

## **The Mirror, the Self(ie) and the New Sacred Bodies, Objects and Figures of the Contemporary “Cult of the Self”**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates the “cult of the Self” pervading contemporary mediatised cultures, adopting a semiotic approach. More specifically, it draws on the analysis of the fictional case of *Ionismo*, ironically represented by director Alessandro Aronadio in the movie *Just Believe* (orig. *IO C'È*, 2018), to shed new light on the figure of the “influencer” (focusing in particular on the emblematic case of Chiara Ferragni), which has become fundamental in contemporary mediascapes. Thus it problematises the *bodies*, as well as the *sacred objects*, and more generally the *figures*, of today’s cult of the Self, with specific reference to the “generative model” suggested by *Just Believe*, as well as to the understanding of the sacred in the “postsecular” era.

### **Key Words**

Cult; Self; Media; Influencer; Semiotics

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## 1. Introduction: Postsecularism, Selfism and Social Media

In a 2021 article published on “The New York Times”, provocatively entitled *The Empty Religions of Instagram*, Leigh Stein wrote:

Twenty-two percent of millennials are not affiliated with a specific religion. We are known as religious “nones.” The Pew Research Center found that the number of nones in the population as a whole increased nine percentage points from 2009 to 2019. The main reasons that nones are unaffiliated are that they question religious teachings, or they don’t like the church’s stance on social issues. But are we truly nonreligious, or are our belief systems too bespoke to appear on a list of major religions [...]? [...] Our new belief system is a blend of left-wing political orthodoxy, intersectional feminism, self-optimization, therapy, wellness, astrology and Dolly Parton.<sup>1</sup> And we’ve found a different kind of clergy: personal growth influencers. (Stein 2021)

In fact, the global decline of traditional religions seems to proceed at a rather rapid pace, with an increasing number of people identifying themselves as “nonreligious”.<sup>2</sup> However, as remarked by Stein and supported by various scholars (see, for instance, Taylor 2007), rather than disappearing, the sacred and spiritual dimension has been “relocated” in the social and individual sphere. As a result, we have entered a new era, which has been labelled *postsecular*,<sup>3</sup> since it is marked by a «condition of conscious contemporarily/co-existence of religious and secular worldviews» (Stoeckl 2011: 3), entailing a permanent tension between them.

Such a tension is particularly evident at the level of the religious experience (to which Stoeckl refers by adopting the expression «phenomenological postsecular», *ivi*: 5), which has become highly personal, individualistic and spontaneous. It is in this respect that Charles Taylor (2007) introduced the idea of the “buffered” self, intended as the «possibility [...] of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind» (*ivi*: 38) typical of the «secular age» (as the title of his book recites), as opposed to the «“porous” self of the earlier enchanted world» (*ibid.*), in which transcendent forces could shape people’s lives (cf. Taylor 2008).

<sup>1</sup> American singer-songwriter and actress, she has always been considered a trendsetter. She is also known for the “Dolly Parton Challenge”, which spread on social media as a result of her 2020 viral four-frame post displaying various faces of her personality, including «her LinkedIn vibe, her Facebook side, her Instagram swagger, and her Tinder sass» (Zapata 2020).

<sup>2</sup> See in particular the results of the Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Studies 2007 and 2014, <<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/>>, to which Stein herself makes reference in the above-mentioned article, as well as those of the World Value Survey, conducted between 2007 and 2019, <<https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>>.

<sup>3</sup> The use, meaning and validity of the concept of “postsecular” has been highly debated, since its first formulation by Jürgen Habermas (2008, 2011) to the widespread idea of the “post(-)secular” as a denial, and an overcoming, of the theory of secularization. We adopt here the definition provided by Stoeckl (2011; cf. Stoeckl, Rosati and Holton 2012) as it favours a tensive view (i.e. postsecularism as a condition of permanent tension) over the idea of a succession (before-after, regime-change).

Within this framework, various forms of “Selfism”,<sup>4</sup> intended as a particular “worship of the Self”, have increasingly imposed themselves, strengthening a trend already initiated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also resulting in new transformations, which have increasingly raised concern and criticism in various fields, from religious thinking to scholarly reflection (especially as related to philosophy and psychology).

