

Dan Brown: Morphology of a Bestsellersaurus

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Abstract

Dan Brown's success finds reasons in multiple factors, social, morphological, cognitive and commercial: the cross-medial restructuring of aesthetic communication on a global scale; the use of zero-sum homeostatic mechanisms in shaping themes, characters and meanings; the mixing of history and fiction; the disappearance of naturalistic elements; the time structuring of plots in «packs», cognitively easy to comprehend; the presence of urban settings, recognizable and meaningful for the global tourist; the elimination of ambiguous elements, favouring an aesthetic orientation to problem solving.

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1. Why do zero-km stories disappear?

Many years have gone by since an American *Writer's Handbook* advised to plan potential bestsellers on a male main character, assertive and incisive in politics; a heroic defender of collective values, outstanding and star-like in action (Contenti 111). Many more have gone by since when, back in the thirties, common thought required a bestseller to contain at least one dog (the trouble-shooting assistant), one medical doctor (a character whose profession implies casual encounters and helping others) and President Lincoln (i.e. tradition, the protecting god of any existence); or when success was to be pursued through the so-called «doctor and nurse novel», like in the case of *The Citadel* (1937) by Cronin, a novel containing a doctor and a reliable assistant (his wife Christine), while Lincoln is painfully missing, since we have the opposite, an elitist and treacherous power (Stevens 1939). The clamorous global success of *The Godfather* (1969) and *Love Story* (1970) was followed by a penitential-looking age, during which novels seemed written to be disassembled and reassembled in university seminars, and only lately things have started to change radically.

What elements and how have been changing in the new novels? Batman's cyclopean Gotham City, *Star Trek's* Enterprise starship, *Blade Runner's* techno-piranesian and futuristic Los Angeles (Ridley Scott's film version of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, by Philip Dick, 1968, came out in 1982) were all sufficiently exotic, but kept the reader at a distance. The text was bi-dimensional, language narrated quite plainly, and was unable to create live 3D special effects. This points to the first new element in recent bestsellers:

the missing distinction between reality and fiction. To investigate this, let's consider the example offered by two scenes from two recent, extremely successful novels.

In the first scene we are confronted with the «mirror of Erised», to be read backwards as «desire», a magical tool to mirror not our body appearance but the desires of the instant, alimeted by the possibility itself to possess such an instrument: a sort of magnetic resonance of desire, so that if I am an orphan I'll see myself in the mirror together with my parents. In the second novel a scintillating globule of matter, similar to mercury, appears in a transparent cylinder fluctuating in the air. What keeps it up? How can it slowly rotate upon its axis as if it were a minuscule planet dispersed in the universe? Here a clot of matter magically orbiting, there a magic mirror: we should think they are extracts from a fairy tale aimed at imaginative children, but we are exploring totally different fictional landscapes instead: Harry Potter's phantasy saga and Dan Brown's thriller *Angels & Demons* (Subbotsky 140).

Harry Potter finds the magic mirror at Hogwarts, a non-existing place described with a precision and verisimilitude typical of naturalist novels; the professor of religious symbology Robert Langdon admires the self-rotating granule of matter in a room at CERN in Geneva, a place really existing and well known to the international scientific community, described as the set of a horror nightmare. The opposites merge together and we may say that the «aesthetics» of globalization and the «dietetics» of narrative themes proceed side by side in the same direction: everything gets swallowed; nothing is expelled (Oatley 201).

What the Illuminists considered universal coincided with a secular transcendence and could be reached *ascending* to a pure dimension with no space or time. «Global» today can be seen as total immanence, and we reach it *descending* into a promiscuous time-space with no localisms, for example the emptied, monochromatic desert of *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, surmounted by the shining cobalt-blue of a sky indistinguishable from any other sky. The global bestseller attacks any singularity and fights local dimensions, unless functional to the valorization of the world-World. What brought us to extinguish the here-and-now literature aimed at a reader who shared that here and that now? What has forever suppressed the zero-km narrations from which all the folklore we have was born? The constant success, constantly extraordinary, pursued with extraordinary means by the American writer Dan Brown is a juicy case study to investigate the anatomy of bestsellers.

2. Men Who Hate Men: Dan Brown's Misandry

Born in 1964, highly educated in music, Dan Brown cultivated his passion for enigmas and anagrams and graduated in English and Spanish, but aiming at a music career he moved to Hollywood, where he met his future wife Blythe Newlon at the Academy of Songwriters. In the following years he published a book of aphorisms in humoristic style, *187 Men to Avoid: A Guide for the Romantically Frustrated Woman*, with the female pseudonym of Danielle Brown. «Danielle», not «Dan»: right from the start our writer manifests a not-so-mild trend to misandry (i.e. a dislike of men), or maybe we should rather say a preference for women as top-quality humans. A later example of this issue is the treatment of the story of Mary Magdalene in *The Da Vinci Code*, where Brown produces an effort to demonstrate that men at their best are women in disguise (Kross-Ayduk, 809).

