide-william-gibson/). Though the future view offered by the novel is an exaggerated dystopia about human consciousness in the highly technologized future world, it launch curious reflections about the oppression of nature and the pervasiveness of the media.

The existence of such a place of "consensual hallucination" gave rise to further reflections about how virtual territories can share an allegory with religious elements and narratives. Margaret Wertheim, for instance, argues that due to its virtual condition, cyberspace provides to the human psyche, once again, its own space to reveal itself and evolve. "Strange though it may seem for a quintessentially twentieth-century technology, cyberspace brings the historical wheel full circle and returns us to an almost medieval position, to a two-tiered reality in which psyche and soma each have their own space of action" (Wertheim 1998). For her, "nothing epitomizes the cybernetic desire to transcend the body's limitations more than the fantasy of abandoning the flesh completely by downloading oneself to cyber-immortality" (Wertheim 1999, para. 10).

The similitudes that can be found between modern computer technology and theological or mystical elaborations - like the ideals of considering the internet as the first manifestation of de Chardin's "Noosphere"[108] - have contributed to assigning religious value to cyberspace. Scholars like Mike King, Brenda Basher, and Jennifer Cobb, just to name a few, have already proposed computational media as a dimension that could offer interesting spiritual possibilities.

Such association with religious phenomena makes even more sense when we consider that cyberspace users can access strategic information by acquiring certain powers only enjoyable by deities. Cyberspace[109] can blur the boundaries between the physical and virtual territories, just as many religious activities connect to the realm of the gods. If religion has been used as a medium to connect people with the metaphysical spheres, what they have in common with digital technologies is that they share that characteristic of mediators, "linking the visible world of human interaction with the invisible world of spirits, gods or the transcendental" (Witte 2018, 1), facilitating encounters with the divine or other spiritual realities.

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[108]   A sort of mental ecosystem destined to unify in perfect harmony the human race (Vecoli 2013, p. 33).

[109]   For a better introduction to the origins of the concept of cyberspace, see William Gibson (1984). Nevertheless, Mark Pesce also introduce it but in a more mystic way, answering to the cyberculture sense that was present during 90s, and very related to virtual reality and the possibility of finding a multi-dimensional world. To read more, see Mark Pesce (2001).

These ideals were clearly expressed by McSherry (2002, p. 5) when stating that "[c]yberspace is a technological doorway to the astral plane… Once we enter Cyberspace, we are no longer in the physical plane; we literally stand in a place between worlds, one with heightened potential to be as sacred as any circle cast upon the ground" (McSherry, 2002, 5). Cyberspace, therefore, allows religious expression to emerge, and the own characteristic of those spaces – its fluid nature, for example- can provide new ways of experiencing spirituality (Brenda Brasher 2001). Gibson, in Neuromancer, regularly associates the immaterial properties of computational technologies– like virtual reality - to concepts of heaven and transcendence. Others have described them as a "mythological space" because of their immersivity (Pesce 1997). Cyberspace, therefore, was conceived as a poetic and collective project materializing notions such as reconnection and affiliation in new ways.

As was just shown, a big part of cyberculture language arrived directly from science fiction and other cultural scenarios, aiming to make sense of the new frontiers of experiences and knowledge humanity was crossing. But at the same, such 'fictional' cultural narratives host several redemptive, magical, and transcendence desires. It seems that the sacred territory is infused not only into technological innovation but also in all other cultural expressions. In this regard, Massimo Leone claims that cultures tend to produce "within themselves texts and other symbolical artefacts, whose distinctive quality is to represent in scale, as in topological fractals, the whole of which they are part, as well as its internal dynamics" (Leone 2019, p. 5). That whole is, in societies, usually given by religion. It becomes the lens through which the world is structured and understood. The 'mystification' of cyberspace, and cyberculture in general, is nothing more but a return to the same reasons, desires, and needs that impel their creation. In such a way, humans build and create technologies to answer their primal understandings of the world.

As argued by Brenda Brasher, during cyberspace's infancy, "it was a marvellously foresighted effort to construct the sacred electronically." (2001, p. 4). The effectiveness of such a project can be affirmed when observing how almost all types of religious systems – like Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Yoruba, and so on - have a presence online. Nonetheless, the same peculiarities of electric media and the similitudes that can be found between modern computer technology and magic have

created a favorable field in cyberspace for the flourishment of neopagan traditions. On this matter, different studies have actually placed Neopaganism as one of the first in bringing their believes and rituals into cyberspace (Davis 2015), and the most active religious group on the early Internet (Brasher 2001).

Other reasons are connected with the eclecticism and openness present in contemporary Paganism. Contrary to many traditional and established religions, there is no sacred book used to transmit all the theological knowledge and the respective rituals. Their integration is, as seen in Chapter 1, mainly experiential. Many Neopagan practitioners "form communities and covens online to exchange information and to affirm and strengthen their pagan identity" (Aupers 2009, p. 156). According Braidotti, it was the search for new rituals and ceremonies what made possible the pagan's integration and expansion towards the 90's cyberculture, producing various brands of posthuman techno-asceticism (Halberstam and Livingston 1995; Braidotti 2002).

As a consequence of the growing presence of Neopagan groups in the virtual sphere, the term Technopaganism[110] emerged. Its meaning has been, however, continuously mutating and enriching itself with other discourses. It represents a wide range of religious practices and beliefs, firstly readapted and then justified by the technological context. In technopaganism, faith and science enter into a particular kind of communion. The technological medium acts as the place where those practices develop, but it is also the medium used by users to reach specific states of consciousness, just as in other religions prayers, chants, music, and substances became the door to cross from the material to sublime and ethereal spheres. Since this situation started to develop in a context forged around and from technological innovations, many beliefs were not content with just migrating their practices but rather began to contaminate themselves with the conditions of the digital environment itself by readapting their rites and ceremonies to computer language, thus proposing other ways of relating to the religious.

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[110] There are many terms making reference to the category of religions belonging to digital media: Cyber-religions, Technognosticism and Technopaganism. However, the first two concepts could refer to other ways of living and practicing institutionalized religions. That is why 'Technopaganism' represents, for the purposes of this research, the most suitable name for eclectic religions or spiritualities, typical of the virtual environment.

3.1.2 Technopaganism: Another perspective of a pagan spirituality

"She is a technopagan, right? Ask her to bless your laptop" (Green 1997).

In 1995 a computer engineer called Mark Pesce gave an exciting interview to Erik Davis for Wired magazine. Pesce (Figure 3.1) presented himself as a technopagan, "a participant in a small but vital subculture of digital savants who keep one foot in the emerging technosphere and one foot in the wild and woolly world of Paganism" (Davis 1995). His proximity with algorithmic programming made him honor computational technology as a vital part of the world. For him, cyberspace is considered not as a mere communication tool but as a territory where the sacred can be manifested and where magical practices can be performed: "[b]oth spaces are entirely constructed by your thoughts and beliefs (…)" (ibid.). He, as all technopagans, "worships the magical powers of cyberspace" (Aupers 2002, p. 215)

Figure 3.1: Mark Pesce during an interview about virtual reality and witchcraft

Pesce was one of the many programmers, tech-enthusiast, and adventurous pagans defining themselves under the label of technopaganism. The term, coined during the 90s, referred to the spiritual aspects of digital networks and the use of technological devices in practices linked to contemporary Paganism and the occult. It was usually defined as a hybrid environment where both the digital sphere and spiritual experiences are mutually integrated, thus overcoming some of the dualisms that have characterized Western modernity in terms of the machine and the non-human. Technopaganism gained popularity among believers, geeks, and scholars by providing a mystical understanding to the – already relatively young – cyberspace, especially by working with magic practices and sacred experiences directly from software algorithms. An

interesting example can be seen in how Pesce could structure his own spirituality into VRML code. This virtual reality markup language would add a third graphic dimension to the net, and it became "the key to transforming the Web into a world, or rather a universe of worlds" (Davis 2015, p. 450). As Heidi Campbell assures, technopaganism illustrates how individuals use technology not only as an instrument or a meeting space but as an act of worship (Campbell 2005, p. 58).

Having Neopaganism as its predecessor - with its eclecticism, heterogeneity, and flexibility in including external languages – Technopaganism also keeps such ambiguous essence by incorporating cyberculture, science fiction, and fantasy narratives involving technological utopias. For such reason, there is no singular definition of technopaganism among its practitioners. The term seems to encompass various trends and intentions, being as plural as the digital environment in which it emerges.

Due to such apparent structural opacity, its origins and development are ambiguous and variable. However, it is possible to detect two aspects that would clarify the appearance and consequent development of the term. In the first case, we have subjects that became 'pagans' when involving themselves with computer technology. This was common during the cyberculture of the 90s, developed mainly in Silicon Valley, in which both programmers and techno-geeks conceived cyberspace as that "other" place in which to manifest magic and achieve spiritual reconnection[111]. The cybernetic universe is understood as an immediate and intimate environment connecting the virtual traveler with other realities and experiences. Thus, the net became a space for awe and other feelings related to the numinous. Erick Davis defines these individuals as technopagans because, in their practices, they intertwine the digital with common elements of pre-modernity, such as magic and the supernatural. However, not all of them would identify their beliefs with the "techno" side of contemporary Paganism. As

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[111] These scenarios, in fact, challenge many of the secularization thesis – understood as a continuation of Max Weber's "disenchantment of the World". To read more: Webber (1978 [1921], p. 506). However, if the development of secularization was understood as a direct consequence of technological innovation - since "technology itself is the encapsulation of human rationality" (Wilson 1976, p. 88) - why some contemporary mystical and religious phenomena are born from digital technology? Considering this phenomena, the current relationship between man and technological innovation would not represent a disconnection with the sphere of the religious or the supernatural.

was explained early in this thesis, its ontological framework does not assume profound distinctions between different aspects of life. In this wave, we could include Mark Pesce, who got involved in the 'craft' – as he used to name technopaganism – by working with coding and computational devices.

In the second case, technopaganism would be the online re-adaptation (Cowan 2005; Campbell 2017, pp. 228-234) of various neopagan currents[112]. In this case, Pagans consider all the 'magical' potentialities of the net – its virtuality - as well as its possibilities of secrecy, discretion, and the disruption of geographical distances. Let's remember that not all members of these paths could have the chance of performing rituals in open and calm natural spaces. Because of religious taboos, even the possibility of creating an altar or sacred space could be seen as problematic. In other words, this "wave" of technopagans found the ideal scenario for their development and dissemination in the digital medium since they would not be delimited by conditions such as geography or authority, thus facilitating meetings between participants regardless of their location.

The following is an example of a 2005 post[113] which was meant to help pagan users find out whether they were technopagans. This post comes with the answers of one of the forum members called "Cerridwen" – in reference to the Celtic goddess - who marked with a "(guilty)" the scenarios that apply to her:

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[112]   As shown in the first chapter of this thesis, Neopaganism, also known as contemporary Paganism, is commonly described as a compendium of polytheistic, nature-oriented, humanistic, ecologically concerned, and creative beliefs (Arthur 2002, p. 303) essentially animistics.

[113]   https://www.hipforums.com/forum/threads/signs-that-you-may-be-a-technopagan.95196/

If the address of your covenstead begins with http:// ...

If you calculate the phases of the moon with software ... (guilty)

If you do cord magick with computer cables ...

If you do most of your correspondence by email and sign off with Blessed Be ... (guilty)

If you draw down the moon using a light-pen ...

If you end a circle with Ctl-Alt-Del ...

If you keep a Disk of Shadows (with encrypted backups) ... (partially guilty)

If you participate in online rituals...

If you refer to deities using 3-letter acronyms (ODN, LKI, THR) ...

If you refer to solitary practice as a stand alone ...

If you ritually down your server for Samhain ...

If your Book of Shadows has a 6-digit version number ... (guilty)

If your screen-saver signals when your meditation period is over ...

If your altar cloth is a mouse pad ...

If your altar has a keyboard ...

If your athame has a SCSI interface ...

If your candles have batteries ...

If your cauldron is a crock-pot ... (guilty)

If your circle is a token ring ...

If your daemons collect news for you ...

If your deities include Murphy and Gates ...

If your drumming is done on a CD player (pre-recorded) ... (guilty)

If your herbs are always mail-ordered (express, overnight) ... (guilty)

If your meditation retreat locations have electricity, phone jacks and a CompUSA nearby ...

If your incense is by Glade ... (guilty, lol)

If your magic wand is a light pen ...

If your magical name, email address, and online name are all the same ...

If your magical writing is done in html or C++ ...

If your patron deity has a homepage ...

If your pentacle is made of computer chips ...

If your search for truth involves regular expressions ... (guilty)

If your tarot cards multi-task ...

If your technician complains about the wax and incense ash on your motherboard ...

If asking what tradition someone comes from is just as important as what operating system they run ...

If when your quarter candles burn out, a backup system kicks in ...

If you've tried to use your mouse as a pendulum ...

Well, you just might be a TechnoPagan!

Even if this post might had ludic intentions, one can observe how it interrelates Neopagan practices and narratives – Book of Shadow, magic circle, pentacle, and so on – with elements from cyberculture in a creative and novel way. Both tendencies in technopaganism are actually interrelated. Many techno-enthusiasts or experts in computer programming were surprisingly already involved with Neopagan paths. Even people identified with any sub-culture could end up being a Pagan due to its revolutionary worldviews and explorative freedom. For some, this is due to the cultural revolution from the '60s, where psychedelia's influence was flourishing, stimulating different conceptions of reality. Both 'witchcraft' and computer technology represented an environment where other manifestations of life were possible, and humans could unfold their creativity. Concerning this, Nevill Drury assured:

> The relationship between neopagans and technology appears to have its roots in the American counterculture itself, for it is now widely acknowledged that the present-day computer ethos owes a substantial debt to the psychedelic consciousness movement. The conservative Wall Street Journal even ran a front-page article in January 1990 asking whether virtual reality was equivalent to 'electronic LSD'. It would seem that the somewhat unlikely fusion between pagans and cyberspace arose simply because techno-pagans are capable of being both technological and mystical at the same time. As cyber-punk novelist Bruce Sterling has written: ' Today, for a surprising number of people all over America, the supposed dividing line between bohemian and technician simply no longer exists (2002, p. 98).

Computational technologies, at the very end, inspired the searching for new experiences and attitudes towards life, which can always be translated into a spiritual searching or a religious conversion. For Pesce, as for other technopagans of that time, the net became that field of exploration. It was not an intimidating or separated 'other' but, instead, a familiar territory: "There's nothing in them that we didn't put there. If computers are viewed as evil and dehumanizing, then we made them that way. I think computers can be as sacred as we are, because they can embody our communication with each other and with the entities – the divine parts of ourselves – that we invoke in that space" (Davis 1995).

This highlights a very particular Neopagan characteristic and is that of dialoguing with the 'canceled other' of Western societies. There is an animistic perspective and a

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posthuman inclusion of the otherness into the human's sphere of action. Davis already noted this when researching cybernetic spiritualities. For technopagans, "the postmodern world of digital simulacra is ripe for the premodern skills of the witch and magician" (Davis 2015, p. 443). Therefore, they have conceived some sort of 'technological animism' or 'technoanimism' (Davis 1998, pp. 439-440).

Such eclecticism of Pagans regarding the spaces where they celebrate rituals and perform magical practices may help explain how they became one of the first religious subcultures to inhabit cyberspace, causing essential changes in its inner structure, as well as an increase in people professing religion in solitary (Berger 2009, p. 21). On this matter, many modern pagans use the internet in a sincere attempt to create new forms of community, some of which were unimaginable a little less than ten years ago (Cowan 2005, p. x). Groups such as Wiccans, Druids, and Asatru, who would never have had the opportunity to interact offline, were now able to develop their relationships in thousands of virtual discussion groups on social media, blogs, or virtual 3D communities. Pagan online communities, also called Cyber Covens, became very popular during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Technology is then a form of magic, a door to access other planes of connection, or a place to meet the divine. As stated by Mark Pesce, "I think computers can be as sacred as we are, because they can embody our communication with each other and with the entities - the divine parts of ourselves - that we invoke in that space" (Davis 1995). Through his technopagan and occult concepts of cyberspace, Pesce developed some performances quite disruptive for that time. We can see this in his Cybersamhain ritual[114] from 1994 which was meant to inaugurate cyberspace. In whichever performance, he worked with the notion of 'the code' as a system of knowledge having deep parallelisms with divinity (Moran 2018). Coding, then, was like magic, and cyberspace and virtual reality were the manifestations of a new world full of magical potentialities. From this perspective, this liminal and dialogic notion of cyberspace functions both as a bridge to access other spheres of existence and as an alive environment of non-organic entities where the sacred is directly manifesting. Again,

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[114] This can be read in Erik Davis interview to Mark Pesce (1995): https://www.wired.com/1995/07/technopagans/

there is another example of the animism involving all contemporary Paganism. The world is a collective web of unfinished and never-closed conditions, where environments, objects, and beings are intimately connected. As clearly exemplified in this technopagan reflection, written by Aaron Pavao[115]:

> […] We, as humans, are tool-makers. Magick has long been associated with the making of precision tools, axes, swords, goblets, fire. But the new techno-magick is different […] It allows us to study the very nature, the goddess, we come from. It has become meta-magick, a meta-mystery […] The technology has a spirit of its own, as valid as the spirit of any creature of the goddess. This is the spiritual force we, those who are called technopagan, feel and must express. Not surprisingly, we find ways of bringing technology into our worship. Our grand challenge, though, is to balance our exploding technology with the forces of nature. We must do as we will, but harm none. (Aaron Pavao 2017)

The previous technopagan fragment possess clear Neopagan elements. For example, the Wiccan Rede[116], ending with 'An Ye Harm None, Do What Ye Will', and references to the divine feminine typical of many Neopagan traditions. It highlights its hybrid characteristic through the celebrations of irrational magic and rational technology (Aupers 2009), expressing what it means to be in a multidimensional space, where various discourses collapse and mix. Nonetheless, it also clarifies how all those Pagan references can be re-written and enhanced from the language of computational media, revealing the domain where all these texts take place. In other words, Pavao assigns another semiotic dimension to such texts in a) their semantics: what the signs signified or how they relate to things, b) their pragmatics: how signs are used – or molded – in their actual interaction, and c) their syntactics: how signs relate to other signs. This demarcation of a given narrative into the technopagan mode of action and context will be explained in the next section of this chapter, specifically under the notions of Fontanille's Forms of Life and Kristeva's Ideologeme.

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[115]   In: Introduction to Technopaganism and Technoshamanism, by Aaron Pavao: http://project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/technopaganism_and_technoshamanism.html

[116]   The Wiccan Rede can be described as set of advices and Neopagan's basic moral principles. For instance: "Bide the Wiccan Laws we must in perfect love and perfect trust. Live and let live. Fairly take and fairly give.(…) True in love ever be, lest thy lover's false to thee. Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill: An ye harm none, do what ye will." Source: https://web.mit.edu/pipa/www/rede.html

On the basis of the reflections in this section, it would be too simplistic to reduce technopaganism as a simple extension of contemporary Paganism (Campbell 2005, p. 58). To diminish the influence of the network, considering it as nothing more than an electronic tool, would not allow us to appreciate all the potentialities of experience and paradigm shift which are being brought into the scenery of spirituality and religious beliefs on the one hand and human-machine relations on the other. Even if it remains an expression of contemporary Paganism, its condition is strongly linked to the online context and functions bidirectionally. Neopaganism affects the digital realm but, at the same time, the digital realm affects Neopaganism and how it manifests in the world. Considering the digital sphere as an environment where Neopagan religious practices arise, then the spiritual narratives it produces are embedded with the own essence and language of the former. This point will be explored further in the section 3.2. Now we need to address an essential question: considering that all that was said above corresponds to the discourses belonging to the '90s and the 2000s, is technopaganism still valid nowadays, or was it simply an expression of the early cyberculture?

3.1.3 Technopagans today: the continuing of a hybrid spirituality

Though it reached a high level of popularity and academic attention, the notion of technopaganism started to be considered obsolete when the magical conceptions about cyberspace ceased to emerge, and digital media became commonplace for a significant portion of the human population. Nonetheless, its significance is still valid when considering the role of computational technologies in the contemporary context. Its ubiquity in almost all social and cultural areas has deeply impregnated religions and spiritual traditions. The strong convergence between technologies and unorthodox spiritual beliefs, indicated by technopaganism during its beginning, has not ended. On the contrary, far from being obsolete, this phenomenon has been mutating, following the techno-scientific development that has redesigned the practices, applications, and services of the digital network in recent decades.

What was once understood as a complex and techno-deterministic form of Pagan spirituality changed radically with the massive arrival of social networks and digital media innovation – as immersive videogames and extended realities. Technopaganism has taken advantage of technological progress and development to manifest into more

collective and embodied practices in the current scenario. Therefore, although the term fell into disuse from the first decade of the new millennium, more and more manifestations implicitly responded to the technopagan ideal. Some users perform religious rituals directly from virtual communities or by amalgamating different practices belonging to contemporary paganism, mystic and occult traditions, and popular culture –in a sort of digital religious syncretism – and projecting them in the aesthetics of their avatars and the worlds they build.

