Sacredness of the book: an exploratory research

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Abstract
    The book is a fundamental manifestation of our culture. In this article I present the results of an exploratory research whose aim is to evaluate the hypothesis of the sacredness of the book.
Keywords: the book, sacred, material culture

1. The social importance of the book

    Throughout history, the book has always deserved a high social status. The Romans sacked the Greek books as war trophies, Alfonso of Aragon used to invite to court the humanists to the "hour of the book" and Luther defined the printing process as the ultimate gift of God. But the historic perspective does not only confront us with the noble face of the book, sparkling with social prestige and power. It equally confronts us with the dark side of the book, from which steams the dark power of the book, which can be of concern: the wave of suicides linked to the reading of Goethe's "The Sorrows of Young Werther" is a tragic demonstration, as well as the critique of Immanuel Kant to the reading of novels, which cause aberrations of the mind. (Cavallo, Chartier, 2009).
    So, here are the books, these strange things of a mysterious and ambivalent nature: they crackle in the flames of the fires lit by the Inquisition and dictators, as much as they celebrate the Lord's Word in the hands of the angels painted in the Basilicas; they grant eternity to the thoughts that they carry throughout the centuries to enrich the minds of posterity, as much as they disturb the mind with evil and subversive ideas. Throughout history, the book has often attracted the attention of both religious and secular authorities, for reasons of prestige and social control.
    The book is also a great protagonist of modernity: not only is it the sacred thing "par excellence" of the Christian religion, but it has also played an important role in the Protestant revolution, and the researches by Marshall McLuhan (1962), Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979) and Walter J. Ong (1982), indicate its strong connection to the scientific revolution. The book, therefore, is a medium of the God's written word and of the thought of thinkers, scientists and writers; it is an authoritative guardian that keeps the legal codes, an instrument of education, a status symbol, a source as much as a threat to the social order: it is therefore very possible that that a dense symbolic value has stratified on this object, the book, which is so typical of our social and cultural history. Of course, today the book has not exactly the same meanings that it could have had in the past. The printing technology has lowered its price, and its marketing has expanded from the traditional bookshops to the supermarkets. The right and the duty to education have spread basic literacy in all sections of society. Surely, since the book became less rare and more common, it can no longer by itself alone clearly define a higher social status.
And yet, the book has not become like any other ordinary object . The purpose of this research is to explore current symbolic meanings possessed by the book, considering, in particular, whether the sacredness of the book is socially recognized[1].

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[1] *This paper is taken from the thesis: "Sacredness of the book: an exploratory research", discussed at the University of Verona, supervisors: Professor Domenico Secondulfo and Professor Lorenzo Migliorati.*

2. A typology of sacred

The term "sacred" refers to several heterogeneous phenomena, which, for the scope of this research, it is useful to interrogate. In particular, it may refer to a religious and supernatural dimensions (for example the sacredness of God), a civic dimension (such as the sacredness of the Constitution), to a socially sacred dimension or an individually sacred dimension (such as the sacredness of a particular thing, the memory of a loved one, insignificant to anyone except to the one who recognizes this meaning).

To clarify the term "sacred", it is useful to construct a typology of the sacred as the one proposed by M. T. Evans (Evans, 2003). His typology is articulated on the axes individual/collective and natural/supernatural, which generate the types of personal, civic, religious and spiritual sacred. This typology clarifies the greater generality of the concept of sacredness compared to the concept of religion, in line with the thought of Durkheim (Durkheim, 2005); it also determines the relationship of the sacred to the individual as well as the collective levels.

The only drawback of this typology is the overlap between the collective/natural sacred and the civic sacred, because it overlooks the moral dimension of the state by focusing primarily on a social dimension of the sacred that, as it is articulated in the next section, is better understood in its many forms (Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, 1989), of which the civic dimension is only one of many. Therefore I propose to replace "civic sacred" with "social sacred" to emphasize the heterogeneity of the manifestations of the collective sacred, that are extraneous to the supernatural dimension of religion.

The sacred to which I refer in this article is the social sacred. The social sacred is at best reflected in the individual sacred at least in part, because it represents social values which, to be social, must be internalized by individuals; but the individual sacred does not coincide with the social sacred: although we can identify social regularities in the processes of individual sacralization of things (Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, 1989) and the cultural factor guides the individual one in the choice of things to sanctify (Evans, 2003), it is possible that some things are sacred only for a specific individual, and not for the community.