After this first attempt Dan Brown and his wife Blythe work hard at several projects: *Digital Fortress* (1998), *Deception Point* (2001) and *Angels & Demons* (2000), where Robert

Langdon, Professor of Symbols at Harvard, makes his first appearance as a protagonist, facing enigmas to decipher and labyrinthine adventures that characterize him as a better-mannered and more politically correct Indiana Jones, intellectualized and anti-macho, more at ease in the great Western cities rather than in the forests or deserts of exotic subtropics («A Harrison Ford in Harris Tweed», the fictional *Boston Magazine* quoted in the first pages of *The Da Vinci Code* recites).

This is the moment when Dan Brown moves upmarket, from the «do-it-yourself» of novel-writing to establishing the rules for so many future bestsellers. At the age of forty, living in his Victorian house in Massachusetts, he is intrigued by the idea that all the history of the Church should be re-conducted to the eternal feminine principle, as incarnated in Mary Magdalene, that much of our new global culture lacks femininity and that civil societies should take notice. What about men? As in *The Last Supper* the apostle John looks like a woman because he *is*, in the characters' opinion, a woman, men can only give up their masculinity and dilute their sexuality to a point of no return.

When we come to think about it, Brown's narrative plots and the dogmas they are based upon – the union of science and religion, technology and mysteriosophy, sacred and profane, ancient and modern – are not formatted too differently from his main character Robert Langdon, appearing right from the start as an elegant oxymoron, a blending of oppositions:

Langdon's friends had always viewed him as a bit of an enigma – a man caught between centuries. On weekends he could be seen lounging on the quad in blue jeans, discussing computer graphics or religious history with students; other times he could be spotted in his Harris tweed and paisley vest, photographed in the pages of upscale art magazines at museum openings where he had been asked to lecture. (Brown, *Angels and Demons* 21)

Does one of the reasons for Brown's success lie perhaps in this mixture of opposites, which opens his narrative to everybody's acceptance and liking, everywhere in the world, across generations: children, adults, young adults? No doubt one element in the writer's secret formula consists in using this variant of the «smart novel», the clever novel to be «surf-read», whose ingredients are a rapid decoding, the quasi-continuous setup of databases and the high circulation of information.

3. Self-Fake!

The Da Vinci Code (2003) jumped to the first place in the New York Times bestseller list in the first week, with 6,000 copies sold on the very first day; so far the copies sold have soared beyond 80 million, with versions in 45 different languages. Besides, its success has given new impetus to the previous novels, to the point that in 2004 the New York Times bestseller lists contained all four of Brown's novels. A retroactive as well as prospective success, we may say, as the next two novels, *The Lost Symbol* (2009) and *Inferno* (2013) have ridden the long wave of interest generated around the author and his serial character Robert Langdon, scoring six-digit sales and righteously entering the number of bestsellers of any time (Murray 80).

Brown's revenues from *The Da Vinci Code* only are estimated around 250 million dollars, and Hollywood couldn't but be extremely interested in Robert's adventures: Columbia Pictures produced the film version with the same title as the novel in 2006 and earned 750 million dollars despite hostile reviews; the same can be said for *Angels & De-*

mons. Pre-production is currently being done for a new film from *The Lost Symbol*, and Dan Brown's official website reports that he will become a fiction character: a Japanese *manga* publication (*Bungo Stray Dogs*) will feature him as a member of a group of writers (including Agatha Christie and Fedor Dostoevskij) gifted with super-powers and able to face global mysteries and threats; that is to say the Author, having been a character himself, will then reappear as author-Author and will mix reality and fiction to an unprecedented level.

Is this an excessively intellectualistic position? We don't think so. On the contrary, the overlapping and mixing of character, narrator and author seems to be one of the keys to success for Dan Brown, a writer who favours every kind of osmosis between reality and fiction: a short-circuit that communication scholars define as «metalepsis». This instrument suits the low ontological density of postmodernism, an age when the very idea of «real» appears doubtful because so much seems fictitious, simulated, virtual. Metaleptic strategies, as advertisers know well, may activate clever manipulations of the borders dividing reality from fiction, and for this reason they have become the identifying barcode of Brown's style since the 1990s.