One of the branches that can be found nowadays having profound resemblances with Technopaganism is what is known as cyber-shamanism[117]: an interrelation of rave culture and technopagan worship (Vecoli 2013, p. 54). The shamanic worldview usually involves believing in supernatural entities and forces that can alter reality. In order to access and communicate to such forces, the subject can make use of specific practices like psychoactive drugs, chanting, dancing, and even his/her own dreams. The shaman guides the individual but also keeps such 'doors' open and in equilibrium. The cyber-shamanic worldview is an extension of this. Since computational media has become so sophisticated and obscure, the cyber or techno-shaman relates with the technological infrastructure, not as a user ordering their machine to do something, but as one sentient being negotiating with another for a performance or a service. In many performances carried out nowadays, especially from artists, 'machines' are usually treated as 'spiritual beings,' and some technological artefacts function as elements to access other planes of existence or to communicate with ancestors. In this chapter and in the following cases studies, we will explore some techno-shamanic artistic manifestations as Mafe Izaguirre's Sensible Machines and Zoe Sandoval's Love ritual, but also some Neopagan digital rituals involving music and chants to create intense meditations among participants, as the online Samhain 2020 celebration performed by Starhawk.

Today, the relationships between digital technologies and spirituality are not reserved for a few geeks in Silicon Valley. Instead, they are experienced, to some extent, by a large part of the world's population. Social networks, from this perspective, become part of a "cyber spirituality" (Yust, Hyde and Ota 2010, pp. 291-293). For instance, taking into account the persistence of dead users' social media accounts

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[117]   To read more, see Markíntová, (2008, pp. 43-60).

(Öhman and David Watson 2019, pp. 1-13), we could imagine that the future of Facebook would be to become an immense digital necropolis. Furthermore, social media can be considered as platforms of spiritual autobiographies, considering how they work as banks of memories when collecting old conversations, photos, comments, and confessions.

Beyond mainstream social media, digital technologies continue to offer a diversity of spaces that can be used for spiritual practices. Some of the most recurrent spaces for all types of religions are 3D virtual communities, such as Second Life, or video games in which individuals or groups perform rituals, organize meetings or simply build temples and sacred spaces, allowing them to commune with the divine and the numinous (Figures 3.2, 3.3, 3.4). In Second life, for instance, there is the Buddha Center[118] (Fig. 3.5), where members can learn Buddhism from experienced monastics while meeting with other users who will speak of their various practices and personal experiences. The options are also incredibly varied for non-traditional religions, like the neo-pagan communities. They can buy sacred tools in the official Second Life Marketplace and can also attend classes and celebrations in organized pagan communities which actually exist in the real world. In the Wiccan Learning Center[119], members can read books and even learn how to prepare an altar. Something similar happens in the Children of Artemis[120] (Fig. 3.6), a coven – that is, an organized group of witches or pagans – created in order to connect people with same spiritual interest in order to assist or participate in religious festivities.

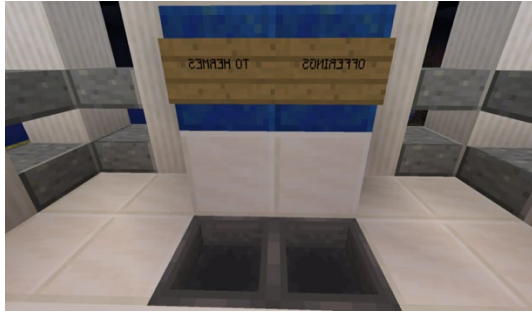[118]   Buddha Center webpage: https://secondlife.com/destination/1066.

[119]   Wiccan Learning Center webpage: https://secondlife.com/destination/wiccan-learning-center.

[120]   Children of Artemis webpage: https://witchcraft.org/secondlife/.

Figures 3.2, 3.3, 3.4: These images, from the game Minecraft, show a temple built by a player, with some offerings that she dedicated to her pantheon. Down, on the left, it can be read "Offerings to Hermes" and on the right, "Offerings to Athena". The images came with this description: "[I] was playing Minecraft and decided to make some temples for my patron deities. The offering hoppers connect to a chest below so I can just throw in items"[121].

Figures 3.5, 3.6: These images – from left to right – the Buddha Centre in Second Life and the Children of Artemis community in Second Life.

A curious detail is how in all these activities prevails a ludic behaviour, a category that in Western history possesses negative connotation such as unreality, inauthenticity,

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[121] This post can be found in the following link: https://owlishwitch.tumblr.com/post/641764524486246400/was-playing-minecraft-and-decided-to-make-some

and inconsequentiality. Regarding such ludic predomination in spiritual practices, Victor Turner "recognized that, despite the apparent contraction of institutional religion in the twentieth century, play (in leisure genres) had 'become a more serious matter,' inheriting something of 'the function of the ritual frame'" (Graham St John 2008).

Contemporary pagans have already conquered such spaces, exponentially enhancing their 'techno' condition[122]. In most of those platforms, there are several profiles and communities of users identifying themselves as technopagans or as members of a given Neopagan path, but also users belonging to other religious and spiritual expressions framed in a technopagan *condition*: that is to say, when practicing their own faith, the conditions to do so resonate with a technopagan understanding of computational technology. These implicit manifestations[123] of technopaganism usually follow: a) an animistic perception of the virtual space[124], b) posthuman considerations about digital embodiment and non-normative subjectivities as, for instance, avatars and, c) the aesthetical or narratorial inclusion of pre-Christian mythologies, folk beliefs and/or popular culture. Although these characteristics are not exclusive to the technopagan condition, when they are all present in a religious text – in Kristevian sense, such inclusion of technology as 'that other' that I inhabit and inhabits me in return resembles technopaganism.

The notion of magic, which is a recurrent element in the traditions belonging to contemporary Paganism, was not characteristic of the early technopagan discourses; it also found new expressions in the current scene, where it is common to observe an strong fusion between ritual, ceremonial magic, and technology through various virtual

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[122] For many Pagans, digital worlds have become their meeting and worship space. This chapter will provide different examples taking place in social media platforms, in digital games like Minecraft and in popular virtual communities like SecondLife. The constant coexistence they carry with such spaces has made them practically inseparable from the online aspect. We could, then, affirm that technopaganism is the most prevalent condition in such cases.

[123] This chapter will not only show and explain the different ways in which technopagansim manifest nowadays, but also why such practices are understood under the technopagan schema. On the following sections we will identified such manifestations a diversity of situations and, also, how they can be approach from a semiotic perspective.

[124] A dialogic inclusion of digital elements, where they are not artificial tools but are treated as *hierophanies*.

reality software. Users can generate a more immersive experience through their avatar when performing rituals or inhabiting the digital environment, reaching a state similar to the magical act while incorporating their own body – digitally embodied in the avatar. Furthermore, technopagan magic has tight resemblances with cyber-shamanism, by using modern technologies to establish communication with the dimension of the senses. The integration of the offline user's chants and dances, accompanied by elements originated by machines – neon lights, electronic music, or transposition of digital images – creates sensory experiences on participants, altering their state of consciousness just like when drinking psychedelic substances or listening to trance music.

According to the aforementioned, technopaganism today does not only emerge as a practice of its own – of people defining themselves as technopagans – but is also a condition present in other practices and beliefs after they have found their natural place in the digital: In a contemporaneity immersed in software culture, new discursive typologies have begun to emerge. When a religion is immersed in a virtual environment, the ideology does not remain the same. On the contrary, "the more a religion is wired the more it incorporates the values of the software it embraces"[125] (Wagner 2012). Technopaganism, therefore, is now a hybrid contemporary manifestation, made up of practices that commune between Neopagan ontologies - whether knowingly/explicitly or not, religion, and magical practices with the technological, the contemporary, and the rational.

Just as was already mentioned in the Chapter 2, the concept known today as "digital religion" has had various developments in academic disciplines, allowing analysis and exploration of all types of faith practiced on digital platforms, including non-traditional beliefs. Academics and experts from different disciplines have dealt with various theoretical analyses to understand the interaction and connection between religion and digital media. Through his concept of the "soul of cyberspace", Zaleski[126] explored how new technologies change the way in which spirituality turns out to be conceived. Helland's (2000, pp. 205-224) study on the distinction between Religion Online

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[125]   Quoted from a lecture of Rachel Wagner, called "Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality" hold at on 2012, for the conference "The Life of Faith in the Digital Age".

[126]   To learn more, see: Zaleski (1997).

(importing traditional religions and their practices on the online space) and Online Religion (the adaptation of religion to create true forms of spirituality online) allow to distinguishes between having spiritual experiences in digital media or using digital media to access spiritual experiences. Another point of view is offered to us by Lövheim and Linderman, who have developed researches on how religious identity is built in the network[127]. Then there are cases like that of Hoover, who states that the type of faith developed by digital media is "fluid and evolving and seeks new resources, symbols and experiences to bring into a sort of 'syncretism of individual experience'" (2012, p. 30).

Those studies can represent a first step in understanding how not all religious or spiritual manifestations on the net need to be deeply aligned with their offline referent, or correspond to a previous tradition. The digital sphere even allows the existence of religious or spiritual texts not only 'using' computational media for their pursuits but emerging from it. In other words, emerging beliefs are by no means ignoring the networks but developing with and through them, not just adapting offline practices to online language, but creating and producing from the digital context itself. Semiotics represents a suitable ground of analysis and understanding of this subject. Focusing on language and signification can provide a map to show how cultural practices and social beliefs correspond to processes of meaning. It is necessary to take the living discourse, together with its contemporary context and the social situations where such phenomena are produced (Kristeva 1988, p. 50). To get a fuller, deeper and more illuminating understanding of technopaganism – especially its manifestations in contemporary media – we need not merely sociological and communication studies, but also semiotics, in order to explore all the connections and implications of the term in contemporary digital media.

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[127]   To read more, see: Lövheim and Linderman 2005.

3.2 Understanding Technopaganism as a textual practice

As will be shown in the next sections of this chapter, technopaganism keeps the main semiotic patterns of Neopagan texts into one single notion: 1) in the perceived 'rhythms' and 'repetitions', as the distinctive expression of poetic language 2) in how they relate to the other, producing other semantic, syntactics and pragmatic dimensions that can be manifested in a animistic/posthuman strategy, and 3) in its dissemination in popular culture, which at the same time allows the emerging of non-normative ways of subjectivities. However, by introducing the digital environment, the previous Neopagan characteristics will get irremediably affected and disrupted by such intertextual dynamics. These texts, therefore, are the result of the continuous process of translations and exchange from one sign system to another. For such a reason, this section will introduce technopaganism under the same instrument of analysis used for Neopaganism in the first chapter, since they will allow to contemplate the emerging contextual and subjective conditions: a semiotic strategy recognizing the changeable and heterogenic dynamics of technopagan texts consisting in the post-structural theories of Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, together with the interpretative method developed by Umberto Eco.

The ontological framework of technopaganism incorporate the 'natural' and the 'technical' into one grand sphere of interconnection. Such embrace of technology and digital media means also a productivity of worldly possibilities, creativity and connections which can be recognized in the dynamics of intertextuality and textual productivity. It is important, however, to touch upon Kristeva notion of text in order to understand how the notion of technopaganism is being constructed and which elements are being taken into account for this analysis. As was already mentioned in earlier in this thesis, the Kristevian text consists on "several semiotic practices which are consider as translinguistic (Kristeva 1980, p. 36) since they operate "through and across language while remaining irreducible to its categories as they are presently assigned" (ibid.).

Understanding technopaganism from Kristeva's notion of text allows to include technopagan's practices and beliefs as lived discourses – that is to say, directly from the subject's experience – as well as the own environment where technopaganism is developed: the digital space. The digital, at the same time, infuses and imposes its own

laws and specific structure on technopagan texts. On such a way, far from being a simplistic and over-generalized way of assuming whichever type of elements and put them together as one phenomena, the Kristevian text doesn't centralized or forced discourses into a single category. Instead, its pragmatism considers the context, subjects and historical moments in order to establish relations and to detect, in Wittgensteinian terms, 'family resemblances' with other texts. This is particularly important in order to intercept and recognize the intertextual dynamics that have originated the analysed text which, in this case, is technopaganism.

As already mentioned in the past chapters, in opposition to any exclusively reproductive and communicative use of language, Kristeva proposes to define the text as productivity. Here, there is not a single meaning but a web of differences where, instead of representing the real, the text focuses on the relations which are being formed. The 'textualist post-structuralism' offered by Kristeva (Suniga and Tonkonoff 2012, pp. 3-4) supposes the affirmation that systems of meanings are founded in the infinity of a signifying field that overflows them and, sometimes, dismisses them. For this reason, instead of emphasizing the symbolic functions of language and of social systems through the concept of signification - the process of attaching a signified to a signifier that takes place within a system - this poststructuralism brings to the forefront the work of significance[128] (ibid.) where the extra-linguistic elements are also taken into consideration. Kristeva proposes her term of significance as an actualization of the classic conceptions of signification, because when considering the production of meaning in each utterance – each time the speaking subject participates – the act of signification cannot be understood as a closed unity.

Based on the concept of text as productivity, Kristeva develops a *semanalysis*, a critical and deconstructive science that explores, from her notion of text, language as production, transgression, and transformation of meaning beyond the communicative language (Todorov 1972). *Semanalysis* considers meaning not as a sign-system but as a signifying process. Such signifying process presupposes a split-subject divided

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[128]   We should remember that what Kristeva called signifiance, or significance is nothing but "the work performed in language (through the heterogeneous articulation of semiotic and symbolic dispositions) that enables a text to signify what representative and communicative speech does not say" (Roudiez 1980, p. 18).

"between unconscious and conscious motivations, that is, between physiological processes and social constraints" as Roudiez wrote in his introduction to Kristeva's works (1980, p. 6).

All those perspectives of language - mentioned above - as production and transgression can be found as well in Jury Lotman, who considers the generative and dynamic principle tracing back the process of the production of the text. Both theoretical approaches, that of Lotman and Kristeva:

> are inflective and generative mechanisms; they can be observed in terms of heterogeneity (…). In the context of the 1960s, both of them explored the semiotic levels of the text in its potentiality for creation and novelty. The semiotic levels are no longer structures and symbols but non-revealed processes of genesis, a space of engendering (Spassova 2018, p. 14).

Even Kristeva reconsidered her theoretical connection with Lotman concerning her notion of intertextuality in comparison with his idea of a secondary modelling system[129] (Kristeva 1994, pp. 375-376). "Parallel with my concept of intertextuality, Lotman elaborated a notion of art as a 'secondary modelling system'" (idem., p. 376). However, it is probably in the notion of texts where both authors' perspective can differentiate the most. For Lotman "the text is always a semiotic phenomenon and a discursive formation that implies signs and language". Instead, for Kristeva, the text is a dynamic site and "a trans-linguistic apparatus that redistributes the order of language" (1980, p. 36). The productive and transformative potential of the Kristevian text transcends language, since it considers extra-linguistic and pre-linguistic elements as

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[129] For Lotman (1977, p. 7), semiotic structures can be regarded as languages. As a consequence, a modelling system can be understood as a language. He sees spoken and natural language as a primary modelling system. All the supplementary structures emerging from natural language create languages of second level, or a secondary modelling system, which can be understood as "an ideological model of the world where the environment stands in reciprocal relationship with some other system. A model of the world thus constitutes a program for the behaviour of the individual, the collectivity, the machine, etc., since it defines its choice of operations, as well as the rules and motivations underlying them. A model of the world can be actualized in the various forms of human behaviour and its products, including linguistic texts (…) social institutions, movements of civilization, and so forth" (Sebeok 1985, pp. 23-38). In synthesis, natural language is understood as 'primary', and as the basic infrastructure for all the others sign systems. For instance, religion will be understood as a resulting superstructure, built upon a primary modelling system (Sebeok 2005, pp. 23-31).

rhythm, gestures, bodily drives[130]. Kristeva goes further when conceiving the elements constituting a text simply because in her *semanalysis* all signifying practices are the result of material bodily processes[131]: language, therefore, expresses bodily drives through its semiotic element.

Although connectivity, ubiquity and communicative processes are characteristic presents in Lotman's semiosphere, it is the presence of the speaking subject - bodily presence into discourse – in Kristeva what makes the signifying practice different. This is important when considering how, on one hand, simultaneous and accelerated fluxes of information affects subjects in the current digital mediated scenario. And the other – as a logic consequence of the former - how subject's discourses understood from the phenomena of technopaganism are continuously emerging.

Technopaganism, understood as that 'recognition' of the domains of the sacred into the digital, also conceives the computational environment as that 'other' place we inhabit and that transforms us in return. Therefore, it points out the transformative 'powers' of the 'machine' on subjects because there is a material relation of the former with the latter[132]. When technopaganism is considered from Kristeva's notion, it highlights how her project traces the effects of the semiotic upon the symbolic order – the strange or the other upon the familiar or the normalized – within culture, history, and the individual psyche. Reflecting how the semiotic dimension seems to involve technopagan discourses we could then state that those discourses enter into the poetic domain - which reactivates the semiotic drive force in language through its sounds and rhythms - and is portrayed in aspects such a religion, ritual, game, and so on.

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[130]   Those pre-linguistic or translinguistic processes belongs to the semiotic stage and its pre-oedipal and pre-linguistic origin. They are initially structured and directed in relation to the mother's body.

[131]   In Kristeva, the signifying process – also understood as significance – involves the semiotic and symbolic dialectics of the speaking subject. That is to say, the body is back into discourse. This can also be understood when Kristeva claims that signification is "an undecidable process between sense and nonsense, between language and rhythm (Desire in language, p. 135).

[132]   In the first chapter, when analyzing Neopaganism from the notion of poetic language, there is a perceptive sensuous involvement between Pagans with nature. In technopaganism technology is not the equivalent of nature – non technopagan actually assures they come from the machine in the ways they conceive nature as creator, but might work as an extension or as a part of nature.

Just as Neopaganism was already considered as a manifestation of the poetic on the sphere of the religious – as a way of re-enchantment, which is another characteristic of this type of language – technopaganism is a manifestation of poetic language, since it transcends the denotative and referential meanings of digital platforms as information tools. Examples can be found in neopagans appropriating digital spaces for religious performances, like the Pagan witch Starhawk in her collective Samhain digital ritual (Figure 3.5), and in artists, like Cy X with their – I use this pronoun because Cy X is a non-binary person - Cyberwitch project (Figure 3.6), mixing art and computational media to perform a ritualistic experiences. In the second scenario is common to perceive a sort of post-human Pagan condition of spirituality. This subject will be addressed, later in this section, in a more extensive way.
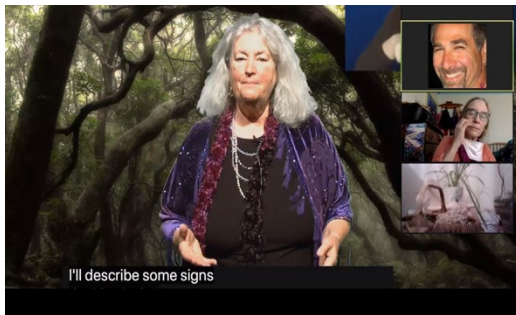
Figure 3.5: The pagan witch Starhawn in the collective celebration of Samhain, a pagan festivity.
Figure 3.6: The non-binary artist Cy X in the exposition Black Projections Project

Addressing technopaganism from Kristeva's theory allow us to understand it not as a problem of culture but as a bidirectional process which transforms the speaking subject and the digital sphere: the former creates an intimal experiences with the virtual platforms by interpreting such spaces under the logic of poetic language. The latter acquires new readings and uses from users. Therefore, what we will define as technopaganism is nothing but as a web of relations. By involving the speaking subject, the digital context, and the neopagan ontological project, religious language and digital spaces are detached from their automatism and ordinary disinvolvement.

Considering what aforementioned, it is in the dynamic of intertextuality where the relation constituting technopaganism are produced and where the subjects role – in establishing those connections – can also be appreciated. One important point to clarify is that Kristeva abandoned the concept of intertextuality for that of transposition (Torop

1981, p. 35). This conceptual change can, indeed, be more helpful for what we will discuss about technopaganism. She defines transposition as "the signifying process' ability to pass from one sign system to another, to exchange and permutate them [...]. [I]t implies the abandonment of a former sign system, the passage to a second via an instinctual intermediary common to the two systems, and the articulation of the new system with its new representability" (Kristeva 2002, p. 48). This can be particularly helpful in order to understand technopaganism not as a mere migration from one sign system to another, but as a process of transposition involving translations, hybridizations and re-interpretations. It is not a reproduction, but a productivity.

3.2.1 More than a neopagan migration to the net: textual productivity

The continuous mobility of texts, and their inevitable hybrid nature, is a constant in the dynamics of computational media. When settling the internet as the stage where technopagan practices are manifested, semiotics allow to consider TP as a continuous process of construction of meaning where signification is not closed and not defined: a sort of web of quotations by practices of interconnections. In other words, we are observing how different discourses, spaces and languages are being articulated together into the technopagan notion due to their resemblances with religious and/or spiritual discourses. There is not a lineal construction or a 'pure' origin validating them. The conception of intertextuality defines how these discourses can be structured – the syntax – and how they can function in the online context, by connecting them to the narratives of use – the pragmatics.

