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# Exercising Visual Essay for Post-secular Approach in Studies on Religion

**Abstract**: This article is an attempt to test the form of a visual essay as an alternative to the secularizational discourse on religion. By the secularizational discourse on religion I mean a situation, in which a secular attitude towards religion is coded within an academic statement (referred to as the methodological atheism by Peter Berger). In turn, a visual essay is understood as a form of academic statement, in which words and pictures constitute its equivalent elements and result in the ambiguity of a given statement. This ambiguity engages the reader in an interpretation, which might take into consideration his or her various attitudes towards religion. On account of that, the visual essay concerning the issues of the consecrated life, which I present in the second part of this paper, remains open for interpretation, depending on many character traits of the readers, including their attitude towards religion. To my mind, a visual essay has a post-secular feature as it allows for an interpretation of a religious phenomenon from the viewpoint of the reader's attitude towards religion.

**Key words**: monasticism, religious life, visual methods, visual essay, post-secular

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reflect on a visual essay as a form of scientific communication that allows elaborating a post-secular approach in studies on religion. A visual essay is understood here as a form that merges images and words and treats them both as equal forms of expression. Images and their relationship to

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words construct an ambiguous and text open to interpretation which shifts the very role of a reader from "a receiver" of interpretation proposed by an author to a co-interpreter. I claim that engagement of a reader into a process of interpretation may be linked to a post-secular call for studying religion beyond secularization and seeking for alternative to secularization problematizations of religion.

Within this paper I elaborate upon this link or space of scrutiny of religion established by visual essay form and in the second part I exercise a visual essay in the proposed perspective[2].

## A spectrum of post-secular approaches

A clear and univocal definition of post-secular approach and its distinction from secularization theory is a challenging goal. On the one hand, one may point to authors who undermine a secularization theory by claiming that there is no contradiction between modernity and religion. José Casanova called the link between modernity and secularization a myth[3]. According to him and many other authors the disappearing of religion in selected, Western countries is not taking place. Critics of secularization result in a search for new problematizations of religion that undermine a thesis that modernity leads to vanishing of religion[4]. Different authors show that what is being observed today is not secularization but deprivatization[5], believing without belonging[6] or belonging without believing phenomena[7], or

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[2] The problem I discuss in this paper is developed in the forthcoming edited volume *A Visual Approach towards the Study of religious Orders. Zooming in on Monasteries* (ed. M. Jewdokimow, Thomas Quartier, OSB, Routledge). Transformed parts of this paper will be published in that book. I am thankful to Thomas Quartier, OSB, for developing with me a reflection on this issue. I have elaborated upon the issue of a visual essay as a form of scientific communication in a previous book *Fotoesej. Testownie granic gatunku*, Brygida Pawłowska-Jądrzyk, Marcin Jewdokimow (eds.), Wydawnictwo UKSW, Warszawa 2016. The section "Theory of Visual Essay" in this paper is translated from Polish and partially transformed: M. Jewdokimow, *Fotoesej – próba konceptualizacji i rozpoznania znaczenia*, in: *Fotoesej. Testownie granic gatunku*, Brygida Pawłowska-Jądrzyk, Marcin Jewdokimow (eds.), Wydawnictwo UKSW, Warszawa 2016, pp. 125-136. My visual essay presented in this paper was originally published in that book *Pomiędzy pracą na marginesach a palimpsestem. Próby przepisywania klasztoru*, in: *Fotoesej. Testownie granic gatunku*, B. Pawłowska-Jądrzyk, M. Jewdokimow (eds.), Wydawnictwo UKSW, Warszawa 2016, pp. 81-96. Here I present its transformed version. In this paper I seek to rethink my previous work on visual essay from a post-secular perspective. Hence, I do not treat this paper as a repetition but – because of the change problematic context – as a reworking.

[3] J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago 2012, p. 12.

[4] S. Burdziej, M. Łuczewski, *Przełom postsekularny*, „Stan rzeczy", 2013, no 2(5), p. 8-11.

[5] J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, op. cit., p. 41.

[6] D. Grace, *The Sociology of Religion*, London 2007.