Fig. 1 A typology of the sacred

A Typology of the Sacred			
		Sacred Source	
		Natural	Supernatural
Sacred Holder	Individual	Personal	Spiritual
	Group	Social	Religious

3. The sacred and material culture

The material culture is the concrete expression of the symbolic system of culture. It can be understood as the set of shared meanings attributed to the things that make up the environment of the social group (Dant, 2007; Secondulfo, 2012).

For many years, researches on consumption and material culture have crossed the sacred dimension. In the tradition of sociological and anthropological studies, for example, this topic has been studied by authors such as Durkheim, Mauss and many others. A more recent series of investigations in this field was undertaken by Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, 1989); these researches show the applicability of the distinction between the sacred and the profane to the interpretation of the meanings associated with consumption practices and consumer goods.

Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, provide a clinical description of the sacred phenomenon. By analyzing the classical literature on the subject, such as that of Emile Durkheim, Mircea Eliade, and later authors, they indentify 12 characteristic properties, and referring to an empirical study of

large-scale, they show that the phenomenology of the sacred does appear in the contemporary world of consumption. Through sacralization, some objects become vehicles of transcendent experiences for consumers, who in this way escape the secular dimension of the everyday life, toward a symbolic sphere which is full of existential meaning. By means of associating consumer goods and religious dimension, therefore, consumers put consumed goods in a separate field, different from the ordinary one: these goods are treated with the highest respect, almost worshiped with fear and admiration; they evoke strong feelings, attachment, and are object of ritual behaviors. Further research focused on specific "community of consumers", has shown these sacred aspects of consumption. For example, the ethnography of Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners (Schouten, McAlexander, 1995), identifies a religious tone in the lives of the most passionate riders. The motorcycle journey is an experience of self-transformation, a ritualistic purification from the tensions of everyday life through its transcendence; taboo protects the motorcycle, which, no one, except the owner, can touch without permission. In addition the motorcycle is the object of cleaning and maintenance practices that have ritualistic aspects, and in accordance with the sociological tradition which sees the sacred as a force of social cohesion, it is this sacred dimension that allows a sense of brotherhood among motorcyclists.

A research on the North American runners and members of the Australian Hip-Hop subculture (Chalmers, Arthur, 2008) identifies some of the properties of the sacred described by Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (Belk et al., 1989) in lifestyles and themes characterizing these subcultures of consumption, such as the turntable model "1200 MK2" and some running shoes. Other research has also found some sacred aspects in the mythologies of subcultures gathered around the brand of the Apple Newton (Muniz, Schau, 2005) and Macintosh (Belk, Tumbat, 2005).

With different goals, these and other studies emphasize the role played by social identity and material culture, and describe a phenomenology of the sacred which is an important aspect of the subculture created by specific "consumer communities" around consumer goods provided by the market.

The research presented here differs from the studies described above in as much as it does not aim to find the sacred within a restricted community of consumers nor does it focus on the market aspects of the material culture. In this respect, the book is not considered a commodity, but a thing which, even if marketed, has the symbolic meaning that results from the role that it has played, and still plays, in the wider cultural history of the West, still recognizing the increased competition offered by new communication tools, both textual and non-textual. Unlike the previously mentioned researches, therefore, the book is not theoretically contextualized in a particular "subculture of consumption" (such as for instance a group of passionate bibliophiles), but in the wider collective culture.

Similar to those researches, however, this study supports the idea that the sacred can be a category offering interesting insights to understanding the symbolic values of material culture. The empirical exploration of social meanings attributed to the book is therefore used to assess whether the category of the sacred can actually help to understand the current symbolic meanings attributed to the book, on the basis of its historical, cultural and social importance.

4. The properties of the sacred

As previously mentioned, Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry have identified 12 characteristic properties of the sacred through the examination of the texts of Durkheim, Mircea Eliade, and subsequent theorists (Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, 1989, pp. 6-8). The 12 properties identified are: hierophany, kratophany, opposition to profane, contamination, sacrifice, commitment, objectification, ritual, mystery, communitas, myth, ecstasy and flow. Below I give a brief explanation of their meaning.

