

Virtual “milagritos” and “online heresy”: appropriation of ex-votes on the Internet context

Milagritos virtuales y e-rejía: apropiación de exvotos en el contexto de Internet

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ABSTRACT

In my text, I focus on the contemporary appropriation of the religious retablo, also called exvoto, in the context of virtual environments on the Internet. What kind of implications does the use of symbols and images associated with some religious lineages in cyberspace have for the religious phenomenon? To answer this question, my work addresses, first, the notion of the religious retablo and exvoto, considering the Mexican context, and, secondly, from a virtual ethnography strategy, I analyze the appropriation of altarpieces on virtual platforms, concluding with a discussion on the concept of “online heresy”.

Keywords

Retablo; exvotos; Mexico;
online heresy; religion
online

RESUMEN

Este artículo reflexiona sobre la apropiación de los retablos religiosos, también conocidos como exvotos pictóricos, en el contexto de los ambientes virtuales de internet. ¿Qué implicaciones tiene para el fenómeno religioso el uso de símbolos e imágenes asociadas con algunos linajes religiosos en el ciberespacio? Para ello, se delimitan las nociones de retablo y exvoto en el contexto mexicano; y, posteriormente, desde una estrategia de etnografía virtual, se analiza la apropiación de los retablos en plataformas virtuales, concluyendo con una discusión sobre el concepto de e-rejía.

Palabras clave

Retablos; exvotos;
México, e-rejía; religión
en línea

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Introduction

The analysis of religious altarpieces has highlighted its historical and iconographic character (Bélar & Verrier, 2013; Agraz, 2007; Del Castillo, 2005; Durand, 1995; Gliffords, 1974; Juárez, 1991). However, the circulation of these paintings on the multifaceted road of the Internet and its so-called social networks, allows us to analyze these expressions also as a phenomenon of contemporary appropriation of religious discourse, considering that their production and circulation are far from the monopoly of the ecclesiastic authority, and that the images seem to meet a certain synergy with the interactions that are established in cyberspace.

The first time that the author of this paper observed an altarpiece was during a religious tourism trip he made during his childhood. Like many Mexicans, his grand-parents were people of deep fervor and made frequent trips to some of the country's main catholic shrines. During some of these journeys, the author found these forms of popular religiosity in small paintings depicting saints praying the Virgin Mary or God directly (in some of their different representations).

Of course, to the eyes of a child, these altarpieces represented a novelty that contrasted with the sacred atmosphere of Catholic churches. While in the main space of the churches, the ecclesiastic authority maintained and controlled a certain organization, in the hall of the miraculous paintings, a semiautocratic, vivid and deeply colorful structure of personal stories and incredible narratives. Almost in the style of a permanent comic ready for the popular intervention in a building generally under a hierocratic control or, in other words, "the only space within the shrine in which people can speak relatively freely, hence breaking from the sober, solemn and organized semantic unit imposed by the shrine" (González, 1986, p. 20).

Since then and currently, the narrative of the space on the altarpieces exposes an accumulation of graphic testimonials of prayers, petitions and miracles granted thanks to popular faith and religious action. Testimonials are particularly important within the fabric of the contact between the believer and the sacred entity. The testimonial of a grace received inscribes itself in a second moment subsequent to the imploration of a personal or social need. In this sense, it implies the division of the religious subject: "I believe in you and this is why I ask you, I believe in your intervention and hence, I thank you. You exist because you are in my prayers": "since a God is above all a living being with whom man must count on and on whom he can count" (Durkheim, 1912).

The graphic testimonials of religious altarpieces are relevant not only historically and iconographically but also sociologically. On the one hand, through them, public and individual needs of a society at a historical moment are acknowledged, i.e., the prayers to the sacred entity illustrate social fears and hardships – in health, employments, public safety, etc. - (Del Castillo, 2005), migratory processes (Durand, 1995), economic crisis

or social anomias in a Durkheimian sense of the term; and, on the other hand, they provide clues of the commitment and popular religiosity in specific societies and epochs: since they address the power of a divinity or intercessor of the sacred, they explain the persistence or irrelevance of certain gods, saints or virgins within the religious cosmogony. Along these lines, Durkheim also says “if it is true that man depends of his gods, the dependence is reciprocal”. Gods also need man; without oblations and sacrifices they would die” (Durkheim, 1912, p. 42).