Drawing on these considerations, this paper intends to investigate the “cult of the Self” pervading contemporary mediatised cultures, adopting a semiotic approach. More specifically, it draws on the analysis of the fictional case of *Ionismo* (Italian for “Selfism”), ironically represented by director Alessandro Aronadio in the movie *Just Believe* (original title *IO C'È*, 2018), to shed new light on the figure of the *influencer*, which has become fundamental in contemporary mediascapes and cultures. Thus it problematises the *bodies*, as well as the *sacred objects*, and more generally the *figures*, of today’s secularised cult of the Self, with specific reference to the “generative model” suggested by *Just Believe* and the understanding of the sacred in the postsecular era.

## 2. *Just Believe*: The Generative Path of Selfism

In order to save his B&B from bankruptcy, Massimo Alberti (personified by actor Edoardo Leo) decides to transform it in a place of worship, where to host his «guests» – as opposed to his former «customers» –, in exchange for tax-free donations – instead of the taxed payments he used to collect. Rejected by the representatives of all the main religious communities in the city, he founds his own cult: *Ionismo* (Italian for “Selfism”), namely «the first religion that puts the Self [*IO*, instead of *Dio*, “God”] at the centre of the universe» (MYmovies 2018, our translation).

But how can one establish a new, credible cult? This is precisely the question that Massimo tries to answer with the help of his sister Adriana (Margherita Buy), an accountant, and the writer and intellectual Marco Cilio (Giuseppe Battiston). They do so adopting what we could define a “structuralist” perspective, that is to say, by identifying and scrutinising the main “units” of the most traditional religious systems (i.e. Judaism, Christianity – more specifically Catholicism – and Islam) and shaping their new cult through an operation of *bricolage* (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962; Floch 1990),<sup>5</sup> in the declared aim to make it *differ* from them. Thus, for instance, when they have to define «who is God for [them]» (Marco, 26’ 20” – 26’ 22”), Adriana says: «this thing about the entity above us, looking at us, judging us and then punishing us [...] always scared me a lot» (26’ 52” – 26’ 58”). Massimo agrees, further

<sup>4</sup> Officially introduced by Paul Vitz in his book *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* [1977] (1994), the term is here considered in its general and literal sense, as a growing “cult of the Self”, without any particular reference to the psychological sphere or specific authors or doctrines.

<sup>5</sup> As it clearly emerges when, during the initial brainstorming involving the three characters, Marco says: «To invent a religion, we must first understand how a religion works. [...] We’ll take a little here, a little there. We’ll make a mix, possibly in good taste, but a mix» (25’ 18” – 25’ 57”). The English translation of this and other citations from the movie is taken from the English subtitles.

insisting on the idea that everybody can be God: «I want to decide, ok? Each of us is God, one democratic thing at least» (27' 06" – 27' 11"). Marco finally intervenes to legitimise this idea and further elaborate on it, hence defining the fundamental basis of Selfism:

Even in the roughness, there's something interesting here, in the reasoning. This idea, for example, to make someone else decide how I should behave, is a little out of fashion, a little ancient. [...] Because you are your own God. [...] I... God [orig. Io... Dio]. Short, agile, quick. These times need synthesis, tweets. (27' 12" – 27' 54")

A further difference distancing Selfism from traditional religions therefore emerges, as the idea of an immanent God (i.e. the Self in the «here and now», not a transcendence entity in an otherworldly dimension or in the afterlife) opens the way to a peculiar conception of life and the cosmos: «This life, here and now, is heaven. Or hell, depending on how you live it» (Marco, 29' 45" – 29' 55"). As a consequence, moreover, *Ionismo* does not entail any strict interdiction or commandment, rather opting for “suggestions”: «Also this whole thing about commandments, right? I'm sorry, but no! We'll give suggestions. “It would be better if”» (Massimo, 28' 54" – 28' 02").

