Article

"The Battle for Men's Minds": Subliminal Message as Conspiracy Theory in Seventh-Day Adventist Discourse

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Abstract: This article describes the presence of a subliminal thesis—with conspiratorial and apocalyptic content—in the discourse of the Seventh-day Adventist tradition based on a documentary analysis of Adventist publications from the 1900s to the 1990s. The history of the development of this thesis is classified into three periods: (1) Proto-Adventist Subliminal Thesis, from 1900s to 1940s, with a discourse of anti-spiritualist emphasis; (2) Adventist Subliminal Thesis' First Wave, from 1950s to 1960s, with a discourse of anti-media emphasis in the context of James Vicary's experiments in the 1950s; and (3) Adventist Subliminal Thesis' Second Wave, from 1970s to 1990s, with a discourse of conspiratorial emphasis in the context of the satanic panic of the 1980s and 1990s. The Adventist subliminal thesis is configured in a way of thinking that considers (1) the human being as a "mass-man" and culture as "mass culture"; (2) the media as having the power of manipulation and mental control; (3) adherence to moral panic phenomena as reactions to media threats to traditional values; and (4) the cosmic narrative of the Great Controversy as a worldview for understanding media messages and products as part of a satanic conspiracy.

Keywords: subliminal messages; Seventh-day Adventist; conspiracy theory; moral panic

1. Introduction

As an object of research in recent decades, subliminal messages have been investigated by three fields in particular: psychology, neuroscience, and communication/marketing. One of the main approaches of interest is to analyze the use of subliminal messages in the context of neuromarketing and consumer behavior.

If we ignore the contributions of philosophy and consider only the aforementioned fields—psychology, neuroscience, and communication/marketing—the study of the unconsciousness and, consequently, the subliminal, has around a hundred years of history and has already produced hundreds of research studies and experiments (Dixon 1971, 1980). However, the study of the topic of "subliminal messages" is still far from definitive in its conclusions. Researching unconsciousness is one of the most complex and challenging tasks in the science of the mind, and there is no room for absolute and irrefutable discourse. Opinions are divergent, and the results are insistently inconclusive.

Given their polyphonic nature, subliminal messages are essentially controversial. This premise is based on three basic reasons:

- The concept lacks semantic clarity and faces challenges in delimiting its epistemological circumscription (Kihlstrom et al. 1992; Dijksterhuis et al. 2005, pp. 80–81);
- The concept does not have enough evidence in the scientific literature to have its effectiveness proven, unlike popular beliefs or common sense (Acland 2012, p. 19; Sur 2021, p. 101);
- The concept tends to generate disinterest or aversion because it is generally associated with knowledge that is considered stigmatized and counter-epistemic, such as conspiracy theories (Barkun 2013, p. 216; Byford 2011, p. 79), and with socially controversial phenomena such as moral panic (Quayle 2015, p. 104; Brackett 2018, p. 273).

Regarding the imprecision of the term, it should be noted that there are two dimensions to its epistemic discussion: that coming from the academic tradition and that generated by media and popular discourse. The academic definition of subliminal messages comes from psychology, originally based on the concepts of "unconscious" and "perception of consciousness".

What is called "subliminal messages" in the academic-scientific context is understood as "subliminal perception", which consists of the idea that human thoughts, feelings, and actions are influenced by stimuli below (sub) the threshold of perception or consciousness, i.e., they are perceived without there being any awareness of the perception (Merikle 2000; Acland 2012, p. 18). Research into subliminal perception dates to studies in the field of experimental psychology from its beginnings in the second half of the 1800s (Dijksterhuis et al. 2005, p. 78). In the history of the development of the concept of subliminal perception and its theoretical and empirical challenges even with fruitful production in the first half of the 20th century, this subject remains controversial, to the point of debating whether it is a real phenomenon, i.e., whether it actually occurs (Overgaard and Timmermans 2010, p. 515). Currently, one of the most productive research fronts on the subject comes from the field of communication studies and neuromarketing, with a focus on consumer behavior. In this sense, the concept studied is "subliminal advertising", the definition of which would be: "a technique that exposes consumers to product images, brand names, or other marketing stimuli without the consumers being aware of it" (Trappey 1996, p. 517). However, studies reviewing the literature and meta-analyses, i.e., research using a statistical technique designed to integrate the results of different studies, present divergent and pendulum-like conclusions: sometimes stating that the practice of subliminal advertising presents inexpressive results (Trappey 1996; Krishnan and Trappey 1999), sometimes considering that certain subliminal stimuli can influence cognition and marketing decision-making (Warren 2009).

Regarding the popular dimension, the term "subliminal messages" has significantly distanced itself from the technical concepts of subliminal advertising and subliminal perception, becoming part of the common lexicon. Within the post-World War II and Cold War context, the popularization of the subliminal had conspiratorial, folkloric, and apocalyptic characteristics. In this scenario, Acland (2012) indicated the emergence of a paradigm that he calls the "subliminal thesis", involving the belief in the irresistible power of the media and its ability to control and manipulate through stimuli that are not consciously perceived.

Taking the scenario described as a starting point, this article seeks to focus on two aspects of the study of the subliminal, which have an interdependent relationship: that related to media culture and that related to the popular, conspiratorial, and folkloric concept of the term, different from those articulated by the research community in psychology and neuromarketing. The aim is to analyze the presence of a subliminal thesis, based on Acland's (2012) concept, in the discourse of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) tradition from official publications of the SDA Church in English, namely denominational books whose theme is the media universe, and magazines and periodicals with news and articles dealing with subliminal messages. Based on the analysis of these publications, this article presents a periodization of the meanings and uses of the subliminal theme in Seventh-day Adventism and proposes the existence of an Adventist subliminal thesis with its own premises and characteristics.

To this end, this article is divided into three parts:

- A description of the emergence and definition of the subliminal thesis, based on the studies of Acland (2012), and a proposal to periodize the subliminal thesis into two waves—the first, in the 1950s to 1960s, and the second, in the 1970s to 1990s;
- A description of the concept of conspiracy theories and a presentation of the subliminal thesis as a conspiracy narrative, based on the studies of Byford (2011), Barkun (2013), and Cassam (2019);
- The periodization of the meanings and uses of the theme "subliminal messages", based on the description of the identity marks of Seventh-day Adventism and the

documentary analysis of its literature, in dialog with previous works (Novaes 2016, 2019, 2024) in order to propose the existence of an Adventist subliminal thesis, of conspiratorial and apocalyptic content.

2. Nothing Is What It Seems: Subliminal Thesis

Two catalyzing and almost simultaneous events were responsible for the creation of a subliminal thesis or paradigm: James Vicary's experiments in 1957 and the publication of Vance Packard's book, *The Hidden Persuaders*, in 1957.

James Vicary, born in Detroit, USA, was an advertising executive with a significant reputation for experimental marketing research in the 1950s (Acland 2012, p. 99). He had an academic predilection for measuring and mapping the relationship between the subconscious and consumer activity. The techniques involved in his research consisted of in-depth interviews and public opinion polls, psychography, and approaches from behaviorist psychology and Gestalt, as well as popular Freudian ideas about the unconscious (Acland 2012, p. 99). He claimed to have carried out experiments in 1956 and 1957 that aimed to make consumers buy on impulse. Vicary became popular in September 1957, after media exposure to publicize his experiment carried out in a movie theater in New Jersey, in which a second projector emitted a slide with imperative words: "Drink Coke" and "Eat popcorn". The phrases were projected on top of the movie at a speed of 1/3000th of a second—allegedly long enough for the subconscious to absorb them but not slow enough for the viewer to be aware of them. The subliminal ads supposedly created an increase in sales of soft drinks and popcorn.

In 1957, still during the "Vicary effect", the book *The Hidden Persuaders* by journalist Vance Packard was published, which promised to "unmask" the dark side of marketing and communication, reinforcing interest and belief in subliminal advertising (Zanot 1992). The book became a bestseller. The subject generated some apprehension in American society, leading the US Congress to debate the moral and legal implications of the issue. Vicary even presented his ideas to a group of senators, and the country's main broadcast TV stations decided to ban "subliminal materials" in their advertisements.

