Article

Guilt, Psychological Well-Being and Religiosity in Contemporary Cinema

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Abstract: This study explains the change in meaning that psychology has given to the relationship between religiosity and psychological well-being since the beginning of the 20th century, dating it back to the deep change introduced by post-modernity. Guilt is interpreted as a paradigm of this change in meaning, and the reflection that the different ways of understanding guilt have had on the screen is analyzed. The Content Analysis of a sample of 94 films showed 5 modes of expression of guilt that can be placed on a continuum from the traditional Judeo-Christian model that serves as a benchmark—harm-repentance-penitence-forgiveness—to the removal of guilt as a requirement for self-realization. The other three models emerge between these two poles: the absence of guilt as a psychiatric pathology; the resignification of the guilty act for the reduction in dissonance; and idealized regret at no cost. Studying guilt-coping models of the films allows us to infer the hypothesis that a large part of the current positive view of religiosity in psychological well-being is related to a culture that does not demand psychological suffering as a requirement for a full experience of spirituality.

Keywords: spirituality; religiosity; psychological well-being; guilt

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, many studies have reported a positive relationship between psychological well-being and the constructs of spirituality and religiosity (S/R). In addition to the well-known meta-analysis by Koenig et al. (2012), there are several studies that indicate that people linked to spiritual and religious practices have significantly better results in recovery processes from different diseases such as cancer (Van Ness et al. 2003) and that they strengthen their faith after serious illnesses (Canada et al. 2020). It is common to find studies that negatively correlate S/R with pathologies such as depression, anxiety, and drug abuse (Abdel-Khalek et al. 2019; Dein 2006; Reyes-Ortiz et al. 2020). There are also studies that place S/R as a protective factor against suicide (Saiz et al. 2021; VanderWeele et al. 2016).

These psychological well-being effects have been explained by the social support brought about by religious practice in communities of believers (Weber [1920] 2012), but also by the outcomes of individual S/R practices in the private sphere (Lewis et al. 2008). The explanations for these S/R benefits for health, especially mental health, range from experimental approaches reporting how some S/R practices, such as prayer or meditation, improve standard mental health scores (Eilami et al. 2019) to more ambitious approaches that add spirituality as a fourth key dimension to the well-known WHO physical, mental, and social dimensions of quality of life (Moreira-Almeida et al. 2018; Saxena 2006). This positive view is relatively recent in the academic world and contrasts with previous approaches

in which S/R was either absent from the scientific debate or had a psychopathological approach (Martínez-Guerrero 2011; Wulff 1997).

The fact that for most of the last century S/R was excluded from the center of the academic debate in psychology, presented as a pre-scientific anthropological heritage and often studied as a method of social control, expression of neuroticism or directly psychiatric pathology (Allmon 2013; Florenzano 2010; Hesnard 1949), has been explained by the influence of two powerful epistemological currents: by behaviorist positivism that placed S/R outside the scope of interest of verifiable observation, except as a manifestation of irrational behavior with a place in the DSM; and, above all, by the powerful influence of Freudian psychoanalysis that explained religious sentiment as an invention of culture to maintain the social order that would be achieved by the introjection in childhood of the father figure magnified as a source of protection and repression (Freud [1923] 1973, [1930] 1987). Many authors who explain the booming entry of S/R studies into psychology present it as a way to overcome the myths and prejudices of the scientific community toward S/R (Font i Rodon 1999; Numbers 2010; Post 1992). We do not deny this explanation, but our starting hypotheses to explain the new vision of S/R as a source of psychological well-being are twofold: the first is that the consolidation of the post-modern paradigm in the academic world of the social sciences has meant, in practice, the disappearance of the great meta-narratives of psychology and, as a consequence, the science-religion relationship has moved from an inside-outside logic to an interaction of narratives without mutual demands of legitimacy. Our second hypothesis, stemming from the first, is that post-modernity, by placing the criterion of truth in individual judgment, has also drastically reduced the demands that Western society imposes on those who live their spiritual beliefs in accordance with the religious or moral principles of the churches or majority ethical systems; and it does so, fundamentally, by providing a new significance to the feeling of guilt.

The development of the first hypothesis is beyond the scope of this article and can be followed in other publications (Bericat 2003; Inglehart 1998); to contrast the second, we will consider the following argumentative process: we assume that the dominant values of each era are fundamentally reflected in the majority cultural products of each historical moment. For decades, cinema has been one of these products in which the majority social norms are reflected, acting at the same time as a modeler of the attitudes of the audience to the values defended by those who have access to its production (Pardo 1998; Tudor 1974). On this basis, we hope to find in the moral models of cinema a change in the way in which Western citizens, regardless of whether they are religious or not, have internalized guilt as an expression of religious and moral demands, from the expansion of cinema as a mass phenomenon to the present day. In this way, we will take as a reference pattern the traditional Judeo-Christian model of guilt experience, expecting to find other alternative models that significantly reduce the demands to face it.

The demands that contemporary ethical or religious systems impose on their followers may be associated with forms of external control of behavior, especially in small communities, but these forms of pressure are irrelevant without an internalization that involves both a sense of duty and suffering for breaking the main characters. It is here that, in our opinion, post-modern society presents new models of coping with guilt that are more compatible with an experience of S/R associated with psychological well-being.

In order to approach the cinematographic models of guilt experience, we need a specification that includes its different forms, something that is not easy because the usual approach of the academic world seems to establish a dichotomous nosology that confronts objective guilt -"being" guilty- versus subjective guilt -"feeling" guilty- (Zabalegui 1997). Choosing between guilt as the objectification of a transgression or crime, which is common in the legal world, versus guilt as a psychological feeling or emotion, as psychology does, would not be useful for our analysis, therefore in this paper we propose to understand guilt in a unitary way as "the negative evaluation of conduct that transgresses relevant norms,

which, when attributed to a responsible person is associated with suffering and usually has a motivational effect".