The emphasis put on the Self is also crucial in defining the sacred object of the new cult: the *mirror* (fig. 1, first frame), which is praised precisely for its ability to «well [...] reflect the image of God» (Massimo, 28' 05" – 28' 07"). This aspect is particularly emphasised in the scene representing the very first collective function of Selfism, when Marco Cilio welcomes a few potential disciples (see fig. 1, second and third frames):

You [pointing to the camera and then immediately to the newcomers around him, with a marked – visual and verbal – *embrayage*, or “engagement”, directly calling to his listeners, both at the intra- and extradiegetic level]. You are God. And so are you. Each of us has the power to create and the power to destroy. Come and look at yourself in the mirror. Come and admire the image of the God you are [while turning to the mirror, and looking at his reflected image]. Every wrinkle, scar, stain, even the dark circles compose the path that we must follow to reach our own fullness. To love oneself means to own the world. So, remember: You will have no other God besides yourself. [...] “Come to me” [always looking at himself into the mirror]. “I come to you” [while hugging the mirror/his reflected Self]. (36' 58" – 38' 07")

Rather sceptical at first, the newcomers then progressively embrace Selfism, precisely as a result of the “reflecting” power – both *of* one's Self, and *on* one's Self – of such a sacred object. A crucial moment, in this sense, is represented by Milos' conversion: initially, as shown in fig. 1 (fourth frame), the man approaches the mirror with mocking laughter (and, probably, words<sup>6</sup>), but everything changes when he looks at the mirror, and “sees” himself (or, better, his Self) into it.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, while laughing, he mumbles something in Croatian, but the subtitles do not clarify the meaning of what he says.



Figure 1. Frames from the movie *Just Believe* (Aronadio 2018).

Drawing on a conception of conversion as an act of communication (in the sense described by Leone 2007), therefore, we could describe Milos’ “change of direction” (as the etymology<sup>7</sup> of the term suggests) as a “paradoxical” experience, based on the coexistence of both difference and similarity, otherness and identity, change and continuity (cf. Leone 2002). In this sense, the mirror plays a crucial role, since – according to what Lotman (1988) highlighted in his famous essay on the semiotics of mirrors and specularity<sup>8</sup> – it both reflects and inverts the man’s image, thus functioning as an instrument of sameness and difference at the same time, namely as a “threshold” device (cf. Eco 1985: 12). In fact, as Milos clarifies shortly after, talking to himself (while always looking at his reflected image, see fig. 1, fifth frame), what he saw in the mirror was both equal and different from himself, which prefigured a possibility of redemption and transformation, making him become «a new man; a better one; even more handsome, [...] ready to start over» (39’ 58” – 40’ 33”).

This highlights a crucial aspect: the mirror does not simply gather information about what it reflects, but also “selects” (Scheibe 1979) and “virtualises”

<sup>7</sup> The word *conversion* derives from the Latin *converti* or *se convertere*, originally meaning «to move from one place to another», «to turn towards someone or something», «to change direction» or «road» (Pianigiani 2023, our translation).

<sup>8</sup> Given their significance, mirrors have been largely investigated from different points of view, from classical philosophy (see, for instance, Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, or Augustine of Hippo’s *Soliloquies*) to more recent works in psychology (see in particular Scheibe 1979; cf. Gregory 1997), iconology (see Baltrušaitis 1981, 1990) and semiotics (see in particular Eco 1983, 1985; De Michiel e Galassi 1997; Lotman 1988, 1989; Levin 1997; Sonesson 2003, 2015; Bacchini 2017; Lobaccaro and Bacaro 2021; for a general overview, see Gramigna 2023). We recall here exclusively the aspects of major interest with respect to the analysis of the figure of the mirror in *Selfism*, as represented in the movie by Aronadio. These are also crucial for the understanding of the “mirror-like technology” (Gramigna 2023: 58) widely used by influencers, i.e. the selfie, whose analogies and differences with mirrors are considered in paragraph 3.2.

(Eco 1983) it, therefore acquiring «the power to add and/or subtract from the [reflected] object» (Smith 1981: 78). In Milos' case, it is particularly the virtualising and additive functions that emerge. Subverting the idea of the reflected image as a dysphoric structure (as described by Lotman 1988), the conversion scene represented by Aronadio confers a marked euphoric characterisation on the mirror, pointing to its potential of prefiguring a possible (positive) overturning of what it reflects.

