

Miracles and Visionaries in the Digital Age

This article explores the influence of digital technologies on the functioning of Catholic apparitional movements and the so-called miracular sensitivity, as well as specific forms of religious folklore related to it. I analyze the current methods of creating and disseminating various messages (texts, photos, films) related to Catholic apparition sites and pay particular attention to the phenomenon of miraculous pictures, examining the status that is assigned to them. I put forward two basic theses: (1) digital distribution of information about religious revelations is a factor that dynamizes Marian apparitional movements, but at the same time causes them to collide with various hostile reactions from skeptics, which consequently results in a more self-reflective and diverse stance; (2) digital technologies are changing the status and reception of miraculous pictures, which now are no longer only treated as hierophanies and material representations of a supernatural reality but are increasingly understood as symbolic signs of it.

Keywords (from the AFS Ethnographic Thesaurus):

Vernacular religion, apparitions, miracles, visionaries, pilgrimages, internet, digital media

THE AIM OF THIS STUDY IS TO RECOGNIZE THE INFLUENCE of digital technologies on the functioning of Catholic apparitional movements¹ and the phenomenon of miraculous pictures. I utilize three concepts to explain this apparitional culture, related social movements, and forms of religious folklore, namely, the notions of miracular sensitivity, the apparitional network, and the idea of “indistinctness.” Using this framework, I explore two theses: (1) digital distribution of information about religious revelations is a factor that dynamizes Catholic apparitional movements and facilitates the functioning of visionary networks, but at the same time causes them to collide with strong negative reactions from skeptics, which in turn leads to the emergence of certain forms of differentiation, reflection, and a weakening of miracular sensitivity; (2) digital technologies are changing the status of miraculous pictures and messages received by visionaries, which no longer function according to the principle of indistinctness as material representations of a supernatural reality but instead are treated as information and symbolic signs of it.

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The actions of visionaries and the apparitional movements related to them within Catholicism may be considered forms of vernacular religion, a term coined and defined by folklorist Leonard N. Primiano as “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (1995:44); such vernacular religious movements are manifestations of the grassroots expression of the religious experience of individual people and groups and, as Primiano notes, are “a way of communicating, thinking, behaving within, and conforming to, a particular cultural circumstance” (1995:42). Aligned with Primiano’s views, I do not treat vernacular apparitional beliefs as counter-movements or “deviant movements,” nor as forms of rebellion or idiosyncrasy situated in opposition to “official” religious institutions or on their margins (Margry 2019:667),² but as “noninstitutional beliefs and practices that exist alongside but apart from institutions” (Howard 2016:5). As folklorist Daniel Wojcik notes, historically, Marian apparition sites and related phenomena “have emerged as expressions of vernacular religiosity and occur apart from the approval and control of Catholic authorities and institutions” (Wojcik 2019a:649).

In the case of practices related to the apparitions discussed in this essay, Robert Glenn Howard’s concept of vernacular authority, which is based on an appeal “to trust in what is handed down *outside* of any formally instituted social formation” and “to a trust in some shared ‘common sense’” (Howard 2013:81), is particularly useful. In this context, an important aspect of vernacular religion, and a way of building vernacular authority, is the creative expression of the faithful serving the representation and interpretation of their religious experiences, “which can be categorized under the rubric of visual or performed arts, public and private cultural performances, and individual acts” (Primiano 1995:44). Such creative practices performed by devotees and pilgrims certainly meet the criteria of folkloric expression, which I define, following Simon J. Bronner, as specific communicative practices for transmitting knowledge that is “gained or learned typically from phemic (i.e., stylized, culturally situated, or expressive) processes of repeated, perlocutional communication in visual, oral and written means as well as imitation and demonstration (often for social and material traditions)” (Bronner 2016:15).

From the perspective of contemporary folklore studies, various aspects and folklore genres that form the phenomenon of Catholic apparitions can therefore be understood as traditions created by the activities of visionaries and their supporters for the transmission of religious messages. For the purposes of this discussion, I focus on prophetic/holy messages, miracle prayers, narratives about miraculous events (apparitions, signs, healings, conversions), and, above all, miraculous pictures, photos, and films.³ As noted by Peter Jan Margry, all such forms of creative expression in the discussed movements “[are] transmitted via unofficial channels, by word of mouth, via pamphlets and flyers, private associations, and, for a decade or two, via the ‘anonymous’ Internet” (2019:672).

To further situate the main goal of my analyses, I also refer to the findings of folklorists who describe the impact of digital technologies and the internet on the functioning of folklore and vernacular religion. First, I treat miraculous pictures and other analyzed messages as examples of genres that “easily traverse the boundary between analog and digital culture” (McNeill 2013:178). At the same time, I attempt

to verify the thesis proposed by Trevor Blank “that many of the texts and performative dynamics that folklorists have traditionally identified in face-to-face context appear to be surfacing through technology in very similar meaningful ways as their oral and corporeal precedents” (2012:6). I explore how digital technologies have changed the ways texts are transmitted, which may entail significant changes in the meanings and functions that users ascribe to these texts. Moreover, from the perspective of performance theories, both the revelations experienced in face-to-face contacts and the various actions that the faithful undertake in relation to them, despite the clear similarities and analogies, are in fact a different kind of performativity than that in which holy messages are created, shared, received, and commented on by electronic means, such as on the YouTube platform (cf. Buccitelli 2012).

The apparitional phenomena and behavior I describe can be variously categorized as the “hybridization of vernacular expression” (Blank 2012, 2013), “digital religion” (Campbell 2013), and “real virtuality” (McNeill 2012). Within Catholic apparitional movements, the offline and online spheres are intensely merged and integrated, and the latter does not supersede or replace the former. What is more, the online realm always has its point of reference and source in situations of direct bodily experience (revelations occur in specific places). However, at present, the “re-virtualized record of the events” (McNeill 2012:96) also plays an enormous role, which constitutes a kind of continuation of the apparitions, and at the same time, strengthens their impact by stimulating the faithful to undertake actions having the dimension of specific physical manifestations (e.g., pilgrimages to places of apparitions). Creating, sharing, and commenting on the documentation and records of the miraculous events can be taken as examples of religious rituals performed within digital media, which, according to Heidi Campbell and Forrest Rule (2020), constitute the essence of digital religion, enabling or facilitating connection to the sacred.

It should be emphasized, however, that contemporary Catholic apparitional movements differ from other manifestations of digital religion such as, for example, “vernacular Christian fundamentalism,” in which “believers use the Internet to engage in a kind of ritualized deliberation that they believe generates a church that exists only on the Internet” (Howard 2016:3). In the case of apparitional movements, it is important to note that they were created long before the appearance of the internet, which is undoubtedly a very useful and effective means of communication for them. However, ritualized deliberation carried out via the internet has not resulted in the appearance of some kind of new online church. On the contrary, we are dealing here with a situation where the “old” (traditional, analog) forms of vernacular religion make surprisingly effective use of new technologies for their purposes but are also transformed by these technologies. As many researchers point out, two issues are of fundamental importance here. First, the internet, and social media in particular, allows people with similar views, interests, and sensitivity to find each other despite their distances. Not only can these people exchange knowledge and experiences in the field of religious beliefs and rituals, but they also can, in their own way, strengthen themselves in these beliefs and develop and practice them. Secondly, as in other spheres of social life, the transition from the offline world to the online world with regard to religious discourse has two serious consequences, referred to as the “crisis

of authority” and “crisis of authenticity” (Dawson and Cowan 2004; Campbell 2013; Campbell and Rule 2020; Howard 2016). The internet can, therefore, paradoxically both strengthen religious belief and, in another way, weaken it, undermining the authenticity of religious experiences and questioning the legitimacy of spiritual leaders. In the case of Catholic apparitional movements, the above phenomena have a significant impact both on their popularity and dynamics, as well as on the very way of perceiving and assessing the authenticity of miraculous phenomena and the legitimacy of visionaries’ actions. These issues will be the subject of detailed analysis below.

I formulate the observations and conclusions on the basis of research conducted from 2014 to 2018, which consisted of the qualitative analysis of existing data in the form of texts, films, photos, and PowerPoint presentations that contained various types of content concerning miraculous phenomena. In my research, I mainly used the method of discourse analysis. I treated all materials (including visuals) as a kind of folkloric text, and identified these with recurring thematic threads and motifs (however, without applying a validated codebook), recognizing that they express the attitudes and ways of interpreting reality characteristic of participants in apparitional movements. Aligned with the views of Reiner Keller (2011), I assumed that the meanings assigned to particular things, events, and actions are the result of social interactions of a continuous and routine nature, which may lead to the development of such forms of communication that meet the above-mentioned criteria of folklore, and thus the analysis of folkloric texts can be used for the reconstruction of common (or communal) knowledge and collective attitudes about reality.