Vicary's experiments and Packard's bestseller received a lot of interest from the press and public opinion for several reasons. Both works echoed the popular imagery of the engineering of mass society by powerful institutional agencies, referring to the instrumentalization of radio in the "construction" of Nazi-fascist regimes in Europe, the dystopian universe of George Orwell's *1984*, and the emblematic episode of collective hysteria that occurred as a result of Orson Welles' radio broadcast reading of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* in 1938 (Schwartz 2016). In addition, the media's discourse of misleading persuasion fit conveniently into the imagery of the Cold War with its narratives of brainwashing and mind control, originating from the supposed testimonies of prisoners of war.

At the same time, there was a growing concern about "new and supposedly nefarious techniques of advertisers" regarding the use of motivational psychology methods in marketing, which Packard called "mass psychoanalysis" (Packard 2007, p. 31). Against this historical backdrop, one cannot ignore the importance of the mechanization of learning for the society in which the subliminal thesis emerged, represented by the tachistoscope. This device examined the speed of visual perception by projecting images as visual stimuli and, at the time, was often used in tests of attention, perception, and learning in military, corporate, and educational environments with a bias towards efficiency and control, becoming a symbol of subliminal studies (Newman 2015, p. 379).

As you can see, all these issues represented the spirit of the times, in which there had been a change in the perception of the "omnipresence" of the electronic in everyday life: we went from a fascination with the long-dreamed-of technical overcoming of the limits of space and time in modernity to a generalized anxiety about the apparent sovereignty of technology and its ethical dilemmas in contemporary times (Scounce 2000). Therefore, subliminal messages became a totem of popular belief in media manipulation and mass

society, with uncritical consumers following the wishes of an invisible institutional power (Newman 2015).

Years later, the techniques proposed by Vicary would fall into disrepute, not only because of the ethical problems they raised, but also because of the lack of evidence proving their real effectiveness (Acland 2012). In an interview with a media outlet in 1962, Vicary admitted that his experiment—that of popcorn and Coca-Cola—had not followed the required scientific rigor and did not allow him to reach assertive, impactful, and comprehensive conclusions, as he had defended and tried to rid himself of the image he had nurtured in the previous decade; he was called "Mr. Subliminal" (Acland 2012, pp. 227–28). Vicary's research was therefore considered a fraud, and, with his "confession", there was a lack of interest in subliminal studies in the 1960s. This period, in which Vicary's research, Packard's book, the role of the tachistoscope, and the imagery of the Cold War which spanned the 1950s and 1960s, is what this article proposes as the "First Wave" of the subliminal thesis.

Even after the discovery of Vicary's fraud, the subject of "subliminal messages" came to the fore again with the book *Subliminal Seduction* by Canadian communications professor Wilson Brian Key, released at the end of 1973. Mixing resources from semiotics and psychology, Key (1973) proposed that drawings and words of a sexual nature were embedded subliminally in magazine ads. Like the logic of his predecessors, one of the major problems with the logic presented by Key is the conviction that hidden messages were more powerful and direct than overt ones—there was no limit or criterion other than creativity to identify hidden messages in pieces of media.

Subliminal Seduction was a portrait of the alleged conspiratorial efforts to manipulate and control the population on the part of industry and government. Key mentioned that the human mind tends to be manipulated and saw the effects of contemporary media as predominantly hypnotic. In his words: "Media has the proven, completely established ability to program human behavior much in the same way as hypnosis" (Key 1973, p. 187). For many, he was the main spokesperson for the subliminal thesis and an exponent of the academic universe on the subject, promoting it throughout the 1970s from a conspiratorial logic. However, he was not alone on the academic circuit. Another intellectual, who Acland (2012, p. 37) considered to be one of the first academics to articulate the subliminal thesis in his research, and who wrote the preface to *Subliminal Seduction*, is the Canadian Marshall McLuhan. In his 1951 book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, McLuhan already talked about the subliminal effects of advertising. Although he did not achieve the popularity of Vicary and Packard, as his reach was more restricted to the academic public, McLuhan's ideas had a significant influence.

No wonder Key's work was so influential that it encouraged subliminal analyses of hidden words and images in children's cartoons, games, and audiovisual products. To cite a few examples, Role-Playing Games (RPGs) and the practice of backward masking, which consisted of listening to music backwards on vinyl records, were the target of moral and religious crusades, especially in the 1980s and early 1990s (Guldner 2023). Traditionalist evangelical groups and conservative sectors in the United States and Great Britain believed that there were orders to worship the devil hidden in rock and heavy metal records, an emblematic episode being the trial of the heavy metal band Judas Priest (Vokey and Read 1985; Stephens 2018). In the RPG universe, the target was *Dungeons and Dragons* and its players, accused of kidnapping children and satanic rituals (Waldron 2005; Laycock 2015).

Key and McLuhan, in their discourses on the subliminal, represented a hermeneutic tradition of suspicion, a philosophical premise on which the subliminal thesis is configured. In his 1969 work, *On Interpretation: An Essay on Freud*, Paul Ricoeur gave the thinkers Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche the nickname "masters of suspicion", in the sense that they criticized the Cartesian idea that consciousness could grasp the meaning of the world and of itself in a clear and evident way. The hermeneutics of suspicion would, therefore, be a "technique of reading texts against the grain and between the lines, of cataloging their omissions and

laying bare their contradictions, of rubbing in what they fail to know and cannot represent" (Felski 2011a, p. 574). This "school of suspicion" impacted the intellectual circuit and critical research in the humanities and social sciences, as it was often motivated by a desire to reveal hidden or underlying causal factors and oriented towards circumventing obvious or evident meanings to extract hidden truths—fundamental perspectives for the epistemic establishment of the subliminal paradigm (Newman 2015, p. 380; Felski 2011b).

Allied to the logic of suspicion, the subliminal thesis was also built on the concept of the "mass", as defended by thinkers such as Gustave Le Bon and José Ortega y Gasset, who saw the large human groups in contemporary urban society as semi-savage crowds, characterized by "irrationality", and who would be guided and shaped by media messages. This concept was part of the vocabulary of Mass Communication Research, a tradition of communication studies that was influential in America between the 1920s and 1960s. In this school of communication, one of the most popular understandings of the media effect was the "Magic Bullet Theory". This theory suggested that the media could directly influence the audience by injecting messages into their minds. And this infusion of hidden messages would occur in the interests of the "mainstream media", organizations, and governments; in this sense, subliminal messages were also conspiratorial.

Later, this tradition of North American studies began to lose strength with the rise of Cultural Studies and the popularization of Mediatization Theories, among other schools. The concept of "mass" would be revised and the consideration of listeners, readers, and viewers as hostages of the media would be questioned. Instead of relying on the naïve belief in the infallible power of media content and messages over the individual, they focused on studying the complex and different reactions of receivers and audiences.

This period, in which Key's book the Satanic Panic and the practice of backward masking stand out, spanned from the 1970s to the 1990s and is what this article proposes as the "Second Wave" of the subliminal thesis.

Although it shows some of its own characteristics in each of the two waves, the subliminal thesis is, therefore, a way of thinking that considers the crowd to be an uncritical mass, believes in the manipulative and unstoppable power of the media, and argues that hidden and implicit messages have more impact and effect than overt and explicit ones. In other words, it is "practical consciousness about false consciousness" (Acland 2012, p. 229). The modus operandi of the subliminal thesis consists of the profusion of conspiratorial narratives and the carrying out of moral crusades, which seek to bring more control and predictability to the scenario of the "omnipresence" and "sovereignty" of technology.