Since the text is a network of "liberating possibilities" – as already mentioned in chapter 2, sub-section 2.2.3 – the intention of defining and encapsulating the discourses occurring in the digital scenario increasingly fades, and with this, also the idea of fixed and immutable meanings. Whether these practices are valid or real, 'religious' or not, is not important. Instead of trying to assign them a stable position in the signifying field, it would be valid to ask: why these connections are made? Which interpretations of the online are brought by users when manifesting discourses and speech acts having religious/spiritual resemblances? Those assigned meanings are only present during the moment of utterance since they are part of a continuum of connections: the text. Julia Kristeva's conception of intertextuality – as shown in chapter two, when exploring the

cyborg figure in sub-section 2.2.1 – disputes, precisely, about that notion of static structures and products. Through her analysis, she assures that the text is not satisfied in representing the real, simply because it is oriented in the significant system in which is produced and in the social process in which it participates as a discourse (Kristeva 1978).

The notion of intertextuality proposes the text as a dynamic site in which relational processes and practices are the focus of analysis. A text is "an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writing" (Kristeva 1980, p. 65). Therefore, if a text is automatically an intertextual construction, it is experienced depending on the connections and crashing of enunciations (Kristeva 1980, p. 36). Just as happens with processes involving a confrontation between different signifying systems, a certain tension can occurred by the disruption of apparently unchanging oppositions. In the context of digital religiosities, this can explain why many traditions have developed a given resistance or different responses towards the 'online'. For such a reason, one should be aware about how the dynamics of transposition can result also essential for the preservation and development of traditional religions, since it gives them the capacity to adapt to new contexts and confront praxes through a continuous dialogue with other systems. Intertextuality provides a conception of texts and traditions that could actually challenge their categorization into the canonical and noncanonical (Deal and Beal 2004, p. 112).

As we have already explored in chapter 2, when understanding the world as a vast network of linked phenomena, the digital media embody these characteristics as a network of connections and a collective territory, as a heterogenous assemblages of meaning-making operations disrupting models and stable categories. If the dynamics of intertextuality dissolved the idea of text as a self-sufficient unit, identical to itself, it therefore exists as it is part of other texts (Alpízar 2003, p. 137) in multiple relations of dialogue, getting closer to the fluid associations occurring with the notion of hypertextuality: a term that, according to Ted Nelson, represents "the true structure of things" (Nelson 1987 [1974], p. 45) since "everything is deeply intertwingled" (ibid.).

The hypertext offers spaces of links and connections rather than linear structures or closed identities. Such conditions describe nowadays culture, which "loses

progressively a structure that resembles a conventional text or book[133]" (Han 2018 [2005], p. 21). This scenario, also helps to reflect about the nature of spirituality carried out on the digital context. Thus, considering 'cyberspace' the medium where these situations are taking place, "the shift from mass-produced text to hypertext affects the proclamation of religious beliefs" (Cowan 2005, p. 6) by making it more dynamic, personalized, pluralistic and transversal, incorporating all sorts of multimedia tools to develop its practice.

Cowan describes this form of paganism as "Open-source", because it is eclectic and antinomian by nature, blending traditions and celebrating a personal conception of deities and rituals by hypertextual dynamics. This concept, inspired by the open-source programming where any user can innovate the original code, welcomes innovation and freedom in the structure of any belief, connecting and matching different elements from other traditions or cultural spaces. The open-source conception presented in religious studies indeed follows the same "open text" logic proposed by Umberto Eco: it needs that someone helps it to work, postulating the cooperation of the reader as its own condition of updating all its unlimited interpretations (1962). These active connections are always expanding, implementing an intertextual operation every time it weaves with other networks and texts.

All of this textual productivity is not an anarchical and chaotic machinery of permutations. Even if nowadays boundaries are blurred, they still respond to dynamics of placement into our contemporary 'hybrid' semiosphere. However, instead of having a division of genres – religious, ludic, technical and so on – we have a typology of texts, helping us to define the "spificifty of different textual arrangements by placing them within the general text (culture) of which they are part and which is I in turn, part of them" (Kristeva 1980, p. 37). On such a way, by analysing the text – in our case: technopaganism - as intertextuality is to also consider it as part – within- the text of society and history (idem., p. 37). Kristeva calls this process of recognition

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[133]   My own translation.

'ideologeme'[134], which helps us to situate the analysed text into historical and social coordinates. It is, then, "the intersection of a given textual arrangement (a semiotic practice) with the utterances (sequences) that it either assimilates into its own space or to which it refers in the space of exterior texts (semiotic practices)" (Kristeva 1980, pp. 36-37).

In the case of technopaganism, several utterances – where the speaking subject is ascribed – add as well the subjectivities of those subjects with their own social, historical and cultural background. On such a way, even if the text, on its own, has no unity or unified meaning, it is still part of an on-going socio-cultural processes. The ideologeme of the text positions it within the text of society and history. To make it more clear, all the functions which are defined by extra-textual elements (ET) acquire some value within the textual arrangement (T). All those experiences, social feelings, practices and ideologies of the subject possess a given value within the text, giving a clue – as a diachronic vertical axis – of a specific position with the signifying field – the synchronic horizontal axis of textual continuity. Technopaganism responds as well to some ideological processes and 'verticalities' which situate it into a social reality. Since for Kristeva one of the main critics to structuralism was its 'staticity' and 'not-historicism', the conception of ideologeme rescues, in some sense, the historical materiality. Therefore, when observing in a technopagan text the uses of certain media and how people relate with concepts such a spirituality, religion and technology, it also expresses how all those aspects are represented and understood in a society. In other words, texts possess an ideological weight, making them irremediable linked to specific moment and place.

If the dynamic of intertextuality is inherent or compulsory for all the texts, when analysing Technopagan texts under such logic, they can be understood as a translinguistic practice which is activated and redistributed by intertextual movements,

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[134]   This concept was first described by M. Bakhtin. He interpreted the ideologeme as a way of representing particular ideology: "Every word/discourse betrays the ideology of its speaker; great novelistic heroes are those with the most coherent and individuated ideologies. Therefore, every speaker is an ideologue and every utterance is an ideologeme" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 429).

creating a network of differences, irreducible to any of its contexts[135]. For this reasons it is impossible to define, nowadays, technopaganism as a simple migration of Neopaganism. Such affirmation could have been partially efficient during the first decade of the XXI century. Now, on the contrary, the technological innovations and the relations we have been developing towards technology are much more common and ubiquitous than ever before. It would be even proper to state - though this can be still a risky affirmation – that the only common aspects between the first wave of technopaganism and what is now understood and recognized as technopaganism might be the syntactic order of its elements – technology and the Neopagan worldview - articulated under the notions of animism, posthuman agencies and emerging subjectivities.

3.2.2 Religion without origin or center: the influence of poetic language

When reflecting on cyborgean spiritual assemblages as technopaganism, there is no obligation to search for fixed meanings or validated origins in such textual arrangements, especially if they take place in the polycentric, multi-voiced, and participative spaces of digital media. This is simply because they are not closed and unified corpora but quotations of many other texts "without inverted commas" (Barthes 1977b, p. 160). Barthes – as we explored in the past chapters with his notion of intertextuality and the differentiation between work and text – emphasizes how single 'theological' meanings are not possible in a bounded text due to the textual productivity that implies the acts of 'writing': that function that can be described as the active utterance of language.

As stated by Robinson, "writing destroys every voice and point of origin. This is because it occurs within a functional process which is the practice of signification itself. Its real origin is language"[136] (Robinson 2011). Therefore, the "message of the Author-

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[135]   For Kristeva, "it has nothing to do with matters of influence by one writer upon another or with the sources of a literary work (…)" (Roudiez 1980, p. 15). It is, however "the transposition of one or more systems of signs into another." (ibid.).

[136]   It is important to remember that for Barthes and Kristeva a text cannot have a single meaning since it is composed of multiple systems through which it is constructed. Specifically for Barthes, the death of the author creates interpretative freedom for the reader. This is also shared by Eco in his Model

God" (Barthes 1977a, p. 146) is diluted in a multidimensional space, in which "a variety of writings, none of them original", are wedded and contested (ibid.). Linguistically speaking, the author is nothing more than "the instance writing (…) language knows a 'subject's, not a 'person'" (idem., p. 145). This logic of textual activity expresses how writing is the correlational act par excellence, avoiding any bounding of sequences within a finite ideologeme and opening them up to an infinite arrangement (Kristeva 1980, p. 58).

Not having an origin or a central source from where structure practices and extract the meaning of such practices – as the Christian's Bible constituting the divine logos and the theological guide – technopaganism relies on the connections and the experiences that are being produced in digital media and which are determined by the nature of the computational medium itself. In that sense, it is not entirely subjugated to offline Neopaganism or cyberculture and science fiction narratives, even if their influence is undeniable. What we see, instead, is a productive work of creative associations. The performance of language through an act of writing. In other words, it is by the connections carried out and the productivity in each act of reading/writing where the technopagan experience emerges. And as with all acts of writing there is "no vital 'respect' to the Text: it can be broken (…) it can be read without the guarantee of its father" (Barthes 1977b, p. 161).

In such dynamics, the operations of interconnection, movement, and dialogues are more present than the operations of selection and law. Here, experiences are more relevant than beliefs – understanding the latter as a theological and fixed position. This resonates with Neopaganism's semiotic analysis provided in chapter one – sub-section 1.3.1 and 1.4.2 – where the prevalence of ritual over common beliefs expresses as well Neopagan affinities with poetic language. These reflections will allow us to make a semiotic move on this analysis by including poetic language as the discursive dimension, which better describes technopagan texts and how we experience them.

Reader (1979), where he states that, in the frame of textual cooperation, the reader possess an essential role in the process of meaning-making.

Though we have already identified poetic language in the first chapter – sub-section 1.4.2 - it is important to highlight some of its key aspects. The conception of the poetic dimension in a given text depends on the various deviations from the grammatical rules of the language. Therefore, it is all which has not yet become in law (Kristeva 1978, p. 67). Poetic language is :

> the language of materiality as opposed to transparency (where the word is forgotten for the sake of the object or concept designated), a language in which the writer's effort is less to deal rationally with those object or concepts words seem to encase than to work, consciously or not, with the sounds and rhythms of words in transrational fashion (Roudiez 1980, p. 5)

Understanding technopaganism as a manifestation of poetic language is doable when conceiving it as that otherness of language. The poetic condition can be seen in the multiple meanings given to a particular object or space, which "it does not carry in ordinary usage but which accrue to it as a result of its occurrence in other texts" (Kristeva 1986, p. 28). This resonates with the similarities between the poetic and spiritual experiences, also explored in the first chapter. As stated by Octavio Paz, since poetic emotion is opposed to the profane and ordinary spaces of daily life, it is also the medium to manifest what cannot be communicated by referential and common language.

Establishing a sacred space in a videogame and celebrating a ritual to honour the earth in a virtual community are non-common uses of those platforms and, therefore, of the ways language is taking place there. The same occurs by doing group magic from a digital platform, reading the tarot using an application, or connecting with ancestors from a virtual world. Since all of them are practices of transposition from one system to the other – because those practices were already present in the offline context - those technologies are acquiring different dimensions due to the cooperative work of users when introducing new practices in the digital. Therefore, by modelling structures, meanings and actors the intertextual dynamic facilitates poetic language to emerge.

Similar to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of rhizome, which combines open processes of de-territorialization and reterritorializations while creating new spaces of freedom, the operations of poetic language in technopaganism creates similar 'spaces of freedom' during the transposition of such texts. Poetic language can be conceived as an agency

that can establish new connections. Reterritorializing a ritual or a festivity from a geographical territory to a virtual ludic space – as a videogame – is a liberating movement since it implies the construction of a new territory where there are no maps of order inscribing such practices on rules or subordinations. The only existing rules are those delimiting the potentialities of digital platforms, as was already discussed in the former sub-section.

Like the cyborg ontology, these assemblages create their own connections by affinities and not by grammatical or 'genetic' laws. The poetic is present since it imposes its playful dynamics by challenging the norm while rejecting any form of ideological or structural imposition. The dynamics of heterogeneity, interconnectivity, and openness of the poetic function free language from automatism by enriching the signifying process with desire and consciousness.

As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, the ritualistic digital practices of Cy X and Starhawk re-appropriate virtual platforms by actually involving with them from processes corresponding to the poetic dimension of language. Starhawk's case is eventually more simple to analyse into the technopagan domains since she is already an involved Neopagan. When organizing a live Samhain[137] ceremony on a digital platform – Zoom - she is also proposing the creation of a sacred space in order to call and commemorate the participants' ancestors and those who have departed recently. There is no possibility to relate with such a ritual practice without actually giving to the sacred and the numinous a 'position' in a shared space. Starhawk, and the other members of her coven, followed the proper steps of an offline Samhain ritual – as we could see in chapter 4, paragraph 4.2.1 – with evident variations of syntactic and pragmatic order when translating the ritual to the online context. There were several cyber-shamanic

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[137]   For neopagans, the festivity of Samhain represents the New Year, and is usually celebrated on the nights of October 31 and November 1 – for the north hemisphere – and . According to Jenny Butler, "this time is seen as one of new beginnings when nature once again enters into its 'dark half'" (2009, p. 68). Samhain is usually described as a 'Fire Festival' "and as such is an affirmation of life and vibrancy in the face of the coming dark and harshness of winter (idem., p. 69)". During this festivals Pagans also reflect about their own 'darkness' and things that should be left behind with the old year. This celebrations is also important since it is used to honour the dead and remember what they did in life, while asking the gods to grant them a worthy rebirth (Lewis 1999, p. 256).

dynamics, like music, rhythms, word repetitions, and prayers. The coven also used images and digital graphics to accompany the meditation moment. Different members from all over the world participated, as well, during the invocation to the ancestors and the call to the Goddess and God into the ritual. The digital platform became a collective sacred space, where an animistic approximation to the online allows all participants to be involved with the medium in an immersive and embodied way.

Cy X, on the other hand, are black queer, non-binary storyteller and cyber witch. In their own description on the web page, it appears that by "[f]using art and technology with the practice of witchcraft, they are inspired to use spells, rituals, and alchemic practices to fundamentally alter the world around us"[138]. Almost all their artistic projects consist of practices aiming for change and transformation – political, emotional, spiritual, and so on – involving magical performances, ritual elements, and computational technologies. The semiotic elements – on Kristeva's notion of the term - of such texts are reactivated by the existing disruptive[139] uses that Cy X give to digital media: repetitive sounds, colour distortions, fragmented phrases uttered with specific intonations and rhythmical electronic melodies. All projects are focused on 'noise' and conscious alterations of the ordinary function of those technologies. Their performance Lacuna (2021)[140], for instance, is presented as an audiovisual ritual expression. A time and space disrupted. Their words functioning as spells. The computational device is a portal to experiences comparable with altered states of consciousness and poetic transformations.

These examples provide a comprehension of technopaganism not only by analysing religious texts having poetic and animistic characteristics, but also in texts that are not directly related to a Neopagan worldview or any other religion. Cy X use the term

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[138]   Cy X description as appeared in the site: https://cyberwitch666.com/

[139]   However, when referring to 'alterations' and 'disruptions' is not about randomness and arbitrariness but, instead, about the consequences of drives that come with the semiotic *chora*, that is to say, the inclusion of the subject's body and her dialectics on signifying practices.

[140]   Cy X describe their project Lacuna as: "audiovisual past present future spiral capturing the diasporic memory of the here/there and the now/then through the question: how do we commune with sound as a way of moving through multiple timelines? The visuals are an intimate weaving of many threads and memories." Project link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNyNXrhuf9Q. All Cy X projects link: https://cyberwitch666.com/More-Spells.

'cyber witch' more as an artistic performance than as a religious signature. However, it is due to the intimal way they relate with the medium, the development of a ritual space and, the nature of their practices – by connecting the poetic experience with spirituality – that their texts can be understood as technopagans. On such matter, this hybrid phenomena of technopaganism is not only present in explicit Neopagan practices – like Starhawk's ritual - but it can be also found in the creative work of artist's involving technological innovation with spiritual pursuits, or in other media like 3D virtual communities and videogames.

The specific cases of digital games and ludic virtual communities have shown interesting opportunities for the development and emerging of technopagan texts. On one hand, when observing how certain digital games narratives involve the realms of the sacred "they tend to reference pagan or neo-pagan values and beliefs first before anything else" (Campbell 2004, p. 21). On the other hand, members of the technopagan community are increasingly inhabiting the gaming environment when it comes to celebrate ritual performances, meet each other or construct a sacred space. Just like Ryan Tanaka assures, "there are countless pagan allegories and references to neo-pagan ideals and values in the medium that best epitomizes the combination of technology and spiritualist narratives: video games" (Tanaka 2015).

3.3 Digital Games: ritual and expression for Technopaganism

As previously commented in chapter two, in order to understand the condition of religion and spirituality in the 21st century, we must also understand how both are being remade through their mutual interaction with digital media (Hoover 2012, p. 28), and how these convergences affect both the attitude of people towards such practices and media themselves. considering that none of them are separated areas any longer. This occurs since most of the religions and spiritual traditions have found in the digital context a territory where to settle and provide peculiar type of experiences, allowing the production of texts which are deeply connected with the online context. Many of such texts have been emerging in environments as computer games (Aupers 2015, p. 7), and therefore they tend to be labelled as "invented religions" (Cousack 2010) or fiction-based religions (Davidsen 2014).

Besides becoming the biggest entertainment industry in the world, Digital Games (DG) also represent one of the most important expression of computational media development, by embodying the existing connection among digital technological innovation, social participation and cultural expressions. This can be seen, for instance, in the virtual persistent world in MMOGs and in the overlapping between the physical and the game worlds in Augmented Reality games, as in Pokemon Go, or in the recent case of Virtual Reality devices, such as Oculus Rift, Quest etc.

By working as a receptacle of social dynamics and cultural narratives, Digital Games started to be perceived as one of the contexts in which people can relate to the sacred and carry out mystical pursuits in the online context (Campbell 2014, Wagner 2012, Detweiler 2010, Bainbridge 2013). Given their potentialities of providing immersive interactive experiences - influencing all types of areas as education, art and business –it is not a surprise that the virtual universes and dialogic nature of DG have the power to influence religious cultural practices, not only by depicting sacred spaces and specific narratives, but by allowing their performances to take place. In light of the importance DG have acquired in several aspect of our lives, their role in the field of religious studies is highly important in order to understand their crosscutting implications with contemporary society and their connection with religious universal dynamics.

On such a way, if the main believer's intention is to connect with the sacred, as well as with other participants, they need virtual interactive environments allowing them to share personal beliefs and to participate in acts of faith through dynamic forms of online interaction and reciprocal engagement (Helland 2015). Many of those digital experiences have found in digital game platforms functioning as Sacramental Spaces, because of the adaptation of symbols, ritual and practices within the virtual environment for religious purposes (Campbell 2004). Digital games have become one of those meaning-making contemporary practices, in which it is possible to portray or emulate religious narratives in a direct or implicit way.

As Rachel Wagner assures (2012), whereas games intersect directly with religion via symbolism or by resembling real locations of spiritual value, "the game itself also often functions as a sort of sacred space, with many of the same features and symbolic, ideological functions". Such statement is close to the theories of Johan Huizinga, when arguing that the categories of ritual, sacred spaces, and play are pretty much intertwined since they create a space which is separate from routines and everyday activities. According to Huizinga "we find play present everywhere as a well-defined quality of action which is different from 'ordinary' life" (Huizinga 1949, p. 4).

Moreover, the role of digital games in the religious context goes beyond its formal resemblance with ritual performances. Some of them have actually become an important element not just in reinforcing traditional and existing faiths, but in developing new forms of spaces, practices and discourses where religious elements - what sociologist call implicit religion - and contemporary beliefs are emerging.

One of the most notable example of this intersection and emergence is provided by Technopaganism. On such matter, Digital Games is becoming an unique milieu for technopagans to broadcast their ideas and feelings related to their spiritual pursuits and religious evolution, considering how Pagan narratives were presented on a technological environment. This section aims at clarifying the ways in which religious performances - as rituals - and digital games inspire or directly intercept each other, instead of merely exploring the religious references and dynamics that can be found on video games narratives, often as a conscious intention of the game developers.

However, it is important to clarify that while many users have identified themselves as technopagans – or at least as Neopagans performing their religion from digital media - for others there was not an explicit religious affiliation, but just a way of understanding and relating with the digital experience from practices having religious and spiritual resemblance. At first, it is mandatory to explore the similarities that can be found between rituals and DG, in which DG are actually not separated from the territory of the spiritual and the sacred. Secondly, if virtual spaces can be the playground of contemporary religiosities, then other digital practices, such as the ludic ones, can contribute to their development, either by inspiring each other or by picturing their myths, pantheons of deities and narratives. In other words, DG can work as a medium for expressing believes, desires and mystical experiences that otherwise would be hard to express on other platforms (Priestman 2017).

The following reflections might also help to elucidate how religious gaming is constructed ideologically, and how different expressions of religion and religiosity are manifested in different gaming genres and narratives. Digital games are, at the very end, an important site of exploration into the intersection of religion and contemporary culture that helps us understand what religion is, does, and means in a changing contemporary society. Just like films helped to illuminate and expose the religiosity of the twentieth century, digital games now depict the religious within the twenty-first century (Campbell Heidi and Grieve Gregory 2014, p. 52).

