

Witold Kawecki

**The Institute of Dialogue of Culture and Religion
Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego**

“To See the Invisible” in the Contemporary Visual Culture

Widzieć niewidzialne we współczesnej kulturze wizualnej

ABSTRACT:

Christianity is a religion in which the apology of visibility take place, especially through art. Article attempts to answer the questions: What should be the art, that leads to God. Article also justifies art as a communication dimension of faith. Assumes that in visual arts theology becomes embodied because it is embedded in what is material.

Art in this approach, becomes a partner of theology in appealing to the value of beauty to the constantly sought-after transcendence.

KEYWORDS:

Faith, visual arts, communication faith

STRESZCZENIE:

Chrześcijaństwo jest religią w której dokonuje się apologia widzialności zwłaszcza poprzez sztukę. Artykuł usiłuje odpowiedzieć na pytanie jaka powinna być sztuka, która prowadzi do Boga. Uzasadnia także sztukę jako komunikacyjny wymiar wiary. Przyjmuje założenie że w sztukach wizualnych teologia staje się ucieleśnioną, bo osadzoną w tym, co materialne. Sztuka w takim ujęciu staje się partnerką teologii w odwoływaniu się do wartości, piękna, do nieustannie poszukiwanej transcendencji.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

wiara, sztuki wizualne, komunikacja wiary

1. INTRODUCTION

In human life and for one's religiousness, the image is an extremely important issue. In *Spirit of the Liturgy*, Joseph Ratzinger notes that “lack of images does not converge with believing in God's incarnation. Iconoclasm is not a Christian option”.¹ Historically, the approach to images has varied. Images used to be terrifying, especially for theologians who argued that they showed more than the mystery allowed. The more popular images got, the more criticized they were. In the

¹ J. Ratzinger, *Duch liturgii*, Poznań 2002, p. 57.

original period of the Church there were no images but two, though of extreme importance: the Shroud of Turin and the burial cloth from Jesus' tomb. We must not forget that these images are very specific since they belong to a quite different category of *acheiropoieta*: "icons created without hands". The images include an element of narrative, although they are not stories. But images are comprehensible only when they are recognized from the perspective of writing. Images show a human milieu enveloped in the social world. Today, visual images are replacing words to become the prevailing form of expression, which is a kind of return to the origins, when words evolved from images (in fact the pictographic writing was first). Thus, we have to do with a situation of words being pushed out by images. These are the sources of the popularity of visual culture. W. T. J. Mitchell says that images are a kind of forms of life, driven by wishes and desires.² Therefore, images live their own lives, charm, and sometimes mislead. Mass media have given images omnipotent powers which enabled them to do anything – which is the reason why they are either blamed or praised.

On the other hand, it is hard to argue with the slogan saying that a "human is a being that can see" and because of this sense (vision) people organize their world. Seeing is a natural and permanent aspect of human activity and it must have its cultural implications because we have continuously been learning to see and to come to an instant conclusion, we can say that we can see what we know. It might seem paradoxical – what Mitchell who coined the "pictorial turn" term has already written about – that seeing is invisible, that we cannot "see what seeing means", therefore we must make it show itself.³ Among many functions that visual culture has is to show the seeing, as Mitchell argues. One should note that the ways of seeing practically make a functional oneness and one should study it with this perspective in mind. Studying the visual, an image is not treated only as a piece of art, but as a socio-cultural fact. Actually, there does not seem to be anything like an autonomous or independent image – what is there is a visual field, i.e. a dynamic space of relationships between a human being, an image and some reality, for which the category of looking is fundamental. For Nicholas Mirzoeff visual culture means *intervisuality*, a simultaneous performance and interaction

² W.J.T. Mitchell, *Czego chcą obrazy*, Warszawa 2013, p. 44.

³ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Pokazując widzenie: Krytyka kultury wizualnej*, in: *Artium Questiones XVII*, Poznań 2006, p. 274.

of different types of visuality.⁴ It is a demonstration of a political dimension of what we are doing.⁵ It uses a “visual subject”, i.e. a person whose role is to be both an eye-sight carrier (independently of their biological ability to see), as well as a result of some series of different categories of visual subjectivity, which one could put down as a slogan going as follows: “I am seen and I can see that I am seen.”⁶ Visual culture should be construed in the anthropocentric sense since the human creates images and finds them as meaningful entities in the context of the external reality. Visual culture extends the scope of studies pushing it beyond the territories traditionally understood as the realm of art and includes studies on everyday ways of looking and showing, that is the sphere of our everyday reality which we have access to on daily basis. Visual culture or image culture should not be understood as a stationary phenomenon but a dynamic one, as a continuous process of constructing an iconic environment whose main function is to enable the symbol-based communication in its broad sense. Visual culture is a metaphor of the modern reality defining the visual dimension of human activities, it is the entirety of visual processes that are going on in the society. Also, as some people suggest, it is a history of art following the history of art, it means that everything that we can see through members of a given community, it is a presence of art in the social life that manifests itself in the form of image and its derivatives.⁷ Visual culture can be analyzed from different angles: the esthetic one as the history of art; technological as media studies; anthropological; historical and cultural; sociological; philosophical; critical, focused on analysis and interpretation of specific phenomena of modern art and audiovisual culture; theological – transforming into visual theology.

2. THEOLOGICAL CASE FOR ART AS A LANGUAGE FOR COMMUNICATING FAITH

We are living in a culture that is overwhelmed by images. We are living in a world that is dominated by images. Everything seems to become an icon. Does it mean

⁴ N. Mirzoeff, *Podmiot kultury wizualnej*, w: *Artium Questiones XVII*, Poznań 2006, p. 249

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 252

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 259

⁷ Frąckowiak, M., Rogowski, Ł. (2009). *Badania nad wizualnością w perspektywie multidyscyplinarnej. Kwestionariusz Kultury Wizualnej*, in: *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, Vol. LIII, No. 4.

that we can see well enough? Not necessarily. This surplus of image production is so considerable today that some people say that we actually have to do with the "disappearance of image", because in the context of the overproduction of images, image itself is ceasing to be noticed as such and distinguished from what it is not. This is the case especially when this seeing concerns a supernatural being that by its very nature is kept secret and hidden. Nevertheless, we keep asking "Can one define God?" No one has ever seen God, though He transpires over and over again, among other things, in our imagination and sensibilities. Can you see Him, can you see faith? Seeing is an extremely complex human activity which could be described as "a way of being", as a human inborn disposition, seeking relationships, a kind of an everlasting longing. In a sense, seeing seems to be then synonymous with faith or, in other words, faith demands to be imagined, otherwise it is only a pre-faith, a state of longing for the Unexpected. Faith is in need for using representations, otherwise it is unable to communicate anything. Each and every image of God is a realization of how close humans are connected with Him. Without image, faith loses trust and we cease to differentiate it from the "fear of the unknown". Nowadays, we seem to have lost our capacity to be in a relationship with image, we look at images reserved or do it entirely thoughtlessly: we do not expect anything from them, interested only in their esthetic value. This happens because we seem to have lost the ability to appreciate the *religious meaning* in today's images, even more: we do not understand what *the sacred* is. Drawing on research and experience, it seems that we are faced with a threat of distorted perception of *the sacred* in the realm of visual culture, which could be metaphorically described as the "dissipating sacred". This refers to *uniformity*: mixing in components from different levels, the higher ones with the lower, lay with religious, valuable with worthless, bringing them all down to one level of products. This primarily concerns religious content presented in a form that enables reaching out to the audience that would be as numerous as possible. A problem that this creates is making *the sacred* a mass product. It also refers to *conformism* which puts too much stress on the sensual (vision and hearing) way of reception in which imagination and emotions often obscure the intellectual and spiritual values. In this way, the addressee lives mainly by impressions and is constantly seeking them, ideally if they keep growing stronger, without any interest in an integral development of their humanity. It makes them perceive the world in a superficial way, hinders interiorization, disables their capacity to live their own lives as a "redeeming