Such dynamics in turn attribute particular importance to the corporeal dimension, and more specifically to the believer's "lived", or "experienced" body – intended in a phenomenological perspective, as opposed to the simple object of an external look, that is, a "material" and "objective" body (see in particular Husserl 1913; Merleau-Ponty 1945). In this sense, the emphasis put on the absence of any dress code («in our religion everyone dresses like the hell they like», Massimo, 26' 14" – 26' 19"), in opposition to the requirements and interdictions of traditional religions, is particularly relevant. The Selfist's body, in other terms, is seen as the incarnation of a *perspective principle*, that is to say, of the dimension of the Subject's values, which is centred on the mechanisms of desire and the modality of "wanting" (cf. Greimas 1966; Ferraro [2015] 2020), and therefore leads to change and variability. This comes to subsume the *Sender-level* – i.e. the dimension of shared, collective value investments, system of norms and principles, which is rather aimed at maintaining a certain balance within the considered system (*ibid.*) –, further reinforcing the crucial idea that, in Selfism, everyone is God, and therefore his/her own Sender.<sup>9</sup>

However, as the movie shows, despite Massimo's attempts to avoid it, the community of Selfists progressively ascribe the role of Sender to him, interestingly addressing him as their «Maestro», repeatedly seeking his advice and instructions, and even recognising him as a «saint» performing miracles<sup>10</sup> in the end. Accordingly, the focus of attention moves from the mirror (i.e. the image of one's Self) to a gigantic portrait of Massimo severely looking at the believers, standing between two smaller mirrors in the background – which do not represent sacred objects any longer, but simple ornaments, as their position does not actually allow people to look at themselves, rather directing their gaze to the man's central figure (as it is evident in the very last frame of the movie, see fig. 2).

<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the words pronounced by another character, Teodoro, always in front of the sacred mirror (see fig. 1, sixth frame), are particularly relevant: «Teodoro [while pointing his finger to his own image reflected in the mirror], for many years you have put yourself in the hands of priests, healers, charlatans. But that's enough. These [referring to his hands, which he raises] are the hands you have to rely on, Teodoro. You are your own God!» (44' 10" – 44' 28").

<sup>10</sup> As Teresa, a young woman with a severe disease, says to Massimo, after having "miraculously" recovered from it without undergoing the surgery suggested to her by doctors: «I knew it, you are a saint» (1h 30' 41" – 1h 30' 44").



Figure 2. Final frame from the movie *Just Believe* (Aronadio 2018).

### 3. From Cinema to Social Media: The Influencer

The dynamics ironically depicted by *Just Believe* interestingly recall some aspects of contemporary mediatised cultures. In fact, references to the sphere of social media are recurrent in the movie, from the initial “tweetable” slogan used to describe Selfism («Io... Dio», cf. *supra*) to the final description of Massimo as an “influencer” by Marco, who replies to the man’s complaints about the fact that everyone treats him like their Sender (in Greimassian terms), by saying: «You have to understand, they are your *followers*.<sup>11</sup> You are a guiding light to them, you are the centre, that’s what you are» (49’ 44” – 44’ 49”).

The aim of the following paragraphs is precisely to investigate such connections, providing insights on the “cult of the Self” pervading contemporary mediatised cultures. To this purpose, we will examine the figure of the influencer in light of the elements highlighted above, initially recalling some general aspects, based on the rich literature on this topic, and subsequently focusing on the analysis of the emblematic case of Chiara Ferragni.<sup>12</sup>

#### 3.1. Influencers: Social Media, Endorsement and Personal Narration

Today’s influencers can be defined as «a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the

<sup>11</sup> With the English expression used also in Italian, as it is common when dealing with social media.