1. *Hierophany*: the appearance of the sacred in perceptible reality. From the phenomenological point of view of Eliade, it is the manifestation of the "Wholly Other" in ordinary reality, and from Durkheim's sociological point of view, it is the manifestation in

the individual consciousness of separation, as determined at the social level, between the sacred thing and ordinary things, which results in social cohesion.

2. *Kratophany*: the ambivalent power attributed to the sacred. The sacred is both a positive power that inspires admiration, and a negative power, awe-inspiring.
3. *Opposition to profane*: sacred things are kept separate from the profane, they are considered radically different, irreconcilable with it.
4. *Contamination*: sacred things can transmit their sacredness by physical or symbolic contact such as for example in the consecration ceremonies.
5. *Sacrifice*: ritual practices of offering, sacrifice and submission with which the devotees are morally obliged to approach the sacred.
6. *Commitment*: emotional attachment to the sacred, which becomes a fundamental part of the personal identity.
7. *Objectification*: the subsumption of the thing defined sacred within a transcendental framework, the consequence of which is the allocation of ideal qualities such as eternity and perfection to sacred things, differentiating them from earthly things, which are imperfect and subject to the normal flow of time.
8. *Ritual*: reverential practices, socially prescribed and sanctioned, by which sacred things are to be approached.
9. *Mystery*: sacred things are not considered rationally understandable.
10. *Communitas*: the feeling of brotherly equality lived by the faithful in contact with the sacred.
11. *Myth*: sacred things are linked to stories that express the origin and the place of men in relation to them.
12. *Ecstasy and flow*: the experience of personal or group rapture, lived in contact with the sacred.

5. Definition of "book" between written text and material support

Before presenting the results of this research, it is necessary to clarify what it is meant by "book". The reply is necessarily linked with the problem of the relationship between the text's material support and the reading practice. It is clear, in fact, that the representation of the book overlaps with the one of the text, and the representation of the text overlaps with the representation of the reading. In fact, for example, "book" is used as a metonymy for the text in the common language.

At first glance, the problem seems to be to dissolve this relationship to access the representation of support, purified from its relationship with the text. But this would be misleading.

Phenomenologically, the existence of the book does not make sense without the existence of the text that it contains, and this leads naturally to the reading. It is true, moreover, that the text and the reading exist independently from the book: in this sense, the book is only one of the different supports of a text, along with newspapers, magazines, whiteboards, posters etc. However, a small preliminary survey, and other data collected during the research, supports the hypothesis that the book, rather than other media, would be the object typically associated with the reading. From this point of view, therefore, book, reading and text belong all to a single representation. Although the investigation supporting this finding has only been limited, the triangulation of data has led to consistent results. This hypothesis was therefore taken to be valid, while recognizing the need for further confirmation. The methodological consequence is to define the symbolic representation of the book, and therefore the unit of analysis, as the complex representation which brings together material support with the "book form", text and reading.

6. Notes on the research method

To explore the idea of sacredness in relation to the book, we analyzed 460 posts having as theme the book, identified in a well-known and generalist online community: the Italian site of Yahoo Answers. We choose a general forum to reduce the likelihood of encountering extreme

attitudes. A community of bibliomaniacs would certainly provide biased results, maybe useful for studying a consumer culture, but not to place the phenomenon in the broader socio-cultural frame in which we intended to study it. As we have already said, in fact, this research aims to assess the sacredness as a quality attributed to the book by the wider social culture, and not just by a small circle of enthusiasts.

In order to investigate the hypothesis of the sacredness of the book in the wider social culture, the exploration has included institutional sites (such as UNESCO and the Italian Ministry of Heritage and Cultural Activities), statistics, newspaper articles and other forums and websites. The research aims is to collect confirmation or disconfirmation with respect to the hypothesis plausibility, in order to contribute to the knowledge of the symbolic aspects of the book. The research should be considered, in this sense, as a preliminary study to which additional and more extensive research should contribute.

However , the definition of 12 sacred properties still allows a certain rigor and limits the risk of establishing analogies that, as suggestive as they may be, might be devoid of empirical evidence.

7. The Sacredness of the book

In the messages, and the remaining material analyzed, we found that the book is presented using some of the properties of the sacred. The words of the respondents and the information gathered from other sources will now be presented and discussed[2].