event”, get on the path of comfort where any ambitious or challenging goals are plainly not existent. What one can find there, however, is an inclination to follow the latest fashion, copying shoddy behaviors, referring to bad-taste role-models. This also refers to a phenomenon of *usurping*. It concerns ascribing oneself attributes which one does not have. In the today’s visual culture, people tend to ascribe themselves the competences of knowing *the sacred*, which entails interpreting it in a false way. It is then that untrue beliefs and opinions about religion and ethics are created. Sometimes this is a consequence of a lack of due diligence in preparing the creative material, though it is not a rare thing that this is a programmed activity, bearing attributes of manipulation. Moreover, it concerns a reductionist approach to *the sacred* being an abridged, one-sided presentation of reality which arises from the ignorance about *the sacred* or religion; It often means reducing religion to an ideology, faking the real essence of its phenomenon.

Despite these difficulties in the appreciation of seeing and image, we do not abandon our efforts to keep learning about them. We will never dispose of our imagination. It is a sphere which calls for being filled up. Therefore, Christianity is a religion where visibility is praised. Wassily Kandinsky once wrote: “(...) the visible finds its expression in the invisible, and art is a path leading to God.”⁸ But does it mean any art? Not the one that construes beauty in the sensual way, that is for sure, only the one that accepts its metaphysical foundation. The one that is not an ordinary, superficial experience but a genuine, deep experience. Superficial experiences reduce everything to themselves, “this is us which is the most important”, whereas it is all about the effort of transgressing oneself (since this is what art is all about), breaking through the human condition, i.e. forgetting one’s own “self”. Art is essentially the pinnacle of the cult, refers to the Absolute, but itself it is not a religion, it is not faith but its expression, neither is it a means to redemption.

Thanks to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite Christian iconography gained its theological foundations for visualization. He argued that to speak about the invisible and supernatural reality theology adopts a two-fold approach: positive and negative. In the case of the positive one, it uses analogies and symbolic images, whereas for the negative one – negations, which undermine the similarities, analogies and symbols making them relative which leads to a conclusion that the Divine reality is absolutely separated from the world of the visible, entirely different

⁸ W. Kandinsky, *O duchowości w sztuce*, trans. S. Fijałkowski, Łódź 1996, p. 111.

from what we are able to imagine or express. In his opinion, one can learn about God through a silent initiation into an unuttered and inexpressible Mystery which our minds recognize as darkness or the unknown. The pinnacle of learning is a mystical experience, which can be achieved through clearing your senses and mind. On the way to the mystical experience, one needs the intermediation of symbolic images which need to be left behind only at the very last stage of the process. All these can be divided into two groups: similar and non-similar ones. The first ones include God's Names like: Word, Intellect, Substance, Light, Invisible, Infinite, Unfathomable, etc. , which do not define what God is but what God is not. The diversity of the symbols which are not similar to one another makes us rise over the things they conspicuously represent to seek their implicit truth (hidden like behind a curtain, *sub integumentum*) that is beyond senses, leading to clearing our senses.⁹ The Pseudo-Dionysius's doctrine was used by Christian theologians to theologically justify the idea that symbolic images have a character of revelations, they are meant to present the hidden truth about the invisible reality, and even they radiate energy which for the ones looking for the Divine truth and sanctity can be helpful on their way to contemplation.

To find a justification for art as a communicative dimension of faith one should refer to the incarnation of Jesus Christ in whom the invisible presence of God became "visible" for people. He became an image (eikon) of the Invisible God (Col 1:15). The Word has become an icon, inspiring the entire Tradition and the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, to express evangelic truth through images and deal with visual theology, i.e. not only the one that uses images for their esthetic or didactic values (*Biblia pauperum*) but also the one which explores the secretive aspects of reality of a person and of their ability to find God. Finding God in matter (by a symbol/sign/image) the faithful can appreciate a new dignity of every material thing – be it visual art, architecture, theater, dance, gestures, performance – able to show them the way to the spiritual, eschatological world, and as a result, to experience faith. Going into raptures over sacred art can help people free themselves from the banalization of the popular visual culture saturated with violence, arrogance, commercialism, loud advertizing and even devastating pornography. In the history of Christian art, which is as long as Christianity itself,

⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pisma teologiczne, Hierarchia Niebiańska* II, 3, 1999, p. 235.

a material sign and the spiritual reality have mingled together, expressing themselves in many ways. From the beginning of the Church, along with the naturalism of the Hellenic and Roman art, a symbolic visual language has evolved, with its aim being to show the spiritual reality, including a mystic image, through forms, colors, sometimes abstract configurations, anatomy studies and linear perspective. This symbolic language (with a fish symbolizing Christ, an anchor – the hope for the eternal life, a lamb – redemption, etc.) developed in the 3rd century when due to the persecution of Christians, the communication of the truths of the faith had to be secured in a special way. This symbolism was especially exploited in the funeral iconography where pagan symbols were ascribed Christian meanings. In this way, image becomes another asset in the Christian toolbox used for communicating the Truth. The catechism of the Catholic Church stresses that apart from the means of social communication there are also beauty and sacred art that bear witness to the truth: “Art is essentially a human means of expression. Apart from pursuing to meet the basic needs of life, it is an opulent source of inner riches of man. A product of God-given talent and man’s effort, art is a form of practical wisdom combining knowledge and skill to express the truth about the reality in a language comprehensible for the eye-sight and hearing.”¹⁰

Image construed as a language of communication can express the genuine human nature and therefore it is an *instrument of Gospel*. More, as John Paul II noted: “(...) along with Gospel, art got into history.”¹¹ The way Jesus foretells future events, later referred to in the Gospels, is based on drawing pictures (parables) is such that – especially today – we are more likely to *see* him rather than hear. It seems that the modern culture expects theology to offer something that one could call a “visible speech”. Is that possible, however, to “see faith”? If we use the principle of homogeneity (uniform applicability) of the word and image, then the answer to this question must only be positive. According to this principle communicating messages, words and images play the same role of intermediaries becoming signs or symbols. In theology words and images are forms of intermediation in communicating the truth (revelation) or life (grace). Remaining there

¹⁰ Katechizm Kościoła Katolickiego, No. 2501, Poznań 1994. See: Konferencja Episkopatu Toskanii, Nota pastoralna, *L vita si e fatta visibile* (Feb 23, 1997), in: <http://www.artcurel.it/Artcurel/religione/liturgiaespaziosacroCRO/notapastoral> (Aug 5, 2012).

¹¹ Jan Paweł II, *Przemówienie do uczestników Kongresu o sztuce sakralnej*, Apr 27, 1981, in: „Wiara i kultura”, Rome 1986, p. 115.

between the communicator and the addressee, they possess the same homogeneous function of signifying and their intermediary character allows them to simultaneously participate in the world of the communicator and enter the realm of the recipient, enabling communication. The principle of homogeneity of the word and image is also found applicable in communicating godly life – grace, in a nutshell. With their matter and form, both the word and the sacramental image of an liturgical event, are homogeneous and complementary in the process of communication characteristic of the Church.