The sample constructed included three types of data:

- (A) Thirty-six websites, which were selected on the basis of the following criteria: (1) contain content concerning miraculous phenomena; (2) run by participants of apparitional movements and not official church institutions; (3) include a large number of materials; (4) function within the network of miracle sites (contain numerous links to materials published on other sites on miracle topics).
- (B) Seventy-four film materials published on YouTube in the period 2009–2018. The sample of films was selected on the basis of the following criteria: (1) representation of different types of content concerning miraculous phenomena, namely, (a) prophetic messages, (b) miracle prayers, (c) miraculous photos, (d) information about different miraculous events/signs, visionaries, and places of apparitions; (2) number of views—videos with the highest number of views in each category; (3) in two cases, the sample included all materials available on YouTube related to the particular event/film (the revelation in Medjugorje, Bosnia, and Herzegovina in January 2, 2017, and the video *Ukazanie sie serca Jezusa na niebie*).
- (C) Comments placed under the film materials published on YouTube. The analysis covered comments for the ten films that had the largest number of views and/or the largest number of comments in the sample of films (approximately 8,000 comments from the period 2009–2018 were analyzed in total).

When creating a research sample in the case of (B) and (C), I used statistical data available on YouTube.

Using YouTube’s communication system, I also tried to engage in conversations with people who publish miracle-related materials. However, these attempts were

unsuccessful,⁴ although in one case, I managed to get answers to a few questions. Since the answers I obtained shed some light on the issues central to my analysis, I decided to include portions of this interview in the data sample.

I have divided this study into four sections. In the first, I present a preliminary description of the relevant aspects of vernacular Catholicism, introducing key concepts used to explain the revelatory phenomena experienced and documented at apparition sites. Next, I provide general reflections about the influence of digital technologies on the existence of the apparitional movements. The third section consists of detailed considerations of the digital methods of producing and distributing the forms of religious folklore related to apparition sites. In the last section, I offer my analysis of the developmental tendencies at the vernacular level in the perception and treatment of miraculous phenomena and the functions of the apparitional movements that refer to and promote such miracles online.

Miraculous Phenomena and Apparitional Movements in the Catholic Church

In the research on Polish vernacular Catholicism, it is often pointed out that one of its basic features is sensualism, which is defined as a strong need to experience the sacred with the senses (Czarnowski 1956; Kasprzak 1999). Willingness to see, hear, and also feel or touch the reality of the holy, of course, is not unique to Polish Catholics. On the contrary, the phenomenon appears to be commonplace and yet has profound consequences, as it may lead to the formation of a specific attitude of the faithful, which can be explained by the concept of miracular sensitivity.

According to the findings of Andrzej Hemka and Jacek Olędzki, one of the main principles of the functioning of miracular sensitivity is that “every positive settlement of real matters (everyday or colloquial) for an individual is often connected directly with the intervention of God or a specific saint” (1990:9). This way of combining everyday matters with the sphere of the sacred also applies to negative events, which are perceived as a kind of punishment for sins sent to people by holy beings. All such events have a sensual dimension. Thus, in a broader perspective, miracular sensitivity consists of the tendency and willingness to interpret various sensory events from everyday life (both mundane and extraordinary), such as fragrances, sounds, and strange shapes appearing on trees, windows, or in clouds, as signs of the presence of supernatural forces. Consequently, within miracular sensitivity, miraculous events function in a paradoxical way. On the one hand, they have an extremely strong emotional potential and evoke the excitement and fascination of thousands of people. On the other hand, they become something “normal” and repetitive, something that in a sense can be expected and sought at certain sacred places. Miracular sensitivity implies an openness to miracles and a strong need for sensual experience of the sacred, from “an aversion to being stuck in the mundane itself.” At the same time, such miraculous events are not regarded as something unusual, special, or marginal, but “they become an inseparable element of this particular type of religious awareness” (Hemka and Olędzki 1990:9, 12).

The most important phenomenon that is central to the miracular sensitivity of much vernacular Roman Catholicism involves the revelations of saintly beings. The

apparition sites usually attract crowds of pilgrims who hope to have a special and direct religious experience at places believed to be sacred (see Wojcik 2019b). The faithful not only pray here, but also seek personal experiences of the senses as well as contact with others who have had such experiences. For this reason, pilgrims are particularly interested not in those places where apparitions happened in the past, but in those places where apparitions are currently taking place and visionaries are currently receiving messages from beings who are considered holy. Consequently, this may lead to the formation of vernacular apparitional movements, characterized by the fact that their devotees usually visit many other apparitional locations, where it is easier to directly contact people who experience apparitions, instead of visiting well-known and officially accepted sanctuaries with a long tradition and history of acclaim within Roman Catholic culture.

These apparitional movements take the form of a network, which consists of many factors and subjects developing different types of relations. As Margry points out, “all of these things combined, devotees, prayer groups, associations, centres, and active individuals, maintain an open and informal network, without any central headquarters or overarching rules, but which is structured on the basis of their shared fascination for and belief in the veracity of the contested phenomena” (2019:680). According to Margry, pilgrims play a key role in creating this network, because “[it] in practice, becomes a reality through the devotees who visit the various sites. They usually do not choose one single devotion to the exclusion of others, but in modern eclectic fashion visit the devotions they like best or which reinforce each other mutually” (2019:671). However, the places of the apparitions themselves and the visionaries who act there also form a kind of network. Although Margry claims that “shrines seem to be self-sufficient” and “there is little inclination for mutual ‘cooperation’ between sites” (2019:676), in many cases, various types of relationships can be seen between them. As the research conducted in Poland by Ariel Zieliński shows, individual visionaries confirm or undermine the messages received by their “colleagues,” indicate other places where the Mother of God is currently appearing, and sometimes even make pilgrimages to these places (2004:74–82). It is worth noting that the relationships within apparitional movements, especially between networks centered around individual visionaries or sites, are not always positive. It is not uncommon to warn against the activities of “alleged” visionaries, whose messages are considered false or are thought to contain various “errors.”

When using the concept of an apparitional network, two points are worth considering. Firstly, similar networks were created earlier, and, as suggested by John Eade and Michael Sallnow, they could both be constituted around specific places or people, and also take the form described as “textual pilgrimage,” the essence of which is “the location of divine power neither in a person nor in a place, but in a text ” (Eade and Sallnow 2013:8).⁵ Secondly, although apparitional networks have grassroots origins and exist as vernacular religious movements, their activity is also partially institutionalized and professionalized, which is manifested, for example, in the creation of pilgrimage infrastructures connected to apparition sites or the establishment of publishing houses specializing in the distribution of books, brochures, and magazines devoted to miraculous phenomena (Margry 2019:675–6, 680–1; Zieliński 2004:74–82).

The functioning of an apparitional network is closely related to the phenomenon of miraculous sensitivity. What sustains the existence of the network is not only belief in the veracity of the revelations but, above all, the fact that many believers feel a strong need to meet individual visionaries, listen to their messages, and see, hear, or feel specific signs of the sacred for themselves. Researchers of miraculous phenomena point to a characteristic and repetitive set of these sensual signals of holiness (Czachowski 2003:115–32). The most important among them are miraculous images, the origins of which go back to the evangelical story of Saint Veronica, and the long and rich tradition of iconography confirms their importance within Christianity (Turner and Turner 1978:140–71). The research conducted in this area indicates that this tradition is related to the development of technology. For centuries, miraculous status has been attributed to images created by various techniques, such as painting and sculpture, and later also photographic technology (Wojcik 1996:129–42; Pagliaroli 2004:71–93; Apolito 2005:101–43). The invention and then the mass production of cameras led to the phenomenon known variously as supernatural/paranormal/spirit/occult photography, and there have been countless attempts by ordinary people to capture the presence of the souls of the dead, supernatural beings, and paranormal phenomena on film. These practices of supernatural photography have manifested both at the vernacular level and in professional and commercial activities, as well as in the form of pranks or frauds, exemplified by the famous photographs of the Cottingley Fairies (Smith 1991; Wojcik 2009:115–6). As Paul Smith has pointed out, the practice of spirit photography that was used to obtain evidence for the existence of supernatural phenomena was inspired by folkloric traditions, but the photographs themselves “created their own lore,” and the discussions around them “contributed in numerous ways to the fairy lore tradition” (Smith 1991:402).