[7] D. Hervieu-Léger, *Religion und Sozialer Zusammenhalt in Europa*, Transit: Europaïsche Revue 26 (Summer 2004): 101–19 after: J. Casanova, *Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective*, p. 14, source: http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/AfterSecularization/8.12CCasanova.pdf

flourishing of spirituality[8], just to mention some of many concepts that compete with secularization theory. Hence, what is observed is rather a decline of institutional religion rather than spiritual engagement of groups and individuals. According to Casanova this very process has a geographical dimension – in the United States increasing institutional differentiation, increasing rationality and increasing individualism, characteristics of European secularizations, does not result in a decline of institutional religion[9]: "Once the exceptional character of European religious developments is recognized, it becomes necessary to search for an explanation not in general processes of modernization but rather in particular European historical developments"[10]. Other scholars uncover conjunction of secularization and liberal discourse[11], [12] or project reinstallation of religion in public sphere[13].

On the other hand, the thesis that secularization theory simply assumes disappearance of religion is untrue, as shown for instance by Katarzyna Zielińska, It rather highlights a weakening of religion's social impact[14].

On another level post-secular approaches are being understood as a change of attitude towards religion. According to Davie Grace belief of amalgamation of the development of modernity and the decline of religion is rooted in the Enlightenment project[15]. Post-secular approaches seek to supersede this assumption and – by doing so – to re-recognize the place of religion in a society. In this perspective, post-secular approaches refer to an epistemological layer of scientific recognition; they call for studying religion beyond secularization, without assuming that religion is to disappear in modern societies and seeking for an alternative to secularization problematizations of religion in modernity.

The work of loosening the connection between modernity and religion is taking place on theoretical and empirical dimensions. Within this paper I would like to discuss this problem referring to a form of scientific communication. I claim that a visual essay may be a form of scientific communication that answers this post-secular call in a specific way – by engaging the reader into interpretation of religion, it allows for constructing space in which one may interpret religion from his/her individual perspective (of a believer or a non-believer).

[8] K. Flanagan, P. C. Jupp, *A sociology of spirituality*, Hamshire, Burlington 2007.

[9] J. Casanova, *Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective*, op. cit., p. 14.

[10] Ibidem.

[11] T. Asad, *Fomations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, California 2003.

[12] M. T. Mjaaland, *Geneatopics*, "Studia Theologica-Nordic Journal of Theology", 2011, no 2(65), p. 172-189.

[13] J. Habermas, *Religion in the public sphere*, "European Journal of Philosophy", 2006, no 1(14), p. 1-25.

[14] K. Zielińska, *Spory wokół teorii sekularyzacji*, Kraków 2009, p. 235.

[15] D. Grace, *The Sociology of Religion*, op. cit.

# Theory of visual essay

A distinguishable feature of visual essay as a form of coping with images is that it treats them not as simple illustrations (the most popular strategy of dealing with images in scholarly work) but as autonomous, an equal-to-word form of expression. Hence, visual essay may be shortly defined as a text that uses both words and images but within which images are not illustrations and words are not subtitles. Images and words merge in terms of narrative and providing of meanings, and mutually enhance in hermeneutic efficacy. Of course, there are more approaches to use images in scholarly expression and empirical researches. Disciplines such as visual sociology, visual anthropology and visual culture provide a set of methods related to the visual: data may be acquired by visual technics such as taking photos but also visible data such as photos or movies (uploaded for instance on Instagram) may be analyzed by the use of different methods (for instance, semiotics).

Luc Pauwels in his attempt to conceptualize visual essay highlights relevant problems related to this form of data and concepts representation: "Though the visual essay as a scholarly format is a 'meeting' of art and science practice, it is still to account to a certain degree for the exigencies (demands, norms and expectations) of the disciplines it is employed for (sociology, anthropology, cultural geography, etc.). This does not imply slavishly emulating the scientific demands imposed on data gathering and data representation, which are largely based on the types of data the social sciences are used to working with (verbal and numeric), since that would largely kill its unique potential, but also doesn't imply a liberation of empirical reference, or methodological or theoretical standards. It is far too easy to simply adopt the attitude that 'anything goes'. The visual essay as a form of scholarly communication would not benefit from such a 'garbage bin' definition. Having said that, the visual essay should certainly not try to shed its avant-garde (and thus almost by nature 'contested') skin or character"[16].

Luc Pauwels highlights that today visual essay varies in terms of the form and meaning ascribed to it: "Today the term 'visual essay' is used for a variety of formats which have moved far beyond paper-based pictures and text combinations, varying in length and breadth from concise articles to book-length contributions, from short clips to full-length films on DVD or on the web, from poster-size constructions to room-filling exhibitions and art installations"[17].