3. VISUAL ARTS IN COMMUNICATION FAITH

There is a connection between image, or the visual art in particular, and the Christian faith and the ways the latter one is communicated. In the Christian religious experience we have to do with the accounts made by the faith and image (art). The faith not only utilizes the image but also, based on an artistic experience, it develops, gets supplemented, becomes more transparent and comprehensible through it. And using the image, the artistic experience may not only be an external carrier of the Christian faith but also constitute itself as the faith, i.e. as an instance and form of the Christian faith embedded in history. Obviously, this is possible if we have to do with faithful artists who want to express the Invisible and the secrets of the supernatural, even if they do it in the non-religious art, though it seems to be more effective in the sacred art. Both can be specific "*locus theologicus*" meaning a source, however intermediary, of theological interpretation. Artists can lead us to *fides ex visu*, to looking at faith. It is unique since the visual artistic form refers to the human ability to see, on the one hand, and to the individual act of faith and experiencing it, on the other. The very communicating of the Revelation is not done only with words, homiletic statements or dogmatic notions. It is done within the image and through the image. The experience of faith that comes as a result of listening to the Word, can be, at the same time, looking on. Faith is an act that appears through listening to the Word, but also through looking at It. Being audible and thus making its transcendence accessible to humans, the Word made itself visible in the person of Jesus Christ, in whom we have seen God's glory. The faith comes with listening *ex auditu* (Romans 10:17) but also with seeing *ex visu*. Jesus himself could see and hear his Father (John 3:32), therefore he is both *Logos-Word* as well as *Eikon-Image*. Using the image, i.e. visualization, to show God's

Revelation can be treated as another way of “writing” Gospel, in fact, this has been understood that way in the Tradition, especially the eastern one, if painting icons was actually defined as writing icons.

It also seems worth noting that the theology of image can transform into the visual theology, going from what is shown to what is perceived. It will be then a theology of the observer and the light that is necessary to get you from looking to seeing. Obviously the light means the faith which allows to transform onlookers (*spectans*) into the ones who have seen (*videns*). It is the faith that allows to see the sacred where others have stopped at looking on. To succeed in evangelizing by reaching out to the agnostic, often nihilistic, world with the message of the Gospel, one should remodel the concept of looking at both theology and evangelization, restoring theology and its message, especially the language of communication which is often unintelligible for the addressees. Restoring the symbolic language (replacing the overgrowth of the abstract one) is the right direction following which art and theology will be able to meet and enrich each other. However, one should avoid overusing images, which often happens in social media, since it leads to intellectual and spiritual impoverishment. The faith starts with the Word, which softens the heart, but it is listened to for people to open their eyes, to see “(...) they were kept from recognizing him “ (Luke 24:16). One listens in order to learn to see, you see to master the skill of listening. “(...) Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight” (Luke 24:31). If the Word got embodied, *Logos* is *Eikon* at the same time.

Going back to the language of communicating faith in theology, one should note that at some point in history there came to a crack between theology and language, since the Christian discourse, i.e. evangelism and interpretation of the word of God started to use abstract notions, sometimes scholastic, fossilized figures of speech, a kind of jargon which was in principle inaccessible to the uninitiated, whereas there is a need for notions that are familiar for everyone being part of their everyday experience, there is a need for a greater use of a symbolic language, one could say “picture language”, which would facilitate to communicate truths of faith that at times might seem challenging for some people. On the other hand, it is true that the modern human communicates by means of the language of *media*, which is not always compatible with, to put it this way, the Christian language. The language of media is by nature a language of domination, cornering the audience, a language of taming, conquering, controlling and

seducing. The Christian language, on the other hand, is founded on the archetype of the Word incarnate, it is a language of sacrificing oneself for another person, a language of being fascinated with love and beauty. The language of the Son-Logos who sacrifices himself for the community by personal communication and not by entrapping or seizing people that every now and then one can witness in the media. The language of media is manipulative, subjective not to say biased. The Christian language is about preaching the truth about God, the truth must be objective and directed to everyone, especially the poor and abandoned. It seems necessary both in culture and the postmodern thought to enrich the language of theology – with image. Art, especially the one based on images, using symbols as a "theological structure" can really be the way (though obviously not the only one) which will allow to combine the contents of faith with the way of communicating them. John Paul II addresses this issue in his "Letter to Artists", pointing out that the Church needs art "(...) since its role is to make the invisible, spiritual, divine reality become visible and possibly attractive. Therefore, it must apply accessible forms to communicate things that by themselves are unfathomable. The unique characteristic of art lies in its ability to present a given aspect of this message, transforming it into the language of colors, shapes and sounds, which support of the intuitive instincts of a person who is looking on or listening to. The work is done without depraving the message of its transcendent dimension or the aura of a mystery."¹²