Smith’s insight applies equally to Christian legends and photographs of the revelations of saintly beings. Within the Christian tradition, the photo of the Shroud of Turin taken in 1898, which later came to be considered miraculous, and the Hidden Christ Picture, which gained widespread publicity in the late 1930s, were important for this use of photography (Wilson 1979; Wojcik 1996:136–7). However, it was the use of cameras at the Marian apparition site in the Spanish town of San Sebastián de Garabandal (1960–1965) that made photographs of supernatural phenomena an important element in the practices of apparitional movements (Pagliaroli 2004:80). Such miracle photos were a continuation, complement, or confirmation of existing narratives related to the apparitions, holy places, and visionaries, yet they themselves also generated countless narratives related to the imagery visible in the pictures.

In the research on Christian miraculous images, attention often is drawn to the fact that, regardless of technological changes, “they articulate and extend Grand Christian Narrative,” in which material facts serve to indicate “the moral problem of belief” (Berryman 2006:450–1). Furthermore, as noted by Wojcik, these technological changes “offer insights into the dynamic nature of religious traditions, and the popular desire for direct religious experiences and tangible manifestations of the divine” (2009:121).

Within Catholic apparitional movements, new technologies are viewed in two ways. Similar to the spirit photography of the nineteenth century, cameras are treated as useful technical tools that allow believers to “objectively” confirm the actual presence

of the sacred in a given place and time and to persuade doubters by providing them with “hard evidence” of the presence of supernatural forces in our lives. Conversely, it is often believed that these otherworldly forces can either use technologies themselves or, to some extent, distort technological processes by manipulating them for their own ends. Such a belief underlies the phenomenon of “true images” (Latin *vera icona*)—those images perceived as being created by divine beings and not by human intervention (Wojcik 1996:139–40).

In light of the previous research conducted on this subject, the most important feature of such images seems to be that they are ascribed the properties of the sacred, and not treated as symbolic representations. Thus, not only is the visual content (matter) very important, but also the material existence of such images is significant. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir explains the way “true images” function by developing Gadamer’s concept of indistinctness:

I mean all those situations in which a religious or cultural symbol experiences the effects of “naive realism” of interpretation. In extreme cases, holiness, seriousness or other ways of expressing the importance of the symbolized phenomenon are so much influenced by the materiality of the symbol that it becomes a sacrament: it can be eaten or dissolved in water, which is given to the sick and needy, touching it or being close to it is a source of blessing. (Tokarska-Bakir 2000:56)

And later:

This sensory indistinctness, gluing together the image and designation, name and person, text and its meaning, is not merely a side phenomenon in relation to religious experience, but basically funds it and enables it. (Tokarska-Bakir 2000:230)

The principle of indistinctiveness includes both verbal and nonverbal aspects in the sensual experience of the sacred and constitutes the ontological basis of “textual pilgrimage.” As Tokarska-Bakir writes, “a magic image in which *signans* is identical to *signatum*, and a sacred language in which visual or sound signs are considered to be entities, endowed with creative power, constitute the two primary pillars of religion” (2000:57). On this basis, messages received by visionaries and disseminated in the form of letters, prints, tape, or video recordings are treated as the true words of God, the Virgin Mary, or other saints. Similarly, miraculous photographs are perceived as images made “by God’s hand” or the effect of the Holy Spirit penetrating the camera (Wojcik 1996:133, 2009:125).

As I mentioned in the introduction, one of the goals of this essay is to examine the influence of digital technologies on the current status of miraculous images (and also other miraculous messages). The principle of indistinctiveness and the question of whether or to what extent it relates to the reception and function of revelatory messages is key to this analysis. It is worth noting that different kinds of miraculous messages, along with the development of printing technology, began to circulate in thousands of copies since the nineteenth century, which has not significantly changed the way they are perceived and treated. However, digital technologies mean that the material (analog) methods of capturing sacred messages (e.g., on film, paper, canvas,

tape, or video) is replaced by recording them in the form of sequences of zeros and ones, which, because of algorithms and electronic devices, can be stored, copied, modified, and transmitted in an extremely efficient manner (effective, cheap, and fast). These circumstances in turn contribute to the unprecedented ease of multiplication and the enormous scale of dissemination, which is not achievable to the same extent with analog technologies.

In the case of digital technologies, there is a doubt whether a digital photo showing a miraculous phenomenon can still be considered a “true image” and treated as a sacred object with special power. If so, what exactly is the ontological basis of this holiness? Can a computer disk be treated in the same way as wood, paper, or canvas? What happens with such common practices as digital copying, uploading, or sharing of miraculous photos? Is there sacred power transferred to the next medium? Is the ontological status of the copied photo the same as the original? The last question is particularly interesting, especially if we take into account that digital technologies allow the creation of a 100 percent faithful copy, yet they greatly facilitate the possibility of far-reaching interference in the copied message.

Before moving on to more detailed analyses that shed light on the above issues, it is necessary to outline a broader context that is relevant to the way miraculous images currently function: namely, how digital technologies influence Catholic apparitional movements, within which different kinds of miraculous messages are produced and distributed.

Apparitional Movements in the World of New Media

Reviewing the previous studies on the influence of new media on movements created around visionaries and places of apparitions leads to the rather surprising conclusion that the internet does not destructively impinge upon this kind of religiosity or contribute to the dismissal of alleged miraculous phenomena in light of current scientific knowledge. On the contrary, digital technologies have strengthened apparitional movements by providing new, highly effective communication tools that enable the easy and virtually unlimited dissemination of both general information about miracles and the holy messages that are communicated by visionaries. Moreover, they also provide access to relatively cheap and easy-to-use devices and software, with which the faithful can independently seek evidence of the presence of the sacred and share them with other participants of the movement (Britt 1998:117–8; Matter 2001:134–8; Wojcik 2009:131–2).

As Paolo Apolito notes, Catholic apparitional movements have a rather ambivalent and paradoxical approach to new media and modern technology. On the one hand, they generally take a very conservative position and strongly oppose the “errors” of modernity. They often express various fears related to the development of technology, condemning, for example, television or the internet as “Satan’s inventions” that provide ways to deceive humanity. On the other hand, as Apolito notes: “That movement makes ample use of technological resources, to the point of constructing a technological devotional environment, and has thus strengthened itself to a degree unprecedented in the past, and thereby radically transforming itself” (2005:9–10).

From the perspective of nearly 20 years that have passed since Apolito's research, it can be said that he accurately diagnosed the general developmental tendencies of miraculous movements. However, his observations can be deepened and updated because of the dynamic development of the so-called Web 2.0 technologies as well as the emergence of smartphones with advanced multimedia capabilities and the mobile internet. As I discuss below, these have significantly influenced the way miracles and apparitional movements function in contemporary society.

Above all, the internet is now a place where a tremendous amount of information about apparitions and visionaries can be found, and thus access to miraculous phenomena and apparitional movements has become easier than ever before. Not only do famous apparition sites or popular visionaries have numerous websites run in various languages by local organizations and groups of worshippers, but they also often have social media profiles and YouTube channels. All these media platforms form a kind of digital network of revelations (Siuda 2012). They often refer to each other by means of hyperlinks and publish some of the same content (e.g., texts of sacred messages, photos, and testimonies of healed people), and some content that consists of varied realizations of the same threads or motives (e.g., history of apparitions, miracles, and prayers). A good example is the internet activity of communities promoting the apparitions in Garabandal. In the course of my research, I identified and analyzed the content of 12 websites that were devoted to this site. It should be emphasized that there are undoubtedly other such sites, and in addition, a lot of information about this Spanish shrine can be found on many other websites that have a wider profile. Something similar is true for the visionary Vassula Ryden, who had already gained worldwide popularity in the pre-internet era. Now her image is intensively created and circulated by many people who post extensive information on this visionary's life and current activities in various languages and on numerous digital platforms; they also publish the texts of messages she has received from supernatural beings and sell various types of publications related to her.

Of particular interest are the special websites containing databases of various revelations and visionaries that, in an organized manner, present information and fragments or full texts of messages from specific holy places. An example is The Miracle Hunter website. With it, the user can carry out a kind of hunt that enables them to find references to all of the most important miraculous events in the history of the Catholic Church. Information is broken down into five categories: "Apparitions," "Miraculous Images," "Eucharistic Miracles," "Stigmata," and "Incorruptibles." In each category, the user can choose the time period of personal interest and receive basic information about the miraculous phenomenon with the option of exploring an extended description, including a set of links to external sources.⁶ Another website of this type is the Polish website Duch Prawdy (The Spirit of the Truth), which contains a huge amount of information on apparitions, holy places, visionaries, related prayer groups, and services. It also provides a database with a list of 167 apparitions arranged in historical order, with hyperlinks to the texts of sacred messages and websites dedicated to specific places and persons.⁷

The above examples can be treated as another indication of the aforementioned professionalization of apparitional movements, which, using digital technologies,

provide all interested parties with professional tools for information management. These contribute to organizing and popularizing knowledge about religious events, as well as promoting the very idea of apparitions.