The phenomenon is global, the cases abundant. It is not just the fact that the author maps his autobiography onto the text and changes reality into fiction, but rather the opposite: the novel character has now an influence on the real author, is embodied with it and contaminates its authenticity at its roots. This suggests the paradoxical hypothesis that today's novels, unlike the naturalistic and verisimilar novels in Zola's style, retain the highest coefficient of reality in the history of the novel as a genre of fiction.

The real author tends to project itself onto the text, as the cases of Michel Houellebecq or Alice Sebold show; in *La carte et le territoire* (2010) Michel appears as main character, a writer who is murdered and chopped to pieces by a killer; in *The Lovely Bones* (2002) Alice hides behind the fragile mask of a character to tell the story of the rape she really lived as a victim during her college years. Author and character – but shortly we shall be adding readers – enter a whirlpool of analogic identifications whose final product is the impossibility to keep these fundamental actors of aesthetic communication separate. Let's see this identification frenzy from the inside for an instant.

Dan Brown's father was the author of a bestselling textbook of advanced mathematics; for Dan, everything has to go through the double filter of success and numbers. An example? He carefully planned the publishing of *Inferno*, all over the world, on May, 14th, 2013, as the date contains the digits of the number 3,1415, the approximate value of π , also a tool for measuring the amplitude of the circles in Dante's *Inferno*, Brown's explicit frame of reference.

Brown, dressed in tweed, pretend-plays Langdon in photographs, on his official site and on the back cover of his books. In fact, «novelized» history, autobiography and historical novel seem to enjoy playing blind-man's-buff. In 2006 Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, co-authors of the book of (fictional) history *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (1982), took legal action against Dan Brown for the supposed plagiarism of *The Da Vinci Code* (a novel built on a fictitious historical basis); they claimed he had exploited the central hypothesis of their book: the alleged marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, the latter's pregnancy and escape to France after the crucifixion, the birth of their daughter Sarah, who gave then origin to the Merovingian dynasty, and the keeping of the secret about the bloodline for almost two thousand years by the Templars and the Priory

of Sion.¹ Surprisingly or not, the accuser and the accused shared the same publishing company, Random House, the only real winner of the case: following the trial's indirect publicity, in 2006 the sales of Brown's novel and of Baigent and Leigh's pseudo-historical essay went soaring again, easing Sony's decision to acquire the rights for a film version of *The Da Vinci Code*.

Brown had paid an explicit homage to the two authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* in the name of a character, Leigh Teabing (anagram of Baigent), the scholarly villain in *The Da Vinci Code* who knows everything about the Holy Grail's (pretended) history. The final sentence of the High Court of London contained a double paradox: in the long text Judge Smith rejected the accuse of plagiarism and at the same time alluded to the possibility, not to be excluded, that the trial was an accurately planned marketing strategy; he also hid his own name in the sentence in the form of an engram, as it was frequent in Baroque literature, signing a new episode in this metaleptic saga. Random House in the meantime had become the publishing company both of the hypotext and the hypertext, and obtained from Baigent and Leigh the payment of legal expenses (£3 million).

Is this the DNA of Brownian smart novels? Pay attention, here we have a chain of events which ended in producing high revenues and no public damage: two self-appointed historians fictionalize documents and formulate apocryphal hypotheses about Jesus' biography, and a writer of fiction assumes these hypotheses as true in his multimillionaire work of imagination; accused of plagiarism by the two, he is declared innocent by the judge because using presumed historical facts for a work of fiction is perfectly legal. Should it be illegal to write the biography of Julius Caesar? What a chaos! In court, it was ascertained that Brown took in fact the central idea from the pseudo-historians' book, but determinant was that these had declared their book to be non-fiction. A cultural paradox, a juridical subtlety and, if you like, a disambiguation of the concept of copyright.

4. Towards a "new global" novel.

How are Dan Brown's novels made, and why have they attracted 200 million readers? If we look closer at his tetralogy – *Angels & Demons* (2000), *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), *The Lost Symbol* (2009), *Inferno* (2013) – we realize how similar to each other his creations are, even isomorphic under some aspects, since all of them:

- Are told in third person, by an omniscient narrator who masters the narrative discourse in complete control, to the point of being able to get in and out of fiction-reality and text-context dimensions easily and smoothly.
- Share the main character Robert Langdon, a sort of cognitively improved Indiana Jones with an ancestral terror for closed spaces.
- Concentrate the temporal dimension of their plots: 24 hours for *Angels & Demons* and *The Lost Symbol*, little more for *The Da Vinci Code*.