This connection between religion and the sociological context through religious altarpieces is what allows determining its production and circulation as part of a communication phenomenon generally associated with certain social strata such as working classes; i.e., to those subaltern strata as opposed to the culture and religion of ruling classes with whom they share “the same significant legitimately sanctioned and administered in shrines by the specialized agents of the Catholic Church” (González, 1986, p. 19), but that express a particular way of appropriating the religious phenomenon oftentimes far from the rationality of the bureaucratic religious executives.

Votive Offerings

Alterpieces are classified within the most general category of religious votive offerings; hence, they are also called pictoric votive offerings (Agraz, 2007; Becerra, 1985). A votive offering describes “every object that is specifically presented in gratitude for a favor or a recovery granted by a powerful agent of metasocial order to intraworld (individual or collective) actors” (González, 1986, p. 9), so that almost any material object can be transformed into a votive offering, including a text, provided it is destined to be a testimony of gratitude, although there are some of propitiatory type, i.e., “I ask you, I beg you, I beseech you”.

According to González’s classification (1986), votive offerings are divided into five types:

- 1) “Religious folk charms” that generally take the shape of pieces to scale such as a body part, animals, houses, cars, etc., representing the favor received and made of different materials (Figure 1).
- 2) Significant objects of the divine grace, e.g., the obtention of an academic degree or diploma or medical devices indicating the recovery after an illness, among others.
- 3) Textual discourses alluding to the miracle in question among which handwritten or printed letters are a common reference.
- 4) Testimonials in media such as the press, to which we can add the recent manifestations of miracles described on the Internet and prayer portals.
- 5) Religious altarpieces, object of this paper.



Figure 1. “Religious folk charms” (*Milagritos*)

Votive offerings are not an exclusive manifestation of a culture or a society. Nonetheless, altarpieces are located historically within the religious actions of Mexican Catholicism and more specifically in the Western area and the Lowlands (*Bajío*), in the states of San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Guanajuato, Querétaro, Jalisco and Michoacán (Bélar & Verrier, 2013). In contrast, its production is less in the central part of the country, i.e., in places such as Puebla and Mexico City itself. Expressed in this way, the contemporary presence of altarpieces in antique or tourist shops could have their origin in some of the central production sites (Gliffords, 1974, p. 13).

In terms of time, the early signs of altarpieces in Mexico date from the 18th century. In Mexican history, one of the first gratitude votive offerings was that of Our Lady of Sorrows (*Nuestra Señora de Dolores*) of Xaltocán (Mexico City) in 1781, a sign of gratitude to the Virgin Mary for her intervention for the recovery from a severe illness of a worshiper (Durand, 1995). On the other hand, a golden age in the production of votive offerings was during the second half of the 19th century; hence, the assumption is that the largest volume of altarpieces was made before the 20th century and their production waned precisely at the beginning of that century. “This, of course, is a generality; an individual exception after these dates could have continued with the previous tradition” (Gliffords, 1974, p. 15).

The research on religious altarpieces would probably not have predicted, at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the appropriation of this type of votive offerings in a context and a sense totally different than that of the church and its concomitant sacrality. Undoubtedly, miraculous paintings have always meant disruption

of the homogeneous narrative of the space regulated by the clergy; however, in the layers of cyberspace and social networks, this type of manifestations of religiosity have began to become popular in expressing other appropriations different from those of request and gratitude testimonials typical of the unfolding of believers.

Virtual Miracles

The figure of the religious altarpiece has returned to getting a great deal of the public attention in the recent years, not only for its appropriation on the social networks and the Internet, but also for its value as cultural and religious heritage. In addition to the different exhibits on votive offerings in the Mexican Republic, in March 2019, the information diffused that the Department of Mexican Culture had received from the Office of Patrimony and Cultural Activities of Italy, close to 596 votive offerings. These paintings representing pieces painted from different parts of the national territory between the 18th and 20th centuries were illegally misappropriated. According to Diego Prieto, anthropologist and director of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH, [Spanish acronym]):

Upon receiving these pieces, Mexico has recuperated the cluster of iconographic testimonials that allow us, over time, to delve into the domestic and community life of Mexican people, in their beliefs and customs and, in so doing, in the different fragments of their life story narrated with simplicity by their own protagonists (INAH, 2019).