3. Nothing Happens by Accident: Conspiratory Theories and Rhetoric

As we have seen, the subliminal thesis operates through the logic of conspiracy and has conspiratorial narratives as the resource on which the protagonism of unconsciousness is "proven"—in this case, the absence of evidence is evidence of existence. In this article, we have chosen to refer to conspiracy theories as "the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end" (Barkun 2013, p. 3). Furthermore, according to Byford (2011, p. 88), conspiracy theories clearly contain a triad of narrative elements, which he calls the "conspiratorial explanatory style". According to Cubitt (1989, p. 18) and Byford (2011, p. 71), the three narrative elements that make up a conspiracy theory are:

- A conspiratorial group;
- A conspiratorial plan;
- The effort at secrecy.

In the conspiracy group, the first element of the triad, two characterizations stand out: the identity and character of the conspirators (Byford 2011). Discovering the identity of the conspiratorial group is one of the central themes in the tradition of conspiratorial rhetoric. This task is paradoxical because, at the same time as the conspirators need to be known to be exposed, they must also be hidden from public view; otherwise, their plans will not be secret—and without secrecy, there is no conspiracy. One solution to this dilemma is to refer

to the conspirators in vague and all-encompassing terms, mentioning symbolic institutions such as "Wall Street", "United Nations", or "the Vatican", or mentions of groups such as "Jews", "communists", "politicians", and so on.

The second characterization of the narrative element, "conspiratorial group", is the character or nature of the conspirators. The conspirator is treated as "a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral Superman" (Hofstadter 1965, p. 31), often associated with religious terms that indicate an unholy vocation, such as demon, monster, Satan, antichrist, etc. However, the designation always present in conspiracy theories is the elite status of the conspirators, so that this alleged privileged position is what gives consistency to reports of the control they exercise over the course of nations. In this way, there is an immanently subversive and populist nature to conspiratorial narratives. Furthermore, when they criticize the power of elites, institutions, and authorities, they generally use speculative, persecutory, and defamatory discourse.

The conspiracy plan, the second element of the narrative triad, is usually portrayed as grandiose, which could drastically alter the course of world history or threaten the existence of humanity. In contemporary conspiracy culture, the most famous plan behind a conspiracy is the establishment of a "New World Order" (Byford 2011). Whatever the plan, it presents itself as "ecumenical", in the sense that it is broad enough to accommodate conspiracy theorists from the left and the right, and from religious and secular organizations.

In the drive for secrecy, the third element in the narrative triad of conspiracy theories, secrecy is understood to be indispensable because it supports the belief that there are mysterious and evil forces behind the social and political reality. It also supports the irrefutable logic of the conspiracy theory, i.e., the absence of evidence about the conspiracy can be taken as incontrovertible proof of its existence because the conspirators are adept at hiding evidence and manipulating reality (Hofstadter 1965; Byford 2011).

In short, conspiracy theories are "intriguing and captivating as a good detective novel" and captivating "morality tales with all-knowing and all-powerful villains and naive victims" (Cassam 2019, p. 58), bringing together "all the trappings of a classic underdog story" (Brotherton 2015, p. 149). Added to this is the fact that conspiracy theorists generally do not admit to their amateur qualifications in matters involving conspiracy theory; rather, they consider themselves experts and researchers outside the scientific mainstream (Cassam 2019). Therefore, the conspiracy narrative is constructed with scientific rhetoric, seeking to present detailed plausibility statements and verifiable historical records in an attempt to prove the elaborate conjectures as a kind of mimesis of science (Hofstadter 1965; Byford 2011).

Therefore, it can be concluded that conspiracy narratives are not merely speculative plots but mainly expressions of a particular vision of how the world works, a form of a mirror of the century (Nicolas 2016). From a philosophical perspective, conspiracy theories operate in an attempt to assign meaning to evil, the result of which is a worldview in which there is an irreconcilable separation between light and darkness. Behind a conspiratorial worldview is a belief in a universe governed by design and intentionality rather than chance, and in this way, it seeks to confer order and agency on the complexity and unpredictability of life in contemporary society. This is portrayed through three postulates: (a) nothing is as it seems; (b) nothing happens by accident; (c) everything is connected (Barkun 2013).

And it is in response to these postulates that conspiratorial rhetoric is constructed as a form of propaganda whose real function is to promote an ideological agenda, giving vent to the social and political dilemmas experienced at the time (Cassam 2019).

Taking into account all the elements of conspiratorial rhetoric and its postulates, the subliminal thesis can be defined as a conspiracy theory. As an example, one could consider in the conspiracy narrative triad that the conspiring group could be the media and the technology industry, the conspiratorial plan would be based on an attempt at mind control aimed at enriching large conglomerates or political advantages for governments, and the effort towards secrecy would be characterized by the refusal of mainstream academia to investigate the topic and the media's attribution of ridicule to the topic. All this is

wrapped in scientific clothing, supported by the presentation of concepts and approaches that are generally contrary to discoveries in psychology, psychoanalysis, neuroscience, neuromarketing, and communication sciences.

4. Everything Is Connected: Conspiracy Narrative and Subliminal Thesis in Seventh-Day Adventism

The association between religion and conspiracy theories is not a recent phenomenon. Conspiracy narratives are often interwoven with theological concepts, such as theodicies and soteriological responses. This underscores the crucial role that religious communities have historically played as key sites for the articulation of conspiracies (Robertson et al. 2018; Piraino et al. 2023).

The integration of conspiracist beliefs within religious movements can be conceptualized as a form of reaction to a Manichean worldview that pits opposing forces against one another. This phenomenon can be seen as a response to the apocalyptic anxiety that is commonly associated with millennialism. Additionally, it represents an attempt to provide an explanation for the existence of evil.

Having presented the definitions and historical contexts of the concepts "subliminal thesis" and "conspiracy theories" and having established a correspondence between them—that is, the subliminal thesis as a conspiracy narrative—it is necessary to introduce the origin and characteristics of the SDA Church and its relationship with mass media and conspiracy thinking.

The aim of this characterization is to describe the denomination's identity marks as hermeneutical keys to understanding the conflicting relationship between the Adventist tradition and media culture in order to help analyze the presence of the Adventist subliminal thesis in Adventist media literature.

4.1. Seventh-Day Adventist Tradition, Mass Media and Conspiracy Thinking

The SDA Church is a neo-Protestant Christian denomination that originated in the United States in 1863. It was derived from William Miller's (1782–1849) millennialist teachings about the belief in the imminent return of Christ. It is well known that millennialist worldviews have always predisposed their adherents to beliefs in conspiracies, including the American Millennialism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Barkun 2013). One of the primary reasons for the intertwining of millennialism and conspiracy thinking is that the latter provides an explanation for the failures of the former; "the more elusive the end-times are, the more tempting it is to blame their delay on secret evil powers, whether in the form of a capitalist conspiracy or of the minions of Satan" (Barkun 2013, p. 3). The SDA movement arose from the "rationalizations for the failure predictions" in 1844, the year of the so-called "Great Disappointment", when a date was set for Jesus' return, which did not occur (Barkun 1986, p. 44). The re-signification of this event would lay the foundations for Seventh-day Adventism, which would have the hope of Jesus' return to Earth in the very name of the denomination—Adventist, from advent.

Both millennialism and conspiracy thinking have another feature in common: the schematic imagination. The conspiracy narrative is usually represented not only by text but also graphically "in the form of complex diagrams and schemas illustrating the ties between different individuals and organizations" (Byford 2011, p. 73). This conspiratory trait dialogs with the visual rhetoric of Millerism, which portrays the chart as an "interplay of graphic, alphabetic, and numeric signs" in order to transform the secret and mysterious character of the apocalyptic symbols into "a singular denotative operation", a systematic and didactic reading of prophecies (Morgan 1999, p. 133).

Besides its millennialist background, the SDA Church espouses the view that one of its founders, Ellen G. White (1827–1915), was a modern prophetess. Due to her prolific writings and her charisma, in the Weberian sense of the term, White was instrumental in helping to establish the denomination's identity marks, including its apocalyptic vocation, with the "Great Controversy" narrative as its worldview (Douglass 2010; Campbell 2013;

Gulley 2016; McVay 2024). In fact, this last element has become a central theme in Adventist theology, consisting of a cosmic narrative about the conflict between God and Satan, from the origin of sin in heaven through the belief in the restoration of truth during the Protestant Reformation to the emergence of Seventh-day Adventism, and culminating in the victory of the remnant people over evil at the end of time (Guy 2014; Canale 2006; McVay 2024).