¹ Actually this was not the only occasion when Brown had to defend his book from the same suspect: in 2004 writer Lewis Perdue had sued him for plagiarism of two of his own novels, *The Da Vinci Legacy* (1983) and *Daughter of God* (2000). The New York District Court had stated that the alleged similarities subsisted «at a very general level only», not subject to copyright.

- The plot is always built around some conspiracy that at least a trio of characters tries to unveil identifying their secret language, clues, symbols and goals.
- Robert Langdon does not make use of weapons to defeat the villains' designs, but just of his hermeneutic intelligence and of the fundamental help of a comparably clever woman; of course he doesn't explicitly attempt at romance with her, while sexual involvement is simply out of perspective.
- An extremely powerful secret society is always at work, ancient for origin and traditions, but still active in the present: the *Illuminati* in *Angels & Demons*, a sect antagonist to the Church, with Galileo Galilei as a member; The «Priory of Sion» in *The Da Vinci Code*, whose aim is the restoration of the Sacred Roman Empire under the guidance of a descendant of Jesus Christ belonging to the Grail brotherhood (European families of ancient nobility directly descending from Mary Magdalene); the Masonry in *The Lost Symbol*, the secret society *par excellence*, divided into the prestigious groups that count high ranks of the political, military, scientific and economic establishments among their members, and the groups open to the lower-middle classes; the *Consortium* and W.H.O. in *Inferno*, associations that play ambiguous roles and pursue good or evil aims, depending on the situation.
- The privileged setting for action is a well-known capital city of the present or past: Rome in *Angels & Demons*, Paris in *The Da Vinci Code*, Washington in *The Lost Symbol*, Florence in *Inferno* (where Venice and Istanbul appear too).
- The Roman Catholic Church is always present, or more precisely the Vatican; its State apparatus with a political sphere and the powerful groups connected to it are generally depicted as negative.
- Architectural-monumental elements always function as conveyor-belts for the plot (that is, a place where action moves from) and aggregation points for the characters (there they meet for the final challenge or clash): a pyramid, like the one at the Louvre; an obelisk like the one in San Pietro Square, hiding a dead body, in *Angels & Demons*; the Washington Monument; the monolith that contains the mysterious writing *Laus Deo* in *The Lost Symbol*.

We may draw the conclusion that Brown tends to loyalize his readers making them acquainted with substantially similar space-temporal dimensions and a structuring of episodes largely based on an identical sequential pattern. Let's go quickly through the plot of *The Da Vinci Code*, beginning with a dead man whose body is a cryptography, and an interpreter looking for the meaning of that cryptography: Jacques Saunière, the aged curator of the Louvre, is shot by a mysterious murderer inside the most famous museum in the world. The victim has time to leave a series of clues to be decoded in a sequential logic, beginning with the position he manages to assume during his agony: the famous Vitruvian man drawn by Leonardo. At the end of a long night and morning of murders and violence in Paris and London, the truth will come out about a conspiracy orchestrated by a bishop belonging to Opus Dei, Manuel Aringarosa: everything seems to be centered around an interpretation of the painting *The Last Supper*, by Leonardo da Vinci, according to which the figure at Jesus' side is not John, his favourite disciple, but Mary Magdalene, as the female features of the portrayed face reveal.

According to the apocryphal historical sources quoted in the abovementioned book by Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln (the third co-author of *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail* was not a part in the cause) the Church of Rome has deliberately obscured what the gnostic and apocryphal gospel written by Philip refers, that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and their union is symbolized in the legend of the Holy Grail. In the novel

Leigh Teabing claims that Jesus had designed Magdalene to succeed to him in the leadership of the community, in the name of the «divine feminine principle» so often evoked (invoked?) in the course of the narration. Sophie Neveu, the woman who is helping Langdon in his rocambolesque quest for truth, is a cryptologist and a French Police detective, niece to the man assassinated in the Louvre at the beginning of the novel, and she turns out to be a descendant of the union between Jesus and Magdalene...

The same pattern is repeated in *The Lost Symbol*, whose setting is Washington, and in *Inferno*, which begins with a mysterious figure throwing itself down from the bell tower of the Badia Fiorentina, in Florence, to escape its mysterious chasers. The readers are invited to move in a sort of «all inclusive» format from setting to setting – from the Louvre to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, to the mosques of Istanbul – as following the suggestions of a good tour operator; they are loyalized through the feeling of familiarity produced by the recurring characters – Langdon, of course, but also the Catholic Church, a shadow-main-character in Brown's novels – and finally hypnotized by the dream that reality is knowledgeable, clear, objectively definable and independent from their cultural, ethnic and religious identity.