Guilt is always objective in a person who transgresses a norm, but who assesses whether or not there has been a transgression—a judge, a community, oneself, etc.; which norm has been broken—an ethical code, a legal rule, a religious principle, etc.; what conduct is evaluated—concrete conduct, a desire, a carelessness, etc.; but, above all, how suffering is experienced—annoyance, discomfort, anguish, etc. and the lines of action it motivates—redress, transference, punishment, etc. are the different variants; but, above all, how the suffering is experienced—annoyance, discomfort, anguish, etc. and the courses of action it motivates—redress, transference, punishment, etc. are the different variants that will allow us to construct models of guilt experience whose presence we can explore in cinematographic imagery.

Similarly, to any other psychological process, the current experience of guilt is the result of a complex historical evolution. If we use classical Greece as a reference, the standards that, when broken, produce discomfort, have changed, as it has changed also the legitimacy that Western societies attribute to the origin of these standards. As a consequence of this attribution, the intimate feeling of obligation to comply with them or not has also changed. Although the perspectives we are about to enumerate coexist in current Western society, we situate each of them as different moments of our cultural tradition.

The first, *fatalism*, can be traced both to classical Greece and to the origin of Christianity, which is rooted in the Hebrew tradition: when the law emanates directly from God, its non-observance is a direct offense to the divinity to which one is permanently indebted. Although divine precepts exist, the one who is in this perspective understands that it is directly God who decides what is right and what is wrong, so his action would conform to what he understands to be the will of God in the hope, not the certainty, of divine benevolence. From this point of view, not sinning, acting in a holy manner, does not free you from guilt. Some authors present Job's model as a reflection of the fact that the fulfillment of divine designs does not necessarily free you from misfortune (Capodebilla 1967; Katchadourian 2010). In this primitive relationship, suffering is not exclusive to the one who sins or breaks a divine norm. The one who acts righteously must accept it without crying out to God (Kushner 2007). This initial idea has its roots in the Homeric poems where guilt resided in the behavior itself and meant the joyful acceptance of the misfortune sent by the gods (Aedo Barrena 2013). The heroes of Greek tragedies were subdued and dominated by superior forces that ruled their destinies (Vives 1970, p. 8).

A second time, *the law of God*, could be described as that of the mediated interpretation of transgression. With the fusion of religious and political power, without eliminating the idea of a god to be accountable to, the procedures are objectified and regulated—the rules to be followed in order to obey his designs. It is God's representatives on earth who prescribe what must be achieved and therefore when to "feel" guilt and how to behave in order to free oneself from suffering. It is the religious authorities who indicate what is forbidden and what is permitted, while describing the punishment that accompanies transgression. Objective guilt and the feeling of guilt coincide in sin, but now the believer can free himself from guilt in different ways: originally through baptism and in different historical periods through regulated guidelines that included, at least, repentance and penance. Guilt is constituted as debt (Mejía 2002). The passage from the first to the second moment was consolidated as the religious authorities gained prominence in the relationship between man, or woman, and God. Some examples in the Middle Ages, which aroused strong schisms, were the so-called Penitential Books that indicated how to pay for sins and established the controversial indulgences and exceptions (Neyra 2006). The progressive control over the interpretation of guilt was even reflected in ritual forms of confession, which, after the IV Lateran Council of 1215, ceased to be public and became obligatory, periodic, and private, always with a priest, who went from being a mere intermediary between the sinner and God to being the protagonist of absolution. The old formula "May God forgive you for your sins . . . " became, after the 1215 conclave "I forgive you in the

name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit". Suffering can be soothed by penance. The central idea of this involves translating religious precepts, or ethical systems, into codes of observance that, in turn, involve objective sanction mechanisms for transgressions. Although it may be considered an obsolete model, this is the inspiration for various contemporary forms of religious fundamentalism (Kienzler 2000).

In the third time—*double legitimacy*—there are two competing norms: one religious or ethical, and the other civil. From archaic times to the present day, most of humanity has been subject to these two legitimacies. Since Ancient Greece and the Rome of "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's", Western men and women have governed their conduct through the inspiration and vigilance of these two powers. In our current environment, only civil rules bind all citizens and punish their transgressions with regulated penalties administered by the civil authorities. The individual has, in the law, a model of what he must not do, accompanied by the penalties for breaking the law. At the same time, depending on his ethical or religious affiliation, he has moral norms about the way in which he should behave; but those who dictate them lack the punitive capacity to sanction deviation. Ethical systems and churches can reinforce compliance with their norms through eudemonic gratification or the affection and warmth of the community, but the only way to prevent transgression, when the moral norm does not coincide with the criminal code, is to place in the individuals themselves the vigilance of the norm and self-sanction through suffering. What we know today as the feeling of guilt has been situated in the Christian theological tradition as a faculty of the moral conscience that is a gift granted by God in a universal way that allows us to distinguish between good and evil and that guides behavior by means of joy or guilt (Elders 1983; Torello 1972). Outside the circles of faith, the authors who marked the academic explanation of the nature of self-punishment in 20th century Western culture were Nietzsche and Freud, the former by describing the genealogy of morality as an imposition of the powerful (Nietzsche [1887] 1984) and the latter by labeling that vigilant and sanctioning instance as 'superego', which, in his opinion, the social order introduces into the psyche of the individual to control, through guilt, the adjustment to social dictates (Freud [1930] 1987). As organized churches lose influence in the legislative power, they must step up their efforts so that their faithful follow norms of religious conduct that are not penalized in the legal codes—for example, abortion—or that are devalued or combated—for example, the prohibition of premarital relations—so that the sense of guilt becomes the central benchmark axis. Although this third model is the dominant one today, the first two survive as the inspiration of important religiously oriented sectors of the contemporary world.