The previous expert appraisals have determined that the repatriated altarpieces are works “that correspond to Mexican pieces made as signs of gratitude for favors received and that must have been exposed in Mexican churches” (INAH, 2019), probably in shrines and parished of Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Aguascalientes, Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, Michoacán, Puebla, Querétaro, Hidalgo, Tlaxcala, Veracruz and Mexico City. After being catalogued and restaured, it was announced that this collection would be exhibited in Los Pinos Cultural Complex (*El Universal*, 2019), the former residence of the Mexican presidents that was transformed in 2018 (as a symbol of commitment of the new government with working classes) in a forum open to art, culture and science.

Together with the effervescence at national level, the altarpieces, that originated above all within subaltern classes, were returned for popular cultural consumption and have shown an unusual adaptation in cyberspace and on social networks. On specialized photography sites such as Flickr, there is the group “Votive Offering in the Era of Social Networks”,¹ while we also note a considerable dissemination of these artworks on Facebook and Twitter, above all from the initiatives of individual users, i.e., from the observations and analyses of the information displayed on the sites aforementioned.

As case study, we have chosen the “Exvotos, retablos y milagritos” (ERM, [Spanish acronym for Votive Offerings, Altarpieces and Religious Folk Charms]) site which by May 2019 gathered more than 35 thousand subscribers. This site formally began its postings in November 2017 with a 1982 altarpiece of the Virgin of Talpa (Jalisco), as a sign of gratitude for interceding in the recovery of a young man from his alcohol addiction. First, the site received ten reactions only on the social network; however, by May 2019, the last post of the votive offering registered more than 1,200 reactions, while more than 600 persons shared the post (Facebook-ERM, 2019).

Beyond the reactions of the Internet that can go from approval, laughter or annoyance of the users, the virtual ethnography strategy developed in this paper demands acknowledging in a site or social network, the institution or agent that produces the information, the implicit or explicit purposes rose in the site as well as the conception and strategy in the process of communication between producers and receptors of the discourse.²

Along these line, the Facebook of the ERM does not openly present a visible agent or administrator of the site. Despite this, the news and topics shared suggest that it is an individual initiative of a user from Mexico City, who generally shares a photograph of a votive offering, while integrating a fax transcript of the text written on the altarpiece. The posts are made without any specific regularity and there is no recognition of a primary source to access the original religious paintings, although the administrator has shared links with the INAH media library which mention:

Votive offerings consist of four main elements: the visual narration of the event where the reason of the request appears explicitly: help for problems of health, money, accidents, catastrophies, among others. The image of the divinity to which the favor is asked; the requestor, that can be a witness of the event or someone who thanks the divinity for having performed a miracle; the text, where the events are narrated in writing while alluding to the three previous elements. While it is common that the text appear, there are times where it is omitted (INAH Media Library, 2019).

Regarding the purposes raised on the ERM site, it is implicit that there is a selection process which objective is to build a sense of farce within the narrative of the religious altarpieces. A farce is being understood as a brief and sarcastic theatrical comedy or, in other words, a grotesque representation that awakes the laughter and scorn of the spectators.

The foregoing is illustrated by the votive offering date 1996 which bears the following text: “ Aurora Medina suffer so much from love sickness that she even thought of committing suicide; when she was on the verge of throwing herself off the cliff, she felt the hands that grabbed her by the armpits and from the corner of her eyes, she saw that it was The Virgin of Guadalupe that had pulled her away from the precipice and, in the

face of the outstanding miracle, she decided that it was not worth ending her life for a bad man and she thanked our Lady” (Figure 2).



Figure 2. 1996 Altarpiece.

Regarding this illustration shared on the site of the network, the users made ironic comments: “Well, we can see that the small virgin is pushing her [...]”, “Awesome Mary” and “I urgently need the intervention of the brunette” (Facebook-ERM, 2019). Generally, these comments are not censured by a monitor or representative of the religious hierarchy (except by the regulations of the social network), which leads to more horizontal communication channel than other expressions of online religion. Hence, the altarpieces that circulate in cyberspace escape the ecclesiastic normalization that, for some time, have considered them as a degenerated and deviated practice of the official doctrine (González, 1986, p. 17).