7.1 Kratophany

The book shows an ambivalent moral power. This power is manifested mainly in relationship between the person and the book, mediated by reading. In the texts that we have analyzed it is often stated that "reading is good" because it increases the culture and "develops the spirit":

> *"[Reading books] is good for your culture in general ... is good for your mind .. good for your imagination ... [it is good for] the way you enter into a relationship ... [reading books] enriches you inside ... "*

> *"[Reading books] is good for the mind, stimulates the brain"*

However, reading books is also risky, because it can estrange the individual from his social relations:

> *"But be careful! If you are always reading books, you can get away from the real world, and friends. But anyway I think that reading is good "*

> *"I have always been criticized for that [because I read] by my parents, my peers, my professors; they waste their time to tell me I'm a social outcast, I should spend more time with friends, I have to find other interests, even if I do not feel the need "*

Then, reading books is good, but it can also be harmful. The idea that reading books is good, not only appears to be a widespread belief, but also a quasi-biological truth sanctioned by the medicine. So much so that in some pediatric hospitals, also thanks to the "Born to Read" project, we can find small libraries. In recent years, some advertising for social promotion has aimed at persuading young parents to include reading books among the basic practices of care (Savioli, Vannucchi, 2010). Reading seems to be really considered the "food of the mind", as necessary as maternal nourishment.

Certainly, it is not the mere presence of the book in itself to be beneficial, but rather the fact of reading the book. Throughout history we can find traces in the belief in the magic power of the book, also capable of triggering beneficent forces that would otherwise remain closed. The books

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[2] Translated by author

that feature these special powers are books like The Bible (Cressy, 1986) and the Little Red Book of Mao.

In the cases identified, however, the books seem to give off beneficent forces in general as long as they are read. The reading is then the true source of the expected benefit. However, the promotion of reading is coupled with the book, in a remarkable and almost exclusive way, and it is never associated with any other media that may as well allow it (such as newspapers or websites). The book, then, as mentioned above, seems to occupy a privileged place in the social representation of reading and its benefits.

I think it is interesting to note that these benefits, even if they are represented in a kind of medical and biological perspective, cannot derive automatically from the act of reading in the same way as a drug can mechanically produce its effects on the body or on the brain. Rather, we are talking about psycho-social benefits: enrichment of vocabulary, comprehension of written text and expression and cultural enrichment are moral goods, whose value exists only because they are socially valued. In this sense, they are placed to a symbolic and social level, and not to a biological level of reality, and therefore they can be recognized as aspects of kratophany.

In support of this view, we can cite more examples of kratophanic power attributed to the book, as genuine charitable initiatives aimed at donating books to the most marginalized groups in society, such as the "Banco del Libro" organized to promote the education of children in Venezuela (www.bancodellibro.org.ve) or the recent "Banco Editoriale" of Verona (www.bancoeditoriale.org), which collects and donates books to prisoners and children of disadvantaged families. Then in the program of the political leader Nichi Vendola for the Italian primary elections of 2013 we read:

> *"Inspired by a special experiment started in some prisons in Brazil (...) we are proposing a law that implements the universal equivalence between the books and freedom. The proposal is to reduce the pain of four days for each book read (...). [...] In Italy we find 153 libraries in 206 prisons (...). It would be an extraordinary novelty if, even in Italy, we could transform the opportunity to read in redemption through reading just like in Brazil"[3]*

We can see, therefore, the sacred power of the book in its ability to reintegrate the marginalized strata of society.

According to Durkheim, the sociological function of the sacred is precisely to generate social cohesion (Durkheim, 2005).

Paying attention to the dark side of the kratophany, it can be noted that the isolation of the reader is ironically sanctioned by the title "bookworm", reserved for those who prefer by far the relationship with books than the relationship with others. Alberto Manguel writes: *"The person who reads books is recognized as a scholar, but his relationship with the book is also considered disdainfully exclusive and excluding, perhaps because the image of a person curled up in a corner, clearly oblivious to the annoyance of the world, suggests the idea of an impenetrable privacy, a furtive self-centeredness"* (Manguel 2009, p. 29)[4].

From the data collected, the book seems really to take the ambivalent and typical profile of kratophany: by reading, the book can be both resource and threat to social cohesion.