For White, the Great Controversy was supernatural in origin and universal in scope, and its resolution was called "The Plan of Redemption". For the Adventist tradition, the controversy between good and evil would become increasingly dramatic after 1844, the year of the so-called "Great Disappointment", when a date was set for Jesus' return, which did not occur (Douglass 2010; Campbell 2013; Gulley 2016).

The metanarrative of the Great Controversy gave the Adventist message an urgency that would eventually lead Adventists, as "the remnant church", to warn the world about the imminent judgment of God and the return of Christ. This unique eschatological message—called "Present Truth"—with a rhetoric of prophecy secrecy (Bratosin 2020) was then taken beyond the boundaries of the United States in migratory movements that began in the 1870s (Greenleaf 2011). The Great Controversy metanarrative and its associated concepts, including the Remnant People, the Plan of Redemption, and Present Truth represent key elements within the Adventist tradition that could be frequently linked to conspiracy rhetoric and imagery.

Today, the SDA Church has more than 20 million believers around the world. The expansion of the Adventist movement was mainly due to the systematic production and distribution of its literature, to the extent that Manners (2009, p. 63) calls the denomination a "print-driven church", and I called it a "text-centered movement". Added to this is the belief in the prophetic value of White's writings, who wrote almost 100,000 pages, the large number of publishing houses in various countries around the world and the role its Bible study paradigm played as a biblical-theological literacy tool for the denomination.

These two identity marks—the apocalyptic vocation and the text-centered orientation—are the basis for the ambiguous and conflicting relationship that Adventism would have with the media from the moment that electronic media, such as radio and TV, began to occupy spaces that previously belonged to the denomination's magazines and books. From my perspective, the aforementioned identity markers are also an important hermeneutic key to understanding the movement's hostile responses to popular culture and entertainment (Bull and Lockhart 2007; Ellis 2019; Diller 2024). This phenomenon is also observed in other Christian traditions, especially conservative ones (Schultze 1996; Bendroth 1996; Woods 2013; Schultze and Woods 2008). Although they understand that the media can be used as an effective evangelistic tool, these groups also criticize it as an "instrument of the Devil", which threatens the values and beliefs of the Christian faith.

However, the peculiar characteristics of the SDA church make its relationship with the media unique. It was a religious denomination that originated as a result of the mediatization of the Millerite movement's "fake news", as Bratosin (2024) posits, and one of the pioneering churches in the creation of evangelistic radio and TV programs in the United States and other countries (Fenn 1960; Fonseca 2008). It has a communications structure comprising dozens of publishing houses with magazines and books and media production centers with radio and TV stations. At the same time; however, as a globally diverse community, some segments of Adventism still present a prohibitive and demonizing discourse in relation to cinema, games, and non-Christian music, among other examples (Moon 1994; Ellis 2019).

4.2. Materials and Methods

In order to propose the existence of an Adventist subliminal thesis and its periodization in the recent history of the denomination, two sets of data were delimited: (1) pamphlets and books and (2) magazines and periodicals. The first of these, based on previous studies by the author of this article (Novaes 2016, 2024), consisted of updating a previous survey of books on electronic media produced by SDA publishers between the 1950s and 2000s

in English. This original mapping was based on consulting the collection of Adventist publishers in English in their online stores, contacting the editors-in-chief by email, and on-site research at the Center for Adventist Research at Andrews University in Michigan, USA. Since then, this corpus of analysis has been expanded, adding more books and an edition of the Sabbath School Lesson for adults, also in English.

Despite the increase in publications since the original mapping, in this article, we have chosen to analyze only the works from the 1950s to the first half of the 1990s because this period adequately covers the most striking phase of the subliminal thesis—from Vicary's experiments, through Key's work, to the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and early 1990s. Furthermore, the discussion of the subliminal in Adventist tradition following the 2000s period saw a notable decline in the publication of official materials. The Adventist discourse on subliminal themes in official publications shifted to the digital media environment, resulting in the emergence of a non-official discourse. Incorporating digital media documents, such as YouTube videos or Facebook comments, would necessitate not only a considerable expansion of the corpora but also the application of distinct methods and techniques that would require their own academic publication. It is important to note that preliminary studies conducted by this author indicate that even an analysis of a post-1990s corpus would not modify the periodization proposed in this article. This is because the contemporary emphasis on Adventist subliminal discourse continues to be conspiratorial.

Therefore, the first corpus of analysis in this article consists of 13 books or pamphlets, namely:

- *Motion pictures and television*, 1951, published by the Missionary Volunteer Department of the General Conference of SDAC;
- *What about television?* 1956, published by the General Conference of the SDA Committee;
- *Will movies and religion mix?* 1957, published by Young's People Missionary Volunteer Department of the General Conference of SDA Church;
- *Quagmire... jungle... desert... or what? The pros and cons of television viewing*, 1967, published by the Young's People Missionary Volunteer Department of the General Conference of SDA Church;
- *Attractive disguise: behind the movies ads and marquee lights—What?* 1967, published by the Young's People Missionary Volunteer Department of the General Conference of SDA Church;
- *The media, the message, and man*, 1972, published by the Southern Publishing Association;
- *The Christian and communication (Adult Sabbath School Lesson)*, 1973, published by the Sabbath School Department of the General Conference of SDA Church;
- *Mind manipulators*, 1974, published by Review and Herald Publishing Association;
- *Televiolence*, 1978, published by Review and Herald Publishing Association;
- *Television and the Christian home*, 1979, published by Pacific Press Publishing Association;
- *The television time bomb*, 1993, published by Pacific Press Publishing Association;
- *Remote controlled: how TV affects you and your family*, 1993, published by Review and Herald Publishing Association;
- *What you watch: a Christian teenager's guide to media evaluation and decision-making strategies*, 1994, published by Signs Publishing Company.

The second corpus of analysis was built exclusively for this article, consisting of official SDA church magazines and journals in English. The increase in the corpus was only made possible by the availability of collections of Adventist materials in two online repositories, access to which was limited or non-existent at the time of the original mapping. These are the Adventist Digital Library in its beta version (adl.b2.adventistdigitallibrary.org) and the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (adventistarchives.org).

In the search field of both repositories, all occurrences of the keyword "subliminal" and its variations were searched. Journals with previously published articles were excluded, so only the first publication was kept. As a result, editorials, news, advertisements and opinion pieces referring to the concept of the subliminal were found in 14 periodicals, totaling 29 editions, covering a period from 1909 to 1997:

- *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald,* editions of the years 1909, 1914, 1918, and 1958
- *Adventist Review*, editions of 1982, 1983, and 1997
- *Australasian Record and Advent World Survey*, editions of 1974 and 1980
- *Columbia Union Visitor*, edition of 1983
- *Gleaner*, edition of 1991
- *Lake Union Herald*, editions of 1965 and 1982
- *Listen*, editions of 1962 and 1985
- *North America Regional Voice*, edition of 1979
- *Signs of the Times*, editions of 1920 and 1922
- *Southern Tidings*, edition of 1983
- *Southwestern Union Record*, editions of 1976 and 1982
- *The Bible and Our Times*, edition of 1959
- *The Present Truth*, edition of 1916
- *The Watchman*, editions of 1909 and 1936

The corpus was studied using documentary analysis with elements of content analysis, with the aim of systematizing the set of data in question, making it possible to understand its meanings by identifying patterns or trends (Riffe et al. 2005; Bardin 2011; Grant 2019).

When analyzing the corpus, it can be seen that, over the years, the term subliminal and its variations—subliminal message, subliminal perception, subliminal technique, etc.—were predominantly articulated in discourses with three predominant emphases: anti-spiritualist discourse, anti-media discourse, and conspiratorial discourse. Based on this finding, it was possible to propose a periodization of the subliminal thesis in Adventist discourse in three phases: (1) Proto-Adventist Subliminal Thesis, from 1900s to 1940s; (2) Adventist Subliminal Thesis' First Wave, from 1950s to 1960s; and (3) Adventist Subliminal Thesis' Second Wave, from 1970s to 1990s.