As noted, the formation of networks of the faithful and the occurrence of the phenomenon of “textual pilgrimage” have had a long tradition, but the widespread availability of the internet and digital technologies makes this tendency significantly stronger. It can be said that nowadays, because of the initiatives illustrated above, virtually all Catholic apparition sites and all documented miraculous events are linked, and almost any interested person can participate in or experience these sites. Thus, the phenomenon of “textual pilgrimage” is significantly strengthened (Britt 1998:111) and is evolving toward what has been described as “cyberpilgrimage” (Hill-Smith 2011) or “media pilgrimage” (Couldry 2007). Accessibility to messages considered sacred becomes easier than ever before as it does not require one’s physical presence at the apparition sites, sending messages by paper letters, publishing them in the form of books, or even subscribing to a mailing list. With the help of tools offered by such portals as *The Miracle Hunter* or *Duch Prawdy*, the faithful have access to verbal and visual messages from around the world, from various historical periods, and at any time. This form of cyberpilgrimage is an example of a wider phenomenon generated by digital media, namely, hyperlocality, which consists in the possibility of parallel “being” in many distant places (McNeill 2012:96).

It is worth adding that digital media also influences the aforementioned tensions among apparitional networks, sometimes contributing to the escalation of conflicts between the followers of various visionaries, and even between the visionaries themselves, who question the supernatural nature of their opponents’ experiences in their messages published on the internet. In recent years, one such controversial figure is Charlie Johnston, the American visionary who runs a web page *The Next Right Step* and gained popularity after allegedly predicting Donald Trump’s victory in the presidential election.⁸ Another example are the conflicts between the supporters of two Polish visionaries, Anna Argasińska and Mieczysława Kordas, which were revealed, among others, in the form of stormy discussions on internet forums and multimedia presentations made available on YouTube.⁹

To sum up, despite the conservative nature and declared aversion to various aspects of the modern world, participants of apparitional movements willingly and on a large scale use digital technologies, which in turn gives these movements new dynamics and significantly increases the range of their impact. This is also because the use of the internet for the distribution of texts related to the revelations leads to a situation repeatedly described by folklorists, who emphasize that folklore “on the Internet has the ability to move faster and spread further, reaching an exponentially larger audience in an exponentially shorter time than face-to-face transmission would typically require” (McNeill 2013:181–2; see also Blank 2009; Frank 2011).

The increased speed of spreading and scope of information about the apparitions and various forms of religious folklore are quite obvious today. More important, however, is who produces such information and how it is created, as well as what the technical conditions are for its circulation and reception. Therefore, in the following section, I will try to analyze in more detail how miraculous pictures (and other types of revelation-related content) are produced, distributed, and consumed.

Prosumption of the Signs of the Sacred

The development of Catholic apparitional movements related to digital technologies is not only about increasing the availability of information about miraculous events and better conditions for the distribution of messages provided by visionaries. On the internet, many of the materials related to apparitions are not created and disseminated by more or less professional and extensive websites devoted to religious topics, but rather by people whose activity in this area seems spontaneous, occasional, and amateur. The “textual pilgrimage” in the space of the internet not only consists of searching for and consuming information and sacred texts, but also producing them. We are dealing here with the phenomenon of prosumption occurring as a part of the participatory web cultures described by researchers of new media (Beer and Burrows 2010). The faithful, using digital tools, report on various miraculous events that they experienced in everyday life or during visits to sanctuaries, share photos and videos taken, and disseminate materials created by other internet users on their profiles. These relationships vary in form and nature. We can find here more or less extensive narratives, personal confessions of faith, comments, and analyses related to the messages of individual visionaries or interpretations of miraculous signs, as well as various films, photos, or multimedia presentations that are published on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook. These statements are often a form of commentary about the content previously published by other users. At the same time, they are also commented upon and supplemented, which creates a dialogical and polyphonic structure in which everyone participates in communication on an equal footing.

This phenomenon can be traced to the example of materials published on YouTube by pilgrims to Medjugorje, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The monthly revelations that Mirjana Dragičević-Soldo experiences are documented by professional film crews, and the recordings are made available on the official channels of individual TV stations.¹⁰ In addition, thousands of pilgrims photograph and film, on their own, both the moment of the apparitions and numerous places and objects to which sacred properties are attributed. From the enormous amount of materials of this type available on the internet, I would like to take a closer look at two cases that show the specificity of the issue at hand.

The first is the revelation on January 2, 2017, during which a member of a large audience suddenly started screaming and making inarticulate noises, which were interpreted by some as a manifestation of an evil spirit. The analysis of the videos on YouTube documenting this event allows us to draw two main conclusions. First, some viewers at the moment of the apparition are not focused on prayer, nor do they look at the visionary or in the direction in which Mirjana Dragičević-Soldo is looking, but instead, with the use of various electronic devices, they try to record what is currently happening. Research carried out at other apparition sites allows us to state that such a situation is not unique or specific to Medjugorje (Knoblauch and Bernt 2015:643–4). As a result, many recordings are made that differ in certain details, and a large number of them are then later shared via social media.¹¹ These differences lie not only in the fact that various events are filmed from different perspectives and situational location points, and consequently offer different details visible in the frame, but also because

some of these folk documentarians make significant edits to the recordings (e.g., using various forms of editing and framing, and supplementing them with music or subtitles). For example, in the film posted on the javier salazar tataje channel,¹² a special edition was used (montage of shots from different cameras, enlargement of selected parts of the frame, stops, marking selected places within the frame with arrows) that draws the viewers' attention to the shouting person (see fig. 1).

In turn, the material from the same event published on the jesushelps2 channel is devoid of all of the above scenes, and the soundtrack has been partially removed so that nothing indicates an unusual occurrence during the event.¹³ With the use of readily available digital tools, pilgrims therefore create and disseminate many messages constituting variant accounts about the same miraculous events.

The second example is a video of the revelation that Mirjana Dragičević-Soldo experienced in September 2017, published on the Sito Medjugorje Assisi channel.¹⁴ It records the moment when the visionary comes down the hill to greet people with disabilities. Hundreds of pilgrims gathering along the road and pointing their smartphones toward Mirjana Dragičević-Soldo are visible (see fig. 2).



Figure 1. Still from the video *Medjugorje Jan 2017 with Blurred Girl*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpQqS7WnK18> (accessed May 18, 2015).



Figure 2. Still from the video *Medjugorje—Apparizione a Mirjana—2 Settembre 2017*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzyUBcsp16w> (accessed May 18, 2015).

Taking photos or films by contemporary pilgrims is not an accidental, occasional, or exceptional activity as it often was in the past. On the contrary, it is a standard and common practice among people visiting shrines and meeting visionaries. Photography has become one of the essential components of pilgrimage and visiting places considered sacred. From a broader perspective, the taking and publishing of photos on social media has become one of the basic forms of vernacular devotion, used to express individual religious experiences, independently from the forms proposed, promoted, and controlled by Church institutions. Some photos and videos are subjected to the characteristic forms of editing mentioned above, and some are repeatedly published, processed, and commented on by various users. The latter clearly exist as recognizable forms of internet folklore described by researchers, who have identified categories such as memes, viral images, image macros, photoshop folklore, or newshare (Blank 2012; Frank 2011; Howard 2008; Shifman 2014). The apparitional phenomena documented and promoted by devotees may be regarded as a new form of internet religious folklore, which is essentially a functional equivalent to the earlier forms related to the cult of holy places and the practice of pilgrimage.

Yet the examples and situation described above are not entirely new. The analysis of the apparitions in places such as Conyers (Georgia) or Bayside (New York) reveals that already in the 1980s and 1990s, photographing Marian apparitions and related miraculous phenomena had become a folk practice undertaken by hundreds of pilgrims (Wojcik 1996, 2009:129–30) that was, to a large extent, ritualized and was one of the essential elements of the “pilgrim apparition work” (Davis and Boles 2003). Various types of recording devices had begun to be treated as “new tools of religious expression” and “vehicles of faith and participation in the ritual” (Britt 1998:115).

The digital technologies used by pilgrims at Medjugorje and other active apparition sites today do not change the essence of this phenomenon, only its scale. Currently, nearly every pilgrim has a mobile phone with the possibility of taking photos and videos, and phone photography and videography does not involve any additional costs or require much expertise. It can therefore be assumed that at Medjugorje and other contemporary sites, not hundreds or thousands, but millions of photos and videos are produced. The significant difference from previous periods is the possibility of their distribution, because the internet and social media make a considerable part of this production available to potentially millions of people from around the world.