7.2 Opposition to the Profane

In the texts that we have analyzed, the book is often defined according to his opposition to the world of the ordinary, the everyday, in other words, as opposed to the profane world. The book, by the process of reading it, leads to a different sphere of life than the every day one. Here are some definitions that occur:

> *"A book is a different world"*

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[3] http://www.nichivendola.it/cms-upload/01_oppure_vendola_cultura.pdf
[4] Translated by the author

> *"[The book is] the world parallel to our reality"*

> *"[The book is] the door to a new world"*

Reading a book is like the experience of riding a Harley-Davidson, as described by Schouten and McAlexander (Schouten, McAlexander, 1995): it is a way to transcend the mundane. In fact, a frequently used visual representation of the book, is the one that plays on the analogy between the pages and the wings, where the flight clearly indicates detachment from everyday life on the wings of imagination, to a dimension which is free from the limitations and the dullness of routine.

7.3 Contamination

Cicero said that "a room without books is like a body without a soul". In this analogy, the book is presented as being able to influence the things that are associated with it with a symbolic and emotional power, such as in the case of analogy of the room attributed to Cicero. The marketing of fake books created especially for furnishing a room can be an additional example of power of books. The books seem to have the ability to summon a special emotional atmosphere that has the tones of moral emotions such as respect, reverence and fear. Thus, the reader can sometimes cultivate a sense of moral superiority over those who do not read, due to his being "blessed" by the book:

> *"Ever since I learned to read I have never detached from the books. And who does not read, does not know what he lost!"*

> *"I consider [those who do not read books] empty people, I'm sorry they do not know what they're missing!"*

> *"[Those who do not read books] are ignorant people"*

7.4 Commitment

The attachment to books and its significance for personal identity is manifested in the definition of a book as a "friend" or a "companion", and in the description of the feelings of attachment which sometimes becomes almost an addiction to it:

> *"Books are my best friends"*

> *"Books are a big part of me "*

> *"... For me the books are companions ... of this wonderful and difficult journey called life ... "*

> *"I cannot ever be too long away from books. Sometimes I feel the need to get one in hand, browsing the pages, read some lines. "*

The intimate link between the reader and some specific books is also indicated by the practice of buying books already read on borrowed editions, to have a personal copy:

> *"The books that I loved... I want them next to me"*

> *"If I read a book that I borrowed from a friend and I like it a lot, I'll buy it, even for the mere fact of having it"*

> *"It is precisely because you liked them that you should buy them .... When a book catches your imagination, it is because somehow it touched something in you that belongs to you deep inside ... so you want to own it ... "*

The link between the reader and the book is sometimes so strong that reading books on a computer can be experienced as a betrayal and inspire feelings of guilt:

> *"Sometimes I read books on the computer, however, I felt guilty when I liked them, that is why I bought them soon after I read them."*

More generally, the attachment to the book, even in its more straightforward connotation of material support to the text, regardless of its content, is indicated by the refusal to replace it with electronic media such as e-books, and it appears closely linked to the sensory experience provided by the paper book:

> *"[The book is] something essential, I thought the digital would erase it from my life, but it has not, the paper book remains present"*

> *"The warmth and intimacy that the paper can give .... it is something that aseptic computer will never replace"*

> *"Book of paper [is] without a doubt [better than e-book]: I like the smell of the pages, touch them and browse them, savoring the book not only with the mind, but also with the sense of touch."*

> *"For me the book on paper is unique and irreplaceable"*

> *"The e-book has its own charm and its comfort, but I think the feeling of flipping through a book in a REAL library or bookstore in your town is a unique feeling."*

The commitment is the psychological phenomenon connected not only to the attachment to the sacred, but also to the conversion, which can be described as the sudden and radical way, by which sometimes this attachment occurs. The books, someone says, "can change your life".
Hence, if we return to the donation of books to the socially marginal or deviant people mentioned above, we may interpret it as offering an opportunity for redemption or conversion to socially shared moral: the fact that the prisoner is committed to reading books, one can actually deduct that he is re-educated, since he gives a reassuring sign of appreciation of what is deemed morally important by the community.

7.5 Objectification

The book is characterized by idealized qualities, such as perfection and eternity. For example, especially in comparison with the electronic book, the book is often considered the textual support for excellence:

> *"[The book] made of paper will always exist for lovers of reading."*

> *"I take the view that the paper is always the best"*

> *"[Books made of paper] will never disappear ..."*

A sentence by Umberto Eco effectively summarizes this view: *"The book is like the spoon, the hammer, the wheel, the scissors. Once you have invented them, you cannot do better".*[5] (Carriere, Eco 2009).