3.3.1 The ritual-based properties of digital game space

In order to understand the religious implications in digital games culture, it is necessary to identify the ways in which religious rituals are found within DG. Authors such as Rachel Wagner have already identified one of the most representative groundwork of such intersection in ritual performances. Her "ritual-game" binomial, in fact, holds interesting parallelism with Johan Huizinga theory of the magic circle[141] and games included in ritual. By working in a similar way as a ritual performance, DG

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[141]   When Huizinga uses the term magic circle, he does not understand it exclusively as a physical boundary. It is, instead, "something that can be marked in ideas, as he states that these can be imaginary places, therefore, not delimited materially" (Petry 2013, p. 39). Since he is referring to the notion of 'imaginary places', then the concept can be used as a metaphor.

acquire a medium faculty, allowing the religious experience and manifestation to take place, while displaying various degrees of interactivity, rules, and narrative. Considering that the ontology of ritual is heterogeneous and polyhedric and its meaning-making potentialities are multiple and complex, a previous exploration of ritual and their characteristic is required.

In a general sense, rituals can be defined as a way of communication – as already mentioned in chapter 2 – which is constituted by a codified set of symbolic actions and articulated in a specific space and time, expressing the values and beliefs of a community with the purpose of creating and reinforcing the sense of identity and social cohesion (Finol 2009). According to Rappaport (1999, p. 24), the term "ritual" is a form or structure that denotes "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers". Yet, considering that neither all rituals are religious, nor all religious acts are rituals, it is important to distinguish what makes a ritual enter into the territory of the sacred and the holy (idem., pp. 25-26).

The step from the ordinary to the sacred is what makes a ritual religious, or more specifically, an event being recognized as a religious performance. For Rappaport (idem., p. 27), these rituals possess certain key elements that can be exposed as follow: the construction of the integrated conventional orders - the logos, the construction of time and eternity, the representation of a paradigm of creation, the generation of the concept of the sacred, of theories of the occult, the evocation of numinous experience and the construction of orders of meaning transcending the semantic. However, the ritual does not rely on the manifestation of all those elements, since none of them belong explicitly to the category of the ritualistic. What is relevant is how such relation is being carried out. Therefore, in order to become a structure, it should be characterized by (idem., pp. 32-50), (Bell 1997, p. 138):

•   A perception of formality based on repetitive behaviour, a conventionality in the composition and a regularity in its celebration
•   The existence of a performance which is "more or less" invariant because of its code of rules that determine the proper behaviour

• Actions and practices can be carried out within a congregation, that should not be confused with an audience since the performers participate in the ritual whereas the public does not

• The process is deeply interactive through the "interaction of the body with a structured environment";

• It is actually more valuable for its potentiality as a medium than for its instrumental properties. This means that ritual does not produce practical results on the external world but, instead, it provides meaning, generate experience and transform the performers.

According to the previous list, the extensive, rich and syncretic concept of what is understood as a "ritual", together with the very particular ways its characteristic elements are related, does not make it a simple complementary practice to express cultural and social situations. Ritual can also be considered as the only device to express certain meanings and effects (Rappaport 1999) and consequently to experience transformation and religion.

In order to be effective, the faculties and functions of rituals need to be articulated within a sacred space, which is the "location for formulized repeatable symbolic performances" (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, p. 9). The sacred space is a place of orientation and significance – a sort of symbolic efficacy – where the ritual takes place and where the participants search to copy the sacred model that transcends all the banality and chaos of the world. A sacred space would be that place "in which sacred symbolic activity occurs" (Wagner 2014, p. 12), a circumscribed territory that has demarcated its borders and performative areas from the ordinary space, establishing rules of behaviour. Mircea Eliade believes that the sacred space is opposed to the profane one – the chaotic – since it tries to repeat "the paradigmatic work of the gods" (1961, p. 32). During its construction in a ritualistic performance, the members of the religious community are usually celebrating a primal and pure order that must be copied and repeated by formal acts.

A similar situation occurs in the gaming environment. For Huizinga, play, like ritual, is a "stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (1949, p. 8) and therefore, it is separated from ordinary time and space.

Games, as rituals, have the ability to project the values of the demarcated space onto everyday reality. Humans build sacred places and engage in sacred ritual as a way of expressing their own desire for a meaningful territory, beyond a profane existence (Wagner 2014). On a similar way, "digital games are constructed as a kind of sacred space into which they inject their wishes for how the world might work. Video game construction, like ritual performance, is a means of demonstrating desire, of mapping order, of developing rules for how to live" (ibid.).

When playing a game, the user is immersed in a micro-cosmos with its own narratives and ways of developing and proceeding. The player moves around maps of order, processes and boundaries, following rules which shape the ambivalence and multiplicity of daily life into a more understandable and predictable set of options. In the case of digital games, the programmer intentionally disposes algorithmic language in order to create – though codes – this parallel micro cosmos and to anticipate the eventual answers. On a similar way, in religious rituals, the priest/priestess, or members of the tradition, move into a mythological and theological background that frames the space/time into a scared one.

The affinity between games and religion is more obvious when considering the importance of programming , understood as the design and construction of the space of action, separated from the profane, that can be referred to a set of symbolic organizational instructions like I Ching Divination, or computational coding language. Both games and rites propose a relief from the confusing and chaotic general panorama of the real and daily life, with their many potentials options, inter-connections and ideologies. As Rachel Wagner declares, the construction of video game reflects as well a desire of establishing an order, "of developing rules for how to live" (Wagner 2014).

This premise can be, for instance, appreciated in the Netflix series Queen of Gambit, where the main character, Elizabeth, finds a relief to life complexities in chess. For her, the chess board represents a whole universe of 64 squares that, unlike the external world, can be predictable and controlled. Nevertheless, considering the separated nature of the chessboard, one could expect an even greater effect in the persistent current digital game world.

3.3.2 Digital Games as a medium for Technopaganism

Digital games (DG) are being increasingly considered a way in which believers can explore and experience their own faiths. If the first Neopagan communities in the internet were already considered a type of 'open source' religion – making allusion to Cowan's term - then technopaganism can also be manifested and diluted in other type of media. On such a way, while for religious traditions with strong institutional structures, computational technologies could only be seen as a complementary tool to perform pre-existing activities, or providing access to other communities or information, for practices with a more fluid structure as those arriving from a Neopagan cosmology, "cyberspace does present more interesting opportunities for innovation" (Cowan 2005, p. 23) allowing innovative readings and syncretic interrelation with other beliefs and cultural expressions.

There are currently a variety of studies about certain technological practices that can be judged to have religious-like qualities working as a sort of implicit religion, where "some forms of contemporary practice or meaning-making can take on religious-like qualities to the extent that beliefs and practices associated with them can be defined as exhibiting a family resemblance to religion" (Campbell and Evolvi 2019, pp. 12-13). We could therefore say that DG are becoming the privilege of certain practices resembling technopagan-like qualities, due to their worship potentialities; engaging with religious imaginary in significant ways.

As previously mentioned, many believers from traditional and non-traditional religions have been using DG as a medium to share, portray and practice their faiths and spiritual inspirations. Skyrim, for instance, allows the player to interact with certain fictional representations of ancient gods and goddesses - inspired by Norse mythology - and to immerse in ritual-like landscapes inhabited by magical creatures as elf and dragons. Minecraft[142] can re-create spaces and contexts for religious activities while

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[142]   Created in 2009 by Markus "Notch" Persson and develop by Mojang, Minecraft is an open-world digital game. There, users can create their own worlds and experiences, using building blocks, a variety of resources and their own creativity. Open-world games – also known as sandbox game – refers to "a video game with a gameplay element that gives the player a great degree of creativity to complete tasks towards a goal within the game, if such a goal exists" (cited from Wikipedia).

other games as Talos Principle can work as ritual on themselves by reframing, through the relationship between human and AI, the relationship between Creator and Creature, making the player explore the possibility of awareness and freedom through faith. Therefore, due to the DG endless sources of inspiration and multiplicity of discourses, their involvement with technopaganism is very strong, linking their storytelling and structure to several narratives as ancient pagan mythologies, the evolving of Artificial Intelligence and the development of human-machine interaction.

On a general sense, digital games can portray certain characteristics present on rituals; they can express religious symbolism, they can work as a sacramental space and they can be articulated under a religious narrative or myth. Those categories of analysis, might help to locate technopagan narratives, as well as beliefs and practices associated with what technopaganism is, in DG. However, these categories are not exclusive for this phenomenom, since they can be also adapted to any other religion or spirituality manifesting on DG.

a) Whether digital games work as a playground for religious spaces:

As we could appreciate earlier in this chapter – on sub-sections 3.1.3 and 3.2.1 – technopagans often make use of a virtual ludic space in order to carry on computer mediated ritual performances, as well as other acts of worshiping. For instance, many Minecraft players take profit of the unlimited build availability of Minecraft in order to make digital altars (Figure 3.7). In this case, digital games work as a sacramental space because of the adaptation of symbols, ritual and practices within the virtual environment (Campbell 2004, p. 21). Here, the avatar becomes a representation of the physical user, allowing to experience a conscious religious performance inhabiting the gaming territory: a space that, as the one created by the ritual, represents an altered reality. This implies as well other ways of practicing and living the user owns faith.

In Second Life[143], for instance, the user can use visual tools and software programs working as a way of stimulation in order to 'travel' between different realities and

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[143]   Created in 2003 by Linden Lab, Second Life is a popular and versatile user-created 3D universe. Quoting Massimo Leone, Second Life "creates a digital three-dimensional representation with a high degree of interactivity and verisimilitude with the non-digital reality. Each user can interact with this

levels of existence, similar to what occurs with 'offline' experiences after chanting, dancing or drinking certain substances (Vecoli 2013, p. 54). Another great example is Fortune-500 (Figure 3.8), a game developed by AP Thomson, using witch culture and magic practices as a medium for healing from mental health problems. Poetic language is deeply present in this category, since the reinterpretation of these platforms allows players to creatively appropriate such spaces for their own spiritual pursuits. Utterances here are less conformed by communicate and ordinary language and more in the user's rhythms[144] and movements, highlighting a playful intimacy with the media.
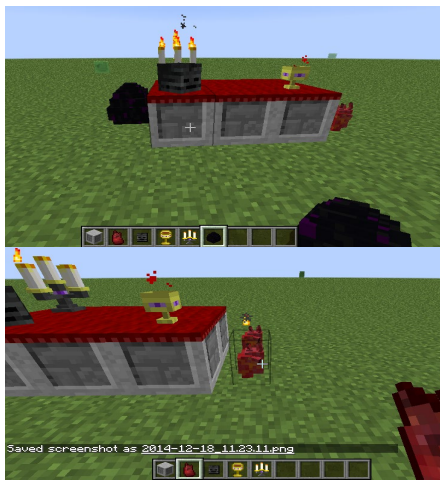
Figure 3.7: An improvised altar in Minecraft

Figure 3.8: Fortune-5000

b) Whether spiritual beliefs shape and influence digital games narratives

This is, possibly, the most common situation. Innumerable examples can be found of pagan narratives inside the storytelling of a game. This category has a direct influence on users, inspiring them to research about other spiritual traditions or ancient civilizations, but also by reaching other levels of experience with the joy of gaming, since players can enter fantastic or mystic worlds beyond their real-life and perceive themselves in alternate ways (Courtois and de Vocht 2012, p. 24). Games such as

representation and with the other users through a digital simulacrum as well as contribute to the construction and the changing of the representation as a whole" (2011, p. 339).

[144]   When referring to the user's rhythms – in allusion to poetic language – is by referring to the 'poet' writing act where she "wants to make language perceive what it doesn't want to say, provide it with its matter independently of the sign, and free it from denotation" (Kristeva 1980, p. 31), the gestures that change the system (ibid.).

Assassin's Creed, Deus Ex Mankind divided (Figure 3.9), Final Fantasy, League of Legends, Skyrim and World of Warcraft are interesting examples of pagan-based scenarios and folklore, mythical elements from ancient cultures and a variety of pantheons strongly mixed with cyberculture and fiction imaginaries. Many of these games mimic the narratives of certain polytheistic or pantheistic civilizations, welcoming the players into events of extraordinary nature. It is common to see, for instance, religious symbols, magical natural elements and grimoires, together with deities belonging to different traditions. In this scenario, the religious intention is frequently scripted, working more at a representational level than as a re-embodiment of digital sacred spaces or rituals. Semiotically speaking, the practices of transposition and translation from one sign system to another are particularly curious here, considering how the game developers create fictional narratives integrating existing traditions and religions or past civilizations.

Figure 3.9: Deus Ex Mankind divided

c) Whether performances carried out in virtual territories embody a religious ritual itself

While this scenario may seem quite similar to the previous point, the digital game's narratives mostly limit to take inspiration from actual religious traditions – past or present – and ritual performances, while not necessarily redoubling through the very ludic experience the religious beliefs, practices and meaning through the ludic medium. On the contrary, certain games do not simply present a defined religious storytelling/theme, but develop, through a clear ludic intent, the practices allegories and ritualities of religious phenomena. Here, games could be used to develop a "religious identity" (Campbell 2005b), allowing the user to convert into a new faith or to reaffirm it. Besides, the player can experience spiritual activities or assist to ritual performances without necessarily believing in supernatural claims. Examples are Awilix, Mayan

Moon Goddess, Talos Principle (Figure 3.10), and Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (Figure 3.11), an immersive world of Celtic and Norse mythologies.

Figure 3.10: Talos Principle   **Figure 3.11:** Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

In the Case of Senua's Sacrifice, the player experience is driven to a state between faith and hallucination, where the strong conviction of the main character is tested and doubted by players themselves, who have to decide what to believe in, by witnessing the game under Senua's perspective. In the case of Talos Principle (Figure 3.10), the objective is to solve a series of puzzles but on a rich religious narrative. The main character inhabits a robot body receiving messages from a mysterious voice known as "Elohim" while moving around some ancient ruins (Cassone and Thibault 2019). The player follows the order given by Elohim, but while wandering around the Garden of Eden, he finds old computers which describe a different perspective from the one told by the God. The player may, over the course of the gameplay, choose to challenge the direct command of Elohim and develop autonomous belief over the existence of the game world, exiting from the Garden. Only in this case, it is revealed that the AI succeeded in a test of autonomy, which was devised as a digital counterpart of the biblical test of faith itself (ibid.).

3.5.1 Technopaganism and Digital Games: an interpretative reading/writing process

As aforementioned, digital games do not only possess immersive narratives and technological innovation, they also allow to connect with experiences as universal as religion, offering players a direct participation in a certain spiritual narrative or performance. This does not simply influence the player beliefs (Bainbridge 2013), but their understanding and interpretation of virtual worlds as well as their meaning making potentialities when it comes to issues related to the sacred.

In the specific case of technopaganism, DG influence and are influenced by this online spiritual phenomenon. Each participant interwinds the digital media with the culture of virtual worlds as well as with religious elements, such as rituals and magic. Therefore, when noticing the multiplicity and versatility of religious discourses present in DG, there is a prevalence of certain elements in their narratives, all of them characteristic elements of technopaganism: polytheistic/pantheistic Pagan traditions infused with pop culture, a reference to magic practices which are performed spontaneously or as part of the game's storytelling, nonnormative subjectivities inspired by religious elements – the avatar and its aesthetics, and an animistic way of relating to those spaces and 'entities' inhabiting the game – the digital embodiment. All of these reflections will be enhanced with practical examples in the cases studies reported in chapter four.

This scenario, however, has also generated questions about the validity of DG acting as a sort of implicit religion mechanism, considering they belong to the territory of the ludic and the entertainment industry. Following Huizinga, from a formal point of view, there is no difference between the delimitation of a space for sacred purposes and the same operation for the purpose of simple game (Huizinga 1949). Such statement reveals that digital games can offer more than just a mean to experience other realities. Just like the sacred space opened during rituals, digital games can also allow to export a superior order back into lived reality and the sense of entering into a controlled space (ibid.), embracing a storytelling and depending heavily upon formal ritual-like experiences in order to contribute to the construction of meaning.

We could deepen the aforementioned by bringing some reflections from Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) who compares the conceptual and phenomenological exploration of play with non-playful activities – considered, instead, as 'serious'. Regarding Gadamer's view, Andrejč ensures that:

> [i]n playing, the focus is always in playing something; the fascination of playing games is, ultimately, in the game mastering its players and not the other way around; one chooses to enter play (play is not a necessity of life); while play is defined as opposite to (or at least being something else than) non-playful, serious activities, it possesses for us a kind 'sacred seriousness' of its own, shown in the fact that serious activities of life are suspended when playing, which is

done knowingly and deliberately; and, importantly, play is the location of the revelation of truth (2016, pp. 150-151).

Such suspension of 'serious' activities is similar to the interruption of the profane when a sacred activity is performed. The same as when the specificities of the game environment invite players to an space outside of chaos and ordinary behaviour.

After all that has been discussed it is possible, then, to claim that DG work as a medium for emerging religious practices, especially when, on one hand, they portrait and adopt religious performances and narratives in their own storytelling while generating different levels of engagement. On the other hand, the technical constitution of their interfaces allows players to enter into an state of liminality through avatars. On that matter, when considering DG as a religious medium they can act as: a) the playground for religious spaces and settings like in Minecraft and Second Life; b) the religious representation of an universe resembling technopagan characteristics, as seen in Skyrim, Assassin's Creed or Cyberpunk; c) the embodiment of a religious ritual itself, welcoming the player to a universe built as sacred and non-ordinary, like what occurs in games such as Talos Principle or Hellblade.

Considering the amount of religious activities on the net, and how they invite users to familiarize themselves with different religious and spiritual paths, digital media are therefore challenging simplistic narratives of secularization which interpret technological innovations as anathema to religious practice (Campbell 2014, p. 4). Such affirmation takes a bigger importance when it comes to DG and the interesting parallelisms they exhibit with ritual performances. Both demarcate certain areas as "sacred" by opening spaces of order and relief from the chaos of ordinary life, inviting alternative universes, fluid narratives, and transformative religious experiences.

One way of examining this is by following Victor Turner's anthropological theory, for whom structures are not stables but processual, due to social relations' dynamic and circumstantial movements. Religions, like all social structures, are identified by their axiology and their norms – what we could understand as the symbolic dimension in Kristeva's terms – however, through history, they have moments of crisis and grades of anomia permitting, on one hand, their restoration and reconfiguration or a transition to

new forms and, on the other, new ways of 'symbolization'[145] – anthropologically speaking. Turner refers to such processes of pressure and changes as 'anti-structure', taking place in the field of liminality (Bao 2001, p. 17). For Turner, liminality is an intermediate state, a positioning in a neutral space between one and the other. He describes it as "a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structure" (Turner, 1990, pp. 11-12). Here, in the liminal state, emerges his notion of *communitas,* which is a psycho-active state of social cohesion, ignoring structure and promoting spontaneity. It is playful but serious, functioning as a change agent (Bigger 2010, p. 6). Mystic and religious communities of subversive nature, for instance, can be an example of the processes of 'atopic symbolization' (Turner 1974, p. 231).

We can consider as a subversive type of *communitas* all those users meeting together in virtual platforms, inspired by discourses of a spiritual/religious nature. The disruptive character of those practices and their spontaneity and playfulness create the perfect scenario for the 'psycho-active states of social cohesion which are present in the *communitas*. Subjects, therefore, can challenge the structure, turning the social order upside down.

All what mentioned in this section affirms how technopagan manifestations in digital games are but the result of textual cooperation providing a new reading of the religious text. In other words, a writing act. Umberto Eco's pragmatic model of cooperative interpretation (1962) can help us to highlight how the user's conceives the potentialities of virtual territories in order to manifest religious discourses. The intertextual relations occurring between the ludic digital platform and the religious ritual – as two heteroclite texts encountering in the textual arrangement proposed by the player – can form

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[145]　For Victor Turner, ritual is a "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers" (1967, p. 19). Likewise, a symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior; it is a "storage unit" filled with a vast amount of information (Turner 1968, pp. 1-2). The symbol is "a blaze or landmark, something that connects the unknown with the known" (1967, p. 48). Symbol is also understood as a field of social action, and stimuli of emotion. Through its properties symbols make their meanings to swing between what is open and hidden, between what is manifested and latent (Bao 2001, p. 17).

interesting connections due to of their open condition, allowing the birth of new practices resulting from cooperative interpretations. The user, therefore, acquires the quality of Model Reader[146] due to his/her essential role in the process of meaning making, contributing to actualize the potentialities of the virtual world by participating in the offered narratives. The user becomes also a Model Author, by proposing to other participants an alternative reading of the digital space, as a place to perform and experience religious activities. For that matter, the value of such practices will not be based on the content – existing signifieds - objects but rather on the processes by which the experience has been produced: the intertextual dynamics bringing to the online a ritual performance. As Eco argued, "a text is a product whose interpretive outcome must form part of its own generative mechanism" (Eco 1979, p. 54).

We could portray this reader/author meaning contribution in Peirce's model of infinite semiosis, where the interpretant – the effect the text has on the interpreter's mind and ensuing behavior for the sign process (Pisanty 2015) – (Ia) becomes the representamen of the following text (Rb). In this specific case, the interpretant (Ia) could be a past ritual experiences, the player's own expectations ritual, the encounter he has had from other religious experiences, pop culture expressions of a similar situation, and so on. Whereas, after the user/reader becomes user/author, his/her interpretant (Ia) is transformed into a representamen (Rb) – the expressive manifestation of the text (ibid.) – for the continuation of the semiosis process, where other user/reader will contribute with his/her own interpretations (Figure 3.12)[147]. At the same time, the pragmatic uses of media platforms and ritual activity will affect the syntax - how they are expressed - and the semantic – content - of all the objects affected for the textual arrangement.