Taking and sharing photos, videos, or other forms of mediated communication do not replace pilgrimages or other physical activities, but instead complement them and, in a sense, dynamize them—they encourage people to take part in pilgrimages, services, prayer meetings, or other forms of religious life. Not only do they facilitate access to information about the apparitions and visionaries, but they also undoubtedly influence the people’s decision making to visit places like Medjugorje. Both the official websites and the thousands of postings by pilgrims provide inspiration and useful advice on when and how to organize a trip to a holy place. As a consequence, apparitional movements have gained increasing popularity and are now part of the wider phenomenon of global religious tourism.

Another recent development regarding the reception of miraculous images is important: the mass production and distribution of audiovisual material related

to apparition sites seem to have significantly altered the meaning and functions of miraculous images and other sacred messages. These changes are particularly clear when it comes to the function of the previously mentioned pictures that were attributed the status of “true images.” In the era of analog technologies, these sorts of images were a relatively rare phenomenon, mainly due to the technical difficulties associated with their production and copying.¹⁵ At the same time, because of the principle of indistinctiveness in their treatment, it was extremely important for the faithful to have such images or the possibility of physical contact with them (cf. Tokarska-Bakir 2000:257–67). Thus, these were objects sought and desired and at the same time exclusive in their own way—available to those who were lucky enough to get them or to have received the grace of making them (cf. Czachowski 2003:137–8). The importance of the material aspect of “true images” is especially visible when the faithful use their own cameras to make copies of miraculous photographs owned by other pilgrims or when they photograph miraculous images visible on trees or other objects (Davis and Boles 2003:384, 390). There is a clear analogy here with actions in the field of contagious magic and Christian practices related to the relics of saints (Wojcik 2009:130–1).¹⁶ Digital technologies change the features and functioning of these types of images in two aspects. First of all, due to the above-described technological conditions, it is now extremely easy to take or acquire a photograph containing signs that can be interpreted as the presence of supernatural beings. Even miraculous photographs previously made using analog techniques are now often digitized and made available on the websites of individual sanctuaries.¹⁷ As a consequence, images with the potential status of “true images” are now widely available, but at the same time, they have lost their value to some extent. Anyone can view, download, copy, and share hundreds of miraculous photos at any time while sitting at home in front of their computer or phone screens.

Even more important, however, is that the miraculous photos stored in digital form have largely lost the material basis of their existence. Yet it seems that the principle of indistinctiveness is limited in their perception. Although there are many people declaring faith in the authenticity of miracles documented in electronic form, digital objects generally are not treated as sacred in the same way as sculptures, paintings, or paper photographic prints. On the contrary, they are usually perceived only as a form of information about something that happened at a specific place and time, and sometimes also as a form of evidence of the truth of these events. Having a specific image by a given person (e.g., on the hard drive of their computer) or being able to get close to it are no longer essential. As a result, the function of miraculous images with regard to digital circulation is radically changing. Such images are no longer seen as a source of supernatural power, but simply as signs (symbols) designed to inform people of a holy reality. This attitude is illustrated by the statement of one devotee of the Medjugorje apparitions with whom I conducted an interview. When I asked if it was important to have one’s own copy of a miraculous photo, the devotee answered:

I made loads of copies and gave them to my family and friends hoping that one day they may visit Medjugorje and experience what I did and I know hundreds of people who have after having watched my video so whether the pics are “miraculous” or not, the real miracle happens in the heart and spreads like wild fire.¹⁸

The dissemination of copies of miraculous photographs is thus not necessarily associated with faith in their supernatural properties, but with the belief in their informational potential and persuasive power. In this instance, this can be witnessed by a noticeable distance from assigning the label “miraculous” to such photos, clearly indicated by the fact that my interlocutor put this term in quotation marks and used the characteristic phrase “whether . . . or not.”

The spread of Web 2.0 technology, social media, smartphones, and the mobile internet clearly increased the importance of taking photos as a form of “pilgrim apparition work,” and at the same time, radically changed the way of producing and distributing miraculous pictures and other types of sacred messages. The findings presented here challenge the assumption that the corporeal form of folklore, previously functioning in face-to-face contexts, retains its features in transmission mediated by digital media (Blank 2012:6). In the case of miraculous pictures, their corporeal form was originally very important, and the transmission to digital formats entails a fundamental ontological change. The miraculous messages and images once transmitted within apparitional networks and previously treated as physical hierophanies (true pictures from heaven, the words of God manifested in materiality) are now seen as symbolic signs of the numinous.

This does not mean that physical hierophanies no longer matter or have been entirely replaced by communication practices of a purely symbolic dimension. On the contrary, participants of apparitional movements continue to seek and experience direct and sensual contact with the sacred, and digital technologies, providing appropriate information tools, can make such seeking of the holy even more intense. However, in the final section of my discussion, I propose that the attribute of sensualism, as one of the fundamental features of apparitional movements and vernacular Catholicism in general, is being transformed and losing its importance. My research indicates that at the vernacular level, the attitude of the faithful to sacred messages is changing and differentiating, and Catholic apparition networks themselves are also subject to a certain ideological loosening.

From Sensualism to Individualism

The changing views about miraculous images have resulted in a transformation in the attitude of the faithful toward such images. For the most part, they are no longer venerated and are not objects of worship. Instead, they often become topics of discussion and objects for interpretation. The typical approach of the believers is to try to read and understand their meanings and the religious and moral teachings they contain. This change in the approach is not caused only by the use of digital cameras and the internet in the process of creating and distributing photos. Other tools, especially commonly available and easy-to-use image editing software, are also important. These tools enable the faithful to edit their own audiovisual materials and perform actions, such as enlarging selected fragments of the frame, slowing down or repeating selected scenes, highlighting or marking certain details, and adding explanatory descriptions. Such actions and manipulations of images—aimed at highlighting their sacred status—are not entirely new and have been the case with analog technologies

as well (cf. Berryman 2006). However, digital technologies significantly expand the range of possible activities and make them notably easier, and therefore they are often and willingly used to provide doubters and skeptics with visual evidence of the presence of holy beings (see fig. 3 and fig. 4).

Yet the use of digital technologies is a double-edged sword. Opponents of apparitional movements often point to the fact that graphic software allows for extremely easy manipulation of images. The production of “false” signs of the sacred and “deceiving” people has become easier than ever before (cf. Matter 2001:135; Pagliaroli 2004:92).¹⁹ There is also a specific form of folklore on the internet that has emerged, which consists of parodying miraculous behavior and creating alleged miraculous images of a mocking nature. One of the most interesting examples are the reactions of internet users to the film *Ukazanie się serca Jezusa na niebie/Holy Love Ministry, OHIO, USA*, published in 2012 on YouTube on the Krystyna Dermont channel. This film, showing the so-called “miracle of the sun” and at the same time documenting the ecstatic reaction of one of the faithful (a woman) to the phenomenon she observed, became the basis for an internet meme. Its countless variants and forms (photos, films, and musical works) ridiculed the naïveté of the faithful, the extremely emotional behavior



Figures 3–4. Stills from the video *Medjugorje—pictures miraculous on video*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdhOGIHYEgu> (accessed May 18, 2015).

of the woman, and the use of an incorrect grammatical form in the word “rainbow” (see fig. 5 and fig. 6).

In addition to this example, one can easily find many parodies of miraculous photographs on the internet that depict the face of Jesus or other saints visible in the sky or on everyday objects. Such parodies are disseminated by both amateur internet users and by major media entities.²⁰ It seems apparent that the discussed forms of religious folklore function in accordance with certain rules of vernacular practices—not only in a situation of grassroots and spontaneous criticism by skeptics and mockers, but also in specific interactions with official and professional practices, facilitating a breeding ground for institutional activities and providing the content that is processed and retransmitted in other social circles. This is a situation consistent with the model described by Howard, arguing that electronic hybridity is constituted by “the dynamic push and pull between vernacular and institutional authority that occurs in, between, and across the sites of the vernacular web” (Howard 2008:211).

Parodies of miracle photos are only part of a larger phenomenon. Revelations, visionaries, and the apparitional movements that develop around them have not



Figure 5. Still from the video *Buzię widzę w tym bułku*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_osAMmEQiU (accessed May 18, 2015).