Another illustration of the same source is the following 1976 painting, where the Lord of Chalma (State of Mexico) is being thanked. The text on the altarpiece reads: “The other night, I was being passionate with my boyfriend and given the noise, my mother almost caught us ; I thank the Lord of Chalma that my boyfriend had the time to hide so she did not see him; hence, I promise to behave” (Figure 3). In the face of this narrative, the users of the site responded with satire and self-recognition: “I, last Saturday, right” and “I can really identify with this”.



Figure 3. 1976 Altarpiece.

This, together with the lack of regulation of the religious heterodoxy, the meaning of the narrative of the virtual votive offerings also reaffirms the return of religious symbols to the mundane. The testimonials on the Internet refers to saints and virgins as part of the profane and everyday actions in which the subjects recognize themselves as whether believers or non-believers. Therefore, this form of appropriation of the religious discourse puts in the same basket the *sacred* intervention of the religious entity, as well as the common situations of everyday life, even those that involve social taboos such as non-heteronormed sexuality, crime, pagan rituals, prohibited consumptions, etc.. This corroborate the differentiation of spheres and the mundanization associated to the general processes of secularization (Blancarte, 2012, p. 78).

#Altarpieces (#Retablos) and #Votive offerings (#Exvotos)

A second analysis context has been found in Twitter, another social network where pictoric votive offerings have been reappropriated through trends such as: #Altarpieces and #Votive Offerings. This media does not offer a single source of information; the users collaborate without any specific regularity with different illustrations related to the topic. In other words, the main agent is the social network and its nodes, who use votive offerings as a communication and information currency.

In this case study, the objective of the appropriation by means of hashtag (#) corresponds to the search of the sense of irony in the narratives of the paintings aforementioned, as observed in the ERM; however, we can also recognize an empathy and continuity discourse among the comments of the web surfers. Following this rationale, the different

twitters that share these illustrations write things such as: “I’m a fan of #Exvotos” (@Urbanomada, 06.04.19); “#Exvotos.The art of saying thanks” (@IsadoraAtellier, 04.12.18) and “I like that era because the museum of popular culture is filled with votive offerings and more” (@EricCharme, 10.10.17).

An additional manifestation on social networks is the use of the aesthetics of contemporary votive offerings³ to explore topics and discussions of recent years. Those topics can be of playful nature (television series, sports games and other entertainment inputs), but they can also expose the problems in the public agenda. The latter is highlighted in a series of altarpieces created by the Association of Catholics for the Right to Decide, where different women show their gratitude to the Virgin of Guadalupe for intervening in abortion situations. One of these altarpieces was shared by @ReyD_CA (13.12.18) user, who writes: “Thanks you Virgin of Guadalupe to have shown me the safe place to interrupt my pregnancy. You have always put along my path brave women that, like you, accompany me” (Figure 4).

Along these lines, the appropriation of cyberspace votive offerings aims not only at thanking or requesting, as it once did, but also at intervening in the public arena and accompanying the believer’s actions with saints, virgins and gods that the popular imagination recognizes as part of the symbols of the religious field that have been transmitted from one generation to another. Of course, this tone of religious appropriation does not aim at updating the transcendental link of the *religare* between the believer and the religious lineage but it seeks to become the symbolic power of the code to re-interpret it heretically, in the sense of another discursive arrangement.



Figure 4. Contemporary Votive Offering.

From Heresy to e- resy

I have used the word heretically in advance to refer to an alternative appropriation of religious symbols on the Internet. The root of heresy (and heretic) is related to the Latin *haereticus* that refers to the notion of another option, even though it is also close in meaning to the Greek *airesis*, that means decision or separation. In any case, it raises other possibilities of appropriation in such a way that heresy become a regularity of virtual discourses. Thus, as Sbardelotto says, on the Internet we observe not only a religious experience but also a religiosity in “experimentation”. “A religiosity marked by the little institutional and doctrinal fidelity, given the fluidity of the symbols in religious transit and the subjectivation of beliefs: from the traditional heresy we move to e-resy” (2014, p. 166).