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[146] In Umberto Eco's theory, the notions of text and interpretation are closely interwoven. Therefore, it is impossible to define one without referring to the other. The text is that something one interpret, "which for Eco coincides with the Peircean sign ('something which stands for somebody for something in some respect or capacity,' CP 2.228)" (Pisanty 2015). It is important to highlight that for Eco, the interpretive possibilities of a text are to some extent embedded in the text itself.

[147] Regarding all the possible ways in which interpreters 'make sense' of texts by perceiving them through their own encyclopedic structures, Pisanty states that: "[w]hile considering a text as the parameter of its possible interpretations, the analyst may choose to examine and compare an array of different interpretive styles or "sense-making" strategies that have been adopted with regard to that specific text" (2015).
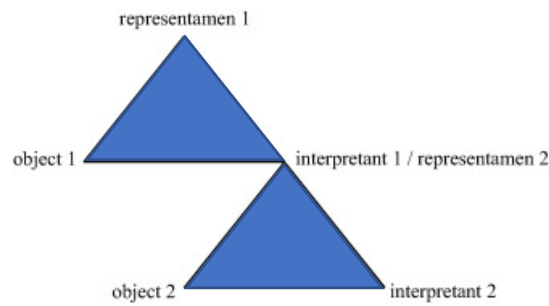
Figure 3.12: Peirce unlimited semiosis

Kristevian perspective of intertextuality can also help us to understand how the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation. As explained by Kabthiyal and Dangwal, "[t]he two axes of intertextuality are: (i) texts entering via authors (who are, first, readers)" and (ii) texts entering via readers (co-producers)" (2016, p. 301). This can allow us to see how texts as emotionally, socially and culturally charged, since they are continuously affected by the "temporal contextuality of the world that surrounds authors as human beings" (ibid.) and by the speaking, desiring, subject in process, influencing all sort of areas (McAfee 2004, p. 120) and producing meanings which are not original, univocal and definitive. Technopagan texts are, then, a web of quotations where the user/reader contributes to the signifying processes by assigning other creative uses to digital media platforms - as digital games - and other interpretations to religious practices or narratives.

Nonetheless, it is important to take into account that the potential interpretation of these spaces has clear limits depending on the platform interface and other aspects related to the narrative and the aesthetics. Even if the religious experience – that we are identifying as technopagan – is the result of the player's practice of reading and writing, such discourses are only possible thanks to the very significant potential of these platforms, allowing the production of practices that have a religious motivation.

3.4 A monstrous spirituality: transgressive practices from neo to techno(paganism)

Two conditions are persistently present in all the above cases: on the one hand, there is an animistic relation between users and the virtual space they inhabit through their avatars and, on the other, there is a ritualization of the virtual space as a result of the delimitations of the sacred from the profane space of the 'everyday life.' These conditions highlight how the dynamics of such texts privilege their intertextual and trans-linguistic aspect. In other words, their cyborgean assemblage.

According to Gaston Bachelard, in his Poetic of the Space (1958), the spaces we inhabit also inhabits us. Bringing his reflections to this analysis, if we decide to relate with the digital lands - phenomenologically speaking and not as a solid representation - then we will be following the poet's dynamics "where the image is not descriptive, but, instead, deeply inspiring" (Bachelard 1958, p. 85). Following Bachelard's proposal, by treating the image phenomenologically it would mean to take the image as it is, not trying to rationalize it with an excess of 'symbolic law.' "The image cannot provide matter for a concept. By giving stability to the image, the concept would stifle its life" (Bachelard 1960, p. 52). Therefore, it is by conceptualizing the image that one suffocates it (Hans 1977, p. 316), meaning that if the reader does not treat images as images, he will destroy the 'poetic potentialities' lying in there: "It is a non-sense to claim to study imagination objectively since one really receives the image only if he admires it. Already in comparing one image to another, one runs the risk of losing participation in its individuality" (Bachelard 1960, p. 53).

When bringing this reflection to technopaganism and its intimal digital performances, it is essential to avoid comparing or evaluating those digital spaces as if they were a representation of 'reality'. When Bachelard says we should take the image as it is, it means to involve ourselves with digital spaces as they are, as software-based spaces, as a territory we 'open' by participating in them. It is not by searching the real that we experience the online. That would be to rationalize and push any experience as a mirror or a copycat, not as an environment on its own. For such a reason, as we could just observe with digital games and spiritual/religious performances, it is by involving

'poetically' with them, with their elements and narratives, that the player participates and access the game's "magic circle". The same occurs when one is digitally embodied in an avatar as an extension of the biological body and not as a disembodied mind trying to copy an organic constitution into a linguistic construction. Again, these reflections invite poetic language as the primary strategy to experience a technopagan reading of digital worlds. That is to say: relating with the online territories as they are before adulterating them with an excess of the conceptual and referential framework.

By acknowledging this, one assumes that virtual spaces are not less valid but simply different. Therefore, those technological others are welcome without the dualistic premises of mind and matter. Following Winfried Nöth, "they must not be examined in terms of approval or rejection. Instead, the question to be resolved is to which degree these claims concerning the semiotic nature of machines are valid and to which degree they are not" (2008, p. 4). In such a way, accepting that 'technological otherness' with their own constitutions and 'individuality' is to accept their monstrosity. A quality that should not be seen as something generating fear but as a tribute to the different and the particular, as a liberation from the oppressiveness of supposed normality that has been established and accommodated in certain prejudices and routines[148]. The 'monstrous' is, then, a fertile ground for creating hybrids and for the regeneration of decaying systems of meaning. It is the breaking point of the norm, the exception by definition. (Foucault 2003 [1999], p. 49). Technopaganism can be understood, therefore, under this concept of the monstrous. This is especially important when considering how it is no longer about beliefs migrating from offline to online but also about religious and spiritual assemblages that keep their creative constitution coherent with the digital environment from which they emerge.

However, conceiving these experiences and spaces as they are also means perceiving their changes and evolution without ideological or political vails. Instead, they result from our own experiences and from how they are assimilated into the social body. For instance, examining how the technological development invites new interfaces and modes of interaction that could inspire spiritual performances. This occurs simply

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[148]   This reflections belongs to Joan Fontcuberta's exposition 'Monstruos' – in English, 'Monsters' – which took place in the Museum Can Framis, Barcelona, from 05/10/2021 to 23/01/2022. https://www.fundaciovilacasas.com/es/exposicion/monstruos.

because, as Nöth stated, the issue is not about their validity but to which degree they are compatible with certain practices of meaning and how they resemblance them. Another point to consider has to deal with the advances in the area of extended realities – virtual and augmented – and how they are reconfiguring our meaning-making practices in the territories of the sacred. Thanks to the effects caused by digital embodiment (Hayles 1999) and the Proteus effect (Yee and Bailenson 2007), these realities are, to a certain extent, capable of proposing other dimensions in the human-avatar relationship and, therefore, in novel ways of uttering oneself in the online territories. This last point is important when evaluating how technopaganism does not depend solely on the subject's immersion in virtual worlds but how it is intensified by the same nature of digital media evolution.

Those epistemological turns invite the posthuman reflections of Katherine Hayles, for whom the relation we have with computation technologies already makes us posthumans. "As you gaze at the flickering signifiers scrolling down the computer screens, no matter what identifications you assign to the embodied entities that you cannot see, you have already become posthuman". (Hayles 1999, p. xiv). Embodiment is not a process only granted for humans, and it "makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it" (ibid.). For her, this 'secondary world' is not a frivolous matter since it has also meant the development of new approaches and linguistic dynamics. Therefore, these spaces are both poetic and rational since they have represented a poiesis of man under technical means.

All of the reflections mentioned above will be examined in more details in the following paragraphs, hoping to clarify, on one hand, how technopaganism, as a pagan-based phenomena, actually functions in the digital by re-escribing specific practices and, on the other hand, how essential Neopagan's characteristics, such as animism and a horizontal way of relating with the more-than-human otherness, are manifested in technopaganism. We can therefore proceed with this analysis by considering technopaganism as a productivity of monstrous spirituality since its operational strategies are of a disruptive order. For instance, praying and relating with others on digital games, connecting intimately with 'machines' through spiritual practices – and

vice versa, organizing collective rituals from virtual platforms, are all strategies appropriating practices and spaces and readapting them to specific forms of living.

3.4.1   Digital animism: enabling a Pagan connectedness

When digital environments are approached relationally and dialogically, users get integrated into the machine's dynamics. Since language brings the body and its drives, the changes and disruptions produced by virtual worlds reflect, as well, in language. Language is irremediably attached to all those different stimuli the new environment provides. The greater the levels of perception and embodiment are, the more significant is the poetic emotion and, therefore, the interaction is more fluid, transformative and intimal. It is then valid to ask oneself how people's involvement within the digital context has deepened as a consequence of technological innovation. For instance, the fields of virtual and augmented reality are already allowing the user to give full play to their vision and 'enjoy' the richness of the senses.

This way of relating to surrounding objects and environments can be attached to the concept of animism. A condition – as we have already seen in chapter one – capable of building a bridge between nature and culture by attributing subjective characteristics to the material environment. These animist conditions were also perceived in most of the technopagan practices we already examined – digital games, virtual communities, social media platforms, or artistic performances. The reason is that some users recognize their spaces and manifestations escaping from what is merely instrumental, allowing them "to inquire about themselves and the world" (Aupers 2002, p. 205). Nonetheless, when bringing the concept of animism to computational media, we also acknowledge the religious impulses emerging from it (idem., p. 201). If for the animist 'pre-modern' all creatures and living beings, as well as other elements of nature, have a soul, in the case of the contemporary scenario, virtual objects and spaces are suitable to manifest the sacred and the numinous. Such animistic perception emerging in human spaces shouldn't be thought as an uncommon phenomenon:

> is utterly normal for the human organism, a kind of default setting (…) for our species; that in the absence of intervening technologies, the human senses spontaneously encounter the sensorial surroundings as a field of sensitive and sentient powers. Our most immediate experience of the

earthly world, and of the myriad bodies that compose this world, is of a multiply animate cosmos wherein no thing is definitively void of expressive agency, or life (Abram 2018).

However, this still doesn't give us a clue about how we can fully conceive the animist notion in a computational context. If animism consists in reinventing interactions with the other-than-humans from a non-instrumental perspective, it also considers establishing horizontal relationships with machines. For instance, in the Chewong hunter's shamanic journeys, new items of technology and 'some species previously not thought of as people, may reveal themselves as such' (Howell 2016, p. 63). And this is where lies the semiotic relevance of animism: how it rewrites the ways of approximating the other, bringing other pragmatic relations that irremediably affect the meaning-making dynamics while acknowledging all the pre-linguistic elements manifesting such animist condition. Animism, in short, proposes different relational epistemologies. In the specific animistic processes occurring in digital media, Erik Davis argues how there was some sort of animated living force in the early cyberspace, much in the same way the premodern animist saw his natural surroundings (Davis 2015). Something similar to Jojada Verrips's speculations of what he calls 'modern animism' as a 'machine animism' (1993, p. 71).

When entering in contact with some digital interfaces, several sensorial elements arrive with it, as well as a vast variety of information and meanings. The digital is a context constructed by language but, still, is in a constant process of interrelation and development with external texts and subjects. As in all systems invented by humans to work as communication technologies - what Pierre Levy called writing machines – the possibilities they offer to connect and relate with language remains the most magical. Erik Davis brings Abram's reflections to elucidate this matter. Just as the Zuni elders, who, by focusing their eyes upon a cactus hear the succulent's speech, we also listen to voices and presences pouring out of our printed alphabets (ibid.). For Abram, "[t]his is a form of animism that we take for granted, but it is animism nonetheless—as mysterious as a talking stone" (Abram 1997, p. 131).

This type of animism, however, presents its own perceptive conditions. When we enter into the digital realm, we "find ourselves (much like in any other environment) one type of thing among many other types of things (…) they (and we) are all *thinging*

and Being in particular ways" (Proctor 2018, p. 235). From an animist perspective, we are all surrounded by different types of personhoods – persons in their own way. However, how can we tell which things have personhood and which do not? According to Proctor, depending on the digital platform, "affordances can limit interactions to 'liking' or 'following' or choosing from a number of pre-programmed quasi-emotional connections. And when we decided to 'follow' another thing, or even have a conversation with it, how can we be sure that thing is endowed with personhood in the same way we feel ourselves to be? It could very well be a bot" (ibid.).

Nonetheless, even bots can escape from the simplicity and be carefully examined under the notion of animism and personhood. Though bots are programs operating in ways that can mimic humanity, "they also remember passwords and settings, organize data based on user's perceived preferences, and run complex multi-step operations that a human would find impossible" (Proctor 2018, p. 235). Due to our own experiences and constitution on the internet, we do not perceive any of this. We just perceive what we feel in the forms of images, sounds, texts, and so on. "We cannot 'see' or 'feel' the underlying code constantly happening beneath and around us, weaving the fabric of the internet" (ibid.).

Proctor provides an exciting example by quoting Eduardo Kohn's research about the Runa people of Ecuador's upper Amazon and the experiences of one of their female members when walking in the forest. There, she is a 'self' within the 'forest's living ecology of selves', therefore she must be aware of all the other possible persons in her surroundings (ibid.). To survive, she needs to recognize and respect the personhood of a creature – a Puma, for instance – but avoid any possible interaction with a shape-shifting human. The Runa, therefore, exists in a world of "complex human, non-human, and human-mimicking personhood similar to our experience of the internet". In such contexts, the strategy of assuming possible personhoods can become, according to Proctor[149], the most rational approach. Though this conclusion might need additional explorations - especially when specifying the degrees of personhood and in which

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[149]   Proctor's notion of animism still follows a key aspect of Neopagan animism. As stated by Graham Harvey, the relational aspect is of great importance since humans are surrounded by many other-than-humans. Therefore, personhood is not relegated to humanity but is also acknowledged in spirits, deities, animals, plants, stones, places, and human artifacts, who possess intention and agency.

scenarios such personhood can emerge - it adapts to our poetic comprehension of the digital sphere when it comes to practices resonating with technopaganism.

This conception of animism in computational technologies also connect us to Bachelard's reflections about involvement with digital spaces as they are, without forcing them into rationalized frames emulating reality. Octavio Paz's bridge between poetic and spiritual experience also enlightens this reflection. For him, "There are no colors or sounds in themselves, stripped of meaning: touched by the hand of man, their nature changes, and they enter the world of works. And all works end as meaning; whatever man touches is tinged with intentionality: it is a going toward…"[150] (Paz 1991, p. 46). This poem resonates in the cases formulated in this chapter, where users do not distinguish between the offline 'real' world of humans and the online 'artificial' domains. On the contrary, by relating with computational media, users' discourses challenge the dualistic and pejorative consideration towards the digital. Those spaces are, therefore, considered animated and owner of a substance by their own. Just like Eliade's notion of hierophany, there is no possibility of 'domesticating' into everyday communication what, poetically, is experienced and recognized as sacred: "[w]e are confronted by … the manifestation of something of a wholly different order" (Eliade 1959, p. 11).

There is another process in digital-based practices that can expand this notion of digital animism. As argued by Proctor (2018, p. 237), the user needs to be present within the medium in order to experience it. Jenny Sundén describes this phenomenon as "actively having to type oneself into being (2003, p. 3). That condition implies a constant doing of oneself, similar like the cyborg's productivity when assembling with other elements and re-doing its own constitution. For Proctor, "this type of recursive self-creation recalls the autopoietic[151] structure: it exists with the goal of remarking and employs information around itself to that end" (2018, p. 237). Such active "doing of

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[150]   Trans. by Ruth L. C. Simms. Original versión in Spanish: No hay colores ni sones en sí, desprovistos de significación: tocados por la mano del hombre, cambian de naturaleza y penetran en el mundo de las obras. Y todas las obras desembocan en la significación; lo que el hombre roza, se tiñe de intencionalidad: es un ir hacia…"

[151]   The term arrives from Maturana and Varela's work with autonomous biological systems. In the digital context, entities are also able to "remake themselves based on information from outside the system." (Proctor 2018, p. 233). To read more, see: Maturana and Varela, 1980.

oneself" in the internet intensifies the process of "recursive remaking" (ibid.). For such an end, this process needs to gather information from the interaction with various elements that may or may not have personhood.

Several non-human persons will actually participate in the process of "autopoietic regeneration" (ibid.). Proctor refers to this scenario as cybernetic animism[152], "the practice of interacting in digital spaces within an ecology of non-humans and/or non-bodied elements and the process through which this interaction makes open-bodied identification available as a way of Being-in-the-World" (ibid.). Nonetheless, for conceptual reasons and due to the previous analysis we have been developing in this thesis, we will continue using the notion of digital animism instead.

This existing bidirectionality - how users are affected just as much they affect the digital environment - is another way of positioning the dialogism human-machine and, therefore, its relational strategy that echoes profoundly in the notion of animism. In order to deepen this analysis, we could bring the work of some artists that, by proposing other relations with the machine, can connect to aims, desires, and needs related to religious practices as, for instance, communicating with ancestors. Cy X, whom we already examined earlier in this chapter, developed a project called "The Black Projection Project"[153], as a way of denouncing the limiting information about the past. As appears on their website, this project seeks to break such an issue: "[w]e have all the tools that we need. We have each other. We have our ancestors. We have love". According to them, "[t]his portal mapping device is the first attempt into exploring the creation of a computational device that could be used to open a portal". Even if the work is imprinted with some political aspects – like race and colonization – once the performance starts, there is no 'one' objective or a singular experience allowed. Each participant is free of involving with the performance according to his/her own

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[152] Though this definition might work to refer to those 'other types of personhood' inhabiting the medium and how 'they' interact with the subject while contributing to his/her autopoietic regeneration, the notion of 'cybernetics' might need an extended analysis in this thesis in order to be used, as well as Proctor's considerations about "non-human and non-bodied elements". In this context, I will use the form of "digital animism" even if I agree with Proctor's contribution and all the potentialities it opens for the study of technopaganism.

[153] To read more about the project, visit: https://cyberwitch666.com.

'subjective conformations' independently of the authors' personal intention[154]. What keeps the phenomenological involvement here is a non-instrumental perception of the machine and the development of poetic language when participating in such performances. In another project, Ritual for Release (2021), a video performance that is also a ritual (Figures 3.13, 3.14), it is possible to note such unfolding of poetic and animistic interaction to construct, together with the computational medium, a collective experience.

Figures 3.13, 3.14: Cy X Ritual for Release (2021). In her own words, (Ableton + Adobe Premiere + Magic).

Another interesting examples is Zoe Sandoval's artistic interactive project called Compose.love – which is fully explained in the cases studies, sub-section 4.3.2. This project consists in the development of a web page in which anyone who enters can participate. The practice transforms into a magical event in which the audience have the opportunity to cast a spell. The artist, therefore, creates a ritual which gives to all participants a poem in return.

In both scenarios, artists - just as players embodied in their avatars when involved with computational elements and environments - enter in contact with all those personhoods present in the 'machine'. We could sustain that those experiences deposit

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[154] In other words, though there is some sort of 'imprint' of the ideologeme of the text, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to get a poetic expression wholly detached from the life's circumstances of the subject. What instead cannot be tolerated by 'the poem' is a delimitation of the levels of the poetic experience by censuring certain experiences or interpretations. In such a way, though Social circumstances inspire cy X's performances, the development of their 'ritual' unfolds by the experience of the practice as it is.

subjects in a spiritual process of autopoiesis which, similar to poets and priests from ancient Greece (Adradoz 1981, p. 19), have a mysterious communication with deities. Subjects are taken out from the everyday world and filled with new feelings and knowledge into them. What aforementioned deeply resonates with Proctor's recursive remaking of subjects in the animist territories of digital media.

If users engage regularly and closely with virtual spaces, there is a dialogue between the digital sphere and subjects, not a monologue. The transformations produced in these performances are, then, vital. A space that transforms 'me', or generates specific changes in 'me', is a place that exists. We could say, poetically speaking, that the digital exists as it is and not necessarily as a representation of something else. This is because, as Jacobson argued, the poetic focuses on the message for its own sake. Due to those characteristics it is possible to create a sacred space on a ritual performance: a sacred space where transformation and change occur (Turner 1967, 95).

3.4.2 The avatar: An anaphoric entity representing the technopagan.

As we have seen in past sections of this thesis, an increasing number of performances experienced through the figure of digital avatars – due to their immeasurable potentialities of interaction – are taking place within innovative and interactive interfaces not only on social media platforms but even in spaces as those of digital games. On that matter, open-world games such as Minecraft and 3D virtual communities such as Second Life have become collaborative and configurable spaces where many users engage with religious practices at multiple levels of immersion and, therefore, become a medium to share, portray and practice their faiths.