The experience of guilt according to these three ideas, not necessarily sequential, has been shaken in our time by the success of some of the basic principles of post-modern society. Probably the most important is the psychologization of the criterion of truth. The Nietzschean death of God—religious authority—and the Freudian murder of the father—the weight of tradition—has been followed by the cornering of modern objectivity—the empire of scientific certainty—so that if the source of the legitimacy of the norms proposed to me does not emanate from God or from a social body from which I am indistinguishable, nor is it based on incontrovertible truths, I can free myself from the pressure to comply with them. The psychologization of post-modern guilt involves "rationalizing" transgression by filtering it through the sieve of self-perceived needs for happiness or self-fulfillment. The traditional feeling of guilt would be meaningless from this perspective because when legal rules are broken and we do not assume our responsibility, the punishment imposed on us—fine, jail, etc.—socially pays the guilt; and when those moral or religious norms with which we agree are broken, but which are not legally punished, we can discover the uselessness of self-punishment—suffering and anguish—and transform it into reparative actions for the possible damage produced by transgressing the norm. The transformation of guilt into responsibility is the key around which almost all self-help manuals revolve, at least since Dyer (1975) proposed the futility of guilt because "My feeling guilty will not change the past, nor will it make me a better person" (p. 103) and "The guilt does not help.

It not only keeps you immobilized, but it actually intensifies the chances that you'll repeat the behavior" (p. 94). The post-modern logic of guilt identifies the external sources that generate suffering as attempts at external control and proposes reparative action as a way of assuming responsibility for the harm caused and, if concrete reparation is not possible, transforming it into individual improvement accompanied by self-forgiveness (Álava 2003; Rojas-Marcos 2009).

We propose to describe the way in which cinema idealizes and presents as a model the different ways of experiencing and approaching guilt by celluloid heroes. As a reference model, we will start from the best-established proposals of the Judeo-Christian Western culture, and we hope to find variations of this proposal that offer alternative options to experience guilt that are compatible with a less demanding experience of spirituality.

It is not possible to speak of a single "Western" canon for the experience of guilt inherited from the Jewish and Christian tradition. Almost all of the elements linked to the transgression of religious laws, i.e., the ways of recognizing and dealing with sin have generated much more than heated theological debates, staining the world with blood during decades of religious wars. Jews, Catholics, and Protestants have significant differences in regard to the sense of guilt in the experience of faith—that is a given fact (Katchadourian 2010). However, in our opinion, there is a reference model in Western culture regarding the logic in which guilt is inscribed, inherited from the Judeo-Christian culture that goes beyond religious experience and that resides in common sense and sometimes in civil laws. The model revolves around four pillars: (a) recognition, (b) self-blame, (c) cost and (d) reconciliation.

Expressed in a simple way, from the individual's point of view, the model would tell us that: when people perceive that they have acted wrongly—recognition—they feel discomfort or regret—self-blame—that usually leads them to carry out a series of undesired or thankless actions—cost—that are expected to lead to overcome the initial situation—reconciliation (See Table 1).

Table 1. "The objective guilt" process.

Model	Recognition	Self-Incrimination	Cost	Reconciliation
Reference	Acknowledgment of fault	Self-incrimination	Cost	Reconciliation
Religious	Awareness of sin	Contrition-Confession	Penitence	Forgiveness
Legal	Accusation proven	Awarded Repentance	Penalty	Completion

It is evident that this logic has a strong anchorage in the Judeo-Christian tradition which, with different expressions, and at times very opposed among the different churches, can be expressed in the same process: when one becomes aware that one has sinned—recognition—the believer feels a pain that he must confess by showing repentance—self-incrimination—and must act in a way stipulated by his church by fulfilling certain precepts, rites or penances—cost—after which one can aspire to obtain God's forgiveness—reconciliation.

If we observe the weight of this process in the so-called "objective guilt" stemming from the judicial world, the process could be as follows: when after an accusation a crime is proven—recognition—justice condemns the guilty person valuing in his favor the repentance—self-incrimination—and makes him pay a penalty, sometimes in institutions called, precisely, penitentiaries—cost—and by completing the penalty he recovers his freedom—reconciliation.

2. Materials and Method

2.1. Sample

In order to analyze the models of guilt experience in films from Western cultures, it was decided to take as the universe of study all the films collected in the Internet Movie Database IMDB that included the term "guilt" as a psychological process in any of its descriptive indexes. From this initial theoretical basis, an initial sample frame was

constructed according to the following criteria: only films accessible through television platforms and library systems accessible from Spain were included; the various entries of TV series (some with several episodes) were taken as a single record; records in which the word guilt had nothing to do with the object of study were excluded—for example, "It's all the salt's fault". Thus, the reference sample frame consisted of 94 entries.

2.2. Design

Qualitative research based on the Grounded Theory reference following what is known as systematic design (Strauss and Corbin 1998) adapted by Hernández et al. (2014) according to the criteria described in the following two sections.

2.3. Variables and Instruments

The instrument used as a basis for the analysis was a template divided into three parts: the first part described in a general way the central plot linked to guilt, including a brief description of the plot and a summary of: (1) origin of the guilt—facts shown or suggested, identifying the main characters; (2) experience of guilt—the way in which the reaction of the character who has transgressed the rule is shown; (3) actions subsequent to the identification of the generating facts. In the second part of the worksheet, starting from the relevant fragments, the greatest possible number of elements linked to the constituent criteria of the definition of guilt described in the introduction were specified: (1) Behavior; (2) Negative evaluation; (3) Relevant rules transgressed; (4) Attribution of responsibility; (5) Experience of suffering; and (6) Actions motivated by or derived from the behavior. In the third part of the worksheet, possible variants of the experience of guilt were presented based on the Judeo-Christian reference model: (1) Acknowledgement; (2) Self-blame; (3) Cost; (4) Reconciliation. In the three parts of the process, a section was left for possible unforeseen emerging elements.