4.3. Proto-Adventist Subliminal Thesis (1900s to 1940s): Subliminal Messages as Anti-Spiritualist Narrative

The first period proposed in this article points to a time before the formation of the subliminal thesis in the 1950s. In the phase called "Proto-Adventist Subliminal Thesis", the premise of the discourse on the subliminal was based on popular understandings of the unconscious. The texts covering this period, all in periodicals and magazines, developed the discussion on the following topics: the "Emmanuel Movement" and North American spiritualism.

The first mention of the term subliminal in the corpora analyzed occurs in the magazine *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, issue of 11 March 1909, in an editorial entitled "The Emmanuel Movement: Its Theology and Psychology". The Emmanuel Movement, a pre-Freudian psychotherapeutic system founded by Reverend Elwood Worcester in 1906, consisted of a church-sponsored healing method combining group and individual psychotherapy (McCarthy 1984b; Gifford 1997). Treatment was offered free of charge, regardless of social class, race, gender, and religious affiliation, and one of the most benefited audiences was alcoholics—in fact, the Emmanuel Movement is considered one of the forerunners of Alcoholics Anonymous (McCarthy 1984a).

In addition to its religious and inclusive nature, one of the great appeals of the Emmanuel Movement was its adherence to the pre-analytical methods of suggestive therapies—very popular in 19th century America—with which it "shared some concept of unconscious mental activity, called the 'subconscious' or the 'subliminal'" (Gifford 1997, p. 5). Worcester understood the subconscious—a term he used to differentiate it from Freud's concept of the unconscious—as a "repository of an essentially positive spiritual force" and a way of communicating with the spiritual realm. Thus, positive suggestions directed to the subconscious could materially affect physical health (McCarthy 1984b, p. 97).

With Seventh-day Adventism having a unique perception of human nature and death and a philosophy of health with strong theological premises, including severe restrictions on hypnosis and other approaches to suggestion psychotherapy (Pearson 2013;

Numbers and Schoepflin 2014), the first articles in Adventist periodicals that mentioned the notion of the subliminal involved criticism of the Emmanuel Movement and its perspective seen as spiritualist and mystical, as can be seen below.

> We think sufficient evidence has now been, submitted concerning the theology, the psychology, and the methods of treatment of the Emmanuel Movement to furnish a basis for a verdict concerning it. In view of the testimony of its advocates concerning the principles underlying this movement, and their application to the cure of certain classes of ailments, we have no hesitancy in declaring that in the Emmanuel Movement we have a revival of Oriental philosophy, an exploitation of a spiritualistic psychology, and an application of wrong principles concerning the relation of one human mind to another. In this system, the so-called " God-nature within us " takes the place of the true God, human philosophy is substituted for revealed truth, and men are taught so to submit themselves to the control of another human being as utterly to pervert the divine principle of the freedom of the will and its active use in the control of human conduct. Speaking frankly, we regard the theology as heathenish, the psychology as visionary, and the methods as little better than magical incantations. (Spicer 1909b, p. 5)

Spiritualism, as mentioned in the previous excerpt, is a recurring and predominant theme in the editions analyzed from the period in question. The notion of the subliminal is often associated with spiritism, but also with occult practices, mysticism, telepathy, and "modern necromancy" (Wilcox 1914, p. 7). The great concern with spiritism is that it represents a direct attack on Adventist anthropological and eschatological understanding, in the sense that it defends the existence of the soul after death—contrary to the Adventist belief of death as non-existence, although reversible by resurrection—and the communication of the living with the dead as a satanic deception especially for the time of the end.

Taking into account the challenges posed by the Emmanuel Movement and modern American spiritualism, it can be seen that the Adventist discourse developed two fronts of argumentation during this period, the result of which would be anti-spiritualist. The first argument consisted of treating the notions of subliminal and unconscious as speculative, fanciful, or even unscientific, as Adventist discourse fought the idea that "the subconscious mind has more direct control of our physical processes than the conscious" (Spicer 1909a, p. 4). On the other hand, the second argument consisted of ensuring that spiritist and mediumistic practices could not be considered manifestations of the unconscious or subliminal communications but should be denounced as satanic deceptions, in which evil angels impersonated the dead in order to communicate with the living.

> When messages come through the spirits purporting to be from our loved ones who have passed away, we may know that the claim is a falsehood. The dead are asleep until the resurrection shall awake them. Whence then do the communications come? Some have suggested that they may be produced by mysterious workings in the inquirer's own mind, a manifestation of some function of the subliminal consciousness, as yet not understood. [...] We learn from the Bible that there are superhuman beings inhabiting the spirit world, of which some are bright and holy beings, while others are fallen angels whose pleasure it is to deceive and destroy. The holy angels would never pretend to be what they are not. Only lying spirits could put forth untrue pretensions, and we are therefore forced to the conclusion that the messages received through the agency of a spiritualistic medium, claiming to be from dead men or women, come in reality from fallen angels. (The Real Source of Spirit Messages 1916, p. 792)

Thus, in the period referred to here as the "Proto-Adventist Subliminal Thesis", the subliminal theme made up the anti-spiritualist narrative that the SDA tradition constructed in response to the alleged threats posed by spiritualist beliefs and suggestion therapy practices, such as hypnosis. In this phase of the genesis of the Adventist subliminal thesis, there is not yet the presence of the media-communication phenomenon, but there is the

eschatological-conspiratorial perception of the subliminal as part of the plan of satanic deception at the time of the end, an important premise for the consolidation of the Adventist subliminal thesis in the following periods. It would be with the first wave of the subliminal thesis—in the wake of the rise of television as a means of mass communication and the influence of the "Vicary Effect"—that the discourse on the subliminal would exchange the "deception" of mediumistic activities for the "manipulative power" of the mass media as one of the great threats to the denomination.

4.4. Adventist Subliminal Thesis' First Wave (1950s to 1960s): Subliminal Messages as Anti-Media Discourse

By the 1950s, television had become the most influential mass medium in America, but it did not find life easy on the evangelical scene. In the early years of TV, because few Americans owned a television set at home, many frequented "demonized" places like bars and taverns to watch talk shows and other televised attractions, making TV spaces very "close" to the dance hall, bar, and brothel (Bendroth 1996). Over the years, the situation became even more unfavorable due to the presence of tobacco and alcohol advertisements and the growing popularity of stars and celebrities, associating TV with "worldliness".

Faced with this situation, Adventists' relationships' with TV was ambiguous, with members and leaders reacting with a mixture of resistance and enthusiasm, in which they alternated positions of demonization—the association of TV with "worldliness"—and sacralization—the evangelistic use of TV. In the 1940s, pioneering initiatives in religious television programming indicated that television was seen as a unique opportunity for evangelism, even if it faced a certain amount of suspicion (Fenn 1960). With its popularization in the 1950s, TV became an object of concern and criticism until it was demonized in the 1960s and 1970s (Fenn 1960; Strayer 1993). Curiously, at the same time as the demonization of television was being consolidated in Adventist discourse in these decades, the Church's worldwide administration was investing massively in new radio and television studios that could improve the resources of already consolidated religious programs, such as *Voice of Prophecy*, *Faith for Today* and *It is Written* (Strayer 1993).

Adventist discourse in this first wave is characterized by comparing the media, and especially television, with activities such as hypnosis, brainwashing, and the use of narcotics. The first publications from this perspective, in 1951 and 1956, although they do not explicitly mention the word "subliminal", develop an anti-media bias and a belief in the satanic-manipulative power of the media.