7.6 Ritual

People approach the books with many rituals. A special form of ritual is to smell the books. In general, the handling and use of the book are related to the category of the rituals of appropriation

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[5] Translated by author

(McCracken, 1986; Secondulfo, 2012), which does not necessarily refer to a moral significance of the object, but rather allows the consumer to appropriate the symbolic qualities of the object, by "make it become his own". There are also other types of behaviors that can be better linked to the moral sense of the term ritual. Among the rituals Durkheim includes taboos, or moral prohibitions of certain acts. The data analyzed show that the taboo of ruining books, turning pages, or writing on it with a pen, is very common:

> *"I love books too much to bend the pages ..."*

> *"I feel bad when the pages are torn. I do not even underline phrases that impress me, but I write them in a notebook"*

The prohibition of throwing away books is also widespread. Here are some answers to a question by which a person asked what to do with some old books, no longer used:

> *"Sell [the books that you no longer use] to markets, or gives them to someone ..."*

> *"Give them [the books that you no longer use] to the library"*

> *"Absolutely do not throw away any books!"*

> *"Put the box [with the books you no longer use] under the bed, but do not throw them absolutely ...."*

This taboo clearly indicates that the book has a moral value, regardless of its content. The person who asked this question did not make any mention of the textual content of the books, and no one has found necessary to ask for it. All respondents have however advised against the possible elimination of books in the trash.

The existence of a social sanction against those who throw the books, although it is the rightful owner, may indicate that the symbolic value of the book is not limited to an individual and utilitarian sphere. The book is not only a personal property, but also a collective ownership. It refer to the same feature the existence of a network of public libraries[6]. The need to have books to read seems to be a universal right. The very term given to the printing and sale of a book, "to publish", refers to the same semantic root. Being a collective good is also one of the properties collectively attributed to knowledge, in line with the modern humanistic tradition. The representation of the book as a collective good, is consistent with the moral and collective character of the sacred.

7.7 Mistery

The book seems to satisfy deep existential needs. It is defined as a "teacher of life", and the ability to stimulate the imagination is recognized as mysterious. Some messages express the impossibility of describing, with the rationality of language, the deeper meaning of the book, precisely because it is inherent to an existential and emotional sphere. In addition, some books can "change a life":

> *"All books can change your life because when you finish reading them you always reflect on something!"*

> *"[A Book] can guide, console, make us think, enlighten us on many issues (...) you need it because sometimes his words give you what you are looking for"*

> *"[The books are] rectangular teachers"*

> *"I could describe the books with a metaphor, but anything that comes to mind is banal and diminutive."*

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[6] There are 12.400 public libraries on the Italian territory (ISTAT, 2009), and two National Libraries which goal is to conserve the totality of the Italian editorial production.

"I cannot express in words what the books are to me!"

7.8 Ecstasy and Flow

The state of flow generated by reading an exciting book is rather widespread:

"[when I read] I forget it all"

"[To Read means] to abandon reality and go wherever the book takes you"

"Reading can transform black and white pages in multicolored worlds of infinite shades"

Visual representations of the book capture this property with the metaphor of flight, which represents the kidnapping of the attention of the reader, as evident in some spots for the promotion of reading (Savioli, Vannucchi, 2010).