2.4. Data Analysis

In the first phase, films from the sample frame that had been cited in some of the texts on guilt and religiosity consulted for the study (see references) and in different web pages specialized in the relationship between cinema and psychology were chosen for detailed analysis; then films were added to the analysis as the categorization progressed until the definitive categories of analysis were formed and the saturation point was reached in which no new noteworthy content appeared, which included the 42 films cited in this text (Guest et al. 2003).

After a first exploratory viewing of each film, where elements that could be related to the guilt were noted in an unregulated way, the film was viewed again in a focused way to complete the analysis template by adding as many free notes as did not fit into the three parts of the structure of the worksheet. When the first ten worksheets were completed, the film content analysis began by adapting the fragmentation methodology proposed by Casetti and Chio (2001), sequencing the films in a selective way, taking those fragments that responded to the contents provided in the reference worksheet. Following the criterion of Saldaña (2013) for the preparation of a taxonomy of the experience of guilt according to the criteria described in the introduction, we started from an initial categorization guided by the four starting criteria that marked the reference model; with this categorization, two blocks were made: the first was constituted by the films whose plots responded essentially to the Judeo-Christian reference model and the second by those that differed significantly in any of the four blocks of significance. With the first block we proceeded to the internal differentiation of the exposed meanings; with the films of the second block, we carried out a new axial categorization looking for the category that acted as the axis of the alternative model to the reference model, grouping all the films around this reference described in the results after the name of each model.

3. Results

After the analysis of the film material, five models of guilt experience have been catalogued: the Judeo-Christian reference model and four others that differ from it in significant aspects.

3.1. The Traditional Judeo-Christian Model

The main characters transgress the norm, recognize the harm, suffer, repent, do a costly penance and may obtain relief or forgiveness.

The character played by Robert de Niro in *The Mission* (Joffé 1986) has been presented as a prototypical example to explain the feeling of guilt and its various derivatives (Etxebarría 2020; Weatherill 2017). It perfectly represents the canonical model of Christian guilt: Rodrigo de Mendoza, a haughty and quarrelsome slave trader, doing business in the disputed area between the Spanish and Portuguese kingdoms in South America, kills his own brother in a duel in the public square, after discovering that he was the lover of his fiancée. When he realizes his actions, his grief makes him abandon everything and take refuge for months in a Jesuit convent where he is visited by the peaceful priest Gabriel who offers to redeem his sorrow by collaborating in the mission of evangelizing the Guarani Indians beyond the Iguazu Falls. Mendoza considers it insufficient to give up everything that had been his life and, during the long journey to the mission, drags an enormous bundle with his old weapons that make him fall again and again. Upon arriving at the mission, one of the Indians throws the bundle into the river and Rodrigo weeps with joy, embraced by Gabriel and a handful of Guarani Indians, to the majestic strains of Ennio Morricone. Joffé loads with symbolism each of the key moments of the process: the fall into pain with the monastic cell and the ragged disarray; the "weight" of guilt preventing any deviation with its gloomy evidence; the demanding, long, and painful penance, and the glory of redemption with the generous welcome in a happy and luminous arcadia. As a final touch, the hero dies dejected while defending the happiness of the community crushed by his former comrades.

This pattern is repeated in most of the films analyzed and responds to the model of classical cinema adapted from Greek tragedy: a person who does something against the moral order of his time, after a precipitating incident, becomes aware of his mistake or sin, suffers for the damage caused and pays a high price or penance that sometimes allows him to be forgiven; but, even so, he either continues to bear the burden of guilt or dies. Of course, after the transgression he will never be happy again. Films such as *American History X* (Kaye 1998), *Scarlett Street* (Lang 1945), *The Light Between Oceans* (Cianfrance 2016) and many, many more reflect this logic with clear and unequivocal unjustified transgressions—racism, kidnapping, murder, etc.—to which are added stories about former criminals who, after a period of penitentiary suffering, decide to leave their old life behind, but their transgressive past prevents them from doing so, as in *Carlito's Way* (De Palma 1993).

Within this classic canon, probably the most recreated and analyzed work on guilt, much more than the previous ones, was Fyódor Dostoyevski's ([1866] 1988) *Crime and Punishment*, about which numerous film adaptations have been made (Sternberg 1935; Kulidzhanov 1970); this is so because it opened a narrative vein that reaches our times: that of moral dilemmas, or the rational criticism of the norm. The young Rodion Raskolnikov surrounds the murder of the old usurer he has decided to kill with a web of social and metaphysical justifications, in which the robbery is just an anecdote. Moreover, he does so in a context of hardship and injustice that draws the reader's, or viewer's, sympathy toward the poor Russian student. After the murder, guilt gnaws at Rodion; but more importantly, Dostoyevsky shrouds his fate in a black cloud, surrounding him with all sorts of dire consequences for himself and his inner circle. *Crime and Punishment* works as a classic parable: you are likely to see forbidden behavior as reasonable, but if you decide to put it into practice, all sorts of evils will befall you. The updating of the Adam and Eve myth, but without an offended God who has been disobeyed and to whom to attribute the dire consequences of a transgression, has been the leitmotiv of numerous films that, using

the Judeo-Christian notion of secularized guilt, have revived the fear of the consequences of breaking religious or moral norms. A very relevant example was *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne 1987) that warned of the dangers of being carried away by desires (Wedding and Niemiec 2010) and in general those films whose final moral is that the discomfort generated by guilt is a price to be paid as a regulator of social coexistence (Baumeister et al. 1995).