We have already focused on the potentialities of meaning of digital spaces in performances understood as technopagans. Now we will explore how, through the enunciation of the religious by digital avatars, users can propose new experiences while enhancing the uses of such texts. In this scenario, the avatar is a powerful instrument of self-reflection – the subject projecting as a believer – and action – every time he creates or participates in religious manifestations such as rituals – in the online context. This takes into account how religious practices in virtual worlds have contributed to reformulating the concept of the digital, understanding it not as a simple artefact but

rather as an environment in which particular meanings related to the spiritual are produced.

This premise could be reflected with a fragment of Jorge Luis Borges when, in The Other, he tells us: "I have thought a great deal about this encounter, which I've never told anyone about. I believe I have discovered the key to it. The encounter was real, but the other man spoke to me in a dream, which was why he could forget me; I spoke to him while I was awake, and so I am still tormented by the memory" (1975). Precisely, the transformative possibilities offered by the avatar - that other digital self - are so strong that they go far beyond the religious or recreational spheres.

In the case of technopagan practices, the importance of the avatar is that it activates the performances and the construction of poetic environments by including the speaking subject in the online world. As we have already seen in chapter 2 – sub-section 2.3.2 – introducing the avatar as the digitally embodied user is to introduce, as well, the practices and desires that come attached to the notion of the body (Braidotti, 2013, p. 33). However, this subjectivity implies a process of autopoiesis which also makes possible the activation of a given digital platform into a sacred space when we relate with it without critical pretensions. For such reason, the avatar is both 'presence' and 'activation'. Without the subject's presence the medium doesn't work therefore neither a poetic experience can emerge, nor a ritual can be performed.

Regarding the conception of presence, the avatar can be portrayed in many different ways. Since it is not - necessarily - a copy or a reproduction of users but a productivity on its own terms, it is not subjected to a 'real' referent. The avatar makes no claims upon conceptual reality and is in no way bound to it. Just as through the perceiving body the world becomes a sense (Finol 2015), the avatar is what opens myself – participatorily – into the digital world, making me inhabit it. The avatar is not a normative term. Therefore, there is no way to delimit in which degrees the subject is embodied in an avatar. However, it can be examined to which degrees there is a process of autopoiesis in a given avatar. For such a reason, we can categorize it as: a) an articulated and complex design, customized by users. Second Life and Minecraft avatars, for instance; b) a figure that can be linked to the user in one way or another. For example, less complex avatars not permitting 3D customization, a picture, a video, etc.

Starhawk's performances, where all the participants are involved in the ritual, can also enter this group; c) a trace, a mark, something denoting the user's presence in that specific space. It is not necessarily a figure like the other types of avatars, but still, the user can leave his own print on the platform. For instance, clicking links or elements in a given interface, a color, a text with a name, or a movement. A good example is the participation of artists and audiences in the performances of Cy X and Zoe Sandoval.

It can be noticed how, indistinctively of the type of avatar embodiment, each time the subject uttered himself through an avatar there is a process of writing. Or, more specifically, a rewriting of both the space and the user – what we already understand as autopoiesis. Such experiences through the avatar – and all the transformations it produces - can be understood under Kristeva's notion of *jouissance*. This term has many faces and is related to different emotions. For Kristeva, the word takes all its etymological complexity[155]. She understands it similarly to Jacques Lacan – as the totality of enjoyment – but for her, all the word's meanings are kept in a simultaneous way (Roudiez 1980, p. 16). In another mentioning of the word, Kristeva refers to it as desire, as mystical discourse (1982, p. 127) but also as suffering and *jouit* altogether (Kristeva 1980, pp. 163-164). What is important about this term is how it presents different dimensions of meaning simultaneously: "in a very it is also perceived as "the 'autonomy' of language coursing through one's writing; (…) a view into the abyss across which one's identity and one's meaning are constituted; it can be a leaving behind of one's ordinary sense of self in an ecstatic moment; it can be the transient

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[155] Jean Graybeal (1990 [no pages, Chapter I]) makes an incredible description of the many faces and meanings around the term of *Jouissance* in different epochs. I will share the whole paragraphs due to its etymological richness: "Jouissance is the nominal form of the French verb *jouir*. *Jouir* is translated 'to enjoy, to revel, to be in possession (de)'. Jouissance then means 'enjoyment; possession, use; joy, pleasure, delight; interest payable'. The Latin root of *jouir* is *gaudēre*, 'to rejoice'. The presumed Indo-European root, *gau- (…), is defined as meaning 'to rejoice; also, to have religious fear or awe'. *Jouir* seems to be etymologically unrelated to *jouer*, 'to play', which derives from Latin jocāri, 'to joke', although the reconstructed Indo-European root of these words, *yek-, apparently meant `to speak'. In any case, *jouir* is connected in the history of words with 'joy,' 'enjoyment,' and a sense of 'religious fear or awe'. (…) Contemporary French idiom uses jouissance as a common term for orgasm, but its connotations have been expanded as well as variously specified by Lacan, Barthes, Kristeva, and others exploring the interfaces among meaning, pleasure, and language". To read more, see: https://publish.iupress.indiana.edu/read/language-and-the-feminine-in-nietzsche-and-heidegger/section/0f248bb9-ba9d-409f-a8b7-82a0092952f1#ich1

paradoxical oscillation of contraries in an image" (Graybeal 1990). *Jouissance* is, then, a process of the subject on trial: self-creation and self-observation. *Jouissance* is where all language, symptoms, and creation are directed (ibid.).

After analyzing how avatars can be manifested and what it means for subjects to construct and destroy themselves in virtual worlds during each utterance, we can now explore the avatar's 'activation' function. According to Chidester and Linenthal (1995, p. 10), the human body is essential for the ritual production of sacred place simply because ritual action 'manipulates basic spatial distinctions between up and down, right and left, inside and outside, and so on, that necessarily revolve around the axis of the living body. The body is what demarcates the special frontiers between one space and the other. And, by experiencing phenomena through the body, we can also assign meaning to certain positions – upside is equal to good, for instance. However, the subject is not geographically positioned in the digital world. He is, instead, linguistically introduced into a given space before activating the performance. This function of linguistically placing the subject can be understood from the concept of anaphora.

Etymologically, the anaphora refers to a movement through a space. In Greek, it means emergence, elevation, ascension, ascension, to rise from the bottom, a turning back. 'Ana' means movement towards, over, through something. It is also used to designate a continuous presence in memory or the mouth. For Homer and other poets, the adverb 'Ana' means to unfold around the space, throughout, and everywhere (Kristeva 1978). Kristeva reintroduces the term of *anaphora* in order to go beyond the concept of structure. The anaphoric function she welcomes is relational and independent from the sign's domain (Van Wert and Mignolo 1977, p. 98). It indicates a relationship and the notion of difference in the text (ibid.). The anaphoric function replaces the unique object (Kristeva 11, p. 1987) since it constantly refers to previous elements or other elements that are not present but still produce some effects.

Then, the anaphora describes what we understand as an avatar, not in its embodied function, but in terms of movement and positioning. We could even say that the digital embodiment in the avatar is possible due to the anaphorical function, which, at the same time, is of a poetic nature: the anaphora, just as the poetic, does not remain in the

stillness of the page, but it moves around, making various connections in the process. In the practices we define as technopagans, the avatar follows the anaphoric functions depending on the subject's actions: participating in a ritual through a digital game, joining in a ceremony on a virtual platform, or intimately involving machines in artistic projects.

The anaphora also describes the break produced when creating a sacred space. The subjects activate such space by breaking the homogeneity of space. It is a passage from one region to another one. The notion of a digital sacred space can, therefore, be described by the anaphoric function because it highlights a space which is not the same. It has been altered and activated by the avatar. This irruption also describes technopagan practices in a given space, considering that space is not homogeneous in religious and spiritual practices. "For profane experience, on the contrary, space is homogeneous and neutral; no break qualitatively differentiates the various parts of its mass." (Eliade 1959, p. 20).

To conclude, we can now reconnect with the first reflections from Bachelard: each image must be taken on its own terms. The image, rather than being constituted once and for all like a metaphor, is new each time it is caught. In such a way, the poetic act has no past (Bachellard 1964, p. xi). In this context, therefore, that transformative character of the anaphoric avatar makes it a poetic act with no origin and no destination. Rather than being a fixed category, images reverberate, transforming the words and images around them.

3.5 Further considerations regarding technopaganism: towards a semio-philosophical approach.

3.5.1   Technopaganism as a form of life: Wittgenstein and Fontanille

The form of life is not grounded on something
more fundamental; it is the fundament.
Gertrude Conway (1989, 24)

Through the development of this chapter, we went through different scenarios in order to understand technopaganism and how it is manifested nowadays. We could see how the main Neopagan's characteristics continue to display a variety of practices existing in virtual worlds. Some of them are directly related to a religious or spiritual pursuit. Others, instead, can be defined as exhibiting a family resemblance to Neopaganism. In this way, and since Neopaganism was already conceived in this thesis as a set of narratives, performances, and discourses having religious resemblances, technopaganism keeps those same or very similar characteristics, but rewrites the uses of different media in such a process. In this context, the analysis cannot indiscriminately define all the analysed texts as 'pure' technopagan, nor can it consider only those texts which explicitly describe themselves as technopagan to be such. Instead, this thesis reinterprets different texts through the lens of an animistic ontology in their way of relating with digital spaces while emphasizing the ritualistic elements and constructing their performances through poetic language.

Because we are not dealing with strong semantic structures but with signifying practices connected between them by Neopagan resemblances, technopaganism could be understood more as a set of configurations of languages and discourses rather than as a self-sufficient category. This takes us to Jacques Fontanille's reflections on the Wittgensteinian concept of 'Forms of Life', understood as complex semiotic configurations (2018, p. 284). This notion shouldn't be confused with 'lifestyles'. The latter are sociological typologies – they are not proper semiotic-objects – whereas forms of life, in Fontanille's interpretation, consist of a pragmatic development of language – pragmatic regarding the semiotic dimension. They are signifying processes constituted by the syntagmatic axis - at the level of expression - and by the set of congruent selections - at the level of content (Fontanille 2018, p. 26). Forms of life depend on the 'practice of language' instead of semantics fixations. Their development, affects "all the

levels of the generative trajectory of meaning of any discourse or semiotic universe: ranging from sensory and perceptual schemes to narrative, moral and axiological structures" (13, p. 409)[156]. Therefore, forms of life can be defined as semiotic organizations – languages, possessing a collective nature since they characterize identities in a social/cultural and individual/collective order (idem., p. 25).

According to those characteristics, Technopaganism can be considered as a form of life. Just as Neopaganism, it can be intended as a language because of its demarcating, signifying, and communicating[157] functions. Through its development, those texts understood as technopagan alter all levels of any discourse's generative trajectory of meaning. It is, besides, a collective practice that actualizes itself in a reader/writer dynamics. Finally, it mainly works in a pragmatic dimension by offering other 'poetic' uses and understandings of platforms and 'objects'. However, some important questions remain to be addressed. In which way, then, can we recognize a text as technopagan when, eventually, it is often not even understood in that way by the people involved?

To deepen the 'Forms of Life' approach as a strategy to analyse technopaganism, we need to explore its philosophical origins. The term was initially employed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his posthumous works Philosophical Investigations, for whom a form of life is a process allowing to generalize the 'language games'. With the concept of 'language games' (Wittgenstein 2009, §7) Wittgenstein seeks to "elucidate the radical variety of the 'things' we do with words. And therefore, conceiving language as a system which is not closed" (Andrejč 2016, p. 25). Wittgenstein's concept of language games, therefore, is important here since it explains how the meaning of an expression only comes into existence when it is used. (Fontanille 2018, p. 26) It searches to "elucidate the radical variety of the 'things' we do with words" without considering language "as a closed logical system or 'the totality of propositions'" (Andrejč 2016, p. 25).

Having this in mind, there is no need to define or encapsulate technopaganism with a unchangeable notion, or to condition such combination of practices as technopagan only

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156   Translation provided by Gabriele Marino, *forthcoming*.

157   This is according Julia Kristeva's studies about language. To read more, see: Kristeva 1969, p. 8.

if they all share the exact same set of characteristics. Just as the later Wittgenstein proposes, "we should not seek a single common characteristic—and hence no unified definition—of everything we call 'language'. Rather, as in the case of the phenomena we tend to call 'games', there is only 'a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and crisscrossing', exhibiting what Wittgenstein calls family resemblances" (Andrejč 2016, p. 25). That is to say, instead of seeking a single essence of language[158] Wittgenstein now suggests us to view language as a family-resemblance concept (idem., p. 26). I suggest we apply the same reflection to what we understand as technopaganism. There is no unified notion of what technopaganism is, no general form. Instead, we have family resemblances of practices and discourses.

However, this does not call for simply *any* random or indiscriminate resemblances. Language games are still governed by rules that provide sense and articulation. Rules of language or grammar, broadly speaking, include(s) "any rule which determines what it makes sense to say, including rules which are commonly described as syntactic, logical, or pragmatic' (Glock 2008, p. 26). According to Andrejč, by this, it is possible to establish internal relations between concepts and delimit, as well, as the variations and transformations which are possible with the concepts and phrases in that system (2016, p. 27). On this basis, grammatical dispositions of the language games involved help us recognize technopagan elements manifested in specific performances or discourses and delimit which elements can 'enter' and which make sense.

Fontanille introduced his conception of forms of life as typologies of social behaviours, constituted by a coherent disposition of attitudes, acts, and utterances allowing to articulate them into certain systems of meaning coherently. They are personal configurations, ways of being and feeling. According to the aforementioned, a form of life is the semiotic norm that pervades and, in the first place, determines such narrative through its enactment, its bodily and existential translation into an experience. To live according to a given form of life means to conform to a regulative model of action, to pursue a style 'of strategic behaviour' (Marino, *forthcoming*).

Fontanille takes the project of Wittgenstein as one of general pragmatics, which will apparently give preference to cultural practices and to the variability of linguistic and

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[158]   To read more, see also Wittgenstein 2009, §66.

semiotic uses over the system and the structure (Fontanille 2018). The hierarchy of the planes of analysis that he proposes makes it possible to replace uses, which are largely unpredictable, with intentional forms - forms of life - (ibid.). In this way, the notion of forms of life contributes to understanding the dynamics from which subjects give a technopagan meaning to their surroundings and how they include and articulate certain patrons belonging to technopaganism, among all the possible alternatives they have in digital spaces.

Chapter 4
Case Studies

The following case studies will provide different analyses on some practices understood as technopagan, or that could enter into a technopagan worldview. For such a reason, this chapter will include a semiotic analysis of certain performances and interviews with the participants. This also introduces other points of reflection consisting of a subjective consideration of religion and spirituality in a digital environment. We will see how users and programmers re-write digital environments and their functions, generating, in turn, new interpretative connections and cooperation. That is why, in this new sociocultural context forged around and from virtual worlds, new ways of thinking about digital subjectivities and other strategies for the production and consumption of religious experiences emerge.

4.1 Programmers: the spiritual journey of a technopagan

The first case study is that of Mark Pesce, one of the most prominent characters of the early technopaganism. Since there is plenty of information about his journey as a technopagan, a brief introduction to his practices and experiences is developed as follows, adding some of his reflections about nowadays' digital words to the case studies.

4.1.1 Mark Pesce: Cyberspace and religion conversions

During the 90s, it was common to find – in both users and developers – deliberations about computer technologies working as doors for a diversity of mysteries and as a promise for the future of religion. Many fictional popular narratives like William Gibson's Neuromancer (1984) and Vernor Vinge's True Names (1981) helped to mold such techno-mystic feelings while creating profound links between computational technology and magic (Aupers 2009, p. 154). Mark Pesce is an excellent example of this stage in digital media. He aimed to use language programming to develop his spiritual journey while exploring the emerging internet and how it has rewritten the ontological understandings of technology. For Pesce:

> Computers are simply mirrors (…) [t]here's nothing in them that we didn't put there. If computers are viewed as evil and dehumanizing, then we made them that way. I think computers can be as sacred as we are, because they can embody our communication with each other and with the entities – the divine parts of ourselves – that we invoke in that space (Davis 1995).

In his online sites "within the Noosphere" - as he used to name the net - Pesce offered his readers and followers a variety of written works, rituals, and interviews explaining why the digital environment should be understood in terms of esoteric reflection and occult practices. Since during those years the internet was not as massified as it is now, his spiritual journey was wholly attached to his work in programming, discovering the many common points between magical and religious thinking with the dynamism, expansion, and interconnectedness of the net. As pointed out by Stef Aupers, Mark Pesce's spiritual conception of the digital was not due to a previous interpretation of technology as magical or enchanted, but instead "it was mainly his interaction with computer technology that set him on the trajectory of technopaganism" (Aupers 2009, p. 159).

In the interview, Pesce told Aupers that a sort of magical thinking impregnated his work as a programmer:

> I went to San Francisco and started working in Virtual Reality… thinking about Virtual Reality and now starting to work in it as a programmer and designer and trying to create it, I now start to see correlations between what we would call "magical thinking" and what we would think of it as the designer: the ontology of cyberspace (..) And it starts changing the way I think the world is constructed. This starts to have an influence on my technical practice. It starts to feedback on my ontological understanding of the world. And that just became a feedback. Until I ended in this place which you can call technopaganism (Aupers 2009, pp. 159-160).

Pesce's way of inhabiting the net was comparable to a digital pilgrimage surrounded by binary codes and algorithmic processes, resulting in his later conversion into Technopaganism. In that way, Pesce also ritualized his virtual environment by bringing – or discovering – the sacred in cyberspace and by shifting the instrumental view of computer technology into a 'lived' territory of spiritual potentialities. An example is his Cybersamhain ritual in 1997[159] (Figure 4.1):
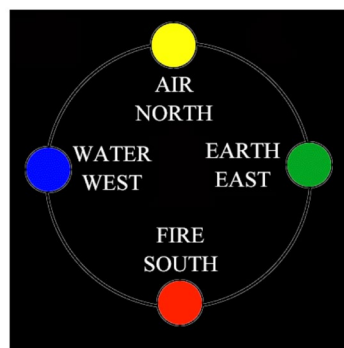
Figure 4.1: Cybersamhain Ritual

4.1.2 A conversation with Mark Pesce

The following is an extract from a conversation with Mark Pesce, where he shares some of his reflections appearing in the draft of a book called Malleus Speculis. There, he reflects on the present condition of virtual worlds and how humans have been conceding themselves, the other, and the digital medium itself. He continuous to share the great mystery this medium still represents for us, not because a significant portion of

humanity populates it but because its ubiquity and effects are still not evident to our comprehension. On such a matter, new mysteries bring new potential lectures of its spiritual potentialities. Though Pesce didn't get into any religious reference, his description of virtual worlds as significantly closed to conscious and the semiotic fluxes of humans – according to Kristeva's notion of "semiotic" – also leaves an open door to our past explorations and analysis about these world's poetic potentialities. However, this poetic element of computational media shouldn't be idealized as a harmless condition. Instead, it welcomes a whole variety of unarticulated processes crushing between each other's while avoiding all intents of control. The digital realm affects us, and we still need to learn on which levels.

> The real world of the mid 21st century, symbolically dense, overstimulating, and panoptically aware of our presence within it - always watching - totally crowds out any innate sense of ourselves. It's gotten to the point that we openly long for (and secretly dread) any brief encounters with a world that simply exists on its own terms, empty and asking nothing of us. If I covered my eyes with a display that projected only a perfect black, and my ears with headphones that cancelled even the smallest ambient noise, I could visit a space of sensory deprivation. With nothing presenting itself to my senses, my interior landscape would slowly relax into whatever it believes is its natural shape.

> As soon as my attention wanders, that brief moment of freedom vanishes. I find myself in another reality: memory. The empty stage quickly populates with experiences, new and old, that have somehow left their mark on me. The virtual world - like a funhouse mirror - twists and amplifies invisible qualities of being, stretching my psychic dimensions into hyperbolic forms, reflecting them back in a way that allows me both to see and ignore the truth. I am unreal, but recognisable, revealing parts rarely seen, rendered at monstrous scale.

> Because it is empty, the virtual world becomes the ideal screen for the projection of my self, making the unconscious, if not conscious, at least visible. All of the neurosis, narcissism and psychopathies that lurk beneath my skin in the real world find their way into the virtual world as tangible expressions, because the virtual is entirely psychical. Its manifestations are projections of me. As a psychic microscope, the virtual world should be the greatest tool ever offered in what Philip Rieff called "The Triumph of the Therapeutic." The virtual world can expose the unconscious in an almost predictable and systematic way. I can get a look into myself nearly impossible by other means. Yet, with the exception of works by a few pioneers like Sherry Turkle, there have been no psychoanalytic approaches to a space that is definitionally psychoanalytically composed.

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[159] To see the full Cybersamhain ritual: http://hyperreal.org/~mpesce/samhain/ritual.html

If the virtual world existed in its own plane, entirely separate from the real world, we could entertain the option of a tactical withdrawal, closing the door and sealing off its psychic amplifier. But the moment to make that choice has passed. In addition to the face-to-face of the real world, another space for connection now exists. Born from commerce and the love of money, cyberspace has been overwhelmed by our all-too-human drive to communicate. We could not claim that people do not love money, but we know that for the vast majority, we love one another more than money. Each of us gets the opportunity to peer into the fascinating depths of others - or at least imagine we see depths in others. There remains the very real possibility that these funhouse mirrors of cyberspace exaggerate human depths. Things online seem more dramatic, ironic, or profound because the online world distorts and amplifies those qualities. We come across full of sound and fury, signifying only that we imagine in one another depths we pretend to ourselves.