Pauwels stresses that visual essay may be created by the use of different "images or visual representations photographic and non-photographic (drawings,

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[16] L. Pauwels Luc, *Conceptualising the 'Visual Essay' as a Way of Generating and Imparting Sociological Insight: Issues, Formats, Realisations*, „Sociological Research Online", 2012, vol. 17 (1), no. 1, p. 2.

[17] L. Pauwels, *Reframing Visual Social Science. Towards a More Visual Sociology and Anthropology*, Cambridge 2015, p. 140.

paintings, graphics). It can make use of pre-existing images, or images explicitly produced for the purpose"[18]. But the very aim is not to present visual data or simply images but to talk by the use of these images or visual representations. Hence, it is not about description or re-presentation of places, people, things or ideas but about "the complementary interplay between different modes of expression to create a signifying whole that builds on – or even transcends – the expressive capabilities of any one mode on its own"[19]. Another vital feature for this very form is allowing for an explicit personal stance (opinions, impressions, judgments) made by an author.

Let's move now from the side of "writing" visual essay, its construction, to the side of "reading" it. It is obvious that this unique form introduces heuristic challenges: a reader has to construct meanings emerging on the verge of words and images, s/he is invited to interpretation, since transparent, easy, undemanding interpretation s/is not introduced as it is in case of classically understood scientific discourse. Hence, a reader becomes somebody more – a co-interpreter. This very feature has to be understood not only as a heuristic but also ethical one. Since no ultimate interpretation is provided and visual essay is – by its nature – open to diverse interpretations (as images and words/images) then its reader is being empowered.

Hence, in terms of scientific communication a visual essay touches upon some crucial assumptions, taken-for-granted in scientific communication such as communication based on words and numbers which are assumed to be clear and almost self-understandable (in contrast to ambiguous photos), emphasis on clear presentation of data and conclusions which constructs a "writer" as a dominant, interpretation providing figure (in contrast to a reader who has to receive this clear unambiguous interpretation of a "writer", additionally, does not speak for him/her-self but in the name of the findings. One can easily notice a naturalized positivist paradigm in these assumptions which were previously challenged by competitive paradigms such as postmodernism, relativism or feminism to which the visual essay alludes.

Linking visual essay and a post-secular approach, I claim that a visual essay may be understood as a post-secular tool of communicating about religion because it leaves a part of interpretative work on a reader. Readers may represent different social backgrounds which impact on interpretation[20]. I assume that religious and non-religious readers may interpret – to some point – differently what is being presented to them. The problem of impact of religious attitudes on reception of religious activities and artifacts is still to be conducted – this overcomes the goal of my paper, which is only an "exercise", understood as both a theoretical reflection and a practical activity (readers of this paper may confront my thesis with their own reception of my visual essay). Putting readers aside, because interpretation of a visual

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[18] Ibidem, p. 140.

[19] Ibidem, p. 141.

[20] P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Harvard 1984.

essay is partially open one may claim that this very form of sociological expression makes connection between sociology and secularization weaker. And by doing so, visual essay transfers post-secularism into scientific communication on religion.

To the same extent what differs secular and post-secular approaches these are not facts or data on religion but rather their interpretation: in a secular approach data is being studied in order to measure secularization, while in a post-secular approach one seeks to go beyond secularization or simply to leave it aside. Hence, a move towards post-secular may be defined as an epistemological shift. Visual essay and a post-secular approach juxtapose in this very process of epistemological alteration – primary engaging a reader into interpretation and secondary seeking for new interpretations. Hence, what is post-secular about visual essay is simply that it does not impose secularization optics of religion.

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Below I present, transformed, my visual essay (Between working on margins and palimpsest. Attempts of re-writing a monastery[21]). My idea here is to show how scrutiny presented by the use of a visual essay form engages a reader into interpretation, and by doing so establishes a post-secular text or a post-secular space. Basically, the visual essay shows transformations of semiotics of a monastery – broadly speaking, it discusses a place of religion in the public sphere in Poland.

## A Monastery Today

Space and meanings of a monastery are under construction today which juxtaposes with broader shifts of religion in a Polish society. It is also the case of monasteries in Western countries. Isabelle Jonveaux, Enzo Pace and Stefania Palmisano observe that contemporary social interest in monasteries transcends religious context, and monasteries and monasticism are becoming attractive i.e. by their tourist value and products they offer[22].