<sup>12</sup> After this paper was submitted, the so-called “pandoro-gate” (i.e. a scandal linked to the advertising of an Italian brand of pandoro involving Ferragni) exploded, with evident impact on the influencer’s image and popularity (with the loss of around 200.000 followers), as well as on her communication (with her unexpected disappearance from social media for 20 days, then her progressive reappearance, and the introduction of some taboo topics, including the scandal itself and her family issues). While certainly relevant, such changes do not currently seem to affect the general dynamics resulting from what is analysed in the following pages. On the contrary, they appear to have contributed to making them more evident.

use of other social media» (Freberg et al. 2011: 90). Hence, two main traits characterising these figures emerge: the use of social media; and the ability to influence the audience of these media, promoting (i.e. «endorsing») particular lifestyles, products and attitudes in various fields, from fashion to food, from technology to politics, from sports to entertainment (cf. Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget 2020; Borchers 2021).<sup>13</sup>

The definition provided by Abidin (2015) also adds a further, relevant aspect: «influencers are everyday, ordinary Internet users who [have] accumulate[d] a relatively large following on blogs and social media *through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles*» (our emphasis). In fact, as Kristian Bankov highlighted, «the influencer achieves all this with narrative. A good influencer is a good storyteller» (Bankov 2021: 50). It is precisely such a “narration”, or “storytelling”, together with the discursive strategies that characterise it, that suggests a parallelism with the case of Selfism as portrayed by Aronadio.

The analysis of a particularly emblematic case study, developed in the following paragraph, will allow us to further explore this parallelism, finally leading to some general conclusions on the contemporary “cult of the Self” and the understanding of the sacred in the postsecular era.

### 3.2. Chiara Ferragni, the “Proto-Selfist”

Born in Cremona in 1987, Chiara Ferragni is a well-known influencer at the international level, and the most popular in Italy (with more than 29 million followers on Instagram). Her career began in 2009 with the weblog TheBlondeSalad.com, whose first post, dated October 12, recited:

HERE I AM!

Here we are at the first independent blog driven by needs of communication and personalization.

After years spent on Flickr and other different web communities I felt like I had to move on and create a space for my own.

The name is “The Blonde Salad” because this blog is gonna be a salad of myself. The ingredients will be those which have always characterized me: fashion, photography, travel and lifestyle.

I hope that this step forward could involve you even more 😊

C.F.<sup>14</sup> (<<https://www.theblondesalad.com/en/chiara-ferragni/here-i-am/>>)

<sup>13</sup> As related to these aspects, influencers have been investigated by various scholars and experts, leading to an extensive literature ranging from marketing (see in particular Martínez-López et al. 2020, Yesiloglu and Costello 2020, Alvarez-Monzoncillo 2022) and the study of trust-building processes (see in particular Bankov 2021; Almahdi, Alsayed and Alabbas 2022; Nuji et al. 2023) to the analysis of such figures from the point of view of sociocultural dynamics, philosophical and ethical implications, and communication strategies (see in particular Borchers 2021; Watkins 2021; Hund 2023; Kozinets, Gretzel and Gambetti 2023; Sudnick 2023). For the purposes of our research, we are going to focus primarily on the communicative dimension, dealing with a particularly relevant case study, which is analysed in the next paragraph.

<sup>14</sup> English translation present in the post, after the Italian version of the text.



A perspective principle is evident since the very beginning of the text, and is further reinforced throughout it. The title of the post, «HERE I AM!», breaks in directly introducing the voice of the enunciator (whose identity is revealed by her name, reported in capital letters and with a final exclamation point just above the date and the title itself, to recall a “shouting” effect,<sup>15</sup> as well as by her initials, which close the message like a signature), with an *embrayage* that is indeed recurrent in the post, with reiterated first-person pronouns and adjectives (e.g. «I», «my own», «myself», «me»). Even when the subject is impersonal, as it happens in the first sentence (which refers to the blog itself), moreover, the text is immediately related to its author, and more specifically to her «needs of communication and personalization».

The focus on the Self has in fact been a dominant trait in Ferragni’s communication, leading to the refusal of any external imposition (or “commandment”) and taboo (exactly as we observed in the case of *Ionismo*). This is particularly evident in the image that accompanies the above-mentioned post: a close-up picture of the influencer reveals her naked body, with her breasts covered by her hair and one of her hands, which holds a Barbie doll (also naked), shown in the act of combing her hair. A sort of duplication of the Subject is therefore visually suggested, ironically recalling the common stereotype of the “blonde doll”, and revealing what has been later confirmed as a crucial element of Ferragni’s communicative acts (reaching up to her appearance in the 2023 Sanremo Festival): the refusal of any dress code and, more precisely, the *exposure*<sup>16</sup> (i.e. nakedness) of her body as a means of empowerment and affirmation of her Self.