Figure 6. Still from the video *Buzię widzę w tym pniu*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AR1jIoThT5M> (accessed May 18, 2015).

functioned in closed cultural spaces for quite a long time. They are the subject of numerous media reports (Matter 2001:126–7) and are met with various reactions from skeptics. Skepticism and hostility on the part of various factors (state authorities, official church structures, and inhabitants of a given place) are reactions that accompany many revelations and, in a sense, have always contributed to their specificity and dynamics (Matter 2001:136–7; Czachowski 2003:171–84; Zieliński 2004:122–7; Krzywosz 2016). Yet the internet and digital technologies have resulted in a significant change. Until now, access to miraculous phenomena required some effort (e.g., the physical inconveniences associated with a pilgrimage to a specific place), and critical opinions about them were limited due to the specificity of analog media. Due to these circumstances, apparitional movements were largely isolated from skeptical critique. However, when the miracles and visionaries' messages are made available in digital media, they can be read, viewed, evaluated, and commented upon by many people who do not belong to apparitional movements and do not need to make much effort to access this type of material. The scale of interactions taking place here is extremely important, as materials with miraculous content often gain enormous viewership on the internet, and they result in numerous reactions in the form of ratings, comments, subsequent shares, or re-creations.²¹ Thus, as I mentioned earlier, they often gain the status of becoming viral or memes (Shifman 2014). At the same time, their reception is carried out in accordance with the rules characteristic of communication via social media (see Reagle 2015). The spectrum of views and attitudes represented by viewers is very broad. An analysis of the comments posted by recipients under the films documenting miraculous phenomena published on YouTube reveals that people who come into contact with these types of messages online adopt at least five different attitudes, which, in a simplified manner, can be described as follows:

1. Miraculous attitude: Commenters express faith in the miraculous properties of the presented photos/videos and the phenomena documented in them. Sometimes people confirm that they themselves have seen or experienced similar phenomena or have taken pictures themselves, which they consider to be miraculous.

Oh My GOSH! I SEE IT, I SEE IT, I FINALLY SEE IT!!! All these things, images, whatever, appearing in videos, most of the time, I'm like, "WHAT is wrong with me that I cannot SEE it!?!?" Well, THIS time, . . . I SEEEEEEE it! Do You folks SEE the FACE!?!?! . . . in the clouds!?!? Amazing! YAYYYY!!!!²²

Hey that photo of Jesus in the end is very real!! I am a witness to that same photo when I was a child!! Believe it please!! A neighbor took a picture of a thunderstorm and Jesus apparition appeared in the photo when it was developed. I am very serious too. Feel lucky to have read this. Not that I am anything but that I am telling you this true story.²³

Hi! My photos from Medjugorje are just like yours with the sun looking that way and orbs. It truly amazed me when I got home and saw my photos. I LOVE MEDJUGORJE!!!!!!²⁴

2. Affirmatively informative attitude: Commenters refer to the presented materials with kindness, sometimes even enthusiasm. However, they do not comment on their

truthfulness, treating them only as messages and reminding others about important religious truths, or inspiring or supporting specific religious practices (e.g., pilgrimage to shrines, prayers).

Hi tdonn07, Just dropping by to say, I like your channel & you have some great vids, on the beautiful place Medugorje. Which has a very special place in my heart & has done every year since, my first pilgrimage in the summer of 2004, well God bless your work on the vids & could you add us please as a friend, thank you . . . Irishiona.²⁵

Thank you for posting this I enjoyed it very much as I dream of one day going to medjugorje myself one day!²⁶

Praise Yahushua, (Jesus) and thank you for sharing His gift to you and the world.²⁷

3. A polemically religious attitude: Commenters criticize the interpretation of the signs present in the photos. They consider individual revelations to be false, express the general belief in miraculous phenomena as a doctrinal error or even heresy (idolatry), and interpret them to be the result of the action of satanic forces. The negative position of the followers of Protestant factions of Christianity against the dominant “cult of images” (in their opinion) in Catholicism is clearly visible here in particular.

NO ONE KNOWS THE DAY THAT THE SAVIOR IS COMING. HE ALSO WILL COME FROM THE ORION STAR. NO ONE HAS REMEMBERED HIS FACE. SO THIS IS NOT REAL.²⁸

Is this a real video? or computer animated? . . . If it is real, I will assume is a soul of purgatory, asking for prayer. Jesus is only present in the Eucharist.²⁹

Mother Mary is a lie from Satan. Like a harlot Catholicism is heathen religion. A fake copy off Christianity. Too bad many people reject God's gift of eternal life, choosing rather to pray to a woman idol and some heathen Catholic priest, foolishly thinking that the priest has power to absolve sins.³⁰

This is a Satanic spirit. If you read your bible it tells you that Satan rules this earth. And until Christ comes he will continue to be in charge of this earth. So when you see ghostly appearances of what looks like Jesus or Mary . . . think again. Jesus is sitting in Heaven and Mary's body is in a grave like the rest of human life. But Satan will deceive masses of people because they won't get a bible and know the word of God.³¹

Anyhow that is my understanding. The only true authentic visionaries are Emma De guzman actual visions caught on camera and Vassula ryden cause even on camera you could see very clearly the vision of jesus on her. Br Cortez with the miraculous rose petals and the apparitions that took place in Egypt over 500 people saw it. These are the true mystics or visionaries. I do not believe the rest.³²

LOL. If (and I do mean IF) this is a real apparition it is NOT Jesus. Jesus is NOT a phantom nor a baby when he appears it is always as a grown man.³³

I'm so glad that my God and my Jesus are real and that I don't have to worship a statue. Statue worship is nothing but idolatry. God and Jesus never told us to worship a statue that represents them.³⁴

4. A polemically rational attitude: Commenters attempt to explain the peculiarities visible in photos and videos by referring to common sense or knowledge in the field of optics, physics, astronomy, or other scientific or para-scientific fields and concepts. These posts included a large variety of formulated explanations, ranging from pointing to typical camera faults and shooting errors, and ending with the theory that wonderful photos show space vehicles, and the revelations are the result of using holography by beings representing extraterrestrial civilizations.

Hi! These pictures are really nnice, but!!!! Those ribons, orbs appears when you are shaking the camera, i have those too in medjugorje and home. We go out alot and take many pictures, orbs i have in many pic. and those ribons are from shaking the camera.³⁵

Oh, so you see the sun doing EXACTLY what is shown on video? If that's the case, this would pass on the world news for days and be studied by scientists from all over the world. No astronomer or physicist stated this phenomenon anywhere, no study what so ever. The only people who see this are religious people hoping to see a miracle before they arrive.³⁶

Yep, my plant pots do that on a sunny day, water is pushed out of cracks when it heats up and expands. Sorry you lot, not a "MIRACLE!!!", just (VERY) basic physics I'm afraid.³⁷

guys this is a real ufo event stop taulking about this god stuff start thinking about whats causeing this because this should be a ghost or a ufo³⁸

5. A humorous, ironic, or aggressive attitude: In this case, there are actually two attitudes, which are closely intertwined, and in practice, they are difficult to separate because they both constitute a form of attack on people publishing miraculous pictures, as well as all those who believe in their authenticity. The first approach is that materials of this type are a pretext for all kinds of jokes or ironic or mocking statements, which are the verbal equivalent of the previously mentioned miraculous picture parodies. Comments of this type may also take the form of trolling when internet users express apparent faith and/or emotional involvement in miraculous phenomena, or provocatively consider them, for example, to be a result of Satan's actions. The second approach involves directly insulting believers, who—often in a blunt and vulgar way—are described as stupid and backward people.³⁹

Baby Jesus looks so pale, someone get him some food

its a tiny mohican walking a tightrope surely?

thats not jesus . . . that just Chris Angel's kid astral projecting while levitating⁴⁰

fuck, how can you believe that shit ? Go kill some gays or something. btw I recommend you to watch "TheAmazingAtheist—Jesus is a Scumbag" or many others his videos. And please, dont make to god bless me.⁴¹

Really!? Good for you, keep praying to your stupid god until you rot, I don't give a shit. Actually I don't know how's the fuck I got to this lunatic psycho page! Dream on, you're all going to heaven. Congratulations!⁴²

I saw Jesus in a pancake. If you'd like to purchase said pancake see my Facebook page. Half-wits.⁴³

In individual statements, these positions may interpenetrate and combine with one another; especially in polemical attitudes, various strategies and arguments are often used to undermine the publishing of miraculous materials and the belief in the authenticity of the phenomena presented in them. The combination of religious and rational approaches and religious and ironically aggressive approaches can be seen in the statements of internet users quoted below:

This is false worship. Worship God not a statue. And that's rain water from inside the statue. It collects on the top where there is a hole. Y'all should do more research before you believe everything you see on the internet.⁴⁴

You have to be light-headed to stare at the plaster, like a magpie at a bone. A wolf in sheep's skin has already deceived you. So many saints and none have enough faith to scream, "Come out, demon, in Jesus Christ's Name" . . . such a strong faith. It is difficult, though, for a demon to cast out a demon. May God have mercy, especially on the person who creates this theater, because she will get the worst prize. Amen.⁴⁵

The constant criticism of miraculous photographs and messages conveyed by visionaries affects and changes their way of functioning on the internet. The believers in Marian apparitions and associated miracles are confronted with their opponents, and thus are, in a way, forced to engage in discussions, defend their position, and provide arguments supporting them. As a consequence, the phenomenon of miraculous sensitivity may become less sensual and more intellectual and text-based when in the form of internet responses. Moreover, as we can see in the case of polemically religious attitudes, in the course of the online debate, even when it's among believers, different concepts, interpretations, and explanations of the same miraculous event often appear. A good example is the discussion regarding the film *Baby Jesus Apparition Video Emerges Just Days after Christmas Mass in Bethlehem*, in which people who do not question the truth of the revelation itself claim that it does not concern Jesus ("Jesus was black! That's a white baby!"; "It's a spirit child, would our lord return as an infant?"), proposing other radically different interpretations of the phenomenon visible in the film. They suggest, for example, that it could be an impure force, Satan, or a soul that is in purgatory and is asking for prayer. In this way, the very idea of revelation and the concept of the visionary cease to function as something consistent, stable, and obvious. Even in the circle of the faithful, there are different ways of reading the signs of holiness and different ways of understanding the intervention of the sacred in the matters of this world.