Within the Judeo-Christian reference model, there are several films that show the excesses of both self-incrimination and self-punishment. In films of a religious nature, the radical assumption of the sinner's condition or the sacrifice of penance are shown in the form of exemplary lives, as in *Fratello sole, sorella luna*—Brother Sun, Sister Moon—(Zefirelli 1972) or *The Way*—Camino—(Fesser 2008); in others, the excess of zeal when it comes to self-incrimination, of doubting the morality of the acts, are shown as Freudian neuroses with characters who seek punishment, obsessed with blaming themselves for crimes they have not committed, as in *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*—Ensayo de un crimen—(Buñuel 1955), where the Christian concept of scrupulosity as a spiritual illness, which for years was described as sinful thinking, is taken to the extreme (Castilla Del Pino 1973).

3.2. The Psychopathological Model: The Absence of Guilt as a Psychiatric Illness

The main characters transgress the norm, they may know how to describe the harm, but they do not suffer or repent, they do not believe they should do penance and they do not seek forgiveness.

In the summer of 1924, the media mogul William Hearst wanted to hire Freud to help him make a film about the real case of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, two upper-class young men who had committed murder for the simple pleasure of committing the perfect crime. Freud refused, but almost a quarter of a century later Hitchcock directed *Rope* (Hitchcock 1948), which depicts the process by which the young men of the University of Chicago take the life of an innocent man who had never harmed them, without showing the slightest remorse. The naturalness with which the crime is executed as an intellectual challenge, alien to the feeling of guilt, has continuity in other characters of the English director, such as Bruno Anthony of *Strangers on a Train* (Hitchcock 1951) who proposes to a stranger to murder their respective wives (Moreno Martín 2021).

This cinematographic model would be of less interest for this work if the logic of the cold killer, or the ruthless swindler, had been limited to portraying a minority deviation of a serious mental disorder: that of the psychopath who kills without the slightest feeling of guilt as in the countless films of serial killers shown as "deranged", such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme 1991), *Natural Born Killers* (Stone 1994) or *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (McNaughton 1986). In one way or another, the cinematic appeal of these films lies in the perverse power that gives the main character no moral impediment to achieve his aims, not even having to justify his vile actions for a higher purpose as in war or superhero films. The fictional psychopath, when he takes life, does not suffer from the weight of guilt, but enjoys his actions, or at best is indifferent to them. The success of such films makes it evident that many viewers enjoy the contemplation of the suffering of others, in a process described in German as "schadenfreude", whose study arouses great interest in our times (Bonn 2014). What we want to emphasize here is that from the main branch of the psychopath-mental-sick person who is to be feared because his illness removes him from any possibility of reasoning, several argumentative threads relevant to the analysis of guilt have emerged.

The first of these threads is that of the serial killer family comedy. These are women who kill without the slightest sense of guilt as a "normal" way of fulfilling their role within the family and community. Although it has nothing to do with the serial killer archetype, Frank Capra started this subgenre with *Arsenic and Old Lace* (Capra 1944) where some delightful old ladies murder any unfortunate person to free them from their pain. They are probably the first female serial killers to be cleared of guilt and integrated into social life with a peculiar way of exercising Christian charity. Later, many more black comedies have been produced where a "perfect" housewife commits crimes without the slightest

feeling of guilt in order to fulfill her role of protecting her family. For the spectacular role that Kathleen Turner played in *Serial Mom* (Waters 1994), this film could be the canon of a type of terrible action that, presented as the result of a personality deranged by its excessive rigidity and lack of capacity for guilt, gets rid of the difficulties that threaten family harmony through the direct channel of making those who harass her home disappear forever. The comedic tone of these murders, which have their continuity in more recent films such as *Home Sweet Hell* (Burns 2015) allow the viewer to interpret the deaths as a satire of horror cinema in which anyone can identify the fantasy of "giving their due" to those who harass us and at the same time feel protected by the obvious psychological disorder of the main characters.

Another of the plot threads of psychopath cinema is more disturbing as it questions whether or not the killer is deranged and thus opens the door for us to question the legitimacy of serious transgressions such as murder, as we will see when describing the last model.

3.3. The Dissonance Model: Resignification of the Transgressive Act to Reduce the Weight of Guilt

The main characters perform acts that transgress the norm they share, but cognitively rework the action so that it is consistent with their beliefs, which spares them suffering, regret and the need to perform actions to obtain relief or forgiveness.

Until the end of the 1950s, once the Lombrosian deterministic theories of ancient times had been overcome, most criminological explanations as to why criminals had no feelings of guilt when they committed their crimes were based on the principles of learning: criminals learned, through the reinforcement of their behavior due to their environment, both the techniques for committing crimes and their justifications (Sutherland 1939). Sociology postulated the existence of "criminal sub-cultures" that would have their own value system, contrary to that of the majority, which would give meaning and value to their transgressive behavior (Cohen 1955). This vision was radically transformed by the study of criminologists Sykes and Matza (1957), who, after a naturalistic observation of urban environments in the United States, concluded that juvenile delinquents shared the majority value system of American culture and that they were equally subject to the rigors of guilt when they broke its rules. What explained why this tension between values and behavior did not inhibit their criminal behavior was that they used, always in their favor and in a way alien to legal practice, the same logic of exceptions that justice uses in its ordinary procedure: "the moral principle that condemns the act of killing . . . does not apply in time of war", "private property is inviolable . . . except in exceptional situations . . . ", etc. (Sykes and Matza 1957, p. 666). Thus, for any criminal action they had committed, or were thinking of committing, young people would introduce justifications that would have the effect of neutralizing guilt. Learning these "neutralization techniques" that deform or cast doubt on the responsibility for the crime committed or about to be committed, would be the best explanation of the crime (Kaptein and Van Helvoort 2019). The same year that this study saw the light of day, Leon Festinger (1957) published his theory of cognitive dissonance, where he proved, by means of several experiments, that people cannot bear the tension produced by incompatible cognitions (opposing ideas, behavior contrary to our values, etc.). This tension has a powerful motivating effect that pushes us to do something to reduce this discomfort. Guilt, as we have been describing it, would be a very clear example of dissonance between cognitions (desiring something I consider bad, harming someone who, in our opinion, does not deserve it, etc.). The theory of dissonance does not limit itself to describing the discomfort caused by tension, but extensively develops the procedures that humans use to reduce it, highlighting two: changing the sign of one of the conflicting cognitions or adding new cognitions congruent with one of them that minimize the strength of the other and allow a return to equilibrium.