Going back to the blog and its first post, a further aspect, which is also based on an *embrayage*, deserves particular attention: the second person is used in the end to get the enunciatee, or reader, «involve[d]» (as the text itself remarks), responding precisely to the need expressed in the beginning. Thus the post extends beyond the mere dimension of the Subject, manifestly aiming at the Sender-level through such a «hope[d]» involvement. In fact, as a result of her activity – on the weblog before, and on social media (and especially Instagram) after –, Ferragni soon obtained a wide recognition, with an increasing number of “contracts”, both in the economic sense – with a series of financial agreements with major brands in the world and the acknowledgment of her success by leading institutions such as Harvard University – and a Greimasian perspective – reaching up to millions of “followers”.

But let us take a closer look at how the influencer has developed a particular identity and relation with her followers on social media, and why these elements can be related to the idea of Selfism we described when analysing the movie directed by Aronadio.

First of all, as mentioned above, it is important to recall that, in this case too, the refusal of any obligation is powerfully encouraged, especially as related to the corporeal dimension, which represents Ferragni’s privileged means

<sup>15</sup> As it is common in online communication (see in particular Crystal 2001).

<sup>16</sup> I.e. adopting the terms introduced by Fontanille (1989), the convergence of the influencer’s “wanting-to-inform” and the audience’s “not-being-able-not-to-observe”; for a further discussion of nakedness as related to these dynamics, see in particular Stano (2023: 99-113).

of (Self-)expression. Her body, in fact, is a crucial element of her posts, thanks to a sacred object that, while reflecting her image (like the mirror used in *Ionismo*), does not return it to herself, but rather to an external gaze, that of her followers (as it happens in the closing scene of *Just Believe*, when the attention moves from the mirror to Massimo's portrait): the *smartphone*. Even when a mirror is used, it is for a *selfie* (according to the stylemes of the so-called "mirror selfie"), that is to say, to show one's reflection to others, rather than to oneself.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, the use of the smartphone is always paired with that of social media, which actualise the influencer's need for sharing, communication and involvement. A series of other media (such as cinema, television, etc.) are also largely adopted for this purpose, allowing Ferragni to further enhance her ability to reach people. What is more, they are often used to try to project an aura of "authenticity" and "truthfulness" onto her messages, by means of a *referential strategy*<sup>18</sup> (cf. Floch 1990) – e.g. by recurring to particular formats and languages, as it can be observed in the docufilm *Chiara Ferragni – Unposted* (Amoruso 2019), or in the docuseries *The Ferragnez* (Imperato, 2021-2023) – and the "promise" to show her «truest» and «more intimate side» – as maintained by the trailer of the movie<sup>19</sup> – «without filters» – as claimed by the official description of the series.<sup>20</sup>

As a result, Ferragni is celebrated as a sort of "deity", and more precisely as an immanent goddess, present in the here and now, ordinary and yet extraordinary, whose main precept is «Believe in your dreams, your spirit and yourself».<sup>21</sup> What is more, she has been explicitly related to more traditional deities on various occasions: in 2018, for instance, on the occasion of the influencer's wedding with the Italian singer Fedez, Andrea Chisesi, an artist from Noto, Sicily, represented her as a crowned Madonna, holding her son Leone (depicted as Jesus),<sup>22</sup> in an artwork (fig. 3, first image) that was later reported for blasphemy by the Codacons (Coordination of associations for environmental protection and user and consumer rights). Similar representations, also criticised for blasphemy and offense to religious sentiment, were produced in 2020 by Francesco Vezzoli, who represented Chiara Ferragni as the *Madonna with Child* (fig. 3, second image) by Sassoferrato (Giovanni Battista Salvi), and in 2021 by Arianna Spalletti, who got inspiration from William-Adolphe

<sup>17</sup> In fact, while, as mentioned above, selfies can in some respect be considered a «mirror-like technology» (Gramigna 2023: 58), since they provide «digital self-portraits of the subject[s taking them]» (*ibid.*), they evidently differ from mirrors in their "orientation", being primarily directed at an external gaze, rather than to self-reflection.