7.9 Hierophany

We explore this property as the last because it is far-reaching property and difficult to detect. I think we can better offer some assumptions rather than data. With the term hierophany one can refer, in the sociological context, on the one hand to the effects of socialization to sacred meanings, and on the other hand to the process of socio-cultural creation of these same meanings.
In the first sense, the transmission of the sacredness of the book can be done by the sanctions with which educators punish acts of ill-treatment of the book, such as the folding of the pages and the marking of them with indelible pen. These internalized prohibitions appear in many testimonies. In addition, the educational practices reward or penalize students for what they have learned from books. The book could then be attached to the power represented by the teachers, and also by the culture that the book contains, of which the teachers are the "priests".
In the second sense, the matrix of the sacralization of the book could be traced back to the humanistic ideals of knowledge and information, to the democratic ideals of sharing knowledge and the individualistic ideas related to personal development.
The materiality of the book could also facilitate the "symbolic fusion" between the text and the support that makes it a "thing with a soul." This synergy is concretely manifested in the correspondence between the text and the materiality of the book: its length is reflected in its thickness, and the definitiveness, completeness and permanence of the printed book may refer symbolically to the same high ideals of the knowledge contained in it.
The new technologies of text communication, such as computers and e-book, do not have this fusional relationship. With an image, one could say that the book embodies a soul, while an electronic book appears more like a window through which many souls can pass. In the case of a e-book, therefore, participation of the matter to the moral dimension of knowledge is fleeting and temporary, while in the case of the book is final. That's why discarding an e-book probably would not provoke the same condemnation for the same act performed on a book: with the e-book you throw away a thing, but throwing away the book you also destroy the text and, symbolically, the knowledge, that no single individual can afford to damage, even if only through the elimination of a simple copy of a book.
Even the secular and fundamental presence of the book may have helped to produce its sacralization "by quintessence", which is one of the processes of sacralization identified by Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry referring to the work of Cornfeld and Edwards (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989, pp. 15-17). The things equipped with quintessence are those that possess the ability to be exactly how they should be; quintessence is generally acquired over a long period of time and refers to authenticity (Idem, p. 16). The quintessence of the book emerges for example when the book is deemed irreplaceable by the e-book, and when a reader refers to printed book as a "real book", as opposed to digital imitation:

> *"E-books are just a grotesque simulacrum, they cannot be read, they can only*
> *scroll down, they are only the mask of the real books, the ones you can touch"*

The quintessence of the book seems perfectly evident in the aforementioned thought of Umberto Eco, which defines the book as a perfect thing, which therefore cannot be replaced by a support that claims to improve it further (Eco, 2009).

7.10 Myth, communitas and sacrifice

The exploration that we made, did not specifically identify myths and sacrificial rituals associated with the book, nor did it identify states of "communitas". With regard to the communitas, it is conceivable that it may emerge in the reading club.

8. Discussion

The data collected in this study indicate that the book is often represented through typical categories of the sacred. Specifically, we have been able to detect 9 of the 12 properties identified by Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry 1989).

This data confirm those of previous researches on the subject (Pozzi, 2011). In particular, our analysis confirms the personal sacredness of the book, due in large part to the commitment propriety, and the diffusion of many taboos and rituals already identified. The study also questions some of the findings and conclusions of Pozzi, who claim that the book is sacred for the individual but not for the community (Idem, p. 42). The conclusions of Pozzi, in fact, resolutely place the book in the type of individual sacred.

In contrast with this interpretation, we claim that the findings and data presented support the thesis of a social sacred representation of the book. The book sacredness doesn't seem entirely attributable to a personal choice, or to a specific consumption culture. The book sacredness, for example, appears in public campaigns to promote reading habits. This data, together with the widespread representation of the book through categories of the sacred, as emerged in the analyzed texts, testify not only of the social diffusion of the value attributed to the book, but also of the institutional value attributed both to this object (we cannot overlook that the book is the main tool used by educational institutions), and to the practice of reading that is connected to it.

We assume that the discrepancy of results may be due, at least in part, to the technique of in-depth interviews used by Pozzi, which may be responsible for a data bias. In fact, the social sacred implies series of internalized moral obligations, hardly expressible by a person because dissonant with other socially determined and widespread values, such the freedom of thought, which can be considered as another socially sacred value. In this case, the interviewee could have been expressing only one of the two dissonant values of the book. The first one is the personal value, socially acceptable because grounded on the individual choice and the freedom of though. The second one is the social value of the book, which implies the recognition of a social conditioning. The latter probably could result in cognitive dissonance with the first, making it difficult to express. An approach to the topic focusing on both the subjective and objective sources, could balance this bias.

9. Conclusion

This study does not have the ambition to be exhaustive, but it is intended as a contribution to the study of the book through a socio-cultural point of view, and a starting point for further, more in-depth analysis. In its being symbolically connected to Western modernity, the book constitutes an interesting perspective on the current cultural condition. The change in its symbolic meanings, in the context of cultural transformation caused by new information technologies, could perhaps establish itself as a "litmus test" of change. For the study of material culture, the current interaction between old and new media is an interesting conjuncture.

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