Practically all the films about Mafiosi, thieves, swindlers and other types of criminals made since the 1970s incorporate, whether they know them or not, the theories of dissonance and neutralization techniques in the plot of the main characters; sometimes

in explicit dialogues and other times leaving the viewer to interpret their criminal actions from the context. In this way, the dissonance between conventional moral principles and their transgression (through theft, deceit, violence, etc.) does not generate anguished guilt in the main characters who, following the classical techniques of neutralization, deny responsibility for the action: deny responsibility for the action, blaming it on forces beyond their control such as having had a hard childhood; deny the harm itself, minimizing or making the evil caused invisible; deny the very condition of victim of the one who has suffered the action, turning the blame on the one who receives the evil as in the series *Homeland*—Patria—(Salvat et al. 2020); they take legitimacy away from those who judge their actions, censuring the hypocrisy or lack of justice of those who dictate or impose the law; or they situate the transgression as the fruit of a superior loyalty that is impossible to refuse, hiding behind the role conflict between complying with the law or helping someone in the inner circle, as argued by the young Michael Corleone when he enters into action in *The Godfather* (Coppola 1972).

The transgressor in this type of film is not a psychopath (he recognizes the harm caused, he may value it as negative, he may even feel some empathy for the victim), but he does not suffer the rigors of guilt because he deploys a wide battery of techniques that neutralize remorse, an effective range of cognitions that complement the explanation of the transgressive action. Although not the norm, scenes sometimes occur in which transgressive main characters justify their crimes to their victims and emerge from them unburdened by guilt, for example, in episode 10 of the second season of *The Sopranos* "Bust Out" (Patterson 2000), the Mafia gang boss finds one of his childhood friends sleeping in a tent inside what had been his thriving sports business, now in the process of going bankrupt. Tony Soprano, taking advantage of his friend David Scatino's ludopathic weakness, takes over the business, dismantles it and leaves him in ruins while making a handsome profit. When David, remembering their childhood friendship, interrogates him out of affection, and asks him why he allowed him to continue gambling, Tony explains: "I knew you had this business, David. It's my nature. The frog and scorpion thing. Besides, if you had won, I would have been worse off, wouldn't I? [. . .]. You're not the first guy we've cleaned out. That's how I make a living, that's how I earn my bread. When this is over, you can go wherever you want." As David bursts into tears, Tony glares at his former friend and exclaims, "Oh, my God!"

3.4. The Sublimation Model: Idealized Regret at No Cost

The main characters transgress certain rules that bring them important benefits; after profiting from their action, they recognize the damage, they repent, but this does not entail any cost or hardship; finally, they obtain relief or forgiveness by exalting the value of those who suffered for their past transgression.

A small group of films analyzed, responding to the general structure of the first model of Judeo-Christian guilt, have a relevant singularity that led us to present them independently, and separately from the following model. They are stories focused not on the reworking of the transgression, as in the previous model, but on the aesthetic reorientation of suffering. The two films of reference are *Atonement* (Wright 2007) and *The Words* (Klugman and Sternthal 2012). Both have a similar structure with respect to the experience of guilt. In the first, Bryony Tallis, a teenager of the British bourgeoisie in the 1930s, jealous of her older sister's erotic relationship with the son of one of her employees, launches a lie against the young man accusing him of abusing her underage cousin. This accusation destroys the life of her sister and her honest lover who fail in their attempt to unveil the truth.

In *The Words*, a clumsy writer, Rory Jansen, finds a wonderful unpublished novel by chance, written decades ago by a passionate young man, who loses the manuscript and with it his dream of devoting himself to literature. Since the loss of the text his life is a succession of frustrations and hardships; Rory, on the other hand, decides to publish the novel claiming it as his own, which makes him a millionaire and so famous that he can

continue publishing and enjoying himself for several decades. The real author, a humble and unsuccessful old man, contacts the one who stole it from him and, before he dies, tells him "Don't look back". The two films end in the same way: the elderly Bryony and the mature Rory write a book telling the truth and, in both cases, exalt through beauty those who they betrayed: they atone for their guilt by forgiving themselves. Rory tells an ambitious and beautiful young woman his conclusion: "it is possible, after making a terrible mistake in life, to go on living; you can even live well". Bryony, in an interview to present her twenty-first book before her death, confesses on television that, after her betrayal, her sister and her lover died separately without being able to see each other again, but that in the novel she gives them a little time together to fictitiously give them the happiness she took from them.

Another film that, in a comedy tone responds to this same logic of making himself forgive a fault through aesthetic exaltation is *Yesterday* (Boyle 2019), where a young worker, who dreams of making a living from his songs, discovers that all reference to The Beatles has been completely erased on the planet and that he is the only one who knows their songs. He enjoys worldwide success pretending they are his compositions, and when an elderly couple lets him know that they are the only ones who have realized the deception, instead of reproaching him, thank him enthusiastically for having given them back the pleasure of enjoying the music of the Liverpool quartet.