<sup>18</sup> Drawing on Floch (1990), we can define the main traits of such a referential strategy as based on a disengaged and informative style (e.g. linear diachronic development, inclusion of interviews and "witnesses", etc.), suggesting viewers that they are told the "truth" about the subject of the communication (in this case, the influencer herself).

<sup>19</sup> Available at the link <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1jzXzNQcxk>> (our translation).

<sup>20</sup> On Amazon Prime, available at the link <<https://www.primevideo.com/-/it/detail/The-Ferragnez/oLPLPFRZL2COYZ6T5WWRBO55WJ>> (our translation).

<sup>21</sup> As declared in her post on Instagram (@chiaraferragni) dated 28 August 2016, available at the link <<https://www.instagram.com/p/BJoOoO9A22a/?taken-by=chiaraferragni>>.

<sup>22</sup> A representation of Fedez as the Archangel Michael also accompanied these two figures.

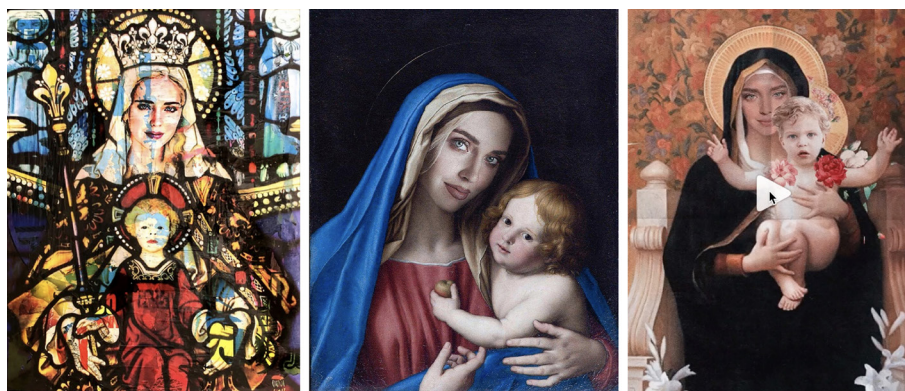


Figure 3. Artworks representing Chiara Ferragni as a Madonna (from left to right: Chisesi 2018; Vezzoli 2020; initial frame from Spalletta 2021).

Bougureau's *La Vierge au lys* (1899) for her animated work representing the influencer and her son (fig. 3, last image).<sup>23</sup>

Another interesting case in this respect is a post by the Uffizi Galleries<sup>24</sup> in Florence describing Ferragni as «a sort of contemporary *divinity* in the era of social media», who «embodies a role model for millions of followers», and whose «*myth* and story [...] is» supported by *faithful fans*» (our emphasis). In the image included in the post (fig. 4), the influencer stands in front of the popular painting *The birth of Venus* by Botticelli, with an evident visual parallelism between the two figures, which is further confirmed by the verbal text:

[...] The female ideal of a blonde-haired woman with diaphanous skin is a very common beauty model in the Renaissance. Masterfully expressed by the Florentine Sandro Botticelli in *The birth of Venus* maybe portraying the face of one of his contemporary, Simonetta Vespucci. A beautiful noble woman, of Genoese origin, beloved by Giuliano de' Medici, the younger brother of Lorenzo the Magnificent; she was so worshiped by Sandro Botticelli that she became his muse.

Nowadays, Chiara Ferragni, born in Cremona, embodies a role model for millions of followers – a sort of contemporary divinity in the era of social media – [sic]

The myth and the story of Chiara Ferragni, argued by harsh critics and supported by faithful fans, is a real sociological phenomenon that involves millions of supporter worldwide and it can undoubtedly be considered a snap-shot of our time.