No, reality for Dan Brown can't but be self-evident (the beauty of Paris is self-evident, the appeal of Sophie Neveu is self-evident), or in alternative sealed in an enigma awaiting to be disclosed. Or rather we should say: resolved. Reality should not be read and interpreted, but *resolved*. The global reader obtains his or her peaks of endorphins also from the undeniable certainty that everything comes with a reason, an identifiable origin and an evident aim: even where something seems to escape our comprehension, we will finally find out that ambigrams can be explained, that the riddle hidden behind Dante's funerary mask has a solution, that a bone cylinder contains perfectly decipherable documents – having studied enigmatology and teaching it at Harvard may help, of course – , and that the image of John the Apostle in Leonardo's *Last Supper* may ambiguously appear as a female figure, but *is* in fact the portrait of a historically documented woman, Magdalene.

As a careful and subtle reader of Brown wrote: «Symbols are not, for Brown and his characters, complex, multivalent things, subject to the vagaries of interpretation and the historical moment. Instead, they are singular, static entities. They mean *one* thing. In this tier, Brown takes things that exist in history and, through a singular and hermeneutically uncomplicated symbol, reassembles them into imaginative narrative.» (Mexal 1100). We may say that Brown's novels represent the narrative exploitation of this univocal dimension of symbols, whose coherent exhibition gives life to a unitary and authoritarian narration of human history that admits no criticism or replies.

5. Grammaticalizing life.

To our knowledge, nobody seems to have noticed an important feature in Dan Brown's novels, in a way his *griffe*: the nearly absolute absence of nature. Only occasionally we meet ecologically uncontaminated landscapes where humans have left no trace. There are no seas or mountains. Brown's storytelling acts as an herbicide working at the roots. Only the great monuments of human history can resist it, the great cities, the works of artists and scientists: no nature, all culture. Were Brown's work some kind of food, it would be stewed for a long time, a mix of ingredients whose identity and original taste have gone lost in the cooking process of cultural amalgamation of flavours. This narrative combo is a tale with no mystery or dark corners, in which the spatial dimension invades

everything and cannibalizes time, and in the end every element loses its individual quality to be blended with others; a «macdonaldized» writing, ready-in-2-minutes, offered to a global palate for whom natural flavours are the remnants of a forever-gone world we'd better lose memory of, as everything is equivalent in the end. Could it be this the reason why Brown's novels are so efficiently adapted for the big screen? His stories seem to float on the paper surface; the pages hardly contain them. The narrative text is a boat loaded with signs and dropping anchor here and there for the simple reason that – it's the case of all smart novels – books are not the privileged harbour anymore for texts to ferry their meaning.

So, to sum up:

- the first law of Brown's success is the author's losing itself in the circuits of its fiction and its return to a novelized reality;
- the second law is the vocation to plagiarism (to become global implies erasing local identities, and this includes the authorship *of others*);
- the third law is the construction of a narrative format becoming familiar to readers, so that they may decide to inhabit it more or less permanently, as the 200 million buyers of copies of Brown's novels did;
- the fourth law is constituted by the certainty, shared with readers, that reality is an enigma with a solution, perfectly attainable given a sufficient cryptologic competence;
- the fifth and fundamental law of Brown's world success lies in the substantial reduction of his stories to a zero-sum game: the hermaphroditic image of John in Leonardo's *The Last Supper*, the ambigrams being read in two directions, science and religion («Science and religion are not at odds. Science is simply too young to understand», Brown, *Angels and Demons* 91), good and evil, male and female, work and play, reality and fiction.

Reality and fiction: it is meaningful that in March 2005 Cardinal Bertone, Archbishop of Genoa, from the microphones of Radio Vatican publicly invited Catholics not to buy or read Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, which «aims to discredit the Church and its history through gross and absurd manipulations». The danger was that readers, overwhelmed in their faculty of keeping history and fiction distinct, could take as real the supposedly «historical» statements contained in Brown's novel. Cardinal Bertone was no exception: a flowering of cottage industry was observed as soon as the sales of the *Code* started to soar to six-digit figures, including articles, TV programmes and books focused on the question about truth or mendacity of its assertions: *Truth and Fiction in "The Da Vinci Code"*, *The Real History Behind "The Da Vinci Code"* and many others (quoted in Mexal, 1085).

If the history of how Brown's novels are received represents an exemplary case of «suspension of disbelief», a state of mind in which the neat distinctions between real and inauthentic, history and novel are often blurred, neglected, sometimes even denied, the zero-sum game applies also to the thematic structure of Brown's narrations. Here is an example, a fragment of a dialogue among Robert Langdon, the scientist Victoria Vetra and the Director of CERN in Geneva, Professor Kohler, while in *Angels & Demons* they argue the substantial non-distinction of what we normally consider antithetic:

Kohler's expression darkened. "Vittoria, what do you mean a certain *type* of matter? There is only *one* type of matter, and it - " Kohler stopped short.