According to the paper’s approach, e-resy overlaps the institutional proposal of online religion or, even, the individual religiosity of the believers on the Internet (Helland, 2005 y 2015). While the first manifestation exhibits the “use religious organizations or movements make of the online content as a tool to guide, educate and reach people with proselytistic and advertising purposes” (Hoover & Park, 2007, p. 180); the second describes the use of the virtual context as a space for religious praxis and convictions of (and from) the believers. On the one hand, the e-resy expresses an opposition to the religious field, i.e., it expresses the loss of power of religious hierarchies and the questioning of its concomitant legitimacy.

While considering the foregoing, the resurgence of religious altarpieces in cyberspace reflects the search for new meanings and legitimations about discourses copacted previously by a religious bureaucracy and doctrine. This approach expresses the relation of our object of analysis and the sense of the general process of secularization, not under the assumption that the Internet contributes irretrievably to the loss of religion but rather that the tools of digital world collaborate in allowing greater flexibility in the religious field once dominated by some religious monopolies.

By way of conclusion

Regarding the initial questioning about the implications of the appropriation of symbols and images such as votive offerings in cyberspace, in this text, we have developed an ethnographic approximation to two manifestations of virtual environments: “Votive offerings, altarpieces and religious folk charms” on Facebook and the trends on Twitter #Altarpieces and #Votive Offerings. Although one of the frequent meanings found in traditional altarpieces have to do with request and gratitude in a communication dynamics between the believer and the characters of the religious universe; on the Internet, religious paintings are premeated by other meanings of appropriation such as irony, empathy or a heretic proposal to address topics outside the regulation of ecclesiastic bureaucracies.

We can conclude with the approach that religious paintings, far from losing the symbolic power as communication channel between believers and gods, have gained collective power as a language to re-interpret the experiences and the expectations of part of the population that has access to the Internet. This of course is limited to the observed sample and the universe of users of the technological artefact that represents the Internet. Despite this, we found that in this mosaic of virtual discourse, the secularization of symbols transfers the legitimizing authority of the body of the religious specialists toward the collective imagination constructed by individuals. They seem to replicate Nietzsche's last century sentence: "I would only believe in a God that knows how to dance" (to which we would add: and surf the Internet).

Conclusions

In this paper we have analyzed the methods, techniques and auditing mechanisms that can be applied to the different voting systems, starting with the classic methods of total and partial recounts by choosing a sample. It has also been described how independent verification systems applied to electronic voting facilitate auditing; however, this is only for on-site electronic voting systems.

On the other hand, there are more adequate techniques to conduct audits of remote electronic voting systems. Some of them are based on the analysis of logs or records of events generated during the voting process. However, the management and analysis of logs presents some important challenges given the large number of logs that can be generated in a system. Automatic log analysis tools, such as the querifier, facilitate the auditor's task in detecting possible tampering.

This paper describes a mechanism that allows detecting, by means of an audit, votes that were added, eliminated or tampered with in an illegitimate manner. Through this mechanism it is possible to detect with great accuracy where along the log chain did the tampering occurred. This gives evidence not only that tampering occurred, but it also deduces in what sense the tampering detected has occurred. Therefore, this proposal contributes to the auditing of remote electronic voting systems; however, the same mechanism can be applied to other types of systems as shown in the example of the implementation of the Medusa mechanism where the logs of a system of information of electoral outcome are protected.

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¹This site (www.flickr.com/groups/pecadosymilagros/pool/) is administered by the Museo Nacional de Arte de México (The National Museum of Art of Mexico) even if the contributions are individual contributions from different users of the social network.

²Virtual ethnography has been approached by Hine (2011) for the analysis of virtual environments on the Internet, not only as objects of study but also as tools to access a larger field of information. Its main criticism are based above all on the lack of singularity of the method and the absence of central elements of the qualitative research as well as the face-to-face interaction, the advantages of permanency and the extent of data and documents, the ongoing production of social sources of information are highlighted.

³The research on Mexican votive offerings agrees that the aesthetics of the paintings began to “wane” along with their production, more specifically in the 20th century. However, it is precisely this more recent aesthetics that has been popularized and replicated in virtual altarpieces with totally innovative themes.