However, no substitution seems to take place in this case. On the contrary, the presence of two clearly distinct planes (with Botticelli's *Venus* in the background, enclosed within the frame of the painting, and Ferragni in the foreground, covering part of it) highlights the discontinuity between these two figures:<sup>25</sup> the former is a transcendent divinity, which forms part of a system

<sup>23</sup> See the post by @aris.artg, Instagram, 20 April 2021, <[https://www.instagram.com/p/CN42lzPoXlg/?utm\\_source=ig\\_embed&ig\\_rid=b4ffaec8-7a24-48b8-beb2-f90773b7c62f](https://www.instagram.com/p/CN42lzPoXlg/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=b4ffaec8-7a24-48b8-beb2-f90773b7c62f)>.

<sup>24</sup> @uffizigalleries, Instagram, 17 July 2020, <[https://www.instagram.com/p/CCu\\_l3JvFn/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/p/CCu_l3JvFn/?hl=en)>. Both the Italian and the English versions of the text are present in the post.

<sup>25</sup> A similar configuration also characterised the picture that was shot for the cover of *Vogue* Hong Kong, shared by Ferragni herself on her Instagram account (21 October 2020, <<https://>



Figure 4. Chiara Ferragni and Botticelli's Venus (post by @uffzigalleries, 17 July 2020).

of gods who govern the world of men but do not belong to it; the latter rather represents an immanent and earthly goddess, namely the tangible manifestation of a cult of the Self that does not look at any otherworldly deity, but finds full fulfilment in the here and now<sup>26</sup> – just as the new cult founded by Massimo in *Just Believe* invites its believers to do.

#### 4. Conclusion

Both the fictional case of *Ionismo* and the cult of the Self promoted by Chiara Ferragni seem to reflect the idea of an “immanent frame”, or order, as described by Charles Taylor (2007). According to the author of *A Secular Age*, in fact, we live in a disenchanted world, where supernatural beings are considered close to impossible; everything important is this-worldly, explicable on its own terms, and each human is charged with finding her or his own way of being human, that is to say, their own individual path. This is precisely the foundation of the cult founded by Massimo, according to which the «Self is God» and what counts is the here and now, not the idea of any otherworldly reality or life. And this is precisely the motto spread and incarnated by Chiara Ferragni, who has developed her identity and communication on the basic ideas that one has to believe in oneself (i.e. one's Self), even when others do not.

However, as the analysis showed, this does not implicate the complete vanishing of the Sender-level – but rather its reconfiguration. Nor it entails a total disappearance of the sacred – but rather a new understanding of it. In fact, as we highlighted, while excluding any form of otherworldly transcendence from his new cult, and repeatedly affirming the importance of embracing a

[www.instagram.com/p/CGmUXcJBx5Z/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/p/CGmUXcJBx5Z/?hl=en)).

<sup>26</sup> A condition that, as the pandoro-gate scandal showed, is ephemeral and precarious.

perspective dimension, Massimo Alberti becomes, against his will, some sort of divinity, or at least a saint, and a prophet to be “followed” (i.e. a Sender), in the eyes of Selfists. Similarly, despite promoting entirely earthly and self-oriented values, Chiara Ferragni is associated with divine figures such as the Madonna or Venus in a previously unseen combination of traditional sacredness and secular glamour, precisely in view of her capacity to involve and influence people (i.e. to establish herself as their Sender).

It is in this sense that the contemporary cult of the Self, whether imagined by cinema or realised by social media, seems to invite us to embrace a new conception of the sacred, based on the acknowledgment of its coexistence and complementarity with the profane dimension: a *secular* – or, better, *postsecular sacred*, which finds its foundation in itself rather than in transcendental entities or worlds and which, being historically and culturally conditioned, varies depending on the context (cf. Filoramo 2022). This, in turn, has interesting consequences as related to the link between the perspective level on which Selfism is based and the Sender-dimension: as it emerged from the analysis, the “sacralisation” processes at work in both cases, exactly as those recalled by a more traditional conception of the sacred, allow people and groups to experience objects, symbols and feelings as expressions of a foundational (immanent, yet sacred) entity that legitimises their experience and practices. Thus, the new forms of the postsecular sacred acquire a particular power over the individuals who identify with them, functioning as powerful factors of action and social cohesion – that is to say, as a real, and unavoidable, Sender.

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