Motion Pictures and Television, published by the Missionary Volunteer Department of the General Conference of the SDA Church in 1951, was actually the dissemination in pamphlet form of a revised ecclesiastical statement of principles and standards for the church's choice of films and television presentations. The original statement was formulated and voted on at the denomination's World Assembly Autumn Council in 1935. In 1951, the statement was revised at another world council, largely prompted by the inclusion of guidelines that also covered television media, not just movies. In the same year that the declaration was revised, the committee involved authorized the publication of this document by the organization's youth department, which was at the time called the "Missionary Volunteer Department".

The 1935 vow had been published in the Adventist magazine *Youth's Instructor*, but the 1951 publication was much more expressive and intended to be distributed in churches throughout the United States and possibly in English-speaking countries. Given its reach, the aim of the *Motion Pictures and Television* pamphlet was "the guidance of young and old in the selection of telecasts and motion pictures to be shown to Adventist groups (Motion Pictures and Television 1951, p. 2). Behind the establishment of guidelines for the consumption of film and television products was the concern of the organization's worldwide leadership to ensure more "quality" in the showing of films and TV programs in Adventist environments and places, such as educational institutions, for example.

In 1956, the same year as Vicary's social experiments, another pamphlet was published by the General Conference of the SDA Church, entitled *What about television?* After a request was voted on during the organization's World Council. Thus, in less than two months after the council, the material was finalized and published, based on the 1951 pamphlet *Motion Pictures and Television*. The booklet was divided into three parts: (1) an explanation of television, entitled "The problem", which in turn is divided into four more topics, one of which focuses on exploring the hypnotizing power of television; (2) a list of acceptable television productions; and (3) a list of unacceptable television productions.

There are implicit and explicit references to Vickery's social experiments and Packard's book in the publications analyzed. In the 1958 article "The Spell of Unawareness", in the *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald*, the supposed increase in sales of popcorn in cinemas is described, although Vicary is not mentioned by name. In the article "The Soft Sell of Liquor Advertising", in *Listen* magazine, published in 1962, the title of Packard's book—*The Hidden Persuaders*—is used to describe the dangers of the "subliminal approach in reaching the impressionable minds of America's young people" (Roper 1962, p. 6).

Whatever the background—religion, health, or some pulsating social problem at the time—Adventist discourse presented the *media* in demonizing language. The media is considered a "satanic device" (Cotton 1958, p. 14) and its subliminal messages as "mind conditioning", "sleep teaching", and "brainwashing" techniques, alluding to the imagery and vocabulary of the Cold War universe (Emmerson 1959, p. 2). Television, in particular, is a tool of mind control and, for this reason, spiritually harmful. It was during this period that the Adventist understanding of the media began to take shape through the lens of the metanarrative of the Great Controversy.

> We stock our pantry shelves with products seen on commercials, and insidiously, though unwittingly, much of what appears in terms of films, entertainment, and public service programming subliminally makes its way into the cornered areas of our thinking and influences more than we wish to admit. [...] We are in a battle for men's minds. No media have so dominated and persuaded the thinking of the world community as have television and radio. (Iverson 1965, p. 1)

4.5. Adventist Subliminal Thesis' Second Wave (1970s to 1990s): Subliminal Message as Religious Conspiracy Theory

Of the three periods proposed in this article, the third is the one with the largest number of publications and the most blunt, demonizing, and speculative language on the subject of the subliminal. In this phase, the logic intensifies that the sense of urgency of the belief in the imminent return of Jesus to Earth, within the perspective of the Great Controversy, is what determines and directs the way Seventh-day Adventism understands and uses the media. For Adventist authors, there is a battle being waged for people's minds, in which Satan "works with vicious subtlety to lure and destroy the faith of God's followers" (Scragg 1972, p. 130).

According to this logic, the devil seeks to prevent Adventists from fulfilling the divine task of preaching the gospel, so it is necessary to recognize what Satan's strategies are for deceiving "God's people". Hegstad (1974, p. 30) argues that "there is nothing the prince of evil fears more than that we shall become acquainted with his techniques", so "it is our obligation to discover them". And among the devil's strategies and methods of deception, the media and its manipulative-subliminal power stand out since Adventist understanding involves the belief that Satan "uses inventions of man—television, radio, drugs—inventions that could be a great blessing to mankind and exploits their potential for evil" (Hegstad 1974, p. 29).

The Adventist subliminal thesis and its conspiratorial rhetoric are confirmed in the publications analyzed through the presence of four elements: (1) implicit and explicit references to the main exponents of the subliminal thesis of the first and second waves in the English-speaking context, i.e., Vickary, Packard, McLuhan, and Key; (2) demonizing and speculative language about the *media* and the anthropological-communicational conception

of the "mass-man"; (3) adherence to the phenomena of moral panic as evidence of a satanic-media conspiracy, and (4) an attitude of blocking and/or abstaining from media consumption as a solution to the problem of the media's manipulative power.

References to exponents of subliminal discourse can be found in various periodicals and books. The book *The Media, the Message, and Man*, released in 1972 by Walter Scragg, is a case in point. Not only is there an obvious mention in the title of the Adventist work of McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message", which had been published in his seminal book five years earlier, but the Canadian communication theorist is also quoted several times throughout Scragg's work. More than just mentioned, McLuhan's ideas, when presented, are the basis for belief in the subliminal (Sheehy 1982; Wheeler 1993).

> You see, television viewing is passive, not active. At least with print and ra-
> dio, the mind translates abstract words into its own visual imagery. Whereas,
> as McLuhan warned us, TV fires imagery full-blown into the brains of those
> watching. (Wheeler 1993, p. 43)

It is important to note that the introduction to the book *Mind Manipulators* of 1974 mentions that one of the works on which the Adventist author was based was *The Hidden Persuaders* by Packard, which offered "penetrating insights into procedures used by advertisers to control purchases by exploiting hidden motivations" (Hegstad 1974, p. 6). In the article "Subliminal seduction", in the *Southwestern Union Record* magazine of September 1976, the title of Key's book is used to justify encouraging subscriptions to the Adventist magazine *Review and Herald*.

> "Subliminal Seduction"—the words leaped up from the book in front of me.
> Astoundingly the book reveals that "hidden" advertising bombards us all daily
> from television and magazines. Incredibly, hidden messages and symbols which
> we never consciously see are programming people, including Adventists, to
> immoral thoughts and actions. When pointed out these symbols can be seen.
> They are unbelievably gross—and they do cause people to sin. Be careful with
> your eyes. Satan will use them to program you right out of your Christian
> experience. Take them off Satan's sights and put them on nature, the Bible, the
> Spirit of Prophecy, and our wonderful church magazines and let God program
> your mind. It is time now to renew your subscription to the wonderful REVIEW
> and HERALD. Its messages are ordained of the Lord and will program you
> toward God's kingdom. The cost is only $15.95 for a year—just a little over 4c a
> day. Don't take a risk. Be sure you are looking at the right things. (Subliminal
> Seduction 1976, p. 18)

These references suggest that the ideas of exponents of the subliminal-media phenomenon—Packard, McLuhan, and Key—may have been the foundations for the consolidation of the Adventist subliminal thesis.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the most significant examples of the use of conspiratorial and anti-media rhetoric occur in the following publications: *Mind Manipulators*, already mentioned; *Televiolence*, from 1978, by H. M. S. Richards Jr; *Television and the Christian Home*, from 1979, by Marvin Moore; and in the articles "Man and the Movies", from 1980, by Daniel Sheehy, in the *Australasian Record* magazine, and news from various periodicals about Correa Ministries, which will be explained further below. All the publications mentioned were released after the *Subliminal Seduction* phenomenon, with *Mind Manipulators* being published only a year after the Key book.

In Mind *Manipulators*, Hegstad (1974, p. 5)states that "without our consent, and in most cases without even our knowledge, our minds are being invaded and changed". He continues: "many thoughts and actions that we assume are spontaneous and uniquely our own are instead responses to information programmed into our subconscious" (Hegstad 1974, p. 5). One of the aims of the book is to make the reader aware of "how techniques of brainwashing are being used by advertisers, politicians, and the public media", and to know a roadmap

that "will protect the mind from manipulation" and "find security against unseen forces seeking to destroy your mind" (Hegstad 1974, p. 7).