3.5. The Self-Realization Model: Overcoming Guilt as a Requirement for Self-Realization

The main characters consciously transgress some rule to obtain a goal; they recognize the harm, but do not regret it, justify their actions rationally and go on with their lives without a hint of negative consequences.

The best way to describe this model might be to change the ending of *Crime and Punishment* so that the young Raskolnikov, after killing the loan shark, instead of suffering terribly, unconsciously seeking punishment from the police and ruining the lives of everyone he loves, manages to behave serenely, hide his crime and in the process solve his financial problems and achieve happiness. That is exactly the proposal of *Match Point* (Allen 2005), an undisguised remake of Dostoyevsky's work, where Chris Wilton, a humble professional tennis player, marries a young woman from the British aristocracy, achieving a very high status. A secret affair with his brother-in-law's wife threatens his future because his pregnant lover demands that he leave his wife or she will reveal the affair; before he does, Wilton kills her by simulating a robbery, taking the life of an innocent old woman in the process to make the alibi more plausible. The police carry out an investigation in which the ex-sportsman is serene and confident. As chance would have it, they attribute the murder to a drug addict who had died in another robbery and was wearing the old woman's ring that he had found by chance. Wilton is cleared of suspicion, returns to his mansion where his wife celebrates that she has finally become pregnant. The most illustrative aspect of how he deals with the potential guilt comes at the end when the two murdered women appear to him in his dreams. When his mistress asks him for an account, he receives this answer, "you don't know your neighbors until there is a crisis; you learn to sweep your conscience under the carpet and carry on; you have to do it, otherwise it will get the better of you". Furthermore, when the old woman retorts, "I had nothing to do with this horrible business!" Wilton replies, "innocents are sometimes sacrificed to make way for a greater order". Woody Allen repeats this dynamic of murder that is motivated by a threat to the status quo of the well-to-do in the dramas *Cassandra's Dream* (Allen 2007) and in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Allen 1989); and in a third, *Irrational man* (Allen 2015), the same structure is maintained, but the murderer dies accidentally when he is about to free himself from suspicion and embark on a happy and fulfilling life.

Far from the sophisticated New York environments, these types of plots have also been recreated in deep America. For example, in *At Any Price* (Bahrani 2012) a prosperous farmer and businessman, Henry Whipple, has some problems with public inspections encouraged by some of his clients; his son Dean argues with one of his old friends over

these issues and accidentally kills him. When Henry discovers this, he hides the body and tells his wife that it was he who killed the boy in a brawl. The wife replies "we are a team, we are a team and you and I are going to carry on without a moment's hesitation; we will keep a smile on our faces, we are going to work very hard". Indeed, the film ends with the missing person case closed and with the killer's family thriving in business and dancing happily with their clients.

The lack of punishment—jail, social isolation, anguish, etc.—when the one who commits extreme crimes has a promising future ahead of him is not a rarity in contemporary cinema. Sometimes these are horror films that could make us doubt the mental health of their main characters, as in *Le couperet* (Costa-Gavras 2005) where an unemployed executive successfully murders all his competitors for a job. Other films feature conventional high society environments that forgive the excesses of their young trainees when they have made a mistake that should not thwart their promising future, as in *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell 2020).

The transgression of the reference values inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition is not presented in these films accompanied by justifications, as in the model of dissonance, or generating in the viewer doubts about the mental health of the main characters, as in that of psychopathology, but as a logical response to the blockage in the life of the transgressors that threatens their process of self-realization. This pattern can be seen in numerous recent American films, also in plots of transgressions other than murder. For example, in *Don't Look Up* (McKay 2021) a journalist who has seduced the professor at a modest university, when discovered by the astronomer's wife, instead of justifying herself, tells him "Can we skip this step please, you know, when you victimize yourself and we tuck our tails between our legs; it's very boring . . . " "It's very boring?" the wife replies, "Do you want me to skip the part where you feel bad about banging my husband?" to which the journalist replies, "Oh, I don't feel bad, Randall and I had a great time".

4. Discussion

Our purpose was to find, in European and American commercial cinema, alternative models of experiencing guilt when the social norm is transgressed. We sought plausible narratives that broke some of the central elements of the model that has dominated for centuries in the Western world. We started from the hypothesis that much of the evidence showing the positive aspects of religiosity and spirituality on psychological well-being could be due to the fact that current Western culture does not clearly associate the experience of spirituality with the rigor in adhering to religious norms, especially the suffering associated with its deviation, that is, guilt. We have described the Judeo-Christian reference model, and, after the analysis, we have found four other alternative models of guilt experience: pathologization, dissonance, sublimation, and self-realization.

The Judeo-Christian reference model for the experience of guilt has its genuine expression in religious cinema, a genre that, from the classical format that recreated in a didactic way the life of the saints, has evolved to proposals of models of living the faith that are compatible with today's world (Sancho 2013): sometimes revisiting biblical passages such as the Book of Job as in *The Tree of Life* (Malick 2011) or exalting sacrifice based on religious testimony as in *Of Gods and Men*—Des hommes et des dieux- (Beauvois 2010). Although we have taken into account some film titles of this type, what has interested us most is the reflection of the Judeo-Christian moral model in the general filmography, where, according to the results of our study, it is still the majority model of the films analyzed. Most films respond to the logic of experiencing conventional guilt with different intensities when it comes to charging more or less drama to the suffering generated by guilt—*Philomena* by Frears (2013), versus *Querídisimos verdugos* by Martín Patino (1977)—or in the more or less bearable way of paying the "penance" to obtain some kind of forgiveness, conciliation or peace of mind (Lonergan 2016; Zvyagintsev 2017). The effects of this model, beyond its moral dimension, have been studied experimentally both in the positive view of regulating

social coexistence (Cryder et al. 2012) and in its negative facet of conformity that prevents the expression of identity (Etxebarria 2000).