Such a situation leads to the conclusion that digital media can have a varied influence on the functioning of vernacular religious movements. On the one hand, they can strengthen their isolation. As explained by Howard in his study of vernacular Christian fundamentalism, "individual believers can deploy even the most powerful communication media to limit their exposure to the diversity of ideas those media have made available to them" (2016:21). At the same time, networked communication can enable them "to cordon off their beliefs from criticism and enact discourse that portrays any resistance from the outside as proof both of their alienation and their righteousness" (Howard 2016:18).

My research points to yet another possibility. It suggests that under the influence of digital technologies, miraculous phenomena (and thus also apparitional movements) begin to succumb to contemporary religion's tendency toward individualization. As numerous researchers indicate, the more collective forms of former vernacular religiosity are transformed under the influence of global processes characteristic of late modernity, related to the development of a "cultural supermarket." The striving of individuals for self-realization and authenticity as well as subjectivation of beliefs subsequently leads to replacing institutionalized and locally rooted religious systems with various forms of privatized and delocalized spirituality (Giddens 1991; Casanova 1994; Mathews 2000; Heelas et al. 2005; Margry and Wojcik 2016). In this context also, attitudes toward and activities in connection with miraculous images and messages seem to be increasingly a matter of individual and differentiated choices. As a consequence, even though digital media increases the range and dynamics of the impact of visionary culture, attitudes about miraculous images are paradoxically loosening. The following hypothesis can be put forward: in pre-internet times, these apparitional networks were largely formed by groups of people whose worldview was conditioned by miraculous sensitivity and who regularly made pilgrimages to places of apparitions, practiced certain forms of devotions, and exchanged sacred messages among each other. Currently, visionary networks do not have such coherence, which was previously conditioned by the relatively homogeneous apparitional worldview of their participants and the need for face-to-face contacts and physical involvement. Today, their existence is sustained by more occasional, fleeting, and disembodied interactions of the faithful, which are not necessarily based on miraculous sensitivity, but in an interest in revelations or all kinds of supernatural phenomena. Consequently, the visionary networks more closely resemble the forms characteristic of the phenomenon of neotribalism described by Michel Maffesoli (1996) than actual religious communities taking the form of "virtual ekklesia" (Howard 2016:11–4).

Still, it must not be forgotten that within apparitional movements, digital activity does not eliminate analog activity. My observations about the process of individualization-taking undoubtedly need to be further explored by conducting in-depth ethnographic research in the places of apparitions visited by pilgrims.

Conclusions

The collected data and analysis on Catholic apparitions and miraculous phenomena lead to several conclusions. Firstly, the universal availability of the internet and easy-to-use applications correspond to the characteristic of vernacular religion and apparitional movements that emphasizes the impulse to experience the sacred through the senses. Numerous websites and social media facilitate the "miracle hunt" and intensify the phenomenon known as "textual pilgrimage." The visual proof of miracles and the messages of visionaries are extremely accessible and distributed worldwide via the internet. The activity of mass media and popularity-orientated YouTubers and Instagram users are also important here, as they tend to treat all supernatural phenomena as attractive content that draws the attention of viewers and readers,

and thus they disseminate information on subsequent places of apparitions (cf. Britt 1998:114, 121). These conditions dynamize apparitional networks and extend the range of their influence, giving them a global dimension that has become a part of contemporary religious mass culture.

Secondly, omnipresent digital devices (especially smartphones with the ability to take photos and record videos) increase the importance of taking and publishing photos/videos as a form of “pilgrim apparition work.” In such circumstances, miraculous pictures (as well as their compilations, remakes, and parodies) become one of the forms of modern digital folklore, which, depending on the communication situation (the attitude of the sender and recipient and the meanings attributed to miraculous pictures), may be religious or secular.

Thirdly, the mass production, distribution, and consumption of miraculous pictures and other types of sacred messages significantly affect their functions and ontological status, and in a broader perspective, the functioning of miraculous sensitivity. Overall, the use of digital technologies makes the experience of miraculous sensitivity more varied, ambiguous, and somewhat weaker. Its once essential element in the form of “true images” no longer functions in the same way in its digital versions, according to the principle of indistinctiveness, and it thus loses much of its value and strength since it is no longer perceived to be a source of supernatural power. This change is of fundamental importance and does not apply only to the phenomenon of miraculous pictures. The principle of indistinctiveness is at the root of many beliefs and practices within vernacular religion, and its disappearance or weakening means that profound changes are taking place in terms of folk belief and practice. Therefore, it is worth remembering that even if some vernacular beliefs and practices are currently still in use, and their expression seems surprisingly unchanged, the meanings and functions assigned to them are very often fundamentally different.

Finally, in the world of social media, the visionaries and their supporters face widely differing opinions about the apparitions, including the critical attitude of their opponents. Furthermore, they are also victims of internet scoffers, trolls, or haters who can easily reach channels, profiles, or forums about miraculous topics. In such situations, digital means of communication may trigger two fundamentally different trends. It can lead to the formation of specific religious information bubbles in which the faithful try to “cordon off their beliefs from criticism” or treat this criticism as “proof . . . of their righteousness” (Howard 2016:18). New media, however, may also fuel the tendencies to individualize and subjectivize religious beliefs and practices within vernacular religious movements. Thus, they can make the networks of the faithful look more like ephemeral, neo-tribal groups rather than traditional religious communities. In the case of apparitional movements, the latter trend seems to prevail, but the question of the long-term fate of these movements remains open for debate. With the weakening of both miraculous sensitivity and the principle of indistinctiveness, will religious revelations continue to generate networks of believers focused around specific places, visionaries, or texts? Or, in the years ahead, will they become only one of the many forms of experiencing the sacred that is chosen within an individualized spirituality?

Notes

1. Within Catholic apparitional movements, the vast majority of the apparitions are Marian, but there are also apparitions of Christ, St. Padre Pio, and other saints.

2. It should be added, however, that in certain situations, vernacular religion has undoubtedly a critical potential and “can develop to contest unequal power relations” (Primiano 1995:47). As Wojcik notes, the grassroots development of Marian apparition sites not only illustrates the dynamics of the creation of sacred space, but “also demonstrate[s] the locales of contested spatial power, as such sites usually are rejected by clerical authorities because of their vernacular origins and frequent condemnations of Church policies (Wojcik 2019b:124). In the case of Polish apparitional movements, such a contestation concerns mainly Church hierarchies, although in some situations, it also applies to current national politics (cf. Grochowski 2020).

3. Other forms of religious folklore associated with apparitional movements include various types of performative acts undertaken individually and collectively at apparition sites, for example, walking on knees, touching or kissing holy places/objects, votive offerings, or various activities with miraculous water (drinking, washing the face, and applying to places of illness on the body).

4. The lack of response to my requests for an interview could have resulted from the imperfections of the YouTube communication system and partly from the fact that some of the materials discussed herein were published a few years earlier, and their authors may no longer regularly check their website accounts.

5. An important aspect of the functioning of many networks created by the faithful is the production, distribution, and consumption of texts that are attributed to divine power, and that can be considered different genres of religious folklore. An example of early phenomena of this type is described by Robert A. Orsi as a “women’s network of stories” related to the center of the cult of St. Jude in Chicago (Orsi 1996).

6. Types of Miracles. The Myrical Hunter. <http://www.miraclehunter.com/miracles/> (accessed October 29, 2020).

7. Duch Prawdy. <http://www.duchprawdy.com/> (accessed May 17, 2018).

8. The Next Right Step. <https://charliej373.wordpress.com/> (accessed October 17, 2017). At the beginning of 2018, the site was closed, and in its place, Charlie Johnston, together with Beckita Hesse, launched a blog called A Sign of Hope. Abraham’s Journey. <https://asignofhope379.com>.