In Adventist discourse, advertisers, among communicators, are the target of much criticism for their fear of subliminal advertising and its devices for inducing habits and behavior.

> They [advertisers] know that you don't spend more than few seconds looking at each ad, and that's all it takes for the images to register on your subconscious. Advertisers often use what are known as subliminal techniques. Subliminal simply means "unconscious". Very powerful imagery, usually sexual, embedded in the ads will affect you immediately on an unconscious level but won't be perceived consciously. (Bain 1974, p. 5)

Given this logic, the subliminal thesis gains traction as the elements of conspiratorial rhetoric materialize: Satan, evil angels, the media, and communication and entertainment professionals would be the conspirators; mind control through media content, the secret plan; and Adventists, possessing the knowledge to which few would have access, would be the ones who reveal the machinations, as can be seen in two quotes below.

> For thousands of years, he [Lucifer] has been experimenting on the human mind, and he has learned well how to manipulate it. Using methods of which Science is just becoming aware, he seeks to distort our sense of reality, destroy our sense of values, diminish our sense of urgency, and, ultimately, to destroy the image of God in humanity. (Hegstad 1974, p. 29)

> The witness of Scripture, the evidence of science, the testimony of our senses, all support this conclusion: everything that crosses the threshold of our conscious mind—radio, television, movies, advertisements—changes us. Thoughts and actions we assume to be our own are instead responses to information programmed into our subconscious. (Hegstad 1974, p. 28)

For this reason, in the spaces dedicated to news in Adventist periodicals, there are many mentions of sermons and lectures at religious events that promise to unveil the diabolical secrets and stratagems behind the media. This type of information is particularly frequent in publications from the early 1980s, when the first years of the Satanic Panic took shape in the North American context (Laycock 2015; Guldner 2023). The Satanic Panic—or Satanism Scare—was a type of postwar American moral panic that reacted to the alleged growth of Satanism in America, configuring, at the same time, a cult-scare response and fundamentalist moral protest movement against perceived threats to traditional family and Christian conservative values (Bromley 1991; Victor 1994).

From this perspective, two distinct narratives emerged in an attempt to articulate these public fears and anxieties: Satanic ritual abuse and Satanic pop culture's corrupting influence over teen life (Guldner 2023, p. 118). The discourse of the Satanic Panic movement was essentially conspiratorial, as it defended the existence of an international religious conspiracy in which Satanists, like cult leaders, operated at all levels of society, performing bizarre rituals, conducting human sacrifices, and working to undermine traditional morality and Christian values (Bromley 1991; Laycock 2015; Guldner 2023). They were believed to use a variety of techniques to corrupt, one of the main ones being subliminal messages.

This scenario produced a series of sensationalist criticisms of three types of pop culture products—games, films, and music (Waldron 2005; Stephens 2018). All three had in common the subliminal element as an articulator of conspiratorial discourse, but it was the last one that received the most attention in the Adventist literature analyzed. The fusion between the belief in subliminal messages and the anti-rock Christian crusade resulted in the "exposure" of one of the most "cunning" strategies of the satanic conspiracy: backward masking, or simply *backmasking,* which consisted of hidden messages on LPs, which could be heard when someone played their records in reverse (Vokey and Read 1985; Brackett 2018). For many evangelists, preachers and pastors, the discovery of subliminal satanic messages has become the topic of sermons, seminars, books and campaigns (Stephens 2018).

Seventh-day Adventism was no different, as recorded in the 1982 *Lake Union Herald*, which announced a Youth Rally in the state of Michigan, with the presentation of a "multimedia program on subliminal messages in rock music" (Youth Rally for District 8 to Be Held April 30 1982, p. 5). The most notorious example; however, is news of seminars held by the Correa Ministry, an Adventist couple that held religious programs on subliminal messages in music. In June 1982, the couple presented the seminar "Destination: Heaven", whose objective was to make members "to be aware of the attacks of Satan utilizing the modern media to control our minds" (Shreveport First Alerted to Rock Music Dangers 1982, p. 12f).

> Specifically, according to the Correas, mind manipulation, use of subliminal perception by the television industry, video game rooms, so-called Jesus Rock, climaxing in the modern rock scene, and backward masking make very clear the truth of the statement that "Satan goes about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour." (Holbrook 1983, p. 12)

In the events portrayed in the news, it is possible to recover the programming script and the logic of the content followed by Correa, which gives us an idea of how the subliminal conspiratorial narrative was developed.

> On 19 June 1982, the First Seventh-day Adventist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana, presented "Destination: Heaven," in which Joseph Correa revealed the influence of various contemporary rock groups. In their effort to increase a strong Christian relationship with the Lord and how the First Seventh-day Adventist Church in Shreveport sponsored the presentation, "Destination: Heaven", by Joseph and Lindy Correa. The first part, presented at the 11:00 o'clock service, covered such topics as: Who created music, the purpose of music, what is "good" music, how the gift of music has been perverted, and how to glorify God with music. The second part of the presentation was continued in the evening at which time the Correas showed why our contemporary music is so appealing; how music is helping Christians to become lukewarm; how backward masking is being used to program people without their knowing it; and positive steps can be taken to develop a strong Christian mind. (Shreveport First Alerted to Rock Music Dangers 1982, p. 12f)

However, the news highlight often consisted of the revelation of subliminal messages and backmasking, in which Adventist literature emphasizes the conspirators—Satan and the recording industry—, exposure of the demonic plan of mind control, and their endeavor to maintain secrecy through backmasking, uniting all the basic elements of conspiratorial rhetoric (Byford 2011, p. 71).

> Delegates and sponsors alike were surprised and sobered by Lindy's [Correa] presentation of the double meanings found in many symbols current today such as stars, eyes, pyramids, scarab beetles, and alphabets. Surprise grew as some of their "favorite" popular songs were played; first, forward slow enough to hear the words which, of themselves, were disgusting or embarrassing, then backward to pick up the subliminal messages that the Correas believe Satan has dictated for our subconscious minds. Among those played were "Number 9" by the Beatles, "Bridge Over Troubled Water," "Another One Bites the Dust," and many others. The hidden messages included "turn me on", "smoke marijuana," and "my sweet Satan." (Holbrook 1983, p. 12)

> One of the demonstrations that really makes the audiences take a step and dedicate their lives to the glory of God is when they show how backward masking is affecting our minds. "Stairway to Heaven," a very popular song produced by Led Zepplin and played in the radio stations all over the nation, starts with an innocent string guitar picking, then a soft flute and a mellow voice explaining that "Sometimes words have two meanings." One segment says, "Dear lady, can you hear the wind blow and did you know your stairway lies on the whispering

wind?" In reverse this explains that "I will sing because I live with Satan." Earlier the song reads, "Yes, there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run there's still time to change the road you're on, and it makes you wonder." Playing the record in reverse this says, "There's no escaping it. Yes, my sweet Satan. The one will be the sad one who makes me sad whose power is Satan." (Correa's Ministry Reaches Out to the Lost 1982, 12f)

The somewhat fanciful belief in *backmasking* and its ability to manipulate behavior and inculcate values through the unconscious is possible, among other reasons, because of the anthropological-communicational perspective adopted by Adventist discourse, which is close to the concept of the "mass-man" as employed by Aldous Huxley in *The Brave New World* and by José Ortega y Gasset in *The Revolt of Masses*—both published in the 1920s. This term involves the idea of an "average man" who is characterized by a loss of individuality and critical-reflective capacity, as well as a condition of extreme vulnerability to the conditioning power of the media, as can be seen in the following example.