Among the alternative models, the first, that of pathologization, is perfectly compatible with the classical Judeo-Christian model, since it places the absence of guilt of the wicked as a disease, which is compatible with the maintenance of a normality based on majority moral norms, derived from religious beliefs or the result of ethical or political consensus. In a secularized society, it is not the devil that directs the will of the wicked, who are incapable of feeling guilty, but a scientifically verifiable anomaly—psychiatric psychopathy—which generates a certain sense of tranquility. However, the vision of the ruthless madman who must be feared, beaten, or tried to be re-educated (Ferrer et al. 2001), has been giving way to a cinematographic vision that investigates not so much behavior as a result of a genetic abnormality of the psychopath, but in the circumstances that could mitigate the lack of repentance in the face of his crimes. Thus, if we compare older films about psychopaths with current adaptations, we can find the radical difference in approach between the most recent *Joker* (Phillips 2019) with the numerous previous adaptations of Batman since the 1940s; or the way in which the real killer Ted Bundy is presented in the recent *Extremely wicked, Shockingly, Evil and Vile* (Berlinger 2019) versus other films about his crimes such as *Ted Bundy* (Bright 2002).

The other three models respond to an approach more closely linked to post-modern logic, since in all three cases the narratives reflect rational decisions of the transgressors that eliminate the painful effects derived from the transgression.

In the case of dissonance, the very meaning of transgression is simply questioned by covering it with cognitions that justify, legitimize or reward it. It is certainly nothing new in our times to free oneself from the suffering generated by guilt by reinterpreting the harm in favor of the one who commits it. In books on moral theology, this process is described as a defective, broad or lax, and sometimes pharisaical, conscience that "tends to minimize moral demands in a concrete case, and consequently suppress the feeling of all inadequacy and guilt" (Flecha 1994, p. 273). The interesting thing about this way of presenting the transgressor's lack of guilt is the way in which the director orients the emotion of the audience by emphasizing, through focusing the attention and the link with the main character, how he should interpret the clearly reprehensible fact for which the perpetrator feels no guilt. For example, in the episode of *The Sopranos* discussed above, the viewer sides with Tony. He does not see that the right thing to do would have been to prevent his childhood friend from continuing to gamble until he lost all his assets, and once he got the store he could have allowed him to recover it in exchange for something and not sell everything in a hurry; the viewer does not see these possibilities because he has his Mafia hero, whom he has been following for weeks, compared with a man who deserves what has happened to him, whose whining makes him feel ashamed. A phenomenon that social psychology has called the "Belief in a Just World", whereby we tend to attribute the blame for evils to the victims who must deserve their misfortune (Lerner 1980).

The sublimation model is hardly different from the classical Judeo-Christian model, since transgressors clearly repent and suffer from guilt, but it is a very pleasant and palatable pain that allows them to live for long periods of time, enjoying the results of the harm they caused. Although it is a very minority model, we have only found it in three films; it effectively represents a widespread idea in self-help books: if you cannot do anything to compensate for the pain you caused, forgive yourself; guilt is useless and will only bring you suffering (Dyer 1975). In the films analyzed, this self-forgiveness also brings a wide variety of economic and aesthetic compensations.

In the last model, of self-realization, the one most clearly inspired to by post-modern individual sovereignty, the main characters challenge and question the legitimacy of the norms, as in the model of dissonance, but they do not use techniques that disguise the fact to cushion the effects of guilt, they directly feel that they are truly free to act and that somehow, they deserve, because of their condition, to go on. It is not a new idea either, it is a clearly recognizable position in Nietzsche's texts where the original morality of the

master, based on strength and nobility, is confronted with that developed later by the slaves based on submission, humility, and compassion (Nietzsche [1886] 1983, [1887] 1984). What would be remarkable about the cinematographic updating of this Nietzschean concept is that instead of presenting it in political leaders with an overwhelming force oriented to grandiose ends to which they feel called, as in war or historical cinema, in these films the main characters who transgress the norm without feeling guilty are simple people with a project of self-realization that they do not allow to be frustrated by social demands.

We consider that cinema has an advantage in interpreting the models that culture offers to the citizen of its time: by fulfilling a double function of representing the dominant values of those who produce it and at the same time promoting models of behavior that serve as a guide to the audience, cinema serves as a vanguard for novelties that society is not willing to accept, but for which it is curious or attracted; after all, it is fiction (Tan 1995). Invented stories, especially those that in their limited footage present different interpretations, can offer, with certain ambiguity, the representation of latent trends in society, both to concretize pro-social innovations without theorization and to glorify selfish or exploitative behavior. Moreover, in its other facet, showing transgressions in a particularly attractive way can be inspiring not only for unstable people, but for people as a whole. The different types of censorship have sought to avoid this danger by prohibiting those proposals that the ruler considered disturbing. This was the case with the Hays Code in the USA in the 1930s, which even indicated to creators how evil characters in gangster films should be oriented and in what context to prevent their actions from being glorified (Hernández Rubio 2017). In most of our countries, these types of obvious limitations on the content of the messages to be broadcast have disappeared and have been replaced by the filters that companies and distribution chains introduce to make their investments productive. Regardless of whether or not the models presented for the experience of guilt are a reflection of a change in the social trend when it comes to proposing the way in which the effects of transgression should be experienced internally, the success of acceptance of the films analyzed in the four alternative models to the Judeo-Christian model leads us to conclude that the moral codes that seem to be breaking through in our time, inspired by religious tradition, leave much more space for the way of living spirituality and religiosity to be unburdened from external regulatory demands and to rely more on one's own judgment, which is probably an important condition for psychological well-being.

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