Today, monasteries interact with the outside world on many levels: economy, culture, and identity processes. Not only monks, and broadly speaking religious actors, impact on monasteries – also local authorities and companies cooperate with them to conduct different socially and economically-oriented activities. Monks

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[21] *Pomiędzy pracą na marginesach a palimpsestem. Próby przepisywania klasztoru*, in: *Fotoesej. Testownie granic gatunku*, B. Pawłowska-Jądrzyk, M. Jewdokimow (eds.), op. cit., pp. 81-96. Here I present its transformed version.

[22] I. Jonveaux, E. Pace, S. Palmisano, *Sociology and Monasticism. Between Innovation and Tradition*, "Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion", 2014, vol. 5, p. XIII.

and nuns present their lives and places in which they live on websites. Old meanings cohabit with new ones creating a new text that one may read. Below I present a set of photos that aim at grasping contemporary transformations of space and meanings of selected Cistercian monasteries in Poland. They touch upon different problems: auto-presentation of monks and presentation of monasteries[23], impact of economy, importance and the presence of patriotism, relationship of monasteries with a broader social world. Photos and texts present findings from field studies conducted since 2012 in selected, Cistercian monasteries in Poland[24]. Interpretation of an author is embedded in the photos' selection and organization of the photos and text. The rest of the interpretation work is on the reader. Photos included here were taken during my field studies or were published on Polish Cistercian websites.

Photo no. 1. Presentation of a monastery on a monastic web-site. The monastery is being presented as a beautiful, distant object.



Source: http://wachock.cystersi.pl

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[23] For more check: M. Jewdokimow, *Prezentacje klasztorów i autoprezentacje mnichów na cysterskich stronach WWW – w stronę sekularyzacji semantycznej?* „Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej", 2017, v. 13, no. 1, pp. 110-126, www.przegladsocjologiijakosciowej.org.

[24] Textual presentation of findings may be found for instance here: M. Jewdokimow, *From the secular to the post-secular. The place of religion in the local public sphere in the context of monasteries in Poland – a case study*, "Journal of Religious Studies, History, and Society/ Revista Ciências da Religião-História e Sociedade", 2014, v. 13, no. 1, pp. 226-240. M. Jewdokimow, *Klasztor w perspektywie sociologicznej: w poszukiwaniu nowego ujęcia*, Warszawa 2018.

Photo no. 2. Presentation of a monk in the context of every-day life on a monastic website



Source: http://www.wachock.cystersi.pl/

Photo no. 3. Presentation of religious vows in a monastery on a monastic website. Presentation of community life



Source: http://www.jedrzejow.cystersi.pl/

Photo no. 4. and 5. A monument of "Ponury" and information on Cistercian bistro in a Wąchock monastery. A monument of "Ponury" in the center of Wąchock
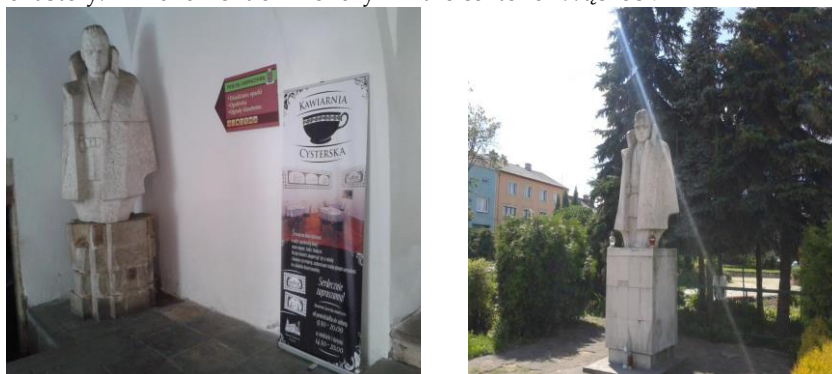


Source: author's archives.

Photo no. 6. and 7. Memorial tablets in a Jędrzejów monastery (from WWII and 2010 Polish Air Force Tu-154 crash)



Source: author's archives.

Photo no. 8. A yard in a Sulejów monastery. The hotel placed in a historical part of the monastery is run by a private company



Source: author's archives.