> It [the television] can make you an addict just as surely the narcotics can make you and addict. It can so hypnotize you that you no longer have power to turn it off. Some of you may have already experienced its power. You sit down in front of it to watch the six-o'clock news. Then, comes the football game or some Monday night movie of the week, and after that the late show, then the late, late show. Finally, in the small hours of the morning you wearily get up from your chair. You have a headache. You feel drugged. In a sense you are. You have let your television become your master. (Richards 1978, p. 23)

The definitions of "mass-man" and "mass culture", which serve as epistemic presuppositions in Adventist discourse, evolve into a vocabulary that refers to a post-apocalyptic scenario typical of science fiction literature: media and subliminal messages can turn people into "zombies" (Melashenko and Crosby 1993, p. 61). Again, the reason is mental manipulation, the conviction that, as the Adventist authors of *The Television Time Bomb* say, "when you sit down in front of your TV set, you are not merely being entertained. You are being brainwashed and reprogrammed" (Melashenko and Crosby 1993, p. 58). It is believed that through the subliminal action of the media, the individual's identity and character change, and behaviors that were considered sinful are attributed to the media's ability to drive actions and shape thoughts. Curiously, in this period there is a significant change from the first phase where the idea of the subconscious, being more defining of beliefs and habits than the conscious, was considered speculative and unscientific in an effort to disqualify spiritism. Now, however, the subliminal is embraced and defended to justify the conspiratorial-eschatological discourse of the manipulative power of the media.

It can also be seen that adherence to belief in the subliminal is justified by the use of religious quotes, which are often presented as evidence of the mass media's conspiracy and the need to abstain from non-religious media content. Two of the most recurrent are: "by beholding we become changed", by Ellen G. White (Scragg 1973, pp. 13, 17; Hegstad 1974, p. 31; Melashenko and Crosby 1993, p. 44; Wheeler 1993, p. 68); and the biblical text of Philippians 4:8—"whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest [...] if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Richards 1978, p. 32; Holbrook 1983, p. 12; Invasion from Space 1983, p. 11).

This whole scenario justifies the main measures that should be adopted by Adventist believers against subliminal messages: blocking and abstention. In the words of Moore (1979, p. 25), in *Television and Christian Home*: "turning off the TV is not a straight path to sanctification. But it helps." The reaction to subliminal conspiracy is not only to expose the intrigue, as is usually the aim of conspiracy theorists, but especially to abstain from media consumption as a decision with soteriological and eschatological implications. After all, it is believed that "the battle for the soul is really the battle for the mind" (Hegstad 1974, p. 17).

Paradoxically, while it is recognized that the media is one of those responsible for bringing society to this state of evil that points to the end times, Adventist believers are invited not only to fight for the end of the media system, but to keep it "holy" by producing religious media content.

> We need the power of the mass media to help overcome error. How easy to condemn the media as devil-ridden, evil orifices of seduction, yet they are one of God's ways of finishing the church's mission. (Scragg 1972, p. 134)

This pendulum perspective, which alternates between demonization and sacralization, besides being one of the features of the Adventism-media relationship, is also a way of exposing the subliminal conspiracy. Because of their power of reach and persuasive nature, television and other mass media are considered technologies for evangelization, even if they are used by the devil and his agents in an "inappropriate" way. Therefore, the battle between Christ and Satan for the man's mind takes place with the same weapons for both sides: while criticizing the unholy use of the media, Adventist believers need to appropriate these communication technologies to spread the gospel, "hastening" the return of Jesus.

5. Final Considerations

Taking Acland's (2012) concept of "subliminal thesis" as a starting point, which consists of a way of thinking that believes in the manipulative power of the media and argues that its subliminal messages have more impact and effect than its overt and explicit ones, and taking into account that the modus operandi of the subliminal thesis operates through the logic of conspiracy theories, this article proposed the existence of an Adventist subliminal thesis with its own premises and characteristics. This proposition is based on an analysis of official publications of the SDA Church in English, including denominational books on the subject of the media universe and magazines and periodicals with news and articles dealing with subliminal messages between the 1900s and 1990s.

The literature investigated showed that, over the years, the term subliminal and its variations have been articulated in discourses with three predominant emphases, namely anti-spiritualist discourse, anti-media discourse, and conspiratorial discourse. Given this scenario, a periodization of the Adventist subliminal thesis into three phases was proposed: (1) Proto-Adventist Subliminal Thesis, from 1900s to 1940s; (2) Adventist Subliminal Thesis' First Wave, from 1950s to 1960s; and (3) Adventist Subliminal Thesis' Second Wave, from 1970s to 1990s.

The first period proposed in this article—Proto-Adventist Subliminal Thesis (1900s–1940s)—points to a time before the formation of the subliminal thesis in the 1950s, in which the notion of the subliminal made up the anti-spiritualist narrative that the Seventh-day Adventist tradition constructed in response to perceived threats from spiritist beliefs and suggestion therapy practices, such as hypnosis. At this stage, there are no media-communication approaches to subliminal messages, but there are eschatological-conspiratorial perceptions of spiritism as a form of satanic deception for the time of the end.

In the Adventist Subliminal Thesis' First Wave (1950s–1960s), the emphasis on perceived spiritualist threats was replaced by the danger of media manipulation as a new conspiratorial plot. In this phase, the rise of television as a means of mass communication and the influence of the studies of Marshall McLuhan and Vance Packard, as well as the social experiments of James Vicary, would lead the discourse on the subliminal to be characterized by comparing the media, especially television, to hypnosis, brainwashing, and the use of narcotics.

In the last period, Adventist Subliminal Thesis' Second Wave (1970s–1990s), Adventist discourse emphasizes that among the devil's strategies and methods of deception, the media and its subliminal messages stand out. With satanic panic and backward masking, conspiratorial rhetoric reaches its peak. This attitude includes unique responses to the narrative elements of the rhetorical conspiracy tradition (group of conspirators, conspiratorial plan, and effort towards secrecy). The traditional actors of media conspiracy theories—governments, the entertainment industry, secret societies—are replaced by the

materialized figure of the devil and his human agents. In this way, the conspiracy plan goes beyond the scheming of a secret group of people, actually revealing itself as a cosmic plot between good and evil, in which the media is the main instrument.

As we have seen, it is possible to verify in the Adventist literature on media analyzed in this article that direct or indirect mentions of concepts, assumptions, and approaches linked to the Magic Bullet Theory (and the concept of mass society that underpins it), to authors of the subliminal in the 1950s, such as McLuhan, Packard, and Key, and to the rhetoric of satanic panic in the 1980s predominate. The notion of the individual as a helpless, inert, and passive being—the "mass-man"—in the face of the subliminal messages of the media, typical of American communication studies, was the perspective mostly adopted until the early 1990s. Thus, for the Adventist literature analyzed here, the subconscious dimension of the human mind is much more powerful and influential in the process of building identity and exercising people's will than the conscious one.

The subliminal discourse cannot be dissociated from the conspiratorial approach and depends on it to operate, especially through re-readings of the Great Controversy narrative in an attempt to make sense of the massive power of the media in contemporary life. Therefore, it is possible to discern from the logic and discourse present in the literature analyzed the presence of an Adventist subliminal thesis. It consists of a way of thinking that considers: (1) the human being as a "mass-man" and culture as "mass culture", uncritical, superficial, and helpless; (2) the media as having the power to manipulate and control the mind, so that its implicit and implied messages have more impact and effect than the explicit and manifest ones; (3) the adherence to moral panic phenomena—especially satanic panic—as reactions to media threats to traditional Christian and family values; and (4) the cosmic narrative of the Great Controversy as a philosophical-theological lens for understanding media messages and products as part of a satanic conspiracy, even though the use of the media for evangelistic purposes is ambiguously defended.

The modus operandi of the Adventist subliminal thesis consists of a profusion of conspiratorial narratives and moral–religious denunciations that seek abstinence and blocking of the media as a solution to the threats of brainwashing and spiritual danger, reinforcing and re-signifying the narrative of the Great Controversy in the face of the "omnipresence" and "sovereignty" of technology in contemporary society. In this sense, in Adventist discourse, subliminal messages are a symbol of satanic strategies to win the battle between good and evil and of conspiratorial accounts constructed to be a form of propaganda for the metanarrative of the Great Controversy—after all, "a battle wages for the minds and bodies of the mankind" (Scragg 1972, p. 31).

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