Vittoria's expression was triumphant. "You've lectured on it yourself, director. The universe contains *two* kinds of matter. Scientific fact." Victoria turned to Langdon. "Mr Langdon, what does the Bible say about the Creation? What did God create?"

Langdon felt awkward, not sure what this had to do with anything. "Um, God created... light and dark, heaven and hell - "

"Exactly," Vittoria said. "He created everything in opposites. Symmetry. Perfect balance." She turned back to Kohler. "Director, science claims the same thing as religion, that the Big Bang created everything in the universe with an opposite." (Brown, *Angels and Demons* 94).

The novel continues on this oxymoronic line of zero-sum game, giving voice to the great desire of becoming immune to the problems of globalization. How to conciliate Muslims and Christians, Americans and Chinese, Western world and Third world? With the law of «fifty-fifty», preparing cocktails inspired to equality that do not meet the reader's expectations. Nothing is as it seems: the discovery of Big Bang for the narrator in *Angels & Demons* is to be attributed not to a physicist but a to a priest – «*Theo-physicist?* Langdon thought it sounded impossibly oxymoronic» (63) – while Leonardo firmly believed that physics was God's natural law, and even Galilei was an *Illuminatus*, a member of the secret society functioning as co-protagonist in the novel. In this case Dan Brown's zero-sum games reveal their pervasive nature through the words of his alter ego Robert Langdon/Indiana Jones:

Yes. Galileo was an Illuminatus. And he was also a devout Catholic. He tried to soften the church's position on science by proclaiming that science did not undermine the existence of God, but rather *reinforced* it. He wrote once that when he looked through his telescope at the spinning planets, he could hear God's voice in the music of the spheres. He held that science and religion were not enemies, but rather *allies* – two different languages telling the same story, a story of symmetry and balance... heaven and hell, night and day, hot and cold, God and Satan. Both science and religion rejoiced in God's symmetry... the endless contest of light and dark. (51)

The insolence and unpredictability of the real world seem to settle at last; Brown's interpretive patterns of symmetry and oxymoron are made possible only by forgetting the clashing conflicts that global reality forces us to face day by day. This may be enough, but a *smart novel* always wants to make the reader (consumer?) feel at ease and capable of obtaining the maximum pleasure from reading. Global consumers love decoding reality their own way, as if it were an ambigram allowing reading words in many directions, rotational or inverse, even when the paper support is rotated by 180 degrees (Norenzayan et al. 531).

Generally speaking, every difference implodes in the annihilation of contrasts and reality is, so to say, «ambigramized». Binary logic, *adieu*. Dan Brown is so obsessively induced to deconstruct conflicts, so willing to accept a fair quantity of Good in the sequences of his plots only if an equal quantity of Evil is inoculated as well, so theoretically incline to unite male and female, so apocryphally in favour of science *and* religious faith; what we would never expect from such a writer is the violent invective against *ignavia*. The narrator in Brown's latest novel reminds us that the most terribly torturing places of Dante's *Inferno* were reserved to those who, in times of moral uncertainty and crisis, had maintained their neutrality, revealing their inability to take a stance. Is this another *mantra* of Brown's narrative – an assertiveness that overwhelms any resistance and obstacles?

The zero-sum approach may also apply to the semiotic level of Brown's texts, difficult to classify inside single genres or text typologies. Maybe Cardinal Bertone was right in treating the American writer as if he were a historian, since he seems to have deliberately erased the semiotic borders among different narrative morphologies and composed his smart novels as a hybrid breed of history, science and fictional imagination. For example, *The Da Vinci Code* begins with a page titled «FACT» in which the information about The Priory of Sion, Opus Dei and all «descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals» are stated to be «accurate» (1); in the interviews following the publication Brown continued to remain vague about his wish to tell a real story, confirming that at last part of the material the book was based on was «historical fact» (TV interview at *Today* show, quoted in Mexal 1085).