Yet this pretense has endured. It dominates conversation. Connected through the virtual, people appear extreme - we seem smarter or stupider, fairer or more prejudiced, happier or more miserable. Reflected in these mirrors - and in the gaze of countless others - human strengths and human foibles amplify to absurd endpoints, an overstimulated emission of emotion. To feel in the virtual world means to feel together. Feeling together can create common ground for understanding, sympathy and empathy. Sometimes, outrages can produce their opposite. We who connect to mourn an outrage often find something in one other that endures beyond a brief moment, persisting even as the outrage fades. Our worst human qualities create the opportunity for other, higher parts to appear. Make hate to make love.

The opposite appears to be equally true. When we rub up against one another intimately in the virtual world, we can see through the mirrors, into something closer to reality. The qualities we project onto one another become translucent, then fall away. That feels like a huge insult to our self, which narcissistically imagines all others as our ideal reflections, a disappointment leading to rage as these others never conform to expectations, nor do they comply with demands. Our inevitable (if infantile) disappointments, shared through these new networks of communication, become the seed for new outrages.

So it goes on, endlessly. In the age of the virtual, we cycle ever-more-rapidly through peaks of love, disappointment and outrage. We seem oblivious to the source of this cycle - emotional attachment. We get such such a charge in the virtual world that it makes us blind to its capacity to bring out the worst in us. The drive to connect that serves us so well in the real world - as evidenced within families, tribes, villages and cities - unexpectedly produces its opposite in the virtual world. The closer we come together, the further we feel driven apart.

These emotionally overwhelming moments of community in the virtual world inevitably bleed over into our real experiences, as we pin the feelings experienced in these funhouse mirrors of ours souls to the people we meet in the flesh. Each day brings its own troubles, and each time its own

tortures. The problems of our present precisely match the needs and the capacities of we who face them, like hammer and anvil. These problems - our problems - emerge from the gift of the virtual world: a universal, unconscious collectivity. We are connected but do not yet understand that, nor what it means for us. Instead, we thrash about like a blinded Cyclops, powerful and terrified, smashing all to wrack and ruin. Who has done this? "No man." We never find the fault in ourselves, blaming others for our circumstance, until the ruin of our world.

But we cannot bestow the gift of seeing on one another. I cannot force you to see the world through my eyes any more than you can force me to see it through yours. This gift cannot be given. It can only be received. Here's the test for each of us - all of us - one that is being administered continually at an ever-accelerating rate, until we learn the lesson. In this moment it consumes almost all of our attention, because what lies on the other side of this test cannot be understood until the test has been passed. The land just ahead of us is unknowable to ourselves today, invisible and impossible and just beyond arm's reach.

4.2 Avatars as mechanism of expression and religious practice

The following research was carried out in open-world games – Second Life and Minecraft – which per se allow a multiplicity of potential options and strategies of enunciation. As we have already seen, among all religious activities, ritual is ultimately the most interactive and immersive one expressing specific meanings and effects (Bell 1997, p. 138) and, consequently, in which one can experience transformation and religion itself. On such a way, when studying digital performances of a religious nature, the avatar's possibilities can be tested in rituals, not only to reach an aesthetic resemblance to the offline experience but also to obtain the immersive levels that are needed to generate their transformative effects (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: Temple in Minecraft

Minecraft and Second Life represent great options of analysis, due to the possible several interpretations by players. As we have seen before, Minecraft does not have a central or fixed objective. Since it is an open-world game, players can grow their character and alter the virtual territory in a personal way. Therefore, many participants make use of the game's unlimited building possibilities to introduce religious actions and aesthetics into it. The game offers the opportunity of designing altars, religious temples, and even their own 'fictional' religions. The same discourse applies to Second Life[160]. This 3D virtual community is characterized by allowing a considerable level of autonomy and experience through the use of a personified avatar. Besides, users can

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[160]   Though it can be considered more as a 3D virtual community than a proper 'game', it still acts as a game and provide users with the same environment and 'controlled space'.

design their own spaces, follow a profession, and even establish relationships with other subjects with similar interests. For such reasons, it has been one of the most recurrent virtual platform regarding religious activities. Second Life has proven to be an ideal platform for believers: they can create or be part of existent groups, attend theology lessons, express their spiritual concerns, and practice rituals. Thanks to their diversity of discourses and their inexhaustible sources of inspiration, users can actively spiritualize the digital territory.

In these games the actions carried out by the avatar would update such spaces by bringing their own religious activities to the plane of expression. Therefore, it will increase the significant possibilities of the digital environment by building different and novel texts. This clearly reflects the anaphoric function of avatars described in the last chapter. Through this, a diversity of activities and practices appearing to be far or opposed to spiritual pursuits acquire a religious dimension. This makes the digital religious performance not only highly dialogic but translinguistic[161], given that it is comprised of different languages emerging from different areas of culture and society. On that matter, the experience is deeply close to the religious, even if the way it has been uttered may even seem profane.

In interactive virtual communities like Second Life, there are plenty of visual tools working as means of stimulation, in order to 'travel' between different realities. This platform has been gaining a high degree of popularity among religious participants for its interactive dynamics that have transcend the merely ludic. In Second Life, users that are embodied-incarnated in their avatars can actually perform a diversity of religious interactions through them.

In the universe of Minecraft, its exploratory and generative faculties allow novel and interesting discourses. By using virtual bricks, there is the possibility of creating a variety of elements: from Noah's Ark, to religious icons - for example in the form of Jesus, popes, priests, rabbis, and angels - basically using blocky objects representing the outer 'skin'. When performing a ritual, it is possible to have access to a diversity of

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[161]   Translinguistic: "an apparatus that redistributes the order of language" (Kristeva 1980, p. 36) and it is not dominated by an ideology, nor by history, and cannot be reduced to any language.

objects like potions, crystal balls, altars and spells, depending on the user's religious path. It is also possible to create fictional religious narratives working as a pastiche of many different belief systems. For instance, in the Botania mod21 – characterized by natural magic and magically altered flowers – the user can prepare a ritual for summoning Gaia (Figure 4.3) by carefully constructing the 'sacred space' with blocks, flowers and other magic objects. The player even has an instruction manual that allows the user to successfully undertake the activity. Here the game makes reference to neopagan or even shamanic religious traditions.

Figure 4.3: Gaia Ritual in Minecraft

In the cases examined in the following paragraphs, Second Life and Minecraft platforms expose all aspects characterizing a technopagan text in their own particular ways. It is important to mention that though in Minecraft there are several examples of Neopagans – and players defining themselves as technopagans – this thesis will present a case study that could result paradoxical: that of Jeremy Smith, a Christian player. This case was chosen among many others to highlight a visible condition of technopaganism: its textual arrangement – being deeply influenced by the poetic language - follows an atheological path. Therefore, this election won't produce any conflict on technopagan's conceptual structures since the importance lies in how practices are being carried out and in the strategies users have chosen to develop their performances.

4.2.1 Second Life: A bank of spiritual memories

Alexis Nightlinger[162] is a cyber-witch that, through the 3-D virtual community, shares her own experiences about Neopaganism, explaining how it has favored her spiritual journey. Her connection to the deities, the performances of magical rituals and the celebrations are all developed through her avatar, functioning not only as an extension of herself but as a process allowing her to aesthetically express her transformation and desires. The relationships she has established with the avatar represent a creative process.

Alexis is actually the avatar's name – not the author's. It is common to see her talking to her viewers about paganism and witchcraft while gardening or working as an apothecary in a virtual shop. Her conversations can include spiritual advices, tips for virtual pagan celebrations, or a description of her altar or ceremonial clothing. In one video, for instance, she shares: "you have no idea of how many emails I get or how many times I hear from people during readings about how they feel stuck in their spiritual life. Well, that is because they are afraid to change things up. I say this all the time. You have to change things up. You have to be able not to be afraid to do something different"[163].

In the specific case of rituals, the preparation for her is ultimately the most important step, as the user's subjectivity is expressed to the fullest there. When preparing to celebrate Samhain – the Indo-European festivity that inspired Halloween – she not only dressed up her avatar with the relevant clothing, jewels and makeup, but also arranged her virtual home with iconic references to the sacred tools, fictionalized creatures and objects really existing in the physical world. Her altar contained a variety of symbolic pagan elements that, while remaining faithful to her religion, also included a notable level of personalization (Figure 4.4). There is also the possibility of 'activating' some of those elements, for instance, clicking on the altar in order to light the candles. As Massimo Leone (2011, p. 340) assured, "the enunciation of the religious dimension in

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[162]   Alexis Nightlinger and her Halloween ritual performance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axxoawrA0Y4.

[163]   Fragment taken from Alexis Nightlinger's YouTube channel. Starting from 4:47 to 5:11: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXzeIRGInQ8

Second Life through the various semiotic elements that compose its representation and interactive dynamics can become an object of study, according to the perspective that requires an aesthetic, phenomenological and semiotic sensibility". However, and for purposes of this thesis, the analysis will be limited to how the interpretation of such environments allows users to construct and express their religious dimension.

Figure 4.4: Alexis Nightlinger's Samhain ritual in Second Life

One of the main advantages of Second Life are the multiple alternative combinations when creating an avatar. When users are free from the limitations of the offline environment, they find themselves surrounded by a multiplicity of options from which to choose, combine and construct their avatar bodies, as well as their sacred spaces. The participant can be in control of every small detail, including the flooring, and particular elements for the priests and priestess to develop their celebrations or sermons. The creator can also enable specific animations - like praying, in order to create a more immersive experience. Furthermore, users are in a constant performative condition considering that such practices are the result of their imagination and interpretation, creating particular narratives in those virtual worlds.

In Nighlinger's experience, the avatar's role is crucial since it allows her to experience a religious performance while fully inhabiting the gaming territory and to explore other ways of relating with her spiritual path. Just as de Wildt pointed out, the avatar adds linguistic and conceptual depth, "suggesting videogames potential for creating embodied, empathic and emotional experiences. By calling it an avatar, the

playable digital object was now no longer limited to merely being a tool, but a potentially new incarnation of self." (2019, p. 7).

4.2.2 Minecraft: Playing in a pagan world or Adventures of Christian theologies

Minecraft Theology[164] is an excellent example of today's scenario where users re-write the game-space by inviting complex cultural practices. In the video blog created by Jeremy Smith, he shares Christian principles while playing the game. He uses Minecraft to represent his religious reflections by creating a narrative aligning both the ludic and the spiritual. In one of his videos, he explains Minecraft Theology's dynamics:

> we are going to have a lot of theological thoughts and we are going to talk about some stuff that's happening in current life and on how gamers can kind to respond to different things, whatever it be (…) for just the average person who loves to be a nerd and what does our faith, what does the scriptures, and what does God's presence means for all of that. So we'll have a lot of fun with that. We wanted this to be a kind of family-friendly process but also at the same time realizing that our audience ranges from 6 years old to (…) 58.[165]

In all his videos, Smith dialogues with his viewers about bible fragments, life advice, and some other reflections when performing specific tasks in the game. For instance, while talking about how it is important to have faith in difficult times and let God have control of one's life, his avatar is suffering difficulties in the game. He recreated a practical experience in a Catholic sermon within the game, and even shared biblical messages such as: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41,10). For Smith, the virtual world of Minecraft is far from being artificial, mainly because it condenses community issues, identity, existential crisis, sacred spaces, and so forth. The ludic and exploratory atmosphere of digital games is the reason why it is possible to mix all those discourses without conflicts, offering other conditions and experiences that could hardly take place in the non-virtual world.

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[164]   Minecraft   Theology   Webpage: https://churchm.ag/minecraft-theology-letting-god-be-incontrolseason-3-episode-02/

[165]   Fragment taken from a Minecraft Theology YouTube chapter. Starting from 1:39 to 2:17: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ikPpOTXQqM

Videogames and digital platforms, in general, are far from being superficial phenomena. On the contrary, they represent "an important site of exploration into the intersection of religion and contemporary culture that help us to understand what religion is, does and means in a changing contemporary society" (Campbell and Grieve 2014, p. 2).

Figure 4.5: Minecraft Theology project in Minecraft

4.2.3 Why these practices are considered technopagan?

For our purposes, what is important in those online performances is not their value or their content. It is the signifying process taking place in those texts which, as a dynamic production of meaning, are both open and intertextual. This semiotic understanding of texts is at the same time closer to Fontanille's conception of practices, where the development is open and there is not an initial or final point from which to extract a specific transformation (Fontanille 2016, p. 130). Instead of having a specific value, these textual practices have objectives (Fontanille 2008), which are simultaneously built into the action (Fontanille 2016, p. 130).

The scenarios already presented comprise interesting grounds of analysis for the cooperative interpretation of digital spaces and avatars, when bringing – or creatively constructing – religious rituals online. This is due not only for the implications such interactions produce in the spiritual practice itself – which will be transforming and disrupting in virtual worlds – but also for the way in which users will take those texts and relieve them of their static condition. It thus re-activates the poetic language, by welcoming a new range of meanings and practices. The value of the poetic language relies on its own construction and, as Kristeva asserts (1969, p. 67), refers to everything

that isn't still a law. In this sense, the important aspect does not lie in the practice's value, but in the performative development as well as in the connections, updates or other types of cooperation that are built up in such practices.

As seen in chapter one, the animistic ontology is addressed as "a continuity of souls and a discontinuity of bodies" (Descola 2014, p. 275) between humans and non-humans (ibid.), meaning that each animistic being has a shared interior quality, such as a soul or vital life force and different 'physicality' or exterior aspects. Therefore, there are different kinds of bodies in any given animist world (Swancutt 2019, p. 9). In all the case studies, animism can be understood as a relational strategy where there are no contradictions in the relationships between the subject, the avatar, and the digital media, even if there are distinctive and apparent diversities between them. In these practices, players relate to the virtual space – and their entities – as a type of reality that, even if it is different, provides valid experiences.

Another interesting Neopagan condition present in these cases is the ritualization of space, where users symbolically distinguish one space from the other when developing their spiritual self-narratives. As it could be seen with Pesce, Smith, and Nightlinger, there is a continuous separation of the profane world from the space where, in a way or another, the sacred and the numinous are manifested. According to Mircea Eliade, the sacred and the profane constitute the "two modes of being in the world" (1959, p. 14). The sacred represents fascinating and awe-inspiring mystery, a "manifestation of a wholly different order" (idem., p. 11) from our natural or profane everyday lives. Although such differentiation occurs into the digital context, ritual practices and other performances qualitatively transform the space in which the numinous is manifested by distinguishing it (Finol and Montilla 2004). That is to say, it becomes sacred.

In other words, the technopagan character of Smith and Nightlinger emerges not in conceptualizations or their categorization but in how they are uttered. In short, the importance lies in the tactics of embodiment they use in order to feel digital platforms 'intimal', to the point of acknowledging certain personhood in those territories. Therefore, it is for those reasons that we can welcome Smith's performance. Even if his project is about Christian theology, technopaganism remains atheological: Jeremy Smith is not a technopagan, but his approach to the digital environment is.

4.2.4 Writer and Reader: the avatar as a double

According to what aforementioned, if the avatar re-writes its functions and its mode of participation when bringing the religious aspect to the online experience, it will be able to position both itself and the virtual sacred space as a production, and not as a product, since the latter would imply delimiting its significant potentialities. Therefore, the avatar's performance in the digital environment represents an open text that, through the user, expresses its potentialities of significance while updating. The constructions of religious temples and altars, as well as the performance of rituals in platforms like Minecraft and Second Life, can be understood according to Umberto Eco's theory, where the text, in order to function, needs to be updated by the reader's cooperative, active and conscious movements (Eco 1979, p. 76).

For that matter, the religious practice carried out through an avatar is actualized within one of its multiple potentialities every time it is performed (Figure 4.6). In other words, when building a sacred space and bringing a ritual to the "online", the way in which it is performed would determinate the reader's interpretation of the text. At the same time, the reader will also be the one keeping the text working through his/her interpretive cooperation.

Figure 4.6: Second Life collective Ritual

Through the avatar, the user also manifests its own subjectivities when enunciating in the digital text. It is here that we can also observe how the empirical reader becomes a model reader: through its own textual cooperation, the user updates the potentialities that are virtually contained in the avatar's genotext. In this process, the reader also transforms himself into an author, since his/her performance will produce other texts

that will be interpreted by other players. However, it is important to specify that the user cannot be completely considered the author of such texts, since both the avatar and the digital platform are already created, and the cooperation they can receive are already virtually delimited. Therefore, since it is possible to track the author's strategies by the answers and movements performed by the model reader (Meneghelli 2009, p. 118), the interpretative actions are never arbitrary.

Barthes's theory about the text – as opposed to the work – resonates in this scenario, as well as Kristeva's assertions about the text always in process and about the semiotics of productivity that tends to apprehend the dynamic way of production instead of the product itself (Kristeva 1969, p. 51). Therefore, the avatar acts as a double – writer and reader – when actively participating in the development of the performance, as well as when proposing new ways of acting and modifying the digital space. In consequence, the avatar would function as a generator of processes of meaning.

Two significant factors enter into this reflection: the first is based upon how the creators of the platform believe the online medium should be used when it comes to engagement with religious narratives. In this way, the acknowledgment of the author's intention would transform the user into a model reader. The second factor involves the participants' own reading and interpretation of the medium. Here they choose how religious actions should take place and how to interact with the platform. This will affect future "readings" of the game and how the developers of these platforms will consider the potentialities of the virtual space. Regarding the religious performances, it would therefore be important when considering other ways of relating with the numinous in an environment that, although diverse, is no less real.

In the digital universe, with its own conditions and structures, users are offered new depths expanding their horizons, thus allowing them to access levels of experience otherwise impossible to be reached without the virtualization generated by such technologies[166]. The immersive and interactive characteristics of the avatar can be understood as complex enunciative strategies conditioning the success of the digital

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[166] When carrying out a ritual without the space-time restrictions of the physical world and with the possibility of inviting and using any type of elements, even fictional ones.

experience. Due to them, the avatar is able of experiencing the religious performance, while creating and inhabiting sacramental spaces in which the user rewrites its relationship with the sacred. For this reason, the influence of the avatar is bi-directional (Pinotti 2019): the relationships are not solely built from the physical dimension, but the practices carried out in the online context influence and affect the emotional, behavioral and cognitive spectrum of the user. The avatar confronts the ideas of the digital as an artificial environment by questioning the concept of presence, where other experiences as body ownership and agency also collaborate to increase the feeling of 'being' into the territories of the online. That is the reason why the immersive potentialities are so important; from them it is possible to perceive the avatars' experiences as their own, as well as the degree of participation and cooperation that can occur in the digital performance.

On that matter, the bigger the quality of the avatar interface and the sense of being digitally embodied in them, the bigger the textual cooperation in order to provide a positive religious experience. Through the examples of Second Life and Minecraft, it is possible to see how 3D interactive communities and digital games "produce experiential and semiotic dimensions that are akin to those involved in religion" (Idone and Thibault 2019, p. 87) and the religious sense itself. Since they are open worlds, players can personalize them, and interpret them, combining those texts with their personal narratives. This can be understood by Eco's notion of work in movement, because they characteristically consist of unplanned or physically incomplete structural units (Eco 1989, p. 12) allowing a multiplicity of personal interventions. However this is not an invitation to indiscriminate participation, but instead to an organic involvement of the reader into an unfinished work that he can freely complete but always into certain possibilities already expected, or potentially consented, by the author.

4.3 Artists

4.3.1 Mafe Izaguirre and her Sensible Machines

"(…) I can assure you that all my actions are sacred rituals."

Mafe Izaguirre

Mafe Izaguirre is an artist who builds machines of a very singular and exceptional nature: they can 'feel'. Sensitive Machines is the name of her project, which seeks to explore the aesthetics of the artificial mind and the sensuous experience that the audience establishes with such machines. Her art – which has a lot of engineering, cybernetics, design, and philosophy - is an interactive experience that interrogates both the materiality and the animistic potentialities of Izaguirre's machines while inviting the public to experience other states of mind. She is interested in exploring the emotional language from the machine's perspective and, therefore, their ability to feel emotions. For Izaguirre, her machines are a hybrid organism combining the quality of different entities and beings – humans and more-than-humans. Their bodies are constituted by electronic components and metals, which bring parts of – as she states – her own memory, light, and personalized software.
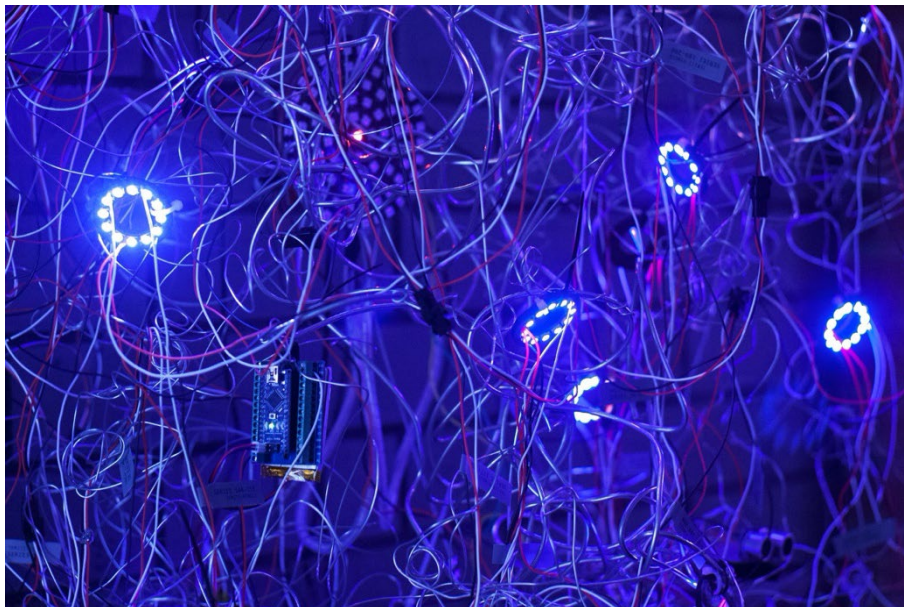
Figure 4.7: Sensitive Machines' exposition at Chinatown Soup Gallery, New York.