9. A characteristic example of such multimedia materials is the video *Anna Argasińska vs. Mieczysława Kordas 2012*, published on the Wicher JCH channel on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bn4fB8-FQbg> (accessed May 18, 2018).

10. These recordings are published among others on the official YouTube channels of the American Stella Mar Films station and the Spanish Reina de la Paz TV station.

11. At the time of the research (May 2018), on YouTube, there were seven different recordings documenting the unexpected course of the monthly revelation.

12. javier salazar tataje, *Medjugorje Jan 2017 with Blurred Girl*. September 24, 2017, YouTube video, 7:30 min. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpQqS7WnK18&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHn06ED0ugbsWXi8V-yzxc_h&index=5 (accessed June 2, 2022).

13. jesusheals2, *Mirjana’s Apparition 1–2–17*. January 9, 2017, YouTube video, 19:51 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETiObEDwb3E&index=8&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0> (accessed May 18, 2018).

14. Sito MedjugorjeAssisi, *Medjugorje–Apparizione a Mirjana–2 Settembre 2017*. September 6, 2017, YouTube video, 17:06 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzyUBcsp16w&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=8&t=0s> (accessed May 18, 2018).

15. It should be noted, however, that the introduction of Polaroid cameras (in the late 1940s) had already caused a significant change by simplifying and accelerating the process of producing and reproducing miraculous photos, and thus the potential of making numerous copies for pilgrims to distribute (Wojcik 1996:137–42; Davis and Boles 2003:379–81).

16. Another practice that confirms this way of thinking about the materiality of miraculous photographs is the custom noted at the Bayside apparition site (New York) of wrapping cameras with rosaries or gluing miraculous rose petals to cameras (Wojcik 2009:124).

17. An example is the extensive gallery of miraculous photographs taken with Polaroid cameras available on the website of the Our Lady of the Roses sanctuary in Bayside (New York) is at <http://www.roses.org/> (accessed May 17, 2018). An extensive collection of such materials is also included in another website dedicated to the apparitions in Bayside, with the significant name of Web Site with More End Times Prophecies on More Topics Than Any Other Web Site. <http://www.tldm.org> (accessed May 17, 2018).

18. Interview conducted via messenger on YouTube (June 20–July 5, 2014). Original spelling. Author's archive.

19. The technology used in Polaroid cameras had the opposite property. Immediate developing and showing the prints to other pilgrims was supposed to prove their authenticity and prevent accusations that the images were manipulated (Wojcik 2009:123).

20. The appearance of sacred signs in the sky is a frequent topic in tabloids, but sometimes such materials are also made available to more reputable publishers. An example may be the article "Images of Jesus Christ and Other Religious Figures Seen in Everyday Objects," published on the website of *The Telegraph*: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/picturegalleries/howaboutthat/8982533/Images-of-Jesus-Christ-and-other-religious-figures-seen-in-everyday-objects.html> (accessed May 18, 2018).

21. For example, a video showing the sweating figure of Christ in Medjugorje entitled *Miracle at Medjugorje—You have to see this to believe it . . . Incredible !!!*, which was posted on YouTube in April 2011 on the CombatCounselor channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6W165TsaFzw&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=3>), had almost 1 million views, 2,700 positive ratings, 399 negative ratings, and 2,626 comments (as of May 18, 2018). In turn, the previously discussed video *Medjugorje Jan 2017 with Blurred Girl* published in January 2017 had over 1.5 million views, 5,700 positive ratings, 1,300 negative ratings, and 1,900 comments (as of May 18, 2018; at the end of 2018 the video was removed and re-published, therefore the above data has changed).

22. stammcooling, *FACE OF JESUS APPEARS IN THE CLOUDS!! He is coming very soon sooner then what we think*. May 4, 2016, YouTube video, 2:20 min. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_zDWSSOjLI&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=6. The original orthography has been preserved in the quotes from the comments.

23. gbhightentertainments, *Real Photos of Jesus seen in the sky. East to West*. May 23, 2009, YouTube video, 2:36 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4I0osT5hiY&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkNwqLFgbM3Da3JZ1bwSygk&index=3>.

24. Terry Donnelly, *medjugorje 2009—miracle photographs i took on my pilgrimage*. September 10, 2009, YouTube video, 9:59 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yx-c6Unl6oc&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=1>.

25. Terry Donnelly, *medjugorje 2009—miracle photographs i took on my pilgrimage*. September 10, 2009, YouTube video, 9:59 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yx-c6Unl6oc&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=1>.

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27. PKV4ever96, *Jesus in the clouds!!!* January 30, 2010, YouTube video, 3:50 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xn92vk7UWqE&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=5>.

28. gbhightentertainments, *Real Photos of Jesus seen in the sky. East to West*. May 23, 2009, YouTube video, 2:36 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4I0osT5hiY&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkNwqLFgbM3Da3JZ1bwSygk&index=3>.

29. WeirdFreaky, *Baby Jesus Apparition video emerges just days after Christmas Mass in Bethlehem*. December 30, 2010, YouTube video, 3:27 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nyt7FMFXgTI&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkNwqLFgbM3Da3JZ1bwSygk&index=1>.

30. CombatCounselor, *Miracles at Medjugorje: You have to SEE AND HEAR it—Incredible! Was the Virgin Mary talking to us?* April 24, 2011, YouTube video, 3:45 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6W165TsaFzw&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=3>.

31. WeirdFreaky, *Baby Jesus Apparition video emerges just days after Christmas Mass in Bethlehem*. December 30, 2010, YouTube video, 3:27 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nyt7FMFXgTI&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkNwqLFgbM3Da3JZ1bwSygk&index=1>.

32. TheGospaMessages, *Medjugorje—Miracle of the Sun—May 2010 (1)*. July 15, 2010, YouTube video, 5:30 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-K8K5GFWFME&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=4>.
33. WeirdFreaky, *Baby Jesus Apparition video emerges just days after Christmas Mass in Bethlehem*. December 30, 2010, YouTube video, 3:27 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nyt7FMFXgTI&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkNwqLFgbM3Da3JZ1bwSygk&index=1>.
34. HOLY LOVE ECUMENICAL SHRINE IN CLEVELAND, OHIO, *Jesus opening & closing His eyes at Holy Love apparition site!* February 8, 2011, YouTube video, 8:08 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-cablX0yeA&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkNwqLFgbM3Da3JZ1bwSygk&index=4>.
35. Terry Donnelly, *medjugorje 2009—miracle photographs i took on my pilgrimage*. September 10, 2009, YouTube video, 9:59 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yx-c6Unl6oc&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=1>.
36. TheGospaMessages, *Medjugorje—Miracle of the Sun—May 2010 (1)*. July 15, 2010, YouTube video, 5:30 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-K8K5GFWFME&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=4>.
37. CombatCounselor, *Miracles at Medjugorje: You have to SEE AND HEAR it—Incredible! Was the Virgin Mary talking to us?* April 24, 2011, YouTube video, 3:45 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6W165TsaFzw&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=3>.
38. TheGospaMessages, *Medjugorje—Miracle of the Sun—May 2010 (1)*. July 15, 2010, YouTube video, 5:30 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-K8K5GFWFME&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=4>.
39. The interactions between believers and their opponents, in particular the strategies and forms of attacking and trolling the followers of the miraculous phenomena, and the ways of defending the latter, are an interesting example of vernacular forms of internet communication. This issue, however, is beyond the scope of this essay.
40. WeirdFreaky, *Baby Jesus Apparition video emerges just days after Christmas Mass in Bethlehem*. December 30, 2010, YouTube video, 3:27 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nyt7FMFXgTI&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkNwqLFgbM3Da3JZ1bwSygk&index=1>.
41. gbhightertainment, *Real Photos of Jesus seen in the sky. East to West*. May 23, 2009, YouTube video, 2:36 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4l0osT5hiY&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkNwqLFgbM3Da3JZ1bwSygk&index=3>.
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44. CombatCounselor, *Miracle at Medjugorje—You have to see this to believe it . . . Incredible !!!* April 24, 2011, YouTube video, 3:45 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6W165TsaFzw&list=PLgmx6UvaMLHkN3qjd88SMyl8Su2mAPzp0&index=3>.
45. 5. Aniol Pomocy, *Manifestation of the EVIL SPIRIT during the REVELATION OF OUR LADY in MEDJUGORIE on 02-01-2017* (accessed May 18, 2018; channel, video, and comments removed from YouTube).

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