The semiotic specificity of Brown's writing – his «code» – lies not only in the use of communicative techniques apt to open new spaces of perfused authorship, at least for the Twitter follower who participates in text production conversing with the author, but in the direct involvement of the reader as dislocated individual at a time when globalization-related phenomena have eroded the historical dimension as we knew it, that is, as a specifically *national* narration. As Stephen J. Mexal puts it:

The significance of *The Da Vinci Code*, and the reason for its bestseller status, lies in this interplay between narrative history and fiction. The novel has provided a cultural site in which the nonacademic public can come together and critically debate what constitutes the “fictional,” as well as how narrative fiction has shaped what we typically recognize as historical. This is a topic resonant with the global public, for as the economic borders of the nation-state have eroded in recent decades, so also has the solidity of the conventional historical narrative. (1086)

Consulting the chats and forums online we can realize how highly effervescent the ambiguity history/fiction has been, to the point of conditioning collective subconscious: people are invited to reject the bitter nourishment of scientific learning to opt for the vibrant, tasty accumulation of everything upon everything; just like the characters staged by Brown, who do not possess a desire of their own anymore, something to pursue freely and openly to sublime their egos in. They rather throw themselves in pursuit of a target that is always information, a solution, a deciphering code, a cloud of bits. The mysticism of science, the real totem in Brown's smart novels, has no other explanation.

6. Narrative tourism and “time packaging”

How are Brown's novels built? They are compelling like action movies, set in 24-hour time intervals, and populated with chases, aggressions, revelations, *coup-de-scenes* and secret plots developing on a geographic stage included in the «seven-cities-in-seven-days» package tour so many retired elders from Michigan or Kobe City find themselves enrolled in.

We may match the pleasure we feel in reading Brown's novels to the pleasure of the tourists sightseeing in Paris, Florence, Venice, Istanbul not with the intent to *know* something, but to *recognize* as real life something they already know (Van Laer et al. 797). Langdon himself is a tourist-detective electing topography as his vocation and destiny and darting through famous and suggestive itineraries under the omniscient narrator's controlling gaze, sometimes in long shot, sometimes in close-up. With pleasure we re-

member the energetic, athletically valuable run through Rome in *Angels & Demons*: at every corner a deadly trap to prevent, a potential victim to save, from the Vatican to Piazza del Popolo to Via della Scrofa to Caffè Rosati. Brown seems to confirm that best-sellers, at least since *Love Story* (1970), offer to readers the opportunity to visit distant landscapes to gratify their hunger for knowledge; to get to know what lies beyond the boundaries of the world they live in (Contenti 82).

Are we talking about the dear old descriptions that in traditional novels alternated to narrations, just like permanence alternated to nomadism, space to time, the waiting to adventure and action? Postcards from Paris and Rome? Not at all. Smart novels have abolished descriptions, making them redundant after a couple of centuries of honourable service, to substitute them with «displays», figurative segments that not only predict the adaptation of the verbal text to screenplay or videogames, but focus less on an objective scenery than on the percepts of a subject immersed in it (Sanford - Emmott 18). We tend to see our perceptions, and not much of what is in front of us; prisoners of a full immersion in narrative fiction, we read what we already know and not what we are actually reading, and this process of self-projection somehow confers reality status.

It is us who integrate everything into our customary world, not the other way round, so that the act of «displaying» produces the effect of certifying what we read as substantially authentic (Hutcheon 22). In place of descriptions, Brown uses short-duration «highlights», linking them in a kind of editing presumably derived from the visual languages of film, of TV and of advertising (Voigts – Nicklas 8 ss.). In the sequence of the arrival to Rome by helicopter in *Angels & Demons*, for instance, the city appears in High Definition, with a precision and richness of details typical of augmented reality:

Rome from the air is a labyrinth – an indecipherable maze of ancient roadways winding around buildings, fountains and crumbling ruins. [...] His stomach dropping, Langdon gazed farther into the distance. His eyes found the crumbling ruins of the Roman Coliseum. The Coliseum, Langdon had always thought, was one of history's greatest ironies. [...] It was ironic, Langdon thought, or perhaps fitting, that it had served as the architectural blueprint for Harvard's Soldier Field – the football stadium where the ancient traditions of savagery were reenacted every fall ... crazed fans screaming for bloodshed as Harvard battled Yale. As the chopper headed north, Langdon spied the Roman Forum – the heart of pre-Christian Rome. [...] To the west the wide basin of the Tiber River wound enormous arcs across the city. Even from the air Langdon could tell the water was deep. [...] "Straight ahead," the pilot said, climbing higher. Langdon and Vittoria looked out and saw it. Like a mountain parting the morning fog, the colossal dome rose out of the haze before them: St Peter's Basilica. (142)

In this realism in HD, the reader faces a picture of reality he/she has already seen, made authentic by a semiotic format revealing it as more visible and more neatly profiled. Brown's characters move inside this habitat: they are deprived of real motivations, desire, memories or doubts, and the narrator lets them express only in direct speech or «tells» them with authoritative voice; he never allows us to access their world in free indirect thought (as when the narrator portrays them from *their* point of view using *their* language) or, in the rare occasions when this happens, italics are deployed to signal these reflections coming up from the inside. Characters can't but be flat, mono-dimensional, scarcely familiar with deep reasoning simply because they do not have time to pause and think: the narrator does not allow them to rest a little while. Time is the ingredient readers swallow page after page, or see and recognize as an ally in the fight against historical uncertainty (Aubry 64).