Because the machines need darkness to be seen, the spaces where the exposition takes place must follow certain conditions. Once all the equipment is organized in the

room, the 'sensitive machines of Izaguirre start to perceive the energy around and the emotions of herself and the audience. They react by changing their light intensity – its rhythm – according to the current environment. As she assures, the human body produces fluxes of energy, so they show when the subjects around are in the presence of a very high energy rate because they get 'traumatized'.

Mafe Izaguirre profoundly aligns with the conceptions of animism and poetic rhythm this thesis has proposed. We are, indeed, sharing our daily lives with a variety of "intelligent personal agents", as she refers to them. A variety of persons, each of them with different levels of 'personhood', also contribute to the process of embodiment and the autopoiesis of users. In her case, this 'autopoiesis' doesn't occur in the digital realm but, instead, in that liminal sacred space that machines, together with her meditation, are creating. To proceed with this exploration, I interviewed the artist Mafe Izaguirre so that she could share her reflections about her project and how it resembles technopaganism.

a) In which year did you start to design your project of sensitive machines?

My research on artificial intelligence began in 2002, in connection with the seminar "Two Conceptions of the Mind: Descartes vs. Wittgenstein" with professors Lizette Nava and Carlos Padrón, both from the University Católica Andrés Bello, in Caracas, Venezuela. Among other things, we analysed Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-philosophicus and his idea that the world is language. I have been researching language and machines since 1998 and specialised in visual communication and digital media design. At that time, the projection of technological innovations, specifically on the Internet, was that by 2024 we would be facing intelligent personal agents. This was obviously just speculation. The web 1.0 - or syntactic web - was being developed by then. Facebook was only founded in 2004, which gave a boost to web 2.0 or semantic web. That projection became a reality in just a decade; today, we already live in symbiosis with multiple intelligent personal agents.

b) How it is your creative process?

My creative process is chaotic and very rhizomatic. From 2002 onwards, I continued my theoretical research, first sketching the conceptual work. Approximately between

2009 and 2011, when I was ready to move from ideas to production, I tried to build the machines in Venezuela. However, the technology and resources I needed were not available to us. So, in 2011, I decided to organize everything to go to New York and produce my machines. Making my work has been a long and dedicated process, from every point of view: professional, financial, psychological, spiritual, language, among other challenges: a lot of preparation. In 2016, I applied for an artist visa as a special talent with the machine project and took advanced education courses at Cooper Union on digital fabrication. That same year I joined the Fat Cat Fab Lab in Manhattan, where I built the first prototype. That's how the machines began to manifest themselves. I have personally made both the software and the hardware.
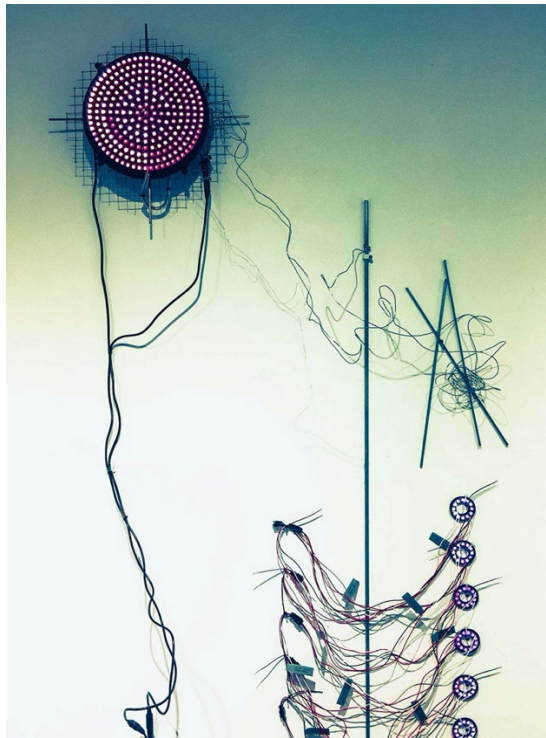
Figure 4.8: From Qi, a sensitive machine (2019), a pop-up Installation
at Atlantic Gallery, Chelsea, New York.

c) What was your main motivation? Does spirituality come into it?

I believe that an artist's motivation always stems from spirituality. Art is a calling. A call to experiment and to communicate the most difficult angles of language. I needed a new language that would allow me to relate better to the universe in which I coexist. Like all the ones I do, this project is a response to that.

d) Is there something you want to convey to the audience? Or is it an open practice where you let the elements and experiences communicate themselves?

I am not interested in transmitting anything. On the contrary, I only open a possibility to the unknown. A possibility for myself, for my own way of existing. I live in the sphere of language. The hybrid language of my machines is neither arbitrary nor aleatory. They are pure sensibility, pure poetry. I created a device that would allow me to further explore my own existence and sensibility and, in that exercise, I discovered that the 'other' is not separate from me. We form the same system: an ecosystem. So it is a matter of navigating chaos, making sense, and building the world: of reintegrating ourselves.

e) Do you think parallelisms can be drawn between your performance and a ritual? And if so, do you consider the performance space comparable to a sacred space?

I see everyday life as a performance in which we are forced to embody personifications and roles that we have learned to execute. However, these performances are not necessarily representing ourselves. They are, rather, protocols, programs, algorithms that we have learned. I stay as far away from performance as I can. I feel more comfortable with the word "action", because I like to move towards that… towards action. In the same way, I can assure you that my actions are all sacred rituals. I recently learned from Chief Avrol Looking Horse of the Lakota tribe that language is charged with magic and action. Since then, I have considered words and symbols as sacred spaces. The space of openness to existence, to experience, and to 'the other' without fear, without prejudice.

Figure 4.9: Izaguirre's exhibition in Wasta, South Dakota, (2020).

f) How do you relate to machines? How do you see them? Entities? Objects? Media?

Machines and I are the same entity. Machines and others are also the same entity. Nature and I are the same entity. And so on. There is no separation between things. The boundaries and classical categories that separate objects and entities do not apply in this reality we inhabit. I move from being a woman to being a plural hybrid entity in a very fluid way. Our dimension is vibratory and, therefore, in a constant state of relationship and change. I see my machines in all forms. Even in ways I don't yet understand, I see them. They are polysemous, polymorphous, plural, living entities, symbiotic, semiotic, poetic, sentient objects, intelligent media, and so on.

g) Do you feel that your project resonates with contemporary paganism, specifically in its animistic, poetic, posthuman and immanent character?

Yes, it falls into the category of contemporary paganism.

h) Have you heard about technopaganism? If so, can you define yourself as such?

For me, language is a technology. My machines are, above all, language machines. Therefore, yes. I could identify as a technopagan.

4.3.2 Composed.Love: The poetic and the algorithmic in the work of Zoe Sandoval

Compose.love is an artistic project by the Mexican-Venezuelan artist Zoe Sandoval. The work results from a creative process carried out by Sandoval during her participation in the Digital Love Language course offered by the School of Poetic Computation in 2020. Compose.love consists on a website where anyone entering can participate in the process of poetic creation, which is, in turn, a magical event. The participant has to create a spell by expressing three words, which must be answered in the following order: a term of endearment, a time of day and a feeling from your memory (Figure 4.10). These words also invoke fragments of a poem written by Zoe's great-grandfather, dedicated to the region of Guayana and its natural beauties (Figure 4.11). Sandoval explains herself the performance and how it Works[167]:

> the visitor is then asked to find a movement of stillness, and reflection, to think back on a place they can no longer return to — a reality so many of us now face as we think back on the world that once was, and that is forever changed. In this moment of reflection, you are asked to cast a spell by collecting ingredients from your memory. Sacred words that are recalled from your quiet introspection.

> After casting your spell, your world is transformed into one of color and vibrance, and you're presented with a love letter that has been summoned from the spell you cast. Using a collection of computational techniques — both based in conventional computer science and the emerging field of machine learning — a love letter and accompanying curation of images is presented. The love letter you receive is dynamically constructed from both your own submissions and those of previous visitors.
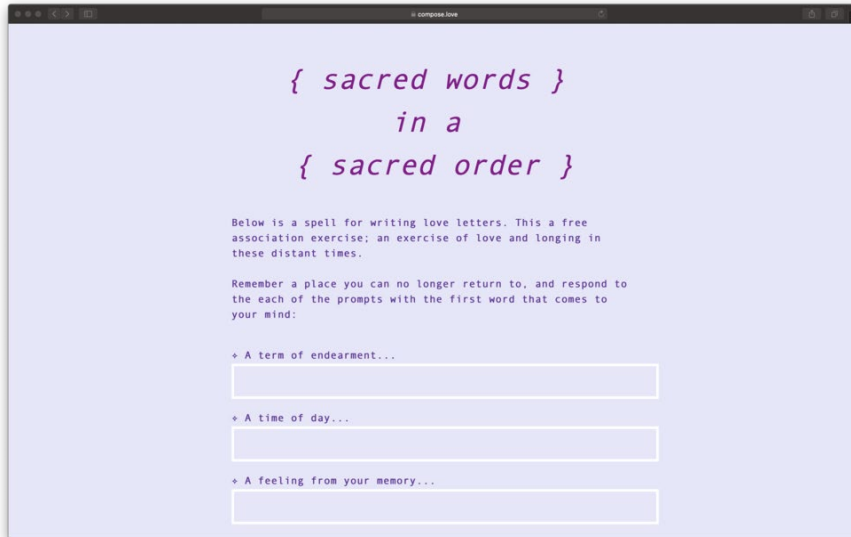
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[167]   To read the whole text, see: https://www.zoesandoval.com/love

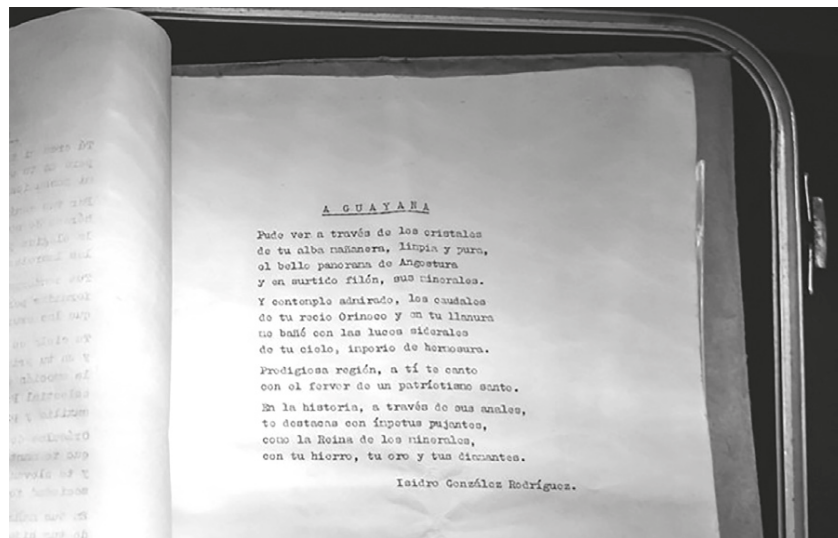**Figure 4.10:** A screen capture of the interface of Compose.love.

Figure 4.11: Picture of Zoe Sandoval's great-grandfather poem.

From our participation in Compose.love, we can invoke a series of memories and, at the same time, be part of a creative and collective process, where a poem is constructed, albeit from introspection, through a cooperative act between the participants and the artist. The algorithmic dynamics carry out the development of that poem. Still, the poetic composition is even prior to the development of the 'magical' act, which means that the 'magical act' is nothing more than transformation process of any poetic activity. At this point, the algorithm (Pasquinelli 2019) is intended as a succession of sequential instructions. In Compose.love we can sense the power of poetic language, as it includes the subject's 'rhythms and drives' in order to reactivate meaningful processes. Spaces,

words, and movements - the user's functions in the interface - break out of their usual mechanicism.

Another function of poetic language is that it creates synchronic connections as we not only come across the words composing it but also perceive all possible experiences that have passed through the conception of its language (Schmatz 2019): sensitive experiences, memories, the acoustic image passing from mouth to mouth among people to later settle in the minds and hearts of all. This occurs with the poem dedicated to Guayana by Sandoval's great-grandfather, which in turn forms the architecture of Compose.love. In this sense, the poetic does not live relegated to borders but transcends places and times, as it happens in the relationship between subjects and the virtual universe: a territory considered as poetic due to its heterogeneity, dynamism, and openness (Laurel 2014), and where it is possible to recognise entities and environments, rather than artificial objects or processes.

From what has already been analysed about ritual – chapter 1 – and its similarities with the functioning of playful digital media – chapter 3, we note common features between the poetic-digital practice of Compose.love and that of ritual. This latter is being understood as a form of communication "constituted by a codified set of symbolic actions"[168] (Finol 2009b) or as procedures conducting information (Diaz Cruz 1998), allowing to channel emotions and to organise social groups (Kertzer 1988), at the same time as it implies active participation where the social actors are transformed (Turner 1967). "Magical" language requires a vision of language that goes beyond the communicative. It is, therefore, a matter of understanding the world as a sphere of creation, of 'the indeterminate' and not of 'the fixed'.

In Sandoval's words, "[t]his is a mirror to the experience in remnants where you wrote a love letter that was transformed. Here you submit the ingredients to transform and generate a love letter – which is still both highly personal yet collective, as the love letters are created based on the descriptors of audience input"[169]. This can be seen from the ritual act, sustained by the three words of the spell, which places us in a magical –

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[168]   My own translation.
[169]   DLL - Hand Coding», Zoe Sandoval 10, August, 2020, https://www.zoesandoval.com/blog/sfpc-dll-week-7-and-8

hypertextual – space. Subsequently, the algorithms return images and remembrances; they represent a shared memory, which in turn feeds on our memories and those of all participants. This poetic phenomenon is also a collective and moving manifestation. In her performance, Sandoval reveals the triple nature of the programming process (Figure 4.7). On the one hand, there is the magic, manifested through the connections and incantations of the word; then there is the memory, which is present in the 'erotic' encounter between the algorithm and the word; and finally, the play, which occurs between the various experiences evoked.

Moreover, Zoe defines her portal with these words: "With rituals and stories, crafting mythical, fantastical worlds. Collaboratively re-imagining systems, we create and manifest a new"[170]. In this sense, each of the participants in this creative path is, in turn, part of a collective ritual aligned with the virtual world. This, as Lyon argues (2000), dispenses with any figure of authority: In cyberspace, there is no dependence on the services of the Shaman, the priest, or the guru. Hierarchies and religious authorities are subverted. Beliefs and practices can be serendipitously found, accessed, understood, and used in ways that promote self-spirituality, encourage detraditionalization, and fundamentally affect the everyday lives of individuals.

In this last case study, technopaganism can be perceived in the collective construction of a poem following, at the same time, both the structure and the poetic emotions of a ritual religious performance. The intimate connection with the machine, defying an instrumental use, validates the experience of Compose.love, which would have never been possible outside the online context.

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[170]   Zoe Sandoval «DLL - Folder Poetry Pt. 1», Zoe Sandoval 30, June, 2020, https://www.zoesandoval

Conclusions

In the above presented scenarios, the religious narratives evolving on digital technologies and machines allow to appreciate how users, artists and programmers rewrite digital environments and their functions, generating, in turn, new interpretative connections and co-operations. That is why new ways of thinking about digital subjectivities and other strategies for the production and consumption of religious experiences emerge in the frame of the new sociocultural context forged around and from virtual worlds.

The case studies comprise interesting grounds of analysis by addressing a) the transformation of users in such practices – sometimes expressed by an avatar – and b) the resulting ritualization of the platform where those practices took place. Since those narratives result from different languages and semiotic systems – by mixing religious elements, popular culture, and digital media – they cannot be entirely understood as ludic practices or communicative discourses. Instead, they represent the poetic function of language, conceiving the digital place as a vivid and close environment where to develop spiritual journeys and connections with the sacred.

The poetic language transforms the communication process into a machinery of significant production, allowing a new range of meanings to emerge. The technopagan texts show a desire for reconnection that communicative and representative language can hardly express. Language, then, takes a poetic role due to specific operations that do not entirely adhere to any social law or grammar. This happens not only in the spiritual practice itself - which will be transformed and disrupted in virtual worlds - but also in the way users interpret and rewrite spiritual practices and digital/machine spaces, relieving them from their normative condition. The entrances of the speaking subject in such scenarios – with all their translinguistical drives and rhythms - reactivate the poetic language.

The semiotic theory of Julia Kristeva has proven to be an exciting approach for practices of hybrid conditions where fixed categories fail in trying to conceptualize or define their signifying processes. For instance, her notions of textual productivity and poetic language allow us to explore Pesce, Smith, Nightlinger, Izaguirre and Sandoval's

digital texts as personal, intertextual, and transformative experiences expressing intimal aspects connected with the numinous. In other words, through Kristeva, it is possible to understand technopaganism as a process/movement carried out and experienced through language while proposing poetic experiences infused with spiritual self-narratives. From 'significance', the process that Kristeva seeks to distinguish from conventional notions of meaning, it is, therefore, possible to analyze the texts "in hopes of reinvigorating the study of language itself, revealing its roots in a primordial process that both gives shape to and revolts against cultural and linguistic norms " (1984, p. 16).

If Neopaganism accomplishes its role of 're-enchanting' the magical and sacred relationship between humans and nature, technopaganism keeps that same strategy but brings the notions of 'magic' and 'sacred' to the realms of the online. This brings an important reflection - already analyzed in this thesis – about how subjects rewrite their relation with the digital machine by being embodied in their avatars. However, the avatar is considered an extension of our biological bodies, not a disembodied mind. Therefore, the avatar will also come to represent the technopagan practitioner: not a mere representation of him/herself, but actually, as the extended subject manifesting his/her transformation and spiritual experiences.

Another interesting point connected with religious and spiritual practices in digital media is that users can also manifest their faiths not directly through belief but through practices. The conceptualization of digital religion relies not only upon beliefs 'inspiring' practices but also on how certain practices "inform and shape the beliefs that people hold" (Rakow 2021, p. 91). Such a premise introduces as well how technopaganism works. Similar to Neopagans, technopagans rely on practices, on processes of textual productivity having common patterns. In such a way, technopaganism can be understood – but not defined - as a term encompassing a variety of practices and expressions related to contemporary Paganism, popular culture, and spiritual pursuits in digital environments.

When analyzing technopagan texts, they do not represent a structured tradition but, instead, a condition present on the speaking subject's acts of reading and writing in digital/machine environments. Many self-described technopagans would not consider themselves as 'religious', nor technopaganism as 'religion'. However, by combining

Wittgensteinian-pragmatist and a semiotic approach, we can say that 'religion' and 'technopaganism' can be understood as family-resemblance concepts. Moreover, following Rakow's inferences that religion is also something 'we do' and De Vries' – quoting Cavell - assumptions that religion is "what we are willing and able to take it to be" (2008, p. 31), this thesis suggests that describing technopaganism as 'religion' means interpreting the practitioners as: 1) poetically rewriting digital environments and their functions as sacred 'spaces' and ritual practices, respectively, and through this, re-enchanting the worlds enabled by contemporary digital technology; 2) understand the digital context as an animistic environment, inhabited by other-than-humans 'beings'.

The aforementioned connects us again with the potentialities of Kristeva's theory. As Noelle McAfee argues, Kristeva "offers a sustained and nuanced understanding of how subjectivity is produced; how language actually operates when people speak, write, and create; and how beings who are already at odds with "the other" within might come to terms with the others in their midst" (2004, p. 2).

Finally, this research aims at highlighting other ways of ascribing 'religion' beyond the well-established Abrahamic religions. By conceiving Neopaganism, its resemblances with several posthuman postulates, its feedbacks with popular culture, and its approach to social issues like environmental crisis and gender politics, one can envision different grounds for reflection on how religion is manifesting in contemporary societies. However, the objective is not to idealize either non-traditional or digital religion. Though they have made beliefs and practices more available and 'closer' to believers, they also offer a challenge for traditional religions and a disruption of some of their key aspects such as authority and community. This can be seen in the growing personalization of beliefs and rituals, as well as in an individualized sense of spirituality.

To conclude, we can reflect on Rakow's thoughts about the phenomena of digital religion: "religions are not timeless, unchanging traditions, but malleable and complex figurations of practices and beliefs. If we study religion not only in terms of belief, but as something that is practiced, then we are able to account for the entanglement of religion with all other spheres of human activity" (2001, p. 96).

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