4. SEEING MORE IN THE MODERN ART

Can modern visual representations be treated as seeing the invisible? Can the old neo-platonic vision of Pseudo-Dionysus, *per visibilia ad invisibilia* – which at the turn of the 6th century ultimately established the existence of religious art and which in any phenomenon of earthly reality have seen a reflection of some divine light and beauty – be nowadays the interpretation of the world of visualizations? Is it still possible for modern art to transcend and is it able to do so? Does it refer to God, to religious content, to spirituality or is it enclosed in the here and now, the ephemeral, and the analysis of one's own means and experience, not answering the deepest human questions, remaining only a tragic reflection of the

¹² John Paul II, *List do artystów* of Apr 4, 1999, No. 12, Lublin 2006.

emptiness and absurdity of existence. Modern art can transcend even in the lay aura of postmodernism but first two fundamental conditions must be met: There must be sources with an encoded inner theological content (explicit or implicit) and there needs to be an addressee with a religious mindset, i.e. one that seeks to read a piece of art in the spiritual way, to see in there references to the Truth, in a nutshell: one that is ready to climb up the ladder to reach God. Undoubtedly, visual arts are challenging for modern people, even if these are pieces inspired by loneliness, suffering or doubts that accompany the modern human. New media and the entire palette of visual arts are not and cannot be the territory that is reserved for the profane and inaccessible for faith. There we can also find theological places thanks to which one can better understand the history of human seeking God since human experience is not exclusive to sacred places. Dealing with theology through art, not only the religious one, seems to be well justified, and in the visual arts theology becomes incarnate since it is grounded on the material which makes it less unreal. In this respect, art becomes a partner to theology in referring to the values, beauty and the incessantly sought after transcendence.

BIBLIOGRAFIA

- Ratzinger J., *Duch liturgii*, Poznań 2002.
- Mitchell W.J.T., *Czego chcą obrazy*, Warszawa 2013, p.44.
- Mitchell W.J.T., *Pokazując widzenie: Krytyka kultury wizualnej*, in: *Artium Questiones XVII*, Poznań 2006, p. 274
- Mirzoeff N., *Podmiot kultury wizualnej*, w: *Artium Questiones XVII*, Poznań 2006, p. 249
- Frąckowiak M., Rogowski, Ł. (2009). *Badania nad wizualnością w perspektywie multidyscyplinarnej. Kwestionariusz Kultury Wizualnej*, in: *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, Vol. LIII, No. 4.
- Kandinsky W., *O duchowości w sztuce*, trans. S. Fijałkowski, Łódź 1996
- Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pisma teologiczne*, Hierarchia Niebiańska II, 3, 1999.
- Katechizm Kościoła Katolickiego*, Nr 2501, Poznań 1994
- Konferencja Episkopatu Toskanii, *Nota pastoralna, La vita si e fatta visibile* (Feb 23, 1997), w: <http://www.artcurel.it/Artcurel/religione/liturgiaespaziosacroCRO/notapastoral> (Aug 5, 2012)
- Jan Paweł II, *Przemówienie do uczestników Kongresu o sztuce sakralnej*, Apr 27, 1981, w: „Wiara i kultura”, Rome 1986
- Jan Paweł, *List do artystów* of Apr 4, 1999, No. 12, Lublin 2006.

Biogram

Profesor nauk teologicznych w zakresie teologii kultury i dziennikarstwa, kierownik katedry „Dialogu Wiary z Kulturą”, autor kilkudziesięciu książek, współpracownik m.in. Polskiego Radia i Telewizji. Członek międzynarodowej komisji eksperckiej „Prawo do kultury”. Przewodniczący Zespołu Kompetencji Kulturowych Kościoła przy Narodowym Centrum Kultury. Ekspert w zakresie teologii i kulturoznawstwa Polskiej Komisji Akredytacyjnej. Zajmuje się teologią kultury, teologią moralną, teologią piękna, etyką i teologią mediów, kulturą polityczną i katolicką nauką społeczną. Adres e-mail: wkawecki4@gmail.com.