True, every character runs through the pages, but running implies the certainty of a goal, of a solution for every query, of the alienation from the here and now. In Brown's novels the High Speed of narration favours the High Readability of the text, conferring to us a special sense of freedom (Mar e Oatley 208). While running, everything around us seems to become liquid, like in a painting by Klimt: bodies are de-structured and become one with the space containing them, colours spread near the edge of things and seem to make them levitate.

Let's consider *Angels & Demons* and *The Da Vinci Code*, novels of comparable length (about 500 pages each) that concentrate action in a limited time: in the first novel Langdon dismantles a conspiracy against the Vatican, identifies the murderer of the Pope, punishes the man responsible for other 5 murders, identifies places of ancient rites of initiation to a secret society Galilei was a member of, jumps into the Tiber from six thousand metres with a do-it-yourself parachute, experiences the destructive power of the anti-matter produced in Geneva by CERN, and seduces the woman-scientist in less than 24 hours; in the second a slightly longer time is sufficient, except for the epilogue, to discover the truth about the Holy Grail, put an end to another long chain of murders and obscure plots by deviant members of Opus Dei, restore the misrecognized descendants of Jesus and Magdalene in the place they deserve in history, fall in love with Sophie Neveu as platonically as a medieval knight, solve a high number of mysteries about a secret society whose traces are disseminated in Paris and London, decipher secret numeric codes and allusions in the works of Leonardo and in a Swiss bank. In both cases, fighting successfully with men ready to kill is included. The rhythm is frenetic and requires the reader to feel immersed as much as possible; this is the reason why Brown adopts a rigorous pattern in his plots, dividing them into narrative micro-sequences respecting with quasi-Aristotelian rigour the principle of unity of time, place and action.

In *Angels & Demons* we have 137 chapters /narrative units, 105 in *The Da Vinci Code*; every micro-sequence is built so that the reader's knowledge about the narrated events increases by «discrete packets» of information, including partial revelations on the mysteries of the preceding chapters and anticipations about the next scenarios to be interpreted.

Such a fragmentary subdivision of the text generates an «occasional» and episodic reading of the novels, for example while going to work on the bus or underground. It is at risk of giving to users some kind of time-space vertigo, to the point of generating obstacles to the entertainment and pleasure of reading, but even in this case Brown displays his ability slowing the rhythm down, providing data (flashbacks, free-indirect thought, historical-erudite notations) or introducing new characters.

In *The Da Vinci Code* the long sequence of events set inside the Louvre deserves attention: it starts in chapter 4 with Langdon's arrival onto the crime scene; it develops in the following chapters with other key figures in the story (tough Captain Fache, the fascinating cryptologist Sophie Neveu, Bishop Aringarosa); it lingers on the couple Langdon-Neveu carefully deciphering enigmas and revealing allusions to sacred feminine; it focuses on Opus Dei and a mysterious conspiracy (chapter 5); then it shifts our attention to the Church of Saint-Sulpice, where the giant albino Silas commits another murder (the fifth of the night), in search of a mysterious and apparently very powerful object (chapters 7, 10, 15, 19, 22, 24, 29, 31); finally it follows the rocambolesque escape of Langdon and Neveu, chased by the French police (chapter 32). With a few exceptions, the time it takes to read and understand a micro-sequence is about seven minutes, the time of three bus stops.

The experience of reading each narrative sequence in Dan Brown's novels is characterized by the rapidity of involvement of our interpretive schemata and emotional response. But in his fiction «rapidity» rhymes «immersivity». Each micro-sequence carefully avoids to overwhelm the reader with the cryptologic and cognitive complexity the plot carries along: the writer manages to fool the reader about the complexity of his texts. Who really understands the intricate history of the Priory of Sion and the interpretation of *The Last Supper* in *The Da Vinci Code*? How many among us, not terribly fond of enigmas, are really interested in the solution of the verbal riddles leading step by step to the final revelation? The massive cognitive effort is micro-filtered in a sequence of «time packets»: a highly digestible and tasty *mousse*, as the 200 million consumer-readers of his novels demonstrate.

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